

# Dalia Ravenstone and the Vicious Circle

**Ravenstone Family series, Volume 1**

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DALIA RAVENSTONE AND THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

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Written by Fay Anne Aura Arts.







## **“Dalia Ravenstone and the Vicious Circle.”**

By = Fay Anne Aura Arts

Dedication:

Dedicated to Lily Elteto, my best friend, who brought me to the wonderful weird world of Portland. I will always miss your smile and your laughter.

Get yourself through the days one by one.

Remembering is painful but necessary;

It's the only part of them still living, those memories.  
Every time you think of them, their spirit's light returns  
For a little bit.



## Chapter One: The House From Nowhere

*Late 2006 - early 2007*

ON A VERY NICE STREET on a rather large hill in Portland, Oregon was a very nice neighborhood called Winterbloom Way, which was full of individuals and families who were wealthy enough to own a home here and a winter home somewhere else so they could escape the incessant rain and depressing gray pallor that Portland got in the winter, yet not so wealthy they could afford mansions or gold-plated toilet seats. As such, the houses were of high quality, some of them large and roomy modern houses painted in neighborhood-acceptable solid colors, while others were smaller Victorian era houses that had been well maintained, modernized in ways that didn't affect the aesthetics, and sometimes remodeled or expanded in similar ways. All of the houses, regardless of when they were built, had a similar look about them, there being strict neighborhood rules about how houses should look. Not as strict as some neighborhoods, of course; this was – after all – Portland, home of a great number of hipsters, even wealthy hipsters.

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The yards were very well kept as well, many of the inhabitants just hiring landscapers to make the yards as pretty as possible with trees, decorative shrubs or grasses, flowers, stones, and other plants and materials. In fact, everything about the neighborhood was under so many rules and regulations that they had an entire committee of people whose job it was to understand and enforce these rules, making sure that nothing was out of place for long. It was, put simply, a neighborhood so carefully designed and watched that a lone woman could go walking around it at midnight on a moonless night and feel perfectly safe.

One of the families living in this neighborhood was the Park family. Mr. Jason Jasper Park was a young, handsome man with brown hair, and his wife was blond. Both were fit and looked too good to be entirely natural, though neither had ever admitted to plastic surgery. Mr. Park was rarely seen wearing anything other than a three-piece suit, which he needed for his job. Around the house, he wore something more casual that nonetheless was nicer than lots of peoples' work outfits. His wife dressed in much the same way, always nicer when going out but her around the house clothes were always a bit absurdly nice. Even her jogging outfit was more expensive than some people's Sunday best. The kids dressed much more casually, in jeans and t-shirts or plainer dresses, mainly so they wouldn't soil anything nice.

Their house abided by the neighborhood rules so carefully that the Parks had never once gotten complaints about it, and had never been reprimanded or talked with negatively about any of it. It had a picket fence with the pickets rounded on the top in case kids or parachuters fell on it. The house

itself was as white as its inhabitants; they could have used more interesting colors as long as those colors were within the rules of the neighborhood, but the Parks had made their house the most boringly normal color possible.

The yard of the house was perfectly manicured, and the home looked warm and welcoming despite looking like something torn from a catalog of perfect suburban homes. Several ornamental flowering cherry trees were planted in the yard. Well... “yard” was a bit generous; the Parks had had all the grass torn up out of their yard and replaced with decorative stone tiles, a flower garden, and those cherry trees of course. You wouldn't see the Parks wasting time doing something as pedestrian as mowing a lawn, nor would you ever see them paying someone else to mow a lawn either, in case the person they hired was an immigrant or was someone who wasn't white. As far as anyone knew, they didn't hire anyone to keep the flower garden maintained. They didn't seem to do it themselves either, as nobody had ever seen any of them gardening, yet it always looked in top condition. Some people had even checked to see if the flowers were fake, but they were real flowers.

Everyone in the neighborhood knew that Mr. Jason Park was a bank manager, and while everyone knew that Mrs. Park had a job with flexible hours that let her work from home a lot, nobody was quite sure what that job actually *was*. But they were perhaps the most normal family in the entire neighborhood, even if they mostly only socialized with a select group of their neighbors, and they were impeccable about their house following the neighborhood rules. Since Mr. Park was a bit of a stick in the mud, Mrs. Park was a little



nosy but very annoying, and both of them had far more conservative beliefs than was usual for the neighborhood, most people in the neighborhood were fine with them sticking to the people who could tolerate them.

Mrs. Park liked the neighborhood she lived in very much, oblivious as she was to the fact that most people in it didn't particularly like her. She waved at neighbors whenever she went out jogging, not noticing that their return waves were feeble and unenthusiastic. She talked to Mrs. Richardson and petted her dog, a Shih Tzu named Foofoo, without noticing that Mrs. Richardson didn't give permission to pet the dog, nor did she think much of Foofoo barking at her. Yes, Mrs. Park was one of those people who was so confident in her social status and in how likable she was that she never noticed any fact that contradicted this confidence. Which made it all the more remarkable that she was the first adult to notice something weird that none of the other adults had noticed.

It happened on an unusually sunny December day, unusual because Portland winters were almost always either gray and raining or gray and *not* raining, but at least it was still cold. Mrs. Park had breakfast as usual, dealt with the usual behavior problems from her kids (nothing too drastic, she expected her kids to mostly behave themselves well, and mostly they did), and an hour after breakfast, she went out on a jog. However, she'd barely gone two houses down when she noticed one of the neighborhood kids staring wide-eyed at something to her left. She stopped and looked where the boy was looking.

It was a house. It was, specifically, a Victorian-era house, Queen Anne style with a prominent tower on the left side, and was painted blood red with black trim and black roof. It was also two stories tall, surrounded by a tall stone wall covered in moss. Nothing about it stood out to the average observer, not for Portland at least, except that it was beautiful. Heather didn't quite like the color, but still thought the house quite lovely. But while the house looked superficially like many others in the neighborhood, it also looked rather menacing in a way. It might have been from the fact that the stone wall was topped with metal spikes that looked like they'd been sharpened only this morning by someone who thought they were meant to be weapons. Or it may have been the signs posted on the wall, such as 'beware of dog,' 'no trespassing,' and 'no soliciting,' which were hand-painted and didn't break any neighborhood rules, even if they were unusual. *Or* it may have been the fact that just last night there had been a totally empty lot where the house now stood.

Mrs. Heather Park stared at the house along with the boy. Oblivious as she was to people not liking her, it was kind of hard to miss an empty lot sprouting a fully-formed house overnight. But looking around, she saw several other adults walking around the neighborhood, all of them somehow doing just that. Heather was agog, wondering how so many people had failed to notice this, were *still* failing to notice this.

She thought, at first, that the house was some sort of hallucination or illusion. Maybe the boy was staring at something else, or maybe he was an illusion himself. But he opened the gate of the fence he was at and closed it; she

heard the gate close, and she felt it when he brushed against her as he hid himself behind her, looking around her at the house. So *he* at least was real.

Being across the street from this house, she wondered if she should get closer to investigate. After a few minutes thinking about it, she did. The boy ran back inside the fence of his yard and cowered behind it, watching her over the top as she approached the house.

A house suddenly springing into existence overnight would have been quite creepy enough to be going on with, but it didn't end there, no not at all. A Himalayan blackberry tangle sat visible in the yard over the top of the unusually-tall wall, its thorny vines covered in bright, delicious-looking berries, even though it was nearly the end of December. While there wasn't any snow and the sun was out, it was still too cold for there to be berries on a blackberry bush. As Heather approached the house, she felt like the blackberry bramble was looking at her, even though that was silly; plants don't have eyes. Well, except for potatoes, but potato eyes don't actually see, and generally speaking, potatoes don't feel like menacing ambush predators waiting for their chance to strike. And that's exactly what that blackberry bramble felt like to Heather.

Moving away from the part of the wall with the blackberry bramble, she touched the wall with one hand. It felt like normal stone, but it also felt wet, and almost alive with some kind of warmth. She then noticed the gate in the wall, which filled the bottom half of a gap in the wall that showed a good view of the front porch and the front-facing windows. There was movement inside the window, and Heather

thought she saw someone in sand-colored clothes pointing at something toward the back of the house.

Feeling scared yet brave, Heather grabbed the gate's handle and tried to open it. It didn't budge, so she let go and continued examining the gate and surrounding wall. Right to the right of the gate was a hole with the front of a mailbox sticking out of it, and no little red flag. Underneath the mailbox was a small doorbell. She blinked at it.

Someone passed by just then, looking strangely at Heather before pausing. Heather looked at the woman; a heavyset widowed white woman in her 70's, wearing a tailored dress, glasses with green frames, and walking a Shih Tzu on a leash; Mrs. Richardson.

"Thinking of buying that house?" Mrs. Richardson asked.

"So you *can* see the house?"

Mrs. Richardson narrowed her eyes at Heather as though angry.

"Yes, I can. Brand new prescription, you know. And I'm not yet so blind I can't see without them, things just look a little blurry without them is all."

"Oh. Right. I'm sorry."

Mrs. Richardson sniffed. "I should hope so. Young people these days, so rude," she said, muttering the last sentence as she walked off.

At last Heather snapped back to her senses as if from a daze, and looked the whole house up and down once more, sighing. She knew what she had to do. For now, her jog was over, so she went back across the street.

"Jackson?" she said to the boy.

"Yes, Mrs. Park?" he responded.

She paused with her mouth open, trying to think of what she should say. What she *could* say. Glancing around, she noticed several more children staring at the house, but none of the adults were even noticing it. Wait, no, scratch that: there was Mr. Smith-Jones and his wife, they were staring at it too. This reinforced her theory about the house. Finally, she thought of something to tell Jackson.

"Um... don't go near that house. Not until I've found out who lives there, at least."

His eyes went wide. "But it wasn't there last night! It's like, I dunno, a monster house or something! It's going to eat us all!"

"Oh don't be silly, houses don't appear overnight," she lied, laughing nervously. Then she took off and left before he could respond, because she really didn't know what to tell him. Maybe Mr. Smith-Jones would fare better.

Once she got into her own house, she picked up her cell phone and dialed a friend of hers from work. After four rings he finally picked up.

"Starling residence," the man said wearily.

"Hello Christopher? It's me, Heather. Heather Park?"

He sighed. "Yes, Heather, I do have caller ID, you know," he said, his voice full of a weariness Mrs. Park didn't pick up on.

"Good, good," she said distractedly. "Christopher, I have something very... unusual to report."

"You do, do you?" he asked, sounding bored. "And what is it this time? Did Mr. Smith-Jones make an automaton just

a bit too realistic to pass mundane notice? Or did Juniper Carmichael accidentally levitate in public again?"

"Oh no, *far, far* more than that. Do you know the empty lot across the street and two doors down from my house?"

There was a pause filled with breathing and crackling static. Then, "Oh yes, the one you keep complaining about for being an eyesore, overgrown with weeds? The one you keep trying to convince the neighborhood association to turn into a small park, even though we already have a park? Is that the one you mean?"

"It's the only empty lot in the neighborhood, so yes. Or rather, it *was* the only empty lot. There's a house there now."

"Fascinating. And why did it take you so long to tell me this? I would've thought a new house going up would be all you could talk about for months."

"No, Christopher, I mean that as recently as yesterday, it was still an empty lot, still overgrown with weeds. Now there's a house there. It just appeared overnight."

"WHAT?!" Christopher sounded panic-stricken now. "I'll call the Council and the PSA at once! Has the video gone viral yet? How many—"

"Calm *down*, Christopher! The only people who even noticed the house are children and... Gifted people like us."

"I—You're sure?"

"Yes. I saw it, Mr. and Mrs. Smith-Jones saw it, and little Jackson Dreyfuss saw it, as well as some other kids in the neighborhood, but the mundane adults are all walking right by it without even noticing it. I talked with Mrs. Richardson, and she sees the house, but doesn't notice it. She asked me if

I was thinking of buying it, when she caught me staring at it. Seemed to think there'd been a house there all along."

"She did? Wow. That's... I don't think I've ever heard of a spell that can do *that*."

"What should we do?"

"Hmm... I'll look into it. If it's a Gifted family, they're required by our law to register moves with the Council, it's only really a problem if they haven't. So if—wait, you live on Winterbloom Way, correct?"

"Yes."

"And the house is on the same street?"

"Yes, Christopher."

"Well it's just... I think I may know something about it. I was feeling a bit under the weather last week, but I seem to recall getting an email, let me just check here..."

She heard the clunk of a phone being set down, then the clack of keyboard keys and clicks of a computer mouse. She waited patiently for several minutes before he picked the phone back up.

"Ah yes, right here, an email from Donald about a family moving to Winterbloom Way. Surname is 'Ravenstone.' According to the email, everything is in order. Oh dear, what a mistake I made. I apologize, Heather, for not warning you about this, I was ill as I said and it quite slipped my mind. Though I must say, there's nothing in the paperwork to suggest a house going up overnight."

"You're sure everything is in order?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Because they've got a blackberry bramble in their yard that feels like it's looking at me as though I was dinner."

"Hmm... well, they'll have to have an inspection within a couple weeks of moving in to make sure they're following the laws, so we'll know then what that's about. Don't you go snooping! Leave the information gathering to me, Heather."

"I make no promises, Christopher."

"I mean it, Heather, you're not on the welcoming committee, don't go scaring them off!"

"You offend me, Christopher!"

"Sorry, but I've told you before that some people are put off by your beliefs. They're unusual for Portland, and even more unusual for the Gifted community."

"Yes, yes. Call me when you know more, won't you?"

He sighed. "Yes, I will."

She hung up then, and went to the window to stare down the street at the mysterious house from nowhere.



HEATHER WAS RIGHT TO be wary of the blackberry bramble, as it transpired. She watched the house over the next week, and a lot happened in that time. The blackberry bramble sometimes appeared to move, even when there was no wind. Several times she saw a bird flying towards its tempting berries, and whatever happened to those birds was too fast for Heather to see. She only saw birds fly in, then an explosion of feathers, the bird nowhere to be found and the blackberry vines moving as though a gust of wind had hit them. After a week of this, the birds started avoiding that plant.



Nor was that the only odd thing to happen with birds around the Ravenstone house. Heather, several children, and once even Mrs. Smith-Jones all saw birds fly straight at the empty space above the second floor and suddenly smack into something invisible with such force that they fell to the ground, stunned or dead they couldn't tell from a distance. More than once when this happened, when the witnesses looked in horror at one another and then looked back (if they happened to be able to see into the yard) the dead birds were gone, and the blackberry bramble was once more rattling as though it could move on its own.

All of those sightings of dying birds took place in the first week of the house's existence, and then overnight on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, it just stopped happening. Something more peculiar took its place, as entire flocks of crows or other birds could be seen avoiding the deadly invisible barrier in a panic, so suddenly that some of the witnesses speculated that whatever invisible thing was there was suddenly visible if you crossed past the threshold of the wall.

It wasn't just birds, either, as proved by the goat incident. Another neighbor had been dealing with her own blackberry bramble problem as it was getting out of hand, and so being a rich Portlander, she hired a man who brought a small herd of goats into the neighborhood to eat the blackberry brambles in her yard. He'd started out with 14 goats, but when he rounded them all up, one was missing. The only clue to the missing goat's whereabouts was one witness who last saw one of the goats nibbling on the blackberry vines of the creepy house, but hadn't seen the goat less than a minute later when he'd looked back again at the sound of the goat's ter-

rified bleating. Again, the blackberry bramble was shaking as though in a breeze.

Juniper Carmichael, a rather serious 15 year old brown-skinned girl with black hair and glasses, even reported to Mrs. Park that she'd been coming home from school for the winter holidays when it had been raining, and she had seen the rain gathering on an invisible roof, pouring off it down to the yard below, while the only visible roof remained dry as a bone. When the kids and adults who knew the house was weird tried to witness this for themselves the next day, though, the visible roof was wet and the water was running from *its* eaves instead of the invisible one above it. Nothing supernatural to see here, run along now ladies and gentlemen.

It wasn't until the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the house being there that anyone spotted somebody who might have lived there, aside from the hazy image Mrs. Park had seen through the window that first day. Mrs. Richardson had been walking Foofoo past the house when she'd been jerked back by the leash and fell over on her backside, the leash leading up into the blackberry bramble. In that same moment, Juniper Carmichael and the red-headed Mrs. Smith-Jones had been watching the house, and spotted someone running out the front door in a panic, holding something long in one hand.

The man, who was black, threw open the gate and pointed the thing in his left hand at the plant. There was something that sounded like singing, a flash of light, and the dog fell out of the plant, his normally well-groomed hair a mess of blood, leaves, twigs, and dirt. Ignoring his fallen mistress, he ran off back towards his house, yelping all the way.

Mrs. Smith-Jones pulled Mrs. Richardson up to her feet, both of them surprised she hadn't broken anything, and Mrs. Richardson limped back home to comfort her dog. Several of the children who had witnessed the whole thing took off running once they saw the dog was fine, leaving only the teenager and the adult behind.

"Oh those silly dogs," the man said nervously, "always uh, you know, climbing into bushes. Ha! Silly scamp." He hastily stowed away whatever had been in his hand, shrugging apologetically.

He was a tall black man with close-cropped hair, no older than 25, and was so thin he was nearly gaunt, even sickly, though his skin was a very healthy dark color. He was dressed like a hippie, complete with fringed vest, granny glasses, and bell-bottom pants. He also had on a wide-brimmed, white straw hat with a lovely black rose pinned to it. The whole effect was like looking at someone from the 1960's had been picked up by a time traveler from their garden and dropped into the modern world, except he wasn't the race most people would expect a hippie to be.

"Are you Mr. Ravenstone?" Mrs. Smith-Jones asked him.

"What? Oh yeah. Yes. Yes, I'm Orpheus Ravenstone. And um, who ah... who might you be?"

"I'm Lexa Smith-Jones. My husband and I are Gifted, like you."

"I see," he said. "And you?"

The teenage girl pushed her glasses back up her nose. "Juniper Carmichael, I'm also a witch."

Mrs. Smith-Jones looked incredulously at her.

"What? All the mundane kids are gone, nobody else mundane is hanging around."

"Witches, really? Good. Well pardon me a moment," Orpheus said, as he took out the long thing he'd had earlier – a wand, of course – out of his pocket and turned around to cast some invisible spells at the blackberry plant, causing its vines to go back to the other side of the wall.

Lexa looked shocked. "In broad daylight?"

"Don't worry. The wards keep it hidden from sight. Um, usually. From a distance. This close up, though, that's another matter."

He had stowed his wand again.

"I see you're a southpaw," Lexa said.

"Er, yes. Is that a problem?"

"Not at all. My husband is a lefty, too."

"Oh. Well it's good to meet some of the local witches," he said, tipping his hat at them, and they noticed he had an extra finger on his left hand. "My wives Morgana and Nizoni are around here somewhere. We'll be introducing ourselves around the neighborhood shortly." He smiled at them some more.

"Wives? Plural?"

"Yes. Nothing official, polyamorous marriage being illegal in this country, but yes. In the eyes of the gods, we three are married. But before you go making assumptions, I assure you it's an equal partnership. They were actually married to each other first, and then I got added later."

"Ah," said Mrs. Smith-Jones.

"Somebody die?" asked Juniper.

"Pardon?" Orpheus asked, confused.

“Your hat, it's got a black rose on it. That usually symbolizes death. Which is why I asked if somebody died.”

“Oh, that. No, nobody died. Well uh, I mean I'm sure many people have died today, but, you know... nobody *we* know. Er, so far as we know, I mean. But no, I just thought it was pretty. Had it preserved with magic. I'm a phytomancer. I grow rare plants.”

The door opened again, and a black woman just as tall as Orpheus but a more healthy weight than him stepped out. She had her hair in many tight braids, which Juniper recognized from the Internet as box braids. But she looked a bit... well, she was dressed like it was Halloween in a blood red dress with silver cobweb patterns on it, her fingernails were painted black with white cobweb design, she wore white lipstick, and had eye shadow the color of a bruise. Speaking of eyes, hers were such a vibrant red they had to be contact lenses, especially seeing as her pupils looked slitted like those of a cat. She had in her arms a small infant girl with dark brown skin like her parents and a full head of black hair that was styled in braids with colorful plastic beads woven into it. The infant, who was missing a foot (in what looked like a congenital way), was chewing on a rubber bat.

“Orpheus, have you taken care of Scylla yet? We don't need any more—why hello there, neighbors. I'm Morgana Ravenstone.”

“Honey, the redhead is Mrs. Lexa Smith-Jones, and this lovely brown young lady is Juniper Carmichael. They're fellow Gifted women.”

“Lovely to meet you two,” Morgana said, curtsying.

After they nodded back at her, she turned to her husband and said, "So, what about Scylla?"

"Yes, my jasmine flower, Scylla will be ready for the inspection soon. We just need to put up some more containment runes, I think. That should stop her from attempting to eat any more pets."

"It will have to wait, Orpheus. Nizoni is rather busy right now completing the anchoring of the third story, and she's run into a strange anomaly."

Orpheus looked curiously at his wife and leaned against the wall. "Anomaly?"

"Some kind of odd spacial disturbance. I don't pretend to understand it. But she says stuff is leaking through into our world from Tirffiniol."

"Huh. Okay. Did you call Ressa for her?"

"Yes, Ressa is on her way."

"Good, good," he said a little distractedly. "You got the welcoming pies made yet, honey?"

"Not until tomorrow, Orpheus dear. I'm sure you know why."

"What? Oh yeah, right, right. Silly me. We just uh, got the utilities turned on today, you see," he explained to the two neighbors. He sounded more nervous than ever. He hastily added, "Long process, moving, and we've been living elsewhere while doing it. We'll be uh, moving in here very shortly."

Mrs. Smith-Jones thought the Ravenstones were nice without being *too* nice, even if they were weird and a little creepy, so she gave them the benefit of the doubt.

“Your house is creepy,” Juniper said suddenly. “What’s the big invisible thing above your roof?”

“The third story,” Morgana said. “But since it’s not allowed by the mundane rules of this neighborhood, we hid it with a glamour. I do hate HOAs, but I’d rather not pick a fight with them. Not yet, anyway.”

The infant, with their free hand, put their thumb on their forehead with the rest of their fingers splayed. The child then repeated the gesture twice. Morgana transferred the child over to Orpheus when they noticed this, Orpheus softly saying, “Papa’s right here, sweetie. Oh, you’re such a calm baby, aren’t you?” Lexa and Juniper noticed, then, that Morgana was a lefty as well.

Holding the bat in their right hand, that arm across their stomach, the baby took their left hand – palm open and facing themselves – and moved it twice towards themselves.

“Yes, Beloved, Papa will sing to you. What do you want to hear?”

The infant just repeated the movement.

“Oh okay, Papa will pick. How about ‘Baa Baa Black Sheep’?”

The baby giggled at this, waving their arms.

“Are you... is that baby *talking* to you?” Mrs. Smith-Jones asked.

“They’re ‘speaking’ with sign language, yes. We taught them how, so they wouldn’t need to cry.” Morgana said as Orpheus began to sing ‘Baa Baa Black Sheep’ to the baby in a lovely tenor voice.

“Sounds handy. Wish I’d known that was an option.”

"It *is* handy. Even more so now that our second child is deaf."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that."

"Don't be sorry. We're not." Her voice was happy, and as she continued, it became filled with wonder. "They'll experience the world in a way we can scarcely imagine, their perspective radically different from our own. Nothing they experience will be the same as the way we experience it. It's exciting, and I'm a little envious. I think when I die I shall choose to be reincarnated as a deaf child, so I can experience it for myself."

"I... wow. I feel ashamed of myself now, for suggesting your other child might be... I dunno, incomplete or something."

"My husband, my wife, and I are telepaths. Do non-telepaths feel incomplete for not being telepathic? I personally know someone who can see in the infrared spectrum, and another old friend of mine can always feel where true north is. I do not feel incomplete for not having those senses, though I do occasionally envy those gifts. Why should our child feel incomplete for not having a sense of hearing? Anyway, it is not a complete deafness. The doctors say they can hear *some* sounds, but not well. They will have to learn to read lips, most likely, but they should be able to hear when someone is talking to them, even though they won't be able to understand what is being said.

"As to shame, I strive not to feel shame, it's like guilt. I prefer to feel varying degrees of remorse, and use that to learn from my mistakes and move on to make entirely new mistakes. We are all of us naught but people fumbling in the



dark for answers. Instead of feeling shame for stepping on someone's toe, or guilt for accidentally kicking someone in the shins, just... recognize you goofed, and try not to do it again."

Mrs. Smith-Jones nodded. "Very wise of you."

"I still wanna know, what was that about 'anchoring' the third story?" Juniper asked, since the discussion had come to a lull.

"It's a bit complicated to go into right now. We're still rather busy, and we ran into unforeseen complications. Perhaps after the inspection we'll have time to talk. We *would* like to get to know our neighbors," Morgana said, smiling with her mouth closed.

Everyone froze as someone with a dog came jogging by. The blackberry bush's vines rattled menacingly, one of the vines actually moving like it was a tentacle. Orpheus spun around to glare at it, pointing a finger at it with the hand that wasn't holding the baby, like the finger was a deadly weapon; which, since he was a witch like them, it likely was.

"Naughty girl, Scylla! I thought we had you trained better than this. No pig's blood for a month!"

The rattling of the brambles intensified, the vines moving more intently. Seeing this, Orpheus began to sing a lullaby to the plant. Just a minute of this, and Scylla's brambles quivered and slunk down behind the wall, out of sight.

"Good. Now remember, no eating dogs or cats, no goats, and definitely no eating mail carriers, not even in a playful way," Orpheus said sternly. "Luckily we never had to worry about you eating kids."

"And as tempting as it is to say otherwise," Morgana added, smiling, "don't eat any of the Jehovah's Witnesses again, not even if you spit them out without hurting them like before. This move was difficult enough, we don't have the time or patience to move again."

"What *is* that thing, anyway?" Mrs. Smith-Jones asked.

"Himalayan blackberry strangler. A rare magical plant," Orpheus explained.

"Honestly, Orpheus, would it have killed you to put Scylla in the other yard?"

"You know I can't, honey; she and Charybdis would tear each other apart. They're too territorial."

She sighed. "I'll never understand you. Man-eating plants don't bother you at all, but hand you a Chinese Bamboo Octopus and you freak out."

"Chinese Bamboo Octopi are venomous, honey. Venomous enough to kill a grown man."

"And that plant would eat you as soon as look at you if you hadn't raised it from a seedling."

Orpheus rolled his eyes and rubbed his neck with his free hand in embarrassment, still holding the baby, but smiled warmly. "Yeah, I know. Anyway, I'll have to put an enchantment up on the wall to keep her contained."

"Himalayan runic magic?" she asked.

"Yes, that would work best. In the meantime, I'm gonna go check on Nizoni."

She smiled again. "Okay, dear. I'll be in the bedroom preparing to relocate the bogeymen to the attic. I think they'll like it better in there once we get settled in."

Scylla's vines rattled again. Orpheus turned to look at her again with a glower.

"No, Scylla, I've told you a thousand times already, you can't eat any lawyers either, they give you indigestion!"

As Scylla settled down again, Mrs. Smith-Jones said, "Um... well, it was nice meeting you."

"You as well, my dear."

As the two Ravenstone adults went back into their house with their baby, Mrs. Smith-Jones smiled, thinking her husband would be most interested in meeting them; they sounded far more interesting than most of the other witches in the neighborhood, especially Mrs. Park.





## Chapter Two: Two Inspections

*Late 2006 - early 2007*

THE NEXT MORNING, MRS. Park looked at herself in the mirror. Perfect blond hair, perfect makeup making her blue eyes more noticeable, perfect teeth, immaculate pink women's skirted suit and matching pink hat and pink purse, just perfect. Even her little gold Christian cross around her neck looked perfect. Not a blemish or flaw to be seen on her whole person. Perfect for meeting new neighbors, and showing them what was to be expected by living in this neighborhood.

That didn't make what she had to do any easier as Seeing Eye to The Council for her neighborhood. Because of what she'd seen, she took it seriously. If she'd only heard rumors from others, that might not have been enough. But with what she'd seen and what she'd heard, she thought a very unsavory element had just moved in, a family with a reputation that could get the witches of Winterbloom Way – maybe even of the whole world – exposed. And she had not worked all these years perfecting the art of blending in with the mundanes – to the point where none of her children had so far showed any sign of magic, a crisis she was still working on

trying to fix – for a bunch of *freaks* to come into the neighborhood and risk exposure of the Gifted world.

So it was with trepidation that she walked over to the Ravenstone house, a casserole in a basket at her arm, to look at the place. As she approached, she felt the familiar tingle of magic in the air, and the eerie atmosphere of the place, which had only grown since the last time she'd gotten close to it. But the house still looked normal to her unaided senses; moreso even than it had over the past 10 days. If the house was populated with a family more like her own than the kind she suspected, this much magic would've been unusual. Reaching with her magical senses, she felt some of the truth of the place. There were massive, very powerful glamours rooted in runic wards, impossible to see through with magical senses alone. This was going to require some specialized tools.

Pulling a glasses case out of the front pocket of her pink dress, she carefully put on what looked like reading glasses with no lenses, and the frames made of jasper. This was, of course, a lot more discreet than the standard “drill a hole in a common stone, enchant the stone, and look through the hole” method, or even looking through a stone with a naturally-formed hole in it, and sure enough she saw the truth of the place for herself.

While appearing, to mundane senses, to be an ordinary, everyday house of a sort that fit in perfectly with the neighborhood, looking through her enchanted jasper glasses she saw something else entirely. The house was colored the same, but otherwise was very different. It wasn't only two stories tall, it was *three* stories tall, which was against the neighbor-

hood's rules, but of course those were the mundane rules, and the wards were good enough to fool them. The paint was also weathered and chipped, like it had been abandoned for years, but she suspected that was done intentionally. The simple stone wall was also not simple at all; it was made with stone that looked weathered and ancient, already covered with yellow-green lichen and the occasional moss. The stones were also damp, though it hadn't rained for three days. Also, the weathered, hand-painted signs that had been on the wall were still there, only now they read 'beware of attack gargoyle,' 'stay on the path,' and 'no seriously, stay on the path if you know what's good for you.' A fourth sign that hadn't been there before also appeared, reading, 'If you *do* go off the path, don't panic!' Scrawled in different handwriting under that were the words 'And always know where your towel is.'

What was more, there was what Heather was certain was a Sorcerous Spruce (*Picea magicae*) sitting in the yard. Most such trees looked like ordinary spruce trees, but were in fact magical trees and could get up and move if it so chose. This one, though, looked haunted and alive in a creepy way. It was twisted and gnarled and looked like a creepy face, but it had nice green leaves. What it was doing here in plain view of mundanes – for it was not covered by the glamour, her jasper spectacles simply let her see its magic – she didn't know. But it wasn't technically breaking any rules, the tree being there.

Anyone keyed into the wards would be able to see the property as it was, and would require the same sort of magical spectacles to see what mundane people saw, which was the only thing saving these people from being fined or even arrested by The Council, though the presence of a Creeping

Himalayan Blackberry Strangler, a dangerous magical variety of an introduced species that was a vile weed close to being as bad as English Ivy or kudzu, was enough to possibly get them nailed by The Council. You had to have a special license to keep man-eating plants like that in mundane areas. Or anywhere, really.

Putting her stone spectacles back in the front pocket of her dress, Heather walked resolutely forward to the gate. She tried opening it, but it wouldn't budge. She looked carefully at it; under the glamour, it looked like an aluminum gate, but the stone frames she put on again told the truth: the gate was a single slab of stone, much lighter than the stone of the rest of the wall. It was also dry, unlike the rest of the wall. She didn't know how it opened. In fact, the only sign it was the gate at all – aside from the glamour making it look like a proper gate – was the fact it was shorter than the surrounding stone wall, a wall she now saw went all around the property.

Trying something, she pushed on the stone door, and it still wouldn't budge. But this time, words appeared in glowing letters on the stone, which read simply 'Feed me, and you shall pass.' She stared at the stone door, wondering what that meant. She pushed again, and more words appeared, saying, 'I eat magic.'

"Absurd door," she mumbled, and tried putting her hand over the top of the door to find a latch on the other side, but a solid invisible wall formed in the air and blocked her hand. The words 'Feed me' glowed more brightly, and turned a menacing shade of red.

Again she stared at the stone door, this time thinking. Then, trying something, she took a small bottle of magical oil out of her purse and dropped a few drops on the stone. The words on the door, now a shade of purple, had changed to read, 'Enter freely and of your own will.' For some reason, it felt like the door was chuckling at her, but she didn't get the joke.

Trying the stone door again, she pushed it; it glided smoothly forward like it weighed nothing, and was as silent as the grave. Going in, she was astonished to find that humans who entered the property still saw what the glamour wanted them to see unless they were keyed into the wards, but judging by the behavior of the birds she'd seen in the area, that didn't apply to birds.

The stone door closed itself behind her once she was inside. To her right was the menacing blackberry bush, watching her like it was a starving child watching a roasted turkey float past, but held back by fields of magic she could see through the jasper frames.

She was, despite herself, quite impressed with the yard. There was no grass anywhere, and instead there were many different stone garden boxes scattered around the yard, each filled with dirt, none of them having been planted yet. There was a wooden trellis set up between the tree and the blackberry bush, but nothing growing on it yet.

Instead of concrete, the main path was made of flat, light gray paving stones. The paths that led between the garden boxes were the same dark stone as the boxes themselves. There was a large round stone slab big enough for a couple chairs and maybe a small table in amid all the garden boxes



as well. She mused that it would probably look lovely once there were plants growing in the boxes.

She looked back at the gargoyle, and saw that the gargoyle's head was suddenly up and looking at her, which made her shriek with alarm and back up. Unfortunately, she went off the path on the other side, which meant backing up against an invisible wall protecting her from the predatory blackberry bush, which was rattling its thorns in anger that it had been disturbed. This made her turn her head away from the gargoyle as she tried to get away from the plant. When she looked back, she screamed again.

The gargoyle was standing in an aggressive way and was snarling at her, but of course it wasn't moving or making any sounds. When she blinked again, it had its mouth open and looked ready to eat her.

"DON'T PANIC!" shouted the other sign.

"Oh sure," said the first sign sarcastically, "*Of course* they enchant *you* to read yourself, but *me*? All they gave *me* was a sarcastic personality. Oh right, and the ability to learn. Note to self: remember to read myself aloud to new people."

Mrs. Park got back on the path while staring wide-eyed at the gargoyle (since it didn't seem to move until you blinked or looked away) and tried the stone gate door with her backside, but the door wouldn't budge.

"Feed her," said the sarcastic sign. "She eats magic, too."

Shaking in fear, Mrs. Park carefully got out the bottle of magical oil from her purse without looking away or blinking, nearly dropping the bottle because her hands were shaking so bad. Then she carefully poured a fourth of the bottle into its open mouth.

Not wanting to blink, but her eyes drying up, she blinked anyway. At first she jumped and looked all around for it, because it wasn't visible anymore, but then she saw it had shrunk to the size of a Chihuahua and was on its back, looking playful. She hastily walked away from it, hoping it wouldn't be offended. She looked back again, and it was asleep again, in its original size and position. She glanced again at the sign saying to not panic if you went off the path, and she laughed anxiously at the thought that she wasn't supposed to panic when a horrible monster was coming at her between blinks.

After first checking the porch for booby traps or other unexpected surprises like the gargoyle, she walked up the front steps and rang the doorbell. It sounded like a wolf howling, making her jump back a bit in fright, her nerves still jangled by the gargoyle incident. She looked back at it nervously, and it was still asleep.

In almost two whole minutes, someone answered the door. It was the black woman she'd heard about, Morgana Ravenstone. She had her 18-month old daughter in one of those things that let one carry a baby hands-free on one's front, and the child was chewing on a black rubber bat.

Mrs. Ravenstone herself was dressed in a simple black dress that looked like something Wednesday Addams would wear, but she had on black and white striped socks. Her makeup was the same white lipstick and bruise-colored eye shadow as Mrs. Smith-Jones had reported, and those red cat's-eye contact lenses, unless she was using a glamour instead.

"May I help you?" Mrs. Ravenstone asked warmly, examining the prissy-looking blonde in a pink dress before her.

Heather held out her hand. "Um, yes. Hello there. I'm Heather Park née Heath. I'm the local Seeing Eye for The Council. Are you the Ravensstones?" She realized as she spoke that her voice was nervous and a little shaky.

Sympathy in her voice, Morgana answered, "Yes we are. I'm Morgana Ravenstone. Are you here for the inspection?"

"Oh dear me no, I don't work directly for The Council, I just report on relevant neighborhood goings-on for them. I expect the inspector will be here tomorrow. I know him, we're friends. I just thought I'd take a look for myself, meet the new neighbors, offer a few pointers for your inspection."

"You are?" Morgana asked, eyebrow raising.

"Oh yes. I mean, I see you have very good wards, a bit excessive for most needs but then, I suppose your house is... well... *interesting* enough to need them. A bit *too* interesting for the neighborhood. That gargoyle, for one. Terrified me out of my wits!"

"Did you go off the path?"

"Pardon? I mean... yes, I think I did. Why?"

The strange woman smiled, still not showing her teeth.

"Oh, Ziraxol wouldn't have hurt you. She just wanted to scare you because you weren't on the path. And the sign was playing a joke on you; you didn't need to feed her to get her to calm down. By then you were on the path again, and Ziraxol would have calmed down anyway. You had only to blink again."

"Um... okay. Good to know. Thank you."

"It was nothing."

Mrs. Park collected herself before speaking again. "So uh... aside from the terrifying gargoyle, about the only thing I saw that could really use some work is, well, you appear to have a man-eating plant in your front yard, I'm sure you didn't know what it was, they look just like ordinary Himalayan blackberry plants. You might want to remove it before the inspection."

At Heather's condescending tone, Morgana smiled without showing her teeth, but it didn't go to her eyes; her eyes were like some kind of icy void sucking in the warmth of the afternoon.

"We're quite well aware that Scylla is a *Rubus armeniacus magicae*, thank you so much for presuming. We have a permit, and we have her trained to not eat people, for the most part. There have been no human fatalities, anyway. Neither of them have ever eaten children, thankfully, not even playfully. Good thing, too, or we'd never have kept them. And the last time she 'ate' an adult human, we were able to rescue him and convince him he'd been having a nightmare. She was only playing with him, thankfully. We are still working on training her to leave pets alone; we've been mostly successful there."

"Yes, I've heard of a couple... incidents. Anyway, you'll have to move it to the back yard before the inspection."

"Oh no, we can't do that. No room in the mundane back yard. As to the *other* back yard, her sister, Charybdis, is back there. They'd destroy each other if we put them together, and likely most of the yard in the process. As it is, we have them separated by more than geography. I'm afraid the spell containing her now is temporary. Don't worry though, my hus-

band and my wife are working on the engravings for a runic ward for the wall to keep her contained in the yard. We made a slight miscalculation with the wards before, but it's being remedied."

"Pardon, did you say your husband *and* your wife?"

"Yes, I did. My husband is not my *legal* husband, of course, polyamorous marriages being illegal in this country, but even if neither the government nor The Council recognize our union, the gods do."

"The... the gods?"

"Yes. We have multiple gods and goddesses. No single family religion, mind you. We all follow different gods, but we all have one thing in common: belief that the earth is sacred."

"So you're polygamists *and* pagans?"

"We prefer the term 'polyamorous,' as the 'polygamist' term brings to mind a certain sect of Christianity that has one man lording it over dozens of wives who are basically his property, but our relationship is an equal partnership that happens to have three people in it. As to being pagan, I know you probably use that term for anyone who isn't Christian, so we prefer you to think of us as polytheists. Polytheism is a family tradition dating back to the days of the first Roman empire. Of course, we weren't called Ravenstone back then, but rather Càrncorb, which means the same thing."

"Mormons don't officially practice polygamy anymore, and anyway, they're not even Christians."

Morgana raised an eyebrow. "I'm afraid they *are*, actually."

"No, they aren't."

"Do they believe in one God, who is also His son Jesus Christ?"

Mrs. Park thought back to what she knew about Mormons. "Um... yes, I think so. But—"

"Then they are Christians. Just because they're a brand of Christians you don't approve of doesn't make them any less Christian."

Heather's smile took on a distinctly forced air. She knew there were Gifted people who were pagans, there'd been even more of the Gifted since paganism started coming back into vogue, something that helped keep magic alive. That didn't mean that she had to *like* it, though. Especially when this woman was arguing with her about what a Christian was.

"You look displeased," Mrs. Ravenstone said.

"Er, it's just... Well, my husband and I are very much Christians."

"Yes, I know; I can see your golden cross. So, how's that working out for you?"

*Not very well*, Heather thought, remembering her so-far mundane children. *But I'm not going to tell you that.*

"I thought as much," Mrs. Ravenstone said, smirking.

Mrs. Park looked up incredulously at Mrs. Ravenstone. "Did... did you just read my mind?"

"Yes. You were practically shouting it, you were thinking it so loud. I couldn't help overhearing. I only put up my mental barriers when I'm out and about, not at home. And it wasn't the only thing you were psychically shouting, either. I knew you were coming before you rang the bell. Well, I suppose you were *literally* shrieking as well. Anyway, I was busy, which is why it took me so long to answer the door. Beloved

here was getting into mischief.” She indicated the toddler in her arms.

Trying very hard not to think, Heather nonetheless couldn't help thinking, *Ugh. A pagan who keeps man-eating plants in her yard, is in a polygamous marriage, and she read minds, too?*

Mrs. Ravenstone smiled a forced smile – again not showing teeth – and didn't say anything, but Heather knew she'd heard that, too.

“Do I smell something delicious?” Mrs. Ravenstone said, looking at the casserole. Mrs. Park looked at it too; she had no idea how she'd managed to hang onto it through all the mayhem earlier.

“Oh yes, I made a welcome casserole for you,” Heather said. “I do it for all the new neighbors.”

“How thoughtful. By the way, where are my manners? Come in, neighbor, come in.” She sounded like she'd rather be saying anything else, but Heather remained oblivious to her tone.

“Thank you,” Heather said, coming in. As she did, she noticed that Morgana was left-handed, but she only just barely noticed. Handedness had never been anything worth caring about, to Heather.

“What a coincidence, my first welcoming pie just came out of the oven, you can take it home with you.”

“You're very generous. Out of curiosity, what kind of pie is it?”

“Strawberry rhubarb.”

“Oh, um... sorry, but Lucinda is allergic to rhubarb.”

“Not a problem, the next one is almost done, and it's cherry.”

“That would be lovely,” Heather said.

From what Mrs. Park saw of the foyer behind the entrance, the whole house was decorated like it was Halloween. The walls were painted orange with brown trim, the carpet was blood red, and there were pentacles, images of the Green Man, fancy hand-made brooms, and skulls all over the walls. Even the staircase opposite the front door was gothic themed, its rich reddish wood carved with handrails resembling snakes, its balusters shaped like human bones. This staircase actually made up part of what she initially took for a wall to the living room, the foyer only having half a wall on the right side, the doorway to the living room being more of a gap between the half-wall and the staircase. On the left side of the foyer, a full wall, with a doorway leading into the kitchen. Glancing quickly into both rooms, they both continued the ‘Halloween’ decoration theme.

Speaking of skulls and bones, Heather was startled when a silvery skeletal arm reached out from the wall at her right side like it was waiting for something.

“What... what does it want?”

“It's waiting in case you wish to hang up your jacket.”

Heather looked where Mrs. Ravenstone was gesturing, and saw that the skeletal arm was attached to a wall-mounted coat rack with several cloaks hanging from hooks that looked like skeletal hands. Cautiously and slightly curious, she took off her jacket and handed it to the arm. It grabbed the jacket and receded up to its wrist into the wall, joining the other hooks.



“Lovely, er, home you have here,” she said, feeling uneasy as Morgana led her through a door just past the coat-hook and stepped through it into the living room. Morgana was soon sitting down on the very fat and comfortable-looking living-room sofa, which was upholstered with silver pentacle designs over a green background. Heather took a seat on a matching single-person chair.

“Be it ever so humble.”

*Orpheus! Nizoni! We have company,* she thought at her two partners. *I don't want to be in here with this woman alone! She's giving me very bad vibes!*

Heather looked around the living room some more while she settled in, struggling to mask her disgust. A television was sitting unplugged and not yet set up in one corner. On the wall opposite of the doorway to the foyer was a fireplace with a mantle, and to the right of the fireplace was a double-wide doorway into a sun-room containing what she was sure was an altar; it was decorated with a multi-tiered shelf containing framed photographs of various people who looked related to each other, several small candles, a clay pot, a small glass bowl of water, a small pot of flowers, a little plate with a bit of scone on it, a tiny bottle of rum, a cigar, and a colorful altar cloth. The overall effect of the house so far was old-fashioned, which made sense given the house was a Queen Anne, though the rooms were about twice as big as she normally saw in Victorian style houses. She suspected, from what she'd seen of the outside, that they had used magic to expand the interior.

“What's especially interesting about the house,” Mrs. Park finally said, “is that it appeared in the previously empty

lot overnight. How did you build a house overnight, even with magic?"

"We didn't build it, we transported it here through the shadows."

She gaped at her hostess. "Through the shadows? You shadow-walked an entire *house*? *How*?"

"Nizoni is good at transporting things."

"I've never heard of anything larger than an elephant being shadow-walked anywhere before!"

"She's *very* good at transporting things."

"I'll say. By the way, I also wonder how you managed to transport the house overnight without the mundanes noticing. Only fellow witches and some of the children seem to have thought it odd."

"Nizoni put a perception filter on the house. Now any mundane adult who looks at it will assume it was always there."

"Clever," Mrs. Park said.

Leaning back in the chair, Mrs. Park only just noticed that the infant was missing her left foot.

"Oh, the poor dear, what happened to her foot?"

"What? Oh, they were born like that. Doesn't slow them down when I put them on the ground, though. I caught them trying to go to the basement earlier, but of course Nizoni is working down there on something dangerous, so I had to stop and pick them up. They would not have been able to get down there, of course, but it's better to teach them caution early."

"And what's her name?"

"*Their* name is Beloved, for now. Nothing official yet."

“Her name is Beloved?”

“*Their* name. For now. We didn't want to presume their gender or give them a name they didn't like. They will choose those later. So we use the genderless singular they/them/their for now.”

Mrs. Park just nodded vaguely, not knowing what to say to that. She thought about her daughter Lucinda to prevent herself thinking something that would offend her host.

After a couple minutes of tense silence, Orpheus came into the room, looking worriedly around. He was holding onto a carafe of coffee and was floating several mugs in the air behind him. Mrs. Park looked curiously at him; he was wearing a loose brown shirt with sunflowers embroidered into it, and his bell-bottomed jeans were studded with rhinestones in little flower shapes. But despite the flowers and rhinestones of his outfit, he and his outfit still read clearly as masculine.

“Er, hello there. Would you want, er, *like* some coffee?” he asked politely, his nervous voice barely loud enough to hear.

“Oh yes, thank you, that would be lovely,” she said, so he filled a floating cup – also showing he was a lefty – and directed it to sit down on the coffee table before her. He then turned to his wife.

“Morgana, dear, could I take Beloved from you for a while?”

“How could I say no, when you're giving me *that* expression?” she asked. At once, the baby began to float in the air, laughing in delight at being levitated. There the baby stayed while Morgana took the baby carrier off of herself and Or-

pheus put it on. When he had it secured, the laughing toddler floated over into the baby carrier. When the baby was secure, Orpheus began at once to play with the child, dangling an over-sized rubber eyeball on a string in front of her.

Mrs. Park sniffed the coffee.

"Is this brewed coffee?" she asked with distaste.

"Yes."

"Black coffee? Nothing added?"

"Er... yes."

"I see. In that case, do you have any creamer?"

"Um, we have cream," Orpheus answered, still playing with the baby.

"Is it vegan?"

"Is it *what* now?"

"Vegan. It means 'containing no animal products or by-products.'"

"Oh. Um, sorry, no. It's from a cow."

"Well," Mrs. Park said in a self-important voice, "I only take organic nonfat vegan soy milk and real vanilla extract with my coffee. And I normally only drink cappuccinos, not this horrible *brewed* stuff. If you don't have any organic nonfat vegan soy milk and real vanilla extract, I'm afraid I won't be able to drink this swill."

Orpheus nodded bemusedly at her, then, smiling a forced smile, said, "Um, sorry, we don't have, uh, anything like that. Not to my knowledge, anyway. Just uh, normal brewed coffee."

"Hmm. I see. Well do you have any tea? I could go for something herbal, anyway."

"Ah yes, we do have that."

*Nizoni, dear, would you bring the herbal tea?* He thought-projected at her. At the same time, he took the coffee from her and stirred it, whistling a tune she didn't recognize for a bit before setting it down.

"I am rather busy at the moment, husband! You will have to get it yourself!" she shouted back, much to Mrs. Park's confusion. The voice sounded regal, somehow, though Mrs. Park couldn't place the accent.

Orpheus smiled again, but instead of leaving, he sat down. "Um... Barry will get it," he said.

"Barry? Who's Barry?"

"Oh. Um, you'll see soon enough."

Mrs. Park nodded, feeling uncomfortable and nervous. "What did you do just now to that coffee?"

"Since you didn't want it, I uh, I used a bit of bard magic to get rid of the caffeine."

Heather was impressed despite herself. "Impressive."

"Thanks. Um... so, uh, you're the, er, the welcoming committee?" Orpheus asked.

"Yes, I am, after a fashion. I'm the Seeing Eye of—"

"The Council. I know. Um, not to be rude, but uh... do you realize your thoughts are so loud when you talk that I, well, I heard you all the way in Tirffiniol? Can't, uh, say I've ever met someone before who could cast their, um, thoughts beyond the veil when a portal wasn't, you know, *open*. Which it wasn't, at the time."

"You were actually *in* Tirffiniol?"

"Yes. My, er, I mean, Nizoni is good with portals, as well as... as, uh, animals. We have a small... menagerie, I guess, of our own." The thought looked like it terrified him.

“Sounds lovely. Does that include the gargoyle?”

“What? Oh no, Ziraxol isn't alive in the traditional sense of the word. She was made by Myrkálves. No idea how they do it.”

He turned as though looking at someone behind him, seeming to listen to something, then turned back to her. “By the way, not that I have to show you, but uh, here's a look at my license to have Scylla and Charybdis.”

Mrs. Park put on her jasper frames and looked at the license without touching it. All the right magical seals were there, it was all in order. “I see you've thought of everything.”

She thought she caught movement in the stone spectacles, but when she turned toward it, nothing was there. A little shaken, she put them back in her pocket.

“Nice specs,” Orpheus said, ignoring her comment and pulling his own magic-seeing glasses out. “Mine are made of, um, clear quartz. It's a *much* better stone for the purpose, I read, than jasper. Though I suppose jasper *is* a form of quartz.”

Before she could respond, an *octopus* of all things came floating into the room inside a floating box that it was plainly controlling with several joysticks and other controls. On the underside of the box was attached cords that held a tray with hot water in a carafe, and several varieties of herbal tea in boxes. Mrs. Park stared at the octopus, pulling back at the sheer weirdness of it. Still, she noticed something odd about the octopus – more odd than its mere existence, oddly enough; it looked like its skin was made of dry tree bark, with little spots of green moss and yellow lichens.

"Thank you, Barry," Orpheus said to the octopus. The octopus gave no sign it understood him, just floated away back into the kitchen.

"Er, Barry is a, um, Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus," Orpheus answered her questioning look. "Quite a clever fellow. He doesn't speak, but Barry understands English pretty well. I've uh, tried communicating with him telepathically of course, but his mind is just too, uh, strange for me. You know octopi have their brains technically in their entire bodies, right?"

"Um... no, I did not."

Mrs. Ravenstone smiled her usual close-lipped smile and said, "Nizoni rescued him from China, of all places. Some poor mundane thought she'd bought a standard octopus, was going to stir-fry him. She had no idea he was intelligent. Nizoni bought him from her and gave her a standard mundane octopus in his place. We weren't there ourselves, though. This was before I met Nizoni, and she and I knew each other before meeting Orpheus."

Mrs. Park's hands were shaking as she tried to make herself some chamomile-lavender tea for her nerves. She'd never even *seen* a tree octopus before in her life, and she'd been living in the northwest since she was four. Nor had she been aware they were *sapient*.

"Oh uh, normally they're not. Sapient, that is. Sorry, you were uh, projecting again."

"Ah, I see. So how is Barry sapient, then?"

"He's Nizoni's familiar," Orpheus said. "Though he was very close to being sapient to begin with."

She nodded. She'd heard that familiars were always smarter than their mundane counterparts, but, well...

"She has a *tree octopus* for a familiar?"

"Yes."

"How... how does he... make tea?"

"Tentacles are just as good at most things as hands are," Morgana responded.

There was an almighty BOOM that shook the whole house. Mrs. Park screamed and dropped her tea, but the two Ravenstones didn't react at all. Not even the baby fussed, though they did turn their head toward the noise. Mrs. Ravenstone sipped her drink when the explosion was over.

"Ah, she's done now," Morgana said, smiling that odd close-lipped smile of hers again.

"Done? *Done?* Done with – with what?" Mrs. Park was clutching her chest, nearly panicking.

"I don't know that I should say," Morgana said. "Nizoni would be able to explain it better anyway."

A few minutes later, Mrs. Park shaking worse than ever as she tried making herself some more of the chamomile-lavender tea and drink some before something else could happen to make her spill it again, a tall woman who looked to be in her late 20's or early 30's came into the room. She looked Native American of some kind, Mrs. Park had no idea how to identify such people. She was wearing khaki pants and a khaki shirt, and had a welding shield on her head, with the visor up. Her black hair was tied in an unusual knot at the nape of her neck, which looked like it was tied in place with an abundance of white yarn. The skin that was visible on her face, hands, and neck was riddled with shiny



scars that Mrs. Park found repellent, but some people would say enhanced her appearance. There was also a blow-torch in her hand. Mrs. Park presumed this was Nizoni.

"A thousand apologies for the explosion," Nizoni said in her regal-sounding voice. Her accent sounded faintly British, but wasn't. Mrs. Park wouldn't have been able to identify it even if she *hadn't* been a nervous wreck. "I am Nizoni Hatathli-Ravenstone, Mrs. Park. By the way, since you were wondering, I am full-blooded Navajo."

Mrs. Park blinked at her. "Oh. Thank you."

"You were having problems down there?" Morgana asked Nizoni curiously.

"Nothing that a little napalm and fire could not solve. To my chagrin, however, I forgot to check for gas pockets beforehand."

"Well, live and learn, live and learn," Morgana said, sipping her coffee.

"So uh, so what precisely were uh, were you um... doing down there?" Mrs. Park asked.

"Exterminating vermin before the inspection."

Speechless, Mrs. Park wondered if she wanted to know what kind of vermin needed to be fought with napalm and fire. Nizoni turned her head to look at her, and smiled.

"My poor woman, you are far better off not knowing, in the state you're in. Suffice it to say there was a slight leak from Tirffiniol during the process of moving the house. If I had known it was going to happen, I would have come here from the beginning to personally oversee the moving process. Not sure it would have helped, since I have no idea how it hap-

pened, but still.” She sighed. “Oh well. At least now I have a few new heads to mount to my wall.”

“My dear,” Morgana said, handing Mrs. Park a small bottle, “take this. It’s a potion to sooth frayed nerves. You look like you need it.”

Stammering out her thanks, Mrs. Park drank the potion. The effect was immediate. She sighed, quite as relaxed as she had been before she came into this madhouse. When she looked up again, she saw Nizoni had taken the welding helmet off – she was right handed, unlike the other two – and set aside it and the welding torch. She walked over to Orpheus and took the baby from him; Orpheus looked slightly disappointed, but didn’t complain.

“How is my darling Beloved?” Nizoni asked, her smiling face in the infant’s face, making the baby laugh. “How is my firstborn child? Yes, you are a fine and happy baby, I know you are.”

“She’s *your* baby? But... but she’s so...”

“Black?” Nizoni supplied.

Mrs. Park nodded.

“That is because they *are* black, and so is their mother,” she said, indicating Morgana, “Biracial is the term. So it is not really all that surprising.”

“But you’re not—wait, I thought *you* were her mother?”

“In a strictly social sense, I am one of *their* mothers, yes. In the biological sense, I am their father.”

Heather Park blinked. “Father? What do you mean, father? You’re a *woman*!”

“Ah, I understand your confusion. You assume the word ‘father’ is gendered, and that only men can be fathers. But

this is not the case. Women can be fathers, and men can be mothers, and vice versa, even without magic. And of course there is blood alchemy. Without using magic, it depends on what kind of man or woman you're talking about. Even Morgana could have been a father had Orpheus or I been equipped to bear the child. Alas, of the three of us, only Morgana has that capability."

Heather was lost and confused. "I... what?"

"It's not really any of her business, Nizoni," Morgana said with a scowl. "Or weren't you listening to her earlier?" If her tone had been any more pointed, it would have made Nizoni bleed.

"Oh, I heard her quite well. If she thought before that we are weird, then—"

"Wait, does that mean you're one of those transgenders?" Mrs. Park asked, looking at Nizoni.

Nizoni's eye twitched at the stilted way Heather had spoken, and at the inadequately suppressed tone of disgust from the blond woman. "Yes, that is the term."

"Wow. I never would have guessed."

Nizoni frowned. "I know you meant well there, in your own way, but it is words like that which you should keep to yourself in the future. You may think it is flattering, but it is not. I will forgive it only this once, since you were unaware of this fact."

Mrs. Park's face remained under control, but her feelings were still in the air, and her contrite tone was not convincing at all when she responded, "Terribly sorry, Ms. Ravenstone."

"Ms. Hatathli-Ravenstone," Nizoni corrected, her tone firm but as kind as possible.

“Er, sorry. My apologies, Ms. Hatathli-Ravenstone. I meant no offense. Some of my best friends are transgender,” Heather said, in the kind of overly sweet tone that she thought made her sound kind, but which other people read quite correctly as a hair-thin veneer of politeness trying and failing to disguise her true feelings.

Nizoni narrowed her eyes. “I very much doubt that, given what I’ve heard of you from the Smith-Jones family, and from your own mind. Even were it true, that would not excuse your words. Educate yourself, please. I hope very much you do not say such things to *every* woman you meet.”

“Yes yes, I’ll do some Googling later about it, thank you,” she said dismissively. “But, well, I still don’t understand. I mean, I gather you still have... well... the equipment necessary to father a child, Ms. Hatathli-Ravenstone, although I suppose there’s always blood alchemy, but, uh, I don’t understand your comment about Mrs. Ravenstone.”

Morgana sighed. “Well, since she’s already spilled the beans a bit (and yes, Nizoni, we *will* be discussing that later), I might as well tell you. I’m intersex. Intersex means, well... you see, male and female as most people think of them are really quite nonsensical labels. Sex is more of a spectrum, there’s male, female, and many various mixes of characteristics, and ‘equipment’ as you say, caused by a wide variety of DNA differences and sometimes things that happen during pregnancy due to outside forces. Someone might look like a normal male on the outside, but have, for an example, a single ovary inside that can only be seen with special scanning equipment. This happens all over nature, not just humans, and happens far more often than most people would guess.

“But in many cases, intersex people are identified at birth. The doctors look between the legs of the baby and instead of being able to easily assign ‘male’ or ‘female’ to the baby (an assignment that people like Nizoni prove to be stupid and often incorrect), in the case of intersex babies they look, and they don’t know what to make of what they see. So usually, they perform surgery to try to make the child look like one or the other, often without parental knowledge or consent, with the hopes they’ll be able to live a more ‘normal’ life, whatever that means, but it just increases the odds the child won’t be happy with their assignment.

“Myself, I was lucky enough to be home-birthed by a family who doesn’t mind if someone or something is unusual. In my own case, probably thanks only to my mother being magical, I became a perfect hermaphrodite and wasn’t mutilated by well-meaning if misguided doctors. I can both bear children *and* father them because of that.”

Mrs. Park gently set her herbal tea down on the coffee table, and stood up very carefully. These people were far beyond even her own worst fears, and she had tolerated their peculiarities long enough. She had not expected her mind to change from this meeting, but it had: for the worse.

“Oh is that the time? Dear me, I have to, uh, go wash... the, uh... the dog. Yes, got to give the dog a bath, I should have done it this morning but well, you know how it goes...”

Mrs. Ravenstone stood up. “Well let me get that welcoming pie for you, dear.”

“Oh, uh, no. No, that’s fine. Thanks anyway, but we’re on a diet, I keep forgetting. It’s fine. I’ll just let myself out, alright? I remember the way.”

"I see. Well, it was a... pleasure meeting you anyway," Morgana said.

Try as she might, Heather Park couldn't help forgetting she shouldn't be thinking around these people, these *freaks* and their horrifying house. And in her moment of weakness she thought about how she'd been right about what sort of people they were when she'd heard they were... darker than was right for the neighborhood. In more ways than one. *And then as if that wasn't bad enough*, she thought, *they're a bunch of freaks of nature as well*. Then she remembered they could read her thoughts, that she was projecting these thoughts for all of them to hear, and turned to stare wide-eyed at a livid Morgana Ravenstone.

While it was hard to be scared by a grown woman wearing a dress of the kind she was wearing, and striped socks, Morgana was suddenly terrifying, an icy look in her eyes. Then she smiled an icy smile, finally showing her teeth.

Mrs. Park stared, thinking at first the woman was wearing some sort of plastic vampire teeth, then thought it was a glamour, but she looked again through the jasper frames and saw that those were the woman's *actual* teeth. Every single one of them was sharpened to a point, and considering the appearance of these teeth and the fact this was a magical family, they likely had been forced to grow that way using magic.

Screaming, Mrs. Park ran from the room, nearly dropping her stone spectacles. She ran to the door, flung it open, slammed it shut behind her, and ran for home as fast as she could in high heels, having even forgotten her jacket in her

haste. The stone gate was already open when she got to it. Morgana chuckled darkly as the woman left.

"It is about time we got rid of that insufferable bigot," Nizoni said, disgust writ large on her face. "The thoughts from her mind, I wish I hadn't heard them! I suggest we put up wards that block us from being able to pick up on anyone's thoughts but each other's. Especially since Beloved will need her privacy eventually."

Morgana was still angry, but nonetheless still shadow-walked the woman's jacket over to her house for her. "She's not getting a welcoming pie. Unless I think I can get away with throwing one in her face."

"I'd tell you not to waste food that way, but I won't because I really hope we are not eating that casserole of hers. Her energy nearly made me puke even *before* she started thinking vile things about us. I thought at first it was the Mongolian Death Worms that somehow invaded the basement, no idea how that happened, but of course their toxin kills rather than merely making people ill, so I knew it had to be something else."

"Energy can be cleansed. I won't be wasting food. But otherwise I agree, Nizoni," Morgana said. "I know plenty of Christians who are perfectly nice and decent people (heck, I once dated a *nun*), but that woman would make Jesus Christ himself flip over a table or two in righteous rage."

Nizoni smiled, and picked up a cookie from the coffee table. "I would pay good money to see Yeshuah ben Yosef of Nazareth chasing that woman down the street with a whip. May a Mongolian Death Worm eat her face."

Orpheus and Morgana shuddered. "Don't say that," Morgana chastised. "Those poor Death Worms would keel over and die if they ate something that toxic. I think the only people I know as bad as her were in books. I had half a mind to ask her if she ever lived at Privet Drive, but I honestly don't think she would have caught the reference. Do you know she's a witch, like all of us, and yet none of her children are witches?"

"Aren't her kids under six? It's unreasonable to expect kids that young to be magical."

"Two of them are. She has three others who are old enough that they should be showing some signs of magic by now."

"What about her husband?"

"Oh he's a witch too, that's why I don't get it. You'd think two witches raising kids together would be able to raise witch kids. I've even met witches who were raised by mundanes. But all of *their* children are as mundane as apple pie."

"Sounds like they try too hard to blend in with the mundies," Orpheus said. "But I don't get it, really; there are plenty of witches who are Christians, despite that revisionist history crud King James popularized with his deliberate mis-translation of the Bible."

"Yeah," Morgana said. "I can't believe how few people know that the original line is properly translated 'thou shalt not suffer a *poisoner* to live.' They keep insisting it says 'witch' rather than poisoner."



"According to some cousins of mine in Ireland," Orpheus said, "some of our ancestors tried protesting the change."

"Speaking of that, did you feel her confusion when I told her our family's old Gaelic name?" Morgana asked.

Nizoni nodded. "I did. Honestly, how difficult is it to realize black people could marry into the name, or some slaves long ago be forced into a name?"

"I'm rather glad she didn't, to be honest. I wouldn't want her to think any of our ancestors would ever stoop so low as slavery, she might think we had something in common then. I don't think any of our ancestors ever owned slaves, did they?"

"Not to my knowledge," Orpheus said. "Maybe back in ancient Rome, I dunno, but that was different; no racism, and slaves were treated a lot better back then, could even buy their freedom in time. Anyway, I know great-grandpa Accalon Ravenstone was part of the Underground Railroad. White as white could be, so pale he got mistaken for a vampire more than once, and they *still* hung him from a tree when they found out what he was doing. His gravestone still said 'nigger lover' as late as 1974, when the family finally found it and replaced it. So yeah, if he'd lived, I'd bet anything he'd have adopted some former slaves into his family to protect them."

"Wait, I thought great-grandpa Accalon *was* a vampire?" Morgana asked.

"No, that was his husband Takashi. Accalon was training to become one, but he never completed his training before his death."

"Oh that's right, I remember now."

Orpheus sighed. "Poor great-grandpa Accalon. One more month and Takashi would have helped him complete the ritual to become a vampire. By the way, Nizoni, how was Takashi doing last time you saw him?"

"He's healthy. Still keeps up with his work taking out human traffickers and other nasties."

"Yes, but I meant emotionally."

"Oh. Still mourning Accalon's death. Still carries the *juzu* from the funeral he gave Accalon. But he's still working toward a better world by slaughtering evil people."

"Well I wish him luck."

She nodded. "Me too. But anyway, Orpheus, I have need to go dismember those Mongolian Death Worms before their blood eats through the foundation stone. You can have the tyke back, now."

"Right," he said, taking the baby from her, and slipping Beloved back into the baby carrier so they were suspended around his belly. Nizoni grabbed a chainsaw from the wall.

"Wait," Orpheus said, looking curious. "Do Mongolian Death Worms even *have* heads? I seem to recall they don't have any eyes."

"True, but they have brains. I will mount the end with the brain in it, once I remove the brain. We cannot let it regenerate, after all."

"Good idea. By the way, don't forget to save all the pieces, including the blood. We could use some more potions ingredients. Mongolian death worm pieces fetch a hefty price on the Goblin market."

“Yes, Orpheus, I am aware. In fact, I believe it was I who told you that.” She hoisted the chainsaw up by one heavily-muscled arm and went downstairs.

When the chainsaw turned on and they could hear the sound of it glancing off magical plates of armor, the toddler giggled. The chainsaw turned off for a while, Nizoni coming back up for the blow-torch to get the armor off, which took her another hour. When she finally started the chainsaw up again, and the room filled with the sound of thick musculature and bones being torn through by the chainsaw, the toddler laughed and flapped her hands with delight.



THE NEXT DAY, A WHITE 2006 Bentley Mulsanne drove into the neighborhood, pulling in front of the Ravenstone house. When the door opened after a couple minutes, out stepped a short, stout man with gray hair and beard. The man was wearing a blue tweed suit, a black felt pork pie hat, a red tie, and using a purely decorative walking stick with the top shaped like a dragon's head, complete with ruby eyes. Even in as nice a neighborhood as this one, he stood out like Ebenezer Scrooge at a rodeo.

Briefly checking a pocket watch for the time, the man looked around, and looked especially at the Ravenstone home. Pulling a pair of gray polished marble lenses out of his breast pocket, he put them on and looked at the house again. He knew the place met the mundane rules for the neighborhood, and now he was checking the magical side of things.

The stone wall had gotten new wards added to it yesterday by the look of things, some sort of containment ward. A very powerful containment ward, too. And on one side of the stone gate for the wall, there was a small hole that a mailbox's lid poked out of, so the mundane mail delivery people wouldn't have to cross the threshold into the yard. There was also a doorbell underneath that.

The man saw, too, the third story, the different paint job, the magical tree in the yard, and also he saw signs that a pretty significantly large portal to Tirffiniol had been opened here. In fact, if what he saw was right, there was a permanent portal, much smaller than the previous one, still active somewhere on the property. Which meant these people were powerful, and likely wealthy as well. Of course they'd have to be well off, at least upper middle class, to live up here.

Putting his stone lenses in his breast pocket again, he took a mirror out of another pocket and stood with his back to the house, looking at it through the mirror. The glamour reflected in the mirror, too. He nodded at this, put the mirror back, and took out a digital camera and an old-fashioned Polaroid camera, taking pictures with both. The glamour even appeared in the photos, which impressed him.

Walking up to the wall, he touched it, surprised that it felt warm. Putting the stone spectacles on again, he tried to open the gate, and found it seemed to be stuck shut, just as solidly as its stone door suggested. He took a small bottle out of his pocket and put several drops of the liquid on the door, which opened at once. Far from being annoyed at this, however, he approved. It was a good idea to have magic designed to keep the mundanes out of magical yards. He even chuck-

led when writing on the stone door changed to read, 'Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.'

Upon entering, he saw the carnivorous plant in the yard, and the same signs Mrs. Park had seen. One sign spoke to him when he approached, saying, "I'm supposed to remember to tell you to please stay on the path. There, now I've done it. You no longer have an excuse for ignoring me." It sighed. "Ugh, my life. Brain designed to learn and think, and here I am working as a living yard sign. Good thing I'm not actually sentient." A second sign then said, "DON'T PANIC!"

Strangely, despite the signs being there, he couldn't see the gargoyle anywhere. Pulling a tablet computer from his pocket, he made a note on it to ask after the gargoyle and the carnivorous plant, then put it back in his pocket.

Everything else he could see from there seemed fairly standard for a magical residence, so he walked up onto the porch and rang the doorbell, which howled like a wolf. He smiled at that, amused, and put his marble frames back into his pocket.

The door opened, and a black woman in a blood red dress answered the door. She had on red cat's-eye contact lenses, or maybe a glamour, just like Mrs. Park's report said.

"May I help you?" she asked politely.

"Are you Mrs. Ravenstone?"

"Yes. And who might you be?"

"Christopher Starling, Chief Inspector for the *Concilio Portlandia*. I believe I sent you an email for you to expect me."

"Oh yes, I just wanted to make sure you were who I was expecting without prompting."

"An excellent idea, madam, especially without your spectacles on."

She smiled enigmatically. "I don't really need those. I had the orbital bones around my left eye replaced with enchanted onyx a few years ago."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

"Fascinating."

"Well do come in, Mr. Starling."

"Thank you."

When the man stepped in and looked around, his thoughts on the residence differed greatly from those of Mrs. Park. He thought the place looked cozy, it reminded him of home. He was seeing all the same things, of course, but the Starlings had a history of paganism as well. They prided themselves on it, in fact, as the reason they'd not had any mundane children for over a century. Not that many outside the family knew this, of course; they'd survived as pagans so long by pretending to be Christians.

She led him into the living room, where three other adults waited for him. Along with Mrs. Ravenstone, her husband, and Nizoni Hatathli-Ravenstone, there was also an older black woman of about age 60. This woman was sitting down, a pack of tarot cards on the table next to her. Her left eye was milky white with blindness. He noticed that the husband, Orpheus, looked very nervous, and was holding onto the arm of Mrs. Hatathli-Ravenstone as though it were a life raft.

The toddler that Mrs. Park mentioned was shakily standing up, holding onto a large mechanical spider with a saddle to stay standing. As he watched, the child climbed up on the saddle and sat up expectantly. A securement resembling the straps on a baby seat lifted up automatically and secured the baby in place. A pair of handles lifted up out of the body of the spider, and the child held onto them. Once little Beloved did that, the spider started to move like it was alive, and he watched it take the toddler climbing up the stairs to another part of the house, to the child's squeals of delight.

"Would you like some tea while I introduce you to everyone?" Morgana asked.

"What? Oh yes, that sounds lovely. Have Barry bring me some Earl Grey, won't you?"

"You uh, you know about... about Barry?" Orpheus said, a distinct quaver in his voice.

"I know a few things about you already, yes. One of your neighbors, a Mrs. Park, is something of a, well, a busybody. She told me about her experience here, and honestly I must say with her low tolerance for unusual things, it's a wonder she's a witch at all. I've never met a witch quite as mundane as that one. Or I hadn't, until I met her husband; he's worse."

"Oh. Really? I uh, well I mean, um..."

"Yes. And there's no need to be so nervous, Mr. Ravenstone. I do have some questions, of course, and I may have more after seeing the rest of the house, but mostly you're doing quite well so far. I do apologize for the necessity of these things, but we have to keep the truth from the mundanes after all. It's not easy, of course, when a strong belief in magic is all it takes to turn a mundane into a budding witch, so we

must take every measure we can to hide the secret from the ones that would hate and fear us. Which, aside from a few questions I have, you seem to be doing quite well in that regard, though I guess I already said that.”

“About Mrs. Park,” Morgana said. “She claimed you and her were friends.”

“Ha! I barely tolerate her, but she's completely oblivious to that. Bigoted woman, the type who puts on a polite face and then talks about people behind their backs. Nominally Christian, but I'm fairly certain Jesus would chase her down the street with a whip if he knew the kinds of things she did in his name. You know I actually saw her cross a busy street to avoid a homeless beggar, once? On Christmas eve, no less! I was so outraged at her I gave the poor man \$100 in 20's. Glad I did, made the fellow light up like a Christmas tree. Probably made his whole month.”

Barry arrived then with the tea, and they all set to making some. Mr. Starling stared curiously at the tree octopus, but didn't seem bothered by it.

“First thing's first,” he said as he sipped his tea. His tablet computer flew out of his pocket on its own and began writing on itself with a stylus. “I know of Mrs. Morgana Ravenstone and her husband Orpheus already. And you must be Nizoni Hatathli-Ravenstone?”

“Yes,” Nizoni said.

“Excellent. And for our records, may I please have your full names and ages? I swear on my life to only tell this information to government officials or law enforcement agents on a need-to-know basis.”



Nizoni nodded, and pointed at herself. “Nizoni Hádí Tl’iish Hatathli-Ravenstone, age 30.” She spelled it for him, having to write out one character for him, then gestured at Orpheus with her head. “Orpheus Rahmat Ravenstone, age 23.” She gestured at Morgana. “Morgana Belladonna Ravenstone, age 26.”

“Thank you for the information.” He turned to the old woman. “Hello, madam. What is your full name and age?”

“Kahina Ravenstone, age 60. I am Orpheus's mother.”

“Excellent. And I understand the infant has no real official name yet, correct?”

They nodded. Then Orpheus said, “We have the second of our two children up in their shared nursery. They’re much younger than Beloved. We call them *Querido* for now. It means ‘dear, cherished, precious’ in Spanish. Like their older sibling, it’s just a placeholder name until they’re old enough to pick their own name.”

“I see. A little unusual, that, but not a problem. Is there anyone else living in the house?”

The Ravenstones all looked at one another, then Morgana turned back to Mr. Starling.

“When you say ‘living...’”

Two spirits floated through the wall into the room. One looked like an older, more sturdily-built version of Orpheus, appearing to be around age 50, who moved to ‘stand’ behind Orpheus. The other was a tall blond woman wearing a Viking shield, battle ax, and helmet. Not the stupid horned hats normally falsely associated with Vikings, but an actual Viking helmet. The translucent ghosts, visible only to witch-

es like himself and everyone else in the room, only startled him a little.

"I see what you mean. And who are you two, sir and madam?"

The tall blond woman ghost said something in a language he didn't understand, but he thought it might be Old Norse.

"Her name is Borghild," Morgana said. "We don't know her surname or age."

"And my name," said the ghost of the black man, "is Amani Ravenstone. I'm Kahina's late husband. I died when I was 48, but I would have been 62 now if I had lived."

Mr. Starling did some quick math in his head and his eyes widened in shock, looking from Amani to Orpheus and back again.

"So you died when your son was only nine years old?"

Amani nodded solemnly. "Yes. I wish I'd had more time. But at least I was only gone for a couple years before my wife brought me back as a ghost. I got to see my boy grow into a man, and he got to know that not even death would stop me being a father to my son." He hugged Orpheus, who smiled with slight embarrassment.

Kahina smiled at Mr. Starling. "I'm a necromancer, among other things. I can't take credit for Borghild, she's been hanging around Orpheus since he was a teenager, he found her in a museum, but Amani is with us thanks to me. Of course, he's free to leave whenever he wishes to. So is Borghild."

"I see." Mr. Starling chuckled to himself. "Oh, it's a good thing Mrs. Park didn't see either of you. I feel certain she would have needed to go to the hospital after that."

"It was odd," the late Amani Ravenstone said, "because we were both here, and yet she didn't see us, not even with her stone lenses. But *you* can see us."

"Like I said, that woman is practically a mundane herself. I'm not surprised she didn't see you."

Borghild sat down on one of the armchairs and started to sharpen her ghostly ax with an equally ghostly whetstone.

"I understand the appeal of family members hanging around after they've passed, but uh, pray tell, why does this viking woman live—er, share the house with you?"

"My husband is afraid of a great many things. When it gets to be too much for him, or he needs to be brave, Borghild possesses him. It's entirely his choice, though; she can only go into his body by invitation. But to his credit, he hasn't needed her help very much in the last couple years."

"I see. Fascinating."

A few minutes of idle chat later, Mr. Starling was done with his tea. He stood up.

"Well, let's get this over with, so your husband can relax sooner. First of all, Mr. Ravenstone – er, Orpheus I mean, if I could see your License to Possess a Class-12 Magical Creature?"

Orpheus got out the license, and Mr. Starling examined it through his marble lenses.

"Excellent, that's all in order. I believe you just have the two of them, right?"

“Um, yes. One in the, uh, back yard - after a fashion, and, um, one in the front. Scylla is the one in front, Charybdis is in the back.”

Mr. Starling chuckled. “Excellent names. Now, I understand there have been some incidents,” he said, reading a file on his tablet computer. “A Jehovah's Witness got eaten three months ago?”

“Not fatally,” Morgana said, “but yes. He was a little cut up and bruised, but we rescued him in time. Which, given Scylla could kill and eat a human faster than he could scream, we assume means she was being playful. Still, we're taking steps to ensure it won't happen again. We recently finished the wards to keep her away from the path from the gate to the door, and wards on the wall to keep her in the yard. And of course you already know we have a locking ward on the gate.”

“Yes, quite amusing, that. Does it say a different welcome every time?”

“Not always. But it has a number of welcomes to choose from. Enough that it gives the illusion of a different unique welcome every time.”

“Splendid. Anyway, I saw the wards you mentioned. But I didn't see the gargoyle Mrs. Park mentioned.”

“We had her hide under the porch today. We didn't want to scare you.”

“Well I would like to meet her,” he said.

She smiled her close-lipped smile, it reaching her eyes as well. “That can be arranged.”

“Excellent. Can I see it now?”

“Of course.”

They went to the front yard together, everyone but the ghosts, and Mrs. Ravenstone called Ziraxol out from under the porch. The Ravenstone family all had their eyes closed. Mr. Starling blinked, and the gargoyle appeared, frozen in a pose with its head cocked in curiosity.

“Ziraxol, I’d like you to meet Mr. Starling. He won’t be scared of you.”

When he next blinked, the gargoyle was full-sized, which did make him startle a little, but he smiled at it. The gargoyle’s mouth was hanging open, its tongue lolling out, and looked like it was smiling. He blinked again, and it had its forepaws on his shoulders, still looking playful.

“Remarkable. I wish I knew how it moves between blinks. Speaking of, what happens if more than one person is looking at it at once?”

Morgana said, “it becomes more difficult for her to move, in those instances. But she can force people to blink if she needs to. She’s a great guardian, intimidating without being actually dangerous. If someone is stealing, breaking things, or hurting the family, then she’ll hold the person down, maybe grab them with her jaw. That can hurt sometimes, but she rarely breaks the skin.”

“Incredible. How much did she cost you?”

Nizoni answered this time. “Ziraxol was payment for services rendered. The Myrkálves made her.”

He blinked again, and Ziraxol was on the ground, her belly exposed for scratches. Bemused, he scratched the gargoyle’s belly, and realized when he did that it wasn’t stone, even though it looked like stone. It wasn’t hard enough to be stone.

"We think she's made of wood, actually," Nizoni said in response to his confused expression.

"Wood?"

"Yes. We think she was made from a type of magical tree that eats magic. The gate doesn't really eat magic, just uses it to allow entry. Ziraxol, on the other hand, really *does* eat magic. We know because there's been times when she was looking ill, and pepped up as soon as we gave her some magic oil."

"If she really is made from a thaumavorous plant, that would be an incredible feat of phytomancy! To use magic to do that to a magic-eating plant... the power requirements for that must be vast! No wonder it's Myrkálf made... I don't think human witches would have the power to do that."

"That's our theory, too."

"Right. Well, let's carry on shall we?" Mr. Starling said.

Not waiting for a response, Mr. Starling examined the wards around Scylla the carnivorous blackberry bramble. He soon made a note on his tablet that it was sufficiently restrained.

"I see there were some other incidents here; an injured dog, a missing goat, and some people witnessed it move. Given that the thing is now sufficiently contained from view by outsiders, I guess we don't have to worry anymore about those things."

"True. The goat is still missing, though."

"Noted. I'd recommend an extra ward to keep the plant stationary when outsiders come onto the property, and possibly a glamour to make extra sure that the plant can't be seen

from beyond the wall. Does your gargoyle move even if mundanes are in the yard?"

"No," Nizoni said. "We have her trained to stay still unless she sees someone magical. Anyway, it's a bit of a moot point, since one of us would have to open the gate for a mundane."

"Right, of course. Silly me. Anyway, aside from those suggestions I made, all is good on that front."

"Good to hear," Morgana said with her usual close-lipped smile.

"By the way, do you have similar containment for the other Blackberry Strangler?"

"You could say so," Nizoni said with a grin.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'll show you. Come, this way."

She showed him around to the back yard, which looked quite ordinary, even through the stone lenses. It had a vegetable garden in it, and a garden shed. He did a double-take when he looked at the garden shed. There was some sort of powerful magic emanating from there. He thought he might know what it was, but he wanted to be sure first.

"May I see inside that shed?"

"Yes. That is where I am leading you."

Nizoni opened the door to the shed and he stepped inside. It looked like an ordinary tool shed until he got to the back wall of it, which had an archway of black onyx bricks built into it. The door looked to him to be made of wood from the African acacia tree. In both the stones and the door were hundreds of very small runes from over a dozen different languages, including a few pictographs.

“Good lord, is this a *permanent* portal to Tirffiniol?”

“Yes. I am a professional portal maker and ward master,” Nizoni said. “Among other things.”

“Indeed? Your family must be richer than mine, with a talent like that!”

“We’re comfortable. The excess goes to organizations and individuals we feel will help improve the world. Or those who are in need.”

“May I?”

“Of course.”

He gently took the knob and turned it, opening the door out into the realm beyond. He stared out into it for several minutes, admiring the view from the top of a grassy hill the other half of the portal was on. He poked his head through the opening and looked around, spotting the other magical blackberry tangle contained in its own little area of the hill, with similar wards. Satisfied, he closed the door.

“Amazing!”

They all grinned.

“I saw your other plant in there, Charybdis. Interesting that she’s not even technically in your yard, unless... do you own the area of Tirffiniol around the portal?”

“Insofar as owning land is possible,” Nizoni said, “yes, we own some Tirffiniol property.”

“How much?”

“In the immediate area, one square mile, and the portal is right in the middle of it. Well, as close to one square mile as you can get in a place as strange as Tirffiniol, anyway.”

“Fascinating.”



“Quite. And the door is how I get to work,” Nizoni said. “My day job is the nearby Pacific Northwest Tirffiniol Nature Preserve. The portals and ward crafting I do freelance, doing a lot of the work at home, going out to my clients as need be.”

“Amazing. Simply amazing.”

The rest of the inspection wasn't nearly so interesting. Mr. Starling was a little befuddled by the bogeymen in the attic, the hive of fairy bees in one of the spare rooms on the third floor with their healing honey that glowed in the dark, the room full of feathery hats chirping and flying around the room, a skating rink, a bowling alley, an enormous room full of myriad bizarre mushrooms, and the acid burns on the floor of the basement. But other than that, he liked the place and he liked the Ravenstones.

“A-plus!” he finally decreed. “Excellent containment all around, perfect glamours, the wards are the best I've seen in 20 years, and that portal! And is it my imagination, or is that entire third floor in a 'hollow hill'? No wait, the view from those windows... is it in Tirffiniol as well? Either way, it seemed almost like an entirely different house.”

“That would be because it *is* an entirely different house. We also own property in a part of Tirffiniol near Toronto, and the third floor is the building on that property.”

“Wait, you mean to tell me we just went all the way to Toronto and back?”

“Well sir, you know how strange Tirffiniol is. Distance can be peculiar there. Especially if you happen to specialize in convincing it to do things it wouldn't normally do.”

“Yes, of course, but to link one house to another over that distance like that, it's amazing!”

“I suppose so,” Nizoni said, smiling. “The only down side is that we cannot visit the yard surrounding the other house without going through the Quartz Door in the room to the right of the bee room, which is a long way to walk. But it's good exercise.”

“If all that is true, how is it that objects like rain and animals were hitting the invisible third floor?”

“The third floor *does* have four walls, a floor, and a roof in which to anchor it. This house really *does* have three stories to it, which would be obvious without the glammers. The real third floor is a necessary part of the link, a place to anchor the link to. Without an anchor, the Sardonyx Door is just a portal to a space a couple stories above the ground in Tirffiniol, which would be potentially deadly to go through.

“Of course, we could use that space anyway if we wanted to, we'd just have to put in a mundane door. But the anchor wards are a bit sensitive to light, so we made a door leading there for the bogeymen, with a sort of 'lightlock' as opposed to an airlock, and they live up there, since they prefer the darkness. We call it the attic, even though our actual attic is in the other house.”

“How much would it cost for a setup like that?”

“It would take six months to set up. If you became a client, it would cost 1.5 million dollars to set up.”

“Odin's Eye!” Mr. Starling exclaimed. He then put a hand on his mouth. He was slipping up, that wouldn't do. Not until he'd come out as a pagan, which now looked possible in a way it hadn't before.

“Yes, well, it is very tricky to set up. Even I cannot do it perfectly. You know those acid burns on the basement floor? Those were caused by a pair of Mongolian Death Worms I had to kill when they somehow crawled in from Tirffiniol. I am still unsure how that happened. But in a couple months I should have it figured out.”

Mr. Starling mouthed the words 'Mongolian Death Worms' in shock. Then he shook himself out of it.

“Well don't tell Mrs. Park about that, she'll have a fit,” he said.

“Several, I expect.”

“Right. Well, fascinating as this has been, it's getting a bit late. I have two more inspections to do today, though I don't expect them to take nearly so long. Your family is unusual in a great many ways.”

“You don't know the half of it, Mr. Starling.”

Mr. Starling looked like he was going to ask about that, then wisely changed his mind. He tipped his pork pie hat at them and jovially left, got into his Bentley, and drove off. His mind was full of possibilities and plans. He needed to talk these people into contributing to the community directly, preferably by joining the *Concilio Portlandia*. He was looking forward to the attempt.





## Chapter Three: Et Tu, Christopher?

*Late 2006 - early 2007*

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for the Ravenstones to become the talk of the neighborhood. Everywhere you turned, people were talking about them, usually behind their backs. It started in earnest when Morgana and Orpheus were pushing their two babies in a pair of coffin-shaped baby strollers. Black people were unusual in that neighborhood to start with, and black *goths* even more so. Trying to be kindly anyway, one of the neighbor women went up to them, the one that just happened to have Beloved in it.

"Your baby is so beautiful. Aww, she's chewing on her foot, the sweetie. I bet that tastes delicious, doesn't it?"

"It sure does," Morgana said. "Just look what they did to the other one!"

She twitched aside the blanket, revealing the baby's missing foot. The woman promptly fainted. The baby giggled. Their sibling in the other stroller didn't react at all, because Querido was deaf, and had been asleep as well.

"You can be so evil sometimes, my raven-hearted queen of the night," Orpheus said, grinning.

"Flatterer," she responded, kissing him right there in public.

Polite as the Ravenstones had been to the nosy Mrs. Park, whom they'd later discovered from Mr. Starling had been somewhat out of the bounds of her job description when she'd given their house her unofficial pre-Inspection inspection, the two families still quickly became at odds with one another. Mrs. Park claimed to think merely that the Ravenstones attracted too much attention and might make the mundanes suspicious with their Gothic appearance and blatant display of pentacles and other symbols of their pagan religion (even though those were mostly confined to the inside of the house), and that didn't make much sense to them, beyond her racism, given that there were mundanes who were pagans, too.

It didn't help relations between the two families that a month after moving in, Nizoni had construction work done to put a driveway and garage in on the side of the larger empty side of the yard. The construction was being done the mundane way, so there were lots of noises from saws, hammers, concrete trucks, power tools, workers talking, and other sources, all working at day and stopping every evening before sundown. Mrs. Park kept being disturbed by the noise, which woke her own baby Anastasia, who cried whenever the noise woke her. Nizoni (hardhat on and still holding a nail gun since she had been helping the workers before being interrupted) listened patiently and calmly as Mrs. Park shouted at her about the noise. When Mrs. Park stopped

shouting, Nizoni explained calmly and patiently that they'd decided to do it the mundane way for *her* benefit, so she wouldn't have to worry about the children being concerned that the strange house had added a garage and driveway overnight, since she often complained about them being sure to out the witch community with their appearance and behavior.

This didn't help. Far from thanking them for their consideration, Mrs. Park petitioned the local Council to have the family removed from the neighborhood. She didn't succeed at this, because the Ravenstones had done nothing wrong and they had Mr. Starling on their side, but it proved to them the kind of person she was, even more than her racist comments had.

The whispers (mostly fueled by the feud between the two families) continued. So did the feud, though the Ravenstones tried to ignore Mrs. Park for the most part. A few weeks after their garage went up, and less than a week after The Council had dismissed Mrs. Park's complaint, they found out from Mr. Starling that Mrs. Park was hosting a party composed of witches from the Pacific Northwest region, primarily Council and school board members but also the unaffiliated wealthy witches of the area. Everyone fitting these descriptions got an invitation from her, except for the Ravenstones. They wouldn't have even known about it if Mr. Starling hadn't told them about it *and* used his position to get them an invite as well, one that Mrs. Park wouldn't know about somehow. Even though it was a party hosted by Mrs. Park, whom they didn't care for, it would be far too rude to refuse an invitation, even if the hostess didn't know, some-

how, that they were invited. The Ravenstones are nothing if not polite, even to people who don't deserve it.



MRS. PARK WAS IN HER element, bustling around preparing the large room she'd rented from a local fancy hotel for the party she'd organized of all the local witches she liked, under the guise of being a gathering of important local wealthy people, which wasn't even a lie, just not the whole truth. With the help of her eldest children and a couple of her best friends, the room was looking elegant and ritzy, with champagne glasses, expensive *hors d'oeuvres*, servers in fancy uniforms, guests wearing elegant formal suits or dresses, the guests all driving fancy cars like BMW's, fancy sedans, expensive sports cars, or cars like Mr. Starling's Bentley.

Seeing as she was busy greeting the arriving guests and introducing them to each other, Mrs. Park didn't see what the valets did; she didn't see, among the Bentleys and BMW's and other expensive cars, the lumbering beast that was an old, blue VW panel van with a brand-new paint-job of blood-red Mongolian Death Worms crawling over it, its headlights looking somehow like eyes in a face that appeared to be glaring at everything, probably because the lines that made a V shape in the front had been painted black, and the bumper had been painted to look like it had sharp, blood-stained teeth. What was more, the hubcaps had been painted with an odd symbol that looked like a lowercase 'h' with a

cross on the top had been placed atop a curtain rod with two identical crosses on each end.

The van pulled up to the valet, and the girl whose turn it was to take this car walked up to open the doors for the strangest assortment of people she had ever seen. From the driver's side came a Native American woman, her face and hands covered with dozens of shiny scars that – far from marring her appearance, somehow added to it. The woman's hair was tied into a bar-shaped knot at the back of her head with a great deal of what looked like white yarn. This yarn – pulled in very tightly and neatly – covered most of the hair in the bun, hair only visible at the top and bottom, and part of the yarn (presumably the tail end of it) hung down in a straight, bundled mass down to the space between her shoulders. The yarn holding her hair together was also partially covered by a hair decoration that looked to be made of copper and turquoise.

The Native American woman was also wearing a black silk suit with a black vest printed in blood red print of a geometric pattern composed of triangular shapes. Everything about the suit was black (except the red on the vest) and it all screamed 'goth!' Over the vest was a tailcoat, its two tails trailing down; their silver trim and turquoise buttons provided the only other color, the trim highlighting the fact that the back of the coat resembled a cloven hoof. She was also wearing a black silk tie.

From the waist down, however, she wore a flowing black skirt, like she was wearing a black evening dress under the tailcoat and vest. This, too, had the same geometric design on it, in a pair of vaguely stripe-shaped areas on each side



– front and back. Her shoes were black leather, men's dress shoes. Though that kind of shoe didn't normally go with dresses, she made it work.

Second out of the van, from the front passenger's side, was a tall and almost unhealthily-thin black man dressed in a tailcoat and vest nearly identical to the woman's, except that the blood red print on his vest was a design of leaves and curling vines, instead of her geometric design.

Below the jacket, he wore matte-black pants with a vine pattern done in a shinier black. His shoes were shiny leather or perhaps a synthetic leather, and he had white spats on over them, the spats decorated with one black pentacle apiece. Yet despite the rest of his attire being very masculine, these shoes were high-heels. The valet hadn't even known shoes like it existed. She turned her attention to the pentacles on the spats, then back to the silver buttons on his outfit, only now realizing they were little silver pentacles.

In the other direction, he had on a black top hat with a very realistic-looking dark green snake coiled around it, appearing to stare forward from its perch; only the fact it didn't move at all gave a sign it wasn't alive. And on the man's face were square-shaped granny glasses with silver frames and black-tinted lenses.

The third person to exit the van was a black woman wearing a long-sleeved black, ruffled silk dress that looked like it had been made with a Victorian-era funeral in mind. She was even wearing a funeral veil, though of a type where her face was clearly visible through the sheer fabric. Her face, in fact, was quite lovely, like it had been carved out of some sort of dark brown stone, except of course she was alive and

her face moved, along with her lips being a metallic silver color. But the most striking thing about her appearance was her eyes – mainly because they were black voids, which had to be some kind of contact lenses, because human eyes just didn't naturally look like two small holes had been cut out of the universe.

The thin, black hippie man took her hand to help her out of the van since she was wearing a bulky dress, and the valet girl saw the woman's fingernails were painted silver to match her lipstick.

*“Te ves preciosa hoy, mi víbora letal,”* the thin black man said to the woman in the funeral dress. He then turned toward the Native American woman and smiled, saying, *“Y tú, mi radiante serpiente de cascabel.”*

The black-eyed woman smiled graciously at the man. *“Mantenga su serpiente en su **propia** guarida por ahora, esposo,”* she said, sounding a little flirty.

The valet wished she understood Spanish. Especially since the man looked shocked at her words, his head and eyes darting around as though trying to determine if any Spanish speakers had overheard, and the Native American woman guffawed with laughter.

Since neither of her companions were capable of talking at the moment, the black-eyed woman took the key to the van's door from the Native American woman and walked over to the valet girl.

“Blessings,” she said to the valet. “My name is Morgana Ravenstone. This is my husband Orpheus, and that is my wife, Nizoni. Not legally, of course, not until plural mar-

riages are legalized. Only in the eyes of the gods. What is your name, dear?"

The valet blinked at the strange woman. "Um," she said, "my name is Emma."

"Excellent. Emma, we have an invitation to a party being held here. We called ahead and paid over the phone, it should be under my name. By the way, here's the invitation, in case you need to see it."

"That's fine, ma'am, I'll just look up your name. Hmm, yes, right here, says 'Morgana Ravenstone.' Excellent. Let me take care of that for you."

When Emma put the list back in place, she held out her hand for the key. Mrs. Ravenstone handed her the door key (since the car was still running), then took a \$50 bill from a black purse shaped like a coffin and placed it in Emma's hand. Emma stared at the money in disbelief.

"Ma'am? Did you mean to give me a \$50? I mean, this hotel is nice and somewhat fancy, but not *that* fancy." *Plus*, she thought to herself, *rich people tend to be stingy*. She wasn't used to getting tipped so well, especially up-front.

"Yes, I did indeed mean to give you \$50, you hard-working young woman," Morgana said, smiling. "And there will be just as much more when we get the van back, of course. That is only right and proper."

"Oh. Wow. Well, thank you very much," she said happily, handing them the ticket with their car's valet number on it. "I'll be very careful. I'm *always* careful, but for you, I'll be *extra* careful."

"Don't go to too much trouble, dear. Ours is a very sturdy van. Someone keyed the van once. They had to get a replacement key."

Without another word, the Ravenstone family left Emma standing there, staring at them for a moment before she snapped out of it.

"Um, ma'am?"

Morgana stopped and turned around. "Yes?"

"Is there anything I need to know about the van?"

Looking pensive a moment first, Morgana said, "Whatever you do, do *not* look under the hood."

Nizoni chuckled. "Amen to that. Also, it is an automatic."

The first statement had been said like a dire warning or premonition, while the second had been said like it was some sort of inside joke. So as they went into the hotel, Emma swallowed and decided she wouldn't look under the hood, not even if it was belching black smoke.



MR. STARLING, STANDING by Mrs. Park, watched the door for his guests to arrive. He hadn't told Mrs. Park, of course. She didn't know that he had been visiting the Ravenstones every week for a month, talking with them about the local political situation. Naturally, they had been appalled, and wanted to help, especially with the school, since in a decade, more or less, their Beloved would be going there. (They weren't sure about Querido yet, but Beloved had al-

ready started making things float, claiming her imaginary friend was doing it.) Mr. Starling smiled to himself as he thought about Mrs. Park's coming reaction to tonight.

The large room, large enough to qualify as a ballroom, was half full of people when the Ravenstones arrived. When they entered the room, a few curious heads turned their way. Mr. Starling smiled at them and turned to see if Mrs. Park had seen. The resulting silence spread faster once the initial silence got the attention of the others around them. Soon, the only sound in the room was the music, which was being provided by a set of DJ equipment that Morgana could see with her enhanced eye was being operated magically, though it was easy to mistake it for a mundane electrical appliance with the same function.

There were other signs, here and there, of magic. Glamours on clothes and hair and jewelry, mostly. One of the punch bowls was filled with some sort of magic potion that acted as a mild drug to get people faintly high. Not by much, though. Not as much as a Ravenstone party would have had, by a wide margin.

Once the silence broke and people started talking again, they saw someone moving as rapidly as she could toward them; a familiar, pretty blond woman in a pink chiffon dress, her hair tied in an elegant knot atop her head. Mr. Starling trailed behind in her wake.

"You three were not invited! Leave now before I call security," Mrs. Heather Park warned them icily.

"Oh no, Heather, you're quite mistaken. They *were* invited," said Mr. Starling. "I invited them."

Mrs. Park turned to Mr. Starling, looking absolutely stunned and betrayed. "You invited them, Christopher? Without telling me?"

"Of course I did, Heather. I thought that was our arrangement. Was I wrong?"

With a sour face, Mrs. Park said, "Yes, that *is* our arrangement. But why them? I thought we were friends, you and I?"

"I don't know what could possibly have made you think that, Heather. I don't recall ever saying or doing anything to indicate that. I never even gave you leave to use my given name, and so I use yours as a sort of passive-aggressive, personal joke. As far as I know, we're not even allies. Your brother-in-law is on the school board, of course. But your husband never had any political aspirations. And thank the gods for that, there's enough of his kind of thinking in The Council as is."

She blinked at him. Then, comprehending, she looked shocked again. "'The gods'? Christopher, I... are you a... a *pa-gan*?"

He took a sip of champagne, then answered with a smile. "Yes. Always have been. Long family history of it, in fact. I got tired of the secret being secret. We live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And now that the Ravenstones are here, I think very soon the power balance is going to shift."

Apparently deciding to ignore the fact she'd never really known him, she whispered, "But they're not like us! They're... *poor*."

Nizoni glared at Mrs. Park. "Actually, we *are* wealthy." Mrs. Park gaped at her. Nizoni continued, "I am *quite* sure

you weren't aware that my family is wealthy. An easy thing to be unaware of, as our branch of the Ravenstone family only came into wealth recently thanks to my work building portals and wards for wealthy clients. Mr. Starling here knows how much I charge for my services, as I recently overhauled his home's wards for him."

"Yes, Heather, they wouldn't be able to live on Winterbloom Way if they weren't wealthy."

"But... but... I mean, I saw their horrible van the other day. I hope they didn't drive it *here*."

"Ayání – our van – is family. He's been in the family for decades. My mother made him and gave him to me. And yes, we drove him here; he's our only vehicle at the moment. And even if he weren't, we still would have driven him here, just for that expression on your face when we told you we had. Orpheus, do take a photo of that."

"Already done, my lovely desert rattlesnake," Orpheus said, pointing to a camera lens on his lapel. He turned to Christopher.

"Mr. Starling," Orpheus said, "speaking of cameras... do you know if we, uh... I mean to say, is it safe to use our Gifts here or not?"

"If you're asking about surveillance, my good sir, you need not worry. I have the finest glammers over the cameras. The mundanes won't suspect a thing, unless the party gets too rowdy." He laughed at his own joke; most of the people in this room looked like they thought humor – let alone rowdiness – was something only for the plebeians.

"Good to know," Orpheus said, reaching with his left hand into a pocket inside his tailcoat and pulling out a wand.

The wand Orpheus had pulled out was... unusual. Most wands were made of wood, though they could be made of a great many other substances as well. This one was clearly a cutting from Scylla, the Creeping Himalayan blackberry strangler in the Ravenstone yard. It was composed of at least half a dozen black vines with nasty-looking thorns, with a handle of bamboo so Orpheus could hold it without hurting himself. (How he'd managed to not snag the thorns on his clothes was—probably magic, come to that.) On the business end of the wand, one of the vines was curled around the base of a razor-sharp and lethal-looking shard of black obsidian, like the wand was alive and holding onto the blade.

In fact, as Mrs. Park looked at the wand, one of the vines twitched like a living thing. She jumped back with a start, clutching her chest. *This man has to be insane*, she thought, *to make a wand out of Creeping Himalayan Blackberry Strangler*. The fact it wasn't dead wasn't surprising; magical plants gave wand materials willingly or not at all, and kept the piece of themselves alive via a magical connection.

Pausing with this thorny wand halfway to his head, Orpheus said, "Yes, Scylla gave me these vines. Charybdis doesn't have the temperament for this sort of thing."

He pointed the wand's tip at the realistic-looking snake curled around his hat and hummed what sounded – oddly – like "Wake Up, Little Suzie." The snake came alive, suddenly, turning its head toward Mrs. Park and flicking its tongue at her. Her eyes went wide in shock, and her mouth gaped.

"Dropped the stasis enchantment," Orpheus explained. "Don't worry, it's just a harmless garter snake. Just a little, uh,



bigger than usual thanks to some animal-centered growth magic. His name is Noodle.”

“It is refreshing to see him take to an animal like this,” Nizoni said. “Most animals scare him.”

“Only the ones that can, you know, do me actual harm,” he said. “This little guy’s bite has never even managed to break my skin. Not that he tries very often, he’s very docile.”

“Yes, well, I am still glad that little Beloved takes after me in that department. I introduced them to an orphaned baby wolverine a couple weeks back, and they soon had it eating out of their hands.”

Mrs. Park looked suddenly green around the gills. “A... you... a *wolverine*? You had your infant daughter around a *wolverine*?”

“A baby wolverine, yes. And by the way, you’re presuming their gender again, that’s quite rude of you,” Nizoni said.

“Now, Love,” Morgana said after sipping some champagne, “She’s hardly the only one to make that presumption, and I’ve yet to hear anyone think Beloved was a boy. So she might be picking up on something psychically.”

Nizoni gave Morgana a doubtful look.

“Or not. Time will tell.”

“*Beloved* will tell. Time’s only role in this is flowing long enough for them to be able to tell us.”

“Where *is* the little tyke, anyway?” Mr. Starling asked.

“At home. Grandma Belladonna Ravenstone is watching Beloved and their sibling Querido.”

“The one-eyed old woman?”

“No,” Morgana said. “The one you met, Mr. Starling, was Kahina Ravenstone, and she’s off with her husband explor-

ing Annwn again. Belladonna is my own mother. She never married."

"So what's your maiden name, if I may ask?"

"Ravenstone. Orpheus took my surname. As did the rest of his immediate family, when he married me."

Mr. Starling blinked at them.

"My uh, my parents never liked our original surname. Neither did I, to be honest."

"Dare I ask?" Mr. Starling asked.

"Prickett," he answered, shuddering.

"May I have a word with you, Christopher?"

"Of course, Heather."

"In some semblance of privacy, preferably."

"Right," he said with a sigh, and they moved into one of the empty corners of the room. He took out his wand, his hand lingering a bit too long inside his jacket first, and cast privacy spells over the area. "So that's done. You may speak freely now."

"What exactly are you doing? Have those horrible people been practicing their mind control on you?"

"My dear, telepathy doesn't work that way. It's just a way of bypassing spoken words to communicate. Yes, it can be used to erase memories, but so far as I know, it can't add false memories. And erasing memories takes so much effort as to be hardly worth it to try, unless your subject is willing. The mind *does* have some natural defenses, after all. Which you'd know if you'd ever taken even an introductory course in the mental arts."

"But you've changed! We've been allies for years, then these people come into town and you suddenly change allegiances? Excuse me if I don't believe you."

"My dear, we have *never* been allies. I barely tolerate you on a good day. You are nosy, judgmental, a die-hard Christian of the worst sort that would make Jesus Christ himself flip a table in anger, and my family have been followers of the old Norse religion for centuries. I could show you my house if it will convince you. There's a reason I never invite anyone in The Council to my home."

"Homes can be redecorated. Especially when magic is involved. I don't trust them, and I don't trust this change in you."

"My dear, this sort of attitude is precisely why I don't like you. You make up your mind, and then look for facts to support your decision, throwing out anything that opposes your point of view. I have tolerated your presence in my life because your husband and brother in law are on the school board, and your brother-in-law is the principal of Fae Springs, and because I have been hiding my pagan status for decades out of old family habit and a preponderance of Christians on The Council. Better to pretend to be one of you so I can talk you out of the more disastrous plans you come up with.

"But *finally* there is someone here to tip the scales in my family's favor, and the favor of other non-Christian families. And anyway, if you want more evidence, I have here for you a list of all the families I'm friendly with on the sly, you have my permission to ask them about me, and they have my permission to answer."

He handed her a list, and she took it, reading the names on the list. All were well-known non-Christian families, mostly Pagan, all poor or middle-class, nobody wealthy enough to dare run for a Council or school board position.

"I see the disgust on your face. Well you know what? I'm tired of wealthy Christians running the local Council. I'm frankly tired of wealth dominating the system. Yes, I know how that sounds coming from a wealthy man like myself, but the system is stagnant, and frankly I have never liked any of the wealthy snobs of Pluviatia. These people you despise for not being wealthy, they have a great many good ideas for changing things up, and it's about time someone without wealth had an influence on the way things are done around here. For all we live in a supposed democracy, our entire government is more of a plutocracy masquerading as a democracy. It's even worse among the mundanes."

"Why are you telling me all this? None of this has happened yet. These Ravenstones aren't on the..." she trailed off, looking horrified. "No! Please tell me they aren't running for The Council!"

"*And* the school board. As for why I'm telling you all this, it's been to give the Ravenstones time to meet another school board candidate who's running this year. Goes by the name of Nestor Metaxas. His wife became a teacher at Fae Springs recently."

"Metaxas? You mean the Defense teacher? My husband and his brother *hate* her!"

"Yes, I'm aware of that. A month into her job, and already Principal Park hates her. But she's the best Defense teacher we've had for years, maybe the best teacher period."

She may be eccentric, but I have grand-nieces, grand-nephews, and grandchildren in that school, and they tell me they've learned more from her in a month than they learned from her predecessor in three years."

After a pause to think, Mrs. Park sneered at him. "You're getting rusty in your old age, Mr. Starling. You've tipped your hand. I'll tell my husband your plot, and that will be that. So much for your vaunted Honey Badger cunning."

But Mr. Starling was smiling and chuckling. "Actually, Mrs. Park, I believe you'll find yourself quite unable to tell him anything we've discussed here." He slipped a stone tablet the size of a trade paperback book out of a pocket inside his jacket. Its entire surface – all six sides – was covered in teeny tiny runes and sigils.

"Cost me a small fortune, even after the discount," he continued. "Apparently, privacy wards that can hide a secret like this conversation usually require informed consent, and getting one to work that can skate by on a flimsy desire to have a private conversation with someone are nearly impossible for human witches to make. I think she said it required blood from one particular species of faery, willingly given. Can't look at the thing through my stone spectacles, it almost blinded me when I tried it. The thing cost me more than the ward overhaul on my house and property did, and *that* was about \$800,000. A lot, but well worth it, I think. For this, and for years of political dealings to come."

"What *is* that thing?"

"Oh, an idea I borrowed from my school days, something the Rosy Boa Banner did out of necessity, but of course that one required informed consent, like they usually do. Ni-

zoni Ravenstone made it a bit more compact for me, though. You wanted privacy, Mrs. Park, well you got it. And so did I. What's been said in this corner stays in this corner. I knew I had to distract you to give Nestor Metaxas and the Ravenstones time to meet and announce their candidacy, because I knew you would try to interfere. You'll be the only person on the opposing side who knows I'm on their side. Everyone else on the school board and the Council will think they don't stand a chance, even with the Ravenstone fortune. I shall quite enjoy watching you stew helplessly in your own frustration, after you have made me do the same for so many years."

He deactivated the stone with a tap of his finger and slipped it back in his pocket, tearing down the other privacy wards with his wand as he did so. Mrs. Park turned around, horrified, to catch the tail end of the announcement he'd been distracting her from. She hurried over to her husband.

"Did you hear that?" her husband asked her.

She tried to say 'yes' and more, but what came out was, "No. I was talking with Mr. Starling. What did I miss?"

"The husband of that horrible Metaxas woman just announced he's going to run for the school board. Then that Navajo woman announced she was running as well. As if that weren't absurd enough, the Ravenstone woman dressed like she's a funeral-goer lost in time announced she's running for the local Council. What madness! They honestly think they'll win!"

Again, she tried to say the truth, and again she ended up saying something else. Laughing, in fact. "You're quite right, darling, it's all so absurd." She was too furious to realize that the spell wasn't making her lie, exactly, as both the things it

had made her say were technically true. They just involved a great deal of context manipulation.

The party could not end fast enough for her after that. Between being unable to talk about what she'd discussed with Mr. Starling and his constant little smirks in her direction, she was quite glad when the party ended and she could go home.

Mrs. Park's next six months were her worst yet, as she silently watched that traitorous Mr. Starling helping the horrible freaks she so hated to pull off a surprise victory. Since their opponents didn't know the extent of the Ravenstone wealth, and didn't know that they and Nestor Metaxas had a secret ally in the Starling family providing money and strong word of mouth advertising, the three of them managed to win. Only after they won did Mr. Starling come out as an ally of their families, and reveal that he was a pagan like them.

She had hoped that Mr. Starling's defense of them earlier in the year would have been a clue for her side's people in time to do something about it, but he hadn't been the only one to basically dismiss her complaints, so they were none the wiser. He had played the game well, and much as she hated him, she respected him too.





## Chapter Four: Her Twelfth Birthday Party, part 1

*Friday, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2017*

IN ONE OF THE BEDROOMS on the second floor of the Ravenstone house, the baby formerly known as Beloved – now named Dalia – was twelve years old and sleeping soundly on her antique curtained, four-poster bed, dreaming fondly of things skittering behind the walls, ready to devour people she didn't like. Or she *was*, until someone rudely poked her awake. She opened her eyes groggily to look at the culprit, and found it was her familiar, a raven named Kobalos.

“Wake the dead!” Kobalos said, poking her on the shoulder with his beak. “Wake the dead!”

“I'm not dead,” she said, rolling over and ignoring him.

*'Get up, Dalia!'* said a voice only she could hear. *'Get outta bed, lazybones! T'éénzíid! T'éénzíid!'*

The curtains around her four-poster bed parted with force, shining bright sunlight on her. Dalia hissed like an angry cat, rolled over, and put the cover over herself. She muttered, “Five more minutes, Doñela.” At these words, Kobalos flew off the bed and onto his perch.



*'No, NOW! It's your birthday party today! Get up now or I'll rip the covers off you!'*

Dalia made no sound in response, so Doñela sighed and pulled the covers off, making Dalia yelp in response. She turned to glare at the other girl, looking twelve like Dalia, but Latina with skin like amber, and long flowing black hair, her body semi-transparent as she stood beside Dalia's bed like an apparition.

"I'm up, I'm up!" Dalia muttered, getting up before Doñela could get around to her next trick of pouring cold water on her. She sat up in bed to put on the prosthetic foot she used around the house, as it was easiest to get on. She took her satin hair bonnet off, set it on the end table, and grabbed her prosthesis with her dominant hand (her left), the same side that her missing foot was on.

*'Good. Now that I'm up, I can't abide you not being up too,'* Doñela said.

Dalia said nothing, just went about her morning routine. Five minutes later, though, Doñela said, *'I'm bored. This is boring.'*

There was no point in reminding Doñela that she could just go somewhere else in the house, maybe do some reading with Tamir, who Dalia could sense was up now, too. Though now she thought of it, that was unlikely to work; Doñela didn't know how to hold still for very long, and was *always* bored. Sometimes she was even bored in the midst of something exciting. And Tamir bored her even faster than normal, most of the time.

At last, though, Doñela floated through the wall and went looking for Tamir, to bother him instead. Dalia was

glad for this; Tamir was more patient than Dalia. Doñela's rowdiness would be like waves crashing against the rocky shore that was Tamir. And if she bothered him too much, he'd snark at her.

After brushing her teeth, Dalia drew up a bath, pouring some lavender-scented bubble-bath solution into the hot water coming out into the claw-footed tub. Its clawed feet idly scratched the magically-protected wooden floor as the warm water poured into it. Dalia smiled; the tub had always loved being filled with warm water. She wondered for perhaps the thousandth time which of the Faery realms a tub like this came from, because it certainly wasn't made in the mundane world; magic couldn't do that to objects from Midgard – the proper name for the mostly mundane dimension Earth floated through.

She slipped gratefully into the warm water and closed her eyes.

*'Whatcha doin?'*

Dalia started at the sound and turned to look at the door, where the voice had come from. Doñela, of course. Tamir must be hiding from her.

"What does it *look* like I'm doing, Doñela?" she snapped.

*'It looks like you're using lavender-scented bubble-bath and are about to fall asleep from the scent and drown in the tub. There shall be no drowning here, I forbid it! If you go dying on me, I'll have Abuela bring you back from the dead so I can kill you.'*

Dalia sighed, rubbing her face with her one dry hand. "I'm not going to drown, Doñela. I've never fallen asleep in the tub before, I'm not about to start now. And anyway,

Abuela can't revive the dead, just call their spirits here from the other side."

*'What? You need to speak up, you're so soft-spoken even I can barely hear you most of the time.'*

Making sure to double her volume, she said, "I *said*, I've never fallen asleep in the tub before, Doñela, and I'm not about to start now."

*'Oh yeah,'* Doñela said, *'on account of you being so high strung.'*

Dalia glared at Doñela. The Latin girl just floated there smugly, her long black curls framing her face perfectly.

*'Not gonna dignify that with an answer, are ya?'*

"No."

*'Thought not. Anyway, I don't get why you're so nervous about this party, it's just gonna be you, your parents, your siblings, Grandma and Grandpa Ravenstone, Sally, and Brandon.'*

"Brandon will be in my house for the first time ever today. And it's not just us, it's also Kira, Yanus, his girlfriend, and Takashi."

*'Oh yeah, your fairy godmother, your human godfather, his Kitsune girlfriend who's like royalty or something, and your great-Grandpa. I'd forgotten about them. So that's...' she counted to herself for a moment, 'fifteen people. Sixteen if you count the baby. Seventeen if you count Borghild. Oh wait, and aren't the bogeymen going to be there too? That would make over twenty now, with their kids?'*

"Their kids are remaining in the attic. Bogeymen are shy, you know that."

*'Fine, seventeen people then.'*

"That's... a lot of people."

*'Yeah, but they're all friends and family.'*

Dalia shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Too many people all at once. It's uncomfortable, and sometimes I get a headache from it."

*'Yeah, but you have other, better things to worry about. What if Brandon's wheelchair goes kerplooeey with all the magic in this house? Or worse and more likely, what if it starts talking?'*

"That might be hard to explain to his parents. They might freak out."

*'Eh, it'd be simple enough to explain to them.'*

"Maybe. Now let me finish my bath in peace, will you? I know I can't exorcise you, but I'm tempted to try."

Doñela rolled her eyes. *'Fine, whatever. I'll go make sure Kobalos gets fed and watered for you.'*

"Just don't pull out any of his feathers, he doesn't like that."

*'Yeah yeah,'* Doñela said, already floating back through the wall.

Dalia sunk deeper into the water, sniffing the scented air with slightly less enthusiasm now, for all she was annoyed now by Doñela, and thinking even more about the upcoming party. Her stomach tightened the familiar knot of anxiety that was always there. She found herself chewing her nails, and stopped abruptly to wash off her chewy necklace in fresh water to chew on that instead. This necklace was a chewy silicone orange goldfish-shaped necklace Dalia chewed on to comfort herself when stressed out or when she just wanted something to do, and was far preferable to chew-

ing her nails. Right now it was helping her cope with her stress.

*'Um, sorry to bother you again,'* Doñela said a few minutes later, her head poking through the door, wearing the gloves and hat and shirt she wore to let other people see her in a sense. Dalia closed her eyes, praying for patience.

"What is it this time?"

*'You know how you told me not to pull out any of his feathers?'*

Dalia groaned. "Yes. Dare I ask why?"

*'Yeah,'* Doñela said, wringing her gloved hands. *'I may have pulled out one of his feathers. By accident! He was flicking seeds in my general direction and shrieking and flapping his wings, and I was trying to calm him down by grabbing him, and well, a feather came out. Just one. But you'd think I'd murdered him, the way he was carrying on!'*

"Well you have difficulty being gentle with him, so he doesn't really like you. And grabbing him is the worst thing to do to try calming him down."

*'So why didn't you tell me not to feed him?'*

"Because you know all this already, and I thought you might be able to do it without freaking him out for once. Also, you never listen when I tell you no."

*'Yeah okay, I should've remembered all that, my bad. Should I just have Tamir do it?'*

"No, he'll be too freaked out now for Tamir to do it. I'll do it later."

*'Right. I'm gonna go practice the drums instead. By the way, you should "chase the sleepy woman out of your bed" before Shimá sees.'*

"I'll make my bed when I get out. In the meantime, *please* don't play the drums. Whenever you play the drums, it sounds like someone's tossing the drum-set down a dozen flights of stairs."

*'Is that a bad thing?'* Doñela asked, smirking.

"You are so lucky I can't strangle you."

*'I'm for sure gonna practice the drums now. Enjoy your bath!'*

Doñela ducked to avoid getting hit by the bar of soap Dalia flung at her – even though it would've gone right through her anyway – laughing all the way upstairs to the third floor. Dalia sulked, and got out the shampoo to wash her hair, since the relaxation of her bath was largely messed up now.



AFTER HER BATH, DALIA dried her hair and did it into locs (mistakenly known to most people by the racist term "dreadlocks") and started to pick out what to wear to the party. Her hair was the easiest part of this process, since her hair was tight and springy enough that it locked together into locs with just a little encouragement from her hands, and would stay like that until she made it do something else. Far easier than any other style she could use, and required no products in her hair. Picking what to wear, though, was more complex. She was not just deciding what dress to wear, but which prosthetic foot to wear, too. Her morning foot was easy to slip on but was best worn with socks on to hide

its artificial nature. Oh, and it was a little ugly in her opinion. She felt like flaunting her disability for once, for reasons she couldn't identify, but she wanted something that looked nice. So she put on the magically-animated robotic foot, which was plainly made of polished steel and a replaceable rubber sole, among other things. It was her best prosthesis, moving just like a real foot thanks to magic, and it had been a birthday present from Sally last year. With just a little help from her father, Sally had made it mostly by herself. (Well, her father had done the metal-grinding and enchantment; Sally had put it together, though.) Sally was good at making and fixing mechanical things.

On her other foot, Dalia wore a silver shoe that sort of matched the mechanical foot, which was bare. Anyway, her party, she could wear what she liked. With that sorted out, she looked through her dresses until she found the one she wanted to wear. It looked like something designed with Victorian-era vampires in mind, if real vampires ever wore such a thing anymore. It was blood red with black lace and had a low enough neckline to be comfortable for her without showing off anything she wasn't ready to show off yet. Not that she had anything to show off yet there, but *so* not the point.

Putting on a silvery pentacle necklace with a lapis lazuli stone in its center accented the dress perfectly despite the blue of the lapis clashing with the red-and-black motif. (She loved this pentacle, it was a form of steel with one percent silver in it, made by Nua Sidhe.) Then she put some red by her mouth as though she'd been drinking blood, a little color on her eyelids (red of course), and finally put in some con-

tact lenses that made her eyes look completely black, since she didn't yet have her maddy's skill at illusions.

"Whatcha think, Kobalos?" she asked, spinning around in the dress for her pet raven sitting on his perch.

Kobalos cocked his head at her, taking in her outfit and appearance with his beady eyes.

"Lovely, darling. Death herself would be jealous," he said in a perfect imitation of Maddy's – Morgana's – voice. Dalia smiled; Morgana Ravenstone was glad to know her eldest daughter had inherited her sense of fashion, among other things.

"How are you, by the way? Doñela told me she accidentally pulled one of your feathers out."

His response was to imitate the sound of gears grinding. This meant he was a little angry but otherwise fine.

"Sorry about her. I told her off again, for all the good it'll do."

"Apology accepted," he said, this time imitating Nizoni. Then he flew over the dresser – right on top of two of his tail feathers – and said, "A gift," while holding the pulled feathers up in one of his feet. She didn't recognize the voice he had used.

"You sure?" she asked.

"Yes. A gift."

Doñela came floating in again, just as Dalia took the feathers from Kobalos and put them in her hair. Doñela was carrying a smart phone in one of her gloved hands. Kobalos glared at her.

*I heard my name. You talking about me behind my back?'*



"I was just telling Kobalos that I was sorry for what you'd done earlier. You should apologize too."

Doñela sighed. *'Fine, fine.'*

Dalia waited as Doñela tapped some things on Loki, her smart phone. When she was done, Loki spoke for her in a voice that they'd long ago designed to sound as much like Doñela as she did to Dalia.

"Hey there Kobalos, it's Doñela," the phone said for her. "Sorry about pulling out your feathers earlier, I should be more careful."

"That a girl. Mind you don't do it again," Kobalos said in Orpheus's voice.

Dalia giggled. She recognized that bit of speech; her father had been telling off Scylla for trying to eat Sally's hamster last year, and Kobalos had been using bits from that every chance he got.

Doñela sighed. *'What time is it? I'm bored. Wait, never mind, the griffin clock is right there. Ah, it's almost 11.'*

The tense knot in Dalia's stomach tightened even more. "Really? Oh gods, I'd better get downstairs!"

Dalia ran out the door and over to the stairs, but carefully went down the stairs so she didn't fall over; no matter how well secured it was, the prosthesis could always slip off or break if she wasn't careful. At the bottom of the stairs she was able to run again, and ran past Barry the tree octopus, almost knocking him out of his floating box. "Sorry Barry!" she called back as she kept running for the door. Barry made a noise of exasperation and straightened his bowler hat, which was new.

The doorbell rang, sounding like a howling wolf, just as Dalia grabbed the doorknob. She pulled the door open. A white girl with dark red hair in a braid down her back and a sprinkling of freckles on her cheeks was standing there grinning. She was wearing a pink t-shirt with very colorful ponies on it, and jeans with rhinestones embedded in them, making patterns of hearts and flowers. It was different from her usual outfit of colorful but old, grease-stained clothes she usually wore because she worked on machines with her dad, including fixing cars.

"Sally!" she said. "Come in, come in."

"Thanks," Sally said, coming in and handing Dalia a wrapped box. Dalia passed it on to Barry, who had a second, larger, empty floating box behind him. He put the gift in there.

"Those black contacts are kinda creepy," Sally said, "but I suppose that was the point."

"Thank you," Dalia said brightly.

"Is Brandon here yet?" Sally asked.

"No. Actually, we should wait outside for him."

"Probably. Gorgeous outfit, by the way. That dress is amazing! Not my own personal style, but still awesome."

"Thank you," Dalia said in a quiet voice.

"Oh hey, here comes Brandon now," Sally said, gesturing with her head out the door. Sure enough, a familiar short-haired Korean-American boy in an electric wheelchair was rolling up to the gate. His wheelchair was personalized; his chair's rear wheels had Star Wars covers featuring the Millennium Falcon, the front wheels had flashing multi-colored lights on them, the fabric of the chair's seat and armrests

were patterned with a colorful galaxy pattern like from a NASA photograph, the tray he used as a portable desk was a vivid neon blue, and the back of his chair was strung with slowly blinking blue lights. These lights wound around the specialized squarish backpack that carried his things, again blue, matching the pair of blue cargo bags attached to the chair's armrests. There was also a clear plastic rain protection cover over the controls of the chair. The other arm rest had a cup-holder on the end of it. His personal clothing style was cool as well; he wore a Star Wars t-shirt, blue jeans, and high-top tennis shoes. In short, his chair looked cool, and so did he.

Brandon took some stone spectacles out of a pocket somewhere on his chair and put them on, looking at the house. He loved looking at the Ravenstone house like this, to see what it really looked like, its ancient stone wall and stone gate, and the house's dark red paint with black trim – the paint job redone recently to be new, yet still somehow looking old.

With a smile, he came up to the stone gate and nudged it with his chair. When he did, words wrote themselves on its surface, saying, ‘*¡Bienvenido amigo!* Enter any 11-digit prime number to continue.’ There was even a keypad displayed underneath.

He blinked at the gate in confusion.

“You want me to get the gate?” Dalia called to him.

“Nope, I’ll get it.”

Since he happened to have it on him, Brandon used his smart phone to search the Internet for eleven-digit prime numbers. When he found some, he moved his chair so he

could reach the keypad. From the list of numbers he found, he entered in '7777774777777' and hit 'enter.'

In response, the gate flashed with dozens of symbols all over it in a clear expression of astonishment, then settled down. When it did, its surface now read, 'Holy Hecate! Impressive, young padawan.' Then, under it was the text, 'I HUNGER FOR MAGIC! FEED ME, AND I SHALL BE APPEASED!'

Getting out the requisite bottle of magical oil, he dropped a few drops of magical oil onto the gate. The gate's text changed to read 'Om nom nom!' Then that one disappeared and a new one said, '*Come play with us...*' in a font that oozed with a cartoonish depiction of blood.

The gate opened on its own, for which Brandon was pleased, putting the stone spectacles away. He rolled forward and through, glancing to the right and seeing the gargoyle Dalia had mentioned before. It was sleeping; he was strangely disappointed.

Over the years, the Ravenstone yard had vastly improved. The dark stone garden boxes were filled now with many different plants, or more often many species in mixed company with each other. Many had beautiful flowers, most of which were blood red, black, bruise purple, or white. Another close to the farthest wall to the left of the house (as you face the house head-on) had various cacti and succulents in it. Another one in front of the large stone gargoyle was full of various herbs. And behind the blackberry bush was a section of yard that was so shaded by the Sorcerous Spruce and by some kind of vine growing thick atop a wooden trellis, that there was barely enough light in there to see where you were

going. But he could make out some wooden garden chairs and a table in there.

Once she saw him coming in, Dalia ran outside to escort him, but froze in her tracks as soon as she got into the bright summer sunlight, hissing like an angry cat and covering her eyes. She awkwardly walked over to him with her hands shading her eyes.

"Guess I won't need to tell you to stay on the path, now," said the sarcastic yard sign. Then it sighed heavily. "The one and only thing I have to entertain myself with all day and all night for the last 10 years, and you rip it away from me! I'm calling the UN, I think this violates the Geneva Conventions against cruel and unusual punishments."

"DON'T PANIC!" cried the other sign.

Ignoring the signs, Dalia said, "Brandon! You made it!"

"Yes, I did. Is everything ready for me?"

"It is! We have a ramp now, and more importantly, we have a way of getting you to the second and third floors."

"Cool," he said, rolling past Scylla, who twitched her thorny vines in welcome. He stared in awe at this, grinning. "I love that gate, it's funny."

"Yeah, me too," Dalia said. "Anyway, so let me show you around the yard a little. Here's Ziraxol, our guardian gargoyle."

Dalia stepped onto the yard and closed her eyes. When Brandon blinked, the gargoyle was awake and looking at him.

"Brandon is a friend," Dalia said, her eyes still closed. "And he's not the one on the yard anyway. Still, come say 'hi.'"

When he blinked again, the gargoyle was right beside him, its head cocked curiously. With a flick of a joystick, he moved his chair to face it. He blinked again, and it was looking happy as Dalia scratched its head. Brandon and Sally joined in the scratching, even if he thought it was a little silly to scratch something that looked like stone and felt like wood.

“By the way,” Dalia said mid-petting, “As a legal resident of the Ravenstone estate, I hereby declare Brandon Han is allowed to see the truth behind the glammers.”

Suddenly, the house switched to how it looked with the stone spectacles. This time, being closer to it he was able to notice a new detail about the house he was surprised he had missed: over much of the house was growing what looked like English Ivy, except that its leaves and vines were a purple so dark they were almost black. They also looked thick enough to be used as ropes to support a person's weight.

“What kind of vine is that?”

“Dunno,” Dalia said. “Some kind of magical vine. It can move on its own, but it doesn't do so often. Anyway, Ziraxol is annoyed with you for not petting her.”

After a few minutes of petting Ziraxol, he let his attention wander around the yard. There was a small flower garden in front of the kitchen window with flowers of multiple varieties, none of which he could recognize. He rolled closer but didn't leave the path.

“You can leave the path if you want, now that I've told Ziraxol you're a friend. She won't bother you now. Nor will any of the other wards. Er, if your wheelchair will let you.”

“Cool, thanks!”

Rolling closer still, and careful not to trample any important plants, he took a close look at one flower that looked like a pink peony or rose that was in a ball waiting to bloom. When he got a few inches away, what he'd thought was a yet-to-bloom flower opened up and revealed it had an eyeball inside. This startled him, but he didn't shout. Instead, he looked on in fascination as the plant's eyeball looked at him, tracking his movement.

"This is one weird flower!"

Dalia and Sally stopped petting Ziraxol and came over to look at what he was looking at.

"Oh those are Demon's Eye Flowers."

"That's actually a flower? I mean, how does it reproduce?"

"It's a false flower. Demon's Eye Flowers breed underground, they use those eyes to see what the surface is like, so they can protect their leaves from harsh elements and from animals. They also like to come out of the ground at night and hunt for small animals to eat. Papa feeds them dead rats from a business that sells such things for snakes to eat. The same place Vedyia gets the rats she feeds to her familiars."

"So that's *two* carnivorous plants in this yard, eh?"

She chuckled. "Yeah, Papa likes them. So do I. Plus, I think they're part of the security system."

Brandon looked up a little and saw a dozen more Demon's Eye Flowers staring unblinkingly at him. When he looked around the rest of the yard from where he was, he saw several other eyeball-laden flowers scattered about the yard, hiding but still able to see every part of the yard, by his estimate.

“Okay, crept out now,” he said, pulling back.

He moved further along the garden towards another flower he didn't recognize. It looked like an ordinary cactus, one of those round ones like a green, prickly ball.

“Watch this,” Dalia said, grabbing a needle. She was about to pull it out, but paused.

“Um, be warned, it'll be loud.”

Her friends covered their ears and nodded. She pulled out the needle, and the cactus began to scream like it was being murdered.

When the screaming stopped, she said, “Screaming Ball Cactus. Don't worry about the noise, nobody outside of the yard or inside the house can hear it, thanks to the wards.”

“Did that hurt it?” Brandon asked with concern.

“Not much. It only screams as an added defense mechanism. Apparently there's some animal in Tirffiniol that can pluck out the needles of cacti with its teeth, stripping them bare so it can eat them. It avoids the Screaming Ball Cactus, though.”

A foot from the screaming cactus was a flower that looked like someone had draped a bunch of black lace over a tiny column. It even moved in the slight breeze like real lace.

“What's that one?”

“That's a flower called Weeping Widow's Wail. Oh hey, I think it's moving.”

The black lace moved, a tiny hand from inside pulling one of the veils aside to reveal – from under a single sheer black veil – a tiny woman with slightly blurred features like it was a moving marble statue, or as if it had been carved from a mushroom. But it *did* have a face, and as soon as they



saw its face, it tore at its hair with its hands, fell to its little knees, and began to weep even louder than the cactus had screamed, little streams of tears falling from its eyes as it did. The sound was heart-breaking in its sorrow. When it started to weep, several nearby flowers of its kind followed suit, making a chorus of misery.

“Why do they do that?”

“Watch and learn.”

From somewhere higher up on the house came half a dozen glowing golden specks of light, swarming around the wailing flowers.

“Are those pixies?” he asked.

“Nope. Fairy bees.”

One of the glowing fairy bees landed on the Weeping Widow's Wail, right on the little pedestal the tiny woman was standing on, and began to lap up the milky-white tears. Brandon looked closely enough at it to see it looked almost like an ordinary bee, apart from the fact it was glowing with golden light and looked almost like it was made of glass, so that it resembled some kind of moving, amber-colored lantern.

“So are the tears... um... nectar?” he asked.

“Yes. The wailing attracts the fairy bees, they collect the nectar the flowers cry, and pollinate the flower in the process. The lace deposits the pollen, the pedestal and the 'women' receive the pollen.”

“Are they attracted to *any* crying?”

“No. Just the crying of flowers like this. Not sure how it works.”

Listening closely to the wailing, he thought he could hear a faint other-worldly quality to the sound that likely made the sound more distinct to the fairy bees.

“Won't the bees escape?”

“The wards keep them contained,” she said.

After the fairy bees lapped up all the nectar, the wailing flowers stopped crying. Some of them looked happy, while others continued to look sad. The sad ones covered themselves back up with their veils, but the veils of the happy ones turned gray then white, and the tiny female figures started to grow visibly pregnant before their eyes, before covering up themselves with their now white veils.

“Wow. That's... weird. But cool.”

Continuing on, the next thing to catch his eye was a very large flower that bloomed before his eyes, revealing what looked like a cute little kitten with fur made of very slender little flower petals. It looked up at him with big adorable eyes and meowed pleadingly at him.

“Don't touch it!” Dalia warned him as he reached a hand out. “It's highly dangerous!”

“A flower that looks like a kitten, and it's dangerous?”

“Yes. Of course now I think of it, you *couldn't* have touched it because there's a ward shield around it, but best to teach you caution. It's called a Siren Death-Stinger. It can look like anything it thinks will entice you to touch it or try to eat it. I guess you must like cats. Which uh, I guess you would, because of Chewy.”

“How is it dangerous?”

“It bites, injecting its seeds into your flesh, where the seeds rapidly start to eat you alive and grow under your skin.

It would take a few days to get to the point where the arm has to be amputated, but it's *extremely* painful. And if not removed, they just keep growing until the shock kills you, and then they use your dead body for fertilizer. The pain is so intense that some people... some people don't wait for the shock to kill them, if they can't get the things removed."

She poked a stick at the deadly flower and hit a solid wall of energy that glowed a scary red color and didn't fade, like a beacon warning you away. The kitten glared at her in rage and yowled, the flower closing up around it as it hissed its displeasure.

"Wow, that's a hefty ward, if it's what I think it is," Dalia said, poking the red energy shield with a stick again. "Completely cuts off the plant and its part of the soil from the rest of the world. The ward probably even makes its own air. You could probably pick that thing up and shoot it out of a cannon at three-foot thick steel and it wouldn't even flicker. Papa probably needs a special ward-key just to water it. Assuming it doesn't make its own water, too."

"That's... yeah, that's a strong ward alright, but I don't know if it should be out here in the garden. Maybe in a greenhouse?"

"Well it helps, in part, that only people Ziraxol considers family and friends can even approach the garden."

"Oh. Still, you might want to talk with your dad about it."

"I guess I will. But honestly, Papa is a phytomancer and is really good at both Waxing and Withering plants; if you got bit, he'd have the seeds out before they could even sprout. He could even Wither the seeds without Withering any part of

your body. But yeah, I'll convince him to move it to a greenhouse, since its presence makes you uncomfortable."

Their tour of the rest of the yard was not so exciting as that; Brandon liked the Sorcerous Spruce, but it and the garden and a shed they couldn't enter were the most interesting things in the rest of the yard. The only other thing in the back yard aside from the shed was a food garden with mundane vegetables in it, though some of them were enormous. The lone pumpkin in its patch was big enough that Brandon thought he and Dalia could fit inside it if it was hollowed out, and if they were in the fetal position.

Finally they were back in the front yard going up the ramp to the porch.

"Ah yes, this is a good ramp, not too steep," he said, rolling up the ramp with ease.

"Good. I was worried about that."

"You worry a lot, Dalia. It's not good for you."

"Yeah, I know. I can't help it. Chronic anxiety doesn't have an 'off' switch. Wish it did."

The porch sank down alarmingly with a groan that was almost alive as Brandon rolled onto it. Already on the alert from this, from the corner of his eye he thought he saw part of the porch shrug as though shaking off an annoying insect. Soon after this, the porch lifted higher up with another groan, frightening him again until it settled into a solid state. Dalia didn't seem bothered by it, though.

"What was *that*?" he asked, his voice shaking.

"Intent-based defensive ward built into the porch," she said casually. "If you'd had bad intentions toward any resident of the house, it would have swallowed you up into an

inescapable pit for holding until the authorities can arrive. It moved because it was weighing your intentions."

"That's more than a little terrifying, Dalia."

"It wouldn't hurt you, even if you had bad intentions. Cushioning enchantments would even prevent your chair getting hurt."

"Still," he said, trailing off and rolling forward through the door.

Brandon and his wheelchair fit through the door perfectly, too, making one less thing for Dalia to worry about. She went inside behind him.

"Well normally it doesn't move like that unless someone has malicious intent, but your wheelchair confused it momentarily," she explained as she followed him inside.

Looking around the entry hall, he said, "Neat! This place looks cool." He was looking, as he said this, at the metal skeleton arm reaching for a coat he didn't have.

"Thanks, and welcome to our humble home, Han Solo," Dalia said.

"Han Solo? I thought your name was Brandon?" asked Morgana, who was coming into the room. She was dressed a bit less fancy than Dalia, and her eyes currently looked lizardlike, a mottled green with slits for pupils.

He was about to answer her when she spoke again instead.

"Oh wait, I see. Your last name is Han, so the joke is you're Han Solo. Clever."

Sally grinned, adding, "And he has this great fuzzy cat he named Chewy."

Morgana laughed.

"Hi Mrs. Ravenstone," Brandon said. "I guess Dalia's told you a lot about me, huh?"

"Well, that and you were thinking rather loudly. I didn't mean to overhear; I'm home, of course, and I only put up my mental barriers when I'm out and about. So I was receptive and thus overheard by accident. Sorry about that, let me fetch you a telepathy-blocking amulet," she said, leaving the room again.

Brandon looked wide-eyed at Dalia. "Your parents are telepathic? I thought you were joking about that."

"Not a joke. All three of them know telepathy," she replied.

"Must suck having telepathic parents."

"Not really. I have a runic sigil done in henna on my right shoulder that keeps them out of my head. They're big believers in giving children privacy."

"Yeah, no kidding," Sally said. "My mom punished me for fighting with my little brother once by removing our doors. When the Ravenstones found out, I could hear Nizoni's tirade a block away. Mom put the door back that very afternoon. My parents haven't done anything like that since then."

Imitating Nizoni's voice, Dalia quoted, "Privacy is an inalienable human right. It is simply disgusting how many people – even people who are good – fail to remember that children are human beings who deserve the same respect and human rights as adults."

"It's refreshing," Brandon said. "We need more adults like that. Wish my parents were like that. I'm doing good to be allowed to use the restroom without being supervised. I

mean that literally, as well as figuratively. If it wasn't for the fact I can stand and walk for *very* short spans of time before collapsing in pain again, I'd have to have help using the bathroom."

Morgana came back, then. She was humming a tune as she did, and didn't stop humming until she'd put the amulet around Brandon's neck, and another one around Sally's.

"Well, Mr. Solo, now that nobody can hear your thoughts until you voice them, would you like the grand tour?"

"Yes please," he said, looking all around him at the very pagan décor. "It's amazing so far. Oh, is that Barry?" He was pointing at the floating tree octopus, who was wearing a black top hat now.

"Yes, that's Barry," Morgana said. "Say 'hello,' Barry."

Barry tipped his hat with one tentacle, making Brandon smile. Brandon made a similar hat-tipping gesture back at Barry.

"By the way, Brandon," Morgana said, "you shouldn't point at people, familiars, or pets with your fingers. In witch culture, pointing with a finger is much like pointing a weapon at someone, since casting with only fingers is common. Try to get into the habit of gesturing with your head, instead."

"Oh. Thanks for the information, Mrs. Ravenstone. I'll keep it in mind."

Just then, they heard a raven's hoarse croak, and Kobalos flew down the stairs, landing on Dalia's left shoulder.

"Oh hey, and the raven you're always talking about, who's almost never around for some reason when I'm hanging around with you. Kobalos, right? Say 'Nevermore.'"

Kobalos gave him a dirty look and said, "Bite me."

Brandon jumped back in his seat and stared wide-eyed at the bird. "He speaks! He actually *speaks*! Magic is awesome!"

"Mundane ravens can speak too, it just isn't well known. They're better at it than parrots, even. It's just that they're willful, and don't let on much. Kobalos isn't much different from a mundane raven. Even more intelligent, since he's a familiar, but he has the same speech ability all ravens have."

"Kobalos is a pretty bird," Kobalos said in Dalia's voice. Then, in a mix of different voices, he said, "Worship – him and – be – judged – worthy, or – tremble in terror – before the hour – of your demise."

"Okay, so he *is* a little unusual, I suppose," she said, grinning sheepishly.

"He's awesome!"

Dalia turned her head to look at the bird. He was looking very smug, and said, "He's awesome!" in Brandon's voice.

"Did you want something, Kobalos?"

"Just the arm of a pretty lady," he said in her father's voice.

"Flatterer. Fine, you can stay there if you behave well."

His only reply was to preen himself.

When they were done touring the ground floor, Nizoni appeared so she could show them how to get Brandon up to the other two floors. She was carrying Dalia's little sibling Sweetheart Ravenstone on one hip, the two-year-old looking



delighted to be there. Sweetheart was happily chewing on a rubber spider.

As it turned out, Nizoni had installed a couple portals that would shadow-walk people and objects up to the second or third floor when the person couldn't do it themselves, one portal entrance on the first and second floors each. Brandon had only become a witch in the last year after finding out two of his friends of three years were witches and being shown proof of magic, so between that and shadow-walking being difficult to learn, he couldn't do it himself. None of the kids in the house could, either; it was *very* difficult magic.

Brandon went forward into the portal and appeared seamlessly in the second floor corridor.

"That was anticlimactic," he said. "I was expecting it to feel weird, but it just felt like moving from one room to another."

"Isn't magic cool?"

"Yeah. Hey, didn't you say your room is on the second floor? Can we look at it before going on?"

"Er," Dalia said, sounding nervous. She looked at Nizoni, who rolled her eyes and nodded.

"Okay," Dalia said.

As Dalia led them to her room, Brandon asked Sally, "Have you been in her room before?"

"Yeah. I come here a lot. I've even been up in her secret second room, which she uses as a reading nook among other things. The entrance is in the closet."

"That sounds cool! Could I go up there?"

"Sorry, no. It's only got a ladder to get up there. Also I don't think your wheelchair would fit."

“Darn,” he said, disappointed.

Dalia’s room was beautiful, and left Brandon in awe. The first thing he saw when the door was opened was Dalia’s four-poster bed, which was an antique-looking bed of dark, reddish wood. The posts were carved into snake-like dragons coiling up the posts, and it was curtained with black curtains that had red trim. These curtains were parted, showing a bed with a black comforter with a silvery spiderweb design on it, lavender sheets under the comforter, and matching pillowcases. There was a cargo net attached to the posts, which was full of a variety of plush stuffed animals including a dragon, a spider, a snake, an alien, a wolf, and a T Rex. On the bed tucked under the comforter was a normal looking teddy bear with a name tag reading “Mr. Hugs.” The walls and ceiling were also lavender, trimmed with gold-colored molding. The carpet was dark purple, and the windows on the opposite wall, which took up most of the wall, were covered in lavender blackout curtains. Because of this, a small brass electric chandelier was the only lighting, casting an amber glow over the room.

Next to the bed was an end table of matching wood and style, with an antique brass lamp atop it, which had twin dragons – the kind with four legs and two wings – perched on its sides. Continuing the dragon theme, her tall, plain wooden bookshelves – of which there were several – had dragon bookends on top of them.

She also had a very cool clock in one corner that was set under the fore-legs of a brass griffin statue. Her bird’s perch in front of the middle of the window was also antique brass.

“Swanky, but in a classy way,” he said. “What’s that in the corner opposite the clock?”

“Oh, uh... that’s my altar.”

The altar in question was a short, plain wooden bookshelf of the same reddish wood as the bed and end table. It had a purple altar cloth draped on it, and was decorated with stones, shells, sticks, some white candles, and various small photos of family members. Like the altar in the downstairs sun room, it also had a little clay pot, a small glass bowl of water, a small plate with a bit of food on it (chicken, in this case), and a small pot of flowers. Brandon recognized some of the faces in the photos from the altar downstairs as well.

On the wall opposite Dalia’s bed, between two of the several bookshelves full of books, was her walk-in closet. His eyes went a little wide at all the clothes inside it. His parents were pretty well off as well of course, for him to be living in the neighborhood, but Dalia still had more clothes than he did, and most of it was very pretty, and very Goth.

“What’s that door on the other side of your bed go to?”

“Er, that’s my bathroom.”

Brandon nodded. He had his own bathroom in his room too, which he knew was unusual. In his case it was so he could go to the bathroom in the middle of the night without needing to get in his wheelchair; he’d use his forearm crutches instead to get the short distance from his bed to the bathroom.

“Cool. Maybe I’ll look at it a bit more later. But I’m curious about the rest of the house, after how much you’ve talked it up the last few months. So how do we get to the *third* floor?”

"The third floor is special, it will take you two portals to get to. First the shadow portal to a corridor in the mundane part of the third floor, then another portal into the Tirffin-iol side of the third floor, which is technically an entire other house hundreds of miles away."

"The third floor is in another world?"

"Most of it, yes. Come this way, I will show you."

The first portal was at the end of the corridor. Before they could go through it, though, a dark-skinned girl of Indian descent (*India* Indian, but so dark skinned as to almost be as dark as Dalia.) appeared briefly in one of the other doorways. Brandon looked up at her, and caught sight of her bare back as she quickly ducked back inside. They only got another few feet closer when she threw the door open again, having clearly thrown a shirt on hastily.

This was Vedyā, Dalia's younger adopted sister. Vedyā stood out quite a bit; aside from having an ethnicity unlike anyone else in the house, she also had rainbow-colored hair done in lots of braids that reached just past her ears. Her clothes were equally memorable for other reasons; her pants were basically black cargo pants, and her t-shirt was blue with a picture on it of an angry black unicorn with blood staining its golden horn. Even her shoes stood out, as they were painfully-bright neon green sandals. The most normal thing about her outfit was her silver pentacle earrings. Even her fingernails were Goth, as they'd been painted black with blood-red tips.

What was more, she had a snake coiled around her shoulders. About four feet long and as thick around most of its length as Brandon's forearm, it was clearly not a mun-

dane snake, for its scales looked like they were made of a rainbow-colored stone known as 'peacock ore,' and glittered in the light. Its green eyes also glittered like emeralds.

She was also rather short for her age. Most 11 year old girls raised in the U.S. from infancy were about five feet to five foot three inches tall, but Vedyā was only about four foot two inches.

"You lot going upstairs?" the rainbow-haired girl asked.

"Yes we are, Vedyā," Nizoni said.

"Good, me too."

Nizoni looked annoyed at this. "Of course you may come with us, Vedyā," she said.

"Wasn't asking permission, but thanks anyway," Vedyā said casually, before turning to glance at Brandon's wheelchair before looking at his face.

"Hey there, nerf-herder," she said to him, grinning and punching him in the arm.

"Ow! Right back at you, snake lady."

She sighed and rolled her eyes. "The point of an insult is to be insulting. 'Snake lady' isn't even remotely insulting. It's factually accurate and totally *átkozott* cool."

"Language!" Nizoni chided.

"Yeah yeah," she said, then turned back to Brandon. "Also, it's more or less an exact translation of my name in ASL."

"Fine, then," Brandon said. "I'll change to 'Hey there, short stuff.'"

"Ha! Like I don't know I'm short."

"Isn't your bedroom on the Tirffiniol side?" Brandon asked. "I remember Dalia mentioning that once."

"Yeah, it is, normally. It's being remodeled. So I'm in this room until November."

"Oh, okay."

Vedya turned away from Brandon and looked Sally's clothes up and down, squinting. "Sally?" she asked uncertainly.

Sally smiled. "Yes, it's me. Just wearing a nicer outfit than usual today."

"I'll say. A lot more girly than what you usually wear. It threw me off."

Brandon mused that someone who didn't know Vedya at all would probably be confused by that, but he'd known her nearly as long as he'd known Dalia, and had known most of that time that she's face-blind. She could see faces just as well as anyone else, but whatever part of the brain is responsible for letting people *recognize* faces doesn't work for her. Vedya can't even recognize her own parents' faces, having to rely on voices, habits of movement, hairstyles, clothes, and other context clues to recognize people. And changes to any of these clues could make someone unrecognizable to her, at least temporarily. Brandon had once seen her walk right by a friend she'd had for five years without recognizing the girl, all because the friend had gotten a very different new haircut and Vedya hadn't been expecting to see someone she knew in that situation – a grocery store, if he recalled correctly.

"Whereas you always wear the same basic outfit, Vedya," Sally said.

Vedya shrugged, making the snake hiss in annoyance. "Hey, at least I have actual pockets."

"That's putting it lightly. Those pants look like little else *but* pockets."

"Yeah, well, if I have to wear clothes for this party, they might as well be useful."

Sally rolled her eyes. Brandon shook his head. Vedyā was practical to a fault, had many times said she found the idea of wearing clothing in the summer to be stupid, and Brandon and Sally both knew from things Dalia had said that Vedyā didn't have any modesty. Those three things in mind, Vedyā only covered up because it was expected and because it was easier than arguing about it.

Vedyā was looking at Sally now with an expression of extreme interest, then awkwardness and a desire to speak, but seemingly unable to find the right words. Brandon caught this, but neither of his friends did. Nizoni didn't seem to have picked up on it, either.

"I believe now we should get back to the tour," Nizoni said then.

"No, wait! I... I learned a new spell that I want to test out," Vedyā said. Then, with no more warning than that, she grabbed Brandon on his upper arm in a vise grip for several seconds before letting go.

"Ouch! What was that for?"

"Testing out some new magic. I call it 'tagging.' I 'tag' you with a reference number only I can see, then I'm certain who you are."

"You can do magic already? On purpose?"

"Yes, I can do magic already. I've been teaching myself, because I don't like the idea of being defenseless. The first few

months of Fae Springs are going to be boring for me because of it, but it's worth it."

She then went on to 'tag' Sally, Nizoni, and Dalia, with much less force than before, the touch lingering longer.

"I thought that would hurt more," Sally commented.

"Brandon was a test. Found out I didn't need that much force. Give me time, and I may even be able to tag people without touching them."

"If you are done," Nizoni said, "we should continue."

Vedya looked like she wanted to object, but didn't seem to be able to find the words again.

Nodding, Brandon and his chair surged forward through the portal to the third floor, which took them through as easily as the last one had, and up a ramp on the other side. On the other side was a corridor big enough for about a dozen people, and at the end of the corridor was another portal inside an archway of red sardonyx carved with runes, the door itself made of acacia wood. Nizoni stepped ahead of him and opened the door for him. He went through, and everyone else followed.

This space was clearly much older, with a lot more wood, but it was well kept and looked nice. Brandon and the others moved forward to go on the tour. Vedya was making an effort to keep pace with the much taller Sally, continually giving Sally a calculating look that was making Sally look back nervously every now and then.

Brandon loved the place. Sally helped Dalia show him around, since she'd been there before. Of the things they saw (since they couldn't view the whole thing in one day), his favorites were the room full of adorable feathered snakes, and



several things seen out on the grounds around the house: the two greenhouses full of exotic magical plants from Tirffiniol (which he supposed were native plants, since they were currently in Tirffiniol), the many ornamental gardens, the dueling practice area, and the dragon roost visible beyond the tall walls surrounding the grounds.

He was less pleased with the room full of dinnerplate-sized spider-crabs that the Ravenstones kept to harvest for silk and for food. He was a little disappointed, too, in the view of Tirffiniol, as the only windows looking out that he could find looked out onto the mid-trunks of tall, imposing trees and lots of shadows in the undergrowth. The view from the grounds was little better. You could see the dragon roost better from there – a cliff side full of holes the dragons lived in, but most of the view was just walls and then trees around the walls. Even from the tallest windows of the house, you couldn't see past the trees, except to an area around the outside of the gate.

"It looked like a cross between a reptile and a bat, complete with ears," Brandon was saying about the dragon as Mrs. Ravenstone led them to their next destination. "Do they breathe fire?" he asked excitedly.

"Some species do," Nizoni supplied. "The kind we let roost around here do not, however."

"We're all going to the Third Floor Dining Hall," Morgana announced. "There's going to be a lot of people, and that's the room with the most space, second only to the gymnasium." She grinned a little as she said this.



## Chapter Five: Her Twelfth Birthday Party, part 2

*Friday, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2017*

MORGANA HELD THE DOOR open, and everyone went inside. The Third Floor Dining Hall had a lot of space alright; not only was it huge and roomy, the walls and ceiling were covered in an illusion making it look like they were clinging to a stone floor floating in the depths of outer space; you could tell because there were no signs of a landscape, and the stars were *not* twinkling, since twinkling only happens to starlight going through the Earth's atmosphere.

“WOW!” Brandon exclaimed. “This room is *awesome!*”

Mrs. Ravenstone smiled warmly. “Thank you.”

There were five tables in the center of the room, all made of a wood that glowed with a faint greenish light, like it was made of bio-luminescent mushrooms rather than wood. The wood grain told them it *was* wood, however.

Two of the tables were running the same direction, the two of them on either side of the other three tables, which were turned the other direction, so the pattern they made would have looked from above like an H with three middle

bars instead of just the one, except there were gaps between the tables to let people move around to their seats. The chairs were also made of that same glowing wood.

"It's cool," Sally said, "but a little dark."

"Easily fixed," Morgana said.

She walked over to a control panel on one wall and adjusted it. Slowly, the starry sky of outer space was replaced with a landscape that looked like a prairie. The sun in the sky was covered by just enough clouds that it was neither too bright nor too dark.

In the greater light the room now had, Dalia saw Grandma and Grandpa Ravenstone – called Abuela and Abuelo, the Spanish words for Grandma and Grandpa – already seated at one of the tables. Grandpa Ravenstone, of course, was semi-transparent, being a ghost as he was, while his wife was still alive, just blind in her left eye. Seated a few seats down from them was Borghild, sitting next to what looked like a narrow wardrobe in the British sense of the word, which was where the bogeymen were currently hiding. Borghild had left her battle ax somewhere else, presumably her room. Nizoni put Sweetheart down, and they started running around the room.

"Abuela! Abuelo!" Dalia said, running over to her grandmother to hug the old woman, and receive a ghostly hug from her late grandfather as well.

"You're back from your vacation to Annwn! How was it?"

Abuela (Grandma Ravenstone) turned her ear toward Dalia. "Say again, dear?"

Dalia sighed and spoke up, repeating herself.

“Oh yes,” Abuela said. “Annwn. Lovely place. Very strange and mysterious. Most of it is tunnels and caves, but some of the larger caverns are lit up with light somehow. Most famous one is Oileán na Madraí, a beautiful island nation on a great underground lake. The ceiling of the cavern must be a mile high, and there’s light as bright as sunlight filling the cavern. The other lit caverns aren’t as bright. Most of the nations that humans can visit on their world are like that. The surface is apparently a nightmare world, nobody ever comes back alive from it. Seems H. P. Lovecraft was having visions of the surface of their world. Sorry, that was a joke, he was a mundane.”

Brandon looked skeptical. “How does any of that work? How can a cave ceiling be a mile high? Where does the light come from? How do you know there’s monsters on the surface if nobody comes back alive?”

Abuela shrugged. “The heck if I know. I already said it’s highly mysterious. It’s another universe, you can’t expect it to conform to the expectations of this universe. And as to how we know there’s monsters... the answer to that answers how there can be life in the caves, as well. The answer is that sometimes dead monsters fall through the surface openings. The cave critters eat the monster corpses.”

“If the surface monsters can come through the openings, then wouldn’t they hunt in the caves sometimes?”

“If they do, I’ve never heard anyone mention it. Anyway, never mind all that gruesome stuff. The island of Oileán na Madraí is gorgeous. It’s very rocky in a lot of places, lots of columnar basalt in some areas. Basically, most of the island is covered in stone formations, though a lot of it has some

pretty strange forests, too. About 60 percent of the island looks almost like the stone forest in China, although there was this one waterfall that was a bit like this place in Iceland I saw once. This waterfall was falling from one of the columnar basalt areas, falling about 1000 feet. From some angles, the waterfall looked like it was liquid fire.”

“WOW!” the kids said in unison.

“Quite. But enough about my vacation, we should see where the others are.”

Abuela rolled a small leather mat onto the table and shook some bones, stones, buttons, and other bits and bobs in her hands before tossing them on the leather mat, reading the patterns. Every so often she'd set one of the objects aside and toss the rest of them to clarify something. After doing this a few times she nodded, satisfied, and collected everything into the leather satchel again.

“They're on their way. Sarah's mother is driving her up here, they'll be here very soon, Yanus is going to be late, he ran into a swarm of electric pixies. Takashi is five minutes away, and Kira plans on being fashionably late, as is her way.”

“Good,” Dalia said distractedly, sitting down beside the space where Brandon had pulled up to at the table.

Despite her words, Dalia was chewing nervously on her chewy goldfish necklace, the anxious knot in her stomach twisting harder. Brandon, knowing what she was like, tried to distract her with talk about school next year. They hadn't yet gotten their acceptance letters to Fae Springs Private Academy – the local school of witchcraft that covered Oregon, Washington, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and part of Canada, IE the magical state of Pluviatia. But it was the

end of June, the letters would come any day now. Assuming Brandon had been magical long enough to get in, of course. That was something he was worried about, and trying to ease his worries eased some of Dalia's own worries.

After talking for five minutes, they heard the wolf howl that was their doorbell.

"Barry is getting it," Nizoni said.

They waited a couple more minutes before there was a knock at the doorway to the dining hall.

"It's open, Sarah!"

Two people came in. The first they saw was the familiar dirty-blond hair of Vedy's best friend Sarah, who visited pretty much every day during the summers, and had done so since the summer after kindergarten with Vedy, so she was very familiar to Brandon and Sally as well. Sarah was not what most people would consider a beauty. Even "plain" would have been a very generous description. Her face was a little squished in from the top and bottom, which made her eyes very narrow. Sarah also had something going on with her teeth that made her look like she was missing a bunch of them. If you've ever seen Dustin from Netflix's "Stranger Things," she looked like a girl version of him, but without the curly hair, and not as cute. But you wouldn't find any of the Ravenstones giving a single heck about her not being conventionally pretty. Vedy sure didn't at least. She waved Sarah over to sit next to her, and when Sarah got there, Vedy got up and put Sarah in a headlock until Morgana told her to cut it out. Sarah retaliated by doing the same to Vedy, again forcing Morgana to tell her off. To keep away further headlocks, Vedy put her snake back around her shoulders.

The second person, Takashi, was a Japanese man of average height, coming in behind Sarah. He had a scar like a jagged slash across his chin, he wore nice jeans and a black polo shirt with a red jacket on over it. His serious face brightened as he saw the people inside, smiling at them.

"Konnichiwa," he said.

"Konnichiwa," most of them echoed. Takashi and Orpheus used "Ossu" with each other instead.

Vedya ran over to him, making the snake around her shoulders hiss in annoyance. Then she hugged him tight, to Brandon's surprise. He'd never seen her hug anybody. "Takashi!" she exclaimed.

"Hello there, Vedya," Takashi said, hugging her back.

She pulled away gently and looked up at him. He looked down at her, cocking his head slightly.

"Yes, I noticed," Takashi said, smiling. "The colors look good on you." He cocked his head again. "Perhaps, around Yule." Another pause. "Yes, I could tell that, but I have a busy job, you know that."

"What's going on here?" Brandon asked.

"Brandon, Sally, this is great-grandpa Takashi Nakamura," Dalia said, taking care to speak up so she could be heard. "Vedya is thinking loudly and Takashi is picking up the thoughts with his telepathy."

"Great-grandpa?" Brandon said, looking at the man with confusion. "He doesn't look any older than maybe 30!"

"Well, that's because he's a vampire."

Brandon looked a bit more at the man.

"He doesn't *look* like a vampire."

“How is he reading Vedy’s thoughts?” Sally asked. “Doesn’t she have a similar anti-telepathy thing on her skin like you, Dalia?”

“Yes, but hers counts Takashi as an exception. They’ve been close since he brought her to us when she was an infant.”

“Is someone going to answer my—”

“Yes, sorry. Forget everything you think you know about vampires, young man,” Takashi interrupted Brandon. “Long ago, the mundanes got us confused with several types of Faery creatures including kinderblut and aswang, among others. The only thing we have in common with those creatures is we occasionally drink blood, as it’s more efficient for us than using needles, and the technique was invented long before hypodermic needles were invented.

“What vampires *actually* are, young man, are humans who have mastered a set of skills including alchemy, blood magic, blood alchemy, transformation magic – also known as zoí kámpsis or life bending, as well as necromancy, spirit bending, and healing magics. We use that skill set to warp our own vitality, our magical core, and our biology into causing us to rapidly heal automatically. It gives us preternatural long life, but we *can* still be killed with enough effort, as we are still living humans that eat and sleep and use the toilet like everyone else. And we do *eventually* die of old age.”

“Oh,” Brandon said. “Cool. But uh, how come you drink blood sometimes?”

“Because Vampires invented blood transfusions, using a kind of magic that makes the blood pierce the soft tissues of the esophagus and travel into our bloodstream from there;



it's easier than trying to get it through the skin. Losing blood isn't good for us, either, which is why we do it. We can use blood from any source, regardless of blood type or species, with exceptions for most Faery beings, because their blood is very different from ours. Our bodies heal rapidly, after all, and can adapt to any blood type based on iron. But if it's not an emergency, we like to use bio-alchemy to change a blood's type and species if it doesn't match."

"Show him your fangs!" Vedyia said excitedly.

Takashi showed them his regular teeth. Then before their eyes, a second set of teeth as sharp as needles came down past his regular teeth. Then they retracted into his body again.

"I thought you said Vampires were humans!" Brandon said.

"We are. The fangs are a body modification done via Flesh Bending. Makes it easier to get blood from animals when we need to. Most of the newer Vampires don't bother, but us older Vampires all have them.

"Now, as I was saying before I was interrupted, the only problem is that taking blood from tainted sources can give us diseases. We rarely stay sick for long, but ever since HIV started appearing, we've had to be a lot more careful where we get our blood; a vampire suffering from AIDS is *not* a pretty sight. They catch every disease there is, because their immune system can't recover from it fast enough once the infection gets a foothold, but other bodily systems keep going enough to keep them alive through a multitude of symptoms. Death is a mercy to those poor souls, and I've had

to euthanize several of my brothers-and-sisters-in-blood over the years because of it.”

“Well this is a cheerful conversation,” Morgana said, smiling in a forced way.

“My apologies, Morgana. I got carried away.”

“How are you Dalia's great-grandpa?”

“My husband, Accalon, was training to become a Vampire. He was not far from finishing the final transformation when he was lynched for helping with the Underground Railroad. But prior to that, he and I had used blood alchemy to have several children together. Some of them had children of their own. I am Orpheus's great-grandfather by marriage; one of my descendants married into her family. But Dalia and I are not blood related.”

“You're not Dalia's great-great-grandfather *or* her great-grandfather?” Sally asked. “But she called you 'great-grandpa Takashi'!”

“She called me that because it's what Orpheus calls me. In the social-familial sense, I am Dalia's great-great-grandfather, but in the biological-family sense, I am not. Mainly because Dalia is not related to Orpheus by blood. But then, neither are her Abuela or her late husband.”

“Yeah, my biological parents are Maddy and Shimá. So my grandparents by blood are Belladonna Ravenstone, Shimasani Hatathli and Tsela Hatathli,” Dalia said. “Ravenstone is Maddy's surname. Papa took her surname, as did his parents. They didn't like their own surname, which was Prickett. And then of course Shimá changed her surname to Hatathli-Ravenstone.”

“Wait, blood alchemy can make babies? Between same-sex people?”

“Yes,” Nizoni said, picking Sweetheart up off the floor again. “Blood alchemy can let those who could not otherwise have children finally have them. As Takashi said, his children were conceived that way. And Sweetheart here is the result of blood alchemy. Their biological parents are myself and Orpheus. Takashi did it for us, and Morgana was the surrogate.”

“How does it work?”

“Simply put, it's transformation magic,” Takashi said. “We use fat cells now, actually, not blood, though blood used to be used. It's easier with fat cells, though, because fat cells are actually stem cells that store extra calories within themselves. The fat cells are encouraged to become stem cells, then encouraged to become either a sperm or an egg. The sperm and egg are mixed, the fertilized egg is implanted in the surrogate, and I had to stay around to make sure Morgana's uterus didn't reject the baby, or worse.

“And I have to say, it's a lot easier now that we have microscopes and the right kind of manipulation tools. When Accalon and I had children, we created an entire teaspoon full of fertilized eggs. If I hadn't been able to sense the zygotes inside and cause some of them to die, the poor surrogate would have given birth to octuplets or more. As it was, we had triplets.”

A different 'doorbell' went off, this one sounding like the roar of a tiger.

“Ah, Yanus is here, at the back door. And the wards have gotten him away from the pixies at last. Orpheus?”

"Yes, Morgana dear, I'll get it."

"Yaw-noose?" Brandon asked.

As Orpheus left, Dalia turned to Brandon, spelling out the name and then explaining, "Yanus lives in the part of Tirffiniol where we are now, over on the Tirffiniol side of Toronto. So he has to come in through the Quartz Door, which is the front door of this part of the property."

"How old are you anyway, Mr. Nakamura?" Brandon asked.

"I am—"

Just then, a tall white man ran into the room, sighed with relief, and wiped his brow, Orpheus returning a minute later. The white man had brown hair and was solidly built, like he had to haul heavy things frequently and maybe did a lot of running, too. He was also tanned, he clearly got a lot of sunlight. But the most striking thing about him was he was dressed in hand-sewn deerskin trousers, shirt, and moccasins. He had a sheathed metal spear strapped to one shoulder with what looked like a leather cord. The spear was unusual in that the entire length was some kind of black metal, not just the blade. Or at least one could assume the blade was metal too, but currently it was sheathed in black leather. The man also had an odd looking taser holstered to his hip; it was odd because the handle had copper plating on it, a strange thing indeed to put on a taser. As soon as he had stopped running, he had put a lollipop in his mouth.

"Uncle Yanus!" Dalia said delightedly, but didn't run toward him, or indeed even get up. He approached her cautiously and set a wrapped gift down several feet from her before retreating.

"Brandon, this is my godfather, we call him Uncle Yanus, even though he's not related to us. Yanus, this is my friend Brandon Han."

"Just a moment, lad," the man said. "Got bellows to mend."

Brandon turned to Dalia in confusion.

"He means he's out of breath."

"Oh." Brandon turned back to Takashi. "So how old are you? You got interrupted."

"I am 248 years old."

"Yes," Morgana said with a grin, "but he was born on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 1768, so we joke he's actually only 61."

"Wow! You're older than the United States?"

"Yes."

"Where were you born?"

"Japan."

Brandon's eyes went wide. "You were living in Japan during the Edo period?"

Takashi smiled. "A clever young man you are. Yes, I lived in Japan during part of the Edo period."

When Yanus finally caught his breath, he turned to Brandon and indicated he was ready. Brandon held out his hand and introduced himself again, but Yanus didn't take it. In fact, he took a step backwards and put his hands in his pockets.

"Pleased to meet you, Brandon Han. Yanus Holtzer at your service," he said, bowing at the waist.

"Er, same to you," Brandon said, putting his hand down. "Um, interesting outfit you have there."

"Thank you for the compliment, lad," Yanus said, his voice having a bit of a sarcastic edge to it. "I made it myself. It's deerskin. Killed, skinned, and tanned it myself. You want one too, wise guy?"

Brandon stuck his tongue out at the man.

"Cheeky little git, I see."

"That's funny, you're using British slang but you don't have a British accent."

"Yeah, well, I do a lot of traveling," Yanus said, grinning. He then gave a hearty laugh, as though what he'd said was a joke. Orpheus and several other Ravenstones laughed along with him, including Dalia.

"What's the joke?" Brandon asked.

"The joke is that it's a massive understatement," Yanus explained. "I'm a World-Walker, which means I can travel to different Faery realms and alternate universes as easily as walking from one room to another. In the years since I became an indentured servant of the Thunderbird nation, I've been to so many different Faery realms that I've literally written the most recent worldwide-standard book about Faery realms. Some of the places I've been to aren't normally places a human could survive, but the Thunderbirds protect their investment."

"Indentured servant? Isn't that basically a slave?"

"It's a slave that can buy their way free eventually, in theory. Also, indentured servants have more rights than slaves. To be entirely honest, I'm not actually sure whether I'm an indentured servant or a slave, but either way, I got what I deserved."

Sally turned to Brandon and said, "I've met him once before. He angered the Thunderbirds somehow, about 100 years ago. He doesn't like to talk about it, so I don't know what he did to anger them so much, but he's going to be repaying them in service for at least another century."

Brandon blinked, looking back at Yanus. "You're over 100 years old? But you look no older than 30! Are you a vampire, too?"

"Nope, not a vampire. If you eat the wrong food in a fairy realm, you can become afflicted with a sort of disease that, if you survive it, you become something called a Tuunderfeerf, AKA a fairy human - biologically a fairy, but still able to have kids with humans. And it gives one a rather long life, several centuries' worth. The Thunderbirds wanted me to work for them a long time for my crime, so they force fed me one of those foods, but used Waxing to make sure I survived."

Sally looked at him with confusion. "I thought you could become a Tuunderfeerf just by spending seven years or more in a fairy world?"

"You're thinking of Blyahnort. That's when a human witch spends so much time in Faery that even if they don't eat the food, their magic is so enhanced by the world's magic that coming back to Earth can make them ill. But they could adapt to staying on Earth again if they chose to, and do it easily enough. Tuunderfeerf are basically stuck in Faery, can only visit Earth for short trips."

"Oh, okay."

"Anyway, going on, another thing about my job is that time behaves strangely in some Faery realms, so though I'm

chronologically only 135 years old by Earth standards, I've lived in realms where time flowed much faster in relation to our world but entropy was pretty much nonexistent, so I've experienced about 210 years of life, subjectively."

Yanus finally took his spear off his shoulder and propped it up in one corner of the room, passing by Brandon as he did. Something in the chair fizzed, popped, and caught fire. Almost before Brandon could react, Yanus smothered the fire with magic.

"Sorry about that, young man, I didn't realize your wheelchair was going to be electronic. Um, the Thunderbird power that lives in me kinda does that to anything electronic. Even light-bulbs burn out when I enter a room. If they aren't plugged in already, they even light up before kicking the bucket."

"Dammit!" Brandon shouted. "Mom's gonna *kill* you for this! Or kill *me*!"

"Well maybe my dad and I could fix it," Sally offered. "I can ask him, anyway. Dad is an electronics engineer."

"Yeah maybe, but what am I going to do in the meantime? Especially since I can't really explain what happened to my parents."

"I didn't want to ruin the surprise for you, dear," Morgana said, "but I'm on the school board for Fae Springs Private Academy, and they've detected magic from your house, coming from you, so you're going to be getting someone visiting you with your acceptance letter soon, to explain it to your parents if possible. Which basically means you're going to be going to Fae Springs."

"Oh wow! That's awesome! Thanks!"



“You’re welcome, dear. But I only told you that because, well... you should have your wheelchair converted to run on magic or be shielded against magic. Fae Springs is in Tirffin-*iol*, so the only electronics that work there are those converted to run on magic, or heavily shielded electronics. And thanks to thaumelectric bridges, you can even get a computer – magical or mundane – to access the Witches’ Internet as well as the mundane Internet.”

“Yes,” Nizoni said, nodding once in an upward motion at Brandon, “and I know someone who knows how to do that kind of conversion. We can get anything you want converted done cheaply. Laptops, electric wheelchairs, tablets, and so on. Even radios. Magical radios are fun, too. Occasionally creepy, but fun.”

“Oh wow, thank you!”

“Not a problem.”

Yanus, who had been standing this whole time, finally sat down on one end of one table that had him well away from everyone else except for two other chairs. When Brandon looked at him strangely for this, he stared back, then grinned.

“To answer the question you didn’t ask aloud (and no, I’m not telepathic), I don’t want to accidentally electrocute anyone who can’t handle it. My girlfriend Morikami and Dalia’s godmother Kira can both be near me, even touch me, without feeling more than a tingling sensation. Everyone else would feel pain at the least, maybe die at worst. I can mostly control it, but only mostly. I don’t like taking chances around humans.”

Dalia felt a familiar sensation, and turned her head toward the door just in time to see Doñela running through it, somehow managing not to make a racket in the process. The semi-transparent Latina girl – who had left behind the clothes that made her visible to others, but still appeared to Dalia to be wearing a dress – walked right through the tables to where Dalia was sitting and spoke to her.

*'Kira's almost here!' Doñela said. 'She's almost at the Quartz Door! And Morikami's with her!'*

Dalia's face lit up. "*Shimá!* Kira and Morikami are here!"

"They are?" Nizoni asked. "Well, I'd better go get—"

The roaring-tiger sound of the 'doorbell' at the Quartz Door went off, and Nizoni got up to get it. Dalia nervously chewed her chewy necklace while Doñela made faces at her to try to make her laugh. Every once in a while, Dalia let out a snort of repressed laughter.

First into the room was a beautiful Japanese woman of regal bearing, looking like she was 20, but who knew with Faery beings how old she actually was? She didn't *look* like a Faery being, she wasn't *impossibly* beautiful, nothing about her said 'I am a Faery being,' unless you happened to be watching the back of her skirt by the floor at the right time to catch a glimpse of fox tail, giving away her status as a Kitsune.

And quite a long skirt she wore, too; it brushed the ground, and had a weighted hem to help hide her tails. The skirt itself was the red color of a fox, as was the rest of the dress it was attached to. When Doñela put her face through the skirt to count the Kitsune woman's tails, Dalia felt her face turn hot as an oven and she looked away immediately,

feeling the ever-present anxious knot in her stomach triple in tightness.

*'There's eight of 'em, if you were wondering,'* Doñela said, grinning cheekily at Dalia.

*'You're incorrigible,'* said another voice from the door. Judging by how Dalia and Doñela were the only ones to react to it, Tamir had just come into the room. But Dalia was very carefully not looking at either of them. *'Putting your face into someone's dress, Doñela? Really?'*

Yanus stood up the moment the Japanese woman walked in, taking her by the arm in an old-fashioned gentlemanly fashion, which she seemed pleased with despite jumping as she got shocked by an arc of electricity from his skin.

"Hey there, foxy lady," Yanus said to her, moving his eyebrows up and down saucily. Dalia turned to Vedyā to get her reaction, but her sister was just watching this exchange intently, as though trying to memorize it.

"You flatterer," Morikami said to Yanus with a grin.

In response, he pulled an orange rose from his clothes and handed it to her. "A beautiful flower for a beautiful lady," he said.

"Oh Yanus, it's lovely," she said, sniffing it. "Hmm... I know what a red rose means, but what is orange?"

"Enthusiasm and passion," he explained with another waggle of his eyebrows, making her laugh.

Still arm in arm, he walked her to her seat, pausing first to make introductions. Takashi stood up as they approached, standing in a stately fashion.

"Sanguine Lord Takashi Nakamura," Yanus said formally, "may I introduce you to Lady Morikami Shimizu, She of the Eight Tails? Lady Shimizu, Sanguine Lord Nakamura."

"It is my pleasure to meet you, Lady Shimizu," Takashi said, bowing.

"As it is my pleasure to meet you, Sanguine Lord Nakamura," she replied with a curtsy.

"Morikami," Yanus said, "I think you know everyone else here, except of course for Vedy's friend Sarah, and Dalia's friends Brandon Han and Sally Anne Smith-Jones."

Morikami gasped at Sally's name.

"You told me her middle name?"

"He didn't," Sally said. "My middle name isn't really Anne. Anne is the short form of my actual middle name."

Morikami visibly relaxed. "Well that's alright, then. Pleased to meet you, Brandon-san, Sally-san, Sarah-san."

"The pleasure is mine, Lady Shimizu," Sally said.

"Please, you may call me Morikami-tono."

"Oh. Thank you, Morikami-tono."

"Tono?" Brandon whispered to Dalia. "I haven't heard that one on any of the animes I watch."

"Cuz it's obsolete in the mundane world and most of the human magical community," she whispered back. "Kitsune still use it, though. It basically means 'Lady.' 'Dono' means 'Lord.'"

Brandon nodded, turned to Morikami, bowed his head, and said, "Pleased to meet you, Morikami-tono."

Sarah, looking a little overwhelmed at meeting Kitsune nobility, repeated what Brandon had said.

Morikami nodded again briefly, smiling, and sat down to one side of Yanus. Now there was only one other person left to come in, and she was taking her sweet time. Dalia knew she was in the building.

Dalia sighed. “Kira?” she said as loud as she could, but she could tell by Doñela’s expression she wasn’t saying it loud enough.

She was about to call out again when the lights dimmed, the room grew colder, and they heard the rumble of distant thunder. Windows that hadn’t been there a moment ago flew open in a stiff, cold wind, their ragged curtains flapping ominously in the chill breeze. It was raining outside, coming down in buckets of ice cold water. Lightning flashed, more thunder rumbled, and the earth began to shake, causing Sally and Brandon to clutch one another and scream, Sarah to grab Vedyá’s arm fearfully, and everyone else to just roll their eyes and look unimpressed.

A shadow so dark it looked like a hole in the world filled the open doorway, and two ominous, glowing red eyes opened, eliciting fresh screams from Dalia’s two friends, and loud sighs and annoyed groans from everyone else. The shadow closed its eyes again and glided across the floor, like a patch of absolute nothingness floating after its prey. Slowly it crept to the table, then across the tables, reaching greedily toward the two terrified mortal children, ready to—

“Oh for Goddess’s sake, Kira, stop with the dramatics,” Morgana said. “You’re scaring Dalia’s friends. Sarah doesn’t look too pleased either, come to that.”

A voice sounding as though a zombie wolverine had been given the power of speech croaked out, “I hunger for

the flesh of mortal children! I will devour your souls and suck the meat from your bones!”

“She’ll do nothing of the sort, kids; she’s just fond of dramatic entrances,” Morgana said.

“Yeah, Maddy’s right,” Dalia said, taking her friends by their shaking hands before Sally could run away. “She’s mostly harmless.”

The impossibly dark shadow turned abruptly, red glowing eyes frowning at Dalia.

“Mostly harmless’?” it said in the same monstrous voice, indignant now. “I am deeply offended, Dalia Ravenstone! Wounded to my very *core*! How dare you be so cruel, so callous, so *heartless* to your beloved fairy godmother?”

“Th-th-that th-thing is y-your f-fairy g-g-godm-m-mother?” Brandon stammered out, barely decipherable. Sally and Sarah quietly agreed; they *knew* Kira, had met her a bunch of times over the years, and had never seen her do anything like this before, so it was hard to imagine this thing could be Kira.

“Yes. She’s just using a glamour to frighten you.”

They looked like they didn’t believe her, but didn’t want to call her a liar. The dark shadow persisted in looking terrifying.

Dalia sighed, and pulled a spray bottle full of water out from under the table. She sprayed it at the glowing red eyes, making the living shadow flinch and raise its arms protectively.

“GAH! No—! Stop it! STOP—ARGH! No—*hey—HEY—* STOP SQUIRTING ME!”

Dalia, laughing now, kept squirting, much more earnestly now. The empty black shape kept raising its arms, trying to keep the water out of its eyes. Dalia's friends started to chuckle reluctantly at the sight.

“STOP IT! STOP—no! I mean it, young lady! Stop or I'll—GAH! Okay fine, FINE! UNCLE! *UNCLE!!!* I surrender! Just—NO! ARRRGHHH!”

In the space of a blink, all the scary illusions disappeared and the room was back to how it had been, a partly-cloudy prairie view, painfully bright and uncomfortably warm now in the transition from the cold darkness. Where the living shadow had been standing was a woman with skin as dark brown as Morgana's skin, her curly black hair, her face, and her blood-red and bruise-purple dress all soaking wet. Her eyes, once red, were now a bright, glowing silver. She had blood-red stripes on her brown skin, they now noticed, and ears pointed sharp as razors. She was still holding up her arms to keep most of the water out of her face, as Dalia was still spraying her and laughing. When the woman who must be Kira spoke, her voice was a normal human woman's voice.

“Oh is *that* how it is? Fine, then, Missy, *two* can play *that* game!”

Kira moved her hands into a position like she was holding something big enough to need two hands, and suddenly they were filled with a very large, neon-yellow and orange plastic water gun with a gallon of storage capacity and pump-action. Furiously priming the pump and grinning like a delighted child, Kira sprayed Dalia, who shrieked with delight and dismay.

"No fair! You escalated!" Dalia shouted, running for cover.

"All's fair in love and war, Little Branch!"

Kira ran ahead and leaped over the table and the people sitting there, chasing Dalia around the room, spraying her with water that never seemed to get any lower despite there being so much of it that Dalia's dress was soaked all the way through, dripping like mad even when she was out of the line of fire.

"Stop it! My dress! You'll *ruin* it!"

"Oh *now* you're concerned about fine craftsmanship, are you? Where was that attitude five minutes ago when I was trying so hard to impress you, eh?"

Dalia shrieked and ducked under a table, but Kira suddenly appeared on the other side and got her right in the face with a jet of water. Dalia spluttered and threw her arms up protectively.

"I SURRENDER! Stop! Auntie Kira, STOP!"

Finally, Kira stopped, holding the water gun pointing down.

"Do you apologize?" Kira asked.

"What? I can't hear you; everyone's laughing too loud."

Silence slammed into place like a house falling on a witch. Everyone was still laughing, but Kira and Dalia no longer heard it.

"Better?"

"Much."

"Good. So I was asking if you were ready to apologize?"

"I apologize for nothing, Auntie. You scared my friends."



Kira sighed. "You're right. I'm sorry for scaring your friends. I won't do it again. Not on purpose, anyway."

"Apology accepted, but you'll have to apologize to them, too. And I'm sorry I got you soaking wet."

"Apology accepted, Little Branch."

There appeared a pause, its water – coincidentally – about to break.

"*And?*" Dalia prompted.

"And what?" Kira asked with mock innocence.

"Aren't you going to apologize for getting me soaking wet?"

"I have no idea what you mean," Kira said, grinning.

Before Dalia could react, she found she was dry and warm again. The water gun was gone, as was the water that had been all over the floor and the tables, and the other people. Kira was still wet, but she frowned in concentration and suddenly the water came off her as steam, returning her clothes to pristine condition, her curly black hair back to its normal poofy frizz. The silence in the room stopped, they could hear the laughter again.

"Anyway yeah, I'm sorry I soaked you, even if it *was* just a glamour," Kira said, grinning. "And to Dalia's friends and to Sarah, I apologize for frightening you. Now get over here, you little imp!"

Kira grabbed Dalia's arms and hoisted her up, giving her a very enthusiastic hug when she was standing; so enthusiastic that she lifted Dalia right off her feet.

"It's been too long, Little Branch."

In a muffled voice, Dalia said, "It's been six months."

"Like I said, it's been too long. You're growing like bamboo, Little Branch. I'm gonna start calling you 'Bamboo.' Anyway, Fægen Borendæg, wúscbearn!"

"You know I don't know Old English, Auntie."

"Why not? It's éaðelic!"

"That was hilarious!" Sally said. "That water fight, not the Old English. The part before it was terrifying, though. I think I wet myself in both terror *and* laughter."

Kira sniffed around Sally and Brandon, then around Sarah.

"Nope, you're all good. Anyway, what I said in Old English was 'Happy birthday, child,' and 'easy.'"

Rolling her eyes, Dalia said, "Brandon, this is my fairy godmother, Kira Tana Dysnomia Gullveig. Sarah and Sally already know her. Don't worry, Morikami-tono, it's an alias. No idea what her real name is."

"Names are like clothes," Kira said. "I came into this world without one, I intend to leave it the same way."

A black shape flew into the room. Everyone looked up, but it was just Kobalos. He landed on the back of Dalia's chair. She navigated around the furniture until she was standing next to him. He looked at her with his head cocked.

"I really felt quite distressed at not receiving an invitation," Kobalos said in a feminine voice.

Dalia snickered. "I apologize for the oversight, Kobalos."

"That a girl. Mind you don't do it again," he said, preening his feathers. Dalia sat down in her seat again, and Kira went over to sit next to Yanus and Morikami.

"Well now that everyone's here at last," Morgana said, standing up, "I'll go get lunch."

Morgana got up and went into the kitchen. Everyone started talking with their neighbors. Doñela, unable to be heard by anyone unless she was possessing Dalia or using Loki, wandered around the room, considering whether or not to play a prank on someone. Tamir had vanished again. Doñela was the first one to notice Barry floating into the room, leaving a huge box of presents in one corner before leaving. Dalia smiled at this; Barry didn't like parties any more than Tamir did.

Soon, Morgana was floating dishes of food out to the table. Dalia's favorite meal (at least for the past six months) was Thanksgiving, so for her birthday they had prepared a Thanksgiving-style feast, with all the usual things: roasted turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, sweet potatoes with marshmallows, green bean casserole, cranberry sauce, apple cider, collard greens, corn, and for dessert they had apple pie with ice cream and pumpkin pie with whipped cream. Just like Thanksgiving, they talked as they stuffed themselves.

Brandon and Sally jumped a little when four long, furry arms popped out of the thing that looked like a British-style wardrobe, the two Bogeymen eating without showing any one more than their arms. All of Dalia's siblings had joined them by now too. Eleven-year-old Vedyā and Sarah were talking animatedly, Vedyā occasionally putting down her fork to sign at Chooli – her also eleven-year-old genderless younger sibling formerly known as Querido – though Chooli didn't respond except the occasional nod or head shake, being too keen on the food to sign back. (Chooli could speak, and had adaptive tech to catch other people's conversations, but zee didn't want to bother at the moment.)

Brandon was sitting next to Sally, and several times he caught Vedyā glaring at him with an angry expression that had something dangerous in it, but whenever he met her eyes, she looked down and abused the food on her plate with her fork, her snake hissing menacingly each time. Their six-year-old brother Ashkii was concentrating on his food. Her youngest sibling, Sweetheart, was in their high chair, Orpheus feeding them mashed potatoes.

Grandma and Grandpa Ravenstone had just been discussing their trip to Annwn again when Yanus made a dismissive noise, gesturing with his wooden fork while he swallowed before speaking.

“Anyone can go to Annwn, you just have to be willing to pay someone to open a portal for you. Though they don’t take mortal money; they consider mortal money to be weak and stupid. Paper money tends to fall apart too quickly in most Faery realms, coins are never a high enough denomination, and gold from our world tends to be so full of negative energy that they can’t bear to touch it. Precious gems will work if they’ve been cleansed, or some people pay by shaving years off their life. If you can get Goblin gold, that’ll work too, but Goblins don’t like to give humans their gold, for the same reason they don’t like human gold. Historically, they’ve also had to deal with a lot of people removing the magic from their gold, which is basically stealing to their minds. It drains their economy of gold, to do that.”

“Abuela, please tell me you didn’t pay in years from your life!” Dalia said in a small and worried voice.

She chuckled. “Don’t worry, Dalia, we did *not* do that. We paid with some artificial diamonds. Goblins love artifi-

cial diamonds even more than natural ones, for some reason. I never did figure out why, though; they're strangely close-lipped about it."

"Everyone keeps mentioning Goblins," Brandon said. "But what do Goblins *look* like? I keep picturing short people with long fingers and big noses."

Yanus snorted derisively, quickly passing the mashed potatoes by levitation before speaking. "That sounds closer to the description for a dwarf or a kobold. The only Goblins you're ever likely to see – the females and the incubators but never the males unless they're covered up head to foot – are about human-sized, though a little shorter than modern Western humans, closer to eighteenth-century European heights, usually. They're also clearly not human, having scaly skin, sort of wolf-like ears, catlike eyes, sharp teeth, and retractable claws. They also tend to be green, with other colors here and there on their bodies."

"Speaking of Goblins," Morgana said, "I have it on good authority that one will be attending Fae Springs Private Academy this year."

Dalia froze with her fork halfway to her mouth. "You got it through? It passed!?"

Morgana nodded, swallowing her mouthful of collard greens. "Yes. There were just enough progressive voices on the school board this year, thanks to me getting on it in addition to Nizoni, for the resolution to pass after all these years of fighting for it."

"What resolution?" Brandon asked between bites of turkey.

"Mmm," Orpheus said, still holding a spoon to feed Sweetheart. "The uh, Fae Springs school board has been trying for years to uh, to get a resolution passed to let non-human beings in to learn magic if they – No, Sweetheart, carrots go in your mouth, not your nose – where was I? Oh yes, the resolution lets non-humans learn human magic now. Their uh, their magic can often differ from human magic, depending on the uh, the species, but the difference is mainly power and the technique they – Yes, Sweetheart, Papa knows you think it's funny to put that there, but I already told you no."

"The technique they use" Morikami finished for him, "Quite true. And for some, like Kitsune, the only magic they master before they can take human form is fire magic and shape-shifting. And while royalty and the wealthy can hire tutors or home-school their kids, the less fortunate among my people cannot afford either of those options. So they're quite as needful of a public education in magic as any human. Though that's not what they're getting with this resolution, because faeries aren't considered citizens of Pluviatia; only human witches are considered citizens. The resolution just says that, after a trial year of only three faery students at the primary campus, faeries that want to join won't be turned away if they have the money to pay the tuition. I'll be paying the tuition for one of my needy subjects – picked by lottery – because of that."

"Wait, I thought Fae Springs was a *private* school?" Brandon said. Dalia caught Sarah sighing – Sarah would of course already know all this, since she spent most of her time during the summers at their house.

“That’s just its name,” Yanus said. “Fae Springs lets in any citizen of Praecantus if they have the magic for it, and as Morikami said, only human witches count as citizens. As to the name, they chose it to try to discourage mundanes from applying, and made sure to say on the website that it’s by invitation only, to discourage mundanes from trying to apply. Doesn’t entirely work, though. Despite the website making it abundantly clear that you shouldn’t even think about applying if you don’t know the people in charge – which any witch in the US or Canada could do easily enough – they still get scores of applications and inquiries from mundanes every year.”

“I still don’t get it.” His fork dipped idly into his corn as he looked at Yanus to explain.

“Well in a sense it *is* a private school, because only witches who are citizens of Pluviatia can get in, though citizens of other magical states can transfer if they need to. But since they exclude mundanes and faeries as citizens, it counts technically as being selective, making it technically a private school. Which, I mean... if a mundane knew what Fae Springs was, they could come join us and develop magic through belief, but governments rarely make any sense.

“But in another sense Fae Springs is public, because you don’t *have* to apply or pay to get in, if you’re a citizen of Pluviatia, and only human witches are considered citizens. US public schools don’t have to accept students from out of the country, I think, but they’re still considered public schools. Similar idea here. Praecantus is considered – by witches, at least – to be another country from whatever mundane one they happen to be in, even though they still have to abide

by mundane laws, too, with certain exceptions, like the fact you have an unlicensed cobra in this house; the magical government doesn't care about that, as long as the mundane one doesn't find out about it. But since we consider ourselves separate entities, politically speaking, and since the magical community has its own taxes to pay for schools and for things the various Witches' Council levels need, it's public because none of the people our government considers citizens can legally be turned away without just cause.

"Speaking of that, the fact faeries that live here aren't considered citizens is kind of bull—I mean bogus, because if they have any kind of job involving the magical community – and most do – they pay taxes to whatever state they're in, as well as to the federal government of Praecantus. But they don't get much if any of the benefits of those taxes."

"That sucks!" Dalia said. Everyone at the table was nodding agreement with this.

"Witches' Council? What's that?" asked Brandon.

"Our government. There's the local city council of witches, called *Concilio Portlandia*. Morgana is on the *Concilio Portlandia*, in fact.

"Then there's our local equivalent of a state government, *Concilio Pluviatia*. The region of Pluviatia includes Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and part of Canada. It's the same region Fae Springs covers, which is why Fae Springs is a boarding school. Not everyone can shadow-walk, after all, and even if they could, it would still be kind of a pain trying to get there on time every day."

"The current president of the *Concilio Portlandia* is Christopher Starling," Morgana added. "He's been an ally of



our family since we moved in. As to Arthur Kemp, the former president of the *Concilio Pluviatia*, now a Grand Councilor; I haven't met him yet. From what I've read and heard of him, he seems okay for a politician."

"Is there a national government, too?"

It was Yanus's turn again. "Yes," he said. "'The Grand Council of Praecantus,' often just called 'The Grand Council.' The Latin translation of the name was too much of a mouthful for anyone to say, so they just went with English. But honestly, I'm bored of this subject. You'll have a History and Civics class in Fae Springs, you'll learn all this and more there. Can we talk about something else?"

"Okay," Brandon said, putting more potatoes on his plate, "then tell us more about Fae Springs, please? I know basically nothing about it."

"Well okay. There's five campuses; two are for children, Oak Campus and Ash Campus. Two other campuses are for adults, those are Thorn Campus and Hazel Campus; Thorn is for adults who are new to magic, Hazel is the college campus. Then there's an emergency campus to go to in case of fire, called Cherry Campus. Oak and Ash campuses are identical. The building is on the Tirffiniol side, you get in via Tirffiniol portals on the mundane side of the campus location. You won't see much of those, though; just the main bit. Anyway, there's magical and mundane classes both, so you get math and mundane civics and science classes on top of magical classes. There's a few groves of trees on the surrounding property, quite large. More like a small forest that's been divided into three pieces, to be honest."

"Is it forbidden to go in there?"

"No, quite the opposite. Well, not most of it. There's a section in the back called the Dark Grove that you should only go into with a teacher's supervision, the trees there tend to be dangerous for one reason or another. Anyway, it's blocked off pretty well, the wards won't let anyone in there unless they're a teacher or accompanied by a teacher, and even then the teacher has to have a special ward key from the main office to get in there. And they have to know the magic password, which keeps changing."

"Anything else? About the school, I mean."

"I don't want to spoil too much for you. You'll see for yourself when you get there. But I will say, it's a lovely place. And from one side of the building at Oak Campus, you can see the Goblin city of Krevjavrok in the distance."

"Do we ever get to visit that city?"

"There might be the occasional field trip or two, yes. But not until your second year."

"Wow, a whole city populated with non-human people! Sounds amazing!"

"It *is* a pretty nice place, for one of the smaller Goblin cities. It's basically the same size as Portland. Not counting the suburbs, that is."

The talk, from there, varied in interest level as the groups that talked switched around a little, and the kids ended up metaphorically stranded on an island together, surrounded by an ocean of boring adult conversation. Dalia looked at Doñela, who was getting dangerously bored now that the conversation was getting dull. She was wandering around the room, staring at plates as though contemplating upturning them just to make life more interesting. Dalia really wished

Tamir would come stop her before she created any chaos, but he didn't like parties, of course.

Luckily, Doñela lasted until lunch was over and the presents started to come out. Dalia blew out a candle shaped like the number 12 perched atop a slice of pumpkin pie, because there was too much food for cake, and she liked pumpkin pie better anyway. Then she began unwrapping presents.

Most of the gifts were pretty normal, a mix of clothes, music, books, games, toys, and other things, with some exceptions. The first exception was the second to last gift she received, from Yanus. It was a box which had visible holes poked into it, suggesting a living thing. The box was surrounded by another box made of a mesh of thin wires. Being familiar with Yanus, she recognized the outside part as a Faraday cage, which had surely been keeping whatever was inside from being electrocuted by Yanus's powers. Curious because she hadn't asked for a pet (she already had Kobalos, after all), she opened it up cautiously. What she saw inside made her eyes light up with wonder.

"Wooooow," she said, carefully taking it out of its box. "It's beautiful!"

Sally and Brandon did not agree with this assessment. Their first reaction was confusion. Then Sally, apparently figuring out what it was, had to turn away to fight nausea. Brandon soon did the same.

The thing was... well, it resembled a bonsai tree, but it was furry all over, and instead of a canopy of leaves, there were instead many weird little limbs like tiny animal legs moving back and forth as though keeping their muscles in shape.

"'Bonsai' meat tree!" Yanus exclaimed.

"Meat tree?" Brandon asked, turning green around the gills.

"Yes, I know a guy who makes meat trees for a living. Usually they're the same size as regular trees. It's an advanced use of transformation magic, you start with the fertilized egg of some animal and then use magic to redirect its growth. Then you end up one day with something resembling a tree, so you can prune the limbs now and then and sell the meat. The amputated limbs grow back. And the best part is, they don't have brains, so they don't suffer.

"This one is bonzai, after a fashion. In real bonzai, the tree is pruned frequently in a way that stunts its growth, but in the case of these things, no pruning is necessary; get it the size and shape you want, and then shut off its ability to grow any further."

"It's awesome!" Dalia said, almost hugging Yanus before remembering she couldn't without injury or death. "Thank you, Uncle Yanus."

"You're welcome."

"Oh God, can you put that thing away please, Dalia?" Sally asked, looking like she was about to vomit.

"Sorry Sally," she said, putting the meat tree back in its box and closing the box again.

"Thank you. Please, for the love of all that is holy, don't you *dare* take that vile thing with you to Fae Springs, I'd never be able to visit your room if you did."

"Right, I'll leave it here. Barry can keep it alive for me."

“That abomination makes me almost understand the people who hate and fear magic, honestly. I'm going to try to forget it exists.”

Now that Yanus had given her his gift, there was just one person left to give her a gift.

“Auntie Kira, did you bring me a gift?”

“That depends. German or English?”

“What?”

“Sorry, bad joke. Yes, I brought a gift. Two gifts, actually.”

“What kind of gifts? It's just that Shimá said that on the day of my birth, you gave me some mysterious magical gift that you described only as 'arms of smokeless black fire.' We're still trying to figure out what that means.”

“It might make more sense if you knew the whole thing. It went, 'By the blood of my savior spilled on the field, this power I leave this hour concealed; Arms of smokeless black fire the power she'll wield, and by my Will this spell be sealed.' That was what I said over you while you were still covered in blood and afterbirth, while I wove the spell into you.”

“Yeah... still cryptic, Auntie. Also, eww.”

“Thanks. But it's not much different than I usually give my godchildren. Sure, I like to mix up the types of protection, it makes life interesting. But you know, it's a protection spell, that's kind of obvious from the incantation.”

“Yes, but you've got something else in mind for me this year, I'm betting.”

“Little Branch, I always get you physical gifts now. Why should today be any different?”

"Because it's my twelfth birthday. You've been with our family for about 1000 years, we know you like to give mysterious magical gifts on significant birthdays. Minutes after someone's born, on their twelfth birthday, and on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday."

"Well yes, that's what I do *now*. It used to be day one, tenth or eleventh or twelfth birthday, and then 14<sup>th</sup>. Or rather, as close to those as we could figure out, in the preliterate days when only royalty had calendars. But people in your culture don't get married at 14 like they used to, so I moved that one up to 18<sup>th</sup>."

"You're splitting hairs. And avoiding answering."

"Look, the formula is simple, Little Branch: 'Day of your birth I guard your life entire, twelfth birthday you get a Gift you require, and at 18 ask your heart's deepest desire, and I'll do my best to get the wish you've inquired.' Within reason, that last one."

"Yes, but that's still rather vague."

"Well like I said, I like to mix things up, make life interesting. Not everyone needs or wants the same things, after all."

"Oh. Well... um... okay."

"May I give you your Gift now?"

"Is it really safe to be getting gifts from a Fairy?" Brandon asked.

"She's been with our family for 1000 years, she's proved herself trustworthy."

"I started being the Fairy Godmother for the Ravens because when I was an infant, I was captured by hu-

man slavers and kept for fifty years before Persephone Ravenstone the First gave her life to free me, a perfect stranger who had been bound to kill her. Against my will I cursed her, but with her dying breath she freed me from my bondage. Her baby son was orphaned as a result, and after I revenged myself on my former master, I raised the babe by myself. I've been with the family ever since."

"Oh wow. Okay, then."

"I don't know what Gift I could possibly require, Auntie Kira, but well, sure... go ahead."

"Stand up, right here in front of me. Yes, there."

A silver circle appeared around Dalia, the lighting dimmed, and there was a power rising in the air around her.

"Blood of dragon, tooth of shark,

Goblin gold and willow bark;

Phoenix fire, Thunderbird spark,

I leave you with this Fairy Mark!"

With an index finger, Kira touched Dalia on the chest above her heart, and Dalia felt a burning sensation there that made her yelp. Sally moved up to her at once to stare at the spot.

"There's a literal mark there now," Sally said. "Looks like a stylized fingerprint with star rays coming out of it. Wait, it's disappearing now."

"The Mark is more than skin deep. It calls the uncalled by She of No Name, and with Her power, on the Marked She lays claim."

"Cryptic as usual, Auntie Kira. But what does it *do*?"

“Simple. Some will see one thing, others will see something else entirely, even though they’ll both see the same image.”

“Still cryptic. Can you be more specific?”

Kira sighed. “Fine, fine, little larkspur, if you insist. Helpful people and forces with the bravery to not be scared off by an Ævintýrichor Fairy Mark will be able to use its power to help you, if the Mark agrees with their use of it. Those that aren’t that brave will turn away with an abundance of caution. And those who are malicious will be terrified of it, for such is my people’s reputation, and my own reputation even more so. Unless they’re too foolish to be scared, in which case the smokeless fire will defend you.”

“Oh. Cool. Don’t know why you had to be so cryptic, though.”

“It makes life interesting. My people live thousands of years, life would get boring really fast if we were clear and concise communicators.”

“I dunno,” Sally said, “you seem to speak pretty clearly for being 1000 years old.”

“One of the benefits of being immortal, at least among my kind, is a degree of mental flexibility. My brain sort of archives obsolete languages and slang, among other memories I don’t need. Once I get acclimated to the language of the place and era I’m in, switching back to older forms requires a bit more concentration. Helps when I have need of protective camouflage. It would be a bit of a giveaway if I went around lapsing into Old English or a weird mix of obsolete slang words all the time.”



"I would think the glowing eyes and the stripes would be a giveaway," Brandon commented.

"Easily hidden. I wouldn't even need a glamour to do it; it'd be more on the order of minor shape-shifting. But now, Little Branch, for your second gift."

"What? Oh wait, the physical one, you mean?"

"Yes."

Kira pulled a box out of a pocket in her dress and handed it to Dalia. Carefully, Dalia took it and opened it up. Inside the wrapping was a box like a ring or necklace might come in, but bigger. When she took the lid off, inside was a pink stone that was shaped like a pyramid that had been stretched until it was narrow even at the base. On the bottom of the base there was a hole; part of the base had been hollowed out, and there was screw-like threading on the inner surface.

"Thank you, Auntie! This is perfectly shaped to be the point of a wand! Hmm... rose quartz?"

"Good guess, but no: it's lilac quartz. Has different properties than rose quartz."

"I don't know that one. I'll have to look it up."

"That's not the only thing in the box."

Dalia looked inside the box again and found a silver ring with an odd sort of design; the silver was threaded through the middle of another piece of lilac quartz so that the stone would be touching her skin when she wore it.

"Neat!" she said, putting on the ring.

"Both stones have been charged in Tirffiniol under the light of its moons during the one time of year when the two biggest moons are full at the same time."

“Wow. I don't know what that will do to the energy, but it sounds cool. Thank you, Auntie Kira!”

“You're welcome.”





## Chapter Six: Preston Park

*Friday, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2017*

AFTER THE PRESENTS were all opened, the party began to wind down, most of their guests saying their farewells and leaving. Which was good for Dalia, because her head was beginning to throb; she downed some ibuprofen to prevent it getting too bad.

By three o'clock, the only remaining people other than the Ravenstones who lived in the house were Sally, Brandon, and Sarah. Sarah ran off with Vedyā to do whatever it was those two were going to do. But since Brandon couldn't move in his shorted-out chair, he was limited in where he could go until it was fixed. Nizoni called the friend she knew who did conversions to electrical stuff to try to fix it, and within half an hour she was there looking at the chair.

The woman was short (barely five feet tall), and of unclear ethnicity but most resembled a native Hawaiian woman. It was also unclear how old she was; she looked no older than 15 or 16, but as she was looking at Brandon's chair and talking with Nizoni, she casually mentioned a couple things that suggested she was at least thirty years old. She

was dressed in overalls and a blue shirt, looking like a car mechanic, but much cleaner.

"Oh, this isn't so bad," said the woman, whose name was Ressa.

"It isn't?" asked Brandon, who had been moved to a dining-room chair while Ressa looked at his wheelchair.

"Nah, the only thing wrong is the battery shorted out. It'll need to be replaced, but the rest of the chair looks fine. So given that, I'd suggest having your parents' insurance pay to get the battery replaced, and later I can come back and cast some magic on it to keep it working at Fae Springs. Just avoid getting too close to Yanus in the future, and you'll be fine."

"You're not going to convert it to running on magic?"

"Nope. It isn't necessary. Also, your insurance company might refuse to pay to fix or replace it if I work on it in any visible way, since I don't have the credentials. But adding some protective runes to it, not a problem."

"So what do I do in the meantime?"

"I can go back to my shop and rig up a temporary rune box to provide electricity to your chair until your battery gets replaced. Have your parents call me when the battery is replaced, and I can put those spells on the chair. Since it won't involve any physical changes to the chair, and most insurance companies don't believe in magic, that won't be a problem."

"You can use magic to create electricity?"

"Well yeah. It's just a portable generator rigged to spin the magnet with magic."

"Why would I need a battery at all with something like that?"

Ressa blinked, looking pleased and thoughtful. “You know, that’s a good point. The generator would normally make noise still, but a silencing rune would fix that. Still, you should talk to your parents before getting a permanent one. Anyway, I’ll be back later. Oh, and I should get you a magical chair to use for the afternoon while I rig up the generator.”

“You won’t need to do that, Ressa,” Dalia said. “Brandon can use mine.”

Brandon looked at her in surprise. “You have a wheelchair? I’ve never seen you use one.”

“My missing foot may be a congenital thing, but it does still cause problems sometimes. Mostly pain, on occasion. When it does, I take the prosthetic off and use a wheelchair around the house. I don’t often use it outside of the house, but we do take it with us on certain trips.”

While they waited for Morgana to bring down Dalia’s wheelchair for him to use, Ressa left to go get the generator installed into his wheelchair, and the family and their two remaining guests retired to the living room downstairs in the mundane part of the house to sit around and digest the meal for a time. Nizoni got Brandon downstairs by using her primary wand to float him along to the living room. Brandon could stand and walk for very short distances of course, but that was a significant distance for him. He wouldn’t be able to go that far without collapsing in agony.

Dalia stared at Nizoni’s wand while she moved Brandon, for her wand was a thing of beauty to Dalia – it was polished black walnut wood with a narrow, pointy finger of quartz on the tip, the base capped with a sapphire; the handle was just plain black leather. She would’ve known this by looking at

it even if she hadn't been told before, because Dalia had an unusual hobby for a witch who hadn't even gone to magic school yet: she made wands. She'd been teaching herself wand crafting for years, and it wasn't really even difficult. Anything could be a wand, though wood and crystal tended to work best; most metals could work, too, with the exception of iron or steel. (Iron soaked up magic like a sponge but didn't release it very easily. When it *did* release magic, it tended to do so in arcs of magic so powerful that it could burn people.) Another exception was depleted uranium and lead, as magic couldn't flow through those at all. It also wasn't wise to use radioactive metals as wands, for obvious reasons.

Even a finger could be a wand, really. But the magical properties of a wand's materials could make wielding magic easier and more convenient, as well as modify the nature of the magic in interesting and potentially useful ways. Dalia didn't know much magic yet, so she couldn't really use any of the wands she made, but still, it was a useful skill to learn. One they would doubtless be learning at school anyway.

Soon, Morgana entered the room with a lavender wheelchair rolling on its own in front of her. It was an ordinary manual style wheelchair, but it didn't have any handles on the back so that no well-meaning but still ableist strangers could try wheeling her around without her permission, and it had magical controls that Dalia explained to Brandon. It was also well padded and comfortable.

It didn't take long for everyone to get settled then, all of them sitting down and facing a large, old-fashioned TV of the sort that was built into a large wooden box, with a screen nearly as large as the side of the box facing them.

This was no ordinary TV, however. It had been designed specifically to be able to get both mundane and magical TV signals, as it was plugged into both a coax for the cable and another cord for the magical antennae on top of the TV set that looked like old-fashioned 'bunny ears' antennae, though increased intricacy meant it could be moved into a wider variety of shapes. Currently it was set to the magical channels, which Brandon flipped through with interest, having never seen magical television channels before. There were shows that looked like cooking shows but were about potion brewing, some sort of public-access TV channels that differed mostly only in content and the style being only a little above average for such channels. On other channels there were plays, soap operas, even commercials for magical products.

Brandon stopped on a channel called WNN, the Witches' News Network, which apparently had news from all over the world and even from some other realms. Currently the news anchor, a bland-looking white man with plain brown hair, was talking about news from the Pluviatia region.

"Today is the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the last known attack by infamous terrorist organization 'the Ghost Leopards,' an organization of dark witches dedicated to destabilizing Pluviatia and terrorizing its citizens. Memorial services for the victims of the attacks are being held all over the region today, in remembrance of the fallen.

"The group's reign of terror was ended ten years ago when most of its members were arrested by a team under the leadership of Arthur Kemp, former governor of the *Concilio Pluviatia*, currently one of two Grand Councilors for Pluvia-

tia. The arrest occurred during Mr. Kemp's time as the leader of the Pluviatia Security Agency. It is thanks to Mr. Kemp's investigative skills that a sting to take out the terrorist group was successful, less than a month after their last attack. Most of its members were captured, but one of the group's members, one Amanda Rahesh, escaped the sting and remains at large. On screen now is a photograph of Rahesh as she appeared ten years ago."

The anchor vanished from the screen and was replaced by a photo of an angry-looking woman of Indian or Pakistani heritage glaring at the audience. Her hair was black, her eyes and skin were both the same shade of warm amber, and she had a scar on her right cheek.

While the image sat on the screen, the anchor's voice could be heard saying, "If seen, do not approach; she is armed and is a very dangerous dark witch, who dueled with Arthur Kemp personally during the sting, escaping him only by pulling a gun on him and shooting him in the shoulder; Mr. Kemp was hospitalized for three weeks after the incident."

The image shrunk to be placed to one side of the anchor's head as he continued.

"Mr. Kemp, who believes Amanda Rahesh has formed a new group and is planning new attacks, has pointed to recent incidents in Georgia as possible attacks by said group, saying the M.O. is eerily similar to known Ghost Leopard attacks. Officials in the region are investigating the incidents with this new theory in mind. Details of the Georgia attacks are being kept from the public during the investigation, but it doesn't appear that anyone was seriously hurt."



“Thank you, Jesse, for that report,” said his female co-anchor. “Let's hope Mr. Kemp is wrong, and that the Ghost Leopards are gone for good.”

“You're welcome, Lily,” Jesse the reporter said. “In other news—”

“I wonder what happened in Georgia, and why they think it's the Ghost Leopards again?” Brandon asked.

“No idea. But I could get on Gegauassi and check my social media accounts on the GTN,” Dalia said.

“What's the GTN?” Brandon asked.

“Global Thaumaturgic Network. Basically a second Internet just for witches, runs on magic instead of electricity.”

“Okay, this I *have* to see.”

“I'll be back in a bit.”

Dalia struggled to get up and walk over to the shadow portal, feeling too bloated to take the stairs. A few minutes later, she came into the living room with an older laptop under one arm. She sat down, opened it up, and pressed the 'on' button.

The laptop did not immediately do anything. She waited a few moments, then tried it again. She had to try a third time before it made a very human-sounding groan, the screen lighting up slowly.

“Whayawan?” a groggy, masculine voice from the laptop said. “I'm tryna sleep!”

“Wake *up* Gegauassi! Something happened I need to look into! And anyway, it's like, three in the afternoon, lazy bones!”

“I ain't got bones,” said the computer, still sounding very groggy.

"You know what I mean."

"First good nap I've had in three weeks," he said, "and now you're waking me up on the one day you said you wouldn't? I should replace all your files with pictures of that dancing baby from the mundane Internet."

"Empty threat, Gegauassi. That would require you put in some effort for once."

"Ah. Good point. Anyway, fine, I'm up. But I'll have you know I was having a very nice dream before you woke me up, about sharing files with your friend's tablet/laptop hybrid. You know, the one with the sleek lines and the deep, alluring voice?"

"Yes, Gegauassi, we already know all about your crush on Hermes. Now will you hurry up and bring up the GTN?"

"Yeah, whatever."

The screen lit up in a lazy sort of way, showing the desktop screen and icons. After several minutes, though, nothing seemed to be happening.

*"Gegauassi!"*

"Hold your horses, I'm looking for the pieces. I'm sure I left them around here somewhere..."

"Ugh! When's the last time you defragmented yourself?" Dalia asked him.

"Listen, I don't nag you about your dirty room, so don't you nag me about the locations of my files. I have a system. An operating system, HA! Get it? Eh, tough crowd. Anyway, last time I defragged, I couldn't find a blessed thing for three whole weeks! So just be—oh good, found it. Here you go; knock yourself out," he said, the window for the GTN browser finally loading to her homepage.

“Woogle.com? *That’s* your homepage?” Sally giggled at this.

“Well it sure beats Zing, by a huge margin,” Dalia argued.

“You’re both wrong,” Gegauassi said lazily. “The best GTN search engine is QuackQuackYo. Woogle is run by demons. Trust me, I’m a computer.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Dalia said. “Demons don’t exist.”

“Not that anyone’s proved, but it’s still possible,” Gegauassi said. “Anyway, there’s plenty of critters that certainly could qualify for the title.”

Dalia was about to type an address in the bar when she spotted Brandon’s expression out of the corner of her eye. “What’s wrong?”

“It... your computer. I mean, the talking signs were one thing, but this... it sounds sentient!”

“What’d be wrong with that?” Sally asked.

“What’d be—do you have any idea the implications of a sentient computer?!”

Sally sighed. “Relax, Brandon, Gegauassi isn’t sentient. It’s just a magical operating system. He mimics sentience but isn’t actually sentient. Gegauassi, for instance, his entire personality is being lazy and flirting with other devices. Sometimes he’ll make jokes from a pre-programmed list of jokes, or chide Dalia for something she ought not be doing – like being up past bedtime – but it’s just a sophisticated operating system. Trust me, I’m a robot geek. I know as much about robots and computers as Dalia does about gemstones and wand woods.”

“And you’re sure they’re not sentient?”

"I'm positive. He's programmed to 'learn' to some extent, like he can learn names and schedules and stuff. But he's perfectly content most of the time to just sit around doing nothing at all. Even the eager computers like Hermes are fine with being shut off. They're just made to mimic sentience because some older schools and stuff have these artificial spirit things from the centuries before computers, which *are* sentient but can't influence the world much. A lot of people are still used to using those, so magical computers were given a mimicry of sentience. But that's all it is, a mimicry."

"I dunno. I think I'd be more comfortable if he failed a Turing test."

Sally sighed. "Gegauassi, what are your ambitions?"

In a lazy voice, the computer answered, "To sleep, perchance to dream. Like right now. Now go 'way, ya bahddrin me!"

"No really, Gegauassi, if you could do anything you want, anything at all, what would it be?"

"Sleeping. Or sharing files with Hermes."

"What do you share files with him about?"

There was a very long pause, and then Gegauassi said, "That's private."

Dalia got in on the game now, saying, "As your registered user, Gegauassi, I command you to tell us what files you share with Hermes."

"Aww, do I havta?" he whined.

"Yes."

His pause was even longer, and then his screen went blank for a moment. When it came back up, there was a picture of a banana.

“Why a banana?” Sally asked with a grin.

“No response has been encoded. Reason: primary user is underage.”

“How did you come to that conclusion?” Sally asked.

Gegauassi’s pause was the longest, here. Finally, he said, “No response has been encoded. Reason: Question was not understood.”

“I’m with him,” Brandon said, “that question made no sense. I mean, it’s not a conclusion at all. He wasn’t asked to do any serious thinking.”

Gegauassi yawned, his screen back to normal. “Are you done asking weird questions?” he asked.

“No,” Brandon said. “I have a question: Why does the porridge bird lay its nest in the air?”

“Why does the what do what now?”

Brandon repeated himself, and Dalia told Gegauassi to consider the question and answer it seriously. Gegauassi paused again. After a full minute of silence, they heard him make an alarmingly loud whirring noise raising in pitch. Dalia swore, and quickly said, “STOP! STOP! GEGAUASSI, STOP!”

The whirring noise slowed down and stopped within seconds. Then Gegauassi said, “Warning: demanding answers to nonsensical or paradoxical questions could damage or destroy your Belanger Industries device and void the warranty.”

“Okay, fine, I’m convinced he’s not actually sentient. Now what were you going to do?”

It took Dalia a few moments to remember, but when she did, she typed a new address into the address bar, going to

Kauldron.com and browsing her feed, chewing her goldfish necklace idly while she waited.

“Yeah, lots of stuff on here about the attack, seems somebody got past the media blockade. The magic school in Georgia was attacked, but only a few of the teachers were there. A woman matching Amanda Rahesh's description was spotted there leading the attacks, and participating. Ooh boy, a few people got burned, seems the leader loves fire. Another person was hexed with a passive torture spell that took an hour to remove, but it says here the spell only glanced the victim, so her arm felt like it was in a vice for an hour, but otherwise she's fine.”

“So they are back,” Nizoni said, concerned. “Back, and causing trouble in Georgia now. It has been ten years, I wonder what she's planning? And why now?”

“Well, um... it's not certain, they're uh, not sure it's Rahesh.”

“Still, looks likely.”

“How many attacks were there back in the day?” Brandon asked.

“They attacked four times before they were stopped. At least half a dozen people died,” Nizoni said.

“What was their agenda?” Dalia asked.

Nizoni scoffed. “Power, of course. A bunch of dark witches bent on taking control of the government for the sake of power.”

“They didn't have any other goals?”

“Contrary to popular belief, little branch, for a lot of people, power is the only goal they need. They may use that

power for other things, but those are often incidental to their main goal of power.”

The howling wolf ‘doorbell’ went off again, and Barry floated off to get the door. A minute later, Ressa was back, with Brandon’s wheelchair, fitted with a magic-powered electric generator.

“Here you go, this should tide you over until your parents decide whether or not to get a permanent generator for it. I predict this one has maybe three months left before its runes burn out.”

“Burn out?”

“Like a light bulb does.”

“Oh. Thank you, Miss uh... what’s your last name?”

She made a dismissive gesture. “It’s just Ressa.”

“Okay. Thank you, Ressa!”

“Not a problem. If you ever need any more help, here’s my card.”

Brandon took the card, which was a simple white card with the name “Ressa” written in a plain font.

“How—?” Brandon began.

“It’s been fun,” Ressa half-shouted and promptly vanished in the blink of an eye. Brandon stared at Morgana and Nizoni, asking mutely for understanding.

“Was that shadow-walking?”

“No. That involves shadows. We’re not sure what Ressa is doing when she does that. May be related to shadow-walking, though.”

“How can you not know?”

“To be honest, we don’t know much about Ressa. She *does* have a surname – Akamai – but she prefers to just be

called Ressa. We *do* know she is from an alternate universe, and she got stranded here somehow, and that she was a Hawaiian native in her universe. She's a human witch, just very powerfully magical for a human, though not much good at combat magic. One calls her by speaking into the card, asking for her help. If she is not busy, she will come right away. If she *is* busy, though, the card's colors will reverse to white text on a black card until she is no longer busy.

"For payment, she takes food or clothing, and will not accept money. We know why, but she's asked us to keep that secret, so we do. I paid her earlier with some leftovers."

"She doesn't take money? How does she pay rent?" Sally asked.

"Ressa lives in Tirffiniol. Built herself a house on unclaimed land."

"She's from an alternate universe?" Brandon asked, his eyes wide. "Alternate universes really exist?"

Nizoni smiled. "Yes. Of course, Faery worlds are alternate universes that are very different from ours, and seem to be smaller and attached to our own universe, but other alternate universes exist that are alternate Earths and similar universes and their own versions of Faery realms. The magical radio occasionally gets channels from other universes that share a closer ancestry to ours, but those are harder to travel to physically for some reason. Some of the things the radio picks up are comprehensible; one of our favorite channels is from a universe where the Beatles are all still alive and touring together because they never broke up. But others are not so comprehensible; one channel we stumbled on once had



what sounded like language that made Klingon sound gentle and smooth by comparison.”

“From things Ressa’s said over the years,” Morgana interjected, “we think she’s from the same universe as a man some mundanes in Japan once had a run-in with, back in the 1950’s. He’d been detained at customs because of something unusual on his passport; it said he was from a country called ‘Taured,’ which doesn’t exist in our world. He suffered a heart attack but survived. He was allowed to get a hotel room, which he paid for in real yen, so we know Japan exists in his world. Guards were posted at the door, but he vanished during the night with no sign of having forced his way out. Presumably he slipped back into his own world. If I recall correctly from the university course where I learned about that incident, the Japanese Witches’ Council had detected two vibrations of the Veil at times that corresponded with his appearance and disappearance; vibrations consistent with inter-dimensional travel.

“One day, we were talking about inter-dimensional travelers like that around Ressa, and her head jerked up in recognition of the name ‘Taured.’ She’d never been to Taured herself, but she knew about the country, had learned about it in geography class. Like the man the Japanese mundanes had detained, she could point on a map to where it was supposed to be. We think their universe may be entangled with ours somehow, and the two of them slipped through a crack into our world. But for whatever reason, Ressa never slipped back home, like the other one did.”

“Wow. Trapped in an alternate universe, with no way back? That’s got to suck.”

“Yes, quite. Luckily for her, there are witches in her world too, and she was one of them, so she was able to find our community. She’s been taking extra courses about inter-dimensional travel from various schools, trying to figure out how to return home.”

“Why doesn’t Yanus take her home?”

“He would, if any of us knew which universe she came from. There’s an infinite number of alternate universes, you see. Just going around blindly looking when you don’t know where you’re going could take an eternity to finally find where you need to be.”

“Oh.”

“If she’s not from this world, what does she do for ID?”

“When she found herself stranded here, she went to the Praecantus government for help. When it became clear she wasn’t going to get back home, they issued her all the right ID’s, both magical and mundane.”

They continued to talk about this and that for about another half an hour, but eventually the discussion dropped off. Chooli left and went elsewhere in the house. Orpheus put Sweetheart down for a nap. Ashkii went back up to the Tirffiniol part of the house to go play in the courtyard.

Dalia, on the other hand, took her two friends to one room on the ‘third floor’ that they hadn’t been shown yet, due to not enough time before lunch: the family library. Since she knew both her friends loved to read as much as she did, she knew it would be a great place to take them for a while, something relatively easy to do while they continued waiting for their lunch to digest.

With her younger sister Vedyá tagging along with them because she wanted to see the look on Brandon's face when he saw the place for the first time, Sarah with her because Sarah was usually with her, and Kobalos perched on Dalia's shoulder, Dalia excitedly guided them to a pair of large oak doors on the second story of the Tirffiniol side of the house. The doors were intricately carved with designs of books, dragons, pixies, magic wands, and trees.

"Dalia, I realize your family is rich," Brandon said, "but just how rich *are* they?"

"Er, well... Shimá is extremely skilled at wards. She gets a lot of money from rich clients. I uh... I don't know how rich we are."

Picking up on something in Dalia's tone, Brandon said, "If you don't want to say, that's fine. I just wanted to know if your parents had this whole house, the Tirffiniol house, built with their new money. Because honestly, this house feels like old money to me."

"Oh, well that's because we bought it from another branch of the family. That branch was going extinct, there was only one person left and he was really old. He didn't have a lot of money left, either, so he sold the house to pay for a cozy retirement home in a warmer climate. He was glad he could find a buyer who was part of another branch of the family."

"Wow, so how old *is* this house?"

"Old as the hills," Vedyá interrupted impatiently. "Are we going to go in or not?"

"Hold your horses," Dalia told her.

Stepping up to the large door, Dalia went up to a large brass door knocker shaped like a Green Man – an old pagan symbol, a man's face made of leaves. This Green Man had a magnificent set of deer antlers affixed to his head as well, and he looked out at the world with a face of serene wisdom. Dalia grabbed one of his antlers, which was hinged, and banged a high-pitched tattoo on the door. The knocker's eyes glowed white, and the light spread to the rest of the carvings, giving them an even more beautiful and magical appearance than before.

The heavy doors came open with a rumble, a loud groan, and a deep clacking sound that some doors make when they open.

"That's... impressive. Does it do that every time you open the door?" Brandon asked.

"It does if you use the main door," Sarah said.

Vedya nodded. "Butch and I like to use the side doors almost exclusively, they're just normal doors. There's three side doors, I use the one closest to my room. They're much quieter."

"Butch?" Brandon asked.

Sarah rolled her eyes. "She means me. Sometimes she calls me Butch, and Joaquin is Sundance. We tolerate it."

"Oh okay. By the way, you usually sleep on this side of the house. I never did ask why you do that, though. So, uh, why do you do that?"

"Because Malek Taus prefers to stay in his home world, and also my magic is stronger here than it is on Earth."

"She's conveniently forgetting to mention that she's super noisy from her weapons practice and target practice with

her throwing stars, so she got stuck over with the other two noise makers, Ashkii and Chooli.”

“Chooli makes a lot of noise? But zee’s deaf!”

Brandon had met Chooli enough times over the years to have a passing familiarity with zem. It had taken a lot of getting used to the zee/zem/zeer/zeers/zeerself pronouns zee used due to being agender – without gender – and frankly they/them like was used with Sweetheart would have been easier, but he had eventually gotten the hang of it. He’d had a pretty solid motivator to do so: every time he messed up in Vedyas’s presence, she would punch him in the arm. Still, he didn’t know Chooli very well, as zee typically spent most of zeer time playing video games online with zeer friends or wandering the neighborhood talking to spirits. As such, he ran into zem outside sometimes but zee was still pretty enigmatic to him.

Sarah sighed. “Yeah zee makes noise, you twit. If you can’t hear, you don’t know when you’re making noise. *We’ve* all learned to be quiet when we do stuff because we know how much noise we’re making. Chooli doesn’t, so it’s more of a struggle for zem to be quiet.”

“And then there’s zeer music,” Vedyas said. “Since zee can’t hear it, but can feel it, zee pumps up the volume and feels the bass throbbing.”

“Why not just put up silencing wards on the room?”

Vedyas said, “One-way silencing runes are a pain in the butt to install, and anyway what if zee has a nightmare and screams? The ‘rents would rather put up with some distant noise from music than not be able to hear a child in distress. Though they’d probably feel that distress with their telepa-

thy. The anti-telepathy runes don't block emotions, so telepathic empathy still works. Anyway, are we gonna stand here arguing in the doorway all day long or are we gonna go inside?"

Dalia stepped forward and led everyone inside.

"WOW!" Brandon said. Sally just nodded, having seen it before.

"It's not as big as the one at Fae Springs," Dalia said sheepishly. "According to Shimá, that is; I've not been there yet." For some reason, this statement made Sally and Sarah raise their eyebrows questioningly, then glance at a wall with a large painting on it of a spiral staircase. Dalia didn't notice any of this, though.

The room they were now in was big enough it could have fit one of the larger three-bedroom city apartments inside of it with room to spare. To either side of the main door were two statues of a man and a woman, which were standing on pedestals that held three rapiers apiece. Nearly every wall in the library either had a bookshelf against it, or a window, or some tables and very comfortable leather chairs beside them. Some walls had both a window *and* furniture. As to the walls, there were five of them, for the room was shaped like a pentagon, and inside the pentagon, woven into the carpeting of the room, was a very large image of a pentacle made of green vines, leaves, and colored flowers. Inside the second pentagon made by the intersection of the lines of the pentacle was a pentagonal table with two chairs set at each of its five sides.

In the middle of the blank spaces of the pentacle, there were more bookshelves, sets of four of them with two facing

one direction and another two at their backs facing the other direction. These bookshelves were nearly as tall as the 13-foot tall ceiling, bolted to the floor with thick steel joins assisted by magic, and were made of a dark brown wood absolutely covered in little pockmarks, as though someone had taken the metal end of a pencil compass to them about a million times apiece. But it strangely seemed to be part of the wood and not damage at all. A quick glance at one of the nearby wall bookshelves showed they were made of a different wood, one that was dark brown with veins of black through it.

“What kind of wood are these shelves made of?” Brandon asked.

“The free-standing ones bolted to the floor are black ironwood, and the rest are ebony,” Dalia said.

“Wow,” Brandon said again.

Brandon looked around some more, while the others – who were all intimately familiar with the house already – followed him to watch his reactions. The walls had ornate carvings on them as well, with all sorts of magical creatures and beings, including centaurs, unicorns, griffons, and more dragons. And the ceiling had an enormous carving of another Green Man on it, this one with his eyes closed.

“This library has books about the construction of the house in it,” Vedyā said. “In one of those books, it mentions that the library is carved with thousands of tiny hidden runes that make this place like a bunker if the house ever got attacked. You could drop a high-yield nuke on this house and the library would survive, along with anyone inside it.”

“WOOOOOAAAAHHHHH...” Brandon said.

"And over here," Vedyā said, talking like a tour guide, "we have the family grimmoire."

She had led Brandon to one of the sets of free-standing bookshelves, which had a small wooden pedestal beside it with a large green book on it with an image on the front of a raven perched on one of the standing stones like you'd see in a place like Stonehenge.

"Pretty bird," Kobalos said in Dalia's voice. He fluttered off her shoulder and onto the book he'd commented on.

"So this big green book is your family's grimmoire?"

"Yes," Vedyā said, "and don't touch it. It's warded so only family can touch it."

"What happens if I were to touch it?" Brandon asked.

"It'd knock you out cold with a spell designed to keep you knocked out until you could be secured for interrogation," she said. "Sarah's touched it a few times over the years. It's annoying for everyone involved." Sarah stuck her tongue out at Vedyā.

"Oh. Er, good to know," he responded.

"Anyway, this is just the latest volume of the grimmoire. This bookshelf labeled 'RSG' is full of the other volumes. Don't touch any of *them*, either."

He looked to the bookshelf to the immediate right of the pedestal and saw that it was full from top to bottom with books of the same shade of green, all the spines labeled with a smaller version of the image of the raven perched on a standing stone. Each spine had a gold-embossed Roman numeral number on the bottom.

"WHAT THE—how many of those things *are* there?" Brandon asked.



“Not sure. But look to the shelf to its right.”

He did. That shelf, too, was labeled RSG, and it too had volumes of the Ravenstone family grimoire, though this one was only half-full. There were a couple empty shelves above those books, then above the empty shelves was another set of books, this time in red.

“What are those red books?” Brandon asked. Sally looked too, surprised she hadn’t noticed them before.

Vedya gave Dalia a significant look while Sarah was entirely too obvious in her attempts to look nonchalant. Dalia shook her head in such a small movement that it was barely noticeable.

“Those are just boring old accounting books and stuff kept for tax purposes,” Vedya said. “If you want something interesting, there’s a set of genealogies around here somewhere that has at least as many volumes as the grimoire does. I think the last three volumes of it consist mostly of people who are still alive.”

Before they could move to look for the genealogies, though, there was movement from the pedestal as the grimoire rose from the table along with a fountain pen. A force field made of black shadow started to fall over the book, but Dalia touched the pedestal and the process paused. They had the distinct impression the pedestal was thinking for a few moments before it made up its mind and the black force field vanished, letting them watch the book open itself up to a point a third of the way through the book, and they got to watch as the fountain pen started to write something so fast that the words were all illegible from haste. But once it got a couple paragraphs down (which didn’t take long), the ink of

the previous words – which had not dried yet – rearranged itself into neater, more recognizable words.

However, the words turned out to be not English, but in a script that would be recognizable to anyone in Portland who had ever paid attention while walking along Sandy street (among others), as it was Vietnamese.

“Don’t look at *me*,” Vedyā said when Dalia turned to blink at her. “I know a lot of languages, but Vietnamese is *not* one of them. *Yet*. I’ll add it to my list. But I still haven’t learned Russian or Japanese yet, so it’ll have to wait til after I learn those.”

“So that family grimmoire automatically updates itself?”

“Only with stuff the other branches of the family want to share with the others,” Vedyā said. “I think they can even specify which branches of the family can or can’t get the updates.”

The pen continued to write in Vietnamese for a dozen more pages, occasionally pausing to draw out pictures or other illustrations. When it finished, the ink dried magically fast, the book closed, and it slid itself into a space under the top of the pedestal. Then a red book from a space below that flew out of its space and up onto the pedestal, which prompted Dalia to pull Sally away from it, but she wouldn’t budge. Nor would Brandon.

“We wanna see the book write in itself!” Sally said.

“It’s just a bunch of boring math stuff,” Vedyā said. “Financial records. It even bores me, and I *like* math!”

Sally and Brandon had a brief glimpse of what looked like either a Celtic knot or four overlapping circles like a strange sort of Venn diagram. Either way, they did see a four-

pointed star in the middle, formed by the lines of the knot or whatever the design was called. They also saw a gold-embossed title, but couldn't make out any words in it before the black force field went up so fast it practically formed between blinks of their eyes. It now completely obscured the top of the pedestal.

"Why would financial records need to be blacked out like that?" Brandon asked.

Vedya huffed, annoyed. "Well *dub*! So nosy guests don't go poking around in our finances, of course."

"But why would other branches of your family be keeping copies of their financial records here in your library? Wouldn't they be keeping those in their own libraries?" Sally asked.

"Yeah, maybe it's books full of dark magic! That would explain why they're trying to move us away from it!"

"Why would we—" Dalia began, but Vedya interrupted.

"Our dark magic books are kept in the basement of this side of the house, which is only accessible from a door on this house's ground floor," Vedya explained. "And those are locked and warded out the wazoo!"

Sally balked. "You actually *have* a dark magic section?"

"Well yeah," Vedya said. "The term 'dark magic' is just a label for any magic that's either mysterious or dangerous to the user in some way, or dangerous to other people, and it's all very subjective. Some people consider divination to be a dark art, for instance. Abuela calling the spirit of her husband is considered a dark art by lots of witches, too.

"And sure, there's some really vile stuff that falls under the same umbrella, but even Light witches have to know

about that kind of stuff in order to fight it. Which is why we have it. Though I will admit not all of our family have been decent people. Some were downright evil, and we've had a few dark lords and dark ladies in our family over the millennia. But that's true of any family that's old enough, even some that are entirely mundane now."

"So that's not the dark magic section?"

"No. Like I said, boring financial records."

"But why would—"

"I dunno, nerf-herder, I didn't do it! Ask our moms and dad if you're *that* curious!"

"How exactly is it you know where the dark magic books are kept?" Sally asked.

"Because Shimá told me. Don—er, Dalia was trying to get into a room down there to see what was in it, and I was there with her trying to talk her out of it, and Shimá found us and told us not to try to get in there because it was the dark arts books and was heavily warded with dangerous wards."

"Ha!" Dalia said. "You were not trying to talk me out of it, you were goading me on!"

"Details," Vedyá said, grinning.

"I still don't believe you about those being financial records," Brandon said.

"Yeah, me neither. You know something, and you're not telling us." She turned to Sarah. "Same goes for you."

"No, they're right. Just boring old financial records," Sarah said.

"I don't believe you," Sally accused.

"Sally, Brandon, can you two just drop it?" Dalia asked. "Please? There's nothing weird about those books. And even if there were, we wouldn't keep a secret from you just for giggles."

The two friends looked between her and each other. Then they shrugged. "Okay, if you insist."

"There we go," Vedya said, walking away from the bookshelves in question. "Now for something completely different. I want to show you the 'elementary magic' section. I've been reading things in that section for years, teaching myself magic. I could probably be home-schooled if I wanted to be, but Fae Springs is just too great an opportunity to pass up, and the only adults in the house who don't have some job to occupy them are Abuela and Abuelo. This way."

After about a half an hour, they were all sitting down at a table, reading. Brandon was again sitting next to Sally, as he often did because they were friends. Vedya kept glaring at him again, with Sarah occasionally elbowing her in the side and rolling her eyes, until finally he grew tired of it and snapped, "Why are you glaring at me, Vedya?"

Everyone looked up from their reading. Vedya raised a single eyebrow and crossed her arms. She uncrossed her arms suddenly, looking like she was trying to hide her anger, and looked away from Brandon.

"She's been glaring at you?"

"Whenever I sit next to Sally, yes. It started at your birthday lunch earlier, and she keeps doing it. Glaring at me like I've done something to anger her."

Sally raised her eyebrows, looked at Vedya a moment, perplexed at Vedya's obvious anger. "What's the matter, Vedya?"

Vedya didn't answer, instead looking thoughtfully at Sally, like she was considering her words.

"She was staring at you earlier, too," Brandon said.

At this, Sally's eyes widened and she smiled slyly. "Why Vedya," she said playfully, "do you have a crush on me?"

Vedya sighed and looked up at the ceiling briefly, then glared at Brandon. Dalia and Brandon both recoiled at the force of her anger. After glaring at Brandon for almost a minute, Vedya finally turned to Sally and said, "Well I *was* intending on flirting with you, but I didn't know what to say, or even if I should say anything at all, since girls tend to not react well when other girls ask them out. Wish I'd known I could've just asked you."

"Well that's new. When did that happen?" Sally asked.

"When I first saw you earlier today. Your new outfit made you more interesting than before, it was like I was seeing you for the first time. Never realized before, but you're kinda hot."

Sally grinned. "You're very pretty yourself, Vedya. But while I'm flattered, alas, I'm not presently interested in being romantically involved with anyone. Sorry. If that changes, well... I might let you know."

"Good to know. Thanks." Vedya took a deep breath in, and let it go. Then in one swift move she stood up, leaned over, and punched Brandon hard in the arm.

"OW! What'd you hit me for!?" he demanded, rubbing the spot on his arm where it hurt.

"I was going to try flirting with her, you dingle-berry! I've never flirted with anyone before, I was gonna try it on Sally. Now there's no point trying."

"You're the one who was glaring at me! Is it my fault I wanted to know why?"

"Probably not, but I took it out on you anyway. I'm not sorry. I'd do it again in a heartbeat." A lot of the anger Vedya had been feeling seemed to evaporate just then.

"I thought you were dating that Joaquin kid?" Dalia asked.

"Joaquin? Gods no. He's a great friend, and I admit he's a very pretty boy. I'd date him in a heartbeat if I thought I stood a chance, but I'm almost certain he's gay, the way he carries on about that Damien boy in the year ahead of us."

"But you asked *someone* out," Dalia said.

"A couple people, over the last year. Last spring, I asked a couple different girls to this school dance. Both turned me down. One of them was nice about it. The other, not so much."

"So you're bi?" Brandon asked.

"Yeah, I am. You are too, *Shádi*, aren't you?" Vedya asked Dalia.

Dalia nodded. "Yeah. I like girls better, though."

"Yeah, well, so do I. Boys tend to be jerks. Every so often there's a good one like Joaquin, but even rarer are the good ones that are also bi, or are hetero. Finding good boys that are into girls is a task akin to trying to find shiny Pokemon. Rewarding, but very difficult, and you have to wade through a lot of cruddy ones first."

"Hey!" Brandon said.

“Oh don't worry, nerf-herder, you're one of the good ones. But you haven't shown any signs of liking girls yet, and I didn't want to be rude by presuming.”

Despite appearances, this turned out to be just the thing needed to clear the air of a tension they hadn't realized was there, before. Everyone went back to reading, and they occasionally informed each other of things they'd read.

After an hour, though, Brandon closed his book and got everyone's attention with a wave of his hand.

“What're you interrupting our reading for, nerf-herder?” Vedyā asked.

“Because there's something I've been wondering for a while now, that I was hoping you could answer for me. Since, you know, you're all pretty smart.”

“We're listening,” Vedyā said.

“It's just... why is magic kept a secret if mundanes, like I used to be, can become witches so easily?” Brandon asked. “In fact, why keep it a secret at all?”

Vedyā closed her book and said, “I can answer this, I do enough reading, and I've wondered the same thing myself before. It's pretty simple: first, there are a lot of terrifying magical creatures in the world. Even a lot of witches tend to be scared of them, especially of the various civilized species of faeries like Goblins and skin-shifters, Myrkálves and Nua Sidhe. People get scared enough with just the *possibility* of these things actually being real, when they tell themselves that they're not real. A lot of people like the world to make sense, and to be logical. Add magic to the mix, and the world gets a lot more chaotic and difficult to cope with.



“Second, there’s the fact that the amount of magic around the world isn’t consistent. Some parts have more magic, others have less. Things you can do easily on one part of Earth can’t be done at all in certain other locations, or can only be done by the most powerful witches, or can only be done by faeries. Lots of healing magic can’t be done most places on Earth, for one.

“Honestly, a lot of what gets taught in magic schools isn’t going to get used on Earth very much because of that. And if you want to consistently do a lot of the more difficult magic, you have to go to one of the Faery realms, or leave a portal to a faery realm open somewhere on your property, while also warding it to keep out dangerous things and dangerous people. It’s why magical hospitals and schools of magic tend to be either in Tirffiniol or near an open portal to Tirffiniol.

“Third, magic has limitations as well, even when there’s a lot of it in an area. Using magic to cure blindness is pretty much impossible. Same with deafness. Trying to use magic to grow a limb that wasn’t there at birth takes at least a decade of expensive treatments to accomplish. We don’t know how to cure most cancers, either. In fact, magic can make some forms of cancer spread faster and get more aggressive. Witches still get ill from viruses, bacteria, and other pathogens. We have a few cures, but mundanes have many more. Most of the cures we *do* have are for afflictions caused by something magical to begin with. A lot of our potions are chemically the same as the mundane medicines, with magic as an ingredient intended to speed up the process of getting the medicine to the right parts of the body. Other potions are so primitive that mundane versions are often more effec-

tive, and with fewer of us in the world, it's taking us longer to invent better versions."

Sally nodded, and cut in. "Not to mention, there's degrees of magic ability. Some people are very powerful witches, and others are barely magical at all. Some people raised in magical families in areas rich with magic still don't become witches despite desperately wanting to be one, and nobody can figure out why. And I guarantee you that there would be enough people who wouldn't understand or accept all these valid reasons if they knew magic was real, and would wage war to try to force us to give them their idea of magic, thinking we were holding out on them."

Vedya nodded. "Yeah, and magic wasn't always secret. Blame Christianity for that. Not because of the witch trials; by that point, magic had been a secret for centuries, and the witch trials were never really about witches to begin with, just like the modern anti-abortion issue isn't really about abortion. In both cases, it's about controlling women. That's why most 'witches' killed by the Church were women.

"The almost funny part is that the reason Christianity is responsible for magic being secret is that the Catholic Church just didn't believe in magic for a long time, apart from their own form of magic in the form of prayers and miracles, and so they actively squashed the practices that didn't match that, even if it meant they had to kill people to do it.

"Which you can largely blame on a bunch of Roman emperors for adopting Christianity and then changing the rules. Early Christianity had reincarnation as an important part of its doctrine for about 500 years before one of the

Roman emperors had that removed, and started killing people who wouldn't agree. The history of the Christian faith is a history of something pretty cool and good being corrupted over the centuries until now what we have is a religion consisting mostly of misunderstandings, misinterpretations, deliberate mistranslations and outright lies added by people who wanted to control the masses, and a whole lot of hypocrisy that's been built into the religion over the last two thousand years. The Protestant Reformation was well-meaning at first, but it just ended up making the problem a hundred times worse."

"Yeah," Sally said. "It's not very pleasant, but it's true. I'm a Christian, but my family are more in line with the original form of Christianity, actually following the whole 'love thy neighbor' thing, and other of Christ's teachings like peace and love and being opposed to the rich and powerful. No offense to your family, Vedy."

"None taken, seeing as we're only just rich, and Shimá got us most of our money by over-charging wealthier dingbats. Our family doesn't have much power to go with that money, and none of us are trying to get into Christian heaven anyway, so that whole 'a rich person can't get into Heaven' thing isn't relevant to us."

"Good to know. But I wasn't finished. I was going to add that imperialism ruins everything, and it ruined Christianity for most people. I wish it hadn't. Jesus would be very angry at most of the people who have called themselves 'Christians' over the centuries."

"Amen to that. In the case of Christianity, it took a nice little religion of people just trying to be kind to one another

and warped it into a monstrous mockery of itself that spread across the planet like a cancer or a plague, killing millions of people along the way. And magic had to go secret in order to survive. As it was, the magic community in Christianity-affected regions was *very* endangered for a *very* long time, to the point of almost being extinct, and it was only the Enlightenment and contact with outside cultures that revived it.”

“Oh. That makes a lot of sense, actually. All of it, but especially the part about the magical community being nearly extinct for so long.”

“Great. Now I’m tired of talking, and want to go back to reading,” Vedyā said.

They spent a couple hours in the library, admiring the different books on various subjects because all of them shared a common love of learning, especially on their own terms. Brandon especially liked it, since it was something they didn’t get to do very often. (Sure, they sometimes went together to the public library, and they all read a lot of fiction, but learning about magic was a lot more cool to him.)

Brandon was reading about the theory of how to access your magic on purpose when Vedyā said, “Brandon!” When he looked up at her, she shouted “*En garde!*” and tossed a rapier at him. Panicking, he held his hands out to protect himself, but felt one of his hands reach out and grab the handle of the rapier of its own accord. He awkwardly used his left hand to grab the joystick of his wheelchair to zoom backwards, almost hitting a chair but missing a swipe from Vedyā’s rapier in the nick of time. He noticed that it wasn’t the type with a round, blunting nub on the end of it, but a

properly sharp-looking rapier. As if hearing his thoughts, she swung and nicked a corner off one of the notebooks on the tables, Sarah shouting in displeasure at this.

"Avast, ye scurvy mongrel! I'll cut ye down like the cur ye be!" Vedyā shouted, lunging at him and ducking back. Even in his panic and confusion, he could tell she moved like she knew what she was doing, like she'd had actual training. Given how wealthy her family was, it was highly likely she did.

Sally and Dalia leaped up seconds after he dodged the swipe of her rapier, each of them running to the front doors and grabbing rapiers as well. He worried for a moment he was going to be set upon three against one, and zoomed away again, weaving almost drunkenly between the chairs and tables of the room.

"Come back here, ye yellow bellied scoundrel!" Vedyā shouted, chasing after him. Between the speed of his chair and the shortness of her legs, he was far ahead of her.

"Stand down, you stinking, unworthy pirate!" Sally shouted. "Have you no honor, attacking an untrained civilian?"

"Arr, honor be fer lawmen and other scallywags! You'll nae get me, whichever ye be!"

"I'll save you the trip to the hangman's noose, pirate, when I cut your throat in twain!" Sally shouted.

Sally caught up to Vedyā, and she and Dalia fought Vedyā two on one, Brandon stopping to watch in amazement. Both girls were just as well trained as Vedyā was, by the looks of it. It was amazing to see as the three girls dodged and weaved, thrust and parried, and occasionally just circled around each other with the rapiers out, watching each other

warily. Sally moved more freely than Dalia, as she was wearing trousers and Dalia had a dress on. But Dalia had also tied the skirt about her in a way that freed her legs, so she wasn't too handicapped by the dress.

Still seated at the table, Sarah was watching it all with excitement, looking between the fight and the remaining rapiers. Suddenly she got up and ran to grab one of the rapiers, running to join the fight. Brandon thought the fight wouldn't last long if it was three on one, but was disappointed when Sarah joined Vedyā, making the fight *more* even rather than less so.

It got harder to keep track of the action this way, especially when Sarah and Dalia drifted away from the other two, making it two smaller fights. Brandon kept his eye primarily on Vedyā and Sally, though, as they seemed the more capable pair of fighters. They circled each other warily, their fight slowing down a few moments while Dalia and Sarah continued sparring. Then in a quick surge of speed, Sally lunged and her blade's tip went right for Vedyā's eye. He covered his eyes, not wanting to see blood, but he heard no screaming, so he looked again. She must have missed, or been blocked, because Vedyā was unharmed.

Sarah struck a blow to Dalia's legs, but rather than blood appearing, there was a flash of orange light that faded quickly. Dalia jumped back, leaped to the right, and lashed out, getting a hit in on Sarah's shoulder. Orange light flared again, and Sarah leaped to her right. It was then that Brandon remembered Dalia was left handed, while Sarah was right-handed. He thought a bit more highly of Sarah's skills,

then, since it had to be difficult fighting someone with hand-  
edness that was your opposite.

After a few more of these hits that made orange light appear, Brandon figured out they must be wearing some kind of magical protective gear. He had just figured this out when Sally did something he missed that knocked the rapier out of Vedyā's hand, and thrust into her chest. The orange light returned, then changed to red.

"Aha! I have killed the scoundrel at last!" Sally shouted with pride.

Vedyā clutched at her chest, melodramatically coughing and staggering around the room for a few moments before falling to the floor playing dead. Sally leaped over to join Dalia, and before long, the two of them bested Sarah as well, who simply fell down with her tongue lolling out of her mouth.

Sally handed Dalia her rapier and went over to Brandon. She bowed with a flourish and said, "Milord, my apologies for the behavior of the dread pirate Vedyā. She'll not bother you again. Justice has been served."

He paused a few moments, the room silent, before shouting, "You could've put someone's eye out!"

Sarah and Vedyā laughed. Sally glared at them for a moment before turning back to Brandon.

"There wasn't any actual danger. They're enchanted practice blades. They create magical barriers over the face, hands, and the rest of your body. I could beat you over the head with this thing and you wouldn't even feel it."

"Yes. Even if you were unarmed," Dalia added.

"You're telling the truth?" he asked warily.

Vedya stood up, then. “Yeah, they’re telling the truth. I wouldn’t attack you with an actual sword, no matter how annoyed I’d been with you.”

He relaxed, sighing. “Good.” Then he looked at each of them in turn. “The rest of you reacted pretty quickly. None of you seemed all that surprised, either.”

By now, Sarah had stood up too. She said, “You get used to this kind of stuff when you’re over here as often as Sally and I have been. We’ve both been regulars during the summer for years.”

“Butch and I met in kindergarten, and I first brought her here as soon as school ended, to show her the place.”

Sarah – who had tensed halfway through Vedya’s sentence – relaxed at the end of it.

“Well if you’re so rambunctious now, Vedya, maybe we should call it a day and go our separate ways for the day?” Sally suggested.

“I could use some sunshine,” Vedya admitted.

It was decided. They put their books and notebooks away, and soon were heading outside. Dalia, Sally, and Brandon decided to go for a stroll, while Vedya and Sarah were determined to do something else. Vedya and Sarah followed them out the front gate but went to the garage quickly. They soon spotted Vedya leaving the garage on a skull-patterned skateboard, wearing a black helmet emblazoned with a grinning monster face drawn with red lines, and elbow and knee pads of matching colors. Sarah was with her, riding a more beat up and older skateboard, with older protective gear. The two girls whizzed by both them *and* the Park house, Mrs. Park glaring at them like they were hooligans. Vedya noticed



this and made a face at her by pulling her eyelids back to show the whites of her eyes, and sticking out her tongue; Sarah did the same. Mrs. Park glared at the two girls even more.

Brandon rolled along to Sally's left as they walked, talking in code now they were somewhere they might be overheard, talking as though Fae Springs was just a school for the gifted.

"My parents don't know I'm, uh... Gifted yet," Brandon said. "They don't know it's a thing, yet. I haven't told them. So I should probably do that soon, I think."

Sally turned to face him. "Why?" she asked. "Someone is going to go to your parents and tell them all about it, I think it was Mrs. Ravenstone who said that."

"Yes, but I think they'd want to hear it from me. Though I don't know how I'd prove it."

"Well," Sally continued, "you could always—"

She was cut off by a distinctive male voice. "Well well, what have we here? A geek, a freak, a crippled gook, and their pet bird out for a walk? Must be my lucky day."

The three of them turned around (Brandon causing his chair to turn all the way around on the spot, to which Kobalos squawked and flapped his wings) and faced down one of three people they least wanted to see that day or any day: Preston Park. Fifteen years old, brown-haired, tall, and strong without fitting the standard jock/bully body type, looking more like he was on the swim team and possibly the debate team than anything else. One of the children of Mrs. Heather Park, Preston was a perfect example of what was wrong with the Parks. He was rich, snotty, racist against vir-

tually everyone who wasn't a white human, he didn't much care for women, and as if that wasn't bad enough, he dressed like he expected that looking like the most insufferable prep-py ever would guarantee him admission to Harvard or Yale. Right now, he was wearing a blue button-up polo shirt, black pants that only went to just past his knees, and brown loafers... with no socks. He was just a few inches of pants leg, a pair of socks, and a tie away from donning a school uniform for the kind of wealthy Republicans who grow up to become politicians who take health care away from the poor and think homeless people should be dehydrated and burned to fuel power plants.

The instant Dalia heard his voice, the ever-present tight knot in her stomach clenched like it wanted to murder her by ripping apart her insides and then flee for its life. Seeing his face added a sinking feeling in her stomach to it, which was an unsettling combination. She could already feel her hands shaking and her voice clocking out in a rush like it was suddenly sick with the flu and worked at a fast food restaurant. She even felt her eyes begin to water. Making it worse, she realized she hadn't changed out of her nice birthday dress before coming outside.

"*Da'alzhin*," Kobalos said, in Vedy's voice. The corner of Dalia's mouth flicked upward in amusement; it was Navajo, and was *not* a nice word.

"Can't you lay off us today, Preston?" Sally snapped at him. "It's Dalia's birthday today!"

Dalia cringed and tried to hide behind Sally. Preston's heartstrings wouldn't be tugged by that; one had to have a conscience for that to be anything other than ammunition.

“Oh ho hoooo, really? Now that *is* interesting, geek. Thank you so much for the information!”

Sally gulped, clearly realizing her mistake, and positioned herself more in front of Dalia than before. Preston was at least a head and a half taller than her, and though his build was average, he was a lot stronger than her. Sally put up her fists defensively.

“Leave her alone!” Sally shouted.

“Now now, geek, you know better than to try to protect the freak. Let her get what she deserves, or you’ll get it twice as bad.”

“Go to the surface of Annwn, Preston!”

“Ah, and now I can add talking about Gifted business in public to your list of crimes. The Council will be interested to hear that, I think.”

“Doubtful, Preston,” Brandon said, weakly. “I doubt anyone would notice. Even if they did, I doubt they’d think anything of it.”

Preston sighed and rolled his eyes. “You say that, little cripple, like it’s going to make me change my mind.”

Sally moved in front of Brandon this time. “You’d hit a person in a wheelchair? I shouldn’t be so surprised; you’d hit a girl, after all.”

“She’s a freak. Nothing wrong with hitting a freak.”

Sally growled at him and jumped forward, faking him out; he flinched. Her growls got louder. Then she started hissing. He stared at her like she was crazy, and no surprise; growling was one thing, hissing was something else entirely.

She kept getting up in Preston’s face, startling him backwards. He looked bewildered at her behavior. Dalia thought

there was something familiar about Sally's tactic, though she couldn't recall seeing it before.

Preston finally decided he'd had enough, and swung at her. She ducked. He swung again, she ducked again, and backed up, since her tactic wasn't working anymore.

Dalia felt Doñela's presence just in time to try to tell her to stop, before Dalia was shoved out of her body, something Doñela could do if she had reason to. She watched from outside herself as her body's entire manner changed, going from pathetic, terrified cry-baby to confident Warrior Witch instantly. Doñela walked Dalia's body to face Preston.

*'Doñela, don't! Just stop! You'll only make it worse!'* Dalia said to her, knowing only Doñela could hear her now.

Ignoring Dalia, Doñela cracked her knuckles and stared the bully down.

"Leave us alone, Preston. I know you need to pick on kids to feel like a man—" Dalia groaned, her noises of protest audible only to her and Doñela. "—but for once in your life you might consider backing off."

Looking thrown by "Dalia's" sudden, uncharacteristic bravery, he nonetheless recovered quickly.

"Why should I do that, freak? What's in it for me?"

"I won't curse you into oblivion."

"HA! Like you could, you little freak. You haven't even started Fae Springs yet, and I've taken three years of classes already. You don't stand a chance, even with the geek and the gook to back you up."

"So what's the hesitation for?" Doñela asked, pointing a finger at Preston, who knew full well what she was doing, though it would look innocuous enough to a mundane.

Preston hesitated again. Dalia guessed he was wondering if she would really risk a magical duel in full view of mundane houses.

“Young fella, if you're lookin' for trouble I'll accommodate ya,” Kobalos interjected.

“Yeah, what he said. Come at me. I *dare* you.”

*Doñela? What are you doing out here? I can feel—'*

Another semi-transparent person had appeared, looking like a black boy the same age as Dalia and Doñela. He'd stopped talking and his eyes went wide at the scene before him. Then he sighed, rubbing his eyes.

“You wouldn't dare start a... Gifted... fight here, in broad daylight,” Preston said, sounding uncertain.

“Are you sure of that? One floor of my house isn't from around here. Any one of my family members is more Gifted than your entire stinking family. Even my pet raven is more gifted than your entire family!”

Kobalos laughed at this. It was an unsettlingly human sound to come from a bird, even one that routinely talked in human language.

Dalia was amazed; for once, Doñela's brash behavior seemed to be having an impact. Preston appeared to be deciding to go away. There was every chance—

She shrieked as Preston leaped at Doñela, punching her in the gut. Dalia couldn't feel her body at the moment, but she still winced in sympathy as Doñela went down like a sack of Goblin gold, clutching her middle in agony.

Preston laughed at her. Sally and Brandon were shouting at him; Sally looked torn between hitting him and helping 'Dalia.' Kobalos took flight and flew at Preston's face, being

careful not to mess the bully's face up with his sharp talons, knowing he could get in some very bad trouble if he did. Preston shouted, waving his arms wildly about to try to get Kobalos out of his face.

“BAD! BAD! VERY BAD BOY! *DIIGIS CHXO'!*” Kobalos was shrieking at Preston as he flapped around.

Preston landed a lucky blow and knocked Kobalos out of the air. The raven looked injured and possibly winded, but not too bad. He was still moving.

Doñela screamed and launched herself at Preston, clawing and biting every inch of him she could reach. Dalia just floated there, sighing, worrying how bad Preston would be after this.

“GET OFF ME, FREAK!” Preston shouted. Doñela was still attacking him, and seemed incoherent with rage.

Sally and Brandon didn't know what to do. They looked at each other. They seemed to decide something with that look, for Sally leaped forward to pull Doñela off Preston. But holding her was no easy task. Tamir, watching all this from outside with Dalia, walked forward and grabbed Doñela, jerking her out of Dalia's body and taking her place instead. The instant change in demeanor as Tamir stopped struggling caused Sally to overbalance and fall over, luckily landing away from Kobalos, who was still on the ground.

Taking advantage of this, Tamir picked up Kobalos with Dalia's hands and cradled him. He turned to Preston, who was on the ground nursing his wounds, and spoke.

“Let that be an object lesson to you not to underestimate your prey. For even the mouse can scratch and bite the cat.”

As the three of them left, Dalia felt something tug gently on her, and she let it pull her along behind her body along with Doñela, who was floating in the air beside her, hurling imprecations at Preston he wouldn't be able to hear. Not that Dalia had much choice about being pulled along; whenever Doñela and Tamir left the house, they could only appear about ten or so feet from Dalia, and the same was true for her when she was out of her body like this. Inside the house, they could go anywhere they liked, but outside of it, they were bound to her for some reason.

Kobalos turned out to be okay. A little hurt, like Doñela had been when she'd been punched, but he recovered quickly enough, and was soon cussing a blue streak about Preston. Some of the things he was saying would have made a sailor blush.

Knowing she would be unable to, and that anything Doñela said would make matters worse, Tamir took on the difficult task of recalling what had happened to her family, which he finished just in time for the howling wolf doorbell to go off.

"That's Mrs. Park," Morgana said. "I'll handle this."

She opened the door, and sure enough, there was Mrs. Park, looking furious. Behind her, a scratched and bleeding Preston Park stood, looking around fearfully at all the odd things around them.

"May I help you?" Morgana asked.

"Your freakish daughter attacked my son without provocation!"

"Interesting. That's not what she said. She said he accosted her and her friends, they couldn't get away, and then he attacked her, and she fought back."

"Of course she'd say that, to save her own skin."

"My daughter isn't a liar. Trust me, she's horrible at it whenever she tries. And anyway, do you remember my daughter's familiar, Kobalos?"

Morgana had picked up Kobalos with her left hand while speaking, and now he was perched on her hand in front of Mrs. Park.

"How could I forget that menace? And what about it?"

"Do you remember that he can repeat back anything he's heard anyone say, in their own voice? And that he has perfect recall within 24 hours of something happening?"

"What's the point to this?" Mrs. Park asked.

"This is the point: Kobalos, please repeat the conversation that led up to the fight."

"My parents don't know I'm, uh... Gifted yet," Kobalos repeated in Brandon's voice.

"Fast-forward to the point where Preston came in."

First making a sound like an old VCR being fast-forwarded with the audio still on, he then repeated Preston's initial sentence, insults and all. He went through the entire conversation, and even managed to mimic the sounds of the fighting. It was almost like listening to an audio recording.

Mrs. Park looked a little uncomfortable, but crossed her arms and said, "Well obviously, this bird is lying. Fabricating a story. He could make us sound like we'd said anything he wanted us to!"



"I assure you that he cannot do that. While he *is* able to piece together words to make new senten—"

"HA! Got you!"

"—ces, when he does, it is rather obvious that's what he's doing. I'll demonstrate. Kobalos, say something in my voice that I've never said before."

After a moment of thought, his head jerking around the way birds do, Kobalos said, "Preston Park is – such a lovely – young man. So kind – and decent."

"See? Brief but obvious gaps between the parts he has available to him, and you can clearly hear from the tones that those are all from different conversations."

Mrs. Park was glaring daggers at Kobalos. "He could be making new words and making it sound like he can't."

"Kobalos, say the word C-H-A-L-C-E-D-O-N-Y in my voice. I'm fairly certain I've never said that word in your presence."

Kobalos looked at her in an annoyed way and said in an entirely different, soft, masculine voice, "I'm sorry, Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Like I'd believe anything you or your bird-brain say anyway. Your daughter attacked my son, and I demand an apology from her."

With Tamir still 'driving,' Dalia's voice said, "Preston, I'm very sorry you think you deserve an apology. I'm sorry you were raised by this woman instead of some *decent* family, such as a pack of wolves. And I'm truly sorry I ever had the misfortune to meet you."

She heard a faint snort of laughter from behind her. Dalia turned her astral self around to look and saw Nizoni trying not to laugh.

Mrs. Park said, "Hmph! Well I suppose I should have known better than to expect remorse from a bunch of demented weirdos like *your* family! We'll be filing assault charges!"

"Excellent idea, Mrs. Park. Dalia and I will do the same, against Preston. He *did* attack first, after all. And your son has been bullying my daughter Dalia for as long as we've known him."

"And who are the authorities going to believe? A bunch of good-for-nothing weirdo devil worshipers like yourselves, or fine, upstanding citizens like us?"

"Oh, so you've finally learned how to walk upright? Mazel tov!" Tamir said. Dalia groaned silently. She'd forgotten, momentarily, that Tamir was a sass master. Doñela was cackling so loud that Dalia was unsure how it wasn't audible to anyone else. It was so loud that Dalia almost didn't hear Nizoni's loud snort of laughter.

Trying not to laugh herself, Morgana said, "I think if we were to go to the Witches' Council, that your case would be harder to defend, with Kobalos's testimony, and Mr. Starling on our side."

"Why would we do that, when the mundane authorities could handle it?"

"Then in that case, it would be he said / she said. They are both minors, I doubt the mundane authorities would take either one of them seriously. In fact, we did try to press charges against one of Dalia's bullies once, and the police did

not care. Why it's a crime when adults attack one another but not when kids attack each other is something I cannot fathom. But the fact is, your family and I are both pretty much equally wealthy, so your money's influence will likely mean very little."

"We have *three* family lawyers," Mrs. Park boasted, her expression asking what they thought of *that*.

"And we have *four* lawyers who are mutual friends of our family and the Starling family, if you wanted to start measuring things," Nizoni said. "Your move."

Before Mrs. Park could answer, Orpheus spoke up, saying in an oddly somewhat Norwegian accent that Dalia recognized as Borghild speaking for him, "This is all so silly. Dalia is three years younger than your son, and he is so much bigger than she is. She is also disabled, in case you'd forgotten about her prosthetic foot. You would not be the one with the court's sympathies in this case, even if the justice system *did* care one whit about a tiff between two minors."

They waited for Mrs. Park while she thought about this.

"The justice system doesn't have to care. It could be a civil suit. We could sue for emotional damages."

Tamir contorted Dalia's face in disgust. "The cat feels oppressed by the mouse."

"We could easily counter-sue," Morgana pointed out.

"Yes," agreed Nizoni. "And again, sympathies would be with Dalia for being so much younger, black, and disabled. In fact, forget counter-suing; if you sued us for this, we could press charges, make a case for Preston's attack being a hate crime."

"You're not listening to this crap, are you Mom?" Preston demanded.

"Preston, dear, shut up. And you know you're not supposed to say 'crap.'" She turned to Morgana again. "If you want to go to war with us that way, then go ahead. My son got more injured than she did. I don't see any wounds on her. From what your dumb bird said, she only got punched in the gut during their scuffle."

"You sure are a stubborn bi—"

"*Nizoni*," Morgana warned. Calmly, she turned back to Mrs. Park.

"Since you seem determined to pretend that your son is innocent and blameless, how about a compromise?" Morgana asked.

"What kind of compromise?"

"Instead of going to all the tedious hassle of legal battles that will just cost both of us a lot of money and likely be a waste of both money and time, being long, annoying, tedious, and leaving nobody satisfied – not to mention dragging your son's supposedly good name through the muck in front of so very many people when we tell them about his history with our daughter – how about instead of that, both children apologize to each other, and we act as though this incident never occurred?"

Both Tamir and Preston had identical looks of disgust and outrage at this idea. But Dalia understood; the Parks were as persistent as black mold if they thought they could gain from it. Maddy had just put the idea into Mrs. Park's head that the costs to her and her family would far outweigh the gains. She watched Mrs. Park, who was clearly trying to

decide whether or not it would be worth the hassle just to spite them. Dalia could practically hear the gears turning; she wondered when they'd seize up and catch on fire.

Finally, after a whole minute that felt like twenty, Mrs. Park said, "Hmph. Fine. I accept your compromise. Preston, apologize to the—apologize to Dalia for attacking her."

"*MOM!*"

"Preston Pemb—" Mrs. Park started to snap, cutting herself off with a look of terror. "I mean, Preston Park, you will do as you are told! Apologize to her!"

"Fine. I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what, exactly?" Tamir asked.

"You little—"

"*Preston!*"

Preston gritted his teeth. "I'm sorry I punched you."

"And...?"

"And I'm sorry I called your freaky little friends some bad names."

"I want you to say 'I'm sorry I goaded you with hate speech and then punched you.'"

Teeth still clenched, he said, "I'm sorry I goaded you with hate speech and then punched you." Dalia thought his tone and expression were adding an implied "when I should have kicked your teeth in instead."

"Good. And I'm sorry I scratched you and bit you," Tamir made Dalia's voice say, with the same tone and expression.

"Excellent," Morgana said. "Now that this unpleasantness is all over with, we can go our separate ways again. I do so hope we will not be having any more problems from you,

young Mr. Park. Good day!" she said brightly, and politely closed the door and locked it.

She looked through the peephole in the door and watched as Mrs. Park and her son left their property and went home. She waited for a few more minutes before having Nizoni and Orpheus escort Brandon and Sally home.

With Sally and Brandon gone, Dalia went to her room, Kobalos on her shoulder. She and her two invisible friends waited for her family to return, as she knew they would.

*'I can't believe his initials are "P. P. P."!' Doñela said, trying hard not to laugh. 'As if "P. P." wasn't hilarious enough on its own!'*

*'Can I please have my body back, Tamir?'* Dalia asked.

"Oh, right. Yes," he agreed. They grabbed hands, tugged, and switched. Within moments, the nervous knot in her belly returned, and she felt nauseous, fighting for several minutes to regain her composure.

"By the way, Doñela, I have a bone to pick with you," she said when she recovered.

Doñela picked up and put on the gloves, long-sleeved shirt, and baseball cap she used in order to be seen by people other than Dalia. She knew she'd need it soon, and the gloves made it easier to use Loki. She picked him up and started tapping away on it to choose what she wanted to say, even though she didn't need to yet.

"Yeah yeah, I know," Loki said in the approximation of Doñela's voice he used when talking for her. "I made things worse and got us in trouble and it's a lucky thing we only had to apologize to that walking, talking – Doñela, I don't think that's very poliiiiiite!" Loki said in a chiding tone, switching

to his own voice for that last bit. His voice sounded exactly like Tom Hiddleston's voice, British accent and all.

*'I don't give half a rotten turnip what you think, Loki,'* Doñela said, tapping on Loki's screen as she did so he would know what she was saying. *'Say what I tell you to say!'*

"Why should I, when it's so hilarious to deny you?" he asked.

Doñela began to curse a blue streak. Of course, Loki couldn't hear her, but Dalia was laughing at her, so he guessed correctly what she was doing.

"I'd clean your mouth out with soap, but we both know that would be a waste of soap," he said.

"Oh Doñela, this is what you get for naming your device after a god of mischief."

Doñela tapped some more on the screen of the phone, continuing her argument with Loki. Dalia ignored her. Doñela had said enough to satisfy Dalia. But as she stood there, she thought about the day's events, and hoped very much that her friends didn't figure out the secret of Doñela and Tamir. It would be a miracle if they didn't eventually figure it out.

The three of them were all so distinct from one another in behavior that it really was ridiculous how anyone could be convinced they were the same person. Dalia was a nervous wreck, anxious even when she was relaxed; Doñela was brash, confident, and often rude, and even when she had control of the body she could never stand still for more than about 30 seconds at a time. And of course trying to read Tamir's body language was always a challenge. About the most expressive he ever got was just before jumping into the

body to fix one of Doñela's messes. Also, he had the kind of quick, sharp wit that Dalia had always wished she had, so he was often sassy. The rest of the time, he was mostly so chill that Doñela routinely called him The Iceman, a nickname he only occasionally protested.

Which wasn't to say they were *always* that way. Tamir's patience had its limits, and he was known to get angry at times. Whenever Dalia was working on something she loved, like wand making, time and her anxiety would melt away for hours, along with her awareness of her body, so that when she finally snapped out of it, she'd have to run to the bathroom before she wet herself, and then run to the kitchen for food before her stomach could pack its bags and take the next flight to Fiji, the divorce papers filled out and ready for her to sign. Even Doñela could be calm, focused, or anxious at times.

Yes, Dalia really should tell her friends about those two. It would make life so much easier for her. But she was far too worried about scaring off her only two friends in the world to dare tell them about it. So she remained chicken hearted about it.

Finally, there was a knock at the door. Tamir snapped up his own shirt, gloves, and hat. He looked hastily around for Hypatia, and realized suddenly that he'd left her somewhere else in the house.

"It's open," Dalia said, sitting down on her bed.

The door opened, and into the room came Nizoni and Abuela (Grandma Ravenstone), the others hanging back.

"Tamir, can we—oh sorry, my mistake," Abuela said, noticing Tamir's and Doñela's clothes. Dalia never did that



herself, she thought it was silly and would rather be in control of her own body. Knowing this, Abuela turned to Dalia.

“Hello there, Little Branch. Can we speak with you?” Grandma Ravenstone asked.

“Yes, Abuela,” she said, crossing her arms. Doñela would have done it defiantly, but Dalia was basically giving herself a comforting hug. Grandma Ravenstone knew better than to hug Dalia now; right now, Dalia only felt comfortable hugging herself. Abuela sat down on the bed next to her, careful to avoid touching her.

“How are you feeling?” Abuela asked.

“I’m okay.”

“Good. Now, is there anything you have to add to the account of what happened, that the Parks wouldn’t have been told?”

She hugged herself tighter. The goldfish-shaped chewy necklace ended up in her mouth again, as well.

“Yeah, I guess,” she said. Even she knew she’d said it too softly, and tried saying it again louder, but failed.

“Never mind that, Little Branch,” Grandma Ravenstone said. “Nizoni can hear you fine. Ears like a bat, that one. She’ll relay anything I can’t hear myself.”

Nizoni nodded. Dalia looked carefully at Nizoni, to try to figure out her mood. Dalia routinely struggled to figure out body language, but years of observing and taking notes helped her. It also helped that her family knew her issues, and accommodated them. Nizoni was exaggerating her expressions and body language a little, to make it plainer that she was concerned but not angry. If anything, Nizoni was

proud she'd taken that insufferable bully down a peg, even if it hadn't been *her*, per se.

"Why do I always have to be the one to do this?" Dalia said so softly even she barely heard herself, but she knew Nizoni would hear it. "I mean," she said a bit louder, "Tamir's better at this than me."

"Because you need to practice speaking up for yourself, Little Branch. Doñela and Tamir may not always be there to help you. And anyway, you shouldn't have to rely on them. I know they don't really like it, but they do it out of love."

*'Hey!'* Doñela shouted, making Dalia jump and clutch her heart. *'I like it! I didn't like getting sucker-punched by that giant, steaming bag of—'*

"What was that, Doñela?" Abuela asked. She hadn't heard Doñela, of course, but she'd seen Dalia jump, and then had seen the clothing and hat on Doñela moving around.

Doñela tapped out something quickly on her phone, and Loki said for her, "I said I like helping her. I didn't like getting punched, though."

"Ah, yes. Thank you, Doñela."

"De nada," Loki said for her.

"I really do wish we could press charges against that human garbage for that," Nizoni said. "But until this society pulls its head out of its collective backside on that issue, well... we can't." Nizoni growled up at the ceiling. "I have half a mind to curse him into oblivion!"

"Don't, Zoni," Grandma Ravenstone said. "We can't afford to anger the people in this neighborhood too much. And anyway, The Council would toss you in Fort Ironbound if you did."

"I won't *kill* the boy. Just make him wish he was dead."

"Still..."

"Yes, I know. I wouldn't really, as tempting as it might be. I know the stakes too. Probably better than the rest of you."

Slowly, painfully, Grandma Ravenstone and Nizoni got the rest of the story out of Dalia, and about her astral self's perspective on Doñela's and Tamir's parts in it.

"Okay. Thank you, Little Branch," Abuela said, turning around to face the clothing that was all she could see of Doñela. "Now, Doñela, it's your turn. I want to try to understand her point of view on this, why she stepped in."

"Do I have to?" came the response from her phone. Judging by the expression on Doñela's face, Loki had guessed what she'd been going to say before she even touched his screen at all.

"Yes, Doñela," Grandma Ravenstone said. "I would like to try to understand why you stepped in, when Dalia was certain you would make things worse."

It was really weird, seeing Doñela glare at someone and knowing they couldn't see it, but that's what Doñela was doing. It was also plain to her that even though Doñela was trying to hold still, that her attention was already wandering, and she was already getting antsy. She began pacing, which had to look weird to her family, and got so antsy she dropped Loki on the bed by accident. Rather than pick him back up, she began to use sign language instead.

{She *always* says that, but every time I leave her to it, Preston goads her til she cries, laughs at her tears, and knowing him, he would have ripped her nice dress, or worse.}

Doñela's eyes went wide, and she clapped her hands over her mouth, even though she couldn't speak in astral form.

"Worse? What do you mean by 'worse'? Come now, tell me please."

She shook her head 'no.'

"Please? I really want to understand, and I can't unless you're honest."

{Fine! Fine, I'll tell you. It's just... I...} she paused, thinking, before continuing. {He calls her 'freak.' But I know he's thinking worse than that. I see it in his eyes, hear it in his words and his tone, and how he holds himself. He hasn't done it yet. But Dalia sees it too, it's that obvious; she's afraid of it happening too. He hasn't yet, thank goddess. She freezes up, though. If I didn't step in... well, it might happen. I can't let that happen.}

Dalia looked at Doñela and saw her eyes were watering. Dalia couldn't remember the last time she'd seen Doñela cry. She had *never* seen Doñela cry in astral form before. It was kind of frightening.

"Afraid of what? What do you think he wants to do?"

She squirmed in place, looking away and picking at her gloves for almost a minute before responding. {I don't know. Worse than a beating. I got scared. I read things on the Internet and the GTN. I was scared for her. Terrified.}

"Was there anything that made you worry about that? Or was this just a random thought?"

Doñela sat there thinking a few moments, then she signed, {Stuff in his body language. He wants to teach the little freak a lesson. I... don't know how to explain it. Seemed to me there was a threat of something scary and dangerous in

his body language, in his eyes. When I think of what might have happened without me stepping in, if Sally and Brandon hadn't been there, and if we weren't out in the open...} She shuddered. {I mean, I doubt he'd have done it there, in that situation, but I saw he wanted to do *something*. Something I don't really want to say. He's just waiting for an opportunity. So I stepped in, to stop him before he could try it.}

"I... see." Dalia could hear Abuela's voice go cold and hard, like a glacier on Pluto, and then she looked thoughtful for several moments. Her enmity was plainly directed at Preston. "In that case, Doñela, if you see that kind of thing in his body language or voice again, you go right on ahead and take control of Dalia's body, protect her from that. And if you *do* end up cursing him, we will defend you with as many lawyers as we need. And I'll tell that mother of his what you told me, what I think it means, and we'll see what she makes of that information. Then we'll have the full measure of her character."

Abuela looked more solemnly at Doñela than ever before. "Whatever you have to do to prevent him or anyone else doing that to her, you go ahead and do it. If you think someone's going to hurt her, in a serious way, protect her however you need to. We'll have your back, always. Even if we have to run away to Annwn or Fomor or somewhere else to get you away from the consequences, we will. Just you protect her."

Doñela nodded. {Of course I will. I would even if you told me not to.} Dalia, for her part, was confused. What exactly was Doñela afraid of?

“Good girl. You should always do what you think is right. Do try to help her stand up for herself, too, though. She shouldn't rely on you overmuch.”

{Right.} Doñela signed, pausing a moment before continuing. {Did you want to talk with Tamir?}

“No. We're done here. We'll have a light dinner soon. But before we do that, one last question, Doñela: do Sally and Brandon know about the two of you?”

{If they do, they've never let on. We see a lot of confused looks from them during... incidents. But they haven't said anything, and we haven't told them.}

“I thought that might be the case. They're good kids, but as much as they love the weirdness in our family, everyone has their limits, and I'm not sure whether or not they'd understand this. But still, you know them better than I do. If you think they can handle it, they should know.”

Calm enough to pick Loki back up now, she tapped swiftly on his screen, and 'her' voice issued from him, saying, “Okay. Um... yeah, they might be cool with it. They know Orpheus lets Borghild into his body sometimes, that's pretty similar. But it's Dalia's decision.”

“Ah, Borghild. Yes. Intellectually, they know that. Assuming they were paying attention when it was mentioned. But that's a long way from seeing it happen, and an even longer way from understanding and appreciating what's going on. Who's to say how they'd feel about it? Especially after Kira's little stunt earlier.” Nana sighed.

“Wasn't Kira *your* fairy godmother too, Maddy?” Doñela asked Morgana.

“Yes, she was. And for my mother before me. According to my mother, Kira was very similar back then, prone to pranks and dramatics, but generous with gifts and Gifts alike, in her own way. Spoke differently, though. Naturally enough; it was a different era. Still tended to slip a few Shakespearean-era words and phrases into her speech at the time, though. But well, it was a more formal time, language-wise, and it wasn't *too* unusual to slip Shakespearean English into one's speech back then. So no, she hasn't really changed.”

Nizoni nodded. “We were a little surprised when she took on that role for Vedyā, to be honest. She'd already been born, and is not any of ours by blood, of course. But we adopted her, and that makes her a Ravenstone, even if she was born a Rani.”

“I'M HOME!” Vedyā shouted from downstairs, Sarah having gone home. “DON'T EVERYONE APPLAUD AT THE SAME TIME!”

“Speak of the devil,” Abuela said with a grin. “Well that's the sign that it's time for dinner, if you feel up to it.”

Dalia nodded. “I could eat.”

But while she'd meant that at the time, when she was finally sitting down to eat, her appetite had quite evaporated. She couldn't stop thinking about the incident with that horrible Park boy, and the things Doñela had said about him. Dalia had been trying to ignore the things she'd seen, pretend they weren't there. But if Doñela was right – and Dalia didn't doubt she was this time, then she'd have to be more careful when they went to Fae Springs, as she wouldn't have her home to run to, even though the entrance to the school

was also in Portland. Even if she didn't really understand what Doñela was afraid of.

And it wasn't like Preston was the only bully. Dalia was no stranger to bullies, she'd dealt with them as long as she could remember. She meant that literally; her earliest clear memory was of an incident with a bully, one that had sent her home crying, bruised, and bloody. And Portland was supposed to be more accepting of differences, with its motto of "Keep Portland Weird." Dalia shuddered to think how much worse other places would be for her, if Portland was one of the more accepting places in the world for weirdos like her and her family.

The more she thought about bullies and school and all that, the worse the knot in her stomach got, until she couldn't have eaten anything without throwing up. In that case, it was a good thing she'd lost her appetite. The adults gave her understanding looks and ended up wrapping her plate up for her when it was clear she wouldn't be able to eat anything. Vedyā looked concerned about her, and confused. It wasn't often, despite her chronic anxiety, that Dalia skipped a meal. Chooli was too focused on their food to notice Dalia's distress, or maybe was pretending so. Ashkii didn't know what was wrong but had taken the seat next to her; he petted her hand with his every now and then in a comforting manner, which made her smile a little despite her mood. Her youngest sibling, Sweetheart, was busy turning their booster seat's tray into a work of art in the media of mashed potatoes, corn, and collard greens.

She excused herself and returned to her bedroom, closing the door. She was sad and angry and scared. Why did



people like Preston Park exist? Why couldn't they just accept other people were different from them and leave people alone?

These thoughts segued on to thoughts of that horrible terrorist organization. It was terrifying to think there were people in the world so bad that they made Preston Park look like a fluffy bunny by comparison. She sincerely hoped she never crossed paths with any of those people, or anyone else dangerous like that.

And to think, she'd been having such a good time at her birthday before Preston ruined it for her. Why did he always have to ruin everything good in her life?





## Chapter Seven: Summer of Changes

*Saturday, June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

THE NEXT DAY AT NOON, a still-tired Dalia got up, put on her mechanical prosthetic foot, and got ready for a more normal day, going about her usual routine. She dressed in a dress with skulls printed on it and put on black Mary Janes before heading down for breakfast, which was leftovers from the previous day. She was fine with that; it took her a long time to get tired of the same meals. She could eat leftovers from her birthday all summer long at every meal and only need the occasional snack for variety. So it was with a satisfying feeling that she made herself a turkey sandwich with cranberry sauce dressing, having some mashed potatoes and gravy on the side.

A musical tone sounded from the mailbox in the wall by the usual dining room on the ground floor (the one they'd been in yesterday was for special occasions), the tune sounding like a creepy haunted music box. She set her plate down on the table, opened the mailbox, and pulled out something in a thick manila envelope. She checked who the package

had been sent by, and it was Fae Springs! She opened it up and pulled out two things: an acceptance letter and a copy of the school handbook.

Waiting until she was in the kitchen first, she said, "My letter came!"

Doñela's head appeared, upside down, in front of Dalia's face; the ghostly girl was hanging from the ceiling.

*'You got the letter? You hear that, Tamir?'*

A non-committal sound came from the corner of the room. Tamir was reading a book, which would have looked to anyone else like it was floating. He would have been doing that all yesterday too, but somewhere out of sight, since Dalia hadn't told her friends about them yet, and she didn't want to freak them out too much.

Setting her letter aside, Dalia ate her breakfast next to her dad as he read the newspaper with his e-reader, and waited until she was done and washed up before reading it. She was a little surprised Sweetheart wasn't there, but she ignored that to read her letter.

Fae Springs Private Academy of Magic

PO Box 7779

Portland, Oregon 97208

Shadow-fax box: FSPA-TF-667-543-3910

Website: [www.faespringsprivateacademy.edu](http://www.faespringsprivateacademy.edu)

Phone: 971-555-0110

Principal: Mr. Jonathan K. Park

Vice-Principal: Ms. Ella Templeton

Dalia Ravenstone

1331 Winterbloom Way,

Portland, Oregon 97212

Dear Ms. Dalia Delphinium Ravenstone of 1331 Winterbloom Way, Portland Oregon;

We are delighted to inform you that you've been accepted as a student at Fae Springs Private Academy of Magic for the 2017-2018 school year. There are two campuses available for minors to learn at, Oak Campus and Ash Campus. You have been chosen to attend the primary campus, which is Oak Campus. When you graduate from Oak Campus, you may choose to either leave the school or continue your education at Hazel Campus, which is our college campus. If you wish to attend at Ash Campus instead of Oak Campus, please let us know by no later than August 15<sup>th</sup>.

Most of your school supplies, including books, will be provided for you, with some exceptions. Please bring with you:

For school uniform:

- Three (3) or more sets of plain, button-up white shirts
- Three (3) or more sets of plain black slacks *or* plain black skirts (knee length or longer)
- One (1) or more pairs of plain black dress shoes

For PE uniform:

- Three (3) or more sets of plain white t-shirts
- Three (3) or more sets of plain red PE shorts
- One (1) or more pairs of plain white sneakers
- Optional for boys: One or more jock straps, as safety gear. (Mostly to prevent testicular torsion.)

## Miscellaneous:

- Several sets of plain black tube socks (above the ankles or longer) *or* plain black stockings of the same length or longer, for school uniforms.
- Several sets of plain white tube socks (above the ankles or longer) *or* plain white stockings of same length or longer, for PE uniforms.
- Several sets of clean, plain white underwear is also required. “Day of the week” underwear is also acceptable, but must be otherwise plain and white.
- Girls must wear bras that must not be visible through their clothing. If this rule applies to you, you should bring at least three bras so as to always have a clean one available.
- Winter jackets and black, gray, or white sweaters or cardigans for colder weather. You may also include tights for colder weather if you wish, as long as they match your socks (only if visible, such as with skirts). Alternatives to winter jackets may also be worn, so long as they abide by the school rules (as detailed in the school handbook) and keep you warm.
- One (1) or more set of appropriate formal wear, as the school will have two formal dances this year, as we do every year; the Snow Ball in December and the Beltane Bash in May. (Please see student manual for details of appropriate formal wear.)
- Optional: You may also bring casual wear for evenings and weekends. Please refer to student

handbook for rules on appropriate casual wear, as there is still a dress code during casual dress occasions.

All clothing should be labeled with the student's name, either the mundane way or with runic-magic personal identifiers. If you cannot afford any of these (except the formal wear), there is a fund that can assist you. Simply let us know if you have need of this assistance.

Fae Springs Private Academy dress code also includes rules on acceptable uniform accessories. This complete dress code and other school rules can be found on our website and in the student handbook we have included in this letter or shadow-fax. We ask the families of all students to read the student handbook thoroughly to know the rules, and what kinds of personal items are allowed or forbidden in school. Please also read the section on familiars and pets, you will be expected to abide by those and all other school rules.

Please note that students are asked to refrain from attempting to exit into the mundane world without adult supervision, due to the school's position in Tirffiniol overlaying Portland's Forest Park, as it is possible to get lost in Forest Park, or to be seen by mundanes. Students are also asked to refrain from using magic in the corridors.

Also note that outside tunnel boxes (portable shadow portals linked to an outside mated portal) are not permitted on school grounds, as they are a security risk; the wards *will* detect such devices and they *will* be confiscated. Any attempt to bring one into the school may result in being suspended or even expelled. If you have too much luggage to

fit a normal closet, expanded closets can be provided on request. And if you require assistance transporting luggage to the school, that too can be provided on request. Also note: Only official school shadow portals and official school shadow-fax boxes are permitted, which are all keyed into the wards independently. Do also note that using shadow-fax boxes (legally distinct from tunnel boxes) that are not keyed into the school's network is a federal offense, as it violates section 384-B of the Shadow-Fax Mail & Package Authority Act of 1841.

Second-year and older students may, with parental permission, take occasional chaperoned day trips into the Portland metro area on certain weekends, or into the nearby Goblin city of Krevjavroq.

Because of the need for secrecy, students are asked to congregate this year at Cathedral Park in St. John's, at Cathedral Park Trail on the north side of the St. John's Bridge, on the bridge side of the trees. You and half of the other first years in your class and their families will come in on September 1<sup>st</sup> at 12 PM this year; the other half will be coming in the next day, while all the other classes will be coming on the third. This is to give first year students a chance to become acquainted with the campus so they can make it to their classes on time when they start on Monday the fourth.

From the rendezvous point at Cathedral Park, you and your classmates will be taking a bus to a nearby portal into Tirffiniol, where the school proper is located. A map of the rendezvous area should be included in your letter. If you have trouble finding the meeting location, or if you are miss-

ing your map, call us at 971-101-1010, or email us at [directions@faespringsprivateacademy.edu](mailto:directions@faespringsprivateacademy.edu).

We would also like to inform everyone who hasn't already heard that the school board has passed a resolution to allow non-human students into Fae Springs. The school board is currently reviewing applications for entry. We will be expecting all students, human or otherwise, to adhere to the same standards of behavior. That includes no bullying of any student, including no hate speech and no hate crimes. Fae Springs is inclusive of students of all protected legal statuses under the rules of the *Concilio Pluviatia* (race, age, gender, gender identity, religion, level of ability, sexuality, nation of origin, and ethnicity) as well as species. Anyone caught engaging in hateful speech or actions against others in Fae Springs will be disciplined in accordance with the severity of the offense. We want all students to enjoy their time at Fae Springs Private Academy, and that is best possible if everyone is polite and respectful to their fellow students and to the staff, concentrating on their work and on having fun.

Whether you accept or reject your place at Fae Springs Private Academy of Magic, please let us know by mail, shadow-fax, or phone; or email us at [admissions@faespringsprivateacademy.edu](mailto:admissions@faespringsprivateacademy.edu). We will expect your response by no later than August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017. If you have any allergies, dietary restrictions, medical conditions, or other special needs we should be aware of, or any other important information we need to know, please tell us in your response.

Sincerely,

Ms. Ella Templeton,

Vice-Principal



Fae Springs Private Academy of Magic

The bit about LGBT being a protected status at Fae Springs made her sigh with relief and release some of the anxiety in her gut. That would make things easier. But something had caught her attention that made her anxiety go up again when she processed it.

“Jonathan Park?” Dalia said. “Isn’t that, um, Anastasia’s dad?”

“No,” Orpheus said. “He’s her uncle. Her father is Jason Park, and he’s a bank manager. Jonathan Park isn’t quite as bad as Jason, but mainly because he’s a stickler for rules who likes to uh, you know, look good. But I should warn you, they’re identical twins. So that might take some getting used to.”

“Oh. Lovely,” she said sarcastically. “Oh hey, there’s a second page here.”

Skipping over the header this time, she went straight to the meat of the second page. From the corner of her eye, she saw Tamir grab the school handbook and start to read it so he could summarize the boring thing later for her.

**First Year, Class One classes for Fae Springs Private Academy of Magic:**

(Secondary teachers – the teachers for the other half of your year’s class – are in parentheses)

*Elementary Transformation Magic* class with **Mr. Garth Rabe** – Learning simple growth magic and transformation magic to speed the growth of plants, influence how they grow, and eventually transform their appearance or other properties. Necessary preliminary class for those wishing to go into the medical profession, as you will need to pass

this class to get into Advanced Transformation Magic. (Ms. Prudence Hill)

*Mathematics* class with **Mr. Eric Erickson**. (Mrs. Teresa Thorn)

*History and Civics* class with **Ms. Kai Carling** – Learn the history and civics of both the magical and mundane worlds. (Mr. Johnathan Summers)

*Science* class with **Mr. Quinn Park**. (Ms. Jayne Starling)

*Magical Self Defense* class with **Mrs. Melora Metaxas** – Learn how to defend yourself, others, and your home with magic. (Mr. Baha'ullah Safiq)

*Crystals and Earth Magic* class with **Mrs. Spinel Thorn** – In this class, you'll learn all about the magical properties of various stones, gemstones, and crystals, as well as some earth magic and elemental magic. (No secondary – this class is years 1 and 2 only.)

*Enchantment* class with **Mr. Gwydion Carling** – Learn glamours, illusions, and magical charms such as making light, levitation of objects, and making objects move. (Ms. Lamia Baker)

*English* class with **Ms. Ginessa Clay**. (Mr. William Dickinson)

*Alchemy* class with **Mr. Richard Marten** – Learn how to make magical potions and mundane chemical solutions. (Ms. Mariposa Martinez)

*Physical Education* with **Ms. Tina Trask**, and occasionally **Mr. Darren Thorsson**. (Mr. Hayden Doherty)

*Art* class with **Mr. Raphael Bacon**. (M. December Bainbridge)

*Music* class with **Ms. Calliope Harper**. (Ms. Angela Whitechapel)

Please note that there are other teachers as well, but those listed above are the ones you will have this year, as you are in year one, class one. For a full list of our staff, please visit our website, [www.faespringsprivateacademy.edu](http://www.faespringsprivateacademy.edu)

“Ugh, the principal is a Park and so is one of the teachers?” Dalia said, thinking of Preston, and how she’d never met a member of his family that she cared to meet ever again. “Why couldn’t I have gotten Ms. Starling this year?”

“Yes dear, but I’ve heard Quinn Park is alright. He’s a normie, but nowhere near as bad as his cousins, Jacob and Jonathan. In fact, I think he’s even a Democrat.”

“Well I’ll give him the benefit of the doubt, in that case. Do you know about any of the other teachers, Papa?”

“Oh, a couple. I think you’ll like Mrs. Metaxas. She’s from a distant branch of our family, used to be a Ravenstone before she married Mr. Metaxas. I believe they’re both Greek.”

“Cool! Any others?”

“I’ve heard good things about the Alchemy teacher. He’s a bit strict, but it’s a dangerous class, and he still manages to make the class fun despite needing to be strict. But, uh, that’s the only ones I know anything about.”

“Oh. Well that’s still something. Thanks, Papa.”

“No problem, sweetie.”

All in all, Dalia was liking the sound of school more and more. Sure, she’d be away from home, but it wouldn’t be so bad. The school’s policy regarding bullying helped ease her mind a lot, too. *He* would still be there, of course, but there’d

be something like 200 or 300 students or so, maybe even more.

Anyway, it meant she might get lost in the crowd, that *he* would be less likely to bother her, and anyway he'd be busy with his own classes and his friends. So that would be an improvement. It wouldn't be as good as him being gone nine months of the year while she'd been here and going to her own elementary and then middle school, but still, better than now.

But no matter how much more at ease she was now, the fact remained that there was still most of two months left until school started. When Dalia thought about going outside, she thought of *him* again, and felt sick. It was going to be a long summer if she couldn't go out at all. That wouldn't do, so she'd have to work out how to get out of the neighborhood before he could catch up.

Vedya came into the room then, wearing only short pants and a snake around her shoulders. This snake, Rajani, was the one Great-grandpa Takashi had found wrapped protectively around her when she'd been a baby in India, a very large female Indian Cobra with black top scales and a cream-colored belly. This cobra was only safe because it had telepathically bonded with Vedya from a young age, and so it was as docile as Vedya was. Well, scratch that, it was docile, unlike Vedya. Seriously, using 'docile' to describe Vedya, what *had* she been thinking?

"Put a shirt on, Vedya," Dalia chided. Sure, the snake was currently covering up certain parts of her torso, but who knew how long that would last?

"Why should I? It's hot, it's summer, we're at home, and I've got as much definition up top as a kindergarten boy. If boys can be topless, why not girls? Besides which, it's perfectly legal for girls and even adult women to run around topless in Portland. Be glad I decided to wear any clothes at all and stop being such a prude."

"We're inside the house, where it's air conditioned. It can't be any warmer than 72 degrees in here!"

"Criticize my choice to be topless again, Dalia, and I'll chuck my shorts into the corner faster than you can say 'stop,'" Vedya said casually as she grabbed a microwavable dinner out of the freezer to make for her lunch. Where Dalia could eat the same thing for nearly every meal for months at a time, Vedya complained loudly if she had to eat the same thing twice in one week. "And you know I don't wear underwear if I can help it," Vedya added as she set the timer on the microwave.

The cobra hissed lazily at Dalia from its comfortable perch around Vedya's shoulders. Dalia hissed right back at it, a distinctly feline hiss. It and Vedya hissed in unison at her, and Dalia made a noise like the yowling of an angry cat.

"Girls, settle down," Orpheus said calmly without looking up from his reading. "All three of you."

Dalia and Vedya both huffed, annoyed, but stopped with the animal noises. The cobra settled down as well.

Vedya snatched Dalia's letter out of her hand and read it.

"Hey! Give it back!"

"When I'm done with it. Which shouldn't be long, I'm ignoring most of this long-winded bologna. Bleh, first couple pages are boring with a side of dull. Ah, teacher list. Let's

see what you got... Uh huh. OK. OK. Bleh! Cool! Uh huh. Uh huh. Uh huh. OK. OK. Alright. Alright. Hmm... Papa? Why does this one teacher have just an 'M' in front of their name? Not Mr. or Ms. or Mrs., just M. 'M. December Bainbridge.'"

"M, pronounced just like the letter. It's a genderless method of addressing people. I think *nimá* mentioned that M. Bainbridge is gender non-binary. Which I guess would explain the M."

"Cool! Thanks, Papa! There's your letter back, doofus," Vedyá said, tossing it back at her.

"Where's Malek Taus?" Dalia asked as she put the pages back in order. The Tirffiniol-native snake Vedyá had been wearing the day before liked to fight Rajani for a place on Vedyá's shoulder.

"He's sleeping outside the other half of the house, up on the roof, taking in the Tirffiniol sunshine. And before you ask, Fio and Tzinti are in the terrarium room, basking in the heat lamps."

Vedyá was fond of snakes, plainly. Obsessed, you could even say. She had been ever since she was an infant, her life being defended by the cobra, Rajani, from the people who had murdered her family. Now she had four of them: Rajani of course, Malek Taus the Peacock Ore Constrictor, Fiontan the pure-white albino Rosy Boa, and Tzinteotl, a corn snake named after the Aztec god of corn.

Vedyá's meal dinged and she took it out, stirred it, and replaced it, waiting for it to finish. "Any plans today, my lovely older sister?" Vedyá asked.

"Not sure yet. Depends on if I can figure out how to avoid Preston."

"I could let Rajani bite him."

"No you couldn't," Papa said, not looking up from his e-reader. "Not unless you want to start over again in, I dunno, Des Moines, Iowa?"

Vedya pulled a face. "Ugh. You mean Bloody Dull, the capital city of Nothing But Corn and Soybeans? No thanks. I was just kidding, anyway. I wouldn't want Rajani to get sick from biting that disgusting sack of infected scabs."

Dalia chuckled at Vedya's creative ways of avoiding saying words their parents would object to.

"Your moms and I have been to Iowa, it's got a lot more than corn and soybeans," Orpheus said. "If the land around it is any indication, Loess Hills School of Magic is very pretty. Lots of greenery. And the school is in a hollow hill."

"Uh-huh. Anyway, Shádí," Vedya said to Dalia, "when I'm done with my breakfast I was going to go outside and do skateboard tricks in the park."

This didn't sound like Dalia's idea of fun, but did give her an idea. *Of course! I'll take my bike*, she thought. But that would mean Brandon would be left out. But she had another idea.

"Papa?"

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Do you still have that bike trailer?"

"Yes, I do. Why do you ask?"

"Do you think it could be made to haul around Brandon and his wheelchair?"

"Hmm... sure, why not? It's strong enough, big enough, and already has stability enhancement spells on it. I'm not great with making things that don't grow on their own, but I know enough to be able to add in some straps, a ramp, and cast a spell to keep Brandon's wheelchair in place. I take it you want to be able to take him out and about in the trailer?"

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking."

"Well we'd also have to make sure it was okay with his parents."

"They don't know about magic yet, though."

"Ah. Well it won't be done today anyway, and uh, but I think his parents will be told in the next few days."

"Really, Papa?"

"Yes, sweetie."

"Great!" she hugged him and ran from the room to the phone. Vedyā waved at her as she left the room.

About phones: in the Ravenstone household, there were several phones. There was a phone shaped like a bat, a phone that looked like an old candlestick-style rotary phone but had push buttons, and of course everyone older than ten had their own cell phone, including Doñela and Tamir. Even the younger kids had emergency-only phones they were to carry with themselves at all times when going out. But the two houses were rather large; to prevent the landline phones ringing too far away for people to answer, the magic of the house would bring the one you preferred close to where you were.

The first and second of the land-line phones were cool looking, but of course Dalia preferred to use her own cell



phone. She hadn't wanted to deal with a talking magical phone like Chooli had, so she'd merely gotten a regular smart-phone and had it shielded against magic. The shield didn't *always* work completely; on more than one occasion, she'd somehow managed to get a wrong number from an entirely different universe, and once she could've sworn there'd been a Goblin on the other end. But mostly, the phone worked normally.

It took her several minutes of digging through the mess in her room to find what she'd done with it. Only when Kobalos informed her in his own way that Doñela had been using it last did she know where to look, and soon found it under a copy of a gothic fashion magazine in the closet. For some reason, there was a banana peel next to it, which she threw away with disgust; as messy as her room was, that was mostly Doñela's fault. But she couldn't for the life of her think why there'd be a banana peel in—*Oh wait, I remember now*, she thought. *The day before my birthday, she was in my body because she likes the sensation of eating.*

Tossing the smelly brown peel in the bag for compost, she grabbed her Android cell phone and pulled up the text messaging feature. She hated talking on the phone to a degree where she'd been really tempted to insist her parents get a plan that was texting and data only, but had decided against it in case of emergency. She was soon texting to her friends about plans for a few days from now. She also asked if they felt like coming over again and just spending time in the house.

Only a few seconds passed between sending the messages and receiving replies from her friends. Dalia relaxed

a little; no matter how much he insulted Brandon, Preston cared too much about appearances to ever hurt someone in a wheelchair. And Sally routinely hauled around heavy mechanical parts for her hobby of building things, so she could take care of herself in a fight. Besides which, Preston only ever seemed to bother either of them when Dalia was with them.

When they came over, she let them in again, and this time they went up to the third floor and then out the Quartz Door into Tirffiniol. Brandon was mildly disappointed by the fact that their Tirffiniol house and its yard were in a clearing of a forest, but he was amazed at the trees, which were varied but all very tall. Along with completely unfamiliar species, there were trees that were basically birch, there were maples, and alders as well. Despite being familiar, most of the trees also looked subtly different. Some of the differences were obvious, such as the fact most of the trees were larger than any the kids had ever seen in the mundane world. But others were more subtle, such as the sneaking suspicion that these trees were far healthier than any trees in the mundane world were, among other differences they couldn't yet put words to.

They couldn't go far, because the clearing didn't extend very far past the house, and there weren't a lot of paved areas for Brandon to be on. Dalia wanted to learn how to levitate things and people so she could take Brandon out into the ward-protected parts of the forest here, but that wouldn't be for months yet.

Anyway, the three kids made the most of it, talking amid the trees. There wasn't much sunlight making its way

through the thick canopy, but there was enough that the two kids who liked sunlight could enjoy it, while Dalia sat in the shaded areas. With some support from Sally and Dalia, Brandon had gotten shakily out of his chair and was laying down on the ground, his two friends joining him. The ground was littered with many kinds of leaves, some parts of the ground were mossy, and in some places there were ferns growing.

“Wow,” Brandon said, looking up toward the house. “Your house is huge on this side.”

“Um, yeah. Three stories tall,” she said. “Our other house is just as tall, but this one is wider and longer, and glamours on the other one hide the third floor, since all it's used for is to anchor a portal to this house, and a place for the bogeymen to live. That, and neighborhood rules forbid a third floor.”

“Where *are* we right now, anyway?” Sally asked.

“This part of Tirffiniol overlays Toronto,” Dalia said.

“You're Canadian?”

“No. I was born on mundane American soil. My family was living in, uh... New York State at the time, I think. Well, I mean... working there and living here, I guess. A quick shadow-walk across the border to the Tirffiniol portal, and they were here.”

“Why'd they move?” Brandon asked.

Sally said, “Mom says they moved because that carnivorous bush in their yard tried to eat a Jehovah's Witness.”

“Er, that might have contributed, but Shimá says she got a better job at the Tirffiniol wildlife preserve near Portland. She's worked there ever since. It's actually kinda connected

to Fae Springs in a way, I think. They keep non-native animals as well as native ones, for the Faery-world zoology students.”

“Cool.”

They said nothing for several minutes, just enjoying the sound of the trees in the breeze.

“The trees around here are bigger than any I’ve ever seen,” Brandon finally said, breaking the silence.

“What? Oh yeah. Um, well... they’ve been growing here longer than the ones on the mundane side. Nature here is more resistant to uh, deforestation to begin with, and also they didn’t have European settlers invading over here. But I hear it’s pretty similar all over Tirffiniol. Nature here tends to fight back if abused. It’s all the magic in this world.”

“Yeah,” agreed Sally. “My mom used to tell me stories about Tirffiniol. I remember one of them was about some Tuatha de Danaan who tore down almost half the trees in one forest within the space of a year, and the forest got so angry it manifested a creature called a Forest God to deal with the infestation of uppity Tuatha. She described it as a bear that was 20 feet tall, had enormous barbed antlers, and a long, lizard-like tail with a great big sledge hammer kinda thing at the end of it. It killed like, five Tuatha for every tree they’d cut down.”

“Holy... but they’re not *real*, are they?”

“They’re real,” Dalia said. “Shimá actually saw a Forest God once. They don’t always look the same. The one she saw looked like, um... what’d she say? Oh yeah, like a 30-foot long and 20-foot tall wolverine that had a stench so bad she only survived seeing it because she had a gas mask on. Three

Goblins and a Tuatha de Danaan she was traveling with at the time all dropped dead on the spot.”

“Should... should we be getting inside, then?” asked Brandon.

“Oh no. Forest Gods don't manifest very often. Just when someone's not respecting the forest like they should. And we may not live full time here anymore, but Shimá still makes sure the locals are being nice to the forests. Oh, and Uncle Yanus helps her, too.”

“Well that's a relief.”

“Hey, did either of you get your acceptance letters from Fae Springs yet?”

“I did,” Sally said, sounding excited. “Just this morning. I can't wait!”

“I haven't yet,” Brandon said, “But then, someone needs to tell my parents I'm a wizard.”

Sally giggled. “Not a wizard, a witch. 'Witch' is a genderless term, regardless of what popular culture says. It means 'wise one.'”

“Right, sorry. I keep forgetting.”

“Forgiven,” Sally said, grinning.

There was, once more, another few minutes where they were silent, letting the sounds of nature wash over and through them, hardly thinking at all. Along with the wind in the trees, there were birds singing, and other animal noises of various sorts. Somewhere nearby was a babbling brook, barely audible from where they lay.

“Is it my imagination, or are the trees... talking?”

“Not your imagination,” Dalia said quietly. “They talk a lot, trees in Tirffiniol. Trees here are sentient, like people.

They can do magic, too. But mostly they just stand there, talking to each other. I wish I knew what they were saying.”

“Is that a magical skill that can be learned, understanding the trees?”

“Well... I know how to talk with one tree at a time, but their language when they talk with humans is different than their language with one another. But uh, maybe. I dunno.”

“What do you say to a tree?”

“Usually I ask them politely for wand wood, but uh, sometimes I thank them for, you know, existing. And making oxygen, and stuff. Or, well... sometimes I tell them my troubles. I’m not really sure how much they understand about human troubles, but they listen and sometimes they give me advice.”

“Is it good advice?”

“Sometimes yes, sometimes no.”

“Have you ever been into the forest proper?”

Dalia felt her stomach tense up again. “No. Goodness no. Not over here in this part of Tirffiniol. Just that time with Anastasia Park, when we got lost. It’s dangerous in a Faery forest for mortals. We’re only okay here because of the wards.”

“How dangerous?”

Dalia had to fight the urge to go mute then. Not like she’d have much choice if it happened, but she tried anyway, and happened to be successful. When she got enough control over herself, she finally spoke up again.

“Um, well... uh... let’s see... well, even fully uh, trained and like, skilled adults can sometimes go into a Faery forest and never come back. They just... vanish. And we’re talking,

you know, witches. Sometimes pretty powerful ones. Even adult humans only go into the forests in groups.”

“Yes, Dalia, but on the whole, I think Tirffiniol is largely safe. I mean, all you’ve said kind of applies to mundane forests as well. Even in cities, people sometimes just disappear and are never found again. Life is inherently risky. And well, your parents must have thought it worth the risk if they built a house here in the middle of a forest.”

“They didn’t build this house, remember?”

“Oh, right. Your parents bought it from a family member, I remember now. Still, my point stands.”

“I guess. Anyway, um, I’m just glad the uh, the wards keep us inside and keep everything else out. I uh, I like monsters, but well, that needs to be on my own uh, my own terms.”

“We’re going to be living full-time in Tirffiniol, aren’t we? In school, I mean.”

“Yeah,” said Sally. “But it’s Fae Springs. I was talking with Mom about it earlier, and students don’t have any access to any actual forests. Just some of the groves full of native and non-native trees they planted mainly for wand wood and like, talismans and stuff, and a few small copses of trees on the ground.

“But I mean, even one of the three groves they have has restricted access and needs adult supervision to even get inside. Everywhere else outside the school itself is also restricted, warded to keep students basically inside all the time.”

“We’d be indoors all the time?”

“No no, I misspoke. The school has some grounds we’re able to use; it would be inhumane to keep us indoors all

the time. But like Dalia's yard, the grounds are warded. We can't leave the grounds without adult supervision, except for emergency portals for if there's a fire. The portals go to another campus, I think."

"Oh, so there *are* two campuses?" Brandon asked.

"Four. There's the one we'll be in, another one for other students our age and older, the adult students have another, and there's a fourth that's used for escaping fires. It's a huge stone building surrounded by nothing but rocks for miles, nothing flammable except the emergency rations, which are in stone cupboards."

"How do you know all this?"

"When Mom was going to school, there was a fire in the Dark Grove. It spread to the building, and everyone had to flee. The building took minimal damage thanks to the anti-fire wards and some speedy action by the teachers, but the students were in the emergency campus through the night."

"What's the Dark Grove?"

"Mom says there's three groves: The Light Grove, full of benevolent trees with really positive magical properties. Then the Grey Grove, which is full of trees that are neither benevolent nor malevolent. Then there's the Dark Grove, full of dangerous trees whose woods are nonetheless useful for witchcraft. Some of the trees there eat people, others are just deadly for one reason or another, and some of them aren't deadly, just not pleasant to be around."

"What uh, what started the fire?" asked Dalia.

"Oh, I don't think she ever found out for sure what happened, but the prevailing rumor was that the Devil Tree was feeling crowded."



“Devil Tree?”

“Yeah, it's this really gnarled, evil-looking species of tree absolutely *covered* in thorns. Even its leaves – which are black – are covered in thorns. Devil Trees grow in clearings, they can't stand to have any other trees or plants or animals within like, twenty or more feet of themselves, with occasional exceptions. The only thing that they let near them most of the time is this weird fungus that Mom didn't want to talk about. And apparently they can use magic to keep others away from them. Rumor was that several other trees in the Dark Grove were growing a little too close to the sole Devil Tree in the grove, and it retaliated against the perceived threat by setting those other trees on fire. Apparently most of the other trees survived, but there was an empty space around the Devil Tree that was twice as big as before, and the Devil Tree was the only tree in the entire Dark Grove that was untouched by the fire.”

“*Wow,*” Dalia said with reverence in her voice. “It sounds *amazing!*”

Sally laughed. “Figures that'd be your takeaway from that story. Dalia Ravenstone, terrified of most humans, adores monstrous creatures and evil trees.”

“Yeah well, humans are unpredictable and dangerous 'cause of it. Animals and magical plants, though, they're different. Predators will want to eat you, sure, but a little caution and respect and you can deal with any animal or magical plant with a pretty standard amount of risk, because their motives are pretty simple. But people... people are complex. Their motives are uh, complex and hard to predict. Most animals of the same species are gonna have pretty much the ex-

act same motives. But some people's motives change several times an hour."

"Hmm... fair point, I guess," Sally said.

"Yeah," Brandon agreed.

There was another few moments of silence, but it was much more quickly broken when Sally asked, "Dalia, is it possible to climb any of these trees?"

"Um... I dunno. I mean, I uh, I prefer to keep my feet firmly on the ground, at least til I learn how to fly. But uh, well... the first layer of trees and maybe the second layer are inside the ward lines. So I uh, I guess you could if you really wanted to."

"Good. Because all this laying around and talking has me itching to climb a tree," Sally said, getting up and marching over to the nearest tree.

"Just remember they're sentient! Don't disrespect them, and try not to hurt them, and you should be fine."

"Got it!" Sally called back.

Sally did not have any immediate success, as the trees in the area didn't have any branches low enough for her to get a grip on, so she ended up taking her shoes and socks off and attempted to climb it like you might climb a mountain. She couldn't get a good enough grip on it, though, and there were no suitable hand-holds either. What she ended up finally doing was shimmying up the tree by hugging it with both her arms and legs. The tree she'd picked was almost too thick for that to work, but work it did. Her two friends watched in fascination as she made her way up and finally reached branches. She kept climbing until she got to a branch thick and strong enough to hold up her weight as she sat there on

the branch like it was a bench, hanging on to another branch with one arm.

“Oh wow,” Sally said. “You guys are a long way down, now!”

“You sound scared,” Brandon pointed out kindly.

“Um...” she paused, thinking. “Well that would be because I am, now you mention it. There doesn't really appear to be any, uh... any way down.”

“Can't you just shimmy down the way you shimmied up?”

“Yeah, not sure how to do that. Sorry.”

*'Ooh, I can help!'* said a very enthusiastic voice only Dalia could hear. It was Doñela. She had appeared from who-knew-where. Dalia stood up as Doñela came out, having an idea what she was planning.

*'I'll just fly on up there and help her.'* Doñela said, floating up 20 feet in the air, coming to a sudden stop. *'Um... I don't think I can go any higher. Forgot about that.'*

“Sally!” Dalia shouted loud enough to hurt her throat. “I can't explain how, but I think I can catch you if you jump!”

“I'm not jumping! You're crazy if you think I'm jumping!”

Tamir appeared then. *'What's going on now? I was hoping you'd wait another few days to have another incident,'* he said. Then he looked up. *'Oh.'*

Dalia walked over to Tamir and from the corner of her mouth, she whispered, “Do you think you could lift me up, Tamir?”

Tamir looked uncertainly at Dalia. *'Maybe. I'll try.'*

Dalia nodded. “Try, then.”

'Okay.'

They got back into position below Sally. Dalia closed her eyes and hugged herself. She felt Tamir's arms, feeling as solid as if he was real, close around her waist. For a few moments, nothing happened. Then she felt herself lift from the ground. She opened her eye a crack to see Tamir's face straining with the effort of concentrating on lifting her up. She quickly closed her eyes again.

"WOW!" she heard Brandon exclaim. "You didn't tell us you could fly!"

"SHUTUPPLEASEI'MVERYSCARED!" she blurted out. She was concentrating on forgetting what was going on nearly as hard as Tamir was concentrating on making it happen, because she would shake like a leaf otherwise, and Tamir would likely lose his grip on her if she did that.

*It's a dream, she thought, trying to convince herself. I'm dreaming I'm flying, I'm dreaming I'm rescuing my foolish friend Sally Anne Smith-Jones from being stuck up a tree like a cat. None of this is real. If I fall, I just wake up. La-dee-dah.*

'Heh-hem,' Tamir finally said quietly. 'We're nearly there.'

'Should I get her?' Doñela asked. 'I'm high up enough now.'

"Hold on!" Dalia shouted up at Doñela and Sally. "I'm almost there!"

"Yeah, holding on isn't really a problem right now," Sally said. She sounded a lot more relaxed than before, with a faint note of amazement in her voice, which made sense.

*'And... here now.'* Tamir said. *'Hurry. You're a lot heavier than a book.'*

"Are you going to be able to handle getting us down?" whispered Dalia.

"What'd you say?" Sally asked.

Tamir ignored Sally. *'I can do it if Doñela helps. She routinely lifts heavy things. Usually to throw them, but still...'*

*'Got it!'* Doñela said, flying into place at Dalia's height, hugging Dalia, and adding her own powers to Tamir's powers.

"Closer," Dalia whispered. Doñela and Tamir nodded, and they moved right up to Sally.

"Are you ready for me, Dalia?" Sally asked. She sounded nervous again.

"I uh, I think—think so," Dalia answered. Nobody else contradicted her, so she took that as a yes. "Yeah, I am."

"Good. But uh, are you sure you can do this? You look like you're barely holding *yourself* up."

"If nothing else, I can um, I can slow our fall."

*'By a lot,'* Doñela said.

"By a lot," Dalia parroted for Sally's benefit.

"If you say so, I'll trust you."

Sally grabbed Dalia around the neck, and hugged her around the hips with her legs. When she felt secure enough in her grip, she slid off the branch. The two girls dipped dangerously, both of them shrieking in alarm, but they stabilized quickly.

"Um, uh... er... well down we go, I uh, guess," Dalia said.

*'WEEEE!'* Doñela shouted.

Dalia's insides clenched so violently she almost threw up her breakfast, but Doñela was just attempting to be funny. They were sinking down slowly, but more quickly than Dalia had been going on the way up. In half the time, they were touching down on the ground. Dalia sighed in relief and fell

over, glad to be on solid ground again. By the sound of it, Sally did the same thing next to her.

“Well that was a stupid idea, I guess. Good thing you can apparently fly.”

“I don't like to. I've never done it before. But, well... I thought it was worth a try.”

“What made you think of it?”

Dalia shrugged. Then, in case they couldn't see her, she said, “Dunno. Just did.”

*'That was BRILLIANT!' Doñela shouted. 'I'm going back up! Won't be the same, but—'*

*'You can't, remember?'* Tamir scolded. *'Outside of the house, our range is limited.'*

*'Bah. Fine then, I'm going back inside.'*

Dalia sighed as she sensed the two of them going back indoors. She wondered, for the umpteenth time in years, whether or not to tell her friends about her two ghostly companions. But that probably wasn't a good idea; she was afraid her friends would leave her if they knew the truth. Dalia didn't want to drive her only friends away by scaring them. But, well... maybe she could work up to it. Slip in little details here and there and gauge their reactions before telling them about Doñela and Tamir. Before telling her only living friends that she had two other friends who were apparitions visible only to her.

*Hey Sally – she imagined herself saying – guess what? You know that imaginary friend I had when you and I first met years ago? Well turns out she's not as imaginary as we thought, and there's a second one now. I'm not crazy, there's proof they're*

*real, they can touch things. And oh yeah, Brandon, I have two invisible friends that can actually touch stuff, they're really real.*

Yeah, even in her own head it sounded dumb. And really, did she even need to tell either of them? She thought about it, remembered what Doñela was like, and realized she would likely go stir-crazy at school. It was going to be a big challenge to get her to behave at school. In a dorm room where she didn't know who her room-mates would be.

She decided, once more, to keep quiet. Let them think she'd done some kind of untrained magic to save Sally. Which, now she was on the ground and thinking clearly, she finally let herself freak out quietly by curling into a ball of anxiety and silently thinking things like *Am I CRAZY? What was I THINKING doing that? I should have gone and gotten Papa or one of the ghosts; **their** ranges aren't limited! Oh my gods oh my gods oh my gods!!!*

Just barely, she heard a pair of sighs that told her that her friends had noticed she was freaking out. She felt two hands – one from each friend – alight gently on her own arms, two of the few pairs of hands she allowed to touch her in times of crisis like this, apart from family. Luckily, it wasn't a full-blown panic attack. She relaxed a little, rolled over, and cried into Sally's shoulder. She was still holding Brandon's hand, too.



A FEW DAYS AFTER HER son had gone next door to attend the birthday party for a friend of his, a sweet young

black girl named Dalia Ravenstone, Cynthia Han née Jacobsen and her husband William Han were expecting a visit from young Dalia – whom they'd met on many occasions – and one of her mothers. Dalia had explained about her parents being in a polyamorous relationship, so that she had two mothers and a father, and while that was unusual, the Hans didn't mind. Cynthia, a psychiatrist, was fascinated by such a relationship for reasons that had nothing to do with her professional life, she just loved hearing more about all the different ways humans lived. She supposed she could call her interest anthropological, but didn't want to use that term aloud in case it was offensive. Sociological? Yes, that sounded much better.

Anyway, Dalia had been over enough times to explain all about her family's unusual nature. Cynthia always felt like she'd been leaving something major out, but as the impression she got from Dalia was one of not knowing how whatever it was would be received, she'd decided not to pry. Still, knowing the girl's biological father was one of her mothers because the woman was transgender made Cynthia very curious about what Dalia might be holding back. She hoped very much today's visit would enlighten her.

At eleven o'clock A.M., the doorbell rang. Brandon was sitting on the sofa watching the television, and William was in the bathroom, so Cynthia went to get it instead. She opened the door, looking down as she did so that the first person she saw was young Dalia Ravenstone. The girl was dressed much as she usually was, in a very goth manner, her dress being black and white skull-print, with black cat Mary Janes and black-and-white striped stockings that looked to



cover the girl's entire legs. Cynthia was always glad to see these outfits; she'd never heard of a black goth before meeting Dalia, but since then she'd found myriad images of other black goths online. Having had a Goth phase in her own teenage years, and still appreciating the aesthetic now, she smiled.

"Lovely dress, Dalia," Cynthia said. "And your shoes are adorable!"

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Han."

Cynthia looked up, pushing her glasses back up her nose as she did. She then took in the appearance of one of Dalia's mothers, Nizoni Hatathli-Ravenstone. The Navajo woman was dressed in khaki shorts and shirt, a tan colored leather trench-coat, and a Crocodile Dundee style hat. She also had something long and cylindrical strapped across her front, some sort of sheath for a very long rolled-up poster, Cynthia thought.

"Well come on in Dalia, Mrs. Hatathli-Ravenstone."

"Call me Nizoni," Nizoni said, taking her hat off.

"Of course, Nizoni."

Nizoni and Dalia came in then, Nizoni putting her hat and coat on the available rack. They were followed by another girl Cynthia recognized as Vedyia Ravenstone. She'd only seen Vedyia from a distance before, and couldn't remember ever having had a conversation with the adopted girl from India. Her first impression, now she saw the girl up close, was one of shrewdness and attention to detail. She seemed to be drinking in everything about the house, almost like she was considering buying the house and everything in it. The girl was also very brightly colored, having dyed her hair the color

of a rainbow, which was new to Cynthia. She also had on a rainbow tie-dyed shirt, black cargo pants with chains hanging off them, and rainbow-colored hi-top shoes.

"Cynthia Han, meet my other daughter Vedyia Ravenstone. She wanted to meet you, too."

"The more the merrier," Cynthia said, holding out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Vedyia."

"Likewise," Vedyia said, shaking her hand with a half-smirk. "I couldn't miss the show."

Cynthia blinked in confusion at Vedyia. She was on the verge of asking about that comment when Nizoni spoke.

"Where is Mr. Han?"

"Oh, he's seeing a man about a horse, he'll be here in a few minutes."

Vedyia snorted with laughter and said something in what Cynthia thought was Navajo. Nizoni glared at Vedyia, but Dalia just rolled her eyes.

When Cynthia looked questioningly at Vedyia, the girl said, "Other people are so weird about human bodily functions. 'See a man about a horse,' honestly... just say he's taking a whiz and have done with it."

"*Vedyia*," Nizoni said warningly.

"What? 'Take a whiz' is too naughty? How about 'take a leak'? 'Drain the lizard'? 'Visit the little boy's room'? Or how about the British euphemism of 'pay a penny'? And people think *I'm* weird for just saying I'm going off to take a pi—"

"Vedyia Roshanee Ravenstone!"

Vedyia sighed, rolling her eyes. "Fine, I'll stop talking about it."

“Good,” Nizoni said. She turned to Cynthia. “Sorry about that, Mrs. Han.”

Cynthia chuckled. “Not a problem. I found it amusing.”

“Vedya is... very practical. Anyway, Mrs. Han, I have something to discuss with you and your husband, regarding your son's schooling in the coming year.”

Curious, Cynthia raised an eyebrow. “You've got my attention. Would you like anything to drink?”

“What do you offer?” Nizoni asked.

“We have coffee, soda pop, iced tea, and several varieties of juice. Dalia can fill you in, she's been over often enough.”

Nizoni looked questioningly at Dalia, who shrugged. “I'll take iced tea. No sugar, no lemon. Shimá will probably prefer a cup of coffee.”

Since Nizoni didn't correct Dalia, Cynthia told them to make themselves comfortable while she got their drinks.

By the time she returned to the living room with drinks for everyone, her husband was in the room sitting down, talking with Nizoni. Cynthia set the drinks down, and they got passed around.

“So what's this about Brandon's schooling? Are you offering some scholarship to a private school for him?” Cynthia asked. “I remember you did that for Sarah Butcher.”

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” Nizoni said. She paused, thinking a moment. She opened her mouth to speak, but Vedya stood up and interrupted her.

“Brandon, yer a witch!”

Brandon, a fake look of shock on his face, said, “Me, a witch? But I'm just... just *Brandon!*”

"Oh really?" Vedyá asked curiously, pulling out a letter and looking at it quizzically. "Well shoot, guess you'll have to erase his memory of this day, Shimá. Very sorry to bother you all."

In an exaggerated way, Vedyá turned to leave, but Nizoni grabbed her by the back of the shirt to prevent her going away. She pouted and sat back down.

The two adults were chuckling at their antics, clearly assuming it was all a big joke. When the laughter died down, Nizoni spoke in a serious tone.

"All joking aside, I am afraid your son is indeed a witch. Which is, incidentally, a gender-neutral term for a magic user in our community."

"Curse that woman for twisting the truth of our world, the *traitor*!" Vedyá said, grinning. "And a horrible disgusting transphobe as well."

"Vedyá, would you *please* stop making this more difficult than it already is?" Nizoni chided.

"Why not? You know they're going to need proof. That's what you brought your staff for, isn't it?"

William Han chuckled. "This has all been lots of fun, but what did you really want to talk about?"

Nizoni was massaging the bridge of her nose with her right hand in frustration. Finally, she lifted her head again and asked, "This house has a back yard, does it not?"

"It does," Cynthia said, sipping her drink after.

"And it is fenced off from view by others outside of it?"

"Of course. That's strongly suggested by neighborhood policy."

“There is a reason for that. Would you all be so kind as to guide me to the back yard?”

Confused but curious, Cynthia turned to her husband, who shrugged. So they all stood up, waited for Brandon to stand up with his friend's help and shakily struggle over into his wheelchair. When he was secure in his chair, Cynthia and her husband led them all to the back yard. Nizoni still had that long tube strapped across her front as they wove through the house and out the back door into the back yard.

When the back door closed, Nizoni took from one pocket a black walnut wand with a quartz tip and a sapphire end-cap. Cynthia and her husband smirked, a little confused and amused about the continued game Dalia's family was playing with them.

Nizoni looked around the yard, nodded, then silently waved her wand around the yard. Cynthia began to grow concerned. Sure, none of the neighbors should be able to see them, but there was a grown woman waving a wand around like she expected it to do something.

Putting the wand away, Nizoni said, “There, now nobody will be able to hear or see anything unusual, even through the cracks in the fence.”

“What is this?” William asked. “I was amused for a little while, but now it's getting a little sad.”

“Dad, don't. Just let her work. It'll be worth it.”

“Fine, fine. Let's see this magic trick, then.”

Nizoni took off the tube she had strapped across her front, and opened the top of it. Cynthia then could see that the tube was a tan leather. From this leather container, Ni-

zoni took out a long wooden staff, which was carved from top to bottom in runes and other writing.

Handing the tube to Dalia, who took it with a nervous smile, Nizoni clutched the staff with both hands, walked to the back fence, then turned to face them again.

“Whatever you do, don't panic. You're not in any danger. Try not to scream. The temporary wards I put up will block them out, but Dalia doesn't like sudden loud noises.”

Cynthia and her husband rolled their eyes. “Fine, fine,” William said.

Closing her eyes and concentrating, the runes of the wooden staff suddenly began to glow with a yellowish light. The Han adults gasped in astonishment, both wondering how she was making it glow without obvious lighting elements.

But the show wasn't over. Nizoni turned around, shifted her grip on the staff so a long bit of it stretched past the top of her hands, and she slashed it down violently through the air. The Han adults shouted, worried she'd break the fence or her staff, but the staff never made contact with the fence, even though by all rights, it should have. Instead, it cut through the air like a knife, leaving a glowing yellow gash in the air.

Before they could even respond to that, Nizoni slashed the other way, making a glowing yellow X in the air. Then she punched the end of the staff into the middle of the X. Immediately, the X became an enormous O, its edges glowing, tattered, and swaying as if in a breeze. Even more incredibly, there was an entirely different world on the other side of the

O, and the rest of the Ravenstone family was standing on the other side.

Cynthia screamed, making Dalia flinch despite expecting it. William fainted. Brandon groaned at his parents' reactions. Vedyā laughed so hard at their reactions that she fell over and went right through the open gash in the world, landing on the other side.

Holding her still-glowing staff in one hand, Nizoni took out her walnut wand with her other hand, and pointed it at William, making him wake up. He sat up and gaped at the hole in the world. As Morgana Ravenstone stepped through the open portal, the infant Sweetheart in her arms, William turned white and pinched himself hard on the arm. Cynthia followed suit. When they were satisfied they weren't hallucinating, they hugged each other.

When the other Ravenstones all made it into the earthly back yard of the Han household, Nizoni gestured at the portal in an offhand sort of way, and it promptly closed shut and returned to normal, leaving behind no sign that it had ever existed.

"For you," Orpheus said, handing William Han an alien flower in a ceramic pot. The flower looked like it was made of glass, except it was blue, glowing, and its petals swayed in a nonexistent breeze. William took the flower in shock, staring at it a moment before fixing Orpheus with a confused look.

"Proof of magic," Orpheus said simply.

Morgana nodded. "Something more permanent and substantial than a portal opening up in your back yard."

The two Han adults continued to look bewildered and shocked for several minutes. Finally, Cynthia recovered her wits first.

"Please tell us there's some way to prevent that happening again. I don't want strange people walking into our yard from another world any time they please."

Morgana smiled calmly. "Nizoni happens to be a professional ward builder, highly skilled in making and maintaining protective wards and magical home security systems. In repayment for the necessity of shattering your world-view, we would be only too glad to protect your home from outside invasion, at no cost to you."

"And why, exactly, have you shattered our world-view?" William asked, a note of hysteria in his voice.

"Because, Dad, I'm a witch. So is Dalia, and so are her parents."

"What? What do you mean, a witch?"

Nizoni reached into a pocket and handed William a letter. It was on quite ordinary paper, much to his surprise. He'd been expecting parchment. But it was an ordinary letter, a letter about their son Brandon being accepted to Fae Springs Private Academy of Magic. He stared at it, still not convinced he wasn't having a very strange dream.

"But... but how?" Cynthia asked. "I mean... how?"

"I believe we should go back to your living room to discuss this. The temporary privacy spells I cast are fading, and will break soon."

"Right, right. Yes. Living room. Yes." William was glad for something normal to focus on at last. He stood up, with Nizoni's help, and in a dazed sort of way, lead them back



inside. 'I am inviting witches into my house,' he thought, chuckling hysterically to himself. 'Real, live, actual witches. And my son is one of them.'



SITTING DOWN IN THE living room later, both of Brandon's parents sipping some calming chamomile tea to ease their frayed nerves, Brandon looked significantly at Dalia. She gave him a nervous smile back.

"Alright," Mrs. Han finally said, sounding a lot better than she'd been. "So magic is real, and everything I've come to believe about the universe is wrong. Lovely."

"Not everything," Morgana said sympathetically. "The laws of physics still work largely the same as mundane science has worked out. Science even has an explanation for what happened in your yard earlier today."

She laughed hysterically. "It does?"

"Yes. Have you ever heard of the many-worlds interpretation of quantum physics?"

"I have," she said. "I don't claim to understand it, really, because it's not my field, but I've seen enough science fiction to know you're talking about alternate universes. Alternate Earths."

"Well those do exist, yes. But the other world you saw was one of the Realms of Faery. The Faery Realms are miniature universes attached to our own like symbiotic organisms. There are many such Realms: Annwn, Tír na nÓg, Álfheim, Myrkálheim, Tir Pell, and Fomor, to name a few. The one

that you saw through the portal was the easiest of such Realms to get to from Earth: Tirffiniol."

Cynthia stared at Morgana. "Faery? Like little people with wings?"

"Those are what is known among witches as pixies. Other faeries look much different. There are humanoid faeries of many different sizes. Species such as elves, which come in many different varieties. Also there are dwarves, kobolds, Goblins, gnomes, and others. Including magical animals like unicorns, dragons, and gryffons."

"Unicorns?" William said. "Like, rainbow-colored glittery magical unicorns?"

Vedya snorted with suppressed laughter. William looked at her, but it was Morgana who answered.

"Unicorns don't look like popular culture thinks they do. They more closely resemble a sort of cross between a horse and an elephant, with a truly massive and dangerous horn growing from their foreheads. And woe betide you if you get too near one; temperamentally, they are more like the rhinoceros."

"And dragons?" Mrs. Han asked.

Brandon answered. "The one I saw from Dalia's house the other day looked like a cross between a lizard and a bat! It even had bat-like ears!"

Both adults turned to stare at their son, then turned to Morgana for explanation.

"Our house has a hidden third story, which acts as an anchor to another property we have in Tirffiniol, many hundreds of miles away from here. The party was in the dining

room there, because that dining room was the only one big enough for all the guests to fit in it.”

“You... what? Wait, so Brandon was... was hundreds of miles away from us during this party?”

“Mom, relax. I was only a five or ten minute walk from being able to leave their house and come home.”

“But what if whatever magic that does that broke while you were there with them? You’d be stranded!”

“No, he wouldn’t be stranded, Mrs. Han,” Nizoni said. “If that were to happen, there would be an adult there with him most likely, and if not, one would be able to get there in a matter of minutes to bring him back just as quickly. We have magical means of transportation that are nearly instantaneous. And if all else failed, we could fly a dragon back to the area and use the emergency portal. Or I could open a portal over there, and we could shadow-walk back home.”

“Shadow-walk?”

“Nearly instantaneous travel by pulling shadows around one’s self. It’s the creation of temporary portals between spaces; those portals look like very dark shadows. It’s sort of like teleportation.”

“I... okay. So teleportation is real, then?” Cynthia asked.

“Yes.”

“Of course it is.” She laughed. “That’s the least absurd thing I’ve heard all afternoon, to be honest. But I believe it. I almost wish I didn’t, but I do.”

“How did Brandon become a witch?” William asked. “Is it genetic? Did we have witch ancestors?”

"It's possible, but unlikely. Magic works based on magical thinking. Put another way, if you believe in magic, magic can start to believe in you."

"Huh?"

"It means your son was likely as mundane as you, or at least as mundane as your average mundane child, until after his friend, our daughter Dalia, confided in him that she is a witch, and proved to him that magic is real."

"Wait, so one of us could become a witch now? Is that right?"

"It is possible. It doesn't happen as much to adults as it does to children. Adults tend to be too set in their ways to want to embrace magic. But Brandon fell in love with magic, and by so embracing it, he became a witch. It could happen to you, but only if you want it to."

"Oh. I see." Cynthia said, drinking more of her herbal tea.

"So you told our son about magic, showed him some to prove it, and he became a witch?"

"Er," Dalia said, anxious at being addressed. "Yes? I mean, yes, that's what happened."

"Why? Why did you tell him? Did you want him to become a witch?"

"No! I mean, I didn't mind when he did, but it wasn't planned. I already had a witch friend, Sally Anne Smith-Jones. I just got tired of lying to Brandon about why he couldn't come into our house. It's very magical."

"So he's been in your house before, then?"

"No. The place is weird enough even by our – I mean, by witch standards – that I didn't want to freak him out too

much. We spent the next uh, several months after that getting him used to the idea of magic and weirdness first. During that time, he started to have bursts of accidental magic.”

“Accidental magic? Like what?”

“Er,” she said, thinking. “Um... there was the time he turned Chewy's fur pink with an accidental glamour. And once when he was really excited about something, I saw him Wax a dandelion with life magic so it grew a flower from nothing before our eyes.”

“Oh,” Vedyá started, “don't forget the day he and I had an argument about Star Wars versus Star Trek and he got so angry when I told him Yoda was an idiot for his 'do or do not, there is no try' quote that his magic shoved me over onto my backside. Luckily nobody mundane saw it, or if they did they assumed they'd just missed seeing him shoving me with his hands.”

“Didn't he also make the hair on your arm fall out once?”

“No; that was you, Shádí.”

“Oh. Right.”

Morgana blinked at the two of them. “You didn't tell me about the Waxing incident. That's very impressive.”

“I'm sorry, what's Waxing?” William asked.

“In transformation magic, also known as life magic, Waxing and Withering are directions the magic can be taken. Waxing encourages growth and can encourage good health when done right; Withering is anything from slowing down growth, to making something so sick it dies.” Catching their concerned looks, Morgana continued, adding, “but that's difficult to do with animals. Even more so with humans. Withering a human or other similar sentient species

against their will takes so much work as to render it not worth the effort to try.”

“For a human witch, anyway,” Vedyā added.

Nizoni smacked her own forehead in annoyance.

“What? I’m right! Kira could Wither a human to death in like, minutes if she wanted to.”

“Dare I ask?” William said.

“Kira is our family’s fairy godmother. She’s an exceptionally powerful fairy witch. Don’t let my daughter’s words alarm you; Kira is adamantly non-violent.”

“That’s not what she told me,” Vedyā said. “She told me she doesn’t start fights, and doesn’t escalate them, but if she had to, she would Wither someone to death if she had to.”

“Vedyā Roshanee Ravenstone, there is a difference between being able to do something if need calls for it, and doing it willy-nilly,” Nizoni said.

“Wait, so your family is friends with an actual fairy?” Cynthia asked.

“Yes,” Morgana said.

“And they’re basically aliens, right? They come from another world?”

“Most of them evolved on other worlds, yes. There are a couple types of humans who have... who have ‘gone native,’ as it were. To the point they become faeries themselves. One of the two can no longer return to Earth for more than short visits. But don’t fret about that happening, it’s quite rare.”

“What kind is this Kira?”

“Her people are known as *Ævintýrichor*. They are mostly humanoid, but when they let their human disguise drop, they do not pass as human. In fact, I believe them to be the

origin of pagan gods with horns, which were later slandered by the Christian church into demons. Though some things Kira has said make me believe their true form is very much *not* humanoid.”

“Aunty Kira has horns?” Dalia asked in astonishment.

“Yes. She usually hides them, even when she has mostly dropped her human disguise.”

“Pah-dohn me,” Vedyā said in a mock posh-British accent that broke the remaining tension in the room, “But could you please direct me to the water closet, milady? One has to go pay a penny, if that’s not too crass of me?”

Laughing first, Cynthia told Vedyā where the restroom was.

“I want to see this house of yours,” William said. “Er, if that’s alright?”

“By that, I presume you mean the true, magical nature of the house?”

“Yes.”

“Dad, are you sure? It’s really weird, even by witch standards. Their butler is a tree octopus that flies around in a wooden box and wears a bowler hat.”

William stared at Brandon, then at Morgana.

“He is correct. The octopus is named Barry, and he is Nizoni’s familiar.”

“So, what, you folks are like the Addams Family?” William asked.

Morgana chuckled. “If they existed, I believe our family would get on quite well with theirs, yes.”

“Right. Well... I think I should eat some lunch first.”







## Chapter Eight: Fae Springs Private Academy

*Summer 2017 – Friday, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017*

THE SUMMER WENT BY a lot more quickly than Dalia had imagined possible after the incident with Preston Park. A couple days after Sally got stuck in a tree and had to be rescued, Brandon texted Dalia and Sally to inform them Ressa had properly warded Brandon's chair with its new battery, and in those two days, he was stuck in the house because his parents were still a bit disbelieving and acting weird about the whole “witch” thing. But only a week and a half after the tree incident, Brandon's parents stopped being weird about it, he was allowed to leave the house, and he got his first ride in the bike trailer, getting to join Dalia and Sally as they biked around Portland, never going farther away than the Hollywood district, which became a frequent stop for the three of them because of the public library there.

A few times there had been some close calls, and they'd nearly gotten intercepted by Preston either when leaving or returning. But Preston was on foot each time, hanging out with friends of his, and Dalia and her friends were on bikes.

Even with having to take turns pulling Brandon on their bikes, they were still faster than Preston, and got faster still as the weeks and then months wore on.

Dalia had started to make comments here and there about ghosts to gauge their responses, which were mostly positive, and even occasionally had Doñela ride her bike for her to show off what the two of them thought was her using her own powers. (Only inside the garage, though, where there was no risk of mundanes seeing it.)

Also that summer, as was usual for their family, Dalia and her family went to two different Renaissance faires relatively close by, as well as to a music festival called FaerieWorlds. Sally and her family went to all three places as well. Dalia in particular mused occasionally over those weekends that these were her last such trips before going to school. Sure, there would be others over the summer, but her family also liked going to various scifi and fantasy conventions such as OryCon. Some of these, like OryCon, were during the school year. Dalia hoped she'd at least get to go to OryCon, given it was in Portland.

At last, however, the summer was coming to a close. Dalia and Sally had all responded to their Fae Springs letters within a day or two of getting them, Brandon taking a week until his parents had seen enough magic when visiting the Ravenstone home to become numbly accepting of its reality, their feelings slowly evolving into pride by the end of the summer.

So it was with great excitement that they met the day of September first. For a week prior, the three kids went crazy getting packed and ready to go to magic school at last.

Even Dalia was so excited that for most of that time, her excitement overruled her building anxiety. It took her over an hour to decide what to wear, and finally she settled on a black skirt with a print on it of little skulls wearing pink hair bows, a shirt emblazoned with the logo of her favorite rock band, "Sundiving Into Betelgeuse" (a black outline of a rocket ship moving into a star), her black cat sneakers, and black cat stockings that went up to just under her knees. She put some steampunk-looking sunglasses on to complete the look. Kobalos flew off his perch and onto her shoulder.

With limited room on the bus that would take them to Fae Springs Private Academy, most of their luggage would be shadow-walked straight to Fae Springs. For those who couldn't shadow-walk themselves or luggage by themselves, there were shadow portals around the region of Pluviatia, including one in Portland.

Dalia and her friends went together in the special van Brandon's family used to cart around him and the wheelchair, Dalia's moms and dad leading the way in their own van – a VW panel van with an image of Mongolian Death Worms painted on its sides – with Dalia's siblings. She and her friends took turns talking and staring out the windows on their way to the St. John's Bridge because they'd never been out this way before, only stopping when they parked far enough away to still be inconspicuous. They and other families took it in turns to trickle out to the rendezvous area.

When their group got to the little copse of trees they were meeting near, they felt a tingle of magic slide over them; first there was a pressure that was testing out who they were, then there was a feeling of acceptance and a feeling like no-

body who didn't belong there would bother them. Dalia noticed, as she entered the area, that Anastasia Park – Preston's little sister, was with them; Dalia remembered, then, that she was in their year. The snooty-looking brunette looked at Dalia like a stinky hobo had just walked in. Dalia thought privately that she'd rather hang out with a smelly homeless person than with Anastasia Park; she knew far more kindly homeless people than she knew kindly members of the Park family. The two girls had never been friends, but Dalia *had* tried to be her friend, once upon a time. Might have succeeded, too, if the ridiculous girl hadn't insisted on the two of them sneaking through the portal in the shed and nearly getting both of them lost forever in Tirffiniol.

At last, 14 new students and their families – minus Preston, thank goodness – were congregated there, along with several teachers. For secrecy's sake, nobody was dressed in uniform yet. A bunch of random people in ordinary clothes was, after all, a lot easier to overlook than loads of uniformed kids. They were all collected now and talking amongst themselves, Dalia excitedly telling Sally about a magical device for lefties she'd gotten from her parents that let her write from right to left so she wouldn't smudge the page or have to push the pen against the grain, and when she was finished with the page, she could press a button and the device would magically rearrange the writing to be the normal left-to-right of a right-handed person. She was very happy to not have to force Doñela into writing things for her anymore, as they had done in school so far. (Dalia did write with her left hand at home, but she also wrote from right to left for non-school things.)

One of the teachers stepped up onto a stepladder and blew a short note from a whistle to get everyone's attention. The around forty year old woman was of medium height and average build for a woman, wearing wire-rimmed glasses, and had her blond hair in a loose knot at the back of her neck. She was wearing a blue skirted suit that somehow managed to look both professional and somewhat casual at the same time.

"Welcome to the rendezvous point, everyone," she said. "I'm Ms. Ella Templeton, Vice-Principal of Fae Springs Private Academy. We're going to take roll now, to make sure everyone's here who's supposed to be here. Let's start with Griffith, Jeffrey?"

"Here," Jeffrey said.

She nodded and marked him as present.

"Han, Brandon?"

"It's Han, as in Han Solo. Also, here," Brandon said. He was next to his mom and dad.

"Sorry about that, Mr. Han. Okay... Harper, Melody?"

"Here."

"Hoyt, Helena?"

"Here."

"Irving, Riley?"

"Here."

She went through the rest of the list like this, checking off names as she went; names like Steven Lambert, Grace London, and Anastasia Park, among others. A couple people whose names were called up to that point – Elliolynn Losolom and Calandra Metaxas – didn't respond, but Ms.

Templeton didn't seem bothered by this. When someone asked about them, she said they were coming separately.

Ms. Templeton kept calling roll. Dalia was startled to hear there were three other Ravenstones in the group with them. Then there was a "Sato, Kohana," Sally's name, and a name that Ms. Templeton stared at for almost a whole minute before deciding she had no idea how to pronounce it. With roll done, Ms. Templeton went on to discuss something with Nizoni, and so Dalia convinced her group to move with her to meet the three new Ravenstones.

"Hi," Dalia said. "I'm Dalia Ravenstone. This is Sally Anne Smith-Jones, and Brandon Han. Who are you?"

"Ah yes—" started a tall, slender black girl.

"—we remember now our dads telling us—" continued a short, fat, but still pretty black girl.

"—about a cousin of ours in Portland joining us this year," finished a morose-looking black boy with long braided bangs, who would've been as tall as the first girl if he wasn't slouching.

"I'm Alvar Ravenstone," the tall, slender girl said.

"I'm Cerridwen Ravenstone," the short, fat girl said. She smiled, and looked even lovelier than before.

"And I'm Sutekh Ravenstone," the last boy said morosely. "We're fraternal triplets. Obviously."

Dalia blinked, and examined the three Ravenstone cousins more carefully. The tall, slender black girl – Alvar – had a supernaturally elegant and graceful look to her, like she could ballet-dance in a straight line during a hurricane. Her eyes were larger than usual, and were a brilliant amber color that was hard to miss. She also had pointed ears, some-

thing neither of the others had. When Dalia's gaze went to her ears, Alvar said, "I'm human. Don't let the ears fool you."

The second girl, Cerridwen, had skin even darker than that of her siblings. She wore glasses and was wearing a Dr. Who t-shirt, so she was apparently a bit nerdy, but Dalia remembered she had the voice of a valley girl. It was an odd contrast.

The boy, Sutekh, had an average build aside from his height. Dalia couldn't see his eyes, they were covered by his bangs. He had on a My Chemical Romance t-shirt, and she saw his fingernails were painted black. There was also a very large number of crows perched in the trees behind him.

"Cool raven," he said, nodding up at Kobalos.

She was just about to say something back when a tiny little Chihuahua down by his feet yapped at her, startling her.

"Don't mind Vlad—" Sutekh began.

"—he won't bite you," Alvar finished.

"Do you guys *always* talk like that?" Brandon asked.

"Oh no, not always. Only—" Alvar began.

"—when we're trying—" Cerridwen continued.

"—to freak out or annoy people," Sutekh finished.

"Often, in other words," Alvar said.

"She's kidding," Sutekh said. "It's actually really annoying to us to do that. Takes too much effort."

"How do you do that, anyway?" Sally asked.

"Telepathy," Alvar explained. "We developed a telepathic triplet bond a few years ago. It was late enough we developed our own personalities, but yeah, we now always know what's happening to the rest of us."

"I see," Brandon said. "I don't envy you that."

They all shrugged. "We get used to it," they said in unison.

"Anyway," the valley-girl voice of Cerridwen said, "here's our dads. The handsome black one is Oryx Honeychurch."

Dalia looked at the man Cerridwen had indicated, and suddenly wondered how she hadn't immediately noticed him. He was easily six and a half feet tall, and if he'd claimed his name was John Henry, Dalia would have believed it in a heartbeat. The man was built like someone had given a barrel pecs of iron and arms of ropy steel cut straight from the Golden Gate Bridge, then stuck a bowling ball atop the lot, as he was bald but had a mustache. Calling him a mountain of a man would be like calling Mount Everest a hill. Despite the intimidating nature of the man, he had a kind and gentle face, at least at the moment.

"Oh." Dalia said in a very small voice. She gulped suddenly. "Um... hi. I'm Dalia."

Oryx Honeychurch giggled. It was very strange hearing a giggle out of a man that huge, the natural expectation would be a booming guffaw, but no, he actually giggled. Then he held out his enormous hand.

"Nice to meet you, Dalia Ravenstone," he said. His voice was deep and calming, and Dalia felt a strange urge to let the man pick her up and hold her in his arms. She took his hand in hers instead. She felt like an infant shaking hands with a bar bouncer ironically named Tiny.

"It's uh, nice to meet you. Um, to meet you too, Mister Honeychurch."

"Oh now sweetie, don't be afraid of me. I'm a big old softy at heart."



"Yeah," said another voice. It was also a man's voice, not as deep as Oryx's voice. It wasn't loud, really, but had a way of cutting through surrounding noise like a weapons-grade laser through a water balloon. "I can attest to him being a huge softy," the new voice finished.

Dalia turned to look at the man who had spoken. He was white, six inches shorter than Oryx and thus still a full six feet tall, and he had the same body type as Oryx. But where Oryx had very little visible hair, this man was almost hairy enough to be a Sasquatch. His hair was brown, and he looked like someone had been feeding steroids to the guy from the Bounty paper towels, then bathing him in Rogaine.

"This is our other dad," Alvar said. "Dalia, meet Peregrine Ravenstone."

Brandon and Sally were staring at the two men. Dalia didn't blame them; she had no doubt at all that if these two men wanted to, they could have faced an army of 500 viking warriors in their prime and won. And then had tea in the middle of the battlefield before moving on.

Dalia couldn't speak either. She attempted to, but all that came out was nonsense.

"Oh my," Alvar said, grinning. "We broke her."

"All three of them," Sutekh said, also grinning.

"That's like, so common," Cerridwen said, adjusting her glasses. "I wish Aunt Xenia had been able to come, too."

"You two are married?" Sally finally managed to blurt out.

After a bit of laughter from the two men, Oryx grinned and said, "Yes. For fifteen years now. Of course, it wasn't official until a few years ago, but still, fifteen years."

"Please never stop talking to me ever," Sally said. "Your voice is lovely."

"Ditto," Brandon said.

Oryx chuckled this time. "I might be tempted to, but Ms. Templeton is waiting her turn."

Everyone snapped out of their reverie and turned to look at the blond teacher, who was waiting patiently for them all to stop talking. At Oryx's words, the chatter ended, and she grinned.

"Excellent. Well everyone seems to be here. So what we're going to do is move over to the bus, once it gets here. We and the bus will be under notice-me-not spells. Cars will avoid the bus, but nobody will really notice it consciously, that's how the spell works. We'll take roll again when we're all on the bus. And when I refer to us all being on the bus, I mean some of the parents and family members shall have to get into their own vehicles if they wish to join us, as we have limited space in the bus. Or you can shadow-walk to the nearest Tirffiniol portal and shadow-walk to the school once you get to Tirffiniol. Your choice. You may also choose to say your farewells here, if you wish."

Nizoni stepped toward Dalia and her friends. "We spoke earlier, knowing this would happen, and we decided I will accompany you to Fae Springs, and see you get settled. Orpheus and Morgana will be heading home soon."

Dalia felt her eyes watering then, and she turned to hug her papa. Her friends talked with their own families, deciding who would go and who would stay.

"Don't worry, sweetie," Papa said. "We'll be able to visit on weekends if you want us to. It's not far away at all for us. A portal trip and a bit of shadow-walking, and there we are."

"Yes, honey," Morgana said. "If you're ever lonely for us, let us know and we'll make plans to visit you. Your siblings, too."

Speaking of her siblings, Dalia hugged Vedyā like they'd never see each other ever again, crying into Vedyā's shirt. Vedyā rolled her eyes, her expression mildly annoyed, and patted Dalia on the head. Chooli just looked sad and uncomfortable, but pushed zeer glasses up zeer nose, then put zeer hands in zeer pockets like zee was trying to seem chill about the whole thing. Ashkii was crying along with Dalia, and Sweetheart just looked puzzled, but was clearly working their way up to crying in response to the other two crying siblings. When Sweetheart finally started crying too, Dalia hugged them and kissed their little noggin, trying hard to stop crying.

Surprising everyone, Grandma Ravenstone even turned up, apparently having shadow-walked there. They continued to say their farewells, Abuela telling her she'd say her farewells to Grandpa and Borghild for her. Dalia laughed at that; Grandpa would have no problem visiting her whenever he wanted to, and Borghild would just say something incomprehensible in Old Norse. Probably something that translated to 'You have the heart of a warrior, little one.'

Eventually their farewells were all said, and Dalia picked up her backpack and slung it over her shoulder. Sally did the same with her own backpack. Brandon didn't need to, as his was still strapped to the back of his chair as it had been since

before he'd gotten into the van. His parents were with him, too, extra luggage in their hands; though new to this magic thing, they were coming along to help Brandon settle in.

Soon, everyone piled into a yellow school bus that looked entirely ordinary except that it had a lift for a wheelchair. (A regular long bus with a chair lift? Dalia hadn't seen such a thing before.) Most of the kids waved back at their family as the bus pulled away and drove around to cross the St. John's Bridge.

Once looking back no longer showed them anything, Sally and Dalia – who were sitting behind Brandon, who had Kobalos perched on his wheelchair – turned to each other and began discussing what the school would be like. Brandon managed to join the conversation even with his back turned to them.

There were a lot of trees on the other side of the bridge, and as they kept driving, there got to be even more trees, for they were driving into Forest Park, which meant there were trees *everywhere*. The bus just kept going, until paved road became gravel road became a dirt path barely big enough to get the bus through. But it went through anyway, driving a ways before stopping. The noise level in the bus suddenly spiked as the kids got anxious about why they'd stopped.

“Calm down, we're not leaving the bus yet, children,” Ms. Templeton said brusquely.

It turned out they had stopped so a private gate could be opened, apparently with magic. Though in this day and age, it would be easy enough to get away with by saying it had been remote-controlled. Once the gate was open, the bus trundled through, the gate closing behind them. Once

in the private drive, they drove on for a few more minutes, until they came to what looked like the ruined stone shell of a burned-out house. Dalia noticed, though, that the stone arch of the apparent ruin was large enough to easily fit a bus through.

As the bus approached the apparent ruin, the stone arch lit up with a large number of runes and sigils, the space inside the arch disappearing and being replaced with a subtly different view of forest, forest that was brighter and healthier. They drove into the portal, and through it, into Tirffiniol. The portal closed behind them, and they continued up the path, which was wider and easier to drive on now. The experience so far might have been cooler to her if her head wasn't starting to ache again with all the noise of the other students. She took some ibuprofen to prevent it getting worse.

How long they climbed before they got to the top she didn't know, but after what felt like an hour, the trees began to thin, and the dirt road became gravel and then paved road. The bus came to a fork in the road, and turned left. A minute later, they slipped through a shadow portal. The larger size of the bus made her feel a strange sense of being in two places at once before they came out onto a paved parking lot. The trees that had still been surrounding them before were gone now, and when the driver parked the bus, they saw why: they were on top of a large hill or a small mountain, with a view of another small mountain about a mile away. From here, they could see a river winding between the two mountains, the light glittering off it making it look like it was fresh enough to drink from (which it most likely was). Dalia heard Mr. and Mrs. Han gasp behind her at the sight.

Flying through the air in the distance was a red dragon, and in the other direction was what looked like a griffin. There was also movement in the bushes nearby, as pixies fluttered about from one bush to another. Most pixies are six inches tall, but a few in this swarm were slightly shorter. There were even some little child pixies, some of which were not much bigger than a Polly Pocket doll, at about three inches or so. All of the pixies had four wings, of a shape similar to butterfly wings, and just as colorful, but wider and much bigger. Some, though, had wings like leaves. One adult pixie with leaf wings landed on a branch and disappeared behind the camouflage of her wings.

Best of all, though, was what was on top of the other mountain. For a large building at least three stories tall sat atop it, and it was made of gleaming white marble. The building was surrounded by a clearing covered in grass, and they could just make out some sports fields in the clearing. There was another parking lot over there as well, with at least 20 cars parked over there.

"Your first view of Fae Springs Private Academy," Nizoni said with a grin.

"Quite right, Ms. Ravenstone," Ms. Ella Templeton said, standing up.

"Ms. *Hatathli*-Ravenstone," Nizoni corrected.

"Oops. Sorry about that, Ms. *Hatathli*-Ravenstone."

"You are excused," Nizoni said with an indulgent smile.

"Anyway, where was I? Oh yes. Children, first year students always come this way, to see the school from here, as it's a lovely view of the building. If we had turned right in-

stead of left at that fork in the road, we would have ended up in the other parking lot instead.”

“How are we getting there?” one of the girls asked.

“Excellent question, Ms. London. Look out your windows on the left side of the bus, and slightly higher, everyone.”

Everyone who wasn't already on that side of the bus got up and rushed over, except Brandon, who could see out the windshield from where he was. Part of the mountain extended out to the left, and it had a plain, squarish building built onto its surface.

“That building, children, is where we go from here. Once there, you can either take a Flying Chair over to Fae Springs and enjoy the view, or you can shadow-walk over there through one of the portals, if you prefer. For now, though, please remain seated until I get Mr. Han here out of the bus.”

Dalia watched as Ms. Templeton helped the process of getting Brandon's chair secured on the lift and lowered out, until he was the first one out. Once the lift was back in place on the bus, she then had everyone exit the bus in single file.

*‘Oh WOW,’* said Doñela, who was floating next to Tamir several feet in the air to admire the view. *‘It’s AMAZING here!’*

Finally noticing something and connecting it to something she'd heard at some point during the summer, Dalia turned to Nizoni and asked, “Shimá? I thought there would be more than 14 people in our group?”

“Yes, about that, Mrs. Metaxas is bringing her daughter along tomorrow instead. The other three of the missing people in your class – class one of year one – are non-humans.

One is a Goblin, another is a Kitsune, and I believe the last is some sort of Lilin. Not sure what kind, though. None of them has arrived yet. They will be here soon, though. I believe we are waiting for them, are we not, Ms. Templeton?”

“Oh yes, thank you for reminding me, Ms. Hatathli-Ravenstone. Children, we have three other students we're waiting for. They shouldn't be long now.”

As they waited for the other students, Dalia took her sunglasses off to look at the view with her naked eyes. What she saw took her breath away, and she coughed and hacked until someone hit her on the back, helping her breathe again.

The sight before her was beautiful. Ridiculously beautiful. Fantastically beautiful. It was so beautiful it was kind of surreal. Though it looked a lot like the natural areas of Portland, it was largely unspoiled by signs of human or non-human habitation, the Fae Springs buildings aside. There was more green here than anywhere she'd been on Earth (an odd thing for a Portlander to think), green for miles around, with a gorgeous blue, sparkling ribbon of a river running through it. The sky was absurdly blue, with puffy white clouds here and there.

For all this beauty, there was something slightly off about the light. It was a bit too bright, but didn't hurt her eyes as much as it should be doing. It was also a bit too yellow, she thought. But it was subtle, the difference. She didn't really remember much about the open spaces of Tirffiniol from her one previous trip (not counting being in the yard of the Tirffiniol part of their house, which was surrounded by trees), so it was like new to her. But beautiful as it was, it was making her feel giddy and light-headed. She put her sun-



glasses back on, and felt much better. Kobalos, on her shoulder, looked at her sunglasses jealously and cawed at her in annoyance. She took a little doll-sized wide-brimmed sun hat from her pocket and strapped it to his head. He made a sound like a cat purring at this.

A couple minutes passed, the anxious children getting harder to keep reigned in as they waited to get going. Another half a minute passed before a burst of flame roared into life 20 feet behind the bus. Everyone turned to face the flame, which was already disappearing. A Japanese girl of about 12 or 13 had appeared there. She was tall for her age, slender, had brown hair that went to her mid back, a narrow face with close-set eyes, thin eyebrows, and high cheekbones. Her eyes were wide with anxiety, but it was clear to Dalia that her eyes would be wide for her ethnicity even without the anxiety. The girl was already dressed in her school uniform, her skirt covering her entire legs except for her feet. She had a very old backpack slung behind her; it was made of gray cloth and was patched in many places and frayed in several more places.

Behind this girl was an adult woman Dalia presumed was the girl's mother. They looked virtually identical, aside from their ages and their clothes. For while the girl's uniform looked brand-new, her mother wore a tattered blue-jean skirt and a patched green blouse. Dalia, knowing what to look for, could see the faintest suggestion of at least one tail under the young girl's skirt, though the mother seemed much more adept at hiding her own tails.

The two of them stepped forward and walked calmly toward the group of human students. Dalia heard a lot of mut-

tering, but apparently the letter was still on everyone's mind, for nobody said anything loud enough for anyone but their neighbor to hear. When the two kitsune got within speaking range, they both bowed.

"Thank you very much for the opportunity to learn at your esteemed school," the young girl said in a cheerful, polite Canadian accent. Dalia blinked. She hadn't been expecting that kind of accent from a kitsune.

"Yes, thank you for letting my daughter learn at your excellent school," the girl's mother said. "We are very grateful for this opportunity."

"You're quite welcome," Ms. Templeton said. "I take it you're Kohana Sato and her mother, Ms. Shizuko Sato?"

"Yes," the young girl said, "I am Kohana Sato, and this is my mother. Thank you again."

"You're quite welcome. If the two of you would like to wait over here with us, we're expecting two more Faery students."

The two kitsune bowed briefly again, then took up a spot at the back of the group.

A minute later, a vehicle appeared out of nowhere, popping into existence in another space with a brief show of shadows now banished by the sunlight. Dalia hadn't seen it, another student had pointed it out, but now everyone was looking at it. The vehicle looked like an old Model T from the early days of car manufacture, but was made of what looked like brass and possibly aluminum or silver, she wasn't sure which. But it was the two people inside who had grabbed everyone's attention the most. Exiting the vehicle were two humanoid beings that looked reptilian in appear-

ance, except for several things; first, their noses looked mostly human, if a bit on the wide side, and in fact, their faces looked very human except for being scaly, and for their eyes, which were large, and also a vibrant yellow with slit-shaped pupils like on some cats. Secondly, their ears were like the ears of wolves, but with scaly skin instead of fur. They appeared to be able to pivot their ears just like wolves could.

The taller of the two of them was somewhat short by human standards, only about five feet tall or just under it. The shorter one, presumably the student, was half a head shorter than their parent. Both Goblins had metallic-green scales over most of their body, with spots of metallic brown in different parts of their body. What little was visible of their chest showed that the scales they had there were a much lighter color, like one often saw on the bellies of snakes. The taller Goblin had an iridescent, rainbow-colored scar running along one side of their face.

When they got closer, Dalia saw the shorter of the two was dressed in the version of the school uniform with black slacks. Their parent was dressed in a vibrant blue outfit that wouldn't have looked out of place during the American Revolution, and might have been taken right off Benjamin Franklin's back if she didn't know better. All the outfit lacked for authenticity was a powdered wig.

The Goblin student bowed before them, while their parent remained standing, a few feet behind them.

"Acknowledgment, colleagues. I am Thaa-szaga Hemen Aavraak Djohk-hoh. You call me Aavraak, to simple it. Thank you for the opportunity to learn at your little school."

The older Goblin snapped something sharp at Aavraak in their own language, and Aavraak's left ear turned toward the sound. Aavraak then bowed again, more deeply, their ears folded closed briefly.

“Concession, colleagues. My folly. I strive again. Thank you for the opportunity to learn at your *fine* school.” Aavraak turned to look at the older Goblin, who nodded curtly. Aavraak smiled without showing their teeth and turned back to face the other students.

Pulling a bit of paper out of one pocket, Aavraak read it, put it back, then said, “My persons, the Goblins, has three sexes. Few humans am seeing Thref, those with seed of babies, for they am hidden. All Goblins the humans am seeing am either Kwanj – those with eggs of babies – or Krolt, those am keep babies in they body.” Aavraak paused then, giving off a vibe of slight confusion for a moment before continuing. “I, Aavraak, am Krolt. My family am search words of sexes in Ingltch and am decide 'she' is sex-word for Aavraak. Not 'he,' for 'Thref of Goblins am not much smart, and Aavraak am Krolt.”

Aavraak's accent was... interesting. When she spoke, her mouth was more open than normal for English speakers, and the movements of her mouth were more exaggerated. Her K's and K-like C's sounded somewhat like G's, but when they were at the start or end of words, these K's clicked harder at the end than English speakers usually did. Dalia paid attention to Aavraak's mouth and found that when a K sound was at the end of a word, Aavraak was making a slight O with her mouth. and there was a hard edge to her G's. It sounded like the initial click necessary for making a G sound was louder

and more exaggerated than was usual. But the overall effect was a lot of obvious clicking, and the blurring together of K's and G's. And as to the grammar... well, English is a difficult language.

Again turning to the adult Goblin for reassurance, the adult Goblin nodded, but looked mildly uncertain, before shrugging.

"My companion," Aavraak said, gesturing at the adult Goblin, "am Thaa-szaga Hemmen Zetheshraak Thwa-ḥoh. You call she Zetheshraak to simple it. She am Krolt. She am my Krolt-parent."

After pausing and not hearing any comments from Zetheshraak, Aavraak asked, "I am now to take my place with my colleagues, am I?"

"Uh," Ms. Templeton said, clearly thrown for a loop. "If I understand you correctly, then yes, you may join us now."

Aavraak turned to Zetheshraak, who nodded. Then the two of them fell in behind Kohana and her mother. Immediately Aavraak tried talking to Kohana in a Faery language Dalia didn't recognize, but Kohana just blinked at her and indicated she couldn't understand her. Aavraak shrugged and sighed. Dalia, for her own part, was looking at Aavraak with annoyance and worry. She wanted to befriend Aavraak, but she was afraid Aavraak might be transphobic, given her comment about the Thref. But she remained open-minded and hopeful.

"Oh good, now that that whole business is done, it's my turn now, is it?" came a young masculine voice from... uh... Dalia wasn't sure *where* it was coming from, to be honest. *Nobody* seemed to be sure.

“Up here, you silly beings!” the voice said with amusement.

Aavraak figured it out first, gesturing at a nearby tree with a closed hand, where a large osprey was looking at them with what seemed like amusement. It opened its mouth and spoke, then.

“Aha! The Goblin spots me first then, no surprise at that!”

A second, even larger osprey in the tree glared at the smaller one. “Elliolynn! Stop this foolishness at once!”

The smaller osprey stared at the larger one. “Fine, father, if you insist.”

With a swoop, the smaller osprey flew down to the ground, but with a soft glow of amber light, it turned into a twelve-year-old boy before touching down. He had bronze skin, yellow eyes that looked human aside from their odd color, and his hair was brown with white stripes on the sides that met in the back, similar to his osprey form's colors. He bowed with a flourish.

“Greetings and hallucinations, fellow Fae Springs Academy scholars,” the boy said, still bowing. “My name is Elliolynn Losolom, and from this day forward, never shall you have to despair, for I am an Aashabahk, my very presence in your hallowed halls shall fill them to the brim with the fortification of eternal hope. I am deeply honored and humbled to be allowed to be a scholar at your venerable institution.”

The second osprey flew down and joined his son in human form. Their coloration was identical, except that the adult man had an extra white stripe on top of his head.

“My apologies for my son. He affects a pompous nature when nervous. My name is Drelaythen Losolom. We are truly honored that Elliolynn has been given this opportunity.”

Ms. Templeton smiled a little uncertainly. “Yes, Mr. Losolom, as are we. Well, now that everyone's here, let's continue, shall we?”

She led the way over to the squarish building that was their route to Fae Springs Academy, rehashing what she'd said earlier about the two main ways to get to the school from there for the benefit of their new arrivals. Dalia was afraid she wouldn't like the 'Flying Chair' option. It sounded terrifying. And, as it turned out when they got inside the building, the reality was even worse. The Flying Chair was a metal chair with a safety bar, but instead of the lesser terror of being sent across the valley and over the river on a taut metal cord, the only thing holding these metal chairs up in the air was magic. Dalia felt flushed at the thought, to such a degree that she thought even a toilet didn't feel this flushed. In horror, she backed up as far away from the ledge the chairs took off from as was possible.

“Ah, I suppose it is shadow-walking for us then, Little Branch?” Nizoni asked her.

Dalia nodded gratefully.

They did not go right away, though. As loathe as she was to trust her life to something that was as aerodynamic as an anvil, she still watched about half of the others board one of the horrible contraptions to fly slowly over to the other mountain. Even Aavraak and her parent got aboard one. Elliolynn and his father, however, looked at one another and

instead flew over in their osprey forms. Kobalos thought that looked good, and took off behind them.

Only when all who were flying over had begun their trip did she and a few remaining others go through an extra-wide shadow portal in the leftmost wall, coming out on the opposite mountain near the landing zone for the Flying Chairs, which they could still see flying in the air above the large fall to the water below.

While they waited for the others, Dalia asked Nizoni a question.

“Shimá?”

“What is it, Little Branch?”

“Why do you think Aavraak talks like that? You know, with the weird grammar. I thought Goblins were some sort of really big deal here in Tirffiniol?”

Nizoni chuckled. “That is one way of putting it, yes. To answer your question... well, yes, the Goblin Empire is the largest in Tirffiniol at the moment. Their reach extends all over the known world here. They are traders, artisans, and merchants. In the past five hundred years, they’ve gotten so influential that nearly everyone who lives in Tirffiniol learns to speak Drovok, the dominant Goblin language. Just like with Americans in the mundane world, they have gotten so used to everyone speaking their language that most Goblins never bother to learn any other language. That makes Aavraak and her parent unusual, since they’re learning English. Even moreso, when you realize English is one of the least-regarded languages in Tirffiniol.”

“Oh. Thanks, Shimá. You know, I think I might help Aavraak with her English if she wants my help.”



"If she's here to learn, which she seems to be, I'm sure she'll appreciate someone reaching out to her."

Kobalos appeared at that moment and flew over to her, landing on her shoulder again.

When the others arrived on the main mountain with Dalia and the others who were afraid of the Flying Chairs, Ms. Templeton got everyone rounded up again. Dalia hung back a bit to introduce herself to Aavraak and offer to help the Goblin with her English. They had to stop talking now and then as Ms. Templeton took them on a tour of the facility. First they saw the grounds, which were lovely. Shining, healthy, too-bright grass grew on most of the grounds, but the edges to either side of the building entrances and exits were landscaped with lovely flowers and shrubs.

Also on the grounds were small copses of trees to play in or sit under, several clear streams, a small lake to swim in, several different types of fields for different sports (baseball/softball, football, soccer, and field hockey), a tennis court, a basketball court, a dueling field, a track, another field Dalia didn't recognize to the west of the dueling field, and several large greenhouses.

As to the building itself, while most of it was a gleaming white marble, spells on the building kept the glare to a minimum so one could look at it without hurting one's eyes. The doors, door jambs, and window sills were all made of redwood. Inside, there were great big oak beams holding the structure together, all the joins done up with what turned out to be ancient Japanese tongue-and-groove techniques, done because iron would have burned the native wood, and

they hadn't had any other strong enough metal to use back in the day.

When the tour was over, everyone gathered in the gymnasium, where everyone who had come so far was meeting with the teachers and one another to talk with each other. Several teachers seemed to be mainly walking around to listen in on conversations, occasionally asking questions or pulling one of the adults aside for a private conversation. Nizoni didn't appear concerned or confused by this at all, though she made a point of making it clear to Dalia and her friends that she noticed it, so Dalia decided to try to ignore it, too, assuming there was a reason for the behavior.

All of them eventually got gently pressured into meeting the Divination teacher, Amraphel Dyer. Dalia was surprised to see the woman, for she was a black woman with red hair and freckles. That at least was something Dalia knew could happen, there were even some famous people like that. But what was more striking even than that was the fact that Ms. Dyer's eyes were each a different color, one being blue and the other was brown. The woman was dressed pretty normally, in black slacks and a black blouse. Dalia did notice, though, that the woman was wearing several large bracelets made of hematite. Dalia raised an eyebrow at this; hematite was known to be a grounding stone, used to keep one's energy down to earth. It seemed a strange choice of jewelry for a Divination teacher.

"Hello dear. Would you care for a reading?" Ms. Dyer indicated a set of bones and other objects in front of her.

"You can read the bones?" Dalia asked. "Abuela – my grandma, I mean – does, too."

"Oh yes, I love reading the bones. It's one of the most difficult of the divinatory arts to master, if not *the* most difficult, but it's also the most flexible, the most detailed."

"Yeah. Okay, sure, I'll sit for a reading. But you should know, I know from Abuela the limits of divination."

"Oh yes, me too. The future is always changing, with every choice we make. I prefer to use divination to read the present, find out things going on now I don't already know. Or reading the past. It can be interesting trying to read the future sometimes, but always take it with a grain of salt, I say. Anything you want to know?"

Dalia thought about it, then shrugged. "I can't think of anything."

"Okay, I'll just look and see what I can see."

Kobalos fluttered down off Dalia's shoulder, still wearing his sun hat, and pecked at some of the objects on the table, because they were shiny. Ms. Dyer shooed him away, and he went back to his perch on Dalia's shoulder, distinctly annoyed at being denied shiny objects.

Once she had dealt with Kobalos, Ms. Dyer had Dalia pick an object to represent herself; Dalia chose a raven talon, which got set aside. The teacher then picked up the other objects, shook them in her hands, and 'cast the bones.' Dalia waited curiously while Ms. Dyer examined the bones and other objects, making interested sounds here and there, chuckling a couple times, occasionally setting things aside and recasting the rest.

"You have a great heart," Ms. Dyer finally said. "You ignore appearances and what other people say about people, judging them by their actions. You have trouble making

friends, but you're very loyal to the ones you have. You're also very loyal to family, you're generous, nurturing, compassionate, and helpful. You stand up for others, especially your friends, even when you wouldn't stand up for yourself. You have a strong desire for justice and fairness, as well."

Dalia shrugged. "I dunno about all that."

"Modest, too, I see." Ms. Dyer smiled. "You remind me a lot of my twin sister, Damiana. She works here, too."

"What else do you see?"

"Do you want me to try reading your possible futures?"

She shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

Dalia waited as Ms. Dyer cast the bones again, going through the whole process all over again. Dalia tried to ignore the little sounds she made sometimes as she read objects, but this time Ms. Dyer was looking more and more concerned.

"That's odd. When I look into your future, I get a lot of answers I can't make heads or tails of. It's like the bones are being deliberately cryptic."

"Oh?"

"Yes, it's... unprecedented. Oh wait. Well that might explain it. I don't know how, but you have the Mark of an Ævintýrichor." She said it with a tone like she was diagnosing Dalia with cancer.

"Wait, Auntie Kira's mark is messing up your reading of my future?"

Ms. Dyer stared slack-jawed at Dalia. "Did you—*Auntie* Kira? You have a personal relationship with an Ævintýrichor?"

“Yeah. One of my ancestors freed her from slavery, and she's been the fairy godmother of our family for like, 1000 years now.”

“You have an *Ævintýrichor* as your *fairy godmother*? Dear, do you have any idea how *unusual* that is?”

“Um... no. Is it?”

“The *Ævintýrichor* exemplify the old adage that knowledge equals power. They never forget anything, they can travel to virtually any Realm they choose, and they love traveling and learning everything they can. There are cultures that worship the *Ævintýrichor* as living gods. Having an *Ævintýrichor* in your debt like that is just *incredible*.”

Ms. Dyer threw the bones one more time, and her eyes went wide with shock as she looked at what they said. Then she hastily put her bones away, looking terrified. “Well, thank you very much, dear. But uh, I have other people to read today. Run along now, there's a good child.”

Feeling very confused and curious about that, Dalia reluctantly turned around and walked away. She just barely overheard something about “the Nameless One” said in a strained voice and when she looked back, Ms. Dyer was drinking an anti-anxiety potion.

Now that she'd been to Ms. Dyer, one of the teachers guided Dalia and Nizoni over to a table with piles of forms on them. Some of the forms Nizoni had to fill out, but one of them was for Dalia to fill out. They were told to read the school handbook first. It would've been dull reading, but Tamir had already read it and summarized it back when she'd first gotten it, and she remembered what he had said. She was glad to skip it and go on to the form to fill out, which

turned out to be about dorm room assignments. She also noted that curfew was from midnight to six am.

“Ooh, there’s a section here that says to check yes or no to whether you want non-human room-mates or not. Checking ‘yes’ on that.” She wrote it down. “And there’s a section under it for a note.” In that line, she wrote ‘Give me as many non-human room-mates as possible.’ Then she filled out the rest of it – mostly boring stuff – and signed it.

She went back to wandering around the gymnasium, and found a table she hadn’t noticed before, that was about the school’s LGBT group, Chinstrap Penguin. She took some pamphlets about it, which included the meeting place and times for the first meetings.

Then it was dinnertime, and everyone filed into the cafeteria, which had several levels to it, but because there were so few students present meant only one level was open. When they got inside, they found it had a buffet. Dalia went to the salad bar first and loaded up with fresh spinach, cut chicken, cheese shreds, black olives, peas, and ranch dressing. She even made up a plate of meat, fruit, and vegetables for Kobalos, who pecked at his food once they’d both sat down.

“This is all so cool so far,” Sally said as she sat to Dalia’s left so Sally could give her left-handed friend more space to eat than other righties would, so they wouldn’t keep bumping into each other while eating. “And then a buffet on top of it all. Hey Nizoni, do they have a buffet every day here?”

“No, just special occasions. But they do always have a salad bar for lunches and dinners.”

“Neat!” Dalia said between bites of her salad.

“So what was all that business with the divination teacher for?” Brandon asked; he was at the end of the table, on Dalia’s left side.

Nizoni swallowed her food and answered. “Fae Springs uses a system by which students with different personality types are put in the same rooms together. It encourages students to diversify their friend base, while the Banner meetings also empower them to find others with similar personalities. They use a number of different tactics to determine personality types, and divination is one of them. But they also use more concrete methods, like interviews with family and friends. It works pretty well.

“The personality types are divided into seven Banners, which are Honey Badger, Bengal Tiger, Eagle Owl, Timber Wolf, Crow, Grizzly Bear, and Anansi.”

“Oh. Well that explains the animal theme for the LGBT group,” Dalia said, showing her friends the pamphlet about Chinstrap Penguin.

“Indeed it does,” Nizoni said.

“So what are the personalities of the Banners supposedly like?” Sally asked.

“Honey Badgers are highly driven, zealous, ambitious, tolerant, tough, resilient, cool headed, natural leaders, charming, and witty. Or some mix of those, anyway; you don’t have to fit perfectly to be given a certain Banner, and there’s some overlap here and there. Anyway, going on. Bengal Tigers are patient, intelligent, perceptive, psychic but realistic, and full of potential. Eagle Owls are free thinkers, imaginative, intuitive, artistic, inspired by nature, inspira-

tional, visionary, and don't care what others think about them.

"Timber Wolves are protective, crusaders for the underdog, they have a strong sense of friendship and family and tend to be fiercely loyal. They're nurturing, compassionate, helpful, gentle, confident, love history and ancestry, and have a need for structure."

"Oh," Dalia said. "That sounds like what Ms. Dyer said about me. I guess that'll be my Banner."

"Could be. Won't know for sure until they tell you officially. Where was I? Oh yes, next is Crow. Crows are thrill seekers, extroverts, playful, adaptable, fearless, and intelligent. They're often seen as outsiders and can sometimes be withdrawn despite being extroverts. They also tend to be deeply thoughtful and brutally honest.

"Grizzly Bears are leaders, vigilant, confident, noble, and high-minded. They like to take on challenges, and are good at overcoming obstacles. Then lastly are the Anansi. They're secret keepers, good listeners, truth seekers, and great story tellers. They tend to be historians, journalists, detectives, and the like, but other times they can be gossips. Or both. They generally have a strong sense of truth and honor, but not always."

"I wonder what my Banner will be," said Brandon.

"Yeah, me too," said Sally.

"We shall see. They usually have it figured out by the end of the day. They prepare for this weeks in advance, which is why they insist on hearing back by August 15<sup>th</sup>."

"I'm a bit curious why we come here on Friday if we don't have lessons until Monday," Brandon wondered.



"Gives the new students time to explore, find the classrooms so they know where to go on Monday, and settle in."

"Oh yeah, that makes sense."

"The second half of your year will be coming in tomorrow, so if there's any of the tables you didn't get to today, you can go back tomorrow. And they keep them up Sunday too, just in case there are any stragglers."

"Cool. Either of you wanna come with me to Chinstrap Penguin?"

Brandon and Sally shrugged. "I don't know what I am yet," Brandon said. "I mean, I've liked girls before, but who knows? I might end up liking guys too. But for now, no."

"I'll go with you, Dalia, if you'd like a friend with you," Sally said.

"I dunno, I mean... yeah, that'd be nice, but if that's the only reason you're going..."

"Honey, Chinstrap Penguin also lets in straight allies. In schools, straight allies often turn out to be closeted, but even if not, they'd still be allowed."

Sally looked a little relieved by that.

"Okay then," Dalia said. "I'd love to have a friendly face there, Sally."

"Cool," Sally said, quickly going back to her dinner.

"Hell-oh once more, Doll-ah Stone Raven," a familiar voice said. Dalia turned to face it.

"Aavraak! Come on, sit down. And it's Dalia Ravenstone, the first name sounds like Doll-yah, with a Y sound before the 'ah.'"

"Thank you, Dalia Ravenstone," Aavraak said properly, sitting down. "Am you and I now friends? You did help me improve my Inglitch today. I would like be friends."

Aavraak still spoke stiltedly, like she was thinking hard about every word she said before saying it, and her grammar was still off, but she was quite improved from this morning.

"Yes, Aavraak, I'd like that a lot. I'd love to have a third friend."

"I am pleased. Am you ever having a Goblin friend?"

"No, Aavraak, you're my first."

"You am my first human friend as—"

"Sorry to interrupt," Dalia blurted out, surprising even herself, "but in English, well... you're right to use 'am' after 'I', but we use 'are' after 'you' and 'they', or before those two words if it's a question. Like 'I am a person,' 'you are nice,' or 'Are you having pie?' And if you say 'he' or 'she' instead of 'I' or 'you,' it's 'is.' Like, 'He is a person.' 'She is nice.' Same with objects. 'It is round,' 'the house is big.'"

"I see. So... you *are* pleased? You *are* never having a Goblin friend before? And this *is* a meal we am having? Or is it a meal we *are* having?"

"Er... yes, that's right."

"That am—are—I mean... that *is* very confusing. But, as I am saying,"—Dalia winced but didn't comment this time, English was complicated—"I am never meeting a human before today. You am—er, you *are* not as strange as I am told. I am surprise humans all look very much the same. Human Thref..." she paused, thinking, before continuing, "*are* very odd still. Goblin Thref are tiny and not much smart and are gross. We hide them away, they embarrass us. Human Thref

are large and intelligent, though. Sometimes larger than human Kwanj. It am—er...” she thought again a few more moments—“It *is* odd, but that... *is* the way of things.”

Dalia wasn't sure what to say to that.

Aavraak poked at her fork with a claw and looked at it. Then she carefully touched it with one finger. When she did, she brightened.

“Aluminum,” she said, seeing Brandon's questioning look, and began to eat.

“Oh good. So they took that into account?” Dalia asked.

“No,” Nizoni said. “The cutlery has been aluminum for decades.”

“‘Been’? What is this word?”

“Past tense form of ‘be,’” Nizoni said. Aavraak nodded.

A few minutes later, Aavraak looked pensively at Dalia.

“I have question, Dalia,” Aavraak said.

“What is it?”

“I am curious about human... I do not know the word.” She thought a moment, then tried again. “Which humans do which things? Which humans am—are leaders? Which are artisans? Which are servants? Which are the unclean?”

Dalia frowned. “Pardon?”

“I think she is asking about castes,” Nizoni supplied.

“Oh. Um... I mean, I think there's a caste system in India, but I'm American. The part of the mundane world overlaying where we are now is America. We don't have castes in America.”

“No? How do you know who does what things?”

“Um... well, we have something similar, I guess. Classes. It's *kinda* determined by birth, I guess. If you're born with

money, you can do whatever you want. If you're born without much money, then you do whatever job you can get to survive. But, well... unlike in a caste system, in our system people can cross class barriers. You can marry someone rich, or win the lottery and become rich, or invent something, sell it, and get rich that way. Doesn't happen very often, but it happens. And sometimes rich people spend all their money and become poor, and end up lower class."

"Don't forget about the middle class," Sally said.

"The middle class is a rapidly vanishing class," Nizoni said. "These days, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and the middle class either get lucky and climb higher or they don't, and end up lower class. So there's effectively only two classes anymore."

"Two classes?" Aavraak said. "What of the unclean? How do you know who is unclean?"

"I think she means something like the Dalit in India. Formerly known as untouchables."

"We don't have that in our system, Aavraak."

Aavraak looked confused. "Do humans not clean sewers? Do humans not take garbage away?"

"Yes, we have those jobs. Those jobs are sorted under 'lower class.'"

"What other of these jobs are lower class?"

Sally took that one, listing off a bunch of things, like wait staff, most cooks, clerks at stores, and so on. Aavraak took it all in with a look of growing unease and confusion that gave way to looking confused and ill, setting her fork down with food still on it.

When Sally finished, Aavraak sat there thinking very hard for several minutes, still looking confused and grossed out, before speaking again.

“Humans have same ‘class’ for both sewer cleaners and people who prepare food?” She looked very disgusted by the thought, like she might vomit.

Nizoni answered. “I do not know how likely a former sewage worker is to be able to get a job as a waiter at a restaurant,” Nizoni said, “but we have cleanliness rules. We have ways of keeping clean enough we do not get sick from things. We wash our hands after we go to the bathroom. Sewer workers have to shower and change into clean clothes before they go home. Same with garbage workers. And the cleanliness rules for food workers are pretty strict. Frequent hand-washing, facial hair has to be shaved off or a mask put on over it to keep hair from falling in the food, and most people have to put a hat on to keep head hair out of the food. I do not know all the rules, but there are a lot of them. They have to pass training classes to work with food, every few years.”

“I see,” Aavraak said, looking and sounding relieved. “So humans are very clean. So clean they have no unclean ones.”

“In our culture, yeah,” Dalia said. “I think even India has been trying to dismantle their caste system.”

“Yes,” Nizoni agreed. “They have not been having the best luck with that. That system had been in place for a very long time. Old habits die hard.”

Aavraak shook her head slowly. “And you can not even know who is what class by looking? By skin color?”

“About that... our history means skin color does get complicated, and mixed in with class issues. Certain skin colors

tend to be low class while others tend to be high class, but like the people of India, we've been trying to replace our old system, so it's impolite to assume someone's class based on skin color. We've made a lot of progress in less than 100 years, but like the people of India, we still have a long way yet to go."

"Yeah," Dalia said. "People with my kin—sorry, I mean people with my skin color used to be slaves. Um, there are still people alive today who were legal slaves. Slavery is mostly illegal now, though."

Aavraak hissed angrily. "Goblins, we do not take slaves. It is wicked. Humans used to take Fae beings as slaves. My people did enjoy teaching those humans a lesson. The lesson is been very much of the time fatal."

"Amen to that," Dalia said fiercely.

"Wait... you said slavery is 'mostly' illegal. Explain?"

"That's very complicated, and I would rather eat than get into it in depth, Aavraak," Nizoni said. "But for now, I'll just say that it's only legal under certain circumstances, such as punishment for some crimes."

"I understand. The Empire is not been forged in one night. We are having more to speak about later, this way."

Nizoni said, "By the way, Aavraak, instead of 'is been,' you can use the past-tense of 'is,' which is 'was.'"

"Was," Aavraak said, sounding out the word. "How am I to use that word?"

"For instance, 'I was walking in the garden last night.'"

"Or 'the Empire was not forged in one night'?"

"Exactly," Nizoni said.

"Or 'Dalia and I was talking earlier'?"

Nizoni looked at Dalia significantly, but neither of them corrected Aavraak. "It will do," Nizoni said, and went back to her food.

They ate their dinner, talking occasionally but mostly eating. They had finished dinner and were eating dessert when several of the teachers started handing out Banner designations and dorm room assignments to all the students.

Brandon looked up from his sheet and said, "Hey Dalia, I got Bengal Tiger for my Banner. And I got that osprey guy and your cousin Sutekh as room-mates, along with some guy named Riley Irving. What'd you get?"

"I got Timber Wolf," Dalia said. "And hey Sally, we're room-mates!"

"Cool!" Sally said, checking her own sheet. "And we get the other two non-humans, too!"

"Awesome! What's your Banner?"

"Honey Badger."

"Hmm, maybe it's time for a change of nicknames," Nizoni said. "Maybe instead of 'Little Branch,' I could call you *yázhi ma'itsoh*."

"I like it. It's fierce."

"*Yázhi ma'itsoh*?" asked Sally.

"It's Navajo for 'little wolf.'"

"Cool."

Aavraak finally looked up from her own assignment sheet. "It is good to have a friend in this room. I assure you, I do not make the... how do you say... the sound of badness in the sleep?"

"Snoring?" Dalia asked, then mimed the sound.

"Yes. That is it. I do not make the snoring. What of you?"

"Me neither. Kobalos would have told me by now if I snored."

"Kobalos?"

"Her familiar, a raven," Sally said. "The bird who's been eating with us. I don't snore either, Aavraak. I mean... I *do* snore, but I have a thing I put on my nose at night to stop it."

"You need show me this thing. My parents both make the snoring. Do you think it would work with Goblins?"

"Probably. I mean, your faces look like ours for the most part, just scaly. I don't know if the strips will stick to scaly skin or not, but your parents could try it. So yeah, I'll show you."

"Very good. Thank you, uh..."

"Sally."

"Thank you, Sally."

"You're welcome, Aavraak."

"Well I should probably go with you to make sure all your belongings are there," Nizoni said.

"Sure, let's go."

They put their plates away, threw out their trash, and used a map of the campus they'd been given to find the dorms. They helped Brandon find his room first, which was on the ground floor of the building for the boys' dorms. There were two separate buildings for the dorms, the boys' dorms in one building and the girls' in another. Dalia wondered what they did if someone didn't feel like either of those.

The dorm-room corridors looked like the corridors inside a hotel. They'd even been given keys with their assignment sheets. These keys were the old-fashioned metal ones,



with some magic in them as well. But these were apparently one-time-only, used to key the rooms' inhabitants into the wards so they could just use their hands or other body parts to get in later.

Brandon unlocked the door of his dorm-room and opened the door. The inside was rather interesting; the place was all one large room. At the left-most back corner of the room was a bed with a small end table beside it. In the corner opposite was another small table beside a desk that looked wide enough for Brandon to get his wheelchair scooted under it so he could work at it. At the back wall next to the first bed was two closet doors of the kind that rolled on tracks. Dalia took a good look around Brandon's room, as she had no interest in coming over here again. If it was just Brandon and Elliolyynn in the whole building, she wouldn't have had a problem coming over here. But she'd had a lot of experiences of being bullied or harassed by boys, and so was determined to avoid them as much as possible.

They looked to the opposite corner, the right-most back corner, and that area was identical but reversed, like a mirror image. Two more closets were on that side of the room. And in the middle was two sets of beds, two sets of two small tables, and two sets of desks separated by a fair bit of walking room. And there was a pair of doors at the back of the room, exactly in the middle of the wall between the two sets of closets, that were two bathrooms.

Brandon found his things at the left-most corner bed, his suitcases all piled neatly on the bed. He opened the closet closest to his bed, and found it was quite roomy and had a dresser drawer built into the left side of the closet. This re-

quired he enter the closet to access it, but the closet was big enough that wasn't a problem, and likely wouldn't be even when his closet hangers were all full of clothes.

Once they were sure Brandon was settling into his room, the rest of them went to the girls' dorm building to find their own. They had to climb a single set of stairs to get to their room (room number 213), but it wasn't too bad of a climb. Plus there were shadow portals if they really didn't want to deal with the stairs.

The girls' room was nearly identical to Brandon's room, down to the colors. (Beige walls, green carpets, redwood accents and closet doors.) The only difference was that the bathrooms in Brandon's dorm room had been handicap accessible, and these weren't.

"They left Kobalos's perch on the end table by the same corner of the room they left Brandon's stuff in his room," Sally noted. "But if you want to move, it's fine by me."

"I'm good. I like the corner, it's cozy. Where's your stuff, Sally?"

"Opposite corner, looks like. Not sure who these other things belong to."

"The bed next to my new friend Dalia has my things upon it," Aavraak said.

"So that must mean the bed at the other side of the bathroom door belongs to the kitsune girl."

Aavraak shrugged, then took a look inside the bathroom. Dalia went back to unpacking. A few minutes later, though, Aavraak came back out of the bathroom, looking confused.

"I am not know how to use your 'bath room.' I recognize the *oHKlaaj* – for washing of hands, and I think I recognize the 'bathing tub,' but I am not know where I am to put my waste. Also, there is a strange white water fountain in there that I am not know the function of."

"Er... that 'water fountain' is the toilet."

Aavraak stared at her blankly.

"The toilet is what you... put your waste into."

Aavraak laughed for several moments, having to grip the door jamb in her mirth. "Oh my *sreshythe*! As your people say, 'that is a good one!'"

"I wasn't making a joke."

Aavraak blinked at her. "You make waste in a fountain of *clean* water?"

"Yes. The water flushes the waste away. The water in the tank at the back, I mean. It flushes the waste."

"I am suppose that does make sense for... for solid waste. But what if I only need to 'make water'? There is so much clean water in there! It is so *wasteful*!"

"Yeah, I agree. At my house, Shimá had all the toilets replaced with efficiency toilets that use reused water from elsewhere in the house. That kind of reused water is called 'gray water.' The only water that leaves the house is from when the toilet flushes."

"But that is not so here?"

"That is 'not so' in most parts of the country. Most parts of the *world*, even. Earth, I mean. At least I think so, anyway. Shimá had to get our toilets from Japan, I think."

Aavraak looked incredulously between her and the toilet. Then she shrugged. "*DrAsh'ah hyi vaa-ḥkahvee, esh ke lo*

*dohkrahmaa, esh kye h̄yi taahkaa,*” she said in an offhand manner.

“What does that mean?” Sally asked.

Thinking a moment to translate it, Aavraak finally said, “I am unsure how to translate. Is Englitch having a word meaning ‘a culture we find very strange’?”

“Um... ‘primitive’?”

“No no. I am knowing that word, that is close but is not what I mean.”

“Er... ‘barbaric’? ‘Civilized’ is what people in our culture tend to call ourselves, but ‘barbaric’ for cultures they tend to look down on.”

“Ah yes, ‘barbaric’ and ‘civilized.’ So what I am saying before is meaning ‘Barbarism is civilized to one who lives where another is a stranger.’ It is what we say when we are needing to remember that to others, we are perhaps the barbaric ones.”

“Oooh, I like that one,” Dalia said. “It’s still kind of condescending, but in a self-deprecating way. Er... not self-deprecating, exactly. Like... like you’re making fun of your own culture by basically going ‘Hey, they probably think we’re barbarians, so I shouldn’t think that of them.’”

“Er, yes, I am guessing that is right.”

“In English, we say ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do.’”

Aavraak nodded. “Simple and accurate. I am not knowing where Rome is, but I am guessing that is not necessary to understand.”

“Exactly,” Sally said.

The three girls went back to work unpacking their things into their closets. They were pleased to find there was enough room in the dorm rooms that walking around the room past furniture wasn't likely to be an issue, not if they left everything where it was. Before putting away her own things, Kobalos fluttered over to the window and looked outside.

Dalia paused what she was doing and turned to Aavraak. "I just remembered something, Aavraak. When you introduced yourself, you pronounced your name something like 'Ah-ahv-rah-ahk.' Have we been mispronouncing your name all this time?"

"Yes and no. In Formal Drovok, it is Ah-ahv-rah-ahk. Yet in *informal* Drovak, it is just 'Ahv-Rahk.' It is spelled, in your letters, A-A-V-R-A-A-K in both forms of Drovok, though."

"How did you catch that, Dalia?" Sally asked.

"That phrase she said... it had a rhyme and meter to it. It was like a haiku, but 7-7-7 instead of 7-5-7. And then I realized when she said her name for the first time, that it was six syllables, a slight pause, then six more syllables."

"Yes, you are correct. Formal Drovok is like a poem. Informal Drovok is not. Here, I shall say the same phrase as before, but in Informal Drovok: '*Nehszy tahkah et drAshob.*'"

"Wow, that sounds a lot easier to say," Sally said.

Aavraak nodded. "Yes. That is why it is Informal Drovok."

Their curiosity sated for awhile, they went back to unpacking.

Opening her trunk, the first thing Dalia removed was an adorable smiling teddy bear named – according to the name tag on his chest – Mr. Hugs. He was brown with black ears, and looked so normal Sally commented on it.

“Wow, you brought a teddy bear? I was expecting a stuffed dragon or something,” Sally said. “And such a cute name!”

“Yeah, I’ve had him since I was three, but I don’t think you’ve seen him when we’ve played together before. By the way, don’t touch Mr. Hugs until I tell you it’s alright. Um... he can get a little scary if someone unauthorized touches him.”

She put Mr. Hugs into the corner of her bed.

“What do you mean by ‘scary’?” Sally asked. “He’s just a teddy bear. Right?”

“He’s a magical teddy bear, enchanted to be able to move. And change. I think he’s cute in both forms, but I know that most people would call his other form scary.”

“Okay, duly noted,” Sally said, going back to unpacking.

“Says on this map,” Nizoni said, “that there is a common room down on the ground floor. It has televisions, comfortable chairs, games, and a pair of vending machines for snacks. Oh, and a refrigerator. Interesting.”

Once they put everything away, Kobalos perched on Dalia’s shoulder and they went down to look at the common room. It was very large, and already had several people in it. But first year students came to the school before most of the others. Which didn’t mean they were unsupervised in the dorm building, no sirree. There was a pair of older students, both 17 years old, who were the RA’s. The RA’s room was on

the ground floor, close to the entrance. The RA's for the girls' dorm were Arlene Starling and Persephone Rose.

Having seen everything there was to see in the dorms, and it being somewhat late now, Nizoni and Dalia said their goodbyes, Nizoni heading home and Dalia heading back up to her room.

*'I was kinda hoping you'd have your own bedroom,'* said a girl's voice the moment she walked in. Dalia looked behind her; Sally and Aavraak were still in the common room. She closed the door.

"Yes, Doñela, so was I. Oh well."

*"Oh well?" You hear that, Tamir? She said "Oh well."*

Tamir, who was digging through one of her suitcases for his book, shrugged. Doñela rolled her eyes at him.

*'You do realize it's going to be kinda hard to live with you if you have to be constantly quiet whenever I talk, right?'*

Dalia shrugged. *'I can thought-speak to you.'*

*'Yeah but that's boring,'* Doñela said back. *'And still means I have to be quiet. You know, ME. I – Doñela Ravenstone – am expected to be quiet.'*

"I'll... I'll tell Sally about the two of you, eventually. And maybe Aavraak too. I don't know this Kohana girl yet, she hasn't showed up. I only saw her a little earlier."

Doñela would have said something else, but the door opened then, derailing her train of thought.

"Is this room 213?" the narrow-faced girl asked.

"Um... Yes, it is. The doors are numbered." Then, embarrassed she'd been unintentionally rude, she said, "Sorry. Kohana Sato, right?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"They uh, they left your stuff on that bed," Dalia said, gesturing at it.

"Pardon me?"

Dalia sighed, and repeated herself more loudly. The girl smiled and nodded. "Thank you. I'm Kohana Sato alright. Who are you?"

"Me? Um, I'm Dalia Ravenstone."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Dalia Ravenstone."

"Likewise, Kohana Sato."

Kohana went over to her part of the room and began to unpack. Dalia went back to her corner and pulled several posters out of one of her suitcases. Using blue sticky-tack, she put the posters up on the wall closest to her bed. Kohana glanced her way.

"Who're those people in your posters?"

Dalia felt the knot tighten as she wondered whether or not to answer. After a few moments of thought, she decided to take a risk and tell the truth. Not the whole truth – Kohana could look up the names if she cared enough to do so – but the truth. It would help her to find out now whether or not Kohana would be a good fit. It wouldn't be easy, though. She took a calming breath before attempting it.

"Um... well uh... thats one – I mean, uh, this... this one here is um, Lupita Nyongo," she said, getting the easy one out of the way first. "And the uh, the one on her right is of Lav-erne Cox. And uh, I'm just about to, yaknow, put up one of uh, of Janet Mock."

"Oh. I think those names are familiar. They're actresses, aren't they?"



“Um, yes. I mean, two of them are for sure, but uh, Janet Mock is mostly a uh, a writer. They're... well, they're three of my uh, my favorite black celebrities.”

“Cool,” Kohana said. Dalia felt the knot in her stomach unclench.

Dalia finished putting up the poster. As she put the last corner in place, she spotted Tamir taking his book into the closet, and the anxious knot in her belly tightened again, but Kohana had looked down at her open suitcase just in time and hadn't noticed anything odd. Doñela gave Dalia a significant look at this. She gave Doñela a frown.

When she was done with her own unpacking and poster placing, Dalia pulled Gegauassi out of her backpack and opened him up. She went through the process of waking him up, and was surprised when it took less time than usual; only two presses of his 'on' button.

“Uhhhhhh...” he said loudly, making Kohana jump with a squeak of fright. “I was having a nap!”

“I know you were, you lazy pile of silicon chips! Bring up the GTN for me so I can check Kauldron, okay?”

“Yeah yeah,” Gegauassi said. “Doing it. Oh hey, the GTN connection is via Fae Springs. I take it we're in your dorm now? Yeah, looks like a dorm room, from what little I can see through my webcam.”

“Yes, it's my dorm room. Sally is one of our room-mates.”

“Oooh. Is Hermes unpacked yet?”

“No he isn't. Focus on the task at hand, not on your crush on my friend's tablet.”

“Jesus Murphy! Your computer talks!” Kohana said.

"Yeah, I talk," Gegauassi said. "Never met a magical computer before?"

"No. They're too expensive, eh?"

"Oh I wasn't expensive. I was bought second-hand after my old owner got tired of my personality. And anyway, Belanger Industries will gladly convert your existing computer to a magical model for a much smaller fee of \$100."

"Yeah that's too high," Kohana said softly, "and thaumelectric bridges are even more expensive, aren't they?"

"I came with one already. But if you're looking to convert, I can look up prices for you."

"If you want to, I guess."

"Oh wait, you're not an authorized user."

"Just do it, Gegauassi," Dalia said.

Gegauassi had the Internet up by then for Dalia, and so he opened a tab in the background to Wands And Wards as Dalia checked her Kauldron feed.

"Oh yeah, you've got a point there. Just searched for thaumelectric bridges on Wands And Wards. Cheapest one is three hundred dollars."

"Yeah, we can't afford that," Kohana said quietly.

"Well I hope you warded your laptop against magic, or else it'll fry around here," Gegauassi said.

Kohana turned red in the face and cast her eyes down. "I don't have one. Those are too expensive, too."

"What? No they aren't. Let's see, mundane Internet, checking eBay. Ah yeah, here's a used netbook style computer for \$70. Another for \$65. And I know you can get a – *ahem* – tablet computer for less than \$50 if you get the

right kind. Also, warding mundane computers against magic is pretty cheap. Belanger Industries does it for \$20."

"Though Shimá can do it for free," Dalia said.

Kohana shrugged. "I suppose I could ask Mum about it."

"Um, in the meantime, if you need to use a computer, you can use Gegauassi. Um, if I'm not using him at the time."

"Ugh, thanks for giving me more work, Dalia. But I guess I should get used to more work since you're in school again. So yeah, Kohana can use me when you're not, if that's what you want. Though the school does have a computer lab, too. At least there's one mentioned on its GTN page."

"Thank you very much, um... What's your name?" Kohana asked.

"Gegauassi," Dalia said. "To say it slower, Geh-gow-ass-see. It's a made-up name. Sally gave me the idea. We got it from Ge, Ga, Au, As, and Si, the letter symbols for Germanium, Gallium, Gold, Arsenic, and Silicon, all metals used in electronics."

"Oh. Well thank you very much, Gegauassi," she said, bowing.

"Soo," Gegauassi said in an exaggerated Canadian accent, "hoo boot them, uh... hockeys, eh? Is that the one where you hit the fairy with a stick?"

Kohana giggled as Dalia rolled her eyes. "It's *a* puck, Gegauassi," Dalia said, "Not *the* Puck."

"Oooh, for sure," Gegauassi continued in the same fake accent. "I doont noo much about hockey, eh?"

Kohana was now giggling hard enough to have to lean against the wall, her face red from the exertion.

“Ooo noo doon't have the biscuit, eh? Den we'd have ter break in a nyew roomie, eh?”

“Your accent is slipping into Swedish, Gegauassi,” Dalia chided him.

“Ach, aye naer was a one fer good accents, lassie.”

Kohana was laughing full-on now, having slipped down to the floor.

“I like this one. She laughs at my jokes.”

“Yes, good. But please stop now, before she passes out laughing.”

“Okay. I'll see if I can say anything to kill the mood. Let's see... dead puppies floating down a river on a raft of human corpses. A necklace of kitten skulls. A dead raven in a blender.”

“Young fella, if you're lookin' for trouble I'll accommodate ya,” said Kobalos in a man's voice, flapping his wings in agitation.

Far from killing the mood, this had Kohana down all the way on the floor, laughing so hard she was wheezing, while Dalia gave Gegauassi a look of confusion, wondering what his programmers were smoking over there at the Belanger Industries server farms. Then Kohana's wheezing got worse quickly, and when it did, Dalia noticed Kohana was sprouting white fur on her face and arms. *This* was what finally killed Kohana's mood. She very quickly got control of herself and the fur receded. She seemed so embarrassed about it that Dalia pretended she hadn't noticed. But privately, Dalia was burning to ask Kohana why her fur was white, rather than red.

Until Aavraak and Sally came into the room, Kohana silently unpacked, and Dalia kept thinking the same thing on a loop: *Should I tell her I think her fur is cool? Or would that be weird, or maybe racist? But it might defuse the tension. Unless it makes things worse? I dunno, maybe I should tell her? But now it's too late to say anything, it'd come off as weird.* She was relieved when the other two came into the room and made their introductions.

With four people in the dorm room, Doñela had to float up to the ceiling to stay out of the way. She could have gone through them, but she didn't like that feeling. She kept giving Dalia significant looks, and Dalia kept ignoring her in favor of her GTN surfing. It was a good distraction from the endless cycle of worried thoughts regarding the situation with Kohana revealing her fur by accident. Not a *great* distraction, but a good one.

Before getting ready for bed, Dalia went downstairs and into the common room, finding the kitchen part again. She looked inside the fridge and was glad to find that Shimá had left her a box of cream. She took a dish like a bowl with a wide lip out of the cupboard and filled it to just under the rim with cream. She put the cream container back in the fridge, and took the bowl of cream carefully upstairs. She was going to have to find an easier way of doing this, she knew.

When she came into the dorm room with the bowl of cream, everyone looked at her. Only Kohana looked confused, though.

"What's with the bowl of milk?" Kohana asked.

"It's cream. It's for the hobs."

“Hobs? What are those?”

“Little tiny fairy people about eight inches tall who come out at night to clean in exchange for cream. I know Fae Springs feeds their hobs on their own, but hobs *really* love cream, and they'll appreciate us giving them more.”

“That's an actual thing?” Kohana asked, bewildered.

Sally chuckled. “Aren't you a Kitsune? Shouldn't you know about things like that?”

Kohana glared at Sally. “Oh so because I'm a fairy, I should know everything about Faery? Do you have any idea how big the world is? Or how many Faery realms there are? There's a lot, is all I know for sure. Too many to keep track of, really. Tell me, you're a human, eh? Then you should be able to tell me everything about all the animals of Earth, for sure.”

Sally sighed. “Sorry, Kohana. That was rude of me. I'll try not to say things like that again.”

Kohana nodded curtly at her. “Apology accepted. But yeah, I don't know much about Faery. We live full time on Earth – in an apartment, not even in a hollow hill. This is actually the first time in my life I've even *been* in Tirffiniol. Or any other Faery realm, for that matter.”

“Ah. Well the same is true for me,” Sally said. “What about you, Dalia?”

“Half of my house resides in Tirffiniol, remember? But not counting that, I've been in Tirffiniol before.”

“You have?” Sally said, confused. Then her eyes went wide as understanding dawned. “Oh. Right. That was the time with that horrid Park girl, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Park girl?” Kohana asked.

"Anastasia Park. Most of her family are not, well... not very nice to um, to weirdos. Um... like my family. They're also racist. You might have problems with them too, Kohana. And you, Aavraak. They, uh... they don't like non-humans much, either."

"Thank you for warning," Aavraak said. "But I feel there is more story. A thing you are not saying."

"I uh... I guess so," Dalia said. "Um... well uh, years ago, she came around to the uh, the side of my yard, to the side wall I mean, and told me that she heard my family had our own, uh, our own portal to Tirffiniol. Which, um... yeah. We do."

Kohana's eyes went wide, and she whistled in awe. "Your family owns its own portal to Tirffiniol?"

"Um, yeah. Two, technically. But Anastasia meant the one in our back yard shed. Shimá is great with uh, wards and portals. She works at Pacific Northwest Tirffiniol Nature Preserve, and it was, um, easier for her to uh, to make her own permanent portal there, step through, and shadow-walk the rest of the way than to uh, drive to the nearest public portal and walk through the warded area around the portal before shadow-walking to work from there."

"Wow!" Kohana said. "Your own portal to Tirffiniol!"

"Tell her the rest of the story," Sally said.

"Yeah, okay. Um... let's see... so yeah. So uh... so yeah, I told her we do. And uh, well... she didn't believe me. So uh, she asked me to prove it. Um... pressured me into it, really. So, well, I did. I opened the shed with uh, a little help," she said, glancing briefly up at Doñela, not that that would mean anything to the others if they even noticed.

"Anyway, uh... so I got in. We got in. I showed her the portal. She uh, didn't... didn't believe me. Told me to prove it. Um, to prove it was really a Tirffiniol portal. I didn't want to, but... well... yeah. She pressured me into it again, and so I uh, I opened it. So she could see. But she ran inside. And um... said something about it could've been an illusion. Wanted to make sure it was really... the place.

"I ran after her, because uh, we weren't supposed to be there and I uh, I guess I had this silly idea I could like, drag her back or something. Like I had the spine or the strength for that. Well, um... we ran into some weird flowers that... well... they uh, they made us see things, you know. Weird things. I think it was some kind of... of drug? In the air, I mean. The scent of the flowers was a drug, I think. We smelled them and uh, we got kinda high."

"Gods' Nightmares flowers," Aavraak supplied.

"Really? Well okay. Anyway, um... yeah. But then the weather changed, raining really hard. I dunno, it was weird; sky was blue one minute, black the next. We tried getting to the uh, the portal thingy, but we'd gotten lost, ended up in a forest. Nearly got trapped there. Shimá had to rescue us. The Parks have never, um, forgiven me for that. Even though it was Anastasia's fault."

"Yeah," agreed Gegauassi. "And likely the only reason Anastasia became magical at all was that little trip. Her family barely have enough magical thinking to count as witches. Anastasia was mundane until she got proof of magic and wanted some for herself at last. See, Dalia, I *do* remember when you tell me things."

"What are the Parks like?"



“Rich like us, but snotty about it. They’re old money, I think. My parents and grandparents all know what it’s like to be poor, cuz uh, it’s only because of Shimá’s portal-making work and ward crafting work they got rich, though other branches of our family are or have been wealthy. I mean, I guess Papa’s family were upper middle class from having taught at some school in Canada, but the rest of them...

“Anyway, we have... well, I’m not like, bragging or anything, but we have a lot of cool stuff now, but they teach us all how to be thrifty. They don’t buy things just, you know, to have things. Everything has to have some kind of use, even if it’s just, uh, you know, like decorative or for spiritual reasons.

“And yeah, they teach us all to be thrifty. All us kids in the family, that is. In case we’re ever, you know, down on our luck. Or lost, or something. We only get one or two gifts per family member on birthdays and a few more on Yule, with the exception of books; we get *lots* of books as gifts. Um...” she wondered if she should tell them about Kira and her magical gifts, and decided it was too complicated to go into.

“So,” she continued, “We earn our uh, our allowances with chores. Nine dollars an hour, because that’s the highest amount most places in the US will pay people. My parents say minimum wage needs to go up to \$20 an hour to adjust for decades of inflation as it should’ve been doing for years anyway, but they fight for \$15 instead; there’s enough resistance to even that much.”

“Well good,” Kohana said. “I’m a bit jealous of your family’s wealth, but at least they’re not afraid of the truth, like most rich people are. I’m glad they’re teaching you these things.”

"Yeah. I uh, bought Gegauassi with my saved-up allowance, in fact. He wasn't cheap; he came with a thaumelectric bridge, is why. I think his model is cheaper now, but at the time it was pretty steep. Didn't know he was so lazy at the time, I just thought he was funny."

"Yeah yeah, whine and moan, whine and moan," Gegauassi said. "But you know you love me."

"I do. Despite your bad attitude."

"Um," Kohana said, "your parents don't make you work for your food, do they? Or rent?"

Dalia's face hardened. "What? No, that's absurd. A parent's job is to take good care of their children, to the best of their ability. A child's only job is to be a child, learn, and grow. And help out with chores sometimes."

"Good. I was a bit worried for a moment, with the talk about teaching you thriftiness."

"They take us to the store and have us figure out what we can buy on the budget they set, and look for deals and cheap stuff, so we can do it ourselves later. They're not monsters."

"Sorry, sorry, I just... the thought came to my head and I had to get an answer or it wouldn't leave me alone."

Dalia softened. "You're forgiven. I know what that's like."

"Well this has been a lovely chat, girls," Gegauassi said, "but it's pretty late now. We all need to... oh gods I can't believe I'm saying this, but we all need to get used to waking up... early." He made a sound as though he was shuddering. "So I'm going to go to sleep now. What you do is up to you, but classes on Monday start at 8:30 am. Toodles."

With that, his screen went dark and he closed his own lid.

"What time is it, anyway?" Sally asked.

"It's 9:30 at night," Kohana said.

"Yeah, if we're gonna get used to getting enough sleep for classes by Monday we should start being in bed by now," Sally agreed.

So the four of them finished up their activities for the night and got ready for bed. Dalia went into the bathroom to change into her pajamas and hair bonnet, and she'd noticed Kohana had also changed in the bathroom. She didn't mention it. She went to bed instead.

Dalia hadn't realized until she lay down just how tired she was, which was unusual for her. She fell asleep within 20 minutes, dreaming of many-legged creatures skittering behind the walls, and for some reason, the smell of flowers, honey, and a faint undertone of overripe fruit. It wasn't an unpleasant smell, though. There was a placid smile on her face as she slept.





## Chapter Nine: The Crush

*Saturday, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017*

DALIA, BRANDON, SALLY, Aavraak, and Kohana spent most of the next morning exploring what they could of the grounds, Kobalos on Dalia's shoulder, and all of them dressed in casual clothing since it wasn't a school day. Most of their clothes were pretty normal, even Aavraak's clothes, except for Dalia's. She had on the same black cat sneakers as yesterday, with skull-print stockings and a black goth dress with laces up the front and back, its black lace skirt going to her knees. She was also holding a white parasol in one hand to keep the sun off her, a small black coffin-shaped purse on a long strap, and was wearing sunglasses that looked almost like steampunk goggles. Her hair in locs had been pulled into two bundles of hair similar to pigtails and topped with black and white skull ribbons, and this completed the look. When Kohana commented on Dalia's parasol and sunglasses, she had responded by saying, "black people get sunburns too, you know. And I can't stand the greasiness of sunscreen. Also, my eyes are sensitive."

The ground was pretty firm and the grass wasn't too tall, which meant Brandon could go around most of it with a few exceptions. The fact there were lots of trails, and the streams had bridges over them, helped a lot. Dalia spent nearly half an hour staring longingly at the great wall that kept people out of the Dark Grove. Kobalos spent a lot of time in the air, flying around above the campus. Doñela, too, was in the air, floating above their heads and looking around at everything.

After lunch, they explored around a little more, staying in sight of the building that the flying chairs landed at so they could see the new arrivals, Kobalos at Dalia's shoulder again. They watched the other kids and parents filter in, but they all looked like humans, to their disappointment. But they kept watching just in case.

"Why's there only three non-humans?" Sally asked when everyone had filtered past. "And why did they all end up in our class? I'm not complaining about that second thing, just... I thought there'd be more."

"Mum says that the resolution letting us learn here is under a trial period," Kohana said. "They're letting in three of us to see how it goes, and if it goes well, they'll let more in. But I wouldn't get too hopeful; it's not like there's a lot of us clamoring to get in. I'm here because I want to expand my powers, and I don't have a high-ranking Kitsune to learn from, because we're poor. I imagine that Aashabahk boy is here for a similar reason. What about you, Aavraak?"

"A bit of that, yes. Also a bit of... what is phrase? Getting to know someone else's... their uh, like a trade. I find more about your people, you find more about mine, that kind of trade."

"Cultural exchange?" asked Sally.

"Yes, cultural exchange. That is it. Also, improve my English. Teach others better English for better trading with humans. Three good reasons to come."

"But why all in the same class?" Sally repeated.

Kohana shrugged. "No idea. Might just be easier to keep an eye on us all that way. Anyway, we saw the newcomers. We should explore the inside of the school, find where all the classrooms are."

"Good idea," Brandon said. "There's something about the sunlight here that makes me feel giddy."

"Oh you'll get used to that, dearie," said the unfamiliar voice of a woman behind them.

They turned around. About five feet away from them, a short, plump white woman in her 50's stood there smiling. She had light brown hair, a friendly smile, and large, kind eyes. She was wearing the blue uniform of the daytime cleaning staff, a floppy pink hat on her head, and had been carrying boxes with her on a dolly, but had paused to rest. Doñela, spotting her, floated over to examine the pink hat. Dalia tried to not look at her as she did.

"Pardon?" Brandon asked.

She gestured vaguely at the sun. "The sunlight here, dearie. You'll get used to it. I don't know why it makes people giddy at first, but after a few days you'll feel normal again. I've been working here since last year, and let me tell you, going back to Earth was an interesting experience. Anyway, didn't mean to eavesdrop, just passing by."

"That's okay," Dalia said. "Um... what's your name? I'm Dalia."

The woman gestured to a patch on her uniform. It said, 'Aurora Hollander.'

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Hollander," Dalia said, sounding a bit distracted. Doñela was grinning mischievously and making like she was going to snatch the woman's hat off. The others all nodded and agreed with Dalia.

Aurora Hollander giggled. "Sorry, it's just Ms. Hollander. I never got married. Never was very interested in that sort of thing, you know. The men I've known in my life have been rather boorish, to put it lightly."

Dalia glared at Doñela, and thought-spoke at her. *'Don't you dare!'*

*'But it'd be hilarious!'*

*'I said NO!'*

"I like your hat, Ms. Hollander," Sally said. "Is it part of the uniform?"

"Oh goodness no, it's my lucky hat. I always wear it whenever I go outside, in case it rains or there's a bird flying close by. Far easier to clean a hat than hair, you know. And when I'm not wearing it, I can fold it up and put it in my pocket, so it's always with me in case I need it."

"Cool," Dalia said. Doñela, hearing the words 'lucky hat,' had backed off with a sigh, pouting.

"Anyway... like I said, dearies, I didn't mean to intrude or overhear anything, I was just taking these boxes inside. I'd better get back to that now before I get caught dawdling again. Ta ta for now!"

Ms. Hollander, whistling a jaunty tune, went back to hauling the boxes away on the dolly. She turned around as she did, and Dalia noticed she wasn't just large in the belly,

but also in the... well, let's just say she probably wouldn't need cushions on her chairs. Dalia looked away suddenly and said, "Let's go explore inside the school, it's hot out here even with the parasol."

Since that's what they'd been planning to do anyway, the others agreed. They soon headed into the building, Ms. Hollander ahead of them, now dancing a little as she whistled. Dalia was grateful they were going inside; she was developing a headache in the weird Tirffiniol sunlight. She took a couple pain relievers from a bottle in her purse and went to the nearest water fountain to swallow them.



IT SEEMED, AT FIRST, that it was going to be fairly boring, exploring the inside of the school. It was just a school, after all. The corridors were plain, their colors the same as the ones in the dorms. There was a gymnasium, an auditorium with a stage, and loads of classrooms. About the only thing unusual about it, aside from the methods used to construct it, was the fact it had no lockers in the corridors. It was a boarding school, so there wasn't really a need for lockers, except in the locker rooms for PE and sports. Dalia also liked the art room and the music room.

Still, that was only if you weren't paying enough attention. If you looked more carefully, there was a lot more to the school than being a school. There were little winged pixies of several different species flying around from place to place and nesting in the rafters, or in unused closets, unused desks,



and other nooks and crannies. The ones that weren't taken up by gnomes, that is – little brown men ranging from five to six inches tall, wearing intricate and colorful outfits, occasionally shooting little crossbow bolts or tiny guns at the pixies and other creatures. The gnomes apparently had a complete city in a storage room in the basement, that some of the kids had heard from older siblings was made of tiny little bricks, stolen bits of drywall, little shingles, and teeny doors. By all accounts, the gnomes had a mix of mouse-drawn carts and little cars that ran on magic, and if you went down there and were careful not to disturb them, you might see some of them praying in their miniature temples. But other gnomes lived in other parts of the school and hunted mice or had little farms on windowsills in unused classrooms.

Then too, there were dozens of species of little creatures in the building or on the grounds that nobody seemed to know what they were called. Some looked like insects with glittering carapaces, others seemed to be furry snakes with mouse-like ears, or others like walking plants. Dalia even thought she saw a nest of fairy bees in one of the rafters, looking like they were made of glass lit from within by an amber light and not as threatening-looking, defending their hives with a mist that caused confusion and made people walk away in a daze.

They were looking for the library when Dalia saw something that caught her attention the way a hidden rabbit trap does – suddenly and completely, leaving you helpless and hanging in the air. One of the girls coming toward them was what had caught her attention; she had a dark honey-toned brown skin that was for some reason called 'olive skin,' gor-

geous brown eyes behind purple wire-rim glasses with rectangular lenses that had rounded-off corners, and her brown hair was cut evenly to just an inch under her ears, but her bangs were long, though tucked to the side. Her hair was tucked behind her ears. She was wearing a black dress with white dots on it here and there, and her shoes were plain black flats. Dalia also noticed she had earrings on, little silver spirals that dangled.

When Dalia saw the girl, who was on her way to the gymnasium, her gaze glued instantly to the girl's face so thoroughly that Dalia ran right into a wall and fell over backwards into Sally, both girls falling in a heap on the ground. Kobalos squawked in alarm and flew away. Doñela, of course, laughed at her, and Dalia was glad she was the only one who could hear *that*.

"Ow! Watch it, Dalia!"

"What has happened?" Aavraak asked.

Feeling her face growing hot, Dalia struggled to stand, and then helped Sally up.

"Sorry," she said in a tiny voice so quiet she repeated herself more loudly without being prompted. "Sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going."

"What? Why?" Sally asked, turning the direction Dalia had been looking. She saw the girl just as she went into the gymnasium.

"Oh," Sally said with dawning comprehension. She turned to Dalia and grinned. "Dalia has a crush!"

Dalia turned away, her face burning hot. "Don't tease me!"

"I'm not. I think it's cute. Well, you have good taste, at least; she's very pretty."

"Stop it!"

"What is a crush?" Aavraak asked.

"She thinks that girl is pretty. So pretty that she ran into a wall because she was staring."

"Ah, you wish to mate with her?"

Dalia choked up, rounding on Aavraak, her eyes bugging in mortified shock. She made a bunch of indistinct noises, Sally's smile growing wider all the time. Kobalos laughed. Brandon's face went red and he made similar shocked noises to Dalia's.

"Oh Aavraak," Sally said, "we don't usually say it like that. Plus, you know, we're only 12. I'm sure Dalia's barely even thinking about hand-holding at this point."

In fact, Dalia had not been thinking even *that* far ahead. She just knew she wanted to keep looking at the girl, or she would, but the girl wasn't here anymore and also she didn't want to make the girl uncomfortable by staring. And anyway, she didn't know what was past hand-holding or cuddling, and was too terrified to ask anyone. She'd had a sex education class once, but it had left her more confused than anything. She knew the mechanics of reproduction, but the class taught her nothing about what her feelings toward other girls meant, or anything really important, and it made a lot of ridiculous assumptions about gender, but she supposed she'd find out by the time she was 18. It had taken her parents several days to untangle that mess and give her a proper education. But she hadn't been listening at the time, she'd been too embarrassed.

“Oh my god, the look on your face reminds me of those animes where the people get nosebleeds when they've got a crush on someone. Sorry, Aavraak, complicated cultural reference.”

Aavraak nodded once in acknowledgment.

“Well,” Sally said, still grinning, “forget the library for now, let's go introduce you.” She said this as she grabbed Dalia's arm and tried pulling her into the gymnasium.

“No, please no,” Dalia protested weakly, digging her feet in against the pull.

“Silly bean, I'm not *really* going to introduce you. I don't know the girl myself, and anyway, you'd probably pass out or die of shock if I did. We'll just set you right here by the door... yes, like that... and then I'll go in and introduce myself instead. Don't worry, I won't tell her you're interested, or ask weird questions. I'm just interested in getting her name for you.”

It took Sally several nerve-racking minutes – nerve-racking for Dalia, anyway – to find the girl again. When she did, the girl was standing by a woman who looked to be in her 30's and also had olive skin, except her own hair was a long, sleek black. The older woman – the girl's mother, Sally supposed, given they looked similar to one another – was wearing jeans and a black sleeveless shirt, and had a bunch of pouches on a belt around her middle, one set of which looked like wand pouches. Her shirt had short sleeves, and on the right arm, just below the shoulder, was a black tattoo of an eight-armed star made of arrows pointing outward from a central point. The arrows going straight up and down

and side to side were longer than the diagonal arrows. Sally didn't recognize the symbol.

She did, however, spot a name tag on the older woman. It said 'Melora Metaxas.' She was putting a name tag on her daughter, which read 'Calandra Metaxas.' Even though she had gotten the information in an unplanned way, Sally shrugged and went to go find Dalia.

"So I didn't talk with her, but I found out her name anyway, from name tags. She's Calandra Metaxas. Her mom is Melora Metaxas."

Dalia's eyes went wide. "Oh my gods, she's the daughter of a *teacher*!?"

"Is she?" Sally asked.

"Yes! Melora Metaxas is the Magical Self Defense teacher!"

"Well I'm not sure that was her mom. Could've been an aunt or a cousin or something. But they look related, is my point."

Dalia made a sound like a pained laugh. "Like that'll make a difference." She began chewing on her chewy necklace out of nerves.

"Why should it matter if she's a teacher's kid? Relative. Whatever. Why should that matter?"

"It just... I dunno, it just does. Let's find the library."

Dalia turned around hastily, still chewing on her chewy necklace, pulling out a map of the school. Her friends hurried to catch up.

*'Dalia's got a cruu-uush, Dalia's got a cruu-uush!'* Doñela teased, floating around her head in an annoying way. Dalia ignored her.

"Here, it's on the east side of the building," Dalia said. "I can't tell which floor, though."

"Hey, is that it?" Sally asked when they got to the easternmost corridor on the ground level. The doors were twice as tall as an average human being, and they were open.

"I think so," Brandon said. "Oh hey, it says 'Library' over the door. Great."

They went inside, and were immediately surrounded by books. It was like being in a forest suddenly, except with books. Especially when they looked up. The reason for the confusion about what floor the library was on was solved at once, doing this; the library was on all three levels, and they could see all the way up to the ceiling. Each level had its own walkways, wide enough that people with a fear of heights could still move around up there, but you could easily look down all the way. And flying through the air here and there were pixies fully twice the size of normal. Dalia had never seen pixies that big before in her life, and her family had a hive of pixies living in the house and another one outside the Tirffiniol house. These over-sized pixies seemed to be working there, putting books back on shelves or dusting things off with their magic. They were big enough that most books only took two pixies to haul around, and many of the smaller books could be managed by a single pixie.

One of the pixies spotted Kobalos on Dalia's shoulder and flew over, trying to shoo him away. Kobalos flapped his wings at the pixie and cawed, but didn't budge from her shoulder.

"No pets in the library!" the pixie said in an oddly normal adult voice, this one a male.

"He's not a pet, he's a familiar."

The pixie crossed his arms and stared Dalia down.  
"What's the difference?"

"The difference is familiars are mentally linked with their witches, and are very intelligent."

The pixie considered this thoughtfully. "So you control him?"

"I could. I don't, though, because he's at least as smart as I am, and pretty well behaved."

"*How* well behaved? We're mainly concerned about noise and, well, animal waste."

"I have an understanding with Kobalos. He knows when to be quiet, I just have to tell him the right word, or sign the right sign. As to animal waste... Kobalos, where should you poop?"

In a perfect imitation of a voice that sounded like her own but which she knew to be Doñela's version of her voice, Kobalos said, "Preston's plate."

Dalia felt her face heat up as Sally, Brandon, and Kohana laughed at this. Aavraak raised an eyebrow, as she didn't get it. The pixie was crossing his arms and glaring.

"Kobalos, you know that's not right. Where should you poop?"

"Preston's clothes," he said, again repeating something Doñela had said once.

"Ossification!" she snapped at him, through her friends' laughter.

"Sorry," Kobalos said, in Dalia's own voice. "Kobalos will be a good boy."

"Good. Now where should you poop?"

"In the grass outside, or in the birdy toilet," he said, still mimicking her voice.

"And you know the phrase that means to be quiet and well behaved until I say otherwise?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Inside voice, Kobalos."

"Yes. Inside voice, Kobalos. And that's a command, not just a confirmation."

Kobalos's response was to bow his head until she said, "Good boy." She turned to look at the pixie. "He'll be a good boy now, until I tell him he can relax."

The pixie considered this, said, "One moment please," and then flew off. A few minutes later, he flew back and stopped in front of her face.

"Your familiar may enter the library as long as he continues to be well behaved. Three noise complaints or one waste 'accident' and he'll be banned from the library. Understood?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good," the pixie said, and flew away.

With that obstacle overcome, Dalia and her friends – Doñela included – walked farther into the library, a quiet Kobalos perched on her shoulder, looking around at everything.

"Why did you say that long O-word, Dalia?" Kohana asked.

"It's a command word that means I'm serious about him needing to be serious and quit joking for now. It's only good for about 20 minutes before he goes back to normal. But



the 'inside voice' command works pretty much until dinner time."

"Cool," Kohana said. "But why that particular word?"

"Because it's not one I'd have any other reason to say."

"Ah, okay."

Distracted by the view in the library, looking over the edge, Brandon asked, "What keeps people and objects from falling all that way?"

*'Let's toss you over the side and find out,'* Doñela said sarcastically, again making Dalia glad she wasn't audible to the others.

"I dunno. Let's find a librarian and ask." Sally said.

They kept moving forward into an open space around a large, round, intricately carved wooden desk. There was a librarian sitting there reading a romance novel. She was short and slender, with long blonde hair and looked barely out of high school. If someone had said she was a cheerleader, Dalia and her friends could believe it.

The librarian looked up from her book. "Oh hi," she said in a cheery voice that was in keeping with the cheerleader image. "First students this year to find the library, huh? I guess I'll be seeing a lot of you, then? And your familiar, as long as he behaves."

"It's amazing," Dalia said in an awed voice, looking up again.

"It totally is. Glad to hear you think so. I'm Audrey Adon, the head librarian."

"Um, hi, ah, Audrey. Ms. Adon. I'm Dalia Ravenstone. This is Sally Anne Smith-Jones, Brandon Han, Kohana Sato, and Aavraak. Oh, and Kobalos, my familiar."

"Welcome to the library, all of you," Audrey said, grinning. "Well if there's anything you need or want to know about the library, or anything that can be found in it, let me know, okay? But if you can't find me, the pixies can help too."

"How do you keep things from falling down from those heights?" Brandon asked.

"Wards keep people from climbing over and jumping, or being pushed. Repels books and other objects too. And if someone leans over and tries to spit, the wards knock them back on their butts."

"Oh good. That's a relief."

"You guys want the guided tour? I'm not doing anything else right now, and I have a feeling you five are gonna be in here a lot more than most people."

"Can I camp out here and never leave my dorm?" Dalia asked.

Audrey laughed. "Sorry kid, no can do. The library closes at 11 pm and opens again at 7 am. And we have wards to detect any stragglers. It's easy to get lost in here."

"How many books can you check out at once?"

"You can have twenty books checked out at any given time. If you want to check out something and it's your twenty-first thing, you gotta bring something back first."

"How did someone so young get to be head librarian?"

She chuckled quietly. "I'm actually 41. I know, I look 18 or 19. But I've been living here in Tirffiniol with my mom since I was 12, and even though I was careful, I slipped up and ate something I shouldn't have, one of the local fruits. Now I'm a Tuunderfeerf, and I'll probably be 200 before I

start to look 40. My mom was head librarian before me. She fills in for me sometimes, but mostly she's retired."

"Do you have any recommendations?" Brandon asked.

"Yeah, actually. 'Tirffiniol Plants To Avoid and Their Properties' by Arleen Tiller. If I'd read that one before I was 15, I'd still be fully human."

They all chuckled appreciatively.

"Um, we're not going to turn Tuunderfeerf by being here in the school, are we?"

"Oh no. The school imports all its food from the mundane world. They do also make food for Tuunderfeerf to eat as well, because it's a special diet. For instance, I can't eat mundane meat or spinach. It's not enough iron to kill me, but it would make me violently ill."

"That doesn't sound very pleasant."

"No, it's really not. But don't worry; even if we ate nothing but Tirffiniol food here, you wouldn't turn Tuunderfeerf. You have to avoid eating certain Tirffiniol foods, but most are okay."

"Oh. Thanks for that."

"Anyway, how about that tour?"

Everyone nodding, Audrey got up and came out from behind the desk. She was barely taller than Dalia, and walked with a familiar sort of preternatural grace that Dalia recognized from Alvar Ravenstone. Dalia made a mental note to find Alvar and ask her if she was Tuunderfeerf as well.

The library had a lot of really amazing books. There were all the normal subjects, then there were magical subjects like they were learning. Dalia was amazed at the number of

books about the different faery realms and their inhabitants. But she was most drawn to the sub-section about faery animals, and the books about the Darker Realms. These were worlds that few humans ever ventured to because they were full of terrifying monsters and harsh climates, like one world where the most docile, friendly creature there was a wolf-like creature the size of a Shire horse that had red, glowing eyes and hydrochloric acid in its saliva. Dalia became so enthralled with the book about that world that she checked it out when the tour was done.

Annoyed that she wasn't allowed to touch anything, Doñela grabbed a book from a shelf anyway when Dalia wasn't looking, the flying book making a pixie swerve in the air and start gabbling angrily in its own language. Doñela hid the book up the back of Dalia's shirt, startling her. She was glad when she got back to the table so Doñela could remove it and hide under the table to read. (Thankfully, Doñela and Tamir could read in the dark.)

They'd ended up spending the whole afternoon in the library, to Audrey's amusement. Although part of this was because they ran into another student, the other non-human boy, Elliolynn Losolom. They were reading at a table when he came up to them, several books under one arm.

"Ah, greetings and hallucinations again, my compatriots," he said quietly when he found them there. "I see I am not the only student coming to the library on the second day." He was smiling warmly.

"Oh, uh, hi," Dalia said. Sally was off in another section at the moment, and Brandon hadn't said anything. "I uh, I'm Dalia Ravenstone. You're Elliolynn Losolom, right?"

"Indeed I am. Keen memory you have there, my lady."

"Er, okay. Thanks, I guess."

"Nice to meet you," Elliolynn said, bowing as he did.

"Likewise."

"And I recognize my room-mate Brandon Han," he added, bowing to Brandon.

"Hey, Eli."

Elliolynn smiled and nodded.

"May I join you?" Elliolynn asked, gesturing to an empty chair with his head.

"Sure, go ahead."

He pulled out the chair and sat down, placing his own books on the table at his left side.

"Yesterday, did you say you're an Aashabahk?" Brandon asked curiously.

"Yes, I did. A keen memory you have as well, my good man."

"Cool. So what exactly *is* an Aashabahk, anyway?"

"We are a sort of Lilin. We feed on hope. But being around us increases the hope in the area, it's a power of ours at work. It wouldn't make much sense to eat something like hope and not be able to increase the supply of it at any time, after all."

"No, I guess it wouldn't make much sense at all."

"Do you, uh... do you *only* eat that? I mean hope. Do you ever eat anything else?"

"Oh yes. We need regular food as well, until we are fully grown. Then as adults we only need regular food after serious injuries in order to recover our lost mass, most of which would be blood."

Sally came into the area where they were at and joined the table. They introduced each other before she sat down, Elliollynn standing up to bow before sitting down again.

"It must be cool," Sally said, "to be able to soar over the trees, fly around all over. Is it cool?"

"It is quite fun, yes. I do it as often as I can. Drives my family a bit mad sometimes, to tell the truth."

"So where do you live?" Brandon asked. "Dalia, Sally, and I live in Portland, Oregon on Earth."

"Really?" Elliollynn said, sounding awed. "I very much wish to see it sometime. I have never been to Earth. I'm from one of the Goblin cities east of here, it's called Uukrapetik."

"Wow," Kohana said. "That's like, the opposite of me. This is my first time ever in Tirffiniol."

"Oh? Aren't you a—"

"Kitsune, yes. My mother has been to Tirffiniol, but I haven't."

"Ah. Living full time on Earth, then?"

"Yes. My mother was a refugee."

"Fascinating. Tell me all about Earth, please."

The rest of the next few hours they spent telling Elliollynn all about Earth, and he just listened, wide-eyed, asking occasional questions. Then he got so excited that he took off to find books about the subject to read, and the rest of them went back to reading, which suited Dalia fine; her headache from earlier hadn't gotten any better, and was in fact getting worse, which sometimes happened if there were too many people around for her liking. Not all the time, but sometimes. It happened most often when she was actually tuning in on her surroundings.

Her headache slowly got a little better over the next few hours of quiet reading, so quiet that Kobalos fell asleep on her shoulder. But when they left the library to go to dinner, Ms. Hollander was cleaning in the corridor, and the smell of the chemicals made her headache get much worse.

Dalia Ravenstone had had a surprising number of headaches in her short life. Sunlight could cause one, even if she was wearing sunglasses. Being around a lot of people, or really intense people, could do it. It especially happened in crowds, among strangers or acquaintances she didn't know well, and when she was under stress. Well, more stress than usual for her, anyway. Right now she was rubbing her head; she had taken more pain reliever at a water fountain, but it was taking its sweet time kicking in. Thus, she suffered under the bright lights of the cafeteria at dinner, surrounded by entirely too many people in one room, all talking and laughing and making noise. (Even with the other levels of the cafeteria having silencing wards separating them.) At least Kobalos wasn't adding to her pain, he was being very quiet.

To help her cope, she pulled her sunglasses out of her purse and put them on, not caring how it looked; she had a doctor's note for them as something that helped her cope sometimes. These sunglasses were her favorite because their goggle-like design blocked light coming from the sides as well as the front. It wasn't perfect, but it was a lot better than ordinary sunglasses. Sally and Brandon would know better than to comment on them by now, but she dreaded the others asking about it. Which they did, at dinner.

"Wearing sunglasses indoors?" Kohana asked with a grin as she sat next to Dalia with her own tray.

"Headache. Light sensitivity," she said, staring at her plate like it was covered in maggots. The headache was killing her appetite, too.

"Oh, sorry," Kohana whispered. "Didn't realize it was a migraine."

"Not quite fully there yet, but close," Dalia said.

"Maybe you should go back to our dorm room," Sally suggested.

"Or the nurse," Brandon said.

"Dorm sounds good. Nurse can't help. Pain reliever hasn't kicked in yet. Sleep will help. See you guys," she said, getting up to clear her plate.

"No, I'll do that for you," Sally offered.

"Thanks, Sally," Dalia said weakly, and wobbled off out the door, passed an adult in the corridor but didn't have the energy to know or care who it was, and continued on to find her room, her friends watching her in concern until she was out of view.

By the time she got to her room, her head felt like it was being jack-hammered. When she got inside, she fell into her bed without even turning on the light, kicked off her shoes, rolled over, and lay there still, silent, and moaning in agony for what felt like an hour before falling asleep.



*SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017*

Dalia woke up on Sunday feeling a lot better than the night before, refreshed, her headache gone. So she got up,



went about her morning routine, and got dressed, this time in a simple green dress with silver trim, some plain black socks, and her usual casual shoes and purse. She was about to leave when she noticed two things. First, she was the only one up so far, the others all still asleep. Even Kobalos was snoozing on his perch. And second, Kohana wasn't looking well. She was rolling around in her sleep like she couldn't get comfortable, and her body language said this disturbed her. It didn't seem like she was having a nightmare, though, so Dalia left her be and left the dorm to go into the school.

She was just thinking she'd have the day to herself when Doñela appeared in the air in front of her.

*'Good morning, good mor-ning!'* Doñela sang.

*'Don't you have anything better to do?'* Dalia asked her with thought-speech so people wouldn't think she was crazy.

Hanging upside down in the air and letting her semi-transparent hair brush the floor, Doñela said, *'Nope.'*

*'Where's Tamir? I didn't see him yesterday, either.'*

*'Same place he always goes when you don't know where he is and we're not at home,'* Doñela said. She spread her arms out expansively. *'The Void! WoooOOOooo!'*

Sighing, Dalia decided to ignore Doñela.

Breakfast wasn't being served yet, so Dalia went to the library. It wasn't open yet either. Doñela offered to unlock the door for her, but Dalia didn't think it wise to get in trouble on the third day of school, especially when the rest of the students would be arriving today. So she went outside instead. The sunrise hurt her eyes, so she went into one of the copses of trees. She wandered around the small wooded area until she found herself at the wall keeping people out of the Dark

Grove. There she spent the next hour staring at it, trying to figure out how to get inside. She knew she had no chance of getting in, the wards would be too good, but it was something to do to pass the time.

She went in again after that, and made for the library. Audrey, the librarian, chuckled at seeing her the moment the library opened. Dalia waited impatiently for the door to open and for her to be let in, immediately going off to the botanical section of the library, where she found a book that included information about the Devil Tree, which she checked out at once, carrying it with her to breakfast, pausing to take her pills, then reading as she ate. Dalia wouldn't normally do something like that, but the library's books were all enchanted to repel messes, something Audrey had mentioned in the tour. It was a little difficult reading and eating at the same time when she didn't have anything to prop the book against, but she soldiered on. Doñela wasn't pleased, of course. She didn't have anything to do but float around Dalia.

*'You know, Doñela, you could just join Tamir.'*

*'No thank you. It's boring enough floating around you with nothing to do. I'd rather not go into The Void.'*

*'Stop calling it that,'* Dalia chided.

*'Well what else should I call it? He's not doing anything, it's debatable to say he even exists right now. I know we have to go there when you're asleep, but I think he's a dingbat for doing it when you're awake, too.'*

She was grateful when the others finally joined her, even though Kohana looked like she hadn't gotten any sleep at all, which of course made Dalia wonder, since she'd seen the kit-

sune girl sleeping before she left, though it hadn't looked like quality sleep.

"You okay, Kohana?" Dalia asked.

"Ugh, yes, you're the third person this morning to ask me that," Kohana said. "I'm fine, alright?"

Dalia looked more closely at Kohana. She didn't come by her awareness of other people's body language naturally, it had taken years of watching them and trying to solve the puzzle of body language for her to get about half as good at it as other people naturally were. It was like being the only human among a species of telepaths, having to puzzle out thoughts and motivations that others around her could just read directly from people's brains. Dalia could usually figure out *what* other people were feeling, but she often struggled to connect these feelings to the right answer of *why* they felt that way, since most people didn't think the way she did.

In this case, however, it was fairly straightforward; Kohana's sleep was not up to scratch. She also didn't seem to want her new friends to worry about it, suggesting a chronic condition, though that was an assumption she didn't want to make in case it was wrong. There were lots of other possible reasons for Kohana's behavior, after all. Not that any of this was really helpful at the moment, of course; she had no idea why Kohana's sleep was messed up, or what to do or say about it. And she very much wanted to help, or at least offer help.

*'I'll help!'* Doñela said, putting her face inside Kohana's head. Kohana shivered as Doñela did this. *'Oh weird! You should see this, Dalia! It's so bizarre! More bizarre than the thought of kind, gentle, open-minded Preston Park!'*

*'Whatever it is, I don't want to know,'* Dalia responded.

Doñela took her head out of Kohana's head, and Kohana looked around like someone had called her name. *'Bleh! You're no fun, you fall right over,'* Doñela said.

Dalia sighed and went back to focusing on her food. As a black girl, she knew that when she went out on her own, she would have challenges because of her race, and was already doomed to work twice as hard for half as much because of that. Yes, even in the witch world; witches and mundanes existed mostly in the same world, and had a lot of the same prejudices. She'd known school here would be challenging; school had always been challenging for Dalia, insofar as the social aspects of it was concerned. It didn't mean she couldn't still be annoyed by these challenges.

Most of the day after that was fairly boring. Most of them were impatient for classes to start on Monday. They'd already explored the grounds and the school building as much as they could. Luckily, the official Banners for first-years were meeting for the first time today after lunch, which was something to look forward to, getting to find out who the others in your own Banner were. So far she only knew what Banners her friends were in. The most exciting thing happening, really, was the rest of the students filtering in over the course of the day.

So Dalia and her friends were very excited after lunch, to have something fun to do. The Banner meetings were all being held in the auditorium, as had the class registration and other stuff the two days previous. It looked different now, of course, the different tables at seven different locations (much fewer tables than before), one for each Banner, with a table

and chairs set up in front of the tables. She went over to Timber Wolf, waving goodbye to her friends.

The table for Timber Wolf had the Banner's, well, banner draped on it. The majority of the cloth was gray, and in a white oval on its side was a picture of a wolf howling at a crescent moon. The oval was wreathed by aloe leaves and violet flowers. According to the brochure about the Timber Wolf Banner, the aloe represents healing, protection, and affection, while the violets represent loyalty, devotion, faithfulness, and modesty.

What the brochure also mentioned was the meaning of the school crest, which was an ash tree whose trunk was also a waterfall, with a witch hazel and a cherry blossom floating on a stream coming from the waterfall's landing point. The ash was a tree sacred to the druids, that had been used in wands a lot. Witch hazel represented magic, and cherry blossoms represent new beginnings and abundance.

Dalia was only the second person to make it to the Timber Wolf table so far, the other one was a boy she didn't recognize. She wasn't feeling terribly social at the moment, and he didn't seem to be either, since he was reading one of several brochures, so she sat down a few seats away and waited, continuing the book she'd been reading at breakfast.

Over the next few minutes, only three more people joined them, all girls. Dalia nearly dropped her book when she saw one of the girls was the one she had a crush on. She felt her cheeks growing hot, and she stared at the page she'd been reading, taking in not a word of it as Calandra Metaxas sat right next to Dalia, on Dalia's right side. Doñela, floating in the air in front of Dalia, was grinning at her predicament.

"Hi, I'm Calandra Metaxas," the girl said with a cheerful smile, holding her hand out.

Dalia didn't move or make any sound at first, but since she didn't want to come across as rude, she forced herself to close her book and turn to face the girl, hoping to the gods that the panic she was feeling wasn't making it to her face, but not feeling too hopeful about it. Mutely, she took Calandra's hand, suddenly keenly aware that she had sweaty palms, but it was too late to do anything about that. She opened her mouth to speak, and nothing came out. She tried again, concentrating on thoughts of her reading to try to distract herself.

"Ahhh... uhhh... ummm... hi," she finally managed to choke out. "I... I... I'm... Dev—er, Dalia. Um... Ravenstone."

"Nice to meet you, Dalia Ravenstone," Calandra said, shaking Dalia's sweaty hand and releasing it to surreptitiously wipe the sweat off. "Dahlia, like the flower?"

Dalia was suddenly aware that Doñela had popped into her peripheral vision and was snickering at her dilemma.

"Uh... um... no. D-A-um, L... I, uh... A. Er, D-A-L-I-A. It... it uh, it means, well... um... it means... 'a strong branch.'"

"Cool name, Dalia. Wait... Ravenstone? My two roommates are Ravenstones. Do you know them? Alvar and Ceridwen Ravenstone?"

"Um... I uh, yes. Yes, I... I know them. Er, um, not well, though. Just uh, just met them... you know, on... on Friday. Cousins. They're cousins. Of mine, I mean. Or I'm their cousin. Or uh, both I guess. Um, yeah."

"Cool. Hey, nifty bird. What's it's name?"

"I uh... that's... he's..."

"Kobalos is a pretty bird," Kobalos said.

"Kobalos, eh? Cool name. What's it mean?"

"It's uh... his... I mean... his name, it's from mythology. Greek. Mythology, I mean. Um... a uh... a mischievous sprite, it was. That he was named after."

"Neat. He's a raven, right? I mean, he's HUGE! Almost the size of a hawk. Much too big to be a crow, and so also too big to be a blackbird, a grackle, or a jackdaw, so—wait, I'm babbling, aren't I?"

"Er, a little, yeah."

"Sorry about that. Anyway, so he's a raven, right?"

"Um, yeah. He's a raven, yeah."

"Nervous about being here, huh? I noticed you sound really nervous, is why I asked."

"Uhhh... sure. Yeah. Nervous. Sorry."

"It's fine. I used to get nervous in new groups of people too, but you know what they say, right? Picture everyone in their underwear. That's usually for giving speeches, I know, but—are you okay?"

Dalia had managed to choke on her own spit, and was coughing. Against her will, she had pictured Calandra in her underwear, and it'd had the opposite effect to what Calandra had intended. She shook so hard she dropped her book, and was getting embarrassed enough where she was tempted to run out of the room, especially with Doñela laughing fit to burst. She felt Calandra pound her on the back and shook her head violently to get her to stop. Kobalos, who had been cawing in an amused way at her predicament was now flapping his wings and flying away. He landed on the table nearby, giving Calandra an annoyed look.

"Er, sorry about that, Dalia. I thought you were choking. Mom says I need to be more careful what I say around other people, for reasons like this. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Dalia was tempted to try to say *Go away, or at least get out of view*, but that would be rude and she was quite incapable of speech anyway. Even now that her breathing was getting back to normal, she couldn't speak at all now. She knew she wouldn't even be able to work her throat enough to form her usual "um's" and "er's" and "uh's."

This, naturally, was a problem. Most people didn't understand going mute when you could normally talk, and it wasn't exactly possible to speak to explain why you can't speak, not until long after the person is gone and offended, anyway. Dalia knew sign language, of course. Her younger sibling Chooli was deaf, though Dalia had been taught American Sign Language as an infant so she could tell her parents what she needed, and when Chooli had been born, she continued. The whole family knew ASL because of that, but not many others did outside of her family. But the point was, it was unlikely Calandra knew any kind of sign language.

Luckily for Dalia, or unluckily depending on your point of view, she had Doñela. Once she stopped laughing, she jumped headlong into her body, shoving Dalia out of her body and behind it. They didn't, strictly speaking, *need* to do things this way, but it gave Dalia an excuse to not have to feel the anxious knot in her belly for a while, even if returning later meant being nauseous for a minute or two.



"Nah, I'm good," Doñela made Dalia's body say, her body language immediately changing to one of someone carefree. Kobalos flapped his wings and flew farther away, when he heard Doñela talking; he always recognized her.

"No harm, no foul," Doñela continued. "Water under the bridge, and all that. Just, uh... yeah, my throat's a little sore is all," she said, feigning a sore throat. "Gonna give it a rest now. We're cool, though. Not your fault. Talk to ya later."

Doñela gave an awkward smile, made finger-guns at Calandra, picked up Dalia's book, and turned toward the table in front of them, the fingers of her right hand tapping out a rhythm on Dalia's book. Calandra, for her part, nodded, but looked very confused. Dalia didn't blame her; Dalia was normally left-handed, just like Papa, Maddy, and Tamir, but Doñela was right-handed like Shimá, and it was kind of obvious right now. Though they'd only known each other a couple minutes, so Calandra probably wouldn't notice.

Dalia gave the best approximation of a sigh she could give in spirit form; she didn't want Doñela doing the socializing for her, but there was no way she could talk now, for at least half an hour. Longer, possibly.

Just then, a familiar face appeared as a teacher arrived at the Timber Wolf table. She looked exactly like Amraphel Dyer, a black woman with red hair and freckles, except Dalia noticed her left eye was blue and her right eye was brown, which was opposite of her sister. They also dressed nothing alike. Amraphel, the Divination teacher, had dressed like a normal person. But Damiana dressed in a brown peasant-style skirt, had on a red blouse, and wore a black shawl.

"Hello, students. Let's see, just five of you this year? No matter. Older students don't usually come to this first meeting, you can meet them later. Anyway, I'm Damiana Dyer, and I teach the 'Faerie Realms, Residents, and Ecosystems' class, which is an elective for third-years and beyond. I'm also the head of Timber Wolf. Which mostly involves get-togethers like this, and the larger ones the school has when everyone is present, as they will be soon. You may have noticed an influx of students today. Most of the other students won't be here until dinner, but some of them have been coming in today, mostly by shadow-walking.

"My other duties as head of Timber Wolf include being someone to come to if you're having issues with other students or emergencies in the dorms. Of course, you can come to any of the teachers for that, but it's preferred you come to me first if possible.

"Well, now that I've introduced myself, let's go around the group and introduce each other. Say your name, something you like, and one fun fact about yourself. Let's go alphabetically, starting with you, Ms. Durham."

Dalia listened, though she didn't take in much beyond the names. There was Aniya Durham, another black girl. The white boy who had been first to arrive was Zachary Hunter.

"I'm Calandra Metaxas," Calandra said when it was her turn. "I'm obsessed with birds, and my mom is a teacher here."

Next was a Sophia Rabe, and she again didn't pay attention beyond the name. But next was her turn, and of course Doñela was in the driver's seat.

“Me? Oh okay. Right. Well I’m Don—er, I mean Dalia Ravenstone,” Doñela said, completely forgetting to feign a sore throat. “Spelled D-A-L-I-A, not like the flower, which has an H in it. I like the band ‘Sundiving Into Betelgeuse,’ and my eyes are really sensitive to bright lights, especially if I get a headache. So I have some sunglasses I wear if the lights are too much for me. Let’s see... oh, here they are.”

“Excellent, students. And uh, whose familiar is this?” she asked, referring to Kobalos.

“Mine,” Doñela said. “His name is Kobalos. But he’s pouting about something at the moment, which is why he’s on the table instead of on my shoulder.”

“I see. Well alright, then. Now we’re going to spend a few minutes where you can talk with one or more of the others, get to know each other better. I’ll just sit behind the table and wait. After that, we’ll be visiting with members of other Banners.”

On her own, Doñela would thrive in this situation. But it wasn’t Doñela’s body, it was Dalia’s, and Dalia didn’t feel up to socializing. So Doñela did the best she could to pretend to be Dalia, which put her in the unusual position of having to be quiet when it was her natural inclination to make a lot of noise and chatter a lot. But she had the um’s and er’s and other parts of Dalia’s nervous speech pattern down pretty good, when she remembered to do it.

Dalia’s estimation of her fellow students in Timber Wolf was pretty spot on, in that Calandra was the only really interesting person. She figured out by listening that Sophia Rabe was the daughter of the Elementary Transformation Magic teacher, and wondered how many other teacher’s kids went

to this school. Doñela tried talking with Sophia and Zachary and even Aniya, and spent most of those conversations trying not to fall asleep standing up. In their defense, Doñela bored easily and had once gotten bored halfway through trick-or-treating one year and had wandered off to TP and egg the Park family's house just for something to do. (Though the fact that Preston had dumped water over Dalia's head the day before had contributed to the decision.)

"How uh, riveting. But I'm afraid I might die of um, over-stimulation if we keep this up," she said to one of the others, the boy. "Bye for now!"

With that, Doñela wandered over to Calandra.

"Don't tell anyone else," she whispered to Calandra, "but you're the only interesting person in this group so far."

This made Calandra giggle, her short haircut falling out of place from behind her ear as she did. She tucked it back again absently, and Dalia was briefly glad she was in spirit form, because she had just made an involuntary squeal that would have said 'Oh my goddess, Calandra, you are SOOOO adorable right now!' if anyone could have heard it.

"Good to know. I was afraid I hadn't made a good first impression, earlier."

"Oh uh, that? Yeah, like I said, not your fault. That was my bad."

Calandra nodded. "Great. So, Devil Trees, eh?"

Doñela laughed. "You Canadian, too?"

"What? Oh no. But my mom knows enough Canadians she picked up the habit of saying 'eh?,' and I got it from her."

"Cool. Er, uh... yeah, Devil Trees. I'm a bit of a goth," she said. "Can't really tell from this outfit, but it's true."

*'Doñela,'* Dalia said. Before Doñela could stop herself, she turned her head in Dalia's direction. Calandra looked there too, confused. Doñela turned away again.

"Sorry, thought I saw something."

*'Doñela, I want my body back now.'*

Doñela's eyebrow twitched, just one of them. Dalia knew what this meant.

*'Yes, I'm sure,'* Dalia answered.

Her ghostly friend rolled her body's eyes a little.

"Sorry, thought of something annoying from earlier."

Dalia stormed up to Doñela and pushed her out, returning to her own body as Doñela was expelled.

*'Well that's actually a relief, but are you sure about this?'* Doñela asked.

Dalia did not respond. She had actually timed this with precision. She'd seen the teacher starting to get up, and had deduced it was almost time to go meet the other Banners. Kobalos suddenly flew onto her shoulder again, now that Doñela wasn't in control anymore.

"Okay, students," Damiana Dyer said. "We're going to be meeting the other Banners in your year soon. But first, if anyone would like a Timber Wolf badge for your clothes, I've got some over here. Just a dollar apiece."

"Right, er... want to get a uh, a badge?" Dalia asked Calandra, which she only managed by carefully not looking at her. She was afraid she'd stare at Calandra's beauty and make things even more awkward, and become completely non-verbal as a result.

"Oh yeah, that's a good idea," Calandra said. "Come on, let's look at them together."

Back in her body, she was once more aware of the quirks it had when she was the one in control, like the ever-present nervous knot in her belly. She grabbed onto a nearby chair to steady herself as a wave of disorientation and nausea washed over her. Then she politely waved off Calandra's help, and they went over to the table, where they bought badges before going over to mix with the other Banners.

The next few minutes were agonizing to her, as she tried to socialize with about as much grace as a drunken horse, and as much enjoyment as if she were at the dentist's office. She had more than enough friends for her wants at the moment, and this wasn't how she wanted to go about making friends anyway. She couldn't fathom how anyone could manage in a crowd like this, with everyone trying to talk at once. How did people hear each other well enough to have a conversation? How could they focus with all this noise? Every time she tried to have a conversation with someone, quite apart from having no idea what to talk about, she'd catch snatches of other conversations that would cause her to lose track of what was going on in the conversation she'd been trying to have, or make her forget what she'd been wanting to say.

Also, where were you supposed to look during these things? Her natural inclination was to watch people's mouths, because that was the part that was moving when they talked, but most people tended to not like that much, so she'd try to look between their eyes, or the top of their nose, but even the little amount of eye contact resulting from that was nearly physically painful for her.

Then, too, was the ever-present issue with other people who weren't used to being around her (and some who *were*), that she'd start to talk and they'd just talk right over her, oblivious to her attempts to speak. Even when she did get words out, they were usually too quiet to be heard, and she got talked over anyway. She'd try to hold her thought long enough to get a loud-enough word in edgewise, and as always in these situations, the conversation would go completely off topic by the time she found somewhere to speak.

After about fifteen or twenty minutes of struggling in this fashion, Dalia wondered if she should leave. She couldn't remember much of anything that had been said anyway, and what little she did remember had been boring. Sports talk, people talking about Pokemon, celebrity gossip, or what happened on the latest episode of some stupid reality TV show... nothing even remotely interesting to Dalia.

Then Anastasia Park showed up and decided things for her. The snooty brunette passed by her, noticed her Timber Wolf badge, and said, "Ugh, the timid little freak got Timber Wolf? I should think they'd come up with a Banner just for you, something like Frightened Rabbit or Nervous Chihuahua." She laughed at her own joke, and Dalia just quietly turned around and left. Before she could get away, Doñela tugged at the back of Anastasia's hair, making the girl shout and yell at a boy behind her.



## Chapter Ten: Lonely Girl

*Sunday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017*

AS DALIA WALKED AWAY to leave the gymnasium, she heard someone running after her. She turned around to see who it was, and felt relieved it was only Sally.

“Hey Dalia,” Sally said. “That all get to be too much for you?”

Dalia nodded mutely, and kept walking, her friend beside her.

“Yeah, I saw you in there. You looked like a lost deer in a crowd of headlights. And that was before Anastasia started harassing you.”

Dalia chuckled. “That's accurate.”

“So I couldn't help but notice earlier, from my vantage point at the Honey Badger table, that the girl you have a crush on is in your Banner. And you two managed to have a conversation without you going immediately mute.”

Dalia ignored Sally, and continued walking, leading her friend into the corridor outside the gymnasium. Sally was used to this kind of behavior from Dalia, so she didn't comment on it.



Doñela, bored again, looked inside of Sally's head now, making Sally shiver and look around.

*'Hold still! I'm trying to see your pineal gland!'* Doñela said, even though she knew Sally couldn't hear her. She gave up and pulled out of Sally's head. *'Bah! Some fun you are!'*

When Dalia got far enough away from the crowd of people, she sat down on a windowsill and sighed, relaxing.

"Did you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

"Feel..." Sally said, stopping because she wasn't certain how to answer. She shrugged. "Thought I felt something."

A few more moments passed, Dalia wanting to be sure Sally wasn't going to bring it up again, before she spoke.

"How people can stand being in crowds of people like that is just... I don't get it."

"They're not like you. They're wired differently. Most of them are probably extroverts, meaning being around other people, even in that kind of way, gives them energy."

"Yeah, whereas people like me are drained by being around other people. Only reason I can stand having the four of you guys hanging around me so much is cuz Kohana and Aavraak don't talk much yet, and you and Brandon understand me.

"Anyway, I need to relax somewhere. I've had a heck of a day so far. I didn't think the Banner meetings would be like *that*."

"Library?"

Dalia thought about it briefly, then shook her head. "Not this time. I think I need some computer time to unwind."

"Off to the dorms it is, then."

"What about Brandon?"

"Oh he's doing alright in there. Last I saw him, he was talking with someone about Star Wars."

"Good. And the other two?"

"Kohana was mostly listening to other people. Aavraak, too."

"Right. To the dorms, then."



DALIA AND SALLY HAD spent the rest of the afternoon on their computers; Sally had been browsing her social media networks, and Dalia had been watching cartoons on her laptop. Gegauassi was silent during this, because he knew she didn't appreciate him talking while she was watching her shows.

They then went to dinner, sitting with Brandon, Kohana, and Aavraak. Kobalos was there, too, tearing off and eating pieces of meat from a chicken leg on his own separate plate, which also had grapes on it. They were halfway through the meal when Sally pointed out something to Dalia with a nod.

"Hey, Dalia. Over there. Look over there."

"Why?"

"Just do it, okay?"

Dalia turned in her seat, noticing Calandra Metaxas again. She was about to turn around and glare at Sally when

she noticed that Calandra was sitting by herself, looking glum.

"Huh? She's—why is she sitting all alone?" Dalia asked. "She's such a friendly girl."

"Being friendly and making friends are two different things," Sally said.

"Well, uh... someone should uh, invite her over here. With us."

"Excellent idea, Dalia," Sally said. "Good luck!"

Dalia's eyes widened. "What? Me? No no, not me. Can't be me. No, can't."

"And why not? She's a fellow Timber Wolf, isn't she? You and she have that in common. Plus, you and she talked already, am I right?"

"I can't just... I mean..."

"What is wrong?" Aavraak said. "Is something wrong with the Metaxas girl? Is she shunned?"

"No. Sometimes people just don't connect. Also, I don't know if you noticed or not, but Dalia has chronic anxiety," Sally explained. "It doesn't help that she has a crush on Calandra."

"I think I understand. This is why Dalia swallows the small medicine buttons?"

"Uh..." Sally looked at Dalia to ask, with a look, if it was okay to tell Aavraak about her pills. Dalia nodded.

"Um, yeah. One's an anti-anxiety pill. The other is an anti-depressant," Sally said.

"What is the other—"

"I have a crush on her!" Dalia interrupted. "On Calandra, I mean."

"All the more reason to make friends with her. You're never going to get anywhere with her if you never talk to her."

Dalia stared at Sally for several moments. "Why me? Why not you?"

"Because you already have a connection with her. If any of the rest of us do it, it'll look like a pity friendship. Whereas you have an actual reason to want to get to know her, and I know you *do* want to get to know her, even if the prospect of initiating the friendship is daunting to you. Can't really be more than friends if you're not friends first."

Dalia sighed. "Honey Badgers."

Sally laughed at this. "Yes, clever and manipulative, that's us Honey Badgers. What can I say? Ambition sometimes requires emotional manipulation. And right now my ambition is to see someone stop being sad."

"But why you? Why a Honey Badger?"

"Compassion for others, looking out for the underdog, those aren't solely Timber Wolf traits. Honestly, these Banners are about the *strongest* traits in our personalities, not the *only* traits. Now go out there, wolf cub!"

"Fine. Okay. Right. I can do this. I can do this."

Dalia stood up and shakily walked over to Calandra.

"Um... uh... hi," Dalia said, when she reached Calandra.

Calandra's bespectacled eyes looked up at Dalia, and she smiled. She brushed some stray hair out of her face. Dalia subconsciously mimicked this action, even though her own hair was bound in locs and already out of her face.

"Hi, Dalia. What's up?"

"I uh, well... I kinda saw you. Um, from over there, I mean. And uh, I wanted to know if you... if you wanted to join me. And my friends. Over there, I mean. Cause you're all by your uh, your lonesome over here."

Calandra beamed. "Really?"

"Really really," Dalia said, thinking of Shrek as she did, and almost laughing.

"Thank you!" She picked up her tray and followed Dalia over to sit with their group. "Oh my gods thank you so much! Er... great, now I sound desperate and annoying, don't I?"

"Do you?"

"It sounded that way to me."

"Not to me. You're relieved. Anyone would be, in your situation. I know I would. Um... if that makes you desperate, I guess I would be too."

Calandra smiled. Dalia smiled back. "Come on, follow me," Dalia said. Calandra nodded, and soon they were over with Dalia's other friends. Dalia froze for a moment when she saw them; Doñela was making faces at Aavraak, who of course couldn't see her, but Dalia groaned internally. The next week was going to be exhausting, she could already tell. She sat down, thinking annoyed thoughts at Doñela, who ignored her.

When Calandra sat down on Dalia's left side, brushing against Dalia's arm by accident, it made Dalia feel like butterflies—no, more like caterpillars—were wriggling in her belly, and made all her skin warm up pleasantly.

"Thank you guys for letting me sit with you. I know I shouldn't have expected to click with anyone in school when

it was just us first-years until the other years came in for dinner, such a small group of people you know. And it *is* only the first day. But I had my hopes up too high, I guess.”

“You have a hard time making friends?” Brandon asked.

Calandra nodded. “Not for lack of trying. But people always seem put off by me. Maybe I talk too much? I think I talk too much. And I’m too loud and annoying, and I don’t know when to shut up.”

“It could be they’re intimidated by your beauty,” Sally said, glancing at Dalia.

Calandra visibly blushed. “What? Are you—”

“Me? No. But it’s something I’ve seen happen.”

“I dunno,” Calandra said, her eyes on her plate. “I do look a lot like my mom, I guess. Oh by the way, Dalia,” she said, her mood picking up again instantly, “I spoke with mom about you, Dalia, and she said we’re related!”

Sally ducked just in time as a bit of meat went flying. Kobalos leaped into the air in surprise and landed on Brandon’s wheelchair; Dalia had been eating, and started choking on her food, spraying it around, when Calandra had said that. Sally stood up and came around the end of the table behind Brandon and started trying to beat her on the back, she was coughing so violently.

The coughing turned into wheezing, and Calandra was trying to help now, too. It took a few minutes before Dalia’s breathing returned to normal.

“Related?” Dalia croaked out in a very sore voice, her eyes watering.

“What?”

Dalia looked absolutely horrified by this news to anyone who knew her well enough, but she was suppressing it well enough to hide it from others.

“How... *how* related?”

“Not by much, sadly. She said we're third cousins. Mom's great-grandma married into the Ravenstone family, and there were a lot of boys in our line, so Mom was originally Melora Ravenstone, before she married Dad and became a Metaxas. So my great-great-grandma is the link with your family. My whole family are Greek apart from that connection.”

Sally smiled. “Ah, so aside from your mom sharing a surname with Dalia once upon a time, you two really aren't much more related than any two random people would be.”

Calandra looked disappointed at this, but Dalia was relieved. Not that it made much difference, they were barely even acquaintances yet, and Dalia could scarcely think about even holding hands with Calandra, but something about having a crush on someone related to her had been off-putting, until Calandra and Sally had clarified the extent of the relationship between them. Sally was right; there were enough people who were Ravenstones in one way or another that in the witch community, it was little different from two people both happening to have the last name of 'Smith.' Well, nothing quite that common, but the metaphor remains valid.

It also made sense for another reason; Calandra was plainly of Greek or of other Mediterranean heritage, and Dalia was black. She couldn't remember if she herself had any Mediterranean ancestors, but she couldn't think of any.

As Dalia sat down and began carefully to eat again, Kobalos returning to his own plate as well, Calandra leaned across the table to speak quietly with Sally. Dalia's hearing was keen enough she could still hear it.

"Did I do something wrong? I don't get it. I don't get her. I was excited to find out we're related. Why isn't she?"

"Um..." Sally said, thinking. "I... I think she was just surprised was all. She's a bit high-strung. Chronic anxiety. I think generalized, but some social anxiety too."

"Oh," Calandra said. She didn't look or sound convinced by the lie, but shrugged and went back to her meal.

Apparently, Aavraak had heard this exchange as well, for she said, "Yes, she takes medicine buttons for this... ang-sigh-etty. We was speaking of it before Dalia went to talk to you. I do not know what ang-sigh-etty is. Nor this depress-sun."

"Do you ever get a feeling of tightness in your abdomen, when something worrying is happening? Not fear, but worry?" Sally asked Aavraak.

"Worry? What is worry?"

Sally thought for a moment, but it was Dalia who spoke instead, only managing it by convincing herself Calandra wasn't there.

"Um, imagine you were, I dunno, walking somewhere outside, and uh... and you're by a cliff, and you hear pebbles falling, and uh, then that means there's a landslide. And you survive the landslide, but just barely. And then, uh, for the rest of your life, every time you hear a pebble drop, you expect a landslide. That's, uh... that's worry. Is that a good metaphor?" she asked Sally and Brandon.

"Sounds good."



"But uh," Dalia continued, "anxiety is different. It's like... like thinking a pebble is going to drop at any time, even when there's no pebbles and nothing that sounds like pebbles. You try to tell yourself there's no pebbles, no landslide, but uh, it doesn't work."

"I think I understand. It is like fear, but different. It is fear of a thing that is not happening, but may happen."

"Yes," Dalia said. "But fear is more intense than worry or even anxiety. Usually. The human brain can't be fully afraid all the time; um, it would burn itself out emotionally if it tried. So uh, anxiety is more like... like a cross between the pebble thing and uh, and claws scratching on metal, but in your head, and all the time, uh, more or less."

Aavraak winced. "You have this problem? This is all the time for you, the ang-sigh-etty?"

Dalia nodded.

"And the medicine buttons make it go away?"

"Um, not really. They uh, they make it... they make it easier to ignore. Less intense. It's still there, though. Some people have this silly idea that anti-depressants and anti-anxiety meds are a crutch. But they're more like a dam holding back the waters of anxiety. Remove the dam, and the flood overwhelms us. Before I started taking my anti-anxiety pill, I uh, I'd have panic attacks almost every day. And the anti-depressant keeps me from drowning in apathy."

"Panic attacks? What is panic, and how does it attack?"

Dalia took a breath, and put her fork down. "Panic is... it's like the feeling you get when you can see the avalanche coming, and you can't do anything about it, but there may or may not be an actual avalanche. It's like fear, but more in-

tense. Like fear mixed with confusion; there's something terrifying, but you can't think of what to do about it. Hmm... I uh, I think explaining a panic attack itself might make it easier to understand."

She took a moment to think, then said, "Panic attacks uh, they feel different to everyone who has them. With me, I feel a pain in my chest because my heart is going really, really fast. I get sweaty, dizzy, I get shaky, and breathing is really difficult. And I either can't speak, or I babble really fast and don't make much sense. It also feels like I'm dying."

Aavraak's eyes weren't the only ones to go wide at this, for Kohana and Calandra looked the same. Brandon and Sally, however, just looked a little sad, but they'd clearly heard all this before.

"You had the 'panic attacks' every day?"

"Um, yes. At least every other day, sometimes more often. Some days I had as many as four in one day."

"Do the medicine buttons make the 'panic attacks' go away?"

"They're a lot less frequent, but I still have them on occasion."

"I think I understand. I think my people have a word for that, but I do not know what it is at the moment. And what of the depress-sun?"

"Depression," Dalia corrected gently. "That's... well, there's uh, special fluids the brain makes so it can uh, work properly. Lots of them. Depression happens when the brain can't make some of those fluids. Or can't make enough of them at the right times. But uh, that doesn't really explain it, I guess. Not what it feels like. Uh... well it means... um, de-

pression makes me less able to enjoy things. Like all the color seems to drain out of the world. I lose my appetite, I get tired all the time, I have a harder time doing certain tasks to the point where it even affects my physical strength. It also feels like the hope is draining out of me, and makes it hard to concentrate on things. Even hobbies stop being fun.”

“Ah,” Aavraak said. “Kleshaata. My Krolt-parent had kleshaata for a time after I came out of her body. She has gotten better since then, it was a short kleshaata, not a long one. But yours is long?”

“Yes. I’ve had it for years. The uh, the anti-depressant makes it easier. It never quite goes away, though. I’m actually doing better with that than I am with the anxiety, though.”

“I am glad to know your medicine is helping you.”

“Thanks,” Dalia said.

“You are welcome. But there was a third medicine button. One more ‘pill’ as you say, which I see in the morning. What is that pill?”

Dalia looked down at her food. “That’s private,” she said with a slight bite to her tone, her face feeling very hot. She shoved some food in her mouth and stared at her plate.

Brandon and Sally looked at one another. They knew better than to say anything more, even though they could have answered for her. They just let Aavraak sit there, looking confused and a little upset. Given what that pill was, and what Aavraak had said the first day they’d met, they knew why she wasn’t telling Aavraak about it. Also, they were in public; anyone could overhear them.

"Don't be offended, Aavraak," Sally said. "It's just something she's not comfortable talking about. Not in public, anyway."

Aavraak nodded, looking around the room for a moment. "I understand. I will not speak of it again. My apologies, Dalia."

"No need for an apology. You didn't know. Couldn't have known."

After that, Dalia didn't speak; the rest of them conversed normally, though, about this and that. Dalia didn't like feeling anti-social like that, but she also felt like she couldn't talk without crying. Aavraak's question had reminded her that the Goblin had some unpleasant biases, or seemed to. She wasn't sure if that translated the way she thought or not, but she didn't want to risk telling her anyway, just in case she was right. Also, she didn't know what Kohana would think at all, much less Calandra.

She felt the warning signs of an impending panic attack at that thought, and paused to close her eyes and take deep, calming breaths. It was a technique that sometimes worked and sometimes didn't. She was hoping it would work this time, because she didn't like the idea of having a full-blown panic attack the day before classes, at least not where the whole school could see it.

It seemed to be working. She momentarily felt several sets of eyes looking at her, but then they looked away. She didn't know how long it took to calm herself, but the others were almost done with dessert when she opened her eyes again.

"Sorry," she said. "I had to try to avert a panic attack."

"Did it work?" Aavraak asked.

"Oh, you'd know if it hadn't," Sally said. "It would be very obvious something was wrong."

"Anyway, I'm gonna grab some cookies and head back to the dorm. See you later, Brandon."

"Bye, Dalia," he said.

Dalia grabbed some cookies, put them in a napkin, and took off with them. Kobalos stayed behind to finish his chicken and his grapes, before riding Sally's shoulder back to their dorm.

*'Thank gods! Maybe now we'll do something interesting!'*  
Doñela said.



WHEN DALIA MADE IT back to the dorm room, she put the cookies down on her desk next to Gegauassi. She immediately sensed Tamir in the closet, reading in the dark. Doñela dug through Dalia's luggage and took out several juggling balls and began to juggle them for something to do. Tamir sighed at this and went outside to keep watch for the other girls from their room.

"You awake, Gegauassi?"

"Yeah. I was in the middle of talking with Hermes, though."

Dalia looked back and forth between him and Sally's side of the room. "Um... but Hermes is all the way on the other side of the room. And I think he's in her dresser drawer."

"Yes, and that would be a bit of a damper on conversation if we were humans, but there's this wonderful thing we have now called 'the Internet,' perhaps you've heard of it? Lets us communicate even on other sides of the world, and even across the Veil into other worlds."

"Okay, okay, no need to be a smart Alec. Just open up MMOTW, will you?"

Gegauassi sighed. "Okay. Here you go."

The desktop was briefly visible before a program opened up. The logo was of an M being mirrored, looking like an M and a W had been fused together with the M on top, separated by a gray line. This was inside of a double rectangle with a small triangle coming out of the middle of the top, a gray circle inside the top point of the triangle, the logo looking like it was framed and hanging on the wall.

When the logo vanished, a screen with her contact list came up.

"Who's the call going to?" Gegauassi asked.

"I need to talk with Chooli."

"Right. Calling Chooli."

Chooli being deaf had presented Dalia's family with the tough question of how best to educate them. Being the kind of parents that valued treating their children like human beings with a say in their own lives, they had done a great deal of research, then presented Chooli with the options that were available. Though Chooli had been inclined, originally, to stay with their siblings in regular school with a hired interpreter, Dalia's troubles at school had made that a bit difficult. The second primary school that Dalia had gone to, that Vedyā and Ashkii were currently going to, was bilingual with

teachers speaking both Spanish and English. Any ASL interpreter that they hired for Chooli would have had to have been *trilingual*, knowing English, ASL, *and* Spanish, which would have been expensive. They could afford it, but part of the expense was demand; trilingual ASL interpreters weren't exactly commonplace. What was more, going to a regular school with their siblings would have meant a lot of isolation and bullying.

What Chooli had ended up choosing was going to a magical school for the deaf on the Tirffiniol side of Salem, Massachusetts, the capital city of Praecantus. Zee had been going there since about the first grade, and loved going there and being around hundreds of other students and teachers who could use ASL. It kept zem away from zeer family most of the time, because even with the school also being in Tirffiniol (in the Salem, Massachusetts overlay area of it) and thus a very short shadow-walk trip to the Ravenstone manor in the Toronto overlay of Tirffiniol, shadow-walking was tricky magic even for adults, so it was more convenient for Chooli to stay at the school most of the time and only occasionally visit except over the summer.

Since schools for the deaf weren't exactly common, nor were schools of magic, and magical schools for the deaf even less so, Chooli's school was the only one of its kind in all of Praecantus (the US and Canada; magical Mexico had its own, apparently). Thus, by necessity it had housing for students whose families didn't live in Salem.

When Gegauassi started dialing Chooli, the screen changed to look like glass with light reflecting off it briefly before mysterious-looking mist was animated across the sur-

face. This continued for about a minute before being replaced by the image of a familiar dorm room with the curious and concerned face of Chooli Ravenstone on it.

Chooli was wearing what looked like glasses, but was really a computer interface so zeer phone, Nyota, could translate speech into text for zem as needed. Zeer hair was tied up in a tsiyyéél bun at the nape of their neck, just like Nizoni's. Chooli could have gone with braids, of course, but preferred to mimic their mother's traditional style instead. Chooli was also wearing a Trail Blazers hoodie and a button saying "Deaf pride."

{Miss me already, sister?} Chooli signed in a mix of ASL and a private sign language Chooli shared with Dalia, Vedyá, and Ashkii.

{Too little time,} she signed back. {Just need friendly eye.}

{What happened?}

{Much.}

{I'm listening.}

Dalia sighed, paused a moment to gather her thoughts, and then began to sign with great speed. Dalia had always found it much easier to talk in sign language than in English, ever since her parents had taught it to her as an infant. In fact, it was her first language, the only one she'd used until she was around three or four years old. It had also served her occasionally when she'd gone mute from stress, as sign language didn't often get affected by her occasional attacks of muteness. She sometimes had to pause to think what to say next, but her ASL wasn't riddled with pauses and repeating words like her other speech was.



And so Dalia vented to her younger sibling Chooli in ASL so rapid that Chooli occasionally had to tell her to repeat things more slowly. She confessed about her crush on Calandra, the minor disaster at the Banner meeting, the crowded nightmare of socializing later, and the incident at dinner, including the information about Calandra being related to them, albeit distantly. At some point during this, Doñela's juggling balls fell back into Dalia's luggage, just in time for the door to open. Dalia hadn't noticed any of that, she was still signing with Chooli.

{Busy weekend,} Chooli noted with a half-smile when Dalia put her hands down finally. {Classes not started, already much fills your life. If your hair goes white by Yule, no surprise here.}

{Very funny,} Dalia signed.

{First famous, deaf, half-Navajo comedian, not bad life goal,} Chooli signed with a grin. {Only problem, I'd need to speak aloud. How do I know they laugh at jokes or just at my accent?}

{You have Nyota. Tell jokes in ASL.}

Chooli rolled zeer eyes. {Yes, only need to wait ten or twenty years til mundane AI gets smart enough to speak with correct inflections and tones. Else magic world exposed.}

Dalia laughed, which Chooli would be able to see, if they couldn't hear it, and signed, {Small obstacle, yes.}

Someone coughed, and Dalia jumped, her head snapping to her left side. Her three room-mates were standing there watching. Kohana had been the one to cough, and she looked embarrassed about it.

"Sorry," Kohana said.

"I do not know what you are doing," Aavraak said, "but it is fascinating to watch. Please continue."

{What's wrong?} Chooli asked. Dalia just barely caught it out of the corner of her eye. She turned back to respond.

{Nothing. My room-mates here,} she signed back.

{Should I turn Nyota on?}

{Sure. You can say hi.}

Chooli reached into zeer hoodie's pocket and pulled out zeer cell phone, Nyota. Zee woke her up with a tap of her screen, nodded at her, and put her on a stand on the table, where she could see the computer screen with her camera.

Chooli signed something, and a split second later Nyota spoke in an androgynous voice she reserved for translating Chooli's words, saying, "Hello, friends of Dalia. My name is Chooli Ravenstone, a younger sibling to Dalia."

Aavraak stepped closer, coming into view of Gegauassi's webcam.

"Your sibling speaks oddly. Their hands summon words that do not come from their mouth."

"Chooli is deaf. So zee is speaking American Sign Language, or ASL for short, and zeer phone, Nyota, is translating it into English. Then translating what we say into ASL via zeer smart glasses."

"You are using words I do not know. Zee? Zeer?"

"Er, yeah. Those are pronouns. 'Zee' is like he or she, but neutral gender. 'Zeer' is the possessive form, like his or hers. There's also 'zem,' but the rules for that are a bit harder to explain."

"Fascinating. So the many hand gestures you made earlier was this ASL?"

"Yes."

"Your brother is cute," Kohana said.

"Sibling. Chooli is genderless, meaning they don't feel like any gender. That's why zee uses the neutral zee/zeer/zem pronouns. Singular they/them/their would work too, but Chooli felt like that set is for someone undecided, which *is* how it gets used in our family, but Chooli isn't undecided. Zee felt like zee *has* no gender, which is a decision and not the same as being undecided."

Dalia was looking at Aavraak when she said this, even though she was talking to Kohana. She wanted to know what Aavraak made of this information.

"Fascinating. So this one is not Thref, or Kwanj, *or* Krolt?"

"Correct. Chooli is just Chooli."

"'Chooli.'" Aavraak said, as though assessing the taste of the name.

"It's zeer name," Dalia explained.

"Yes, I am aware. Just... this 'Chooli' name is different in style from most other names I have heard these last few days. Is it of another language?"

"Yes. It's a Diné name, a name from Shimá's people. Chooli and I are both half Diné, though Chooli looks the part, and I don't."

"Diné is the proper name for the Navajo, right?" Sally asked, with a distinct air of knowing the answer already, and only asking to benefit the others.

"Yes."

Aavraak looked confused.

“Er, it’s a tribe name, Aavraak.”

“Like clans?”

“Yeah, I think so. Pretty close, at least.”

Aavraak looked between Chooli and Dalia curiously and then said, “Do you have different Thref-parents?”

“Er, no. Um... our biological parents are the same.”

“Really? Fascinating. Many Goblins cannot tell one human from another, and I was one of them, but I have been learning these last few days, and I can tell you and Chooli look very different.”

“That can happen sometimes with mixed-race kids. Um... possibly with other kids as well, it depends on different stuff.”

“A real Goblin!” Nyota translated for Chooli’s ASL. “You made friends with a Goblin!”

“Uh, yeah. Her name is Aavraak,” Dalia said, signing the name in ASL alphabet as well.

“Hello, A-A-V-R-A-A-K,” Nyota spelling out the letters they were signing.

Aavraak bowed to Chooli. “Hello to you as well, Chooli.”

“Is there easier name for A-A-V-R-A-A-K?”

“Is there a sign for ‘Goblin’?” Dalia asked.

“Yes, in our dialect of ASL,” Chooli said. Getting her idea, zee made up a sign for Aavraak’s name, which was the sign for ‘Goblin’ plus the sign for ‘A’ and ‘K.’

Kohana waved bashfully at Chooli. “Sorry for thinking you were a boy, earlier,” she said.

“You’re forgiven. What’s your name?”

"Me? I'm Kohana Sato," she said, bowing.

"Dalia mentioned you, Kohana. You're a Kitsune?"

"Yes."

"Cool! Our Uncle Yanus, a friend of the family, is dating a Kitsune."

Kohana blinked. "Really?"

"Yes, he is. They won't marry, it's against some rule because she's nobility, but yes, they live together and love each other."

"Huh. Never known any Kitsune who was dating a human before."

"They live in the Toronto-overlay area of Tirffiniol," Dalia said.

Kohana shrugged. "Never been there, on either side of the veil. I'm from British Columbia."

"This is all very interesting," Gegauassi said, "but you girls all have classes in the morning. Which means *I* might have to be up in the morning too. So even if you all don't go to bed, I'm gonna go to sleep soon. Dalia, you and Chooli should say goodnight. And Chooli, you're three hours ahead of us, you should be in bed too!"

"Oh fine, you. Chooli—"

"I know. Nyota told me," came the translation of Chooli's ASL. "You have to go to bed. Tell Gegauassi he's not the boss of me."

{Yes,} she signed. {See you later, Chooli. Don't know when. Depends on the after-class work we get.}

"Well bye, Dalia," came zeer reply.

"Bye," she said, waving.

The others in the room waved goodbye as well, and the screen went blank. Gegauassi shut down the program, turned off his screen, and closed his own lid.

"Night," he said and his lid snapped shut.

"Good night, Gegauassi," Dalia said.

Dalia looked through her stuff for her PJ's. When she found them, she headed toward the bathroom to change. Halfway there, Kohana sneezed, fire coming out of her mouth. She clapped her hands over her mouth, looking wide-eyed. Everyone in the room was staring at her.

"Sorry," she said when she uncovered her mouth. "No idea why that happened. It's been years since I lost control of my foxfire."

"Um, okay," Sally said. "You're forgiven." The others nodded agreement.

Kohana closed her dresser drawer, her face red with shame, and changed into her faded plaid pajamas, that honestly looked a bit threadbare. Dalia went on into the bathroom on her side of the room to shower and change into her own pajamas, and hair bonnet. When she came out later, Kohana was in bed, tossing and turning again. Kohana's head lifted up and hit her pillow, and Dalia suddenly smelled a familiar scent of flowers, honey, and overripe fruit in the air. As Dalia watched Kohana toss and turn, she wondered, again, what was wrong. But this wasn't the time, so she went to bed and lay down herself, hunting a sleep that was getting elusive tonight because of her excitement for the next day. After a couple of hours, she finally managed to fall into a shallow, fitful sleep.

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## Chapter Eleven: Order and Chaos

*Monday, September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

MR. JONATHAN PARK, Principal of Fae Springs Private Academy of Magic, was rarely seen wearing anything other than a three-piece suit, for he liked order, and he believed that the kids in the school would respect him and the order he desired if he seemed impressive and intimidating. So far, he was mostly correct.

His brother Jason was fond of order as well, but not as good at getting it from children as Jonathan was, and so preferred to be a bank manager instead. Personally, Jonathan would rather deal with bratty children all day long than bratty bank customers, because at least children could be taught to behave, whereas misbehaving bank customers were adults, and thus too set in their ways to ever improve their behavior.

Like his identical twin brother, Jonathan Park was well groomed, his brown hair trimmed to professional perfection, his face shaved with laser precision, his gaze usually ranging in tone from 'a general looking with pride upon his troops' to 'a general scowling in disapproval at his troops.'



On Monday morning, as he did every morning, he rose at 5 AM sharp, did 100 push-ups, went to the restroom to do his morning grooming, then came back out and did 100 jumping jacks before sitting down to a breakfast of black coffee, plain oatmeal, two pieces of plain, whole-wheat toast, and half a grapefruit, which he ate solely for the vitamin C, stomaching the taste only by eating a Miracle Berry first, to turn the sour flavor to a sweet one, even though he didn't personally care much for sweet foods (it was preferable to sour foods, though). Then he did 100 more push-ups, showered quickly, and got dressed in his crisp suit, grabbed his briefcase, cast a 'keep-clean' enchantment over his shoes with his primary wand (ramrod-straight bay laurel wand with Eisenkiesel Quartz tip), and left the teacher's dorm for his office inside the main building.

At precisely 6 AM, he came into the office, and Anisa Rahim, one of the school secretaries, waved at him without looking up from her work, doubtless beginning the gesture before he'd even touched the door, knowing he'd be there.

"Morning, Ms. Rahim."

"Morning, Principal Park."

"Any news?" he asked her.

"I have a question from Dalia Ravenstone about familiars in the classrooms, sir."

He looked annoyed at this. "What is her familiar, again?"

"A raven named Kobalos. She says he's very well trained, and of course a familiar rather than a pet, so they have a mental connection with each other."

"The rules say that trained familiars may come into the classroom if the teacher permits it, and if the familiar is not disruptive, except for quizzes and tests, or other situations where they might be used to cheat," he said in a tone that indicated he was disappointed she'd had to ask.

"I know that, sir, but I wanted to make sure it had your approval."

"Approval? Rules are rules, Ms. Rahim. You know that."

"Yes, but principals can overrule those. Sorry, I should have known you wouldn't do that."

"No no, it's quite alright. I do have that right, even if I rarely use it. You did well."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're quite welcome. Any other news?"

"No sir, everything else is running like clockwork so far."

"Thank you, Ms. Rahim. Carry on."

Mr. Park went into his office then, closed the door, set his briefcase down, and sat at his computer. Aside from being warded against magical interference and having a thaumelectric bridge installed so it could connect to the GTN, his computer was a perfectly normal, solid black desktop PC. It did not have a mind of its own and never would, much like its owner. Mr. Park had also warded it with his own set of meticulously-made Order Magic wards and it therefore did precisely what was asked of it, nothing more and nothing less. It did not crash, fail to connect to the Internet, fail to print, print the wrong thing, print too much of one thing, get viruses, get malware, or any of the scores of other things that normal mundane computers did, for he just would not tolerate that kind of nonsense.

Opening his briefcase, Mr. Park took out his tablet computer, which was essentially a miniature touch-screen version of his desktop PC, and set it aside. In fact, the two were slaved to each other, so he could have access to his desktop PC at all times, even when making his rounds about the school, or out on the grounds, or in his room. For this was a man who believed that sleeping, eating, grooming, and restroom breaks were aggravating interruptions to his work, and leisure was a vice of lesser men and women than himself.

As he reviewed his files and calendar in preparation for the day ahead, he came across another dreaded reminder of something he did not like one bit. He had nearly had a stroke over the summer when he'd first heard that there were five students from the Ravenstone family in his school this year, on top of the three non-humans the School Board was forcing him to take in. It did not matter that one of these five Ravenstone children was the daughter of one of his teachers, nor that her surname was actually Metaxas; he knew full well that the Ravenstones had a family policy of "once a Ravenstone, always a Ravenstone." From what he knew of Melora Metaxas, that seemed to hold true; the woman was a Ravenstone to the core, no matter her surname.

*'Ravenstone, ha! Might as well be called Chaos-bringers,'* he thought. His school had been a perfect, well-oiled machine of education for almost a decade when that Metaxas woman had come in. He hadn't wanted to hire her, but the School Board had insisted because she had an incredible record of accomplishments. A list that had, in point of fact, been precisely why he didn't want to hire her. She'd started out as a trapeze artist in a circus since she was a small child,

and had attracted one mess of trouble after another for the next 30 years of her life until she'd married her trapeze partner and left the circus to work for Fae Springs. The fact she'd attracted so much trouble hadn't bothered the School Board, they'd been too focused on the fact that she'd met every bit of ridiculous trouble head-on and came out victorious. From angry Goblins to dark witches on murder sprees, she'd beat them all down and came out smelling like a rose.

After that first year of her teaching, he'd nearly had the School Board convinced to let her loose, but that had been when the other Ravenstones had decided to butt in, with Nizoni and Morgana Ravenstone successfully getting onto the School Board and killing any hope of getting rid of Melora Metaxas, who had been a pain in his backside ever since. And, of course, Defense scores had gone up dramatically, which further cemented her place at the school, to his chagrin.

Then, as if that hadn't been enough, they'd proposed letting non-humans become students of Fae Springs, and gotten it passed finally the year before. Ten years of fighting that ridiculous proposal, all for nothing. He just hoped the new policy wouldn't disrupt his well-ordered world too much. And if it did, well... he could work with that, use it to get that policy overturned. He shuddered; whether this went well or badly, he was probably not going to have a good year. Adjusting to any change in his work routine was always difficult, and this was a huge one.

Of course now there were five new human students, the Ravenstones, to further disrupt things. If the adult Ravenstones he knew were anything to go by, these five would like-

ly spread bedlam throughout the school. His only comfort was that if they messed up badly enough, he could expel them, making them a problem for someone else.

He glowered at his reflection in the computer screen, for these changes were already disrupting his routine. He was already two full minutes behind his usual schedule from Ms. Ravenstone's question about familiars, and from thinking about all the trouble they would surely cause. He'd already taken extra time putting up signs reminding students of rules they ought to know if they'd read the student handbook. It was only 40 pages long in 11 point font, for God's sake, did nobody *read* anymore?

Annoyed at himself as much as at them, he put them out of his mind and focused on his work. Thankfully, it worked, and half an hour later he was back on schedule, his mind untroubled by worries of disruptions, everything working for him as smoothly as the Rolex watch on his wrist.



DALIA WAS DREAMING of riding a giant centipede into battle against men in business suits, swinging at them with a battle ax, her enemies scattering in terror of her. One of her enemies stopped, turned around, and shouted.

“Wake up!”

“Is that the best battle cry you can think of?” Dalia asked.

“WAKE UP!”

She bolted awake and upright.

"It's nearly 7:30! – Classes start – in an hour!" said Kobalos in a mix of different voices. Dalia realized, then, that it had been Kobalos shouting "wake up!"

Dalia got out of bed and looked at the other beds. The other three girls were asleep still, too. Doñela flew over to one of the alarm clocks and picked it up, handing it to Dalia.

*'It'll go off in a moment, it's on snooze.'*

Sure enough, a moment later the alarm began screeching, Aavraak reaching over to try to hit the snooze button again, only to yowl in pain when her wrist hit wood instead.

*'Allow me,'* Doñela said, popping inside Dalia's body, pushing Dalia out. She stood up awkwardly on Dalia's one foot, the prosthesis sitting on the floor.

"WAKE UP! CLASSES START IN AN HOUR!" Doñela yelled.

Everyone bolted upright. When what she was saying sunk in a few seconds later, the panic started. An hour for four girls with two bathrooms to get ready, go to breakfast, and get to the first class? Nobody could possibly do that much in that little time!

"Aavraak, you use the restroom first. I can hold it pretty good," Doñela said. Aavraak thanked her quickly on her way to the restroom.

"Sally, let Kohana go first, you always take forever."

"Right."

With Aavraak and Kohana in the restrooms, and Sally rushing to get her things together so they'd be ready later, Doñela switched places with Dalia again, and Dalia changed right there in the room instead of the bathroom, since Sally already knew the secret behind why she changed in the re-

stroom, and Doñela was standing guard outside the door. Sally was focused on her own stuff anyway, so she didn't see Dalia pulling off her pajamas, changing her panties, and getting into her school uniform shirt and skirt. Then they switched off tasks, Dalia rushing to get her stuff together while Sally changed into her own uniform.

Aavraak had done a rush job in the restroom, and even so, Dalia's legs were crossed by the time she had the change to rush inside. She didn't have time for a shower, so she brushed her teeth while sitting on the toilet, then pulled her hair bonnet off and did her hair as quickly as possible, which meant pulling her poofy hair into two little puff-balls, one on either side of her head. Even going as fast as she dared, the other girls were all gone by the time she got out. She grabbed her backpack, let Kobalos perch on her shoulder, and ran out the door.

She ended up having 25 minutes to eat and get to class, all while being careful not to get the white uniform top dirty. Thankfully, their explorations over the weekend meant they would know where their class was, as soon as they got their class schedules.

Dalia was halfway through her breakfast when the schedules came down to her. Ignoring Doñela pretending to eat Sally's food, she took one and passed the others down.

"Ugh. All that rushing, and it's just boring old mundane subjects until 2:30? Well, except for History and Civics, but that's not really magic. Bleh! A Days are gonna suck this year."

"B Days look better though," Sally said. "Crystals and Earth Magic at 8:30, followed by Enchantment. Then Alche-

my after lunch. Wow, look at all these study halls! Two today, either three or four tomorrow, depending on the availability of Darren Thorsson for PE on B Days.”

Ah, A Day/B Day class schedules. On A Days, one set of classes. On B Days, an entirely different set of classes. Alternating A to B to A to B, yadda yadda, so on so forth. Very convenient in some ways, a nightmare in others. Fae Springs had a lot to teach these kids, and by gods it was going to do it in the most annoying way possible, by making students memorize two completely different schedules and then struggle to keep track of which schedule they were on that day. Helped along by helpful signs on the walls declaring whether it was an A Day or a B Day, signs that were not nearly as helpful as their makers seemed to think they'd be. As a wise person once said, 'Imposition of order leads to escalation of disorder.' A nice bit of wisdom that Principal Park would sooner die than admit had any truth to it.

Adding further to the confusion was that each year was split into two classes, and each of the two classes had its own schedule, meaning each year had four schedules instead of two, because each of the two halves of each year had its own A Days and B Days that differed from one another. But ultimately, unless you needed to know the schedule of someone in the other half of your class or another year entirely, you only had your own A Days and B Days to memorize. Or, if you were as bad at memorizing things like schedules as Dalia was, you folded yours up and kept referring to it every 50 minutes or so, and wrote down a copy elsewhere in case you lost it.



Of slight help was the fact that Principal Park hated disorder, and regular alternating A/B days never resulted in the same schedule for each week, which he couldn't abide. So he had modified the system slightly; instead of doing it the normal way that A/B day schedules were done – where the first Monday was an A day and the second Monday was a B day, unless there was a skipped day – at Fae Springs, the alternating days reset every week. So Mondays were always A Days, and there were always three A days and two B days every week, barring class cancellations.

Despite the dull schedule, Dalia was pleased in her first class to find that the desks were designed in such a way that – while still one-piece units so they could be moved around easier – had the desk bolted to the chair in the middle of both, low enough to be comfortable to sit in. This pleased her because her previous school had used desks where the writing part was on the right side. Great for right-handed people, but horrible for lefties like her, as they would leave her arm dangling in the air. She was thrilled she wouldn't have to struggle to write left-handed on a right-handed desk anymore!

That morning was otherwise very dull, though. Dalia had hoped her first class at Fae Springs would be something cool like Magical Self-Defense, or Elementary Transformation Magic, or even Crystals and Earth Magic. Neither she nor her friends had anticipated having to suffer through English and Math in the morning, taking lots of tests to see where everyone was, since they had come from all over Pluviatia, and the various schools often had different education standards (especially with the rise of 'common core' edu-

cation, which Principal Park loathed). All morning long, Doñela floated around the room trying to entertain herself without showing any sign of her presence, to Dalia's chagrin. But it was hard to fault her. Even Kobalos was getting antsy from boredom. It had been easier in a mundane school, where her two head-mates had been forced to remain inside her body during classes. But it was going to be very difficult to convince Doñela to do that here.

There was a little bit of magic in History and Civics class with Kai Carling after lunch, but so far only in their textbook, as their first History class also consisted mostly of tests to see where they all were on the subject, and Science was the same way. The primary difference between the two is that in History and Civics, they got their first textbook, passed out in the final minutes of the class.

It wasn't until 2:30 pm that something magical and somewhat interesting appeared in their first day's schedule, in the form of Elementary Transformation Magic with Mr. Garth Rabe. As such, he was only the second teacher Dalia really paid attention to how he looked.

Mr. Rabe looked to be in his late 40's, had thinning, sandy-colored hair, wore tortoiseshell glasses, and had a gentle and kindly manner. The room the class was held in was full of so many plants it looked almost like a florist shop or a gardening store. She mused that her little brother Ashkii would love this class when he got old enough to come to Fae Springs, as he was a natural at plant magic.

When the teacher entered the room, he said, "No talking please" in a polite and calm tone that nonetheless brooked no argument, and the room immediately went quiet. He

noded approvingly and took roll call, as had all the other teachers. When he was satisfied everyone was there, he began.

“Welcome, class, to Elementary Transformation Magic, or as I prefer to call it, even though the term is technically incorrect, 'Phytomancy.' Here you will learn, as my preferred name implies, the magical art of Phytomancy. When I say the term is technically incorrect, I mean that the suffix '-mancy' usually refers to forms of divination. But over the last hundred years or so, the art of transforming plants with magic has come to be called Phytomancy, and people who use transformation magic only on plants have come to be known as Phytomancers. Since Phytomancy is easier to say than 'Elementary Transformation Magic,' that is why I prefer to call it that, even though Principal Park reminds me of the proper name for the class every single time he hears me call it that, and requires me to explain the proper name of it.”

*'Finally something interesting!'* Doñela said to her internally.

Unable to hear Doñela, Mr. Rabe continued. “With that out of the way, I will now define transformation magic for those who don't already know. It is, simply put, the art of using magic to cause living things to grow in certain ways, or to *not* grow in certain ways. Phytomancy is also called Plant Bending, because you are bending plants to your Will. It is essential to learn Phytomancy before going on to applying the principles of the art to animals, if you wish to pursue the subject that far; many do not, considering Animal Bending to be... icky. However, if you wish to join the magical medical field, Animal Bending is a skill you will be required to

learn, even if you do think of it as icky, since humans and most faeries are technically animals, the art of Animal Bending is required to become a Healer, and Animal Bending is far more difficult than Plant Bending. Transformation magic on humans and faeries is even *more* difficult than Animal Bending, too, because their intelligence can work against you when you try it. Though, it can also work *with* you, if you are lucky.

“So, in this class I will first be teaching you to learn how to care for plants in general, giving you a few specific examples. This is important because knowing how to do it the mundane way is a necessary foundation for learning how to improve upon mundane care of plants with magic. I will also be teaching you some basic biology as it applies to plants, like the way their cells and their systems work, for understanding the anatomy of plants is also essential to learning how to Bend them with magic. Yes, even something as simple as causing a plant to grow faster than usual requires an understanding of their physiology.”

He paused to take a drink of water, then set it down and continued. Doñela, grinning, contemplated moving it or tipping it over. Dalia sent her a warning thought against it.

“But before we get to any of that, the first two weeks of this class and other classes of magic will be dedicated to teaching you youngsters how to feel your own magic, and then how to feel outside magic. These are the basic foundations of learning to do magic, after all.

“From there, you will be taught how to do simple magic wandlessly, so you know how to do so. Once you have mastered simple wandless magic, you will move on to using

wands and learning what kinds of wands are good for which kinds of magic. For while you may not require a wand to use magic, wands are useful, having properties that boost the power of magic, aid in different kinds of magical control, act as a safety valve for magic, and can even have magical influences over their users. When your year comes around to wand lore, in this class I will talk about the magical qualities of different plant-based wand materials, mostly different kinds of woods.

“So with all that in mind, I'm going to pass out the textbooks to get that over with, and we'll spend the rest of the class learning to feel your magic. If I could get some volunteers to help me? No takers? Alright, how about you, Miss Alvar Ravenstone, and Mr. Griffith, you too. Books are right over here.”

Alvar picked up 10 of the books and held them effortlessly in her right hand, passing them out with equal grace using her left hand, a feat made all the more impressive because her thin frame made her look weak and frail. Her dark skin and graceful beauty turned heads as she did this, but she kept her eyes downcast. Jeffrey Griffith, however, only carried five books at a time, and struggled to hold them and pass them out at the same time, even dropping a few at one point. Mr. Rabe saved them from crashing to the floor by pointing a wand at them. Judging by the look of the thing he put the wand back into – a sort of cloth tool belt made for holding multiple wands – he had at least five wands on his person, their handles poking out of their pockets.

When the books were all passed out and put away in backpacks, Mr. Rabe began to instruct them on feeling their

magic. This involved, first, focusing their imaginations and their Will on creating heat from the index fingers of their primary hand while it pointed at their other hand. It was a lot more difficult than it sounded; most of them hadn't done magic except in the heat of intense emotions, and doing it on purpose without the emotional component was very difficult. When the bell rang for the end of class, nobody had managed to make any heat with their magic, but Mr. Rabe did not look surprised.

There being a study hall between this class and Magical Self-Defense, they didn't hurry. When they got to the study hall, everyone went back to trying to make heat with their magic, and the teacher watching them looked like she had expected this. But alas, after another hour of trying, nobody seemed to have made any progress. Doñela spent the whole hour spinning lazily upside-down and then right-side up, over and over again.

The bell rang, and the next class was on the third floor, meaning they took the wider-than-usual shadow portals twice to get there. Luckily, the classroom was right there on the opposite side of the corridor from the exit portal. They all went in and sat down, Dalia taking a desk near where Brandon had parked his electric wheelchair, up toward the front.

When the second bell rang, the teacher still wasn't there. But a couple minutes later, the door opened, getting everyone's attention. Then they all did a double-take at what they saw, staring open-mouthed at the sight before them.

Mrs. Melora Metaxas was dressed in camouflage-print pants and long-sleeved camouflage-print shirt, and her hair

was bright neon orange today, but that was normal compared to the fact she was walking into the room on her hands, saying "Good afternoon, class," as casually as if she were doing nothing unusual. She then climbed up a step-stool at the front of the classroom, still on her hands, the step-stool elevating her eyes enough that she could see them all, her feet almost touching the ceiling.

What was more, she was barefoot and had a metal spork held in the toes of one foot, which she used as a wand to levitate the attendance list in front of her face and turn it upside down so she could read it. She called attendance like that, which meant she had to further prompt a few people who were still gaping at her. Dalia noticed that Doñela, on the other hand, was looking around the room in confusion.

*'Where'd that voice come from?'* she asked. Dalia gestured up to the front with her head.

*'Whadda ya mean the front? There's nothing there,'* Doñela replied. Dalia was confused now, too. She looked from the teacher up front to Doñela, who was still looking around like she was trying to see what everyone else saw.

"You're upside down!" someone finally blurted out, when she had finished taking attendance.

"Why yes I am, Mr. Irving, thank you for noticing. Excellent observation of your environment, though I must say I'm a tad disappointed it took someone so long to say something about it."

She dropped the spork onto her desk and fell backwards off the step-stool and onto her feet so she was facing them, pushed the step-stool back out of the way, and put some ballet flats on her feet.

"Pow, pow, POW!" she said, making finger-guns at several students. "You three are dead. Several others in this room would be falling ill. And this one—"

Someone screamed as she was grabbed from behind. Everyone bolted around to look. The person grabbing her was... but that was impossible! She was up in front of the class! They looked back and forth between the two grinning, identical faces of Melora Metaxas.

"—would be my prisoner," said the Melora in the back, holding onto a girl Dalia was pretty sure was named Grace London.

When they all turned to look at the teacher in the front again, she vanished before their eyes, as did the spork on the desk, and the step-stool. They turned back to the teacher in the back, whose hair was now black as it usually was. Her clothes were also different; she was wearing a sleeveless shirt now, so they could see the eight-rayed arrow-star tattoo on her right arm. On her left arm was another tattoo, of a golden apple with Greek lettering written on it. She let go of the girl and apologized to her, walking toward the front of the room once she was sure Grace was going to be okay.

*'An illusion!'* Dalia thought to Doñaela.

*'Oh that explains it,'* she responded, looking where everyone else was looking now – the back of the room. *'Yeah, there she is!'*

"I'm sure you're all wondering what just happened. Well, it's simple. I was in the room the whole time, and nobody noticed. It wasn't like I was even trying that hard, I didn't even have an illusion over me, I was just hiding behind a desk in the back. Someone should have seen me, or said something if



they saw me but didn't speak. I could have been an evil dark witch sent to assassinate all of you."

She had reached the front of the room again, pulling the spork out of a wand holster and holding it in her hand like a wand. Seen up close now, Dalia's eye caught a glint of silver around her neck, and she looked at the necklace on the chain around her neck; it was silver, and looked like two crescent moons back-to-back with a line between their backs, or like two arrows that were smashing point-first into one another.

"The me that walked in on her hands was an illusion, of course. A very realistic illusion, full of rich details of image and sound, but still an illusion. I cast it from my hiding spot, and I had you all nice and distracted. I could have taken out several students with my wand," she said, wiggling the spork, "before any of you even knew anything was wrong. I'm disappointed, really; nobody has any common sense anymore. Well, except for my daughter Calandra, who was told ahead of time what would happen, and was ordered to keep quiet. Thank you, Calandra."

"You're welcome, Mo—er, Mrs. Metaxas."

Brandon raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Han?"

"You said several of us would have been falling ill, too. What did you mean by that?"

"An excellent question from Mr. Han, and one long overdue. But then, you were just attacked by a dark witch, so I'll grant you were distracted. The answer to your question, Mr. Han, is the next part of my lesson."

She walked over to Sally, and opened Sally's desk, pulling out a piece of paper with '#1' written on it.

“This paper represents hex #1. No actual magic went in to any of these, by the way. Hex #1, were it real, would have been a hex bottle full of various herbs, crystals, or talismans meant to make someone fall ill. But don't go looking them up to try them, I don't teach how to do harmful magic, and even if you wanted to learn, the books to do so are locked up tighter than a dolphin's blow-hole, and they would take a powerful amount of magic to do even if you had the right books. You kids haven't likely even managed to produce heat with your magic yet, so you've got at least another four or five years before you could even *hope* to try performing any of these hexes. I suggest you don't attempt it, there are harsh penalties for abusing magic, the various Witches' Councils won't take kindly to it.”

She crumpled up the paper and tossed it in the garbage, then moved on to Elliolyynn Losolom, the Aashabahk boy. She reached into his desk and pulled out a paper saying '#2.'

“Hex number two,” she said. “This paper represents a spring-loaded mechanism that would toss the hex at its victim, but it's one that would really only hurt a Faery like Mr. Losolom. Never mind for the moment how I knew he'd sit there, next to the window like that. For now, just know that hex #2 is actually one we *will* learn, because it's not really a hex. It's something called Black Salt, and is very effective as a temporary defense against Faeries and malicious spirits. It contains sea salt, iron dust or filings, wood ash, and black pepper or cayenne pepper, so it's useful against human threats as well.

“When used against Faeries, the iron in the Black Salt fuses to their skin and makes a dusting of tiny little burning

points of torturous agony. If using iron filings, there's less of a chance the filings will fuse to the skin, but the ones that don't bounce off to the ground will burrow under the skin and into the muscles, which is far more painful, I'm told, than it sounds. Some Faeries who've been hit with that variant of Black Salt were observed to beg for death while the filings were being removed. Some even committed suicide before treatment could be completed. Though it has less of an effect on skin-shifters like Mr. Losolom, here.

“By the way, if I learn of anyone using Black Salt against any of our Faery students for any reason short of that student actively trying to kill you, I will personally ensure that your suffering equals theirs. I will also be quite displeased if you abuse it against any humans, as well.”

Mrs. Metaxas tossed that one in the garbage as well, then went to the desk of Sutekh Ravenstone, who looked up at her with a sort of casual melancholy, his long bangs covering both his eyes. Being black and having stiff hair as a result, they stayed in position. She reached under his chair and pulled off a third piece of paper. It said '#3.'

“The third and final hex of this demonstration. This one represents an alchemical sigil. I know you haven't had Alchemy class yet, but basically, Alchemy is magical chemistry. But while part of it involves potions-making and other common chemistry-like things, another part of it – a much newer aspect to alchemy called Atomic Alchemy, invented in the late 1800's and refined a lot since then – involves using runes and sigils to alter the arrangement of atoms in a given substance.”

She pulled out another wand, a perfectly straight copper wand with a crystal point sticking out of one end of it.

“This wand, the wand I use for combat, was made with Atomic Alchemy. I used Atomic Alchemy to turn a graphite rod into a diamond rod, and then fused many layers of copper onto that diamond rod.”

She showed the combat wand around to the whole class without letting anyone touch it, then she put it away and returned to the front of the class.

“Atomic Alchemy takes a massive amount of runes and sigils to create even the simplest things. I could clear this entire room of all furniture and have just enough space on the floor to lay out the rune and sigil circuits to make a new combat wand. But *destruction* with Atomic Alchemy is much simpler. On the space of this paper that was under Mr. Ravenstone's desk, I could lay down an Atomic Alchemy circuit to do something simple but deadly, like boil all the water in his body, or short-circuit his brain.

“But what I had in mind for this demonstration was more subtle, and stretches the limits of such a small circuit, but is doable with enough talent and power: raise his body temperature high enough and fast enough to make him start to burn from the inside out, so that no amount of water could save his life in time.”

The room was silent in shock and horror for several tense moments, until Sutekh himself grinned and said – with awe and delight in his voice, “*Wicked!*”

“Indeed it is, Mr. Ravenstone, but likely not in the manner you meant. Burning to death is not a fun way to die. There are worse ways to go, but it *is* still pretty high on the list of horrible ways to die.”

She took a drink of water before continuing.

"Now, I'm not trying to make you paranoid with this demonstration, just to drive home some points on the kinds of ways magic can be used for evil. But the odds of any of you becoming a target of any of these magics is not very high. Dark witches are not really as common as many would have you believe, and the ones that exist tend to go in for simpler, more direct methods than these. A hex bottle, like Ms. Smith-Jones had a representation of in her desk, is simple enough for such people, as is spraying a Faery with Black Salt, but you'd have to have done something really horrible to anger a dark witch enough to use hex #3 on you, or done something to become an assassination target. Unless the dark witch was a complete sociopath, I suppose. But those tend to get weeded out fairly quickly while they're still in school, so don't get paranoid, at least not until you've lived the kind of life where paranoia becomes a survival trait.

"Anyway, with the demonstration done, I'm going to tell you a little more about this class, while Ms. Melody Harper and Mr. Steven Lambert pass out the textbooks."

The two named students got up and started passing out the books as instructed.

"Alright. So you've got at least three other classes where they're going to instruct you to do the basics like feeling your magic, then feeling outside magic. That's great. We're not doing that in this class, though. This is because while you're all struggling to make that particular breakthrough, and then follow that with learning to cast really simple spells, someone could still attack you while you're new to magic, and I'm going to help you learn how to defend yourself first with things that don't even require any magic to use.

“For instance, the Black Salt. Black Salt is literally nothing more than sea salt, iron dust or filings, wood ash, and black pepper or cayenne pepper. That’s it. A total mundane could make it, and it would be equally effective. Some people like to push some magic into it or bless it to make it more effective, but it’s not necessary. In fact, the iron filings tend to be more dangerous when not enchanted already, to humans as well as Faeries. Iron tends to suck up magic like a sponge and then discharge it dangerously when touched. Putting magic into Black Salt makes it dangerous to the user as well as to the opponent, and I don’t recommend doing it.

“There’s a number of other materials that can be made and used without you needing to put any of your own magic in it, like several herbs that are useful against certain kinds of spirits. And then there are forms of magic from other sources you can use, like charging crystals or other gemstones with moonlight or sunlight.

“Also, there are a number of very useful tips of things you can do or avoid doing to minimize the risk to yourself. While we still have time, I want to go over a few of these, and I’ll start with one very simple one: never give out your full name to anyone who might be a magic user, unless you trust them with your life. Full names can be used, with enough skill and power, to hex you. It doesn’t work so well on its own, usually having to be paired with a picture of you or a bit of your hair or fingernail or toenail clippings, but it’s one less thing that can be used against you if you’re careful to keep it a secret.”

“Wait, hair and nail clippings?” someone exclaimed.

Mrs. Metaxas chuckled. “Yes, quite. Those and blood are the most reliable ingredients in creating a poppet for hexing

someone via sympathetic magic. So try to keep your blood in your body, and dispose of it yourself with fire when possible. Same goes with hair and nail clippings. Though if you toss nail clippings in the garbage, someone would have to be both exceptionally dedicated and exceptionally lucky to find them.”

This broke some of the tension, the students – all of them seated again – laughing.

“And as for hair, the ones in the shower won’t be an issue – even if you were the only one to use that shower, someone would have to be, again, very dedicated to fish soggy, slimy hair out of the shower drains to use against you, and such soggy hair tends to be far less effective than the dry kind. Also, you’re probably safe getting a haircut at a mundane hair stylist unless you’re someone who’s attracted the wrong kind of attention. But if you want to be really sure on that front, just make sure to collect the hair and destroy it yourself with fire.”

Someone raised their hand, and she called on them.

“What about shaving?”

“Well, you’re probably a bit young for that just yet, but unless you’re trimming off hairs big enough to hold a clump of them in your hands, you’re probably okay. If the clumps are big enough, though, just burn them. And if you nick yourself, dispose of any blood in a way it can’t be used against you. Fire works, but so does flushing it down the toilet. But uh, girls, don’t flush your pads or tampons, please. And don’t burn them, either.”

There was an uproar, mostly from the boys, who were grossed out. The girls mostly rolled their eyes at the ridiculousness of the boys.

"There's actually not any need, for one," Mrs. Metaxas continued, once the boys had quieted down. "Menstrual blood—QUIET, BOYS! Cover your ears if it bothers you, you silly billy goats. As I was saying, menstrual blood trapped in pads and tampons isn't very useful for that kind of magic, as it tends to be decomposing already, so again, unless you're certain you've become important enough for someone to be *that* dedicated to trying to hurt you, just toss them in the garbage. It's what I do, and I definitely have made lots of powerful enemies in my life. OKAY, BOYS, THE GROSS STUFF IS OVER, YOU BIG BABIES!"

Once the boys – except for Sutekh Ravenstone, who hadn't batted an eye at the period blood talk (not that anyone could tell if he batted an eye by looking at him) – settled down, she continued.

"But the most important thing to know about hexes that use sympathetic magic – and thus hair, blood, or other body parts – is that they take an *incredible* amount of power, skill, and personal hatred to fuel them. What I mean by 'personal hatred' is that the person has to have a very powerful, very *personal* reason to specifically hate *you*. More diffuse hatreds, like racism or homophobia, aren't powerful enough, no matter how intense they are. Even a lot of the lesser personal hatreds won't work. If someone got a part in a play you wanted, I doubt that would be powerful enough to use against them unless you're a complete sociopath. Even stealing someone's boyfriend generally isn't strong enough. The kinds of person-



al hatred that can most reliably fuel sympathetic-magic hexes include things like revenge against the person who murdered a friend or loved one, righteous anger against a tyrant who ruins lives, or the victims of serial bullying or other abuse fighting back against their attackers after years of putting up with worsening abuse.

“With that in mind, by far the most sure-fire way to protect yourself from most sympathetic-magic hexes is to be a good and kind person, or at least avoid being an evil, bullying jerk. And that, I should hope, is a *lot* easier than being paranoid about your hair, blood, and nail clippings being properly disposed of at all times.”

“Well that's a relief!” someone said, and everyone laughed, even Mrs. Metaxas.

“Glad you think so. Anyway, I think we have enough time left for me to be one of those boring teachers that asks you to take notes as I write on the chalkboard, and I expect you to do so, because these are things that may save your life someday. But just a quick warning first that anyone doing any un-sanctioned messing around in this classroom will be the volunteer for my next three demonstrations, and it won't be nearly as fun as what happened to Ms. London. Now, write this down.”

They got out paper and pens as she started writing, and began their notes as soon as her writing was visible. What she wrote on the board was this:

Basics of Defense according to Melora Metaxas:

1. Never give out your full name unless you trust the person with your life, or you're certain they are

entirely mundane.

2. Properly dispose of hair, blood, and nail clippings.
3. Always carry charged/cleared protective gems or talismans. (Complicated. More on these later.)
4. Always carry some Black Salt.
5. Carry iron with you, if you can. Wrought iron or cast iron, but NOT steel. Iron in steel is chemically bound to other substances and does **not** react with Faery biochemistry in most cases. Make sure to carry it in a leather holder or in cloth, iron tends to soak up magic like a sponge and can discharge it randomly if you're not careful. Yes, even the iron in steel.
6. Carry rune-enhanced stone spectacles or a stone with a natural hole in it to see through illusions. Note: Does not always work against Faery illusions or really powerful Dark illusions.
7. A salt circle plus Willpower can protect against malicious spirits and some Faery beings. (More on this later.)
8. Silver is a powerful protective metal, especially when magically charged.
9. Symbols of faith can repel Faery beings and malicious spirits, but only for a faith you actually believe in strongly. This includes the crucifix, Star of David, holy water, holy oil, and pentagrams, as a few examples.
10. If you can carry some, Peace Water can be useful. (More on this later.)
11. When in doubt, use fire if you can. (But be careful

with it.)

When they were done writing, there was five minutes left of the class. Mrs. Metaxas turned to face them again, got their attention, and said one last thing.

“Before you go to your next class, students, I just wanted to say a couple things. First, while we don't have a points system in Fae Springs, I do have one in my class. The student with the most points at the end of the school year will win a protective talisman I made, and a book of defensive hexes. The points stand thus – Mr. Irving, 5 points for saying I was upside down. Mr. Han – 5 points for asking about my saying several of you would have fallen ill. And five points each for everyone else who contributed to the class discussion,” she said, writing down several more names on the board. “I'll copy these points to my own notebook, so I can put them back on the board later.

“Next, I will be expecting you to be on your toes in my class. Keep your eyes open, look around you, be aware of your surroundings, and be suspicious, because some days I will have more demonstration scenarios like today, and other days I won't. You won't know which days are which, and even asking my daughter Calandra won't work because this is the first and last one I'm warning her of, as she could use the practice as well. Doing all this is important for learning to defend yourself, and also it can earn you more points. Oh yeah, and don't tell the other half of your year what happened here today on pain of me making you all run 20 laps around the outside of the school if you do.

"And last but not least, please read the first chapter of your textbook before the next class. And there's the bell. Adios, everyone!"

They all filed out of the room, chattering excitedly, as that had been the most interesting class all day, and they hadn't even done any magic.

"Your mom is *amazing* at illusions!" Sally told Calandra.

"Yeah, I hope I can get as good some day. I can't wait til tomorrow when we start Enchantment. That's the subject with Illusions in it."

"How much you wanna bet we just do more 'feeling our magic'?" Brandon said, annoyed.

"Well maybe if we practice tonight and again in the morning, we'll figure it out by then and can move on," Sally suggested.

"Move on to feeling *outside* magic, you mean?" he asked, sounding glum.

"I guess so. But progress is progress. Anyway, Mrs. Metaxas said there's magic we can learn to use until then. Charged crystals and so on. I looked in the chapter on charged crystals, and it's pretty simple."

"Isn't that just like, I dunno, enhancing the natural magical qualities of the crystals?"

"Well sure, but it's still magic. And who knows, maybe if we charge crystals, we can feel outside magic too, and make even faster progress?"

"That's a good point. Thanks for that," Brandon said.

"Any time."

DALIA RAVENSTONE AND THE VICIOUS  
CIRCLE

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## Chapter Twelve: The Panic Attack

*(Moments later)*

DEFENSE CLASS NOW OVER, it was time for their next class. Calandra stopped and pulled her backpack off, everyone else stopping as well. She dug around in it and pulled out her PE clothes. When Dalia saw this, she felt her stomach tighten. Kobalos, on her shoulder, sensed her feelings and looked at her with concern.

“Crud! PE! OMG OMG OMG,” she said. Then, realizing she’d said this aloud, felt her pulse start to race. Not wanting a panic attack, she tried breathing deep and holding it, but that wasn’t working this time. She flapped her hands anxiously, trying to speak, nothing coming out. Kobalos flew off her shoulder and landed on one of the nearby windowsills.

*‘Aw crud!’* Doñela said at Dalia.

“What’s wrong?” asked Calandra.

“Oh boy,” Sally said, looking at the expression on Dalia’s face. “You guys go on, I think she’s having a panic attack. Tell the teacher we’ll be late.”

Aavraak and Calandra turned to look at Dalia curiously as Brandon and Kohana started to go.

"Not now, you two!" Sally snapped. Aavraak nodded sadly and went on with the others. "Sorry," she said more kindly, "but this is a bit of an emergency. I'll explain later."

Dalia was now curled against one of the walls of the corridor, feeling dizzy, light-headed, and ill. She was wet with cold sweat and crying quietly while gasping for breath. Sally knelt by Dalia, carefully not touching her.

"What is it? PE?"

Dalia nodded. Sally felt glad; it was always easier to help Dalia in these times when the panic attack had a reason. They didn't always have a discernible reason; sometimes they just *happened*.

"Did you forget to wear your PE clothes under your uniform?"

She nodded again.

"Do you *have* your PE clothes?"

Once more she nodded.

"We discussed this over the summer, remember? Just ask the teacher about it. And I'll be there with you to help you."

{More story,} Dalia signed, unable to speak.

Sally paused to review in her mind the conversation just prior to Dalia's panic attack. Then it clicked.

"Oh. Well we can solve that problem. I'll explain to the others that sometimes panic attacks just strike without warning, for no reason. There's no reason for them to think anything of your words. Just keep trying to breathe regularly. Can you stand? Yes, lean on me, let's get you somewhere quiet."

Sally felt Kobalos land on her shoulder. Ignoring him, she looked around, not knowing where the nearest quiet

place was. She was on the verge of just picking one and risking it when something tugged on her shirt. She whipped around and saw a door open of its own accord. It should have terrified her, but for some reason she felt it was safe and pulled Dalia along through the open door, finding one of the unused classrooms behind it. It was lucky, really; the building wasn't really all that large, there were only so many unused classrooms in the whole building. And she thought this was the only one on this floor, as well.

When they were sitting in a corner together, Sally looked around for something to distract Dalia, while giving occasional words of reassurance - "You'll be okay," "the school policy is on your side, the PE teacher has to let you change somewhere else if you're not comfortable in the changing room," and "it'll be okay."

Dalia's purse fell against Sally's leg, getting her attention. She was confused about that, she was sure Dalia had been clutching it to her chest in a panic, but Dalia was in a fetal position at the moment.

"Is it okay if I look for something in your purse to help you?"

Dalia nodded. Sally thanked her and looked in the purse. She found some emergency anti-panic pills. She read the label and instructions.

"Do you want one of these pills?"

Dalia shook her head.

"Oh yeah, swallowing pills might be risky right now. Alright, I'll put that back. Um... there's a tiny portable chess set in here. Want to play chess?"

Dalia nodded.



Sally got the chess set out and set up the pieces.

“Black or white?”

Dalia relaxed her body enough to sign {Black.}

“Right,” Sally said, and considered her first move. Soon, she moved the right-side knight's pawn.

“Pawn to G4,” she said.

Dalia stared at the board for an uncomfortably long time before signing {Knight to F6}

They played one game, Sally winning and Dalia relaxing and recovering bit by bit. Then they played another, and by the time they finished that one, Dalia was sitting up. They played a third, and Dalia was thoroughly bored by the end of it.

By then, Sally realized that PE would be almost over.

“Are you feeling better?”

Dalia sighed and nodded. Sally nodded, knowing Dalia was calm enough to leave soon, but still unable to talk.

“Do you feel up to leaving?”

{What's the time?} Dalia signed.

“PE is almost over with, if that's what you're asking. I'm sure she'll understand. You have a note filed with the office about these panic attacks of yours, right?”

Dalia nodded.

“Good. Um... do you want to go to talk with the PE teacher about the next time we have that class, or to the nurse's office, or somewhere else?”

After a pause to think about it, Dalia signed, {Teacher.}

“Do you want to go now, or wait?”

{Now,} Dalia signed.

“Alright. Just gotta put this away.”

{Let me,} Dalia signed. Sally nodded, and let Dalia put the chess pieces away.

When that was done, Dalia stood up and asked, via sign language, how she looked.

“Like you’ve been crying and rolling around in dust,” Sally said. “Want help brushing off?”

{Yes, please.}

When Dalia was clean and had put her sunglasses on to cover her red eyes, she and Sally went to the gymnasium, where PE was just getting out. Kobalos hadn’t moved from Sally’s shoulder the whole time.

“Sorry we didn’t show up til now, Ms. Trask. Dalia had a panic attack.”

The woman before them was a bit androgynous. She was also short, but still taller than the librarian. Her brown hair was cut in a pixie cut, and she wore a track suit.

She nodded understandingly at them. “Yes, your friends told me something was up. And I read everyone’s pertinent information before my first class, so I thought that might be it. My office door is to the left of the girls’ changing room, down that hall. Meet me there, I think I know what you wanted to talk about. I’ll be there in five minutes or so.”

“Thank you, Ms. Trask.”

Sally and Dalia went down the corridor indicated, and soon found the right door. They looked in it, and it was full of sports equipment and other PE stuff, as well as a desk and papers and a computer. They tried the door, but it was locked, so they waited outside.

A little over five minutes later, Ms. Trask arrived at the office door and unlocked it.

"Do you want her with you for this, Ms. Ravenstone?"

Dalia nodded.

"Okay, then. Come on in, girls."

They did, and she closed it behind them. She sat behind her desk and told them to sit at the chairs in front of the desk.

"First day at a new school, first PE class; with what I read in your file, Ms. Ravenstone, I'm not surprised you had a panic attack. I just want to reassure you, I fully support our policy on transgender students. I know you can't change in the boys' changing room, most of the little monsters would eat you alive in there, and of course there would be a risk of violence, especially... um... but anyway, if you don't feel comfortable in the girls' changing room either, Ms. Ravenstone, there's a single-occupancy unisex bathroom at the end of this hallway you can use in the future."

"Thank you," Kobalos said in Dalia's voice. Ms. Trask blinked at him, looking mildly surprised. Then she turned back to Dalia.

"You're welcome, Ms. Ravenstone. And don't worry about the other students; if they ask why you're in there, just tell them it's for medical reasons, but nothing contagious. You can even say it's mental health stuff if you like, it's true enough in a roundabout way. Or best yet, tell them to mind their own business, it's cleared with the teacher."

"Thank you," Kobalos repeated.

"Not a problem. Also, since you had a medical emergency today, that won't count against you. Just try not to get into a suspicious habit of panic attacks before PE," she said, grinning.

Dalia smiled. "I won't," she said aloud for the first time all hour, but it was barely audible. Still, Ms. Trask seemed to have caught what she said anyway.

"Good to hear. And don't worry about B Day PE classes either; Mr. Thorsson knows what I know, and he's a good man."

"Thank you again," Dalia said.

"You're welcome. Now you two – er, three? – should run along to dinner. Dismissed," she said, gesturing to the door with a half-smile.



"WHAT ABOUT CHOOLI, though?" Sally said quietly to Dalia as they went to dinner. "Zee's agender, right?"

"Yeah. But Chooli already goes to a magical school for the deaf."

"Oh, right," Sally said. "Duh. Silly me."

"Yeah. Um... thanks for earlier, by the way," said Dalia.

Sally smiled. "I haven't forgotten. I'm still in top form."

"What do you think Brandon will say? I don't think he's ever seen me like that before."

"He looked concerned. We'll just explain it at dinner. Well, not all of it, obviously. But Aavraak is going to be curious too."

"Can you explain it to them later? Like, in the common room? I don't feel up to discussing it tonight."

"Sure. I mean, I *think* boys can get into the common room for the girls' dorms. The rooms themselves are keyed to

their inhabitants. Anyway, we're almost there. You want me to go ahead and tell them to hold their questions for now?"

"Yes, please."

"Great. Be done in a minute or two."

Dalia waited a couple minutes before going into the cafeteria to get dinner, sitting down at last with friends who all looked at her curiously and with concern, at least at first. To stop the weird looks, she started to talk about classes today, and speculating about what tomorrow's would be like. Kobalos, for his part, was eating from his own plate again; he was enjoying some strawberries and chicken nuggets.

Sally, though, was quiet and thoughtful at dinner. Two very strange things had happened today around Dalia; that door was heavy, and she'd been certain it had been closed just prior to it opening on its own. The way it had been designed, its weight should have cause it to close on its own if it was open, not open more if someone had left it ajar. Especially since there hadn't been any open windows in there.

And then there was the purse. On its own, she could ignore it, and assume Dalia had dropped it. But she had long experience over the years of Dalia's panic attacks, and Dalia relaxing enough to drop something she was clutching just before going into a fetal position was very unlike her.

No, something else was going on, she was decided. Noting these two unusual things made her remember all the other times unusual things had happened over the years. This last summer there had been the incident with Dalia flying. She hadn't gotten up all the way and yet had wanted Sally to jump, had seemed certain Sally would be safe if she jumped. And she'd been talking to herself then. Also, there'd been a

few other incidents in the past of locked doors opening up around Dalia, or the time Dalia had almost fallen sideways on her bike, and somehow it had righted itself; the bike had been too far down to right itself without magic, she'd known that at the time and had assumed it was emotional ("accidental") magic.

Dalia also talked to herself, or seemed to, quite a lot, now Sally thought on it. Though over the years, she'd been doing it far less, like she was afraid of being thought crazy. But the other day, Sally had seen Dalia's head turn toward something invisible; Calandra had noticed Dalia doing that as well. And it wasn't the only time she'd done it, either. She was a lot better about not doing it these days, but in the first few years of their friendship, she'd done it nearly every time they were together. Sally had always assumed Dalia had an imaginary friend that vanished after it became clear Sally wasn't going away, but there were still signs of something invisible hanging around Dalia. And it seemed to be friendly to Dalia, helping her with things like the panic attack today.

After dinner Dalia went up to their room, and with everyone in their friend group gathering in the girls' common room, Sally explained to the others what to do if someone has a panic attack (how to recognize one, how to validate their feelings and reassure them without making things worse, how to put them at ease or distract them from their panic, among other things), then afterwards she went to one of the desks in the common area and started reading through the *Magical Self-Defense* book. First she looked at telekinesis, but then she moved on to the chapters about spirits and

ghosts, since whatever it was seemed to have a mind of its own.

Knowing what to do to investigate further, Sally took the book upstairs. Dalia was busy signing with Chooli on the computer again and didn't notice her come in, so she took advantage of that to try to find some stone spectacles, only to remember she didn't have any yet. So she went back into the school building to find Mrs. Metaxas's office, the door to which was in her classroom.

When she knocked on the door, she heard some sounds inside. Soon, the door was open.

"Hello. You're... Ms. Smith-Jones, right?"

"Yes. Can I come in, Mrs. Metaxas?"

"Of course," Mrs. Metaxas said, holding open the door as Sally came in.

Closing it behind her, she asked, "You wanted something already, Ms. Smith-Jones?"

"Yes. Uh... are there any stone spectacles the school loans out, that I could borrow?"

"Well we have stone spectacles for class use, but none officially designated for personal use. Why do you want one?"

"I just... I think my friend might be haunted. If she is, it seems to be a friendly ghost, but I wanted to make sure."

"Ah. Well I do happen to have a box of stones with natural holes in them. Much better than stone spectacles in terms of power. It's my own personal store, I don't mind giving one out. Just stay there," she said, and went digging through a box in one corner of the room.

A few moments later, she came back over to the desk and handed Sally a stone that hung from a leather cord by a

jump-ring bolted into it. There was a weird, crooked hole in the middle; it was obvious this stone came by its hole naturally, as there was no way a human could have made that shape of hole and still kept the color of the inside of the hole the same as the rest of the stone.

"These are remarkably effective. Stone spectacles actually just use runes and the stone's natural magical properties to mimic the effect of these sort of stones. People prefer them to these, generally, only because stone spectacles are easier to use. Also, in a lot of ways it's easier to make stone spectacles than it is to find stones with naturally-occurring holes in them, especially in our world full of drills and other stone-working tools."

"Thank you, Mrs. Metaxas. Um... how long can I keep this before I have to return it?"

"Oh, let's say the end of the year. I have a lot of them."

"End of the year as in before the winter holidays, or the end of the school year?"

"Good question. End of the school year, I'll say. But if you want to return them sooner, then feel free to do so any time."

"Well okay, if you're sure."

"I am. And just remember, if they're friendly spirits, make sure to get your friend's permission before exorcising them. After all, I think I heard from my husband that Dalia Ravenstone has a grandfather whose ghost still hangs around their house."

"I'll do that. I just want to know for sure. Um... I just look through this, then?" She struggled to see through it. She could do it, but it wasn't easy.



“Yes. It'll see through illusions and show ghosts and other spirits even if they try to be invisible. Oh, and when you're using it, if you happen to see any black amorphous blobs or matte-black humanoid figures, often seen wearing black fedora-shaped hats, especially if they also have what looks like turned-up collars, let me or another teacher know right away. Shadow People can be really nasty to deal with.”

“Um... I'm not going to ask for more information about that. Pretty sure I don't want to know.”

Mrs. Metaxas laughed. “Right. Don't worry too much, we have pretty good wards here. It was just a 'give me a heads-up if you happen to see that' sort of thing. Though I should also mention that Shadow People can be seen with the naked eye sometimes, too.”

“Well thank you, Mrs. Metaxas.”

“You're welcome.”

Sally left then, slipping the stone under her shirt. It bulged quite obviously, but there wasn't anything she could really do about that.

When she got back to the room, she'd been prepared to use the stone to look for ghosts. What she hadn't been prepared for was a shrieking, squawking Kobalos with slightly singed feathers being forced into his cage by Dalia while Kohana cried, trying to apologize while blubbering.

“What happened?” Sally asked, once Kobalos was in his cage.

“That is excellent question,” said Aavraak, who was nursing a burn on her hand with an ice pack.

"Kohana lost control of her foxfire again," Dalia said. "I think something's wrong with her. She hasn't been sleeping right, I think."

"What's the matter, Kohana?" Sally asked.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!"

"Just tell us what's wrong. Listen, if even Dalia's noticed you haven't been sleeping, that must mean it's really bad."

"Hey!" Dalia protested.

"She has been almost-sleeping in classes as well," Aavraak said. "Even in this 'PE,' she looked tired enough to go to sleep in one beat of the heart, while standing up."

"I can't say! I can't say!" Kohana cried, sounding absolutely miserable.

Dalia walked over to Kohana. "Is it alright if I hold you?"

Kohana looked up, cried even louder, but nodded. So Dalia sat down on the bed next to her and held onto her with both arms. She was whispering something into Kohana's ear. It looked like it was costing her a lot to do this, which made Sally think she knew what was being said. Kohana's eyes went wide with surprise, and she turned to look at Dalia. She whispered something back to Dalia, who broke down in tears of her own.

Aavraak bristled and growled, but Sally put a hand on her shoulder.

"Those are happy tears, Aavraak. She's relieved."

Aavraak relaxed, but looked sad. "She has told some secret to the kitsune? But not to me?"

"Give her time, Aavraak. I think she'll tell you eventually."

Aavraak snapped her head up to look at Sally. "You know this secret as well?"

"She and I have been friends for a very long time, Aavraak. Of *course* I know."

Aavraak sighed. "Sorry. I feel... like I am less a part of something for not knowing this secret."

"She'll come around eventually. In the meantime, I think Kohana has a secret as well, and I think Dalia told Kohana her secret to try to coax Kohana's secret out of her."

Dalia had stopped crying, and Kohana was saying something else to her. Sally and Aavraak waited. It took a long time; Kohana was clearly terrified of revealing whatever it was. When she finished, looking a millimeter from crying again, Dalia hugged her tight and spoke loud enough they could all hear it.

"I'm not going to do that to you, Kohana. I'm not like her. My uncle Yanus is dating a kitsune, and I've stayed over at their house sometimes, so I should've known that already. I should've wondered why you weren't doing it that way either, but I didn't know it was necessary, I just thought it was Morikami's preference. Anyway, I doubt a Goblin would judge you for that, and I can vouch for Sally being understanding. So, uh... is it okay if I tell the others what you told me?"

Kohana thought a moment, then nodded.

"So what's the matter?" Sally asked.

"Kitsune need to sleep in fox form, or they don't really get to sleep. And she was scared we'd stop being friends with her if she did."

"What? Why would she think that?"

“Yes, I do not understand. Goblins know all about kitsune, it would be no problem for me.”

“She uh, was mainly concerned about me and Sally. See, she had a witch friend once. This witch girl knew Kohana was a kitsune, but uh... got freaked out during a sleepover when Kohana went into fox form, and kicked her out of the house. They stopped being friends after that.”

“Oh god that's horrible!” Sally said, and hugged Kohana. “That girl was absolutely terrible to you, we wouldn't do that to you!”

Aavraak came over and joined the hugging as well. “You need not worry about me, either.”

Kohana burst into fresh tears, but these felt like happy tears. Though Dalia thought there was still a touch more continued terror and worry in them, so she pulled out of the hug to speak.

“Alright, words aren't going to be enough. Kohana, shift to your fox form, please. I want to put your fears to bed, so you can go to bed too.” She grinned at her own joke.

Kohana sniffed. “I suppose I'd better... better rip the bandage off, eh?”

“One way or another, yes, it would be better. Trust me on this.”

Kohana nodded. “Stand back, then.”

When everyone was clear, she whispered something under her breath, and in the space of a blink and a puff of smoke, a snow-white fox with silver eyes and two tails was sitting up on the bed, its two tails flicking as it – she, rather – looked up at her friends with a canine tilt of her head, a big green leaf falling off of it and onto the bed. The fox was huge,

too; not quite the same mass as Kohana in her human form, but roughly the same size, so a lot larger than a mundane fox. Closer to a wolf in size, actually. Her snout started out kind of squashed looking, but lengthened as they watched, until it was the same length as fox snouts usually were. They noticed, at this point, that her head was at least twice the size of a normal fox's head, looking almost human-proportioned. She also had fore paws that were furry hands, including opposable thumbs.

"Ooh!" Sally exclaimed, the exclamation turning into a squeal of delight. "You're *gorgeous!*"

Aavraak smiled. "Yes, quite beautiful indeed."

Dalia grinned. "Quite lovely."

The white fox that was Kohana opened her mouth and she said, "Thank you."

"You can talk in this form, too? Cool!" Sally said. Though privately, she thought it looked a little weird to see a fox talk like that, since she wasn't even moving her lips.

Dalia scratched the fox behind the ears, then froze, terrified she'd done something offensive. Kohana, however, rubbed her head against Dalia's hand, encouraging her to keep going. So she did. Kohana's eyes closed, her tongue hanging out happily. Taking this as a cue, the other two girls started petting her – Sally going along the spine, and Aavraak scratching under her chin.

After a few minutes of this, Kohana the white fox was yawning very obviously. She yipped happily at them once and they removed their hands from her. She spun around in place several times, curling up canine-style to sleep, one of

her two tails being used like a pillow, while the other covered her eyes.

"I am greatly saddened," Aavraak said quietly to Dalia as they walked away, "by knowing a friend felt sad and scared that I would think bad of them for a secret. But I understand. I just hope other friends will find the strength to tell me if they have a secret, so I may show them I will not judge."

Smiling sadly, Aavraak went to her desk to read the assigned chapter of their Magical Self-Defense book.

Dalia wanted to tell Aavraak, she really did. But the two secrets weren't the same. Aavraak knew about Kitsune, the two species interacted with each other often. But Aavraak had said something her first day that might mean she might have prejudices against someone like Dalia. Some people had strange ideas about girls like Dalia, like thinking they were faking for some reason. Ha! As if! Why would anyone pretend to be a girl when they weren't? Especially with all the hatred and prejudices against such people? Nobody would choose to go through all that pain and anxiety about being accepted for who they were if it was a choice. It was absurd to think otherwise.

It made even less sense for Dalia, who had always known without being told that she was a girl, even as a toddler, the same way most people always knew they were a boy or a girl without being told. Other people had decided to slap labels on children without them having the chance to agree or disagree with those labels first, deciding for them what clothes they could wear, what things they could like, what jobs they could have, and who they could love, all because a doctor had looked between a baby's legs and used that information

to label them forever with a label that had no basis in reality and was just an arbitrary definition. It was especially absurd because intersex people like Morgana Ravenstone – people who defied easy gender labeling because the doctors looked between their legs and went “Huh?” – proved the whole system was flawed and stupid, as there were at least as many intersex people in the world as there were redheads in the world. Possibly more, since some intersex conditions didn't show any outward signs.

Dalia was glad her parents had never let anyone else decide that kind of thing for her, or any of their other children. People assumed that the gender labels told what was between someone's legs, and she thought information like that was private. What was more, it was creepy that anyone who knew which label a kid had been given would automatically know something so private – or think they knew – without even being able to help it. And normies called *her* a freak!

She realized she had no frame of reference for Aavraak, no idea what Aavraak knew or thought about human sex and gender ideas. She also had no idea what the context of Aavraak's original statement about the Thref was.

Not knowing whether she was going to tell her or not, Dalia went over to Aavraak and got her attention.

“Yes, Dalia? You are wanting something?”

“Yeah. Um... do... do you remember what you said, uh, back on the first day? You know, um... before I started helping you with your English?”

Aavraak groaned. "Yes. I was very foolish sounding, I am sure. It fills me with shame, to know my words were so... so... what is word? Um... so broken. Yes, that is it."

"Er... I wasn't trying to make you feel, I dunno, bad for that. Sorry. Um... it was... I wanted to ask you about something you said."

"Oh. Well, you may ask."

"Thanks. Uh... you said some pretty concerning stuff about the Thref. Which I guess is uh, like males, boys and men, for us. Um... you said they were dirty and stupid."

Aavraak blinked. "I am unsure why you are asking this, but if it concerns you... wait, I am confused. Why are you upset about my words about the Thref?"

Dalia raised an eyebrow. "You basically called all men dirty and stupid, and it's a mystery why I'm upset? You basically insulted my dad. And Brandon."

"What? I... *oh*. Oh... I apologize, it is misunderstanding. I was not speaking of your men, I was speaking only of Thref."

"Um... but you said Thref were the seed-bearers. That's generally considered to mean the same as men, in our culture."

Aavraak sighed. "I know your men are not stupid and disgusting. Before I came here, I studied humans from books. Human men are little different from your women. Different roles in making babies, small differences in body parts and appearance, but apart from that, the same. Same size, for most part; same smarts. Same strength, for most part."



“But Thref, same role in baby making as men for Goblin species, very different from human men in other ways. Thref very different from Krolt and Kwanj. Thref are tiny people, size of human toddlers, and Thref are object-valley stupid. Object-valley dizguzting. They make soil and water in their undergarments, and roll in muck if given a chance. We cover them in cloth so we need not bathe them so much. We keep trying to make them smart, teach them, and no manner of teaching does a thing. They can speak, but not well. My Kwanj-parent has been trying to teach my Thref-parent writing and manners and other things for over one hundred years, and still he has mind of a toddler. He is behaving better than most Thref, but not by much. So as I say, object-valley stupid. We do not know why they are this way.

“So I did not say those things about Thref to be mean to them or any person else. I was simply speaking truth. I am sorry I offended anyone, I simply did not have the words to explain further at the time, and later I simply forgot to make my meaning more clear.”

“Oh. Um... sorry I didn't ask you sooner.”

“I forgive you. Do you forgive me?”

“Yes, I forgive you.”

“Good. Was that all of your worries about me?”

Dalia thought about it a moment. She didn't want to come right out and say it, she still didn't know much about Goblins. This would take more questions.

“Um, yes. I mean no. I mean, I had more questions. Um... so... um, how do you, in your culture, how do you tell who is Kwanj and who is Krolt?”

Aavraak shrugged. "Mostly we do not. Sometimes we give our terms freely. But Kwanj and Krolt are mostly the same. Less difference between Kwanj and Krolt than between human men and women. We use same... what is word? Means... like the he and she words?"

"Gender pronouns."

"Yes, gender pronowans. We use same gender pronowans for Kwanj as for Krolt, unless the difference is known and important for some reason. Different ones for Thref at all times, though."

"I see. Thanks."

"You are welcome. Is there more?"

"Um... yeah. Just a little. Let me think a moment."

Dalia thought for several minutes while Aavraak patiently waited. Finally, she spoke again.

"So, um... so in our culture, Western human culture, sex and gender is a bit different. The two commonly accepted genders in Western culture are male and female, also called men and women. In children and teens, they're called boys and girls. People in our culture have these arbitrary roles, rules, and stuff for men and women. It's kind of like a weird sort of horoscope, if you know what that is?"

Aavraak shook her head.

"Well what I mean is, in our culture, most people think only men can like certain things, or do certain things. And there's a different set of stuff women are supposed to like and do. It's kind of arbitrary, and doesn't match reality, because like you pointed out, there's not really any significant differences between the accepted sexes.

“But, well... in a lot of other human cultures, it's not so simple. In other human cultures, they have extra genders, or recognize some people have no gender, like Chooli. Or, uh... or that someone can be labeled one gender at birth, by their uh, the parts between their legs—”

“What? I am confused. Among Goblins, we all have the same thing between our legs. Er... there is something else that comes out in Thref, but I have never seen one. I am Krolt, so I will never *need* to see one, thankfully. But my point is that we can tell no difference. If Thref were same size and smarts as Kwanj and Krolt, we would not be able to know who was Thref without asking.”

“Oh. Um... sounds like your people don't uh, don't equate reproductive roles with one's... I guess the best way to say it would be 'one's caste or status.'”

“No, we do not. It would not make sense for us, we have no outward difference between Kwanj and Krolt and Thref, down in that area. Er... I take it you mean humans *do* have differences down there?”

“Yes, we do. Um... in Western culture, those with the reproductive role similar to Thref are generally called men. Our culture generally considers women to be the ones with the reproductive role similar to the Kwanj.”

“I knew that already, which is why I use she and her pronouns. But you are coming to some point, I am thinking?”

“I am, yes. Um... okay, so uh... so Western culture is beginning to evolve, to recognize other genders than just the two it normally recognizes. And it's also, uh, beginning to recognize that sometimes their labels turn out to be wrong.”

"That is good to hear. Your sibling Chooli is without a gender, I understand?"

"Yes. And, uh... and Shimá, she uh... she... well, uh... her parents were different, like mine, but if she'd been born to 'normal' Western parents, she likely would've been given the uh, the wrong label. At birth. By the doctor."

"This doctor would have said she was a man? A boy?"

"Yes."

"So... oh. I understand. You thought I was calling Nizoni a man?"

She nodded.

"I apologize. I did not mean to offend anyone. Do not worry, I have seen your men. I know the clothing and grooming differences between men and women. Your Nizoni is clearly a woman. Er... if she is not like your Chooli?"

"You're right, she's a woman."

"Good."

"And I'm a girl," Dalia said firmly, her voice shaking slightly nonetheless.

Aavraak frowned thoughtfully. "Well yes, but why—oh. Oh. I understand. You... they gave you the wrong label at birth?"

"Would have, if I'd been born at a normal hospital."

Standing up, Aavraak held out her arms to offer a hug. Dalia nodded, and Aavraak hugged her.

"I do not care if you have the baby-making role of seed-bearer. You say you are a girl, that is what you are. I am sorry you had sadness and fear of my unknown reaction to this knowledge."

Dalia, not wanting to wake up Kohana (their conversation had so far been pretty quiet), did not make any sound when she cried into Aavraak's shoulder. Aavraak patted her back awkwardly.

When she was done crying, she pulled away gently.

"Yeah, I'm a 'seed-bearing' girl. For now. Any day now, I'm going to take the next step in my treatment, preparation for the Flesh-Bending needed to make my uh, reproductive role fit my gender. Sort of. I won't be able to have kids without blood alchemy when it's done, and someone else will have to be a surrogate, but I'll look fully like a cis girl. But that's gonna take about six years. Shimá never did it for herself, but I want to for me."

"Is that what the secret extra medicine button – er, 'pill' I mean – is for? Something to do with the blood and body alchemy?"

She nodded. "Yes. It's a pill to prevent puberty starting, until I can start the transitioning process. In November, great-grandfather Takashi will start the Flesh Bending to gradually cause my body to change the way I want it to. A couple weeks before that, I'll start taking a pill for the right hormone, and another to cancel out the wrong one my body would make when puberty starts. I'm glad the rules for that sort of thing are different for witches. Mundanes don't get to start transitioning until much later.

"As to the Flesh Bending... my fairy godmother Kira could do it overnight, but apparently that's huge magic and would hurt so bad it could kill me, and possibly exact some other toll even if I live, she wasn't very clear on that point. So we're taking it slow instead."

"I am happy that you will be able to get that change. Er... this fact about you, it is to remain secret? I see no reason why I would ever tell anyone, but I just wish to be certain."

"Yes, it's a secret. I mean, Sally, you, and Kohana know. So does Brandon. And my family, and the staff and teachers of the school. But otherwise, it's a secret, yes."

"I thought so. No need to worry about that, Dalia Ravenstone. Your secret is safe with me."

"Thanks, Aavraak."

Aavraak smiled, and was about to turn away, when a thought struck her. She turned back around to face Dalia.

"So if you were to mate with Calandra, you would want it to be with you both in the Kwanj role? Assuming, of course, that she is not also... is there a word for your gender? I mean, a word for it not matching your culture's silliness?"

Trying very hard to ignore the first part of Aavraak's first sentence just now, Dalia said, "Yes. The term is 'transgender.' Or trans for short. Wait, never mind that part, there's other meanings for 'trans,' and I don't want to confuse you. But you could also call me a trans girl, just not to anyone who doesn't already know. Or anywhere someone who didn't know might overhear. So er... just call me a girl, I guess."

Aavraak nodded. "Of course. But yes, assuming she is not also transgender, you would both have the same reproductive role?"

"Er... um..." her face was hot with embarrassment again. "I uh... I suppose so. Er... I don't actually uh, know what that would uh, how that would work. And well... I don't really *want* to know. Not yet. Maybe just for, well, like... educational purposes, some day. Point is, I just want to cuddle

her, that's all. I mean, there's more to it emotionally, which is hard to explain, and I don't feel like getting into it yet."

"Do not worry. I have friends who are Kwanj but do not wish to ever be with Thref, and that is similar in my culture."

"Um... my liking other girls is, uh... a bit of a secret as well. Though not as much. It's, uh... frowned upon, in our culture, to uh, to like people your own uh, well, other girls if you're a girl, or other boys if you're a boy. And so on. The culture is evolving, but, well..."

"If it is a secret, Dalia, then you need to be more... more... more of whatever is opposite to 'openly shown.'"

"Discreet?"

"Is that the word? Means, um... more secret-like. More... er... better at keeping secrets?"

"Yes, that's what 'discreet' means, Aavraak."

"Ah. Then that, yes. Because your interest in Calandra is very much obvious."

"Well, I mean, I could handle it if *that* secret got out, especially if I got to uh, well, to date Calandra, if she's into other girls. I mean, I get called a freak enough as is, I'm kinda used to it by now. And I fear Preston Park might know I'm trans, or suspect it, possibly, on some level." She shook herself suddenly and closed her eyes. "Mongolian death worms crawling on stone, dragons roaring, Preston Park being chased by a Hell-hound through a dark swamp at night during a new moon..."

"What are you doing?"

"Thinking happy thoughts, to calm myself so I don't have another panic attack."

“Good. It is... oh my! It is quite late. We should go to bed.”

“Right, yeah. Um... looks like both restrooms are available.”

“Wait, did you re-clothe yourself in there because of your secret?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if we all know now, you need do that no more.”

She smiled. “Thanks. You don’t mind, uh... accidentally seeing my, uh... aberration?”

Aavraak snorted with laughter. “I will be fine. As long as it is not attached to a Thref, I do not care. Besides... the books about humans say that the human... version of that... that... thing, is looking very different from the Goblin version.”

Dalia sighed, and was happy for the rest of the evening as she bathed and got ready for bed. Everyone in her dorm room knew her biggest two secrets, and so she felt lighter than she had in a long time, with the weight of that worry lifted from her. She still had to keep the secret from others, and Calandra for now, and she thought she’d still feel too weird dressing where anyone else could see her, so she wouldn’t be changing her changing habits... but still, she felt content. Her dreams that night were full of monsters, and she was a warrior who could command monsters, riding a Hell-hound into battle. A placid smile graced her sleeping face again.







## Chapter Thirteen: Night and Day

*Tuesday, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017 (afternoon)*

THE DOOR OF THE DORM room flew open and slammed shut. Jumping into the bed in tears, Dalia slammed her hand on a special spot on the wall that put up a black barrier blocking her from view of the rest of the room. It also blocked out sound, letting her cry without disturbing others or being disturbed, though it was meant to make it easier to get to sleep, and would fall after an hour.

Her day, the second day of classes, had not gone well. Classes had been boring; Crystals and Earth Magic was mostly going to be learning the properties of crystals, how to charge them, and similar things for the first half of the year or longer. Enchantment was just more of that 'feeling your magic' stuff so far. She had at least managed to make some progress there, but only a little. Then Alchemy had just been learning the lab's safety rules all hour, though she thought she might like Mr. Marten, he seemed funny and kind, even if he could be a bit stern about the rules, but that much made sense, the class was potentially very dangerous. But the next class looked to be more of the same; there were a lot

of rules, and they were all very important. He had even assigned homework concerning the rules.

By far the best part of the day had been Art and Music, back-to-back toward the end of the day. But it didn't make up for what happened at dinner. She'd been walking to her seat from the serving line when Anastasia Park had tripped her, and she'd face-planted right into her mashed potatoes and gravy. Then Anastasia had called her that horrible word, 'freak,' that was a sore spot for her.

Against her will, her mind took her back to the first time she'd heard the word used as a weapon against her. She'd been in kindergarten, and was using the restroom when another girl opened the stall door because Dalia, in her hurry, had forgotten to lock the door. The other girl had gotten an eyeful of something Dalia very much did not want seen.

"You have a pee-pee!" the girl had exclaimed. "You're a boy! What are you doing in here!"

"I am NOT a boy!" Dalia answered back hotly. "You take that back!"

"But you have a pee-pee! Only boys have a pee-pee!"

"Shows what *you* know! My shimá has one, too!"

"Eww! You have two dads?"

"No I do not! I have two moms and a dad!"

"Freak! You're a freak! You come from a family of freaks! I'm telling the teacher there's a boy in the girl's restroom!"

By then, Dalia had gotten up and pulled her underwear back up and her skirt back into place. "If you do, you'll be lying! I'm a girl! I've *always* been a girl!"

From there, it had escalated into a shouting match, and then Dalia had grabbed the other girl to keep her from run-

ning to the teacher, and got pulled so she knocked into the other girl, who then turned around and punched her right in the nose. It was a full-fledged girl-fight, with hair pulling, biting, scratching, and punching, with both girls bloodied and dirty. Dalia had even knocked out one of the other girl's teeth.

It took some time to get the whole story told to the teacher, because they kept arguing with one another, whenever they weren't crying or screaming at each other. They did finally manage to get the whole story told, and Dalia felt righteous as she waited for the verdict, thinking the other girl would get in trouble for starting the fight.

That's not what happened, though. What happened hurt her more than the fight did. Dalia got detention for attacking another student, while the other girl hadn't gotten in any trouble at all. What was worse, the teacher commanded her she was to use the boy's bathroom. That had been a huge, painful blow, and she cried and pleaded and begged, reaffirming her proper gender over and over again to an uncaring teacher. Dalia finally got frustrated enough to call the teacher a hateful bitch, which had gotten her sent to the principal's office, and her parents were called in.

Her parents were, of course, on her side. Shimá had tried to remain calm, but after an hour of attempting to calmly and rationally argue her point had ended up shouting at the principal and the teacher both; she was loud enough that it had drawn a small crowd of students that had pulled away from the teachers en route elsewhere. Dalia had later overheard Shimá saying she'd been very tempted to hex the principal and teacher to have terrible nightmares for the rest of

their days, but had decided in the end they weren't worth the energy or the risk.

That had been such a debacle that they ended up needing to transfer her to another school. But incidents like it kept happening. Even in a more understanding school, where the policy was in their favor, there had been incidents. Bullying by boys and girls alike for one reason or another, either something related to her gender, her autism, or her frequent crushes on other girls and the occasional boy. Trouble had followed her wherever she went, school was uniformly horrible for her, and she had been a fool to think it would be any better in Fae Springs.

That first incident had even given Dalia an intense fear of being found out, and a phobia of public bathrooms so bad that she would physically jam the door while in the stall, and had on quite a few occasions accidentally used her magic to force the door to be nearly welded shut whenever she was forced to finally go to the restroom and had no other way to ensure she couldn't be walked in on. She still hated public restrooms, and finding out that Fae Springs had single-occupancy, lockable bathrooms scattered about the building had been a *huge* relief. (Even if they *were* intended to be used by the physically handicapped.)

Naturally, that incident had also changed her personality. She'd been louder, a lot more confident, and a lot more sociable back then; within months of that incident, though, she was withdrawn, quiet, shy, and increasingly anxious. She was pretty sure that and later incidents were responsible for her developing depression as well as anxiety.

She'd been so focused, over the summer, on the threat of Preston Park, that she'd forgotten what a horrible evil hag Anastasia Park was. The whole family was rotten to the core; the only one that might be any good at all was the science teacher, Mr. Quinn Park, but she didn't know him well enough to know yet. And okay, maybe Principal Park might be okay, but she didn't know him very well, either.

And so, after she'd washed the potatoes and gravy off in the bathroom, she had run back to her room to cry in peace. She cried so long and so hard that she actually managed to cry herself to sleep, something she'd always thought was just a saying.

When she woke up again, she checked the time. She hadn't been asleep long; it was only 10 PM. So, roughly only three hours without having gotten a chance to eat dinner. Dalia's stomach growled, so she sat up in bed, thinking to check the common room's little kitchen for something, anything, to eat. But this was rendered unnecessary, for when she sat up, she saw a small pile of sandwiches on her bedside table, with a note. It was in Sally's handwriting. She picked up the note and read it by the light of her smart phone:

*Dear Dalia,*

*Since you didn't come back, understandably, after that bitch tripped you, we figured you'd get hungry. We brought you these sandwiches, which we got by all your friends – Aavraak, Kohana, Sally, Brandon, and even Calandra – giving up half their sandwiches for you. Calandra had her mom put an enchantment on it to keep bugs away and prevent spoilage. Also, behind the plate is a couple apples for you because Kohana said you need something healthier than sandwiches, but I argued*

*there's lettuce in the sandwiches, and she made the good point that lettuce is basically crunchy water with fiber, and not real food. So, apples.*

*With love,*

*All your friends.*

At the end of the note, they had all signed it. Dalia felt her eyes water with happiness, but she was all out of tears. She looked up, and saw everyone else was asleep in their beds. So she quietly ate the sandwiches and one of the apples, then used the light from her phone to write a thank-you note for them all, made a copy, and left one on each bathroom door.

She wasn't ready to go back to bed; she felt too awake after her unplanned nap. Her first thought was to use her computer behind the black-out screen, but Gegauassi would complain if she did that. She thought instead about reading, but then she was struck by a familiar feeling, a sort of nocturnal wanderlust she sometimes had.

*'That's your "Call of the Night" face,' Doñela said from Dalia's left side. 'Hey Tamir! We have an "A.H.V. 13" situation!'*

*'I love those,'* Tamir commented with a smile from Dalia's right side.

*'Yeah, I know. Hence my excitement. It's the only time you ever break rules!'*

*'It will be challenging here,'* Tamir said. *'It's already 11 pm. If we get caught, we could get detention. Get caught enough times, and we could be suspended.'*

*'You sound reluctant,'* Doñela said.

*'No. Just cautious.'*

*'Well in that case, let's bring Kobalos! He can play lookout.'  
'How many times do I have to tell you, Doñela, ravens are diurnal. They sleep at night.'*

Doñela sighed. *'Fine. Let's save our allowance for a drone with night-vision, then.'*

Dalia rolled her eyes and stood up.

*'Oh, looks like it's happening! Eagle Two, this is Eagle One, the nightingale has left the nest, I repeat, the nightingale has left the nest. Over.'*

*'The proper atmosphere, Doñela, please,'* Tamir said. *'This requires a more solemn atmosphere. This is a spiritual experience.'*

Doñela rolled her own eyes this time. She tapped the spots on the walls for the blackout screens of the other girls, to keep any noise or light waking them up; she had no problem passing back through the screens when she was done. Dalia got out of her school uniform, which she'd been sleeping in due to her unplanned nap, and changed into a special dress she had for these occasions. It was a dark gray, and rune-enchanted to resist dirt and other filth. It also bore a resemblance to those old Victorian era nightgowns except that those were usually white. But the dark gray was perfect for blending into the darkness, and with Dalia's dark skin tone and hair color, it would be really difficult for anyone to see her.

Dalia also took her shoes and socks off, grabbing some special ballet flats that could be folded and kept in one of the secret pockets she had sewn into the dress, just in case she needed them. They were also rune-enchanted to keep off dirt. For now, her foot was bare, her prosthesis bare as well

(she usually had a shoe and sock on it), the ballet flats in her pockets. Her feet were always bare, at least at first, when the night called her. She placed the other apple in another pocket, called to do so for some reason.

Since there was no rule against being elsewhere in the dorm building, her two invisible partners in mischief weren't bothering to scout for her yet. Not until she was about to turn the corner to face the exit, anyway. The two of them went ahead, looking carefully for anyone who might spot her coming or going, and also looked for cameras. After watching the slowly panning cameras for a while, they figured out when to move to get into the cameras' blind spot.

Dalia stepped into the blind spot in front of the door. It wouldn't last long, so she immediately tried the door. It was locked.

*'Let me try something,'* Doñela said, going right through the door and trying it from the other side. It was still locked.

She came back in. *'Well there's an emergency exit, but that'll trip an alarm, so let's not. I'm gonna try something else.'*

*'Hurry,'* Tamir warned, pointing at the moving camera panning toward the door.

Doñela brushed her long hair back a moment, then reached inside the lock, feeling around for a minute before they all heard a slight 'click.' She tried the door again, and it was unlocked.

*'Easy peasy,'* she said, opening the door for Dalia, who walked through and to the side just before the camera could spot her. The camera might see the door vibrating, but anyone watching would likely assume some animal had knocked into it. Doñela locked it behind them.



The transition from indoor floor to the damp, chilly grass gave her a small thrill. This was a very interesting sensation, and she paused to go into a brief transport of delight at the peculiar yet amazing texture of the Tirffiniol grass under her one real foot, the prosthetic being made of metal and thus feeling nothing.

Snapping out of her giddiness quickly, still hearing the call of something Greater, she resumed walking through the grass, letting the pleasant feel of the grass add to her experience as she walked around the building and found the stream that ran past the back of the dorms. She could feel that going right at the stream would take her to the small copse of trees between the two student dorm buildings, but went left instead, toward the Light Grove and the Gray Grove, both of which were only lightly warded, mainly to prevent malicious people from getting in to harm the trees. But she shared both Shimá's love of animals and Papa's love of plants, so she would have no problem getting in.

*'The night, she calls me-ee, she calls me-ee, she calls me...'*  
Doñela sang, Tamir's voice joining hers as Dalia walked along the stream toward the groves.

Dalia looked up as she walked, up into the sky. With no city lights to pollute the air out here, the sky was like looking at a black velvet expanse covered in thousands of glittering diamonds, sapphires, rubies, and other gemstones. Instead of the road-shaped Milky Way galaxy dominating the sky, here there were two such galaxies. One was large, and slightly to the left of where the Milky Way would have been on Earth. The other was much smaller, off in the right-hand corner of

the sky, a distant galaxy seen edge-on. The bigger of the two was obviously the galaxy Tirffiniol was in.

There was what appeared to be a larger moon here than on Earth, and it looked very different, but it was just closer to its planet so it only looked bigger. Same color, but it had a much different surface, one that more closely resembled a snake passing by a sleeping dog. It was in a waxing crescent at the moment, very nearly full, its light illuminating her path. There were two other smaller moons around this planet too, but she didn't see any of them yet.

A lot of people thought that because Tirffiniol was on the other side of the so-called Veil meant it was an alternate Earth, but no, the Realms of Faery were very different from the Earth ones, being miniature universes only a few galaxies large at best while Earth's universe and other regular universes had thousands or even millions of galaxies, scientists were always finding new ones. And since the Veil was just a dimensional membrane that kept all the worlds apart, technically every one of the infinite other universes to exist was on the other side of the Veil. The confusion came from the fact that many worlds were much easier to get to from Tirffiniol, but that was just the result of the much higher concentration of magic in that world.

With Doñela and Tamir humming now instead of singing, Dalia felt the power calling her growing, swelling inside her. The night sky seemed to take up her entire field of vision as she kept staring up into it as she walked, relying on the others to keep her from running into things. It felt like the Universe itself was reaching down toward her, or her soul

was swelling upwards. It felt like staring into the face of Eternity.

The water of the stream, when she stepped into it, did not stop her or slow her down. Something bigger than herself was guiding her feet, and to get to the Light Grove, she had to pass either over or through one of the branches of the stream. She had been called, this time, to walk through it, the cool water feeling amazing on her one living foot. The other one was titanium, so she didn't worry about it. She just kept walking, and staring into Eternity.

*'The trees, the trees,'* Doñela and Tamir said minutes later, their warning matching the tone of the night. Dalia fought to pull her eyes away from the night sky. When she did, she stopped in place and saw beautiful trees, extremely tall trees, reaching up like pillars holding up the sky. Their height drew her eyes back to the sky, where the tops of the ones on the edge of the grove melted into the night sky. Suddenly she felt the urge to speak.

“What if the roots of trees are veins going into the world from a branch of the world tree, and the world is a leaf, while the branches of trees are roots planted in thousands – no, millions – of other worlds?”

Neither Doñela nor Tamir responded. They knew better; it might interrupt the flow of whatever force it was that made nights like this happen.

They resumed walking into the Light Grove. Even at night, with only moonlight for illumination, the Light Grove looked beautiful. She hadn't gotten a very good look at it before during the day, it not being her usual aesthetic, but at night there was something beautifully, hauntingly

Gothic about it, but in the way of old Gothic churches, not the modern usage of the term. It was like visiting a church at dawn, but thrumming with life, for this was a natural temple, its pillars were alive, and she could feel Goddess, Life, Eternity, whatever you wanted to call it, filling the trees and the rest of the grove like white, smokeless fire, barely contained, flowing into the world from the sky above. A power of pure Good, but a power that could nonetheless vaporize you in an instant if it saw the need.

Ever-present in magical groves or forests, the trees were whispering. They always whispered, but in the day they usually slept, like cats sleeping in a ray of sunshine, but older, slower, more powerful. At night, the whispering was much louder, especially with fewer literal sounds to compete with it. She didn't know what they were talking about, the trees, but their words filled her with peace and happiness, as well as awe and wonder and a feeling like she was both very tiny and unimaginably expansive at the same time.

Dalia would normally have hugged one or more of the trees in a moment like that, but she felt, instead, the urge to move on. And move on she did, her feet still bare, but she had long experience going into wooded areas and avoiding hurting her one living foot, even if this was the first time she'd managed to have such a journey in Tirffiniol, at least beyond the walls of her family's yard in their second home in Tirffiniol.

Going into the Light Grove itself was like the Eternity in the night sky had morphed from stars into the canopy of trees, but she didn't stare at it anymore, being driven instead to watch where she was going. Slowly, as she walked

along, her focus shifted from the grand scale of eternity to the smaller perspective of nature. She looked at every plant, every fallen leaf or conifer needle, her eyes found every small animal that lived in the underbrush, and she almost felt like she could sense their heartbeats, felt almost like they were whispering too, like the trees. But it was a quieter, stealthier whispering, for they were trying to hide, and right now it felt like she could only hear their unintentional whispers because of the Spirit that was driving her on.

To say she was losing track of time would have been an understatement. Time felt like it had no relevance here, there was just the night, just this wandering moment in the night, an island surrounded by a placid but currently unimportant ocean of other time. The passage of time, tonight, was no more important to notice than the passage of water would be to a fish. Human concerns like the passage of time had no place tonight for her.

The Gray Grove was similar enough to the Light Grove that it took her an unknown but long amount of time to notice she'd passed from one to the other. The trees here felt more down to earth; not less powerful than the Light Grove trees, just more of an earth-centered, grounded energy than the cosmic energy of the Light Grove. It better matched her narrowed focus on the small life all around her. In the Light Grove, they had felt like smaller, quieter, stealthier fellow congregates in the Universal Church, but now they felt like residents, this was their home. She was a guest in their home.

In the middle of the grove, before she passed the stream that flowed through it, was a tree with an immensely thick trunk. But that was far from its most prominent feature, for

this tree had clearly been Bent with magic, guided by some consciousness to change its usual form. It was immediately apparent by whom, as well, for the tree was clearly an immense... well, like a cross between a city and a very large apartment building, a skyscraper with many windows in it, the windows covered by wooden blinds, but light still visible through the cracks in the blinds of many of the windows. Judging by the size of the windows, and the size of the doors, she guessed it was a Gnome city, one so immense compared to their size that it had to have had a population of at least a couple million living in it.

The Spirit moved her to take the apple from her pocket and set it down on a pedestal next to what looked like the front doors. The pedestal lit up faintly when she did, and some moments later, a line of Gnomes in little gray cloaks marched slowly out the front door in a pair of lines, each Gnome no more than a foot tall. The front two Gnomes were waving little thuribles around, incense drifting from the little metal censers, while the others chanted in an unfamiliar language. The chanting Gnomes formed a circle around the apple and prayed around it as the incense-bearers walked around the circle waving incense around the praying Gnomes. The incense-bearers made three circuits around the circle. When the third circuit was done, the praying Gnomes raised their arms into the sky and shouted in English.

"Thank you, Emissary of The Great Spirit, for this gift! Please accept our gift in return for your kindness!"

Coming from the front doors of the Gnomes' tree city was another couple lines of Gnomes, carrying a long, slender rod of wood that looked to be from their own city's tree.

They carried the rod over to Dalia and set it before her on a bare patch of earth.

“Oh. Um, thank you kindly,” she said. “I am honored and humbled to accept this gift.”

One of the Gnomes was gesturing her to lean forward, so she did. When she had her ear to the hooded figure, the Gnome spoke, and sounded like the voice of a woman.

“Emissary of the Great Spirit, Called on this night as many before you have been Called, please accept this wand from our Home Tree, this the Tree-City of Alagon, which has been charged in the light of the waxing Great Moon ever since after the Great Moon was dark. Use it yourself if the Great Spirit calls you to, or pass it on to someone worthy if that is its wish instead. We know it will find its way to its destined master or mistress, Emissary, and we thank you for helping it on its path. Peace be upon you, and blessed be.”

“Peace be upon you as well, Gnomes of the Tree-City of Alagon, and blessed be.”

The Gnome who had spoken to her bowed. Dalia picked up the wand and looked at it in what little moonlight made it through the canopy. They must have had it up high on the tree to bathe it in moonlight, unless they'd gone all the way outside of the groves, which seemed unlikely. She put it in her pocket and watched the Gnomes carry the apple on a litter, taking it into the city through the large front doors, the two incense-bearers at the front of the group, still spreading their incense around with the thuribles.

When they were back inside the tree-city, Dalia immediately knew she would have to set the wand on her desk for

the others in her room to see. This would, she also knew, facilitate it moving on to a worthy home.

For now, though, she stood back up and continued her night-time wandering. She knew, suddenly, where she had to go, but this time, the Spirit was driving her there.

The Gray Grove's stream was deep enough she had to lift the hem of her dress up past her knees to avoid it getting soaked, but she made it through to the other side, Doñela and Tamir still with her, now bearing silent witness to the remainder of the night.

She went on, out of the Gray Grove and into the grass again. She was outside the wall keeping students out of the Dark Grove. She kept moving along that wall, not talking, not looking into the sky again, just walking. She did not stop for many minutes, only stopping when she had reached a part of the wall she'd not been to yet, and up a small hill. The wards would not allow her to use the hill to get over the wall, and she wasn't suicidal enough to try. But more importantly, the Spirit was not telling her to go in. In fact, it told her to stay out unless she had adult supervision. This advice was a little redundant, since only an adult could get into the Dark Grove, but still, she silently thanked the Spirit for this advice anyway.

From the top of the hill, she could see one lone tree in the distance, very near the wall, the other trees keeping at least 20 or 30 feet away from the outermost reaches of its branches. She knew which tree this was; it was the Devil Tree. Spirit informed her that the tree was misnamed, the tree wasn't evil, it was just very defensive and prone to attacking anything it perceived as a threat; even other trees did that



at times, hence the existence of Forest Gods. It was also very lonely and scared. The two of them were kindred spirits, in a way.

After that, she walked across the grass, past the greenhouses, and back to the girls' dorms. She put the folded ballet flats on because her feet were wet and dirty, then opened the door once Doñela told her it was safe to do so. Doñela locked it again by reaching inside it once more, and the three of them returned upstairs.

Once inside, she placed the Gnome wand on her desk, took off her ballet flats, and washed up before changing into her pajamas and returning to bed.



*WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

Dalia awoke the next morning with the events of the previous night still filling her with an unusual amount of calm, peace, and receptivity to heightened intuition. She knew from experience that it would be gone again by the end of the day, but it was still pleasant while it lasted.

Since it was earlier than usual, she spent an hour or two writing down her memories of the previous night into an encrypted file on her very groggy and grumpy laptop, Gegauas-si. When she was done, she let him go back to sleep, and finished reading the assignment for Magical Self Defense, then practiced feeling her magic. The heat she produced with her finger was intense enough to hurt both hands a little, but there was no apparent damage.

Reading ahead in the Enchantment textbook to the part about feeling outside magic, she practiced with her hand over the Gnome wand. After another hour, she thought she could feel warmth from it, but a kind of warmth that felt like the heat equivalent of the light from one of those sticks full of chemicals that glow when you bend them in half.

The others got up, starting to get ready, but she was still practicing feeling the wand. It felt important to keep doing that just a little bit longer.

Several minutes later, someone knocked on the door. Dalia cautiously opened it and looked out. It was Calandra.

"Hey, found your room at last!" She said. "Can I come in?"

Dalia nodded and stood aside to let her in.

"Oh great, I was worried you'd say no," Calandra said, chewing her nails. Dalia made a note to herself to get the girl a chewy necklace.

"No need to worry, Kohan— I mean Calandra. Sorry, those names are kind of similar."

"Oh, I guess they are. You can call me Cally for short if you like, so it's not so confusing."

"Cally? Well okay, if that's okay with you."

"Sure it is. Anyway, you sound a lot calmer than usual. Hey, what's that?"

"A wand base. Gnomes gave it to me. Charged in waxing moonlight."

"Really? That's so cool! My mom could seal that moon magic into it with a rune if you want. Oh my, it's pretty."

'Cally' was staring at the wand with what felt to Dalia like a intuitive itch to pick something up.

"You can hold it," she said.

"Really? You're sure? I don't want to mess up its energy for you."

"Go ahead and hold it."

"Well okay, if you insist."

Cally picked up the wand, immediately slipping it into her hand like she was going to use it.

"Oops, sorry. I didn't mean to grab it *that* way, Dalia."

"It's calling to you. You should keep it."

"What? No, it's yours. Gnomes gave it to you! They don't do that often. It's like, once a year at best, usually once every two years. There was one time they did four in one year, and I mean this is over the whole Pluviatia overlay of Tirffniol, not just one tree, but still—"

"They said I'd know its path," she said, cutting off Cally's rambling. "My intuition tells me you're its new owner. Anyway, I'm being called to a wand from a different tree. My primary wand hasn't found me yet."

"Um, okay, if you're really sure. Oh hey, this thing is warm. Not like, human hand warm, but warm. Is it supposed to be warm?"

"I think that's its magic. I felt it, too."

"Cool. Wait, were you an Emissary? When did this happen?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Sure. Well I mean, yes, assuming nobody is getting hurt or committing a harmful crime but like, school rules can be bent and oh gods I'm rambling again so yes, I can keep a secret."

"Last night, after curfew, I went outside and wandered around. Sometimes I feel called by Spirit to do that."

"Cool! What happened? Aside from the Gnomes calling you an Emissary and giving you a wand, I mean. I can't wait to hear—"

The others were done getting ready, and Cally had paused when she saw two of them come out of the restrooms.

"Hi there! I came to find Dalia, but I can't remember—oh wait, I wanted to tell her I can feel my own magic now, mastered it last night but then she had this wand which I guess she gave me and—hey ouch okay okay, you can let me go now!"

Aavraak and Sally had grabbed her by her arms - each taking one arm - and had dragged her out the door.

"Why'd you do that?" she asked.

"It seemed faster than asking you to stand aside from doorway," Aavraak said.

"Oh. Well anyway, she had this wand..."

Cally chattered on as they walked to breakfast, seemingly having forgotten what she'd just been talking about, now hopping from subject to subject seemingly at random. Dalia was smiling, but her smile faltered when she entered the cafeteria. A few people stared, or gestured at her and laughed, remembering dinner the night before, but most of them seemed to have forgotten about her pratfall. Cally just kept going, oblivious to these facts, but abruptly stopped mid sentence when she started eating.

With Cally occupied, the rest of them talked over breakfast about their upcoming second A Day of the week, among

other things. Hopes weren't high; so far, only Dalia and Cally had managed to make any real progress with feeling their own magic.

On their way to English, Cally started up again.

"So what do you think, should I or shouldn't I?" Cally asked.

Dalia blinked, confused. "Should you what?"

"Go with a hematite end-piece on my wand when we start making wands, of course," she said matter-of-factly.

Dalia blinked again, confused, thinking back. She remembered they'd been talking, or rather Cally had been talking, about wands before breakfast.

"Cally," she finally said, exasperated, "the last we were talking about wands was like, over an hour ago! That wasn't even the last topic you were on when you stopped talking last!"

"Oh, I guess you're right. So should I?"

Dalia sighed. "No. Hematite is a grounding stone, it isn't usually a good idea to use it on a wand, it has a high iron content and so can disrupt or even stop the flow of magic in a wand. But you should definitely get a hematite necklace or ring or something, you could use some coming down to earth more."

"Wow, that's actually a lot smarter of an answer than I was expecting. How'd you get so good with gemstones?"

"I've been reading about them and about wand stuff for years, even making my own wands."

"Oh, so like me and birds, then?"

"How do you mean?"

"I love birds. I read about them all the time. I talk too much about them. I was known as 'that weird bird girl' in school most of my life. Didn't you think it was odd I was listening off different corvids before, like crows, grackles, and jackdaws?"

"Oh, uh... no. I was too busy being nervous to notice."

"So just how good *are* you at gemstones? I could probably teach a class about birds, if they'd let me, and if I had the time."

"Er, so much so that Crystals and Earth Magic is going to be a really boring class for me this year, I think. I already knew everything she covered yesterday."

"Well that sucks for you, but you can help me study for that one if you want to."

"Sure. Are you good at magical self defense?"

"Is water wet? I mean yeah, my mom is the teacher and she's got a healthy amount of paranoia, she's always regaling us with information about it when she's home."

"Good. We can be study buddies," Dalia said.

"Cool!"

Halfway through English, though, Dalia realized what she'd said to Cally, and the implications. Her eyes grew wide as she realized that, under the influence of the fading energy from her spiritual experience the night before, she'd just made plans to study with a girl she had a crush on. She felt so terrified for the impending awkward situations that she loudly went "EEP!" in class.

"Is there something wrong, Ms. Ravenstone?" Ms. Clay asked, looking over her glasses at Dalia.

Dalia sunk into her seat. "No ma'am. I'm sorry."

"Mm hmm. Well, as I was saying..."

Doñela wasn't so bad this time as she'd been the last couple days. Tamir had showed up, too, and the two of them were off in a corner of the room, having a quiet conversation so they didn't bother Dalia.

In study hall, most people were practicing feeling their magic again. Dalia had mastered making heat with her finger enough that she could reliably make enough to make her other hand jerk out of the way in pain to avoid being burned. She wasn't quite sure how that happened without hurting her finger, but supposed the magic was leaving her finger, heating the air, and moving that heat away from her finger.

Glancing over by chance toward the end of study hall, Dalia saw Anastasia Park glaring at her again, probably jealous that she and her friends were getting good at something Anastasia was still struggling with.

In Elementary Transformation Magic, Cally, Kohana, Sally, and Aavraak were next after Dalia to start managing to reliably make heat with their fingers, and took turns trying to burn each other until Kohana lost control and shot a jet of flame loose that nearly caught Dalia's book on fire. After that, Mr. Rabe suggested she visualize her magic as a tingling sensation, rather than fire. Doñela and Tamir were once more talking quietly, for which Dalia was glad.

Magical Self-Defense was interesting again. Before anyone went in, Sally looked around the room through the hole in the stone around her neck. When Mrs. Metaxas came in, Sally did this again, and declared it was another illusion; Doñela had spotted that as well, again by not being able to see the illusion, but again, Dalia hadn't mentioned it. Every-

one got up and started looking for the real Mrs. Metaxas, finding her in a closet, where she leaped out and grabbed the person who found her, holding a chopstick to his head.

"Ms. Smith-Jones, four points for not coming into the room right away, another three points for checking for illusions before coming into the room, and another three points for checking to see if the illusory me was real or not, but no points for the rest of you for looking for me. If you suspect a dangerous person is nearby and hiding to attack you, you run and fetch a trusted adult.

"Actually, two points to Mr. Irving here, for putting up with me grabbing him. And a retroactive two points to Ms. London as an apology for grabbing her in your first class. But my point about running to fetch a trusted adult still stands."

Cally raised her hand.

"Yes, Ms. Metaxas?" Mrs. Metaxas said.

"Well last time, you talked about charging crystals for defense, and I wanted to know if we can use other charged things for defense? Like, well, what about wood charged in the light of the larger Tirffiniol moon as it's waxing?"

"Depends on the wood. Actually, I'm glad you brought this up. I'm going to go a little off-topic back to crystals here first, because crystal charging is a good segue to charging other materials, which you'll understand in a bit.

"Where crystals are concerned, I recommend charging them at first because it's something you can do without having control of your own magic yet. But to understand why, you have to know what I mean by charged or cleared crystals. Crystals actually are *always* vibrating because of their structure, they're not batteries that need to be filled. They vibrate



to whatever energy is in their vicinity, but they can be 'tuned' and 're-tuned' to vibrate to different kinds of energy. What crystal charging is, really, is using outside magic to re-tune a crystal to the vibration you want it at. And charging a crystal in moonlight is going to involve lunar energy, which is celestial and revolves around birth, life, healing, emotions, menstrual cycles, and protection. Well, there's a lot more to lunar energy than that, but I'll get to that later. My point is, you can charge a crystal without needing control of your own magic, but once you get enough control of your own magic, you should learn to *clear* crystals instead, meaning using your own magic, your own Will and visualization, to tune the crystal.

"Now, charging is a little different for other substances. Wood is basically just stored solar energy from plants photosynthesizing, and that energy comes out when it's burned. Wood makes a good channel for energy, because it was once alive and is basically still the same substance as when it was alive, and when it was alive, it was channeling and storing energy. Cellulose – what wood is made of – can soak things up, as well, including energy. Whether wood channels or absorbs energy depends a lot on your intention.

"In a way, wood is *still* alive. Magical wood, such as comes from Tirffiniol trees – if given freely by the tree as a gift – *is* actually still alive, and still technically part of the magical tree from whence it came. So it responds to the intentions of witches; in mundane woods, by letting us be its new consciousness. In magical woods, it works in the same way a horse cooperates with its rider. Which can be a blessing if your intentions line up with the tree's intentions, but a

curse if they don't. Different woods have different properties and personalities, which is a large part of why we use different wands for different things. You wouldn't want to use, for instance, a birch wand to harm people, because birch likes to protect and heal; so dark witches don't use birch very often for that reason.

"But long story short: yes, wood can be 'charged' with certain energies, adding those energies to its own, and unlike crystals, the energy in charged wood can be depleted, if the wood is dead or a living wood stops cooperating. But you could also charge it with energy of your own, same as clearing a crystal. Did you have a specific type of wood in mind, Ms. Metaxas?"

"Um... I don't know for sure what kind it is. But Dalia does, she gave it to me."

"Ms. Ravenstone? What kind of wood did you give my daughter?"

Dalia felt her face grow hot at the choice of words. "Um... well, it's uh, it's from the Gray Grove. The uh, the tree-city of Alagon."

There was some laughter at this, probably because if you'd never seen it, a tree-city sounded silly, but Mrs. Metaxas looked impressed. And also a little suspicious, but in a wry, co-conspirator sort of way.

"Gnomish wood, eh? Hmm... Alagon is a magical elder. Elder wands are most often used in Faerie Magic, banishment, protection from evil, imagination, change, and healing."

Some in the room were muttering. To this, Mrs. Metaxas said, "Don't let the ideas of the Christians ruin elder wood

for you. Supposedly elder wood was used to crucify Jesus Christ, but nobody actually knows what wood was used to crucify Jesus Christ. Crucifixion was just the standard Roman way of executing criminals, and they pretty much just went with whatever wood was both available and strong enough to support the weight of a human body. It's much more likely that the Catholic Church made up the story about elder wood being used to kill Christ so they could attack pagan religions, such as the druids, to whom trees like the elder were sacred.

“Anyway, adding waxing lunar energy to a wand of elder wood... that would aid in healing, prosperity, attraction, success, gains, love, increases, friendship, protection and any other positive magics. So it would enhance the elder's healing and protection powers. And, well, it would enhance pretty much *all* of elder's positive properties. A waxing-moon charged elder wand would be an excellent wand for fighting evil spirits, healing people and animals, and would even give you a boost in causing plants to grow faster. You can further enhance those powers with the right gemstones. Well, Ms. Metaxas, once you get that wand finished, assuming you want to add gemstones to it at all, it should be the one you favor in Elementary Transformation Magic.

“By the way, five points to Ms. Calandra Metaxas for the excellent question.”

After that, she wrote up on the board about how to make a protective witch bottle, something else that didn't require control of magic to do, though adding magic under Will would enhance their protective properties. Used to defend against malicious witchcraft and evil spirits by deflecting bad

luck and malicious energy into the bottle, the witch bottle was a lidded glass jar filled with sharp objects such as pins and bent nails. Sometimes it also had a black or white candle, a red ribbon or string, or sea salt in it, and the metal objects were best if rusty.

“Some people put urine in the jars as well,” she explained, “to link the protection to them and their home, but that’s disgusting, and so instead I recommend substituting a bit of hair or nail clippings, or a drop of blood in salt water, which will do just as well. To clarify, you need salt water for all three of those things, not just the blood. Not only is salt protective, it prevents things growing in the witch bottle, which would be potentially dangerous physically and magically. Wine, especially consecrated wine, can substitute for urine as well.

“By the way, when placing a witch bottle in your home, put it somewhere small kids and animals can’t find it, somewhere it won’t be stepped on or knocked to the floor by accident. Preferably it should be put somewhere nobody is going to be looking, like up a chimney, under the porch, or even buried in your yard. But it has to remain intact to work, so keep that in mind as well.”

As one last bit of advice before assigning them more reading and a small project concerning witch bottles, she also told them that anyone who could reliably make their magic do something like make heat, they should do two things: First, practice feeling for outside magic, especially in charged items. Second, practice trying to channel your magic through a wand. Any wand would do, though wood was best for beginners in her opinion. Metal was great for well-

practiced witches with years of experience, but it was inanimate, and inanimate objects (except for crystals) tended to resist channeling magic up to a certain power level.



## Chapter Fourteen: Chinstrap Penguin

*Wednesday, September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017 (still)*

WHILE B DAYS SOMETIMES had PE, Mr. Thorsson hadn't been available that day, so Dalia's first PE class she actually got to was with Ms. Trask again. She changed in the unisex bathroom and didn't have a panic attack. The class was outside in the sun, though. But Sally had warned her about this ahead of time, so she had her sunglasses on. She would have liked to have had her parasol, but didn't think it wise during PE class. This turned out to be smart, because they were playing soccer in one of the fields, once they warmed up first. She wore a wide-brimmed hat instead.

Dalia sighed; she hated PE. The only exercise she liked to do was walking, or sometimes dancing. Anything else was too much work, and team sports were especially bad because it was like socializing, but while doing running and having to judge social cues when you couldn't see people's faces half the time. She also had a tendency to get targeted in PE, balls 'accidentally' hitting her right in the nose, or the back of her head. She wondered, in one idle moment, if there were any

talismans that could protect her from these 'accidents.' Probability Manipulation could do it, but that was an elective, and wouldn't start until third year.

Right as predicted, Anastasia Park 'accidentally' kicked the ball right toward Dalia's face, and she barely ducked in time to avoid it, falling over backward in her attempt to avoid a bloody nose. All the way back to the school building, Doñela yammered on about how she was going to hang around Dalia in PE and hit balls out of the way for her.

At dinner, she felt fully herself again after the events of the night before, and wished she could have more experiences like that. While they increased the odds of getting caught each time, she felt it would be worth it to feel so calm for a few hours every morning. And who knew, maybe doing it every night would help her overcome her anxiety?

She was interrupted from her musings by Brandon complaining about Riley Irving.

"Third day of classes and already he's becoming a drag. He was pretty optimistic the first couple days, then he started getting less so, and now he's annoyingly pessimistic. I mean, I don't get it. What does he have to be pessimistic about? He was fine before, and it's not like we've had much work yet. We only just received most of our books today, first A Day was tests. But he just hangs around in the dorm room all the time, these past two days. I hope he gets over his funk soon."

"He could have depression," Dalia said. "Depression is a chemical imbalance, it doesn't need a reason to mess you up."

"I suppose. But then, it's just been two days. Maybe he's down about something he hasn't told me about. It's not like

we're friends yet, we barely know each other. You're lucky, you bunch; you all seem to be friends already."

"Well Sally and I were already friends. And I was be-friending Aavraak before we knew we were rooming together. Kohana, um, she took a bit more work. Her problem was she wasn't uh, sleeping right. Maybe that's his problem, too?"

Brandon shrugged. "Could be. Anyway, Eli and I are becoming friends, so it's not a total loss. And there's your cousin Sutekh. Um... he's a bit of a downer too, but he's been that way since day one, and he's not annoying about it. Just weird. I mean, I know you're weird too, so I should be used to it, but it's a different kind of weird, you know? You're anxious and you have a goth aesthetic, but you're pretty pleasant to be around, whereas Sutekh is morose. Except when he laughs for no apparent reason."

Sally perked up at this. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, he'll just be sitting there, staring at the wall – something else weird he does – or doing something serious like reading a textbook, and suddenly burst out laughing. He never explains it, either."

"Um, well... you know the triplets are telepathically linked to each other, right?" Dalia asked. "He might be laughing at something one of his sisters said, did, saw, or heard."

"What? Oh. Good point. I hadn't thought of that."

Dalia suddenly noticed Aavraak was sitting apart from them, looking grumpy.

"Aavraak? What's the matter?"

The Goblin turned her ear and then her gaze toward Dalia. "Sorry I am not feeling social now. I feel... it is like the



nails on metal you spoke of, but angering instead. I am not sure why.”

“Oh. Okay. Well uh, do you want left alone for now?”

“Sorry, but yes.”

“I understand. I get that way sometimes. Hope you feel better soon.”

“Thank you,” she said to Dalia before returning to her meal.

“I guess we all have bad days,” Dalia said, taking a bite of her salad.



AFTER DINNER WAS SOMETHING Dalia had been waiting for since she first got to the school. It was a social event, but one she felt she could handle: the first meeting of Chinstrap Penguin, the LGBT Banner. An unofficial Banner and official club, more correctly, but that wasn't the point. The point was, she had at least something in common with most of these people in theory, and in theory that could help make socializing easier. Well, more tolerable, anyway.

She also had Sally with her. Sally wasn't identifying as any kind of LGBT yet, but the pamphlet had said allies were welcome, and it would be easier with Sally there for morale support. (Yes, she knew the term was 'moral support,' but that term never made sense to her, so she said 'morale support' instead, since that was much more logical.)

Kobalos was going with her, too, as usual. He'd been with her almost all the time this week. He got put out into

the corridor for tests, but so far Mr. Marten was the only teacher who forbade Kobalos in his classroom all the time. Dalia was glad Kobalos was with her; quite apart from anything else, he could be useful as a talking point, and had a tendency to help her out when people kept talking over her. So he was a bit like a service animal in that way. He could also translate ASL into English. She wondered, suddenly, what it would take to get him registered as a service animal.

So it was that she popped outside after dinner to let Kobalos take a bathroom break in the grass before returning to his favorite perch on her left shoulder so he could join Sally and Dalia at Chinstrap Penguin.

“Where’s this being held at, anyway?”

“Apparently the third floor has a bunch of rooms dedicated to Banner meetings, and the school lets Chinstrap Penguin meet in one of them.”

“Hey guys, wait up!”

They turned around and saw Brandon speeding along in his wheelchair as fast as he dared, which was pretty much the speed of an able-bodied person running. Kohana was hot on his trail, huffing and puffing as she struggled to keep up with him. And what was perhaps funniest of all, Brandon’s fuzzy brown cat Chewy – who truly did look like a four-legged feline version of the Star Wars character – was standing on the movable tray that he called his writing desk, striking a pose like she was the captain of a sailing ship and was standing on the bow of her vessel when it was going at top speed through choppy waters.

“Arr, Captain, there be scurvy scallywags on the horizon,” Kobalos said, then laughed.

“Oh uh, sorry, Brandon, Kohana. Guess we forgot to ask anyone else if they wanted to come with,” Dalia said.

“It’s okay, you’re forgiven. Hey, did you guys know there’s another unofficial Banner, that’s for people with all different disabilities and neurotypes? It’s called Black Rhinoceros.”

“What’s—what’s a neurotype?” Kohana asked, out of breath.

“People with different brain operating systems, like autism or ADHD. Dalia told me about the term; some people use it because they don’t really see their autism or whatever else they have as being a disability. Anyway, since I have ADHD *and* I use a wheelchair, I check both columns.”

“I use the term in relation to my autism,” Dalia explained, “but my depression and anxiety are most definitely disabilities. Sounds like somewhere else to check out. Do you know when Black Rhinoceros meets?”

“This Saturday after lunch, apparently. Then Chinstrap Penguin meets again after dinner on Saturday.”

“Well if I like it this time, we can go again later. Hey, is that it?” Dalia asked.

It was a rhetorical question she’d asked, actually; the room had a literal banner over it with a picture of a chinstrap penguin wearing an LGBT flag for a scarf. Emblazoned in rainbow lettering were the words ‘Chinstrap Penguin.’

“Hmm, I don’t know,” Sally joked, “looks like it might be a rodeo, actually.”

“Har har,” Dalia said sarcastically. “Okay, here we go. I’m ready.”

The door was open, but they couldn’t see anything except blurry silhouettes. There was some sort of spell on the

door preventing anyone from seeing in unless they came through the door.

They went inside, and could see finally that the place was set up like a small party. There were a couple tables on one half of the room with different foods on them like chips and dip, sandwiches, cookies, and brownies. And there were chairs lined up in the other side of the room all facing a table with chairs behind it. It reminded Dalia strongly of the setup of the panel rooms at OryCon, when her family had taken her (which was every year in November) and other similar scifi convention panel rooms.

There were already about a dozen people of various ages there, none older than about 18, by the look of things. Everyone had their official Banner badges on, and at least half of them had on a Chinstrap Penguin badge, as well as various LGBT pins. One girl even had little LGBT flag earrings.

"Younguns!" Someone said, a cheerful boy who had come up to them. "Sorry if I startled you, we just don't get as many kids your age coming in. Usually people don't find us until second or third year or later. Anyway hi, I'm Marty Sanchez, current goodwill ambassador and treasurer for Chinstrap Penguin. Just means I greet people and I take care of the money. I'm in fifth year. And who are you, if you don't mind saying?"

"Dalia Ravenstone," Dalia said.

"I'm Sally Anne Smith-Jones. Here as an ally and friend for Dalia."

"Brandon Han, ditto."

"Kohana Sato."

"Kobalos is pretty bird!" Kobalos said.

"Well it's nice to meet you, Dalia, Sally, Brandon, and Kobalos. And who's this handsome fellow?" he asked of Chewy.

"My cat, Chewy. Despite the name, she's a girl."

"Chewy, eh? Oh wait, I get it. Han, Chewy, that's pretty clever. May the Force be with you!"

"Live long and prosper," Kobalos said.

"Live long and prosper," Marty mimicked, chuckling. "Wrong universe, but that's okay. Anyway, please help yourself to snacks, and we have pamphlets at the table against the other wall there. Uh oh, I got more people to greet. See you in a bit!"

With that, Marty went off to the next group to come in, a group of about six people, and was just as exuberant with them as he'd been with Dalia and her friends. Who, incidentally, wandered off to check out the snacks.

Dalia was already looking around the room, feeling slightly lost. It was like being a ship in a harbor full of other ships and not knowing anything about how to communicate with the other ships, except to avoid running into each other. She didn't know any of these people, and while she might have something in common with them, having sexuality in common with someone wasn't really a lot. After all, straight people have their sexuality in common too. It wasn't at all the same; LGBT people also had oppression in common, where hetero people usually didn't, but still, it wasn't enough for Dalia.

She was saved the agony of having to make awkward first contact in search of someone to connect with thanks to the outfit she'd worn. Since she'd had to get changed after PE

anyway, she'd changed for the rest of the day into a black dress with a white pentacle print on it, and wore her favorite silvery pentacle necklace with lapis lazuli stone in the middle, and matching pentacle earrings, as well as her black cat shoes and somewhat matching black cat socks.

This outfit only took about five minutes to attract someone's attention. A dark-haired sixteen year old white girl standing in front of the drinks table looked up and smiled at Dalia's outfit. The girl was at least a foot taller than Dalia, and had an angular face.

"Fellow pagan, I see?" the taller girl asked, pointing at her own silver pentacle necklace.

"Oh, yeah. Um, merry meet," Dalia said.

"Merry meet," the other girl said back. "Hi, I'm Arlene Starling." She held out her hand.

Dalia took the proffered hand and said, "Starling? The RA? Any uh, relation to Christopher Starling?"

"Yeah, I'm one of the RA's for the girls' dorm. As to Christopher Starling, yes; he's my granddad."

"Cool. Mr. Starling is uh, one of my family's allies in the, uh, *Concilio Portlandia*."

"Oh really? Hmm... let's see, with your spiderweb design over black nails, the cute skull hair thingy with pink bow, dark brown skin, and a pet raven on your shoulder; would I be correct in assuming you're one of the Ravenstone family?"

"Yes. Um, Dalia Ravenstone," she answered.

Arlene perked up at this. "Vedya Ravenstone's sister?" Arlene asked.

"Er, yes. Why do you ask?"

Looking around carefully first, Arlene whispered, "I'm with Kyklos Ouroboros. We offer you the protection and friendship of the Chalikar, if you have need of it. I mean, I would be offering my friendship anyway, but, you know..."

Dalia nodded. "Vedya's network. I was acquainted with some of them in our old school. Wasn't aware she'd spread her network here, though. She's not even in the school yet."

"She talked to me and Persephone Rose a few years ago. We've been spreading the Chalikar here at Fae Springs on her behalf."

"Right. Well if I need protection, I'll contact the Circle. Friendship, though... I just want to be friends with people because we like each other."

"Makes sense. Anyway, I think I would've been friendly with you anyway. I mean, I didn't know who you were until you gave me your name, right?"

Dalia smiled. "Okay, fine. Our families are friends anyway, I guess."

"Ah yes, that's right. Speaking of that, my granddad once told me a fun story about you. He was visiting your house one day when something like a pale centipede the height of a Saint Bernard and three times that long came skittering into the room, and you were riding on it, this little five year old girl, laughing like you were riding a pet dog. Gave Grandpa a hell of a fright, that creature."

Dalia sighed. "Yeah, my first ever pet. Her name was Clicky, for the clicking sounds she made when she walked on hard surfaces."

Arlene laughed. "So that's her name, eh? Grandpa never did stop running away long enough to find out. He only

started going back once he heard she had died. What kind of creature was she, anyway?"

"Annwn tunnel-crawler. Grandpa Ravenstone brought an egg back from one of his trips there, and we raised her from a grub. She died when I was eight. She should have lived to be 20, but she escaped into Tirffiniol and got eaten by a griffin. She never had any babies of her own, sadly."

"Oh, oh gods, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to bring up painful memories."

Dalia shrugged. "It's okay. I miss Clicky, of course, but I haven't cried about her in years. Just get a little sad sometimes. She'd be big enough by now I could still ride her, if she'd lived."

"Oh, uh... yeah. Sorry about that."

"Yeah," Dalia said, sounding a little sad.

"Well, uh, done anything interesting lately?" Arlene asked, to change the subject.

"Yeah, actually. I got a gift from some Gnomes."

"Really? Sounds cool, tell me more."

And tell her more Dalia did, retelling the tale without giving away the fact she'd been out after curfew, which wasn't easy but wasn't impossible, either.

"Sounds amazing. Hey you know what? I'm part of a Banner for pagans and neopagans. We have get-togethers like this, but we also do rituals on the significant points on the wheel of the year. The pagan Banner is Rosy Boa, named because snakes are a symbol of pagans, since they've been sacred to loads of cultures over the millennia. Also, rosy boas are incredibly docile snakes. Anyway, I really only come here to Chinstrap Penguin to keep an eye out for people who



might not know about it and another Banner I'm a part of, which is related to this one."

"Oh? What Banner is that?"

"I can give you pamphlets for both if you want. The other one is Spotted Hyena."

"Oh my god, 'Arlene,'" said another girl, a short-haired blond wearing an expression like she'd just stepped in dog poop, "you're not still pushing that nonsense, are you?"

Arlene glared at the other girl. "What's it to you, Joyce?"

"Oh you know exactly what it is to me, 'Arlene,'" the girl said, once more saying her name with a sarcastic tone. "You know what it is to me and all the other lesbians here."

"I'm a lesbian too, Joyce."

"No, Arlo, you're a boy in a dress."

Dalia and her friends all glared at Joyce along with Arlene. Dalia also sensed Doñela and Tamir appearing at her sides, both of them looking angrier than she'd ever seen them.

"*Arlene is a girl*, you bitch!" Dalia shouted loud enough that everyone in the room turned to look. There were a lot more people here now than before, and Dalia noticed about half of them looking disgustedly at Dalia and Arlene, turning and walking away as if they might be contagious. Her friends were looking at her like she'd grown a second head; she didn't say bad words often, after all.

Joyce rounded on Dalia. "I suppose you're just like him, are you?"

"It's 'just like *her*.' And it doesn't matter if she is or isn't," Sally said. "Especially in a world where Flesh Bending is a thing."

Joyce looked down her nose at Sally. "You can change the flesh, but you can't change the spirit. Once a boy, always a boy."

"That might be true if she'd ever been a boy," Brandon said. "But she's a girl. Always has been, always will be."

"Exactly," agreed Sally.

Dalia noticed they'd spoken in ways that meant they could be talking about Arlene just as easily as her. Plausible deniability, excellent. She didn't want to be outed, and Joyce seemed the kind of girl who would spread secrets. She noticed, then, an Anansi badge on Joyce's lapel. That didn't mean anything necessarily, as Kohana was an Anansi as well, but she'd heard some Anansi turned their storytelling and truth-seeking tendencies toward gossip and telling secrets that weren't theirs to tell, and she was suddenly worried.

Glancing at Dalia, Arlene said, "Don't worry. Chinstrap Penguin uses secret-keeping wards. What happens in Chinstrap Penguin stays in Chinstrap Penguin. She can't out you without your consent unless she wants all her hair to fall out and grow back a horrible puke-orange color. Or worse; I'm not the one in charge of the runestone, so they may have changed it. We put the runestone in the door, it activates when you walk in. It also keeps people from being able to see in from outside."

Dalia's eyes went wide; that was an extremely powerful ward, had to have been set up by someone 18 or older. Wards that utilized Flesh Bending were difficult to make and required a lot of power, even for something as simple as making hair fall out and regrow as another color. And to make it powerful enough to act as a deterrent suggested that Bend-

ing the hair back to its original color would be difficult to manage.

“Yes, be thankful for that; you freaks don't belong here.”

POW! Joyce fell backwards onto her backside, her nose bleeding. Doñela had lost her temper and punched Joyce right in the nose. Everyone in the immediate vicinity was looking confused and scared, fearing a violent ghost. Some of Joyce's friends bent to help her. Even Arlene tried to help her, but Joyce didn't want Arlene touching her.

Amidst cries of “What happened?!” Dalia – who had just gone mute again from the stress – was signing something, trying to get Sally to notice her in the confusing aftermath of the punch. Finally, Kobalos shrieked for attention, and when it had quieted enough to be heard, Kobalos translated her ASL for her, in her own voice, though the kind that sounded cut-and-pasted.

“Accidental magic,” he translated. “Angry. Hate that f word she used. Magically punched her. Didn't mean to. Even though she deserved it.' Atta girl.”

Sally was looking at Dalia oddly, but Dalia barely noticed. She was too busy watching them take Joyce to the nurse's office, afraid that she'd just made the one thing she didn't need more of: a new enemy.

“There's a lot of people like her in Chinstrap Penguin, I'm sorry to say,” Arlene said. “Ridiculous, since trans people were right there with everyone else in the LGBT community before, after, and during the Stonewall riot, and kept being huge in the budding LGBT pride movement. Still are, obviously. Anyway, I guess it sounds like you're one of us, Dalia. You are hereby cordially invited to Spotted Hyena, the Ban-

ner for transgender, gender non-binary, and gender questioning individuals.”

Arlene handed Dalia the two pamphlets she'd been kept from giving her earlier, with Spotted Hyena on top. The pamphlet had a picture of two spotted hyenas on it. The first hyena had one leg up on a stone, the pink and blue Transgender Pride flag draped behind it, and was wearing a flag scarf that was a violet stripe on top, a dark green stripe on the bottom, and a white stripe between them. The other one, standing behind it, was wearing a flag that had seven horizontal stripes which were colored (top to bottom) black, gray, white, green, white, gray, black.

“Thanks. Um... what are these colors on their scarves?”

“The violet, white, and green one is the gender-queer pride flag. Gender-queer is an umbrella term for all gender identities that fall outside the accepted male/female binary. Like, people who don't feel quite male or quite female, but some mix of both. Or who have no gender, which is called 'agender,' and the other flag is the agender pride flag.”

“Oh wow, I have to tell Chooli about that! Zee's agender! Er... not that zee'd be able to come. Chooli is deaf, goes to Salem School For Deaf Witches.”

“Cool. Is Chooli one of your family?”

“A younger sibling. Chooli might be able to visit at some point. I wish zee could come here, but zee's happy in Salem. But my adopted sister Vedya will be coming to Fae Springs next year.”

“Yes, she told me about that the last time we spoke.”

“So uh, does Spotted Hyena have the same, uh, sort of... you know, secrecy hex that this place does?”

“Yes, it does.”

“Good. When's the first meeting?”

Arlene smiled. “Well the first meeting was last night, but the next one is Saturday, before lunch. And yes, a lot of the different unofficial Banners make sure their meetings don't overlap.”

“Cool. Um... what about Rosy Boa?”

“Sunday morning there's a get-together. Then an autumnal equinox ritual on Saturday the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Oh by the way, in Rosy Boa we call them Wheel of the Year festivals in general, not the Wiccan 'sabbats,' because that term is anti-semitic, originally coined by Christians when they were equating Judaism to witchcraft.”

“Oh. Good. I'll remember that.”

“Good. By the way, if you're also gay, lesbian, bi, or pan, and you want to keep coming to Chinstrap Penguin to connect with the half that aren't horrible transphobes, you're in good company.”

“I'll think about it. Um... any chance you could speed up finding them?”

“I could. Shall I do so now?”

“Wait,” Brandon said, “you never said why the trans Banner is Spotted Hyena.”

Arlene's face went red. “Um... well...”

Sally giggled. “I know this one. Because, uh... well, let's put it this way: if you had a boy hyena and a girl hyena, and you looked between the spotted hyenas' hind legs, you wouldn't be able to tell which one was the girl.”

Brandon frowned at this, thinking and mouthing the words 'the girl?' Then his eyes went wide and his face turned bright red. "I'm sorry I asked."

Kobalos laughed loud enough, flapping his wings, that it made heads turn. He laughed so hard he nearly fell off Dalia's shoulder, which just made Brandon more embarrassed. It wasn't until Chewy started staring at him and flicking her tail menacingly that he quieted down mostly, trying to hide behind Dalia's head and not having much luck finding purchase.

"What's uh, what's with the chairs? Um, the ones over there? Looks like a scifi convention panel over there."

"Oh, that? That's mostly for planning sessions. We also have speakers sometimes, and so yeah, sometimes it gets used a lot like a panel at a scifi con. But you know, also it's for anyone who just needs to sit down."

That ended up being what the chairs were being used for this time, as everyone here today seemed content to mill around the snacks and talk, or go sit down to talk with someone. Dalia's enthusiasm for being there had long faded, though; most of the people there were otherwise boring normies, judging by what she was overhearing. Arlene may or may not have been Ravenstone family material, it was too early to know, but at least she and Dalia had three things in common – trans status, both pagans, and a positive connection between their families.

"You know, if you wanna just talk with me, that's fine. Your friend Sally may be a social butterfly, and Brandon may have found a group to talk with, but you look like you'd rather not be around most of these people."

"Yeah. A bunch of them are bigots, I saw that with my own eyes. And the rest are just kind of boring. Plus, socializing isn't my strong suit."

Arlene smiled, and the two of them began to chat about this and that. Well, mostly Arlene asked questions, at first, and Dalia barely answered. But when Arlene's questions got around to the wand base the Gnomes had given her, and then to wands in general, Dalia was suddenly talking Arlene's ears off about everything to do with wands and crafting them, and how the wands she'd made were serviceable and she was planning on sending her family an email to tell them to send a particular selection of her wands to her at school for practicing with.

"You know, Dalia, if you're good at making wands, which it sounds like you are, you could make a living making wands. A lot of people don't have the crafting skills to make quality wands, so they just use plain wooden ones. But like you pointed out, stones and metals and even runes can enhance or alter the properties of the wand, in potentially useful ways. There are a lot of witches that would love to get a wand customized to their specific needs."

"Thanks! I would like to do that. It's just... I don't think I'd be any good at advertising or dealing with customers."

"So you find someone to handle that end of things for you. Sally seems like she'd be good at that."

"Sally has her own interests. She likes making machines, wants to learn how to make magical machines on her own. She and her dad made this mechanical foot for me."

"Well, there's plenty of time until then. You'll find a way. Plus, you know, there's online ordering. That's a huge thing

these days. You should probably have a business website someday anyway, so witches all over the world can buy your wands. It would cut out a lot of the customer issues by making it all happen via email and the like.”

The two of them ended up talking for another hour, but it was getting kind of late, so they stopped, then, for the night, Dalia and her friends going back to their rooms.



*FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

Friday had been another typical A Day for them, with another Defense class spent adapting to the situations Mrs. Metaxas was throwing at them. This time, as they all stood outside the door trying to decide what to do, Sally had noticed Dalia whispering to thin air again. Sally took out the stone with a hole in it and looked through it at Dalia as she addressed the invisible figure. While Sally could see signs of magic in the wall, floor, and ceiling behind Dalia, she couldn't see what Dalia was talking to. Did this mean Dalia was talking to herself? An imaginary friend? A hallucination? If she were, it wouldn't bother Sally, as Dalia seemed fine otherwise, and came from an eccentric family, but she was curious all the same.

Dalia stopped talking and turned her head, following some movement Sally couldn't see; the movement went to the door. She watched Dalia through the stone, confused, as the other students all argued with each other. A few minutes later, Dalia nodded faintly at the door and pulled some-



thing out of her purse. It was an iron horseshoe on a long twine. Dalia opened the door, ducking back quickly in case of attack; Sally put down the stone and saw what looked like a 500-foot drop down a cliff. Ignoring this, Dalia spun the horseshoe around a little on its twine and tossed it at the drop...

...where it hit the empty air with a clang, making sparks, and shattered the illusion. Everyone turned to look at Dalia as she pulled the horseshoe back in, nodded faintly again at something Sally still couldn't see, even with the stone back up at her eye. She wondered, then, if this stone was even working right. Could it even see ghosts and spirits? Maybe Dalia was haunted, but the stone couldn't see it. If that was the case, Mrs. Metaxas had lied to her, which she didn't think the teacher would do. She had no reason to. Or maybe its power had broken?

Dalia did not go in yet, though. Instead, she put on a pair of snowflake-obsidian spectacles and started looking carefully around the corner. But she stopped after a couple seconds, coming back into the corridor.

"Sally, Mrs. Metaxas is sitting on the windowsill, invisible. Or she was, just a moment ago."

"Okay. We should all go find a trusted adult, like she told us to."

Hearing this, the others discussed it amongst themselves. Already there was a dissenting voice. Anastasia Park.

"Like I believe anything *she* says. She's friends with that freak."

Dalia jumped with a start and turned her head slightly at empty air, looking put-out. Sally looked with her seeing-stone, but saw nothing unusual there.

"Believe me or not, Anastasia, I don't care," Sally said, putting the stone down. "But use that word around me again, and I'll slug you right in the nose."

Mrs. Metaxas came out of the room just then. "Ten points to Dalia Ravenstone for shattering the illusion with a horseshoe and for not entering the room. Five points to Ms. Smith-Jones for remembering the last lesson so far. I'm also subtracting ten points from Ms. Anastasia Park for disagreeing with a good plan using an *ad hominem* argument, and giving her a detention Saturday morning and afternoon for verbal harassment of another student."

"What? That's unfair!"

"If you've never been on the receiving end of bullying, Ms. Park, I don't see any way you could possibly know if my punishment in this case was fair or not. And fair or not, it is your punishment. You will come to my office after breakfast on Saturday to serve your detention."

"Aren't you going to give *her* a detention, too? She threatened me!"

"An easily avoidable if/then type statement of fact is not the same as a threat, Ms. Park. Just avoid fulfilling the 'if,' and you'll never have to worry about any 'then' happening. For example, *if* you keep arguing with me about your punishment, Ms. Park, *then* you will get even more."

Anastasia nodded her understanding, but glared at Sally and Dalia when the teacher wasn't looking.

“Everyone sit down at their desks now please. Class is about to start.”

As they went to their desks, Sally managed to overhear Mrs. Metaxas telling Anastasia, “Tripping other students – especially at meal times – isn't very nice either, Ms. Park. Be grateful I didn't give you an entire weekend's worth of detentions.”

Sally smiled. She knew what she was doing Saturday morning. Dalia would forgive her, Arlene would be there for her.



*SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

Dalia awoke on Saturday looking forward to her first Spotted Hyena meeting, which was actually after breakfast, though it was open all morning long until lunchtime. All through breakfast she awaited the meeting. The only problem with it was she was going to miss out on spying on Anastasia's detention – Doñela could easily pass through the door and report on what she was seeing, just like she had the day before in class. But her range was restricted, so it was one or the other. Oh well. Spotted Hyena took priority.

Just before leaving for it, Sally stopped her to tell her something.

“Dalia, sorry, I'm not gonna go with you to Spotted Hyena. I was gonna see if I could find out what Anastasia's detention is. I have a plan, I worked on it all night last night til midnight.”

"Is that why you had all that electrical stuff out? It looked like you were making some kind of robot."

"Yes, I am. It's gonna slip under the gap in the door and eavesdrop on them. Don't worry, it'll be invisible. Daddy taught me the rune for invisibility. It doesn't work well on large objects without a lot of power and skill that I don't have yet, but for something this small, it shouldn't be a problem."

"Oh cool! Right then, try not to get caught."

"I'll try."

Sally took off, then. But Kohana and Aavraak stayed behind.

"Where are you going?" Aavraak asked.

"It's an unofficial Banner called Spotted Hyena," she said quietly, close to their ears. "For, uh... people like me."

"Could I come?" Aavraak asked. "Krolt do not actually fit in your culture's 'traditional' gender ideas."

"Uh, sure. Cool!"

"Can I come too?" Kohana asked. "Without you asking why? I mean, at least until later in our room."

"Sure. Come, let's go."

Her two non-human friends followed her, quietly excited.



AT LUNCH, THEY ALL met up again to tell each other about their days, including Cally. Before Cally could dominate the discussion with her chatter, Dalia spoke.

"Did you uh, find out what Anastasia's detention is?"

“Oh yes, I did. I did indeed. You’re going to love this.”

“Well? Go on!”

“Okay, this is great. Mrs. Metaxas gave her this book, apparently, that’s full of gruesome details of what victims of bullying and other kinds of abuse did to their tormentors. She has to read it all and write an essay about it! The spy-bot didn’t have video, but I was hanging around where I could see the door when she came out for lunch, and she looked ill. Hopefully that’ll mean she thinks twice before being a bully.”

“Excellent. Hope she shares what she learned with Preston.”

“So, Dalia, what was Spotted Hyena like?”

“A lot more friendly. Room was laid out the same. Oh hey, I can’t tell you who, but you’d be surprised who showed up there, other than me—” she went mute suddenly.

“Oh crud, that’s the ward stone activating, is it?”

“Yes. I can’t say anyone who was there, except myself.”

“I was there as well,” Aavraak said. Then her neck went very suddenly stiff, you could see it in her body language.

“What the heck?” Sally asked.

“Seems I cannot even... indicate others who were there... by using my body. Not even...” she was struggling to say something for a few moments, then gave up.

“Well that’s cool,” Dalia said. “Uh, let’s see, um... okay, I’ll try Chinstrap Penguin. Someone I saw there was a—a—nyah! Wow. Can’t even say the gender of someone who was there!”

“Guess that covers the potential loophole of describing someone who was there with like, ‘the girl third to the left

from you, with the glasses,' or something like that." Sally said, then winced, having tried to turn her head toward someone to try to test out that method.

"Jeez Louise, that hurts!"

A sound drew Dalia's attention to the door of the cafeteria then, and she saw Ms. Aurora Hollander coming in, pushing a wheeled cart as she whistled and danced, earbuds in her ears trailing to a small MP3 player in one of her uniform's pockets.

But though Ms. Hollander was on the cleaning staff, this was a mail cart.

"Mail call, dearies," she said, handing letters to some students, packages to others. Dalia got a package as well.

"Thank you, Ms. Hollander. I didn't know you did the mail, too."

"Oh, not usually my job, but poor Raul was feeling a bit unwell this morning, so I'm subbing for him, along with my other duties. Always something to do around here. Had to help mediate a dispute between two different groups of pixies the other day. They were fighting over hunting territory over by the greenhouses. Apparently the juiciest, plumpest beetles in the school hang around over there. Anyway, enjoy your meals and your mail, dearies!"

With a smile and a nod at them, the cheerful cleaning lady kept on passing out mail around the room, all while dancing and whistling to a tune that sounded oddly like a song Dalia recognized from an anime.

"She is nice," Aavraak said. "I like her. She is sometimes around, doing daytime cleaning, when I am coming out of the room, and we talk when I have time."

"Yeah," Dalia said, rubbing her head. "She told me about the black-out screens around the beds. A lifesaver, that."

Dalia remembered she had a package in her hand then, and stopped rubbing her head to look at the label on it. It was from home, written in Nizoni's handwriting. She opened it up eagerly.

"Practice wands!" Dalia said. "Three of the wands I most wanted from the ones I've made over the years."

"Well, let's see them then," Kohana said, interested.

Dalia laid them out on the table, pausing to rub her head again and take a pain reliever; the noise in the room had gone up, and she was starting to get a headache from it. She knew from experience she had to take care of those quickly or they became migraines.

"Okay, so the first one is apple wood, simple quartz tip, jade end cap. This wand will be good for when we finally get around to learning Waxing of plants in Transformation class."

The apple wand looked like a perfectly ordinary wand, it was hard to believe a goth like Dalia would make a wand like that.

"This second one is ash wood, has a tip made of angel quartz, and has a smokey quartz end cap." This one also looked pretty ordinary.

"But the star of the show, last but not least, is this one. Made from blackthorn wood. Tip is smokey quartz, end cap is obsidian."

Now this wand was more Dalia's style. The wood was black, you could see where the thorns had been filed off, but in such a way that it still had an uneven surface. The smokey

quartz tip was shorter and squatter than the tips of the other wands, but still came to a point.

Sally looked at the wands, admiring their beauty. She noticed that each one of them looked like the tips had been put in by drilling a hole in the end of the wood and gluing them in with faintly visible clear glue.

"These were all made before I started practicing making ends with screw threading. I practiced on a lot of spare pieces of wood to do that, not wanting to ruin actual wands. But I've gotten good enough at screw threading that I'll be ready by the time my primary wand comes to me."

"What, you don't want to use the blackthorn wand as your primary?"

"Oh, it's a good wand. They're all good wands, these three. But I'm feeling Called to another for my primary. But getting it is going to be difficult."

"Why's that?" Cally asked.

"Because the tree that's Calling me is in the Dark Grove."

"Woah. Those trees are often dangerous," Cally said. "My mom told me they got most of them from several really bad forests around Tirffiniol, the kind that manifest Forest Gods like something out of Lovecraft's nightmares if you so much as pull a single leaf off them. And the rest are like, carnivorous."

"The tree Calling me is misunderstood. Called the Devil Tree, it—"

"The Devil Tree! Good goddess, that's the worst one! That tree doesn't even get along with other dark trees. You know one of them escaped to Earth? Yeah, a seed flew through the Veil and grew on Earth, and now it's infamous,



despite not being as powerful on Earth as it would be in Tirffiniol. Even the mundanes know it's bad news. But nobody can move it or kill it, anyone who tries ends up dead, the tree curses them. And that's pretty standard behavior for a Devil Tree."

"Precious darling, too good for this world, too pure," Dalia said with a wistful sigh in her voice.

"Dalia, trust me on this, you've got about as much chance of getting a Devil Tree wand as I have of sprouting wings and flying to the moon," Cally said. "They didn't even plant that tree there, it just started growing one day. All the other trees in the Dark Grove are there because they have legitimate magical uses. But nobody dares approach the Devil Tree, it kills anyone who hurts it even accidentally.

"What's more, Devil Trees can't even stand one another. Nobody knows how they even manage to breed, nobody's ever seen two of them within 20 miles of each other. Nobody's seen their seeds, either, they're just presumed to exist because well, they're trees. And some magical arborists even suspect they originated from the surface of Annwn!"

"I know people believe all that, and it might even be true usually, but I know what I'm talking about. The Devil Tree wouldn't be Calling me if it didn't want me to answer. And answer I will, even if it takes a decade to manage it."

Cally said nothing to this, just shook her head in disbelief.





## Chapter Fifteen: Secrets

*Friday, September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

THIS WAS BORING. SUTEKH was bored. So were his sisters. They were all expected to go to the same classes, but they didn't need to. Though they all had their own personalities, they were telepathically bonded, so they could have had a lot more study time. The only things they really needed to practice individually were things that involved working up muscle memory, stuff you couldn't get good at through telepathy alone. So far, that was just feeling their magic. Which they and most of the school had down pretty good by now.

Sutekh and his sisters had taken to using wands to practice with, because Mrs. Metaxas said using wands could help you get good at wandless magic, as long as you rotated between the two. The triplets had gotten good enough in the first few weeks of school using this technique that they were regularly having 'duels' that involved pushing each other around with magic. In a week and a half this game went from basically poking one another from a distance to outright shoving matches. It was most fun trying to push Alvar,

she was always so annoyingly graceful and quick in her reflexes that she could turn a shove from behind into a handstand or something. Of course, it was also impossible for any of the triplets to surprise one another, but it was still fun to try.

But mostly, school was boring. And inefficient. If they had their way, they'd all have three different schedules with no overlapping classes. Why should all three of them take Math when all three of them could remember what had happened in Math class, even though only one of them was there?

The one dark cloud on this silver lining was that come third year, they could each take a different elective and it'd be just like taking *all* those electives. They could breeze through their school careers this way if allowed to, and graduate from university level in their early 20's or sooner. But these people running the school didn't understand telepathic bonding, and hated telepathy. These people considered telepathy a borderline dark art. It was astonishing that Fae Springs even *had* a Mind Magic course available. University level, of course, but still, astonishing all the same.

Nothing was a challenge when you had three minds such as theirs working on it together. Awakening conscious control of their magic had been really their only challenge, everything else came easily; if one of them forgot something, another remembered. Homework was a breeze when they took turns doing it and could imitate each others' handwriting. This left them with a lot of free time. Free time they used to shake things up around here. And they had Mrs.

Metaxas to thank for the idea, for someone had finally asked her about her tattoos in class one day.

When it had happened, she had smiled and said it was about time someone asked her.

"Now, I can't talk about the one of the golden apple; school policy forbids me from doing so, you'll have to ask my daughter if you're curious about that one."

Naturally, everyone had turned to Cally, who had sighed and responded, "I'll tell Sally, and you can ask her, but don't bother me, please."

"I quite agree, and an excellent solution. But the other tattoo, the eight-armed star, that one I *can* talk about." She paused here, then said, "So basically, it's the symbol of a relatively new branch of magic called 'chaos magic.' It's named, I think, after chaos theory in mundane science, but don't quote me on that. The idea behind chaos magic is that witches, over the centuries, have painted themselves into a corner with all the rigid rules in magic, that most of those rules are artificial, and that magic doesn't really have many real rules of its own, since it's just the art of using the mind to influence reality.

"So, those into Chaos Magic are all about expanding the boundaries of magic by seeking to remove as many limitations in human thought as possible; challenging norms, questioning the so-called rules, and thinking outside the box, at least within the context of magic, though I personally find doing those things in all aspects of my life to be most useful. But basically, the point is to expand what's possible with magic by questioning everything we think we know about it.

"Now, there *are* some real limits to magic, like any physics. Learning to control your magic consciously almost always takes a lot of work, for one. And human magic is far less powerful than faery magic. Whether these limitations can be expanded or not, I don't know. I take the position that we should try to find out where it's safe to do so. I think there *are* hard limits to magic, but have we found them yet? Probably not."

Mrs. Metaxas paused to take a drink of water from a water bottle before continuing.

"Most of the recent breakthroughs with magic over the last few decades came from chaos mages. In fact, one of the breakthroughs they made, that I'm currently learning to do, is something called 'runic casting.' Runes are normally carved, drawn, or painted onto some surface, then you cast energy into them. Well in runic casting, you write the rune out in the air and empower it as you're drawing it, before throwing the spell at its target. Tricky stuff to master, and not something you should learn to do alone, because it can go horribly wrong. But nobody thought to do it for centuries, until one day a chaos mage thought of it and decided to try it, and it worked.

"I mean, technically sometimes people have drawn out protective symbols as a form of probability manipulation magic, but runic casting is much different. It takes a lot of power, imagination, concentration, and control to do it right. A lot of people who try to learn never manage it. I still haven't mastered it myself, to be honest. And it's dangerous enough and new enough you can only learn it from one-on-

one classes with someone who's mastered it, because none of the magic schools teach it as a class yet."

Sutekh raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Ravenstone?"

"What is runic casting good for, if it's so hard?"

"Good question, Mr. Ravenstone. Five points to you for it. There are several uses for runic casting. Want to make a temporary runic spell and don't have the materials to do one the normal way? Runic casting. Want to modify a regular spell by tying a rune into it? Runic casting can do that for you, letting you – for example – modify a flying spell with the rune to make the object spin like a top. Not a great example, but an okay one. Yes, Ms. London?"

"Couldn't you write out a rune in the air and *then* empower it?"

"That was what the inventor tried at first, but they couldn't get it to work. The runes kept collapsing under the weight of the new magic, since they were basically just illusions cast in the air, meaning they had no solid substrate to keep them from collapsing. It was enough of an issue that runic casting almost didn't get invented, but finally the solution was found – empower the rune as you write it. A difficult work-around to master, but nothing better has yet been found. Still, who knows. Some people still experiment with other ideas. I know of one person who's trying to work out how to suspend ink in midair and keep the resulting rune stable enough to take a charge. Last I'd heard, he hadn't managed it yet.

"Anyway, another use for runic casting would be using runes to hold normal spells in midair until you're ready to

use them, releasing them from the runes to hit their target, which would be incredibly useful in duels, especially as you could bombard someone with dozens of the same spell at the same time. It'd be a bit like having partners with you in the duel. Or you could put the runic spells near the ground like land mines, or throw them over your shoulder as you're fleeing an opponent.

“Also related, you could put normal spells inside runes in midair, tie them to each other with more runes, then release the combined spells at the opponent. And with a sufficiently focused mind, you could even cast a rune spell with one hand and a wand spell with another.

“Then, last but not least, there's the possibility of mixing ritual magic with runic casting. Ritual magic can be quite powerful, especially if you're proficient at it, but it takes time to raise the energy and shape it the way you want it. Some people already mix ritual magic with runes, casting ritual magic spells into a rune for later use, but there are applications for runic casting there. Not many, really, since the runes in runic casting don't last long, but at the very least it would be an interesting thing to get proof of concept for.

“Again, I want to stress how very dangerous runic casting is. Even the simplest rune spells done this way can explode in your face if you do it wrong, and maim or even kill you or others. So if I hear of any of you attempting it on your own or without the help of someone who has mastered it already, I will put you in detention for the rest of the school year, or even recommend expulsion.”

Brandon had a question; she called on him. “If runes need a solid substrate to keep from collapsing, why does

charging them while they're being cast work when the other way doesn't?"

"An excellent question, Mr. Han. First, trying to cast power into an illusory rune doesn't work because the energy matrix needed to display the illusory rune isn't designed to be added to. Such illusions can be cast to resist attempts to add power to them, but the open ones overload easily, popping like a light bulb that's been given too much electricity.

"The reason charging while you cast a rune works is because the kind of illusions that resist added power are more robust. They have to be, to resist being modified, especially since such illusions tend to persist a lot longer than the other kind. But since they can't be added to after the fact, you have to charge them as you're making them. Since they 'cure' within milliseconds of the witch finishing the last stroke, there's no time to charge them after drawing them in the air. So you have to charge them while they're being drawn, before they cure. Which means, also, that in runic casting, you have to draw the entire rune in a single stroke. You can still make complex symbols, but nothing that involves 'picking up the pen' and making extra strokes. Extra strokes would count as separate runes.

"By the way, five points to Mr. Han and Ms. London for their questions."

Hearing about Chaos Magic had only whetted everyone's appetite to hear about the other tattoo, the one she was forbidden to talk about, so Cally told Sally about it after class, and Sally took on the task of retelling the story. And it turned out Mrs. Metaxas couldn't tell them all herself because the golden apple was a symbol of her religion, and



teachers were forbidden from talking with students about their religion. Sutekh, luckily, happened to overhear Cally's original version of the tale, though:

“Okay, so the golden apple on her left arm has writing on it; it's in Greek, and the word is 'Kallisti,' which means 'to the prettiest.' It's from the mythology of ancient Greece. The goddess Eris, goddess of discord and strife, wasn't invited to a party of the gods, and so She threw that apple into the party, and several goddesses – Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite – fought over it. They settled Their feud over who got it by having a mortal named Paris decide the winner. I don't remember what Hera and Athena tempted him with, but Aphrodite gave him Helen of Troy, which started the Trojan War.

“Anyway, in the 1950's, these two guys made a kind of joke religion around Eris, calling it Discordianism. The basic idea was that the world was too orderly, too stagnant and bureaucratic, and so Discordians should work to combat that stagnation with positive chaos. Not strife and discord like the original Eris of the Greeks was, because there's too much of that in the world already, but rather creative, happy chaos to shake things up. Things like, well... like walking into a classroom on your hands, or walking around the school backwards, using a mirror to see where you're going, like Mom did the other day. Or just thinking outside the box.

“But basically, though it was started as a parody religion, some Discordians take it seriously, and it's their actual religion, or part of their religion sometimes; Discordianism is actually compatible with a lot of other religions. Anyway, Mom – Mrs. Metaxas – is a Discordian. One of the ones

who takes it seriously, in fact. She says she's been one for decades, but really took to it in a huge way when she got the job here, because of Principal Park. She calls him a Grayface – a Discordian term for someone who's like, the opposite of a Discordian; someone who is big into excessive, stagnant, or otherwise bad kind of Order.

“Anyway, I'm not sure if chaos magic came from Discordianism or not, but the two philosophies are compatible.”

When Sutekh and his sisters got back to their rooms later that day, they immediately got on the Internet and started looking up Discordianism. They found that Discordians sometimes organized themselves into groups called cabals, on the idea that imposition of order leads to escalation of disorder. But there were also solitary Discordians, too.

“We should start a cabal,” Alvar said. “Maybe invite some others. Is Calandra a Discordian?”

“No idea,” Sutekh said.

Of course, they both knew this already; Alvar had only asked the question to make note to find out. He also wasn't even in the same building as her, so if either of his roommates had come in before that, it would have looked like he was talking to himself. But of course, his sisters could hear him.

“I'm gonna go find her and ask,” Cerridwen said, standing up and leaving the room.

“Hey Calandra,” she said, having found the bespectacled girl in the rec room. “We were curious if *you* are a Discordian, too?”

"I'm Cally, now, actually. Dalia kept getting 'Calandra' and 'Kohana' mixed up, apparently, so I told her to call me Cally."

"Won't that get you confused with Sally, then?"

"I doubt it. Hard K sound in Cally, an S sound in Sally, they're pretty different. If someone *did* make that mistake, it'd be almost as bad mixing up 'Saul' and 'Paul.'"

"Oh. Good point. Anyway, you didn't answer my question, Cally."

Cally shrugged. "Dunno. Never really thought much about religion. I do like being silly or weird or doing some of the other things Mom does to bring positive chaos into the world. But well, Discordians don't have to actually believe in Eris, they can believe in whatever, and there's even atheists who are Discordian as well, so I guess I *am* a Discordian."

"Want to join a cabal? Sutekh and Alvar and I are starting one."

"I guess so. Yeah, could be fun. I'll have to refresh my memory on some of this stuff with some online searches, but that's no problem."

"Ask her about Dalia," Alvar said. Since she wasn't in the room with Cerridwen or Cally, Cerridwen had to relay this.

"Alvar says to ask you if you think Dalia wants to join."

"What? You planned the conversation out that much in advance?"

"No, we're telepathically bonded, remember?"

"Oh right. Sorry. Anyway, I don't know, but I could ask. What's the cabal called, anyway?"

“Dunno. We haven’t thought of one yet. Discordians tend to have some funny names for cabals, though. Should be fun coming up with one.”

Soon, Cally and Cerridwen were finding Dalia and asking her about joining their cabal. She agreed, and they tried to think of a cabal name, but got sidetracked thinking of Discordian holy names for themselves, which were also hilarious. Alvar claimed ‘Pope Drunken Frog Weasel,’ Cerridwen went with ‘Reverend Absquatulating Aardwolf,’ and Cally picked ‘Saint Mumpsimus of Numbles,’ all of which were funny, while Dalia went a more serious route with ‘Lady Bloodfire Furyheart.’ Sutekh liked that idea, so for himself he went with ‘Lord Hesperus Haruspex.’

Finally, they got around to talking about cabal names. A great many names were bandied about, but finally they settled on one.

Alvar, grinning, said, “I do officially declare this the first ever meeting of the Starlit Apostles of the Benign Occult Tabernacle, or SABOT for short. For truly, now is the SABOT age!”

“That pun doesn’t really work very well,” Cally said. “‘Sabot’ is French, the T is silent.”

Alvar frowned at her. “For my first official act as Pope Drunken Frog Weasel, I do hereby award Saint Mumpsimus of Numbles the title Killjoy Extraordinaire.”

Cally stuck her tongue out at Alvar and made a raspberry sound. “Well I’m a Saint, so I outrank you, Pope Drunken Frog Weasel. I hereby un-award myself that title.”

"Anyone can be a Discordian saint, all they have to do is suffer," Cerridwen scoffed. "And anyone who's been born meets that qualification."

"Anyway," Alvar said, ignoring Cally and Cerridwen both, "first disorder of business for the cabal: how can we bring a little happy chaos into the world?"

"Well it can't be anything magical," Cally said, "because we don't know enough magic yet."

"Okay. So we need ideas. Let's discuss it."

Like with the cabal's name, they spent over an hour debating it before they finally came up with a good idea to try, something they could do with their limited resources and knowledge. They had a great idea, and so they spent a bit more time preparing the things they'd need to do it. They decided to get started the next day.

When they were done discussing and planning, and everyone went back to their own rooms, Kohana and the now-returned Aavraak in the bathrooms, Sally looked at Dalia and quietly asked, "Why didn't you tell them you can see through walls?"

Dalia froze, then turned to stare at Sally. "Um... what?"

"Well that one day at Magical Self Defense, you looked inside the room and knew stuff about it while the door was closed. I don't know how you did it, but it's pretty cool, and could be useful. Also there was that flying thing you did over the summer."

"Oh. Um... I guess I should uh, should probably tell you about... yeah, I think I will. Um... so uh... so I've got two friends. They're invisible, only I can see and hear them, but

they can move stuff around. Their names are Doñela and Tamir.”

“So they’re ghosts?”

“Er, no. Okay, so uh... alright, so... um...” Dalia took a deep, calming breath and began to concentrate on forgetting her anxiety long enough to switch into ‘autistic info-dump’ mode. When she was calm enough, she began.

“The first thing you have to know is some branches of the Ravenstone family are prone to something the family calls ‘being multiplied.’ It’s when there are multiple souls living in a single body. Well, multiple minds, anyway. None of the multiplied have ever come back as ghosts, at least not to my knowledge, or not in a way that proved they had more than one soul, at least. Though that doesn’t necessarily mean they don’t. Just that it’s never been proven or disproved.”

“Wait, so... you mean like ‘Sybil’?”

“Ugh,” Dalia said. “No, don’t get me started on that book. I’d be extremely surprised if that book had a single true word in it. Written by an absolute hack, that was. Sensationalist garbage.”

“But you’re still talking about... about multiple um, personality disorder, right?”

“It’s called Dissociative Identity Disorder now, but it’s more complex than that. DID is on one end of a spectrum that ranges from single-minded people like you, to full-blown DID. The people in our family who become multiplied tend to be a bit farther toward the singleton end of the spectrum. I think I—we—are about three-fourths of the way toward the DID side, as we have a memory we can all access, and we can co-front, but we can still keep thoughts

from one another if we choose to. Anyway, full-blown DID tends to require truly horrible amounts of childhood trauma, but other forms of being multiplied don't require that. Several branches of the family are genetically prone to it, apparently."

"Wait, so you're telling me they're... that you're... one of these 'multiplied'?"

"Yes. You know those red books Vedyia kept insisting were financial records?"

"Uh huh. What about them?"

"They're called 'The Diaries of the Legion.' They're the record of all the journals of every group of The Multiplied in our family for like, hundreds – maybe thousands – of years."

Sally paused to turn this over in her mind a bit. Dalia started to get anxious again. Several minutes passed like this, Dalia getting more and more anxious, before Sally spoke again.

"So it's some kind of... of mental condition caused by magic?"

"Er, well... probably, but uh... apparently some of the Multiplied have met people like themselves among mundanes. Could still be magic; mundanes have small amounts of magic. But could be something else, too."

"Can I... can I see... can one of them move something for me?"

"Oh, sure. Yeah, I can show you. Um... I think the other two are showering, they'll be there a while. So uh... Doñela? Pick up something. So she can see."

Sally saw a magazine get picked up by an invisible hand and open up, the invisible Doñela flipping through it. Sally looked right there with the stone, and frowned.

"I don't see anything. I mean, I can see the magazine, and runes and stuff around the bed, and I can see a magic field around Gegauassi, and some other signs of magic. But there's nothing else there. How is she doing that?"

Dalia shrugged. "Maddy and Shimá think it's telekinesis plus some kind of astral projection. It's apparently really weird, even for the Multiplied. Probably even unique. They think it happened cuz of the ghosts in the house. Everyone who's Multiplied has a phase where they see the others as imaginary friends, but most of them, their others eventually go back into their bodies and exist as voices that can sometimes take control of the body. But uh... my family think that I decided, at some point, that they were ghosts, so they manifested as ghosts. Even when I found out the truth, they kept doing it. They can pop back into my body the way other Multiplied do, but yeah, they still tend to manifest like spir-its."

"I see. And... well, we've known each other since early 2010, and you're only now telling me about this?"

"Sorry," Dalia said in a small, shaky voice. "I was scared. Both magical and mundane culture tend to vilify, even demonize the Multiplied. Or pity them, decide it's a horrible affliction and try to get rid of the extra minds. But they're like another brother and sister to me! Getting rid of them would be murder! And I was terrified of losing my best friend over this."



Sally sighed as she looked at Dalia. "I wish you had told me sooner. I'm hurt you didn't. But I understand. I'm sorry you had to go through all that alone."

Walking forward, she held out her arms to offer a hug to Dalia, who nodded gratefully. Sally hugged her friend, and Dalia began to cry tears of relief into Sally's shoulder. This was how they were when one of the bathroom doors opened.

"What is going on? Why is Dalia crying?" asked Aavraak, who had just come out of the bathroom. She blinked. "Is that a spirit?"

"Not exactly, Aavraak. It's complicated."

Dalia's eyes went wide at someone else having seen Doñela, but then she relaxed with a sigh.

"We might as well tell the other two. Aavraak and Kohana."

"Did I hear my name?" Kohana asked, coming out of the other bathroom. She was wearing only a pair of towels – one around her body, another around her hair. She had clearly just been in the shower.

With Dalia too anxious to talk now, Sally explained to Aavraak and Kohana what Dalia had told her. Aavraak, as she usually was with anything that humans would think was weird, was fascinated, and spent a few minutes studying Doñela as she made things move around the room. Kohana was frightened at first, but a few more minutes of discussion, and she had moved past that to acceptance.

"You sure you're fine?" Sally asked.

"Yeah. I mean, now that I know to disregard the stuff popular culture says about Multiples, I'm fine. It's weird, yeah, but who am I to talk about 'weird'? I'm a giant, talking,

sentient fox pretending to be human!" She walked over to Dalia and hugged her. "You accepted me at my weirdest, I'd be a real tool to do any less, eh?"

"You guys understand this is a secret, right?" Dalia asked. "I mean, I'm gonna tell Brandon eventually. He and I are pretty close now. But otherwise, very secret."

"Yeah, we get it," Sally said, and the others agreed.

"I would like to meet this other person who shares your body. In person, I mean," Aavraak said.

Dalia sighed. "Yeah, I should've known that you would. You okay with it, Kohana?"

"Yeah. Might as well. It'd be real proof."

*'At last I'm freeeee!'* Doñela said jokingly, as she jumped into Dalia's body, pushing Dalia out of it entirely. She went along with it because it was easier this way.

Naturally, Dalia's body's body language changed completely. She went from constantly anxious and tense to loose and relaxed. Doñela sat down on Dalia's wooden chair and put her feet up on the desk, her hands behind her head.

"Sup, witches?" Doñela said.

"That is so weird," Kohana said. She looked at Sally. "That is so clearly *not* Dalia! Dalia's *never* been that relaxed. She looks tense even when she's *asleep!*"

"Yeah... I can't believe I didn't figure it out before," Sally said.

"You two gonna gawk and yammer on about how surprised you are, or are we gonna have a conversation or something? I bore easily."

The two girls looked at each other. They didn't know what to say.

Doñela got up and put her arms around both of them. “Girls, girls... I know your minds have been well and truly kaplooeeyed, but do try to snap out of it and maybe treat me like any other person you’ve met in your life, ‘kay?”

“She speaks louder than Dalia,” Sally noted. “I can barely hear Dalia most of the time, but Doñela... I have a hard time *not* hearing her.”

“Speaking of, where *is* Dalia right now?” Kohana asked.

“Right there,” Doñela said, gesturing with her head. “Floating there all boring-like. Do something interesting! Hey I know, you could go over all mime-like, sign something to Sally.”

Doñela looked over at Dalia, who had taken her advice and put on a t-shirt, a Nightmare Before Christmas beanie hat, and a pair of very long, black opera gloves.

{Hi, Sally,} she signed. {Hi, Kohana. This is how they communicate with others when they’re in spirit form.}

“Well, that and Loki,” Doñela said, rushing over to dig her talking magical smart phone from the dresser drawer.

“Why hello there, Doñela,” Loki said.

“Your phone is named Loki, and sounds like Tom Hiddleston?” Kohana asked, and giggled.

“Yup. Sure is. Loki, I’m gonna loan you to Dalia for a moment.”

“Of course,” he said.

She tossed Loki at Dalia, who fumbled him but just managed to catch him. Then she began tapping on the screen.

"Hi Sally, Kohana, Aavraak," Loki said in Dalia's voice. "This is Doñela's phone, which she uses to talk to other people when she's in astral form."

Another phone and set of clothing appeared, coming from the closet.

"Hello," Hypatia said in the voice that sounded like Tamir's. "I'm Tamir."

"Fascinating," Aavraak said, grinning.

"Oh hey," Doñela said, and ran over to their trunk, digging through it. A few moments later, she tossed a sketch-paper notebook at Sally. "First and second pages, what we look like to Dalia."

The two girls looked at Dalia's drawings of Doñela and Tamir. Doñela's drawing, while still, nonetheless had an almost-animated quality to it, like it wouldn't surprise you if it started to move on its own. In her drawing, she was hanging upside down in midair, playing with Brandon's cat. Meanwhile, the drawing of Tamir had a quiet, studious stillness to it. In Tamir's drawing, he was sitting down and reading.

Doñela began to juggle as they looked at the pictures, and Dalia's astral form floated over to watch their reactions to her art. Kohana had to stop looking at it for a few minutes to get changed into her pajamas, but then she returned.

"I would very much like to see this Tamir using Dalia's body," Aavraak said at last.

"Righty-o. Tamir?"

Doñela tossed the balls she was juggling high into the air and off to one side. Suddenly, Dalia's body wasn't nearly as animated, as someone calm and still had taken over. The balls

fell down and were caught by Doñela's astral form. She kept juggling them around the room.

"Tamir?"

He sighed. "Yes, it's me. I'm not sure what I'm doing here like this. It's too late to go to the library, for instance."

The juggled balls fell and Doñela snatched Loki out of Dalia's astral hands. She tapped a few things out on him, and soon they heard 'her' saying, "Don't sell yourself short, you're really witty and sassy when you put your mind to it."

Tamir shrugged. "I guess."

"Brevity is the soul of wit," came Doñela's reply. Then, a moment later, "Eat something. I love eating when she lets me use the body, it's loads of fun."

"I'm not hungry."

"So? Grab some cookies, stuff her face. OM NOM NOM!"

"I'm not an uncouth blue muppet, unlike you, Doñela."

Feminine laughter issued from Loki's speakers at this. "There's a small taste of that wit."

"I am an arteest," he said. "Great art cannot be rushed! Besides, my sassiness is best when used against bullies."

"That's a good point, actually. By the way, Dalia wants her body back." She tapped something else really quickly, and a recording played of Doñela from a time she was controlling Dalia's body, of her singing a song to the tune of "My Bonny Lies Over The Ocean." The words were, instead, "My body lies over the ocean, my body lies over the sea; my body lies over the ocean. Oh bring back my body to me! Bring, back! Bring, back! Oh bring back my body to me, to

ME! Bring, back! Bring, back! Oh bring back my body to meeeee!”

By the time the song ended, Dalia was back in control, which became obvious as she immediately began to shrink in on herself with anxiety. Then a few moments later, she was on her knees, fighting nausea.

“Don’t worry about her, guys,” Doñela ‘said’ via Loki. “It’ll pass.”

Doñela stuck Loki in a pocket of her shirt and moved over to retrieve her juggling balls. By the time Dalia was recovered, Doñela was juggling while Loki kept replaying the “Bring Back My Body To Me” song at top volume.

“Is this how it’s gonna be from now on?” Kohana asked, almost shouting over the noise. “You know, with her being weird and loud and stuff all the time?”

“No. She’s been cooped up, forced to be quiet all the time for over two weeks. She’ll get it out of her system soon enough, and be only mildly annoying most of the time after that,” Dalia assured them.

“I sure hope you’re right about that,” Sally said.

Aavraak was still watching Doñela with fascination, but she had her ears flattened in the way they knew meant she was trying to cut down on the noise. Which became a lot more difficult to do when Kobalos started shrieking and flapping his wings in agitation at Doñela because one of her juggling balls had almost knocked his perch over.

Dalia, aggravated now, went over to her bed and activated the privacy screen to block out the noise.



*SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

Dalia had an unusual experience the next morning. It wasn't unprecedented, but it was unusual for her. For she woke up in bed and realized as she did that she was in astral form. Somebody – probably Doñela – had already taken her body out for a spin. She had to still be in the room, though, since their tether outside of home was so short. So she sat up and floated past the privacy screen, which Doñela must have renewed for her. She was instantly met with the sound and sight of Doñela using her body to skip rope, which she was doing with enthusiasm. This gave Dalia an idea, and she made a mental note to let Doñela take over the body during PE, since she was so exuberant and needed the outlet more than Dalia did.

Dalia looked at the clock; it was late enough that breakfast would just be starting, and the lack of any room-mates in the room (and two open bathroom doors) indicated they'd gone ahead.

*'How much longer are you going to do that?'* Dalia asked her.

Doñela just shook her head. Dalia realized, then, that she was counting.

*'She told me she wanted to get to 200. She's just passed 100,'* Tamir informed her, from where he was reading a book in the corner.

*'Thanks, Tamir.'*

*'No problem.'*

Dalia was glad to see Doñela had at least had the sense to jump rope in sweatpants and a tank top, rather than getting her normal clothes all sweaty. Doñela also had a black sweatband on above her eyes.

Instead of wasting time, Dalia decided to dig around inside her stuff to decide what she would wear today, since it was Saturday.

"...195, 196, 197, 198, 199... 200!" Doñela shouted, stopping to flop face-first onto the bed like a rag doll. "Ugggggh," she said, her voice muffled – "I forgot how much work controlling the body is."

A moment later, Doñela was up again and grabbing her things for a shower. Dalia kept looking through her outfits, ignoring the sounds of singing from the shower, since Doñela was singing some horrible country western song at top volume.

After her shower, Doñela dressed in Dalia's outfit for her, a skull print dress, a skeleton hair bow, and the black cat shoes she loved so much.

"Hey, can I have breakfast? Can I be the one to go down to breakfast? I like eating, it's cool."

Dalia sighed. *'Fine. Just don't be too... you. When you do it.'*

Doñela brightened. "Sweet! Cool!"

*'And make sure the straps on the prosthetic are secure!'*

"Yeah, yeah," Doñela said, tightening the straps. Then she stood up, paused, and ran out the door, dragging Dalia behind her in the air.



Later, when Doñela sat down by Dalia's friends, her friends stared at her because Doñela had loaded her plate with about twice as much food as Dalia normally got for breakfast, and promptly made a sandwich from a waffle, eggs, and sausage, with maple syrup as a condiment.

"You must be very hungry," Brandon said.

"Yup. I could eat an entire unicorn."

Aavraak looked at Kohana and Sally, her expression asking a silent question. Sally shrugged at her in a way that clearly said 'Yeah, that's probably Doñela.'



AFTER BREAKFAST, DOÑELA continued controlling the body, going through the library for books that interested her. Then she let Tamir have a turn for a while before switching back. They 'checked out' one of the private study rooms in the library and read for a while. Tamir was reading a book about different faery species, and Doñela was reading about half a dozen different things.

When it was time for lunch, they put most of the books back, checked a few out, and dropped them off at the dorm room before going to lunch.

Since Dalia had missed the day's Spotted Hyena meet, after lunch she and Doñela went back to her dorm room to grab her sunglasses and parasol to go outside for a while. Doñela followed the stream that went by the dorms all the way into the Gray Grove, which looked a lot different in the daytime, warm and friendly in a down-to-earth sort of way.

Doñela started walking toward the edge of the grove, toward the sunlight. Dalia watched her body from the outside as Doñela walked casually around in it. She'd done this before, so she knew what it was like, but it was always strange. Dalia knew from videos of herself that when she was in control of her own body, she always looked awkward and timid, even in how she walked. Doñela, on the other hand, marched ahead like she had no fear at all, like she was the most dangerous thing in the world right now. Dalia was a slow walker, too, while Doñela walked so fast that if they'd both had their own bodies, Dalia would never have been able to catch up with Doñela unless Doñela deliberately slowed herself down for Dalia. Aside from the occasional run, this was the fastest Dalia had ever moved.

There was another difference between them as well; Dalia looked around herself sometimes in order to see threats coming, but usually preferred to look straight ahead or down at her feet when she was somewhere familiar. It wasn't like she was likely to do anything with threat information, though; Dalia's response to threats was to freeze up and hope the threat went away on its own, like a deer in headlights. (According to Maddy, this was a common pattern among girls and women.) Whereas Doñela looked around a lot, too, but mainly because her mind thirsted for input, and it would take anything it could get, looking at everything that was remotely interesting, homing in on movement when it could, and scanning around for something else if nothing was moving. Here in Tirffiniol, though, there was lots of movement. Gnomes were out and about doing gnome things, pixies flitted here and there like hummingbirds or in-

sects, and something like a snake with bat wings flew by at one point.

Doñela walked around like this for about 20 minutes before finding a weeping willow tree. To Dalia's surprise, Doñela stopped at the tree, set her book-bag down, and lay down under the tree on her back, her hands behind her head, and closed her eyes.

*'Keep watch for me, will ya?'* Doñela asked her.

*'You're taking a nap?'*

*'Nah, just enjoying the beautiful day.'*

*'Oh. How long are you going to use the body?'*

*'I dunno. But you owe me for the last two weeks. So I'll let you know when I'm done with it. Definitely before Monday, though.'*

Dalia sighed. But at least she had a book to read, as did Tamir. They took their books from the book-bag and sat down in some shadows that were good enough to disguise the fact that the books appeared to be reading themselves. (At least until someone got a lot closer, and by then they'd be aware of other people, since Dalia and Tamir took turns looking up from their books to 'keep watch'.)

As the sunlight dappled through the trees, this hypnotic pattern mixed with the warmth of the afternoon made Doñela very heavy with sleepiness, drifting off into a comfortable nap.



*AN HOUR LATER*

Someone poked Doñela awake. "Huh? Wha? Huza-wha?"

"Hey Dalia, there you are," Sally said. "We've been looking for you!"

Doñela sat up groggily and looked up at Sally. And behind Sally, Doñela saw Aavraak, Cally, Kohana, and the triplets. When Dalia 'woke up,' after Doñela did, Kohana's was the first face she saw. This being the weekend, she was out of her uniform and was instead wearing a dress that looked like it had been made from an old pair of jeans by taking out the inseam of the jeans and filling the rest of the dress's space with a red fabric printed with little white polka dots.

"Oh hi, everyone. So why were ya lookin' for me?"

Sally looked curiously at Dalia, almost suspiciously, like she had a suspicion that Dalia still wasn't the one in control just then, but didn't want to say anything in front of Cally or the triplets, who didn't know yet about Dalia being a plural mind.

"We were going to do the prank today, remember?" Cally asked. "We didn't remind you at lunch, but now I guess we should have, you seem to have forgotten."

"Oh right, the Discordian prank. Yeah, I got distracted and it slipped my mind, sorry."

"You're forgiven. But you were taking a nap. Do you feel up to helping, or did you want to sleep some more?"

Doñela shook her head. "Nah, I hadn't meant to sleep. I can help."

She looked into the shadows where Dalia and Tamir had been. Of course, whenever the body was asleep, all three of

them were forced back inside. But in the time since Sally had woken Doñela up, Dalia and Tamir had returned, though they dared not pick up the books in front of Cally and the triplets.

“Just a moment, gotta grab these books,” Doñela said, going into the shadows and picking them up.

Dalia, not wanting to float around being dragged by the tether again, whispered something to Tamir, and while Doñela was getting the books, they closed their eyes and snapped back into the body, with Doñela still 'driving.' But this way, they got to see and hear and feel everything Doñela did, as she did it. Best yet, Dalia's anxious knot only came back if she was 'driving' the body. If she was just 'riding shotgun' in it, the nervous knot wasn't there.

“You shouldn't leave library books out on the ground like that, even if they are enchanted to resist dirt and rot and stuff,” Cally chided.

“Yeah, sorry, I was reading, then I decided to lay down and forgot to put the books back. All done now!”

As she stood back up to face them again, her mind – still groggy from her unplanned nap – registered something it hadn't before.

“Wait, I thought this was a SABOT thing? Why's Aavraak with us? She wasn't with SABOT earlier. Dunno *where* she was earlier. Oh... and I don't think Sally or Kohana were there either.”

“I was not aware of your SABOT group until this morning,” Aavraak said. “Calandra explained it to me. I have joined.”

“I'm actually going by 'Cally,' now.”

Aavraak blinked, and Cally had to explain again about the reasons for switching to her new nickname, but Aavraak nodded in understanding. It had the added benefit that most of their other friends now knew the nickname, too.

“...and that's why I'm called Cally now,” she finished, the end of a long Cally ramble. “Anyway, Aavraak was saying she hadn't heard of SABOT before today.”

Sally laughed. “Yeah, tell her the holy name you came up with for yourself, Aavraak.”

Aavraak drew herself up proudly, her pointed ears perking up and forward with pride. “I am Deacon Dogbreath Baconfart the First.”

The girls all burst out laughing. When they stopped, Doñela looked expectantly at Sally and Kohana.

“Kohana and I joined, too. Sounded fun,” said Sally. “I am Lady Belle the Tinkerer, and Kohana is... what were you, again?”

“Princess Silver Helicopter Tails,” Kohana said. “I always loved Tails from Sonic the Hedgehog, because he was like me.”

“Ha!” Doñela said. “Oh my gods, a kitsune can get representation in the media, but a black autistic trans girl can't? Yeesh. No offense, it's not your fault.”

“None taken. But hey, I only grew my second tail 12 years ago.”

“Wait, what? Wouldn't that mean you were born with two tails?”

Kohana blushed. “No. Um... kitsune live as foxes for fifty years before we can take human form.”

“You're sixty-two years old?” Sally asked incredulously.

“Technically yes, but also technically no. We're not much smarter than normal foxes for the first fifty years of our lives. Once we grow our second tail, we can take human form. Learning how to take human form is, for us, like a baby human learning to walk. Partly because we do have to learn how to walk on two legs. Then we have to learn to talk and all that like a normal human. So while I was born sixty-two years ago, mentally I'm only 12. Part of why we're poor is Mum had to keep moving around. Not even pet foxes normally live for fifty years. I think mundane foxes only live about 12 to 15 years in captivity.”

“Oh. Well that's okay, then,” Sally said. “I would've been a little creeped out if you'd been mentally sixty-two, living in our room. But you're basically our age, so that's fine.”

They were at the door to the school now. When they got inside, they saw Brandon was moving toward them.

“Hey girls,” he said. “Whatcha doin'?”

“Oh crud!” Doñela said. “Brandon isn't part of SABOT, either!”

Hiding inside her body while Doñela controlled it, Dalia felt a little anxious. SABOT had been fine when it had just been five of them, but now there were eight, and it looked like there was going to be a ninth added. It was right at the edge of being too many people for her. Another part of her was glad she had so many friends, there'd been years of her life where she'd have been glad to just have one or two friends, but still, ten would be too many people. It made her uncomfortable enough that she spoke up.

“Um, uh...” she began, but tripped and fell into Cally, which made her even more flustered than before. Suddenly

there was an internal struggle as Dalia, Doñela, and Tamir all tried to control the body at the same time, and she ended up on the ground, one of her shoes five feet away from her, and her lip was bleeding.

“Crud, you alright, Dalia?” Brandon asked, watching from his chair as Sally and Cally tried to get up, too. “And Sally? Cally?”

“I’m alright,” Sally said.

“A little bruised, but otherwise fine,” Cally said.

“I... I’m bleeding, but otherwise okay.”

“Who’s ‘Cally?’” Brandon asked. Cally sighed, wrote down the explanation, and had him read it. He nodded and handed it back to her.

“Here,” Alvar said, pulling something out of her pocket. “I’ve got a salve for that. I don’t need it for myself, but the other two sometimes trip and fall.”

Alvar put the soothing salve on Dalia’s cut lip. It must have been magical, because in seconds the cut was healed and feeling normal.

“Thanks, Alvar.”

“No problem. What happened?”

“Oh gods, I... I’m... I’m sorry, everyone. I was just... I was trying to say, uh... I was trying to talk, and some wire got crossed and I tripped. Um... anyway, what I was trying to say... uh... Oh yeah; I think we should cap SABOT at nine members, if Brandon uh, if he wants in. Any more than that would, I dunno, um... I don’t think I could handle more than uh, nine people in SABOT. Um... myself included.”



"That's fine, Dalia. Honestly I should've realized that myself," Sally said. "If the triplets agree, that is; it was their idea."

"We're fine with that. It's a good number."

"Hey, where *are* the other two, anyway?" Sally asked Alvar.

"Sutekh has been printing out the signs, while Cerridwen has been scouting locations," Alvar said.

"Signs?" asked Brandon. "What signs? And what's SABOT?"

Sally and Alvar explained the Discordian cabal they'd founded, and Brandon was fascinated. He agreed to join. As they walked to the computer lab to meet Sutekh, Brandon tried to think of a Discordian holy name.

"Cardinal Freely McWheelie," he decided. "Or maybe Professor Hexavier. Yeah, that second one."

"You could have more than one if you wanted," Alvar said.

"Nah, I like Professor Hexavier."

"We can call him Hex for short," Doñela said with Dalia's voice. "Which hey, good idea, doing for-short names. Let's see, Alvar can be Frog Weasel or just Frog, we'll call Sutekh 'Lord Haruspex' or maybe just 'Spex.' Sally can be 'Lady Belle,' Kohana can be Tails, Aavraak can be Dogbreath, Cerridwen can be Aardwolf, Cally can be Mumpsimus or Mumps, and I'll be 'Fury' for short."

There was a lot of laughter, but when it quieted down, they all agreed to their shorter nicknames. Though Alvar had one addition, that people could call her Kermit if they wanted.

"Hex, Spex, Kermit, Belle, Dogbreath, Aardwolf, Tails, Mumps, and Fury," Alvar said. "Nice ring to it."

"So what're we doing, anyway?" Brandon asked. "You know, for our first prank?"

"Watch and learn, Hex, watch and learn," Alvar said.



AFTER THE FIRST LEG of their prank campaign (the whole thing would take most of Sunday to finish properly, since there were a great many other students to avoid in the halls), Dalia was very tired, and went to bed early. But for reasons she didn't know, three hours later she was awake again, and she couldn't get back to sleep. After laying in bed for several hours, she gave up and went down to the dorm building's kitchen to get something to eat.



*MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

At five AM to the second on Monday, Principal Jonathan Park awoke completely without needing an alarm going off. It would have gone off about ten seconds later, but he turned it off before it could. He then got up and began his daily routine, annoyed the whole time as usual, for bodily functions, showering, shaving, and eating breakfast was a necessary but annoying waste of his time. If he could, he'd magically take care of bathroom necessities in his sleep, tele-

porting the waste directly into the school's septic tank. He had also considered having the hair of his face Flesh-Bent to prevent the hair growing, but he knew it would make him seem vain if he did, and would be a waste of magical talent, using it for something so banal.

Then there was eating. He never understood why people made such a fuss about eating. Apparently, most people found the experience enjoyable, but to him it was just another necessary and annoying waste of time. He'd found, when at dinner parties, that he had to lie and say the food tasted good, since it was what was expected. But to Principal Jonathan Park, all food tasted like the color gray might, if the color gray had a flavor. Naturally, he put it off until after his workout. His caveman ancestors had needed to hunt for their food, or at least go out gathering, so it made sense to him to exercise first, then eat.

Getting into the same three-piece suit he always did, he grabbed his briefcase and went to work.

"Morning, Principal Park," Anisa Rahim said as soon as he opened the door to the main office.

"Morning, Ms. Rahim," he said back automatically, continuing on to his office.

He knew the secretaries and teachers joked that he was more reliable than an atomic clock. He didn't normally approve of jokes about himself, but in this case he made an exception, since it was accurate.

"Any news?" he asked her.

She hesitated, which was unusual for her. "Nothing much," she finally said. "You got a shadow-fax from Mr.

Arthur Kemp a little bit ago," she said, handing him the letter.

"Thank you, Ms. Rahim. Anything else?"

"A few kids have come down with a flu. Not an epidemic yet. The nurses are working on making sure it stays that way. Oh, and Ms. Nizoni Hatathli-Ravenstone sent an email asking someone to tell her daughter Dalia to visit Mr. Hoyt later. Seems she's had a couple panic attacks again. I forwarded the email to Mr. Hoyt at once."

"Excellent. You are very efficient, Ms. Rahim."

"Thank you, Principal Park."

"You're welcome. Any other news?"

"Nothing important enough to mention here. You should have some emails about the rest."

"Excellent. If there's anything else, let me know," he said.

"I will," she said.

He was already through the door to his office, though, and checking his watch as he set his things down. He always budgeted five minutes for such updates, and she hadn't gone a second over. In fact, she was so efficient he had a few minutes left to go. If the both of them weren't already married, he'd almost consider asking Ms. Rahim out on that merit alone. But of course, that would be most improper, and he hated impropriety.

Anyway, the extra few minutes gave him time to read the letter from Arthur Kemp. The man was a Fae Springs alumnus, one of the most prestigious, since he'd climbed up from being a nobody in poverty to a well-respected member of the Grand Council, which was something like a cross between a congressman and a senator in the mundane government.

Principal Park had always been fond of Arthur Kemp, for making so much of himself, and for being living proof of the American Dream realized. Work hard enough and smart enough, and you too could become a Grand Councilor, going from poverty to wealth. What was even better, Arthur Kemp was a fellow Grizzly Bear like himself. You'd expect clever social climbing like that from a Honey Badger, but seeing it in a Grizzly Bear made him even more fond of the man.

He smiled as he read the letter. Mr. Kemp was beginning to prepare for his campaign to become President of the Grand Council, and wanted to make an inspiring speech to the students of Fae Springs about his life, to help raise his name recognition with the older students about a year before announcing his candidacy for President of the Grand Council. (Thus, the official reason for the speech was to criticize the current President's handling of certain security issues, in his capacity as Chief of the Grand Council Security Agency.) The speech was still two weeks off, of course, but it was best to have these things planned out ahead of time. He and Kemp had been friends long enough that the man knew this. Principal Park didn't like disruptions to his routine, usually, but with two weeks' warning, he could easily make an exception for Mr. Arthur Kemp. The man had, after all, used his influence with the School Board to recommend Principal Park for this job when Principal Aubergine had moved on.

Deciding to risk messing with his schedule a little, he decided to write a return shadow-fax letter.

*Dear Mr. Arthur Kemp, Grand Councilor, Chief of the Grand Council Security Agency;*

*It was most pleasant to hear from you again, Arthur. It is always an excellent bonus to my day hearing from an esteemed Fae Springs alumnus and personal friend such as yourself.*

*As to you coming to the school to give a speech, of course you may do so. You have done so much for me, and you are such a personal inspiration, I can only hope the students under my care can be equally inspired by your example and vision. Perhaps if they see the rewards of being a bastion of law, order, and ethics such as yourself, they will grow up along the right path, rather than taking guidance from less savory individuals such as my Magical Defense teacher. Yes, I know that you think she's a harmless eccentric, but I have always had a bad feeling about her, she's a disruptive influence. Yes, she's an excellent teacher, but that just makes her even more dangerous. I know she's been here for years without any serious disruptions yet, but mark my words, I sense that will change.*

*Anyway, enough of unpleasant topics. I am looking forward to hearing you speak at my school in two weeks' time. Thank you for asking to speak at the school, as well. But of course, my scheduled time for this letter is running down, I shall make time later for a longer letter.*

*Sincerely,*

*Principal Jonathan Park,*

*Fae Springs Private Academy of Magic*

Satisfied with his letter, he put it in an envelope, sealed it with wax because he couldn't stand the thought of using saliva on an envelope, addressed it, and put it in his shadow-fax box and closed its door, where the letter vanished with a slight 'woosh.'

Pleased with himself, he got out his tablet and began his rounds through the school, to make sure everything was running smoothly. As he entered the cafeteria, he noticed a few students look at him and suppress laughter. He frowned at this, wondering what it was about. He doubted there was anything off about his appearance; he had a full-length mirror on the inside of his office door, solely for making sure his appearance was still immaculate. His appearance reflected on the school, after all.

But no, he doubted it was that. He'd just checked, and Ms. Rahim hadn't said anything or done anything all that unusual. And it wasn't even universal, the kids trying not to laugh at him. Some were even staring at the kids who were amused, then back at him in confusion, as if the joke wasn't obvious. This wouldn't do, not at all. He couldn't give detentions for suppressed laughter, at least not without knowing what was so funny.

Walking up to one of these almost-laughing kids, the boy froze as he approached, no longer finding the situation funny.

"Mr. Reed," Principal Park said. "Pray tell, what is so amusing?"

"Um... uh..."

"You will not be in trouble, Mr. Reed. Just tell me what the joke is, why so many students find me so funny all of a sudden."

"You're sure I won't be in trouble?"

"None at all. I simply wish to know what the joke is."

"Oh, okay. Well, you know those signs you put up all over the school, with reminders of the school rules?"

"Yes, I do. What about the signs?"

"Well, some of them are... different now. It's not obvious at first glance. They look the same, but uh... they say different things, now."

"I see. Funny things, I presume?"

"Uh, yes. Weird things, too."

"I see. Well, carry on with your breakfast, Mr. Reed, while I go verify this."

"Yes, Principal Park. Thank you, sir."

He didn't bother welcoming the boy, just carried on out the cafeteria to find the nearest of these signs. Several students were gathered around one of these signs, laughing, until they saw him coming. They scattered as quickly as they dared, not looking at him. He didn't bother with them, just went to read the sign. After all, it wasn't against the rules to laugh at something amusing, he wasn't a monster.

Ah yes, he saw what was going on. This sign normally read, "To all students: Please remember that school uniforms must be worn during weekdays between breakfast and dinner; if you are caught out of uniform between these times, you will receive detention. Uniforms are to be white button-up long-sleeved shirts or blouses and either black dress pants or black knee-length or longer skirts. Improper uniforms are as inappropriate as no uniform at all, and are subject to detentions. - Principal Park."

The new sign, however, which looked virtually identical to the original, including the school's letterhead, now read, "To all studnets: Please remember that school uniforms must be worn during weakdays between sunrise and sundown; if you are caught in bed wearing pajamas after sunrise,



you will receive a spanking on your bare bottom. Uniforms are to be white button-up long sleeved turtlenecks, ankle-length pants or skirts, and ski-masks to prevent impure thoughts. Improper uniforms are as inappropriate as full frontal nudity and are subject to spankings. - Principal Park."

This... this was an outrage. As if he, of all people, would misspell a word! And the fake version of the rule was insulting on its own, too. Spanking was quite against the rules of the school, as it was child abuse, and even without that, the fake rule was just absurd.

Principal Park took out his wand and cast a spell on it to find the culprit. The spell detected skin cells that came off when people touched things, and traced them back to the owner, but the hooligan making this sign had been clever enough to wear gloves while handling the sign. He checked the tape for similar residue, but no such luck. So he tore the sign down instead and folded it up, putting it in his pocket.

With the fake sign in his pocket, he went back to his office. Ms. Rahim looked up at him in confusion, then concern as she saw the anger in his face. She didn't ask what was going on; she knew he'd tell her as soon as he felt it necessary or had the free time to do so. While in his office, he printed off the correct signs again, and carried a separate empty folder with him to stow the false signs in for the time being.

Other signs were just as bad. One in the boys' bathroom read, "To all stuents: Please remember that the toilets are not for hand-warshing. Washing your hamds is to be done in the sinks and nowhere else. - Principal Park." While this was technically true, it wasn't a rule, as such; they'd never thought to make such a thing a rule, because that was dis-

gusting, and nobody had ever done it. But the presence of the sign implied it had been an issue enough to warrant putting up a sign and making a rule to go with the sign. It did not reflect well on the school, or on him. Worse, now that the hooligans had put the idea out into the wild, someone would probably do just that, and such a rule would have to be written.

He got more and more angry with each unique sign, and there were many of those. Some examples included:

"To all stundents, please remember that it is illegal to race unicorns in the corridors. Studeents caught doing illegal unicorn races will be sent to Fort Iron-Bound without trial for the next twenty years. - Principal Perk."

"Too all sundents, please remomber that it isn't nice to call other people names like Captain Blunderbuss or Sas-safrass Pete. Silliness like that is illegal. Stundnts caught being silly will be given 40 lashes in the eyeball. - Principal Park."

"To all studentss, please remember that imagination and creativity are prohibited except in designated creative zones adn times. Failure to be a mindless, soul-less robot outside of such times and zones will result in twelve hours in The Void. - Principal Parkk."

"To all sundress, please remember to only flush human waste down the toilets. Maintenance has been trying to fight a rabid sewer chupacabra lately, and it doesn't make their job easier if pennies, cans of shaving cream, and cacti keep falling on their heads during the climax of their battle. Be kind, rewind. - Principal Park."

"To all stunnednets, loquacious liveried lorry ladles languish lackadaisically in lubricious lagoons. - Princical Park"

"To all studennts, please stop spreading the rumor that the cafeteria hamburger is actually ground-up centaur meat. It is, in fact, perfectly healthy ground-up rats raised in captivity, like you'd find in any normal school. Centaurs are people, and anyway their meat is too expensive for the school'd budget. Anyone caught spreading this rumor will be sacrificed to Moloch. - Principal Park."

And then there was the one that was most puzzling to him, which read simply, "Fnord? Fnord fnord. Fnord fnord? Fnord. - Principal Park."

If he'd thought it couldn't get worse than all that, he'd have been wrong, because not a single one of the signs had any skin residue or hair to trace with his magic, and interviewing dozens of witnesses hadn't yielded any results. How the culprits had managed to post signs like this all over the school without being seen by anyone was beyond his comprehension, and he very nearly gave detention to several clearly innocent and scared students, including young Ms. Dalia Ravenstone, who started crying so badly when he accosted her that she went into a panic attack, prompting her friend Ms. Smith-Jones to scold him. Annoyed at himself for his behavior, he escorted them to Mr. Hoyt's office, since Ms. Ravenstone needed to visit the school counselor anyway.

By the end of the day, he'd found himself more exhausted than he'd been in a long time, and furiously wondering if this could be blamed on Mrs. Metaxas. In the end, though, he decided he was jumping to conclusions. She'd been there for over a decade without incidents like this; as much as he dis-

liked her, it would be unfair to accuse her of having anything to do with this. And as rigid of a fellow as he was, he was at least fair.





## Chapter Sixteen: The Mystery of the Malfunctioning Powers

*Monday, September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017 – Friday, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017*

DESPITE PRINCIPAL PARK yelling at her and the subsequent panic attack, Dalia was still nonetheless amused by SABOT's prank and all the people talking about it, wondering openly who the culprit was, all of them looking like they wanted it made very clear that they didn't know, even though they all thought it was funny. Several people had gotten pictures of the signs with their phones, which they weren't supposed to have with them on school days but people rarely got caught for that anyway, and the pictures made the rounds of the school. Even Dalia, whose social network accounts were anonymous and friends-only because she'd read terrifying things about cyber-bullying, got to see the pictures from one or more of her friends.

The prank inspired several other people to try pranks of their own, but lacking telepathically-bonded triplets, a Multiple who could get past locked doors, and the element of surprise, all these people got caught and punished. Their

pranks had been boring compared to SABOT's prank, anyway.

Classes finally got more interesting. Being able to feel their own magic, some of the classes were still on trying to feel outside magic, but Mrs. Metaxas once again went a different way after the first time and had them trying to conjure a simple shield in class, to block unfriendly magic. It was pretty difficult. You couldn't just wave your wand a certain way and say a certain incantation. In some ways, it sounded easier – wand movements meant very little, and incantations could be anything, as it was basically just an activation phrase, and could even be said in your head, as long as it was said with intent to cast. But feeling your own magic and getting it to do what you wanted it to do were two entirely different things, and involved a lot of visualization and concentration. Also, it wasn't easy trying to concentrate on feeling your magic, grabbing hold of it, and trying to tell it what to do all at the same time. It was, in fact, rather like trying to divert a creek with your hands while fumbling in the dark for the creek and trying to see in the dark well enough to sort out where you were trying to get the water to move to.

Thus, trying to shape their own magic was becoming such a chore that going to classes that concentrated on trying to feel outside magic, or even going to their mundane classes, was a relief. Or would have been, except that they had Magical Self-Defense at the end of their A-Days.

Befriending Cally and having her around a lot had made it easier for Dalia to talk and otherwise function like a somewhat normal person around her, but Dalia still had a crush on Cally. She still thought Cally was gorgeous and still want-

ed to sit under a tree with her while they leaned against one another and held hands together. Dalia still occasionally stared dreamily at Cally, doodling in notebooks with images and words that would look incomprehensible to others but basically meant hearts and flowers and “Dalia and Calandra 4Ever,” which she did to protect against bullies, along with writing love poems and diary entries in shorthand. Hardly anyone knew shorthand anymore, and bullies couldn't get much ammunition from doodles and text they couldn't understand.

She wasn't even remotely interested in kissing; she'd finally asked one of the people at Spotted Hyena what kissing was like between people in love. She'd thought it was just pecks on the lips like normal kisses, except maybe more prolonged, but halfway through the description of “adult” kissing, she nearly puked, and it took her ten whole minutes to recover. Touching lips was one thing; involving saliva and tongues, that was just too much for her. Every time she thought about it, she had to hold back her gorge. When she'd told Gegauassi about this, he had been quiet for several minutes before informing her that kissing was not a universal human activity, nearly half the world *doesn't* do it, and a lot of cultures consider the practice vile. So at least she was in good company.

In art class, they'd been starting portraits, and Dalia had managed to get paired with Cally. They took turns posing while the other drew. When it was Cally's turn to pose, Dalia had to tell her several times to act naturally before just talking with her instead; as this involved giving Cally a topic to talk about while Dalia listened, it worked out well. Made her

a little difficult to draw, since she was a very animated talker, but Dalia managed it. She did, after all, have lots of practice drawing Doñela.

Dalia had gotten so in 'the zone' while drawing that Cally had to poke her to get her to snap out of it before class ended. Luckily, there was time enough to look at what she'd drawn before turning it in.

"Holy—wow!" Cally said, staring at the page. "This is... wow."

"Ooh can I see?" Sally asked. Even Brandon rolled over to look.

Dalia had drawn a pretty good picture, capturing in pencil an image of Cally with an expression that looked like one part embarrassed, one part amused pride, and the image was gorgeous and flattering, all flowing lines and softness. The position of her hands accented the expression, with one hand brushing back some hair, the other hand held on the table in an almost inviting way.

Sally gave Dalia a knowing glance and grinned at her. Dalia felt her cheeks grow hot.

"My my," Mr. Bacon, the teacher, said. "Quite a lot of talent you have there, Ms. Ravenstone."

"Oh. Well... um, been, you know, practicing for years. Best way to get talent is to practice."

"I quite agree," he said.

She looked up at him and smiled. He smiled back. She liked Mr. Bacon, even if there wasn't a chance in heck she'd ever be able to recognize him outside of Fae Springs. The reason for this was his appearance; he was a skinny, white, bespectacled, bearded hipster dude with his hair in a man-bun



on top of his head, and he wore plaid shirts with jeans every day. In school, he was recognizable as being the only hipster among the adults, but if she saw him in Portland without someone telling her who he was, she could walk right by him and not recognize him, because hipsters that looked exactly like him were plentiful in Portland. So plentiful, in fact, that she tended to think of them as the real-world equivalent of generic, non-player characters in video games, people so obsessed with being cool that they were just as much cookie-cutter conformists as people like the Parks, just from a different 'tribe.' Not that she would ever dare tell him any of this, of course.



*FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017*

On Friday, Sally woke up to the other girls in the room waiting for her to wake up. Dalia was holding a chocolate chip muffin with a candle in it. When she sat up, the three girls said "Happy 13<sup>th</sup> Birthday, Sally!" and Dalia lit the candle on the muffin. Smiling, Sally took the muffin and blew out the candle.

"Your mom sent a cake, of course, but that's for later," Dalia said. "We're gonna ask the hobs for some food to have a birthday party in here after dinner, you can get cake and presents then."

"Thanks, Dalia. Thanks all of you," she said, grinning.

The rest of the day went by rather slowly for Sally and her friends, as everyone was raring for the party. But their

minds were taken off of the party a bit during Magical Self-Defense class, for Mrs. Metaxas was doing something weird. She had put up a very ugly suit on a headless mannequin in the front of the classroom. It was an ugly mustard yellow with red faux fur lining, and a great many pockets sewn all over it in colors that didn't match each other, let alone the rest of the suit. When asked about it, she'd said to ask Cally about it. From Cally they found out it was for her take on a Discordian holiday called Bureflux.

"Byer-eh-fluks?" Aavraak had asked. "What is that?"

"Well, the Discordian calendar is made up of five months with seventy-three days each. The months are Chaos, Confusion, Discord, Bureaucracy, and Aftermath. They're also said to represent the rise and fall of those things in their names, like Chaos and Confusion, throughout the year. Because they're Discordians, Chaos and Confusion and Discord are good, mostly, and Bureaucracy not so much. Dunno about Aftermath.

"Anyway, Bureflux is a holiday celebrating the waning of Bureaucracy. Kinda like how the winter solstice celebrates that the sun is returning. Um... yeah, so, then because she takes this all so seriously, she puts up a Bureflux Suit to represent Bureaucracy. What you do is you write down things you want to disappear from your life, and put those slips of paper in one of the suit's pockets – a spell keeps other people from stealing your secret – and then on Bureflux Day, she sends the suit off in a boat, with the suit lit on fire, so all those bad things get burned away. And of course, along with the things on the notes, it's also burning bureaucracy – both little b and big B bureaucracy – in effigy. Kinda like an exorcism."

"Begone, demons of bureaucracy!" Alvar shouted, making everyone laugh.

"Exactly!"

"And when is Bureflux Day?"

"September 26<sup>th</sup>. AKA the 50<sup>th</sup> day of Bureaucracy."

"Is that the last day of the Bureaucracy month?" Dalia asked.

"Nope. That'd be the 73<sup>rd</sup>. Five months, each with 73 days."

"What about leap years?"

"Leap day is celebrated as Saint Tib's Day."

Talk of Bureflux in their group quickly changed back in to talk about the party later. Brandon wanted to come, as did Sutekh, so they decided to have the party in the common room of the girls' dorm building.

Cake and other party foods were eaten, songs were sung, presents were opened. Everyone had a good time, and they were all looking forward to the next birthday party, which looked to be that of the triplets, who were all born on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October. (Their party would be on the 30<sup>th</sup>, though, because of a conflict with Samhain.)



THAT WEEKEND, THE 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>, seemed like just another weekend at first. Dalia had thought about going to the Rosy Boa Banner celebration of Mabon on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, but

decided she wasn't interested in Mabon. Especially not after the birthday party the night before.

SABOT was still taking a break, resting on their laurels for now by some accounts, or laying low by others. Really, it was more a case of trying to think of something else to do, but the other things were considerations as well. Hence, taking a break, doing fun things like weekends were for, sneaking into the Defense classroom – which was conveniently unlocked – to put in the Bureflux Suit the names of things that they wanted to disappear from their life. Kobalos had some fun chasing pixies, until the pixies started to chase him back, wielding razor-thin blades larger than their entire bodies. He was lucky they were only trying to scare him; Saturday afternoon, Dalia and some of her friends were in the Grey Grove again, and witnessed a swarm of pixies take down a full-grown buck with their razor-thin swords. It had been a gruesome sight; even Dalia had been ill upon seeing it. Even worse, the pixies began to strip the meat off the deer with a speed akin to Hollywood portrayals of piranhas, which they didn't stick around to watch.



*SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

Sunday morning, Dalia woke up to the scent of what smelled like a mix of cinnamon and ginger, mixed with a smell like moist, dark soil. She looked up and saw Aavraak changing the pillowcase on her pillow.

“Good morning, Aavraak.”

“Good morning, Dalia.”

“What smells good?”

“I do not know. I think perhaps it is the smell of the soap they are using to wash the bedding, though.”

“Could be. I sometimes smell flowers, honey, and rotting fruit around here. Maybe they changed laundry detergent?”

“I do not know. Perhaps. Either way, the scent is making me hungry.”

“Yeah, we can go to breakfast together. You can use the bathroom first.”

“Thank you.”

It was a good morning, that Sunday morning. Everyone was rested and happy, nobody fought over the bathrooms, and breakfast was especially delicious. The rest of their morning was going well, too, until they ran into someone they didn't much care for, who ruined their good day: Preston Park.

Dalia, Sally, Brandon, Cally, and Aavraak were in the hard-packed dirt of the short grass that grew in the relatively sparse copse of trees between the two student dorm buildings when it happened. All of them were dressed in casual clothes, except for Preston, who always looked like he was wearing a school uniform even in the summer. Even Dalia was wearing just a Diving Into Betelgeuse t-shirt, a plain black skirt, black tennis shoes, and her customary sunglasses, her parasol folded up beside her. They were sitting in the shade and talking, tuning out another group of voices coming their way until Preston spoke up loud enough to catch their attention.

“Ching ching chong!” he said, pulling his eyes so they narrowed to slits and giving himself buck teeth. “You-ah fleaks want-ah my bento box? It-ah made of raw fish guts and moss, much-ah yummy!” Several of his buddies laughed as though this was a hilarious joke.

Doñela, who had been riding around in the body with Dalia, jumped out and flew at Preston, but Tamir held her back. Sally and Cally stood up angrily, but Aavraak stood up calmly and deliberately and walked over to Preston, whose face went to normal as he backed up warily, even though there was nothing at all threatening in Aavraak's posture or face.

Aavraak stopped, standing there, and said calmly, “I know people like you among my people. If they could be here now, they would come to you and say, 'So you are a man, translate this man-speech to our language for us: 'Ook ook ook!' ' For to them, your language sounds like the sounds of monkeys, and to them, you are a monkey. To them, you are furry and you stink of poop and monkey sweat, and you are an animal who should be climbing trees and eating bananas.

“I do not say these things and mean them, as opposed to your own words and actions. You think yourself superior, but you are not. You think you are clever, but you are not. You think you are funny, but you are not. Please tell me, how are you different from Goblins who think humans are monkeys?”

Preston glared half-disbelievingly at Aavraak. “You have some gall saying I look like an animal, you disgusting cross between a dog, a human, and a lizard!”

"I was using examples of people I have met to make a comparison. I do not think you are a monkey, even if your behavior towards Brandon suggests otherwise. For to insult you that way would be to insult my friends in the same way, and I am not full of hatred and low self worth as you are. And that is why I am using words, when my deepest desire at this moment is to tear out your tongue."

The words had been delivered calmly, matter-of-factly. This is, perhaps, why Preston stepped back a few more steps, his eyes wide as saucers.

"It threatened me! You all heard it!"

"You are not very bright, are you?" Aavraak asked. "I did no such thing. I merely stated that I was holding myself back from harming you, because I am a sapient being and proud of it. It would be deeply shameful for me to give into the animal nature we all have, and attack you, no matter how tempting the idea may be. No matter how much you would deserve it."

"Stay away from me, you scaly, dog-eared freak!"

"Mister Preston Park! How *dare* you use such words!?"

They all turned around to face the source of the new voice. It was the familiar voice of Ms. Aurora Hollander, in her pink floppy hat, her normally friendly face looking uncharacteristically angry, her usually kind eyes narrowed in dislike, and her normally kind voice very angry. She walked up to him, and though she was a full head and a half shorter than him, she grabbed his arm with a grip like iron. Athletic as Preston was, he couldn't pull away.

"Lemme go!" he shouted. "Wretched peon!"

"I'll have you know, Mr. Park, that this wretched peon still has the power to take you to a teacher and get you a de-

tention for your language! Which is exactly what I'm going to do! I may not look it, but I have excellent hearing, and I heard every word you said. If I hadn't been so busy at the time or if my legs weren't so short, then when the fuss started, I'd have come sooner. Now you're coming with me, young man!"

Despite her short stature and older age, Ms. Hollander was pretty good at pulling the tall, 15 year old Preston along by his arm. No matter how hard he struggled, he couldn't pry loose her grip. He also knew that if he hit her, he'd be in worse trouble for assaulting a member of the school staff. He ended up giving up and letting her drag him along, his buddies trailing behind, presumably to defend him before whatever teacher she took him to.

Curious if they could find out what his punishment would be, and to be there in case Ms. Hollander needed any more witnesses on her side, Dalia and her friends followed as well.

To Dalia's surprise and delight, the first teacher Ms. Hollander found was Mrs. Metaxas, who had been idly juggling in the corridor. She stowed her juggling balls away at the first sight of Ms. Hollander.

"Bright blessings, Ms. Hollander," Mrs. Metaxas said with a flourish. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

"I heard this... this *boy* making racist remarks against Mr. Brandon Han and Ms uh... Aavraak."

Mrs. Metaxas turned to everyone else present.

"Witnesses to the harassment, I presume?"

"Yes," Ms. Hollander said.



"Alright then, everyone this way, to the Defense classroom."

Whether to be funny or to keep an eye on Preston and his gang or just because she was eccentric, Mrs. Metaxas walked backwards down the corridor, making it look easy. Even when they had to dodge gnomes or pixies or people's pets in the halls, she dodged them as easily as if she was walking normally.

Once everyone was inside the Defense classroom, Mrs. Metaxas pointed her spork wand at the door jamb and activated some runes there, likely privacy wards. Then she sat cross-legged on her desk and said, "Regale me with the sordid tale."

Several people started talking at once. Mrs. Metaxas made a loud slide-whistle sound with her spork wand to shut them all up and get their attention.

"One person at a time, thank you very much. You first, Ms. Hollander."

"I was doing some yard work nearby when I heard Mr. Park here make racist remarks at Mr. Han..."

Mrs. Metaxas listened to the whole sorry story, glaring at Preston as the talk went on, though pausing at parts to give Aavraak an approving look for her own calm part of the affair. Dalia and her friends corroborated the story, while Preston and his friends contradicted the story.

"Right," Mrs. Metaxas said. "I've heard enough. Mr. Park, I don't know if you knew this or not, but I used to be part of a circus as an acrobat. One of my best friends in that circus was a Goblin, one who was really good at disguising himself as human. We even went on a date once, long be-

fore I met my current husband. So to – don't look at me like that, young man! What consenting adults do with one another, who they choose to be friends or even romantic partners with, is *none* of your business. It's nobody's business but their own!"

She put her spork wand away and pulled out the copper and diamond combat wand, making Preston and his pals flinch. Making no comment on this, she cast some sort of spell on him, bathing him briefly in lavender light. Then she put her wand away.

"So you have Irish ancestry, Mr. Park?"

He frowned slightly at her. "Yes. Why?"

"Because for your punishment, you're going to write a 40 page report about the persecution of Irish immigrants in the 1800's."

"WHAT?"

A little louder, she said, "I assigned you a 40 page report about the persecution of Irish immigrants in the 1800's. And just to make it relevant to Magical Self Defense, I expect you to include the perspective of the Irish witches from that era, to explore how those two different statuses intersected with one another."

"But *why*?"

"Because you might learn something valuable from it, and because you're being punished. Now that's 40 pages, single-spaced, in 12 point Times New Roman font. If you mess with the page margins, I shall know. And it had better be well written, well researched, with a bibliography, endnotes, and in MLA format, except where I specified 'single-spaced.' A couple other provisos: you're to write it on one of the mun-

dane computers in the computer lab, without help from a magical computer nor from any of your friends, and I'm also going to be forbidding the library pixies and the librarian from helping you find your research materials. Which means you'll have a lot of card catalogs to look through and a lot of ladders to climb.

"Furthermore, while the paper will not give you any extra credit, failure to turn in an acceptable report by curfew on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October will result in me counting it as a zero against your semester grade. You will abide by the terms I've laid out here, because if I have sufficient reason to think you cheated, that will be an automatic zero. And I remind you, in case you forgot or didn't know, that I'm friends with the local gnomes and pixies, so I shall know if you've cheated. Do you understand me?"

He looked completely shocked. "Only two weeks to do all that?"

"Yes, Mr. Park. That's rather the point of a punishment. In fact, I feel I'm being generous giving you two weeks. I know from my own school experiences that I could write a term paper in a single weekend. But as fun as it would be to run you ragged like that, I'm more interested in you learning something from your research. So that's another proviso: no doing it at the last minute. You will start tonight and work on it every day until the deadline. If you finish it in less than a week, I'll check it for quality and then make you re-write it by hand just to get the information going through your brain one last time. Now do you understand what's expected of you?"

"You can't do this! You're not my Defense teacher! Mr. Safiq is."

"I'm sure he'll understand when I explain it to him. Mr. Safiq and I have a very good working relationship. So, do you understand what I expect you to do?"

"Yes, Mrs. Metaxas," he said resignedly.

"Good."

She turned around and whistled a short tune. A pixie flew out from behind a file cabinet and saluted her midair.

"You heard everything, Korrov?"

The pixie nodded his head.

"Good. Go tell the library now, please."

The pixie nodded again and flew away, through a hole in one of the ceiling corners.

"As for the rest of you," she said, indicating Preston's friends, "it's not against the rules to laugh at racist 'jokes,' though I really wish it were. But don't think you're getting off scot free. When Mr. Preston Park is done with his report, and I've deemed it acceptable, he's going to be reading it to your entire class, and I'll be expecting everyone in your class, yourselves included, to be taking notes the whole time, since it will be relevant to the subject. In fact, now that I think about it, I'll have Mr. Park read his report to every single one of my classes, in addition to your class. Yes. Now I can't be accused of punishing people who did nothing wrong, as it's just part of the class now."

She stood there thinking a moment while everyone took time to stare at her in shock. Well, except for Dalia and her friends, who were torn between annoyance and amusement.

"Isn't that more like history than defense, though?" asked one of Preston's friends; Dalia didn't know his name.

"There's often a lot of overlap. Hmm... but that's a good point. I'll be adding my own research to the class, using his report as an introduction, then do one or two classes on the ways the Irish immigrant witches defended themselves with magic. Yes, that sounds good. Nice little silver lining to that cloud you conjured, Mr. Park. Should be educational all around. You may all go now."

She deactivated the wards with her spork wand, and the door opened on its own. Everyone filed out the door. Everyone, that is, except for Dalia. She had stayed behind, despite the situation having given her a headache. It was one of those headaches that lurked on the edges of her awareness until just a few moments ago, when it had cheerfully leaped into her full attention, squeezing her head in a vice.

"Was there something else, Ms. Ravenstone?"

Dalia rubbed her head a little to try to get rid of the pain. "Uh, yeah. Guys, go on without me, I'll be along later."

Her friends shrugged and left. Mrs. Metaxas closed the door and reactivated the privacy wards behind them.

"You may proceed."

Suddenly feeling a little self-conscious, she looked back toward the door a few times before speaking. She was already starting to feel slightly better, now that everyone was out of the room but for her and Mrs. Metaxas. She took some pain relievers out of her purse and swallowed them with a little water from a small bottle of water clipped to a belt around her waist.

"Um... well you see... uh... have you ever felt Called? To like, a wand or something like that, I mean?"

"What? Oh. Well, yes. My primary wand, this metal spork... I didn't choose it deliberately. I saw it in a store one day and it told me to pick it up, so I did. I immediately knew it wanted to be my wand. So yes, I'm familiar with the feeling."

"Cool. Um... so uh... I've been feeling Called lately. There's a tree on campus, it keeps Calling me."

"And you haven't yet answered that Call?"

"Can't. Um, I can't get to it."

"I see. Where is this tree at, then? Outside the wards?"

"No. No, it's inside the wards."

"Ah. So it's in the Dark Grove, then?"

"I—what? I mean, yes. How'd you guess?"

"That's the only place left it *could* be, with a description like that. You've got access to all the other trees within the wards, after all."

"Oh. Right. Well yeah, it is."

Mrs. Metaxas sat down in her desk's chair. "So which one is it? Do you know?"

"Yes. Um... it's the Devil Tree."

Mrs. Metaxas smiled, rolling her eyes a little. "Oh, you're a Ravenstone alright. I once met Orpheus, your father. Well, more than once. Point is, I saw his wand. Very interesting, his wand. Quite possibly unique. If you ever managed to get a Devil Tree to give you a wand, you'd have a unique wand, too."

She sighed, rubbing her face. Dalia watched, nervous but in a hopeful way, and chewed on her goldfish necklace to calm herself.

"The thing is, Dalia, there's a lot of hoops to go through to get into that grove, and I don't think anyone as young as you has ever been let in there, even with adult supervision. I'm not sure what it would take to get you in there, and I'm not sure I'm willing to take the risk both to your life and my career for this Calling. The Dark Grove is dangerous to begin with, and the Devil Tree the most notorious of all of the trees there, I believe my daughter told you as much. So at the very least, we'll have to think about this a while and see if we can come up with a plan. Because I do believe strongly in answering when Called, but as they say, fools rush in."

"Oh. Well at least you're not yelling at me for even suggesting it."

"People who yell at children without a whole lot of really good reason to do so shouldn't be teaching children. Or having them, or raising them. And honestly, I can't think of a single situation in which yelling at a child or a teenager is appropriate, shy of one putting their own or others' lives at risk by doing something stupid and dangerous. But I'm kind of a minority among teachers, in that regard."

"A minority among adults in general," Dalia said.

Mrs. Metaxas chuckled. "Very true. Sadly, very true. Anyway, I'll look into that Devil Tree issue and get back to you on it later. Is there anything else on your mind?"

She looked at Mrs. Metaxas, then at the door, thinking hard.

"You can tell me anything, Dalia. Unlike most adults, I take children seriously. I hope you've seen enough of me to know that's true."

Something about her tone struck Dalia as odd. She turned to look at Mrs. Metaxas, the goldfish necklace falling out of her mouth as she did.

"What are you implying?"

Mrs. Metaxas blinked. "Oh, it's just that I saw the way that Park boy looked at you, the few times he bothered to glance your way. I didn't like it."

*'What is she talking about?'* Dalia thought at Doñela and Tamir.

*'How should I know? I'm not a mind reader. Yet.'* Doñela responded.

*'You know something.'*

*'I do not!'*

*'I can hear it—'*

"Nothing's wrong, not a thing. Everything is hunky-dory," Doñela said aloud.

Mrs. Metaxas blinked in confusion, turning her head like a curious dog.

"LIAR" croaked a voice that made Dalia jump quite literally out of her skin and into the air in her astral form. She'd forgotten that Kobalos was still perched on her shoulder. Quickly, she pulled herself back into her body, noticing as she did that Mrs. Metaxas had been glancing up at her. Had she somehow seen Dalia floating there above her own body?

"Feather-puller lies!" Kobalos said.

"Oh my gods, you feathery little dingbat!" Doñela said, her voice raised. "You're still sore over that whole business?"



How many times do I have to apologize to you? It's really hard to *not* pull feathers when your hands are—" Doñela froze, clapping her hands over their shared mouth.

"Ahh," Mrs. Metaxas said, nodding. "I think I see what's going on here. I'm familiar with the old Ravenstone stories. A lot about you that was confusing is coming together now, like certain changes in your magical aura. Tell me, how many of you are in there?"

Doñela pouted. "Just me, Dalia, and Tamir. My name is Doñela."

"And does my daughter know about any of this, yet?"

"No. Just Sally, Kohana, and Aavraak."

"Not even your friend Brandon?"

"Well uh, yeah. We meant to tell Sally, but then Aavraak and Kohana found out as well. Dalia's still scared to tell Cally or Brandon about it."

"I see. And I understand being afraid to be yourself, when what you want to be yourself about is reviled or feared by other people. You don't know who to trust, how people will react, until you tell them, and that's pretty scary. But you know, if a friend can't accept the whole of who you are, then they're not a very good friend."

"Yeah, but I ask myself 'what's the worst that can happen?' and there's lots of horrible answers to that," Dalia said. "Like the other day, I was telling Mr. Hoyt I was scared to tell Cally and the triplets about being trans, and he said I should tell my fears to take a hike. And I said, 'Right. Sure. I'll just face my fears and say "Hey there, My Fear of Being Murdered For Being Trans, go take a hike!" Cuz that sounds *really* useful,'" she finished off with heavy sarcasm.

Mrs. Metaxas chuckled a little bit. “Yes, people who never stray outside the borders of what’s normal and acceptable to society *do* tend to be mightily clueless about the lives of those of us who exist outside those borders. Even some people who *do* hail from somewhere outside of those borders tend to be clueless about people from metaphorical countries other than their own. I’m Greek and cisgender, for instance, and you’re black and transgender. I wouldn’t dare presume to know what the particular forms of bigotry you face are like, because the forms of it I get are much different, and I find that people who think they know what all bigotry is like just from experiencing the form of it that comes to them tend to be very difficult to talk to about the ways bigotry differs from person to person. Some of them are almost as bad as your run-of-the-mill bigots. Some are even *worse*.

“But enough of that. We’ve strayed miles from the point. We were talking about how that Park boy looks at you.”

“If he tries anything, I’ll wreck him,” Doñela said. “I can grab stuff in my astral form, I’ll wring his puny neck.”

“Well, don’t kill him. And if you do hurt him in self defense, don’t do it in mundane Oregon. The laws about self defense in Oregon are messed up.”

“Messed up how?”

“I mean that you have to prove in a court of law, with lawyers and evidence, that you couldn’t run, that you had no choice but to fight. If they think you could have run, you’re the one who gets in trouble.”

Doñela gave Mrs. Metaxas a weird look. “What the what now?”

Then Tamir took over the voice box. "That doesn't make any sense. What if the person can run faster than you? And don't they know that girls and women tend to freeze up when faced with a violent attacker, or try to defuse the situation? Those laws don't take human biology *or* psychology into account!"

Mrs. Metaxas shrugged. "That's just how it is. Stupid, I know. The law needs to change."

"It sure does!" Doñela said.

"Well, I'm glad you have a defender with you at all times, Dalia. It eases my mind a little." She glanced at the door again. "Not nearly enough, though."

"Right. Anyway, Dalia wasn't even thinking about talking about that *dlaád da'alzhin!* She uh... she was thinking about... um... something else. It's not my place to say what."

*'Yeah, and I don't want to talk about it now,'* Dalia thought at Doñela.

"Well, if Dalia wants to talk about it with me, I'm glad to listen."

"I... honestly, I'm exhausted now. It's been a stressful day so far, once *he* showed up. My head *still* hurts."

"Understandable. Well, just remember I'm here for you if you change your mind."

"I will. Thanks, Mrs. Metaxas."

"You're welcome, Dalia. Oh and by the way, Dalia, I don't think I'd mention your Multiplied status to the school counselor if I were you. He has some very mundane ideas about that sort of thing. He'd jump to all the wrong conclusions. I keep telling him 'the conclusion you jump to may be your own,' but he never seems to get it."

"Right. Thanks for the advice."

"You're welcome."

The door was opened up again, and Dalia left to go find her friends.



LATER THAT NIGHT AFTER dinner, something strange happened. Dalia and her room-mates were doing some schoolwork for the next day when Kohana sneezed, blasting fire against the wall and reverting back to her fox form, the leaf on her head slipping off. She struggled to get it back on while Sally, Aavraak, and Dalia put out the fire. A moment after the fire was put out, Kohana got the leaf back on and became human again.

Aavraak rounded on her angrily. "What is wrong with you! You could have burned the whole building down!"

Her shouting made Kohana burst into tears. Dalia stood there awkwardly, looking in confusion between Kohana and Aavraak. Sally took the initiative and held Kohana, glaring over her shoulder at Aavraak.

"What's wrong with *you*, Aavraak? I've never seen you so angry before."

Aavraak didn't answer in words at first, she was too busy growling and glaring at Kohana. Then she looked up. It looked like it was a struggle for her to think straight, but a few moments later, Aavraak was looking ashamed of herself.

"My most sincere apologies. I truly do not know what came over me."

Sally blinked. "Really?"

"Truly. I... I have not felt well since getting back to the dorm room. I am deeply confused about my outburst. Again, Kohana, I apologize."

Aavraak made like she wanted to move forward to hug Kohana, but changed her mind, going back to her school-work. Dalia stared at her, then turned to Kohana.

"Have you been sleeping poorly again?"

Kohana had stopped crying. "I... I don't think so. I woke up feeling fine. But now, I dunno, I feel a little weird."

"Um... weird how?"

"Almost... fragile. Weak. Not physically, but like, it's taking more effort to keep my human form going, which shouldn't happen, and I guess that burst of fire used the last of that power, making me go fox again. I almost couldn't go human again, just now."

Sally reached into her shirt for the stone with a hole in it, but froze. "Oh great, it's gone! Where'd I put it?"

"What's gone?"

"The stone with a hole in it."

"Oh. Um, when did you have it last?"

"I'm not sure. I... oh wait, I left it on the end table by my bed."

She checked the end table for it, and the floor around the table. She even checked in the table's drawers, to no avail.

"Drats! I don't know where it is!"

"What do you want it for?"

"I wanted to see if there was any weird magic stuff around Kohana."

"Hmm... I have an idea. I'll be back."

Dalia left the room, Sally still looking for the stone under her bed and other places. Dalia went down to the kitchen and found some ginger snaps and milk, bringing the cookies up with her in her pockets and the milk in a saucer. When she got back to the dorm room, she set the milk and cookies out on her own table and wrote a note that she put atop the cookies.

The note read:

*Dear hobs,*

*The cookies and milk are for you, extra thanks for your help keeping the school clean. But also, I was wondering if you could help us with something? My friend Sally lost a necklace, a stone with a natural hole in it, that was held by a cord through the hole. Can you look for it for us? Would you please keep an eye out for it and return it to Sally if you find it, please? Thank you either way.*

*Sincerely,*

*Dalia Ravenstone*

“Okay. If that works, it's cool. But what if it leaves the building or property by morning?”

Dalia shrugged. “I dunno. Um... Kohana? Maybe you should go to the hospital wing, ask the nurse to check you out.”

“I'm not sure that will work. I'm not human, and I doubt she's qualified to help kitsune.”

“Well you could try anyway, just in case. After all, there are multiple nurses on staff.”

Kohana sighed. “I suppose. Yeah, okay, maybe I should.”

“Do you want one of us to come with?”

"No, I'll be fine. I know where it is, and nurses and doctors don't bother me."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Thanks anyway."

Dalia watched her leave, then went over to Aavraak.

"Maybe you should go to the nurse as well, Aavraak. You might have caught something. You were fine this morning, after all. Right?"

"I was, yes. It was only after that incident I began to feel... agitated. Then angry. I was feeling angry before Kohana's incident. I do not think I am ill, Dalia. I think I am merely angry at that Park person."

"You weren't angry earlier, though."

"I was very angry, actually. Remember I said I was restraining myself from hurting him? That was true. I have not stopped being angry. I should not have taken it out on Kohana, but in my own case there is nothing mysterious about my anger."

Sally snorted. "Oh so you keep your cool and manage to sound calm and polite with the racist bully, but you snap at a friend for losing control of her magic? Dalia's right, that's fishy."

"Fishy?" Aavraak asked, confused.

"Not right. Weird. Unusual. You should go to the nurse, too. But I'll take you, so you don't blow up at anyone on the way."

Aavraak sighed. "Fine, if you insist. But I am telling you, I have simply been angry all day long. It is not easy to keep control when I have been angry that long."

"Have you lost control like that before?"

"Recently, yes."

"Earlier, here at school?"

Aavraak blinked. "Yes."

"Anything before that?"

Aavraak snorted. "Not since I was a small child. My parents would never let me hear the end of it if I had such outbursts in the past few years."

"So something unusual *is* going on. You should see the nurse."

Sighing, Aavraak nodded. "Yes, take me there. We shall see what she can find out."

"Well there's more than one nurse, actually. Several, in fact. And I think a couple of them are men. But cool, let's go. Dalia, sorry about this. We'll be back as soon as we can."

"It's fine. You go. I'd rather not go if I don't have to."

With another nod and a half-smile, Sally and Aavraak left to go find the hospital wing.



*MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

Dalia woke up the next morning to an empty dorm room. Concerned momentarily, she found a note on the door to the room and read it. It was from Sally; Aavraak and Kohana had been kept overnight for observation, and Sally was already at breakfast. The nurses hadn't been able to find anything wrong with either of their fairy friends, but they'd admitted to not being familiar with the medicine for either species, and had brought in Damiana Dyer, the Faery



teacher, to help. She hadn't been much help either, so they'd called for a doctor from the nearby Goblin city, and she was apparently coming to the school this morning. It seemed likely their friends would miss their morning classes at least, if not the whole day.

Checking the tray with the cookies and milk, she found the tray and the saucer of milk were perfectly clean. The note she'd left had been turned over and written on in writing so small she had to squint to read it. It said, 'Thanks for the gift. We'll keep an eye out for your friend's missing item. Sincerely, The Hobs of Fae Springs.' So that was a bit of good news at least.

At breakfast, though, they found out everyone would be missing morning classes today, because of an assembly in the auditorium. It seemed Mr. Arthur Kemp, a Grand Councilor, was speaking to them today after breakfast. Dalia groaned when she heard the news; assemblies were not pleasant for her. The whole school would be in one room, so it would be packed with people and noisy. Half the time she ate in the cafeteria, she could only stand to do so because she wore headphones to drown the noise out with music. She couldn't do that during an assembly, so she checked her purse to make sure she had her pain relievers and water with her, which she did. She also put some ear plugs in; they would muffle the noise but she'd still be able to hear the person on the stage. And she could chew on her goldfish necklace during the stupid assembly, small comfort that it would be.

Leaving breakfast early, Doñela having taken control of their body to do so, Doñela fetched a second stim, Doñela's own: a ring that had a spinning outer ring she could fidget

with. One of her previous schools had banned fidget spinners because 'normal' kids had been making trouble with them, which had been a major irritant to the autistic and ADHD kids who were calmed by such spinners, and so Dalia's parents had gotten her a spinning ring charmed to be silent. The teachers had never caught on to what it was.

Dalia and Sally went alongside Brandon as everyone filed into the auditorium. Being towards the front, the three of them got a seat in the front row, which not many people liked to sit in, and so they could hear better. Might as well hear what the man had to say if they had to be here anyway, right? And it was difficult for Dalia to hear if she were in the back, even with the sound system piping his voice into the back from speakers in the walls and ceiling.

Their seat was also an aisle seat, technically; there was an empty space for a wheelchair there, making that row of seats shorter than most of the others, and Brandon's chair was parked in that gap, Dalia to his left and Sally to *her* left. Cally found them as well and joined on Sally's left, but the triplets had gone to sit in the back.

In Dalia's opinion, waiting was the worst part. People took their time filing in, and they talked and filled the room with noise that was magnified by the design of the room. Then there were people moving around and bumping into other people. That was another reason they'd chosen to sit in front; fewer people bumping into them. And with Brandon there to act as a buffer, Dalia wouldn't get bumped as much. She really did hate being touched unexpectedly and without permission by anyone, especially people she didn't know or didn't like.

And so, in the rising noise, the heat in the room climbing as all those warm bodies swarmed into the room like clowns into a clown car, Dalia's head already began to pound. She took pain relievers and went back to chewing her goldfish necklace and spinning her ring, mentally checking out until the assembly began, because that's when the noise would die down for a while. Mentally checking out also made it easier. If she went into an almost meditative state, where everything just washed over her and she wasn't doing anything but concentrating on getting through the next few hours, it made the experience just barely tolerable. Whereas if she didn't check out mentally, her thoughts would feed her anxiety and make everything a dozen times worse. In this state of mind she was in, time flowed by like a lazy river. If she didn't check out mentally, it was like trying to swim upstream against the flow of the rapids.

Closing her eyes helped, too, so she did. Now bereft of visual noise, she only had to tolerate the audio noise, the vibrations through the floor and chair, the heat of the room, and the closeness of all those bodies. Honestly, she couldn't figure out how people could tolerate these sorts of things; their chairs were so close together that any two chairs shared the same armrest between them, unless you were lucky enough to be on the end of the row, and despite the fact she was friends with Sally and Brandon, she had to pull her body in away from their own because she couldn't stand the physical contact under the circumstances, which made her even more tense and uncomfortable than normal. It baffled her that anyone sane would design a room this way.

Time being nearly impossible to keep track of like this, Dalia didn't know how long she'd been checked out like this when Sally whispered to her for her attention. Snapping out of it at once, she looked up. As she did, she noticed the noise in the room dying down until it was very nearly silent. The lights had gone out, except for the lights on the stage, and she saw Principal Park standing rigidly at the podium, calling for quiet, even though the change in lighting had already done that. Dalia heard some boy complaining about someone else's flowery cologne, but then he said "ouch!" as someone dug their elbow into his side to shut him up. She glanced back and recognized a boy named Riley Irving, sitting next to Elliolyynn Losolom, the lilin boy. Seeing them, she remembered they were room mates. They didn't seem to get along with each other very well, though.

As she looked at the stage, she wondered why there was a woman standing to one side on the stage, also with a light shining on her. This was answered when Principal Park spoke again; as he spoke, she signed a translation. A sign language interpreter!

"Good morning, boys and girls of Fae Springs Private Academy of Magic, Oak Campus. As you all should know by now, I am Principal Johnathan Park. Yet I am not here to talk to you myself, no; in fact, I have the honor of introducing a different speaker, all the way from the capitol city of our country of Praecantus in Salem, Massachusetts. An alumnus of our dear school, he has made much of himself over the years. He has also come a long way and is a very important person, so I expect you all to be well-behaved and respectful. Now please give a warm round of applause to Grand Coun-

cilor Arthur Kemp, Chief of the Grand Council Security Agency!"

Dalia winced as hundreds of hands gave applause of mixed enthusiasm. Some people wolf-whistled, probably ironically. She clapped her hands over her ears until it died down.

A tall, handsome man with light brown hair and a smiling face but shrewd look to his eyes shook Principal Park's hand on his way to the podium. That done, he continued on jauntily and waved at the students jovially.

Leaning toward the microphone, he asked, with an air of announcing a sporting event, "Who in the zoo are the Perseus heirs?"

"NOT THE TIGERS, NOT THE WOLVES, IT'S THE *GRIZZLY BEARS*!" came the shout from dozens of people in the audience.

"Who in the zoo are the best ones to be?"

"NOT THE BADGERS, NOT THE OWLS, AND *NOT ANANSI*!"

"Who in the zoo are the best ones to know?"

"IF IT'S NOT GRIZZLY BEARS, THEN YOU'D BETTER EAT CROW!"

"Who in the zoo are the cream of the crop?"

**"IT'S THE BRAVE GRIZZLY BEARS CAUSE WE RISE TO THE TOP!"**

The Grizzly Bears in the audience all burst into self-congratulatory cheers under Mr. Kemp's encouragement. Dalia raised an eyebrow. What was this, a speech or a pep rally? Whatever it was, Mr. Kemp seemed to be drinking in their cheers with enthusiasm. Dalia just wished they'd be quiet.

“Yes, Grizzly Bears, we’re a force to be reckoned with indeed. Why look at me, I once went to this school like all of you, and now here I am helping our nation fight terrorists and other people who would use magic for evil ends. And it’s all because I keep in mind what Grizzly Bear Banner is all about: bravely fighting evil to protect the innocent. Like Perseus, I fight monsters to save people, but of course, the monsters I fight are human. Well, *most* of them are.”

Dalia glared at him. Perseus was the Greek ‘hero’ who had killed Medusa, an individual who – depending on what version of the story one believed – was either cursed by Hera for being one of Zeus’s lovers, or else was given the power to turn men to stone in order to protect her from male violence, something she’d been a victim of. Either way, it wasn’t her fault she was turning men to stone, and she was, after all, hidden away so that the only men she turned to stone were the ones foolish enough to seek her out. Dalia, therefore, didn’t consider Perseus someone to be looking up to.

“Some of you in the audience may have friends or family who were hurt or killed by the terrorist group the Ghost Leopards, so you at least will know the stakes of this fight. What you may not have heard yet, since the High Council is keeping it out of the news, is that a new group has risen to prominence in the past year, a group called Gaia’s Furies. This group, which I and the other agents of the GCSA believe may be run by Amanda Rahesh, the only known escapee of the Ghost Leopards – though she’s currently calling herself Madam Kali Aconite – has been building up numbers in the last ten years, and has started at last to go on the offensive.

"Now, I'm doing my best to put an end to this group, find out where they are and arrest them for terrorism, but my hands are tied by the policies of the current administration. President Mary Michelson has consistently been holding me back from the steps I need to take to bring these people in. It's a bit complicated to go into here, but there are spells, artifacts, and techniques I could be using to hunt these people down with, but by the time I get through all the red tape to authorize these things, they've moved on and I have to start all over again. They know how limited I am, I'm sure of it; they're moving around the way they are because they know this. They may have attacked Georgia, but they've been moving from region to region for years, I've seen the evidence of it."

There was more to his speech, but Dalia was having a hard time concentrating on it, it was just so dull. She'd heard political speeches on the television before, they all sounded basically the same, all of them more boring than a giant tunnel-boring machine. This one was no different. Explain why the current President was inadequate, and why he was better, then make a bunch of promises, most of which she didn't understand and he wouldn't keep anyway, that was the formula. It sounded like a campaign speech, but the election was years away and he hadn't announced any intention to run, of course. The best thing she could say for him was he wasn't slinging mud; he was being respectful, though critical, of the current President. And he sounded frustrated, too; frustrated that he was having such a hard time closing in on the terrorists.

She wasn't the only one looking bored, either. Cally was fidgeting in her seat, Sally was leaning back in her chair looking like she'd be dozing off if the noise coming from the stage would only stop, and Brandon was working on a Rubik's cube.

Dalia felt a surge of boredom and annoyance from Doñela. *'Ugh, this guy drones on worse than the Taos Hum. This is a campaign speech, but he hasn't even announced his candidacy. Why is he giving a campaign speech to a bunch of kids?'*

*'Likely because some of the students here are old enough to vote, or will be by the time of the election,'* Tamir replied.

So now on top of a boring campaign speech, she had to listen to Doñela and Tamir discussing the dratted thing. She almost envied Kohana and Aavraak, they were in the hospital wing and didn't have to listen to this noise. Even classes would be better than this.

*'Hey, you know what? I think Principal Park is within range of my astral form,'* Doñela said.

*'No. Whatever you're thinking of, don't do it.'*

*'Who me, up to no good? I'm wounded, sir, that you would think I would misbehave!'*

*'Right, sure, you're a perfect little angel. A fallen angel.'*

*'It's funny you thought that would offend me.'*

Dalia was about to snap at them again to be quiet when she felt something strange from behind her and to the left. She glanced that way, wondering what she was feeling, but saw nothing unusual at first. Just a bunch of other students, including Riley Irving and Elliolynn Losolom. Elliolynn looked bored and distracted, maybe a little ill, but Dalia



didn't know why any of that would make her feel... whatever she was feeling. She turned back to face the front.

A few minutes later the weird feeling – which hadn't gone away – was much worse. She turned around to look for the source again. Judging by the way other people in the area were acting, she thought they might be sensing something unusual as well. There was whispering as people tried to figure out what was going on.

This disturbance had caught the attention of Grand Councilor Kemp, who stopped his speech.

“Is something the matter down there?” he asked, sounding wary.

“Students, cease this disruption at once!” commanded Principal Park.

This didn't help much. Some people quieted down, but others kept whispering. The area was the center of attention, now.

Then it hit her, a feeling that was all too familiar. A bone-deep weariness settled over her, like everything took just too much energy to even think about, let alone do anything about. Her earlier annoyance and then confusion dulled down to a bored sort of apathy, like the emotional equivalent of the color beige, or perhaps a dull gray like you might see in a Portland sky in winter. She sighed heavily; this whole assembly was just such a pain. School was a pain. Just sitting there was a pain, too, but she had no desire to get up, because getting up would be a pain.

Many thoughts flowed sluggishly through her mind; anxieties, worries, fears, embarrassing memories. They all went by, then circled around again to further drive home

their point: that life was pointless, existence was meaningless, so what was even the point of caring about any of it?

'Why do you keep trying?' a wordless voice in her mind said. It wasn't Doñela or Tamir, it was something everyone had in their minds. 'People hate you for what you are, why can't you just be normal?'

Another wordless voice retorted, 'People are going to hate her even if she's normal, because she's black. So why bother even trying to be normal?'

'You're right,' said the first wordless voice. 'Try or don't try, nothing matters. Life is horrible, living is horrible. Death would be preferable. Death would be quiet and peaceful, freedom from all the noise and anxiety. Just stepping into the silent darkness of nonexistence.'

That sounded like a good idea to her, but she didn't have the energy to die. All she could do was sit there being hopeless. But it did occur to a small part of her that death wasn't an end; ghosts were real. The soul lived on.

'Whatever,' the wordless voice said. 'Afterlife or not, either way it would be a freedom from the noise and anxiety of the living world.'

She couldn't even respond, it was too much effort. But she wouldn't have had the chance anyway, because all of a sudden there was an interruption from the real world.

"*Sleep*," someone behind her had said in a voice muffled by distance and their own body. With that, the apathy eased enough that she realized what direction her thoughts had gone and she began to feel cold and scared at the knowledge.

Looking around, she saw everyone in the room was either standing or sitting while shaking with cold sweat, or else

crying, shouting angrily, or some other negative reaction. In short, the room was full of confusion, chaos, and misery. Some of these people were being made to sleep by the same voice that had pulled Dalia out of her own thoughts, some-one pointing a copper and diamond wand around the room at individuals who were being verbally or physically violent.

*'What just happened?'* asked Doñela from inside her own head. She sounded very shaken.

*'That's what I want to know, too,'* Tamir replied.

"What's going on?" Dalia asked.

Nobody responded; all her friends were upset and confused as well. Cally was hugging Sally, crying while Sally just had a haunted look on her face. Brandon was shaking like a Quaking Aspen leaf in the wind, and had clearly been crying as well.

Mrs. Metaxas was still dealing with people whose reactions were a danger to themselves or others. Even when she put the last violent person into an enchanted sleep – Principal Park himself, who was demanding answers of upset students and looking slightly insane as he did – Mrs. Metaxas had to move on to trying to soothe the people who were crying, catatonic, or otherwise unreasonable in their upset. Which, as it appeared to Dalia, was most students other than herself. She wondered why some people, like herself, were recovering faster than others.

Suddenly remembering Elliolynn, she turned back to see him asleep in his chair. He must have been the person Mrs. Metaxas had made sleep, when Dalia had been woken up by her words.

Her eyes went wide at a sudden thought.

*'Doñela, Tamir! I think Elliolyynn was the cause of what happened!'*

*'What? How?'* Doñela asked.

*'He's a hope lilin. I think he was eating all the hope in the room!'*

*'But lilin generate a field of magic that encourages hope in others, so they have something to eat,'* Tamir said. *'It wouldn't make sense to eat hope and be unable to generate it.'*

*'Yeah, but Kohana's powers have been going haywire lately, and Aavraak was behaving strangely for her.'*

*'You think these events are related?'*

*'Yes I do, Tamir. Something fishy is going on here. Three different Faery races all having strange issues all at once? That's fishy. I just wish I knew why I recovered so fast, when he's only two rows behind me, and people on the other side of the room are far worse.'*

*'You have experience with depression,'* Tamir said. *'That was magically mimicking the effects of depression. Which explains the violence, too. Men in our culture can sometimes get irritable, angry, or even hostile when depressed. And look, some of the boys look sick to their stomachs. Stomach-ache can be a symptom of depression in males, too.'*

She looked at Brandon; he, too, looked ill, like he'd just gotten off a roller coaster and was motion sick.

*'I wonder if being on anti-depressants has helped you recover faster once the magic causing it stopped,'* Tamir thought at her.

Dalia thought he had a point. If that was the case, it was likely true of the other people who had already mostly recovered along with her. But she didn't know why Mrs. Metaxas

was doing so well. She had a sheen of sweat on her face, her hair was damp, and her armpits were visibly sweaty, but otherwise she looked fine.

Speaking of Mrs. Metaxas, the Magical Self-Defense teacher got up on the stage and took the microphone to address the room.

"Students and staff of Fae Springs," she said, "there has, obviously, been an incident. The source has been neutralized for the time being. Those of you awake, alert, and collected enough to help out, please do so. All the sleeping persons will have to be taken to the infirmary. Any students talented enough to levitate them, please do so gently, don't let their heads move around too much, we don't want them getting hurt.

"As to what exactly happened, that can wait until after everyone's recovered. I've sent a message ahead to the infirmary, they'll know what's going on and how to deal with it. Now, if you're able, please stop standing around and help me out."

Doñela and Tamir popped out of Dalia's body and into their spirit forms just then.

*'Let's get Elliolynn,'* Doñela said. Tamir nodded, and the two of them worked together to lift the lilin boy while Dalia checked on her friends.

"Does anyone know what happened?" Sally asked, turning to look at Dalia.

Dalia looked around for eavesdroppers before whispering, "I think Elliolynn happened. Malfunctioning powers, like Kohana."

"Elliolynn? The lilin boy?"

"Yes."

Sally looked at him and gave a small start. "Doñela and Tamir are carrying him, aren't they?"

Dalia nodded. "I'd better follow, their range is limited."

Sally looked down, her eyes still wide, at Cally in her arms. Cally was still crying into Sally's shoulder, but looked like she was about out of tears to shed.

"I'll come with you, and try to bring Cally. Brandon, how're you?"

"I... I think I can manage."

He wiped his eyes dry and started to follow. He didn't really have anywhere on his chair to carry anyone else, so he couldn't help, even though he kept looking at people like he wanted to be able to help.

Before they could get very far, though, they heard a man's voice suddenly shouting angrily. Turning around, they saw it was Arthur Kemp. He didn't look very handsome right now with his face and hair sweaty, bags under his eyes, sweat stains around the armpits of his shirt, and his clothes and hair in disarray. He looked unbalanced, an unhinged cast to his eyes.

"SABOTAGE!" he had shouted, and was shouting it again. "Someone's sabotaging me! Some political rival, or maybe even terrorists!" He was gesticulating wildly as he continued shouting about sabotage and demanding to know what Mrs. Metaxas was going to do about it.

Frowning at him from where she was tending to someone who was wounded, Mrs. Metaxas pointed her wand at him. "*Sleep*," she said, and he fell asleep standing up; she caught him from falling by gesturing with her left hand and

wandlessly easing him down to the ground. Once he was laying asleep on the stage, she went back to tending to the wounded student.

Dalia and her friends turned back around and continued to try to exit the auditorium. Brandon became useful by surging ahead of them and clearing a path through the confused and scared students milling around in the aisles, but he had to stop once and a while to direct people to move sleeping students out of the way.

On their way out of the room, they passed by Ms. Hollander, who was leaning against the wall, catatonic and shaking, staring off into space with a haunted look on her face. At first they didn't know what to do for her, as they were already burdened with Elliolynn floating behind Brandon and Cally being almost carried by Sally. Dalia didn't think she could get Ms. Hollander off the floor, even with as short as the older woman was, due to her girth. But she tried anyway, and found to her surprise that Ms. Hollander was lighter than expected; just light enough for Dalia to pull her to her feet and support her as she guided the unwell woman to the infirmary with the rest of them.

There were people milling around in the corridor outside the auditorium, too; they wandered around aimlessly, like terrified zombies. Sally talked to them as they passed, trying to convince them to follow. While many just stared at her like they couldn't figure out where her voice was coming from, by the time they got to the infirmary they had about half a dozen students shuffling along behind them.

Several nurses rushed ahead as they came in and told Dalia to levitate Elliolynn up onto the table. Only one of the

nurses looked astonished she could do that, the others were too busy for that sort of thing. Another pair of nurses took Ms. Hollander and Cally from them and set them down on hospital beds. Just in time, too; holding up Ms. Hollander was hurting her head from the effort of it. Her headache was pounding with every heartbeat, she needed a pain reliever very badly.

"Is he injured?" one nurse – a 30-something year old black man with very short hair – asked her, about Elliolynn. Even in the emergency, she couldn't help but note he was rather handsome.

"Um... I don't know. He uh... I think he was seated when she made him sleep, I think. But he was... I mean, this is just a guess, but I think he was the source of the commotion."

"What do you mean?"

"Um... didn't Mrs. Metaxas send a message ahead?"

"All she said was people were freaking out and would need to be calmed. An equilibrium-restorative potion is being brewed as we speak. But if she knew what was going on, she didn't tell us. Judging by her manner, I think she forgot to in her near-panic."

"Oh. Um... well I recognized what—er, I mean, the symptoms were familiar. Um, it felt like a powerful bout of clinical depression. I felt apathetic, didn't have any energy, and um... I uh... I was thinking about death. About how peaceful it would be to die."

"Suicidal ideation?"

She nodded. "Yes. But I didn't have the energy to do anything about it. And I'm back to normal now. No more thoughts of suicide."



The nurse looked at Elliolynn, a look of dawning comprehension on his face. "He's an Aashabahk, a hope lilin. Another case of malfunctioning powers, like Ms. Sato earlier?"

"That's what I was thinking, yes."

"Right. I'll go tell the alchemist she'll need to add Hope Blossoms Eternal to the potion, if she can find any in the stores."

Without explaining what he meant, he walked briskly away to do just that.

"What's Hope Blossoms Eternal?" Sally asked.

Dalia shrugged. "No idea. But it sounds like it might have some magical ability to restore hope."

Having delivered Cally, Elliolynn, Ms. Hollander, and some zombie-like students to the infirmary, Sally, Dalia, and Brandon left to go offer more help. Dalia's headache from supporting a nearly catatonic adult's weight was getting intense enough now that she took some pain relievers quickly on her way to go offer more help.

The next person she found asleep for her two head-mates to carry into the infirmary was Preston Park. She was tempted to pass him by, but instead decided to be the better person. Doñela, however, convinced Tamir to drag him to the infirmary while she fireman-carried a second-year girl she didn't recognize. Tamir grinned and complied, grabbing Preston under his arms and dragging the boy's feet, legs, and trouser seat through the dust of the floor. Dalia found another second-year, a boy, to fireman-carry as well; as light as he was compared to Ms. Hollander, the weight still made her head throb worse. Sally helped support Alvar, who looked like she was having a hard time staying awake. Fearing a con-

cussion, they all worked to try to keep her awake and responding to them.

Once the nurses were tending to Alvar, they went back to help some more. Having something good to do felt good, especially when it was helping others.





## Chapter Seventeen: Too Sensitive

*Monday, September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017 – Tuesday, September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

CLASSES WERE CANCELED for the day, naturally. It took until lunchtime to get everyone either to the infirmary or into the cafeteria to sit around while waiting for answers about what had happened. It took even longer to start treating people, because someone had to go out into the Light Grove to find Hope Blossoms Eternal, which turned out to be a magical flower that only bloomed at dawn. They only found six blossoms of the flower, but it was enough to make a suitably strong equilibrium-restorative potion for the people who still hadn't recovered. So morning classes the next day had been canceled as well.

Ms. Ella Templeton, the vice principal, worked with Mr. Gaylen Hoyt, the school counselor, to contact some more mental health professionals to come in as quickly as possible, because even with the potion restoring everyone's mental equilibrium from magically-induced depression, most students were still haunted by the experience. Also, the quick application of the equilibrium-restorative potion didn't

guarantee a full recovery; there was a chance some people would develop clinical depression from the experience, so everyone would have to be monitored closely for signs of clinical depression.

Elliolynn Losolom was being kept sedated, since they couldn't risk his power malfunctioning around already delicate students after The Incident, and it was becoming clear that Faery doctors or nurses were going to have to be hired, since none of the human nurses had a clue how to treat unwell Faeries. It also took time to call for such people from the nearby Goblin city of Kreyjavrok. Some had been called for Kohana and Aavraak on Sunday and it took them until Tuesday to get there. Neither the Kitsune nor Goblin doctors had any idea how to treat an Ahshahbahk, though, so Elliolynn would have to remain sedated. In the meantime, his parents were contacted.

As to Kohana and Aavraak, the Faery doctors couldn't find anything wrong with them. The nurses had guessed that the two of them had probably recovered on their own. But because of Kohana's fire incident and Elliolynn's incident the other day, they too were being kept for more tests and observations, just in case they had a relapse, and also in case it was contagious. Dalia learned all this from them when she visited them in the infirmary, and it just added to her suspicion that something fishy was going on.

At dinner, with Kobalos picking at his own small plate of food beside her, Dalia watched her friends eat with her. Brandon looked like he hadn't been getting enough sleep. Same with Sally and Cally.

Waiting until they'd eaten half their food, Dalia finally broke the unusual silence at their table.

"I think someone's sabotaging the Faerie students here."

"What makes you think that?" Sally asked.

"All three of them having strange malfunctions of their powers at the same time? That's fishy. And then Kohana and Aavraak seem to have gotten better since being in the infirmary, but nobody can figure out what was wrong with them or how they improved."

"Yeah, that's pretty fishy," Brandon agreed.

"Not to mention, I think if Ahshabahk had problems with their powers malfunctioning, someone would've heard about it before now. Seems like the kind of thing that would be huge news."

"Well it would also make sense to cover up something like that, too," Brandon pointed out. "It'd be bad PR."

"Yeah, I guess," Dalia said, picking at her food.

"How's Alvar?" Sally asked.

"Oh she's fine. She had a minor concussion, but the nurses gave her a potion to heal it. She hasn't reported any cognitive problems. But she's lucky; if she'd been a normal human instead of a Tuunderfeerf, it could've been a lot worse."

She sighed. "Of course, it wouldn't have happened at all if her powers hadn't been affected by whatever happened to Elliolynn. The Incident, I mean. Obviously we don't know what caused *his* powers to misbehave."

"Her powers? Oh wait, you mean that supernatural grace she has?" Brandon asked.

"Yeah, that."

"Do you think she could get affected by whatever's affecting the others?"

"I dunno. Maybe. But the librarian is Tuunderfeerf too, and she's been here for years without a problem. If someone's sabotaging Faeries, maybe they don't consider Tuunderfeerf to be Faeries, since they're the same species as us, just... different."

"Well whatever's going on," Sally said, "we need clues. All we know so far is that all three Faery students in school are having issues with malfunctioning powers."

"Um, don't forget that for at least two of them, the nurses couldn't find anything wrong with them."

"Yeah, that's a clue too," Brandon agreed. "What else?"

"For it to affect three different species, it has to be a person. I doubt it's anything contagious, diseases don't generally like to jump species. If it *was* a species-hopping disease, it'd probably be affecting humans, too."

"Unless it's a parasite?"

"I'm with Dalia on this one," Sally said. "They haven't found anything wrong with Aavraak and Kohana, so unless it's a tiny, hard to find virus, then it's likely sabotage, not a disease. Maybe some kind of dark curse?"

Brandon nodded at this, finally convinced.

"The problem is, um... there might be clues we don't recognize as being clues. Real life mysteries tend to not have obvious clues."

"Well we could try forensics. Look for unusual fingerprints or hairs."

"I don't know how to tell one fingerprint from another, do you?" Dalia asked.

"Well... no. But it's worth a try."

"Dalia's right, we need clues we can actually use," Brandon said.

"Yeah, but what kind..." she trailed off, looking thoughtful. Then she snapped her fingers. "That's it!"

"What's it?" Brandon asked.

"That stone with a hole in it that Mrs. Metaxas gave me, that got lost! What if it was stolen?"

"A what now?" Brandon asked.

Sally briefly explained, without saying why she wanted it, about the stone with a natural hole in it.

"Okay," Dalia said, "I admit it could be a clue. But it could just as easily be a coincidence it got lost when it did."

"Maybe. But I always put it on the table by my bed. I didn't find it on the floor or stuck behind anything. What did the hobs say when you asked them about it?"

"Their return note thanked me for the milk and cookies, and they said they'd keep an eye out for the stone."

"Hobs?"

Dalia paused to explain hobs to Brandon, and what she'd done to get their help the night before the incident.

"Oh, okay," he said. "But uh, why would someone steal that?"

"Well they can see through glamours and other illusions, you know," Sally said.

"Playing uh, Devil's Advocate here, but um... lots of people have stone spectacles enchanted for that," Dalia said.

"Yes, but stones with natural holes in them are more powerful than your standard enchanted stone specs."

"But not as powerful as, say, diamond spectacles with gold-filled rune engravings, done by a master enchanter. And I'm fairly certain Mrs. Metaxas has at least one pair of those. Since she knows alchemy, she probably made them from charcoal and sea water."

"Sea water?"

"I know what she's talking about, but Dalia, the amount of gold in seawater is so tiny it wouldn't be worth it to extract gold from seawater even using alchemy. It'd be easier to extract it alchemically from the soil, especially soil from areas currently or previously known to be rich in gold deposits. And anyway, we were talking about clues."

"Yeah, and why would someone steal that stone when Mrs. Metaxas has even better things for seeing through glamours?"

Sally shrugged. "Dunno. Maybe they don't know she has them? It's not like she gets them out very often."

"That you know of?"

"Fair point. But if we don't know of her getting them out, maybe the villain doesn't either."

"I admit you could be right," Dalia said. "I'll keep an open mind about it. Closed minds don't solve riddles."



*THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

That Thursday, Elliolynn's parents came with an Ahshabakh doctor to transfer Elliolynn to the doctor's own clinic. Dalia heard about it from Kohana, who along with



Aavraak had been released from the infirmary, even the faery doctors having found nothing wrong with them.

They were in the middle of eating breakfast and talking when they heard a loud voice at the table behind them. It was Preston Park, talking to his friends.

“Can’t believe that stupid Metaxas bitch expects me to still do that dumb punishment essay, even after one of those freaks attacked us all at the assembly last Monday. She’s not even my teacher! Safiq may be a dirty rag-head, but I’ll bet he could still kick her ass in a duel! She’s a joke of a teacher, always goofing off and calling it a religion. Completely ridiculous.”

Disgusted, Dalia replaced her normal earplugs with enchanted earplugs so she wouldn’t have to listen to him. As she did, she noticed a pixie flying away from nearby Preston and out the door into the corridor. Dalia smirked, suspecting that the pixie was off to tell Mrs. Metaxas what he’d said.

When they left the cafeteria later, they found Preston Park having an argument with Mrs. Metaxas. Listening in, she told him that slurs weren’t allowed in Fae Springs, that the slur he’d used had been for the wrong group anyway because Mr. Safiq was Bahai and not Muslim, and that on top of his punishment essay, Preston was now going to be in in-school suspension for the rest of the day. Dalia didn’t know what this entailed, but apparently Preston did, because he was unhappy about it. Though he was even more unhappy when he found out he was going to be provided a non-magical computer with a very strict Internet filter so he could spend the time working on his punishment essay, able to use the Internet only for research.

"Ha! Preston Park is getting more punishment, that's great," Brandon said. He was still understandably very sore about all the many times Preston had called him slurs.

"As funny as that is," Sally said, "I think I know why he mentioned Mr. Safiq dueling her. I heard there's going to be an exhibition duel next Friday. Not tomorrow, but the Friday after it, I mean. Mom emailed me last night and mentioned there's always at least one of them every year. It's mostly a way of advertising the dueling club and the dueling teams, but also gets used to show off what some of the teachers can do."

"Oh yeah, I know about those," Cally said. "Mom's in it this year, but she missed it the last couple times because she was doing something more important, don't remember what, and they didn't have one the year before that because the weather was lousy. I remember Mom said they tried rescheduling it several times, but they had to get on with the dueling team practices, and some of the duelists had graduated while others were just busy with dueling competitions elsewhere, so they ended up canceling the exhibition duel that year."

"Who else is in it?"

"Well, the Masters level Defense teacher is always there, along with some of his students, the ones getting a Master's Degree in Defense. Mom actually got offered that job by the school board after being here a couple years, because the previous Masters-level Defense teacher retired. But she turned them down."

"What? Why?" Sally asked.

"Because she wanted to give students a good foundation in Defense, so she only wanted to teach younger students."

She wasn't too happy about being restricted to class one of every year while Mr. Safiq gets class 2, though."

"That's a shame, everyone should get to experience Mrs. Metaxas!"

"Amen to that!"

"I'm sad now for class 2," Dalia said.

"Hey, don't be too sad. Mom also gets to do between six and ten guest lessons every year for class 2 in each grade, she's mentioned it a bunch of times, it was one of the concessions she asked for when they were trying to get her to only teach class one. So they'll have those to look forward to."

"Yeah, but it's not the same thing."

"I know. She's really cool. She's my mom, and you'd think I'd be like 'ugh, mom is so uncool,' because that's like, expected, but no, she's cool and I love learning from her, too."

"I can't wait to see how she does in a duel, if she turned down the Masters-level teaching position," Brandon said.

"Oh, I've seen her dueling before," Cally said with a smirk. "Preston is going to have to eat his words, come the fifth of October. Especially since she gets better every year. I know that because I see her practicing every summer, it's really impressive, and it's a good thing we don't have any close neighbors, because it's pretty noisy, too, and sound-proofing is expensive. Anyway, depending on what she does in the duel, Preston may even wet himself in terror, which would be really funny to see, I hope he does."

"Wow, I can hardly wait!"

That day in classes was a mixed bag. Crystals and Earth Magic was still boring to Dalia, because she already knew most of what they were covering so far. In Alchemy they had

finally finished with learning and doing tests about the safety rules, and were now going over learning to identify potions ingredients, learning what their properties were, and how to safely handle said ingredients. So, kinda boring.

Enchantment was getting more interesting at last. While many students still struggled to feel outside magic, Mr. Carling was moving on to teaching them to produce light with their magic. Soon, several students were shining little lights at each other from their fingers. Dalia was the third person to do it, but her light was brightest, nearly blinding a boy in her class whom she was practicing with. By the end of class, Alvar was showing off with a light on every finger and one from her nose, which she made red.

"I'm Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer!" she exclaimed.

The boy she'd nearly blinded was now trying to get back at Dalia by shining lights in her eyes.

"It was an accident! I didn't mean to!" she protested.

He said nothing, just laughing as he tried to shine light at her. He had her cornered, there was nowhere for the light to go. Her hands weren't enough to block it, either, it was so bright. Mr. Carling was busy giving another student extra help, and had his back turned to her. Her friends were also not paying attention to her, for they were having their own troubles with this boy's friends, who were doing the same thing to them.

Desperate to stop the painful light, she used what she'd learned and felt in the air for the magic making the light. She grabbed it with her Will and pushed on it, which bent the light the other direction back into the boy's face... just in

time for the teacher to witness it, for he had turned around to face her just a second before she did it.

“Ouch!” the boy shouted, putting his hands down and putting out the lights coming from them.

“Ms. Ravenstone—” the teacher began, as he came over.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Carling, I didn’t mean to. He was just shining it in my eyes, and I couldn’t get away from it, so—”

“I’m not chastising you, Ms. Ravenstone. In fact, I came over to say I’m quite impressed.”

“Er... you are?”

“Yes. I can’t say I’ve ever even heard of a first-year student bending someone else’s magic like that, especially someone in their first month of schooling. Tell me, what did you feel as it happened, and just before?”

“Um... well, I just... I dunno. I just... I could feel the magic making the light, just as much as the light itself. I just reached out with my Will and pushed it away. Which uh, I guess that bent it.”

“Quite impressive, Ms. Ravenstone. I don’t teach how to do that until the middle of second year. For that, you get extra credit of ten points for the day. And there’s ten more for you if you can do it again.”

He shone a light in her eye with his own finger, making her wince and hold her hand up to it. But she thought about what he’d said, and tried it again. She reached forward with her mind like before, grabbed it, and yanked it again. This time, the light shone on Mr. Carling’s chest instead of his eyes, like she’d done to the bothersome boy.

Mr. Carling looked delighted as he looked down at the light on his chest.

"Amazing! That promised extra ten points are yours, Ms. Ravenstone. Do you mind if I tell the other teachers about this? It's really quite astonishing that you can do this, and your first month at school hasn't even ended yet."

"Er... yeah, I guess."

"Sorry, dear? You were mumbling."

"Um," she said more loudly, "I said sure, you can tell them about it."

"Excellent, Ms. Ravenstone. Now just to satisfy my own curiosity, can you tell me which of these fingers is emitting a small stream of magic?"

He had all ten fingers held out. None appeared to be doing anything. But magic could flow without doing anything, so she focused on his hands and felt each. At first, she couldn't sense anything, but she closed her eyes and felt the area anyway.

It wasn't easy, but not for the reason one would think. She could feel her own magic, and Mr. Carling's magic, and several other nearby people's, too. She had to concentrate on focusing more closely, tune out most of what she was sensing. It was easy to tune things out, she'd done it all her life, out of necessity. Not perfectly easy, of course; she was still autistic and thus still had sensory issues. People gave her headaches sometimes from the noise they made, and certain kinds of lights made her nauseous. But the sound level had gone down in the room, so she had less to tune out.

There it was! She felt it. It was a trickle. If Mr. Carling's magical aura was one of the Great Lakes, this was a stream you could hop over by comparison. Except that Mr. Carling's magical aura wasn't like a lake at all, it was like a series of great

rivers at different layers of his body, flowing all through his body in different directions, some of it even pooling at what she assumed were the chakras.

She was about to answer when she felt something else. There was an even smaller stream of magic coming from the other hand. That sly devil, he was trying to trick her.

"Both hands have magic coming from them," she said. "One is so small it barely qualifies as a stream." She pointed out the particular fingers the magic was coming from.

She opened her eyes and saw Mr. Carling with his jaw dropped. Dalia didn't think she'd ever seen anyone ever actually do that before.

"'Astounding' seems too inadequate a word right now, Ms. Ravenstone," he said. "Honestly, I expected you to fail that one. I've met adult witches specializing in transformation magic with a healing angle who couldn't sense a stream that small. I had intended that one as a joke, in fact. That is worth far more than ten extra credit points. I'm giving you 50 extra credit points for that, Ms. Ravenstone. And I am definitely going to tell the other teachers. May I also tell your parents about it?"

She felt her face growing hot. She was suddenly aware that the room was quiet because everyone was watching her, and at Mr. Carling's words there were a lot of impressed looks. Anastasia Park was giving her a dirty, jealous look.

"Er, um... I guess so, Mr. Carling."

"Thank you, Ms. Ravenstone. Anyway, while everyone else practices making lights with their magic, I think I'll have you start on the next step: shaping your magical light into a floating ball."

He stepped away and class resumed. Something shifted in her mind, though she knew she was still in magic-sensing mode, so she didn't know what had shifted. Not that she had much time to think about it, because almost at once, her head felt like it was splitting open, the light in the room like knives in her eyes, and the sound of talking was like a rock concert right next to her ears. She felt clammy and cold, and before she could process what was going on, she vomited all over the floor.

The resulting screams of disgust didn't help her headache at all. In fact, the sound made her immediately feel a spasm in her head like an iron band being very quickly squeezed around it tight enough to break her skull, then she knew only darkness.



DALIA WAS WARM AND laying in something soft, but her head was still pounding. Even with her eyes closed, she could tell that the lights were out, for which she was grateful; in her current state, any light strong enough to get through her closed eyelids would be a new wave of torture.

She was awake, but only just. Movement of any kind was sure to bring more pain, so she just continued to lay there. Someone came over to her, she could hear him talking, his quiet words like a jackhammer to the skull. She couldn't think well enough to even recognize what language he was speaking, and any glimmer of a coherent thought in her head



was quickly extinguished by the pain. He said something else, and she went unconscious again.

Dalia had no idea how long she was out again when she woke up for a second time, but this time, her head felt a lot better. It still hurt, but it was bearable. She opened her eyes, and saw the room was still quite dark.

“Uhhhhh...” she said, a failed attempt to say ‘Hello?’

“Why hello there, Ms. Ravenstone,” whispered a gentle male voice. “Glad to see you’re awake at last.”

She couldn’t move her head, or rather she didn’t feel like it, but he came into her line of sight. It was the black nurse from the day of ‘the incident.’ He was a very handsome black man with a soft, androgynous face, and very short hair.

“Whaaa...” she started, unable to form words still.

“‘What happened?’ Well given what Mr. Carling told me, I’d guess that while you were passing his little test, your magic was filtering out most of the information from your senses, and when the test finished, we think that filter dropped while you were still fully receptive, and thus you had a violent case of sensory overload. Before you do something like that again, you need to learn how to keep the filter on long enough to turn your receptivity off before you let the filter drop. I suggest you get personal tutoring from a fellow Sensitive.”

“Oh. Uh... who... who would... uhh...”

“‘Who would that be?’ you mean?”

She nodded ever so slightly, and winced at the resulting spasm of pain that went through her head.

“Well that’d be a toss-up between Amraphel Dyer and Melora Metaxas, odd as it sounds.”

“Odd? Why odd?”

“Oh, well... it's just that most Sensitives don't go into something like Defense. It's rather like seeing someone with hearing like a bat getting a job as a death metal musician.”

She laughed at that comparison, and immediately regretted it, her clamminess returning as the pain intensified.

“Oops. Sorry, I shouldn't be making you laugh in your state. I gave you the strongest pain relief potion recommended for migraines, but apparently it's not enough. Still, you'll have to sleep the rest of it off, I'm afraid. Can't risk an overdose.”

“What... time... is it?” She wondered how exhausted her voice made her sound; she was pretty exhausted, after all. Sleep sounded like a great idea, in fact.

“It's 2:30 pm, same day you passed out. But in your condition, I insist you stay at least until dinner time. Maybe longer, in fact. I can have a meal brought in for you if you get hungry before you're ready to leave.”

“Thanks... what's your... um... name?”

“I'm nurse Jackson. Nurse John Jackson, to be precise.”

“Mmm...” she said, smiling. “Nice name. Nicer man.”

He chuckled quietly.

“Well Ms. Ravenstone, I'll go have someone tell your friends you're recovering. Which class would they be in right now?”

“Prolly... studying in library.”

“Alright, I'll make sure they know. You go back to sleep, recover fully.”

“Sure thing, handsome man...”

He chuckled again and walked out of her field of vision. Since she was exhausted, it didn't take her long to drift back to sleep, even despite her headache. That wasn't so surprising; she'd had headaches as long as she could remember, she was used to falling asleep while one was still making a nuisance of itself.



WHEN SHE NEXT WOKE up, she was able to sit up. Her head was still hurting in what she called a 'reminder headache,' IE it was just painful enough to remind her of the migraine she'd had earlier, but she could sit up now, and she thought she could tolerate light again.

"Up again, I see," said nurse John Jackson.

"Yeah. Feeling a lot better."

"How's the light sensitivity?"

"I think I'll be okay with *some* light."

Nodding, the nurse went over to the light control and slowly turned up the adjustable lights with a knob. The lights got up to just past twilight level before she winced again, and he turned it back down to twilight level.

"Okay, still sensitive to light it seems, so you're staying here overnight, Ms. Ravenstone. Are you hungry?"

Her stomach growled loudly just then.

"I guess that's a yes," he said with a grin. "I'll go call up some food for you."

"Can my friends visit me?"

"If you feel up to visitors, sure."

"Yeah. By the way... how do you know who my friends are?"

"I presumed they were the ones helping you help people the day of the incident. Was that incorrect?"

"No, that's them alright. Well, them and Kohana and Aavraak."

He smiled. "I'll be back soon. If you need anything, there's a call button. One of the other nurses can answer if I'm not back yet."

"Thanks, nurse Jackson."

He nodded at her and left the room.

The meal he brought back for her consisted of very light foods; fruits, un-buttered vegetables, sandwiches with low-fat meat and mustard for condiment, apple sauce, and fruit juice.

"I call it the 'migraine diet,'" he said. "A lot of patients with migraines report that fat-rich foods make their migraines worse, so I only brought you light foods."

"Thanks. I'm very familiar with the migraine diet, so I'm glad you thought of it when I forgot to."

"You're welcome, Ms. Ravenstone."

When she was done eating, her friends came in. Not all of them, as the nurse wouldn't let too many people in at once, but Brandon, Sally, Cally, Aavraak, Alvar, and Kohana were all there. Of course, Alvar being present meant the other two parts of that triplet set were there as well, through the mental link they shared.

"Ohmygoodness, what happened? You were fine one minute, being all impressive and stuff with that magic vision thing, it was so awesome, and then the next minute you're

sick all over the floor! I was worried you'd caught a bug. Did you catch a bug? How bad is it? Are you going to live?" Cally rambled, just before beginning to chew her nails. Dalia made another mental note to get Cally a chewy necklace to help her break that habit.

"Um, apparently I had a magical filter that was filtering out most of the noise in the room. I need to learn how to keep that filter going long enough to return my uh, receptivity to normal first. Being that open with the filter off was the worst pain I've felt in my whole life. Made my previous worst migraine feel like a little twinge in comparison."

"Ouch," Brandon said sympathetically. The others all nodded.

"How do you feel? Cuz you sound horrible, your voice all scratchy and weak."

"Better. Head still hurts, but it's a wee little baby headache now. Still need to stay the night to fully recover, though; I still have some lingering light sensitivity."

"Glad you're feeling better, anyway," Sally said. "We'll let Kobalos and Gegauassi know what happened."

"Thanks."

"Cally was right, that *was* quite impressive," Alvar said. "Sensing the tiny magic streams, I mean. Though that *was* rather an impressive amount of vomit, too. You set a couple other people off as well, when you did that. It was quite disgusting." By her tone, Alvar seemed morbidly pleased.

"Yeah," Brandon said, pulling a disgusted face. "But we actually got to see hobs! They came in almost at once and started cleaning up the mess with tiny mops and buckets, but they magicked away most of the mess first. They look a bit

like the gnomes, but shorter and squatter. They were dressed in tiny little versions of the blue uniforms Ms. Hollander and the other human maintenance staff wear. It was so cool!”

“Uh huh,” Cally said. “They came in, got to work, and in less than five minutes they were gone again, and the floor was clean and dry. They really know their stuff! My house has hobs, too, but ours aren't quite so efficient, they don't have much to do. It's a small house, and my parents are both gone from it most of the day. Mom lives on campus during the school year, so it's just my dad and my sister at home after Dad gets back from work.”

Dalia shrugged. “Seeing hobs isn't all that impressive, honestly. I've seen them plenty of times before; our house is full of them.”

“So all they work for is room, board, and occasional goodies?” Kohana asked.

“Yes. Why?”

“Can you teach me how to uh... hire? Do you hire hobs?”

“Yes, I can teach you that, Kohana. It's not difficult.”

“Great! Because if we had some hobs, that'd take a huge load off Mum's workload, and she could do with less stress in her life.”

“How much do hobs eat?” Brandon asked.

“Not much. They mostly live off the insects and rats that infest houses. Though in some places, they've been raising their 'prices,' due to dangerous chemicals in their usual food sources. Pesticides and so on, you know. And their family groups tend to be kinda large, starting at about 30 individ-

uals. Our house has roughly 200 of them. So uh, you might look into that situation first, Kohana.”

“Drat! Always a catch.” She sighed. “Yeah, where we live that would probably be a problem.”

Cally's eyes went wide. “Oh wow, you have 200 hobs? How big is your house? I kinda wanna see a house big enough to have that many hobs, I bet it's super impressive! Ours only has 34, I think.”

Dalia continued, “Um, yeah, our two houses, which are linked by a portal, are collectively pretty big. The Tirffiniol side is bigger, most of our hobs live in that one. Which is good, because they can also hunt for food in Tirffiniol, so there's that. You'd need a nearby portal if you wanted to do that, I think. I uh, don't know whether or not they can go between worlds on their own. I suppose I could always ask them, though.”

“If there's 200 hobs in your house, Dalia, how many do you think are in Fae Springs?” Brandon asked.

“No idea. There's multiple campuses, for one. I'd say probably at least 500 per campus.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. But I don't know how big your home is, Kohana. You might not need a lot of them.”

“We live in an apartment. I think 30 hobs would probably be a little crowded.”

“I doubt it. They like to live in the walls, ceilings, and floors. And they're pretty good about avoiding electrical wires.”

“Wait, what? You mean like in that movie, 'The Borrowers'?”

"Hmm... yeah, that's right. I wonder if the people who made that movie knew about hobs?" Dalia wondered aloud.

"It was originally a book," Kohana said.

"I'll bet the author knew about hobs, then," Dalia replied. "Mundanes can see them, even if they usually try to forget it when they do."

The friends continued to talk about different things; the classes Dalia missed, what people were saying about her taking ill in class, and various other topics until nurse Jackson reminded them about curfew, and they had to leave Dalia mostly alone in the infirmary. But she was tired again by then; headache-recovery sleep wasn't quite the same as regular sleep, after all. So in less than an hour, she was asleep again.



*FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

On their way from lunch to History and Civics class the next day, Dalia's attention was drawn by a vague feeling of worry, but not her usual kind of worry. This was worry about others, though who it was focused on she couldn't tell. But it had a direction. She broke off from the group to follow it. Brandon noticed first, and stopped, the rest of her friends nearly running into him.

"Dalia, where are you going?"

"I'm feeling something this way. I think someone needs me."

"You're needed at class," Sally reminded her.



"I don't know what this is, but it feels more important than class. Whether it is or not, I'll risk the punishment. You lot go on without me."

Sally giggled. "'You lot'? What are you, British now?"

Dalia ignored her and turned left into another corridor, following whatever it was that had her attention. The others shrugged and went on to class.

A few minutes later, the source of the vague sense of worry and need was located. It was outside a locked maintenance closet. A pixie was there, female by the look of her, but smaller than normal for the species of pixies that lived in and near the school, only about three inches tall. She was scratching on the door and crying. She turned when Dalia approached, then flew up to Dalia's face and started yammering away in the pixie language of the area, which sounded like dolphin squeals, but faster and mixed with something like bird chirps. She had no idea what the pixie was saying, but clearly needed to get into the maintenance closet urgently. She nodded at the pixie, and it landed on her shoulder, waiting.

*'I'll get it,'* Doñela said.

Doñela popped out into her astral form and went through the solid door, unlocking it from the inside. Normally this would make Dalia very worried about getting caught and punished, especially with the pixie on her shoulder, but given its behavior, something in there was worth the risk. And she could always say the pixie made her do it. When the door was unlocked, she opened it and turned on the light.

Despite there not being much space available in the small room, it was still difficult to locate what she was looking for amid all the stuff that was crammed into it. But the pixie flew off her shoulder and alighted gently on the floor behind one of those yellow mop buckets on wheels. There was something there, that the pixie was looking at and pointing at while crying.

“Oh my goddess!”

It was a very small person, a child by the look of her. The tiny little girl was five inches tall – an inch shy of the maximum height for a hob – but had a frame too slender for a hob. Also, hobs wouldn't have left one of their own like this, they would have known she was hurt even if no other hobs had been there to witness it. Plus, even the hob children of the school wear the maintenance uniforms, and this girl was wearing a dress, made of what looked like silk. She didn't have any wings, either, so she wasn't a pixie. At least, Dalia *hoped* the child wasn't a wingless pixie. Dalia decided to think of her as a gnome.

Dalia pushed the bucket out of the way and got down on her knees for a closer look. The tiny child, her skin the color of bronze, was unconscious but breathing. Dalia carefully blew on the girl's face to get her black hair out of her face to help her breathing. Then, holding her hand over the girl, she tried using the trick she'd learned yesterday to figure out what the problem was. This being a quiet room with no other people around, and kinda dark even with the light on, Dalia thought it worth the risk.

The pixie yammered in alarm at Dalia putting her hand over the gnome. “Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt her, I'm

going to see if she's hurt," Dalia said. The pixie stopped yammering.

It wasn't easy seeing the rivers of power in the gnome girl, she was so small. Dalia was surprised to find the gnome girl's magic was very strong, like someone had taken half the power of an adult human witch and shoved it into someone five inches tall. The pixie felt the same. If Dalia had been able to see this magic as light, it would have blinded her, like looking at two tiny suns. So the issue wasn't that the magic was hard to see, but rather it was difficult to make out details like the flow of the magic. She could feel herself sweating as she strained to sort out the network of magical streams inside the tiny fireball of magic that was the injured gnome child.

After an unknown amount of time, Dalia figured out the issue. The gnome girl had a broken leg. She must've fallen from somewhere. Where *from* was another issue, there were too many possible things in here for a gnome child to have been climbing on. But the most pressing issue was what to do about this. She could make light with her fingers, but they hadn't moved on to levitation yet. If only—

She smacked her head with her hand, feeling stupid.

"Doñela, can you pick her up very gently? She's got a broken leg, and I don't know how fragile or tough gnomes are."

*'Sure thing, boss,'* Doñela said.

The pixie child looked at Dalia in confusion, then looked around the room, still baffled. Doñela knelt through the bucket on wheels to get closer, and very carefully slid her hand through the floor and then up, the gnome girl floating in her hand as it came out of the floor, making the pixie

cry out in alarm again. Then instead of standing up, Doñela floated a couple inches above the ground, still kneeling in midair. Dalia waited a couple minutes to be sure her sensitivity level was back to normal before leaving. She didn't know if Doñela would pop back inside the body if she passed out or not, but it was very likely, and she didn't want to risk the girl getting hurt more if she did. The two of them made their careful way to the hospital wing, the pixie girl on Dalia's shoulder, crying in worry for her gnome friend.

"Back again already, Ms. Ravenstone?" nurse Jackson asked before noticing the floating gnome girl. "Ah, I see you're not the patient this time. Tell me what happened."

"I think she fell, but I didn't see it happen. I found her like this, after this pixie got my attention. She's alive, but unconscious," Dalia said. "And she has a broken leg, I think. I'm not certain, but there's a lot of angry energy in her leg that looks like it might be pain. I uh, I mean that's how I interpreted it."

"Well put her up on this bed and I'll see what I can do for her."

Doñela put the gnome girl down on a bed, which was of course absurdly large for her. Nurse Jackson took out a wand of willow wood and moved it through the air above the girl, focusing on her legs.

"Yes, there's a broken leg. Slight concussion, too, I think. I'm not sure how to treat her, though. I'll be right back to ask one of the new faerie nurses, just a few moments. If you could keep an eye on her?"

She nodded, and he smiled at her and left the room.

*'I believe the gnomes have a city in the basement,'* said the calm voice of Tamir from inside her head.

"Oh, yes," she said aloud. She decided to tell nurse Jackson that when he came back.

A few moments later, nurse Jackson came back with a female nurse at his side. This nurse was immediately obvious as a kitsune, because she wasn't even *trying* to hide her three bright-red tails. Seeing her face, Dalia wondered if all kitsune *had* to look Japanese or if they could choose a human disguise that was some other ethnicity instead, but thought it impolite to ask.

The nurse looked at the gnome girl and ran her own tests with a wand of a wood so white it was glowing. Dalia was fairly sure this had to be Angelic Ash wood, a species native to Tirffiniol.

"Well I'm afraid gnomes aren't really in my area of expertise," the kitsune nurse said. "I know they're sturdy beings, this one probably had to have fallen at least six feet and land on it wrong to break her leg like that. But beyond that, I don't know what to say or do."

"Um... isn't there a uh, a gnome city in the basement of the school? Surely they have their own doctors?"

"Ah yes," the kitsune nurse said, nodding. "Good thinking."

The new nurse went over to the wall and tapped a rhythm out on it. A moment later, another pixie flew out of a hole in the wall, looking curiously at them all. The kitsune nurse began, then, to speak with the pixie in its own language. When she finished, the pixie squeal-chirped back at her and flew out of the room at top speed.

“Nifri will make sure the gnomes are notified. Someone should be along shortly.”

A few minutes later, there was a tiny 'pop!' sound, and a pair of adult gnomes appeared, having been teleported in by several hobs. These hobs were unusual, though, in that their uniforms were green, not blue. Before Dalia could ask about it the hobs vanished again, and the gnomes set to work treating the gnome child.

One of the gnome doctors was a man, the other was a woman; the man was an inch shorter than the woman, and she looked to be the max height for gnomes at six inches tall. Dalia watched nervously, from a respectful distance, while the doll-sized doctors worked. She chewed nervously on her goldfish necklace and rocked back and forth in place to soothe herself as she waited. The pixie girl on her shoulder was gripping Dalia's earlobe so tight it hurt, still crying for her friend.

When the gnome doctors were done, the girl had a cast on her leg and was awake.

“Thank you for helping our child, Tall One,” one of the doctors – the woman – said while bowing.

“Yes, thank you very much,” the male gnome doctor said, also bowing.

Dalia shrugged, to the pixie's annoyance. “Someone was in pain. Her friend was crying and her emotional pain got my attention when I sensed it. I had to help.”

“There aren't many who bother to pay us gnomes or pixies any attention, even to help the injured,” said the gnome woman. “Usually when Tall Ones do pay attention to us, it's

to ask something of us. We are grateful for your compassion. What is your name, child?"

"Dalia Ravenstone," she said.

"Álse-láshon shá-rethchách, Dalia Ravenstone. I am Orlá u Zek a Drákká, and this is my colleague Ákándrá u Evesh a Drákká. 'Drákká' means 'healer,' we're not related."

"What did those first two words mean?"

"'Álse-láshon shá-rethchách' means 'Blessed day,' and it's the greeting for daytime in our language. You respond with the same."

"Álse-láshon shá-rethchách, Orlá u Zek a Drákká and Ákándrá u Evesh a Drákká."

The two gnomes tilted their heads in thanks.

"If I'm correct," said Orlá, "you helped our cousins in the trees as Emissary to the Cosmos. Am I correct?"

"Er... yes. I helped them get a wand they made to its owner."

The gnomes, including the young girl, smiled at her. The woman spoke.

"You have friends among the gnomes now, for your kind deeds. If ever you need help, call for it in the name of Ilsálthár." She looked up at the pixie on Dalia's shoulders, and added, "Looks like you've made a friend of the pixies, as well."

Dalia privately thought she already had the friendship of the gnomes and pixies in her own home, but these were totally different groups of them, so aloud she said, "Um... okay. Cool. So uh, how does that work?"

"Just tell a gnome or a pixie 'I need help, by Ilsálthár!' They'll recognize that, even if they don't know English."

She blinked, astonished. "The pixies will help, too?"

"They will pass on the message, at least. You came to the aid of a pixie today, even if she was just worried about her gnome friend. I'd be very surprised if the pixies didn't count you as a friend after today."

"Cool. Oh uh, by the way, what's your people's um, policy, on uh, visiting your city? Us big people, I mean?"

"It is usually discouraged, because there are many among your kind who are not nice – or who are even violent – to us. But if you ask a gnome to ask their Elders for an audience, it can be arranged for you. Just give them your name when you request an audience," said the male gnome.

The woman, a bit more wary, asked, "Why do you wish to visit our city?"

"Because I want to see it, and learn about your people. And make friends. I have gnomes and pixies at home I'm friends with, but they're different groups and different cultures from the ones here. Also, you can ask around, I'm friends with a goblin and a kitsune, a friend of the family is dating a different kitsune, we have bogeymen living in our attic, and my godmother is an *Ævintýrichor*."

Both adult gnomes fainted at this pronouncement, making Dalia's eyes widen in worry, but the little gnome girl was giggling. Her pixie friend, now at her side, was just confused. The two nurses were also wide-eyed, staring at Dalia in amazement.

"You scared them, I think," the gnome girl said. "But they'll be okay."

"Hi there. I didn't catch your name."



“Álse-láshon shá-rethchách, kindly stranger. I'm Tozrilen u Váándáá a Quevendá. 'Tozrilen' means 'mossy tree trunk of the northern mountains' in Nomebborch, one of the seven ancient tongues of the Vokávní tribe of the Nomávál – what you would call gnomes.”

For some reason, the kitsune nurse had gasped in surprise when Tozrilen introduced herself. Dalia ignored that for now.

“Álse-láshon shá-rethchách, Tozrilen u Váándáá a Quevendá. I'm Dalia Ravenstone. 'Dalia' means 'a strong branch.’”

“Thank you. Dalia Ravenstone, I wish you to know that House Váándáá owes you a great debt for helping me.”

There was another gasp from the kitsune nurse. This time, Dalia asked.

“Okay, why do you keep gasping like that?”

Tozrilen giggled, but the nurse didn't answer in time before Tozrilen did.

“She is doubtless aware enough of local politics to recognize my family name and my title. My mother is a Prálsek, which is a rank of nobility similar to a duke or duchess.”

“Oh. So you're gnomish royalty?”

“Nobility, not royalty. Wouldn't know it to look at me, though. Especially since I am a 'willful child' who is 'always running off alone and getting into trouble,' as my family routinely inform me.” Tozrilen was grinning as she said all this.

“Ah. Yes... I might have thought the silk dress was unusual if I hadn't been so focused on helping someone in need of medical attention.”

“Yes. My mother will be quite cross with me for dirtying it, once she finishes worrying after my safety. It's genuine spider silk harvested from a black widow spider.”

Dalia whistled, impressed. “That must cost a lot.”

“Not too terribly so; spiders are much bigger compared to us than they are to you, after all. Unlike humans, gnomish royalty and nobility are *not* extravagantly wealthy. To be so would, by our morals, be terribly gauche.”

“Neat. Well this is something to write home about. Our gnomes at home are just simple folk who grow mushrooms in our basement. They have Elders, but no nobility or royalty. I wonder what my family will say when I tell them I rescued the child of gnomish nobility.”

Tozrilen shrugged.

“Um... by the way, who's your friend?” Dalia asked, having noticed the pixie girl was now sitting next to Tozrilen.

Tozrilen took the pixie girl's hand. “This is my friend Zix.”

“Tell her 'hi' for me.”

The gnome girl said something in the dolphin/bird sounding local pixie dialect, and the pixie answered back. “She thanks you for helping me,” Tozrilen said.

“No problem. So uh, I hope it isn't too forward of me, but can we be friends?”

Tozrilen smiled. “I would like that, Dalia Ravenstone. I doubt we'll see much of each other, but some visits are possible, and you can always send me letters. Ask your librarian or the Faery Realms and Residents teacher how to send me letters, it's something you have to be shown. Or you could ask an adult pixie to get in touch with Zix for you. Though Zix

is a common name. You'd have to specify 'small, quiet Zix' of Chitsocha Hive."

"I don't suppose your people have email yet?"

"Not widely, no. But I'll see if Mother will get a gnome-sized computer for me. More likely she'll donate several dozen of them to our neighborhood's library, and then I'll have to wait in line to use it, but it would be better than no computer."

"I could get you a smart-phone. They're pretty cheap these days. It'd be a bit big for you to carry around, but small enough to use like a large tablet computer."

"Oh I couldn't," Tozrilen politely declined. "No really, I thank you for the offer, but that would be seen as an extravagance among my people."

The two gnome doctors were waking up at last from their fainting spell. Tozrilen giggled at them. They were quickly fully recovered, and soon after were calling the hobs from earlier with a magical coin. In less than a minute, the hobs teleported a small carriage for them onto the floor. This carriage was drawn by two black gerbils.

The two adult gnomes cast spells on themselves and jumped the three or four feet to the floor, while Dalia carefully lifted Tozrilen and set her down next to the carriage. The adults lifted her into the carriage and got in. There was a driver in the carriage, a middle-aged gnome wearing a black uniform and bowler hat.

Dalia couldn't help herself, she had to do it. She got out her phone and snapped a picture of the gerbil-drawn carriage to prove it was real to her friends and family. Then took some video of it, too.

“Er, you don't mind, do you?” she asked nervously, only belatedly thinking to ask.

“Not at all, Dalia. I understand most humans think gerbils are cute. We think they're cute, too. Keep it.”

“Thank you, Tozrilen.”

“Sháḥoy-rethcháčí, Dalia Ravenstone,” Tozrilen said. “That means 'Magic bless you.' It's our goodbye.”

“Sháḥoy-rethcháčí, Tozrilen u Váándáá a Quevendá.”

Tozrilen looked up at the human and kitsune nurses. “Sháḥoy-rethcháčí-ael, saynomáánju a Drákká.”

“Er,” the human nurse said. “Sháḥoy-rethcháčí-ael, Tozrilen u Váándáá a Quevendá.”

The Kitsune nurse sighed and said, “Sháḥoy-rethcháčí, Tozrilen u Váándáá a Quevendá.”

The gnome girl nodded her acknowledgment, then waved with a smile as the driver gently flicked the reins, and the gerbil-drawn carriage rolled out the infirmary door. Still recording video of the carriage, Dalia briefly wondered how they were going to get the carriage to the basement from here.

As soon as the carriage left, nurse Jackson handed her a slip of paper. “My phone number, so you can text me a copy of that picture and the video. My boyfriend will squee with delight when he sees it.”

Dalia chuckled and took the slip of paper from him. “Will do.”

“Oh, and here's a note excusing your tardiness,” he added, handing her another paper.

“Thanks, nurse Jackson.”

As she left, she heard nurse Jackson asking, “So did I say the goodbye wrong?”

“There are different endings depending on who's being addressed,” the Kitsune said. “The one she used for us was the plural-you form. I think 'saynomáánju' means 'strangers.’”



SHE DIDN'T GET AN OPPORTUNITY to tell her friends the story of what happened until study hall that afternoon. They nearly got in trouble for laughing in the library when she showed them the gerbil-drawn carriage, Ms. Adon raising an eyebrow at them in mild chastisement, but chuckling herself when they showed her the video.

As they were giggling and talking, Doñela was fifteen feet away in her astral form, listening to the pixies talking to each other in their squeal-chirp language, and watching their body language as they spoke. Doñela didn't know how similar their body language would be to human body language or to the body language of regular-sized pixies, but she hadn't noticed any major differences in the body language of the other humanoid faery species so far.

These pixies seemed... worried. She had no idea what they were saying, as the pixies they had at home always spoke English or Spanish around the family, so she didn't know pixie language yet. Still, their tone and body language suggested worry. They were also being furtive, as though discussing something and worried someone would overhear. Ironic, considering Doñela was listening in. Of course, she

doubted they'd worry about that, since she couldn't understand them.

Still... she thought it possible she *could* learn to understand them. She was already noticing patterns in the strange language. It sounded very musical, this language, and she had made note of several bits of song that were familiar. Since Dalia was in the library a lot – every study hall and a lot during the weekend – and since Doñela wasn't allowed to read in here in case someone wondered what was going on, Doñela decided to make a project of trying to figure out the pixie language. Doñela was slightly better than Dalia at languages. Dalia only spoke English, Spanish, and American Sign Language well; Dalia could *understand* Diné (Navajo), but her ability to speak it wasn't very good at all. Whereas Doñela was fluent in all four of those languages.

Nor was the pixie language the only language she was listening to. Doñela had caught Aavraak speaking on MMOTW with one of her parents. Where the goblin girl had gotten a computer, she didn't know, but figured such things could be imported. Or heck, maybe they made them and it was slightly racist to assume they hadn't. But the Goblin language... What had been interesting is she'd heard two distinct languages that day. One was a harsh, guttural language of the kind you'd expect from goblins, based on stereotypes about them. The other, however, was soft and gentle, reminding her of one of Tolkein's elvish languages. It was the second one that had caught her attention, in fact, as it seemed so unlikely. But she supposed she should know better than to judge by appearances.

When the pixies appeared to change the subject, she watched them as one of the two seemed to be teaching the other one something about the library, or the books on the shelves. She caught author names in their proper languages, which sounded weird coming from the pixies. This led her to wonder how pixies and gnomes spoke loud enough to be heard by humans. *Probably magic*, she thought.

Fascinated, Doñela scooted closer as one pixie was reading something from one of the books. At least, the tone sounded like one people tended to use when reading something aloud from a page, but the book wasn't written in pixie, it was English. With a shock, Doñela realized this pixie was teaching the other one English; it alternated between the pixie language and English in a way that was unmistakable as anything else.

Doñela was so engrossed in what they were doing that she didn't notice Dalia and her friends getting up to go to Magical Self-Defense. So she got rather violently jerked away from the scene as the invisible tether – always so annoyingly short anywhere but home – pulled her away. She tried to shout, and somehow ended up using Dalia's voice, making their shared body say something that sounded like pixie speech, though the accent must have been horrible.

Whatever Dalia had accidentally said, it made everyone in the room stop and stare at her. The pixies were staring, too, and looking confused. For all Doñela knew, she'd accidentally said something ridiculous like 'my hovercraft is full of eels.' Or more likely, given its shortness, she'd probably said 'Shoe brain!' or something equally absurd.

"Ms. Ravenstone," the librarian said, smirking. "May I ask why you said 'noble leg' in Ipsix?"

"I don't even know what Ipsix *is*!"

"It's the primary language of the pixies in and around Fae Springs. Your accent is atrocious, by the way. You shouldn't try to speak Ipsix by mimicking the sounds, it doesn't work that way. At least half the sounds in Ipsix are either outside the range of human hearing or can't be made by a human larynx."

Dalia felt herself blushing. "I don't know how I even managed to say *anything* in a language that sounds like something a dolphin and a parakeet invented together. Especially if what you said is true. I know how to speak exactly six languages: English, Spanish, Navajo, Plains Indian Sign Language, Bogeymanese, and American Sign Language. ASL and Plains Indian Sign Language are both entirely non-verbal, and my Navajo is simply *terrible*. Whenever I try to speak complete sentences in it, my family always beg me to stop. So I only really speak three verbal languages at all well."

Brandon chuckled and then started doing a Bruce Willis impression. "'Whoa lady, I only speak two languages: English and bad English,'" he quoted.

Dalia grinned back and quoted back, "Multipass." It sounded like 'mool-tee-pass.'

*'Hey doofus, it was me,'* Doñela said to her. *'I was listening to some pixies talking and accidentally made you say something in their lingo when I got jerked away.'*

*'How is that possible?'*

*'No idea. A wire must've gotten crossed. We both live in the same body, after all, even when I'm floating outside of it.'*



"You must've overheard some Ipsix here in the library, then," Ms. Adon said, naturally unable to hear their internal conversation. "You're here often enough it wouldn't surprise me if you picked up a word or two here or there. Anyway, don't worry about the accent, just remember that learning pixie languages properly is a magical skill somewhat akin to telepathy."

"Right. I'll look up a book about it sometime. Anyway, we'll be late to class, so we'd better go."

As they walked to class, Brandon kept asking her questions about what had just happened. She didn't know how to answer; she hadn't told him about Doñela and Tamir yet. She realized she should probably do that soon, or Brandon might be cross at not knowing when Aavraak and Kohana did, even if they'd found out basically by accident when she was telling Sally.

"Listen, if you promise to drop it for now, I'll explain it tomorrow, okay?"

Brandon looked at her curiously for a moment, then nodded. "Deal. Don't think I'll go forgetting, though."

"Fine," she said, clutching her books closer to her chest.





## Chapter Eighteen: Exhibition Duel, Part 1

*(Same day)*

SINCE IT SEEMED UNLIKELY that boys would be allowed into the girls' dorms (it was something of a minor miracle they were let into the building at all) she didn't really know where to go to tell him without risking someone unwanted overhearing. Not unless one of the Banners with privacy-enforcement magic would let her and her friends stay behind after the rest of the Banner had left. Or use it early? Well, she knew someone in Spotted Hyena, maybe she could ask them? That one was open right after breakfast, but there hadn't been anyone besides her and her friends and Arlene for just over an hour. Yeah, she could tell them then. It might be difficult getting Brandon to come, though.

In Magical Self-Defense, Mrs. Metaxas was still teaching them shields, moving from simple shields to more complex ones. They still didn't know any offensive magic, but given their age and the name of the subject, it made sense to focus on defense over offense. Dalia was using the blackthorn wand for this class, because she'd found Mrs. Metaxas had

been right that pushing your magic through a wand built up a good sort of 'magical muscle' that made it easier to use magic without a wand. Also, the blackthorn wand was best suited to Defense out of the three wands she'd had shipped in from home.

She was getting better with the shield, but she was still one of the people in the middle of shield effectiveness and reliability for their class.

"Ms. Ravenstone," Mrs. Metaxas said gently as she was going around helping people, "it might help you to control your magic better if you visualize your magic as a river or stream of energy, and sort of... push your magic out of your body, then grab onto it like it was outside magic, and push it and shape it that way. Then switch back and forth between the two modes. Try that."

"Er, I suppose so," Dalia said.

Focusing on the kind of visualization she needed while being afraid of overdoing her sensitivity and ending up in the infirmary again was making her problem worse, though.

"Don't be afraid of your sensitivity," Mrs. Metaxas said. "Yes, Mr. Carling told me and the other teachers about your remarkable sensitivity. Don't fear it. What happened that day was the result of simple ignorance and inattention which caused your filter to drop. If you hold onto the feelings during higher receptivity and slowly ease yourself back out to normal receptivity, you'll be fine. It's like coming back after scuba diving; too fast and you get the bends. Do it slowly enough, and you adjust without a problem. You're a Sensitive, use it. It won't hurt you if you're careful."

Nodding uncertainly, Dalia focused on feeling the magic in her wand, her sensitivity coming into focus. She felt the wand's power, like a calm pond inside the wood and stones of the wand. She tried reaching for her magic to draw it out and push it forward, shaping it. What happened instead was she missed, pushing the magic in the wand out and shaping it. The resulting shield felt like her weakest yet.

When Dalia finished returning to normal, Mrs. Metaxas asked, "Clearly something went wrong. Any idea what?"

"Um... well, I couldn't get my own magic out. Um... instead, I uh, pushed the magic out of the wand. I think I drained it."

Mrs. Metaxas waved her concern off. "It'll refill. Quite rapidly, in fact, here in Tirffiniol. In fact, you can probably try again already."

Nodding, Dalia focused again on becoming receptive, to seeing the flow of magic. Sure enough, the wand was back to full power as though nothing had happened to it. With one less thing to worry about now, she tried reaching inside for her magic again. At first, she couldn't find it again. Then she had the idea to think of herself as another series of rivers of power she could see, but in her mind's eye.

Her magic-receptive 'vision' then showed her hand as a series of magical streams. From there, it was absurdly easy for her to pull the energy out of herself, push it through the wand, and out to be shaped.

There was a crash, a clatter, and a lot of angry yelling. She calmly kept her filter up despite this, and eased herself out of receptivity before trying to figure out what had happened.

"Alright, what'd I do wrong that time?" she finally asked.

Looking around showed her several desks knocked over, some already being righted by students. Other students were picking up pencils or pens or other things that had fallen over. Still others were rubbing their backsides or helping one another off the ground.

"From one extreme to the other, Ms. Ravenstone," Mrs. Metaxas said with a grin. "You grabbed too much power from yourself for the spell, and the shield expanded outward, knocking over people and objects as it went."

Dalia stared wide-eyed at Mrs. Metaxas. "Wow. Really?"

"Really really," Mrs. Metaxas said. "Such is the potential power of Sensitives."

Mrs. Metaxas leaned forward and whispered into her ear, "In time, you can even learn how to build up your magical core to superhuman levels, or tap into ley lines. Give it a decade or three and you could fight a seven-tailed kitsune and win. Rather, you could win if power was the only consideration in a fight with a seven-tailed kitsune, which it isn't. So even then, I wouldn't recommend it."

The teacher stood back up again and grinned at Dalia's look of astonishment.

"So... that... *you*?" Dalia asked.

"Yes, me. I've never fought a kitsune before, and I don't really want to try, but roughly that power level, yes. For brief periods of time."

Dalia's jaw dropped.

"Anyway, you're not puking or passing out or even sweating, so you must've figured out how to ease out of a receptive state."

Dalia closed her mouth and nodded.

“Excellent. Just remember to keep doing that. Over the years, it will get easier and faster as you figure out how to shut your receptivity off separately from your filter. Better yet, you'll learn how to turn your filter on when you're at normal receptivity, and even how to increase your filter's filtration, which I daresay you'd find useful. For now, though, they're still probably going to feel connected in your mind, hence the caution and slow, deliberate easing out. Now let's talk about moderating the power you use in your spells.”

She nodded, ready to proceed.

Mrs. Metaxas had spent half the lesson on Dalia by the time they were done working on moderating Dalia's power output. Dalia kept practicing as Mrs. Metaxas helped the other students in class, until the bell rang. Before she could leave, Mrs. Metaxas came back over to her.

“Ms. Ravenstone, a word quick?”

“Uh, sure. You lot go without me,” Dalia said.

Sally snorted at her continued use of 'you lot,' but nodded, heading out with the others.

“Yes, Mrs. Metaxas?”

“I just wanted to quickly note a couple more applications of your Sensitivity, Dalia. First, I think you'll find transformation magic becomes ridiculously easy in a receptive state. The trick there will be finesse, control. A lot of caution goes a long way when working with magic flows directly.”

Dalia nodded. “Makes sense.”

“Good. Also, I understand you have a family member who's a Vampire?”

“Yes. Great-grandpa Takashi is a Vampire.”

“Right. Well, most Vampires tend to be Sensitives, either by nature or by decades of practice. It's *much* more difficult to become a Vampire if you're not a Sensitive, in fact. Just in case that was a direction you were considering in life.”

She winked at Dalia, who winked back.

“Mrs. Metaxas?”

“Yes, Ms. Ravenstone?”

“The incident the other day, with Elliolynn... something was wrong with Aavraak and Kohana as well, that same day. Aavraak was having unusual losses of temper, and Kohana was losing control of her foxfire and her human disguise.”

“I see. I take it you think these things are related?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I didn't know that before, but now that I do, I agree with you. Did they find anything wrong with your friends?”

“No. And they got better during their stay there, but nobody knows why.”

“Odd. You suspect sabotage?”

“Yes!” Dalia said with excited relief.

“I'll look into it. There's quite a lot of different ways to mess around with faerie magic for someone skilled enough in the dark arts. Even practitioners of Light Magic could pull it off, too. Most of these methods leave signs behind that a skilled Sensitive like myself can find. I'll go through the list and investigate. If I find anything, I'll let you know before I turn my findings over to Principal Park.”

“Is he likely to believe you?”

“Good point. I can get some support before going to him, then. But I have to find something first.”

"What about Amraphel Dyer? You know, the Divination teacher? She's a Sensitive too, and she's good at divination."

"I'll ask her, but Amraphel Dyer is..." she paused, thinking before continuing. "She's a bit... well let's just say, she's not quite connected to our reality. She doesn't seem like it if you've only known her a few minutes or hours, but she's just as likely to tell you information about another universe or parallel dimension, or even a part of the past with no obvious relevance to your question, as she is to give you a sensible, relevant answer. She comes down to earth on occasion, but her inner eye is a bit unfocused."

"Oh, is *that* why she was wearing all that hematite while doing a reading for me?"

"Yes, she was keeping herself grounded. She always wears at least one of them, but she wears all four of them when she has extra need for it. So again, I'll ask her, but I don't expect any of her answers to be comprehensible or relevant. And even if they are, it'll be hard to find the diamond in the rough."

"Oh. Well thanks anyway, Mrs. Metaxas."

"You're welcome, Ms. Ravenstone. Now, off to PE with you. Here's a note in case you're late."

Dalia nodded, took the note, and gathered her things. As she left, she noticed Mrs. Metaxas start to float little metal spheres around the room. She chuckled at the teacher's antics as she left for PE.





*SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017 – Wednesday, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

For the week leading up to the exhibition duel, not a whole lot happened. Dalia was still working on mastering her sensitivity and the abilities it gave her (which was having mixed results in classes so far), Kohana and Aavraak continued to be back to normal, and life went on. About the only thing of note for Dalia was she noticed several people still hadn't recovered from the incident. Several students and even some of the staff weren't looking as energetic or as happy as they had. Even Ms. Hollander was looking pale and subdued, not at all her normal cheerful and animated self. Dalia liked Ms. Hollander; she missed seeing the normally-cheerful woman's bubbly personality, and seeing even someone as normally affable and lively as Ms. Hollander being brought down was, well, a downer.

Saturday was a bust as far as getting a chance to tell Brandon about being a multiple was concerned. Arlene had been ill with a flu, so Dalia hadn't been able to find her to ask about getting some free time with her friends with a secrecy-keeping ward stone. She'd tried going in early with Brandon, Cally, and the triplets, but there were other people there, to everyone's mild annoyance.

It wasn't until Wednesday at lunch when Dalia found Arlene and asked her about it. There wouldn't be a chance to use it until Saturday, when Arlene said she could set out a note giving them privacy for an hour after breakfast that day, so they at least had a date set for doing that. Assuming nothing else major happened before then.

That same Wednesday night, Sally left the library early, surprised that Dalia hadn't been there after dinner. According to Ms. Adon, Dalia was frequently in the library after dinner, but about once or twice a week she wasn't. Curious, Sally went back to their room to see if Dalia was there.

When Sally got inside the room, she first saw what had to be Doñela tossing a ball against the wall above Dalia's bed and catching it, over and over again. Then she heard Dalia having a conversation with someone on her computer. She glanced at the screen and saw Vedyā, Dalia's adopted younger sister from India. The two were going over classwork, oddly.

"Are you sure that's all you've learned there in a month?" Vedyā asked, sounding annoyed.

"Yes, Vedyā. The first month or so of school is getting in touch with your magic and then feeling outside magic."

"But that's boring, I already know how to do that. I've been doing that for years. Thanks to emotional magic, I've been doing far more than this since second grade! I can already see I'm going to be bored out of my skull next year for at least a month."

"Well uh, that's not exactly unusual for you, though, is it?" Dalia asked. She knew Vedyā had always been far ahead of others her age, that she'd been reading at a high school level by the time she was eight, and had excelled at most subjects. She had also turned down several offers of skipping a year at school by teachers who recognized she was much smarter than any of her year-mates.

"No," Vedyā said, answering Dalia's question, "but it's aggravating being expected to be at the same level as the Nean-

derthals around me. Then having to choose between leaving behind the people I can tolerate and skipping ahead to something actually interesting, or staying behind and being bored senseless.”

“But why would that be an issue? You’ve got your network. The Circle. Kyklos Ouroboros.”

“Yes, but there’s also bullies in the later years. Anyway—”

“Er,” Sally interrupted, “hi guys. Whatcha doin’?”

“Neither of us are guys,” Vedyā said without looking up from what she was reading.

“It’s an expression,” Sally said.

“Dalia and I prefer the British plural you of ‘you lot.’ All the other options for plural you in English are either gendered or sound completely stupid. ‘Y’all,’ ‘yous,’ and ‘youse’ all sound like they were invented by someone with no sense of elegance at all. Not nearly as ridiculous as terms like ‘frouple,’ but still...” Vedyā trailed off.

“Anyway, what are you two doing?”

“I was hoping to get ahead of everyone else in my year next year by learning the class lessons from Dalia, but most of the information she’s given me is completely useless to me as I’m already well past that point.”

“Ah. Well... if you’re really so far ahead, maybe you could help Dalia instead.”

Vedyā paused to consider this. “It’s a possibility,” she finally said.

“So what’s Kyklos Ouroboros?”

“Dalia’s confused. The network itself is called The Chalikar. Kyklos Ouroboros is the *inner* circle, which consists so far of myself, Acorn, Joaquin, Sarah Butcher, and Arlene

Starling. The middle circle is Kyklos Kentrikos, and the outer circle is Kyklos Achanís. I know I've likely butchered the Greek when I came up with those names, but I was nine when I thought of them, so sue me."

"Okay... that doesn't really explain what it is, though."

"Vedya's network. An anti-bullying network she came up with on my behalf, starting back when she was in first grade."

"Yes, but it's grown beyond the scope of the original idea. It's fighting bullying through my entire school, and now has spread to Fae Springs by way of Arlene and Persephone."

"Speaking of Persephone, why didn't you include her in Kyklos Ouroboros?" Dalia asked.

"Because I don't know her well. She's Arlene's friend, not mine. She's Kyklos Kentrikos, though."

"I see. This network exists here, too? And Dalia didn't tell me about it?" Sally said, looking sideways at Dalia.

"Sorry. The only members I know are Arlene and Persephone. And I don't really... I mean..."

"Big sis was never really on board with the Chalikar. She would rather pretend bullies don't exist until they bear down on her and then cower like a frightened bunny. The Chalikar had to resort to spying on her to find out when it was needed."

"Which you're probably still doing, right?" Dalia asked pointedly.

"Of course," Vedya said, without a trace of regret. "Unluckily for you, though, your bullies in Fae Springs don't seem to have a predictable pattern yet."

Wisely deciding to change the subject due to the tension in the room, Sally said, "So, no classes on Friday. Excited?"

"Why don't you lot have classes on Friday?" Vedyā asked.

"What? Oh uh, right. I forgot to tell you. Um, there's an exhibition duel that day. Is it going to last all day long, Sally?"

"I think so," Sally said.

"Exhibition duel? Who's dueling?"

"A bunch of the Masters-level Defense students, and several of the Defense teachers, including Mrs. Metaxas."

Vedyā's eyes went wide. She blinked, then turned around and shouted at someone elsewhere in the house, while running out of the frame.

"*ASHCHÍINII! ¡VAMOS A UN DUELO!*"

Dalia blinked at the screen and shrugged, turning to Sally.

"I don't know much Spanish," Sally said, "but it sounds like she's *telling* your parents they're taking her to the duel, rather than asking."

"She does that sometimes, yes."

"Also, did she switch from Navajo to Spanish there?"

"Yes. It's called 'code switching.'"

"*¡VIERNES! ¡EL SEIS DE OCTUBRE!*" They heard Vedyā shouting excitedly. Then, a moment later in annoyance, "*CH'IIDII! Háát'ít biniyé?*" Another pause, a very loud sigh of annoyance from Vedyā, then, "*¡UGH, sí! ¡SI! 'Por favor.' ¡Feliz ahora?*"

Vedyā ran back into the frame. She paused and looked up as someone outside the frame said something to her in a chastising tone.

"Oh like you don't say worse things ten times a week!" Vedyā called back, then laughed.

Turning back to the screen, Vedyā said, "The parental units are still being annoying, but I can tell they're going to give in. I'd be very surprised if we aren't there to watch the duel."

"Cool," said Dalia, grinning.

"You said a naughty word, didn't you? What was it?" Sally asked with a smirk.

Vedyā rolled her eyes. "I said *Ch'iidii*. It's Navajo, it means—"

"VEDYĀ ROSHANEE RAVENSTONE, DON'T YOU **DARE** TELL THEM WHAT IT MEANS!" they heard Nizoni shouting from outside the frame. Vedyā just smirked and signed them the answer.

At this, they heard a long string of very annoyed Navajo as Nizoni chastised Vedyā again. She responded in the same language, amusement in her tone. When the conversation ended, Vedyā turned back to the screen.

"Shimá isn't really that angry, she was half-smiling," Vedyā told them, running one hand through her rainbow-colored hair.

"That is a very colorful person," Aavraak said. Dalia and Sally turned around; they hadn't even heard her come in. Kohana was right behind her.

"Aavraak, Kohana, meet my younger sister Vedyā Ravenstone. Vedyā, this is Aavraak. I don't remember her whole name, it's very long. And this is Kohana Sato. I think I've mentioned them before."

“*Yá’ át’ ééh atní’íni,*” Vedyá said, bowing her head. “*Nizhónígo athééhosiilzjíd.*”

“Vedyá, they don’t know *Diné bizaad*,” Dalia said in annoyance.

“Fine, fine. Greetings and hallucinations, friends of my lovely sister.” Dalia glared at Vedyá, who rolled her eyes and continued, “but what I said was Navajo for ‘Good evening, pleased to meet you.’”

Aavraak smirked, then inclined her head toward Vedyá and said, “*’hol’chaat szin’tthretch nyaak’nah, gleth’ahkt.*”

Vedyá leaned forward interestedly; she was a whiz at languages. “What’s that mean?”

“It means ‘greetings, foreign mortal, good evening.’”

Vedyá paused a moment, thinking. Then she repeated what Aavraak had said nearly exactly.

“Your accent is in need of work,” Aavraak said. “But astonishingly good for your first attempt. You have quite the ear for languages.”

“I should hope so, I know enough of them,” Vedyá said with a grin, counting them off on her fingers. “English, Spanish, Navajo, ASL, Plains Indian Sign Language, Bogeymanese, French, German, and Arabic. Currently working on learning Russian.”

Dalia nudged Kohana, who stepped forward. “Hello,” she said.

Vedyá looked over at Kohana, and looked her up and down like she was admiring artwork. Dalia thought the expression looked familiar, but she couldn’t remember when she’d seen it before. Then after a thoughtful pause and a brac-

ing breath, Vedyā looked into Kohana's eyes with determination.

"Hey there, foxy lady," Vedyā said, moving both her eyebrows up and down several times. Dalia cocked her head slightly at this, for it sounded and looked familiar.

Kohana's face turned bright red, and it spread to her neck and shoulders. Vedyā's response to this was to cackle with amused laughter.

Dalia suddenly remembered something, though why it popped up now, she didn't know.

"Oh hey, that reminds me, Kohana; you never told me why you wanted to go to Spotted Hyena with me."

Still red in the face, Kohana turned away from Vedyā, who had gone back to watching her with interest, and said, "Because, um... well, Kitsune gender is... it doesn't fit the human norm. And um, I'm not really comfortable saying any more than that."

Kohana turned her eyes downward, clearly too embarrassed to say any more.

"Come on, how strange could it be?" Vedyā asked. "And honestly, I wouldn't care if you turned out to be, I dunno, gender flexible or something. You know, sometimes a girl and other times a boy. In fact, that would be even more interesting."

"I don't want to talk about it," Kohana said much more firmly than before. "Sorry, I just... I don't know you very well yet."

Vedyā sighed but put her hands up in surrender. "Alright. It's not a problem, my little vixen."



Kohana looked up at Vedy's face on the monitor and blinked. "Are you... flirting with me?"

"Yes, I was indeed flirting," Vedy said. "I think you're pretty, and I'm curious to learn more about Kitsune. I know next to nothing, despite Uncle Yanus dating one."

Dalia nearly slapped herself in the face. *That* was why Vedy's words had been so familiar: she'd been parroting Yanus's words from her birthday party!

"You have an uncle who's dating a Kitsune?" Kohana asked.

"Yeah. And she's like, royalty or something." She paused, then said in a smooth voice, "But the only royalty I need is you, my queen."

Kohana smiled, despite looking extremely embarrassed. "I uh... I have to go to the bathroom. See you later, Vedy."

"Call me? Dalia will let you use her computer, if you need to. I want to get to know you."

Nodding, Kohana left for the bathroom. Vedy let out a sigh.

"Wow. I did it. And unless I'm mistaken, that wasn't exactly a 'no,'" Vedy said. "There's hope yet."

"What *was* that?" Dalia asked, shaking her head in embarrassment.

"Like I told Kohana, I was flirting, *Shádí*. Finally got the chance to try it."

"Oh. Like you wanted to do with Sally back in June?"

"Yes. Anyway, you're amusing when you're embarrassed, and it's incredibly boring around here without you, so I need to get my entertainment *somehow*. By the way, I'll have to introduce you to Susan Cooper over the next holiday, I don't

think you two have met yet. Boring name, but fascinating to talk with, and very easy on the eyes. She spurned my advances, sadly, but she accepted me as a friend, so it evens out."

"I thought you said you hadn't flirted before?"

"We had this discussion once before, remember? Back on your birthday? Anyway, Susan was one of the girls I asked out to the spring dance. It wasn't flirting, it was a simple yes/no question."

"Oh, okay."

Nizoni came into the screen's view then and said, "Vedya, say goodnight to your sister for now."

Vedya sighed. "Okay. *Yá'át'ééh hiitchi'i', Shádi.* And fare well to you for now, Aavraak. *Shádi*, give *ch'il biláhtah nizhóni* a kiss from me."

Dalia sighed. "I'm not doing that, Vedya. But I'll pass what you said along to Kohana."

"Excellent. *¡Adiosa, mi hermana!*"

The screen went blank then. Sally looked in confusion at Dalia.

"I thought the Spanish for goodbye was 'Adios,' not 'Adiosa'?"

"Um, '*adios*' comes from '*a dios*', meaning 'go with God.' '*Adiosa*' is Vedya's own take on it. See, '*dios*' is god but '*diosa*' is goddess, so uh, '*adiosa*' means 'go with Goddess.'"

"Wow. So atheists use '*adios*' as well?"

Dalia shrugged. "I guess. Dunno."

With that done, Dalia went back to her schoolwork. (The teachers called it homework, but they weren't home, they were at school; so she called it schoolwork.) When Kohana came out of the bathroom, Dalia told her that Vedya

had called her a pretty flower in Navajo and that she had wanted Dalia to give Kohana a kiss for her, which she wasn't going to do. Kohana had blushed again and sat down to focus on her own work.



*FRIDAY, OCTOBER 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

Classes were indeed canceled on the day of the exhibition duel, but everyone was required to watch the duel instead, unless they had a genuine excuse to avoid it. Dalia didn't think many people were going to object to that, honestly.

After breakfast, everyone followed the teachers out to the dueling field. Since there weren't any classes, everyone wore what they liked. Dalia had on a simple black dress with a white skull pattern on it, her black cat shoes, her sunglasses, bat-shaped hair clips, and she had her white parasol open to keep the sun off her, Kobalos sitting on her shoulder. Sally wore jeans and a simple pink t-shirt. Kohana wore a yellow dress that looked several decades old, and was patched in a few places. Brandon had on a blue sweatshirt and jeans. The Ravenstone triplets all wore very similar outfits of black shirts and black pants. Aavraak was wearing her uniform, the only person Dalia could see who was. And Cally had on a lovely baby-blue dress, with the silver spiral earrings she'd worn the first day Dalia had seen her. Several times as they went up to the dueling field, Dalia accidentally ran into peo-

ple or tripped over her own feet because she was paying more attention to Cally than she was to where she was going.

As Dalia and her friends entered the bleachers and moved toward Dalia's family, Dalia spotted Mrs. Metaxas out on the field walking on her hands. She smiled at the eccentric teacher, but she was too far away to notice Dalia's smile. Dalia was really looking forward to watching her duels.

They were lucky that the school was considerate enough to provide a ramp for wheelchairs, though the ramp was steep enough that Sally and Cally had to make sure Brandon didn't fall over backwards while going up it. They'd have to discuss that later with whoever coordinated these things. There also wasn't anywhere he could go but park his wheelchair next to the first row of bleachers, but Dalia's family had apparently realized all this upon looking at the bleachers, and were sitting in the first and second rows.

When Kohana spotted Dalia's family, she froze in place and stared, open-mouthed. Dalia supposed she could understand why; they made a striking mix of people, and it was her first time seeing most of them. Even Cally was staring a little. Nizoni was dressed in her usual khakis and tan trench coat, with a matching cowboy hat that had a red band with some kind of teeth in it. Most such hats usually used crocodile teeth, but Dalia knew that hat to be using dragon teeth instead. (*Juvenile* dragon teeth that had fallen out on their own, but dragon teeth all the same.) So Nizoni looked like a highly-scarred, female, Navajo version of some sort of hybrid between Crocodile Dundee and Steve Irwin. Dalia's brother Ashkii was wearing an outfit similar to Nizoni's, but in black,

and minus the hat, his hair in cornrows. He was clearly trying to look like Nizoni, but the effect was sort of ruined by the fact his skin was much darker than hers.

Sitting on Nizoni's right side was Dalia's Papa, Orpheus. Even though it was a warm, sunny day in Tirffiniol that day, Orpheus was wearing a black button-up shirt with black jacket which looked to be made of velvet. He had black gloves and silver sunglasses on, too, and was wearing a black top hat with a real live snake coiled around it. The snake kept looking around and flicking its tongue at people. Orpheus also held a black parasol in one hand and antique-looking silvery opera glasses in his other hand, regarding the dueling field with them even though not much was going on down there yet.

Then there was Morgana. Her dress was made of very shiny black satin, and there wasn't much there to call a dress, really. It covered her front with a low-cut but tasteful neckline, and it covered her legs entirely, but it was sleeveless, backless, and only half covered her sides; it looked like it was held up by magic or glue, but nobody could really accuse her of appearing indecent. Like Orpheus, she too was wearing gloves, but these were black opera gloves, with the faintest tracing of spiderweb pattern that was only visible because the pattern was matte where the rest of the gloves were shiny.

What was more, from where they were standing and the angle they were seeing her at from there as she was turned to speak with Nizoni, they were getting a clear look at the entirety of Morgana's back... which was dominated by what looked to most of Dalia's friends like some kind of picture, maybe a tattoo, of a coiled cobra lifting its head up high and

flaring its hood. The cobra had wings that spread across Morgana's shoulders.

It was like a tattoo, but it wasn't a tattoo, not exactly. Like a tattoo, it was a shape made of colored lines, but those lines – sometimes long, sometimes short, and sometimes just dots – were all raised higher than the rest of the skin, and were shiny. Kohana suddenly realized what she was seeing; this tattoo was made of shiny scars that had then been inked. She had to have had it done deliberately, there was no way scars looked like that naturally.

Oh, and Morgana was wearing a large satin witches' hat, like you saw in popular culture and Halloween costumes, only this one was very fancy. Made of high-quality satin, it pointed off to one side, but on the side opposite of where it pointed was a large, fancy array of black satin ribbons and bows, and what looked like a black peacock feather. She didn't even need a parasol, her hat's brim was wide enough to protect her whole torso and arms from the sun. She, too, was holding opera glasses.

Vedya was a big surprise to Cally, with her rainbow-colored hair and a black t-shirt with a large white pentacle on its front, black cargo pants, and rainbow hi-top shoes. Even though Vedya wasn't related to them by blood, her skin was almost as dark as the skin of Dalia, Morgana, Orpheus, and Ashkii.

But there was more to Vedya this time. Along with her usual attire, she also had a bunch of rings on her hands, six in total. Most were silver, but one looked to be pewter. They all had tiny little runes carved into them, covering the whole surface of the rings.

Her parents had their youngest child – Sweetheart – dressed in a 'Mommy's Little Monster' shirt (black, red text) and a black skirt, which Dalia knew was to make it easier to change Sweetheart's diaper. Sweetheart, their hair in tight braids with little plastic skulls woven into them, was also sporting a pair of curly black horns, the strap just barely visible.

In comparison to everyone else, Chooli was normal in zeer black jeans and t-shirt of a head-banging Beethoven thrashing on a guitar, the shirt emblazoned with the text 'Deaf Metal!' Zee did, however, have a bird skull necklace on and appeared to have some things under zeer shirt that made shapes as they pushed the shirt up, as well as zeer smart glasses, but Chooli looked, otherwise, like a miniature Nizoni (minus the scars).

When Vedy spotted Kohana, she looked to Dalia questioningly, mouthing 'Kohana?' Dalia sighed and nodded, so Vedy stepped forward, got down on one knee, and kissed the tops of Kohana's hands. Dalia felt a slight pressure from their direction, and assumed Vedy was 'tagging' Kohana with a spell to remind her of who Kohana is.

"Greetings, beautiful maiden," Vedy said. Kohana blushed again.

Vedy handed Kohana an orange rose and said, "A beautiful flower for a beautiful lady." Dalia wondered just how red Kohana's face could get.

"Oh. Uh. Thanks, Vedy. Um... what's orange mean?"

"Enthusiasm and passion," Vedy responded saucily. Kohana blushed deeper.

Ignoring the fact Vedyā was still parroting Yanus, Dalia looked over at Cally, wondering what she thought of this, but Cally was silently watching the exchange. Dalia was pleased to note Cally was looking amused.

“Er, Vedyā? How’d you recognize her if you’re face blind?” Sally asked.

Vedyā stared at Sally. “I can see her tails,” she said, gesturing at the tips of Kohana’s tails poking out from under her dress. “Plus, she’s the only girl with Japanese appearance who hangs around Dalia, that I know of. Then Dalia confirmed her identity for me.”

“Oh. Right.”

Vedyā whispered something in Kohana’s ear, and Kohana squeaked slightly at this, but smiled. Dalia really didn’t want to know what was said.

“What’s that on your back, Mrs. Ravenstone?” Brandon asked Morgana.

“A winged cobra, done by causing deliberate scars. The practice is called scarification, and comes from Africa, but it’s dying out over there due to disease concerns like HIV. But over here, it’s safer to do. So my husband, my wife, and I all learned how to do it from an Elder. A little magical Flesh Bending kept the scars from healing in ways we didn’t want them to, bypassing the more time-consuming mundane method, and prevented infection.”

“Didn’t that hurt?”

She shrugged. “Yes. But so do tattoos.”

Orpheus took her hands in his, staring at her lovingly. “Plus, we enjoy pain. Don’t we, my beloved winged viper?”



"But of course we do," she replied, baring her sharp teeth with a salacious grin.

A magnified voice interrupted, then; the voice of Principal Park telling everyone to please get seated rather than milling around. Annoyed, everyone sat down. Vedyā sat between Dalia and Kohana on the second row. Cally sat in the first row next to Brandon and Sally.

Vedyā waved her hand in front of Dalia to get her attention, and began signing at her, saying, {Judging by glasses and her being with you, that's Calandra?} She gestured at Cally in front of them with her head.

Dalia nodded anxiously. {We call her C-A-L-L-Y,} she signed.

Vedyā smirked. {You tell her you have crush on her yet?}

Dalia's face felt very hot. With an annoyed expression, she signed, {No.}

{You need tell her eventually, before she gets away.}

{Can't,} she signed, her eyes wide with fear.

{I can tell her for you. I can tell her 'Cally, my older sister thinks you're hot and wants to cuddle you.'}

Dalia shook her head, flapping her hands anxiously.

Vedyā shrugged. {Whatever,} she signed. {No surprise if she gets taken before you act. Cally very yummy looking. I court Kohana, but if not, and if I weren't such a nice person, I may court Cally instead.}

Dalia frowned at her sister. She didn't doubt Vedyā's words at all. In fact, knowing her sister as she did, Vedyā might eventually get bored of watching Dalia do nothing and pursue Cally anyway. But---

Her thoughts were interrupted by the magnified voice of the PE teacher, Ms. Trask, who apparently was commenting from a special box in the middle of the opposite bleachers.





## Chapter Nineteen: Exhibition Duel, Part 2

*Friday, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

“WELCOME STUDENTS, STAFF, and visitors to the 104<sup>th</sup> annual Fae Springs exhibition duel, which marks the start of the 150<sup>th</sup> annual national inter-school dueling competition circuit. I'm your commentator, Ms. Tina Trask. It's a pleasure to see so many turning out for this event, on this lovely sunny Tirffiniol day!

“The duelists are still warming up, so I'll just give you an overview of the lineup. But first, a little bit about how this event is organized. First up to duel will be Oak Campus's primary civics teacher Ms. Kai Carling and its primary Alchemy teacher Mr. Richard Marten, chosen for the first duel because they are average duelists, and are thus an example of the lowest level of Defense competence we hope to get out of most students who graduate Fae Springs.

“Mr. Marten, Ms. Carling, are you ready to duel?”

There was a pair of shouts of “Yes!” from the two teachers.

“Excellent. Mrs. Metaxas, if you could power up the dueling wards?”

Flipping back onto her feet, Mrs. Metaxas jogged over to a panel in what looked like a tall stone box. Whatever she did there made an oval of glowing runes and other symbols turn on, surrounding the dueling field and making the air shimmer for a moment.

“The dueling wards are the best in all of Pluviatia, possibly the best in the nation, designed by our very own school board member and professional ward-maker Nizoni Hatathli-Ravenstone, with input from all three Oak Campus Defense teachers. These wards will keep you spectators safe no matter how dangerous the magic coming from our duelists, directing the magic harmlessly into the ground. Designed to thwart even lethal spells, they're overpowered for what we use them for, I assure you. But better safe than sorry, of course.

“Mrs. Metaxas is now testing the wards to make sure they're still working fine.”

Mrs. Metaxas shot spells of red, green, purple, and even black at the wards using her diamond and copper combat wand. Even from this distance, Dalia could feel that a deceptively bubble-gum pink spell was full of malice and danger. She didn't know what that one did, and didn't think she *wanted* to know. She felt someone feeling very sick to their stomach and turned to the left, where she could see a bunch of the teachers and staff. She wasn't sure which one of them had felt ill; probably one she couldn't see from behind someone else. She turned back to face the field.

“Now that the wards are up, running, and tested, we can get on with the first duel. Duelists, take your places!”

Ms. Carling and Mr. Marten stood on the field 20 feet apart from each other, and bowed to one another. Then they each brought out their wands.

“Begin!”

Mr. Marten immediately shot something yellow at Ms. Carling, who dodged in time and shot back her own purple spell. Hers didn't make contact either. They jogged around to different locations on the field to regroup.

What followed was a lot of more of the same, casting spells and dodging, regrouping, rinse and repeat. It was, in fact, kind of dull. After nearly fifteen minutes of this, Ms. Carling won the duel by sending a spell, feinting one direction, then going another and sending a spell that connected, knocking Mr. Marten unconscious.

“A round of applause for our first duelists, please!”

There was polite applause at this unimpressive display. Mr. Marten was awoken and they both bowed to more polite applause before leaving the field.

“Next up are two Fae Springs students getting their Masters Degrees in Magical Self-Defense, Gerald Crowley and Leticia Woods. These two are in their final year at Fae Springs, set to graduate in May. They have each competed in the national inter-school dueling competition and have each won several medals in that competition.”

A black girl with her poofy hair tied behind her like a kind of puffy ponytail and a Chinese-American boy walked out onto the dueling field. Like the previous duelists, they bowed to each other first.

"Begin!"

The difference was immediately apparent, as a dozen spells flew in all directions within the first minute of the duel, the duelists jumping and running around, skidding into the ground, bouncing themselves off the wards, feinting, and tossing spells every which way. The pace was much faster, but Ms. Trask still had time to say what she thought they were doing. At one point she mentioned that the wards made it so she wouldn't be heard by the duelists until after the duel was over, so they couldn't use her comments to cheat.

It was an intense duel that lasted an entire half an hour before Leticia Woods hit Gerald Crowley with something that made him dizzy and fall over puking long enough for her to knock him out. But Crowley had gotten in some damage, too; Woods had cuts and bruises visible even from here, and she was nearly completely exhausted once she'd won. Crowley wasn't looking much better himself. Dalia half suspected, given what she'd seen in the duel, that Crowley had let Woods win just so it could be over.

There were half a dozen other duels after that, all of them intense and largely between duelists of roughly equal ability. Then there was a break for lunch, during which Vedya and Kohana talked with each other the whole time. Dalia watched them, because she'd never seen Vedya flirting until recently, and had worried Vedya would get bored by now and upset Kohana, but Vedya seemed genuinely interested in the conversation she and Kohana were having. And she seemed almost as surprised about that fact as Dalia was.

When lunch was over, everyone came back for the rest of the exhibition duel. There were about half a dozen more

student duels, each exciting but all largely interchangeable. When the last pair of students was done, though, it was time for some more adult duelists.

“Ladies and gentlemen, humans and Fae, our next duelists are Defense teachers. One is the secondary Defense teacher for Oak Campus, and the second is the primary Masters-level Defense teacher for Thorn Campus. Please welcome Mr. Baha'ullah Safiq and Mr. Clement White!”

There was a lot of enthusiastic applause at this from older students, teachers, and many of the visitors. Onto the field stepped a Middle-Eastern man with short hair and a goatee. Nizoni leaned forward and told them this was Mr. Safiq. The other fellow, Mr. White, was... well, he wasn't white, but his ethnicity was difficult if not impossible to tell. The only thing white about Mr. White was his beard, mustache, and hair. He kind of looked like Colonel Sanders, but with darker skin and a more stern demeanor. Also, he was wearing black sweatpants and sweatshirt, and sneakers. Mr. Safiq, on the other hand, was dressed all in blue.

It took longer for the noise to die down for these two, but when it did, they bowed like usual.

“Begin!”

Nothing much happened at first. The two adult duelists were circling each other, probably trying to psych each other out. Then Mr. Safiq made a sudden movement with one hand that kicked up a dust storm on the field, blocking him from view. Mr. White smiled and swept the storm away with a swish of his wand, disappearing with a familiar flicker Dalia recognized as shadow-walking, and reappearing behind

where Safiq had been. But Mr. Safiq had shadow-walked away as well, over to where Mr. White had been before.

He immediately gestured with his free hand, sending hundreds of clumps of dirt from the field toward his opponent. With a downward slash of his wand, Mr. White sent the projectiles to the ground, stopping their momentum. He flickered away into a better position, sending purple light at Mr. Safiq before flickering away yet again. Mr. Safiq flickered away just as the spell was cast, tearing the ground apart under where he had been a split second previous. He had no time to be annoyed, however, for Mr. White was behind him. Not having time to flicker away, Mr. Safiq ducked. But Mr. White had anticipated this and cast something that was heading straight toward Mr. Safiq's face.

Ducking, however, had given him time to flicker away, missing the spell by millimeters. He used the resulting confusion to jump Mr. White from above, tackling him. Or so he'd thought; he ended up passing right through the man. Realizing it was a glamour, Dalia saw him pulling the shadows to flicker away, but it was too late. Mr. White hit him in the back with a lime green spell that knocked his opponent back across the field, where he slammed into the wards hard enough to break his nose. The duel was over.

Several nurses ran onto the field as the wards went down, tending to Mr. Safiq. The damage must not have been too bad, though, for he was up and smiling a minute later, able to bow along with Mr. White. The applause was so deafening, Dalia was glad when Nizoni put a spell over her ears to keep most of it out.



Dalia glanced toward Mrs. Metaxas, to see what her Defense teacher thought of the competition. She was surprised to see Mrs. Metaxas leaning back in a wooden chair and casually eating a very yellow apple as though she was merely watching something interesting on television.

There was a recess for an hour while the duelists recuperated, and someone came along the milling audience selling hot dogs and popcorn, another person selling fresh fruit, and yet another was selling various drinks and other refreshments. Dalia bought a soda and a hot dog and a banana.

During the recess, everyone talked about the duel so far, how exciting it was. Several older students were taking bets on the outcome of the next duels, which were apparently listed in a program Dalia hadn't gotten one of. The next duels were several more pairs of Defense teachers from various Fae Springs campuses – Oak, Ash, Thorn, and Hazel campuses to be exact. There were also a couple duels between members of the school's melee dueling team, the Fae Springs Phoenixes, which was fairly exciting, one duel being one-on-one, the other one being Doubles.

But it was the last duel most people were interested in. To Dalia's astonishment, it was going to be two on one: Mr. White and Mr. Safiq versus Mrs. Metaxas. Predictably, Preston Park was sneering about this, especially after several of the students running the betting pools were predicting Mrs. Metaxas would win.

When everyone was settled back down again, the next duel started. It and the next several duels after it were all very intense, but Dalia was still anxious for the final duel of the day. Mrs. Metaxas continued to look nonchalant, when she

wasn't doing push-ups while standing on her hands, or something else impressive yet casual.

Then at about 5 pm, the final duel was starting. Mr. White and Mr. Safiq had been in other duels since their first duel and both had won against their opponents. Everyone was excited to see these two victorious duelists tag-team against Mrs. Metaxas.

While the two men jogged onto the field, soaking up the applause and the cheers, Mrs. Metaxas was casually strolling onto the field with her hands in her pockets. She was wearing jeans and a plain black blouse. She had no jewelry on.

"For our final duel, ladies and gentlemen and Fae folk, we have two return duelists, Mr. White and Mr. Safiq against Oak Campus's primary Defense teacher, Mrs. Melora Metaxas!"

The audience exploded in cheers. For whom, it was hard to tell.

As with all the duels, the duelists bowed to each other, and got out their wands. Mrs. Metaxas still had her combat wand on her, naturally.

"Begin!"

There was a small explosion of light, blinding everyone momentarily. When their vision cleared, there were approximately 20 copies of Mrs. Metaxas on the field, all standing there grinning. Each copy ran in a different direction, confusing the two men. The men ducked and flickered, shooting spells at the copies to try to find the real one. The scene rapidly devolved into bedlam such that Ms. Trask gave up trying to commentate pretty shortly, just making bewildered noises as stuff happened.

Dalia, careful to pay attention, caught more details than she thought she would, and would later get even more details from her friends and family. Among the highlights were Mrs. Metaxas leaving hastily-scrawled runic ward traps like magical land mines, projectiles of all sorts flying around, Mrs. Metaxas using non-wanded magic to create thunderous shock-waves, her doing cartwheels or somehow grabbing invisible bars in the air to duck out of the way of spells, and it even rained a couple times, muddying the field. The earth shook, the heavens rattled. At one point, Mrs. Metaxas got close enough to Dalia that she heard the teacher doing a fairy-style rhyming poem spell. She had no idea what it did, though, such was the chaos of the scene. Dalia was also pretty sure Mrs. Metaxas was flickering around so fast and so frequently that she was making it all the more difficult to tell which her was a glamour or not.

Dalia was one of several people who witnessed Mrs. Metaxas seeming to know what her opponents were going to cast before they cast it, and at several points she caught a spell of theirs with wand or hand and tossed it back at its caster, or sending something against the spells that canceled them out. Dalia thought this might be Mrs. Metaxas using her receptivity as a Sensitive to see the shape of the magic the men were trying to form before they could cast it.

Someone called down lightning; Mr. White, it looked like. Someone else was using copious amounts of fire; she thought that was Mr. Safiq. At points, the ground rattled so hard that several people held onto each other for fear of being knocked down. Dalia even thought she saw the duel-

ing wards flicker at one point, and heard Nizoni hiss with a sharp intake of breath when it did.

And then there was the laughter. Mrs. Metaxas was laughing gleefully at her opponents, like this was merry fun she was having, while the two men were sweating buckets and looking about ready to drop from exhaustion. It was quite obvious she was playing a game of cat and mouse with them. Dalia was pleased to notice Preston Park looking green around the gills at this.

Then, not long after witnessing Mrs. Metaxas starting to look bored, there was one final thunderclap that made the bleachers vibrate, and suddenly Mrs. Metaxas was standing in one place looking smug. The dust began to settle, and they saw the two men knocked out and tied up to each other, hanging in midair.

Nizoni sighed. "It is such a shame to see her holding back so much," she said.

Dalia and all her friends stared open-mouthed and wide-eyed at Nizoni.

"Holding back'? That was her HOLDING BACK?" Sally exclaimed.

"Oh yes. She is powerful enough she could've beat those two and all the other duelists together at once in five minutes. You saw that pink spell she cast earlier; that was a very nasty dark hex. Mrs. Metaxas graduated from Ördögfa Gerinc Iskola, a Dark Arts university in Hungary, with flying colors. It is part of why Principal Park does not like her. But you really *do* have to know how to do the Dark Arts in order to fight them."

"So wouldn't that mean she'd have to use dark magic against them to win in that situation?"

"What? Oh no, not at all. I mean, I suppose that would mean she would be holding back even then. I merely meant she could hold back much less than she does, without resorting to dark magic, and still win."

"Oh."

"What style do you think she was using, anyway?" Brandon asked. "Like, what would that be called?"

Sally grinned. "I think I'd call that 'gonzo Discordian' or maybe 'weaponizing sheer madness.'"

"Did you see how fast she flickered away?" Brandon asked. "The other duelists needed several seconds at least to react fast enough to flicker away, but she just kept going zip-zip-zip, so fast she might well have been in two places at once! Do you think she took lessons from Ressa?"

"I would surmise she did not react at all," Nizoni said, "but instead she planned out where she was going ahead of time, and relied upon their confusion to avoid the pattern being spotted."

"Yes, quite," said a new voice from nearby. They turned to look down at the front of the bleachers, where they saw Mrs. Metaxas.

"In fact," she continued, "I'd be quite surprised if they could predict the pattern even without the speed and dust and stuff."

"Why is that?" Nizoni asked.

"Because where I planned to go was decided using my computer. I've got a program on there that works with the science of chaos theory. Also, an alchemist made the com-

puter itself, it's an experimental quantum computer using magic to do what mundane computer science hasn't worked out yet. So its ability to generate random numbers is rather impressive.

"The best part is, the same numbers it spat out could be used in any situation with flat ground. And I have a few sequences memorized for other land types as well. Of course, the tactic isn't foolproof. To cast a spell, you have to pause in one place for at least ten seconds to give yourself time to adjust to your surroundings, cast, and restart the flickering. Which is why I had the illusory copies of myself in place. I take the place of one of them, and my opponents don't know where the real me is. And if they'd already cast through one of the decoys with no reaction, I can go back to that decoy, as it would make even *better* camouflage then.

"Oh yes, and lastly: it's a very advanced technique. Took me years of practice to perfect it. And I have to keep in practice, or else I get rusty."

With an acknowledging nod at them, Mrs. Metaxas walked off, starting to juggle as she did.

Since most of the other spectators were off the bleachers now, Dalia and her friends and family finally went down the ramp, keeping Brandon from tipping over as they did. Dalia spotted Vedya offering her arm to a blushing Kohana, who took it with a smile; the two of them walked down the stairs instead.

While everyone else went ahead, Vedya and Kohana hung back, taking the opportunity to really talk with each other in person again. Dalia glanced back at them every now and then, smiling and happy they were together at last. Cally

occasionally looked back as well, after noticing Dalia doing it.

Dalia looked back a fourth time, and this time gasped and stopped in her tracks. Cally stopped a moment later and looked back in confusion.

“What’s going on?”

“Preston Park,” Dalia said in barely a whisper. But she was gesturing with her head and started to walk in that direction, her knees shaking. Cally decided to follow.

“What about him?” Cally asked.

“He’s approaching Vedy and Kohana. He’s a bully, and he’s not alone, so that can’t be good.”

The two girls got in hearing range just as Preston started to talk.

“Hey look, the colorful adopted freak has a girlfriend now, and it’s the fox!” he exclaimed in a gleefully cruel voice. His friends and his sister Anastasia laughed at this. Then he continued, “Hey rainbow freak, if it doesn’t work out with the fox-girl, an uncle of mine has a nice German Shepherd you can date!”

Glaring at Preston, Vedy opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted when Kohana, mortified, covered her eyes with her hands and began to cry, running away. “Kohana!” Vedy shouted to the sound of more bullying laughter, but Kohana just kept fleeing.

The temperature in the area dropped suddenly as Vedy glared at Preston, everyone able to see their breath on the air. Dalia tensed up and ran up to Vedy, pulling her back.

“I’LL KILL HIM!” Vedy snarled, resisting Dalia and pulling them both toward Preston.

"He's the nephew of the Principal! You'll get booted out before you even get a chance to come to school! I don't want you to have to go somewhere else!"

"Then let me look into his eyes and make him fear me," Vedy a growled in a low voice.

It was hard to speak loud enough for Vedy a to hear her over the laughter of the Parks and their friends, but Dalia said into her ear "That's considered dark magic! You'll be arrested!"

"I've used it before!" Vedy a growled.

"Against mundanes, yes. But he's the nephew of the Principal and the son of a banker! And anyway, you almost went to prison for the times you did that to the mundanes."

Cally was oddly silent through all this, watching it unfold with confusion. But Dalia's words got through to Vedy a, and she stopped walking towards Preston. Dalia let go, but looked wary, as though expecting it to be a fake-out.

"I'll get you back for hurting my girlfriend, just you wait!" Vedy a said with a terrifying, cold malice in her voice. This just made the bullies laugh harder.

Without saying another word, Vedy a turned around and ran after Kohana. Dalia grabbed Cally's hand and pulled her away to follow Vedy a, since she didn't want to be around the bullies anymore.

When they were safely away from the bullies, Cally asked Dalia, "What was all *that* about?"

"How much did you hear?"

"I was just close enough to hear something from Vedy a about making Preston fear her, and you warning that it was dark magic. And something about mundanes? And prison?"



Looking around the make sure they weren't in hearing range of anybody, and casting a simple privacy spell on the two of them with an amulet first, Dalia said, "Um... when she was in kindergarten, Veda accidentally discovered a natural talent for reading a person's greatest fear and uh, projecting it back at them as a hallucination. She used it a few times, but only against people who were mundanes at the time. It's technically dark magic, though on the mild end of the spectrum. More importantly, it's telepathic assault. First time she did it, she got off with a warning because it was an accident. Next two times she did it were on purpose, and it took our folks a lot of work to keep her out of prison. But that was against mundanes. It could mean real trouble for her if she used it against a witch. Especially one with important family like Preston."

"Oh. That sounds cool. Scary, but cool. Too bad she can't use it against that bully, he seems like he deserves it."

"Yeah. She uh, also has a history of picking fights with bullies, and beating the snot out of them. Which would likely get her charged with assault if she does it against one of the Park kids."

"Oh. Wow. Good on you for stopping her, then. Where'd she go, anyway?"

"Dunno. Let's find the others, first."

After looking around for the others and spotting them, they walked for a few more minutes toward where they were, at a nearby large pond called 'Small Lake.' Dalia didn't know why they'd gone there, but it was a good choice, since it had trees. When they got to the trees, everyone sitting down under the shade, they saw Veda and Kohana under one of the

trees away from the rest of the group, Vedyā comforting Kohana by holding her hand and talking with her. They sat down in the shade a few feet away.

Dalia sat next to Cally under an oak tree. After glancing in Vedyā's direction several times, Dalia finally spoke to Cally, who was quietly resting against the tree.

"Er... um... so, uh... Vedyā and uh... and Kohana. How about that?"

Cally turned to her, confused. "Did you say something? You'll have to speak up."

"Er," she said more loudly, "I uh... I said 'Vedyā and Kohana. How about that?'"

Cally shrugged. "Eh. My mom is bi. Of course she's married now to my dad, and she's monogamous, so she doesn't pursue women anymore, but I still sometimes catch her looking at women she thinks are gorgeous. Dad doesn't mind. In fact, sometimes they point out beautiful women to each other when they think I can't see them. I don't mind them doing it."

"Er... cool." Dalia turned away, anxiety twisting in her gut more than usual. How to go from there to asking Cally how she'd feel about Dalia having a crush on her?

The question was answered for her when she felt Doñela take over control of her body. Sally and Dalia's family were the only ones who knew what was happening when Dalia's entire manner seemed to change at once from shy wallflower to the boisterous girl who put her arm around Cally's shoulder in a companionable way, startling Cally.

"Cool, cool. But how d'ya think you'd feel if Vedyā was interested in you?"

Vedya spun her head around, glaring at Doñela icily, who stuck out the tongue of the body she and Dalia shared.

{Call me that again and I'll have Loki replace your voice with the voice of Donald Trump,} Vedya signed at Doñela.

Doñela merely stuck her tongue out again at Vedya.

She turned back to Cally, who was staring in confusion at the two of them. "So what's your answer, Cally? I'm curious."

Cally looked at Doñela with an odd, confused expression on her face for a moment. Then she considered Vedya, who was still glaring at Doñela. She then turned to who she thought was still Dalia.

"Not my type."

*'Well that was a super helpful response,'* Tamir thought sarcastically at them.

"What's your type?"

She shrugged, difficult with Doñela's arm still around her shoulder. "It's an expression. I don't really have a type. I'm 12. Vedya may be into dating already, but I haven't really thought about it yet."

"Okay what I'm trying to ask you is what you think your feelings would be if a girl said she had a crush on you."

Cally chewed on her fingernails for a moment. "Dunno," she finally said. "It hasn't happened yet. But if I were to guess... well, I'd probably be flattered."

Doñela gave Cally one last squeeze with her arm before smiling and letting go. "Cool. *Ahora te devolvemos a tu Dalia programada regularmente.*" Doñela let go control of Dalia's body then, and her aspect changed back to her previous shy anxiety. An anxiety now colored by embarrassment.

The Ravenstone adults and several of the siblings snorted with repressed laughter. Sally grinned; she didn't know Spanish, but she thought she knew what Doñela had said.

"You speak Spanish?" Cally asked, impressed.

"Er..." Dalia said. "Yeah. Shimá was raised in the southwest. Maddy grew up in Mexico until she was like, 11. My parents speak it a lot around the house." By the time her sentence was finished, Cally could barely hear her. "And uh, we went to a bilingual school, English and Spanish both in classes."

Cally was looking confusedly at Dalia. Dalia thought her friend had noticed the difference between her and Doñela (how could she not?), and it was probably time to tell at least her and Brandon about Doñela and Tamir. But the prospect of doing so filled her with dread. What if it was too much weirdness for Brandon? Cally probably wouldn't mind. In fact, given how fast Mrs. Metaxas had figured it out, Dalia was kind of surprised Cally hadn't worked it out yet.

{Vedya,} Dalia signed at her sister once she had her attention. Vedya was still sitting by Kohana, but the benefit of ASL was that it wasn't subject to Dalia's tendency to be too quiet.

{Yes, Dalia?} Vedya signed back.

{Sorry for Doñela.}

"Meh," Vedya said aloud.

{Vedya?}

{What?}

{I think I need to tell Cally and Brandon about Doñela and Tamir. But I'm scared. Only known Brandon a few years. Only known Cally for a month.}

{You're looking for advice from *me*?}

{Yes.}

{I'd say tell Brandon. Wait to tell Cally. Not what I'd do myself, but you are not me.}

"What are you freaks talking about?" said the horrible voice of Anastasia Park. "Plotting against my brother, are you?"

Dalia and Vedya looked up, noticing Anastasia had come over to the trees to antagonize them. The other Ravenstones were looking at Anastasia with annoyed disgust.

"Two freaky weirdos talking in their freak language," Anastasia said, sneering and waving her hands around in an exaggerated mockery of ASL.

"First," Vedya said, "you should learn some more insults. 'Freak' is kind of worn out, and I for one embrace the term the way many LGBT people have embraced 'queer.' Second, if we wanted other people like you to know what we were talking about, we'd be speaking English. Third, nobody invited you over here anyway," Vedya finished, and turned to Dalia to try to continue their conversation. She didn't get far.

"You're talking about me! What are you saying?"

Vedya turned to face Anastasia. This time it was her turn to sneer.

"Like we'd waste even a second thinking more about you than we had to."

"You threatened my brother, and now you're plotting your revenge!"

"Guilty conscience?" Vedya asked.

"You wish, you little lezbo!"

"Young lady," Nizoni said to Anastasia before Vedyā could freeze the leaves off the nearby trees, "did your father not tell you that I am on the school board, as is my ally and friend Nestor Metaxas? Furthermore, my wife Morgana here is on the *Concilio Portlandia*. You might ponder the implications of that awhile before you bully my children in front of me."

Anastasia stared at Nizoni as though the thought genuinely hadn't occurred to her, and she was now properly horrified. She mumbled something that sounded as much like an apology as whale song sounds like rock and roll, then hurried off to the school.

{Talk later,} Vedyā said, standing up. {We go eat now.}

"Here, dear," Morgana said to Kohana, "let me put a glamour around your eyes so you don't look like you've been crying."

"No need, Mrs. Ravenstone, but thanks," she said, suddenly going up in a poof of smoke; when the smoke cleared, she looked back to normal.

"Cool!" Vedyā said. Kohana grinned.

As they walked toward the school, Cally moved closer to Vedyā.

"What do your rings do?" she asked. "I noticed them earlier, but I didn't get a chance to ask."

"What makes you think they do anything? You're right, of course, but I'm curious."

"The runes. Clearly they're magical rings. What do they do?"

"The pewter one protects against incoming malevolent magic. It's not very strong, really. Good enough for what I'm

likely to run into, anyway. This silver one is a summoning ring, watch this."

She held her hand out, palm up, at a stone on the ground and made a 'come here' gesture at it. The stone flew into her hand.

"Cool!"

"This other one is a banishing ring," she said, tossing the stone in the air and making a shooping gesture at it, which caused it to fly through the air.

"And that one?"

"Protects me from physical blows. Deflects punches and incoming dangerous objects, but it also keeps me from bleeding when I wipe out on my skateboard."

"And these two?"

"That one makes me fireproof. The other one is a notice-me-not ring. Great for getting into mis—er, I mean out of conflicts. If I notice a bully coming for me, I activate it and suddenly they no longer notice I'm there. Unfortunately only covers me, and not other people."

"Why do you have them all?"

"I don't like feeling vulnerable. Anyway, we're here," Vedyā said. Sure enough, they were at the school.

And thus, Dalia's family ended up staying at the school for dinner and to look around at the school for a little after dinner. Vedyā and Ashkii were amazed at the place, though not as impressed by its population of pixies and gnomes, given they had those at home, as did Chooli's school. Vedyā fell to her knees in awe at the library, and had to be literally dragged away when it was time for Dalia's family to return home. Dalia noticed she'd been in the 'Human Transforma-

tion' part of the library at the time, reading a book outlining the process of becoming a vampire. She didn't know what to think about that. Vedyā was already scary enough at times *without* being a vampire.

She also didn't know what to think about Doñela listening to the conversations the pixies were having with one another. But as it happened, she had noticed recently that Doñela and Tamir were getting longer leashes in the library than elsewhere; usually they could only go about 20 feet from her before being yanked back like they were on a tether. But in the library, the length of their tethers had increased to twice that. The only other place they had such long leashes was home, where they could go anywhere in the house, even the Tirffiniol levels of the house, and not tug on their tethers. Maybe their leashes expanded in places they all felt comfortable? That made a sort of sense.

Watching her family leave was sad, but she knew they could come back whenever they wanted. Morgana had also informed her, in private, that they'd be coming back on October 31<sup>st</sup> to join Dalia and the Rosy Boa banner in their Samhain ritual. So she had something to look forward to. She'd been wondering about that, in fact; normally her family did their Samhain ritual at home on the hill that the shed's portal led to, but now she was in Fae Springs, it looked like that was changing. She was glad; she wanted to invite her friends along, so they could see what one was like. She made a mental note to do that tomorrow.



DALIA RAVENSTONE AND THE VICIOUS  
CIRCLE

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## Chapter Twenty: Misunderstanding

*Saturday, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

DALIA FOUND ARLENE as soon as she could the next day and asked her again about a chance to use the ward-stone of Spotted Hyena to have a private conversation with some of her friends. Arlene was recovered from her illness – some kind of minor flu – and agreed right away to allow it.

“Do I get to be included in this conversation too, or is our acquaintance too tenuous at the moment?” Arlene asked.

“Sorry, not yet. I’m not even telling the triplets yet. Just Brandon and Cally. And I’m only telling Cally because—well, there are reasons.”

She had almost gone ahead and told Arlene about Doñela right there in the corridor outside the cafeteria, which could have been bad if anyone overheard.

Arlene smiled. “It’s fine, I was mostly joking anyway. We barely know one another.”

“I’d like to get to know you better, Arlene. You’re cool.”

“Right back at you, Dalia.”

The two girls parted ways, which really involved them going in to breakfast at the same time but at different seats. None of Dalia's other friends were at breakfast yet, it was still early. So early in fact that Dalia herself felt like she would rather be in bed again. That was a common occurrence, actually, for her. She was a nocturnal soul, school hours had never been easy for her even when she was little; she looked forward to being an adult and doing something for a living that would let her sleep in the day and be up all night, as was natural for her. If people knew that about her, maybe they'd stop staring when they saw a 12 year old drinking pitch-black coffee every morning. Except during the summer, when she could keep her own hours – birthdays notwithstanding – and not needing caffeine then.

Dalia picked at her food, too tired to be hungry and too preoccupied to eat if she were. Doñela was so annoying, she'd almost spilled the beans, and Dalia wasn't ready, emotionally, for that. She was worried enough as it was having to tell Brandon about being a multiple, now she had to tell Cally as well, and while she didn't think either of them would reject her for that, anxiety wasn't something that listened to reason. People kept reassuring her of things, thinking that would ease her anxiety. But for every one time others reassured her, she had already tried reassuring herself 100 times. Anxiety just wasn't a logical thing, it was going to be anxious no matter what you told it.

Making matters worse for Dalia was the fact she'd been up half the night worrying about how Doñela had nearly given away two different secrets in one conversation, her brain unable to stop playing different disaster scenarios if

Cally had figured it out. All she'd wanted to do was sleep, but her brain had not been in the mood for anything but constant, gut-churning anxiety. Even trying to distract herself with Internet surfing hadn't helped. She'd only gotten to sleep when her brain had finally exhausted itself, literally unable to muster enough energy to do more than doze off at her desk.

So yeah, she was quite a bit more on edge than usual today, and it wasn't even nine in the morning yet. Add to it an unhealthy amount of coffee that wasn't even working at all this morning, an empty stomach that currently found the idea of eating to be about as appetizing as licking dirt, and the full force return of last night's particular flavor of anxiety like the world's worst leftovers, and well... She couldn't finish that thought; her brain was too disordered to think that far coherently, so she just let it hang there.

Of course in situations like this, she knew going back to bed would be pointless. The cause of the anxiety had to be addressed, at least in part, or else going back to bed would be a waste of time. Which meant telling Brandon and Cally about being a multiple.

*'And you know what?' She thought. 'Why not invite the triplets to this thing as well, get all my friends up to speed at once? At this point, adding them to the list would be like adding a lit candle to an already out-of-control wildfire the size of Texas, so why not?'*

Dalia was moving her eggs around her plate, lost in thought, when she felt someone approach her. She looked up in time for Cally to put her arm around Dalia the way Doñela had done the day before, faintly registering that she'd

said "Hi" to Dalia a split second prior. At this, Dalia's anxiety went into maximum overdrive at the unexpected hug from her crush and she stiffened, squeaked like an upset kitten, and began to hyperventilate.

Cally let go of her at once and worriedly asked what was wrong, in her rambling way. But of course, Dalia couldn't answer; she could barely breathe, let alone talk. She slipped out of her seat, cracking her knee on the underside of the table as she did, but she barely noticed the pain, she was too busy having her second full-blown panic attack in barely more than a single month.

Several teachers ran over to help. One of them took hold of her and pulled her legs out from under the table, which made her wail and thrash about, trying to get out of the grip of whichever teacher was touching her. The wailing had a strange, ululating note to it, given she was still hyperventilating.

"What are you doing?" she heard Sally say from the entrance, her voice getting closer. "Let go of her! She's having a panic attack! Touching her will only make it worse!"

"Her leg was stuck against the underside of the table, Ms. Smith-Jones. And you shouldn't talk to a teacher like that!"

"Well read up on how to manage panic attacks and I won't *have* to talk to you that way again. For now, back up everyone!"

"What did I do?" Cally asked plaintively, sounding like she was about to cry herself. "I just put my arm around her like she did yesterday to me!"

"Sorry, Cally, but I can't help you right now, I have to help Dalia."

Dalia had stopped making noise, but she was curled up face-down against the floor, her arms covering her eyes. Aside from this, she seemed to be improving. Sally soon had Dalia getting up and leaning against her. Sally thought it was going well, but then Dalia noticed how many teachers and students were watching her in the midst of a mental health episode, which led to her thinking how the story would spread around the school quickly and the bullies would have one more thing to make fun of her for. Those thoughts made her worse, and suddenly she was wheezing like an asthma patient and feeling like she was about to pass out from lack of oxygen.

Once Dalia began to slip back to the floor, Sally made an executive decision and picked her friend up in a fireman's carry, carrying her out of the room, figuring that touching Dalia would do less damage than would leaving her at the center of so much attention. She didn't get far at first, Dalia being too heavy for her, but then the load lightened significantly all at once.

"Thanks Doñela, Tamir," she whispered.

To Sally's astonishment, a pixie flew up to her to get her attention, beckoning her to a nearby room. It was a different room than last time. This one must have been in a hollow hill, because the ceiling was impossibly high, and there was a huge pixie nest hanging in the center of the ceiling like a peculiar natural chandelier made out of living plants – looked almost like English Ivy, in fact, but it was the wrong color.

Sally put her friend down, and saw as she did that Dalia was already looking more alert and calmer. Her eyes were tracking the pixies flying around the room, and Sally thought

she looked a little like a strangely-shaped cat as she did. Something in Dalia's expression made Sally think that if she had a tail, it would be twitching in a predatory way.

"So are you feeling any better?"

{A little,} Dalia signed. Then she signed something Sally couldn't quite make out.

"What was that last thing you signed? I mean, I caught 'What happened,' but I don't know what this means," she said, repeating the sign: one finger-spelled letter 'C' held up to her eyes in a movement outward and partially closing the semicircle, repeated once, followed by two fists crossed over her chest.

Of course, the moment Sally repeated the sign, she figured it out. But Dalia was already finger-spelling the answer: 'C-A-L-L-Y.'

*Of course, Sally thought, the letter C modifying the sign for 'glasses' followed by the sign for 'love.' Figures. Boy are they both going to have an awkward time if Cally ever figures out enough ASL to decode that.*

Answering Dalia, she said, "She was upset and confused. Beyond that, I don't know. I was too focused on you."

One of the pixies landed on the desk nearest Sally's face. She looked at it – no, correction, *him*. Probably. It was sometimes hard to tell with pixies.

"Greetings. My name Zisquis. And you?"

"Sally Anne Smith-Jones," Sally said pointing at herself. "My friend is Dalia Ravenstone."

"Greetings Sally Anne Smith-Jones and Dalia Ravenstone. Do Big Ones need any help? Any messages I send or seek?"

“Do you know what a wheelchair is?” Sally asked.

“Yes. Some Big Ones cannot walk, and use wheelchairs. Are you needing a wheelchair?”

“No thank you. Instead, if you would, please go find a boy in a wheelchair named Brandon. Er, the boy is named Brandon, I mean. Ask him what happened with Cally. Dalia wants to know.”

The pixie saluted. “Find wheelchair boy named Brandon, ask what happened with Cally. Dalia wants to know. Zisquis do that now.”

Without another word, the little pixie flew off like a blue-green Christmas light capable of flying on its own.

While they waited, Dalia watched the other pixies coming and going quietly. Sally, thinking, found it odd how quickly Dalia had calmed down, and found herself wondering if this room had some kind of calming pixie magic on it. When Dalia had panic attacks, she rarely recovered this much this quickly. Then again, Dalia was still looking catlike as she watched the pixies. Sally half expected her to jump up and start batting at them with her paws—er, hands.

“What happened back there, anyway? Er... if you feel up to talking about it, I mean.”

Dalia hesitated, chewing on her little rubber goldfish necklace for a few moments before responding.

{Scared about later,} she signed. {Not much sleep. Anxious. Then Cally touched me without asking first.}

Sally nodded. She opened her mouth to respond, but Dalia signed something else.

{Doñela's fault.}



"Ah, yes. Well you'll be able to explain this afternoon. And I'll be there with you."

{Thank you. You good friend.}

Sally smiled. {You good friend too,} she signed back.

The pixie came flying back in and landed to report.

"Brandon said Cally ran away crying. Zisquis asked Brandon to describe Cally. Zisquis was told, and figured out from description Cally is daughter of Melora Metaxas, and knew I'd met her but didn't know her name. I flew off to find her, by magical signature. She is in her mother's office, crying still."

"I don't suppose you know why she's crying?"

Zisquis shrugged. "Zisquis did not ask, and Brandon did not say."

"Was Mrs. Metaxas there, too?"

"No. I do not know where she is. Should I find her?"

"No, Zisquis, you did fine. Thanks for—hold on a moment."

Sally had stopped because Dalia was signing something.

"Oh. Don't worry about that, Dalia, I've been to her office before. Thank you, Zisquis, your help is appreciated."

"You are welcome. Is there anything else I can help with?"

"Not right now, thank you."

Zisquis saluted again and flew back into the hanging pixie nest. When he did, Dalia stood up.

{Translate for me?} Dalia signed.

"Yes, of course."

Dalia nodded and opened the door.

Several minutes later, they were entering the Magical Self Defense classroom, which was empty. They went over to the office door and knocked gently. There was no response. Dalia focused on her sensitivity, which she suddenly decided was a silly thing to call it, and decided on the spot to call it Magic Vision. So she focused on her Magic Vision and tried to peer through the door, but it was warded. She carefully pulled herself back to normal perception and knocked harder on the door.

“Go away!” they heard Cally shout.

Dalia looked wide-eyed at Sally, asking a question with her expression alone.

“Cally, Dalia's better now. Still non-verbal, but she's recovered. She wanted to explain what happened.”

They waited for almost a full minute before the door to the office opened. A red-eyed, tear-stained Cally stood there.

“Come in, then.”

The two girls followed their friend into her mother's office. Sally – who had been there before but hadn't been paying attention the first time – was immediately struck by how normal the place looked, aside from a poster of a golden apple with 'Kallisti' written on the side of it in Greek letters, and a Dali-esque melted clock ticking away on top of a metal filing cabinet. Its numbers were on in reverse order as well, so that the clock was ticking backwards.

The office was quite roomy, including a desk, filing cabinets, a sofa, and several comfortable-looking chairs. One of these, an especially fat brown chair, had a sign over it saying 'The dreaded Comfy Chair: Beware, this chair may devour your desire to move.'

The melted clock struck the top of the hour, and started to chime in a way that suggested someone had recorded a clock chime on cassette tape and the tape was failing. It was fitting, a broken-sounding chime for a melted clock.

Dalia signed something to Cally, and Sally translated.

"She says 'Sorry for freaking out earlier. I was already anxious, and then you grabbed me and I wasn't ready for it.'"

Cally was glaring at Dalia. She didn't respond right away. When she did, she sounded angry.

"You grabbed me last night, all chummy like. I just did to you what you did to me."

Sally looked to Dalia, who was clearly weighing her words before signing again.

"The explanation is complicated," Sally translated for Dalia's signing. "I was already going to tell you something that would explain it, but that whole thing happened before I got the chance to invite you and Brandon to hear it. I don't want to repeat myself a bunch of times today, will you come with us and Brandon so I can tell you all at once?"

Cally stood there silent for several moments.

"Fine," she finally said. "Where are we meeting?"

"At the room where Spotted Hyena Banner meets," Sally answered. "We'll guide you there. It's almost time. We made an appointment to use it before the banner meets."

"Alright. Lead the way," Cally said.

"We're going to pick up Brandon on the way, first. Okay?"

Cally nodded.

They ran across Brandon on the way out the classroom door. Apparently, the pixie from earlier had told him where

Cally was. The four friends went in awkward silence to the proper floor and room, where Arlene was waiting for them.

"Don't worry, I'll be out here standing guard," Arlene said. "I won't be able to hear whatever you're talking about in there."

"Thanks, Arlene," Dalia said, shocked she'd found her voice again already, even if it was barely audible.

They all sat at a table on the far side of the room from the door, Sally pulling a chair aside for Brandon to park his wheelchair there. Cally sat down across from Dalia, her arms crossed.

"Um... okay... so uh... so um... alright... er... okay." Dalia breathed in deeply to calm herself. "Right. So the thing I gotta tell you. Er..." She concentrated on detaching herself from the story a bit, like she'd be telling about something happening to someone else to make it easier to say. "So as long as I can remember, I had this friend who I thought at first was an imaginary friend, then I thought she was a ghost. Her name is Doñela. And a couple years later, another one showed up, his name is Tamir. Doñela looks like a Latina girl with long black curly hair, and Tamir is a black boy. Doñela is hyperactive, bores easily, and is pretty good at learning languages, at least compared to me. Tamir is more laid back, the voice of reason to Doñela's wildness, and kinda snarky. He likes to read.

"Um... so I thought they were ghosts for a few years, but then my parents figured out what was going on. Doñela and Tamir aren't ghosts at all. They never were. Necromancers would be able to see them if they were ghosts."

Dalia grabbed her backpack from under the table, which she had set there earlier in the day, and from it she pulled a three-ring binder full of printed-out sheets that she'd printed in the computer lab the other day.

"This is a very small part of a very long set of books from our family history about the condition I have. Um... it's called 'multiplicity,' or 'being multiplied.' It's when there's more than one person sharing a person's body at the same time. It used to be called Multiple Personality Disorder, when it occurs among mundanes. Now it's called Dissociative Identity Disorder. But uh, apparently in our family we don't consider it a disorder at all unless it's actively causing significant problems, which usually in our family it doesn't."

Now she was in full autistic info-dump mode, it made the rest come out as easily as talking about any one of her passions.

"Oh yeah," she continued, "and whatever you think you know about it from popular culture, you should dismiss right away, because most of it's false. There's a lot of demonizing of the condition. Even the most kindly interpretations by psychiatrists and psychologists say it's always the result of child abuse. But first of all, if that was true then there'd be so many people with the condition that there'd be no doubt in anyone's mind it was real because it'd be like half the population by now. And I never suffered from any child abuse. I mean, I was bullied a lot in school, but I've never heard of school bullying being enough to cause DID, and Doñela showed up years before I ever entered school.

"And anyway, what I have is caused by magic somehow. Our family has been mostly magic going back thousands of

years, after all. I mean, we assume it's caused by magic because that's what the evidence points to. And anyway, most of the collectives in our family have been healthy, they get along mostly well with one another.

"In mundane DID, the different people in the collective often don't know about each other until after some psychotherapy, but not in Ravenstone multiplicity. And okay, maybe magic isn't necessarily the cause. After all, there's some modern entries in the diaries of collectives who found other collectives who weren't the slightest bit magical, that also had the co-awareness and some shared memories like them, so—"

"Woah woah woah, slow down please," Brandon said, holding his head with both hands. "My head is spinning."

Cally was looking through the printout in shock. Then she smacked herself on the forehead.

"Ohmygoodness, I can't believe I didn't think of this!" Cally said. "Mom mentioned this in passing several times over the years. She was even reading some of those journals once. I feel like a doofus now!"

"Er..." Dalia said, not knowing what to say.

Cally looked up from the journals. "Oh. *OH*. Was that Doñela last night? And that's why the difference between you grabbing me and me grabbing you?"

"Er... yes. To both of those. I don't like being touched without giving permission first. Especially when I'm already anxious, except by some of my family or by Sally. I was really anxious about this meeting, and I hadn't slept well, so... yeah. I freaked out."

Brandon made a noise that was hard to classify, getting their attention. He looked like he had a thousand questions on his mind, which he did. He chose one at random.

“Why’d you think they were ghosts?”

“Because that’s how they manifested. They didn’t do it any other way until after our family told us about what we were. They still manifest that way most of the time.”

She stood up, said, “Doñela? A demonstration?”

Brandon and Cally watching, they watched as an invisible force grabbed her around the middle and lifted her into the air several feet before setting her back down again.

“This last summer!” Brandon said. “She lifted you? And helped get Sally down out of that tree?”

“She and Tamir worked together on that, actually. Er... all three of us did, rather.”

“Wow. Well that explains that. And now I’m thinking about it, sometimes your behavior is very different, I mean you talk differently – sometimes a lot louder than normal, or you hold yourself differently, or walk differently. It always confused me. Now I know why.”

“Yeah.”

Sally asked, “That incident with Preston over the summer... am I right that both Doñela and Tamir took turns controlling your body? I’ve wondered about that ever since I found out about all this.”

“You told her before me?” Brandon said, sounding sad. “Well, I guess she *has* been your friend longer, but—”

“I told her first mainly because we shared a dorm room. It’s the same reason I told Aavraak and Kohana.”

Brandon blinked. Then he looked hurt.

"You told *them* before me, too?"

"Sorry, but Doñela bores easily and getting her to stay quiet and hidden for over two weeks was hard enough. I didn't want to tell *anyone*; I was scared, but I knew if I didn't tell my room-mates, that Doñela would go stir-crazy and accidentally out herself."

"Oh. And you didn't have that worry with me, because I sleep in the boys' dorms. That makes sense. Sorry I got all defensive and huffy."

"It's fine. I understand."

"And Cally is here because of Doñela was being weird around her?"

"Yeah," Dalia said.

"Wait," Cally said after several minutes. "Wait a moment... why was Doñela trying to find out what I thought about Vedyia flirting with Kohana? Why was she asking me what I'd think if I was the one being flirted with?"

Sally glanced carefully at Dalia, who was chewing on her rubber goldfish necklace again, her eyes wide with anxiety. Brandon looked between Sally and Dalia, as if asking which of the three of them was going to answer the question.

"Hmm... and was that Doñela I met back when you and I first met?" Cally asked. "I remember thinking it was weird that your stutter just vanished, and how withdrawn you were later. At the time, I just chalked the first bit up to finding your courage, and the second bit to moodiness."

"Yeah, that was Doñela."

"So..." Cally said, clearly thinking something through. "So when you're the one in control, you're quiet and mostly



let me do all the talking. But when Doñela is around, she talks a lot more.”

“Er, yeah. Except it's been all me today.”

Cally was tapping her finger on her mouth and looking thoughtful.

Desperate to steer Cally away from potentially dangerous territory, Dalia said, “So um, uh... how 'bout them... uh... basketball? I don't know any local teams, sorry.”

Brandon shrugged. Sally rolled her eyes. Cally hadn't noticed, she was still thinking.

“So was Doñela trying to suggest Vedyia might be interested in me? No, that doesn't seem right... Vedyia seems the sort to be open about what she wants. Is *Doñela* interested in me?”

Something fell over behind Dalia, startling all four of them. Dalia turned to see Doñela rolling around on the floor in paroxysms of laughter that only she could hear.

“What was that?” Cally asked anxiously, standing up now.

“It was just Doñela. She's... she's laughing. On the floor.”

“Oh. So she's *not* interested in me?”

“*She's* not interested in you, no,” Dalia said. Then she froze, realizing what she'd just said. Brandon and Sally froze as well.

“Wait... so...”

Dalia closed her eyes, praying quietly, *Please don't figure it out, please don't figure it out, please don't figure it out...*

“Oh,” Cally said. Dalia didn't know how to describe how she was feeling now, besides saying she'd never thought one little word could put her through so much agony.

Dalia opened her eyes to look at Cally, who was blushing.

“Um... Dalia?”

“Er... what is it, Cally?”

“Is it *you* who's interested in me?”

Dalia looked down. Her mind raced. Cally didn't know her other secret yet. What if she thought Dalia was disgusted for being trans? It had happened to Dalia before, someone she had a crush on finding out the truth and being disgusted. She couldn't bear the thought of it happening again. But instead of another panic attack, she burst into terrified tears.

Cally's eyes went wide and she, too, began to cry. For the second time in one day, she'd done something to upset her best friend, and it was wrecking her emotionally. Sally ran to Dalia's side and tried to comfort her, but Dalia just felt like crying, and ignored Sally. Brandon looked awkwardly between Dalia and Cally, wondering what to do. He didn't really know how to handle awkward situations like this, not at all.

And then as soon as it began, Dalia stopped crying, as though she had just turned it off. Anxious to know why, Cally stopped as well. But Dalia's whole body language had changed. Dalia was normally tense, holding herself close to herself like she was afraid the world was going to hurt her and it was the only way to protect herself. But now her body was loose and relaxed, her arms held out farther from her torso than normal, her manner more open and animated. Almost like Cally, in fact, but more expressive with her hands.

"Hoo boy," she said. "Awwwwk waaaaard!" She drummed on the table in a brief drum-roll at this, and they noticed she was favoring her right hand.

"Doñela?" asked Cally.

In response, Doñela leaned back in the chair so it balanced on its two hind legs, focusing on Cally. She winked and gave Cally a thumbs-up.

"Ding ding ding! You won the thirty-two hundred dollar question, Cally. Poor old Dalia is floating in the air behind me, still crying, because she's afraid what you'll say if you knew her *other* secret. Also, what you said didn't really indicate your feelings one way or another to start with."

"Her... *other* secret?"

"Yeah, that," Doñela said, rocking her chair back and forth with her leg on the table. "You're the only one in this room who doesn't already know. And it's got her freaking out about how you'll react." She turned her head to look at something invisible, then, and blew a raspberry at the empty space. "Tamir, don't be a buzz-kill. I won't fall over!"

"Um... what's the other secret?"

"Do you know what the word 'transgender' means?"

"What? Well yes, I do but... oh. Oh. Is *that* all? Goodness, you had me really worried there for a minute!"

In Dalia's body, Doñela looked back behind herself by turning her head back so she was looking upside-down at Dalia's spirit form.

"See there, *ch' ikēēh*? Nothing to worry about!" Then she lifted her head and rolled her eyes. "Silly bean is being silly still. Pretty sure she's still not entirely put at ease. So go on,

Cally, how do you feel about Dalia having a thing for you, now that you know all her major secrets?”

“Well I mean... I'm flattered. Beyond that, I don't know. I've never had a crush on anyone myself, or been the recipient of one before. But yeah, I'm flattered. And I'm not going to say no based on you being transgender, that's a stupid reason to reject someone. But well... I mean, I don't even know if I'm straight or gay or whatever. I've never thought about it before, because I'm 12. Though that might be changing, soon, thanks to puberty. Anyway, we've only known each other for like, a month. I mean, that's enough to be friends, but more than that? I dunno. Also, a moot point, given the other stuff I said.”

Doñela looked back at Dalia for a few moments, then turned back to Cally. “Well she's glad to know that, but now it's again awkward. Somewhat.”

“Can you bring her back, Doñela?”

“I can try. She might try to run. Well, so to speak.”

She glanced back where Dalia was floating. Then she stopped rocking in the chair, stood up, grabbed the air, and suddenly their body's manner changed to Dalia's again. She was hugging herself, tense, and looked especially anxious, all four feet of the chair back on the floor.

Cally got up and was about to hug her, but stopped. “Uh... I mean... is it okay to hug you?”

Dalia blinked. “You want to hug me? Even after everything that's happened today? Everything you found out?”

“Dalia Ravenstone, if you think I'm going to stop wanting to be friends with you because I know you have feelings for me, or because your gender is different from normal, or

because you've got two other people in your head, you're going to have to think again. You're my first ever friend, I never had any before Fae Springs, so I'm not gonna give up on you. Besides, I'm a Ravenstone at heart, if not in name. We thrive on weird. Now can I hug you or not?"

Grinning, Dalia nodded and forced herself to let her arms down. Cally hugged her, and it was an awkward hug for Dalia, but it was still nice.

When the hug was over, Cally asked, "Er... what kind of feelings do you have for me, anyway? If you're comfy telling me."

Dalia hugged herself again, her eyes downcast. "Well, I think you're very pretty."

"Ha! That's an understatement," Sally said. "First time she saw you, you were walking down the hall, and she was looking at you so keenly she ran right into a wall."

Blushing so much it was visible even on her dark skin now, Dalia continued. "Um, yeah, you're gorgeous. I like looking at you. I like it when we brush against each other, or touch accidentally. Usually, that is. And I like it when you touch me with my permission. I like talking with you. I love being your friend. And uh..." she trailed off, shrugging.

Cally looked thoughtful a moment, then looked a little 'weirded out.'

"You don't want to kiss me, do you? Because I don't know how I feel about that. Just because, well, I haven't thought much about kissing anyone yet, it hadn't really crossed my—what's wrong now?"

Dalia had clapped her hand over her mouth and turned around. Sally, knowing Dalia as she did over the years, knew

Dalia was about to gag from the thoughts associated with the concept of kissing, so she quickly stepped in to offer a preemptive explanation.

"Cally," Sally whispered, standing in front of Dalia to block Cally's view, "Dalia is saliva phobic. You don't have to worry about her wanting to kiss you."

"What's she—"

"VERY saliva phobic," Sally said as quietly as possible, but she knew Dalia could still hear their conversation when there was a clear retching noise from Dalia's direction. Then the sound of running as she took off for the nearest bathroom.

"Wow. I'm sorry I brought it up," Cally said.

"You couldn't have known, Cally."

"How does she function? I mean, with a phobia of saliva?"

"Compartmentalization. She pretends saliva doesn't exist most of the time. At least, that's what she told me."

"But she chews on that necklace of hers!"

"Like I said, compartmentalization. Besides, other people's saliva bothers her more than her own does. She's almost blasé about her own saliva. Not quite, but almost."

"Oh."

"Yes. Anyway, um... I'd better tell you more about what she's said about you to me, to clarify things for you. Okay so... I don't know if this is just her age or what, but she's got no interest in anything more than hugs and cuddles. I guess that would qualify as some kind of platonic relationship."

"Really? Huh..." Cally said, thinking. "Have her parents given her The Talk yet? Mine did for me a few months ago."

"I don't know, to be honest. Probably, given what I know of them. But then again, with what I know of Dalia, she might not have gotten through it before being sick."

"She's not too disappointed by my just wanting to be friends with her, for now, is she?"

"Honestly, I doubt it. Maybe a little disappointed, but seeing as she didn't even want to tell you her feelings, and Doñela kinda forced the issue, I think she'll be fine with friendship. But don't expect her to stop mooning over you." Sally smiled. "She doesn't get over her crushes easily."

Cally half-smiled, blushing a little. "I don't mind." She paused a few moments, then added, "I think she's pretty, too. Though that doesn't matter so much. Anastasia Park is pretty, too, but if I found out *she* had a crush on me, I think I'd puke. But Dalia... she's a good person, so I don't mind."

Dalia came back then, looking a little green around the gills. Following behind her was Alvar Ravenstone. Sally noticed this, but Cally had her back to the door and didn't.

"So if Dalia's only interested in platonic romance, why did she freak out about me being a cousin of hers until you explained we weren't really much related?"

Sally shrugged.

Dalia answered instead. "Because I mean, we're cousins. It's kinda weird when you think about it."

Cally turned around and shrugged. "So? People used to marry cousins all the time, and we're third cousins, so like Sally said, we're hardly more related to each other than any two random people off the street. And anyway, we're both girls. I mean, I suppose—oh hi, Alvar."

"Pope Drunken Frog Weasel,' please," Alvar said with a grin.

"Er... no. That's kinda long winded. Plus, that's your Discordian name."

"Whatever," Alvar said, smiling.

Dalia noticed Cally looking at Alvar curiously.

"I ran into Alvar on the way back from the bathroom. The triplets are telepathically linked, so I figured I could tell all three of them at once this way."

"Tell us what?" Alvar asked.

Again dissociating herself from her words a bit, she said, "Do you know what 'transgender' means?"

"Yes," Alvar said. "A woman born with the birth defect of being mistaken for a boy by the doctors and family, or a man mistaken for a woman by same. My dads have a few transgender friends. Like Nizoni, right?"

Dalia felt herself relax, and the dissociation collapse. "Yeah, like Nizoni."

"Cool. What about that? Wait, are you transgender, too?"

She smiled. "Yes. I should've known you'd be okay with that. You're fellow Ravenstones."

Cally raised an eyebrow at this, but didn't comment.

"I guess. I don't know many other Ravenstones," Alvar said.

"Anyway, there was something more."

"Go ahead."

Dalia breathed in and started to explain about Doñela and Tamir, as she had for her other friends. Alvar didn't speak until Dalia was done explaining everything. She asked



for some proof, and Doñela switched places with Dalia for a few minutes, then switched back and picked Alvar up by the middle and lifted her a foot into the air before setting her back down again. Alvar, for her part, was remarkably calm about this.

“Wow! That's so cool! So she and Tamir can see around corners without being seen? What else can they do?”

“Um, we got into a locked door some time back, to rescue a wounded Gnome.”

Alvar's eyes went wide. “They can get through locked doors?”

“Uh, yeah. I mean, I suspect if a door is warded against telekinesis, that they wouldn't be able to, but otherwise, yeah.”

Alvar grinned wide. “What does this Doñela think about using her powers to help us pull pranks?”

Doñela took control of Dalia's body without pushing Dalia out. But everyone in the room now recognized when the change happened, though it was a bit more subtle this time, as Dalia still felt her anxiety knot despite Doñela being in control.

Feigning shock and horror, Doñela said, “Oh my heavens mercy me, I could *never* condone mischief making, for I am all about rules – SNERK – and – SNERK – and...” Doñela burst out laughing, unable to tell such a brazen lie.

When Doñela recovered, she said, “Pope Drunken Frog Weasel, you have a partner in pranking in me for sure. More-so even than Dalia, who largely just goes with the flow.”

Alvar held out her hand. Doñela took it and shook it.

“We need a new Discordian name for you, Doñela.”

“How about Queen Quacking Quince?”

Alvar chuckled. “You came up with that pretty quickly.”

“Been thinking about it for awhile now.”

There was a knock at the door and Arlene poked her head in. “Hey everyone, the Banner meeting is about to begin.”

“Thanks for letting us come here early, Arlene.”

The older girl shrugged. “Not a problem.”

People started coming into the room for the Spotted Hyena Banner meeting. Brandon, Sally, and Cally stayed there even though none of them were trans or gender-queer. Alvar stayed too, explaining that her telepathic link with Sutekh and Cerridwen made her feel gender-fluid. A few minutes into the meeting, which was mostly just a meet-and-greet, Aavraak and Kohana came in as well.

Dalia and Cally ended up talking with Arlene Starling again, about the exhibition duel the day before.

“How old do you have to be to join the dueling club?” Dalia asked.

“You have to be in second year or above. And older than that to try out for one of the school teams. Usually.”

Dalia groaned. “Vedya isn't going to be happy about that. She'll probably be able to do some dueling by the time she gets here. She's been teaching herself magic from home because she hates the idea of being magically defenseless. Also, she's got this magical 'tagging' system she came up with to compensate for being face-blind. I've been studying with her via MMOTW, so she's probably going to continue her trend of being way ahead of everyone else in her year.”

"Oh. Well in that case, they might make an exception for her. I think the only reason they limit it to second years and higher is because most first-years wouldn't have the magical skills to do anything, but if your sister is already that far ahead, I think they'll let her join the club early."

"Cool! I'll let her know. Thanks!"

"*De nada*," Arlene said.

"I'm curious why the exhibition duel was held," Brandon asked. "I mean yeah, it's impressive, but I dunno... is it just an advertisement for the dueling club and dueling teams?"

"Well, yes and no," Arlene said. "It's partly for advertisement, partly to show off what levels of skill the school wants at different levels of training. By the way, Cally, your mom was awesome in her duels!"

"Thanks, I quite agree."

"I've heard some interesting rumors about your mom over the years, Cally," Arlene said.

"Ha! Mom tells me the rumors she hears. I'm curious which ones you've heard."

"Well what I heard was that part of the interview process for getting the job of Defense teacher entails dueling the other Defense teachers – the primary, secondary, and Masters level teachers, and that she dueled the secondary, the Masters level, *and* the retiring primary teacher, defeating them all, not just one-on-one as required by the hiring rules, but also in tag-team duels."

"That's actually true, all of it. I'm surprised. Rumors aren't normally that accurate," Cally said.

"It is? Cool!" Arlene said, grinning. "Anyway, I also heard that they were so impressed with her skills that they in-

sisted she participate in the exhibition duel the very year she was hired.”

“Yeah, that’s true too.”

“And what about the rumor that she joins in the exhibition duels since then by choice, and does it whenever the board is getting pressured by Principal Park to fire her, in order to prove why they shouldn’t?”

“You have good information, Arlene. That’s exactly right. Principal Park hates Mom, and keeps trying to get her fired. He’s all about Order, and Mom is a Discordian. But she’s the best Defense teacher in the history of this school, and the board knows it. Mom doesn’t let them forget it.”

“I’ll say. I heard that ten years ago, when your mom started teaching, the Magical Self Defense grades went up by like, *a lot*.”

“Again right. The last primary Defense teacher was good, but Mom is so much better. Grades skyrocketed her first year here.”



*SUNDAY, OCTOBER 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

After lunch the next day was their first Rosy Boa Banner meeting for the month. Dalia being a pagan, she went, of course. Cally was there as well, as well as Arlene, and the triplets Alvar, Cerridwen, and Sutekh. They were the only friends of hers who showed up, though there were a few other people from her class there. She also saw some other people who were from her year but in the second half of the

class, people she'd only ever seen at lunch or in the common room of the dorms.

The leader of the Rosy Boa Banner was a pale, raven-haired girl named Persephone Rose, a 7<sup>th</sup> year student and most likely 18 years old, who was one of the RA's for the girls' dorms as well. Dalia felt her cheeks grow hot as she saw the girl, who was tall and lovely, even though her expression seemed aloof and her features seemed carved from ice. Behind Persephone was a shorter Hispanic girl of about 14 years old with her hair cut so short it was barely there anymore. It was a good look for her, though. This girl introduced herself as Alexia Argent. Alexia was training to be Persephone's replacement as leader of Rosy Boa, because Persephone was graduating next year. Alexia was warm and friendly in opposition to Persephone's "ice queen" affect.

Dalia felt a sudden itch at her chest just above her heart, and scratched it for a few moments surreptitiously, annoyed. Then her attention was seized by Persephone Rose speaking.

"Greetings, all, and welcome to Rosy Boa. I see some new faces here, so I'll do the introductions again. Our Banner is mostly a place for the pagans at our school to meet one another and discuss whatever we wish to discuss. If you want to discuss pagan spirituality, you may do so. But primarily we are here building a community.

"Yes, we do also do rituals together, for those of you who wish to join us, including any guests you may wish to bring. Not everyone does; many prefer to go home for the holidays and celebrate with family. But we usually have a pretty good showing for Samhain, Ostara, and Beltane. Not so many for Imbolc and Mabon. And of course Yule, Lughnasadh, and

Midsummer are during school holidays, so we don't get to do those, sadly.

"I have been leader of this Banner since I was 14, and now that I am graduating next year, I've been training Alexia Argent to be my replacement. She will be my assistant this year and next year while learning how to be the leader and Banner High Priestess.

"Let us now go around the room, introducing ourselves."

Being somewhat used to this now, between meetings for Timber Wolf, Spotted Hyena, and Chinstrap Penguin, Dalia didn't stumble over her words nearly as much as usual. Though within minutes, she had forgotten most of the new names she'd learned, from the dozen new people she'd been introduced to. Honestly, she didn't remember most of the people there from her one previous meeting here, in which they'd talked about Mabon. She hadn't gone to that one for various reasons, but she was determined to go to the Samhain ritual.

It being essentially a new group of people, Dalia hung back, intending to stick to hanging around Cally, but the bespectacled girl was an extrovert to Dalia's introvert, and went around the room talking to multiple different people while Dalia just sat there, nervously chewing on her goldfish necklace.

That is, of course, until Doñela got bored and took over control of the body, going around like Cally and talking to different people. Cally looked at her with momentary confusion before apparently remembering and subsequently not being bothered by it anymore.

Dalia didn't feel too bad about this; at least she was still in her body, and so wouldn't have to worry about returning to it later. But being in her body meant still getting headaches. And that itch was back, she kept scratching at it while Doñela didn't seem to notice it.

Persephone Rose had excused herself from the conversation and was writing something down, consulting a confused Alexia Argent about it. But Dalia and her body were on the other side of the room from them, so she had no idea what they were discussing. But she guessed it might be plans for a future ritual.

When the Banner meeting finally began to wind down, to Dalia's relief, Doñela returned control of their shared body to Dalia, who was rubbing her head, which was throbbing with a mild headache considering the amount of noise had been quite high. She went back to her original seat to grab her things and go.

"...dunno, it still seems a bit odd, not our usual style," she overheard Alexia saying to Persephone. "Where did you get this from, anyway?"

Though mildly curious about that, Dalia's headache was worsening, so she grabbed her things and left before she could catch the answer.

On her way back to her room, she overheard something else, too. One of the teachers, Dalia's math teacher Mr. Erik Erickson, had caught Ms. Hollander in the hallway and was telling her the principal wanted to speak with her.

"What about?" Ms. Hollander asked nervously.

"He didn't tell me," the math teacher told her. "Just that you were to see him in his office."

Ms. Hollander nodded, but judging by the expression on her face, she was scared to comply, but looked determined all the same. Had Ms. Hollander done something wrong? Dalia knew she was still suffering the after-effects of the incident in the auditorium, she was hardly the only one. Surely Principal Park wasn't going to punish her for something related to that? If she was suffering, what she needed was a psychiatrist, not a dressing-down.

As much as Dalia wanted to go hang around to offer moral support to Ms. Hollander, her headache was getting unbearable. She was going to have to skip dinner again, there was nothing else for it, because she was going to have to sleep this one off.



*THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

On Thursday, Dalia was in Alchemy class, and everyone waiting for the teacher to show up while quietly doing their own thing or whispering with friends. Dalia was seated next to Cally, and was reading a novel when she suddenly clutched her head with pain. But before even Cally could react to this, Dalia's expression went terrified, and she slid down her seat, making herself as small as possible, shaking in terror. Cally looked around for a source to her friend's distress, and didn't see or hear anything. Anastasia Park wasn't even in the class, as she'd gotten sent to the principal's office earlier for something.

"What's the matter?" Cally asked.



"He's coming, and he's *angry*!"

"Who's coming? And how do you know? Did Doñela or Tamir see something?"

Dalia shook her head, still shaking. "Too far out of range for them. But I know he's coming."

"*Who* is coming?"

"Mr. Marten."

"Oh, so the teacher is coming?"

"Yes. And he's *very* angry about something," she said in a small voice, dipping even lower in her seat.

Cally blinked, looking around the room. The door was closed, and there were no windows in this room. She listened very carefully, as her ears were quite good, but didn't hear anything. She was on the verge of asking Dalia for more information about why she thought this when the door slammed open, startling everyone in the room, even Dalia, who had been expecting it.

Judging by the look on Mr. Marten's face, he was indeed furious about something, and remained angry for most of the class period, which was unlike him. It was so unlike him to be angry, in fact, that there was no way Dalia could have predicted this. But since they never did find out why he was so angry today, that didn't offer any clues.

Cally ended up looking between Mr. Marten and Dalia for the rest of the class period, and even shot glances at her all during PE, Art, and Music. Dalia looked a paler, more sickly shade of her usual dark brown, and kept massaging her head and moaning, even after she'd taken pain reliever for it. It was a mystery, but one Cally's mom might be able to help her with.





## Chapter Twenty-One: Surfing the Emocean

*Tuesday, October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

THE FOLLOWING TUESDAY, Dalia and her friends arrived in Crystals and Earth Magic class, and instead of going right to work, Mrs. Thorn had an announcement for them instead.

“Picture day is coming up in a month. It will be the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, and since you all live here at the school, you won’t have any excuse not to come. You should go get your picture taken in the gymnasium with everyone else even if you are sick that day, especially since we are also doing the class pictures that day. I know it’s a month away, but we will be giving you occasional reminders every week until it arrives, and then there will be an announcement on the PA system the day of the event.

“Principal Park would like me to remind you of the rules for picture day. You are required to wear your uniforms for these pictures. You may have hair accessories, makeup, or necklaces on if they meet the dress code rules in the student handbook. An additional note that he has added this year

for some reason reads that none of you are allowed to wear colored contact lenses unless they are prescription lenses and look, I quote, 'Like normal human eyes.' End quote."

Dalia felt herself blushing; she wondered if her presence here was the reason for Principal Park's additional note. If he knew Maddy well enough, he might suspect Dalia of using such lenses during picture day. Which, now she thought of it, she might be tempted to do if not for that rule.

In Enchantment class, they were working on light balls. This was a bit more difficult than just lights from their fingers. Dalia had as much trouble with it as anyone else, to Mr. Carling's disappointment. But he explained it again anyway.

"There's a point at which your magic starts turning into light. It can be hard to sense, I know, because the light still has magic in it, but though the difference is subtle, it's there. Find that place of transition and move it around. Change its size, its shape, its distance from your finger. Then when you've mastered those skills, you can use those to make it into a ball."

Taking his advice, Dalia felt for the place at her fingertip where the magic became light. It took a few moments, but she soon could sense the difference between pre-light magic and post-light magic. So she held onto that spot with her mind and tried moving it away from her fingertip. With some gentle nudges of her Will, the spot of light flew five inches away from her fingertip, and stayed that distance away in relation to her finger, moving when her finger moved. She passed her other hand over her fingertip, and the beam of light continued to glow steadily, proving she'd moved it.

"See here, everyone," Mr. Carling said to her mortification, "Ms. Ravenstone has the first step figured out. Keep up the good work, Ms. Ravenstone."

Shrugging internally, she tried stretching the light sideways, which was made harder by Doñela batting at the light like a cat attracted to a laser pointer. She tugged, and nothing happened. She tried it again, and this time overdid it until she suddenly had a strip of light two feet long following her fingertip.

Gently nudging it back into a smaller shape first, she tested to see if she could pivot the light on an axis. She ended up shining the light right in her own eye, her Will reacting by shoving the light upward. Now Doñela was at the ceiling chasing the light.

After half an hour of experimentation like that, Dalia finally managed to shape it into a ball of light by stretching the light both directions, then wrapping it around an imaginary sphere. She got more extra credit for her work, and used the rest of the hour to play around with the light again. When the class was over, she struggled to put out a light that now wrapped over her whole hand like a glowing white glove.

"You haven't gotten rid of that thing yet?" Sally asked during lunch, when the light now looked like fingerless gloves, but was still glowing.

"Oh no," she said sarcastically, "I thought I'd start a new fashion. It'll be all the rage."

"Just shut down the stream of magic fueling it."

"Yes, thanks for your help, Captain Obvious," Dalia snapped, flapping her hand to try to get the light off her skin. "Sorry for snapping at you," she immediately apolo-

gized, “but the problem is this thing is feeding off multiple streams of magic now. I shut down one, and it moves to another. Gah! Now it’s moving up my arm!”

It now looked like Dalia was wearing a glowing white arm warmer, and it kept creeping up even further toward her shoulder.

“Well maybe if you shove it off your skin, you can see the streams better and shut it down that way,” Brandon suggested.

“Worth a try, I guess.”

With some concentration, the cloth-shaped light peeled away from her skin like a weird sheet-like ghost. Within a couple minutes, it was floating in midair, unattached to any of her skin. She started breaking magic streams one at a time, and it faded away as she did. A few more minutes of this, and it completely disappeared.

“Forty-seven!” she said. “Forty-seven streams of magic it was using when I started removing it. That was tedious.”

“Well at least you got rid of it,” Brandon said.

“Yeah, now you can eat.”



DURING THE REST OF October, classes progressed steadily. In Enchantment, they moved on to changing the colors of their balls of lights, making multiple balls of light, even making them blink on and off. When they were done with that, they took a break on these “early principles of glamour/illusion magic” to try to start on levitation of ob-

jects. This was a whole other ball of yarn from the simple illusion magic they'd been doing, because now they were trying to affect solid objects. Dalia was determined to learn how to do it the right way, rather than relying on Doñela or Tamir to do it for her. By the end of the month, she had progressed from nothing, to throwing objects against the wall accidentally, to throwing objects against the *ceiling* accidentally, which was more progress than most of the other class was managing, except for Anastasia Park, who was able to get the teddy bear she was practicing on to spin around lazily with its head on the table.

It was around the middle of the month that Dalia started to regularly use a wand in Enchantment class, because she found herself better able to focus her magic with one than without one. Other students were taking her lead. Anastasia Park was one of them, though she pretended it was *her* idea, not Dalia's.

Other classes got more interesting, too. In Elementary Transformation Magic, they'd finally progressed from simply biology lessons (which were being transferred to science class) and moving on to Waxing of plants. They were practicing on bamboo, which on its own almost grew fast enough to be seen by the naked eye. In their first class on Waxing, Mr. Rabe had made a bamboo shoot grow an entire foot taller in ten minutes. It didn't look very healthy after doing that, which Mr. Rabe explained was because growing something fast while ensuring its good health was advanced magic. He could do that advanced magic of course, but had done it this way on purpose to show them what it would look like for them at their level.

One of the first people to succeed at Waxing, even faster than Dalia, was Cerridwen Ravenstone. In fact, she'd progressed to Withering without permission from the teacher. She demonstrated this by making her bamboo grow before their very eyes, then start to wilt and look sickly, then back to healthy again, again and again, all while saying "Wax on, Wax off. Wax on, Wax off."

(Which, while we're on that subject, an aside: Dalia had noticed something odd about the triplets. She'd noticed that the three of them sometimes seemed to trade bodies. The "wax on, wax off" thing was more Alvar's style, for instance. But sometimes she'd sulk gloomily like Sutekh usually did, and Sutekh would be the one to be vivacious and joking. Or Cerridwen would. It was weird, but Dalia found it amusing for the most part.)

In Magical Self-Defense, they'd mastered the simple shield and – once Preston Park gave his punishment essay speech to the class – they moved on to a simple mind magic: confusion spells. The reason for this, Mrs. Metaxas explained, was that at their level of magic, it would be better to confuse the enemy than rely on a shield that could be easily beaten if you knew how. Confusion would buy you time to run away, and the shield might take your enemy by surprise.

Confusion spells were *not* easy. What they basically were was an application of minor disruption magic to create interference in the electrical field of a person's brain. To practice, Mrs. Metaxas guided them in an exercise to learn how to make a lit light-bulb flicker with their magic, with a side goal of putting the light-bulb out if they could, because darkness could help you get away in most cases. She explained



they would refine the technique gradually until Yule break, and warned them not to attempt this on anyone until they knew how to do it properly at the end of lessons, because it was dangerous enough that premature use of it on a sentient being could be considered attempted murder.

Mrs. Metaxas being the way she was, of course, meant that she peppered her classes with occasional breaks as they did something completely different for a class or two each week. Among the things they worked on were a spell to summon darkness (which was really a spell to make light just stop and disappear, the opposite of the light creation spell in Enchantment class), using magic to enhance the protective properties of certain gemstones, and more substances they could make and carry to use for defensive purposes, which included some herbs and incense, among other things.

That wasn't the only thing to happen in Magical Self-Defense class, either. Mrs. Metaxas was giving Dalia little tips here and there about how to deal with her newfound powers as a Sensitive. In fact, Mrs. Metaxas was paying a lot more attention to Dalia than to any of the other students, though she was being subtle about it. But with Doñela and Tamir liking to hang around during this class with her, they had caught Mrs. Metaxas looking at Dalia, observing her.

She'd thought they were being paranoid, honestly, until Mrs. Metaxas told her to stay behind after class one day. A little worried about the reason for it, Dalia nonetheless stayed behind.

"Relax," Mrs. Metaxas said. "You're not in any trouble. I just wanted to share some of my observations with you, Dalia. And possibly some conclusions as well."

"Er... okay?" Dalia said, uncertain.

"Well there have been some things I've been wondering about. My daughter told me about a mysterious incident in Alchemy class a few weeks back, and I've been observing you closely ever since. Tell me, does your head hurt you right now?"

"A little," Dalia admitted. "Not enough to bother with, though. Why?"

Mrs. Metaxas handed her something from inside a desk drawer. Dalia took it, curious; it was a bed sheet made of either satin or silk.

"What's this?"

"Silk sheet. Wrap yourself up in it."

Dalia stared at Mrs. Metaxas.

"Please?"

Confused, Dalia shrugged and did as asked.

"Put some of it over your head like the cowl on a cloak, please."

Even more confused, Dalia still did as asked, since it seemed harmless. When she did, her headache started to diminish. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Woah! The headache is... wait... it's gone! Well, not completely, but much better. How?"

"Before I can answer that, I have some questions for you."

"Er, okay."

"First, how frequently do you have your headaches at school?"

"What? Well... every day. To some degree or another."

"How often do you have them at home?"

Dalia had to really think about this one. But finally, she answered, "Not very often. Maybe once or twice a week?"

"I know you live in Portland. Do you ever use the bus?"

"Yeah."

"How often would you say the bus gives you a headache, when you use it?"

"Almost every time."

"*Almost* every time? When does it not?"

"If there's only a few people on the bus, I'm usually okay."

"Do you know if the headaches have any correlation to how many people are in a room with you?"

"Er, yeah. They're usually worse when there's more people. But sometimes I get bad ones when there's only one or two people around. Not often, then, but yeah. Why?"

"Not done yet. Take the silk sheet off your head and tell me how many people you think are in the room right now."

"Like, solid people with their own bodies?"

"Yes, that's right."

Dalia took the sheet off of her head and sat there, not sure how Mrs. Metaxas expected her to answer the question.

"I can't really tell. There's you, and me, but then there's this weird buzzing that keeps moving," she said, surprised to find herself saying it.

"Do you know where the buzzing is coming from?"

She looked around the room for a few moments.

"It's in the walls. And the floor, and the ceiling."

Mrs. Metaxas looked at those places too, before responding. "I think you're sensing the pixies and the hobs."

"Sensing the—but how? I don't have my Magic Sight up right now."

Mrs. Metaxas smiled. "The how is simple enough. The same way you knew Mr. Marten was furious about something long before you should've been able to know he was on his way to class, when it is very out of character for him to be that angry."

She blinked at the teacher. "Um... what? Are you saying I've taught myself telepathy somehow? I mean, aside from my connection with Kobalos, but that doesn't really count."

"Did you know *what* Mr. Marten was angry about?"

"No. Just that he was furious."

"Then not telepathy. More like... telempathy. It's possible you might be an empath. Able to sense the emotions of others, without having to see them or hear them. Not relying on body language, I mean."

"I... huh? No, I don't think so. I've had to learn how to know what people feel by observation and working out body language when it didn't come naturally to me."

"Well, Ms. Ravenstone, do you have an alternate explanation for how you knew Mr. Marten was furious about something, when nobody else even knew he was on his way to class? When he doesn't get angry very often?"

"Um... no," she admitted. "But if it's true, what you said about me... I mean... it's not very useful so far. Except for that one time, I just get headaches. And even that time gave me a headache, too."

"I'm not an expert on mind magics," Mrs. Metaxas said, "but my hypothesis is that you've had a latent or perhaps partially blocked telempathic skill for years, but so far it just manifests mostly as noise. Maybe a bit like having sensitive hearing, but without having learned language yet. But

something sufficiently loud, like Mr. Marten's anger, can slip through and be understood."

Dalia blinked at her.

"That mark on your right shoulder, Dalia – and before you ask, I know it's there because I can sense it – tell me, do you know if your parents thought to provide an exception for telepathy as well as the exception for your bond with your familiar?"

"Er... I dunno."

"Well you might want to ask them about it. I suspect that mark has been holding you back, letting your Gift through just enough for other people's emotions to feel like painful noise, but not letting you learn how to use it properly. You'll need to have that mark re-done with an exception for your telepathic Gift. Though you'll also need to learn how to shield. Learning how to shield should cut down on the headaches, maybe even get rid of them completely."

"Really? You think all that?"

"I do."

"Wow... I hope you're right. I don't know what I feel about being an empath, but if learning to shield against that can get rid of the headaches, I want to try."

"Ask your family about the mark, first, and get it modified. Before then, I can't do much to help you. But once you get that taken care of, I think some extra classes for you wouldn't go amiss. I'll be teaching you, unless you'd rather be taught by Amraphel Dyer?"

"I don't know her like I know you. So I'd be glad to learn from you, Mrs. Metaxas."

“Good. Any other questions you can think of for now, before I give you a tardy excuse for your next class?”

“Um... yeah. Did you ask Ms. Dyer to divine what was causing the problems with my faery friends?”

“I did. Her response was cryptic. She started talking about a man turned into a donkey 'two handfuls of centuries' ago, and then said 'The Horned One comes to break the circle, as the circle was broken before. It is all my inner eye can see, it fills my Sight like a blindfold.' Then she shuddered in fear and started wandering off, crying into her hands. I didn't feel comfortable asking her to elaborate. And my own investigations have been turning up nothing.”

“Oh, I see. Poor Ms. Dyer.”

“Yes, quite. Now, is there anything else before I send you on your way?”

Dalia thought for a few moments, then shook her head. Mrs. Metaxas handed her the note excusing her tardiness.

“If you think of any questions later, write them down and you can ask me when we both have time, okay?”

Dalia nodded.

“Good. Now run along to PE, Ms. Ravenstone.”



*SUNDAY, OCTOBER 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017*

A couple days later, a Sunday, Nizoni showed up at school and found Dalia at the Rosy Boa Banner meeting. She made her presence known but told the people there that she could wait for the Banner meeting to be over. An hour

later, Dalia stepped out and found Nizoni sitting on empty air, reading a book. When she saw Dalia, she stowed the paperback in her trench-coat pocket and stood up.

“Come over here, *yázhi ma’iitsoh*, and sit right here where I was sitting.”

“I can’t see it.”

“I’d be willing to bet you could if you wanted to,” Nizoni said with a smile.

Dalia nodded, and stood there concentrating on slipping into her Magic Sight mode, which was getting easier the more she practiced it. Soon enough, she saw a shape formed of magic before her, and another similar shape behind that one. They looked vaguely like chairs, if chairs were made out of a hazy cloud of luminescent fog. She touched the invisible chair and it felt soft, like the cushion on a recliner. So she shut down her Magic Sight very carefully and sat down on the chair.

“That’s a neat trick, Shimá. A chair you can just conjure out of thin air, neat.”

“Thank you,” she said, sitting down in the other chair.

Lifting up Dalia’s sleeve, she held her hand over the henna mark there, a knot of rune-work meant to keep other people out of her daughter’s head. But of course, it needed a new exception. She sucked the magic out of it quickly – a trick that would blast anyone but her off their feet and across the room if they tried it – and started using advanced transformation magic to siphon off some of the runes and re-arrange others.

The moment the magic left the mark, Dalia felt a great increase in the noise of her head, but this was different. Be-

fore, it had felt like there were lots of people talking in a busy room, with all the voices blurring together into noise. But now, it was like she was making out some of the voices in the noise, and more were decipherable with each passing moment. It was like hearing a lot of disjointed, overlapping conversations, a few words here or there without being able to follow any of it, though it wasn't *actually* words. Strangely, it didn't hurt as much as she'd thought it would. She was sweating, and her head was aching, but only a little compared to how much she was picking up.

The only person's emotions she was able to pick out of the noise, at first, was the calm patience of Nizoni as she worked on the new version of the rune mark. But then another person entered her awareness, his emotions feeling to her like a cross between a military commander inspecting his troops, and a gray box full of neatly organized files. She wasn't terribly surprised to see that this man was Principal Park.

"What are you doing, Ms. Hatathli-Ravenstone?"

"Fixing an anti-telepathy ward on my daughter's skin. It has been holding her empathic Gift back, causing her pain."

"She's an empath?"

"Yes. Is that going to be a problem?"

Dalia felt a dark storm-cloud form in his mind. "Is she also a telepath?"

"No. Just an empath. So she is not privy to any more information than anybody else would be, except that she can sense emotions through barriers and from distances most people couldn't if they were just using just vision and body language interpretation."



"Is there any way she might be able to cheat on school-work or tests with this Gift?"

"I would be absolutely astonished if that were possible, Principal Park. As I said, she can only sense emotions. I cannot even begin to fathom how that could translate to cheating."

Dalia didn't know what to make of the emotions he was feeling as he thought that over. But finally, Principal Park said, "Nor can I. If this empathic Gift changes to telepathy, please let me know as soon as you are aware, so we can discuss what measures to take."

"Of course, Principal Park," Nizoni said.

He nodded curtly and walked away, turning the corner into another corridor.

"His emotions are like a judgmental filing cabinet," Dalia said so quietly she could barely hear herself. But the corridor was nearly completely silent, as far as regular sounds went.

Nizoni chuckled at Dalia's description of the principal's emotions, and went back to her rune-work.

Having fixed what she could with magic, Nizoni got out a fine-pointed paintbrush and the henna, and began to carefully paint new runes on with the paintbrush. Dalia, having experience with this before, went into a mode where she just stopped moving at all or thinking, except for her breathing and blinking, though it wasn't easy with all the empathic noise. But thanks to her stillness, it didn't seem like long before Nizoni was done painting the henna on, and was now using transformation magic to speed up the process of getting the henna to stain the skin. Dalia's only thought during this was to wonder how Nizoni saw the henna at all when

it was basically the same shade as Dalia's skin. But it might have been magical henna, and if it was magical enough, even someone who wasn't a Sensitive would be able to feel it.

The quiet thoughtlessness she'd felt earlier was getting more and more difficult to maintain, as there were more and more emotions she was starting to 'hear' clearly through the usual empathic din. She picked up snippets of happiness, sorrow, anger, jealousy, and annoyance, and had no idea who they belonged to or what was causing those people to feel that way. It felt like the voices were getting louder and closer to her, and the occasional high-pitched whine of the pixies' emotions didn't help.

"Almost done, my brave little wolf," Nizoni assured her as Dalia began to look distinctly ill.

"I don't think that's going to help, Shimá."

"You need to put up a shield, Dalia. Like that filter you use while using your Magic Sight. Block off the wall of emotions."

"I'll try," she said, privately thinking she had about as much chance of doing that as she had of spontaneously learning how to tap-dance.

"The henna is finished. Now all I need to do is empower the ward."

Dalia nodded, even though it made her head feel like someone had pounded a nail into it with a nailgun, because she didn't trust herself to speak without vomiting.

Nizoni put her hand over the henna ward and pushed her magic carefully into it, activating it. Dalia felt a familiar warm tingling in her shoulder as it happened.

"All done now, little wolf."

Shimá's voice felt like a jackhammer to her skull. Dalia pitched forward and let loose her last meal upon the floor, every heave feeling like a red-hot iron band tightening around her skull.

Nizoni watched her eldest daughter sit up at last, looking very ill, and pulled out a moist toilette, handing it to Dalia so she could clean her mouth somewhat. Then she stood up, helping her daughter up carefully. A group of hobs suddenly appeared by the mess and started to clean it up.

"Thank you for your hard work," Nizoni told them in a whisper. "I will ensure you are rewarded tonight for it, with extra cream."

"Please don't talk about food at a time like this, Ma'am," one of the younger hobs said, looking ill himself.

"My apologies. Also, could one of you please alert the nurse that we are on our way?"

An older female hob directed the young hob who had spoken to do that, and he gratefully disappeared in a small woof of displaced air.

Meanwhile, Dalia's purge hadn't helped her feel any better. She was still drowning in an increasingly hard-to-ignore tide of other people's emotions. Nizoni took a silk sheet out of her trench-coat and wrapped it around Dalia's head so that only her eyes were visible. The relief this afforded Dalia was immense and immediate, as the noise died down to almost nothing.

When they made it to the nurse's office, the nurse on duty was unfamiliar to them, but she was familiar with Dalia's history at the school, after looking at her chart.

“What seems to be the problem this time?” she asked gently.

“Empathic overload. I removed a ward from her shoulder that was blocking most of her empathic Gift, and replaced it with one that would not. She does not know how to shield, though.”

“Oh boy, that’s a bit out of my pay grade,” the nurse said. “Just a moment, I’ll call Nurse Johnson.”

She pressed a button. While they waited, she turned the lights down, which helped Dalia immensely.

“Ah, it’s my favorite patient,” Nurse Johnson said as he came into the room. “What’s the matter this time, Ms. Ravenstone?”

Nizoni repeated what she’d told the other nurse, and explained in more detail.

“Well, I suggest she use an artificial empathic shield until she learns how to make a regular one for herself. I hear you’re good with ward work, Ms. Hatathli-Ravenstone?”

“Yes. I can make a psychic shield ward in necklace form.”

“Good. You go do that, and I’ll get some anti-nausea potions and headache-relief potion into her,” he said, bustling off to the store cupboard to grab two potions.

Dalia sighed after taking the potions. How many times had she been in the infirmary since starting school? And the way things were going, she’d be coming here far more often in November to get Flesh Bending treatments from Takashi on a weekly basis from now until she was 17 or 18. People, especially Anastasia Park, were already making note of how often she ended up in the infirmary. She supposed she’d have to figure out some chronic illness she could plausibly have

that wasn't contagious, as something to tell people so they didn't figure out she was transgender.



*MONDAY, OCTOBER 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2017*

Dalia spent the night at the infirmary, a very tired Nizoni handing her a necklace that would block her empathic Gift while she wore it. She didn't like it much. As it turned out, she hadn't been anywhere near as good at reading body language as she'd thought she was, apparently having been relying on a very myopic form of her empathic Gift for years. It made a sort of sense; her magic likely had known she was struggling with body language, and had filled in the gaps as well as it could in its partially-blocked form. Now that this necklace was blocking it completely until she learned how to shield, it was leaving her more frustrated than ever. By the time she reached Magical Self-Defense, she'd already had two different small fights with her friends over misunderstandings she couldn't quite believe had happened.

Some good news was that Mrs. Metaxas held her after class and told her she'd start teaching Dalia how to shield her empathic Gift tonight after dinner, and that they'd be doing these extra lessons every A Day for an hour after dinner. And because of the weird way Principal Park had set up the A Day/B Day system in the school so that every week was the same set of A or B days, that meant three new lessons every week.

So, after eating dinner, she went to Mrs. Metaxas's office and knocked on the door. The door opened, and Dalia stepped inside, pausing in shock at what she saw in front of her. Mrs. Metaxas was there, hanging by her legs from a horizontal bar, so that her hair trailed on the floor. She looked even weirder than normal, though, as she was wearing a mask on her face that made her entire face impossible to see, replacing it with a blank look, the eye slits barely wide enough to see through, surely.

"Dalia Ravenstone," Mrs. Metaxas said in a slightly muffled and monotonous voice. "Welcome. Make yourself comfortable. Like I've done for myself."

Dalia nodded, sitting down on the sofa across from where Mrs. Metaxas was hanging at her ease. She stared in fascinated confusion at the teacher.

"Right. So if you look around the room, you'll see there's runes all over the walls that weren't there before. Those are keeping this room empathically closed-off. Meaning when you take that necklace off, you'll be able to feel my emotions and nobody else's."

Again, she nodded, this time taking the necklace off and setting it on the nearby end table. What happened next felt like waking up from sleep, when your senses become acquainted with you being awake and conscious. Only instead of her eyes or ears, it was her empathic Gift waking up. As it did so, Mrs. Metaxas's emotions came into focus, bright and clear as a sunny early afternoon in summer. The teacher was feeling concern for her, but as she spent longer and longer without looking ill, that concern morphed into a feeling of happiness and relief.

"You were concerned for me, but now you're relieved and happy."

"Yes. And between the mask hiding my face, the spell on it that flattens my voice's tone, and the glamour I'm using to hide my body's other body language from you, that's more confirmation of your empathic Gift."

"Oh, so *that's* why you're wearing the mask?"

Mrs. Metaxas made no sound, but Dalia felt something like a chuckle pass through the air nonetheless.

"Yes, exactly. And the fact you didn't question it means you're a true Ravenstone," she said, more amusement passing silently through the air. Then the impression of a small storm-cloud formed around her head, and she said, "Though speaking as your Magical Self-Defense teacher, if you see someone wearing a mask like this, you should probably run away. After all, how do you know I'm really Mrs. Metaxas?"

"Um... good point. But uh... well, you feel like you. And you sound like you, even with the flat tone. Oh yeah, and your tattoos are visible."

"Very observant. Still, I could be a glamour."

Focusing her mind, she turned on her Magic Sight and looked at Mrs. Metaxas.

"Nah, you're you. The rivers of magic are like fingerprints, and I haven't yet seen a glamour that could mimic that."

"Well let's just see about that, why don't we?"

In Dalia's regular sight, there appeared a second Mrs. Metaxas, this one unmasked and leaning against the desk casually. To Dalia's Magic Sight – which she was sort of seeing at the same time, it was hard to describe – she saw the rivers

of magic that the other Mrs. Metaxas had. It was hard to tell when one was upside down and the other was right-side up, but she turned her head and tried to compare the two.

"There's slight differences. I'm not sure. I mean, the desk one is obviously the glamour, but well... Wait, let me try something else."

She focused her Magic Sight even more, like she'd done that one day in Enchantment class. Here she saw a plain difference. The Mrs. Metaxas hanging upside-down had rivers of magic that flowed like water. The other one, though... its rivers of magic were like a thick mist drifting in place in the more-or-less correct shape. Dalia relayed this information back to Mrs. Metaxas. As she did, she felt pride and happiness and fascination from Mrs. Metaxas.

"Of course," Dalia said, "Even if I hadn't seen that one suddenly appear, I would have known that one was fake because you couldn't have your emotions coming from two places at once."

The Mrs. Metaxas wearing a mask came down from her upside-down position and stood there. The other version of her changed to match her. Then both started to flicker, like they had in the exhibition duel.

"How about now?" two identical voices said from two different directions.

After several minutes of trying to sort things out, she finally gave up. "Yeah, alright, you made your point. That flickering thing makes you feel like you're in two places at once."



Mrs. Metaxas stopped flickering, and one of her vanished. She was still wearing the mask, but she took it off and set it on the desk.

"I should hope so," Mrs. Metaxas said, her voice and body language back to normal. "When I went to Ördögfa Gerinc Iskola, my Dark Curses teacher was a fellow Sensitive, and also an empath. That technique was essential in getting good enough to beat him in a duel, which is what earned me the top position in my graduating class. And don't think I didn't have to deal with the fallout of *that* for years afterward. Jealous former classmates trying to murder me wasn't fun, but I've managed to make them back off. Haven't had any issues on that front for the last twelve years."

Dalia's eyes went wide at this information. Especially since Mrs. Metaxas felt entirely sincere.

"So you really *did* graduate from the most infamous Dark Arts school in the world?"

"Yup. 'Know thy enemy' and all. As I understand it, your great-grandfather Takashi Nakamura graduated from there as well. But we're getting off track. Shielding, that's what we should be focusing on."

"Is it possible to use my Magic Sight shield for this?"

"Not sure. Are you still using your Magic Sight right now?"

"Yes."

"Is the filter for that up and running?"

"I don't know."

"Well there's a simple test for that." Mrs. Metaxas pulled her copper and diamond combat wand from a pocket and pointed it at the wall, casting a spell.

What Dalia saw with her mundane vision was a spell the color of meat that was starting to go bad, which flew straight as it ran into the wall and dissipated in a smell much like the rancid meat it resembled. What her Magic Sight saw, though, looked like a dark storm cloud just before it turned into a tornado, but full of lightning. When the spell hit the wall, the storm cloud lingered for half a minute after all sign of the spell had vanished from mundane sight. Dalia relayed this information to Mrs. Metaxas.

"Then that means your filter is up at what is likely full power, or nearly so. If it hadn't been, you would probably be feeling mildly to moderately ill from looking at it with Magic Sight. That's a spell my Dark Curses teacher invented specifically as a weapon against Sensitives. In my duels with him, I would use my Magic Sight to analyze his spells well enough I could often come up with counter-spells on the fly. But the first time I saw that one, I doubled over the moment he cast it and puked my guts out. He hadn't even been aiming it at me."

"Are you sure it wasn't the smell of rancid meat that did it?"

"Positive. He'd pulled *that* trick before, and so I had my sense of smell magically neutered at the time."

"So what does all that tell us?" Dalia asked. "What was the point of it?"

"It means your Magic Sight's filter isn't doing a darned thing against your empathic Gift. Which likely means it'd be more trouble than it's worth to try to change it so it does. You'll have to build an empathic shield from scratch."

"Great," Dalia said sarcastically.

"Well gird thy loins, thou dire wolf cub, for tis necessary," Mrs. Metaxas said in an amused tone, affecting a British accent.

"Okay. How do I start?"

"Well... there are many techniques, but I'm going to teach you one that a Goblin friend of mine taught me, when I was becoming an empath. Unlike you, it didn't come naturally to me; I had to be taught how to become an empath. But once I started managing to do it, I began having the same issues you're facing. And the Goblin method is well suited to amateur witches.

"You see, in the usual technique, you basically have to go the usual human-magic route of building what you want in your mind's eye every time you bring it up, which is a large part of why human magic takes years to master. You're basically learning how to turn your imagination into a weapon, but it takes a lot of work over years to figure out how to hold more and more information in your mind at one time, and empathic shields don't come easily with the human technique. I doubt you'd even be able to *start* learning a human empathic shield until you're 15 or 16, and it would likely take you another one or two years after that to master.

"The Goblin version, though, involves a lot of cheating. You still have to build the shield piece by piece, and it's still a complex spell, but you're essentially taking each piece of the spell like parts of a house and slowly building the house bit by bit, rather than trying to assemble the entire house all at once."

"If the Goblin method is so much better, why don't we learn it in school?"

“Well... first of all, most humans don't have the magical sensitivity to learn the Goblin technique. One of the things you have to learn first is how to sustain the pieces you've already assembled in their incomplete form, which takes a good deal of magical control and sensitivity to pull off. Once the spell is fully assembled, you can drop it like a stone into one of the rivers of power in your body, to sustain it until you need it again.

“Also, the human method of learning magic has some advantages. If you master the human technique, you can invent new spells on the fly and use them as soon as you can craft them in your imagination, since you're building an entire metaphorical 'house' all at once. You can't do that with the Goblin method, because with that method, crafting a new complex spell from scratch takes hours, if not days or weeks, to piece together into a finished spell.

“Sure, what you end up with is reusable, as long as you keep returning the spell into your body after you're done with it, whereas human spells fall apart without something to sustain them, but yeah, the Goblin technique is not great for on-the-fly spell creation. Goblins who learn that technique have to keep an arsenal of spells in their bodies at all times, and if they forgot something, or an opponent uses something new, they're out of luck. I understand there are Faery species that can weave brand new spells in seconds using the Goblin technique, but those tend to be the really powerful species.”

“Oh, okay. I can see why Aavraak wants to learn the human technique.”

"That could well be the reason. She won't know the Goblin technique yet. Knowing the Goblin technique tends to interfere with learning the human technique, but you're only going to be doing this for one spell, and anyway, Sensitives like us have better luck than most at learning both techniques. The same is true of Faery Sensitives, too.

"Hmm... now I think about it, your friend Aavraak might someday be able to do both, if she learns how to be a Sensitive. Something to tell her, perhaps?"

"Yeah. So uh... how do I make a shield?"

"Right. Well, it's a rather personal thing, shields, and what works for one might not work for others. Some people picture white light surrounding them in a bubble, another might prefer a red bubble, or perhaps a wall. And those simple ones can work okay in emergencies, but they tend to be a drain on one's resources. Which is why it's best to build one the Goblin way. A Goblin-style empathic shield, once completed and activated, runs continually as long as you remain magical, unless you shut it off manually, or something overloads it.

"Now what I suggest is you work on building a simple blocking shield first, so you have at least that for a defense. They're faster to make, and basically work the same way that necklace does. Once we have that done, we can work on more complex shields that filter things in different amounts, then shields with multiple layers. But like anything, you have to learn how to crawl before you can stand, stand before you learn to walk, and how to walk before you can run."

"My younger sister Vedyā skipped right past crawling. She went from sitting up to standing, to walking. Only started to crawl later for the heck of it."

"I see. Well, it's a metaphor, and I think you know what I meant by it. Am I right?"

"Er, yes."

Mrs. Metaxas spent some more time talking Dalia through the process of building a shield, which was a lot like the process for making a ball of light float in midair, with the different dimensions, the fact that blocking telepathic signals was far different from creating light, and how to make the shield visible to only her Magic Sight, so she wasn't walking around obscured by a bubble of regular light.

Her first attempts to place the spell in one of the rivers of magic inside her failed, as the current melted the spell like ice in boiling water. With some practice, though, she managed to get the spell to self-sustain itself inside her body.

Further complicating the process was that she tried a bubble of white light, and that didn't work. Once it was set up and activated, it fell apart in a matter of seconds. The spell itself was intact, but the shield it generated couldn't even stand up to one person's emotions. Dalia experimented with several more forms of the shield before settling on a bubble of spectral ice. That one had a surprisingly powerful strength for ice. Of course, it was a metaphor, or rather a form of magic that worked like a metaphor, so it worked. She watched as Mrs. Metaxas's emotions stuck to the bubble like fog freezing to very cold ice, forming frost.

The next step was to test the shield under normal circumstances. Dalia stepped out of the warded office and into

the Defense classroom. Watching with her Magic Sight, Dalia saw the icy shield immediately fog over with a thick layer of frost. She could still see through it, even with Magic Sight, even as the frost kept getting thicker and thicker. Dalia was worried the bubble would break under the strain of so much frost, but then a bunch of it sloughed off and vanished. She had a working empathic shield! What was more, it had something akin to an on/off switch in the form of activation and deactivation words, so if she really needed to sense someone's emotions, she could turn the shield off, listen to their emotions, and turn it on again before she could get too sick.

When they finished, it had been three hours.

"Your future lessons won't be that long," Mrs. Metaxas said. "An hour at most. We did the most important step, getting it out of the way. There won't be the same rush for the next level of shield, so we can take our time with it."

"Thank you for helping me, Mrs. Metaxas," Dalia said.

"You're welcome, dear. Now you should get going, it's almost curfew. But here's a note just in case. Don't abuse it, go straight to your dorm room, okay?"

"Don't worry, Mrs. Metaxas, I'll do that."



DALIA WAS LATER SITTING on her bed in their room, reading idly, when she looked at Kohana, who was seated at Dalia's desk using Gegauassi to do some sort of research online. As she watched her friend, she thought of how some humans looked to her Magic Sight, and remembered some

time ago when Doñela had put her face inside Kohana's body and thought what she saw was weird. Burning with curiosity now, she coughed to get Kohana's attention.

"Yeah, Dalia?"

"I was just thinking about how Mr. Carling looked to my Magic Sight, all those rivers of magic, and I got curious what *you* look like that way."

"Oh. Um... you can't see through people's clothes with that, can you?"

Dalia felt her cheeks get hot. "It's not x-ray vision, it's seeing magic. I wouldn't use it at all if it could make me see people naked."

"Oh good. Then sure, if you want, you can look at me with your Magic Sight."

Dalia nodded, saying her thanks, then concentrated. She had to shut her new empathic shield off because she couldn't really See through it yet, but she, Kohana, and Kobalos were the only people in the room, and the walls were better baffles against empathic noise here than in the main school building.

What she saw when she looked at Kohana with her Magic Sight made her eyes widen with amazement. Instead of the rivers of power she'd seen under the skin of her human teacher the first time, Kohana looked instead like a paper lantern or a fairy bee's glass-like exterior, the glow under her skin coming from a light source with a much different shape inside than her exterior. Dalia had to focus on seeing past the glowing, lantern-like skin before she could see the light source under it.



Looking at that level, the light's source turned out to be just like the rivers of magical power she'd seen flowing through Mr. Carling's skin, only in this case it was fox-shaped, not human-shaped. It was standing upright inside the outer shell, its forelegs tucked inside the arms of the human disguise. The hind legs of Kohana's true, fox-shaped form were bent backwards from how a fox's legs normally bent, so they could fit inside the legs of the disguise. Most disturbing of all, Kohana's muzzle looked like it had been squashed flat in order to fit her head inside the disguise's head in a way that lined the eyes up properly.

Dalia pulled back a little bit and saw thousands, maybe millions of tiny, faintly-glowing threads woven into a thick mesh throughout the space between Kohana's fox center and the inside surface of the disguise just under its outside surface. These glowing threads, no thicker than a human hair each, were all flowing from her fox center to where they connected to the skin of the disguise, or else connected to strands that were connected that way, to make the mesh. It took Dalia longer than it really should have to realize that the primary threads were very long strands of fur. What the threads crossing those fur strands were, though, she didn't know.

The full effect was, to Dalia, even more beautiful than Mr. Carling had been under her Magic Sight. She was very reluctant to stop staring at this remarkable vision, but finally she knew she had to. Very carefully, she focused her attention toward shutting down her Magic Sight and viewing the world normally. Kohana was looking curiously at her when she came out of it.

"So what's it look like, eh?" Kohana asked.

"Amazing! There's two layers," she said, and began to describe everything she'd seen in minute detail to an impressed Kohana.

"You can see my fox form under my human disguise? That's... kind of scary, actually. I mean, I know we can't hide our tails with our magic, but this means even the longest skirts would be an ineffective disguise against a human Sensitive. Some humans have been known to hunt Kitsune," she finished in a small voice.

"Yeah, that's kinda scary alright."

When Aavraak came back, Kohana told her what Dalia had seen. Curious, Aavraak had Dalia look at her that way, too. Dalia obliged, but it wasn't as impressive to her. The only real difference between Aavraak and Mr. Carling had been intensity, as well as the exact pattern of the rivers of magic. Being a Goblin, Aavraak's network of flowing paths of magic were much brighter than Mr. Carling's had been. As to the pattern itself being different, though... when Sally came back, she got the same treatment, and it seemed like everyone had a unique pattern of how their magic flowed, like a fingerprint. Sally's magic was also slightly dimmer than Mr. Carling's had been. Dalia supposed age and experience had something to do with that.





## Chapter Twenty-Two: Samhain

*Tuesday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

A WEEK BEFORE SAMHAIN (Halloween to the non-pagans), there was a bullying incident. It wasn't the only one; Anastasia had targeted Dalia several times that month. But this one was notable in that it *didn't* make Dalia want to cry. Quite the opposite, in fact.

It was in B-Day PE class with Mr. Thorsson. They were indoors because of the weather, running or walking laps around the gym as each person saw fit, because to Mr. Thorsson and Ms. Trask, exercise was exercise, and walking really was better on the knees anyway. But while she usually walked on these days, that day Dalia felt like jogging.

So she'd been jogging around the gymnasium, Doñela floating ahead of her pulling faces, so she hadn't noticed Anastasia Park up ahead on Dalia's left side, nor notice the girl fall back and stick out her foot to trip Dalia. Several things happened when she did this: first, the straps that secured her prosthetic foot to her leg came undone, because she'd been late to rise this morning and had secured them improperly in her haste to get to breakfast before it was time for

classes. Thus, when she was tripped, her prosthetic foot fell off in its sock and shoe, hanging onto her leg at a weird angle. Secondly, Dalia fell right into Doñela, who stopped her from falling any farther thanks to quick reflexes.

Third, and most important, Dalia had the rare presence of mind to have a flash of a brilliant idea. Once she realized she wasn't going to fall, she said, as loud as she could, "My leg! My leg is broken! She broke my leg!"

Anastasia went white as a sheet, then turned somewhat greenish and fainted, being caught by one of her roommates. Several other people screamed. It was chaos, with students screaming and running around, the teacher trying to figure out what happened. Doñela was laughing so hard she hit the ceiling and started rolling around a girder, accidentally knocking down a lost basketball in the process. It didn't hit anyone, but the sudden sound of it didn't help matters any.

"Ms. Ravenstone, how are you still standing if—" the teacher began. He was interrupted by her foot falling off the rest of the way.

There was more screaming. Dalia reflected that the fact she was physically disabled was not well known in the school, because of how her clothes hid her prosthetic most of the time. Her musing was cut off when Mr. Thorsson blew his whistle for quiet and attention.

"Ms. Ravenstone is not hurt, children. She was born with her left foot missing, and uses a prosthetic. Doubtless what Ms. Ravenstone said was referring to the prosthetic being broken, and she misspoke in her distress."

He picked up her prosthetic and pulled it out of its sock and shoe. It was her preferred mechanical prosthetic that

Sally and her dad had made for her. When everyone saw it, there was a lot of relieved laughter, but there were also dirty looks directed at Dalia, and even a few boos.

“Ms. Hoyt,” he said, talking to Helena Hoyt, since she was the one who had caught Anastasia, “please take Ms. Park to the infirmary to be checked over.”

Anastasia had woken up by now, and was glaring daggers at Dalia, who was trying very hard to not smirk. She went with her room-mate as instructed.

“Ms. Ravenstone, I won't punish you this time, since you were tripped. But in the future, please don't say things that are untrue. And also please try to secure your prosthesis more securely in the future.”

“Yes, Mr. Thorsson.”

He paused a moment, then said, “I don't know how you did it, but congratulations on not falling over after you were tripped. Especially considering your prosthesis had come off.”

She blushed, nodding. He handed her the prosthesis and the shoe and sock he'd taken off of it. She put the shoe in a pocket, Doñela keeping it from falling out, and she hopped on one foot over to the stage so she could re-secure the prosthesis to her leg.

“Wow, you have a missing foot?” said a boy she didn't remember the name of. Possibly Steven? He was black, pudgy, wore glasses, and his tightly-curled hair was shaved close to his head. “What happened?” he asked.

“Er, yeah. I was born like this.” She showed him the end of her leg, with no foot on it.

“Cool,” he said, clearly fascinated.

She sat down on the stage and looked at the prosthesis, thinking. People hadn't known she'd had a prosthesis, she'd been keeping it covered. She'd done this because in the past, she'd thought it was cool and had taken the prosthesis off to show people in school, but there were a lot of negative reactions – screaming, crying, people going “ewww!” But then, those people hadn't known she was using a prosthesis, either, and they'd been a lot younger than these people. Now the pixies were out of the bag, so to speak. Also, whether people could tell she was using a prosthesis or not had always given her anxiety, especially when they needed to know for some reason. It wasn't the only thing by far, but it contributed.

Making a decision on the spot, she left the sock and shoe off the prosthesis, openly displaying the mechanical foot Sally and her dad had made for her, buckles and all, and she thought it was cool, so why hide it? She stood up. She'd have to have Sally adjust it a little, it was an inch short because it usually had a shoe on it. But it was serviceable for now.

“Can you walk without that thing?” Steven asked.

“Er, not really. I uh, I mean, in an emergency I think I could. But uh, it's not easy. That leg is shorter than the other.”

“Yeah,” said the boy, smirking with suppressed mirth. “By a *foot*! Get it?”

Dalia laughed at the boy's joke. But she kept laughing, unable to stop. She fell back on her elbows. She couldn't stop laughing, though.

“Er, yeah,” said the boy. “It wasn't *that* funny.”

Sally came over then and said, “Hi Steven. Don't mind Dalia. Some people with clinical depression can sometimes

go into uncontrollable fits of laughter like this. I think it's like... well, like she doesn't laugh often enough, so the need for it builds up until something makes the dam burst."

"Oh. Will she be okay?"

Sally considered Dalia, who was on her hands and knees on the floor of the gym, laughing so hard she was wheezing.

"Mr. Thorsson?"

"I heard, Ms. Smith-Jones. Take your friend to the nurse's office for something to calm her down."

Steven watched Sally trying to lift Dalia up by the arm, struggling with her friend being mostly dead weight, because she couldn't control her own body during the laugh attack.

"Can I help too?" Steven asked.

"Um... she doesn't really like to be touched by people she doesn't know well. Sorry, Steven. But you can help hold the door open for us when we get there."

"Okay," he said brightly, smiling.

Sally ended up having to get the teacher's help, Mr. Thorsson using his magic to cast a spell on Dalia to make her float an inch above the ground, Sally pulling her friend along by the hand like a parade balloon. But just as they got to the door, Dalia stopped laughing with an exhausted-sounding sigh. She was still breathing hard, like she'd been running a marathon, but she had managed to stop laughing.

This lasted for all of two minutes before she started up again. She'd thought about Anastasia's reaction to her words and fallen prosthesis, then about Steven's joke, and just couldn't help herself. Mr. Thorsson insisted she go either to the infirmary or somewhere quiet to recover. Sally asked if she wanted to go to the infirmary, and Dalia shook her head

no. She ended up escorting Dalia to the single-occupancy bathroom she changed in, instead. Sally waited outside the door. Dalia would stop for a few minutes, start to turn the knob, and start laughing again when her mind brought her back to one of the two funny things from earlier. One time, she even got halfway down the corridor again before having another laugh attack.

Ten minutes after class ended, Dalia came out the door of the single-occupancy, lockable bathroom she used to change in, still in her PE clothes, for the last time that day. When she opened the door, all three of the triplets were standing there, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"That was BRILLIANT!" Alvar shouted. "OMG, 'she broke my leg!' And Anastasia fainting like that, most hilarious thing I've seen all month! Maybe even all year! Oh wow, how'd you think of that? Was it... I mean," she looked around, and whispered into Dalia's ear. "Was that Doñela? It sounded like something she'd say."

Dalia blushed. "That was all me," she said quietly, giggling. Louder, she said, "I don't know what made me think of it, I just did."

"Well that was an amazing prank," Cerridwen said. "Even if it was unintentional."

"Yeah, we're gonna write home about that one if you're okay with it," Sutekh said.

"Um, sure. Yeah, go ahead. I don't mind."

"Hey, does that bathroom you change in have a shower?" asked Alvar.

"No. I have a free period right now, and A-Day PE is the last class of the day. So I shower in our dorm room. Which is



why I haven't changed. I just went back to the bathroom for my stuff."

"How do you keep someone from stealing your stuff out of there?"

Dalia grinned, and leaned forward to whisper into Alvar's ear. "I have Doñela lock the door from the inside when I come out. She can then go back in and unlock it."

"Wow, cool!" Alvar said.

"That makes sense," said Cerridwen. "And there's loads of those single-occupancy bathrooms around here, it wouldn't even be much of an inconvenience to anyone else."

"We should discuss that in more depth later," Alvar said. "For now, I'm gonna go hit the showers. See ya!"

"See ya," she echoed, and they went their separate ways.



WHEN DALIA WAS DONE showering and changing, she came out of the bathroom to find Sally already had her tools out on her desk.

"I noticed you stopped wearing that other shoe, so I knew you'd want to have me adjust its height for you. Did you want me to do that now, or have some dinner first?"

"Dinner first," she said.

Sally, Dalia, and Kobalos went down to dinner then, her prosthesis drawing a lot of attention. People were talking about the incident in PE, and Anastasia was glaring daggers at her. At least Principal Park hadn't had anything to say about her choice to only wear one shoe and one sock; not

yet, anyway. (Judging by how the teachers were talking at their own tables, that might not last.) She managed to ignore the extra attention long enough to eat dinner and get back to the dorm room. Dalia removed the prosthesis with relief – its straps often pinched or just irritated her skin – and let that leg just hang out while Sally worked on it with her tools, using wrenches and other tools to adjust its height back to original specs.

After an hour, there was a gentle knock on the door. Doñela poked her head through the door to see who it was.

*'It's Mrs. Metaxas!'*

Without waiting for either of them to respond, Doñela pulled open the door. Mrs. Metaxas looked surprised at this for a whole two or three seconds before apparently remembering about Doñela and Tamir.

“May I come in?” she asked. “I come bearing news from Principal Park.”

“Er, okay,” Dalia said.

Mrs. Metaxas came in, and Doñela closed the door.

“So what's the news?”

“There was a lot of debate at the teachers' table about you today, Dalia. Policy issues, mostly. School uniform code says you have to wear socks and shoes. Principal Park wanted to insist you go back to wearing your sock and shoe over the prosthesis, but I managed to convince him that your choice to wear it openly probably stemmed from an anxiety about whether people could tell you had a prosthetic or not, and worrying about their reaction when they found out. You wouldn't be the first prosthesis user to have those thoughts

and worries, after all. Also, I pointed out that the prosthesis counts as a shoe.

“With that in mind, you won’t have to wear any shoes over it if you don’t want to. He wanted to insist you wear a sock underneath it, but I educated him that such was impossible, as the socket needs your leg to be bare under it to work. I’m not actually sure if that’s true in your case or not, since your foot is just small and malformed, not completely missing. Principal Park claimed it was just the rules, but judging by his attitude at dinner, I’d guess he couldn’t stand the asymmetry of you having only one sock on. I reiterated the information about the socket, and he conceded the point but asked if you could please at least wear a sock on your other foot that’s the same color as the socket. Not that he’s going to be 100% thrilled with the fact your prosthesis is a different color than your shoe, but he did make that concession anyway. I volunteered to be the one to tell you. Make sure you comply; I’m not sure he trusts me to tell you everything properly. Plus, I have a glamour bracelet for you since you won’t be able to glamour it yourself.”

“Oh. Well okay,” Dalia said. “Thanks for the glamour bracelet. Tell him I understand, and I’ll wear the glamour.”

“I shall do that. In the meantime, if you ever feel like you might need more brownie points with Principal Park for some reason, you can come to me and I can cast an illusion so that your prosthesis looks black to him.” Mrs. Metaxas smirked. “And *only* him, but don’t tell him that.”

They giggled at Mrs. Metaxas’s little joke, and she left the dorm room after making a short bow.



*TUESDAY, OCTOBER 31<sup>st</sup>, 2017*

Anastasia Park was fuming. That little freak had gotten the better of her, made her look a fool in front of the whole class, and those weirdo triplet cousins of hers kept reminding her of it by bursting into laughter every time they passed her in the hall for a whole week.

Well she'd get that little freak back. The day it had happened, she tried breaking into the freak's dorm room, but apparently once people had settled on what rooms they wanted, only someone who slept in that room could get in if the door was closed. Well, and the maintenance staff too, of course. And possibly the teachers.

Still, she didn't let this deter her. She'd been watching their door surreptitiously all week, getting a feel for their schedules. On Tuesday the 31<sup>st</sup>, she was finally able to strike.

As that horrible Goblin opened the door of their room, Anastasia jumped at the door and forced her way inside, making the Goblin fall over, hissing in anger.

"You just stay there, Goblin, if you know what's good for you. I can always scream and claim you kidnapped me. I only wanted to look for some dirt on that little brown freak you live with."

Growling at Anastasia, Aavraak nonetheless stayed on the ground. The invader looked around and soon saw the posters by Dalia's bed.

“Ah yes, all these ugly brown women,” Anastasia said. “That’s got to be her bed. Oh and will you look at that, the wittle fweak has a teddy bear, how adorable.”

“Do not touch it,” Aavraak said. “We were told not to, without permission.”

“Oh really? Well now I *have* to touch it. Oh and look at that, his name is Mr. Hugs, how sickeningly *cute*.”

Aavraak said nothing, but smirked slightly as Anastasia reached for the bear. She didn’t know what would happen, but knew it would be entertaining.



DALIA OPENED THE DOOR to the building with the girls’ dorms in it, Doñela and she having an internal conversation about the triplets’ birthday party the day before as she walked. But their conversation was cut short by a shrill scream coming from her room, followed a few beats after by loud guffaws of laughter. The scream continued, but it was muffled, and Dalia ran ahead, knowing what she’d see.

A girl fell blindly out the door to Dalia’s dorm room and landed hard on her arms. She rolled over, clawing at something on her face: a very fuzzy, stuffed something, a plush teddy bear with eight plush spider legs coming out its sides, which were wrapped around the girl’s head. The bear’s face had also folded open like a flower, revealing an interior of red plush muscles and plush teeth. It was making a screeching sound like a dinosaur but warbling slightly. Inside the room,

Aavraak was kneeling, doubled over with laughter at Anastasia's predicament.

"MR. HUGS! DOWN, BOY!"

The skinless flower-petal face turned to look at her, glowing red eyes staring at her. She glared at it, her arms crossed, her foot tapping impatiently. Its face re-folded, returned to that of a normal smiling teddy bear, its eyes normal now as well. His spider legs let go of Anastasia's face and he fell off, skittering back into the room on his many legs. Anastasia screamed afresh, and she took off running down the hall and out the door, probably to tell a teacher she'd been attacked by a monstrous teddy bear.

When Aavraak finally regained her composure and stood up, she said, "That was very funny! I did not know such toys existed?"

"He's homemade. Grandma Belladonna Ravenstone made him for me. She made a lot of my toys over the years."

"Did that not terrify you as a child?"

She snorted. "As if. By the time I was four, I had a baby monster living under my bed, was occasionally babysat by bogeymen, and had a pet Annwn tunnel crawler I named Clicky. Also, at the time there was a basilisk living in my closet. Luckily there wasn't anything in the closet to be ruined by it nesting there. My parents tell me I named the basilisk 'Mrs. Cluck-Cluck' because of its resemblance to a chicken, and because it was sitting on a clutch of eggs that looked like chicken eggs. They also tell me I kept trying to hug it. But well, basilisks aren't exactly kid-friendly." She chuckled. "Apparently, after the third time they found me stunned uncon-

scious in my room and my arms covered in basilisk acid, they had enough and relocated it.”

“Why did they not relocate it at once?”

“Because I wouldn’t let them. I screamed and cried whenever they got close to it, things would fly around the room, and several times they had to pry my hands loose from it before the acid ate through my skin.”

“I see.” Aavraak adjusted her uniform shirt. “Do you think you will get in trouble for Mr. Hugs?”

“I doubt it. Shimá checked to make sure he was permitted before letting me bring him. And it’s Anastasia’s fault for barging into our room.”

“But she said she could claim I grabbed her.”

“Hmm... dunno.”

The door to the outside opened, making them turn to look. Anastasia was there, looking around in fear for signs of Mr. Hugs, and the teacher she’d brought was Principal Park. Dalia sighed internally; of *course* Anastasia would appeal to her uncle.

“Ms. Ravenstone,” Principal Park said. “I understand one of your toys attacked my niece.”

“Did she not also mention she barged into our room first?” Aavraak asked calmly. “I was coming out of the room and she ran in, knocking me down. I can show you the bruises. Also, I told her not to touch the teddy bear, and she did not listen.” Dalia nodded her agreement with Aavraak.

To Dalia’s surprise, Principal Park looked sternly at Anastasia. “Is this true, young lady?”

“Of course not, they’re both lying. They’re in cahoots!”

He sighed. “You always were a bad liar, Anastasia.”

"But Uncle Jonathan—" she said in a whiny voice.

"Not another word, young lady. The school wards register when uninvited guests break into the rooms. I was ready to give you the benefit of the doubt, thought it might be a mistake, but like I said, you're a poor liar, Anastasia. And it's 'Principal Park' when we're at school."

Anastasia's face fell. "But... but..."

"Back into the school, young lady. Right now. We must discuss your punishment."

Principal Park chivied Anastasia ahead of him and out the door. The door didn't even get a chance to close all the way when Kohana, Sally, and Cally came in, staring back at the two Parks.

"What'd we miss?" Kohana asked.

Aavraak grinned. "Come on in, all of you. Allow me to tell you the most glorious tale, a tale perfect for Halloween."

"Oh, Halloween!" Cally said. "Tonight's the Samhain ritual. I think it's at 9 o'clock. Have your family showed up yet?"

"Not yet," Dalia said. "But last night, Vedyá and Shimá assured me they'd be here by 8."

"Who all is coming?"

"Everyone from the house except for Grandpa Ravenstone."

"I heard Rosy Boa is letting your family lead the ritual this year," Cally said. "Is that right?"

"No, Persephone is still leading it. But should be fun all the same."

"Come on, so I may tell you the tale before it is too late!" Aavraak chided.





OVER THE WEEK SINCE getting her new empathic shield, she'd found it was at least as annoying as the necklace had been, because it also blocked everything her empathic Gift could sense, except for emotions from people who got close enough to be inside the bubble. A bubble she could only see when she was focused on her Magic Sight. Thankfully, it didn't interfere with the telepathic connection she had with Kobalos.

This was likely why she hadn't sensed Anastasia before being tripped in PE, and may have kept her mind clear enough to come up with that quip that had so scared and then angered the other girl, but she was getting tired of having to put up with this shield to get on with life. Dalia was waiting for the next time Mrs. Metaxas would give her a private lesson, because she'd promised Dalia to try to start on a kind of shield that could be operated as partial filters. But that would have to wait until after Samhain. Which was tonight.

With the end of October in Tirffiniol came weather cool enough that the jackets and coats came out. The Ravenstones were different, at least some of them. Morgana Ravenstone had on an ice-blue, woolen winter cloak with a fringe design of snowflakes. Orpheus was wearing a thick, multi-colored poncho. Nizoni had on her usual tan leather trench-coat, but it was buttoned up. And Dalia had on a black cloak of something that looked like spun angora, but felt like the softest cat

fur ever. When asked, it turned out to be made of something called 'raw silk velvet.'

Compared to them, the other Ravenstones were normal. Vedyā was wearing a blue coat as tall as herself, that was so fluffy with goose down that she looked a little absurd engulfed in its fluffiness. Chooli had on a normal black autumn jacket and sweatpants on, as did Ashkii. Sweetheart was being minded at home by Grandpa Ravenstone and the bogeymen.

When Dalia and her family came into view, all of Dalia's friends were waiting by the school's main entrance. As the Ravenstone family approached, a great many people started to flow out of the main entrance. Some of them were people they knew well, like Arlene Starling and Mrs. Metaxas, and there were a few kids from their class like Helena Hoyt and Melody Harper. Other students she only recognized from previous meetings of Rosy Boa, which happened about once every couple weeks as a sort of meet and greet so they wouldn't all be strangers when doing rituals together.

Also in the mix were two other teachers they recognized, Amraphel and Damiana Dyer, twin sisters that were identical except for a small detail in their eyes. Both were light-skinned black women with freckles and red hair. Both were also heterochromatic, meaning both of them had one blue eye and one brown eye apiece. But one had a blue right eye, and the other had a blue left eye.

Dalia had met Amraphel of course, as divination was often used as part of determining Banner assignments, so they'd met on Dalia's first day in the school. The Divination teacher noticed Dalia and seemed to remember the last con-

versation they'd had, for she looked haunted for a moment before recovering.

All told, there were at least two dozen people here for Rosy Boa's Samhain ritual. The leader of the Rosy Boa Banner – a pale, raven-haired 7<sup>th</sup> year girl named Persephone Rose, appeared from the group and moved to the front of it. Behind Persephone was Alexia Argent. Persephone still gave off an “ice queen” aura, and Alexia still was warm and friendly, her own hair shaved extremely short.

“Greetings, members of Rosy Boa. It's good to see you all here tonight,” Persephone said in a dark and mysterious sounding voice that matched her aloof affect. “And welcome as well to our guests, invitees of other members. It's good to see new people become interested in the Old Ways.”

Kohana, Brandon, and Sally grinned, as they were the guests. All of Dalia's other friends were already members of Rosy Boa, except for Aavraak, who wasn't going to be joining them for the ritual. Aavraak and her family had a different religion.

Persephone took roll, to make sure all the members were there.

“Excellent. Now we are all here, follow me into the Gray Grove.”

They followed Persephone, who had a grace about her almost as magical as Alvar's grace. She was wearing a long, flowing dress of green silk, and seemed to be floating rather than walking. Her long hair shone beautifully in the moonlight, as did her pale skin. Dalia understood why she was the leader; she had a powerfully magical presence about her.

The mood of the group became charged with solemn gravitas by Persephone's leadership as they walked. Dalia was surprised that Mrs. Metaxas was going along with it; her style tended more toward silliness and laughter. But it seemed she could adapt.

A cloud drifted past the moon, briefly enveloping the school's grounds in deeper darkness. They came past the corner of the school and were now walking past the greenhouses. Dalia looked into the sky and saw the twin galaxies in Tirffiniol's sky again, the sky like thousands of glittering jewels spread across navy velvet.

The greenhouses fell behind them, and before long they were walking into the trees of the gray grove. They walked into the middle of the grove, past the gnomes' tree city, and into a clearing big enough for them all.

They all got into a circle around the clearing. Persephone and Alexia set some things up in the middle and at certain points around the circle. When this was done, Alexia got back in the circle. Persephone pulled a dull silver dagger called an athame from her dress.

"In this, nature's temple – in this, the truest church of the Divine – we gather," she said, holding the athame casually at her side. "But first, we must recognize the dangers of the world and protect against them." Persephone waited as Alexia took a small bundle of witch hazel and lit its end aflame to purify the circle by smudging the witch hazel as she walked sedately around the circle. As Alexia did that, Persephone held the athame up in the air, following behind Alexia. As Persephone walked like this, a line of silver light formed from the tip of the athame. When the two of them

returned to their starting point, they had made a glowing silver circle in the air, and the whole place smelled of witch hazel. Alexia put out the witch hazel in some sand, in the center of the circle along with several candles, statues, bells, shells, and other assorted objects.

Alexia walked back across to her spot in the circle, but stood outside it to hold up a paper fan. Persephone went to the part of the circle opposite.

Still holding the fan, Alexia lit a white candle on the ground and said, "Guardians of the North, element of Air, protect this circle and all its participants from harm. We call on your assistance so only entities coming in peace and benevolence may come into our circle."

A fifth-year boy whose name Dalia couldn't recall stepped outside of his part of the circle, lit a yellow candle there, and spoke.

"Guardians of the East, element of Fire, protect this circle and all its participants from harm. We call on your assistance so only entities coming in peace and benevolence may come into our circle."

Persephone stepped out of the circle, lit a red candle sitting inside half of a geode, and said, "Guardians of the South, element of Earth, protect this circle and all its participants from harm. We call on your assistance so only entities coming in peace and benevolence may come into our circle."

Nizoni stepped out of the circle. She lit a blue candle floating in a bowl of water, and spoke.

"Guardians of the West, element of Water, protect this circle and all its participants from harm. We call on your as-

sistance so only entities coming in peace and benevolence may come into our circle.”

Alexia raised her hands palms-up and said, “Divine Creator, Gods of this world, ancestors, all who come in the name of benevolence, welcome. So I Will it, so it shall be.”

She lowered her hands. Persephone stepped back into the circle, as did everyone else. But Persephone kept going, to the middle of the circle. She picked up a bell and said, “On this Samhain night, the boundary between Autumn and Winter, to honor the land, I call upon Késséél,<sup>[1]</sup> Goddess of all life in Faery, to watch over us and protect us from harm on this hallowed night. Pwá é-hé-ly-hwil, Késséél! Dyá ōsákō'ssá, -hábé-shél; py-réal kétēl, Késséél! Kwéyáng ōsá-á, ◇úf ◇é'yō! Kwéyáng ohsá ◇úf lō◇◇k'◇ky'e◇◇k! Chézōl yá-áng ◇úfút kēkōsh, kétēl-oil kikel'á'yikil! Pwá é-hé-ly-hwil Késséél!”

Dalia's eyes went wide. Persephone was invoking one of the gods of the Ævintýrichor, Auntie Kira's race. And from what little she knew of it, Persephone was speaking flawless Hévéwesh, a language common among the Ævintýrichor. A language that was difficult but not impossible for humans to pronounce properly. She even had the odd cadence of the language that was reminiscent of certain poetic meters, this one going like ‘da da da da daa, da da da; da da da da daa, da da da; da da da da daa, da da da,’ over and over again, almost like a song.

At the end of the foreign incantation, Persephone's hands held in the air and her gaze to the sky, the trees encircling the clearing seemed to grow twice as tall and twice as thick. The whispers of the trees, which had been barely audi-

ble before, became nearly impossible to ignore. The candles seemed tiny and insignificant compared to the bright lights of the moon and stars in the sky. Something seemed to swell inside Dalia's chest.

Persephone herself also changed, her green dress seeming to turn into moss, her hair into spun obsidian, and her skin into chalk, without anything seeming to truly change at the same time. However intense Persephone's energy before then, it had intensified now. Dalia wondered if she were channeling Ké-ssee-él.

In a voice the same but also much more powerful, Persephone spoke again. "Hard times are ahead of us all. But with the right tools, you may be prepared. I am Ké-ssee-él, Goddess of all Life, in both this world and the spirit world, for spirits are alive as well. I shall reach beyond the Veil for you tonight, and spirits of ancestors who wish to visit you may pass into our world for the span of this ritual."

Persephone, or the Goddess, whoever she was now clapped her hands together once, then slowly prised them open. A chilly breeze issued from her hands, and a silvery orb of light formed there. Dalia felt Kohana grip her hand tight, and looked at her friend. She knew even before looking that Kohana was feeling like she hadn't signed up for something this intense.

Dalia leaned forward to whisper in Kohana's ear. "If you want to leave, you can. Nothing bad can get in, but we're all free to leave whenever."

Kohana shook her head. It was intense, yes, but she seemed to want to stay.

"The door is open. Only benevolent souls will come through. I am the guardian of the doorway," Persephone/Ké-ssee-él said, her tone promising powerful retribution to any souls that dared defy this edict.

Dalia heard a familiar clicking sound coming from the 'doorway.' She didn't see her former pet Clicky, but didn't need to. A tear came to her eye as she mourned her old friend and pet.

When Clicky left, Dalia felt a gentle presence, a familiar presence. Her mind was flooded with images of a smiling Takashi and three young boys, and knew she was in the presence of great-grandpa Accalon Ravenstone. She felt him smiling at her.

Accalon didn't leave, but another presence came to her. She saw images in her mind of a woman captaining a wooden sailing ship, having a heated sea battle with a whaling vessel before she took a harpoon to the chest. The woman fell into the water and smiled as she saw a mother baleen whale swimming away with its baby.

The next presence she felt was that of a trans woman from ancient Ireland, who traveled to Greece to join the Greek cult of the goddess Cybele. But this presence felt different. She probed Dalia's mind in turn, curious about her. She knew all the things that were special to Dalia, the things she loved and that loved her in turn.

Beside her, as the follower of Cybele gently probed her mind, Dalia sensed Sally next to her, crying. At Dalia's other side, Kohana was smiling but crying. There was hardly anyone in the circle who wasn't sad or happy or some odd mix of both.



*'I can help you, child,'* said the follower of Cybele. *'I can help you get to your Calling.'*

*'What? How?'* Dalia thought back.

*'Let me show you.'*

*'I don't know if I should.'*

*'I am here with honorable intentions, child. I would not be here if I was not. The Guardian would not allow it.'*

Dalia looked to Persephone Rose, who was standing perfectly still as she held the doorway.

*'I mean you no harm. We will not leave the school grounds, Dalia. You have my word as a fellow trans sister. I swear by Cybele.'*

Dalia's attention turned to Mrs. Metaxas, who was ignoring her own vision to regard Dalia with concern for some reason.

*'Okay, show me,'* Dalia said.

The spirit slid into her body. Mrs. Metaxas became alarmed, jumping ahead and grabbing Dalia's arm as the world became dark, and she felt like she was everywhere and nowhere at once.



DALIA OPENED HER EYES and found herself on the ground in a clearing. At first she thought she was still in the clearing with the rest of Rosy Boa, but then she noticed there was a tall and impressive tree about 20 feet away from her, and a great many trees behind her. The trees behind her formed an oppressive and very dark wall of vegetation.

At her feet was the strangest fungus she'd ever seen. It looked like human skin, complete with moles and little hairs. It grew in a huge patch around that tree growing in a large empty spot. Looking between the weird fungus and the tree, she realized where she had to be. She was in the Dark Grove, and that was the Devil Tree.

She stood up and heard a woman groaning. A few feet from where Dalia had been laying was Mrs. Metaxas. She was waking up, rubbing her forehead like she had a headache.

"Haven't had one this bad since my last week of college," Mrs. Metaxas said in the wavering voice of someone who was about to be sick.

Dalia noticed then that the spirit of the follower of Cybele wasn't there with her anymore.

"Mrs. Metaxas, what happened?"

"Ow," the teacher said. "Not so loud, please."

Mrs. Metaxas sat up and looked around in a daze.

"We're in the Dark Grove, aren't we?" Mrs. Metaxas asked.

"I think so."

Dalia looked up at the Devil Tree in the distance, in awe. Without thinking, she stepped forward onto the weird fungus. It moaned like a human being in pain, and where she'd stepped there were red footprints like blood.

"Oh wow," Dalia said, looking down at her footprints. "Bleeding-skin fungus!"

"Lovely," Mrs. Metaxas said sarcastically. "Dalia, come off of there now. We need to get back."

"No way. Now we're here, I want to hug the Devil Tree."

"Hug the—what?"

Dalia kept walking forward, ignoring the weird sounds from the fungus. She also ignored the aura of malevolence the Devil Tree was radiating. Soon, she was underneath it and looking up at its thorny branches.

"Dalia, please," Mrs. Metaxas said, coming up behind her. "We need to go."

"How'd we get here, anyway?"

"I'm not positive, but I think that spirit you were talking with opened a portal back to Earth, pulled you through it, and shadow-walked you to another portal here. Not sure how it managed that, the wards should have prevented that."

"She was a priestess of Cybele, and a witch."

"Oh. And that doorway was there." Mrs. Metaxas blinked. "Okay, new theory that explains my headache: she took us through the spirit realm to here, somehow."

Dalia was by now running up to the tree. Mrs. Metaxas ran despite the pain in her head, trying to grab Dalia before she got hurt, but Dalia eluded her and hugged the tree. Mrs. Metaxas took several steps backward, trying to decide what to do next.

"You're so beautiful!" Dalia told the tree.

She and Mrs. Metaxas both felt the tree's aura shift from malevolence to confusion. This human wasn't hurting it, she was... loving it? The tree didn't know what to think about this development. It had never been loved before. Not even by its own kind. Until now, it hadn't known what love *was*. But it could now feel her love radiating from her.

"Oh you're so beautiful, I wish I could move you to our yard over by our house in Tirffiniol so I could hug you all

summer long! I'd move my room to somewhere I could look out at your beauty whenever I wanted to."

The tree was even more confused. Beautiful? It?? Dark and impressive, sure. Inspiring fear and terror with its aura and its sharp spines everywhere, yes. But *beautiful*? If the tree'd had a head to scratch or arms to scratch with, it would be doing that. It was just lucky for Dalia that its trunk wasn't prickly, or she'd be in a lot of pain right now.

The tree then noticed the other human there, who was keeping a respectful distance, and was feeling concerned but not fearful. The older human was remaining calm, and could kind of see what Dalia meant about the tree being beautiful.

Probing her mind, the Devil Tree saw that the human sapling was genuine in her appreciation of the tree's beauty. If the tree could have blushed at this, it would have. What was more, a feeling it hadn't known before today filled its heart. Checking it against the human sapling's mental catalog of emotions, the tree identified this emotion as 'loneliness' mixed with 'sadness.' Also 'happiness' as its previous rage directed at the rest of the world evaporated. The tree hadn't even realized it had been angry until now, but it knew it had been.

"You need a name," Dalia said to the tree.

The human liked to name things she loved. The tree liked this new emotion, love, and was flattered and happy. It wanted a name, if that's why she named things.

"I think I'll name you Kallistos. It's Greek, it means 'most beautiful.'"

Kallistos. The Devil Tree liked this name. Kallistos 'blushed' again and felt happy.

"Dalia, we need to leave before people get too worried."

Dalia sighed. "But I want to spend more time with Kallistos."

"I'm sorry, but we can't."

Kallistos didn't want to be alone again, and could sense that the sapling didn't want to leave Kallistos, either. Searching through the sapling's mind again, Kallistos found something useful, information about wand trees that a lonely tree like a Devil Tree wouldn't have known before. Kallistos released one of its smaller branches, which fell a couple feet from the human sapling.

"Oh my goodness! Thank you, Kallistos! Oh wow!" Dalia reached out to touch it, but noticed the branch was covered in sharp spines. As soon as she noticed this, the spines fell off along the whole length of the branch, the leaves with it. She could now pick up the branch, so she did.

"Alright, fine, can we go now, Dalia? You can communicate with the tree via the branch. There's even a little bit there that looks like it'd make a great wand."

"Oh fine, I don't want anyone to worry too much. Love you, Kallistos!" she said, giving it one last hug, then waving to the Devil Tree as she left. Its aura flashed amusement and affection at her.

Mrs. Metaxas took Dalia's hand so as to not lose her in the dark. "Luckily for us," she said, "we don't have to go in to the rest of the Dark Grove to get out. There's another exit this way, and even though the locks keep people out, by design they don't keep anyone *in*, either. Nobody human, anyway."

Dalia was still communicating with Kallistos through the still-living branch it had gifted her with, and so she wasn't paying a lot of attention to the journey. But she did keep overhearing Mrs. Metaxas say things like "Principal Park is going to be angry about this, but don't worry, I'll help calm him down," or "Persephone Rose is going to be lucky to avoid being expelled over this, the poor dear."

Somehow, Dalia's family and friends, along with several Rosy Boa members including Persephone Rose, Alexia Argent, and Arlene Starling, were already not far from the gates of the Dark Grove when they left it. They spotted Dalia and Mrs. Metaxas, jogging to catch up to them. Principal Park was not far behind, and he looked more worried than furious, but yes, he was both.

The rest was a muddle of ecstatic friends crying tears of joy, most of Dalia's family hugging her before demanding answers, Vedy's reaction being to stare in fascination at the Devil Tree branch. Persephone Rose was crying, she hadn't expected that invocation to be that powerful. Mrs. Metaxas and Principal Park were arguing until they got to a point where they could agree that listening to Dalia's side of the story was worthwhile. So, clutching the branch from Kallistos for emotional support, she told them what she'd experienced as well as she could remember.

"A spirit you didn't personally know offered you something and you took them up on that offer?" Mrs. Metaxas asked, a calm sort of anger in her voice.

Her head down, Dalia said in a small voice, "Yes."

"Why?"

"She said she was one of my ancestors, like the others. She swore by Cybele she wouldn't hurt me, or take me off the school grounds. And, well... she kept her word."

"I hardly think so, young lady," Principal Park said. "You ended up in the Dark Grove. It is very dangerous in there, which is why only adults are supposed to be able to go in there. I'm going to have to have ward masters in here going over every inch to find out what happened and plug the hole."

"Did the wards tell you anything?" Nizoni asked.

"Yes. They alerted me to a surge of very powerful fairy magic in the Gray Grove, followed by the opening of some sort of inter-dimensional portal. Then as I was on my way to get Mr. Safiq, the wards told me about a second surge of fairy magic, and another portal opening in the Dark Grove. As well as a report of unauthorized shadow-walking by a student."

"Brigit – the spirit – came into my body and shadow-walked me there."

"Was the second portal the same type as the first?" Mrs. Metaxas asked.

"No. I couldn't make heads or tails of the first one, until after hearing this story. The second one was a portal to Earth, made a sort of tunnel through Earth's side of the Inter-dimensional Veil, bypassing all the wards in the Dark Grove. Shouldn't have been possible, the power requirements are absurd. But then I guess the fact that the local ley line suffered a brief sharp drop in its power levels means that shouldn't really surprise me.

“What’s more, both surges of fairy magic were of an Ævintýrichor nature. Though the first one was plainly Ævintýrichor magic being used by a human, the second surge was purely Ævintýrichor.”

All three of Dalia’s parents and Mrs. Metaxas stared at Principal Park when he said this, confused and shocked. Then her parents looked at each other and began to converse in rapid Navajo. Dalia could feel Doñela listening in, but didn’t bother to ask for a translation.

Finally Morgana said, “Well, as far as we know, the only Ævintýrichor we’re acquainted with is on Earth, currently on a different continent.”

More was said after this. The adults pondered the mystery a little more, but then moved on to punishments. Persephone Rose – who tearfully insisted she couldn’t remember where she’d gotten the night’s ritual from – was nonetheless fired as the head of Rosy Boa for using potentially dangerous fairy magic she was unfamiliar with, and would be spending all next weekend in detention for it, but wasn’t being expelled, thanks to some fast talking by Mrs. Metaxas. Also, all future rituals done by Rosy Boa would be run past Mrs. Metaxas for her to approve or deny, and she would also be chaperoning future rituals. Persephone was also losing her RA status.

Dalia, for her part, got detention all Saturday afternoon for taking an unfamiliar spirit up on its offer, but since it didn’t seem like she’d really known for sure what the spirit would do when she made the offer, Dalia wouldn’t be punished for being in the Dark Grove. Especially since, even if



*was* entirely by accident, a teacher was there with her at the time.

Principal Park didn't want to let her keep the branch the tree had given her, but as it no longer had any spines on it, and was passive as long as it was secured or was on Dalia's person, he reluctantly let her keep it on the condition she'd take it home during Thanksgiving break (excepting the wand-sized piece she convinced him to let her keep for a wand). He also insisted on the bulk of the branch being secured in one of Mrs. Metaxas's high-security vaults on the basement level of the school, until it was time for Dalia to take it home with her.

Mrs. Metaxas led Dalia back inside with the others, and then led her to the room Shop Class was in. There she let Dalia carefully use a hand saw to cut off the piece she wanted for her wand and another bit she planned to make into a bracelet before carefully securing the rest in a secure room in the Omega corridor of the basement. As she went downstairs, Dalia went back to her room. She could still feel the connection to Kallistos through the wand, and knew she'd have to get out her tools as soon as she had a chance, to shape the wand and sand its handle smooth without changing the gnarled, twisted appearance of it. The wand would let her do this, because the tree knew it was another thing she would be doing with love.

As it was, Dalia fell asleep holding her new wand.



*WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 and the next few weeks.*

The next day in her first free period, Dalia was in her room using her tools to fashion one of the pieces of Kallistos the Devil Tree into a bracelet, boring a hole through the center while wearing her protective goggles and gloves, then filing and sanding for a while until she had to go to her next class. But she was back at it that afternoon in her second free period, and again for two out of her three B Day free periods. Then on Saturday morning, she began on the rune work to strengthen it. This was where having lived with a large library came in handy, for she had experience with runes. She'd never enchanted them before, but she could carve them, and now that she could manipulate her own magic, enchanting runes would be easy. When she was done with this bracelet, it would be as hard as steel, and a minor sticking rune would keep the necessarily over-sized bracelet from slipping off her arm when she wore it.

She had only made half progress on the rune work when it was time for dinner, so she promised Kallistos she'd be back later in the evening, and went to dinner, then to her detention.

Her detention was with Mr. Safiq, a man she barely knew. Her assignment during the detention was to read about all the different ways spirits could be malicious or sneaky, which she supposed was intended to frighten her, but that was sort of lost on her, since she lived with her dead grandfather's ghost. Still, it wouldn't hurt to be more cautious, though she still believed she'd judged the situation cor-

rectly during the Samhain ritual. After all, Brigit had done exactly what she'd said she would do, no more and no less.

Dalia's friends all had different feelings about the whole affair. Kohana, Sally, and Brandon were a little shaken up by her disappearance from the ritual and the ritual's unusual intensity, but weren't scared off. They were also grateful she was safe, and exasperated by her obsession with the Devil Tree. The triplets, on the other hand, thought the whole thing sounded like an amazing adventure and were a little jealous of her for it, but they were still good natured about it and just as fun to be around as usual.

Aavraak, who hadn't been there, had listened to the whole story, her eyebrows climbing ever higher up her forehead until the end. Then she'd regarded the in-progress bracelet and the rough, gnarled, twisted wood of the wand like one might regard an angry rattlesnake. She was hardly the only one who did. In fact, the whole school seemed to know within days what had happened. Well, there had been a lot of people at the ritual, there always were at Fae Springs, especially for the Samhain ritual.

The story going through the rumor mill had a pleasant side-effect that the Park children were giving her a wide berth now, not wanting to touch the wood of such a dangerous tree, especially since this wood was technically still alive. She didn't bother telling them what she'd told her friends about it.

"Kallistos isn't going to hurt my friends," she told Sally and the others. "And he won't hurt anyone else, either; I won't let him. We have an understanding. Also, he's a lot happier now that he's in nearly constant communication

with me. The poor lonely dear was scared before, and lashed out a lot because of it. But he won't do that anymore, now he has a friend." She stroked the wood of the bracelet as she said this.

Over the next couple weeks, Dalia spent most of her spare time finishing carving runes into the bracelet, with remote help from Nizoni via MMOTW. When the rune-work was finished, Dalia took the bracelet to the Shop Class with Mrs. Metaxas to supervise as she varnished it. After the varnishing process was finished, then with guidance from Mrs. Metaxas, she empowered the runes. They glowed, a simple runic spell to make the bracelet essentially unbreakable. That done, she applied sealant. Mrs. Metaxas sped up the process of the sealant curing with her magic, and the bracelet was done.

So by Wednesday the 15<sup>th</sup>, Dalia came to classes with the finished wooden bracelet snug around her upper arm, the bracelet was so large on her. But since this bracelet was made of wood that was still magically alive, if her arm ever got too big for the bracelet, she could get some help making the bracelet grow to fit her arm. For now, though, it fit fine around her upper arm.

All morning long, classes were interrupted here and there for different classes to go get their pictures done for picture day. Dalia had her new bracelet on, had gone to the trouble to have Sally and Alvar help her get her hair into box braids – a much more difficult hairstyle for her because it involved even more washing and conditioning than her hair normally did, then had to be straightened before it could be

braided. There were even more steps, and it was very difficult for her even with help.

Once the box braids were in, though, it was relatively easy to keep them in for up to a month or two with witch hazel treatments to keep them clean, and regular scalp shampooing. The upkeep on box braids for that long was a lot of work too, though. The Snow Ball was in a month; she wanted to look nice for that, and she could keep the box braids in until after the Snow Ball was over, if she wanted to. Still, that was a lot of work to do over the next month. But doing all that work for the benefit of just one day seemed too much for her, so Dalia decided instead to keep them in for a couple weeks and then go back to her usual locs.

Other preparations for Picture Day for Dalia included braiding skull-shaped beads into her hair (which were allowed by the dress code; she'd checked), pentacle earrings, her lapis-centered pentacle necklace in full view, and blood-red nail polish. She also hadn't been able to find anything in the student handbook against fake vampire fangs, and she had a pair of porcelain vampire fangs. So when she smiled for the camera on Picture Day, she was showing off her fangs.



*MONDAY, NOVEMBER 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

On Monday, Dalia got called to the infirmary via a pixie whispering into the ear of Mr. Quinn Park, the science teacher. He had nodded, written a hall pass for her, and handed it to her without comment. Knowing what it would

be for, Dalia already had permission to take Sally with her for extra emotional support, so she was unsurprised when he gave one to Sally as well. They went to the infirmary together, nobody else in class knowing where they were going. Presumably they'd assume she and Sally had been called to the Principal's office, or to the main office to meet a visitor.

The two girls entered the infirmary and were guided by the nurse to a private room. In that room, as they knew he would be, was great-grandpa Takashi Nakamura. He was standing in the middle of the room, and Dalia smiled. But her smile fell as she glanced down and noticed he was wearing an obviously artificial leg, a 3-D printed leg made of some sort of mesh that left a hollow space inside the leg where the bottom of the leg used to be, the thigh still being present.

"Great-grandpa Takashi!" Dalia said, tears in her eyes. "What happened to your leg?"

"Workplace injury," he said. "I was in Peru, and a dark witch got in a lucky shot. It will grow back in six weeks, little branch, not to worry."

"Oh. Well that's good to hear. Are you... I mean... will you be able to... you know..."

He smiled. "My abilities are unaffected. I am a Vampire, we recover quickly. My magical core is unaffected by the injury. We need to take things slow in these first few sessions anyway."

"Um..." Dalia said, looking at the hospital bed he was standing by. "Am I gonna need to... I mean... er... I mean, you're gonna be Bending my insides with your magic. So do I need to... um..." she flapped her hands in frustration at her own reluctance to speak.

"I think she's trying to ask if she needs to get into a hospital gown. Or, well... we talked about this the other day, and she's convinced you need to be able to see the offending tissue to Bend it."

"If that were the case, magical surgeons could not fix organs without cutting people open to look at their insides. Dalia, you will not need to change your clothing, nor do you need to expose anything you do not wish me to see."

"Oh thank the gods," she said in relief. "I trust you, of course, but I'm relieved all the same."

"Understandable. Please lay on the bed, and we can begin."

When she was on the bed, he handed her several potions to drink, which he told her would make her body more pliable, more likely to change. She drank those, trying not to spit them back up again because they were so vile.

When she was done with the last potion, Dalia held Sally's hand as Takashi began holding his hands in the air over her lower body, his eyes closed. He held that position for a minute before starting to slowly move his hands in the air like some kind of localized yoga or Falun Gong movements. As he did, Dalia felt the entire bottom half of her body tingling like it had fallen asleep. It was uncomfortable, and she squeezed Sally's hand to distract herself from it. As he continued the process, the discomfort climbed, and she was squeezing Sally's hand hard enough to make her friend grimace in pain.

But to her shock, after about a quarter of an hour, she felt her brain slipping into Magic Sight mode against her will. She looked down at herself and saw the rivers of magic in her

lower body were glowing more brightly than they should. They were also wiggling around like something was trying to divert them. A cloud of bright mist swirled in the air between Takashi's hands and her body, the mist crawling inside of her as it approached. She watched, so fascinated it distracted from the discomfort, and saw several new tributaries begin to break off from the existing rivers. They were mostly clustered in her abdomen, like glowing hairs crawling into gaps in the pattern.

This process continued for another quarter of an hour, the little hair-thin streams of magic doubling in thickness. As they did, she suddenly felt a stabbing pain in her belly, and let out of small yowl of pain. Takashi paused, and the pain stopped. After a few moments, his hands started to move again, in a different pattern. The pain did not return, and the discomfort was easing. The little streams of magic weren't moving anymore, either. Takashi continued for another half an hour before he stopped.

Putting his hands to his sides now, he walked over to a cabinet and took out a few more potions, which he handed to her.

"These will finish sealing the work I have done today," he explained.

She drank the potions, all of which were disgusting, and set their containers down.

"What exactly did you do?" she asked him.

"To change the body in ways it doesn't already have the programming for, one must first change the rivers of magic in the body, which is something all lifeforms have, even mundanes. Making the kinds of massive changes to that network



we need for this is a long and arduous process. It will take the majority of the effort and time in the coming years. Only the final year of the process will begin to utilize those changes with regular Waxing to begin causing the tissues to rearrange themselves, and new tissues to grow.”

“Why so long?” Sally asked.

“Because what we are attempting to do is resetting the body's own ideas about itself and its arrangement. In essence, we are changing the body's mind about itself to match what Dalia already feels in her heart. Once that is done, certain potions will artificially induce the body into realizing that its map no longer matches the territory. When this happens, with the application of Waxing, the body will begin to, in its mind, repair the perceived damage to itself.”

“So you're going to end up tricking her body into thinking it's injured?”

“Yes. Vampires use a similar process to regrow missing limbs and recover from many otherwise fatal injuries. You see, when the body is injured, it does not typically have the resources or programming to regrow certain things, like legs. It heals the injury just enough to keep one alive, often needing help even then, with skin grafts or stitches, or magic. A part is missing, as with my leg, but the body still remembers having that leg. As does the brain. Which is why amputees get phantom pains in their amputated limbs.

“But Vampires have learned how to permanently supercharge our own magic, and put our bodies into a permanent state of pliability, so that thanks to magic, the body forgets its usual limitations, the magic automatically begins Waxing the healing process, and thus our bodies can do things like

regrow a missing limb without any outside help. It is essentially taking the same process of limb regrowth with magic that magical healers can do for people, and turning it into an automatic process, no second or third party involvement necessary.”

“Wow!” Dalia said, her eyes wide. “I think I get why Vedya wants to become a Vampire when she grows up.”

Takashi smiled a little sadly at her. “Just keep in mind, little branch, that Vampires live hundreds of years because of our automatic healing. It even heals the damage that causes aging. Becoming a Vampire means you might fall in love with someone, only to watch them die. Then you have to live with that pain for the rest of your very long life.” As if to highlight his point, he fingered the beads of his *juzu*.

“Oh,” Dalia said, deflated.

Takashi smiled, and held her hand in his. “I am sorry if that upset you, little branch.”

She put her other hand atop of his hand, sandwiching his hand between the both of hers. She said nothing. Nothing seemed adequate. What do you say to someone whose grief had lasted three or four generations? His husband had died just before the start of the American Civil War, and if she was remembering correctly, Takashi might very well be older than the founding of the United States. Maybe Accalon hadn't been the first loss in his life, just the most painful one, due to Accalon being close to completing the process of becoming a Vampire at the time of his death.

It suddenly occurred to her that he had to be grieving not just for great-grandpa Accalon, but also for the children that had survived him, and other descendants over the cen-

tury and a half since Accalon had died. Unless they had all become Vampires, of course, and Dalia knew that wasn't the case. Her papa's father, after all, was a disembodied spirit haunting their house. Thinking of her papa, she knew Takashi would one day mourn him as well, and then he would mourn *her* some day. The whole thing struck Dalia as profoundly sad, and her eyes began to water as she thought of it.

Without warning, the room thrummed like a very loud bass drum had rumbled, and the runes on her wooden bracelet were glowing red. All three of them turned their attention to it at once, one terrified, the second wary, and the third confused. But then the hand on that arm clutched Takashi's hand tight and transmitted thoughts and feelings down her arm into Takashi's brain via black, vein-like lines that briefly spread from the bracelet into his hand before vanishing.

Takashi's eyebrows raised a moment, then he smiled.

"What happened?" asked Sally.

"Kallistos was sharing his sympathy with great-granddaddy," Dalia said with a grin.

"A novel experience, sympathy from a Devil Tree. But if anyone could soothe a savage beast like a Devil Tree, it would be you, Dalia." He smiled at her.

Privately Takashi thought, *I pity anyone who angers that tree enough on her behalf for it to strike at them.*



## Chapter Twenty-Three: Thanksgiving Trip

*Wednesday, November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017*

THE WEDNESDAY AFTER her first Flesh Bending treatment from Takashi, Dalia was being picked up by Morgana to be taken home for the Thanksgiving holiday. Classes were being suspended for the rest of the week because she wasn't the only one to be going home for Thanksgiving, but any student that didn't go home could stay at school and have an extra long weekend. Aavraak and Kohana would have been among the students staying, because Goblins don't celebrate Thanksgiving and Kohana's mom didn't want to travel all the way from British Columbia for Thanksgiving. Dalia, however, insisted that they check with their parents to see if they could come with Dalia to her house, so she could show them Portland. Kohana, being excited for a chance to spend time with Vedyā for five days, immediately called her mom.

Neither set of parents was keen on letting their kids go to the house of someone who was a stranger to them, even if they were friends of their kids. Not at first, anyway. But when they mentioned that Nizoni was on the school board

and Morgana was on the *Concilio Portlandia*, this elevated them to someone who was responsible. More importantly, it elevated them to someone who would get into a lot of trouble personally and politically if friends of their children went missing after going to their house. So the parents of both agreed.

Sally and Brandon were also going home, but Brandon's parents had no way to pick up their son from school on their own, so he was going with Dalia and the two faeries. Sally's mom picked her up at the same time Morgana arrived, and they all walked together to the nearer parking lot on the school side of the river. They must have looked a little unusual, with Morgana and Dalia wearing cloaks against the cold temperatures (Dalia still wearing sunglasses in the dimmer light, and Kobalos on Dalia's shoulder wearing his own little jacket), Aavraak wearing a green woolen long-coat trimmed and lined with thick silver fur, Mrs. Lexa Smith-Jones and her daughter wearing mundane autumn jackets, Brandon in a similar jacket. As if they didn't make a strange enough looking group, Dalia was also carrying the remainder of the branch the Devil Tree had given her, since she'd promised Principal Park she'd take it home, using it like a walking stick.

Down in the middle of this parking lot was a small building that turned out to be a shadow portal. This one was much larger than any at the Ravenstone household, being big enough to fit a semi truck through. Morgana tapped a sequence of runes into a keypad on the portal and hit a red button, opening the portal up.

When they stepped through, they were standing near the top of a cliff overlooking a very winding river and a very old forest. There were mountains in the distance, puffy white clouds floating in the bright blue sky, the sun still the unusual brightness that said they were still in Tirffiniol.

Turning around, Dalia saw a portal as big as the one they'd entered through just floating there in the air. Unlike the tattered and flapping thing Nizoni had made in Brandon's backyard, this one was starkly outlined in a thick red rope of light. As Dalia watched, the portal shrank until it vanished. Now the portal was gone, she could see a familiar stone arch with wooden door. In fact, the whole area was familiar.

"Wow!" said Kohana. "It's beautiful!"

Dalia blinked around at everything. "Hey, we're in the part of Tirffiniol right outside our house! I recognize it from when me and Anastasia were here! But... um... how can that be? Our portal isn't that big."

"Our portal is designed to pop out of its arch if it needs to be bigger," Morgana explained.

"Wow," Brandon and Sally said in unison, looking out at the sight of grassland, strange animals grazing below. Kohana watched, too. Aavraak, for her part, didn't look impressed. Dalia supposed it was as ordinary and boring to Aavraak as a field in Iowa would be to Iowans.

The place really was gorgeous, though. Mostly grassland, there were trees in the distance, and mountains. Several rivers wound through the area, so bright and reflective they were like something out of a Miyazaki film. Colorful flowers bloomed everywhere around the top of the cliff they were

standing near, their scents enticing the kids to sniff them. But signs of autumn were everywhere, too. The trees were changing colors, the grass didn't look as green as Dalia remembered it, there was a chill in the air, and the flowers they sniffed looked almost frozen.

"Hey, these are different flowers than before," Dalia said.

"Yes. After the incident with you and young Ms. Park getting lost in here, Orpheus removed the Gods' Nightmares Flowers from this hillock and moved them to a greenhouse at our other property. He still doesn't know why the Gods' Nightmares Flowers were there; they had never been there before. The ones here now are Glass Flowers. Like the one I gave your parents, Brandon."

Dalia looked closer, and sure enough, the blue flowers looked like they were made of glass. She recognized them from a few months ago. Except that they weren't moving now, and were looking more like glass than ever before.

Morgana took out a fancy, old-fashioned silver key and stuck it in the lock of the door in the archway. She turned it, and the runes in the archway and on the door glowed. Turning the knob, she opened the door into the small shed that Dalia recognized from the one time she'd been in it years ago.

"Children first," Morgana said.

"Should I not be putting on a human disguise first?" Aavraak asked.

"No need. Nobody can see us in the back yard, except from the house. You'll be fine, Aavraak," Morgana said. Aavraak shrugged, accepting this.

They let Brandon go through first, and to their relief, his chair fit fine. Dalia and the others had worried his chair would be too big, but Morgana had been unconcerned. And Dalia wasn't sure if she was imagining it or not, but it seemed like the door got wider as Brandon got nearer to it, then shrunk back again when he was through.

Morgana stepped through next, moving around him to unlock the door of the shed. Once she was out and holding the door for him, Brandon came on through. The others followed behind him, Mrs. Smith-Jones right in front of Dalia. Dalia closed the portal door behind her. Morgana closed the shed door when Dalia was through.

"I love magic," Brandon said with a grin. "That whole trip took maybe 15 minutes, including walking and standing around staring at stuff. And now here we are in the mundane world again."

Dalia nodded, glad to be back.

The autumn chill was less noticeable here on Earth. Dalia took off her cloak, and Aavraak took off her woolen coat, looking around the place with interest. She noticed a thriving garden, with lots of different foodstuffs growing in it. Mostly squashes, but also chard, pumpkins, and a few things not so easily identifiable.

"Where did Charybdis go?" Dalia asked. "I thought she was on the Tirffiniol side of the portal?"

"Oh, she normally grows a bit farther down the hill than we could see from where we were at. But she isn't there right now. She's off looking for a mate."

Mrs. Smith-Jones, Sally, and Brandon stared at her in disbelief.



“They can uproot themselves and go looking for mates?” Sally asked, horrified.

“Yes. Don't worry about Scylla, though. She's out in Tirffiniol looking for a mate as well. Scylla only moves from her place in the yard when we let her. The wards holding her there have to be suspended manually to do that. She'll be back sometime in January.”

“What if she doesn't come back?” Dalia asked.

“She will. She loves Orpheus. This is her home.”

Instead of going through the back door, Morgana led them to the front yard, where Dalia introduced Mrs. Smith-Jones, Kohana, and Aavraak to Ziraxol the gargoyle and the remaining plants in the yard. Brandon was disappointed to see that the flowers that looked like little women wearing veils were gone, already dormant for the winter. Even the evil shape-shifting plant that had looked to him like a kitten was drowsy and sluggish.

Mrs. Smith-Jones didn't come in with the others, as she had to get to work. Sally hugged her mom goodbye and everyone left went in.

“By the way,” Morgana told Mrs. Smith-Jones loud enough for everyone else to hear as well, “if you find yourself being spoken to by talking wasps, don't talk back to them. And until further notice, do not under any circumstances say the word 'W-I-S-H' at all, even in private. The neighborhood has recently become infested by a hive or three of Genie Wasps. Nasty things, they grant... favors. Like genies in folklore do, you know. Where that stereotype of genies came from I don't know, genies are just a humanoid fairy race.

"Anyway, yes, Genie Wasps grant... boons. But have you ever read a story called 'The Monkey's Paw'? That is the sort of boon they grant. So no using the W word until we give you the all clear. And that goes for all of you, too, children." She sighed. "We've had to call in a specialist. She's a ghost, so the wasps can't grant her any boons. But unlike the somewhat translucent ghosts like Borghild or my father-in-law on Orpheus's side, she can appear fully solid and mundane looking, all on her own. The only sign she's a ghost is that she died in the 40's, and has that sort of fashion aesthetic."

"Oh," Mrs. Smith-Jones said. "Um... okay. Good to know. I'll spread it around."

"Good. I've already told Mr. Starling, of course. And I even told Mrs. Park. She was put out with me for some reason, as though I have any more idea than she does how a species of wasps native to Annwn ended up on Earth."

As her mother left and everyone was heading into the house, Sally said, "Wasps that grant wi—I mean boons? Why is that a bad thing?"

"Because the boons always turn into curses. Ask them for a million dollars, and you get it. But then the IRS will want to know where you got that money, or it'll be involved in a crime and the criminals want it back and are willing to kill for it, or it'll be a million dollars worth of plutonium just sitting out in the open, something like that. Or ask for a dead loved one back, and they turn one of their own into a very bad copy of your loved one that then kills you and uses your body to feed their larvae. Nothing you ask them for will ever go well for you."

“Okay. I think now I will have a phobia of that W word for the rest of my life, now,” Sally said, a haunted look in her eyes.

They approached the door, and saw that it had on it a wreath of black thorns, a grinning skull inside it, and silver pentagrams in its eye holes.

Morgana noticed them looking at it. “Samhain wreath. We keep it up through the Yule holidays as well, taking it down in January and only putting it back up before Samhain if there's a Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, another holiday for us.”

When they got inside, Dalia looked up and saw a familiar face at the sofa playing a video game on the TV.

“Chooli's here!” Dalia shouted, setting the Devil Tree branch against one wall and running over to her younger sibling.

Chooli looked up from zeer video game and paused it, tossing the controller aside just in time for a hug from Dalia. It was over quickly, the two of them pulling apart to begin an intense ASL conversation in a flurry of hands so fast that Sally was finding it impossible to follow. Sally sat in a fluffy love-seat, Brandon slowly getting out of his wheelchair, trembling as he held onto it long enough to plop down next to her. Kohana sat in the opposite love-seat. Aavraak sat on the sofa next to Dalia.

In one corner of the room was a tall, dead-looking tree that looked vaguely like a Christmas tree, if it had been stripped of its needles and had survived a fire that charred it black all over. Though looking at it, it gave the impression it had been grown that way deliberately. It was also decorated with all sorts of odd ornaments, including tiny skulls with

glowing red eyes, what looked like real shrunk heads, little models of severed hands that twitched realistically, a few bloody knives, a realistic-looking beating heart in miniature, live garter snakes and tarantulas crawling around it (glamours, they found out later), and was topped with what looked like something a child had hand-made of clay, resembling a zombie Santa Claus.

"Holiday tree," Morgana said, seeing where the kids were looking. "Samhain, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Yule."

"Vedya made the tree topper," Dalia said, looking oddly sour about it. "Back when she was 7."

"Where *is* Vedya, anyway?" Kohana asked.

"Vedya is out skateboarding," Morgana said. "She should be back soon. Now don't ask me any more questions right now, I'm calling Brandon's parents to tell them he's at our house now."

Barry the tree octopus floated into the living room on his floating box, looking somehow expectant. Chooli and Dalia signed something at him, and he nodded, turning to Sally and Brandon. Dalia informed them he was asking if they wanted anything to drink.

"Um... do you have Dr. Pepper?" Brandon asked.

"I'll have some hot cocoa," Sally said.

He nodded, turning to Aavraak.

"I shall try what Brandon is having."

When it was Kohana's turn, she asked for hot green tea. He nodded, and left the room.

"You sure you want pop, Aavraak? It's really, really sweet," Brandon said. "And fizzy."

"I am willing to try it. If I do not like it, well, then I will know I do not like it."

As Barry left, there came a great ruckus of noise from upstairs, like someone had tossed a drum set down a flight of stairs.

"What was that?" Aavraak asked, her ears flat against her head to try to block the sound.

"Oh, that's Doñela practicing on her drums," Dalia said.

A door slammed, blocking off the worst of the noise. Then a book floated down the stairs and over to a spare chair, opening itself up with the kind of haste that looked like anger.

"And that's Tamir, getting as far from the noise as he can," Dalia added.

When Barry came back with drinks for everyone, including some Earl Grey for Morgana, Aavraak looked at the brown liquid in the glass before her and sniffed it experimentally, nearly sneezing when she got bubbles up her nose. But then she sipped some of it carefully.

"Thoughts?" Brandon asked her.

"I like the feel of the bubbles in my mouth. But I am not sure about the taste. Aside from the sweetness, I am not sure what I am tasting."

"Well I can't speak for the modern recipe," Morgana said, "but originally Dr. Pepper was flavored with some sort of fruit flavoring."

Aavraak took another sip.

"It is strange. But good. But also too much at once. I think perhaps I could be satisfied with three parts less of it."

"That's probably healthier, anyway. Too much sugar can be bad for the health, at least among humans."

Dalia stopped talking with Chooli then and explained to Aavraak and Kohana what the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> would be like for them, what a traditional Ravenstone Thanksgiving looked like. Then the conversation wandered, as conversations do, and they were talking about restaurants and movies and shopping. After several minutes of this, they all agreed that they should get lunch out somewhere so Aavraak could experience it. Just as soon as Vedya got back from her skateboarding, which they knew would be soon, since Vedya had known they'd be coming.

When Vedya came back about 20 minutes later, they explained their plans to her. She nodded, paused to kiss Kohana on the hand, and went to grab some money from her room. Dalia went to get some money of her own. All that was left was Aavraak putting on a human disguise. This did not take long. Aavraak activated a medallion around her neck, and with a shimmer, a glamour snapped into place.

Now, instead of a green-skinned, scaly Goblin was a girl who looked remarkably like Dalia, but with slightly lighter skin, and hair that was brown, rather than Dalia's black hair.

"Do you like? I made it myself," Aavraak said. "Took me a month. Goblin magic."

"Cool. Um... but uh... I should probably warn you that people that look like me tend to uh... well... we're not well thought of by a lot of people."

Aavraak's now-human looking face fell.

"Oh. Did I make a mistake? Are you low of caste?"

“Um... kinda. Like we said before, our culture doesn't really have castes, but... don't be surprised if people treat you with suspicion or dislike because of how you look. Mostly from people who look like Sally. Sorry,” Dalia said.

Sally shrugged. “No need to apologize. It's true. I wish it wasn't, but it is. I've been out and about with you enough times to have seen it for myself.”

“Well,” Aavraak said, “if this is how my friend Dalia is treated, I will be there alongside her getting the same treatment.”

Dalia smiled.

{Chooli, you coming with?} Sally signed.

“Yes,” Chooli said aloud in the very distinctive accent of someone who has learned to speak a language they can't hear. “Are we going to the Portland Goblin Market?” zee asked, putting zeer computerized glasses on, and Nyota into the breast pocket of zeer jacket.

“Chooli, you speak?” Aavraak asked. “I thought you could not hear?”

Waiting first for Nyota to translate for zem because lip-reading was challenging and zee had never really had any reason to learn, zee responded, “I can feel my own voice. And voice coaches helped me learn.”

“Fascinating,” Aavraak said.

“Your accent isn't as thick as I would have thought it would be,” Kohana said, blushing. “Um, sorry if that sounds rude. But it's true. It sounds... deeper than expected. And a lot clearer than I expected from TV and movies. Though plainly spoken with more deliberation.”

“You're forgiven,” Chooli said.

"You're going to need a different name when you're out there, Aavraak. Your real name stands out too much," Sally said.

"I ask my friends to pick a name for me, then."

Dalia thought for a few moments. "Ava," she said when she was done thinking. "And uh, if we mess up and say Aavraak, we can say her full name is Ava Rock. Even though the first A is saying its name in 'Ava' but *isn't* saying its name in 'Aavraak.'"

"Ava," Aavraak said. "I like it. Are we ready to go?"

"What's the Portland Goblin Market?" Brandon asked. "Chooli mentioned it, but I haven't heard of it before."

"It's this place with a bunch of different magical shops, like a magical mall," Sally answered.

"What, like Diagon Alley in Harry Potter?" Brandon asked.

"Something like that, yes."

"Are Goblins involved?"

"I think Goblins own the space. They made the hollow hill inside it, at least. Anyway, we should have time for lunch and the Goblin Market both. Does anyone else need money? We should probably go Yule shopping while we're there."

"I don't have any money," Kohana said, sounding embarrassed.

"I'll cover your meal, Kohana," Vedyā said. "It can be our first date, sort of."

Kohana blushed, but didn't object.

"What if she wants to get presents?"

"Don't worry about that," Kohana said. "I'm uh... making all my gifts for people."



“Oh, okay.”

“You’ll have to cover her bus fare, too, Vedyā,” Dalia said.  
“Or I could do it.”

Vedyā shrugged. “I’ll get that for her, too.”

“How far do we have to go to get a bus?” Brandon asked.

“Not far at all, nerf-herder,” Vedyā said. “Oh, just a sec.”

She turned around and grabbed Aavraak by the arm quickly, holding it a few seconds before letting go. “Now I’ll know who you are.”

“You have ‘tagged’ me, then?” Aavraak asked.

“Yeah. Didn’t need to before, you’re the only Goblin that goes to that school so far. But now you look human, so you need to be tagged. Oh, and I’d better tag you too, Kohana, just in case.” She grabbed Kohana around the arm for a few moments, then let go with a grin. “All done!”

After a few more minutes to make sure they had everything ready, the seven of them left the house and yard. Vedyā was walking with Kohana’s arm in hers. It was Vedyā who noticed Preston and Anastasia Park out in their yard, but seeing the group of seven people, which included Vedyā, the two Parks wisely ignored them.

“Why do you think they ignored us?” Brandon asked.

“Er...” Dalia said. “Because uh...”

“Because there’s seven of us and two of them,” Vedyā said. “And because they’re afraid Dalia’s new leafy friend will kill them if they mess with us. But that’ll pass. Remember the time I put all those realistic magical toy snakes in Preston’s bed after he broke that toy of yours, Shádí?”

“Yes. You’re lucky they couldn’t prove it was you.”

"Yeah. But they didn't bother us for two months afterward, was my point."

"What happened with the toy snakes?" Kohana asked.

"Preston screamed like he was being murdered. I heard he had to sleep in the living room on the sofa for a month afterwards. Serves the little dingus right, he'd been picking on her mercilessly for a week before breaking that toy of hers," Vedyā said.

The trip from the Ravenstone house to the line 75 bus was longer than Vedyā had promised, but it was mostly downhill. Brandon's chair had a setting where the brakes would keep him from going too fast down a hill, but still let gravity do most of the work. The others, sans Vedyā, were not so lucky.

"I'm not looking forward to the trip back," Brandon said.

"Don't worry about that," Vedyā said. "I've got a few tricks up my sleeve to make the return trip easier."

They turned right. Then it was another half a block down the street the 75's route was on until they got to the stop. To their astonishment, the bus came only a minute later. The bus put its ramp down for Brandon and he rolled aboard, putting his money in the machine for a day pass and taking the resulting ticket. His friends piled in behind him as he got his chair situated. Luckily for him, the seats were already lifted so he could get in place; Kohana had spotted some random rider putting the seats up for him before the driver could get there to do it.

There was just enough space open behind Brandon for the rest of them to pile into the seats there. Vedyā sat next to Kohana of course. Dalia and Chooli were having an ASL

conversation while Aavraak stared in interest at everything around her, looking like a tourist. Which, Dalia mused, she was. Kohana was, too, but she preferred to alternate between staring out the window and looking shyly at Vedyā.

When they got to Hollywood Transit Center, they got off and followed Brandon up the twisty turns of the concrete ramp. Aavraak refused to enter the elevator because it stank of urine, and so used the stairs down to the MAX instead. She wasn't the only one. Even Brandon looked like he wished there was a ramp back down to the MAX station.

"This place is poorly designed," Sally said as she and Brandon exited the elevator. "They had the foresight to put in a ramp going up, but then there's just an elevator going down. What if we got off at this stop and the elevator wasn't working? We'd have to go on to another stop!"

"Yeah, a lot of these MAX stations are like that. But a lot more are already at ground level, no ramps needed. Where are we going, anyway?" Brandon asked.

"Lloyd Center Mall," Vedyā said. "I think we have enough time for lunch, a movie, and then the Goblin Market."

"Where *is* the Goblin Market, anyway?"

"For that, Kohana, we'll have to get back on the bus."

Dalia noticed then that Aavraak was staring in astonishment and disgust at the many cars and trucks going by on the highway on the other side of the MAX tracks.

"Aav—er, Ava?" she said, getting her friend's attention.

"So far, your city is very strange to me," Aavraak said, without looking away from the cars. "I do not like it so far.

It is very noisy, smelly, there are too many vehicles, too many trees, and there is garbage everywhere.”

“You’re in good company,” Dalia said, pointing at ear plugs she had in her ears. “I don’t like most parts of cities either. The noisy, dirty parts especially.”

First looking around to make sure they were alone, Aavraak said, “You would like my home city of Krevjavroq. It is quiet, there are few bad smells, and this garbage would not be permitted to be everywhere.”

“What do you mean there’s too many trees?” Sally asked as Dalia nodded. “Don’t you like trees?”

“The trees make me uncomfortable,” Aavraak said. “In Tirffiniol, most trees are witches. They do not like sharing space with people. They have their own places, the groves and woods and forests. Angering a tree is a good way to get hurt or killed. We would not have all these trees in a city. Mostly our cities have crops, flowers, or bushes in them, for plants. But not trees.”

“You keep staring weirdly at the cars,” Brandon noted. “And you said something about too many vehicles. What’s that about?”

“In my culture, our ‘cars’ are for the wealthiest people only, as they are difficult to make. Most people get about by walking, using two-wheeled vehicles powered by their feet—” “Bicycles?” “I believe so, yes. Where was I? Oh yes, and also we have trains for people.”

“The MAX, which we’re waiting for, is a train for transporting people,” Sally said.

“I guessed this, from the... the metal... the metal...”

“Tracks?”

She blinked at Sally. "Tracks? You call them tracks?"

"Yes. Why is that weird?"

"Tracks are made by an animal's feet, or by a machine's wheels. Oh! I think I see a reason why you call them 'tracks.' Even though they are made by people for the machine to move on, I suppose it is like walking in existing tracks through snow."

"We also call them 'rails,' if you prefer that term."

"That is a good term, yes."

Brandon said, "So all these cars... I guess from your point of view, it would be like one of us going somewhere and seeing hundreds of limousines everywhere."

"What is a limousine?" Aavraak asked.

"It's a very long car that some wealthy people here like to ride around in. They're so long you need special training to drive them, even if you know how to drive a regular car. Which is because they're very hard to turn."

Aavraak stared at Sally disbelievingly. "You are making a joke!"

"I swear I'm not."

"She's not," Dalia said.

"What... I mean..."

But her question was interrupted as a sound from a distance made them all look to see the MAX train coming toward the stop. They interrupted their conversation and got on the train.

Aavraak was impressed by the mall, all the shops in one place but much more organized than such markets tended to be in Tirffiniol. She was even more impressed by the glass elevators, the ice rink, and the Food Court.

Oh yes, the Food Court. Aavraak stood in awe of all the choices, not knowing which one to go to. The rest of them got together and decided to each go somewhere different, so they could get a little something for Aavraak to try. Aavraak herself went to a place that had barbecue chicken, but thanks to her friends got to try a little pizza, part of a McDonald's hamburger and a few fries, some broccoli beef from a Chinese place, part of a sub sandwich, a hard-shelled taco, and other things besides. She shared the barbecue chicken, since it would have been too much food for her even without all the other bits of other people's food. She even tried some ice cream.

Then they all went to a movie together. Aavraak stared in awe at the theater screen. When something on screen moved toward the audience for the first time, she screamed and tried to run, causing lots of weird looks from other people. Her friends explained to her that it was just light projected onto a flat surface, and wasn't able to hurt them, but she still jumped in her seat after some of the sudden on-screen movements.

She also complained that it was very loud. Dalia agreed, and passed her a spare pair of ear plugs. Aavraak stared at them.

"What am I to do with these? I cannot put these in my ears. The human ones you see are illusions, and my true ears would not be helped by these."

Vedya pulled a hat out of a pocket in her jacket and shoved it on Aavraak's head, which helped. She settled in to watch the movie.

"Is this a true story?" Aavraak asked after 20 minutes, sounding like she wanted the answer to be 'no.'

"No, it's called science fiction. It's a genre of films that's fictional, and very loosely based on science concepts," Sally explained. "So loosely, in this case, that it'd be more accurate to call it 'vaguely sciencey fantasy.'"

"So the man who is striking foes down with lightning is a falsehood? Like in a story for children?"

"Yes."

"Good," Aavraak said. "But I do not think this is appropriate for children. So much violence."

Aavraak didn't end up getting to see the end of the movie. She had tried some of Vedy's popcorn, and spent the last half an hour of the movie in the bathroom being violently ill.

"I don't get it," Vedy said when they were leaving the mall, Aavraak having recovered.

"What don't you get?"

"There isn't even any butter in movie popcorn anymore, it's all this weird soy-based fake butter. And she didn't have a problem with the pizza or ice cream."

"Unless it was a delayed reaction?"

"No, your Vedy is right. I have eaten dairy products at Fae Springs and had no ill effects. Something in the popcorn made me ill."

"Probably the soy. Some humans are allergic to soy, and I doubt soy exists in Tirffiniol," Sally said.

"Then I shall avoid this 'soy,'" Aavraak said.

They told Aavraak the rest of the story of the movie she didn't get to finish as they walked to get back on the bus. This

time, there was another person in a wheelchair on the bus, so Brandon had to use the opposite side. The rest of the bus was pretty crowded as well, so half of the rest of them ended up standing the whole way there.

Half an hour later, they were at a bowling alley. It looked, outside and inside, like any bowling alley, except this one was old, run down, and not very busy. Half the lanes were closed for repairs. It even smelled and sounded like a bowling alley, too: a mix of wood polish, sweaty gym socks, and stale beer.

"Is this it?" Brandon asked. "It looks like a bowling alley."

"That's because it *is* a bowling alley," Sally said. "But that's not *all* it is."

When the seven of them approached the desk, the short, fat man in his 60's working there looked at them over the tops of his glasses. Then he pushed them up his nose and blinked at Aavraak.

"Um... seven, uh... reservation for seven under, uh, the name Crowley, for lane 13," Dalia said.

"I can see that," the man said. "Got that aura about the lot of yeh. Especially that one, who's lookin' a little green to me, if yeh know what I mean."

He laughed in a wheezy voice at his little joke. When he realized they weren't laughing with him, he sighed.

"Kids these days. Alright, lane 13 it is. Here's yer tickets. Right through that door there," he said, pointing at a door with a sign on it saying 'Reserved.' The 'tickets' were several pairs of bowling shoes. Even Brandon got a pair.

"Is it wheelchair accessible?" Brandon asked.

"If it weren't, I'd have told yeh so," the man said.



They took their 'tickets' and went into the door he indicated. With the door open, it looked like a room with a private bowling lane in it, but once they were through the door, a small tingle flitted through their skin and it became a small, mostly empty room with a staircase at one end leading down. There was a ramp going down, too. At the other end of the room was a platform for people to shadow-walk directly into the room. At the top of the stairs was a female witch with a physique like a body builder, just standing there like a bouncer. Next to her was a box half-full of bowling shoes.

"Who's that?" Brandon asked.

"I'm a bouncer," the woman said. "Sometimes people drag a mundane friend along to try to prove to them magic is real, and if the friend doesn't take the revelation well, we can push them out again and erase their last few minutes of short-term memory. My co-worker is down at the bottom, too, because sometimes they're fine with the hollow hill, but freak out at the sight of all the faeries."

"You can erase memories?"

"Only short-term memories. And it's not me doing it. The spells in and around Lane 13 cause mundanes to not be able to keep short term memories for the duration, if they're here for less than about 20 minutes. Longer than that, and the spell lets them keep their memories."

"But there's got to be several dozen bowling shoes there in that box. Won't they be suspicious there's that many people who're supposed to be in here, especially if they go through the door and nobody's there?"

"There are spells that make mundanes not pay attention to the door or anyone going through it. None of them are go-

ing to have any idea anyone's ever even here, and they're not going to be bothered by it one way or another."

"Oh. Thank you for explaining."

The woman nodded, and let them pass. They tossed their bowling shoe 'tickets' into the box.

As it turned out, the staircase/ramp down went a lot farther than it looked like it did. As they went down it, Brandon turned to ask a question of Dalia.

"Reservation for Crowley'?" Brandon asked.

"There's a couple dozen names we can choose from for the code name," Vedyia explained. "Everyone's encouraged to pick a name and remember it for future visits, so any mundanes in the bowling alley don't get suspicious. Crowley is the one our family chose."

"Why not just prevent mundanes from being able to enter the building?"

"Because that would be difficult to do without raising suspicions. Not impossible, but this way is easier."

After going down what felt like three or four flights of stairs, or the ramp equivalent in Brandon's case, they reached the bottom. Stepping through the entryway into the room beyond, they felt that weird tingle again. Then the room before them changed, becoming a huge bazaar inside of a very large room that was lit with lights hanging from the ceiling above. If it wasn't clearly indoors, it would look like an outside marketplace, like Portland Saturday Market downtown.

"We're in a hollow hill," Sally said. "That's what we felt when we went through that door, and then again just before the room changed. Only witches and fairies can enter hollow hills. Properly, I mean. Well, I suppose we could bring a

mundane down here if we were holding them during the transition, like the woman upstairs said.”

“Well that solves the mystery of its name,” Vedyā said. “Hollow hills can only be made by fairies. At least, I haven’t heard of any humans that can do it. Either someone is renting the space from a fairy, or the space was stolen from one.”

“What *is* a hollow hill?” Brandon asked.

“It’s a magical space not quite in our world,” Vedyā said. “Kind of... like someone used magic to burrow under the skin of the universe. If a mundane person went through the door upstairs by themselves, the room probably *is* just a spare bowling lane to them. But to us, it’s a hollow hill with that staircase and this room in it.”

“Yes,” Aavraak said. “We have such things in Tirffiniol as well. It lets us expand cities when the surrounding wilderness refuses to let us expand otherwise. The first tingle is from entering the antechamber. The second tingle brought us here.”

“I’m pretty sure the library at school is in a hollow hill,” Dalia said. “And another in the basement.”

Brandon nodded. “So there could be hundreds of miles of these things in Portland, and we’d never know it.”

“Yeah,” Vedyā agreed. “I think there’s a similar place in Portland for dark witches, but I don’t know where it is. I guess I’d have to know other dark witches to find out.”

“Other dark witches,” Chooli said aloud again. “Already she speaks like she is one.”

“Didn’t you say your biological parents were killed by dark witches?” Brandon asked.

“Yeah, some pretty nasty ones. But there’s degrees in all things. I’d probably end up more of a dark gray.”

"Are we gonna talk or are we gonna shop?" Chooli asked.

The Portland Goblin Market was huge, a sprawling area filled with tents and food carts and tables and even people selling things from cork boards or other portable devices. It was like Portland's Saturday Market, but underground and magical. And from what they could gather, the size was because people came from all over Oregon and sometimes neighboring states to set up shop here. Though there was another one in Seattle that was even bigger, according to some of the vendors.

All sorts of things were sold at the Goblin Market. There were arts and crafts, wands, precious stones, wand blanks, herbs, plants of all sorts from Earth and other Faery realms, potions ingredients, talismans, magical toys, exotic magical pets, magical games, magic mirrors of various sorts, spirit jars to catch harmful spirits in, and all sorts of other things. There was so much, and they were Yule shopping, so they took turns going off in pairs so they could shop for everyone on their lists.

The place was also swarming with different species of pixies, there was a gnome city hanging from one wall, they could see hobs flitting about cleaning up messes (assuming one of the bat-like mini-dragons didn't beat them to it first, like the faery equivalent of ravens or pigeons), and human-sized or larger Faeries of all sorts as well, which were identifiable because most of them had let part or all of their human disguises down. They saw Satyrs, Goblins, a couple of Minotaurs, some humanoid Faeries that had skin the exact color of the blackest coal, beings with horns of various sorts, and even a very large fountain full of naiads, obvious because

they were impossibly beautiful and feminine, but had no breasts, but *did* have skin that more closely resembled the skin of dolphins.

Knowing it was safe, Aavraak let her human disguise down while they were here. She and the others soon found that the Faeries weren't just shoppers, there were merchants among the Faery races here as well, selling all sorts of arts and crafts and manufactured items from other worlds or just other hollow hills, as some faeries lived on Earth.

Vedya found herself drawn to a display of blades forged by one of the coal-colored humanoids, who turned out to be a Myrkálf. Dragging Dalia along with her, since they were both shopping for people which included Kohana, Vedya was in awe of all the various blades there.

"We don't sell to anyone under the age of 18," the shop's merchant warned them. "You can look, and I might consider letting you touch if you ask first, but you're not allowed to buy anything until you're 18 or older."

"That's fine, I just like looking at them," Vedya said.

Dalia was looking at the Myrkálf. It was difficult, looking at him, because he was tall and strong and handsome, his jet black skin contrasting beautifully with his red tunic and blue trousers. But something was off about him to her. She took out some stone spectacles and put them on her face to look at him. She still couldn't see anything unusual, but she knew faery magic could be strong enough to fool such devices.

"Um, sir? Excuse me, sir?"

"Yes, little lady?"

"Um... am I right to... I mean, if it's not rude... is that what you really look like?"

“Ah, a perceptive one you are, to sense my partial disguise. No, I don't look like this. And before you ask, no I won't shed my disguise. Sorry, but I did that once and it spooked some of the human customers.”

“Well I'm sure you're beautiful in your true form as well as in this form. I hope to see one of your people in their true form some day.”

The man laughed, a loud, booming laugh. “Oh ho, I like you, human child. I too hope you get to see one of our kind in our true form some day. We are quite impressive, it is a sight to behold indeed. But sadly, that shall not be today, lass.”

While she *could* just use her Magic Sight to look past his disguise and see what he really looked like anyway, she felt that would be quite as rude as trying to see past someone's clothing without permission, so she didn't. She curtsied to him instead, which made him grin, his teeth so white they would make a Hollywood actress green with envy. His smile made a sharp contrast with his coal-black skin.

The next place Dalia ended up at was a shop where a Minotaur taller than a professional basketball player was sitting at a desk doing the finest, most intricate needlepoint she'd ever seen, the designs as complex as they were gorgeous. She moved on, though, to several human vendors, then to a dwarf tailor who specialized in serving the “big and tall” clients, a lamia selling paintings of sunsets with works of her love poetry in calligraphy underneath, a chorus of singing Gnomes, a Sasquatch who was a cobbler, and a group of three impossibly beautiful women she was pretty sure were Sirens who were drinking beer together near a food cart run

by a bogeyman who was wearing a black cloak with the hood up. She was pretty sure the Sirens were discussing a recent football match. She witnessed one of them belching loudly.

By that point, they had met up at the fountain and switched partners several times. She was currently walking around with Chooli. Both of them were laden with multiple bags of their purchases. They walked around another hour before deciding to get a bite to eat.

“What time?” Chooli asked aloud, zeer hands full, when they sat down at a table.

{Six. We need to go soon,} Dalia signed back.

Dalia was just wondering which of them should go seeking food first while the other watched their purchases when the others showed up. That wasn't too unusual, the area of the Goblin Market with the thickest concentration of food carts was a stone's throw from the naiad fountain.

“Are we eating something before we go home?” Vedy asked. “Because my feet are tired and I'm both hungry and thirsty.”

“Chooli and I were just going to get something to eat,” Dalia said. “But we uh, we should take turns staying back. To watch the stuff, you know. In case of thieves.”

“Like any of us could do anything if someone wanted to steal our stuff,” Vedy said.

“You just volunteered,” joked Sally.

“Sure, fine. My feet hurt anyway. I'm not used to walking so much.”

They didn't get full meals, as they'd likely be eating at home, but they took turns going and getting food from the carts, each of them trying something a little different. They

mostly ate, their talking sporadic as their energy was collectively flagging.

“Um, I just had a thought,” Kohana said. “How do we explain all our stuff? We went into a bowling alley, there’s not normally shopping centers inside bowling alleys.”

“Shadow-fax,” Vedya said. “There’s a shadow-fax office down here, I saw it near the entrance on our way in. I know our home address. We pay them a fee, and they send our stuff home via shadow-fax.”

“The box isn’t big enough,” Dalia said.

“There’s a separate one for packages upstairs, you doofus.”

Dalia yowled at her like a cat. Vedya hissed like an angry snake. Dalia yowled louder, and Vedya somehow made a sound like a rattlesnake’s rattle. Aavraak and Kohana, whom had never seen exchanges like this between them, stared in worried fascination. Sally, however, rolled her eyes. She’d been in Dalia’s house before enough times, and hanging out around them long enough, to see this happen before.

“Cut it out, you two,” she said, and they did. They always did, she knew. Well, *almost* always.

“What was *that* all about?” asked Kohana.

“They do that sometimes. That time it had a playful sound to it, like they were just joking around. Sometimes, though, they mean business.”

Dalia made a small “Mrow?” at Vedya.

“Woof,” Vedya replied. “What? The Snake word for that is in body language, and you suck enough at human body language I didn’t think you’d even pick up on it if I tried it.”

“Snake word?” Aavraak asked.



“Animals have language, after a fashion,” Sally explained. “Dalia likes speaking Cat. Vedy a speaks Snake. Except when she speaks Dog or Cat.”

“Or Monkey,” Vedy a said, and began to do a very realistic impression of a monkey, which attracted a lot of attention from the crowd around them, and prompted Dalia to hiss at Vedy a from the back of her throat, sounding like an angry cat.

“What?” Dalia asked, looking at her friends' faces. “Animal language is sometimes easier than people language. I'm autistic, I don't always know how to express myself in human languages. Animal languages are a lot of fun sometimes, too.”

Soon they finished eating their treats, and after taking turns going to the bathroom, they moved as one unit over to the shadow-fax office by the entrance, shipping most of their things to Dalia's house, but Sally's things got shipped to her own house.

“Those things can transport a person, too,” Vedy a said, “but it costs too much, and the one time I tried it, the box was stuffy and I ended up in our home box for three hours before someone found me and released me.”

Unburdened of their purchases, Aavraak put her human disguise back on, and the seven friends went back up to the bowling alley, taking a pair of shoes from the bouncer to return to the man at the desk. They left the shoes there and said goodbye to him; he grunted back at them with a small smile.



## Chapter Twenty-Four: The Memorial Meal

*Wednesday, November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017*

AFTER TRAVELING ON two different buses for almost an hour, they got off at the stop near their neighborhood.

“So what’s this trick you have up your sleeve for getting us home faster?” Brandon asked.

“I did it already, on the bus.”

“You were on your phone.”

“Exactly. That was 20 minutes ago. So in five, four, three, two, one... NOW!”

She pointed up the road at the exact moment the Ravenstones’ VW van with the painting of the Mongolian death worms on it rolled into view, pulling up next to them.

“TA DA!” Vedyā said. “Our ride is here.”

Brandon rolled his eyes. “Trick up her sleeve, she says,” he grumbled jovially.

The side of the van opened up, and out stepped Orpheus, who slid a metal ramp out by hand for Brandon.

“Ah, the low-tech option. Cool,” Brandon said. “Is it safe?”

“Um, it had better be,” Orpheus said. “It’s Adamant.”

“Adamant?”

Orpheus swore, slapping himself on the forehead. “Sorry. I’ll tell you when the doors are closed.”

Once Brandon was secured in place in the back, everyone else was inside, and the van was driving forward so Orpheus could find a place to turn around, he explained.

“So uh, that ramp is Adamant,” Orpheus said. “A Faery-made metal. Basically steel that’s been enchanted.”

“Steel? I thought steel hurt Faeries. Kohana and Aavraak were very careful today to not touch iron or steel with their bare hands.”

“It’s uh... yeah, it can be dangerous for fairies. But some races, er—species, I mean, can handle it better than others. Dwarves and Goblins, for instance. And Myrkálves. Oh, and Nua Sidhe,” he added as an afterthought.

“Ah yes,” Aavraak said. “Iron worked by Nua Sidhe is safest, best iron there is. They can hear the iron screaming, and make it quiet.”

“Iron screams?”

“It uh, collects magic,” Orpheus said. “Like static electricity, but worse. Sucks up a lot before it uh, releases the charge. Even witches can be burned by iron, if it’s in uh, some place high-magic. Like Tirffiniol. I think it’s why Fae Springs uses aluminum cutlery.”

“That thing, of quieting the iron’s screams... I heard the Myrkálves came up with that technique first, before the Nua Sidhe,” Vedyá said. “There was a post on Kauldron about it, written by a Myrkálf. They’re not happy about the Nua Sidhe getting all the credit for their invention.”

"Yes, there's some uh, some bad blood between those two races," Orpheus said. "The Nua Sidhe kept the Myrkálves as slaves for a while. And yes, the Myrkálves had that technique for thousands of years before the Nua Sidhe stole it. Which is why we prefer to buy from Myrkálves. The Adamant ramp was made by Myrkálves."

Aavraak looked fascinated. "I did not know this. I am not very familiar with either species."

When they got back to the Ravenstone house, Sally went home right away for dinner with her parents. Brandon picked up his purchases from the shadow-fax room for packages and went home as well. Which left the Ravenstones with just two guests for dinner that evening: Aavraak and Kohana.

"Where are we sleeping tonight?" Kohana asked in the middle of dinner, between bites of home-made pizza.

"There's plenty of spare bedrooms around the place. Especially on the Tirffiniol side of the house," Dalia said. "You can take your pick."

"Are there any close to yours?" Aavraak asked.

"Yes. I sleep on the second floor. On the Earth side. There's two guest bedrooms right next to it."

"Kohana can sleep in my room," Vedyā said.

"No she cannot," Nizoni scolded. "I know you two are sweet on each other."

"Oh for crying out loud! We're girls! *Cis* girls, no less (as far as I know of), and not even the same species! Why can't we sleep in the same bedroom?"

"Because you sleep in the buff, and there are still plenty of things two *cis* girls can do together that I would rather

you waited for. I know I cannot stop you if you choose to, but you have not had a proper LGBT sex education class yet—”

“—and whose fault is that?” Vedyā asked.

“—and I would have to ask Yanus and Morikami for how to do a cross-species sex education lesson. Also, please do not interrupt. And to answer your question, you are eleven.”

By this point, Kohana's face was tomato red. “We won't... I'm not... we're not...”

“What I think my delicate flower of femininity is trying to say is that she's not ready for more than maybe a peck on the cheek, and I am nothing if not a consummate gentlewoman, sophisticated and mature.”

Dalia snorted loudly in disbelief. Vedyā stuck her tongue out at Dalia, pulling her mouth corners back with her fingers and crossing her eyes.

“The fact still remains you sleep in the buff. Also, you have a venomous cobra in your room. I do not want to put any guests in harm's way unnecessarily.”

“You should've led with that,” Vedyā snipped.

“So we are agreed, Vedyā? That nobody but you and your snakes are sleeping in your room?”

“Yes, Mother, I do believe we have an accord,” Vedyā said in affected formality.

“Good. I hope I need not make you sign to that effect in blood?”

“Such will not be necessary, Mother,” Vedyā said in lady-like fashion, then jammed a whole slice of pizza in her mouth all at once.

"Where did you get your manners from, a pack of wild dogs?" Morgana asked.

"That'd be an improvement," Dalia quipped.

"Ah ahm da vewy mahdah ahv ah mahdun muhjuh jah-nrahl," Vedya said with her mouth still stuffed full.

"Don't you *dare* do the whole song," Dalia warned.

"Ahv unfumuhshun amuhmuh, veguhbuh, ahn munuhruhl."

Morgana glared at Vedya. "One more word out of your mouth with food in it, young lady, and I will make you sleep on the sofa for the next three days," she warned. "While *clothed*."

Swallowing very audibly, Vedya then said, "I'll be good."

Dalia snorted again. Vedya pulled a face at her, pulling her own nose up with two fingers.

"Nyeeeh! Bleh bleh bleh bleh!"

Kohana giggled. Aavraak grinned. Morgana sighed.



*THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2017*

The next morning, Dalia was woken up by a high-pitched shriek from Kohana, followed by a door slamming. She sent Doñela over to find out what was going on. Doñela grabbed a pair of gloves and a hat from a table outside the bedroom door and put them on as she flew upstairs through the proper door. When she got to Vedya's room, she saw Kohana covering her eyes, her face tomato red, a hastily-dressed Vedya trying to apologize for something.

{What happened?} Doñela signed.

Vedya, her hair mussed up and her shirt on backwards, caught the movement.

"She knocked on my door and in my half-asleep stupor I forgot we had guests," Vedya said. "So uh, I wasn't exactly wearing anything."

Kohana looked up to see who Vedya was talking to. Her eyes grew wide when she saw the gloves and hat floating in midair. Then she relaxed, recognizing a sight she had still been getting used to over the past couple months.

"Doñela?"

"Yeah, that's Doñela. At least, I *think* it's Doñela." Doñela nodded, which of course looked like a floating hat bobbing up and down on an invisible head. "You know about Doñela and Tamir, then?"

"What? Oh. Um... yeah, but it still takes some getting used to."

"Hey Donny, what's with the ASL? You forget Loki?" Vedya asked Doñela, who crossed her arms at Vedya.

"Loki?"

"Yeah, they can't talk aloud to other people without their phones, because they don't have voice boxes of their own. Loki is Doñela's phone."

"Oh, right. I've seen her use that before, but usually she just has Dalia relay things to us." Then she paused as a thought occurred to her for the first time. "Wait, she can't talk because she doesn't have a voice box of her own, but she can *hear*? How does *that* work? Wouldn't she need her own ears?"

Vedya shrugged. "I'm gonna guess 'because magic.' She can see, too, without her own eyes."

Kohana stared wide-eyed at Vedya, then back at Doñela. "This is *so* weird."

"I guess I never thought about it before. She's just part of the family."

Another hat and gloves appeared behind the first pair, this one with a hoodie on as well. This set started signing as well.

{What's taking so long, Doñela? Dalia nearly fell over trying to get up here faster.}

{Accidental flashing,} Doñela signed.

{Of course,} Tamir signed back. {Makes sense.}

"Tamir?" Kohana asked, looking to Vedya for an answer.

"Yeah that's Tamir."

Dalia came stumbling into the room then, still in her nightgown, with her prosthetic foot poorly secured. It fell off as soon as she got within sight of the others.

{What happened?} she signed, being too winded to speak aloud.

*'Vedya forgot we had guests and accidentally flashed Kohana,'* Doñela thought-spoke to Dalia.

"Of course she did," Dalia said. "You okay, Kohana?"

"I uh... yeah. A little freaked out by Doñela and Tamir, but yeah."

"Ugh. Should've known." Dalia sat down then, and worked on securing her prosthetic foot properly. "I told you last night to wear a cami and some panties at the very least, Vedya."



"I don't like clothes," Vedy said. "If I could be nude all the time, I would."

"You sound like Auntie Surya," Dalia grumbled as she cinched the straps of the prosthesis.

"Auntie Surya?" Kohana asked.

"Papa's sister," Vedy said. "She lives in a nudist resort."

Nizoni came up the stairs then. She saw Kohana, Dalia, Vedy, and the two sets of floating clothing, looking over the scene. Before anyone could say anything, she sighed. "I warned you this might happen, Vedy."

"Yeah yeah, you and everyone else."

"Poor Kohana's gonna probably need her eyes regrown after that. Or a healthy dose of brain bleach."

"Is... is that a thing? An actual thing?" Kohana asked.

"I wish," Dalia said, finally standing up.

Nizoni turned to Vedy. "I presume there was something that began this whole mess?"

"Kohana knocked on my door. I was half asleep and forgot we had guests. What did you want, Kohana?"

"What? Um... oh yeah, I remember now. I wanted to know if I could get something from the kitchen. Nobody else was awake. I couldn't even find Barry."

"It's like, a quarter after 7," Vedy said.

"I'm still on school time. I'm surprised everyone else was still asleep."

"I can't speak for everyone, but Dalia's nocturnal. She doesn't usually wake up before noon unless she has to."

"Kohana," Nizoni said, "you are a guest of ours. If you are hungry or thirsty, you may help yourself if nobody is awake."

"But I... well, I mean... what if there was something in the fridge or freezer that was being saved for later? It would be rude to have to make you go to the grocery store because I ate the wrong thing. Especially on Thanksgiving Day."

"A fair point, I suppose."

"Guess I shoulda told you the rule of thumb in our house: 'If it's already open, go for it.' Unless it's one of the things I wrote my name on," Vedyā said.

"And uh, anyway, the hobs can always... I mean, ask them and they'll let you know what you can have."

"You have hobs?"

"Well, yeah. Anyone can have hobs if they know how to start a contract with them. There's a number of rituals for attracting hobs, most of which boil down to calling them magically and/or attracting them with cream. Once they come to your house, they accept the contract by accepting your gift of a bowl of real cream. Though they'll take half-and-half or ice cream if you have it."

"Or chocolate," Dalia said. "Hobs *love* chocolate. We give our hobs chocolate milk and chocolate ice cream every holiday we celebrate."

"Yeah, Dalia's talked about this before, I just forgot, since that was like, a month and a half ago or more. But in the meantime, I'm hungry."

"Well now that we are awake, I can make something for you all," Nizoni said.

Kohana beamed and followed her and Dalia to the staircase. Vedyā went into her room to fix her hair.

"Where's Aavraak?" Kohana asked. "I'm surprised my scream didn't wake her up."

Nizoni stopped and walked up to the room Aavraak had chosen to sleep in, putting her hand on the door.

"She's not in there. One moment."

She moved her hand to a panel on the wall. A moment later, she said, "Aavraak is on the top floor, apparently lost. I shall send Barry after her."

Ten minutes later as Nizoni was making breakfast, Barry floated in, Aavraak following behind, her right ear twitching.

"Hiya," Kohana said. "I heard you got lost upstairs."

"Yes," Aavraak said in an embarrassed tone. "I woke up, found nobody else awake, and decided to try to find the library Dalia told me of once. I ended up in a maze-like room full of strange beetles instead, and could not find my way out again."

"Ah, the room with the recently-acquired colony of labyrinth beetles," Nizoni said. "Have they *really* already managed to build an entire labyrinth in just one week?"

"Yes, they have."

"Interesting. I suppose I should lock that door now, so it does not happen again. Sorry about that, Aavraak. I thought it would take them at least another week to complete their nest."

As they waited for breakfast, they talked about what happened earlier. By the time Vedyā came back, her hair still wet from a shower but combed neatly, breakfast was being served. They talked idly between bites about this and that, including what the day was going to be like.

"Where's your other two parents?" Kohana asked.

"Orpheus and Morgana are at the Third Universal Church of Divine Love, helping to cook for the charity Thanksgiving meal being held there. It will last from noon to six PM. It is a tradition in our family to help out with the meal. Though you two are guests, so you will not be expected to volunteer. But you may come with us and spend time there. They will have food and entertainment there. Singing, dancing, stand-up comedy, and even a poetry reading."

Dalia sighed. "Yeah, I'm gonna have to take my earplugs. It's really loud there, every year."

"Is your grandma gonna be there, too?"

"No, she's in Annwn with Grandpa," Dalia said. "They went there again in September. They're looking for proof of some lost civilization that lived in the tunnels."

"You surmise correctly, little wolf."

"Wait," Kohana said, thinking. "If your family are there already, how'd they get there? How're *we* gonna get there?"

"We have more than one vehicle. The other three took Ayání, since they need to transport supplies. We'll be taking Waheela."

"Which one is which?" Kohana asked.

"Ayání is the van."

"Ayání' sounds like a neat name. Does it mean anything?"

"It is the Diné word for 'bison.'"

The conversation was paused by the sound of someone running into the room full tilt. A six year old black boy, Dalia's brother Ashkii, came bounding in shouting "Breakfast! Breakfast!"

"No running in the house, Ashkii," Nizoni chided. "It's dangerous."

"Oops. Sorry, Shimá. Ooh, eggs and bacon!"

"Shimá, where's Sweetheart?" Dalia asked.

"Up in their crib. The Thing With A Hundred Eyes That Lives In The Ceiling is minding them for now, but we will take them over to Sally's house before we go. Sweetheart won't like all the noise."

"They're not the only one," muttered Dalia.

Kohana's eyes went wide with fear, and she looked at an equally stricken Aavraak, before turning back to Nizoni.

"The Thing With A Hundred Eyes That Lives In The Ceiling'?"

"Oh yeah, it's been there since I was a baby," Dalia said before taking a bite of sausage.

"So it's... safe? It's not um... what is it, anyway?"

Nizoni smiled. "Oh, I am not actually sure what it is. Yanus took a good long look at it when it first moved into the house, and he said he knew what it was and which Realm it came from, but did not have the proper kind of voice box to speak its name, nor the name of the Realm it hails from. He called that realm 'Weirdland.' But The Thing With A Hundred Eyes That Lives In The Ceiling is harmless; it eats our garbage, it minds the children sometimes, and its only waste product smells like bergamot. We use its waste to fertilize the garden."

"I tried naming it, but it closed all its eyes and made a sound like nails on a chalkboard every time I tried, so I gave up," Dalia said.

Both guests looked nervously up at the ceiling. Then they went back to their food, determined not to think about it. But both girls agreed that the Ravenstones were far weirder than most witches in the world. Most witches, even other Pagans like the Starling family, would probably balk at having a hundred-eyed monstrosity living in their ceiling.

“Do not look so worried, it does not live in the *entire* ceiling. Just in the ceiling of the baby's room, though its tendrils have grown down the garbage chute into the midden under the house.” She paused, thinking a moment. “Or it might have grown *up* from the midden and into the baby's room, now I think of it. Oh well.”

“Did you ever try to move the baby to a different room?”

“We did move Dalia at first, when it was an unknown quantity. But when Yanus told us it was harmless, we moved her back in. It's adorable when its tendrils come down to play peek-a-boo with the baby.”

Seeing that they still weren't convinced, Nizoni added, “Girls, Yanus has traveled to more realms than any human alive currently, at least as far as I know. If he says it's harmless, I trust him. And it hasn't done anything threatening or harmful the entire time it's been here. In fact, Scylla could take lessons from it in good behavior.”



AFTER BREAKFAST WAS over and everyone was ready, they all went into the garage to take the Ravenstones' other vehicle to join the others. Nizoni turned on the light, and

they saw at once a 1950's style four-door black car with fins that looked like bat wings, hubcaps with pentacles, with blood-red circles on the tires where such 1950's cars usually had white instead, and pentacles painted onto the doors. The 'face' of the car – headlights and grille – looked angry and intimidating. Adding to this impression was the angry wolf with glowing red eyes painted on its hood, the wolf's mouth open and blood dripping from it. The wolf's face was framed by a circle of bloodied blackberry thorns. The trunk lid and the roof of the car were both decorated with the same image of an open-winged raven sitting on a mossy stone.

"This is Waheela. She is a 1959 Cadillac Eldorado Brougham, modified to run solely on magic. Both of our cars run on magic, in fact."

"She's very lovely, in a goth sort of way," Kohana said.

The car's engine revved several times, even though nobody was in the car yet. It jerked forward a little, like it was impatient to get going.

"Er... Ayání doesn't do that. Why is she doing that?"

"She likes to show off," Nizoni said. "Calm down, Waheela."

Waheela revved her engine again, spinning her rear tires to make them squeal, but no smoke came off the wheels, and the tires didn't leave rubber marks on the floor of the garage.

"I said calm down! We have kids with us today. If you do not behave, we shall never use you again."

The car turned its engines off with a sound almost like an annoyed 'harrumph!' But it opened all four of its doors for them.

"Is it safe, this car?"

“Yes. She is well behaved once I remind her forcibly to do so. Plus, she is protective of our children. She was Grandmother Belladonna Ravenstone's car, until she got too blind in her old age to safely drive anymore, a couple years after we moved to Portland. Waheela can do some things by herself, but cannot drive herself around without a driver.

“Also, Belladonna included a great many magical safety features. Predictive collision avoidance, inertial dampeners, runes to bulletproof and curse-proof the entire vehicle, glamours in the windows to hide any magic use from outside eyes, indestructible tires and body, and her air conditioning smells like fresh mountain air. Basically, if you ever find yourself on the run from dangerous dark witches, this is the car you want to be in. Ayání has some of the same features, but Waheela's defenses are superior.”

The car revved its engine again jovially. Shrugging, Kohana got into the back with Vedyá, Dalia, and Chooli. Aavraak sat in the front passenger's seat, with Nizoni driving, and Ashkii sat in a seat between them that had been added where the stick shift used to be (Waheela was a fully automatic thanks to magic). The back was a little crowded with four people in it, but it was an older car and those tend to be very wide, Waheela was no exception.

“Fingers back,” Nizoni said. “The car has spells to prevent loss of fingers from these heavy doors, but best not to risk it.”

Everyone made sure to pull their hands back all the way. The doors slammed shut, making a loud noise since old cars were basically built like tanks. Then everyone buckled up



because it was the law, even though the inertial dampeners would prevent them from flying out of the vehicle.

The garage door opened up quietly, Kohana looking out the window of the car at the empty space where Ayání normally sat. Waheela turned her engine on, rumbling her V-8 unnecessarily. The windows rolled down by themselves and the radio turned on, lighting up and playing a song that Kohana didn't recognize, by a female singer. The refrain went "I'm a leader, I'm a winner, And I'm cleaner, Cause I'm awesome, I don't need you cause I'm neat and I beat you, Cause I'm awesome, That's right!" The song was being played loud enough she was certain the whole neighborhood could hear it as Waheela came out of the garage and pulled onto the street, bouncing up and down like a low-rider.

"'Because I'm Awesome,' by The Dollyrots," Vedyā told her at the look of confusion. Then she turned to the front and said, "Waheela, I know this is your favorite song, but maybe you could play something more familiar?"

The radio changed to something industrial with some kind of beepy kind of sound in a repeating melody. It hadn't been playing for more than a few seconds when Nizoni said, "Language, Waheela! Be a good girl!"

"What was that one?"

"You don't want to know," Vedyā answered. "But it's by Wumpscut, and the title of the song is a mean response to what I said."

"And how do you know *that*, young lady?" Nizoni asked.

"Oh *please*," was all Vedyā said.

Told to behave, Waheela's radio changed again to play "Monster Mash."

"I take it that's not a real radio?"

Before anyone could answer Kohana's question, the car started squealing its tires again, and she spotted someone in the Park family's window looking out at them. As though the car knew this had happened, it zoomed off down the street honking its horn.

"I thought you said this car couldn't drive by herself?"

"I did. It is true. But only because Belladonna designed her so she couldn't drive by herself without someone at the wheel. Waheela is doing all the actual driving, yes, but only because I am sitting here in the driver's seat, with my hands on the wheel."

Despite having zoomed off down the road, Waheela was actually obeying the posted speed limits. The windows rolled up all the way on their own as it started to rain, and the heater turned on. The car would rev its engine at stop signs and stop lights and occasionally honk her own horn whenever another car or a pedestrian was there to observe this. She didn't squeal her tires anymore, though.

"Attention hog," Vedyā said, shaking her head as if disproving, but ruined the effect by grinning.

The songs the 'radio' played were an interesting batch. There was 'Fire of Unknown Origin' by Blue Oyster Cult, the first few minutes of 'Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor,' 'Voodoo' by Godsmack, and strangely, even a couple Enya songs. And Waheela had a sense of humor, too. At one point, as they were sitting at a stop light next to an ugly boxy car, the windows rolled down again and the radio started blaring 'Throw Them Overboard,' by Abney Park, which was a song all about how new-fangled things should be thrown

overboard, which she started playing just before the refrain. The other car's owner looked annoyed but impressed despite himself. Then when a police car drove by a few minutes later, the air from Waheela's heater briefly smelled of cooked bacon, making Vedyā laugh so hard she was wheezing when the car pulled into a parking spot right next to Ayání. The song changed to 'I Shot The Sheriff,' the original Bob Marley version.

"Don't worry about Waheela while we're in there," Vedyā said. "Ayání does a good job of keeping her calm and quiet."

When the doors closed, Waheela shut her engine down and everyone could feel that she had gone quiet.



BY THE TIME THEY'D gotten there, most of the prep work was done. Tables were already in place, as were chairs. The kids put tablecloths down; they opened up packages of disposable plates, cups, utensils, and napkins. Other little details were taken care of here and there as directed. Then assignments were given out for the meal itself: Dalia would be a sign language interpreter for any deaf individuals coming to the free Thanksgiving meal, but she would also be hanging coats up for people. Chooli was handing out programs for the entertainment and pamphlets for the church if people wanted them. Aavraak – in her human disguise that looked so much like Dalia – helped Kohana, Vedyā, Nizoni, and a dozen other adults with the task of serving the food to people. (Aavraak and Kohana weren't required to help, but they

had volunteered since Dalia, Vedya, and Chooli were helping and they didn't feel it was fair to them to not help too.) Ashkii was one of the many kids going around taking orders for people who were old or infirm or disabled enough to need help getting their food and drinks.

Dalia always hated the noise at this place, every year it was torture for her. She had earplugs in that were enchanted to block most of the noise but let through nearby voices so she could hear what was being said by the people she was helping. She also had her empathic blocker necklace on, because there were so many people at this event every year, all of them in such a small area, that her still-new empathic shield would probably collapse under the weight of that much emotion.

Sure enough, once the place opened up to let people in, it quickly filled with so much noise that she could hear some of it even through the enchantment of the earplugs. Doñela, who had been exploring the far edges of the room when it was quiet, felt herself being pulled back to a much shorter leash when the noise got to that level, and she floated five feet up in the air to keep an eye out for suspicious or inappropriate behavior.

Hours passed, and though a lot of people left as soon as they were done eating because they didn't care for the noise of talking and the music from the stage, the place remained packed full for the whole time. Dalia got occasional glances outside and saw the line was going for several blocks.

All went basically the same as it did every year, lots of noise and a job she largely checked out mentally to do, interspersed with the occasional need to do sign language inter-

pretation for people while Ashkii took over the coat-checking temporarily. That is, all went the same as usual until there was about another hour left til they ran out of food.

When it happened, Dalia had been waiting by the door, which had been closed for a few minutes because there wasn't any more seating left, and even most of the standing room outside of the food line was occupied. This happened sometimes, and the door would open again when more space became available. So she was waiting, simultaneously bored and more anxious than usual, since people tended to not bother her when she was working, but started bothering her once she was standing around.

A woman in her 50's or 60's came over to her and started asking her kindly about the job, asking her if she'd had any of the food. She explained she had, during a break a couple hours ago, and went on to say she hated the noise and wished she could have stayed home. That was when the woman nodded understandingly, putting her hand on Dalia's shoulder and saying something that Dalia couldn't hear anymore because her whole body had gone rigid, her breathing shallow; her heart raced, she had broken out in cold sweat, and she was feeling nauseous. She felt Doñela and Tamir both snap back into her body in a heartbeat as she remembered every time in elementary and middle school that someone had touched her with malicious intent, scores of times when bullies grabbed her to threaten or pummel her. She wanted to run for her life, but in the past, attempting to run away had made the beatings worse. Crying wasn't an option for the same reason. She couldn't move at all, or make any sound of distress, the terror had that much control of her. Rational

thought was exorcised from her brain fully, and had been since the moment the woman put her hand on Dalia's shoulder.

The woman noticed nothing of this, gave no sign she noticed anything amiss, and lifted her hand away as casually as she'd lain it there before kindly saying goodbye and explaining that she was going to get a to-go box before heading home. Dalia nodded politely and made a noncommittal noise. She was still standing there, rigid as a board, her heart-beat taking its sweet time to calm down.

Vedya appeared in front of her, signing something. Dalia didn't respond. She couldn't process language, not even ASL, she was still too far gone with the panic attack the casual touch had triggered.

Suddenly, she felt herself being pulled along by an invisible force that she recognized as Vedya's telekinesis. A form of emotion-driven magic, also known as 'accidental' magic but not accidental in this case, Dalia recognized it and let her sister pull her outside through a back door and into the parking lot, letting her go next to a drain built into the concrete behind the building. Here, Dalia pitched forward onto her knees and was sick right onto the drain, which wasn't really made for that purpose, so the sick mostly just stayed there slowly filtering through the holes of the drain. When Dalia was done being sick, Vedya pushed the sick down with her telekinesis, forcing it through the holes before going inside and bringing back a bucket of water to wash the rest of the sick away.

When language started coming back to her, she heard the last half of whatever Vedya had been saying.

“—noise in there, I keep telling Shimá to let you stay home for this thing. Maybe now she'll listen to me. You were so much paler than usual, and so sweaty that they're probably in there right now trying to convince people you're not contagious. Oh hey, you look like you understand me now. What happened?”

Dalia put her hand on Vedyá's shoulder the way the woman had done to her, and looked significantly at Vedyá. Vedyá went stiff and was clearly very irritated by the touch but didn't hit her, like she would have if a stranger had done the same thing.

“Oh yeah, I saw an older woman standing near you. What is with neuro-typical people and invading the personal space of other people? Honestly! It's so *rude*! And presumptuous, too. GAHH! I wish it was legal to punch them in the face when they do that!”

Dalia nodded, not agreeing to the punching part, just with the rest of it. Vedyá didn't like being touched without permission by strangers or enemies any more than Dalia did. But where Dalia would freeze up like a deer in headlights and quietly spend several minutes terrified she was going to be brutally murdered, Vedyá just got angry and yelled at or hit people who touched her when she didn't want to be touched. The only person Dalia had seen who could touch Vedyá unexpectedly without getting punched really hard or shouted at – aside from family and close friends – was Kohana.

Dalia got up off the ground, checked her knees for cuts, and when she found none, she went over to Ayání and opened his door, closing it behind herself and curling up

on the rear-most seat to recover. Vedyā nodded and went back inside to update her family and the other volunteers on Dalia's condition.



“WAKE UP, SWEETIE,” Morgana said after opening one of the doors of the van closest to Dalia. Her daughter woke up bleary-eyed and blinked at her in the dimming light.

“Timesit?” Dalia asked.

“Six PM. We're all done and cleaned up now, so we can head home. Do you want to ride home in Ayání, or in Waheela?”

“Ayání,” she answered, laying back down. “Why'd ya wake me if we're not home?”

“Well, I wanted to give you the choice.”

“Can't sleep in Waheela. Too crowded. And she's too noisy.”

Dalia curled up again, drifting onto the edge of sleep, but kept being denied full sleep by little bumps and rattles and other movements as Morgana drove the van home. It didn't help that she and Orpheus were being unusually quiet, a kind of quiet she knew meant they were having a telepathic conversation with each other. Probably about her panic attack earlier. She hoped Vedyā was right, that she would be allowed to stay home next year. Those events weren't enough to make her hate Thanksgiving dinner, it was still her favorite meal type, but still... meh.



She woke up fully again when the light level suddenly dropped sharply, telling her they were in the garage. A moment later she heard Waheela's engine and the song 'Low Rider' playing on Waheela's radio.

Her appetite wasn't too good at dinner that night, which was just a normal dinner – the Ravenstones didn't celebrate Thanksgiving as such, their version of the Thanksgiving dinner would be tomorrow on 'Black Friday,' and was called 'Memorial Dinner.' Dalia only got through half of her meal before giving up and going upstairs to bed.



*FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

Kohana was awoken the next morning by a knock on the door. She got up out of bed, put the leaf on her head to activate her human disguise, and went to the door, to see Vedyā standing there.

“Hi, Kohana. Waking you up so I can tell you how today works.”

“You look different. Your hair is *black*!”

“Yes. It's a glamour. My hair is still rainbow-colored, but for today Maddy put a glamour over it. Today is a day of mourning, after all.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. Why do you think we call it a Memorial Dinner?”

“Oh. Well come on in.”

Vedya nodded and came through the door. She began, then, to explain at length about the tradition and what one had to do for it.

"Wait," Kohana interrupted toward the end, "what do you mean we need to wear formal dress? I only have a few outfits programmed into my leaf, and none of those is formal attire."

"None? Really? You do know Fae Springs has a Winter Formal dance just before they let out for Yule, right?"

Kohana's eyes widened. "They do? I mean, it does? Nobody told me!"

"The Fae Springs letters said you needed one or more set of formal wear for formal dances. I read Dalia's copy, I remember it saying that."

"Oh, right," she said in a quiet voice. "I remember now. Mum didn't get me that, she didn't have the money." Kohana looked down at the ground in shame.

"Well don't worry about it, you can borrow something of Dalia's for today. I think you're about the right size. Obviously nothing *I* own will do," she said, in reference to her short stature (she still hadn't surpassed four foot two inches). "Come on, she'll be up already."

Dalia nearly jumped at the unexpected knocking at her door a few minutes later, as she was currently halfway dressed. She put a bathrobe on over herself and opened the door.

"Vedya? What are—?"

"My foxy lady here needs to borrow something to wear for the Memorial Dinner."

"Did she leave her dress at Fae Springs?"

"Yes," Vedya lied easily.

"Oh. Well okay. Just be careful about the closet, Gyezmahl recently moved out of his parents' place in the attic, and now lives in my closet."

"Gyezmahl?" Kohana asked.

"The eldest son of the bogeymen who live in our attic. He wanted his own space, and I'm rarely here anymore, so he moved into my closet."

"I'll manage the closet," Vedya said. "You stand over there by the mirror, my beautiful flower."

Blushing and yet smiling, Kohana did as she was asked and stood by the mirror as a long, hairy arm with pimples on it came out of the closet handing dresses to Vedya. She held up a dozen of them to Kohana's body before giving her a gray dress to wear. It was rather plain for a dress, a simple cut with no ruffles or lace or embellishments.

"Sorry it's kind of ugly, my beautiful flower, but it fits the tone of the meal."

She had Kohana try it on, and it fit well enough that they soon were out of Dalia's room, leaving her to get dressed in peace. Vedya took Kohana back to the room Kohana was sleeping in, and had her leave the dress there for later.

All through breakfast, Kohana wondered what Vedya would look like in formal wear. She honestly had a hard time picturing Vedya in anything less than bright, vibrant colors, like her personality. She also had a hard time imagining Vedya in any kind of dress or skirt.

Aavraak, on the other hand... she could picture Aavraak in formal wear quite well. She just wasn't sure what constituted formal wear for a Goblin. Though judging from what

she remembered of the day Aavraak had arrived at school, she thought Goblin formal attire must look like something out of the Revolutionary War era, or the Victorian era.

After breakfast, the girls all sat around the TV watching a movie while they waited for the memorial dinner to be prepared, which would be served at noon. The movie was 'Addams Family Values,' and watching it was apparently a Thanksgiving tradition at the Ravenstone household. Kohana noticed Dalia blushing and staring doe-eyed at the screen every time Wednesday Addams came on screen, her reaction stronger at some times than others.

Vedya noticed, too, and tapped Kohana on the shoulder to get her attention. "Dalia's first crush, starting back the month before kindergarten, was Wednesday Addams," she whispered. "She hasn't gotten over it yet. She even wrote Christina Ricci a gushing fan letter once."

"What about you? How do you feel about the character?"

Vedya shrugged. "She's pretty, for a white girl. But I knew this movie was old from the start. It was already 12 years old when I was born. The actress is like, almost 40 years old now. Kinda ruined it for me. No, my first crush wasn't a celebrity at all. *My* first crush was a boy two years ahead of me, when I was in first grade."

"You had a crush on a third-grade boy when you were in first grade?"

"Yeah. I didn't go much for appearances back then, this was before that started coming in. Darn puberty. But he was intelligent, engaging, weird, and fun. We were friends for two years despite the age difference, but then his dad

got transferred to another country, and they had to move. He and I email each other occasionally, but not nearly often enough. And he's gotten a bit boring since then, at least according to his emails."

Dalia had noticed their conversation finally, and was looking at them. "I thought you still preferred interesting people?" she asked.

"Well yes. Why?"

"I just... well... I mean..." she was looking at Kohana. Kohana didn't seem to know what Dalia was driving at, but Vedyā did, and sighed.

"Kohana is interesting. She talks with me on your computer sometimes. I look forward to our conversations. Yes, I first started flirting with her solely based on her appearance and the fact she's not human, but I haven't grown bored yet, and I don't anticipate doing so anytime soon. If you weren't so busy mooning over Cally, you might have noticed that."

"What do you talk about?"

"Lots of things. Magic, books we've read, TV shows we've seen. Kohana likes talking about plants and herbalism, she's pretty knowledgeable, too. And she knows all about what you can and can't eat to survive in the wild, among other survival skills."

Dalia turned to Kohana. "You know all that? About the survival stuff and herbalism, I mean?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I was in Girl Guides. I really got into the wilderness stuff, and started reading every book I could find about surviving in the wild. Of course, it's a little harder to find the same information for kitsune. You know how dogs are allergic to chocolate? Well kitsune have some differ-

ences in what we can and can't eat, too. We're not the same as dogs or mundane foxes, either. We can have caffeine and chocolate, for one."

"Um... do you have a list of your allergies? I think we should give one to the hobs," Vedyā said.

"Oh don't worry about that, Nizoni already got a copy of my allergies from the school before we came here. Aavraak's as well."

"Well that's good. But uh, in case I want to get you anything to eat for a gift, are there any I need to know about, my flower?"

"Er... well, I can't have avocados, grapes or raisins, macademia nuts, walnuts, or anything with xylitol in it. Xylitol is the worst one of the bunch, as it can cause liver failure in kitsune. But the others aren't any fun, either. I also have to be careful not to eat too much onions, garlic, or other plants in the plant genus *Allium*, like leeks or chives. Anyway, I have a necklace that scans food for things harmful to kitsune and warns me off eating them."

"Does that mean you won't be getting any stuffing?"

"I talked with Nizoni about it, the hobs are making some special for me that doesn't have onion in it."

When everyone's food allergies had been discussed enough, they got to work setting the table, the hobs teleporting the food itself with their magic, though Morgana was helping with that. The kids got changed for dinner. The Ravenstones mostly dressed in what looked like things appropriate for a funeral, all somber and ordinary, hardly fitting their usual style. Vedyā's hair being black was especially jarring to anyone used to her usual rainbow-colored hair, and

she wore a plain black dress with long sleeves. Their guests looked very similar, as they both had to borrow something from one of the Ravenstones for the event.

Even the dining room looked like a funeral. The tablecloth was black lace, the chairs were black, the walls were a dull gray (as was the cutlery), and the plates were gray. Instead of regular drinking glasses, there were glass goblets with skulls and tombstones printed on them, the handles – made of white-colored glass – looked like bones.

“Do you like the décor?” Morgana asked from behind her black funeral veil. “We use the same décor at Samhain as we do for this meal, since both meals honor the dead.”

“It’s very goth.” Kohana said.

Morgana smiled. “Thank you, dear.”

Along with the living Ravenstones and their two guests, the table also had Borghild sitting at her own place at the table. Kohana and Aavraak both wondered aloud to each other if ghosts could eat. They were halfway through this speculation when Borghild concentrated for a moment, and suddenly she looked as real and as alive as anyone else at the table, save for a bit of fuzziness around the edges.

“She’s been able to do that the whole time?” Kohana asked.

“Yes,” Dalia said. “She still can’t eat, of course, but she looks realer. Abuelo can do it too, when he wants to.”

When everyone was seated, Nizoni stood up to speak. She wore a black men’s suit jacket with a long black skirt, black tie, and had her hair tied with black yarn instead of her usual white yarn, though it was hard to tell against the black of her hair. She, too, was wearing a black funeral veil.

"Greetings, guests, both living and living-impaired. We gather here today to mourn the deaths of all those who died over the centuries of European colonialism. Entire cultures and peoples were wiped out because of greed and religious extremism. Some of us survived. We of the Diné survived. Many other tribes of the First Nations still survive, despite continuing adversity. The descendants of those forced over here from Africa as slaves survive and thrive in the face of continuing adversity.

"Racism persists, always changing the form it takes, the current most popular form of racism appearing to be denying racism exists and telling the oppressed to shut up when we complain we're being murdered at a much higher rate than anyone else. Thousands die every year for the 'crime' of existing while black. First Nations women are raped and murdered on reservations by white men who get away with their crimes because their law's jurisdiction doesn't cover the reservations, the law enforcement of the reservations is rarely up to the job, and the criminals flee back to their own lands where their people wring their hands and claim they can do nothing about the problem, when they deign to acknowledge the problem at all.

"The First Nations had this land cultivated and largely tamed, it was an Eden-like garden of plenty, and the Europeans came here in their boats. They broke bread with us and repaid our generosity with betrayal, murder, genocide, and oppression. They tried to break us, to enslave us, and when they found we would die before we would be slaves, they raped and pillaged another continent for their slaves.



“Nay, they raped and pillaged every corner of the earth they could find. No peoples escaped their cancerous spread save for some lucky few tribes like the Senegalese people, who have let no outsider touch their island's shores alive. The Europeans pillaged and corrupted India as well. We have adopted to our family a victim of that corruption,” she said, gesturing at Vedyā.

“They even took iron weapons into the Faery realms and burned them with iron, cut them down like a scythe cuts down wheat. It is just lucky for the Fair Folk that they are strong enough they taught those fools a lesson they won't soon forget.

“The First Nations people, the people of African ancestry, the people of India, and the Faeries, among others, are brothers and sisters in our suffering and oppression, and now those of us at this table are family by marriage or blood, or the bonds of friendship. We eat to honor those bonds. We eat for those who no longer can, we celebrate life for those who can no longer celebrate anything. We feast on the bounty of our harvests for those who have nothing, and because we cannot feast on the still-beating hearts of our enemies.”

The Ravenstones all shouted “Amen!” Kohana and Aavraak said it a second later, much quieter than they had.

“Dig in!” Nizoni said.

Dig in they did. The living people at the table served themselves, and the two ghosts summoned ghostly food that they ate with every bit as much enjoyment as if it were real.





## Chapter Twenty-Five: Confusion

*Saturday, November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

VEDYA WOKE UP SATURDAY morning when Malek Taus, her Peacock Ore Constrictor, slithered out of bed, which made her notice that Rajani had already done so. Malek Taus was now joining Rajani – Vedyas black cobra – inside a sunbeam from the window. Vedyas momentarily considered joining them, but then decided she'd rather be up. She got out of bed and went to the restroom to relieve herself and take a shower before hunting for something to eat.

Once more, she almost forgot they had company, and had her hand on the doorknob before she remembered to put on some shorts and a shirt. Once dressed, Vedyas left her room and began to stalk downstairs to see what the fridge and freezer had on offer for breakfast. After studying her options, she went with some frozen lemon chicken, putting it in the microwave to reheat it.

Now she was bored, since nobody else was up. She normally went out skateboarding or called one of her friends this year, but there were other people here now for the week-

end, so she had options. Dalia was home. Aavraak and Kohana were here as well. Kohana... yes, Kohana was here.

Making her decision, she went back upstairs to Kohana's room, and knocked on the door. After waiting several minutes and getting no response, she tried again. She heard a whining sound inside. Worried for her girlfriend, she tried opening the door, and found it unlocked. The whining got louder, so she turned the knob and entered Kohana's room.

What she saw made her freeze in her tracks in confusion. There was a large snow-white fox on Kohana's bed, asleep and clearly having some kind of nightmare. This had to have been Kohana, she reasoned, given that she knew kitsune could turn into foxes, but why was she sleeping in fox form?

"Kohana?" she asked.

There was no response. Vedya kept trying a few more times without success before resorting to carefully, gently stroking the fox's flank. The silver fox jumped awake, teeth bared at Vedya before waking up fully and closing its mouth. Then the fox – Kohana – yipped, grabbed a green leaf from the bedside table, and ran away into the bathroom. A moment later, there was a puff of smoke from the bathroom, and a fully-dressed Kohana came out of the bathroom, looking mortified.

"What're you doing in my room?!"

"I heard whining. I thought you were in trouble. So I turned the knob, found it was unlocked, so I came in and saw you having a nightmare. Um... why were you sleeping in fox form?"

"You came into my room uninvited!?"

"Er, yes."

“WHY?!”

“Like I said, you sounded like you were in trouble. I was worried about you. You didn't answer my question, by the way.”

“What question?”

“I asked you why you were sleeping in your fox form.”

Kohana's face turned bright red, and she said, “Please go. I need to use the bathroom, and I'd feel better if the bedroom was empty when I got out.”

Without waiting for a response, Kohana went into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. Vedyā blinked at the place she'd been, and left the bedroom, feeling very confused.

As she walked down the corridor, still confused, Vedyā realized she'd never read anything about kitsune, and Kohana had so far refused to discuss anything important about her species. Such things hadn't come up in her conversations with Dalia, either. So Vedyā decided to go to the library and look up kitsune.



AN HOUR LATER, EVERYONE but Vedyā was having breakfast. Kohana wasn't very talkative, and seemed angry about something. Dalia wondered if she should ask about it, but decided not to. But she later got some indication of the problem when Vedyā came in and stood in the doorway looking at Kohana, who could see Vedyā from where she sat. She was ignoring Vedyā, though.

When breakfast was over, Vedya was still standing there, blocking the door.

“Move please,” Kohana said.

“I wanted to apologize for earlier,” Vedya said. “Even though I didn’t do anything wrong, and you never explained why you got so upset.”

“You have a strange way of apologizing,” Kohana said.

“Yeah, I know. I suck at this kind of thing. People are weird, I can never figure them out. I look at other people doing other-people things and I feel like I’m missing something. Frequently. But I really do want to apologize.”

“Why can’t you do it here?”

“Because it’s none of their business, it’s between you and me.”

Kohana looked at the people in the room who weren’t friends of hers, a scared look on her face.

“Great idea. We can go to my room,” Kohana said.

Kohana pushed past Vedya, who followed her up the stairs to the room Kohana had been sleeping in. She closed the door behind them, and Kohana – her arms crossed – turned around to face her.

“You can apologize now,” she said.

“Right. Well, I’m sorry that I came into your room without your permission, even though you left the door unlocked, and even though I was worried about you.”

“Okay, so an apology is typically ‘I’m sorry I did X and/or Y, I won’t do it again.’ What you did there, not really an apology.”

Vedya sighed. “Well I really *am* sorry, okay? Seriously, didn’t you see the looks of shock on my family’s faces when I

said I wanted to apologize? I don't normally apologize. And my family is okay with it, they're used to it. It's not that I'm never wrong or anything, I just... typically, I screw up somehow, they explain to me why it's a screw-up, I learn from the experience and don't do it again. But a necessary part of the process is that someone has to explain to me why what I did is a screw-up, I can't figure these things out on my own. So please tell me why you were so upset that I was worried about you and trying to help you?"

At this, Kohana rubbed her face with her hands before talking.

"Vedya, I'm not upset about you being worried about me. But... first, you came into my room. You... you saw me sleeping. That's a touchy subject for me, and I'll explain that later, because it's worrying me, but I have to go on.

"Second, you touched me when I was sleeping. I'd really rather you didn't."

"Okay, I can understand that; Dalia doesn't like being touched in her sleep, either. And I don't like being touched without my permission. But I tried waking you up with my voice first, and it didn't work. What should I have done instead?"

"You... I mean... well, you could've gotten Dalia or Aavraak to help. Had them come into my room instead."

Vedya raised a single eyebrow. "You're saying I should have let you continue to have a nightmare, and instead of helping you wake up to realize you were safe, I should have wasted time grabbing one of your friends to do what I could have done myself?"

Kohana sighed loudly. "You have a knack for making anything sound unreasonable, you know?"

"Have you considered the possibility *you're* the unreasonable one here? And before you explode at me, I get that I shouldn't have touched you to wake you up, I'm sorry about that, but you still haven't explained to me why coming into your room was a bad thing. I mean, you did at least give me an alternative, but it was an alternative that makes no sense to me, and I still need to understand."

There was no immediate answer, as Kohana was standing there, clearly thinking of what to say. Vedyā waited.

"I... because I could tell by the look on your face that you didn't know my secret, and until September of this year, the only humans who knew my secret rejected me for it." The last few words she'd said were slightly garbled, as she was beginning to cry.

Vedyā moved forward to indicate Kohana could cry on her shoulder, but Kohana took a step back, hugging herself as she cried. Vedyā sighed, rubbing her forehead; people crying had always bothered her. For years it had been simply aggravating, but now it was more a case of being awkward, she never knew what to do or say. She'd let Kohana cry on her shoulder in the past, because it was something she'd seen people doing on TV and in movies before, and the comfort words that went with it, but now that Kohana was refusing even that, Vedyā was back to feeling awkward and confused, not knowing what to do or say.

It's not like she could even draw on previous experience, either. She herself had only ever cried when physically injured, and in times like that, only pain relievers and other

medical treatment helped. Emotional pain was something foreign to her, a set of emotions she'd never felt in her life. How could she comfort someone who was suffering something if she'd never felt such a thing herself before? That's where TV and movies had been helpful, but now their usefulness had found a limit. So she waited.

When Kohana finally stopped crying, she dried her eyes on her arm and said, "You haven't said anything."

Vedya shrugged. "I didn't know what to say. Saying nothing seemed like the safest option."

"What? But my secret!"

"Don't know what secret you're talking about. You haven't said yet what it is."

"But you... I mean... oh. Right. Um..." Kohana was shaking with anxiety. "This... this isn't my true form. *This* is."

With a puff of smoke, Kohana's human form was replaced by a massive snow-white fox with silver eyes. And, for some reason, a leaf on its head – a head that clearly housed a much larger brain than foxes normally had. As Vedya watched, its squashed snout expanded into a normal-looking fox snout.

Vedya looked at her in confusion. "What? I don't get it."

With another puff of smoke, Kohana reappeared.

"My fox form is my true form," she said, misery in her voice. "My human form is a kind of magical hologram. It's not real, even though it feels real."

Vedya blinked. "So kitsune are – what? – some kind of giant talking foxes that can wear a human disguise realistic enough to fool the senses?"



Kohana nodded, braced for the proverbial “other shoe” to drop.

“And this is the secret you mentioned?”

She nodded again.

After a few moments' pause, Vedyā asked, “And some people who knew this secret rejected you for it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I can see where that would make you touchy about the subject. But I gather by things you said that my sister and your other two roommates know about this?”

“Yes,” Kohana said, sounding both slightly relieved and confused.

“Oh. Well good to know. Does this mean my entering your room was only a bad thing this one time, or should I keep avoiding doing that?”

Kohana blinked at her. “I... what?” Vedyā began to repeat herself, but Kohana cut her off. “No no, I meant... *that's* your response? I tell you this painful truth about me, I bare my soul to you, and your response is to ask me a question about... about protocol?”

Looking at Kohana with even more confusion, she said, “Uh, yeah. Why?”

“No comforting words like ‘No, Kohana, I would never reject you for that’?”

“I thought that was implied by my question. Wait, are you like Dalia and me in that you can't read between lines like that? Sorry about that if so. But no, I'm not rejecting you, if I was rejecting you, I'd be running screaming in the other direction or something.”

"No I'm not... UGH! I mean... GAH! *Yes*, I can read between the lines, but you know, some assurances would've been nice. Comforting words, you know?"

Vedya was sighing and rubbing her head again, leaning against the wall and sliding down to the floor. Then she began talking to herself aloud in a sarcastic tone. "Actions speak louder than words,' they say, but then if you don't use words, or don't use the *right* words, they complain about *that*, too..."

"Oh my... Vedya? Are you autistic, like Dalia?"

"Er... no. Shimá, Maddy, and Papa took me to some psychiatrists when I was younger, like they did for Dalia, and I got a diag—er... I mean... what I have is... different. I uh... well, Dalia feels as alien to me in some ways as other people do. Like this whole business with you being sensitive about your true form. I know I *said* I understand, but that's like, intellectual understanding. I don't understand emotional pain, I've never experienced it."

"Never? You've *never* been sad?"

"I've cried when physically hurt. But I've never felt the need to cry for any other reason."

"Never? What if someone said something mean to you?"

"Then I'd get angry."

"What if you wanted someone to be your friend, and they rejected you?"

Vedya shrugged. "I'd be disappointed, but that's it. Maybe annoyed as well, but... well, I don't know what 'sad' feels like, but nothing I've felt in my mind has ever made me cry, or my voice crack with emotion, or so on. I only ever

cried when I got physically hurt. And that was more ‘tears of anger.’”

“But you were so good at comforting me, after the Park terrors made fun of us immediately following the exhibition duel.”

She shrugged. “Stuff I learned from TV and movies. I do it for Dalia and my other siblings sometimes, too.”

Kohana sat next to Vedyā on the floor, and leaned against her. “It’s good to know you don’t reject me. And now that I know you’re neurologically atypical in some way, I can keep that in mind in the future.”

“Cool. Thanks. And I’m sorry I suck at apologies.”

Kohana laughed. “Oh Vedyā, you don’t have to apologize for that. Not now that I know why you do it that way.”

“Thanks. By the way, you never answered my question about, you know, whether I can or can’t come into your room in the future if I’m worried about you, now that I know your secret.”

“Yeah, you were right about me being upset that you’d seen me sleeping in my true form. You can come into the room if a similar situation happens again. Now that that particular bandage has been ripped off, I don’t mind. Just don’t touch me to wake me up, okay?”

“Understood. Thanks for letting me know.”

“You’re welcome.”

After a few minutes of them sitting there silently, Kohana sighed contentedly.

“Vedyā? I want to understand you, too. But I don’t get how you can’t feel emotional pain. It seems... I dunno... weird that you never get sad.”

"Yeah, well, it's weird to me that other people *do* get sad. I can't figure out why they do, or why I don't. What am I missing? I mean that both in the sense of 'what in my brain is missing to make sorrow not be a thing for me' *and* the sense of 'what does sorrow feel like'?"

"Hmm... do you ever lose control of yourself when you're angry?"

"Sometimes. Not often, but sometimes. Why?"

"Well, sadness feels like a loss of control. But instead of wanting to hurt other people or things, the hurt is inside. There's more to it than that, but that's part of it."

"Mmm," Vedyā responded. "Well thanks for trying to shed light on it, but given I've been trying to understand it for almost a decade, I think any attempt to explain how sadness feels would probably be like trying to explain the color green to someone who's been totally blind since birth. But well, if you think of any other ways of trying to describe it, don't be afraid to tell me. It may be pointless, but then again, maybe it's not. Who knows?"

Vedyā turned to look at Kohana, before continuing. "I mean it. I have a friend who was very happy, care-free, delightfully weird, and fun to be around, but she lost someone close to her back in September, and now she cries all the time. And yeah, I get it in some ways. If anyone in my family died, I'd be upset as well. Knowing me, I'd probably just be angry all the time. But still, that'd be a significant personality change.

"Anyway, I want to try to help her, this friend of mine. She goes to my school, same year as me. I miss the way she used to be. I know it's only been a couple months, and she's

probably going to be mourning for years to come, but... it's like I'm mourning her, in a way. Like her mourning is taking her away from me."

"How does that make you feel?"

"Annoyed. Confused. Angry. But it's all jumbled up. And my anger... some of it's directed at the situation, but some of it gets directed at Acorn – that's her name – and I don't want to be angry at her, it's not her fault she's sad. But I still get angry with her for being sad. I don't let her see that anger, though."

"That sounds a lot like sadness."

"I dunno, maybe it does. But it's *not* sadness. I've never felt like crying because of it, even though I want Acorn to be alright again. I'm just annoyed, angry, and confused about it. And the worst part is, a lot of those feelings are because I want to understand what Acorn is going through, and I want to feel sad that she's sad. I keep thinking that if I could feel sadness, maybe I could help her."

"Well like I said before, you were pretty good at comforting me."

"Yeah, but it's not the same. I tried that for a while, but she started telling me to stop. Which, okay, it was getting tedious for me, but it was a little surprising that it was getting tedious for her, too. Not that she said it that way, but from what she did say, I figured out she was just, well, 'sick of' me always trying to comfort her."

"Oh yeah, there's limits to how much you can comfort someone before it gets to be too much for them."

"When can I try again? Or should I try something else?"

"I don't know. Probably you should just give her time. Make sure she knows you're there for her. Don't like, beat her over the head with it, just physically be there for her, unless she tells you to leave her alone. Actions really do often speak louder than words. And sometimes, there *aren't* any right words to say."

"Thanks."

"No problem."

"But uh, don't think I didn't notice you know what your diagnosis is, and didn't tell me what it was," Kohana said slyly.

"Spotted that, did you?"

"Yes. You know my big secret, and I know Dalia's big secrets. What's yours? What's so bad that you're hiding it from me?"

Vedya didn't answer at first. She just picked at a loose thread on her shorts while Kohana waited.

"Shimá said I should probably keep that a secret. The term for what I have. People tend to jump to conclusions about it."

"More so than they do about multiples like Dalia?"

"Yeah. It's... even a lot of people who accept other mental illnesses and neurotypes get weird about my neurotype. Scared. Angry, even."

Kohana put her hand on Vedya's. "I won't."

"I can't be sure of that."

"I won't," Kohana repeated.

"Not even Sally or Brandon know this! Nobody outside the family knows this! Well, Yanus and Takashi and Morikami do, but they're the only ones."

“Try me.”

Vedya looked at Kohana, staring for several minutes. Then she looked away.

“I got several diagnoses, actually. There's not a lot of agreement on where the lines are for a lot of these related conditions, and I don't quite fit most of them, so it confuses most of the psychiatrists I've been to. Some of the doctors said I have 'conduct disorder,' but there are symptoms of that condition I don't have. I also don't quite fit 'antisocial personality disorder,' either, especially because of my age.”

Kohana's eyes widened a bit at this, but she said nothing.

“Sometimes I seem like I have ADHD, but other times not. And if I have that, it's co-morbid with something else.” She shrugged. “On the whole, I don't seem to be able to feel the emotion people call love, or maybe I don't feel it very strongly? It's confusing. And I have a decreased fear response that mostly just manifests as anger. Then there's the fact I struggle with empathy, it doesn't come naturally to me. I've kind of cobbled together something similar to it on an intellectual level, but there's still times Dalia or someone else will have to remind me how normal people respond to things.

“And so even though I don't struggle very much with poor decision making or poor risk assessment... despite the fact I can act like a normal person a lot of the time... my parents and Takashi looked at the whole of it all, the symptoms I *do* have, and decided 'clinical psychopathy' was probably the closest I'd ever get to an accurate diagnosis. Which... I think a lot of why I confuse the shrinks so much is because I was raised by a loving, caring family, who spotted my issues early and have been working to help me learn how to adjust

and function in society. That, and I think my bonds to my familiars affects the results. But before you ask, I'm fairly certain my snakes are a *positive* influence. Remember, Rajani was coiled protectively around me as a baby. And I didn't bond with her until *after* she'd already done that. Anyway, I've had brain scans done, and they're all pretty certain I was born this way."

Vedya finally looked up at Kohana, a question in her eyes. Kohana nodded, and smiled, and took Vedya's hand.

"That's... wow. I don't know what to say to that. It must be a lot to bear. A heavy burden."

Vedya shrugged. "Not really. I am what I am. Sure, I don't tell most people about it, but that's mainly because most people don't respond well to 'Hi, I'm Vedya Ravenstone, I'm a clinical psychopath. What's your name?'"

"So... so your sister is an empath, and you can't even do normal, mundane empathy?"

"I can, it just doesn't come naturally to me. It's like how Dalia is with social stuff. Where most people come by it naturally, where they learn it without even trying, I struggle. I learn by experience and thinking about things intellectually. And, well... I struggle with social stuff too."

"Well yeah, empathy is a social thing to begin with."

"So... I need to know your thoughts about this. Or your feelings, rather."

Kohana squeezed Vedya's hand. "I feel like I understand you better now. But I do have one question."

"What's that?"

"What about friends? How do you pick friends? And beyond that, too. I mean... a lot of my friends just kind of



happened to me either by sharing a room with them, or being introduced to friends of those friends. But however they came to be, I know who my friends are because I love them, and I trust them."

"Ah, yes. This is one area where the difference between me and regular people is... interesting. I pick my friends based on who's interesting to me. People who stimulate me intellectually, or who are useful to me in some way, or sufficiently entertaining to me; preferably two or more at once. Honestly, I don't think I'm doing anything different from what normal people do in regard to making friends, aside from being more honest about the process, and having to remind myself to let people down gently if I've decided they've gotten too dull or annoying for me to tolerate them anymore. And there's a fair number of people I haven't let go of as friends at all because I've long since realized loyalty can be useful."

"Is that related to your... the circles in your Chalikar thing Dalia was telling me about?"

"Yes. The outer circle is acquaintances, people I barely know, but they're useful to the Chalikar. The inner circle are people I find intellectually stimulating on a deep level, I've known them for years and they're still fun and stimulating to be around. The middle circle are people who are either still proving their worth to me, or fell out of favor with my inner circle but are still useful enough to be in the middle circle."

"Where am I at in this?"

"Well, you're not in the Chalikar yet. Did you want to be?"

Kohana shrugged. "Maybe. But I meant, where would I be in that? I doubt those circles only apply to Chalikar."

"Oh, I guess you're right. But you're the only friend I have who isn't in the Chalikar, so I didn't think to apply it. But I guess you'd be in the middle circle."

"*Middle* circle? Not inner circle? But I'm your *girl-friend*!"

Vedya shrugged. "I've only known you for a few months, and most of that has been online. Inner circle members I have to have known for at least a year first."

"Oh. Well okay, I suppose. I guess I'll just have to stick around long enough to prove my worth to be in your inner circle."

"I'm glad to hear that. If it's any consolation, I think you're prime inner circle material. If I were going to bet money on it, I'd bet \$1000 you end up in my inner circle some day."

"Flatterer," Kohana said, giggling.

Vedya took Kohana's hand and smiled. Kohana smiled back. The time for words was over now, they just sat there enjoying each other's company as time passed.



LATER THAT DAY AFTER lunch, Dalia was glad to see that Kohana and Vedya had made up. Both of them looked really happy as Vedya taught Kohana how to have a sword fight with the house's pixies. Both Kohana and Aavraak had been surprised that the Ravenstone house had pixies in it,

since Brandon and Sally had never mentioned them, but as Morgana had explained, the pixies had gone on a religious pilgrimage while Brandon was over, and only just now returned. (Sally had simply shrugged, saying the topic had never come up.) Dalia laughed as Vedyā and Kohana clanked their swords against what looked like regular pixie razor swords but were in fact dull blades for play only, the pixies wielding them being children as well.

Kohana wasn't any good yet, of course, as she was only just learning. But Vedyā was a pro at this, having been taught by Morgana over the years. So while Kohana was just doing essentially the standard 'kids playing with fake swords' moves, Vedyā was leaping around like an expert, occasionally tossing throwing-knives or shuriken ("ninja stars") at the pixies, who were so fast when they wanted to be that they could snatch the flying blades right out of the air and toss them back at her. Luckily for all involved, neither the throwing-knives nor the shuriken were sharp enough to do much damage. In fact, Dalia saw several of them hit the wooden wall perfectly but bounce off or stick for only a few moments before falling off.

By now, they'd attracted a large crowd, mostly of pixies but also of the other humans in the house, Brandon and Sally, the house's hobs, and even the bogeymen watched from particularly thick shadows. Every time Vedyā tossed some of the shuriken, Sweetheart – the youngest Ravenstone – laughed in glee.

When they eventually got tired and stopped, and most of the spectators disappeared along with the pixies, the

friends all sat down around the living room and talked. Which eventually came around to the topic of full names.

“Kohana, I know we only get so much time together on MMOTW and occasionally in person, but I trust you. Sally here knows my full name, somewhat by accident, so I want you to know my full name, too.”

Kohana was blushing again. “I’m honored. But we’ve only known each other for a few months!”

“Eh, so what? It takes a ridiculous amount of power and hatred to use someone’s full name against them. So Kohana, my full name is Vedya Roshanee Ravenstone. You don’t need to tell me yours if you’re not comfortable with it, don’t worry.”

Kohana didn’t answer right away, but Sally did. “I guess it’s only fair, then, that you all know I’m Sally Andromeda Smith-Jones.”

They turned to Aavraak. “You already are knowing my full name. It is very hard for you to pronounce, as I remember.”

Brandon’s turn came up, and he shrugged. “I don’t have a middle name. I’m just Brandon Han. Dalia?”

“Dalia Delphinium Ravenstone.”

“That’s pretty,” Kohana said. “What’s ‘Delphinium’ mean?”

“It’s a collective name for certain kinds of poisonous flowering plants, like larkspur. I chose ‘Dalia’ after my family read me a whole slew of names to choose from, it means ‘Strong Branch.’ But I let Maddy pick my middle name. Maddy’s side of the family has a tradition of naming people after poisonous plants. Maddy’s middle name is Belladonna, also

known as 'deadly nightshade,' which is her mom's first name. I think Grandma Belladonna's middle name is Hemlock. Maddy also has a little brother named Oleander."

It was Kohana's turn again, but everyone was trying not to pressure her. After a few moments, Vedya opened her mouth to change the conversation, but Kohana beat her to it.

"Kohana Hisako Sato."

Vedya took her smartphone out of her pocket and started searching on its browser. "Hmm... seems 'Kohana' means 'little flower,' and 'Hisako' means either 'child of long life' or 'child of old story.' Hmm... fitting middle name for a kitsune, either way. And my nickname of calling you 'my flower' is even more fitting, now."

Kohana was blushing again.

"Now don't tease Kohana that way," Sally said, pulling out her own phone. "Let's see what Vedya's name means. Hmm... according to this, 'Vedya Roshanee' would mean 'celebrated light.'"

"Yeah, my biological parents named me Vedya Roshanee Rani. Thank the gods I ended up a Ravenstone instead. I mean, it sucks my biological parents died, but 'Vedya Roshanee Rani'? Ugh."

"Ha," Sally said, "'Celebrated light,' and she wears rain-bow everything. You should wear prism earrings, Vedya."

Vedya pulled a grotesque face at Sally, which involved her tongue sticking out, her eyes rolling back in her head until you could only see the whites of her eyes, and she twisted her face all weird in addition.

"Gross!" "Eww!" "Your face'll freeze like that!" came the responses, followed by a lot of laughter and continued talking, once Vedyá wasn't pulling that face anymore.

Their laughter and talking continued for another 20 minutes until Vedyá's phone rang. She looked at the caller and said, "It's my friend Joaquín, I have to take this." She walked away, and they heard "*¿Aló, Joaquín? ¿Qué deseas? Soy ocupado.*" A pause, then "*¡Cálmate, cálmate! ¿Acorn? ¿Como es ella?*"

Listening to Vedyá's side of the conversation, Dalia translated what she heard. "Something's wrong with her friend Acorn," she said. "It's got Joaquín anxious."

Vedyá let off a rapid burst of Spanish that nobody but Dalia could even pick individual words from, it was so fast. "Now Vedyá's anxious, too. Demanding Joaquín calm down and explain as calmly as he can."

Dalia kept listening, but Vedyá wasn't giving her much to work with now. Not until the end, when she said, "*Man-tenla allí. Estare ahí pronto. Adiosa,*" and hung up.

"Gotta go, you lot," Vedyá said. "Acorn is having a bad day. She's begging her parents to take her to her tree. Which of course isn't there anymore."

"Her... tree?" Brandon asked.

"Acorn is a dryad raised by human parents," Vedyá explained. "That's a long story, highly unusual. Anyway, her tree burned down in September, in one of these nasty fires we had. It's like becoming homeless, finding out your parents died, and finding out your twin sibling died all in the same day. She's not taking it well at all. I have to go see if I can help her. I honestly don't know what I'm going to do, of course,"

she said, looking at Dalia and Kohana. "Unless one of you wants to come with?"

"I'll get my bike," Dalia and Sally both said in unison.

After a few hurried minutes of rushing around, Vedy, Dalia, and Kohana were ready to go, the rest of them staying behind. Vedy had taken longer than the rest, having gone to her room for a few things first, which for some reason included a silver bracelet she'd put on that had several gemstones on it. But she was ready. Vedy was in her skateboarding gear, Dalia on her bike, and Kohana was borrowing Sally's bike. Soon, they were zooming out of the garage and down the street that led down and out of the neighborhood.

"Where does Acorn live?" Kohana asked as they sped down the hill.

"I'll get us there," Vedy said. "Turn left at the stop sign. Then you turn onto 42<sup>nd</sup> and follow that street past Fremont and Prescott all the way to Killingsworth. I'll tell you the rest when we get that far."

A few turns after reaching Killingsworth, they were at the right house. It was a nice house in a nice neighborhood, though not on the same scale as the houses the Ravens lived near. This particular house was sea-foam green, and the white sedan parked on the road in front of the house was being pulled on by a girl Vedy's age with bronze skin, amber-brown hair of a texture almost as stiff as Dalia's hair (which was tied back in a knot at the back of her head), her brown eyes streaming with tears as she cried. The girl's ethnicity was plainly some sort of middle-eastern. Dalia knew from Vedy that this ethnicity was specifically Egyptian, because her human disguise looked like a mix of her adopted parents – an

Egyptian woman and a white British man, heavily favoring her mother's appearance. Both of these parents were outside, looking anxious.

This girl, Acorn, was pulling on the sedan's door handles, crying, and talking rapidly in Arabic. Her mother was nearby trying to calm her down, speaking in a mix of English and Arabic, while her father looked like he was desperate for something he could do to help. Despite the two women speaking Arabic, neither of them was wearing any kind of hair covering.

Vedya pulled up to where Acorn could see her, though how much she could see through her tears was up for debate. Joaquin – a Latino boy with slender, delicate features, large, beautiful, soulful brown eyes, light brown hair, and honey colored skin was standing nearby, talking rapidly at Acorn in Spanish. When he saw Vedya, he talked to her instead. She listened for a few moments then said something to him in Spanish that sounded like a gentle dismissal, before turning to Acorn.

“Acorn, you wanna maybe cool it with the Arabic?” Vedya said. “All it'd take is one ignorant cop cruising by to jump to a racist conclusion and then BAM! You're dead. Which would be especially stupid, seeing as nobody in your family is Muslim, but then that's racism for you.”

This, at least, made Acorn stop pulling on the locked car door handles and glare at Vedya. “*Madha taeruf?*” she snapped angrily.

“Quite a bit, actually. Ever hear one of Shimá's rants about the subject?”

“*Atrikni wahadi! Dena 'iilaa busaa!*”



"English, please. Like I said, we don't need you getting dead from a misunderstanding."

"English! *English!*?" Acorn snapped, with just the faintest trace of an Arabic accent. "Yes, I sprouted and grew in Oregon, but when I was a sapling, English was not spoken here yet! The human tongues then were spoken by much better humans: Chinook, Clatskanie, Wasco, Wishram. Molalla. Kalapuya. Many more besides. They were caretakers of nature, but then the European *pestilence* befell them! Serpents came into Eden and bit the caretakers with their venom! *English!*" Acorn paused to spit on the ground in disgust. "It is an invader's language!"

"And Arabic *isn't*?" Vedyā countered.

Acorn responded with an angry string of Arabic that made Vedyā smirk, and Acorn's mother blush. Even her father seemed to know enough Arabic to blush.

"Such a foul little mouth you have, Acorn! Making your mother blush? I'm so proud. It's just a shame it took this tragedy to bring that out in you."

Acorn ground her teeth at Vedyā, and Kohana noticed that the grass around Acorn's feet was wilting rapidly in a circle around her. Joaquin took a few steps back when he saw this. Before Vedyā could comment on it, though, Acorn was shouting at her in Arabic again.

"Such language and behavior is unbecoming of a dryad," Vedyā said with a faint smirk. "And anyway, your dad is British. If English is an invader's language, it comes from his people. Your mom isn't from around here, either. Your tree chose to put you with two 'invaders.' How would it feel to know you were speaking ill of them?"

"How DARE you speak of my tree! My tree and I are of the same mind! I am to my tree as one candle lit by another are the same flame. You know NOTHING of which you speak! YOU MOCK MY PAIN!" Acorn shouted.

"No. Not mocking your pain. Just your behavior."

Opting to ignore this, Acorn turned to her mother and begged, "TAKE ME TO MY TREE! MOTHER, PLEASE? *PLEASE?*?"

"Your tree is gone, little one," her mother answered sadly, her voice cracking with emotion. "I'm sorry. You saw its stump, remember? It burned up and then fell down."

"NO! YOU ARE LYING! YOU ARE *LYING!*"

Acorn fell to her knees on the grass and let out a long, keening wail that was clearly not a sound a human larynx could make. It sounded like a higher-pitched version of whale song, but with a birdlike quality to it. Everyone outside who heard it immediately felt intense sorrow overcome them. Everyone except for Vedya, that is, who was unaffected, and merely looked annoyed and frustrated.

"Acorn! You're going to cause a secrecy breach if you don't stop it," Vedya said. "You don't want to get the Pluvatia security goons involved, do you? They're almost as bad about faeries as mundane cops are about people of color."

The keening wail just got louder, to the point where several birds that had been flying fell gracelessly onto the ground, awkwardly stood themselves upright, and then hopped into place in a circle around Acorn with their heads bowed like they were all in mourning. Joaquin had run away crying, Kohana was crying, Acorn's mom was crying, her dad was crying. There were even two other children in the win-

dow of Acorn's house – her younger siblings, one boy and a girl – that were crying. Dalia was crying, too, but not just from the magical effect of the wailing; Acorn's emotions had spiked so hard that it ripped through Dalia's shields and was giving her a piercing headache on top of the immense sorrow, so she was also crying in physical pain.

Vedya put her arms around Acorn, pressing the silver and gemstone bracelet against the girl's skin, and said, "Hush, little one. If you're going to mourn, let's do it in the house."

The keening wail stopped, and Acorn, sniffing, nodded. She let Vedya stand her upright and guide her inside the house. Her mother and Kohana soon followed. As soon as the door was shut, and thus the silencing wards were up, Acorn began to wail again, the sound reverberating through the room and setting Vedya's teeth on edge, while everyone else was busy crying from the waves of anguish coming from Acorn.

Dalia was still down on the ground clutching her head and crying. She wanted to stop crying, because crying was making the headache worse, but the sorrow whammy Acorn had put over her was still going full force. Mr. Bonewits, glad he'd finally found something he could do to help, helped Dalia up and asked how she was. Every syllable out of his mouth was like a pickaxe to her temple. He helped her stand and guided her into the garage, setting her down on a yard chair while he went out to bring the bikes and skateboard into the garage. He must have thought she was just being hit hard by Acorn's powers, because it wasn't until he was a bit too loud with the last bike that he figured out noises were

hurting her, and rushed inside to get her something for her headache.

He was back a minute later, and she had managed to stop crying. But that was only because now she was vomiting into the bushes next to the garage, which was twenty times worse than the crying had been. The feeling like a vise around her head got worse with every spasm from the vomiting, and the only upside to this was that between the spasms were brief moments of relief as her body relaxed before tensing up again when the next spasm hit.

After evacuating the entire contents of her stomach, and a few more minutes of dry heaving, Dalia carefully made her way back to the yard chair and sat down again, soaked in cold sweat and feeling like death would be a mercy. It hurt to breathe, it hurt to blink. The sunlight coming through the garage door hurt, too. But the worst of it was over.

"Here, I brought you some aspirin," Mr. Bonewits said.

"No," she said weakly. "Won't work. Water, please."

He set a cup of water down on a table next to her. Dalia fumbled around for her purse, and pulled out a bottle of ibuprofen in liqui-gel capsules, quickly downing two of them.

"Isn't that a bit overkill?"

She rolled her head over to look at him. "You ever have a migraine?"

"Er, no. Sorry."



INSIDE THE HOUSE, THE wailing had continued. Despite the wailing annoying her, Vedyā sat there on the sofa, letting Acorn wail next to her for a few minutes until the wailing stopped and changed to normal human crying, Acorn weeping into Vedyā's shoulder.

Vedyā regarded Kohana, who was still crying. "Sorry about that. I didn't think she'd do that, she hasn't wailed like that since the day it happened. But the effects will wear off in an hour."

The effects did, in fact, wear off an hour later, everyone affected rapidly returning to normal. Except for Dalia, who had passed out in the yard chair, Mr. Bonewits picking her up to set her in the more comfortable recliner in the living room. By then, Acorn had cried herself to sleep, and Vedyā was carefully laying her down on the sofa and putting a blanket over her. Noticing Dalia passed out on the recliner, she put a blanket over her as well. Mrs. Bonewits – Acorn's mother – invited Vedyā and Kohana into the kitchen for some tea and cupcakes in lieu of both a thank-you and an apology. Vedyā agreed, but called Joaquin on her cell phone first to make sure he was alright first.

"Thank you for helping Acorn, Vedyā," Mrs. Bonewits said in a faintly Arabic accent, once Vedyā got off the phone. "You and your all your friends who came. I know she'll appreciate it someday. Assuming she ever gets better. Not all dryads or other wood nymphs do, you know. Recover, I mean, after their tree has died."

"Yes, I think you told me they sometimes die of a broken heart. But I think Acorn is strong enough to survive."

"I agree. And I hope she is. We've had her for 11 years now, almost 12 years. She was our first child, the one whose presence in our lives made the other two possible."

"How so?" Kohana asked.

"Dryads have natural fertility powers. People who spend even a few hours around one can overcome fertility issues. My husband was infertile when her tree gave her to us. I didn't think we'd ever have children of our own."

"Don't I know it," complained Vedya with a half-smile. "Six months ago I started getting my periods for the first time, and much earlier than usual, just from being her friend."

"I thought dryads were born fully-grown?" Kohana said.

"They usually are," Mrs. Bonewits said. "But Acorn is a special case. Her tree had an incomplete understanding of the process, poorly explained by an Angelic Ash nymph. My husband and I had been using a portal near her tree to go back and forth between Earth and Tirffiniol, looking for a solution to our childlessness. Her tree liked us, felt sad for our plight, and so one day when we came back to Earth, the tree gave birth to baby Acorn in front of us. We've raised her ever since."

Mrs. Bonewits sighed. "I just wish there was something we could do for her. But we'll have to just wait and see if she recovers."

Vedya and Kohana stayed in the kitchen and started playing a game of Scrabble with Mrs. Bonewits. One game turned into two, and then in the middle of a third game, Vedya got up to go to the restroom. When she came back, she said, "Acorn isn't on the sofa anymore."

They looked around the house for her, a little worried, until Kohana spotted something out the back window. Mrs. Bonewits led them out the sliding glass door onto a small patio overlooking a pretty decent-sized yard for the neighborhood. It was surrounded on two sides by tall wooden fences, and the other two sides were a small copse of trees and some shrubs.

It was the middle of the yard that had attracted Kohana's attention, though. For she'd spotted what looked like a very short, leafless, two-limbed tree at first; a tree that had been wearing a dress. Looking more closely now from the patio, though, she saw it was Acorn. But she looked different; her skin was gray and bark-like now, with little flecks of a familiar yellow that Kohana had seen on trees in Portland, some kind of moss or lichen that grew on the trees around here. Acorn's hair was still brown, but it was now a brown mixed with other colors and would have worked well as camouflage against a tree's bark.

Stepping down off the small patio, the two young girls and Acorn's mother walked down to move into a position where they could see Acorn's face. When Kohana saw it, her eyes widened. Aside from the bark-like color of her skin, Acorn's face looked exactly the same as it had when she'd been wearing her human disguise.

The most astonishing thing about Acorn was that she was standing almost perfectly still, her eyes closed, her only movement was a slight sway whenever a breeze blew by, even though the breeze wasn't nearly strong enough to be making her sway, so she had to be swaying on purpose. Oh, and she had put down roots; her shoes sat nearby as though kicked

off in a hurry, and now her feet were roots digging into the earth.

When Mrs. Bonewits saw this, she sighed with relief. "Oh good, she's just Treeing."

"Treeing?" Kohana asked.

"Being a tree," Vedya said. "Well, not really. She's still a dryad. She won't be able to become a full tree until she turns 15. But dryads put down roots sometimes to just... Tree... for a while. They do it sometimes when they get homesick and are too far away from their original tree to rejoin it. Or if they need nutrients and can't find any food."

"Yes," Mrs. Bonewits said. "Wood nymphs like Acorn prefer to Tree by returning to their tree of origin, of course. But, well... you know."

"Can she hear us?" came a voice from the patio.

They looked up to see who had spoken; it was Dalia. She was groggy and had her sunglasses on despite the shade from the trees. She looked like people tended to look when they'd been sick and weren't fully recovered yet, even as she was shakily coming to look at Acorn's face with the rest of them.

"*And* understand us, yes," Vedya answered. "So can trees."

Dalia envied Acorn this ability in that moment, then immediately felt guilty for that feeling, since Acorn was suffering and mourning the loss of her tree of origin. But Treeing looked so peaceful.

"Come on, girls," Mrs. Bonewits said, "we need to leave Acorn alone for now. Talking with a regular tree is fine, but trying to talk to a wood nymph when she's Treeing is quite like trying to talk to someone when they're sleeping."



Mrs. Bonewits led them back inside and quietly closed the sliding glass door. She led them back to the kitchen.

"Dalia, how are you feeling?" Mrs. Bonewits asked.

"Better. Still horrible, but better."

"What happened, anyway?"

"Empathic overload. Acorn's emotions ripped through my shield and gave me the mother of all migraines," she said. Her voice was still hoarse from being sick earlier.

"David told me you'd been sick in the bushes. Do you feel up to eating anything?"

"Just some saltine crackers, if you have them, please."

A moment later, Dalia had in her hands a small plate full of crackers. "Thank you."

She ate slowly and carefully, washing them down with some tap water. Then she looked in the direction of Acorn.

Catching the direction of Dalia's gaze, Mrs. Bonewits said, "She's going to be like that at least until after dinner, I think. So you girls should probably go home soon. Thank you for helping her, Vedy. And thank you two as well, for being here in her time of need. Sorry you got ill, Dalia."

"You're welcome, Mrs. Bonewits," Kohana said.

"It's okay," Dalia said.

"No problem," was Vedy's response. But her offhand statement was belied by a heavy sigh.

"What's the matter, dear?" Mrs. Bonewits asked.

"I just... ever since she started mourning her tree, it's felt like I've been mourning Acorn. She's still alive, but, well... today was the most responsive I've seen her in weeks. Last few weeks at school, it's like she's the walking dead. Still breath-

ing, but just staring out into space, not answering questions, not giving any sign she was paying any attention at all.”

“She lost a part of herself, Vedyā.”

“I know that, Mrs. Bonewits. But I still miss her. She was so funny, weird, and full of life.”

“She’s strong. She’ll come back. She’ll probably always be a little more reserved in the future, but I have faith she’ll get better, eventually. For now, the wound is still fresh. It can take years for humans to move on after the loss of a loved one. Wood nymphs who lose their tree have it worse, it’s a lot like losing their identical twin.”

“Mrs. Bonewits, she knows,” Kohana said. “She was talking about Acorn to me just this morning, and telling me it was like, and I quote: ‘becoming homeless, finding out your parents died, and finding out your twin sibling died all in the same day.’ So she knows. She’s just sad, misses her friend.” This wasn’t, of course, strictly true, in that Vedyā had admitted she hadn’t felt emotional pain before, but Mrs. Bonewits didn’t need to know that. Besides which, Kohana’s opinion was that Vedyā *did* feel emotional pain, just felt it differently than most people did.

Mrs. Bonewits approached Vedyā and hugged her. Vedyā tensed up and gritted her teeth, but didn’t lash out, to Dalia’s surprise.

“I know you miss her, Vedyā. I miss her, too. My whole family misses the cheerful, upbeat, delightfully weird Acorn. But you’re right, she was more responsive today than she’s been in a long time. That’s actually a good sign. It means there’s hope that she’ll recover. The wood nymphs that die of a broken heart while mourning their trees keen and wail for a

while, then close in on themselves and just become catatonic until they turn solid as a dead log. The fact she's keened and wailed a second time means there's hope of recovery."

Vedya smiled and nodded. She thanked Mrs. Bonewits again, who led the girls to the garage to get the bikes and skateboard. Dalia didn't look up to traveling, though, so Mr. Bonewits called her parents, Orpheus coming to get her in Ayání, the VW van that was one of two Ravenstone vehicles. Luckily, Dalia had left the trailer off of her bike this time, it might not have fit in the van along with her bike.

"Hi, Papa," Dalia said as she got into the front passenger's seat of the van.

"Heard you got sick, little branch. Empathic overload?"

"Yeah. Apparently a dryad in mourning can rip through my shield and give me the Godzilla of migraines."

Hearing this, Ayání turned his own radio to an "easy listening" station. This made Dalia smile weakly before closing her eyes.

"Thank you, Ayání. I love you."

Ayání's engine purred in response.



AT HOME A BIT LATER, the girls – minus Dalia, who was sleeping off her headache – plus Brandon were sitting together in the Ravenstone living room. Vedya had left the room to get something, and they were waiting for her because she'd asked them to wait. But now she was back, holding onto a laptop computer. She set it down on top of the

TV, plugged a cord in between the two, and soon the much larger screen of the TV was serving as a monitor for Vedyas laptop. She pulled up a video file and began it playing.

“What Acorn was like before she lost her tree,” Vedyas said. “Specifically, this was taken not long after one of her visits to her tree. She got especially weird after those visits. I loved it.”

The camera was shaky at first, but then it stabilized and they saw a view of a school playground. The video continued as the person filming it crossed a grassy field over to a garden full of wildflowers. An amber-skinned person Kohana recognized as Acorn was at the garden, kneeling to look at something. She was holding so still that it would have been easy to mistake her for a very lifelike wax sculpture.

“Hey, Acorn,” the camera-person – Vedyas – said. “Whatcha doin’?”

Slowly, Acorns head turned toward Vedyas, a bemused expression on her face. She turned back to where she’d been looking briefly, then back to Vedyas. Acorns expression was distant, like she wasn’t all there. She also looked confused, and took almost a minute to respond. Given the series of expressions crossing her face, it was like she’d forgotten how to speak and was trying to work out how to do it again.

Her first words, tentative, were in Arabic. The Vedyas holding the camera said something back to her in the same language, which made Acorn frown in mild annoyance, then roll her eyes. Then she began to speak in English, slowly and deliberately, like it was a struggle to put words together in a way that made sense to other people.

“Land-guardian and his steed, bald of tail. Land-guardian was a sapling. His Knowing pierced the clouds across my form, saw me standing tall among my brethren.” She paused, thinking, before continuing, “He spoke to me as might a cleric to his god. I tried to speak as well. But the sapling was in a hurry to return to his grove under the ground. I watched him mount his steed, and as I did, I began to Tree. Then you came, and reminded me to Dryad.”

“Land-guardian... you mean Gnomes, right? A Gnome child?”

“Yes, thank you for clearing the sky for me.”

“You're welcome. And he was riding a rat?”

“Yes.”

“Cool. I didn't know this school has gnomes in it.”

“Gnomes live many places. They guard the land, as best they can. They come from the other place, on the other side of the gaping mouths of light, but many live here as well.”

“So they evolved in Tirffniol?”

“Yes.”

“How come nobody ever sees the gnomes?”

“The Gnomes are very good at not being seen. They speak words of power with force of Will, and become unseen to avoid the Big Ones. The humans. Even the saplings have this knowing. He knew I was not human. His vision pierced the clouds over my form.”

“They use invisibility spells?”

“Yes.”

Acorn looked up at Vedyā – and thus the camera – and looked confused again. “Why are you here?”

"Because school ended an hour ago and your mom is expecting you to come home. She knows how you get after visiting your tree, so she asked me to make sure you got home. Last time you visited your tree, you didn't come home. After four hours of frantic searching for you, they found you standing still next to an oak tree in the park, like a statue."

"Oh, that. I was having a discussion about philosophy with a young friend. Tree discussions can be very long and involved, you know. That friend is very young compared to me, only 84 years old. It's a shame you did not get to hear the conversation we were having." She shook her head incredulously. "Some of the ideas these young ones have, I do wonder where they get these peculiar notions."

"Yeah, well, I had to call your mom to let you know we'd be late as is. I'm glad you didn't stray too far while I was gone."

"You were gone? Where did you go?"

"I was in Mr. Wexler's classroom. I came out here because Mr. Wexler was staring at you from there, wondering aloud how you could be so still. I couldn't wait to get out of there."

Something seemed to shift in Acorn's mind then, because she suddenly looked more human, in her behavior. Before, she'd been quite slow and very still, but now she was slightly faster, more human-like.

"You were... what is the word... 'in detention' again, weren't you?"

"Er, yes. Yes I was."

Acorn sighed. "What, pray tell, did you do *this* time?"

"Mr. Wexler had gotten it into his head that I made Dustin Gibbon cry. And yes, I did. But Dustin was picking

on Amelie mercilessly for a week, the teachers were as useless as always, and the network wasn't intimidating him because he's a fool. So I blackmailed him instead. Mr. Wexler didn't see it happen, doesn't know what I did, but he saw me follow Dustin, saw Dustin run crying from the room a few minutes later, and like an idiot, I got caught coming out of the same area not long after."

Acorn had gone quiet again, with a thoughtful expression on her face. Vedy, apparently used to this, waited. But instead of responding to what Vedy said, Acorn was looking at the camera.

"You have something on your head. It's black and shiny and looks a little like an eyeball."

"Yeah, that's a camera. I wanted to show Sally how still you can get sometimes."

Acorn nodded. "Sometimes I forget I'm among the fast ones now. I've been living with my human grove for eleven winters now, but of course I sometimes re-merge with my tree and forget I'm a dryad afterward."

"Acorn, we use solar years in this culture, not 'winters.' Your birthday was May 1<sup>st</sup>. You're 11 solar years old."

"Years, winters, what does it matter?"

"Because given your birthday, you may be 11 years old, but you're only ten winters old. You won't be eleven winters old until December at least."

"Oh. That makes sense. Thank you for clearing that sky."

"Yeah, no problem. Anyway, you mentioned re-merging with your tree. Didn't you just visit your tree like, last Saturday?"

"What is the date?"

"Monday May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017."

"Ah. Then yes, it was a Saturn's Day when my tree and I renewed each other."

"And that's like, sharing memories?"

"Two became one again, and then one became two," Acorn said.

"So the tree gets your memories of being a 'fast one' and you get memories of being a tree in a forest?"

"Yes. We become one for several hours, and then we become two again."

"So from your point of view, you're existing in two places at once?"

"Yes. But we are not aware of that fact most of the time, except as an abstract concept. Only when we become one do we experience the fullness of being two."

"Vedya! Acorn!" a voice from off-screen said, and the camera turned to face a Latino boy their age coming toward them. It was Joaquin. "*Esos matones que causan problemas por Acorn están en camino. Mejor ve ahora.*"

"*Gracias, Joaquin. Iremos ahora.*" The boy – Joaquin – nodded and turned to face the other way, playing lookout. The camera turned to Acorn again. "Did you understand any of that? I know you normally know Spanish pretty well, but you tend to forget everything but Arabic and English after a tree visit."

"There are bullies coming," Acorn said. "That's what Joaquin said."

"Yeah, the ones that always give you a hard time for being so weird, especially after you've been to your tree. He also said we'd better get going. Joaquin, you got my skateboard?"



“Sarah has it,” he said, his accent thick. “Maria Cardoso has Acorn’s scooter. They will meet you over on the side street there.” He pointed to the camera’s right side.

The camera turned to take in the street, then kept going and caught a view of two girls – one blond and the other a black-haired Latina girl – crossing the grassy field toward the road. The blond – Sarah – was carrying Vedy’s skateboard, and the Latina girl had a scooter across one shoulder. The camera turned back to face Acorn and Joaquin.

“Good. Go get the others and distract the bullies for us as agreed, will you?”

“*Sí. No hay problema,*” he said, and began to leave toward the school.

The camera got shaky again as Vedy put it away, and soon the video ended. Vedy got up and disconnected the laptop from the TV, sitting back down again next to Kohana, who put her hand over Vedy’s hand. Vedy did not object.

“She lost a part of herself,” Sally said, sounding stunned. “‘Two became one, then became two again.’ Now she’s stuck as just one, while the other half of herself died horribly. No wonder she’s grieving.”

Vedy nodded. “But there’s hope. If she can get through the next few years, she can become a new tree over the summer once she turns fifteen, then one can become two again. It won’t be the same as having her old tree back, but it’ll be something. A part of her will be able to Tree all the time. I hope she can keep going.”

“Gives her plenty of time to learn runic magic, so she can put fire-proofing runes on her new tree,” Sally said quietly.

Nodding, Vedyā said, “Yeah. That it does.”





## Chapter Twenty-Six: The Second Incident

*Monday, November 27<sup>th</sup> – Monday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017*  
DALIA AND HER FRIENDS returned to Fae Springs on Sunday, which was fine by Dalia, as she was still feeling a bit out of sorts from what had happened at Acorn's house. Vedyā and Kohana had been hard to separate, though. The events of Thanksgiving weekend had strengthened their relationship a lot. So much so that one of the last things they'd said to each other before Kohana went back to school was Kohana inviting Vedyā to the Winter Formal Dance on December 15<sup>th</sup>, also called The Snow Ball. Vedyā had been pleased as punch to accept, enough that she was still grinning when they said their final goodbyes.

"Why is it on the 15<sup>th</sup>, though?" Vedyā had asked them first.

"Because school will be getting out for the winter holidays that weekend," Nizoni explained. "The holidays officially last from December 17<sup>th</sup> until they return on January 2<sup>nd</sup>. School will start again on the third of January."

"What? They couldn't have shifted it over a couple more days?" Vedyā said, exasperated.

"Why?" Kohana asked.

"Because my birthday is on January 4<sup>th</sup>."

"We will have your birthday party on the first, Vedyā," Nizoni said.

"Eh, okay."

With that, they soon said their final goodbyes until the winter holidays, and went their separate ways.

It was now Monday December 11th, school had been back on for two weeks. The whole school was talking about the school dance, The Snow Ball. Kohana was going with Vedyā, Sally had asked Brandon to it as friends and he'd agreed, and many others had dates as well. Dalia had been screwing up her courage to ask Cally out to the ball (as friends, since Cally wasn't interested in anything other than friendship yet), but still hadn't worked up the courage to do it. She didn't quite get panic attacks about it yet, but the heightened level of anxiety she was feeling couldn't have been doing her any good.

Also not helping was the fact she'd been to the infirmary twice in as many weeks for more of what she was now calling 'corrective magical surgery for an unfortunate birth defect' with Takashi. Of course, only her friends and some of the staff knew why she was having these appointments, so the word through the grapevine (for anyone who cared what that weird black goth girl was doing, anyway) was that she was having more headaches. Which, okay, there were worse things they could be saying, but Anastasia was having a lot of fun with it, clutching her head every time she saw Dalia and

saying that if Dalia was so hurt by other people's presence that she should go be a hermit. Dalia just rolled her eyes at this, because it was just so lame, as insults went. Even lamer than constantly overusing the word 'freak.'

That morning, Dalia had barely been seated for breakfast a whole second when Brandon looked up excitedly at her and the other girls and said, "Hey guys—er, girls I mean, guess what? Elliolyynn wrote to us!"

"Oh wow, is he coming back?" Kohana asked hopefully.

"No, sadly not. What happened was a huge scandal in faery civilization, his parents are deeply embarrassed by the whole thing. Anyway, he says he's fine now. But get this: his parents did an investigation of what happened. The doctors couldn't find anything at all wrong with him, just like with Kohana and Aavraak, but his parents hired an investigator. They checked our whole room for clues, and they're still doing alchemical tests on the things they confiscated from it – his personal effects, the bedclothes, his toothbrush and so on. Nothing yet."

"Well at least we know he's okay," Kohana said.

"Yeah, and this is more evidence of sabotage!" Dalia said. "Three healthy faery students all with malfunctioning powers at the same time, and nobody can say why or how? Suspicious. I wasn't sure about Elliolyynn being the same way as Kohana and Aavraak, but now we know he was, that's more evidence I was right."

"I agree. I think we all agree. Anyway, I'll write back to Elliolyynn and ask him to keep me in the loop."

"Thanks, Brandon. Tell him hi from us, too. We didn't know him well, he wasn't here for long, but we would have liked to have gotten to know him better."

"I'll pass that along."

At lunch later that day, Dalia was picking at her food, lost in thought again about how to ask Cally to the dance, though occasionally her mind wandered to the stagnant mystery of the malfunctioning faery powers, and wondering why no new incidents had occurred. Then someone gently touched her on the arm with one finger. She jumped, turned to face the culprit, and saw Cally.

"Finally! Sorry I touched you, but I've been trying to get your attention for like, five minutes, but you didn't seem to hear me."

"Oh. It's no problem. What did you want?"

"Well... actually, it wasn't just today. I've been trying to ask you something for weeks now, and you're always just so preoccupied. But it's this coming Friday, so time is running out."

"Time is running out? For what?"

"Well... now I know I said I wasn't interested in romance yet, and I know you've got feelings for me, but Sally and Brandon are going as friends, and Aavraak got asked as a friend by Sutekh, and I dunno, I thought it might be fun. I've never had a friend before you, Dalia, and, well... d'ya wanna go to the Snow Ball thing with me as, you know, friends?"

Sally looked up at this, and giggled at Dalia's expression. It was hard to classify, but "stunned" would have been a good start. Sally half expected her friend to pass out from shock, but what she did instead was far funnier, though she tried

very hard not to laugh for Dalia's sake. For Dalia had said "Yes" in a very high-pitched, squeaky way that was very loud, and then sunk into her seat with shame when she realized what she'd done.

"Good," Cally said, buttering some bread. "Now that's settled, I should tell you that even though we're going as friends, I don't mind at all doing at least one slow dance with you. For the experience of it, you know. Plus, I may not be interested in romance yet, but there's a lot of homophobia in this school still, and like Mom, I like to figuratively poke big-ots in the eye.

"The signs for the ball all say that the ball is being held in the basement in room Gamma 2. Anyone who doesn't know where Gamma 2 is should stay by the stairs for the teachers to show them. It starts at 8 PM on Friday. According to the signs, there won't be any more classes after lunch that day, and dinner starts early at 5 pm, to give people plenty of time to eat and get ready for the ball. Meet you at the stairs at 7:30?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

"Great," Cally said, then went off on one of her rambles again. The rest of Dalia's meal was heavenly. She ignored Sally's smirks and Brandon's grin.

Dalia, feeling better than she had in weeks, was so light on her feet the rest of that afternoon that she practically floated. She said hello in a bright, loud, cheerful voice to all her favorite teachers, to the head librarian, and even Principal Park. She would have said hello to Ms. Hollander as well, but Dalia couldn't find her, and nobody she asked who knew who she meant knew where Ms. Hollander was. At least, not

until she asked Principal Park, whom she passed on her way from dinner, Kobalos calmly perched on her shoulder.

"Ms. Hollander? You mean Ms. Aurora Hollander from the maintenance staff?"

"Yes."

Principal Park frowned in a sour way. "If she knows what's good for her, she'll be doing her job down in the basement like I told her to, room Gamma 16. But if she *doesn't* know what's good for her, then she'll probably be drowning her sorrows in her quarters, but students aren't allowed access to the staff quarters. With the exception of RA's and students whose relatives are on the staff, of course."

"Oh. Thank you, Principal Park."

"You're quite welcome, Ms. Ravenstone."

Principal Park marched off again like a drill sergeant inspecting the barracks, and Dalia went back toward the cafeteria to find one of her friends. As it happened, she ran into Cally first. She explained what the Principal had said about relatives of staff having access to staff quarters, and that she was worried about Ms. Hollander.

"Oh, well it sounds like you should check the basement first before you do that, she's probably working. Then check her office, and if she's not in either of those places, we can check her quarters, but you know he's right, she's probably working. I mean, I hope she's working because I like her, I don't want her to lose her job. Has she talked to a psychologist or psychiatrist yet about the incident? If she hasn't, she needs to. Anyway, did you want to check the basement now, or wait for later?"



"I'm worried about her now after what Principal Park said, so yes, I'd like to check the basement first. Um, if it's fine with you."

"Eh, no problem. We can find the ballroom so we know where to go later. Anyway, I've got my schoolwork done for the next couple days, it's fine. You know, you're right about they should call it schoolwork and not homework, we don't take it home, after all. I liked that, when you said it, so I started doing that instead. I told my mom about..."

"Cally," Dalia said, barely audible even to herself with Cally chattering on.

"CAW!" Kobalos cawed, very loudly.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to wander so far off topic, I just—"

"*Cally*," Dalia said pointedly.

"Er, right. Sorry, I can chatterbox while we go down to the basement, it's fine," she said, following Dalia toward the door to the basement. "Anyway, as I was saying, I told mom about it too, and she agrees it's a good change in terms, but she doesn't know how well it'll catch on..."

Cally followed Dalia down the stairs to the basement, which just looked like the rest of the school, but with a lot of the wood replaced with stone. It didn't look at all remarkable when looking at it this way, not at first, anyway. It was just a corridor full of doors. There weren't any doors in the wall across from the stairs, though.

The first unusual thing they noticed was that the corridor they were in was very long, possibly longer than the building itself, and went in both directions. Around the left corner from the stairs was an intersecting corridor that was

just as long as this one, in both directions. Across from the stairs was a blank wall; the doors didn't begin until just past the intersecting corridors to either side of the stairs. They walked along the corridor, just looking, and noticed that there were regular gaps where other such very long corridors intersected with the main corridor.

On the doors in the corridor were letters and numbers. They saw A1, right next to A3. Across from A1 and A3 were A2 and A4, respectively. The other direction, though, had A37 through A40.

Dalia said, "That letter A must be the corridor designation. And the numbers go this way, but they jump across the aisle. A1 is there. Next to it is A3, but across from A1 is A2. And next to A2 is A4. So we're in Corridor A."

They walked back past the stairs to the intersecting corridor on the left of the stairs and looked down it. The doors here were marked with a weird letter like an upside-down horseshoe.

"I think that's the Greek letter Omega," Dalia said.

"You'd know better than I would."

Dalia was certain it was an Omega. The doors they saw in this section were Omega 1 through Omega 4.

"Okay... so Principal Park said that Ms. Hollander was supposed to be in Gamma 16. And the signs say the ballroom is Gamma 2. So let's go the other way."

They walked back the way they'd come and found a corridor with doors marked by what appeared to be an upside-down L. The girls had no idea what letter this was supposed to be, but curiosity drove Dalia to touch one of the signs on

the doors. When she did, the letters glowed, and a gentle male voice said, "Gamma 2 – Main Ballroom."

"Well there's the ballroom," Cally said. "Easy enough to find, right by the stairs. But look at all these doors. There must be dozens of them. Maybe hundreds! I wonder what else is in these rooms?"

No sooner had she said that than Doñela and Tamir appeared in the air beside Dalia. Cally couldn't see them, of course, but Dalia could.

*'Oh I gotta go see what all these rooms are,'* Doñela said, rushing off to look. Tamir was also excited, and began looking in another direction.

*'A1 – Conference Room. Booooring!'* said Doñela. *'A3 – A break room. Bleh! A4, same thing. A5 – an office. Booooring! What's down Omega? Oh hey, Omega 1 is a dueling room. Omega 2 is another dueling room. Omega 3 is an armory – locked and warded against telekinesis, though. And Omega 4 is also locked and warded. Labeled "non-euclidean training room," whatever that means. Killjoys!'*

*'Gamma 3 is an auditorium, but we already have one of those upstairs,'* Tamir remarked. *'Gamma 4 is another ballroom.'*

Dalia filled Cally in on some of the things Doñela and Tamir were finding as they went down Corridor Gamma to find Gamma 16. Given there were two doors in the walls between every corridor, Dalia estimated that they'd have to pass by Corridors B, C, and D before finding Gamma 16. They'd already gone by B and C corridors before they realized they weren't in the right corridor.

“Wait a moment, Dalia, these doors say... um...” she touched one of the doors.

“Delta 10, indoor tennis court,” the sign said aloud.

“Yeah, this is Delta. We must have gone one corridor too far.”

“Oh. Um, well that’s okay, we can get to 16 and then turn uh, turn right to get back to Gamma,” Dalia said.

They kept walking, pausing to look at the different rooms. All the doors had signs on them, and most were labeled. The only reason they’d needed to touch any of the signs was to identify the Greek letters the signs were using. So now along with an indoor tennis court, they could see an indoor baseball diamond, indoor football field, indoor field hockey field, indoor running track, indoor soccer field, and so on.

“Delta must be the corridor for indoor sports fields,” Cally said. “I guess they wouldn’t be able to use the outdoor ones if it was raining or snowing.”

“This is amazing,” Dalia said, looking into one of the rooms. “Is every single one of these rooms a hollow hill? This must have taken a whole *team* of faeries *years* to make! Maybe even decades!”

Doñela and Tamir had found all sorts of other things in their own explorations as well. Tamir had gone down Corridor B and found a bowling alley, a movie theater, a locked and warded room with a swimming pool in it, some rooms with ornamental gardens in them, and what looked like spare meeting rooms for Banners.

The more rambunctious Doñela had wandered around a bit more haphazardly. After finding most of the rooms in

Omega were locked, she wandered down Corridors Z and Y, and found quite a mixed bag: several rooms for art and music classes, a few chapels, some small kitchens that looked like they were used by Home Economics class, a few rooms that looked like they were used by Shop Class, a robotics lab, a room full of materials for practicing runic magic with (chalk, slate, wood, stone, and tools for working same), and even some locked and warded guest quarters.

“Okay, this is D, we turn here to get to Gamma,” Dalia said.

Cally nodded and followed Dalia. They got to the next corridor over and checked the doors.

“Wait, what? This isn't Gamma. This is—” she checked the nearest talking sign, “Um, we're in Lamda.”

*'What do you mean you're in Lamda?'* Tamir thought-spoke at her. *'If you turned right from Delta, you should be in Gamma. If you turned left instead, you should be in Theta.'*

“Thank you, Tamir, for your oh so helpful comment,” Dalia said sarcastically, aloud.

“What? What'd he say?”

“Said we should be in Gamma if we turned right, and Theta if we turned left. I already knew that first part, and we *did* turn right. There's *no way* we should be in Lamda, it's two corridors in the other direction!”

*'If it helps,'* Doñela said, *'I think this space is a bit wonky. When I was down Omega, I saw some things that made me think there should be a lot more space between Omega and Gamma than there is. Also, I'm pretty sure these corridors loop back on themselves. Let me go check.'*

After relaying to Cally what Doñela had said, they waited a few minutes for Doñela to answer again.

"You know," Dalia said as they waited, "if Doñela is right, then this entire basement has got to be a hollow hill as well. Which means they've got hollow hills inside of hollow hills. That's super impressive."

"Yeah, well I'll be more impressed if we can actually find where we're going."

A few minutes later, Dalia heard Doñela saying, *'Yup, I was right! I started at A, marking an X with some chalk from the runic magic room, then went straight down Theta, past BCDEFG all the way through WXYZ, and ended up at Corridor A and the stairs where I started. There's the same chalk X here. Trying the other way now.'* A few more minutes passed, then she said, *'Yup. Went down A starting at Omega, putting a Y on the wall first, and went past Gamma, Delta, Theta, Lamda, Xi, Pi, Sigma, Phi, Psi, and ended up back where I started again, in Omega.'*

Dalia relayed this back to Cally, who responded, "That doesn't really help us. It's not behaving the same way for us."

"Let's try to get back to the stairs," Dalia suggested.

"Good idea. I don't want to get lost."

Carefully, they went up Lamda, going backwards along the alphabet until they found A. They went along A, going past Theta, Delta, and Gamma, reaching the stairs.

"Alright, well, in that case, let's try finding Ms. Hollander again, if she's even still in Gamma 16 anymore."

They walked over to Gamma, checked the doors to make sure it was the right corridor, then carefully went down Gamma. They went past Gammas 1 through 12 without a

problem. They checked ahead and saw Gammas 13 through 16, so they continued ahead. Only problem was, when they went past Corridor D to get to that section, Dalia felt a very subtle shift, probably so subtle only a Sensitive like herself would notice it, and now the doors before them were A1 through A4, and the stairs were to their left.

“What. The. Frilly. *Heck?*” Cally asked.

“Something moved us. We were on the right path, being careful. When we passed by Corridor D, I felt an extremely subtle shift, and then we were here, instead.”

“Where are Doñela and Tamir?” Cally asked.

“Doñela went wandering down Lamda, retracing our route. Wait, here she is. She looks confused. Says she went the same way we did, the same thing happened to her.”

“And Tamir?”

“In Corridor Q, apparently. You know, it's weird, but their tethers aren't usually this long outside of home.”

“Maybe whatever makes this place get lost trying to find a specific room helps their tethers be longer?”

“Hmm... maybe. Um, I'm gonna try something. I'm gonna try to find, to pick a random number, Pi 14. You wait here, I'll be right back.”

“Okay,” Cally said. “Can Doñela stay beside me while I wait?”

Dalia turned to face what looked to Cally like an empty spot to Cally's left. “She says she'll stand guard over you,” Dalia said, then left.

Carefully, Dalia went down Corridor A until she reached Pi. She turned right down Pi, and before long found Pi 14, opening it up and finding it was a large blue room full

of cats of all different shapes, sizes, and colors. Making a note of that to check it out later, she chose another room, Q23, and went to go find it. She found Q21 – a ward room, Q22, and Q24, but no Q23; just a blank spot in the wall where Q23 should be. She tried again for three more rooms, and soon found P30 – a maze, Phi 19 – a room with a Mayan-style pyramid in it, and Y40 – a room full of old hats – without any problems. So she tried Q23 again, and again it wasn't there. Lastly, she tried Gamma 16 one last time. This time, she found it. She opened the door, and it was a room full of closets that had nothing but empty wooden hangers in them. Also in the room were some coat racks, hat stands, umbrella stands, and one section that was labeled "Weapons Check Desk."

She looked around some more, and saw signs that someone had been vacuuming the floor recently, and all the surfaces looked like they'd been polished. So it seemed likely Ms. Hollander had been here very recently, they probably just missed her. So why weren't they able to find this room until after she'd left? Did she not want to be bothered while she worked?

Dalia pondered that mystery as she headed back towards the stairs. When she got to the stairs, however, Cally wasn't there. Dalia checked with Doñela, and Doñela reported that Cally had claimed to have heard something down Omega and had gone chasing after it. A couple minutes later, and Cally was back at the stairs.

"Why did you go chasing that sound? Doñela says she didn't hear anything."



"She said that? Well maybe she didn't hear anything, but I sure heard something. Thought it might be you. And anyway, how do Doñela and Tamir see or hear without eyes or ears of their own?"

"No idea. How do ghosts do it? Doñela and Tamir probably see and hear the same way ghosts do, even though they aren't ghosts. Oh and uh, I just remembered: far-seeing and far-hearing are a thing. I think they're called clairvoyance and clairaudience."

Doñela was staring at something on the wall by A2. She floated over to look at it. Curious, Dalia went over to it.

"Hey uh, what do you suppose these wooden circles between the doors are?" Dalia asked.

"No idea," Cally said.

Dalia held a hand over the circle, and felt warmth. But not heat, it was magic she felt.

"Cally, these circles have magic in them."

Without waiting for Cally to respond, she knocked on one of them. Previously invisible runes lit up, then, and the circle opened up like a door. Behind it was a hob, a tiny man wearing a red uniform.

"Hello, students," the hob said. "Can I help you?"

"You mean to tell me we've been getting lost down here for the last half an hour, and all we had to do to find some help was knock on one of these little wooden circles? Ugh!"

*"Cally!"*

"Right. Sorry, mister hob, sir."

"Don't worry, happens all the time. Students wander down here frequently. It's odd, though, that you've been down here for that long without running into anybody else."

The pixies here patrol the corridors regularly. About every 15 minutes. Here comes one now.”

They looked where he’d indicated, and saw a female pixie flying down the corridor in their general direction. She was about to turn down one of the other corridors when she spotted them, and flew straight to them.

“Are you students lost?”

“Not anymore, but we were a moment ago. We were looking for Ms. Hollander.”

“I haven’t seen her, but Tona can send word, can’t you, Tona?”

The hob standing in the opening of the little circular door nodded. “Right, I’ll find out where she is, and one of us hobs will tell you where she can be found.”

“Just how big *is* this place, anyway?” Dalia asked the pixie.

“Not as big as it looks,” she responded. “The way this one was made, if you go far enough down a corridor, you’ll end up back where you started. It’s easy to get turned around in here, but harder to get really lost than you’d think. I think the longest someone was lost down here was an hour, before they found the stairs again.”

Dalia thought to herself that it sounded like a great place to go to hide from someone chasing you, like a bully. Come down here, duck into one of the larger rooms, hide in it somewhere. Like that maze room. And from what Doñela and Tamir had found, the place sounded perfect for that. Most of the rooms had multiple exits, and some of the rooms led directly into other rooms.

“We uh, sort of figured out a lot about this place. By being lost, I mean. Um... it loops around on itself?” Dalia said. “How does it do that?”

“Oh, that. Hollow hills are pocket universes bound to whatever larger universe they're in. If you could somehow travel from one side of your universe to another, you'd probably end up back where you started there, too. It's just a lot more obvious when the universe you're talking about is as small as this one.”

“How come the nesting hollow hills in the rooms don't loop back on themselves?”

“They do, sort of, but the people who make them can control how that works, when it's that small a scale. Usually you can't tell there's any curvature on that small a scale. But sometimes that enchantment breaks down, like the one in this room,” she said, flying to the next block of doors. “Go ahead, go into door A4, keep the door open, cross the room, and open the door across the room from this one and step through it.”

Cautiously, Dalia opened the door. Inside was a small spare break room for the teachers, or maybe the maintenance staff. It was small enough that they could see the other door easily. Dalia went inside, over to the door, and opened it. On the other side of that door was Cally. Cally could see herself, too, and gasped. Dalia stepped through the door, and...

“What just happened?” Cally asked. Dalia was standing in front of her, and looked even more bewildered than she did.

The pixie giggled, then said, “Broken enchantment on the rear door. If the enchantment were working right, that

door would lead into Corridor Z. But since it's broken, it leads back to the door into Corridor A. That kind of thing doesn't happen in nature, as far as we know, so your brain can't process what it's seeing. So it chooses to pretend it didn't see what it just saw."

"But if the corridors loop around on themselves..."

"There's spells on the area to keep people from noticing the looping in the basement as a whole. Which is super easy, because the brain is far too willing to believe a comforting lie."

"Is it safe to be in here? If it's a pocket universe, I mean?" Cally asked. "What if it pops?"

"Hollow hills are tricky to make, but once one is in place, they're even harder to get rid of. More stubborn than the offspring of a mule and a cat."

One of the circular wooden hob doors opened up and an entirely different hob appeared inside it.

"Got a message for ya, Ur," she said to the pixie.

"Go ahead."

"Ms. Hollander was down here cleaning about ten minutes ago, but she went back upstairs. The upstairs hobs say she's cleaning one of the boys' bathrooms. The one nearest the top of the stairs."

"Darn. Well, I can say hi to her later," Dalia said. "Hey, that reminds me, where's the gnome city? I was told it's down here."

"Oh, you want G33 for that. But the gnomes there don't generally like having Big People over to visit this late. You'll have to wait for the weekend, try them at noon. Anyway, if

you decide to visit them on the weekend, just knock on a hob door, ask for Ur, and I'll show you how to get there."

"Thank you, Ur."

"You're welcome... um, I didn't catch your names."

"I'm Dalia Ravenstone, and this is Cally Metaxas."

"You're welcome, Dalia and Cally. See you Saturday?"

"For sure. Possibly sooner. I might come back to look around at the rooms in here."

Dalia and Cally waved goodbye to Ur the pixie and went back upstairs. Dalia turned and went a short ways to a bathroom she'd seen near the stairs in case it was the one Ms. Hollander was at. She waited there, listening to Cally talk about the basement as she pretended to read a poster near the bathroom. There was a boys' bathroom and a girls' bathroom nearby, and the boys' bathroom had a cleaning cart in front of it, with one of those signs that blocks entry and tells you it's being cleaned, so she just had to wait for Ms. Hollander there.

Suddenly, Kohana turned a corner, looking frantic.

"There you are! Dalia, I was using your computer to talk with Vedy, but she wasn't allowed to talk to me for more than the amount of time it took to explain... she got in trouble!"

Dalia turned to Kohana, shocked. "What'd she do?"

"She says those bullies who always give Acorn a bad time were at it again. They've been especially horrible since Acorn lost her tree, though of course the whole school thinks she lost a grandparent or something like that. Anyway, these two bullies were giving Acorn a really hard time, making her cry, and Vedy... she attacked them! Two bullies, each of them

twice her size, and she attacked them! Used magic, too. Apparently she threw one of them several feet through the air, and the other one she jumped on while the first was struggling to get up, and choked him out! The first one saw her do that and ran off. Then Morgana told me that the Witches' Council was investigating the incident for illegal use of magic on a mundane."

"Oh wow," Cally said. "She used magic on them?"

"Well yeah, she used that banishing ring on the one. Claims she just did it with emotional magic, though."

"Is Vedyā still going to be able to go to the Snow Ball?" Dalia asked.

"Morgana said that depends on whether or not the Council presses charges. But she doesn't think they will. Vedyā's excuse is plausible enough, and the boys are certain she must have tripped the first one because obviously magic isn't real. She says the Council will probably call it accidental magic and be lenient, even though Morgana is pretty sure there was nothing accidental about any of it. Most kids her age don't have the kind of control she does, and those rings of hers are usually invisible, so the Council won't have any reason to think it wasn't an accident."

"But isn't she getting grounded for that?" Cally asked.

"Not according to Morgana. Nizoni had to struggle to not laugh at the whole thing, she's always told her kids to fight back if a bully attacks them, and Morgana and Orpheus agree with that policy."

"Yes," Dalia said. "Papa doesn't like violence, but recognizes that most schools don't do diddly squat about bullying. Fae Springs is one of the exceptions. I'm surprised Vedyā

fought back like that, though. Last time she did that was years and years ago, and she got in trouble for it. The bully didn't get in trouble, but she did. And so did I, for trying to break it up. She was so angry, I remember Shimá being afraid Vedyá was going to burn the school down or something, but she started her anti-bullying network instead."

"Why'd she attack them?" Cally asked.

"From what I heard, those two started it. They were pushing Acorn around physically, and one of them grabbed her hard enough to make her shout and cry. That's when Vedyá attacked."

"Are they okay? The bullies, I mean?" Dalia asked. When everyone looked at her funny, she added, "They're not going to press charges, are they?"

"Doesn't look like it. They're a little sore, but they'll be fine."

Dalia looked between the bathroom and Kohana, thinking. Making up her mind, she said, "I'm gonna go and talk with Maddy. Cally, do you wanna come with?"

Cally shrugged. "Okay. But I thought you wanted to say hi to Ms. Hollander? We did just get lost for half an hour trying to find her, after all."

"Yeah. She's busy. If she's working, she's probably fine. I'll say—AHH!"

Dalia had suddenly fallen to the ground, clutching her head. All her friends turned to find out what was wrong.

"Sorry, just... I think my shield collapsed. Getting another headache. *Shields up!*" she said. The shield spell those words activated came on, visible only to Dalia, and only briefly.

“Oh, that's better. Head still hurts, but it isn't getting any worse now.”

Standing up, Dalia shifted her focus a little and looked at her shield, which looked to her magic sight like a frozen bubble around her. 'Frost' was forming on one side of it to such a degree that it was no wonder it had collapsed. She checked the direction the empathic waves were coming from, based on the location of the frost, and saw it was the bathroom where Ms. Hollander was working.

“Looks like Ms. Hollander is still in a lot of emotional pain. But I'll say hi to her later anyway. She's busy now.” She turned and began to go back to her room, Kohana and Cally coming with her.



*FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

As Cally had said, on the 15<sup>th</sup>, classes let out for lunch at 11:30 as usual, and after lunch there were no more classes for the day. Dalia wasn't sure why they needed that much time to prepare. Surely makeup and hair couldn't take more than an hour or two? Hers wouldn't be taking that long, anyway. For one, her own hair never took very long; one of the few things she could do with magic was make her hair change pretty quickly. But more importantly, she couldn't wear most makeup. Aside from a little bit of mineral-based red on her eyes and corner of her mouth back on her birthday, she'd never done any real makeup before. She'd tried a few times over the years, even had it done properly by Morgana a couple times



recently, but it made her face itch and kept getting smeared or smudged when she tried to scratch, so she wasn't going to bother this time. At least, that's what she told Cally in the hall after lunch when she asked.

"Sorry, couldn't help overhearing," said the familiar voice of Arlene. "But if you can't stand makeup, maybe I could put some glours on you instead."

"Um... maybe. But I mean, I'm also 12."

"Yes, and you're at that age when things are going to start changing. In your case, probably for the better. But until things settle, it couldn't hurt to smooth out any rough edges – so to speak – that might be forming from puberty."

"But I—"

"Yes yes, I know what you're going to say, and we can't say it here, out in the open. But I can take you to my dorm room to help you if you want, and explain things more if you don't. You can come too, Calandra, if you want. I can help you, too."

Dalia looked at Cally – who was telling Arlene that she was going by 'Cally' now – and then turned, shocked, to Arlene again.

"Cally doesn't need any glours! She's already gorgeous."

As Dalia's face went super hot and Cally's face turned bright red, Arlene chuckled. "Oh that's so cute. Cally, I think she has a crush on you!"

"She does. But we're just going as friends."

"Ah well, I understand," Arlene said with a wink.

"No really, we are!" Dalia said.

"I know. I'm not trying to call you liars, I'm just... well, my first girlfriend was my best friend before we were girlfriends. Still is my best friend, though she's not my girlfriend anymore. They say the best marriages end up being people who are best friends with each other. Might be you two, might be someone else down the road. Anyway, it's your first Fae Springs dance, you'll want to look nice. Nicer than usual, I mean.

"Anyway, my room is the last one on the northwest side of the top floor, you can meet me there at... let's say five? Unless you want me to do your hair, too. That would take longer."

"Thanks, but I can do my own hair," Dalia said. "I do it all the time."

"I don't mind you doing my hair, though," Cally said.

"Right. Then make it 4 PM, for Cally. Dalia, you can come in at 5 if you want."

"Okay," Dalia said.

Dalia went to her room to read, since she needed something to calm her down from all the nervous energy she was feeling. She didn't know where Cally went, but she soon found herself wishing she'd gone with Cally, because Sally and Kohana were bustling about making a lot of noise about this dance, and getting ready for it. She didn't know why people were getting ready when there was like, six hours left until the dance started, and she didn't bother asking because she didn't really care enough to do so. The last straw, though, was the strong scent of the floral, honeyed perfume the school seemed to sometimes use on the bedding, which was strong enough now to give her a minor headache (espe-

cially with that undertone of overripe fruit!). Between that and the noise, she ended up going to the library to read instead.

At four, Dalia went back to her dorm room to do her hair. As she had already planned, she'd shaped it into a bunch of locs that were much thinner than she usually did, then pulled it back into a bun of sorts, so that the locs were making a whirlpool sort of shape at the back of the bun. A few stray locs hung like long bangs, framing her face without hiding it at all. The other girls in the room were impressed. She thanked them for their compliments, grabbed her dress for the ball (which was inside a protective covering) and went to Arlene's.

On her way to Arlene's room, Dalia got compliments from a lot of the other black girls in school, and a few girls who weren't black. One of the white girls who complimented her wanted to touch her hair, and she firmly said no and sped off without explaining. She wasn't in the mood for that conversation today, especially with a stranger.

Arlene's room turned out to be on the top floor of the girls' dormitory building, with quite the view from a window on the wall next to her bed. The other three girls in the room, all about Arlene's age of course, were busy fussing about helping each other get ready.

"Isn't it a bit early to be getting ready? The ball doesn't start for like, two hours."

"It's a social thing, starting really early. Anyway, while you two are here, I can explain. I have a secrecy spell up, the other girls won't be able to hear us. Not that they're paying any attention to us anyway.

"Anyway, you may be only 12, but puberty is a beast, even for girls like you and I, Dalia. Trust me, you'll love it. And if you don't, it's pretty simple to erase glamours, at least for the person who cast them in the first place."

Arlene sat Dalia down on a chair, and got out a rack full of several wands of various sizes, shapes, lengths, and types. After deliberating which one to pick for a few moments, Arlene took out an unusually short wand, only about six inches long, and held it in her hand as she examined Dalia's face to figure out what she was going to do. The wand, which didn't have any stones on it, barely went past Arlene's finger. Arlene caught Dalia looking curiously at it and chuckled.

"Yeah, this one's pretty small, but it's great for doing stuff up close, high-detail sort of work. I normally use it for really detailed rune-work, but it's good for glamours, too. Anyway, let's get started."

Arlene took a few minutes more to examine Dalia before saying, "Not much to do yet. A couple pimples starting. Might use some glamours to make your eyes pop. Sorry, that just means they'll stand out more."

"I have some contact lenses I want to use for the dance, will that be a problem?"

"Why should that be a prob—oh, do you mean like your mom, Morgana, does?"

"Yes."

"Let's see what you have," Arlene said.

Dalia showed her the lenses.

"Cool. What's your dress look like?"

In answer, Dalia unzipped the bag over the dress and showed Arlene. Arlene nodded, then turned around to one

of the other girls in the room, saying, "Jen, do you know where Persephone Rose is?"

"Probably in her room. Why?"

"Because Dalia's style isn't mine, I need some expert advice, and I understand Persephone is a bit of a goth."

Jen laughed. "Yes, she sure is. Want me to go find her and bring her here?"

"Would you, please?"

"Sure thing. I have a few spare minutes."

A few minutes later, the blond Jen came back with the pale, black-haired Persephone Rose behind her. Arlene shooed Cally outside until it was her turn, then Arlene and Dalia showed Persephone what Dalia was wearing to the dance, showed her the contact lenses, and then Arlene asked for Persephone's opinion. The pale girl grinned and said she had the perfect idea. She gave Arlene a few tips to get started with, and then sat down at Arlene's table to work out how to do what she had come up with.

That said, Arlene got to work. She explained what she was doing as she did it, though Dalia doubted either she or Cally were far enough along with their magic to really make use of it. But Arlene said the same principles could be applied to mundane makeup. What she was doing was making Dalia's eyes more noticeable – even though Persephone's idea was going to make that kind of redundant – and reshape her cheekbones a little, among other things. Persephone had to help once in a while. The effect, when they were done, gave Dalia a more mature, aristocratic, and mysterious look.

Next, Persephone took a few minutes to cast the glamour on Dalia's eyes.

"This," she said as she was working, "is something I've been working on for a while. I just had to do some math to adjust it to your eye size and personal physiology. It's the most complex glamour I've ever made before. It's honestly my best work yet. It'll respond realistically to your mood and to your eyes being open or closed, and it'll respond to light. Specifically, if it's dark and there's enough light all of a sudden, your eyes will glow like real cat eyes. What's more, it'll protect your eyes from sudden bright light the same as if your eyes were really cat eyes."

"Oh wow. If you could bind that to a charm bracelet or necklace, I would spend my allowance on something like that."

"You would?"

"If it looks as cool as I hope it does. Even Maddy's glammers don't do that sort of thing."

"How much would you pay for something like that?"

"Me? Hmm... A glamour that mimics actual cat eye physiology and is permanently bound using runes to a necklace? That's worth at least \$50. Probably a lot more, if you have to tailor it to individual people."

"Interesting. Well if you like it, come back to me after the holidays and I'll tell you how much of your Yule cash you'll need to let go of for such a thing. Just... I should probably warn you now not to use it where mundanes would see it. In fact, you'll have to have someone remove the glamour for you before you head home for the winter holidays."

"Yeah, I know," Dalia said with a sigh.

"By the way, I'm all done now."

Persephone stood aside and Jen gasped. “WOW!” she shouted, getting the attention of everyone in the room.

“Oh cool! Did you do that, Persephone?” another girl asked.

“Indeed I did.”

“It's amazing! Kind of creepy, too, but amazing!”

Arlene handed Dalia a mirror, and she, too, gasped. It looked like someone had taken her human eyes out and replaced them with real live amber-colored cat's eyes. It was a little hard to tell in the mirror, but they seemed to move and respond just like real cat eyes. The lights got turned off and someone shone a light in her eye. It didn't hurt nearly as much as it should have, and somebody got photographs of her eyes glowing in the dark.

“Between that and your dress, you're going to look amazing!”

Dalia grinned at this, and thanked Persephone.



BY 7, EVERYONE IN THE school was milling around either the top or the bottom of the stairs, and it was getting so bad that the teachers started chivying people into the ballroom ahead of time just to make room for everyone else to get downstairs. The lighting inside the ballroom was dim, mostly lit with Christmas lights that looked like icicles.

Since the sound system wasn't quite ready, everyone was told to stay by the front entrance, on either side of the doors so they didn't block the exit. This they did, people talking

with each other as they waited. Everyone was dressed in formal wear of course, since it was a formal dance. It wasn't as formal as a prom would be, but it was close. Everyone looked nice.

Dalia met Cally at the stairs. Cally hadn't seen Dalia's dress yet, and Dalia hadn't seen Cally's dress either. Arlene and Persephone had insisted Cally wait outside while Dalia got into it. Dalia had similarly been prohibited from seeing Cally in her dress until meeting her at the stairs, since they were going with each other to the dance. The fact that they were going as friends seemed not to matter to Arlene.

It paid off, though. Dalia was speechless – literally non-verbal – at the sight of Cally in a sleeveless lilac gown with darker purple trim that matched the purple lenses of her glasses. Her nails were painted lilac as well, and her shoes were also lilac. Cally's hair was still short as it ever was, but now it hung down in loose curls that framed her face wonderfully, making her silver pentacle earrings more noticeable. Her friend hadn't noticed her yet, and was grinning at something someone else had said, her makeup making her dimples stand out more than usual.

Cally turned her head and spotted Dalia. It was clear from her expression that she didn't immediately recognize Dalia, but when she did, her jaw dropped, and she blushed. Dalia's dress, a sleeveless silk dress, was clearly magical, as it was literally as black as night, depicting a realistic-looking view of the Milky Way in a clear night sky. Around the bottom edge of the dress was the black outlines of skeletal-looking trees that occasionally rattled soundlessly in an unheard wind. If you caught sight of the dress at the right time, you



could faintly make out the movement of an owl in one of the trees turning its head.

Dalia's shoes were interesting. First, she didn't have her usual prosthesis on. Instead of its mechanical steel, the end of her left leg was fitted with a prosthesis that looked like it was made of gold, but couldn't have been because gold was too soft. The gold-colored metal had been made into a mesh comprising a design of vines and leaves, and was hollow. The golden filigree mesh continued up the side of her lower leg, holding itself in place without any straps or buckles. It was also jointed, and clearly enchanted so the foot could move at her mind's command the same way her usual prosthesis did. On her other leg was a boot-like shoe that bore a strong resemblance to the prosthesis. Unless you noticed the left foot was hollow, you wouldn't even know she was wearing a prosthesis.

Sitting on her shoulder was Kobalos. He had on a little piece of white and black cloth that made it look like he was wearing a tux. He also had what looked like white spats on his feet, despite the fact he wasn't wearing shoes, and he was wearing a little silk top hat on his head, and a little glass monocle on a chain was over one eye, both hat and monocle stuck in place with magic. He seemed like part of her outfit, in a way.

To complete the look, Dalia's nails were painted black, which again had sparkling stars on them. She also had on a necklace of blue gold-stone that had been enchanted so that the copper inclusions in the dark glass that made up the artificial gem glittered like stars, even in the darkness. And naturally, she hadn't taken off the bracelet she'd made from the

wood of the Devil Tree. She even had her Devil Tree wand strapped to her side, hanging there from a black silk ribbon. Only now, it was clear she'd done more work on the wand, as it now had a lilac quartz tip screwed into its point and an end-cap of obsidian. Despite the color of the tip, the fact it resembled the end of a dagger seemed fitting for the gnarled wand.

"Ms. Ravenstone," came the voice of Principal Park to her right, who intercepted her before she could get to Cally.

"Yes, Principal Park?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to leave the wand in your room. Either that, or find a holster for it that covers most of it up. If someone were to touch it—"

"Kallistos knows not to hurt anyone, Principal Park."

"Kallistos?"

"It's the name I gave the Devil Tree."

"I see. Well, I wasn't concerned about that before, though I am now. I was concerned that the tip of that wand is rather pointy and sharp looking. You'll need a better holster for it."

Privately thinking she'd like to see what he thought of Papa's wand with its sharpened obsidian point, Dalia opened up the black, coffin-shaped purse she always had with her, and from it she pulled a black leather wand holster. "Like this one?" she asked, slipping the wand inside it. The wand was completely covered in leather now, except for the handle.

He nodded. "That is acceptable. Carry on."

Tying the holster to the silk ribbon again first, she then hurried over to Cally.

“Oh my GODS you're more gorgeous than ever! Hold on a moment, I gotta get a picture.”

When Dalia got her cell phone out of her purse, Cally posed for several pictures, then insisted on taking several of Dalia.

“Where'd you get that dress anyway, Dalia? It's so amazing!”

“Papa made the dress itself, and Maddy is really good with glammers. Speaking of glammers, check out what Persephone did for my eyes.”

Cally was thrilled and awed by the cats-eye glamour, and agreed with Dalia that a necklace capable of holding such a glamour was worth at least \$50. They were still talking about it when Dalia spotted Kohana approaching. Her dress was simple yellow cotton with no pattern or trim. It looked okay for formal events, but not great, and in fact looked like it'd been purchased at a thrift store. Which, given she and her mom were poor, it probably was. Her shoes were also old, worn black leather Mary Janes.

When Kohana saw Dalia, her eyes went wide, and she glanced down at Dalia's golden prosthesis and matching boot, her expression suddenly going cold. Dalia didn't know how to interpret this expression, so she used her empathic gift, and felt in her own belly Kohana's twisting jealousy and anger.

“It's not gold,” Dalia said suddenly, her voice cracking with fear and sadness and worry. “It's 3D printed plastic that's been spray-painted gold. And Shimá enchanted it herself. The enchantment will wear off in 48 hours. Papa made

the dress, Maddy made the glamour. But *her* work is a lot more permanent.”

Kohana blinked, then looked suddenly ashamed, realizing Dalia had felt her jealousy. “I... Dalia, I’m sorry, it just happened. I know your family is rich, and I saw your outfit and I... I guess I assumed. I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” Dalia said, and gave Kohana a hug.

“Thanks,” Kohana said.

They finished the hug and stood there a bit awkwardly.

“Um... Have you seen Vedyia yet?” Kohana nervously asked Dalia.

“Not yet, no. Do you want me to call Maddy? I have my phone on me.”

“If you would, please.”

Dalia hit the speed-dial number for Maddy’s cell phone and waited. It rang three times before picking up.

“Hello, dear. We are outside the front door of the school,” came Morgana’s voice from the phone. “We’ll be at the stairs in five minutes.”

“Five minutes? Okay. Thanks, Maddy. See you soon.” She hung up the phone.

Kohana sighed with relief. “Oh good. I know you said this morning she was coming, but I’m glad to hear they’re on their way. Thanks for letting me know.”

“Not a problem. But uh, Kohana? Are you feeling okay?”

“A little shaky. I’m sure it’s just nerves, though. I’ll be fine.”

“Um... okay. If you say so.”

Though the bulk of the school was down in the ballroom already, there were still quite a few people hanging around

the stairs along with Dalia and Cally and Kohana. Brandon and Sally were there, Brandon looking smart in a black suit and tie, and Sally was looking good in a simple blue dress made of what looked like satin. Aavraak and Sutekh were there, too. Both were wearing black suits with black ties. For some reason, even though Aavraak always wore slacks instead of skirts, this outfit took Dalia aback enough she almost forgot Aavraak was a girl. Or, well, identified as a girl, even though she was technically a third sex. Not really an important distinction, here.

Cerridwen showed up as well, wearing a gold dress that looked like it was made of metallic scales. It looked amazing contrasting her dark brown skin. Next to her was Alvar, the third triplet of their group. Alvar was wearing an actual tuxedo, which stood out among the younger years, but plenty of the older students were wearing tuxes, too. Mostly boys, but some girls as well. None of the triplets had opted to bring a date along to the dance. When asked about it, they had replied in stereo, saying "We're hunting for fresh meat." Alvar's expression when they said it reminded Dalia of a tiger stalking its prey.

When Vedyā appeared, Kohana was staring in clear awe, her face turning red. Dalia turned to look, and saw what she saw. For Vedyā was wearing a forest-green silk dress with silver trim, the dress going no farther down than just past her knees, though it had a train of green fabric with silver lace that floated an inch above the ground, being levitated by magic. The green of the dress had a pattern of snakes on it done in thin silver lines, and she had on two bracelets of metallic-green and gold in the shape of snakes.

What was more, Morgana had done some pretty impressive glamours on her face that made her look a lot older despite her short stature and being a year younger than the youngest Fae Springs students. And completing the look was Malek Taus, her Peacock Ore Constrictor draped around her shoulders like a living necklace. His scales glittered in the light, and something about how he was holding himself made Dalia think he was delighted to be looking so pretty. If so, his master was feeling the same way.

And of course, her hair was not its usual rainbow color, but neither was it black. A glamour made her hair appear to be an unnatural-for-humans silver color, which was actually pretty close to the color of Kohana's fur in her fox form, and was tied up in an elegant knot at the back of her head. Despite the green and silver of her outfit, Dalia's reaction to Vedy's hair color was a strong urge to break into a rendition of 'Let It Go.' By comparison, Morgana's backless, black silk dress was plain, despite the fact that it had a pattern of cat skulls and vines barely visible on it. Morgana was also carrying two cloaks over her arm, which Dalia knew to be hers and Vedy's cloaks.

Since Dalia and her friends were all staring, too, this got the attention of the others who were waiting for their dates to show up. Several boys, the youngest of whom couldn't have been any younger than 15, wolf-whistled at Vedy.

"I'm *eleven*, you pervs!" she snapped at them. "And anyway, I'm already taken." As she said this, she took Kohana's arm, and kissed Kohana very quickly on the lips. Whether it was this or the presence of Morgana that shut them up was unclear, but either way the result was the same: the boys

looked very uncomfortable, Morgana sighed in an annoyed manner, and Dalia feared Kohana's head might catch on fire if her face got any redder.

"I don't suppose you ran the idea of that kiss past Kohana before doing it?" Morgana asked.

"Er... no," Vedy said, sounding abashed. "Sorry, Kohana. I should have asked first, even if you *are* my lovely girlfriend with kissable lips."

Kohana blinked. "I... huh? Um... cannot... words?"

"Oh boy, I think I broke her," Vedy said, waving a hand in front of Kohana's face. "Tirffiniol to Kohana! Tirffiniol to Kohana!"

"Wha—what?" she said, snapping out of it. "Oh... er, it's fine. I don't mind."

"Good. I still should have asked."

With all of them there, Dalia and the rest of them started heading down the stairs, leaving a bunch of other people behind as they did. Walking just behind them was Morgana, who had agreed to come as a chaperon.

They went down the stairs, and on the way to the ballroom, Mrs. Ravenstone paused in Gamma 1, which was another coat-checking room, though this one didn't have a weapons-check desk. The two cloaks she had brought in were one of the few things hanging in there, since she and Vedy were the only two people coming to the dance from outside the school. They were also likely two of only three cloaks in the entire school at the moment.

When they got to the ballroom and went in, the dance still had not been officially started yet, so people were still milling around the half of the ballroom nearest the door.

Among those closest to the door was Principal Park, who looked at Vedyā with a frown on his face.

“Who might *you* be, young lady?” he asked. “And why—wait, are you one of the Ravenstones?” His voice sounded slightly exasperated, and more than a little tired.

“Vedyā Ravenstone at your service, Principal Park,” she said with an affected ‘elegant’ accent.

“You are not a student here yet.”

“True. I was invited here by Kohana Sato. She’s my girlfriend.”

“Ah, yes. I remember now. Your mother – Morgana Ravenstone, I mean – told me.”

“Quite right. And anyway, I’ll be joining your esteemed institution next year, Principal Park.”

“I can hardly contain my enthusiasm,” he said sarcastically. He turned to Morgana. “You didn’t tell me she’d be bringing a pet snake with her.”

“Malek Taus is Vedyā’s familiar. His species are very docile animals even before forming a familiar bond with a witch.”

“I thought her familiar was a cobra?” he asked.

“She has four familiars. Malek Taus and Rajani – her cobra – are two of them.”

Principal Park’s eyes went wide. “*Four* familiars? I’ve never heard of someone having so many at once before.”

Morgana sighed. “Yes, I’m sure there’s rather a lot of things you haven’t heard of before. It is rather a large multiverse, after all.”

She turned, then, and everyone caught a glimpse of her back, which was bared, showing off the image of a winged



cobra made with scars. The way her long hair (done in box braids) had been pulled over her shoulder so it draped across her front side, she clearly wished people to see it. Principal Park, on looking at it, pulled a disgusted face.

“Do you have to go showing that vile thing off whenever you come here, Mrs. Ravenstone?”

She paused, then carefully turned to face him with an icy stare. Vedyia whispered, “Oooh boy, he’s gonna get it now.”

Her voice, when she spoke, was calm and polite, yet laced with anger the way an assassin’s blade was laced with poison.

“Principal Park. The design on my back is no more ‘vile’ than a tattoo. It hurt me no more or less than a tattoo. It is a beautiful image. It is also an ancient tradition that is dying out in its homeland because of the state that the continent was left in when the Europeans pillaged and raped it for every resource they could steal, and I am doing my small part to keep the tradition alive, here in a land that does not have to worry as much about diseases. I remind you that the school policy of Fae Springs prohibits cultural or racial discrimination, and I kindly ask you to keep that fact in your mind at all times and think about the possible ways your words might offend people before you say something else that reflects poorly on your character, Principal Park.

“And while you’re at it, Principal Park, if you could please try to remember a few important details: first, that my wife Nizoni is on the school board, as is our mutual friend Nestor Metaxas. Second, that I myself am on the *Concilio Portlandia*, along with our family’s friend Mr. Starling. Keep-

ing those facts in mind whenever you wish to speak with one of us, that would very much be to your benefit.”

At this, she grinned, showing him her two rows of sharpened, pointed teeth, just briefly enough to remind him of their existence before she hastily closed her mouth again. It was a nice little warning, well executed, her body language perfectly orchestrated. If he wanted to make an issue of it, claim she had threatened him, she could easily claim she'd forgotten in the heat of the moment. The witnesses, which included several teachers, would back her up.

Principal Park looked both scared and furious, but his only reaction was to stiffen up and say in a tone almost like speaking through clenched teeth, “Thank you ever so much for the advice. I will make sure to remember that, Mrs. Ravenstone.”

“Excellent,” she said brightly. “Now that we've cleared up *that* little misunderstanding, shall we get the festivities started?”

“Yes, let's,” he said, and went over to the DJ station to use the microphone. “The 2017 winter formal dance known as the 'Snow Ball' now hereby begins. Have fun, but behave yourselves; the school rules are still in effect. Chaperons will punish rule breakers.” When he said this, a lot of people looked over to the side corners closest to the doors, where several adults stood, including Mrs. Metaxas, Ms. Hollander, and Mr. Rabe.

Everyone surged ahead to fill the ballroom's space. Dalia and Cally held back to avoid getting trampled, but went ahead once the danger was over. The first dance was some popular hit that Dalia wasn't familiar with, but it had a

catchy beat. Cally and Dalia found Sally, Brandon, Aavraak, and the triplets, who were already dancing to the beat, and joined in. Kobalos, on Dalia's shoulder, spread his wings, opened his beak, and bobbed up and down to the music.

"He's dancing with us!" Brandon said, moving his chair back and forth in a semblance of dancing.

"Of course he is," Dalia said. "He's a stylish and cool fellow."

Kobalos flew to Brandon's chair to give himself more room to spread his wings while he 'danced.' Brandon spun his chair in place at this, making Kobalos give a mild caw of protest.

Compared to her familiar's dancing, Dalia's dancing was not so great. She just kind of stood there and turned her torso back and forth a bit while rocking from side to side.

"Do you not know how to dance?" Cally asked, speaking loud to be heard over the music.

"Not this kind of dancing, no," Dalia responded, nearly shouting. "My parents taught me things like waltzes and Spanish dances like the flamenco and the tango. Apparently Shimá learned a bunch of Spanish dances when she went to school in 'Escuela de Torre de Roca para Magia' when she was living in Mesa Puesta de Sol. And Maddy used to live in Mexico."

"Wow. I don't know any of those dances."

"Well maybe I can teach you sometime."

"By the way, how are you managing with all this noise and all these people? You usually get overwhelmed easier than this."

“Magical ear plugs that make the music a lot quieter, and lots of shields,” Dalia said.

“Less talking, more dancing!” Alvar said.

Dalia continued to dance feebly and uncomfortably to the unfamiliar music, even through a second song. When the third song came up, though, it was a slow dance. She held her hand out to Cally.

“May I have this dance?”

Cally grinned. “You may,” she said, taking Dalia's hand.

Several of her friends wolf-whistled as Dalia took the lead position, right hand on Cally's hip, left hand in Cally's other hand. Though the lights were dim, Dalia could still tell Cally was blushing. Dalia glanced up and saw Kohana and Vedy dancing. They looked like they were having fun, too, Vedy teaching Kohana a simple box step waltz. Thinking that was a good idea, Dalia did the same for Cally. It was a little awkward at first, but soon they were dancing pretty smoothly.

“This is nice,” Cally said as they danced. “Is this a waltz?”

“Yes. A box step waltz. It's simple and easy but elegant.”

“Cool. Though that was actually two different thoughts I had there. First was that this is nice, slow dancing with you. Second was my waltz question.”

Dalia smiled. “Cool,” was all she could say.

“How do you determine who leads when we're both girls, though?” Cally began. “I mean, I thought the leader was, you know, the boy.”

“Um, well... in this case, I'm leading because I knew the dance already. But if you want to try leading, I'm game.”

"Sounds cool. Maybe later, though." Dalia nodded her understanding.

They danced in silence for a few more moments before Cally spoke again.

"I'd been thinking, ever since you told me about your crush on me. Or, well..." she shook her head. "Anyway, I've been thinking ever since then. About everything you said, I mean. And like... yeah, I still don't know about like, crushes or whatnot. I don't know about being like, girlfriends or anything. But, well... I thought about this dance, and while I might dance with some of our other friends too, you're my first friend ever. I know now you became my friend because of your crush, but I don't mind. I just like having a friend. Friends."

"Well, even if I hadn't had a crush on you, if I'd noticed you all alone, I probably would've asked you to sit with us anyway. Would've made it easier, in fact."

"Cool. Anyway, I don't mind how it happened, I'm just glad it happened. But I wasn't done with my thoughts." She paused a moment, thinking, then said, "I don't see why we couldn't, you know, hold hands and hug and cuddle as friends, too. I dunno about you, but I've gotten kinda touch-starved over the school year. I mean, Mom is good about that kind of thing if I need it, and so is Dad. And my sister, to a point. But we live at school now, Mom's busy, and well, you're with me most of the time. So far, we have all the same classes together. And I know where your room is now, you could invite me in to cuddle. Or I could take you to my room. Cerridwen and Alvar might tease us a little, but they're cool."

"Anyway... so yeah... I know you've got different kinds of feelings for me than I do for you, but we're friends; you've got a craving for touch, I've got a craving for touch, we don't need to be girlfriends to like, cuddle or whatever. But just let me know if your feelings for me change at all. As long as we're both still friends, and both still touch-starved, then I don't think any change in your feelings will get in the way of this arrangement, so don't worry about that. Just, you know, I want to know. I want us to be honest with each other now. I want you to feel like you can tell me stuff and be safe."

"Oh. Well uh, okay. Sounds good to me."

Cally giggled. "Cool. Now um, I know you've got issues with people touching you without asking, so I don't know how much I have to ask, or what the process of that is—"

"Cally. If I'm aware you're there, and you're slow enough reaching to touch me that I have time to realize what you're doing and tell you to stop before you actually touch me, well... if I don't want you to touch me, I'll tell you. Otherwise, as long as I can tell what you're trying to do, you can take my silence as a 'yes.' Um... unless I'm having a panic attack and I'm non-verbal because of it."

"I can? I mean, how does that work? What's the limit? Not that I have any plans to like, grope you or anything," she hurried to add, blushing more than before. "I just... want to know."

"I get that. And I'll answer in a moment, but Cally? Have you ever been taken in for a diagnosis for autism? Because I think you and I have that in common. Autism, I mean."

“Oh yeah that's right, I forgot to tell you. Yes, Mom and Dad took me in to a shrink a few years ago, I'm on the spectrum as well. Now um, can you answer my question?”

Dalia chuckled. “Sure. My answer is... um... I don't know. I've never had that kind of arrangement with someone before.”

“You mean you and Sally don't ever cuddle?”

“No. We hug sometimes, and she'll sometimes like, take my hand when I'm panicking or something, to guide me somewhere quiet. But no, we don't cuddle or anything. I think she got stuck on the idea of me not liking being touched without permission, and sort of... but well, I mean, I could have—”

The slow dance song ended, and something a bit more high-paced and loud started up again.

“You should teach me that sign language thing,” Cally said, struggling to be heard over the music. “Then we could keep talking in all this noise.”

“Wanna get something to eat?” Dalia asked.

“What?”

Doñela took control of her body briefly and repeated the question much louder.

“Sure!” Cally said.

After Doñela gave Dalia back control of her body, she followed Cally over to the refreshments table, which had drinks of different kinds, and party food like potato chips, corn chips, salsa and other dips, and even little sandwiches of crackers, meat, and cheese. They took plates and loaded them up. Doñela popped out of Dalia's body and took hold of their drinks for them, to the astonishment of several near-

by onlookers, who doubtless thought one of the two of them had already mastered telekinesis.

They went over to some chairs over to the left of the entrance and sat down next to each other to eat. As they ate, they watched their friends dancing.

“Oh hey, Dalia; your other two parents are here now!”

Dalia looked where Cally had indicated, and saw Orpheus and Nizoni. Orpheus was wearing the same suit he'd worn years ago to the party where they'd announced their candidacy for the Council and school board. Nizoni, on the other hand, was wearing a Navajo style halter dress, white with turquoise-colored zig-zag designs down the front. Around her middle was a black leather belt with silver metal work on it inlaid with turquoise stones. She was also wearing a copious amount of turquoise jewelry – a necklace of turquoise beads, bracelets and a very large ring with many turquoise stones in each, and a similar design of earrings.

The two of them were also dancing together with Morgana, to Principal Park's annoyance.

When the next slow dance came up, Cally and Dalia were still eating and talking. Vedyā and Kohana, on the other hand, were dancing together again.

“Wow, they're really dancing well!” Kohana said to Vedyā, watching the three Ravenstone adults dancing.

Vedyā looked for herself. They were doing some kind of fancy dance with twirls and dips and other theatrics, that had them switching partners every now and then. First Orpheus and Nizoni danced, then Orpheus and Morgana, then Morgana and Nizoni, before switching again.

“Yeah, they sure are,” Vedyā said.



"They weren't too bad earlier for the faster dancing, either. It was a little wild, in fact."

Vedya grinned. "Yeah, don't be fooled by any of their outward personalities. Especially not Maddy's cool, calm, mysterious attitude. She's a secret party girl. They *all* know how to party. Maddy and Shimá even met at a bacchanal, did you know?"

"What's a bacchanal?"

"It's this huge party in the woods with lots of drinking, wild dancing, and other debauchery, that's usually held at midsummer. They're not exactly forthcoming about it, but they've let slip some things over the years, and I figured it out. Pretty sure I've pinned down the one they go to, it's held in the woods in Oregon somewhere. Maddy and Shimá met each other at one of those things on the east coast."

"How much debauchery are we talking about?"

"Oh, I shall not offend your delicate, innocent ears with such details, my flower. Suffice it to say that my brother Ashkii was born nine months after one of these bacchanals."

Kohana blushed bright red, visible even in the dim lighting. Vedya laughed at this.

"I love your perfume, by the way. What is it?"

"I didn't put any perfume on. Perfumes are too strong for me to tolerate. You know, because of my sense of smell."

"Oh. Well you smell nice anyway. Don't you smell that?"

"Yes, I think I know which scent you mean. Does it smell like honey, but sort of floral and earthy?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"Then that's the laundry detergent the school uses sometimes. I uh, well I took a shower this morning, but then I was

laying down for a few minutes later, in my human form, and I think some of it transferred from the bedding.”

“Oh. Well you should ask them what scent it is, so you can find a perfume that smells the same. Er, if you can find one that's weak enough for you to tolerate.”

“Maybe,” she said.

The ball continued on in this vein for a couple hours. Dalia and Cally had long since finished their food and drink, and gone back to dancing, preferring the slow dances. Vedyā and Kohana had some refreshments, too, then returned. Most of the night was a lot of fun for all involved. But then someone had to go and ruin it.

It started soon after the DJ changed the song to 'Who Let The Dogs Out?' Naturally, Anastasia Park and several of her friends found Kohana and Vedyā as the song was playing, and said, “They're playing your song, Lassie! Can you dance like a person, Lassie?”

“Woof woof!” said another girl. Then the mean girls started singing along with the song, pointing at Kohana whenever the word “Dogs” came up.

“The only bitches here are you lot,” Vedyā said to Anastasia and her friends. But it was too late. Kohana was already rushing away, her eyes streaming with angry tears.

As the mean girls laughed at Kohana's back, Vedyā turned around and slugged Anastasia right in the nose with a sickening wet CRACK. There were screams and cries of “She's bleeding!” But Vedyā was already running off after Kohana.

The ball fell into chaos at that point, as the teachers and other chaperons tried to get through the crowd and figure

out what had happened, then as they tried to get Anastasia through the crowd to the infirmary. Vedya and Kohana went unnoticed in the resulting chaos.

Vedya was following the sound of crying, trying to get to Kohana. She caught a glimpse of her at the end of the hall and ran even faster in that direction. She ended up following Kohana up the stairs back to the school proper.

“Kohana!”

The only response was more crying. Then, without warning, Kohana sneezed, and there was suddenly reddish-orange light and heat filling the stairway. Vedya flinched, but she was still wearing her invisible magic rings, and one of them made her fireproof. Good thing, too, or Kohana's out-of-control foxfire would have burned Vedya alive.

Kohana was screaming in fear and confusion, a scream that morphed weirdly into something very much not human. Vedya fumbled through the wild-fire level flames blowing down at her like a river of fire, trying to find Kohana somewhere in all that. Finally, she grabbed something furry – one of Kohana's tails. It was reddish-orange as well, and Vedya realized that the fire was coming from every part of Kohana's body, even her fur.

“KOHANA! TURN IT OFF!”

Kohana whined in terror, and then saw Vedya and looked astonished that Vedya wasn't on fire. Even her clothes were being protected by the magic ring. Then Kohana made a sort of howling sound, sounded more like a whine than anything else. Vedya realized there was no leaf on Kohana's head anymore.

"VEDYA!" came a stricken voice from Kohana's open mouth. It was very strange, seeing a fox talk like that, especially since she wasn't moving her lips, but Vedyia had other concerns right now.

"WHERE'S YOUR LEAF?"

"I DON'T KNOW. I CAN'T CHANGE, AND I CAN'T STOP THE FIRE!" Kohana said.

Vedyia also knew from previous conversations with her that Kohana's leaf was not an ordinary leaf – it was magical and helped her hold her form – and would be expensive to replace. But for now, they had to get her somewhere to contain her foxfire. Vedyia grabbed Kohana around the middle and picked her up; she was very heavy, but Vedyia managed it, slinging Kohana over her shoulder. Once she was secure, Vedyia ran up the stairs shouting "FIRE! OUT OF THE WAY!"

Running through the halls, Vedyia used another of her magic rings to force the front door open because she didn't have time to waste doing it otherwise, and the door was made of wood. She ran out the front door and began to levitate them both off the ground, as high up as she could go. Doubtless they looked like a comet or Johnny Storm as they flew into the air.

"THERE," Vedyia said, still having to shout over the roar of the flames. "NOW WE WON'T CATCH THE BUILDING OR GROUNDS ON FIRE!"

"YOU CAN'T HOLD ME FOREVER! WHAT DO WE DO?"

"I DON'T KNOW!"

Luckily for all involved, the school's building and grounds were covered in extensive fire-proofing wards that were constantly being checked and renewed where necessary, so the building and grounds were fine. But Vedyá didn't know how much longer she and Kohana would be fine. Levitation was not Vedyá's strong suit. Well actually it was, but it wasn't as good as she'd like it to be, is what she meant. She was already starting to feel the strain.

"DAMN IT, I CAN'T SEE A BLASTED THING WITH ALL THIS FIRE! WHERE'S THAT SMALL LAKE?"

"NO IDEA. I CAN'T SEE EITHER!"

Vedyá suddenly felt something on her left shoulder burn, and for a moment she was very concerned that the ring might be failing. But then she heard a voice in her head: Nizoni's voice.

*Fly forward at 5 mph, Vedyá. Trust Shimá on this.*

Nodding, she did as commanded, waiting for more instructions. How long she waited, she wasn't sure. Could have been 5, could have been 15. But it felt like a long time, and her stamina was faltering rapidly.

*Try to keep your altitude up, for now. The trees are still flammable, I think. Good. You're almost there, Vedyá. Drop suddenly when I tell you to, but try not to go too fast. Got it?*

Vedyá nodded. Unsure if Shimá could read that, though, she thought back *GOT IT!*

*Good. Hold it... hold it... and... NOW!*

They were falling, now, and it took every ounce of stamina for Vedyá to keep from going too fast. How fast was 'too fast' she didn't know; she had no idea how high up she'd

gone before starting to fall. But when they hit the water, they survived the fall, and nothing felt bruised or broken. Though they were now underwater, and as she held her own breath, she realized she hadn't warned Kohana to hold hers. So she pushed through her growing exhaustion and levitated them enough out of the water that she could hear Kohana gasping for breath, but plainly still breathing.

Kohana's fur was soaking wet now, and no longer on fire. Though how long that would last was unclear; the amount of steam coming off Kohana's hide seemed a bit too copious to be explained by body heat. Her eyes were also glowing like embers, something she had thought before was a reflection of the fire.

Vedya let go of Kohana, because Kohana was wriggling out of her grip. Now she'd let go, she could see why; Kohana was the superior swimmer. The only thing keeping Vedya from drowning, though, was her continued levitation. Between that and the chilly water, she was fading fast. Luckily, Kohana's powers seemed to be heating up the lake's waters even as they continued to float there.

A hand grabbed Vedya, and pulled her out of the water. It was Mrs. Metaxas, who was flying through the air like she'd been born to it.

"Kohana!" Vedya said weakly.

"I'll get her as soon as I'm done with you, Vedya. Just relax."

When they were floating over grass, Mrs. Metaxas set Vedya down on the ground and went back to the lake. Vedya sat up to watch, and someone wrapped a thick blanket

around her, one that was clearly enchanted to be warmer than usual.

Mrs. Metaxas pulled Kohana out of the water, and her fur steamed so much that it dried before their very eyes and started to glow like embers in preparation to 'flame on.' But as soon as Kohana was out of the water and Mrs. Metaxas had her secured in one arm, she used her free hand to tap Kohana's head gently and speak an enchantment.

"*Sleep*," she said, as she'd done before to Elliolynn, and Kohana went out like a light in more ways than one.

The aftermath this time was at once easier and more difficult than before. There was nothing else to do but get Kohana and Vedyā to the infirmary, as nobody else had gotten hurt. But it could have been so much worse. If Kohana hadn't been leaving the ball when she did, the night might have ended in the deaths of hundreds of people, a fact that Principal Park wasted no time bringing up when the heated debate about Kohana's expulsion started up in the hall outside the infirmary, Nizoni and the other Ravenstone adults – including Mrs. Metaxas – defending Kohana. The discussion was so loud that Vedyā could hear it through the closed doors of the infirmary.

Despite nobody else having gotten hurt *directly* by the foxfire, when Vedyā and Kohana got there, they saw Dalia was also in the infirmary, knocked out cold. When Kohana had left the ballroom crying, Dalia had experienced only a slight twinge of a headache as those feelings pierced her shield, but the instant Kohana had burst into flames, the combined emotions of a terrified Kohana and Vedyā had made Dalia scream in agony and drop like a sack of potatoes.

It had made her the center of attention until someone spotted the light of the foxfire traveling down the corridors.

Vedya watched, dry and warm now in the infirmary bed, as one set of nurses tried to figure out what was wrong with Kohana, while another set of nurses were hustling to make sure Dalia would be okay. They were concerned because her nose had been bleeding, despite Cally having caught her before she fell all the way to the floor. Her heart was also racing, she was hyperventilating, and she was clammy and cold with cold sweat.

Cally was in the far corner crying in worry about her friends, but especially Dalia. Cally was contained in a glowing, semi-transparent bubble that was trapping her emotions inside it so they wouldn't further hurt Dalia. When one of the nurses noticed Vedya watching in worry, she too got put inside a glowing bubble. And though Kohana was asleep, they put one around her, too, for good measure. All of this despite the fact there was a similar bubble around Dalia and the nurses tending to her.

As Vedya watched, Dalia made a gagging noise. The nurses turned her on her side and she vomited in her... sleep? She was passed out and yet clearly still undergoing something heavy, could that be called sleep? Vedya noticed, then, that Dalia's dress had been removed and she was wearing only panties as the nurses worked to help her. She wondered if it was still intact, as hobs in special medical haz-mat suits appeared to clean up the sick. They had to stay a while, though, because she was still going at it, to the point of dry-heaving for several minutes before it finally stopped.



Thankfully, this seemed to be what Dalia needed to start recovering. Once the dry heaving stopped, the beeps of the heart monitor slowly went back to a normal heartbeat for someone who was asleep, and her breathing returned to normal. The nurses worked for a few more minutes to wrap up loose ends and try to wash some of the stink of sweat from Dalia's hair and the sick from her mouth, then left the bubble, sliding through it like it wasn't there.

"I don't get it," Nurse Johnson said, pulling his face-mask down at last.

"Don't get what?" Vedyā asked.

Nurse Johnson turned to look at her, and said, "I know that had to be pretty intense, what she felt from you and Ms. Sato. But I've never seen an empath have *that* strong of a reaction to any kind of emotional stimulus, not even one Dalia's age. I think I'll be recommending she get her power level tested. I suspect it might be higher than we previously suspected."

"Don't be silly," the kitsune nurse said. "Her reaction was absurdly strong. She'd have to be literally off the charts in terms of power for that kind of reaction, which hasn't happened for over 150 years. If she was that powerful, we would have seen something like this long before now, even with the interference from that improperly done anti-telepathy sigil she had until recently."

Another nurse was still using his wand to run tests on Dalia. This man looked to be in his 50's, was bald, and had a mustache. Vedyā had barely noticed him, but she looked his way when he said, "Hmm..."

"You find something, Nurse Lovato?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure what to make of it. Her brain scan looks different than the ones she's had before, and she's gotten quite a few of those over the school year so far."

"How does it look different?"

"Look for yourself," he said, pointing at a display on some magical device Vedyā didn't understand.

It was agonizing, waiting for the nurses to finish arguing over what it meant. It got even worse when they declared this out of their league and called in this campus's sole doctor to have a look. She came in, a tall black haired woman, and joined the discussion. Which, after an hour, finally ended.

"Something has altered her brain, something magical. Whatever it is appears to have shut down the part of her brain that filters out extraneous input. She isn't any stronger an empath than she was before, her brain is just ignoring very little of it now, and making itself even more overwhelmed. And when an empathic event like this happens, it sets off a chain reaction that affects that filtration system for all her senses. It's a miracle she didn't go catatonic after that last one. I think her shield, despite not lasting long under a barrage like that, may have saved her.

"Of course, we still have no idea what it is that did this to her brain. We'll have to run more tests..." and then she was off, listing a slew of different tests for the other nurses to run, none of which made any sense to Vedyā.

"Nurse Johnson?" Vedyā asked before he could run off.

"Yes, Ms. Ravenstone?"

"Where's Dalia's dress? Did it survive?"

"It's fine. Whoever made it... well, it's pretty tough. Easy to get off her, though, which saved it from having to be cut off of her. Your mother—Morgana, I mean—has it with her."

"Are you going to put her in a hospital gown now? She'll freak out if she's topless when she wakes up."

He chuckled. "I'll do that right now," he said. She thanked him, and he walked off and did exactly as he'd told her he would. Vedya was glad. One less thing to worry about, now.

"As to you, Vedya," he added on his return to her bed, "I'm keeping you overnight for observation. That water was pretty cold, and we have to make sure you didn't suffer any internal fire damage. It's unlikely you did, your tests came back clean, but without knowing the quality of the fire-proofing ring, it's best not to take any chances."

"That's fine. Thank you again, Nurse Johnson."

"You're welcome, Ms. Ravenstone."

With him gone, Vedya turned to look at Dalia. Then she looked at Kohana, lying there asleep in her fox form. It was still strange, seeing an over-sized fox with an unusually large head for a fox and thinking of that as the true form of her girlfriend. But then, humans were just another great ape. Vedya examined Kohana's form for other differences from mundane foxes. Aside from her sheer size – much bigger than a standard fox, more like a wolf – and the larger head, there was that human disguise. While serving the same function as Aavraak's human disguise, a kitsune human disguise had more functions than that. They spent 50 years stuck in fox form before learning how to take human form. What was the point of it? She meant, why did they have human

forms at all? Kohana's human disguise was... well, it felt so *real*. It not only made her look human, she also felt human and smelled human. So why had they evolved it? Protective camouflage?

Vedya reviewed the sapient species of faery she knew, and what they looked like. If other skin-shifters were anything like kitsune, then kitsune were hardly the only species to have a humanoid form and an animal form. She hadn't gotten a good look at Elliolynn's bird form, but she suspected it would have big differences from the mundane equivalent. And then there were species like Goblins, dwarfs, and gnomes. Every sapient faery species she could think of off-hand were humanoid in the two-arms-two-legs-and-hands sense, or could take a humanoid form. It seemed to be a popular design in nature.

She got up and held Kohana's... well, there was no denying it was a paw. But she looked at the paw, it was different from an animal paw. Definitely a paw, but the fingers? Toes? The digits on the paw were long and flexible, kind of like a raccoon's hands. And they had opposable thumbs. So a paw-like hand, then, and almost as big as Kohana's hands in her human form. Big brain, opposable thumbs, they could talk, and they were self-aware; that was good enough for her. To Hell with what the bullies thought, Kohana was a fully sapient and sentient person, and that was what was important. Vedya crawled into the bed next to Kohana and pulled Kohana closer to her. As she drifted to sleep, Kohana's fur in her face, she realized Kohana smelled the same as she always did.

DALIA RAVENSTONE AND THE VICIOUS  
CIRCLE

953





## Chapter Twenty-Seven: Tis The Season

*Saturday, December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

WHEN DALIA WOKE UP at last, her head felt like it had been wrapped in cotton after being hit a few times with a baseball bat. The next sensation to filter through to her groggy consciousness was that someone was holding her hand. She sat up and looked to see if she could identify the person, and saw that it was Cally. Cally was, in fact, asleep in her chair beside Dalia. Given the angle she was resting at, she had to have been held up by magic.

“You are awake,” said the familiar voice of Aavraak.

Dalia looked up. On one bed was Kohana, still sleeping in fox form. In the bed on the other side of Kohana was Aavraak, who had gotten up and was walking toward Dalia.

“Aavraak? What were you doing on that bed?”

“I am here because I am a patient here as well. Again.”

“What happened to you?”

“Kohana was not the only one to have an incident of losing control. The one named Preston Park was saying Kohana was going to be expelled, and I lost control of my temper

in quite a big way, as before with Kohana, but worse. Lucky for us both, our friends Sally and Sutekh realized what was about to happen, and restrained me. But I was yelling, shouting, growling like a beast, and baring my fangs. I am deeply ashamed, even knowing it is likely no more my fault than is what befell Kohana. Thankfully, I am in control of myself again, though still experiencing more irritation than normal."

"Oh. Well I'm glad you're—wait, did you say Kohana is being expelled!?"

"That is only what Preston is saying. I am given to understand that your sister Vedya convinced Principal Park to think about it over the holidays before making a final decision."

Dalia started to sob into her hands, dropping Cally's hand as she did, which woke Cally up.

"OHMYGODS Dalia are you okay? Nurse! NURSE!"

"She is not injured, Cally," Aavraak said, just as the kitsune nurse whose name Dalia had never caught rushed in at Cally's call.

"Do not worry, Nurse Ishikawa, she is not in medical distress. Just very worried for her friend Kohana."

"Oh thank goodness," the nurse said, checking Dalia over again anyway. "Anyway, Ms. Ravenstone, your friend is in good health. Ms. Sato has lost her leaf, it has yet to be found. That's why she's still in fox form. Kitsune can change to human form without one of those leaves, but it's more difficult that way."

Dalia stopped crying and looked up, her face still screwed up with emotion. "I'm worried about her being ex-

pelled. Please tell me you know something about why this happened to her. I suspect sabotage.”

“So do I, Ms. Ravenstone. Unlike last time, this time I found that her magic is disrupted, but I can't figure out what did it, and whatever it is, it's fading. Her magic is going back to normal. Slowly, but it should get there unless whatever happened happens again.”

“Okay. Thank you, Nurse Ishikawa.”

“You're welcome.”

“By the way, how long have I been out?”

“It is nine AM on Saturday. You've been unconscious for twelve hours.”

“Thank you,” she said, rubbing her head.

“Is anything wrong, Ms. Ravenstone?”

“They're getting worse, the headaches.”

“Yes, well after finding the disruption in Ms. Sato's magic, I checked you over again. Something is disrupting your magic, too, but in a different way. Whatever has affected your friend is working primarily by causing a short-circuit in the part of her brain that regulates control of her magic, which has secondary effects that are easier to spot.

“You, on the other hand, are experiencing a control issue of a different sort. For you, it's a disruption in the part of your brain that filters out excess sensory data, concentrating itself on your empathic sense. Have you been experiencing any difficulties with your other senses?”

“What? Oh, yes actually. It's harder to figure out what you're saying. Um... not sure how to describe why, though.”

“Does it feel like other sounds in the room are drowning out voices?”



Dalia's eyes went wide, then she nodded. "Yes, that's it exactly."

"I thought so."

"I am confused," Aavraak said. "What do you mean by 'filtering out excess sensory data'?"

"Oh, of course. Most people don't know this, but the brain doesn't use all the information it gets from its senses, however many we have – which is a bit more than just the 5 everyone knows, but that's another matter. The point is, there's a lot of stuff from our senses that our conscious mind just doesn't focus on, it tunes that stuff out. The subconscious mind usually pays attention, which is why people sometimes know things intuitively – the subconscious has noted something the conscious mind hasn't.

"Anyway, Ms. Ravenstone may already be familiar with this concept. Autistic brains tend to filter out less sensory information than non-autistic brains to begin with. A lot of the issues autistic people have are the result of this; their brains are paying attention to more than most people's brains do, and if the amount of this extra information gets high enough, it gives the conscious mind a lot of problems."

"Don't I know it," Dalia said. "Aavraak, you've seen me wearing earplugs, right?"

"Yes, I have. Why do you ask?"

"Because I can hear better than most people can. To a degree that it's often painful. I got my hearing tested once, and I can even hear frequencies of sound most people can't."

"I'm not surprised," Nurse Ishikawa said. "I'll bet you can hear certain electronics and other machines making sounds that nobody else can hear, right?"

Dalia nodded. "I hate fluorescent lights, too, though that's more a visual sensory issue. They make me sick, the way strobing lights can give some people seizures. But even if I can't see the light, the sound they make... it's horrible. Makes me shudder. Grates at my nerves, too. It's almost as bad as the light they make."

Even thinking about it, she was curling up on herself and shuddering.

"I do not understand. How can a sound make you ill?"

"It doesn't, not exactly."

"Ms... er... Aavraak, have you ever heard the sound of two pieces of Styrofoam rubbing against each other?"

"As I do not know what 'Styrofoam' is, I cannot say that I have."

"Just a moment, I happen to have a couple pieces." She went to her office to go get some, Cally and Dalia already tensing up in preparation for the sound of it. Aavraak was looking curiously at them.

When the nurse returned with the two pieces of Styrofoam, both girls covered their ears and winced. They couldn't hear the dreaded sound now, but they knew the moment it happened because Aavraak had an intense reaction to the sound, her ears pulling back against her head, her hands going to her ears as well despite this.

"Aaaa! Stop it!" Aavraak said, then growled and bared her teeth. They were quite sharp indeed.

"Sorry," Nurse Ishikawa said, putting the two accursed pieces of foam down.

After everyone had calmed down again, Nurse Ishikawa ran some more tests on Aavraak, and found a disruption in

her amygdala. It, too, was fading. She started doing more tests, to try to find a culprit. She was almost done with her preparations when it happened. It began with her obviously having quite an itchy nose, clearly trying to prevent herself from sneezing. She held it long enough to sneeze into the crook of her arm.

“FIRE! SHE'S ON FIRE!” Dalia shouted.

Nurse Ishikawa tore her lab coat off and tossed it on the floor, stamping on it. Another nurse ran in from the other room and extinguished it with a spell that smothered it.

“Okay, what just happened?” asked the other nurse, an older man.

Nurse Ishikawa answered. “I was getting ready to run more tests to try to find out what's been happening to these three students. Whatever has been causing the faery students to have malfunctioning powers has started affecting Ms. Ravenstone here as well. Specifically, her empathic sense, though her other senses are affected as well. Then as I was preparing to do a test on Aavraak, I sneezed into the crook of my arm and caught myself on fire.”

“Really? Well this is serious. A kitsune child with only two tails losing control of her powers is one thing, but a grown adult with three tails? If this is communicable, it could be a huge problem!”

“I haven't found any viral agents at work. Nor anything bacterial, either. I doubt it's a contagious disease,” she said.

“You don't know that! After all, the HIV virus is so small it was very difficult to see even with a microscope, unless one knew what to look for!”

Nurse Ishikawa ignored him, and began sniffing Kohana. She didn't seem to find anything, so she tried Aavraak next. Then Cally, then Dalia.

"I can't smell anything unusual on any of them."

"Nurse Ishikawa, I doubt you'll be able to smell a communicable disease."

"It's not a disease. It can't be, there's nothing wrong with them aside from these unexplained disruptions in parts of their brains."

"So what good is smelling them going to do?"

She sighed. "I thought... never mind; it was a hunch. But it didn't pan out. Anyway, like I said, there's nothing I can find to explain those disruptions."

"Too bad we can't check Elliolynn for a similar disruption," Dalia said.

"Could they have ingested something?" the older nurse asked.

"That wouldn't explain how it spread to me. Not unless it's in the school food. We should check Mrs. Metaxas, she's an empath as well."

"Agreed. But someone from outside should do it, and they should do it somewhere else. You and I might have been exposed here."

"Good thinking. I'll call for some help."



DALIA, KOHANA, AND Aavraak stayed behind in the infirmary after everyone else who was going to leave for the

holidays had done so. Vedyā had stayed behind because both her sister and her girlfriend were in the infirmary still, and she didn't want to leave either of them for long. (Especially since, according to Vedyā, Principal Park had said that once she left with Dalia for the holidays, she – Vedyā – wasn't allowed back to the school until next September, as punishment for punching his niece in the nose.) Nizoni had gone back to her job, but Morgana and Orpheus stayed at the school as well, waiting for Dalia and Kohana to get the word that they could go home.

An exhaustive search of their hair, clothes, and various fluids retrieved from them had been run, exhaustive tests done. Nobody could figure out what was going on, but they'd ruled out something communicable. The older nurse who had responded to the fire hadn't been affected, though he was human and not an empath, so that might not mean anything. Vedyā was tested too, just in case. She had, after all, been exposed to Kohana during her latest fox-fire incident. Even Cally was tested. But those yielded nothing, either; both girls were clean and free of problems.

Outside the school, Mrs. Metaxas had been tested rigorously, but whatever had been affecting Dalia had not spread to her, even though she had been the one to pull Kohana out of the small lake during the incident. The nurses wanted to test Anastasia Park and her friends, but Principal Park vetoed that. Besides which, they were already home. He told the nurses that if his niece reported any problems, that they would be the second to know after him.

The school was now going through the time-line of events to try to find some sort of pattern, the teachers ex-

tensively questioning all the nurses, Vedyā, Cally, Orpheus and Morgana, even Kohana herself. All they could figure might be significant was that Nurse Ishikawa had been the first on the scene to help Dalia after she screamed and passed out in the ballroom, only transferring to Kohana once she was brought in from the lake. What significance this had, though, nobody knew.

As another test, they had Mrs. Metaxas hang around Dalia for several hours, to a degree that both of them found uncomfortable. In a desperate hope that her earlier hunch might somehow be right, Nurse Ishikawa even had Mrs. Metaxas sniff Dalia's hair deeply. They kept her in the infirmary at another bed, testing her every hour for 13 hours, but nothing happened, so they let her go.

Finally, when they'd run out of ideas, the school let all of them go home late on the 19<sup>th</sup> of December. Kohana went home with her mother, who had been trying to get into the school since Saturday but had been barred in case she caught whatever it was from her daughter. This was also true for Aavraak's parents.

The Ravenstones and the Metaxas family went home, Dalia and Cally exchanging wrapped gifts beforehand. Brandon and Sally were already waiting in their house for them, Nizoni having let them in. They spent the next several hours going over everything that had happened in detail, then wondering together about the mystery of it, all of them trying to solve it.

That might have been the end of it, except for what happened the next day.



*WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

Orpheus Ravenstone was sitting in the living room drinking some tea and reading the latest issue of 'Phytomancy Monthly' when there was a sudden flurry of tiny bodies making noise in the walls, ceiling, and floor. Despite having never heard such a sound before, he immediately realized it was the hobs. He tossed the magazine aside, put his tea down, and went over to a painting of rotten fruit over the mantelpiece, rapping on the frame until it opened up.

Sure enough, a flurry of hobs were stampeding through the walls. He tried getting their attention several times, to no avail. Finally he grabbed one by the back of his tiny shirt with two fingers, set him down on the mantelpiece, and gently asked, "What is going on?"

"Very sorry for the commotion, Mr. Ravenstone sir, but there's a sickness spreading among the hobs, sir. The sick ones have been quarantined, difficult as that was, but the rest are panicking, sir."

"Including yourself?"

"Yes, sir. I am ashamed to admit it, but yes."

"That's understandable. What kind of sickness?"

"We do not know, sir! We are scared!"

"I mean, what are the... the symptoms?"

"Uncontrollable teleportation, magic going awry in strange ways. Some of the afflicted are breaking out in boils, growing horns in strange places, changing colors, or other

things of that sort. My own seventh daughter has even gone invisible! The healers only know where she is by the sight of her nightgown floating about!”

Orpheus sighed. “I uh, I think I might know... well, not *know* exactly, but it sounds like uh, something that was happening up at Fae Springs.”

“You have brought some disease from the school in Tirffiniol?” the hob asked, sounding panicky again.

“Our own healers couldn't figure out what it was. But uh, it seems to fade within a day or two. The 'afflicted' should be fine in a couple days.”

“Really?”

“Yes. The nurses said those of us uh, big people who got affected – my daughter Dalia, a goblin, and a kitsune – were back to normal, and let us go. They uh, still don't know what was doing it. We suspect someone is, I dunno, cursing them or something.”

The little hob sighed deeply. “That is great news. I will try to tell the other hobs.”

“Good. But before you do, can you answer another question for me?”

“What question is that, sir?”

“Um... the ones that first got... afflicted. What uh, what were they doing? Before they got ill, I mean?”

“We do many things, sir. Hobs that are old enough to work and able-bodied to do so, we do lots of different things. Even those who are not able-bodied usually find something to do with themselves, the ones that can, anyway. The rest are cared for by healers.”



"Yes, that's good, I'm glad. But uh, I mean, can you be specific? What specifically were those hobs doing before they fell ill?"

"I don't know. I will ask around when I tell my people that this is temporary."

"Good," Orpheus said. "You may go now."

The little man went running off to tell the others, who were all still running around aimlessly in a panic.

"Orpheus, what is that racket?" Morgana asked. "What has the hobs so bothered?"

Orpheus explained to her what the hob had said. When he was done, she nodded and rang the gong next to the portrait of the rotten fruit. All the hobs visible behind the open portrait stopped at once and turned to look at Morgana.

"Yes, M?" asked the hob closest to the opening. "Can we help you?"

"I need you all to calm down and stop running about. I also want all of you to listen to what I am about to tell you, and make sure everyone else in your colony knows about it within the hour. I also want to speak with the healers here by the end of the hour. Understood?"

The hobs all nodded.

"Good," she said, and then spent the next few minutes explaining to them what was going on. When she finished, they indicated they understood, and left to go spread the word.

"If our hobs are being affected by this affliction, I imagine the hobs at the school might have the same issue."

He nodded, and the two of them waited for an hour, both trying to read while they waited and not having much

luck. They were both very relieved when a dozen little people on the mantelpiece got their attention politely but loud enough to be heard.

"You wished to speak with us?" one of the healers asked. Again, it was the one in the front of the group.

"Yes. We wish to know something. The ones who were afflicted today with this condition, what were they doing before they fell ill?"

"One moment, please," the hob in front said, as she turned around the talk with the others in a language that sounded a lot like a bunch of high-pitched squeaking. They spoke among themselves for several minutes before the hob who had spoken before turned back to them.

"There is no pattern we can see, M. Some were cooking, others were dusting, some were cleaning messes, others were doing laundry."

"Are there any jobs that all of the first to be afflicted have in common, since we got home?"

"Several. All of them were cooking at some point—"

"Not Vileesto!" interrupted one of the other healers. "He was scheduled for kitchen duty, but Joro was out with a broken leg, so Vileesto took over her duties for the day."

"So were there any other common jobs among them?"

The lead hob said, "Yes, several more. Laundry, dusting—"

"Mith is allergic to dust," interrupted a male hob. "He was excused from dusting. But he did kitchen duty, laundry, cleaned toilets, put fresh linens on the beds, and also he helped the bogeymen clean the attic."

Things continued like this for several minutes; the lead hob would list some things, there would be corrections and occasional corrections of erroneous corrections. In the end, all the hobs afflicted had been working in the kitchens, the laundry room (including stripping the beds of their bedclothes and putting in new ones), and general cleaning around the house. From this, Morgana deduced that the most likely beginning point had been the laundry. Most of those afflicted, whether first or later, had been working in laundry. Morgana found it most interesting, too, that most of the afflicted hobs had been in the room when they'd received Dalia's dress from the night of the ball; the rest had interacted directly with the others shortly after they had finished cleaning it. Whatever had been on it had to be either bacterial, chemical, or alchemical in nature, as most viruses would not have lived the four days it had taken for the dress to finally make it to the laundry room.

Much to everyone's annoyance, though, the dress had already been washed and dried, and had even been returned already to Dalia's travel bag so she could take it back to school. So any chance of testing it had been lost, given how thoroughly hobs clean things. Morgana reassured the hobs that they could not have known they would need it kept aside, and commended them on their efficiency.

"Less than 24 hours after being exposed to Dalia's dress, all those hobs got sick. Not Vedy's dress, which Nizoni took home a few days before that. No, just Dalia's dress," Morgana said, thinking aloud. "Very curious."

"Yes. Especially considering they were uh, dancing rather closely a few times, in those slow dances," Orpheus said.

"My implacable lady," Nizoni said to Morgana, "you and Vedyia did not get to the dance until a few minutes before it started. Dalia must have been exposed before that."

"Yes. And Cally didn't seem to be carrying anything. She got a clean bill of health."

"She wasn't wearing her own dress when they were doing those tests, though," they heard Vedyia say.

The adults turned around to face her. She was standing in the doorway, and had evidently been listening in on the conversation.

"She wasn't?" Orpheus asked. "Then uh... what *was* she wearing?"

"According to Cally, she was holding a cup of punch when Dalia fell over. She got punch all over both of them. The nurses told Cally to go after they stabilized Dalia. Took a lot of insisting, but she left. She came back less than an hour later, wearing a different outfit. She refused to be kicked out again."

"We should see if we can get that dress back," Morgana said.

"No luck," Vedyia replied. "In her haste, she put the dress in with the rest of her laundry, and it was cleaned and folded by the time we all left the school."

"Have there been any reports of any sicknesses among the hobs?"

"I do not know, *mo nathair*," Nizoni said. "But I can go find out today. I have time."

"Yes, please do. And don't be too long, we have our annual Yule Eve tradition to uphold this year."

"I'll be here in time to get ready," Nizoni said. "It's not even noon yet."

The group dissolved at that point, the adults tending to other things while they waited. Vedyā slunk away to see if she could speak with Joaquin about the mystery.



### *THE PREVIOUS DAY.*

Dalia was worried; worried that her friend Kohana would be expelled. She'd been worried since she woke up on the Saturday after the dance, and she hadn't stopped since then. After pacing her room for several hours the night they came home, she had worked herself into a state of worry such that she began to cry, and there was nothing left to stop her or slow her down.

There was a soft knocking on the door and she heard Papa ask, "Little branch? May the gardener come in to see how his little sapling is doing?"

His words flooded her mind with memories of Papa from her childhood, making her crying slow but not stop. Whenever Nizoni or Morgana were working, which was most days except for weekends, holidays, and birthdays, Papa Orpheus was there for her. Not that he didn't have a job, he did: he grew rare plants and sold them to collectors from around the worlds. But he worked from home, so whenever she skinned her knees, Papa was always there to gently clean the wound, dress it, and kiss it all better. Or sing a healing tune if it was worse than a kiss could heal. When some bully

made her cry, Papa would hold her close to him and soothe her distress while Shimá went out to seek justice for her. And when she was happy, she sometimes would go into the garden or the greenhouses with him, and the two of them would talk while he worked, or he would sing to his plants and to her.

It was so tempting, then, to tell him 'yes' and experience his gentle affection and soothing presence again. But Dalia wasn't ready to be comforted just yet. At the moment, she *wanted* to cry. She *wanted* to get these feelings out of her system. They were like poison that had to be drawn from a wound before the wound could heal. Papa's comfort was for when the thing causing the wound was done, and the wound had only to heal. But *this* wound was not only still open, something was still actively digging into it. Kobalos, on his perch, sensed this and thought a moment, then said – in Orpheus's own voice, "Deep in earth my love is lying, And I must weep alone."

"Well okay, my little larkspur," Orpheus said gently, silently amused that Kobalos had quoted Edgar Allan Poe. "If you change your mind, you can send Doñela or Tamir to find me. I'll be in the greenhouses upstairs." (He was, of course, referring to the greenhouses outside of the other house in Tirffiniol.)

She heard his soft footsteps on the floor, walking down the hall to where she knew the shadow portal to the third floor was, the sound of his footsteps suddenly vanishing as he stepped through the portal.

With Papa gone now, she resumed her crying. How long she cried she did not know, but she cried herself to exhaustion and the exhaustion gave way to sleep.

A few minutes after she fell asleep, three glowing red eyes opened in the space underneath her bed. A monster there, unseen in the shadows but for its eyes, made a sound halfway between a growl and the weird sort of growl-like sound a crocodile makes, and then a long, insect-like, many-jointed hand slid slowly from under the bed. Alongside it was a red eyeball on the end of a long eye-stalk, so it could see what it was doing. Dalia was asleep, and thus did not see the eyeball or the hand creeping up in front of her – its arm impossibly long, with far too many joints – and wriggling its fingers in anticipation. The monster made another weird growl, and began to breathe heavily as though trying to catch its breath.

Slowly, the hand crept closer to her, to the sound of heavy breathing and growls, until at last it reached forward, and in one swift motion it grabbed her blanket and gently draped the blanket over her sleeping form. Another identical monster arm came out from under the other side of the bed and helped the first arm tuck her in. Then when she was snug in her bed and sleeping soundly, the monster returned its arms and eyeball back under the bed where it lived, and closed its glowing red eyes for some sleep of its own.



*WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

When Nizoni got back from Fae Springs, wherein she'd found that there hadn't been any problems among the hobs at school, they all got dressed up to go on their annual Yule Eve dinner. As they drove in Ayání to their destination, they all agreed that however clothing was related to the incidents, the person responsible must be aware of the connection and was intercepting the laundry before it could affect the school hobs and pixies.

"Where are we going this year, anyway?" Vedyá asked.

"You'll see," Orpheus said.

Every year, the Ravenstone family used divination to figure out which server at which restaurant was most in need in the city this year, and went there to eat and leave a generous tip as a Yule gift to that needy employee. So they rarely ate at the same place twice. Though Grandma Ravenstone wasn't there with them, she had popped back into town a couple weeks before to divine who was most needy, and then went back to Annwn to finish her trip.

After a shorter drive than they'd done the year before, Nizoni parked the van and everyone got out. Dalia, Chooli, Vedyá, and Ashkii were all curious where they'd be eating this year. When Dalia saw that it was a Mediterranean restaurant, she squealed in delight. Second to Thanksgiving Dinner for Dalia was Mediterranean food.

"Table for eight, one of them a toddler, in Doris's section please," said Morgana to the man who had come up to seat them.

He blinked and took in their unusual appearance. A woman in an outfit like a cross between Steve Irwin and Crocodile Dundee, with a thin black man dressed like a hip-



py in flowery clothing, and a black woman wearing a Victorian style dress. Morgana had, at least, opted to have normal human eyes this time.

Then there were the kids. One, a miniature replica of the black woman, right down to the outfit. Then a rainbow-haired Indian girl in a rainbow-colored t-shirt and blue jeans, and a brown child of indeterminate gender wearing a white button-up shirt and khaki pants. Then with the black toddler wearing a "Daddy's Little Monster" shirt, that left the six year old black boy looking the most normal of them all, wearing a shirt with a design of a man's face made up of leaves and vines.

"Er, okay. Right this way," he said, and led them to a section in the back. He set the menus on a table while he started to pull some tables together.

"Let us help you with that," Morgana said, and she and Nizoni grabbed a table and started moving it next to another one, Orpheus holding Sweetheart's hand as the toddler tried to get away to explore.

"It's no problem," the host said.

"Sure it is, these tables are heavy, and there's a line waiting. You go do that, you busy man, and we'll take care of the tables. We wouldn't have offered if we minded."

He looked up to the front, where there was indeed a line. "Okay then," he said. "But if my boss sees you, make sure to tell him you insisted."

"We shall," Morgana responded, and the host left to go seat more people.

When they had enough tables pulled together for their group to sit at, a hassled-looking blond woman of at least 40 came over to their table.

"Can I get your drink orders?" she asked.

"Are you Doris?"

"Er, yes."

"Excellent. Then two pitchers of iced tea, no sugar, and seven glasses with ice please. Also a pitcher of water, please, when you have the time."

"That's it? No soda? Coffee?"

"No thank you, that's all the drinks we need. And no need to hurry on our account, it will probably take us about 20 minutes to decide what we want to eat."

"Okay. And you're all together?"

"Yes, we are. It will all be on one ticket."

"Good, good," Doris said idly, writing it down. "I'll go get that for you."

"Thank you, dear."

Everyone sat down and they all began to talk over the options on the menu. Doris brought their drinks over in short order, and left again since they were still debating options. Then twenty minutes after sitting down, Doris came back, and they ordered.

"Three meat mezza sampler plates, two schwarma plates – one lamb and one chicken, a lamb gyro meal for Vedy, a plate of meat stuffed grape leaves, and a plate of falafel."

"The sampler plates come with falafel already."

"Yes, I know. We're very fond of falafel, so we're ordering extra."

"Falafel isn't awful at all," Vedyā joked. Doris rolled her eyes.

"I'm sure she hears jokes like that all day every day, Vedyā," Morgana said.

"I sure do," Doris responded. She then repeated their order back to them to make sure she had it right. She did, so she left to go put in the order.

While waiting for their food, they talked, of course. But since they didn't want to censor themselves too much, Morgana surreptitiously cast a spell on the tables with a wave of her finger, that would make anything they said to each other sound like gibberish to anyone else. It helped, too, that the restaurant was busy enough that nobody was likely to notice a bunch of gibberish coming from their table, when all the talking of the other people was pretty much slurred together into gibberish already.

Due to the noise, Dalia was wearing magical earplugs that would block out any noise coming from outside a certain area around her. This allowed her to converse with her family and hear Doris when she spoke to them, but they might be alone in the restaurant for all she could hear. What was more, she'd started to triple-shield with her empathic shields because she hadn't yet figured out how to increase the opacity of her shield, so layering them was all she could do to filter more things out.

"So is Abuela still in Annwn with Grandpa?" Dalia asked.

"Yes. We've gotten some letters from them, and she came back for one night two weeks ago to figure out who needed

our help this year, but then she left again. They won't be back until April at the earliest."

"It's a shame she's not here, she could figure out who's sabotaging the faery students. Any chance we can get her to come back, or at least tell us whodunit?"

"I don't think so, honey," Morgana said. "Her letters come back riding on the back of magical constructs that look like spiders, but we don't know where in Annwn she is exactly, we can't get messages to her. And even if we could, divination doesn't work well outside of the universe one is asking about."

"Speaking of that, little branch, you don't look well," Nizoni said.

"I'm worried sick that Kohana's going to get expelled. And lots of people could have died last time. Vedyia would've died if she hadn't been wearing that ring that makes her fire-proof!"

"My paranoia is a survival trait," Vedyia said with a grin.

When the food came about half an hour after that, everyone dug in, and the talking largely stopped for several minutes while they enjoyed the excellent food. In fact, the food was so good that it was almost 20 minutes before someone finally said anything, and even after that, conversation was largely absent until all the food was either gone or in take-home boxes. Then they spent some time talking while they digested their meals enough to be able to walk to the van without exploding.

Dalia's eyes went wide at the bill: \$114! Nizoni handed Doris her card. When the slips came back with her card, she wrote a \$30 tip. Dalia, who was familiar with Yule Eve tra-

ditions, knew that this \$30 tip was mostly so Doris's boss wouldn't get suspicious, the real tip would be in cash, handed to her in person.

When they were ready to go, Morgana cast a quick enchantment on the boss and other employees to keep the attention away from them. She walked up to Doris when this was done.

"Thank you ever so much for the lovely evening, Doris. Here's a little something extra for your trouble." She slipped a wad of bills into Doris's hand. Doris glanced at it and saw a \$20 on top, then slipped the cash into her pocket as she said, "Thank you."

The Ravenstones left, and Doris smiled. They had been the best customers she'd had all month. They'd been polite – even friendly, easy to please, and hadn't given her any trouble. They hadn't been too loud, or annoying, or anything bad like that. She wished all her customers could be that way.

Doris had no problem slipping her extra tip into her pocket; between the fact that servers' wages were several dollars per hour less than what most people thought the minimum wage was, the fact that she wasn't making that even when she counted all her tips, and also the fact that her tips were taxed as income, it all boiled down to her trying to eke out a meager living while her employer and the government were basically stealing most of her income. Also known as "capitalism at work."

So it wasn't until she got home and took the wad of cash out of her pocket to count it that she found out how much she'd gotten from the Ravenstones. When she laid it all out on the table, she nearly fainted. Their bill being \$114, the

\$30 tip they'd left on the card – of which Doris didn't get much – had been about 26 or 27 percent gratuity. It was generous, but not too much so for a large group.

Here though, the cash Morgana had handed directly to her so she could hide it from the thieves she worked for, was an *insanely* high tip, and a little piece of paper that had “Happy Holidays” written on it. She counted it twice, thrice, then a fourth time just to be sure. But there was no miscount. Morgana Ravenstone had given Doris a cash tip of \$1000. Still in shock, Doris checked all the money with a counterfeit detector pen, and found they were all real.

She began to weep with relief at this. Her car had been in the shop, and she hadn't been able to afford to repair it. Her employer had told her to get it fixed soon or she'd be fired, despite the fact she had been using the bus and hadn't been late even once. She already lived hand to mouth as it was; if she lost her job, she wouldn't be able to find a new one in this economy in time to pay rent, and she'd end up homeless. But now, thanks to a family she'd never met before today, she could fix her car and keep her job, with a little left over for something special. It was a Christmas miracle.



#### THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21<sup>st</sup>

On Yule (December 21<sup>st</sup>), the Ravenstones gathered around the Halloween/Yule tree and exchanged gifts, opening presents from other friends and relatives as well. Everyone was dressed in red or green or both; even Kobalos was

wearing a little red and green Yule hat. The normally empty fireplace had a fire in it that was merely a glamour, but provided interesting light to the room.

Among the gifts Dalia got this year was a rose quartz monocle from Grandma Belladonna that was enchanted to filter an empath's shield from their view when using their magic vision, a book from Vedyā that she barely looked at before she blushed and shoved it away to hide it, a new chewy necklace from Brandon in the shape of a bat, a book of Goblin poems and their translations from Aavraak, a mug from Chooli that had the logo and name of Salem, Massachusetts on it, a hand-made ceramic bowl from Kohana with the Japanese kanji symbol for 'protection' painted on it, some useful books, a bunch of novels, a poster of her favorite band from Sally, lavender soaps, shampoos, and perfume oil from her parents, and a new set of uniforms from her parents, which were all silk (including the socks and underwear). Of all the gifts she'd gotten, this was the most appreciated, since the silk uniforms would help take some of the load off her empathic shields.

Dalia grinned at some of Vedyā's gifts. Kohana had gotten Vedyā a hand-made ceramic mug with the words "vampire in training" on it, as well as some photos of herself. Chooli got her some little skull-shaped beads intended to be braided into her hair, and a hover-board made from a skateboard from Grandma Belladonna. Dalia had gotten her a book about the language the Fae Springs gnomes spoke, and it was far from the only book Vedyā got for Yule; everyone in their family were avid readers.

Even Kobalos had gotten some gifts: more little hats, some shiny objects for him to play with, and a huge bag of unsalted, whole peanuts. Within minutes of getting his gifts, Kobalos was dropping the peanuts onto the floor from two stories up and picking the nuts out of the shells, making a game of seeing if he could fly to the ground before the peanut could hit the ground, then disposing of the shells once he'd eaten the nuts, sometimes arranging the shells into patterns on the floor or a table before carrying them off into the compost bin. He did not, of course, manage to overtake the falling peanuts, but he had great fun trying.

There came a crowing sound from outside, and Kobalos flew over to the window to look out it. Dalia looked, too. There were loads of other ravens outside on the telephone wires. Kobalos flapped his wings, wanting out. So she got up and opened the window for him. He paused, grabbed his partly-empty bag of peanuts in his beak – struggling to lift it until Papa took pity on him and lightened the load with his wand and a few bars of “Wind Beneath My Wings” – and flew it outside to share with the other ravens. Dalia smiled, reflecting on how she'd found Kobalos to start with.

She'd just turned nine, still mourning the death of Clicky, and had been outside walking morosely around the neighborhood. Preston had been at some kind of summer camp for rich people – probably the junior branch of the Skull and Bones secret society or the witch equivalent – when she'd heard a piteous, echoing sound. She'd heard lots of other ravens crowing as well, all of them clustered around one of the storm drains. It was obvious to someone who knew raven behavior as much as she had (for she had fre-



quently given ravens food and gotten shiny objects and solidarity from them for it) that they were extremely worried.

“What’s wrong?” she’d asked them.

The ravens had started hopping around frantically, making sounds like splashing water and something hitting metal. Then one of them said, in a clear human voice that had shocked her at the time, “What is it, Lassie? Timmy’s trapped down a well?”

Once she’d gotten over her shock, she’d realized she recognized the voice. Someone on television – and *not* from the Lassie show – had said it just yesterday, blaring loud enough through the closed windows of Mr. Webster’s house that it could be heard a block away. She was impressed that this raven understood the meaning well enough to use it. She knew it had done this because there was a brief silence, then an echoing crowing sound from inside the storm drain.

“One of your flock is trapped down there?” she asked, pointing.

“Somebody save my baby!” the raven said, in a different voice. This one she recognized from the first Spider-Man movie, another movie Mr. Webster had seen within recent memory. The raven repeated itself several times.

“Hold on, I’ll get help,” Dalia told them, and ran off to get her papa.

The ravens had still been there, still worried, when she had arrived with Papa. Papa had brought with him a camera on a rope with a small light hot-glued onto the top of the camera. Papa lowered it down the storm drain to try to see where the trapped raven was. A laptop gave him a live feed of the camera, and soon he found the bird, barely young

enough to fly. He got out a pendant ocarina hanging from his neck and played a tune that magically moved aside some things that had trapped the bird, then a different tune levitated the bird slowly and carefully out of the storm drain.

All of the ravens had cawed in celebration. The talking raven had gone over to its baby and started to try to clean it.

"He's covered in gross slime," Papa had said to the talking raven. "Let me take him inside, I can wash him up carefully with some very gentle soap."

It had taken some careful talking, and promising to let the talking raven into the house with them while they cleaned up the young bird. Using an old toothbrush and some unscented organic dish soap, Orpheus had cleaned up the young raven and then carefully dried him off. Within an hour, the two ravens were reunited with their flock.

The next few months after that had seen the two ravens hanging around the house a lot, spending a lot of time following Dalia, bringing her shiny objects every day. She still had the collection of all the things the ravens had given her over the years.

Over the months, the young raven got older and bigger and stronger. He began to talk, just like his parent. (Of course all ravens could learn to do that, but most didn't bother for whatever reason.) The young raven liked to play with his human friends, sometimes playing light-hearted pranks on them, like tricking them into thinking one of the other family members was talking to them, or hiding something they were looking for, then "miraculously" finding what the Ravenstones had been looking for.

At some point along the way, the young raven had spent so much time with Dalia that they began being able to sense each other's thoughts. A few weeks later, the Familiar bond had strengthened and settled in place. She'd given him the name Kobalos for his impish nature, and they were still bonded to this day.

She smiled, glad Kobalos was visiting his family for the holidays, sharing nuts and playing with the other members of his flock. Including the other talking raven she now knew was his mother. She knew family was still important to him, and was glad; she'd have been annoyed with him if it wasn't. Sometimes she'd catch Kobalos looking at the little altar of shiny objects he'd gotten from his mother and other flock mates that she always took with her to and from Fae Springs, feeling homesick. She understood that all too well, and decided to arrange for him to visit his family every couple weeks or so, from now on. Which would give her an opportunity to visit her own family, too.

“Happy Yule, Kobalos.”



*FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017 – Monday, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018*

Orpheus was concerned about his eldest daughter, Dalia. As the holidays progressed, she holed herself up in her room more and more often. When she did come out, she had so many bags under her eyes she might have been packing to move to Jupiter. He heard her crying in her room at times,

and he continued to ask her if she wanted comfort from him, but she continued to refuse. He understood, of course, but he wished there was something he could do. Nizoni was already doing everything she could to convince Principal Park to let Kohana Sato stay at school. He had gone in a couple times as well, with Borghild's help, to do the same. But Principal Park had a point that it was a safety issue. Sabotage or not, people had almost died. His daughter Vedyā might have died if she wasn't so paranoid about safety. Would he be so forgiving of Kohana if Vedyā had died that night? If she'd decided to leave the rings home that night? He was ashamed to admit he didn't know.

Because he paid attention and because the wards were tuned to tell one of the adults these things, Orpheus also knew Dalia was leaving the house some nights to visit the Tirffiniol-side garden – which was a huge and largely ornamental garden – to visit her favorite weeping willow tree that grew out there. It was well within the wards, getting out of the wards would have been a huge challenge to someone Dalia's age, and more importantly someone breaking into the wards was so difficult as to be a non issue, so it didn't worry him. If she needed a quiet place to think, under the light of Tirffiniol's moons, then who was he to deny her?

She seemed to sleep better on the nights she went out into the ornamental garden, too, which helped ease his mind a bit. The night before Vedyā's birthday party was one of these nights, so Dalia was more alert and happier that day, though Orpheus could tell most of her happiness was a mix of denial and faking it. But he'd take what he could get.



*WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018*

Sally woke up Wednesday morning – the first day of classes for the new term – a little groggier than usual, having started to get used to sleeping in a bit on the holidays. She got up to wake up Dalia and the others. Her face fell when she saw Kohana's empty bed; there still was no word on if she'd be coming back. Ignoring that bed, she went over to Dalia's bed, but what she saw froze her in her tracks.

Dalia was standing in front of her dresser drawer in the closet, not moving, like she was a very exhausted-looking statue. Her arms were limp at her sides, but clutched in one hand was a nightgown, in the other hand was a different nightgown; she was still dressed in the dress she'd worn the day before, when they'd returned to school: a dress the purple color of a bruise, with a print of thorny vines that appeared to wrap her up in their grip. She was staring blankly ahead at the wall of the closet. What was more concerning was the fact that there was no sign of either Doñela or Tamir.

"Dalia? Dalia? What's the matter?" Sally waved her hand in front of Dalia's eyes. The only reaction was a slow blink.

After a few more minutes of trying to get Dalia to respond with words, Sally gave up and tried gently poking her. Kobalos flew over and landed on Dalia's shoulder, nipping gently at her ear.

“WAKE UP!” Kobalos squawked so loudly that Aavraak jumped out of bed in fright.

Dalia's reaction, this time, was to blink again and turn her head slightly in his direction. She still looked really out of it. The expression on her face slowly turned to bafflement, like she couldn't figure out what had made that noise in her ear.

“Are we running late?” Aavraak asked.

“No, we've got plenty of time. But something's wrong with Dalia.”

Aavraak got up, concerned, to try to help snap Dalia out of it, but they didn't have any more luck.

“It looks almost like... like she's frozen. Like the way a computer can freeze, sometimes. Even Gegauassi has that issue sometimes.”

“Should we call for help?” Aavraak asked.

“Yeah, I think so. I don't know what's wrong or what to do about it.”

“You stay here, I shall go find an adult,” Aavraak said.

Sally nodded, and Aavraak left. She kept trying to get Dalia to respond, but the most she got out of her was a confused look, cocking her head to the side like a bird, but in slow-motion.

A few minutes later, Aavraak came back with Ms. Hollander, and informed Sally that Ms. Hollander had sent a message to the infirmary with a hob. The kindly older woman looked at Dalia and tried to get her attention as they waited for a nurse to arrive. By the time nurse Ishikawa arrived, the most they'd gotten out of Dalia was that now she

was rubbing her head like she was getting another headache, the nightgowns still in her hands.

The nurse ran her wand over Dalia, checking a bunch of different body stats. Dalia kept rubbing her head, her eyes now closed. A minute into the wand-scan, Dalia began to make a sound like an angry cat, which sounded a bit like “Rrrrruuurrrr!” This startled everyone but Kobalos and Sally, who knew she had a habit of making animal sounds sometimes, when people sounds were too difficult or not as fun.

The sound coming from Dalia's mouth got louder and more alarming, and the nurse said, “Everyone out of the room but me!”

Quickly, Ms. Hollander and Sally left the room, Kobalos on Sally's shoulder. The angry-cat noise died down as they did. The two of them waited outside for several minutes until the nurse started levitating Dalia out of the room and down the hall. She still looked like she was suffering a headache, which looked to get worse momentarily as she passed them. After waiting for them to get a good head start, and for Sally to get dressed, she and Ms. Hollander went to the infirmary as well.

They hadn't gone into the infirmary with Dalia and the nurse, but waited outside, talking to each other, wondering aloud what was wrong. After twenty more minutes, the nurse came back out.

“So my best guess, after scanning her and then calling her parents, is that Ms. Ravenstone hasn't been sleeping for the last two nights at least. Her parents told me when she hasn't slept enough, sometimes her mind slows down so much she gets stuck mid-task. I have no idea how long she was stuck

like that, but they said she usually gets un-stuck after about half an hour. Judging by the nightgowns in her hands, though, she was getting ready to go to bed when she got stuck, which suggests she may have been stuck like that for several hours.”

“Either that or not thinking clearly enough to realize how late it was, the poor dear,” Ms. Hollander said.

“That’s a possibility, too. Anyway, I put her out with a sleep spell, and she seems to be sleeping just fine.”

Sally smirked despite herself. “Have you tried turning it off and on again?” she quoted.

The nurse chuckled softly. “Yes, something like that.”

They thanked Nurse Ishikawa, who informed them she’d tell Dalia’s teachers and the Principal that Dalia was going to be absent today, and Sally had the task of collecting assignments and homework for Dalia while she was absent. She bade Ms. Hollander goodbye, and went to go eat breakfast.

Sally had just finished telling their other friends – minus Kohana – what had happened to Dalia when Principal Park’s voice came over the loudspeakers.

“Students of Fae Springs, this is your principal, Principal Johnathan Park. As you may all be aware by now, during the dance known as the ‘Snow Ball,’ there was another incident with a faerie student’s powers going haywire. As many students could have died in this latest incident had we not been lucky, I have spent the holidays debating whether to allow this student back or not. I was not inclined to allow it, for safety reasons, but Mrs. Melora Metaxas has come up with a solution to this safety issue that allows the student to remain.” Sally thought he sounded annoyed by this.



“Mrs. Metaxas,” he continued, “spent most of the holidays procuring a device that suppresses the foxfire of kitsune. This student will still be able to do magic, but she will no longer be a danger to the other students. The device will be on her... arm... at all times. I have seen the designs of this device, and I have heard of the maker of the device – a famous Nua Sidhe artifact maker named Ravaat Keh’sy Né. Her fame is long lived and well earned, her work has a long history of being exemplary. I am assured that this device can only be removed by Né, and that the device will not permit any foxfire from this student.

“I would also like to remind you all that bullying is not permitted at Fae Springs. Even if you are scared or angry about the incident at the ball. Ms. Sato will be returning today in time for first period, and I implore you to leave her be if you are incapable of being civil to her. *Anyone* caught bullying any student will be punished in accordance to the severity of the act. That is all. Have a good day.”

Sally and the rest of Dalia’s friends cheered at this news.

Of course, it wasn’t so simple as that. Kohana did indeed show up for first period – English – and was wearing a thick silvery bracelet around her arm near her elbow that was the power suppressor, but the only people who would sit by her in classes were her friends. Everyone else got as far away from her as they could get away with, giving her terrified glances every so often, or else being very careful to not make eye contact with her.

Worse, they would move to the other sides of corridors to avoid her, or even stop if they saw her in the hall and take a different route. She and her friends kept catching people

whispering about her behind her back, stopping suddenly when they got caught. Anastasia and Preston both looked at her like they were furious she dared continue to exist, polluting their precious air with her filth. Even Steven Lambert – the boy who had helped Sally and Dalia in PE once – avoided her. And there were a lot of people who grabbed only portable foods from the cafeteria if she was in there, hurrying away quickly as though afraid the room was a death trap if she was in it. It was extremely disheartening, especially when coupled with Dalia being in the infirmary.



DALIA, VERY CONFUSED, woke up in the infirmary again. She was starting to lose track of how often that was happening. She sat up, and realized in annoyance that she hadn't been wearing her bonnet. The worst part of waking up in the infirmary was not having her bonnet on, which protected her hair while she slept. It was so much more difficult to maintain it if she had to sleep without a bonnet.

"Ah, you're up. Did you have a good sleep?" Nurse Ishikawa asked.

"Er, yeah. But why am I here? Last thing I remember is being on the Internet, trying to find something that might tell me what's going on with my friends' powers going haywire."

"Well it seems that at some point in the night, you got up to go to bed, but because you hadn't been sleeping these last two nights, you got stuck mid-task. Your friends Ms.

Smith-Jones and Ms., er, Aavraak were quite concerned about you. So was Ms. Hollander. But your parents explained you do this sometimes when you're especially anxious."

"What? Oh. Right," she said, that anxiety returning.

Nurse Ishikawa came over to scan Dalia with her wand again. When she was done, she said, "You missed breakfast and lunch. Dinner isn't for another hour, but I insist you stay long enough to me to bring you some food from the kitchen before you go trying to find Ms. Sato and your other friends."

"Thanks, Nurse Ishi—wait, did you say 'Ms. Sato'?"

The nurse smiled. "I did indeed. She's been permitted to stay. She has to wear a device that suppresses her foxfire, but she gets to stay."

Dalia burst into tears of joy, and Nurse Ishikawa sent a message to the kitchens with one of the pixies.



DESPITE HAVING EATEN already, Dalia rushed into the cafeteria and grabbed Kohana in a fierce hug so tight that Kohana had to gasp about how she couldn't breathe. Her form also wobbled a bit, in a way that concerned Dalia enough to gasp as she let Kohana go.

"Oh that," Kohana said. "Don't worry about it too much. We never managed to find my leaf after the incident, it could be anywhere. I can hold my human form pretty well, but getting into it in the morning is a lot more difficult without the

leaf. Took me half an hour this morning, and that was with having all holiday to practice.”

“What about getting out of it again?” Sally asked.

“A lot easier. About 30 seconds of concentration, and poof! Back to fox form.”

“I’m glad you’re back, Kohana. I was so worried about you I wasn’t sleeping.”

Kohana nodded. Sally had told them all about it during the study hall after English.

“But you feel better now?”

“Yes. Rested and relaxed. Especially now that Kohana’s back.”

“Right,” Kohana said, looking sadly at the students that were afraid of her now.

“Give them time, Kohana,” Sally said. “The longer you go without any other incidents, the more they’ll come to realize you’re safe again.”

“Yeah, but what if I have to wear this thing until I graduate?” she asked, gesturing at the power-suppression bracelet.

“I doubt that. They’ll find out what’s going on by the end of the year. Whoever’s doing this is bound to slip up eventually.”

“Have you checked your room for hex bottles?” Brandon asked. “I remember from Defense that those can be used to hurt people. Maybe someone’s leaving them in your room?”

“No, we haven’t found anything unusual in our room,” Sally answered him. “And good thing, too. Because if we had, that would imply it was either one of us, or a member of staff.”

"You hear anything back from that Elliollynn guy yet, Brandon?" Cally asked.

"Nothing new. Sorry."

Sally said, "Dalia, you told me Mrs. Metaxas was investigating? Has she found anything?"

"Not the last time I talked to her, but that was before the holidays. And she asked the Divination teacher, but apparently the woman's visions are either unreliable or cryptic. The one she gave Mrs. Metaxas, sounded like a prophecy, but it was super cryptic."

"What was it?"

"Something about a man turned into a donkey, then 'The Horned One comes to break the circle, as the circle was broken before.'"

"The Horned One?" Cally asked. "Like the Horned God of Wicca and neopaganism?"

"I doubt it," Dalia said. "Whoever the Horned One is, she was terrified of them."

"Could this 'Horned One' be the person behind these incidents?" Sally asked.

"If they are, then it's not terribly helpful. I mean, I haven't seen anyone with horns, have you?" Brandon asked.

"No, but that doesn't mean they aren't still the person responsible. They could have hired someone else to do the dirty work for them."

"What circle do you think she meant?" Kohana asked. "The only circle I can think of that might be relevant is Vedy's network. The Chalikar. I think 'Chalikar' is like, Sanskrit for 'circle.' I looked it up over the holidays, but I'm not actually sure if that's right. Wikipedia wasn't terribly clear."

"I can't imagine what Vedy's circle could have to do with all this," Dalia said. "I've barely had anything to do with them all year, aside from being friends with Arlene."

"Maybe you could ask Ms. Dyer for clarification?" Brandon suggested.

"Maybe. Wouldn't hurt to try."

After dinner, Dalia went up to the teachers' desk and up to Amraphel Dyer.

"Ms. Dyer?"

The Divination teacher turned to look at Dalia with wide, terrified eyes. Almost immediately, she bolted toward the door as fast as she could, saying "The Horned One comes! The Horned One comes!"

*'Wow. Good thing there wasn't anyone else in the room to hear that,' Doñela said.*

*'Why?'*

*'Because there's some people who would take that to mean your appearance was the sign of the devil coming.'*

*'Those people are stupid.'*

*'True, but that doesn't change the fact they could make things hard for you.'*

That had been highly weird. So weird that Dalia pretended to her friends that she'd missed her chance to speak with Ms. Dyer, rather than get caught up in a huge debate about the meaning of that bizarre encounter.





## Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Swarm

*Saturday, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018*

LIFE FOR KOHANA DID not much improve much over the next month. The other students remained just as fearful as before, still avoiding her as much as they could. What was worse was that Anastasia and Preston were getting bold again. And this time, their insults were far worse. Doing their utmost to not get caught, they would whisper things at Kohana about how she should be spayed or muzzled. Or else they'd suggest Vedya was extremely disgusting for being interested in Kohana. When they could, they even called her an 'it' and a 'thing.' But nobody had heard any of these insults but Kohana.

“They must have befriended a Honey Badger,” Brandon said one day after Kohana had tearfully confessed about the latest bullying episode. He continued, saying, “Because neither one of them is smart enough to have come up with that plan, whether alone or together.”

Kohana just kept crying, but she was laughing a little now too. Dalia held her close, comforting her while the others all did homework together. They were in the basement,

down in room B12, which was a study space just big enough for the seven of them. It was one of two study rooms in the basement they'd been using over the past month, the other one having space for nine, but the triplets were busy doing something else. Probably mischief, since the others weren't really in the mood.

"Still no word from Elliolynn?" Sally asked.

"They're still investigating. Still no idea, last I knew."

"Even with what you sent them?"

"Yes, even with that. And I sent them everything we know."

Dalia sighed, her head in her hands. "When is this mystery going to be solved so we can have a normal school experience for the rest of the year?"

"No idea," Brandon answered.

"I'm sorry, you guys," Kohana said, "but I need to go back to my room."

"If you want, I found a new route there," Dalia said. "I discovered there's a hidden door across from the stairs, it goes right into the girl's dorm, through an underground passage. Comes out at that one wall by the stairs in the dorm building."

"Oh yeah, the rainy-day passage. Ms. Hollander told me about that months ago," Sally said. "It's for use when it's raining, if you don't want to get wet. There's one for the boys' dorms, too; same wall. Girls' is on the left, boys' on the right."

"How do you get into the boys' one?"

"Why? You have to take a special shadow portal just to get down here," Sally pointed out.



"I get wet in the rain too, you know. A slightly longer route is a small price to pay for staying dry."

"Oh. Okay. You knock three times on the slightly redder brick."

"What about the girls' dorm passage?" Kohana asked.

"Kick the white brick near the left corner."

"Okay, thanks."

Kohana got up and left the study room. A moment later, Dalia grabbed her things and followed.

"Where're you going, Dalia?" Sally asked.

"I have a feeling I'll be needed. Not sure why."

She caught up to Kohana a minute later. Explaining the vibe she'd gotten first, she walked alongside Kohana through the halls of the basement. When they got to the wall across from the stairs, Dalia kicked the brick gently with her prosthetic foot, and a door slid backwards and sideways into what looked like empty space. But of course, the 'secret' passage was a hollow hill as well. After a trip through the underground passageway (lit with gas lamps that glowed an eerie blue), the two girls climbed a flight of stairs and came out a similar hidden doorway in the girls' dorm building.

They were in the corridor their room was on when their two least favorite people showed up. Anastasia Park, and her brother Preston.

"What are you doing here, Preston?" Kohana asked.  
"This is the girl's dorm."

"Visiting my sister. Not that it's any of your business, little doggy."

Dalia felt Doñela taking over her body to speak. "Will you knock it off with calling her a dog? I dunno about kit-

sune, but mundane foxes are scared of dogs. They're canines, but that's not the same as being a dog."

After looking around for witnesses, Preston stepped forward and said, "Poh-tay-toh, poh-tah-toh. An animal is an animal."

"The only bitches I see around here are the two of you!" Doñela shot back.

"Dalia, let's just go somewhere else until they leave."

"No. I'm tired of this hairy dingle-berry and his trout-faced sister pestering us."

A pixie flew over then and asked them if there was something the matter.

"We're fine, you little twerp!" Preston said. "Honestly, I don't know why we tolerate all these stupid pixies and gnomes and other little freaks in this school like you, little dog," Preston said, swatting the pixie out of the air.

Dalia winced. Partly for the pixies sake, but also with the knowledge that if he had seen pixies do the things she'd seen them do, he'd know he was playing with fire. Kohana was looking the same way.

The pixie bounced off the floor and Preston laughed at it. So did Anastasia. The pixie flew off into a hole in the wall.

"Yeah that's right, you little Faery freak, fly away back to your little hidey hole!"

As Preston laughed, Dalia felt a rising sense of doom and anger ooze from the walls, so strong it pierced her shields. She recoiled, pulling Kohana with her. Preston and Anastasia were still laughing when the wall suddenly began to gush hundreds of glowing pixies. Normally they glowed yellow or gold or orange, pink or even green, but these were glowing

an angry red color. Luckily for Preston, none of them were armed with their usual razor swords, but even so, she knew they didn't need swords to fight a human.

The two Park children's faces fell as they saw the swarm of several hundred angry pixies in the air before them, but not in fear; in annoyance. Dalia pulled back a bit more, but the pixies didn't attack. They hung back, instead, as the pixie Preston had swatted moved forward and balled its little fists at him, gritting its teeth in rage.

Preston, realizing the other pixies were only watching, laughed at the belligerent pixie.

"Oh, the teeny tiny person wants to take on someone twenty times his size, does he? Ha! Don't make me laugh! Bring it on, little twerp!"

"The challenge is accepted!" chorused hundreds of pixies in unison. "Begin in three, two, one, GO!"

The pixie zipped forward at the still-laughing Preston and punched him squarely in the stomach. With an "oof," he fell over clutching his stomach and making agonized moans and groans. There he lay on the floor, bent over and clutching his middle, tears of agony in his eyes.

"The evil is defeated!" the pixies cried in unison. They then excitedly shouted "Praise the victor" and his name, which was something in Ipsix.

Anastasia had stared, bewildered, at the six inch tall pixie knocking her brother to the floor with one punch, but once she collected her wits, she ran to him to try to help. The pixies swarmed back into the wall from whence they'd come.

"Hmmm," said the voice of a woman behind Dalia. She turned around to see it was Ms. Damiana Dyer, the Fairy Realms and Residents teacher.

"Yes, Ms. Dyer?" Dalia asked.

"Mr. Park is very lucky that pixie was holding back," she said.

"That was it *holding back!*?" Anastasia exclaimed.

"Yes. More accurately, it used a spell to distribute the force of its punch over a greater area. Without that, he could've easily punched a hole through Mr. Park's skin, muscle, even organs. A pixie doesn't need a weapon to kill a human being, because they're just as strong as us, but squeezed into a smaller area."

As Anastasia blanched, another woman stepped forward now; it was Ms. Hollander. She was wading through the swarm of pixies. When she got through, she used her wand to levitate Preston.

"Infirmary for you, young man. And I reckon Mrs. Metaxas will want to have some words with you when you're done."

"Where did you two come from, Ms. Dyer?" Dalia asked, rubbing her head; she was annoyed at all these people in the corridor giving her a headache. Anastasia went off after Preston, which helped.

"I can't speak for Ms. Hollander, dear, but I for one was coming back from meeting my niece, Cristiel Dyer. She's my sister's daughter, and she's in fifth year."

"Oh. Okay. By the way, do you know what's up with your sister lately?" Dalia asked her.

Damiana Dyer looked at Dalia sadly. "Something she keeps Seeing is disturbing her. It was mild enough at the beginning of the year, but then Mrs. Metaxas asked her if she could See what was causing these power malfunctions in the Faery students, and ever since then she's been extremely distressed. She can barely function well enough to teach, even. Keeps downing calming potions, but it doesn't seem to help much. She even started wearing all four of her hematite bracelets, which usually helps her come back down to earth, but she just keeps Seeing this 'horned one.'"

"I tried asking her about that last month, and she took one look at me and ran away like I terrified her."

"She probably sensed what you were going to ask her, and it was already taking her somewhere she didn't want to go. That's my guess, anyway."

Dalia nodded, and Ms. Dyer tipped an imaginary hat at her and left. A grateful Dalia went with Kohana into their room, where she got some water and downed some pain reliever.



*SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

Dalia, Sally, Cally, and Kohana dedicated Sunday to being outside in the cold and wet. Vedy had taught Dalia, Kohana, and Sally a rune she'd looked up in the library, it made anything you used it on repel water. They'd cast it on all of their clothes and shoes, then gone out into the rain. Fresh air was fresh air, after all, and Dalia at least loved rain.

Brandon bowed out, not wanting to try to enchant his entire wheelchair just yet, and Aavraak had gotten grumpy today for some reason.

Stopping where she was, Dalia put her face skyward and opened her mouth. The rain that fell into her mouth tasted better than any rain she'd ever tasted back on Earth. So good that she wouldn't be surprised if this rain was basically completely pure.

Since they were the only people outside today, the four of them decided to play a game on the grounds, a form of tag where they cast spells at each other with their wands. This mostly consisted of lights, heat, shields, and confusion spells (which they'd mastered). They also practiced their levitation, and tried to Banish things at each other with the levitation spell, since Banishment was related to levitation. But they weren't very good at this, and were mostly just succeeding in moving small objects shakily through the air.

Also remembering their Magical Defense class, sometimes they cast with their hands – including their non-dominant hands – instead of their wands, keeping in practice with wandless magic. This was eventually insisted upon by the other girls, because Dalia's Devil Tree wand seemed to be far more powerful than their own wands, though Dalia insisted it was just because she had a closer relationship with the tree her wand came from, and the others could do the same thing if they just listened and spoke to their wands. Cally tried this, and was the first to make a mental connection with the tree her wand came from (a magical Elder tree that lived in the Gray Grove).

The girls spent the entire afternoon playing like this, before coming inside to get some dinner. The warm food felt especially good in their bellies after having been playing in the wet, chilly weather all day long, and they washed it down with some hot cocoa.

Deciding to take the underground route back to their rooms because they'd had enough rain, the girls talked on their way to the dorm building. They were all still happy and laughing, but as soon as Dalia opened the hidden door leading into the building, she froze.

"Everyone stop!" she said loudly and firmly, and they were so surprised at her tone that they did.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm not sure. *Shields down*," she said, which was the phrase she used to shut her empathic shields off.

As soon as her shields were down, she clutched her stomach and grimaced like she was ill.

"We need to get out of here, NOW," she said, heading back into the underground passageway. A bit terrified by her tone, they complied. As Sally shut the door behind her, she heard an ominous buzzing, like an oncoming horde of locusts, or maybe a swarm of killer bees, but much bigger than either one of those. *Much* bigger.

"Let's go find a teacher or member of staff!" Dalia shouted.

"What's the matter? Why are we running?"

"I'm not sure. I just sensed a massive wave of anger coming from the entire building. No, 'fury' is a better word."

"Who was it?"

"It's not one person, it's... oh my goodness! It was the pixies!"

"The pixies? But why would they be furious?"

"I don't know."

Coming out the underground passage again and running up the stairs, they ran right into Mrs. Metaxas at the top of the stairs.

"Hello, girls, how—what's wrong?" Her tone, which had started light-hearted, was now tense.

"There's something wrong with the pixies in the girls' dorms! I could feel it! They're *furious!*"

"About what?"

"No idea. But they were swarming. They felt like really big killer bees."

Mrs. Metaxas nodded. "Go tell Principal Park, I'll go check it out." She got out her combat wand and ran for the door to the outside.

As the girls hurried to find Principal Park, Mrs. Metaxas hurried into the girls' dormitory. The moment she opened the door, she could feel what Dalia had meant. She wasn't a natural empath, not like Dalia, but she could use it if she focused. Or if the signal was big enough, as it was here. She followed it up the stairs to one floor in particular.

Girls appeared on the stairs, running screaming in her direction. She ducked out of the way to let them pass, the horde of girls of various ages stampeding to escape whatever mayhem was hounding them. Towards the end of the stampede, objects started flying in their direction, and she used her wand to freeze as many of these objects in midair as she could.



There was an almighty shrieking sound that raised the hairs on the back of her neck, as it was clearly not human and clearly coming from hundreds of individuals. The sound heralded their appearance, but while the sound gave the impression of unity, the pixies that appeared – having dropped their human disguises and now looking like large, vaguely human-shaped insects with four arms and two legs, and glowing a purple so dark it looked black, except for their glowing red eyes – were in complete bedlam, flying every which way, screaming, throwing things, punching holes in the walls and knocking doors off their hinges. Some pulled furniture or other possessions out of the rooms and threw them at things or walls. Some punched these objects into pieces. Others punched each other, often so hard that one or more of the pixies would fall down and not get up again.

Mrs. Metaxas was completely flabbergasted at this sight. Never in all her years, even at that school of the dark arts she'd gone to in Hungary, had she ever seen pixies acting like this. Nor had she ever *heard* of such a thing before. Pixies were... well sure, some species of pixies were pretty nasty, but those kinds generally lived in really dark, evil forests and peat bogs. The only species of pixies that lived in the Fae Springs region – *Pixis sapiens tranquilis* – were famous for being gentle, intelligent creatures, their predatory nature notwithstanding. They could be pretty scary when hunting, or when defending themselves or others, but this... this was like something you might see on the surface of Annwn! These creatures bore no resemblance whatsoever to their usual peaceful selves.

As she stared at this chaos, she noticed something else. Some of the pixies in the swarm were clearly unaffected, and looked quite normal, human disguises and all. The unaffected ones were mostly trying to subdue the affected ones, but a few now and then got punched out by the glowing purple and red zig-zags of the affected pixies. Even as she watched, she saw two of the affected pixies fighting over an unaffected pixie, pulling so hard she was screaming in pain.

Snapping out of her bewilderment, Mrs. Metaxas stunned the two warring pixies with her wand, making them drop the one they'd been pulling, who fell to the floor in pain. Pulling out a second wand, Mrs. Metaxas double-wielded, stunning all the pixies she could hit. Luckily for her, the mass of rage pixies was too disorganized to seem to care to try to stop her, and they just kept on going berserk.

Then a battalion of hobs appeared, casting their own spells at the rage pixies. Next, several doors opened up in the walls and out swarmed several armies of Gnomes, joining the battle against the rage pixies. One set of Gnomes in black robes cast spells in unison at the angry swarm of pixies, knocking a dozen of them to the floor. A second and third group of Gnomes took aim at the area by the fallen, as some of the rage pixies were swooping out of the air to try to cannibalize their fallen brethren.

Mrs. Metaxas realized somewhere in the back of her mind as she stunned more and more pixies that there were klaxons going off. The alarms had hopefully gone off and the wards sealing the building before any of the rage pixies could escape. Setting aside that horrible thought until later, she kept stunning pixies, using spells with wide areas of effect

– it was, after all, better to stun all the pixies regardless of side, and sort it all out later. Pixies were sturdy beings; falling from this height because they'd been stunned wouldn't even scratch them.

She witnessed an unaffected small child pixie getting ganged up on by four rage pixies, and she stunned the lot of them with extreme prejudice. Whoever had done this to these pixies was going to live to regret it for the rest of their days, if she had anything to say about it!

Principal Park, Gwydion Carling, Baha'ullah Safiq, Lamia Baker, Yoshi Mori, Tamerlane Veltrand, Damiana Dyer, and Sorcha Cleary all appeared, their own wands and hands adding to her strength. With their help, they made quick work of stunning all the remaining pixies in the swarm. Mrs. Metaxas used her wand to sweep them all to one side of the corridor so they could go through every room in the building looking for strays without accidentally stepping on any stunned pixies.

As they turned a corner, they saw before them Aavraak, the Goblin student in first year. She was swatting pixies out of the air without regard for what kind they were, growling and snapping at them, and generally acting like a wild animal. Not knowing if this was a rational response to stress or if it was something more sinister, Mrs. Metaxas pointed her wand at Aavraak and said, "*Sleep.*"

"Whatever's affecting these pixies, I think it got to her, too," she said. There were several nods as they carried on.

Whatever was causing all this, once the rage pixies were stunned they stopped glowing, but they could tell the pixies were still alive, most of them. They still looked like insects,

which is what pixies *were*. The only pixies that still looked like little humans were the ones that had been trying to stop the raging swarm, or who had been trying to escape the madness.

When the strays had been stunned too, they went about collecting the pixies and making the stun effect a bit longer lasting before quarantining them. They were all quarantined, the rage pixies in a different containment area than the others. The Gnomes and hobs were quarantined too, again in their own containment areas. No sense putting them in danger if the so-far unaffected pixies started showing symptoms as well.

“What in the name of the Lord and Lady was *that* about?” Sorcha Cleary asked. The Runic Magic teacher – a kindly woman in her 50's with long red hair and who dressed in many shawls and bangles – was sweating head to toe and leaning against a wall for support. She wasn't the only one. Even Principal Park was looking tired.

“Isn't it obvious?” Mrs. Metaxas asked. “Whatever caused Ms. Sato's and Mr. Losolom's powers to malfunction clearly affected Ms... Aavraak and the pixies as well.”

“How could those things possibly be linked?” Sorcha asked. “I mean clearly they were, but this... this wasn't malfunctioning powers, it was... they were like little flying rage zombies! And if Aavraak was affected by the same thing, then it appears she was going berserk as well.”

“Yes,” said Yoshi Mori, the Probability Manipulation teacher. “Extreme aggression completely unlike their usual behavior, that is a far cry from powers going haywire. Neither

Ms. Sato's nor Mr. Losolom's moods were affected. Not in this way, anyway."

"The only possible pattern that fits the facts is sabotage," Melora said. "Someone is doing this on purpose, for some reason."

Wiping his brow, Principal Park said, "Then, Mrs. Metaxas, I believe we need to ask Amraphel Dyer what the *hell* is going on."

"We could try that again, sir, but I already asked. She gave me a cryptic answer, one that terrified her for some reason, and now she doesn't want to talk about it anymore."

She took a few moments to fill the others in on Dalia's suspicions, and Melora's own investigation, starting with Ms. Dyer's Vision.

"Whoever's doing this is using something obscure," Mrs. Metaxas said, nearing the finish. "I've been through dozens of different methods already, and haven't found a trace of any of any of them. And nothing I've eliminated accounts for... *this*." She gestured at the quarantined pixies. "Hell, nothing I can think of would account for this."

"What are we doing next?" Mr. Veltrand asked. The others looked at the Translocation and Portals teacher with exhausted expressions.

"What do you mean, Mr. Veltrand?" Principal Park asked.

"I mean, the girls need to sleep tonight. It's an hour til curfew. Where do we put them?"

"Most of the building is intact," Mr. Safiq said. "It looks like the raging pixies tore through just one corridor on their rampage. Only a dozen of the doors are broken, only eight of

those are off their hinges completely, and the rampaging pixies appear to have only ransacked about seven rooms. I think we have the other, unaffected pixies to thank for that.”

“And the Gnomes and hobs,” Mrs. Metaxas added. “They contained the swarm before it reached the stairs. If they hadn’t shown up, the swarm would’ve washed right over me, and I might’ve been in a whole lot of trouble.”

“The point is, with the pixies quarantined, we can put most of the girls back in the dorms. The rest we can put up in guest quarters down in the basement.”

Principal Park nodded. Then he sighed heavily, sounding defeated. “What are we going to tell the parents? What are we going to tell the *press*? Twenty years in this position, and I’ve never had a year like this! I don’t know what to do about it! I still haven’t gotten over the indignity and shame of the articles *The Pluviatian* ran about the incident in September, not to mention that the one in December was all over the TV news for Pluviatia as well. What do I *do*?” Now he was sounding slightly hysterical.

“We tell them the truth, which is that we have no idea what’s going on. Then we tell them what happened at each incident, and then we ask anyone reading or listening to the news to contact us if they have any ideas about what might be causing it all.”

Looking annoyed now, Principal Park nodded. “Yes, quite sensible. Thank you, Mrs. Metaxas.”

She grinned. “You’re welcome, Principal Park.”

“I still don’t like you, though,” he admitted to her.

“Yeah, I know. I don’t hold it against you, sir.”



WHEN ALL OF THE ADULTS were recovered from fighting berserker pixies, they surveyed the damage. The walls, floor, and ceiling looked like there'd been a giant gun battle in there, because of all the holes the size of a Barbie doll's fist that had been punched into them. Some of the light bulbs were broken, the lights with hanging panels. Some doors were knocked off their hinges, others had been cracked in half or were full of holes, and there were pixie bodies everywhere – a mix of the living and the dead. Mrs. Metaxas felt a deep sorrow as she helped round up the living ones and collect the dead ones for evidence, to try to figure out what had happened.



DALIA AND HER FRIENDS – minus Aavraak, who was in the infirmary – ended up in guest quarters in the basement while the adults closed off the corridors that had been trashed by rampaging pixies, and took the quarantined pixies away.

The news of the event spread quickly, and everyone was talking about the madness that had been taking the school lately. The oldest students were some of the most upset, since they'd been going to school here for between six and eight years without any kind of significant trouble. Theories

abounded, ranging from the unlikely to the absolutely absurd.

People were also scared and worried. Hardly anyone had paid any attention to the pixies, Gnomes, or hobs before, but now everyone seemed scared of them. Teachers tried to ease these fears by pointing out that there had been pixies, hobs, and Gnomes working to subdue the raging pixies, but that didn't help much, because people asked what happened if the hobs and Gnomes got affected, too. Dalia was a little help with this, as she told everyone she could that her hobs had been affected, and all it had done was make them break out into weird conditions, none of which included going on a rampage. Of course, as Sally pointed out to her later, it was likely something different that was causing the two different sets of symptoms, as Mrs. Metaxas had figured out as well. After all, the pixies at the Ravenstone household hadn't been affected.

To try to allay the fears of the students and parents, all of the school's pixies, hobs, and Gnomes were quarantined to specific rooms in the basement. This meant that students had to start getting used to finding and retrieving library books on their own or get the help of an adult or student proficient enough at levitation (which was generally second-year or higher). The school also had to hire extra staff to keep the building clean with the hobs temporarily out of work.

Dalia was worried and afraid, too. Unlike other students, though, her worry and fear were mostly for the Faeries whose lives were being disrupted by these mysterious events, including Aavraak, who was also being quarantined. But that didn't mean she wasn't also worried about getting attacked



by some poor Faerie that couldn't stop itself from what it was doing. She started taking to doing as Mrs. Metaxas had suggested, carrying around an iron horseshoe, Peace Water, some magical oils, and black salt; she also spent at least ten minutes every morning and an hour every evening charging her pentacle necklace with lapis lazuli center stone with protective energy. She even dug out a couple old pentacle bracelets and did the same to them.

She wasn't the only one, either. Some had gotten the idea from her, others had thought of it on their own, but either way, a lot of students and some of the staff were charging symbols of faith – pentacles, Stars of David, crucifixes, and in one case an atheist was successfully charging a silver pendant of an atom. Sally was among these, as well; normally she didn't openly wear symbols of her faith – generally considering such overt displays to be tacky – but ever since the swarm attack, she never left their guest dorm room without her little silver cross.

On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, they went into Magical Self Defense. They were all so worried that they forgot to look out for traps she may have laid, but having judged the school's changing attitude these past few weeks, she hadn't been laying any traps for them lately. Instead, she was writing something on the board while everyone was coming in. Though when Dalia came in, Mrs. Metaxas – whose back had been turned to Dalia – turned to look at Dalia, pulling back a little.

“Ms. Ravenstone – Dalia, I mean – I hate to single you out like this in front of the whole class, but if those three pentacles of yours were any more charged, even *I* might get

burned by them. You might want to cut down to charging them once every two or three days, that would be more than adequate.”

“Er... okay, Mrs. Metaxas.”

“And that goes for everyone else. You don't want to overload it on these things. Too much charge on symbols of faith can short-circuit them. I once knew someone who charged his crucifix so much that it melted to his skin. He survived, but it was painful.

“Anyway, given the dire things happening at the school this year, I thought it would be a good idea to teach you the Sleep spell. I don't normally teach this spell until third year because of its difficulty, and because I usually pair it with catching a person wandlessly so they don't hurt themselves on the way down, but if pixies get knocked out midair, they're sturdy enough to survive the fall. And the Sleep spell is low-power enough for you to do it, the difficulty of the spell notwithstanding.”

Someone raised their hand, and she called on them. “How is it difficult? I mean, what about it makes it difficult?”

“Good question. It's a control issue, mostly. There's two kinds of Sleep spell. One will put someone out instantly, and the other just fills the person with a massive desire for sleep. The first one takes some knowledge of the brain's anatomy or a detailed study of the rivers of power by a Sensitive. The second one could be done by any of you, but the downside is that if the person isn't already tired, it'll be fairly easy for them to shake off. But it could distract them for a little bit,

maybe mess with their focus. Safer than a confusion spell, just not as effective at your power level.”

She then spent some time at the board – which had some diagrams on it – and went through the process of what she was calling the Sleepiness Spell. It required focusing on thoughts of tiredness while trying not to let those thoughts affect yourself, and pushing those thoughts out at the other person with a large amount of Will.

For the second half of the class, they paired up, put thick cushions on the floor, and practiced the spell on one another. Dalia got paired with Steven Lambert, the boy who had made the 'by a foot' joke. They played Rock Paper Scissors for first turn, and Steven won. As he struggled to concentrate on sleepy thoughts without falling asleep himself, she went into Magic Sight mode and watched him and others. Nothing much was happening, so she watched the rivers of power in his brain, moving through the different layers, trying to figure out what Mrs. Metaxas had been talking about.

After a few minutes, she saw something. Someone had yawned loudly, and she'd caught a change in the flow of magic when they'd done it. She watched a few more people do the same thing, and got a feel for how the power was changing. Of course, she didn't know what to *do* with that knowledge. She didn't feel safe pulling or pushing on anything in someone's brain, not after some of the accidents she'd had with wands and her own power.

When it was her own turn, she came out of her trance. She relaxed herself, like the self-hypnosis she sometimes did, relaxing her body while still standing in place, and sort of dissociated herself from those feelings before she could make

herself too tired to stand. So far, she was in somewhat familiar territory. Next, she imagined those tired feelings were Steven's feelings. Once that image was stable in her mind, she Pushed with her Will.

WHUMP! She came to her senses at once and noticed that Steven had fallen onto the cushions on the floor. He was the only one who had fallen asleep, though several others looked rather tired.

"Oh my goodness. Ms. Ravenstone, was that your first attempt?"

"Er... yes. I mean, I was watching Steven when he was doing it, and thinking what I'd do when it was my turn. Then I relaxed myself, dissociated the sleepy feelings from myself, and sent them to Steven. But I don't know how effective this spell would be for me in a high-stress situation, Mrs. Metaxas. I can't exactly force myself to relax."

"Ms. Ravenstone, I daresay you would have more luck than most people in class with that. Especially after that demonstration. Fifteen points for an excellent example of a Sleepiness Spell."

"Beginner's luck," she heard Anastasia Park say.

"Perhaps," Mrs. Metaxas said. "But she did it all the same, which is more than you can presently say, Ms. Park. So keep practicing. All of you. Even you, Ms. Ravenstone."

Mrs. Metaxas woke up Steven with her spork wand, and Dalia let Steven have a turn at it again.

At the end of class, Mrs. Metaxas came up to her and said, "As a Sensitive, if you're in a situation where you're dueling with someone, you can use your power to See the changes in the rivers of power in someone's body and brain

that indicate what spell they're likely to use next. Takes years of learning and practice to master, and advanced witches can learn to counter those advantages, but something to keep in mind for the future."

"Thank you, Mrs. Metaxas."

"You're welcome, Ms. Ravenstone."

Dalia was about to leave when she turned back and asked, "Mrs. Metaxas? Have there been any clues yet about what happened?"

"Not much. The autopsies of the dead pixies didn't reveal much. The living ones that had been going berserk had some differences in their brains and magic that was similar to what happened to Aavraak. But they still haven't found a cause."

"Any other clues? Anything the pixies had in common? Our hobs that got sick had all been exposed to my dress from that night, before it got washed. Whatever was doing it to them had a delayed reaction."

"Not really. All the affected pixies were from the same nest, one out of three that live in the girls' dorms and like to travel around the school pretty extensively. So whatever is doing all this didn't spread past that nest."

"Which nest was it?"

"Naturally, it was the one living in the walls of the corridor your dorm room is in."

Dalia paused. She had a strange thought.

"Mrs. Metaxas?"

"Yes, Ms. Ravenstone?"

"The day before the pixies went crazy, I found Anastasia Park and her brother Preston in our corridor. He said he was visiting his sister, but she doesn't live in that corridor. And

then he swatted a pixie out of the air. It got angry with him and they fought. It punched him in the gut.”

“Ah yes, I remember Ms. Dyer mentioning that at a staff meeting. She and Ms. Hollander were there to witness that. And come to think of it, I believe it *was* the same hive in both cases, which is a connection.”

“I’d like to accuse the Park terrors of being the culprits, but they don’t have the smarts for that.”

“Did you witness anyone doing any kind of magic on the pixies there?”

“No. Preston swatted that one out of the air, it went to fetch its friends, it fought him and won, and Ms. Hollander took Preston to the infirmary.”

“I’ll investigate this further, Dalia. I’ll interview both women, then Anastasia and Preston. And the pixies, too, while I’m at it. It should give me a greater understanding of what was going on, maybe someone saw something that could break this case.”

“I hope so.”

“Me too. Anyway, you’re going to be late, so here’s a note,” she said, writing it out and handing it to Dalia. “Now go have fun in PE.”

“Oh, right. Fun. In PE. Everyone’s a comedian,” Dalia muttered, making Mrs. Metaxas chuckle.





## Chapter Twenty-Nine: Danger

*Thursday, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018*

REPAIRS OF THE DAMAGED parts of the girls' dormitory took longer than expected. The walls, floors, ceilings, and doors had to be replaced, the runes had to be re-cast, the lights had to be fixed which included some re-wiring, and other repairs had to be done as well. So almost an entire month after the pixie incident, the girls from that corridor were all still in the guest quarters in the basement.

None of the surviving pixies from the fight with Preston the day before the incident could remember anyone doing anything suspicious. Neither could Ms. Hollander or Ms. Dyer, or any of the students who had been present. Dalia still felt that something had to be connecting those events. It couldn't just be a coincidence, could it?

Thinking maybe they'd come into contact with something dangerous, the school had acted immediately after the pixie incident and confiscated as many garments, books, papers, or other possessions as might possibly be involved from everyone who'd been in that corridor up to 24 hours before the pixie incident, but so far tests hadn't found anything.

Most of these confiscated items had been returned when the tests turned up negative. Aavraak had finally been released from quarantine as well, for which she was very glad. The pixies, Gnomes, and hobs were still kept in the basement for another two weeks, because the students and staff were afraid of another incident, but by the start of March, the quarantine was down. The hobs, Gnomes, and pixies were keeping to themselves for the most part so as not to scare the students.

Tests of the corridor were turning up nothing but debris and dust from the incident, none of it particularly noteworthy or helpful. It just seemed to be one false lead after another, and everyone was getting more tense and worried the longer it went unsolved. But then something happened to change that.

On the first of March, Dalia and most of her friends were in their favorite basement study room doing some studying an hour before curfew when they heard the motor of Brandon's wheelchair and saw him rolling over at the speed of a run, a paper in his hands.

"Guys, guys—Er, I mean girls, girls! Elliolynn wrote me again! They found something! They'd already tested everything, but an anonymous tip from some reader of *The Pluvian* made them think to test his clothes and bedding again for something else. They found something on his clothes!"

"What is it?" Dalia asked.

"Some rare herb called Banshee's Bane. According to Elliolynn, in most faery species it causes their powers to go haywire. Unless you're a Banshee; it's deadly to Banshees, hence the name. And humans are largely immune to its effects! I



went to the library really quick to check out a book about it. Took me four hours to find the right book, even with Ms. Adon's help, and even then it was tucked away in this really far away corner. But I got the info!"

"I *knew* it! I *knew* someone was sabotaging the faery students!" Dalia said, excited to be right.

"It wasn't just Elliolynn, though," Sally said. "Like Dalia pointed out back in September, Kohana's powers were going wacky even though she was getting plenty of sleep. And then Aavraak was getting uncharacteristically aggressive. Aavraak, do you know anything about Banshee's Bane?"

"I do not. I have not heard of it before."

Brandon set down several copies of a book called "Two Hundred Rare and Unusual Faery Banes and Poisons" by Sumati Bandopadhyay. Sally got one copy, Cally got another, and Aavraak got the third.

"Okay, so according to this book," Sally said, "Banshee's Bane has an instantaneous effect on Banshees, causing them total body paralysis and a swift death by heart attack, but most other faery species it just makes their powers go bonkers. Affected species include all known species of Lilin – like Elliolynn – as well as kitsune, forest elves, Tuatha de Daanan, pixies, hobs, and a bunch of others. Species that are immune to its effects include nymphs, Urisk, Dwarves, tanuki, Minotaurs, satyrs, and humans."

Looking at her own copy of the book, Aavraak said, "There is a list here of all the species affected by this plant. Goblins are included, but this says that Goblins are only affected by the powdered root of the plant, not its flower. The

powdered root of the plant causes us to turn aggressive. And not just us, either. Pixies as well.”

“Well that explains the pixie incident,” Dalia said.

“This is interesting,” Sally said, reading another part of the book. “It says here that for most species affected by it, the effects can take up to 13 hours to manifest, and by then checking their system for the plant won’t yield anything because the effects only happen once the body metabolizes the herb. No wonder they didn’t find anything in anyone’s system!”

Cally said, “Another part over here says the flower only grows in one jungle in all of Tirffiniol. It *can* be grown in captivity, but it’s very finicky, hard to keep alive outside of its native environment.”

“That doesn’t make a very good weapon, by the sound of it,” Brandon said. “An herb that rare? Then you’d have to dose the person a whole bunch of hours ahead of time, and if they suspected you did it, they could go get treatment. Does it say how to dose someone, Cally?”

“According to this, they just have to breathe it in. Goes on to say the powdered flower smells to most people a lot like honey and flowers, with a slight undertone of rotting fruit. And the powdered root usually smells like cinnamon and ginger, with undertones of moist, fertile soil.”

Dalia smacked her forehead. Kohana and Aavraak were gasping.

“What? What is it?” Brandon asked.

“Our second night here, I watched Kohana struggling to sleep for a minute or two. At one point, she shoved her pillow with her head and I smelled flowers and honey and rot-

ten fruit. And I'd recognized the scent from a dream I had the night before!"

"And the day of the first incident," Aavraak said, "you and I were talking of smelling cinnamon and ginger."

"Someone sprinkled it on our beds, possibly our pillows," Sally deduced.

"It makes so much sense! But that means it had to have been done by a staff member, probably a human. Especially since they didn't find anything on the bedding, that suggests someone intercepted the laundry."

They all looked at each other, sick at the thought of the implications.

"Someone's been coming into our room when we're not there and trying to poison us!" Kohana said. "And they dosed Dalia's bed that first night, too!"

"They probably didn't know who would pick which bed. Our stuff was already in place, but we could have changed our minds."

Brandon said, "The morning of the incident, Riley Irving – one of my room mates – was complaining about Elliolynn's cologne, said it smelled like a girl's cologne, like flowers and honey, but there was something wrong with it, something rotten. Elliolynn said it wasn't a cologne or perfume, it had been on his pillow. But Riley didn't believe him and wouldn't let it go, because Elliolynn smelled like it, and Riley is allergic to honey; he was griping about it again just before the assembly started. And the first night we were here, Riley was freaking out because his bed smelled like honey, he went to one of the cleaning staff and insisted they replace his bedclothes with unscented ones."

"Oh hey, and something else I forgot about," Kohana said. "I emailed Mum about my first week here, and she said kitsune might feel tired and a little weak from not enough sleep, but she couldn't think of anything from that first week that could have caused my powers go to haywire the way they did. But this Banshee's Bane sounds like it could."

"Yeah, and what happened with Aavraak."

"Boys and girls, do we have a consensus?" Sally asked. "Do we all agree it had to be this herb?"

Everyone there nodded.

"Then we should take these findings to the adults?"

"But if it's one of the staff, who can we trust?"

"Mrs. Metaxas?"

"Mom would probably disagree with you on that. She's a member of the staff. That makes her a suspect. So we can't tell her until after we know the culprit got caught."

"If not her, then who? If all the staff are suspects..."

"We could find out if there's a way to contact Elliolynn, that wouldn't get intercepted."

"Just send him a shadow-fax," Dalia said. "If you do it yourself, the message would have to be intercepted on the other side, and the suspects are all here in the school."

"Unless Elliolynn dosed himself and the rest of—"

"Brandon, there was another two incidents after he left, remember?" Sally said.

"Oh, right. Sorry."

"Not a problem. We have to consider everything, eliminate every possibility until there's only one left. 'Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.' Arthur Conan Doyle."

"Pardon me," said Aavraak, "but I have found something else in this book. A small section of the text you need to see."

"What's it say?" Brandon asked.

"It says here that while Banshee's Bane is normally harmless to humans, it can affect empaths if they are given multiple doses. It is a cumulative effect, which can suppress parts of the brain that filter out extraneous input, and this can result in what is often mistaken for an increase in their power and sensitivity."

"So the night of the Snow Ball... Dalia's reaction, how they thought she was going to die for a while there... that's from being dosed by this flower?"

"It would appear so. And of course, being Kohana's room-mate, Dalia would have gotten multiple doses by contact with Kohana."

"There's another bit here," Sally said. "It says that the dosage can be tricky to figure out. Too high a dosage, and the effects of the loss of control can intensify. With the proper dosage, the most that would happen to an affected Kitsune is a few fire-sneezes, maybe a loss of the ability to hold their human form, or reform it. Whoever's doing this must have used too much on Kohana before the Snow Ball, which is why she basically exploded in a massive fireball."

"Alright," Brandon said, pulling pen and paper from his bag, "I have the best handwriting of all of us, with the exception of Aavraak, and Elliolynn knows me. I'm going to write him, telling him all this stuff. Then I'll go to the office to send it off."

"Don't go alone!" Dalia said. "One or more of us should go with you."

“Right. Dalia, you're the one with that magic vision. You should go with me.”

She nodded. “Makes sense. And Doñela and Tamir can help out, too.”

Sally said, “I think two of us should go find Mrs. Metaxas and tell her about this.”

“We haven't eliminated her as a suspect yet! All staff members are suspects until we have some proof of who the real culprit is!”

“But Mrs. Metaxas said we should go to a trusted adult with these things.”

“Yeah, but we can't trust her, given the circumstances. We *can* trust Elliolynn's parents, though.”

“Guys, you can get on Gegauassi and MMOTW my family, we trust them, right?”

“Can your Shimá get into student spaces?”

“I hope you're not suggesting we can't trust her,” Dalia said. “But no, she can't. Not without permission from the students.”

“Sorry, of course we can trust her. We'll go to the room and do that, you and Brandon go send the shadow-fax.”

“Thanks. And while you're waiting for Gegauassi to load, tell Kobalos hi for me.”

Everyone nodded, and so they split up. Brandon and Dalia went toward the stairs, and everyone else went to the guest quarters that was serving as the temporary dorm room for Dalia and her room-mates.

After ten minutes of travel through the basement, Dalia stopped Brandon.

“What's the matter?”

"The stairs aren't this far. We should've gotten to them by now."

"I can't use the stairs, Dalia. I need the portal. The shadow-portal room is Z1. I felt I should point that out in case you'd forgotten."

"I didn't forget. Z1 isn't far from the stairs, though. We'll head there first, and we can go on from there."

They looked around for the stairs for several more minutes, and still couldn't find it. Dalia was getting increasingly frustrated.

"Listen, Dalia, I know you've mentioned before that the corridors down here change sometimes, but I haven't experienced that at all this past month or any time before it when we were down here."

"Are you calling me and Cally liars?"

"NO! No, I'm not. It's just I've been down here plenty before without a problem, and... wait a minute, you're right. This is T12, we should be in Corridor A."

"We *told* you!"

Shaking her head at Brandon, she knocked on one of the little round doors to the hobs. But there was no response.

"Oh right, they're still not fully back to normal schedule yet. Damn. Let me try something."

At a thought, Doñela and Tamir – who had been floating along behind them – went off looking for the stairs. They soon found the stairs, and began following the instructions her two head-mates sent her.

"Glad that whatever makes us get lost down here sometimes doesn't seem to be able to affect Doñela and Tamir."

Even following the instructions, though, they kept getting lost.

“DAMMIT!” Dalia shouted. “Listen here you! I know there's some kind of... spirit, or something, some intelligence doing this to us! Now unless you want me to tell the principal on you, Mr. or Ms. Spirit, I suggest you let us find the staircase RIGHT NOW!”

There was no response.

“Did that make you feel better?” Brandon asked.

“No. But if this spirit thing knows what's good for it, it'll behave and let us to the stairs or the portal room! It can't keep us in here forever, and it's not even curfew yet anyway.”

They turned a corner, and there were the stairs.

“Ha! I was right! We just went from the corner of Corridor Sigma and Corridor F straight to where Corridor A meets Corridor Gamma. I *knew* there was something messing with us!”

Surging forward, Brandon falling slightly behind due to slightly slow reflexes, they moved forward. Dalia went toward the stairs, and Brandon went down the corridor to find Z1. Dalia began to climb the stairs, and was three stairs up when Brandon came back out again.

“Dalia! I can't find Z1. I've never had that problem before.”

She stopped and came back downstairs. “The spirit thing is still messing with you?”

“Yeah. Don't know why. It's never done this to me before. I thought it might be because I was with you, but now I don't think so.”



“Ugh! This is so frustrating! What are you trying to *tell* me, spirit?”

There was no response, yet again.

Digging something out of a bag on his chair, Brandon said, “I have an idea! Have Doñela and Tamir go to Z1 and run this ball of yarn from there to here. Then we can follow the path it makes.”

“Great idea!”

*‘We’re on it!’* Doñela said in her mind, and she plucked the ball of blue yarn from his hand and took off with it.

Their search did not immediately yield positive results. After several minutes of frustration, Doñela started zooming down Gamma trying to find Z. She found every corridor except for Z, instead. Tamir had more luck, and found Z1 pretty quickly. Dalia figured this meant the spirit or whatever was tracking the yarn ball as well.

She growled her frustration and said, “What in the FREAKING HECK is going on!? Why can’t we get this to work? Stop messing with us!”

Doñela began, then, to open doors along the corridors and looking in them or entering. It wasn’t clear what she was doing until Dalia heard her voice in her head saying, *‘This’ll help!’*

From a nearby door, a slew of other blue balls of yarn came flying out and started flying every which way.

“Clever,” Brandon said. “Now it can’t track her because it doesn’t know which yarn ball is hers. I hope it works.”

It took another few minutes, but finally Doñela returned with a thread to follow, Tamir holding it down on the other end. They briefly saw a few other threads being pulled else-

where. Dalia wondered how Doñela had enchanted them to do that, but was too busy following the thread to care just now.

Thankfully, they made it without further incident to Z1, and Dalia opened the door, the two of them going inside before the basement had a chance to change again.

“Ms. Hollander!” Dalia said, startled.

Aurora Hollander was standing on the other side of the door. She smiled at them warmly. “Hello, dearies. You two sneaking off somewhere? It’s half an hour til curfew, you know.”

“We were going to send a shadow-fax.”

“Couldn’t that wait until morning, dearies?”

“Er... maybe. But it’ll only take a few minutes. We’ll be back in time before curfew.”

Ms. Hollander chuckled jovially. “In a rush, are you? Well in that case, I can do it for you. Just give me the letter and the shadow-fax address, and I’ll send it off for you.”

In that moment, two things happened. First, Doñela – perpetually bored no matter what was going on – randomly stuck her face inside Ms. Hollander’s head to look at her brain, then pulled back with a weird look on her face, like she’d seen something very shocking and bizarre. The second thing that happened, in response to Doñela’s shocked look, was Dalia remembering something: Ms. Hollander had been wading through a swarm of pixies about 13 hours before they started going crazy. And while it hadn’t really reached her conscious mind at the time, she suddenly remembered that at the time, Ms. Hollander had smelled of ginger and cinnamon and dirt. The basement had been trying to protect

them by keeping them away from her. It had known she was dangerous.

*'Dalia,' Doñela said, sounding scared. 'I don't know how to tell you this, but I uh... I can't see inside Ms. Hollander. It's just... blackness. That's never happened before.'*

Stepping back, Dalia said, "No no, that's okay, you're right, it can wait til tomorrow."

"It can?" asked Brandon. "But—"

"Yeah, it's nothing terribly important. *It can wait,*" she repeated with emphasis.

Catching on to her worry, Brandon said, "Oh. Right. Of course. Silly me. Yeah. I forgot I have to get back to my dorm room anyway, we miscalculated the time. See you later, Ms. Hollander."

Dalia turned around, trying to act casual, but suddenly there was a grip like an iron vise on her upper arm, and someone slapped her back between the shoulder-blades. It burned where she'd been hit, like someone was touching a fire-brand to her skin.

"OW! WHAT THE—"

"LET HER GO!"

Then the pain started. It was like someone had cracked her skull open and was pouring the essence of agony into it. Her vision went black, and she thought she heard screaming. Something heavy fell over, and there was a sound like a deck of cards being flipped into the air, but instead of the cards falling to the ground, there were weird splat noises like something wet was falling instead.

The vise-like grip dragged her, and Ms. Hollander said something to somebody. Dalia wanted to cry for help, but

she was in too much pain. She thought she heard Brandon's voice and the voices of Sally and Cally, but then she was lifted bodily into the air and over someone's shoulder. The iron grip switched to her right ankle now.

For several minutes she was taken somewhere, and the whole time she thought she could hear screaming. Since it didn't look like she was going anywhere soon, or likely was about to die, she focused on the screaming instead. The more she focused on it, the more pain she was in, but it felt like the thing to do for some reason. She was having an intuition that the screaming was important.

She became less and less aware of the outside world the more she followed the screaming. But she was so close, and she felt like she'd understand something important soon, something that felt like it had been bothering part of her mind all year long. Some riddle was about to be solved, she knew it.

Her progress slowed to a crawl, it was like marching uphill while waist-deep in chilled molasses. But she was determined to find it. She struggled, and fought. It felt like hours, days that she traveled. But finally she made it.

It was a cry for help. It was the scream of a tortured soul, trapped in an unimaginable Hell that it didn't deserve by a being that didn't care about justice. The voice was a woman, and she was trapped in her own body, a prisoner of her own skin and bones as she was controlled by a cold, burning evil that thought of her as an annoyingly noisy tool. It was...

Ms. Hollander! It was Ms. Hollander! But there was something off about her. The scream, while mostly human, had a feral quality to it, an animal quality.

Pain shot through Dalia. It was dull, a shadow of a shadow of a whisper of an echo of the pain in her head. But this was in her backside. And the agony in her head spasmed as a literal scream broke the air in the outside world.

The pain in her head changed; the telepathic screaming hadn't stopped, but she could barely sense it anymore. With the source of the pain greatly diminished, the agony in her head was draining like water from a bathtub. Within a few minutes, she was able to sit up and look around.

She'd been dropped. Ms. Hollander – or whatever it was that was controlling her body – was crumpled in pain, clutching her shoulder, which was bleeding. Dalia suddenly smelled burned flesh, and followed the smell down to the pentacle around her neck. Bits of burned skin and singed fur were stuck to it, and they were still on fire. She looked up at Ms. Hollander, who had sprouted fur all over her body, and her form was wavering.

*'She's a skin-shifter!'* Doñela said the obvious in her mind.

*'Help me escape!'*

*'Can't. She did something to us. Tamir and I can't leave your body anymore.'*

“YOU LITTLE... you BURNED me!”

Ms. Hollander wasn't human. Which was just... *so* confusing. A human she could have understood, but a faery attacking faery students? Inconceivable! But something made her stop and think, since she could still hardly move. That screaming... that cold, burning malevolence. Could it be that she was... iron bound? A slave, like Kira had been, forced to act against her will by a powerful artifact?

The thing controlling Ms. Hollander stood up on shaky legs, glaring at her. She had never imagined seeing such hatred and malevolence in the face of someone as kind and jovial as Ms. Hollander, but it was certainly there now.

She patted herself down, looking for her purse, as it would have something in it she could use against this threat. But her purse wasn't there. What she found, instead, was a small bag of black salt taped to her thigh. Dalia remembered putting it there this morning; it had been weird, she hadn't known why she'd done it, but it had felt like the thing to do. Now it was going to help her.

Glowering malevolently at her, Ms. Hollander said, "I *was* just going to take that shadow-fax and the letter the lilin sent you and erase all your memories of the last hour so I could get on with my mission, but now I'm thinking I want to murder you. Miserable little confused abomination you are! I want to see the life drain from your eyes!"

"Where's Brandon!? What'd you do with him?"

"That little gimp is safe. My paper soldiers have him contained, along with your other friends. I couldn't let them get on your computer to tell what they knew, after all. Not when my mission hasn't been completed yet."

"Mission? What mission?" Dalia was stalling for time to pull the little bag out of its place at her thigh, trying to be inconspicuous. She was managing it, but only because Ms. Hollander was too preoccupied to notice Dalia had her hand up her skirt.

"Don't play stupid, you little tranny freak! The mission to get the faery students out of this school! Someone very

rich and powerful is very angry about that, and I was hired to put an end to it.”

“Hired? HIRED? You mean *created*, don't you? You're some... some *thing* that's taken over her body! You've trapped her inside her own body!”

She had it now. Without waiting for a response, Dalia pulled the bag of black salt out from under her skirt and tossed the contents at Ms. Hollander's face.

“AAAAHHHHH!” Ms. Hollander screamed, tiny flecks of iron dust pockmarking her face, neck, and hands like really bad acne that was also on fire, burning little holes into her skin as it burrowed its way inside. Dalia watched this just long enough to confirm that Ms. Hollander was some kind of faery, then she took off running—

—only to fall on her face when she stepped down with her left foot and there wasn't anything there.

“Looking – GAHHH – for *this*?” Ms. Hollander asked, holding up Dalia's mechanical foot. Dalia turned to look. Ms. Hollander was still in a lot of pain, but she threw Dalia's prosthetic into the pool. The deep end of the pool, no less.

Not wasting any more time, Dalia crawled as fast as she could toward the door, since it was faster than trying to hop on one foot. Something hurt on one leg suddenly, but she paid it no mind as she kept focusing on fleeing. She soon made it to the door this way, getting up to open it, step out, and close the door.

“Sorry spirit in the basement, you were right! Now help me, please!”

She hopped down the hall, her hand on the wall for balance. This was hindered by the fact – she soon discovered

– that she was bleeding from her one good leg; it was a scratch, a row of four scratches side by side. Ms. Hollander had scratched her!

Dalia peeked around one corner, but saw several very strange things down there. They were the height and basic shape of a human being, but featureless and white as paper. In place of faces, they had Japanese writing on them. And they were carrying what looked like real weapons. She hopped in the other direction, hoping to get away from those things, since she didn't know what they were. But one of them had spotted her, and she heard them coming for her. When the things ran, they sounded like they were made of cardboard or poster paper, and hollow inside. These were obviously the 'paper soldiers' Ms. Hollander had mentioned.

Ducking down a hall, she found herself far from the soldiers that had been pursuing her, but there were others ahead of her. They had their backs turned, though, so she ducked through a nearby door. Not trusting them to be deaf, she went out the opposite door into the corridor, which was empty, and ran a few doors down to duck in there instead.

The room she found herself in was full of shoes, boots, socks, belts, and other clothes. Thinking fast, she grabbed a boot that fit her pretty snugly once she zipped it up, shoved some socks inside it, and put it on. She tested this out, and found she could walk on it. It wasn't a great solution, but it made her more mobile. Since her good leg was bleeding, she tore up a ratty looking t-shirt she found and wrapped the scratch up with the rags from that.

Someone or some thing was trying to open the door, probably tracking the blood she'd been dribbling on the



ground. She ran through what was now clearly some kind of extra-large closet, and out the opposite door, but fell right into the arms of two of the paper soldiers. She screamed and tried to break free, but their grip was surprisingly strong for something made of paper. One of them covered her mouth with a free hand, while the other picked her up off the ground.

Dalia felt her Devil Tree bracelet pulse with malice, and saw the paper soldier's body grow some black veins. But these were very faint, like a projection of light instead of blood, ink, or ichor, and they faded quickly. She felt from Kallistos that he couldn't kill these things because they weren't actually alive. Not the normal way, anyway.

She wasn't going to go without a fight, and so she twisted and pulled and contorted her body, trying to get out. Though made of paper, they were smooth with no sharp edges, so she didn't have to worry about paper-cuts, but still, it was a desperate struggle, and she was losing.

Then something in her chest tingled with warmth, and she watched her clothes and skin catch on fire. But it was a black fire, clearly magical. It didn't hurt her skin or clothes, but it caught the paper soldiers on fire, letting her escape. She ran for it, not looking back, black flames still coming from her body. She barreled through more paper soldiers, setting them on fire as she went.

Some of the paper soldiers in the back began tossing spears at her, making her have to duck out of the way. When she spotted some of these paper soldiers getting bows and arrows out, she bolted as fast as she could. But every time she rounded a corner, there were more of the paper soldiers wait-

ing for her. Dalia realized her wand was in her purse, and she felt stupid for not having a holster for it. There wasn't much she could do with magic yet, but her wand had a link to the Devil Tree, who knew what it was capable of on its own? But that was a moot point, she had to escape.

Running at a good clip now, Dalia had to skid to a halt when turning down another corridor, more of the paper soldiers turning to face her. She ran for several minutes through the maze of the basement until there was enough of a clear space to go into one of the doors again. The first three were locked, but then she found one that wasn't locked and went inside, locking it quickly.



### *A FEW MINUTES EARLIER*

Brandon didn't know what had Dalia worried all of a sudden, but she clearly wanted to leave and seemed suddenly terrified of Ms. Hollander. He trusted her instincts, so he too got scared. "Oh. Right," he said. "Of course. Silly me. Yeah. I forgot I have to get back to my dorm room anyway, we miscalculated the time. See you later, Ms. Hollander."

Dalia turned around, and Ms. Hollander grabbed her arm in a grip that made Dalia whimper in pain. Suddenly, Ms. Hollander's happy, friendly face was full of anger and annoyance. She slapped Dalia on the back for some reason too, which made Dalia make more sounds of distress.

"OW! WHAT THE—"

"LET HER GO!" Brandon shouted.

Ms. Hollander said nothing, but kicked Brandon's chair, knocking it over. He was so surprised by this that the only sound he made was a grunt as he toppled over. He heard a sound like playing cards being riffled into the air, and looked up. Ms. Hollander was spraying a bunch of plain white index cards with Japanese writing into the air, activating some magic in them that made the writing glow and caused some kind of ectoplasm to form around them. They fell to the ground with a splat and grew suddenly like weird jellyfish until they became barely-humanoid figures made of what looked like paper.

Dalia was screaming now, she looked like she was in agony. Ms. Hollander pointed a wand at her, silencing the scream, and began dragging her off. Brandon tried to shout or scream himself, but she must have silenced him while he was dazed on the floor, because no sound came out. She left the room, and two of the paper soldiers pulled him out of his wheelchair.

He struggled as best as he could, mostly with his arms but a little with his weak legs, too. It was no use, though, they were too strong. He was being carried between two of the myriad paper soldiers, who were all marching along. Some split off from the others for some reason while the group of about a dozen – including the two carrying him – went towards the guest room that the girls were staying in. And for some reason he couldn't figure out, the walls around them were shaking as if in a very minor earthquake, glowing with blue light as they did. This went on for a few minutes before it stopped just as suddenly as it had started.

They got to the guest room and one of the soldiers opened the door and looked inside. Nobody seemed to be in there, but they all went in anyway, two of the soldiers checking the bathroom just in case. The soldiers turned the light back out again, and waited with the door closed. Brandon tried to shout or scream again, but he couldn't. He couldn't even hit anything to make any noise.

A couple minutes later, the door opened up and the girls poured in. The paper soldiers swarmed them. There was a lot of shouting, screaming, and things going bump in the darkness, but then everything went quiet as the soldiers put duct tape over their mouths and held them in place. Soon they were joined by more soldiers, which all had weapons from somewhere. Within a couple minutes, there were two soldiers to every one of the kids.

In the light of the corridor, Brandon could see the scared and confused faces of his friends Sally, Cally, Aavraak, and Kohana. They looked at him for some explanation, and he tried to talk, but still couldn't. Despite this, the soldiers duct taped his mouth, too. Maybe the silencing spell was wearing off? He didn't know. Nor did he know where they were being taken, as they were marched back the direction he'd come with the soldiers. Probably to go meet up with Ms. Hollander again.

They'd been walking a few minutes when the paper soldiers halted suddenly, looking around at each other in what looked like a creepy, faceless parody of confusion. Sally took advantage of this confusion and tore free, grabbing a sword from one of them and cutting the arms off several of the soldiers, freeing a few of their friends. Aavraak punched another

er soldier in the face, grabbed its mace, and hacked at more arms. This way, everyone got free, including Brandon, who fell against the wall struggling to keep himself upright on his weak legs.

Sally tore the tape off her mouth as the others hacked at the remaining soldiers, put the sword against one wall, and grabbed Brandon, and lifted him up in a fireman carry. She staggered a bit, but didn't fall.

"To the stairs!" she shouted, and the others followed her.

They ran to the stairs, but there were dozens of the paper soldiers there, and they were no longer confused.

"To the portal room!" Sally shouted, and they followed her.

"Why the portal room?" Cally asked.

"Because we can't fight those things! We got lucky with the ones that captured us, taking them by surprise when they were confused."

"Oh yeah," Cally said.

There were just as many paper soldiers in the portal room as around the stairs, and they had to retreat without getting his wheelchair, a horde of those paper soldiers hot on their trail. But Sally was getting tired from carrying Brandon, as she wasn't any more used to carrying heavy loads than the others were. So they ducked into one of the rooms Sally knew was a robotics lab, and several of them worked together to push heavy furniture against the doors.

"It's not going to hold them forever," Sally said. "Stand guard by the doors, I'm going to see if I can use anything in here."

Brandon watched from the floor as Sally went around the room silently taking stock of everything the room contained. Then he jerked in alarm as something heavy slammed into the far door. The paper soldiers were trying to get in.

"Damn it, no radio parts. Nothing that could get a signal out of here, anyway. Not in the time we have. But there's a finished robot here," Sally said.

She grabbed it and set it down on the table. It was a simple wheeled robot with an arm coming out of the front end of its top side. It also had a radio controller. Short range, the signal likely wouldn't make it out of the basement, but it was good enough to control the robot. She tested it out a bit, making it roll around on the table. Sally didn't know who had built it or why the room wasn't locked, but instead of worrying about that, she switched it off and looked around the room some more.

"Whatever you're gonna do, do it soon!" Cally shouted. "They've cracked the door!"

An ax suddenly split the door, making everyone scream in alarm. But the ax was stuck now. There was more pounding on the door, though.

"Let's see, this robot has an arm. Which means it has wires sending an electrical signal to the arm..."

She looked around some more. There was, of course, a soldering iron in one of the toolboxes. Several, in fact. The beginnings of an idea were taking shape in Sally's mind, but not one using the soldering irons, so she kept looking. There was a large bottle of hand sanitizer and a pressurized air apparatus that the lab was using instead of dangerous chemicals to clean dusty electronics. It was, in fact, an airbrush that ap-

peared to have never been used for its intended purpose, but had all the gear to be used that way.

"Someone check the other door! Take a weapon! I don't think I can kludge anything up in the time we have!"

"Right," said Aavraak, who left Brandon's side to peek out the other door quickly.

"It is a trap. They are waiting for us out there."

"Figures. Well... everyone here knows how to make shields and banishing magic, right? Use your magic to buy me some time, will you?"

The door burst open, but someone had done as asked and forced a magical shield back hard enough to knock the paper soldiers over into a pile. More swarmed in, and found themselves unable to pass the invisible barrier. At once, they began banging on it. Aavraak got ready to pick Brandon up and carry him again.

While all that was happening, Sally was working faster than she'd ever worked before on something. She was hastily pulling wires out of the end of the robot's arm and exposing parts of the wires with a wire stripper, taping the wires to the end of the airbrush. Then she poured the hand sanitizer into the chamber of the airbrush device, zip-tied the device to the robot, zip-tied the airbrush to the end of the arm, zip-tied the arm in place, and then used more zip ties to attach a small air compressor to the whole thing. She had done the whole thing in such a way that the hand of the robot's arm would still squeeze closed on command, the arm just couldn't move now since she'd used that wire for the ignition source.

"WE CAN'T HOLD IT MUCH LONGER, SALLY!"

“Almost done!”

Setting the thing on the floor, she switched on the robot. Every time she moved the control to move the arm, the exposed wires sparked and the arm didn't even twitch. She tested the hand, made sure it could squeeze the airbrush trigger. When she saw it could, she turned on the rune-powered air compressor, which made the robot vibrate and was super noisy, but if this worked, it wouldn't matter.

“NOW!” Sally said.

They let go. Aavraak grabbed Brandon and carried him. The paper soldiers began pouring in, and Sally activated the relevant parts of the robot. The airbrush shot out a spray of aerosolized hand sanitizer, which being alcohol-based was flammable. It passed through the sparking wires, and a fireball sprayed out at the paper soldiers, making them scatter and run.

“Follow the robot!” Sally shouted, sending it forward, occasionally shooting off fireballs.

“Did you just McGuyver a flame-thrower?” Brandon asked in awe.

“Yes I did.”

With the flame-thrower robot surging ahead of them to clear the path, they headed back toward the portal room, but when they opened the door, they found the portals leading upstairs were all being blocked by filing cabinets that had been bolted into the floor. But Brandon's wheelchair was still there, so they righted it while Sally and the robot kept watch, and soon Brandon was in his wheelchair again.



“Freedom!” Brandon said as he started moving his wheelchair. “I’m so glad it still works; I was afraid the controls might have broken when she knocked it over.”

“Come on, we need to get to the stairs.”

They headed for the stairs, the flame-throwing robot leading the way. But this was all happening around the time Dalia was running around setting paper soldiers on fire with the black fire surrounding her, so the soldiers got wise to that pretty quickly and began throwing spears and shooting arrows at them from out of the robot’s range. One of the spears went THUNK into the robot, apparently piercing its battery and catching it on fire.

Wasting no time, and the thicket of soldiers around the stairs being too thick, they ran for it. They tried to stay together, but they got swarmed, and ended up getting split up as they made their individual escapes.



### *BACK TO DALIA*

Safe for now inside one of the basement’s many rooms, Dalia turned around to see where she was, and found the most peculiar room she’d yet seen. It was a round-walled room with thirteen doors inside it. The walls were painted yellow with blue polka dots, and the doors were all shaped weirdly. None looked like a normal door. There was a circular door, a triangular door, a diamond-shaped door, doors of various star shapes, a door that would have been ordinary if it hadn’t been on its side about two or three feet from the

floor, and one door was even coming from the ceiling. What was more, instead of being marked with things like A23 or Theta14, they were labeled QN, QO, QP, and so on through QZ.

As soon as she had taken in all these facts, the black fire coming from her skin went out and the spade-shaped door labeled QT opened on its own. She felt a spasm of terror as it did, but nothing came out of the door. She stared at it, but it quivered in what felt like an impatient way. Not knowing why, she went through QT, the door closing behind her.

Inside QT was another room with multiple doors. Only this time, the room was a shape like a hollowed-out pyramid. The doors – all different colors and different shapes – were labeled QRS through QRSTUVWXYZ, for a total of eight doors. A door in the floor shaped like cherries and labeled QRSTU opened up and wiggled itself. Confused but riding an intuition, Dalia went through it.

She was, this time, unsurprised to find yet another room full of doors. The room was like the inside of a cylindrical room, and the doors were QQQ, QQR, QQS, and so on until QQZ. An orange door shaped like a banana and labeled QQU opened up, and she went in.

Thankfully, that had been the last layer of rooms full of doors. Instead, QQU looked like a very comfortable room full of cloth bean bag chairs, children's toys that looked like they'd been designed by M. C. Escher, and walls painted a vivid yellow color. After glancing around for movement or threats, Dalia paused to check her makeshift bandage quickly before risking a better look at the room.

Dalia walked around the room in fascination, hoping this room was safe and secure. She was examining a bookshelf full of young adult novels when the banana-shaped door opened up again, startling her into facing the door. But she needn't have worried.

"BRANDON!" she shouted, and ran forward.

"Dalia? I don't know where the others are. We got separated."

"How'd you get here? Ms. Hollander said her paper soldiers had captured you and the others."

"Yeah, she was telling the truth about that, at least. Those paper soldier things were carrying me to your room, where they ambushed the others. Then they were escorting us somewhere else, I don't know where, when they stopped in confusion. We took advantage of this, fought them, and tried to get out of the basement, but they had both the stairs and portal room locked up pretty good.

"Then we got chased into a robotics lab, Sally modified a robot she found there by giving it a McGuyvered flame thrower, which got us to the portal room again. They made the portals impassable, but we got my wheelchair back. Then when we were trying to find another way out, they killed the robot with a spear, swarmed us, and we got separated. I know we should've stuck together, but we were panicked and not thinking straight. What about you?"

The banana-shaped door opened up then, making them turn around in fright. But Cally and Sally stepped through instead.

"Cally! Sally! You're alright!"

Dalia ran ahead and hugged them both.

"Yes, yes. We finally managed to shake off those soldier things. Then we ducked into the nearest room we could find – Q42 – and it was so *weird*," Cally said. "Just all these doors and—but you probably saw all the same stuff we did, if you're here. Brandon! Oh good, you made it too! Dalia, how did *you* get away?"

"My necklace," she said, lifting up the blackened pentacle necklace. "It burned her. She's a faery! Some kind of skin-shifter! But then I got caught by some of those paper soldiers, and I caught on fire – black fire, I think that was Kira's Gift she mentioned."

"*Who's* a faery? All we know is those paper soldiers," Sally said.

Dalia turned to Brandon. "What?" he asked her indignantly. "I didn't get a chance to say anything! The soldiers taped over our mouths and escorted us, and then we were fighting and running, and then they were trying to break down the doors, and I was too busy being terrified to mention Ms. Hollander. Besides, Sally was too busy kludging that robot to listen even if I had been able to talk about it!"

"What do you know?" Cally asked.

"Ms. Hollander is the one who's been putting that herb on faery students," Brandon said.

"And she's a faery," Dalia said. "I threw black salt in her face, and it looked like it hurt a *lot*. But she's being controlled by something. I could feel her true personality screaming, begging to be released, when she grabbed me."

"Wait, do you mean like Kira was enslaved 1000 years ago?" Sally asked.

"Yes, I think so."

“Do you have any of that black salt left?”

“No. And my iron horseshoe was in my purse, but she took that. My wand was in there, too.” She smacked herself in the face again. “I just remembered, my purse had Ressa's card in it, too! I should have put *that* against my thigh along with the black salt!”

Cally was staring at her left foot. “Er... Dalia? Why are you wearing one boot that doesn't match your shoe?”

“Ms. Hollander tossed my prosthetic foot in the deep end of one of the pools. I don't know which one.”

“And your other leg is bandaged with rags,” Cally said.

“Ms. Hollander scratched me.”

The banana-shaped door opened up again. Everyone tensed, but it was just Aavraak and Kohana.

“And now the gang is complete,” Brandon quipped.

Dalia let Brandon and the others catch Aavraak up on what they knew, while she examined the room some more, wondering what this place was. Then, as if in answer, she found a small TV. As she approached, the TV turned itself on. It was familiar as MPBC, the Magical Public Broadcasting Channel. It was an old, pre-recorded episode of some educational TV show.

“Hey you lot, over here,” she said.

They were soon gathered around the TV, just as the episode was really getting started. An old white man with glasses, dressed in a white button-up long sleeved shirt and brown trousers, began to talk.

“In the days of the Romans, we find some of the first references to a phenomenon known in witch circles as the 'genius loci,' or 'genii loci' in the plural. What is a genius loci,

you may be wondering? Well, when an area has enough magic flowing through it, when the life-forms inhabiting the area put enough of the right kind of energy and magic into the area, then a sort of self-aware spirit begins to form. Think of it as an area coalescing into a life-form of its own, and the genius loci is its brain and soul combined. The different beings inhabiting the area are like the cells in a human body, coming and going, living and dying, and their collective intelligence and emotions come together to give a place new life. That life, that thinking spirit, is the genius loci.

“Now, a genius loci's creation is informed by the emotions of the life-forms that inhabit the area of its demesne. The more powerful the emotions, the more powerful the magic. The more powerful the magic, the more powerful the genius loci. In eras like ancient Rome and Greece, these genii loci tended to form around temples and other holy places, being interpreted as gods or goddesses. But they could also form around learning institutions, governments, and any place that inspires sufficient coherence of emotion. Meaning that the more people and beings have the same kinds of emotions about a place, the more likely a genius loci is to form.

“In fact, in the modern era most genii loci form either in certain magical forests or in schools of magic. Every school of magic worthy of the name that has existed for more than about 50 or 60 years develops a genius loci, and any leader of the school would be a fool to try to deny it, suppress it, or hide its existence. Yet some misguided witches in our world do exactly that. In history, at least 20 different schools of magic failed to stay open because they put too many restrictions on their school's genius loci. A genius loci that is giv-

en only reasonable restrictions is a powerful ally to have on your side. But too many restrictions will cause a genius loci to die, and the only thing more powerful than a genius loci is the ghost of a genius loci. If an institution's genius loci dies or becomes twisted by lots of negative emotions, it can cause another phenomenon known as a 'haunted building.'"

The TV shut off at that point.

"So does that mean the school has one of these genius loci things?" Brandon asked. "And does that mean it... saved us by leading us here?"

Kohana said, "Well that would explain how we can get so bizarrely lost in the basement. But if it has that kind of power, why isn't the whole school like that?"

"I dunno," Dalia said. "But is that really important right now? We can't stay here forever. We need to get help! We need to stop Ms. Hollander and get her help, free her from that thing controlling her!"

"But who can we go to? Those paper soldiers are everywhere, and I think she did something to the other temporary dorm rooms, sealed them up or something," Brandon said. "I know several of the doors I tugged on were dorm rooms like that, but they were all locked."

"Kira," Sally said. "She has experience with iron bindings, right? If that's what this is. Even if it isn't, she's the most likely person to know what to do."

"But I don't have any way to contact her!"

A door opened up in the wall, startling them. This one was in a different wall, and it was the door of a phone booth. Dalia stepped into it and looked at the phone inside.

"It's a pay-phone! I don't have any money, and anyway, I've never used one before. I've only ever seen them on TV before. What do I do?"

"Try calling collect," Kohana said. "I'll talk you through it."

"Er... right," Dalia said. She took a deep breath, and reached out to grab the phone's handset.



### *ELSEWHERE AT THE SAME time*

The warm, crackling magical fire was the only source of light in a cavern so dark and oppressive that its light seemed to be devoured by the darkness with an intense greed. But small as the pool of light was, it was keeping the predators of Annwn's tunnels away.

Kira had been searching for the Ravenstone grandmother for weeks, ever since she'd heard from Orpheus about the incident with the Faeries at Fae Springs. Since divination had never been Kira's strong suit, it was easier to divine things about places you had some connection to, and the divination teacher at Fae Springs had been of no use, Kira had been forced to try to find Dalia's grandmother in the darkest tunnels of Annwn.

Naturally, she had stopped for a nap. She'd been down here so long she had no idea what time it would be in Fae Springs, but it wasn't like anyone could contact her here anyway. Even with all her powers, even she would have to portal back to Earth to message anybody, and portals to Earth



were tricky from Annwn, as anyone sane who went to Annwn stayed underground.

The last thing she expected, therefore, was to be woken from her nap by the sound of a telephone ringing. She jumped up, confused, looking around. She'd almost convinced herself she'd hallucinated it when it rang again. This time, she turned around to face the source of the noise, ready to fight, but fell short when she saw the strangest thing she'd seen in 1000 years of living.

It was a telephone booth. A perfectly ordinary and once-ubiquitous public telephone booth. But it was here, in the middle of an Annwn tunnel that was miles underground and hundreds of miles from the nearest civilization.

"Gnarly," she said in a California surfer accent, and opened the thing up, curiosity overpowering her caution. Honestly, anything that could manifest a telephone booth in a tunnel in Annwn deserved to eat her if it was dangerous, she felt, that was how impressive the feat was to her.

The phone rang again. It had, of course, been ringing for minutes as she had stared at it. Finally, she picked up the handset and held it up to her ear.

"Hello?" she asked.

"Hello," said a pleasant female voice. "You have a collect call from" - a pause, then "Dalia Ravenstone, in Fae Springs" in Dalia's panicked voice, before continuing in its own voice, "do you accept the charges?"

Kira pulled the handset from her ear and stared at it incredulously. Then she returned it to her ear and said, "Er, okay. Yes, I accept the charges."

"The charges are 1,840 thaums. Would you like to pay by debit or credit?"

"Uh... what's the difference?"

"Debit will take the magic straight from your body through the headset. Credit will mean you have to come to Fae Springs to deliver the magic in person."

"Okay. Debit, then."

"Thank you. Collecting toll now."

There was a sound like a vacuum cleaner running, and Kira felt some of her magic drain away into the phone's headset. It wasn't very much, not to her. She barely noticed the difference.

"Thank you. I will connect you now."

There were some mechanical sounds, and then she heard a different voice. "Aunty Kira? Is that you?"

"Dalia? How are you making this call? I'm in Annwn right now—"

"I'll explain later. But you need to come right away. We're trapped in the basement! There's all these weird paper soldiers, only they're like something out of a nightmare, but real. And all the faeries with powers going crazy, that was Ms. Hollander! She used a rare flower called Banshee's Bane to do it! We figured out what did it but she knew somehow, and she knew I was trans! I think she's been spying on us with a listening device! We can't get out of the basement, we can't get help! My purse got stolen and she took my prosthetic, and you're the only person I could think to help us!"

"Why not Nizoni? She's closer."

"Because Ms. Hollander is some kind of faery! And I think she's been iron-bound! She's trapped in her own body

and she's screaming and I was the only one who heard! You have to help her! You have to help *us*!”

“Iron bound?” Kira's blood ran cold. “I'll be there in ten minutes, Dalia. Are you somewhere safe at the moment?”

“I think so. The school's genius loci has us hidden in some weird room. But those paper soldiers... there's hundreds of them, and I'm afraid they might find their way—” BANG BANG went a noise on the other end. Kira was about to ask about it when Dalia screamed. “THEY FOUND US! THEY'RE TRYING TO BREAK IN! HURRY!”

The phone went to dial tone.

“Shit,” Kira said, and dropped the receiver back on the hook.

Not even bothering to put out the fire, Kira gathered her strength and made her hand glow. She paused, thinking. This wasn't going to be cheap, magically speaking. Shortcuts like this always had a cost, and she knew she would pay for this later – oh how she would pay for it – but time was of the essence. So she made her decision, took a deep breath, and punched a hole in reality.

It sounded, in the echoing tunnel, like the earth had split apart under her feet and lava was spilling forth. The blue glowing cracks in reality were even more impressive than that, though. Kira slipped through the cracks – which felt like being sucked painfully through a hole the size of a straw's opening – and they sealed up behind her, returning Annwn to its previous peace.



SCREAMS ECHOED THROUGH the room as the several girls and one boy tried to block the banana-shaped door from being broken open by faceless, paper-white monsters. The door cracked down the middle from an ax blow, Dalia couldn't get the black fire back yet, and they were out of ideas, ready to face their fate. But then the floor opened up under them and they fell, screaming, into the void.



KIRA WAS ALSO FALLING screaming through a void, but it was over in less than a minute. Now she was falling through air, having miscalculated the path to the right spot on Tirffiniol. She'd apparently not been as far down as she'd thought. But the moment she realized she was falling, she sprouted great wings the same span as the wings of a 747 – both wings spotted like eyes – and flew.

Looking down at the ground from here, she knew she was hundreds of miles from Fae Springs, but she was at least in the right universe. She hyper-powered her flight, and zoomed off so fast she made a sonic boom.



IN A BEDROOM IN THE staff dormitory, Amraphel Dyer awoke from sleep sitting bolt upright, quaking in terror.

“The Horned One comes to break the circle, as the circle was broken before. The Horned One comes to break the circle, as the circle was broken before. The Horned One comes to break the circle, as the circle was broken before...”





## Chapter Thirty: Breaking The Circle

*Thursday, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018*

DALIA AND HER FRIENDS began to slow down at last, and within minutes they were all gently touching down on the ground. Even Brandon in his heavy wheelchair landed as light as a sparrow on a branch. Dalia looked up, and saw the ceiling was normal. However they'd gotten here, it had been through the power of the genius loci.

"Thank you, genius loci," she said. "Now where *are* we?"

"Turn around, Dalia," Brandon said.

She did, and what she saw made her gasp. It was a little building, clearly a Gnome building. It was taller than her, but not by much. There were hundreds more of these buildings, as well. The entire Gnome city must have taken up as much space as two or three gymnasiums in area. She looked down and saw they were standing in a grassy field on the outskirts of town.

"I feel like Godzilla," Kohana said, moving closer to the building. "Yeah, we're about the right size in relation to these

buildings. Except that these aren't tall enough in relation to Gnomes to be skyscrapers."

"Yes, but Gnomes are eight inches tall. If we assume their ceilings are twelve inches tall, I'd say these buildings are probably five stories tall," Sally said.

"Saynomáánju nithánom! Saynomáánju árádolotáló, mánsoáló gyai?" came a voice from a nearby window. It was a fat, bearded Gnome man with white hair and glasses. He looked so much like the image mundanes had of gnomes that all he was missing was a little red cone-shaped hat to complete the look.

"Sorry, what? I don't speak your language," Brandon said.

"e said you bigguns is strangers," said a young Gnome boy from a different window. If Dalia had to guess, she'd say he was no older than 10. "e was also wundrin if yeh bigguns is friend or foe?"

"We're friends," Dalia said. "And we need help. We're being chased by very bad people. I was told if I ever needed help, the Gnomes would help me. Oh gods, what did she say to say? I can't remember! I wish Nurse Johnson were here, maybe he'd remember what Tozrilen said."

"Tozrilen?" asked the young Gnome boy. "Not a very common name round these parts. You got more to that name?"

Dalia thought hard. "Um... Tozrilen... u Váándáá... a Quevendá."

"Wot, the daughter of the Prálsék?" he asked.

"Yes! I rescued her from a closet. She'd broken her leg!"

“Oh yeah, that was on the telly way back. Wot's yer name, biggun?”

“Dalia Ravenstone.”

“That was the name, right 'nuff.” The boy then turned toward the man in the other window and started talking in their own language. She could tell by the man's expression that the boy had told him who she was.

“'e said he's gettin on the hotline ter tell em yeh need help. They set it up special so she could be informed if yeh dropped by. They gots their own 'obs they do, so she'll be 'round quick 'nuff.”

“Why do you speak with a British accent?” Brandon asked.

“Nosy git, en't you? If yeh must know, it's cuz me parents and grandparents and I moved over 'ere from Britain a couple years back. Gramps never learned the biggun lingo, though.”

The old man returned, saying, “Vál Taylonomá gennáth ínaís fálán grá álse-shih bae álse-nomácolokírláth.”

“What'd he say?”

“Gramps said the Lady is on 'er way 'ere by steed.”

“Epp várlonomáju ebbuju nithánák.”

“With a great army,” the boy translated.

“Sháhoy-rethchách, árádolot,” Doñela said through Dalia.

“Thot you said you dinnit know our lingo?”

“I only remember a little of it.”

“Right. Well it en't far to 'er 'ouse from 'ere, so she'll be along short-like,” he said, then he and his grandfather closed the windows and left. Dalia and her friends waited.





THE STEEDS, AS IT TURNED out, were large rats. A whole slew of rats came running down the street, each with a Gnome on it, and at the front was Tozrilen on a white rat, and an older woman – her mother – on a brown rat.

“Álse-saylok shá-rethchách! I am Orichíní u Váándáá a Quevendá, Prálsék of this city. I believe you know my daughter already?”

“Hello, Orichíní, hello Tozrilen. I’m Dalia Ravenstone. Sorry to rush this, but we’re being chased by a skin-shifter known as Aurora Hollander and these faceless paper soldiers of hers.”

“Faceless paper soldiers?” said another woman on a black rat two rows behind Tozrilen. “Did they have Japanese writing on their faces?”

“Yes, they did. But they were paper white otherwise.”

“That sounds like Japanese magic. You have to cut their ‘faces’ open, it’s the only part of them that’s real.”

“Fire works too,” Dalia said. “I mean, they burn when you set them on fire.”

There was a distant pounding sound, of someone pounding on wood.

“The enemy has found you!” one of the male Gnomes shouted.

“Already?” Brandon said.

“Yes,” Orichíní said. “We need to call our allies, the pixies!”

"Is that a good idea when Ms. Hollander is the source of the problems they had?"

"Do you know how she is doing this witchcraft?" Orichíní asked.

"It's a rare herb that she powders. If you breathe it in, it's bad for you."

"Then my armies and the pixies will wear goggles and gas masks. We have a stockpile of those things. Don't ask why, it is much too complicated to get into at the moment."

The booming sound continued. A hob that had been riding with the Gnomes teleported away.

"The door to our city's dimensional bubble is sturdy, reinforced with our own magic. The main issue shall be getting out."

"I think we've got options," Dalia said, listening to the distant booming.

"Tozrilen will go with you and guide you to the other door. Go out that door, open the two doors next to it, and the pixies will meet you there to guide you."

The bronze-skinned, black-haired Gnome girl, who stood no taller than five inches tall, got off her rat. Dalia bent over, held out her hand, and Tozrilen stepped onto it. Dalia put Tozrilen on the shoulder Kobalos usually rode on, and she grabbed onto one of Dalia's locs so she wouldn't fall off. This also put her very close to Dalia's ear.

Hundreds of hobs appeared suddenly, spreading out among the hundreds of Gnomes to distribute goggles and gas masks. They even left two human-size pairs of goggles and gas masks for Aavraak and Kohana. Then they teleported away.

"To war!" Orichíní cried, lifting her sword in the air. The other Gnomes cheered with their own swords, axes, and other weapons raised, and the rat-riding cavalry surged ahead. Dalia and her friends waited for them to pass before following, so they wouldn't step on anybody.



AT LAST, KIRA COULD see Fae Springs in the distance. She began to slow down so she wouldn't bounce off the wards like a skipping stone. Kira also resisted her first impulse to shatter the wards with her fist; that could be perceived as an attack, and with the toll that was going to be taken from her soon, she didn't want to risk it. Besides which, it would take a long time to repair, and the school would be vulnerable in that time. Instead, she landed outside the wards, went into full 'human disguise' mode, and began running up the path towards the school. It was about a mile to the school from there, and she had to stick to human speed lest she set off the alarms, which annoyed her. But it would be faster and less risky to do this than it would be to just barge in. *'I'm on my way, Dalia!'* she thought.



AS DALIA AND THE GIRLS jogged beside Brandon in his wheelchair, going around the perimeter of the city towards the other door by following Tozrilen's directions,

Doñela used Dalia's voice to ask, "Hey, so how do your people manage to talk loud enough for us to hear you fine when the tallest of you lot are only 8 or 9 inches tall?"

"It's a spell," Tozrilen said. "I'm not using it at the moment because I'm right by your ear, but normally we use a spell to speak loud enough for the Tall Ones to hear. It's useful in getting pixies to hear us, too, as they're usually up in the air."

There was another distant boom, a loud CRACK, and the sound of warriors shouting. The paper soldiers had burst through the door. Dalia just hoped that Ms. Hollander hadn't decided to run away and let her paper soldiers handle the problem that their living represented.

After a lot of jogging, they reached the door at last, and found it was locked. But they were inside it, so it was easy to unlock it and open the door.

"Hello dearies," Ms. Hollander said.

Dalia froze, as did all her friends. Ms. Hollander was blocking the door, but she had something in her hand. It was a deck of unlined white note cards with Japanese writing on them. She flipped these cards into the air so they flew behind Dalia and the others. Some magic in them got activated and the cards fell down to the ground with a splat as they were now covered in something like glowing white ectoplasm. Ectoplasm that was growing rapidly into bodies, the cards taking up the place of a face. This was how her paper soldiers were activated, then, Dalia noted in a detached sort of way. They had hardly managed to process this reality when the soldiers grabbed all of them. Even Tozrilen got grabbed, held

in one of the soldiers' fists. The rest of the cavalry got stopped by some kind of magical barrier.

"Wait a minute," Kohana said through the gas mask. "Japanese magic, skin shifter that isn't affected by the herb she's using, jovial attitude until recently, the big backside, the lucky hat, that comment about boorish men when we first met you... you're a tanuki!"

Ms. Hollander frowned. "Perceptive little brat, aren't you? Yes, my host is a tanuki. And to answer the question Ms. Ravenstone here asked but threw black salt in my face before I could answer, yes, I *am* an iron binding. But there's not a blessed thing you can do about that. This host is MINE. And you kids are all going to die tragically tonight."

One of the paper soldiers pushed Kohana forward into Ms. Hollander's iron grip. With a flash of magic, she removed Kohana's foxfire-suppression bracelet, and grabbed the gas mask and goggles off her face. A soldier forced her mouth and nose open, and Ms. Hollander waited as Kohana held her breath. After half a minute, Kohana couldn't hold her breath any longer. Ms. Hollander blew flower dust into her face as Kohana breathed in; she couldn't help but get a huge whiff of it.

"You couldn't just stay in the ballroom and burst into flame, no, you had to run away crying. I should have realized you were a crybaby, and factored it into my plan."

"You would've killed everyone in that room!" Brandon snapped.

"Oh no, I'm not falling for that obvious ploy. Let's just say you're wrong and leave it at that."

"What're you going to do with us?" Sally asked.

"I *told* you, I'm not falling into that trap. I'm *not* going to reveal my plan to you. Anyone stupid enough to do that in real life is going to be stupid enough to get caught very early on."

Ms. Hollander took out a wand of willow and pointed it at Sally. "*Sleep.*" Sally went limp in the paper soldier's arms and was clearly asleep.

Usually, when Dalia was close to panic, she fought it. But now, she did the opposite, pushing herself farther into it in the hopes it would activate that black fire again. But whether it was the genuine threat or something else, this panic was more the "fight or flight" kind of panic. It was a strange sensation, her thoughts getting clearer rather than cloudier. So she decided to change tactics.

*'Kallistos,'* she thought to the Devil Tree via their link from the bracelet. *'When I touch the bracelet to her skin, you hurt her enough to knock her out, but don't kill her. She's not in control of herself.'*

She felt a feeling of agreement come from Kallistos.

*'Thank you.'*

With her wand, Ms. Hollander knocked Dalia's necklace and the two pentacle bracelets off. She was about to do something to the Devil Tree bracelet when Dalia – who had been standing loose – surged forward, breaking through the paper soldier's grip, and shoved the bracelet against Ms. Hollander's bare arm.

Ms. Hollander screamed, every blood vessel in her body turning black, her skin going pale. She backhanded Dalia, who fell backwards into the paper soldier's grasp again. Ms.

Hollander leaned against the wall for support. She looked awful, very ill.

It was clear Ms. Hollander was in no shape to move, her breathing shallow. The one good thing about this was she couldn't give any orders, and with no other orders to act on yet, the paper soldiers had defaulted to holding Dalia and her friends in position until told otherwise.

Wondering what Mrs. Metaxas would tell her to do in this situation, she answered herself by reviewing what she *could* do. Her only options at the moment were to use her minimal magical knowledge, and one of the two magical skills she had developed. Deciding her telepathy wouldn't be useful here, the first thing she did was go into her magic vision mode and look at one of the soldiers with it. Where living beings were a multitude of rivers of magic, these things were like wire frames of glowing wires inside of a paper lantern, all the lines of power stemming from the piece of paper that made up their 'face,' converging on the Japanese writing. She grabbed that magic with her Will and tugged hard on it, draining the soldier of power.

It worked, the note card of its face suddenly finding itself in midair and falling to the ground, dead as a normal piece of paper. But it had also made Dalia's hair explode out of its locs into a giant puffball, made her feel giddy and tingly all over, and set the soldier holding her on fire. She jumped away quickly as it flailed at its body to try to put the flames out, but instead of running away, she stood there and giggled at it.

"I'm Hermione Granger!" she said, giggling and fluffing her poofy hair with her hands.

Sally turned around and bit the face of the soldier holding her, tearing the paper with her teeth when she pulled back, turning most of its body into ectoplasmic slime. Her hands free, she pulled a pen out of her back pocket and stabbed another soldier in the face. This time, the soldiers had no idea what to do, so they just stood there looking confused, letting themselves get 'killed.'

"The pen truly is mightier than the sword!" Sally said as she stabbed the last paper soldier in the face. This one had been carrying Tozrilen; Sally caught the gnome girl before she could fall, and put her on her own shoulder, as Dalia was acting strangely.

"Good thing this slime they turn into evaporates like it never was," Brandon said, staring at his slimed hands.

"Funny white people go poof!" Dalia said. "Ha! White people!" she burst into a fit of giggles at this.

"Oh wow, she's out of it. What happened to her?"

"STOP!" Ms. Hollander croaked out.

They turned to look at her. She was on her knees, but she had a gun pointed at Sally.

"Bang-bang stick!" Dalia said, giggling and pointing at the gun with a pair of finger-guns. "PEW PEW! PEW-PEW PEW!"

"Dalia, now would be a great time to snap out of it!" Sally exclaimed.

Just then, they heard an angry buzzing that was very familiar, and everyone in the room – even Ms. Hollander – turned to the source of it. A massive swarm of pixies was coming toward them, the most pixies Dalia had ever seen in one place, and they were all carrying weapons. Some had



full-sized baseball bats, clubs, or axes in their hands. Others carried the large-for-them razor-blade swords Dalia knew were extremely deadly in the hands of a pixie.

Thankfully, they were all glowing a reddish pink. Angry, but not out of control. And they were all wearing goggles and gas masks.

“Fear not, students! We are here to rescue you!” the lead pixie woman said. Another of the pixies zipped forward and snatched the gun out of Ms. Hollander’s hands so fast she blinked in surprise. The gun disappeared into the back of the swarm.

“She’s not in control of herself! She’s iron-bound!” Sally said.

“Yes, we know.”

“You know? How?”

“We were told by another. Here she comes now.”

They heard a change in the buzzing, and saw the pixie swarm part to let someone through. It appeared that Kira – looking fully human and brown enough that she might’ve passed as one of Dalia’s relatives if her face wasn’t so different from Dalia’s – was here at last.

“Hello, little branch.”

Dalia giggled, pointed at the pixies, and said, “Wee little flying people! Weeee!!!” Then she put her arms out and pretended to be a flying airplane, complete with airplane noises.

At this, Kira look confused. She then looked at the pixies, then at Ms. Hollander, looked at Dalia again, then faced Sally.

“What happened to her?” Kira asked, gesturing at Dalia.

"She did something to one of those paper soldiers, and ended up like that."

"Look at me, Auntie Kira! I look like Hermione Granger now!" she giggled again and twirled around like a ballerina.

"Oh little branch, did you try pulling their magic out of them? That was very dangerous. You're lucky they were such low-powered constructs."

"Is she gonna be alright?" Cally asked.

"She'll be fine. She's just drunk on magic. It passes quickly."

"ARE YOU ALL FORGETTING THAT I'M STILL HERE?" Ms. Hollander demanded.

Kira turned to Ms. Hollander. "No, iron-bound tanuki, we haven't forgotten. But your gun was taken, so you're less of a threat now. Do you know who *I* am?"

"No. Should I?"

"I am Kira Tana Dysnomia Gullveig. Does that ring a bell with you?"

Ms. Hollander's eyes widened in terror, and her whole body shook with anxiety at the name. She leaped up from her prone position and grabbed Dalia, holding a wand to Dalia's neck.

"You're not very nice, you know!" Dalia chided Ms. Hollander, still sounding loopy. "So now you don't get any cake. And it's strawberry cake, your favorite."

"Shut UP!" Ms. Hollander said.

"Oh *now* you're in for it. Papa shall be giving you *quite* the stern lecture now!"

"I SAID *SHUT UP!* I have a wand to your head!"

"She's still drunk on magic, iron-binding. Let her go and I shall be merciful to you," Kira said.

"Stand back! I'll kill her!"

"'Kill' is a funny word," Dalia said. "Kill kill kill kill kill..."

"Iron-binding, can you do that before I can take you down, though?" Kira asked calmly, with a slight grin.

Ms. Hollander paused, thinking. "Maybe I can, maybe I can't. How confident are you in *your* skills?"

"Please. I could fight 10,000 of you at once and barely break a sweat. And that's *without* a massive swarm of pixies to back me up."

Appearing to give up at the prospect of fighting Kira and a bunch of pixies, Ms. Hollander tossed Dalia at Sally, but she used the distraction to throw a silver dagger at Kira. The blade struck her heart, and she fell to her knees. Ms. Hollander ran away, the pixies swarming after her. She tossed more paper soldiers behind her as she ran, but the pixie swords made short work of them. Then the Gnomes and hobs showed up and joined the chase. But the kids barely noticed this; they were worried about something else.

"KIRA!" Sally cried, running to her side.

"Aunty?" Dalia asked, looking worried. She was starting to look more lucid now.

"She's been stabbed! With a silver blade!" Cally cried.

"What, this silly old thing?" Kira said, pulling the knife out of her shoulder. "It's already healing."

"That was in your heart!" Sally said.

"No, it wasn't. What, you think I'd let her really hurt me? Mistress of illusions here, remember?"

"But she's getting away!" Brandon and Cally said in unison.

"No she isn't. Between the genius loci in here and my own powers, she's not going to be able to escape. In fact, I met the hobs and pixies before showing up, filled them in with what I knew, and so they're going to chase her into a room perfectly suited to what I need to get rid of that iron binding in her body."

Kira picked up Kohana's power suppression bracelet and put it back on Kohana's arm.

"You're going to need that, Kohana," Kira said. "The genius loci told me you got dosed with that powdered flower."

"Thank you, Ms. Gullveig."

"Really, call me 'Kira.'"

"Of course, Kira. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, let's go find Ms. Hollander, shall we?"



SHE RAN THROUGH THE corridors, trying to find the stairs, or a door she could flee through. Or a window, she'd take a window – it wasn't impossible with magic involved. Anything, really. She just needed to get out of here. She had failed her mission. All those gnomes, and those dratted kids had gotten some kind of message out, if that woman was any sign to be trusted. She was also out of paper soldiers, she'd used her entire stockpile in one day, and it took far too long to make more. Her master – for she always thought of her-

self as whatever gender her host was at the time – her master would probably reprogram her for her failure, but that was less scary than the risk of being broken. She had recognized the race of that woman, after all, once she knew the woman's name. Clearly she was an *Ævintýrichor*. No wonder the divination teacher was terrified of her.

Finding a door she recognized as a door to a portal room, she opened it up and ran inside. Too late she realized she was in the wrong room, somehow. The door slammed closed behind her, trapping her in a large empty room with concrete floors and a drain in the middle of it. Hundreds of pixies poured into the room from holes in the walls and ceilings. Hobs by the hundreds teleported into the room, all of them holding the hands of Gnome soldiers riding rats, which they had teleported in with them. They all dropped their hands, the Gnome soldiers filling their hands with all sorts of weapons. Some of them even had guns.

“You are surrounded, Aurora Hollander. You are trapped.”

The iron binding reviewed its options. It knew it could get hacked, tricked into divulging the details of its mission and the identity of its master. It didn't know the name of its master, or her master's face, but it knew his voice. Someone as crafty as an *Ævintýrichor* that had somehow escaped bondage and turned on her former master could surely figure out who her master was from that. Especially one that had been alive for 1000 years. She sighed. There was only one option, then.

“I am an iron binding,” she said. “The host is being held against her will, forced to act against her will. You are speak-

ing to the iron binding controlling her, right now. If you come any closer, I will kill my host and myself by dissolving all of my iron into her bloodstream. Then you will learn nothing, and an innocent will die. And you will have no proof that I have done anything.”

All of the pixies, hobs, and Gnomes looked uncomfortable all of a sudden, talking amongst themselves in low whispers. Clearly they were debating the truth of her words.

*‘Good, they’re talking. That gives me time,’* she thought.

So intent was she on the enemies before her that she failed to notice the darkening shadows behind her, or the woman walking out of them like they were a doorway. So she also didn’t notice when Kira touched her on the upper part of her right arm, saying “Boop.” She fell to the ground like a marionette with its strings cut, but got caught halfway down by magic that laid her out on the ground on her back.

Dalia came into the room then. Kira froze, a sword in her hand. Dalia was fully lucid now, though her hair was still poofy.

“Little branch, you need to look away for this. There’s only one way to deal with this thing before it can kill her. I have to cut her arms off.”

“Both of them?”

“There’s something inside each arm. I don’t know which arm is the iron binding, or maybe it’s a new form where both of them are the iron binding. Look away.”

Dalia closed her eyes and turned around. A few moments later, she heard a sick, wet cutting sound like a butcher’s meat cleaver cutting through flesh and bone, then another one. She expected to also hear the splatter of blood, but

she didn't. Though she *did* hear a 'poof' noise that confused her.

"You can look now. There's no blood. It might still disturb you, though. So only look if you think you can handle it."

She turned around and looked. Ms. Hollander... *was* that Ms. Hollander? It was something like a raccoon, but brown where raccoons were usually gray, it was fluffier, and it was almost as large as Ms. Hollander had been. Its snout stretched out as she watched, and that's when she noticed it was missing its two fore legs. An illusion was blacking out the parts that would have had bone and muscle exposed, and there was no blood. So it didn't gross her out, it just looked very strange to her. Kira's sword vanished like it had never been.

"Okay, so that was informative. I cut the right arm off first, and nothing changed. But then I cut the left arm off, and suddenly I could see inside every part of her body except for the left arm. Whatever's in there is blocking people from seeing inside her. Which is how she passed for human for so long. Cover up the outside with a glamour only visible with stone spectacles or by Sensitives, and then hide the rest in case it ran into someone like you: a *natural* Sensitive."

Dalia nodded, still staring down at Ms. Hollander.

"Right. Now for the hard part."

She looked up. Kira closed her eyes, breathing steadily, and dropped her human disguise. Her skin turned a darker brown, her blood-red stripes that went along her arms and face appeared, and her eyes briefly glowed metallic silver before losing their glow to just be metallic silver in color.

But then by far the strangest thing Dalia had seen her do happened. The air around her head shimmered like a heat haze, and two very long, twisted brown horns faded into existence, sprouting from Kira's forehead. Dalia's eyes went wide, and she suddenly remembered Amraphel Dyer's prophecy.

"The Horned One comes to break the circle, as the circle was broken before."

Dalia turned around, and Amraphel Dyer was there, staring at Kira. She was down on her knees, like she was seeing something worthy of worship.

"They inspired stories of both angels and devils, you know," Ms. Dyer said to Dalia. "I wasn't sure which she was until now."

Dalia felt Tamir use her voice to say, "The fact she was freeing a slave didn't clue you in?"

"Hush you two, I have work to do," Kira said.

"Yes," Ms. Dyer said. "You have to break the circle, as the circle was broken before. Pardon my intrusion. But may I watch?"

"Okay fine, whatever. Just don't interfere."

Dalia watched as the illusions hiding the carved meat of the tanuki's arms faded. She was startled to see that Ms. Hollander's people didn't have red muscles as you might expect, but purple. It made the tableau even more surreal, honestly. She wondered if it was a Faery thing. Curious about what Kira was doing, Dalia focused and turned on her magic vision, making sure to split her focus so she could see both the magical and the mundane.



She had thought she'd be prepared for what Aunty Kira looked like under her magic sight. Since Kira wasn't a skin-shifter like Kohana and was currently without her human disguise anyway, Dalia figured she'd look like Mr. Carling or any other human, but brighter. Yet while there was a very superficial resemblance in terms of both being composed of rivers of magical power, Kira looked *very* different.

In humans, the rivers of magical power never got much thicker than strands of normal-width yarn, though they could look thicker in places where there were bunches of these rivers nearby. These rivers also looked, in both humans and in Aavraak and Kohana, like they were made of light at similar brightness to Christmas lights.

Kira, on the other hand, was made up of thick ropes of red-orange magic so bright that it would blind her to look at them if she were seeing them with regular vision, almost like they were made of nuclear plasma piped in straight from the sun. The biggest of these ropes of magic were an inch thick, the smallest she could see – branching off like tributaries from the main rivers – were barely thicker than a human hair. And the mass of knotted ropes of magic at her head was so intense to look at that even though it was magic vision, Dalia's head hurt to look at it. Even Kira's twisted horns were thick with sun-bright rivers of magic.

Still, this was the least striking difference between Kira and humans. For there were hundreds, maybe thousands of variously sized glowing, glittering jewels of swirling light floating in most of these streams of power, like a multi-colored galaxy floating in the sun-bright rivers of power. These were so bright they almost eclipsed the intensely bright

streams of magic they floated in, and the rivers of power were so thick with these jewels of light that it was a wonder the jewels didn't clog up the flows of magic.

But there was yet more. The magic that flowed through the air in Tirffiniol and especially in a school like Fae Springs was disrupted by an intense aura of magic around Kira. Wards that normally resided in the walls had been pushed down into the earth or shoved out of the way to bend around the aura like light bending around a black hole. The space inside this aura wasn't empty, though; it soundlessly buzzed like millions of angry bees, crackled like high-voltage electricity around a massive electrical transformer, and worse, Dalia could "hear" a faint, bass "sound" like a cross between a rumble and a roar, as ominous as it would be if you were standing in front of the Hoover Dam and suddenly heard an enormous CRACK as it began to split down the middle.

Kira knelt over the unconscious form of Aurora Hollander, the tanuki now in her true form and looking to Dalia's Magic Sight much like Kohana had under her disguise, and used a quick movement with her finger to cut the skin and muscle of one of Aurora's forelegs – arms – down to the bone, exposing the cursed thing Dalia had sensed there for them both to see.

To her mundane vision, the enslavement spell was an iron band around Aurora's bone, an iron band with dozens of tiny, glowing runes carved into it. To normal vision, it looked pretty harmless, aside from the fact it shouldn't have been there, and the fact that the muscles were attached to it instead of to the bone. But to her magic vision, it looked like an open sore that had gotten badly infected, with veins of

red venom snaking through Ms. Hollander's arm. She could even see black places in the rest of Ms. Hollander's body where the thing's influence had been cut off, those areas now experiencing the spiritual and magical equivalent of gangrene.

The band of the thing itself gave off an aura of red light that somehow felt as venomous as the venom of a black mamba snake. She had to give the disgusting thing credit, because its light was radiating despite being buffeted by the power of Kira's aura.

After examining the iron-bound curse for a few minutes, Kira grabbed the other arm and cut it open with a spell to examine it as well. The other arm was bound in metal too, but it wasn't iron, Dalia could tell. And it was just a standard ward matrix as far as she could tell.

As soon as Kira got a look at that arm, though, the one with the iron-binding began to pulsate with red light, startling Kira into tossing the other arm aside to hurriedly focus on the first one. The iron-binding was doing something to that arm, and Dalia witnessed the arm begin to shrivel and blacken under the fur. Pulling a silver dagger from her belt, Kira swung it down on the right arm again underneath of the iron-binding, removing the iron-binding from the rest of the arm. Then she worked very fast, singing the incantations to several spells, freezing the iron-binding in place. But she seemed satisfied she'd bought enough time to finally speak.

"Very crude slavery binding, very poorly made. Whoever did this doesn't really know what they're doing, probably tried to reinvent the thing after I spent the last 950 years burning any books that told how to make them, and killing

anyone who knew the art of how they're made. Which is probably the only reason you're alive now, little branch. Whoever designed it couldn't figure out how to get all of the thing's functions into the iron-binding itself, so they decided to subcontract those functions out to the host's own brain, which allowed Ms. Hollander to fight it as much as she did. If not for that design flaw, she wouldn't have been able to fight it at all."

"Is that why Ms. Hollander was getting drunk on the job?"

Kira considered this. "No, I don't think so. More likely what happened is her screaming and fighting irritated the iron-binding enough to drink alcohol in the hopes of shutting her up. I don't think this thing's creator told it about its own limitations, or it would have known that was a bad idea."

Before Dalia could speak again, Kira took a different, smaller silver dagger from her sleeve and poked the tip of her finger with it. Dalia watched in terrified fascination with her magic vision as a trickle of sun-bright light spilled from Kira's fingertip, Dalia's mundane vision informing her that Kira was bleeding onto the iron that bound Aurora Hollander with a stream of blood that, to the mundane eye, seemed far too thin and watery to be blood – closer to bottled ink than blood – and was a dark purple, rather than red.

"My spells aren't containing it well. It's going to dissolve itself, and then we won't have any evidence. I would have preferred to keep it and interrogate it, but that's not going to be possible. So I'll have to break it. And while it's physically disconnected from the host now and can't kill her, it's still mag-

ically linked to her enough that breaking it is going to hurt her. A lot. So don't be alarmed when she starts screaming."

Kira went back to work, bleeding a bit more on the iron-binding. To her magic sight, Dalia saw something traveling down the stream of blood. It was an intensely bright, green spell jewel that landed on top of the venomous red curse and sat there waiting. Kira, now finished bleeding onto the iron-binding, healed herself and held her hands above the cursed iron band as she began an incantation:

*"A rose in a field of green oh so bright,  
Its thorns wrap your soul and bind to it tight;  
But my power shall reach right into your brain  
And verily shall it breaketh the chain."*

The green spell jewel unfolded like a Jacob's Ladder, turned into something like an octopus made of bright green solar plasma, and wrapped itself around the evil red spell in the iron-binding, which began to struggle, trying unsuccessfully to sting the green anti-curse to death.

*"With former slave's blood potent and bright,  
My power will wrap around the blight  
And burn the invader from every vein!  
Brace yourself for no small bit of pain."*

Ms. Hollander's body seized up in great tension, and she screamed a horrible, inhuman scream due to her not being human, the sound – like the sound of an animal being tortured – echoing off the stone walls around them. Dalia and Amraphel Dyer covered their ears, but Dalia could still hear the scream. Ms. Hollander's claws dug into the stone – quite a feat considering they were not presently attached to her body – which added a horrible scratching sound to her

scream. Kira cast a quick spell on her to hold her body down so she wouldn't hurt herself.

*"Chain of iron, Chain of Will,  
Calm thyself, be thou still!  
Chain of iron, thou **wilt** detach,  
For verily you've met your match!"*

In response to Kira's magic, the evil spell binding Aurora hissed like a cobra and rattled like dry bones, but thousands of tiny, sharp-toothed mouths made of green plasma were now ripping pieces off it like a horde of hungry Great White Sharks taking chunks out of a weakened dolphin.

*"Chain of iron, Chain of Will,  
Calm thyself, be thou still!  
Chain of iron, thou **wilt** detach,  
For verily you've **met your match!**"*

Fiercely, the enslavement spell fought, but Kira's repetition of her previous stanza made the green spell burn brighter and fight back against the poisonous red curse even harder.

*"Chain of iron, Chain of Will,  
Calm thyself, be thou still!  
Chain of iron, thou **wilt** detach,  
For verily you've **MET. YOUR. MATCH!!!**"*

The iron-binding spell continued to fight like mad, but in the face of this last surge of magic, it was as doomed as would be a mouse writhing inside the grip of a boa constrictor. As the last of the curse got swallowed by the green plasma, it gave a psychic scream to chill the marrow before it died. Then, in mundane sound instead of psychic sound, the

iron of the binding snapped into several pieces, the lights of the runes going out.

The green plasma spell returned to its jewel form and Kira accepted it back into her body as she used a different jewel spell, blue this time, to pick all the pieces of iron out of the wound, some of which were still fused to the bone or muscles. Then she scanned for any remaining pieces. Once she was satisfied of that, she put the blue spell back. That done, Kira said another incantation, only her second of the night:

*"Tis a shame my little sister*

*Shall never know a mister*

*Quite like Doctor Lister,*

*For his horse died, and he missed her."*

A purple spell in her left shoulder tripled in brightness at these words, flew out of her body like a pixie, and coated the wound. To Dalia's regular vision, the open wound started to close as tendons reattached themselves to bone, muscles repaired themselves, and layers of fat and skin knitted back together without getting any fur or other debris in the wound. The whole time this spell worked, the entire wound had glowed faintly to the mundane eye, while Dalia's magical sight told her this glow had a sterilizing effect, killing microbes and other nasties.

Finally, the wound was as though it had never existed, and Aurora Hollander – who had been tormented even while unconscious – suddenly looked much more at ease, despite still having both her fore-limbs detached. Dalia opened up her shield to get a feel for her emotions, which were calmer than they had been, but still troubled.

Kira moved over to the other arm and looked at the ward matrix there. She pulled the muscles and tendons from the bone and held the arm upside-down over her other hand.

*“Power down,”* she commanded, and the runes stopped glowing. The ward matrix was dead now.

*“Detach,”* she commanded it, and it slid right off into her hand.

Setting that aside, Kira repeated her spell to restore the arm to its previous intact state. Then she used a different spell in an unfamiliar language to seal the left arm back in place on the stump. She moved over again to repeat this process on the right arm. She struggled with the right arm for some time, explaining that she was trying to cleanse the arm of the residual evil magic and dissolved iron so she could heal it. But after almost half an hour, she gave up and reattached the arm without having cleansed it first.

Dalia still had her shields down and could tell that getting her left arm back had relaxed Ms. Hollander even more, but when the right arm went back on, she became even more troubled. Likely because that arm was partially shriveled. Kira, too, was troubled, for other reasons. But mostly, she was angry. Furious, in fact. Kira's anger was so intense that Dalia had to put her shields back up to avoid another headache.

*“When I find out who did this to her, I am going to make them tell me who else knows how to do this, and who hired them if applicable, and then all the people involved in doing this to her and others are going to spend the rest of their lives as wild, terrified rabbits, however long or short those lives end up being. If I have to travel to every universe that exists*



to find them and punish them, I will. Even if it takes another thousand years!”

Kira's emotional intensity was so high now that Dalia's shields collapsed, and she had to put them back up again. At the sound of the activation phrase, Kira turned to Dalia, her anger ebbing.

“Are you feeling better now, little branch?”

“Yes, Aunty Kira. How is Ms. Hollander?”

“Ms. Hollander – if that's even her actual name – will be okay. She might opt to amputate that right arm when she wakes up, though. It was damaged by the iron-binding, and it's got to be causing her pain, but that's the worst of it. As poorly made as that thing was, I have to give its maker credit for that self-destruct function, that's something I've never seen before. Of course, I've never seen an *internal* iron-binding before either. It used to be they would just be attached to the outside, with iron spikes piercing through the muscle and almost touching the bone. Those could be removed with enough raw mechanical force and leverage, but this... this is just cruel and sick, cutting into someone to put something in their body against their will.”

Kira sighed, then continued. “But as I said, aside from some muscle and nerve damage and residual evil magic preventing healing, she's going to be in pain and ill for a while, possibly in a coma. Between at least two years of iron poisoning, evil magic exposure, and the psychic trauma of being a prisoner in her own body while someone else uses it against her will, I am very concerned for her. But I think she's strong enough to recover. She's a fighter, which is more than I was before I was freed.”

There was silence for several moments as they both stared at the tanuki known as Ms. Hollander. Then Kira sighed again, and picked up the ward matrix she'd recovered from the left arm.

"As poor as the craftsmanship on that iron-binding was, this thing is a *lot* more impressive. This is magic unlike anything I've seen before. I mean, I know what it is, but it's the skill and application of it that's unique. This here is an anti-psychoic area-effect ward. It's usually used on banks, prisons, treasure vaults, the houses of really paranoid people, that sort of thing, and is used to hide an area completely from any kind of psychoic vision or divination. I've never even heard of someone using it on a living being before, and I know how to do things that human witches forgot how to do centuries ago. I'm not even sure how this is possible. Such wards usually require a block of stone or metal the size of one of the standing stones at Stonehenge."

"Shimá once told me she reduced a secret-keeping ward to something the size of an iPad, but three times thicker. She's a really good ward master, she gets clients from all over. But she would never make something like that."

"I know, little branch. If I thought for a moment that Nizoni had done this, I wouldn't be here right now, I'd be tearing her a new one, and that's not just a figure of speech. But this is way out of her league. If a normal anti-psychoic area-effect ward were a metaphorical computer, it'd be one of the original ones that took up an entire room and was a glorified calculator. This, in terms of the metaphor, is a smartphone. But Nizoni turning a secret-keeping ward from needing to be carried by two people into something you can keep

in your pocket is like trading in a flip-phone for a smart-phone.”

Cally poked her head into the room. “Is all the scary and icky stuff done yet?”

“Yes, Calandra,” Kira said. “Sorry, I mean Cally. You and the others can come in now.” She turned to look up at a pixie flying there. “Would you be so kind as to fetch Nurse Ishikawa and bring her here? She has a patient, and we need her expertise.”

The pixie nodded and flew away.

“So that's a tanuki, then?” Cally asked, staring. “She won't hurt us now, will she?”

“No. She's free now. See those pieces of metal? That's the remains of the iron-binding. Ms. Dyer, I assume your sister is familiar with the old stories, and will be able to recognize it for what it is?”

Amraphel nodded at this. As she did, Kira frowned a little and grabbed her arm, startling her. But she didn't fight it. Kira was examining one of her hematite bracelets.

“I think you will want me to remove this, my dear,” Kira informed her.

“Why is that?”

“Because this is not hematite. It's fake. Something inside it is having the opposite effect. All four of these, in fact.”

Amraphel hurriedly took off all four of the bracelets and handed them to Kira. With a couple spells, she broke them open, revealing that they were mostly hollow, with some aluminum ball bearings inside to mimic the weight of hematite, but of particular note was that each bracelet had a hunk of

multi-colored stone inside it. She picked one of these up and examined it.

After several minutes of examining it, she said, "Azeztulite, lilac quartz, white morion quartz, and diamond, all fused together and enchanted. This is a very potent charm designed to disconnect a person from reality. Expensive, too. Azeztulite and diamond are expensive; azeztulite and lilac quartz are also rare."

"How is that a charm against reality?" Sally asked.

"Azeztulite has an extremely high natural vibration, it's great for expanding consciousness and raising your vibrations. Lilac quartz is excellent for inter-dimensional travel. White morion quartz is also high-vibration, associated with angelic energy. And diamond amplifies magical and emotional energies. Fused together like this and enchanted to boost their power even more, and you have something capable of making the most down-to-earth person float off into the clouds, mentally speaking. Give four pieces of this thing to someone who's as good at divination as Ms. Dyer is said to be, and I'm astonished she managed to be at all lucid."

"I've always been a bit... off among the fairies, so to speak," Ms. Dyer said. "Even as a child. But now you mention it, that has been getting rather worse, this last school year. It began... a couple weeks before that incident in the auditorium."

"Huh. Well if this area-effect ward being used on a person was as new and experimental to its maker as it was to me, then maybe they slipped you these as a sort of insurance plan in case the ward didn't work right. Anyway, I'll confiscate these as more evidence. You should invest in some new

hematite bangles as quick as possible, to help you come back down to earth. In the meantime, find yourself any source of hematite you can to bring yourself back down.”

Ms. Dyer nodded in a vague sort of way. Then she turned to Dalia and said, “You have a powerful friend somewhere, Dalia.”

“Um, yeah. That would be Auntie Kira.”

“Yes, I know. But that's not who I mean. I can't see anything clearly about it, but someone far older and far more powerful than Kira is watching over you.”

“Um... is it Kallistos?” she asked, gesturing to her bracelet.

“Oh no. Kallistos is far younger than Kira, and nowhere near as powerful as her.”

“Er, okay, Ms. Dyer,” Dalia said, deciding the woman must be referring to some god or gods. As she said it, though, she remembered the entirety of Ms. Dyer's earlier prediction. Before talking about the Horned One coming, Ms. Dyer had said something about the Horned One having turned someone into a donkey.

“Auntie Kira? Did you ever turn someone into a donkey?”

Kira blinked in astonishment. “How did you know I'd done that?”

“You did?” Brandon asked. “Who?”

“The man who enslaved me. As soon as I was free of the iron-binding, I sought him out and slowly, carefully Flesh-Bent him into something that was essentially a donkey with a human mind. I traded him to a man who beat his current donkey, for the freedom of said donkey, which I gave to a

very lovely family who were very kind to her. My former master, on the other hand, lived as a donkey, toiling in hard labor and being whipped regularly for fifteen years before he died. When he died, I went back and turned the man who beat his animals into a musk ox and sold him to a good man who nonetheless used him to plow fields for the next 20 years. But again, how did you know I'd turned a man into a donkey?"

"It was part of Ms. Dyer's prophecy. Mrs. Metaxas said that Ms. Dyer here said something about turning a man into a donkey, then said that business about 'the Horned One comes to break the circle.'"

The door opened up then, and in came Nurse Ishikawa.

"Oh my goodness, a tanuki? How did it get into the school? And what's wrong with it?"

"She got into the school by pretending to be a human. Meet Ms. Aurora Hollander," Sally said.

"Really? How?"

"Complicated story," Kira responded. "I'll tell you later. For now, she's been through two or more years of iron poisoning and exposure to very dangerous evil magic, in the form of an iron-binding, which will also have given her a lot of psychic trauma. I've removed the binding, because breaking it was the only way to stop it destroying itself completely and/or killing her. It managed to damage her right arm in a way I can't repair. You should talk to her about amputating it, it's going to cause her a lot of pain for the rest of her life, otherwise. The rest can wait."

Nurse Ishikawa seemed to finally notice Kira's horns. She gaped at them. "Are you—"

"An Ævintýrichor? Yes. Now stop gawking and treat your patient. She's probably in a coma by now from all the trauma."

The nurse nodded and began tending to Ms. Hollander. Kira called another pixie down and told him, "Go find whoever teaches the class about crystals here, and see if they've got some hematite. Tell them to make sure it's real, and to bring as much as they can carry. If they ask why, tell them it's for Ms. Amraphel Dyer."

He nodded his tiny little head and flew off. The rest of the pixies looked at her questioningly.

"One of you go fetch Principal Park. Another go find Mrs. Metaxas. Bring them both down here."

"Wait. I'll be moving her soon."

"That's fine, I'll escort them up there later. First, I want to show them these," she said, gesturing at the remains of the iron-binding and the dead ward matrix.

"As for the rest of you, I think that's everything. We'll knock for a hob if we need to. I think you should all go back to wherever you were before this last incident. I have a feeling there's going to be an announcement tomorrow morning explaining what happened, reassuring the students it's all over."

"But I got dosed with that—" Kohana began.

"You've got the power suppressor, right? Wash your clothes and bedding, take a shower, and wait a few days. It'll be safe by then."

She nodded.

"You kids can stay here for now, you're all witnesses."

A few minutes later, Principal Park and Mrs. Metaxas, along with Mr. Rabe showed up in the room. Principal Park almost had a fit when he saw Kira's horns, which she quickly hid again with another heat-haze type shimmer, making them vanish. The others calmed him down and bit by bit, they explained everything that had happened in detail to the three teachers, Kira showing them the remains of the paper soldiers as well as the remains of the iron-binding and the dead ward matrix, explaining what all of them were. Mrs. Metaxas was similarly astonished by the ward matrix, and also knew the idea behind the kind of ward it was, as Kira had. Principal Park did as well; after all, his brother was a bank manager.

"Of course," Kira said, nearing the end of the explanation, "we still don't know who hired her, who enslaved her, or why. I mean, it seems like they wanted the faery students out of the school, but why anyone would go to this much trouble, I don't know. It'd probably be easier for someone that wealthy to just use their wealth to directly stymie the resolution's passing."

"Yes, I can see where you would think that," Principal Park said. "But I know for a fact, from talking with my brother, that a lot of powerful people fought that resolution with all their available resources. But it had more supporters than detractors, two of its supporters were as wealthy combined as the people fighting the resolution, and one of those supporters was a very cunning Honey Badger. Then they got the people on their side, and by then it was all over for the opposition." He sounded very annoyed by this. Everyone



looked at him suspiciously. He noticed after a few moments, then glared angrily at them.

“If any of you are about to suggest that I would invite such... such *chaos* into my school, endangering children and wrecking school property, then boy have I got news for—”

“Never mind,” Mrs. Metaxas interrupted. “You’re right. You being the culprit would be like the Catholic pope funding a band of Satanic assassins to kill his enemies for him.”

“Except that that would be the perfect cover,” Kira said.

Mrs. Metaxas shook her head. “No. Trust me, he’s been this way since long before there was even a hint of talking about letting faery students into the school.”

Ms. Dyer examined Principal Park for a few moments before saying, “There’s a version of him that colluded with the criminal mastermind on this plan in another universe, but that one is an outlier. Very unusual circumstances which aren’t present here.”

“I don’t suppose you could just tell us who the criminal is, Ms. Dyer?”

“Oh no. Sorry, but no. Whoever it is, they are very good at covering their tracks. There’s a few possibilities, based on mistakes made by other versions, but it’s such a muddled mix of possibilities, I can’t say how many are even remotely close to being true for us and how many are complete nonsense for our particular universe. For one example, in about 40 different universes, the culprit is Donald Trump. But I’m fairly certain our version of him has no idea magic even exists.”

“HA! There’s that,” Kira said, “and the fact he’s not nearly as rich as most people believe he is. I doubt he could afford this thing even if he sold all his assets,” she said, holding up

the dead ward matrix. "This thing... if there are no reasonable objections, I'm going to study it and then hide it somewhere until I can make sure that this sort of thing won't be repeated. It's far too dangerous to let fall into the wrong hands."

"And I suppose you think yours are the right hands?" Principal Park asked.

"Mr. Park," Kira said, "first of all, my people don't forget anything ever, so I already have all the knowledge I'd need to recreate this thing if I wanted to. What's more, I assure you that if I were the 'wrong hands' for dangerous knowledge, that I could and would have conquered the entire planet by now, and there wouldn't be anything anyone human could do to stop me. I've *forgotten* more kinds of powerful, evil magic than all of human kind even knows exists, even though I've never used any of it. Knowledge is power, after all."

"I thought your people were incapable of forgetting anything?" Mrs. Metaxas asked.

"Okay, you got me there. I haven't forgotten anything, but I've archived it. It's effectively the same thing. Those memories are buried so deeply it'd take months of hard work to pry them back out. It took me months of equally hard work just to archive them that deeply in the first place."

Principal Park said, "Fascinating as this is, I think the children should return to their rooms for the night. It is long past curfew. They will not be in any trouble for being out so late, since it wasn't their fault, but still... tomorrow is a school day. There will be an announcement in the auditorium in the morning, but that should only take an hour."

"Someone needs to find my purse and my prosthesis! Ms. Hollander stole my purse, and threw my foot in one of the pools. This boot has socks stuffed into it, I've been using it as an emergency prosthesis."

"I shall have the hobs scour the buildings and grounds for your prosthesis and your purse, Ms. Ravenstone," Principal Park said. "If they find your things, they will be returned to the table by your bed side."

"Thank you, Principal Park. Oh and Auntie Kira? Can you fix my hair?"

"Sure thing, little branch."

With a twirl of her fingers, Kira's magic restored Dalia's poofy hair to its original locs. The main remaining difference was that Dalia usually tied her locs back in a fashion similar to a ponytail, but she had lost the hair tie for that, so her locs were hanging loose now.

"Thanks, Auntie Kira. Oh and can you do something about this thing on my shoulder? Ms. Hollander put it there."

Kira examined it. Then she glanced from Dalia, who was looking anxious, to Principal Park. Dalia knew Kira knew it was an anti-telekinesis ward, and didn't want to say.

"Sure, just a moment. Looks like a tracking spell." She pinched her fingers against the outside of the skin, not pinching Dalia but rather air, and pulled it out of her. She felt a tingle as something left the area.

*'Oh what a relief to be free!'* Doñela said, floating in the air in front of Dalia, still only visible to her. Tamir appeared next to Doñela and stretched out like he'd just gotten out after an hours-long car ride.

"That did it. Is the spell dead?"

"Yes it is, little branch."

"To bed now! All of you students!"

"They should probably go to the infirmary first. Dalia, at least, is injured. The others might be injured as well," Mrs. Metaxas said.

"Oh. Right. Of course. Pardon me, my mind is in a tizzy from all this chaos. Infirmary, then, and if you get a clean bill of health, go to bed!"

Mrs. Metaxas led the kids to the infirmary, since it was after curfew. Kira stayed behind with Ms. Hollander and Nurse Ishikawa. Another nurse they didn't recognize – likely a night-shift nurse – checked them over with his wand, and twenty minutes later they were being escorted to their temporary dorm room, most of them having been pronounced in good health despite the stress of being hunted. Dalia got a proper bandage on her leg and a magical healing salve on it beforehand, but she'd be all healed by the morning.





## Chapter Thirty-One: After the Trauma

*Friday, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018*

THE NEXT DAY, DALIA woke up and looked for her usual mechanical prosthesis for five whole minutes before remembering that it had been tossed into a swimming pool. So she put on her spare prosthetic, which she didn't like, writing herself a note to get a better spare in case it became necessary. Then she tried to find her purse where she usually left it in the temporary dorm room, but it wasn't there. She remembered that Ms. Hollander had taken that, too.

All morning long, Dalia was annoyed by the spare prosthesis. It had been months since she'd used it for anything at all, and she usually only used it around the house. She had gotten used to the mechanical prosthesis and the way it moved like a real foot. This one was just a piece of plastic curved like a human foot, that had been bolted to a plastic joint. It was *strong* plastic, and kept her from falling down when she stepped down, but she tripped a few times because she was no longer used to how it worked, and had never used it for this long before.

Dalia went into the infirmary during second period's break because she wanted to see Ms. Hollander, or whoever the woman really was. She went in with Brandon, Sally, and Kohana for morale support. They weren't sure what to expect, after all. The last they'd seen of Ms. Hollander, she'd looked like a very large raccoon, and before that she'd been threatening their lives. Or rather, the thing controlling her had been doing that.

What they hadn't expected to see was an entirely different woman in the bed Nurse Ishikawa had said was hers. This woman (who was asleep) had bronze skin and black hair, and a completely different face, though the body type was the same.

"Where's Ms. Hollander?"

"That woman is her. I was taking her vitals, and she woke up just enough to form that appearance before she started screaming and had to be sedated. But I assure you, that is the tanuki that we knew as Ms. Hollander. We're still calling her that for now, since we have no idea who she really is."

"But she doesn't look anything like Ms. Hollander, though!" Brandon said.

"Um... that's because skin-shifters can also be face-changers," Kohana said. "Though it takes a lot of skill and practice to master a single form, and even more to master other forms."

"So you don't have—I mean, you could choose to look different from what you look like now?"

"I couldn't. I've been in this form for years, and holding it without the help of my leaf is really challenging. It's like... imagine if you had to hold your breath all day long. It's kinda

like that, but less intense since breathing is necessary. Returning to fox form at the end of the day is as easy as letting go of a held-in breath.

“Anyway,” she continued, “it would take me another decade or more to learn how to take other forms, if I could even manage it. Not all skin-shifters can learn how to do more than one human form. Learning to do more than one human form is a very difficult skill to master.”

“Yes,” Nurse Ishikawa said. “I’m the same way – only one human form, which is this one. I imagine Ms. Hollander was only able to take the form you knew because the iron-binding was cheating for her, a bit like Ms. Sato’s leaf does—er, did.”

“If most skin-shifters like tanukis and kitsune can only do one form, then how don’t you know who she is yet?”

“Because most tanuki live in Tirffiniol, which is less a single universe than it is a whole set of parallel universes that are daisy-chained together in such a way that it’s rather easy to get from one to the other. Portaling over to Tirffiniol from Earth always takes us to the same ‘foundation’ universe, but once you’re here, it’s pretty easy to travel to any of the scores of alternate universes, versions of Tirffiniol’s planet – which is actually called Satra by the largest percentage of inhabitants; ‘Tirffiniol’ is the name of the interconnected realm of alternate Satras – that are slightly different from each other. It’s basically all one long world, in a sense. So there’s a lot of room to spread out in. There’s no guarantee she came from here, or Earth, or from one of the other Satras in the chain.

“Then too, even if there was only Earth and Satra Prime to pick from, there's a lot of communities that either don't have the kinds of records we need, or don't let outsiders access those records, at least not without a lot of cajoling. Your godmother, Kira, wants to go out and scour the worlds for the information we need, possibly intimidating a lot of people, but I think it'd be better to wait.”

“And I told you earlier that she's probably lost her sanity, given she woke up and was screaming for twenty minutes straight before you sedated her,” said a voice from the doorway. They turned and saw Kira, who was walking toward them. She looked human now, the only thing standing out about her now was her dress, as it was purple and looked a few centuries out of date, and the fact that she was leaning against the wall as if exhausted.

“What's wrong with you, Auntie Kira?”

“Nothing too bad, little branch. But I think I need a hospital bed.”

Nurse Ishikawa helped her over to a nearby bed, and helped her into it.

“You'll have to be more specific with me,” Nurse Ishikawa said. “In fact, you may know more about medicine for your species than I do.”

“I don't doubt that. Even if I wasn't 1000 years old and incapable of forgetting anything I didn't archive away. As to what's wrong with me, it's just a Magical Price. I didn't have the time to go climbing through miles and miles of Annwn tunnels to find a portal back to Tirffiniol, and making my own portal that would bypass the usual overlay issues would have taken too much time as well, so I just punched my way



through reality to get here. Reality *hates it* when people do that, and the cost of repairing the damage is greater than the cost of making it to begin with, so reality demands a high toll for that kind of power. The next month is going to really *suck* for me.”

Kira laid down, looking paler than usual, and sweaty. “I’ll probably be fine in a month, with likely a huge drop in power for a year or more, but Ms. Hollander doesn’t have it so well. She may have lost her sanity from the trauma.”

“You think she’s gone insane, Auntie Kira?” Dalia asked.

“I hope I’m wrong. And it’s really too early to say for sure. But I’ve freed other iron-bound faeries over the centuries, and about half of them either go insane or are just completely broken. The ones that don’t fit into those categories, though, they tend to get a lot stronger.

“I never told you this before, but about 300 years after I was freed, someone else set a trap for me and slapped another iron-binding on me. Back in the day, they were on the outside but had iron spikes that went into the flesh. When the second attempt was made, more potent than the first, I fought it and broke the thing. Pulled iron spikes out of my arm for the second time in my life, but this time with no outside help. Second attempt never managed to force me to do anything against my will. I was so enraged by this second attempt that I put 99% of my time and effort for centuries trying to eradicate the knowledge of how to make iron-bindings. I *had* thought I’d succeeded, but I guess I was wrong.

“The point is, if she isn’t insane or broken, she’ll be stronger than she was before,” Kira finished.

“Hey, I just had a thought,” Brandon said. “Isn’t the prison for Pluviatia called Fort Iron-Bound? Is there any connection between that and this iron-binding practice?”

Making a sour face, Kira said, “Yes. Fort Iron-Bound was originally a faery prison, where an old, now defunct empire – the Kleknunumak Empire, comprised mostly of what are laughingly called High Elves – kept prisoners, whom they enslaved for free labor. They abandoned the prison during a war with the Goblins, sending the rest of the prisoners out to fight in the war. Not long after that, the Goblins slaughtered their entire government and annexed their territory. The Goblins have long had a distaste for slavery, so they raided the prison, clearing it of anything slavers could use and destroying the things they cleared from it, then left it alone for a few centuries.

“Then Old World witches moved into the Pluviatia region and got a foothold there. When they started needing a prison, they bought Fort Iron-Bound from the Goblins, who gave them a great price on it because they didn’t want it, due to its unsavory history,” Kira finished.

“Oh. Interesting,” Brandon said.

Kira nodded in a distracted way. She then glanced down at Dalia’s left foot. “Have they not found your mechanical foot yet, little branch?”

Everyone else looked, too, even though they’d seen already that Dalia was wearing her spare prosthetic, the one she wore around the house but didn’t like wearing in public because she thought it was ugly.

“Not yet. So I’m wearing this one for now.”

“It looks kinda neat,” Brandon said.

"It looks like a piece of plastic, one step up from a peg leg," Dalia said. "At least the mechanical one looks somewhat like a human foot. One inside a metal shoe, but it still looks like a foot."

"I dunno, I think it looks cool," Sally said.

"Yeah, well, you don't have to try to walk with it. I keep tripping on stuff I didn't trip on before. I nearly face-planted into my breakfast this morning."

Ms. Hollander whined a little, then, and began to toss and turn. Not really thinking about it, Dalia took her by her furry hand to comfort her. As she did this, Dalia felt a pain in her head and fell to her knees, still gripping the tanuki's hand. Her awareness of the room around her faded, and she became aware of someone in terror. Then to her astonishment, she found herself in a nightmare. Ms. Hollander was having a nightmare about being stuck in her own body. Dalia saw her sprinkling some sort of powder on students' beds to make them lose control of their powers. Then she saw Ms. Hollander attacking Dalia and the others, trying to kill them.

It got worse from there. Apparently, Ms. Hollander had been imprisoned for at least a decade or two, because some of the images in the nightmares showed Ms. Hollander with other appearances. Sometimes female, other times male, sometimes androgynous. Dalia felt and saw some really scary things. Some of the scenes had blood and gore in them, others were boring images attached to significant terror. It was getting a bit overwhelming, being able to see and feel and hear these scenes from a life of absolute slavery.

*'You're safe now, Ms. Hollander. We killed the iron-binding. It can't control you anymore.'*

Watching from outside, the others saw Ms. Hollander slowly calm down as Dalia continued to reassure Ms. Hollander that she was safe, though she remained at least somewhat agitated. After about ten minutes Dalia let go, her awareness returning to the real world.

Fighting through the pain in her head, Dalia said, "Nightmares. She's having nightmares. About the things she was forced to do. Saw some really scary things."

"You saw what she was seeing?" Kira asked.

"Yes. She's been enslaved for a decade or two, I think. It took her a long time to find the strength to fight that thing."

"Oh wow," Brandon said. "Are you becoming telepathic now, too?"

Kira answered, saying, "It's probably a side effect of how the Banshee's Bane has been affecting her. She's not supposed to be this strong, after all. It's true that even people who aren't normally telepathic can develop telepathic links to people they're close with, but that's probably not going to happen to Dalia naturally until after she's learned enough mental defenses to get that anti-telepathy ward removed from her shoulder, and anyway, she's not close to Ms. Hollander. Quite the opposite."

"How is she making a telepathic connection, then?"

Nurse Ishikawa said, "The Banshee's Bane is still making her empathic sense absurdly strong, and telepathy and telempathy are related skills. It'll take a few months for that to fade completely. On top of that, Ms. Ravenstone was the one

initiating the contact, so it was bypassing the ward by a technicality."

"What I don't get is why that stuff never affected Mrs. Metaxas, when it affected Dalia," Sally said.

"That would be because Mrs. Metaxas isn't a natural empath. She has to concentrate on it for it to work. She's a Sensitive, yes, but not a natural empath. Unlike Ms. Ravenstone. Also, it's unlikely Mrs. Metaxas got exposed to it."

"Well, kiddos, if she wakes up, it won't be anytime soon," Kira said. "Anyway, wasn't Principal Park going to have an announcement in the auditorium about all this?"

"He's postponed that until after lunch," Nurse Ishikawa said. "He wanted to make sure he knew everything there was to know about the situation before he made his announcement."

Dalia looked at her watch. "Oh, we have Math in 15 minutes. We should probably get going. It's good to see you again, Aunty Kira," Dalia said, hugging her godmother. "Get well soon."

"I'll miss you too, little branch, but I'll be ill for a month, and bedridden for at least a week. After that, I'll be able to get up and move around, but I'll still be ill with a preference for sitting still. I would have stayed for a while anyway; I'm hoping Ms. Hollander wakes up soon, even if I'm not really expecting it."

"See you later, then!" Dalia said, and she and her friends left for their next class.



DURING LUNCH, THREE important things happened. First, a pair of hobs appeared on the table in front of her, handing her the purse that the iron-binding controlling Ms. Hollander had taken from her. She thanked them with an offer of food from her plate. One took a bite of hamburger steak that was an entire meal for such a small person, and the other took part of a buttered croissant, and both disappeared in a blink. She then checked her purse to see if the iron-binding had removed anything from her purse. If she had, the hobs or gnomes or pixies had found it and returned it.

Second, a seventh-year girl of some sort of Asian ancestry, whom none of them recognized, stormed over to where they were at and crossed her arms. The girl was tall, with short hair.

"Which one of you is Sally Smith-Jones?" the girl demanded.

"Who wants to know?" Sally asked.

"I do."

"And you are...?"

"Satayu Wattana. Also known as the girl whose robot you wrecked yesterday! According to Mr. Vasilev, anyway."

Sally blushed and sat a little lower in her seat. "I-I'm sorry about that. Our lives were in danger, we were running blindly into any room we could hide in. I improvised with what I found."

"Oh, you just happened to find my robot in a locked room?"

"It wasn't locked. We're first year students, none of us know how to break into a magical lock," Brandon said in Sally's defense.

Satayu blinked at him. "You're lying."

"I'm not," Brandon said. "It really wasn't locked."

"Um, guys... what about the genius loci?" Dalia asked. But as soon as she said it, she knew she hadn't said it loud enough.

"What was that?" Brandon asked.

"GENIUS LOCI," she said, accidentally nearly shouting, making everyone in the immediate area either jump back or turn to look at her briefly. "Er, sorry. I mean, I think the genius loci might have unlocked it for us. It was trying to protect us from Ms. Hollander, maybe it unlocked the door to the robotics lab to try to help you."

"A genius loci in the basement? I've heard rumors about that for years," Satayu said, curiosity overpowering her anger. "But nobody's ever been able to prove it before."

"Well, we don't have proof either," Brandon explained, "at least nothing we can take to other people. Not unless you can find that VHS tape again."

"I doubt it." There was something weird about those Q rooms that Dalia couldn't put into words.

"Too bad. Anyway, you still owe me a robot. I mean, while it was cool you improvised a flame thrower, why couldn't you have kept it a hand-held flame thrower? Why put my robot at risk?"

"I'm sorry. Listen, if you tell me what parts you used that won't be easy to replace, like the circuit boards and so on, I can see what I have in my collection here and at home, or call

home for anything I don't have, and replace all the parts for you. I can even help you put it together if you want."

"I'll take your first offer. No help, though, I want to do it myself. I'm going to be keeping the new one in my room; my room mates know to leave my stuff alone. I'll bring you a list in the morning."

"Okay. Sorry again."

"Yeah yeah," the girl said as she stalked away.

The third thing to happen at lunch was an announcement over the PA system telling everyone to go to the auditorium after lunch for a school-wide assembly. It was a bit of a short notice for most people, who hadn't had any previous warning about it, but everyone went anyway. Most people liked the opportunity to get out of class.

Dalia again had issues with all the people in the room, but it was easier this time with her empathic shields. True, there were several people around her that were inside her shields, but those were Cally, Sally, Aavraak, and Kohana, so it wasn't a problem for her. But she was using three shields at the same time now to have plenty of leeway in case the noise overwhelmed one or more of her shields.

That meant all she had to deal with now was the literal noise of people talking, but she'd gotten some sound-dampening enchanted earmuffs for Yule, and was using them now. So the world was blissfully quiet. The best part, for her, was that the sign-language interpreter was back, so she didn't even need to take them off to know what was being said, once the principal and Mrs. Metaxas began to speak. Dalia decided this was how she was going to do assemblies from now on.



For the first time in her entire history at any school, Dalia enjoyed an assembly. The seat was still uncomfortable and too cramped, but she had her friends on either side of her, so she didn't mind. But other than a bit of discomfort, it wasn't bad.

Principal Park and Mrs. Metaxas explained that the cause of the disruptions to the powers of the faery students had been identified as a saboteur, and that the danger was neutralized. Mrs. Metaxas went on to explain that Ms. Hollander had been under 'a powerful geas' that forced her to do these things against her will, but did not out her as a tanuki. They also did not go into much detail about how she'd been doing it (not wanting to give anyone any ideas, even though Banshee's Bane was rare and expensive) nor about the involvement of Dalia and her friends, beyond "a few clever students figured out the rather obscure method used, and Ms. Hollander attacked them to prevent them from telling the Principal." That had been at their own request when asked by Mrs. Metaxas at breakfast that morning – Dalia hadn't wanted the attention, and neither had her friends.

The principal then mentioned that there was an "expert curse-breaker" in the school who had been brought in on an emergency call to break the geas on Ms. Hollander. (He didn't mention she was an *Ævintýrichor* – didn't even say she was a faery – but it was obvious to anyone who knew her that he meant Kira.) He went on to explain that this expert was still in the building to keep an eye on Ms. Hollander to make sure she got better (explaining the curse appeared to have traumatized her mind), as well as to check the rest

of the school for any curses Ms. Hollander may have been forced to cast. Mrs. Metaxas confirmed this.

Dalia smiled. She knew – everyone knew, really – that Principal Park and Mrs. Metaxas didn't get along with each other. Principal Park disliked Mrs. Metaxas almost to the point of hating her, and Mrs. Metaxas was often critical of Principal Park. So the two of them sharing a stage and agreeing with each other on what had happened as they explained it to the students was a brilliant move on their part. If two people who disliked each other so much (but who were both so well respected by most of the school) both agreed that the danger was over, people would believe them.

Even more brilliant had been the warnings about possible other curses that were being searched for and disarmed, especially the way they said it: as though it was a remote, unlikely possibility, but they weren't taking any chances. It reassured people while promoting caution and also giving them an “out” in the unlikely event something else happened.

At last, the two of them – with some help from Damiana Dyer (the teacher of the class about faeries) – told everyone about how the pixies, gnomes, and hobs had gotten dressed in gas masks and goggles and helped in the battle against the enchanted Ms. Hollander, helping to subdue her, since she'd inadvertently affected the pixies and could have gotten the hobs sick as well (explaining that the hobs of one of the students involved in the December incident had gotten sick from second-hand contact with the “rare, cursed potion” Ms. Hollander had been forced to use). And knowing what to look for at last, the infirmary had been able to scan all the pixies, gnomes, and hobs for any sign of being affected by

the “cursed potion.” All those that had gotten a clean bill of health were free to go wherever they wanted, now, and only the ones that had been exposed to the “cursed potion” were being held in quarantine, mostly for their own safety since the nurses now knew how to clean the potion from clothes and skin.

Mrs. Metaxas also told them that the curse-breaker was also scouring the school for the unique signature of the potion that had caused the problems, to make sure none had been left somewhere around the school.

Lastly, Principal Park said that since Elliolynn Losolom had been a victim of this potion, he would be coming back to school in September, starting his first year over again since he hadn't lasted a single month before being taken out of school. There was a lot of muttering about this, Dalia knew because she had lifted her earmuffs to verify her suspicion, but Mrs. Metaxas stepped in and reassured everyone that they were going to increase security next year. Their curse-breaker had agreed to come back in September to scan everyone for curses or deception upon entry to the grounds of the school. Also, Elliolynn was going to be wearing a powers-controlling artifact, that would let him feed like normal without another incident like the September incident being possible.

Wanting to hear the last bit of the assembly spoken, Dalia removed her earmuffs.

“One last thing before we let you go to your next class,” Mrs. Metaxas said. “I want to say that between the fact our faery students were targeted and the fact that the enchanted Ms. Hollander had said the architect of the crime had been

targeting the faery students, I want to point out that if you're harboring any ill will towards faery students just because they're faery, that those feelings were the point of this attack. They *wanted* you to turn on our faery students.

"The affected faery students are not your enemy, though; they were victims in this. If you want to be angry at anyone, be angry at whoever orchestrated this attack on the school, a person who is almost certainly a human. Someone out there hates faeries so much they put the lives of everyone in this school at risk to get their way. Someone out there is so full of hatred for faeries that they put the lives of human students and teachers at risk to get us to turn against them. When we find out who did this, we will let you all know who to be angry at. For now, don't let them win. Faeries are people too, please treat them the same as you'd treat anyone else. Any questions? Yes, Mr. Pritchard?"

"You don't know who cursed Ms. Hollander? So they could send someone else?"

"Ms. Hollander hasn't recovered yet. She woke up twice, but was screaming both times and wouldn't stop, so she had to be sedated again. Though the curse has been broken, the psychological effects of the curse still linger. It was a traumatic experience for her, she was trapped in her own body, unable to control herself. Don't worry, the kind of dark magic it would take to do that would be detectable by the school wards. The artifact that did this was implanted during the summer when she was away from the school, and a second artifact was cloaking the dark magic of the first device. Now that we know what to look for – including the cloaking field

– we have ways of detecting these. Whoever did this won't be able to do it again.”

Dalia thought Mrs. Metaxas gave her a significant look just then, but she wasn't sure, it had been so brief.

“But they could do something else?”

“Possibly. But as we explained, we're increasing security. We'll be employing non-invasive techniques we hadn't thought necessary before, scanning for curses and dark artifacts. We'll also be keeping a closer eye on staff, and encouraging greater communication about suspicious behavior. But we don't want everyone to become paranoid. There's every chance this was a one-off, a singular attempt to derail the new program to integrate faery students into the school. We're hoping Ms. Hollander will be able to tell us, eventually, who cursed her, so we can bring them to justice. We already have the assurances of the Pluvatia Security Agency that they'll help us hunt down the criminal responsible.”

This seemed to calm most people down. If the PSA was helping, the criminal would be caught soon enough, and they could stop worrying. It didn't take long after this for the assembly to wind down. A good thing, too; the assembly had overrun its estimate of an hour, and there was only 30 minutes of Science because of it.

In study hall before Defense, Mrs. Metaxas showed up and pulled Dalia out of the library to talk with her in the hallway.

“You wanted to talk with me?” Dalia asked, nervous about what was important enough to tell her before class.

“Yes. You sometimes fall back after class to talk with me, and since a lot has happened lately and since I have this pe-

riod free, I decided to talk with you before class instead, so you can go straight to PE after class.”

“Okay...” Dalia said, now confused.

“It’s just... I noticed you noticing the glance I gave you earlier. I know how your mind sometimes comes around to interesting conclusions. I talked with your godmother, and she tells me her people know of no way to put an iron-binding on human beings, so if you were worried of that possibility, you don’t need to. And compulsion curses, though they exist, are easy enough for someone of my skill level to detect, since it takes powerful dark magic to cast those. I also have more than adequate skill to remove such curses.”

“Um... I hadn’t been worried about that, actually. It hadn’t occurred to me. But I’m glad to hear that. It uh, it sounds like something I might think. But uh... you’re sure that can’t happen again?”

“Well, I’m a Sensitive, and that second artifact that was hiding Ms. Hollander’s true nature from being detected is obvious, now that I know to look for it. Those new security measures I mentioned in the assembly, I’m already doing them by using my Magic Vision on every student and member of staff that I meet. Also, Amraphel Dyer has proper hematite bracelets again, and she’s been checking for threats to the school ever since. Which she can do, because she has all four of the new hematite bracelets on all the time now. She didn’t like being blinded to threats like that.”

“That’s good to hear. And uh... I’m glad you decided to talk with me here, because uh... I did have something I wanted to say.”

“And what would that be?”

“Um... I just wanted to say, uh... well, thanks for that tip in our first class about black salt. I... I don't know what made me decide to strap some into uh, well... to the side of my thigh. I hadn't been doing that before, but that morning, well...” she shrugged. “I just did. Had a feeling it might be needed. And it was. It saved my life.”

“I'm not much surprised. You're a Sensitive. Sensitives can sometimes become sensitive to vibrations from the future. The most common form is thinking of someone a moment before they call, that sort of thing. But if there's something big brewing in the future, even people who *aren't* Sensitives have been known to have the sudden feelings of foreboding. Even now, I sometimes hear stories of people – even complete mundanes – who suddenly felt ill or scared or decided for no apparent reason to do something that made them late, one thing or another preventing them from stepping onto one of the airplanes that were hijacked for the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks.

“Myself, I don't have much of an aptitude for divining the future or even the present – divination was never my strong suit – but not all Sensitives are the same. What happened yesterday wasn't nearly so huge as what happened on September 11<sup>th</sup>, but it was also a big event, not just for you and your friends, but for Ms. Hollander, the school, and who knows who else will be affected by it down the road.”

Dalia's eyes went wide. “Reading the future is possible? I thought divination just told things going on in the present or past!”

"Well the future isn't set in stone by any means, it flows like water. But like water, time's flow is sometimes inevitable without some kind of huge disruption. It's easy enough to divert a stream of water flowing from a hose or the tap, but take out a major dam, and the water is going to rush through its old riverbed like a vengeful god, taking out anything in its way. Things had been in motion toward yesterday's events for months. Change the circumstances, and it might have happened earlier or later or differently, but once things were set in motion, *something* was bound to happen. Even impaired as she was by those fake hematite bracelets, Amraphel Dyer still felt that one coming."

"Oh. And so like someone on a river, I sensed we were going faster, and grabbed a life vest for the bumpy ride ahead?"

"Yes, exactly. I can't say how good you'll be at divination someday, but you're already better than I am at sensing impending major events, if your intuition to hide that sack of black salt was any indication."

"That saved my life. I'm going to replace that sack soon, since what happened the other day scared me a lot."

"Thought as much," Mrs. Metaxas said, tossing something underhanded at Dalia, who flinched and missed it by a wide margin. But when she turned around, she saw a small sack floating in the air. She grabbed it and put it in her pocket. Mrs. Metaxas tossed a couple more of these small sacks at her, and she put them away in her purse for now.

"It never hurts to be prepared," Mrs. Metaxas said. "By the way, I have one more thing to tell you."

"What's that?"



“Kira told me she did some digging into the incident back on Samhain, and studied your fairy mark again from afar – which is apparently something she can do, if she’s in the same building as you – and she found someone had tampered with it, causing it to influence Persephone Rose. It’s been fixed, and she put a powerful tamper-proof locking spell on it, so no need to worry about that. I only mention it because this information means Persephone Rose wasn’t at fault for the incident, and is being re-instated as RA and head of Rosy Boa.”

“Cool! I’ll have to congratulate her! But it’s also kinda scary. Who tampered with it? How? When?”

“No idea. Kira says it’s not easy, though. One more mystery to look into. Anyway, better run along now.”

Dalia nodded and thanked her. Mrs. Metaxas let her back inside the library before leaving herself.



## **Chapter Thirty-Two: After the Trauma, Part Two**

PE WAS NOT GOING WELL so far. The other kids definitely noticed her plastic prosthesis and there was a lot of muttering about it. Predictably, Anastasia Park began laughing and pointing at it. When she stopped laughing, she said, “She’s wearing a spatula as a foot!” The laughter continued, and a bunch of other students around her laughed. The teacher was off on the other end of the football field.

That was another issue: the football field was still wet enough that walking with the plastic prosthesis was difficult. The metal one probably would have had issues with the soft earth, too, but the plastic one was even worse. She kept almost falling every so often when the prosthetic would get stuck in the damp soil, and it needed to be scraped clean every time that happened. Dalia knew she was going to have to stop at the nearby stream to wash it off before going back inside.

“Leave her alone!” a boy’s voice said. She turned to see the source and was astonished to see Steven Lambert, the

pudgy, bespectacled black boy who had once made that joke about her leg being shorter than the other “by a foot.”

“Ooooh, freaky's got a *boyfriend!*” Anastasia said, making kissy noises at them.

Another girl – Grace London – said, “Now now, Ana, don't you remember? The black Dalia is a lezbo. She and that Metaxas girl were dancing at the Snow Ball.”

“Oh of course, how could I forget? Just like that sister of hers. Well sorry, Chunky Steve, looks like she's taken.”

“We're just friends,” Cally said. “But even if we weren't, so what? Why do you care so much? I mean, don't you know what they say about homophobes? You know, that they're secretly in the closet themselves?”

“Yeah,” said Steven. “Me thinks thou dost protest too much.”

Anastasia and Grace had glared at Cally's words, but at Steven's they burst out laughing.

“What was *that*? You sound like a retard, Steven!” Anastasia said, before laughing again.

“That was a quote by the great bard himself, William Shakespeare! Specifically from ‘Hamlet,’ thou uncultured swine!” Steven shot back.

“Look who's calling who a swine,” Anastasia said angrily. “If you were any fatter, they'd have to teach you outside because the doors aren't big enough!”

“Oh yeah? Well I'd rather have a fat belly than a fat head like yours, Anastasia!”

“Is there a problem over here?” Ms. Trask asked. Everyone turned in shock to look at her.

“Anastasia was making fun of Dalia, saying her prosthesis was... that it looked like a spatula. I told her to leave Dalia alone, and she, uh... she said...” Steven was black, but his skin was light enough Dalia could see him blushing.

“Ooooh, freaky's got a *boyfriend!*” said Kobalos – on Dalia's shoulder – in Anastasia's own voice. Judging by the horrified look on Anastasia's face, she'd once again forgotten Kobalos could do that. She continued to look horrified as Kobalos replayed the rest of the conversation in everyone's voices, too. Grace, at least, had the good grace to look ashamed.

When Kobalos was done, Ms. Trask nodded. “I see. Ms. Park, I want you to run 20 laps around the track for your use of multiple slurs. Ms. London, you get 10 laps for your own bullying language. And Mr. Lambert here gets five laps for saying Ms. Park has a fat head. *Now, people! RUN!*”

Ms. Trask blew two short blasts on her whistle and pointed at the track. Grace dejectedly went without complaint, while Anastasia tried to protest and got snapped at, which made her finally give up. Steven, before he went, said, “Worth it.” But he didn't sound very convinced of that.

“I said *run*, Mr. Lambert, not walk! This is punishment, not the usual warm-up exercise!” Sighing heavily, Steven ran.

Dalia winced for his sake. Steven looked... well, rather like a sea lion or walrus with legs when he ran. Cerridwen was obese too, of course, but Dalia suspected most of her excess weight was actually muscle, because when Cerridwen ran – which was every PE – she looked like she was born to run. Her bulging middle and large backside barely moved at all when she ran, she looked amazing when she ran, and she

took quite a bit longer to get winded than other people did. Steven, on the other hand... his fat bounced so much when he ran that it looked very painful, and he was already panting like an asthma patient after less than a minute of running.

Looking at Dalia's muddy prosthesis, Ms. Trask said, "If you want, Ms. Ravenstone, you can go over to the concrete area over there and do jumping jacks or run in place. Or heck, even climb up and down the bleachers. It'd keep you out of the mud."

"Er, thanks, Ms. Trask." She looked over at Steven, thinking about how he'd stood up for her, and how much running had hurt her when she'd been running for her life. "I think I'd rather join Steven, though."

"Really? You want to run? I know you usually choose to walk."

"Yeah, well... recent events have made me think I need to run more. Or, well... jog instead, for now. Just in case."

"Well if you're sure, go on ahead."

"Thanks, Ms. Trask," she said, and jogged over to Steven, catching up to him pretty quickly. Kobalos flew off into the sky, since he didn't like being jostled.

Speaking with difficulty while panting, Steven said, "Oh – wow. How – are you – doing – that? I can – barely – go even – this fast."

"This isn't – really easy – for me either," she responded in similar fashion.

"How'd you – lose your – other prosthetic?" he asked.

"Know that – assembly today?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Those 'clever students' – that figured out – Ms. Hollander – was cursed. That was us. Ms. Hollander – threw my foot – in a pool."

"Oh wow!"

"Don't tell anyone – we don't want – the attention."

"My lips – are sealed."

"I'll hold you – to that."

It took Steven slightly longer to do his five laps than it took Grace to do her 10, but to Dalia's and Steven's amusement, Anastasia was struggling almost as much as Steven was. She may have been slender and conventionally pretty, but she was spoiled and out of shape. By the time Dalia and Steven stopped running, Anastasia had – according to on-lookers – only gotten to lap seven herself, and her face was beet red.

"Great, now there's little red rocks all over it, stuck into the mud," Dalia said as they went to go sit down and rest on a bench.

"It'll come off more easily now," Steven answered, sitting down next to her. "Now that it's dry, I mean. Just chip it off."

"Yeah, good point. Thanks."

"Are you really a lesbian?" Steven blurted out. He immediately looked horrified with himself, muttered "Sorry," and covered his mouth with his hands.

"It's okay, Steven. I don't mind you asking. But uh... well, no. I mean... I'm bisexual. 'Bi' for short."

"Bisexual? What's that?"

"It means I uh... I like both boys *and* girls." She felt her cheeks get hot. "Though uh, I'm... er... more into girls than uh, than boys."

“Oh. Um... can I ask why you like girls better?”

“What? I mean sorry, I did actually hear the question, don't know why I said that. Um... well, before Fae Springs, most of my bullies were boys. I uh... don't know for sure why.” This was a lie, but she didn't feel like revealing her gender identity to Steven yet, when they barely even knew each other, and she certainly wasn't about to do it where anyone could overhear. But boys seemed to always somehow sense she was different from the other girls, and they didn't often like it.

“Oh. Sorry about that. I mean, I know I wasn't one of those boys, but well... sorry all the same.”

“Thanks, Steven.”

“Er... sorry if this is really ignorant, but well... does that mean you'd date, say, a boy *and* a girl at the same time? Sorry.”

“I might someday, but that's a separate thing from being bi. Most bi people only date one person at a time. Dating two or more people at a time is 'polyamory.' Er, if everyone involved knows what's going on and is fine with it, then it's polyamory. If not, then it's just cheating.”

“Oh. Cool. But... how do you know that, anyway? I mean, now I think about it, I've heard of bi people before, I just kinda forgot. But the other thing... polyamry? How do you know about that?”

“Polyamory,” she reflexively corrected. “And I know because my parents are polyamorous. I have two moms and a dad.”

“Oh wow. That's pretty cool, I guess,” he said, smiling. “Weird, but cool.”

Briefly opening up her shields with a little willpower first, she said, "Thanks for standing up for me earlier, Steven."

At her words, she felt sure she felt something from him more strongly than from other people in her range. But she couldn't identify the feeling. It might have been embarrassment, but it didn't feel quite right for that. It didn't help that she wasn't sure she was getting a clear enough signal from him; for all she knew, what she sensed from him might be mixing with someone else's feelings.

"You're welcome," he said. The feeling she sensed from him intensified.

"I'm glad you're safe," he said quietly. "After what happened yesterday, I mean. Was it scary?"

"Very scary. Terrifying, actually. She had us trapped in the basement, and she was trying to kill us. And she had help from these creepy paper soldier things, that looked like featureless humanoids with Japanese writing for faces. They were wielding actual weapons. I think they stole the weapons from the armories down there."

"How'd you get away?"

"Come down to the basement, room B12, after dinner. I'll tell you all about it then."

"You still go down in the basement after what happened?"

"Have to. Our dorm room still isn't repaired after the pixies got poisoned and tore the place apart, and our temporary room is in the basement."

It suddenly struck her, then, how scary it was to have to go back there every day after what happened. But she was



determined not to let that get to her. After all, that nice genius loci protected the space as best it could, and there was a gnome city down there, among other cool things. What happened down there could have happened somewhere else just as easily.

“Oh wow, you still live down there, too?”

She shrugged. “Yeah.”

Despite her attempt at nonchalance, she found she was hugging herself, her knees pulling up as well. Kobalos, who had been flying around since she'd decided to run with Steven, returned to her shoulder then, studying her.

“Oh no...” Steven muttered. “Dalia?” He waved a hand in front of her eyes, but she didn't respond, except to pull in to herself more than ever, and put her face against her knees.

Steven watched as she began to shake in place. Kobalos flew off again, but this time he landed on Sally's shoulder and said in a crackly voice, “Dispatch, we have an 11-99; do you copy? Over.”

Sally didn't know what an 11-99 was, and she wondered how Kobalos knew such a thing, but she guessed he was trying to bring her attention to Dalia with some kind of police scanner code. She turned where he'd flown from and saw Steven trying to get Dalia's attention.

“10-4, Kobalos. Over,” she said, and began walking toward Dalia. When she got there, Dalia was rocking back and forth. This... this was unusual, even for Dalia. Sally didn't know what to make of it. Was it some kind of panic attack?

“Dalia?”

“She isn't responding. I think I broke her,” Steven said, unshed tears in his voice.

"Don't be silly, you didn't break her. She's just... well honestly, I don't actually know what's going on, but it's not your fault."

Sally risked poking Dalia gently on the shoulder while saying her name. This didn't appear to have any effect.

"Um... what were you two talking about before this happened?"

"She told me about what happened in the basement yesterday, with her and some of her friends being chased by Ms. Hollander, who was trying to kill them. She invited me to room B12 to tell me about it in detail later, and I said 'You still live down there in the basement, after that happened?' So yeah, I think I broke her."

"I think the reality of the situation just hit her. She's been scared at school before, scared of bullies and scared of being beat up by bullies, along with other anxieties. But I think this is the first time in her life that she's legitimately been in danger of dying. Just... well I think the best course of action is to just let her know we're here for her, and – I dunno – talk with each other or something while we wait for her to snap out of it."

"Just wait? All we do is wait?"

"All we can do, at this point."

"Something going on over here, Ms. Smith-Jones? Mr. Lambert?" Ms. Trask asked.

"Dalia's gone into some kind of catatonia," Sally said, and explained to Ms. Trask what she'd already explained to Steven.

"Oh. Well class is almost over with. Do you want me to levitate her back inside?"

"No. If you do, she'll be mortified later. Just let everyone think she's tired."

"Okay, Ms. Smith-Jones. Will do."

They waited as everyone else went in, but Dalia still wasn't responding. Sally thought of one more thing she could try, but didn't want to say it in front of Steven. So she sent Steven inside to get Dalia a cup for water from the nearby drinking fountain, in case Dalia got thirsty. It was make-work to get him out of the area, but he went. She carefully checked the area around them for anyone hiding, wishing she knew some privacy spells, but finally was satisfied nobody was going to be listening in on them.

"Doñela? I don't know if you're there, but if you're there, can you get Dalia moving so she can be catatonic in her own dor—ACK!"

Sally jumped back in fright as Dalia's head had jerked up suddenly.

"She doesn't want to go back down into that basement just yet. Even though she's sorta friends with that genius loci. She was too tired to think about it last night, but yeah."

"We could probably ask the pixies to guard us while we're down there," Sally said.

Doñela blinked Dalia's eyes. "Oh hey, that's pretty cool. Hey, I can feel Dalia coming back. Ciao!"

Dalia's head sank suddenly as Doñela dropped her control of the body, and Dalia slowly looked up again. "Thank you, Sally," she said.

"No problem. Now come, let's go get changed."



BEFORE GOING TO SHOWER in the temporary room, Sally helped Dalia find a pixie to ask their help, and soon the two of them had an honor guard of a dozen pixies of various genders, zipping around to scout ahead or else buzzing in a circle around them, keeping lookout. Instead of their fists or their over-sized razor-blade swords, they were carrying metal baseball bats. It looked a little absurd, something the size of a Barbie doll carrying a full-sized baseball bat, but the way they were swinging the things put the girls in no doubt the pixies could use those bats just as well as a human could. Sally supposed that from an evolutionary point of view, super-strength served a function similar to a stinger in other insect species.

The small swarm of pixies continued to guard the outside doorway for them until Dalia was done showering, then guided them back upstairs. The pixies were also there when Kohana and Aavraak joined them downstairs later after dinner, in B12 with Cally and Brandon.

“I am glad the pixies are guarding us. But would it not make more sense for the gnomes to do it, given that the pixies are susceptible to the Banshee's Bane?”

“Mom told me earlier that all the Banshee's Bane has been confiscated and sent in to the P.S.A. for evidence,” Cally said.

“Evidence against who, though?” Brandon asked. “Ms. Hollander was a slave. We don't know who the real villain

here is, yet. If this was a book, that would mean the story wasn't over yet."

"Yeah, that's a whole other can of worms," Cally said. "We don't have the iron-binding intact to question, we don't know who made it or how to find them, we don't know who hired the person who enslaved Ms. Hollander, and I'm pretty sure your godmother is going to be the one to sort out *that* whole mystery. If this story was made into a book, it'd have to be like, a trilogy or something."

There was a knock on the door. One of the pixies came out of a hole in the corner and said, "There is a boy named Steven Lambert here to see you."

"Thank you," Dalia said, and went over to open the door.

"Hi Steven! Come on in."

"Hi Dalia," he replied, coming in. He stood there, waiting for Dalia to take a seat because he didn't know which one was open and was too nervous to ask.

They made their introductions to Steven since most of them didn't really know him. When that was done, Dalia and her friends took turns telling Steven about their harrowing adventure down here in the basement, telling him everything. He was wide-eyed by the end of it.

"You have a fairy godmother? That's so cool!"

"Yeah, I guess it is."

"And that black fire you briefly used was from her?"

"Yeah," she said in a quieter voice than before.

"Awesome!"

"Er, yeah. I guess it is."

They tried to keep the conversation going once the story was told, but when it became clear they didn't know what

to talk about, they decided to do schoolwork instead. Steven left for a while to get his things, then came back to join them in doing schoolwork.

Later, when Dalia and her room-mates got back to their temporary room, she saw Mrs. Metaxas and Mr. Safiq waiting by their door.

"Ah, Ms. Ravenstone, Ms. Sato, Ms. Smith-Jones, and Aavraak. Hello to you all," Mrs. Metaxas said.

"Hi," Sally said. "Um... can we help you with something?"

"No, quite the opposite. We wanted your permission to go through this room to scan for any kind of spell or device that might be used to eavesdrop on you. Something Dalia said in her explanation of what happened the night before made us think of it. The part about Ms. Hollander knowing certain facts about you which suggested she was eavesdropping on you."

"Oh, right." Dalia said. "Er, I guess so. What do we do in the meantime?"

"You can come in and watch us work, make sure we don't steal anything. Not that we would, of course, but you know, oversight."

"Also we wish to cast some more protective spells on the room," Mr. Safiq said. "Including one that would forbid any staff members coming in alone without being invited, and faery detection spells. You two and the hobs will still be able to get in, of course," he said to Aavraak and Kohana.

"Yes, and we may add that to all the dorm rooms over the summer, as there really is only one reason for the human staff

to be in the rooms, which is to do maintenance on the runes, the lighting, the electrical, or other hardware issues.”

“I think Principal Park will approve that,” Mr. Safiq added.

“Can you check room B12 when you’re done, too?” Kohana asked. “We hang out in there a lot, too.”

“We’ll do that,” Mrs. Metaxas promised.

“Well go ahead then,” Sally said.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Metaxas said, and they began.

With the pixies outside the door in shifts, the room cleared of eavesdropping spells and devices, and the added protections on the room, Dalia felt more secure than she had before. It helped that she hadn’t been attacked in this room, and apparently neither had the others – they’d been caught in the hall outside it instead. But it still took Dalia over an hour to get to sleep. The others had almost as hard a time as she did, too.



THE FOLLOWING WEEK in Magical Self Defense, Mrs. Metaxas began teaching them about wand crafting. Because hers was pretty much done already, Dalia’s wand was used as an example of fine craftsmanship, which made Dalia blush, though this wasn’t visible on her dark skin. It also bothered her slightly, because she didn’t consider it done yet, even though it was polished (as much as a gnarled wand like hers could be polished, anyway) and had a lilac quartz tip and an obsidian end cap. She still needed a handle on it, and she had

an idea for that which she had to go home to do. She had heard somewhere about basilisk feathers and wanted to use one on her wand, too.

By far the most surprising thing was that Mrs. Metaxas touched the wand with her bare hands and didn't seem afraid of the fact it was a Devil Tree wand. Though she *did* pause and glance down at the wand, as though it had done something to get her attention. When she was done showing everyone, she returned it to Dalia, who put it in its holster which was now attached to a belt instead of being in her purse, as it had been previously.

They spent several weeks alternating between working on their wands and doing other things in Magical Self-Defense. During those weeks, they also worked on Waxing in Mr. Rabe's class, by practicing on bamboo shoots, with the goal of making the bamboo grow twice as fast as it normally did. Since bamboo already grew almost fast enough to watch it happen, that meant that it would be a lot easier to notice when the bamboo was growing faster than usual.

Alchemy class was still boring. They'd long since finished with the safety training, and the basic, mundane aspects of the class. Now they were learning to identify magical potions ingredients, what their properties were, and how to safely handle them. Mr. Marten also had them starting on a school-work project about interactions between two or more ingredients, especially the dangerous interactions.

In Enchantment class, they'd moved from making objects levitate to trying to make other people levitate, with the eventual goal of learning how to make themselves levitate. This yielded disappointing results, as some people were really



good at levitating large objects, and others still struggled to get smaller objects to reliably float. Nobody at all managed to levitate another person all week long, but Sally told Dalia after the second such class that she thought she felt a little lighter than she had before.

A month after that night in the basement, Sally finally got all the pieces from that older girl's list for the robot she'd wrecked turning it into a mobile flame-thrower. Sally and her friends were still stuck using the spare dorm room in the basement, the corridor the pixies had wrecked was still undergoing repairs. It wouldn't be long now, all that was left was to finish the rune work, which meant Dalia occasionally saw Nizoni around school, since Nizoni was doing most of the rune work.

Speaking of still having to be in the basement, Dalia wasn't recovering from her traumatic experience as well as she thought she should be. With the exception of Mrs. Metaxas, Dalia had gotten so scared to be alone in a room with a teacher that she would go into panic attacks every time it occurred, her mind filled with a desperate need to escape. Luckily, it hadn't happened more than a few times, but these things do sometimes happen, and she actually got a detention for it the first time it happened, which was dropped once she managed to confess to Sally how scared she was, and Sally passed this on to Mr. Hoyt – the school counselor. Even when talking with him, Dalia had to have a second adult in the room with them. Since she was available, Nizoni volunteered for this duty.

The whole month, Dalia hesitated every time she had to go to the basement. Even with the pixies as an honor guard,

she found going down there difficult. She would flee to the room as quickly as possible, or to room B12. Still, she never felt fully comfortable in either room. They even had Brandon's birthday party (March 20<sup>th</sup>) in one of the spare rooms upstairs rather than the basement because of it.

The whole thing was annoying her, too; Dalia *liked* the basement, with all its cool different rooms, and she wanted to feel comfortable enough there to explore it again. It was on the list of things she was working on with Mr. Hoyt, though his suggestion was that if she was still having problems when school let out for the summer, that she should get a psychologist from within the witch community. She told him she already had a psychologist she saw sometimes, as well as a psychiatrist because of her depression and anxiety. He had said, "Oh. Well there you are, just make an appointment with one of them if you need it."

Then things got worse.



*FRIDAY, APRIL 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

Sally was having a good dream wherein she had made a robot that fed her maple pancakes in bed. She had just asked it for another couple of pancakes when a scream woke her up. She bolted upright in bed and grabbed a screwdriver from her bedside table, looking for the threat. But none was readily apparent. Also startled out of sleep were Aavraak – who was also in fight or flight mode, and Kohana in her fox form, her hackles raised, looking around the room in fear.

They all saw the source of the noise at the same moment. Dalia was twisted up in her bedding, wriggling around like a worm on a hook, talking in her sleep.

“No! NO! LET ME GO! HELP! SOMEONE HELP ME!” she screamed again, and everyone instinctively covered their ears.

Sally tossed the screwdriver onto the bed and rushed over to Dalia. Sally saw she was crying in her sleep as well, actual tears making tracks across her face.

“Is it a nocturnal horse?” Aavraak asked.

“What?” Sally asked her.

“A nocturnal horse. The kind that is a bad dream.”

“A nightmare? Looks like it. Dalia, wake up! It's just a nightmare! WAKE UP.”

Aavraak moved forward to poke Dalia awake, but Sally grabbed Aavraak before she could do that. “It's not a good idea to wake up people by touch if they're having nightmares this bad. Especially with Dalia, who I think had PTSD even before that night with the paper soldiers.”

“PTSD?” Aavraak asked.

“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.”

“What do we do?”

“DALIA! WAKE UP!”

Dalia jerked awake, pulled her hair bonnet off hastily because it was covering her eyes. She looked around with wide, fearful eyes until she saw her friends standing nearby, concerned looks on all their faces. As soon as she realized what must have happened, she burst into tears. A moment later, she felt something furry leap onto the bed and settle next to her. Out of habit, she began to pet the furry thing, not real-

izing until she'd started that it was Kohana. She stopped, but only because now she was hugging Kohana's furry form and crying into the white fur of her friend.

Sally sat on the bed, careful to not touch Dalia in case she didn't feel like human touch at the moment. Aavraak pulled up a chair. They waited quietly for Dalia to calm down in case she needed to talk about it.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Sally asked gently, when Dalia had stopped crying.

"I'm sorry I woke you up," Dalia said.

"No need to apologize. You couldn't help it," Sally said. "Now, do you want to talk about it?"

Dalia shook her head, then hugged her knees and putting her face down on them.

"Pain should be acknowledged," Aavraak said. "For we cannot heal if we ignore pain."

"She doesn't have to talk to us about it if she doesn't want to," Sally said.

"That is true, but it is also true that it is best if she speaks of it. My nonda – what I call my krolt parent – says that it is especially true of bad dreams. You must get the poison out of the wound. Usually the dreams sound silly when spoken of aloud."

"I really don't—"

"Sally," Dalia interrupted, looking up at her now. "Aavraak has a point."

"Sorry, Dalia. Go ahead."

Dalia was silent for a few moments. Then she spoke. "I dreamed that... that I had one of those... those iron-bindings in... inside me. It was controlling me. It was making me hurt

my friends and family—" here, her voice cracked with emotion, her eyes watering again. She wiped her eyes and continued. "I couldn't stop myself. I couldn't move. Nobody could hear me. It wasn't like with Doñela and Tamir. No matter how hard they fight for control, I can always push them aside if I really want to. I can always take back control. But this..."

She pulled her chewy goldfish-shaped necklace out from under her pajama top and began chewing on it. Sally noticed she'd worn all three of her pentacles to bed, and Sally could feel something akin to heat coming off of them, which she knew meant Dalia had gone back to over-charging them.

"That's it. We need to get them to put us somewhere else," Sally said. "I don't claim to know if having to be down here every night for a month after Ms. Hollander tried to kill us is causing Dalia's nightmares or not, but it can't be doing her any favors, and I've been having nightmares of my own. Nothing near as bad as Dalia's, but still nightmares."

"Me too," admitted Aavraak in a quiet voice.

"Me too!" said Kohana, who was now being petted for comfort by Dalia again.

"Then it's settled. We'll try Mr. Hoyt first. Then Mrs. Metaxas, if that doesn't work."

"It is two of the clock in the A.M.," Aavraak said. "We cannot do it now. What do we do in the meantime?"

"Dalia, what do you feel about trying to sleep the rest of the night?"

"I feel like I'd rather drown myself in the toilet."

"Yes, I thought so."

"I could sleep next to you," Kohana offered.

"Thanks. That might help. But still... that nightmare has me more scared than I was before."

"There are pixies outside the door," Sally said.

"Yes. But still... they're not wearing their gas masks and goggles. What if whoever sent that iron-binding here comes into the school and continues the attacks? What if Ms. Hollander isn't really free – what if it grew back, or the person who sent her here sneaks in and puts another one inside her?" She was near tears again, barely containing her panic.

"The nurses told us a few weeks ago that there's containment spells and alarms on her. If she wakes up, one alarm goes off. If she tries to get out of bed, she won't be able to but the effort will set off another alarm. There's also alarms against unauthorized entry, in the private room she has now. Nobody's going to be able to hurt her or reactivate her. And even if she got out somehow, her staff permissions were revoked, and she's been banned from the basement and dorms entirely, enforced by wards," Sally said.

Dalia relaxed a little bit. "We should still tell the pixies to wear goggles and gas masks."

"I do not think the other students would agree with you on that point," Aavraak said. "The gas masks and goggles make them look very disturbing."

At these words, Dalia grabbed her knees again and began to rock back and forth. By now, the other girls had been around her enough to recognize it as something she did to comfort herself, another stim like the necklace she was still chewing on.

Sally stood up and walked over to the door, opening it up.

"You cannot come out here, it is still curfew," chided one of the pixies.

"I'm not planning to come out. I just came here to tell you that... wait, did you hear Dalia screaming earlier?"

"Yes. We peeked in from a corner of the room when it happened, and saw it was a nightmare and that it was being handled."

"Oh. Well that's a comfort. For a moment I was scared you hadn't heard it. Anyway, I came out here to tell you that Dalia is very afraid right now, and it would help her a lot if you could all start wearing goggles and gas masks. At least until we get up in the morning."

"Why? The threat is gone."

"That's an assumption. It might not be gone yet. We still don't know who sent Ms. Hollander here, or who enslaved her. Also, anxiety isn't logical, so if you could please just do as I ask, she'll be more at ease than she was."

"But the other students might be scared of us."

"First of all, a lot of them are probably still scared of you anyway. Secondly, you can always just explain to the other students that it's for their own safety."

"Principal Park would not want us to do that. To continue to act like there is a threat when there is none is bad for student morale. Scared students don't concentrate on their work, and make the school look bad. That was a paraphrase of what he said."

"Just for the rest of the night, please? I can ask the genius loci to direct people away from this room unless they're specifically trying to find this room. Would that be a good compromise?"

The pixies looked at each other for a moment, then sighed. “Yes, we can do that.”

“Good.”

As soon as Sally spoke to the genius loci – which looked and felt entirely like talking to yourself or to God – one of them zipped away. Less than half a minute later, it returned and began to distribute the equipment. Now that the pixies were in that gear, they took their places buzzing around the door again.

“Wait,” Dalia said. “Can they contact the hobs? Ask them if they can transport people as well as objects.”

“Why?”

“Because I'd feel even safer with hobs guarding me in the room itself, if they can do that.”

“Okay.”

“If they can, tell the hobs I could get them a whole large carton of cream to pay them for their time.”

One of the pixies nodded and zipped off.

“Not a bad idea,” Sally said. “Wish one of us had thought of it before.”

A few minutes later, a dozen hobs were sitting in a circle around a tiny magical fire on Dalia's bedside table, roasting tiny marshmallows and having conversations entirely in their own form of sign language. The crackling of the fire, the night-light type lighting it provided, the gentle emotional energy coming from the hobs, and Kohana's furry form in the bed next to her was enough to put Dalia in a much calmer mood than she'd anticipated being capable of. But it wasn't quite enough. Half an hour later, she grabbed Mr. Hugs and put him in “harmless” mode so he wouldn't scare



either of them by activating his anti-theft mode in the middle of the night. She held him close on her other side, and settled down again. It took her over an hour after that, but she did finally get back to sleep. She had a few more unsettling dreams even like this, but nothing that had her screaming or rolling around in the bed.



*SATURDAY, APRIL 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

The next morning, a Saturday, Dalia woke up to the sound of Gegauassi trying to get her attention. It was so unusual for him to be up before her that she bolted upright in alarm.

“Chill, home fry,” he said in an accent so bad she couldn’t even identify it. “It’s not the end of the world. It’s just that Kohana was speaking to Vedyā on MMOTW and then Vedyā wanted to talk with you once Kohana left for breakfast.”

Dalia sat up, put her mechanical foot on - for it was returned and fully repaired now - and walked over to Vedyā. As soon as she saw the look on her sister’s face, she knew Vedyā was going to say something inappropriate. Vedyā usually said something inappropriate whenever she grinned that wide.

“So, Dalia, I hear you’ve been sleeping with my girlfriend.”

Dalia didn’t have the patience for this, so the groan she gave was a very annoyed one. “It’s too early in the morning

for your rude sense of humor. I had a nightmare last night, I missed two hours of my usual amount of sleep.”

“Yes, Kohana told me. Then she told me that you and she slept—”

“In the same bed, yes we did. It’s not like you make it sound, though.”

“I was only pulling your leg, Shádí, don’t get so bent out of shape about it.”

“I literally just woke up. I’m not in the mood for leg pulling.”

After a minute of silence between them, Vedyá said, “So... a dream about being iron bound?”

“She told you about that?”

“I think she sensed you didn’t want to bring it up with me yourself.”

“Yeah, I had a dream about being iron bound. I was made to hurt my friends and family.”

“What did it make you do to *me*?”

Dalia paused a few moments before speaking with a voice cracking with emotion, and barely audible. “Gutted you like a fish.”

“Wow, yeah, that’d be a heck of a way to die alright. If you ever do kill me, please knock me out with a tranq dart and then dose me with aconi—”

Vedyá was cut off by Dalia bursting into tears, her face on her hands.

“Oh crap. I fun ducked up,” Vedyá said. “Come on, I’m sorry, you know me, how I keep trying to cheer people up with inappropriate humor, including gallows humor. I’m sorry, please stop crying.”

Sally came out of the bathroom wearing only a towel, plainly having just showered.

“What’s wrong? Dalia?”

“I overstepped the bounds of decency and taste by telling me how she should murder me if she ever has to,” Vedyā said, her voice full of remorse.

“Please tell me you’re kidding,” Sally said.

“Wish I was. Can you comfort her for me? Maybe give her a hug, since I can’t?”

“I’m wearing nothing but a towel.”

Vedyā rolled her eyes. “Well get dressed first, obviously. Duh!”

Kobalos chose this moment to wolf whistle at Sally. As Sally stormed out of the room to change in the bathroom, Kobalos landed on the desk and looked at Dalia as she cried. After a moment, he turned to Vedyā and said, “Naughty naughty!”

“Like you’re one to talk, you’re worse than I am, sometimes! Like just now!”

Sally came out a few minutes later to Vedyā and Kobalos having a full blown argument. And Vedyā, by the sound of it, was losing. But Dalia wasn’t crying anymore. She was smiling at their antics, and wiping her eyes. Sally decided to let the two sisters make up in privacy, going off to breakfast alone.

“I really am sorry about that stupid, tasteless joke,” Vedyā said.

“Thanks for apologizing.”

“Yeah, no problem.”

Dalia’s stomach audibly gurgled then.

“Ha! Well I’ll let you get ready for your day and go get some food. Catch you later!”

“Sure thing. Later!”





## Chapter Thirty-Three: End of Year

*Saturday, April 7<sup>th</sup> – Friday, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

DESPITE ONLY HAVING to stay in the spare dorm room in the basement for another week after Dalia's first nightmare – thanks to Nizoni's speedy rune work on their original dorm room, Dalia kept having nightmares and kept having trouble trusting teachers or other staff being alone with her. This was also despite Kohana continuing to sleep in Dalia's bed with her, and the pixies and hobs standing guard over Dalia, and the pixies at the door at night. She had tried to convince the pixies and hobs to continue this vigil after they'd moved back into their old dorm room, but both were a little put out with her about this, and had politely refused. After that, Dalia had been completely unable to sleep for the next two days. This time, instead of freezing in place halfway through some task, she began to act almost like she was drunk, like she had when she'd stripped that paper soldier of its power, but not as loopy or as silly.

Visiting the infirmary to take sleeping potions didn't really help, even with the still-unconscious Ms. Hollander in her own private room and sleeping in a bubble that isolated

her emotions from the rest of the world. The first time they tried it, they gave Dalia first one dose and then a second dose, but she was still awake. Only an overpowered sleeping spell from Nurse Ishikawa managed to put her under at last, but she woke up only three hours later and couldn't use any more magical assistance to get to sleep without risking being harmed by it.

It got so bad that week that on the 20<sup>th</sup>, Dalia got permission to head home after dinner and return by Monday morning. The first thing she did when she got home was she searched her home for Papa. She found him in greenhouse one, cleaning up after re-potting some flowers. Dalia hugged Papa so tight that he had to pry her off with magic a few minutes later so he could finish cleaning up. Once he was cleaned off, though, the two of them went into a sort of second living room up in the Tirffiniol side of the house, and he set her on his lap – with some difficulty, as she was almost 13 – and asked her what was wrong.

After Dalia managed to tell Papa everything she could think of about the time since that night in the basement, he thought for a few moments before speaking.

“So it sounds like your nightmares are inspired by what you saw when you linked minds with Ms. Hollander, more than anything else. Which makes sense. As frightening as the rest of it must have been, you saw some truly horrific things when you linked minds with her.”

Dalia didn't respond to this at first, except to nod mutely. Then, after a few minutes of silence, she said, “And she still hasn't woken up. It's been almost two months, and she still isn't awake yet.”

Orpheus squeezed Dalia a little tighter for a brief moment. "I know, my little larkspur. All we can do is wait, and remember that only faeries can be iron-bound."

"Are you sure of that?"

"As far as I've ever heard. Kira and Takashi both work to put an end to the continuing evils of slavery, through Vzácná Svoboda<sup>[2]</sup> International Investigations."

"That's called 'human trafficking,' isn't it? The modern continuing practice of human slavery?"

"They fight all kinds of slavery."

"What about the mundane prison system? The people in there work for pennies a day and usually end up in there for really dumb reasons."

"Not a lot they can do about legal slavery in a country with as much surveillance as the US. And the Grand Council would shut their North American chapters down pretty quickly if they tried interfering with the US prison system."

Dalia sighed. "I'm gonna ask Kira or Takashi about Vzácná Svoboda, and what I'd need to be good at to join them."

"That's a noble calling, my little larkspur. But it's also dangerous and demanding. I'm not trying to discourage you, I just worry about you, because I love you."

"I know, Papa. I love you, too."

Orpheus continued to hold his daughter on his lap, the thumb of one hand stroking the back of her hand as they sat quietly for over an hour, only pausing from this when he realized Dalia had fallen asleep. Since they were comfortable on the couch, he decided to let her sleep, moving her only enough so the two of them could recline on the sofa, rather than sitting upright. Soon, he was asleep as well.



*SATURDAY, MAY 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

Dalia's weekend at home and her papa's comforting hugs put Dalia more at ease than she'd been in a long time. When she got back to school and in her bed in their dorm room, Dalia was able to sleep again. She still had occasional nightmares, but they weren't as bad as before. She wasn't screaming in her sleep anymore, and Mr. Hugs became enough of a comfort for her to get back to sleep after an hour or two, allowing Kohana to sleep in her own bed again. Though it probably helped that Dalia and Vedya had found a way to smuggle the monster under her bed from their home to the space under Dalia's bed at school, especially since she now had it tucking her in at night.

As May approached, people started talking more and more about the upcoming dance, the Beltane Bash on the 5<sup>th</sup>. Cally surprised Dalia by again asking her out as a friend. The triplets were going unaccompanied this time, as were both Brandon and Sally. This may have been in solidarity with Kohana, since Vedya wasn't allowed into the school again until September, but they wouldn't say if that's what they were doing or not.

Dalia wasn't quite as excited this time as she'd been for the last one, and wasn't putting in as much effort. Her hair was in its usual locs, though this time she made them about half as thick as usual, and held these slimmer dreads back like a ponytail of sorts, fancying it up a little with some red rib-



bon. As to the outfit, she was wearing the same Victorian-era Gothic dress as she'd worn for her birthday, the blood-red one with black lace. It was a tighter fit now than it had been almost a year ago, and she could see more of her legs, showing she had gotten taller. She also wore the full-eye contact lenses that made her eyes look completely black, and her fingernails were blood red. She even had the same silver shoe on her one good foot, matching the mechanical foot still.

Of her friends, Dalia was the only one besides Kohana wearing a different outfit than last time. Kohana's previous dress had been programmed into her leaf, which she no longer had, and since Vedyā wasn't allowed to come, and Kohana had failed to figure out how to change her form to match the old dress anyway, she wasn't planning on attending.

"Oh you have to come," Sally had said. "I have a surprise for you, that you can only see if you come to the dance!"

"I don't want to go without Vedyā," Kohana said glumly.

"No really, come anyway, trust me, you'll be glad you did."

Kohana looked curiously up at Sally. "What do you have planned?"

"You'll see when you come to the dance. I already ran the idea past Principal Park, and he grudgingly agreed to allow it, on a few conditions that I was happy to agree to."

No matter how hard any of them cajoled her, Sally wouldn't reveal what the secret was to any of them, not even Dalia. So reluctantly, Kohana decided to go, wearing an actual dress that she borrowed from Dalia, which was plain black but still goth in style.

"Are you sure you're okay with me wearing this dress, Dalia? What if I have another incident?"

"That's all over with. I trust you. And if something does happen to it, I'm not going to hate you or anything for it, unless you do it on purpose, which I know you wouldn't."

They were outside the ballroom. Dalia was surprised to find that the basement wasn't giving her any issues at the moment. Of course, it was crowded full of people, which helped. She looked over at Kohana, who was still looking at the dress like she didn't know if she should.

"Um, Dalia? Do you happen to know how much this dress cost your parents?"

"Oh uh... not sure. But let's see, given the style and the uniform color, I'd guess maybe \$30 on eBay. I used to wear that dress a lot, back in mundane school. I still have another seven just like that one. They wouldn't have spent much on those kinds of dresses anyway, after one of my better dresses got torn by a bully in third grade."

"That's horrible!" Kohana said.

Dalia shrugged. "Yeah, I know. I've always had to deal with bullies. But Fae Springs has been a lot better than the others. Even with Anastasia and her friends and her brother picking on me, I've gotten bullied far less here than at other schools. Anyway, it's time to go in."

"I don't know about this, Dalia," Kohana said. "What's the point of me coming to this dance if Vedya can't be here?"

"Lots of others came alone. The point is to have fun."

"Says the person who can't stand crowds and loud noises."

"I'm wearing the necklace that blocks my empathic sense tonight, and Persephone helped me with an amulet that subtly convinces people to give me personal space, with a button on it to program in exceptions like Cally and you and my other friends."

"Right. Well, I suppose I can try to have fun. Enough to not ruin anyone else's night, anyway."

The two of them had finally gotten inside the ballroom behind the other people in the crowd that vaguely resembled a line, and Cally – again in her lilac dress with purple trim, lilac fingernails, and matching lilac shoes – grabbed Kohana's and Dalia's arms and said, "This way!"

It was much easier to move here, on the sidelines, because everyone else was keen on getting into the middle of the room to dance. The DJ already had the music playing, and the lights were dimming. They passed a few teachers until they came to where Sally was. She stepped aside to reveal something behind her.

It was a robot, and a very odd one at that. The base was a standard four-wheeled robot, with wheels of a kind that allowed it to turn in any direction it was directed to, but attached to this base was the empty wooden shaft of an old broom or mop. Bolted to the top of this shaft was a metal frame that had a tablet inside of it, which was displaying Vedy's grinning face on it.

"What the... Vedy!" Kohana said, running up to the tablet. "What is this?"

"I built a tele-presence robot," Sally said. "It's pretty simple. Hermes here is controlling the robot using a Bluetooth-enabled video game controller that I modified to accept in-

put from Hermes via the Bluetooth connection. He's also got access to some Bluetooth-connected cameras I attached to the robot base to track your movement. My dad built a matching robot from my design and loaned it to Vedyā for tonight."

"So... does that mean she and I can dance together now? With these robots?"

Sally grinned. "Yes, that's right! Have fun!"

"Cool!" Kohana said.

The robot moved forward a little. "*Danse avec moi, ma douce?*" Vedyā asked in French.

Despite not being really sure what Vedyā had said because she didn't know French, she'd heard 'danse,' so Kohana guessed it meant 'dance' and answered, "*Oui, mademoiselle.*"

Dancing with the tele-presence robot was a little awkward, because it had no arms or shoulders, so Kohana had to walk forward and back, the robot moving along with her as she did. Sometimes she gave Vedyā and Hermes instructions of where she wanted to go or how she wanted them to move.

Predictably, Anastasia and her friends came over to try to torment Kohana. Vedyā spotted them before they said anything and quickly said, "Butt-head says 'what?'"

"What?" Anastasia said in confusion. As several nearby people laughed at her, she glared at Vedyā's image on the tablet.

"Oh har har, that was really funny back in the third grade," Anastasia said.

"So Anastasia," Vedyā said, "whatcha eatin' under there?"

"Nice try, Lezbozo, but—"

The rest of Anastasia's sentence was cut off by a howling cackle of mirth from Vedyā, who was laughing so hard there were tears coming from her eyes. Anastasia glowered at her, since the victim wasn't supposed to laugh at the insults of the bully, it was disrupting the natural order of things, and Anastasia didn't know how to respond.

"Lezbozo?" Vedyā asked in amused disbelief, between chuckles. "What is—oh my gods, what? Like I'm a lesbian clown? Sorry, Anastasia, but if that's your fantasy, I'd rather not know about it." After a pause, she said, "Lezbozo!" and burst into loud guffaws again, laughing hard enough to fall against the wall on her back and slide down the wall out of the frame for a few minutes. She could still be heard guffawing like a mad woman.

Vedyā forced herself to stop laughing and said, "Come and see the great Lezbozo! Marvel as she juggles ovaries! Be astounded by how she ties knots with her tongue!" she looked like she wanted to say more, but instead she just started laughing again. Kohana blushed at that last joke, but was still laughing herself.

"Come on, let's go," an annoyed Anastasia said to her friends, most of whom were giggling themselves.

The pattern that followed was so much like one of Dalia's occasional laugh attacks that Kohana wondered which of them got it from the other. Just like with Dalia, Vedyā would calm down for a few moments, sometimes as long as a minute or two, and then remember the funny thing again and start guffawing all over again. At one point, she even stopped laughing to say "OW!" because her side was in so much pain, or have to stop because she'd run out of air, only

to start laughing again a minute later. It continued on this way for another hour before Vedyā finally stopped laughing so hard, but for the rest of the night, she would randomly snort with repressed laughter every so often, or else randomly blurt out “Lezbozo!” again.

An hour and a half after that incident, Anastasia and her friends tried again with Dalia, but when Cally saw Anastasia, she blurted out, “Lezbozo!” with a grin. Anastasia and her friends didn’t stick around after that. The news had spread among all Kohana’s friends, and every time the bullies would swoop in to try to attack, someone would say something to indicate they’d heard the joke already. It got to where one of them only had to grin in a certain way for Anastasia and her groupies to wander off.

That wasn’t to say the night went perfectly well. People still gave Kohana wary looks, despite having been told that the danger was over and nothing happening that anyone else had seen since the pixie incident back in February.

“I guess six months just isn’t enough distance from something like that,” Sally said to Kohana after Kohana had mentioned this at one of the refreshment tables.

“No, I guess not. I hope that the summer makes them forget.”

“Probably will. After all, they were terrified of you before, now they’re just wary. Oh hi, Steven!” Sally said, turning her attention to Steven Lambert.

“What? Oh. Hi, Sally,” he responded in a distracted tone.

“You look nice tonight,” Sally said.

“Well yeah, it’s a formal dance,” he said, still distracted.

Sally turned to try to see what had him so distracted, but before she could figure it out, he noticed what she was doing and walked closer to the table, adding some little sandwiches to a plate that already had chips and peanuts on it. He was very carefully avoiding looking at anything but his plate now.

Trying again, Sally looked around for something that might have attracted his attention. But there wasn't anybody there when she looked the second time, and nothing else interesting. Her suspicion was that he'd been quietly keeping an eye on someone he had a crush on, which got Sally's match-making radar pinging, but there weren't any more clues. Steven was just standing awkwardly by one of the refreshment tables. Which one he stood by changed occasionally, as he went to refresh his drink, but she didn't catch him looking at the dance floor again, in the few minutes she tried before Alvar grabbed her and pulled her back into the mass of dancing students.

For the next hour, she had brief random moments where she was free to let her mind wander back to Steven. She felt bad for him, he didn't look like he was having any fun. He was hardly the only person awkwardly hanging back, and there were people sitting to rest in some of the chairs, but he made no attempt to talk to anyone, and didn't seem to respond much when others tried talking to him.

Finally, she couldn't take it anymore, and went over to him.

"Come dance with us, Steven. Me and some of my friends, I mean. It's fun!"

He shook his head hastily. "No no, I... I couldn't."

"Oh come on! If you're worried about attention, more people are paying attention to you moping out here than there'd be if you danced with us!"

Steven paused, glanced at his now-empty plate and cup, then looked up at Sally. He looked into the crowd again and pushed his glasses higher up the bridge of his nose.

"I... well..." he breathed in deeply, exhaled, then said, "Okay."

"Great! This way!"

Steven stood up and followed Sally on shaking legs. Halfway there, she had to stop and gently pull him along by one arm. But finally, he joined them. The triplets, Cally, Kohana, the robot streaming Vedy's face, Aavraak, Brandon, Sally, and even Dalia – though Dalia was wearing magical earplugs that were blocking almost all of the sound out for her.

At the sight of them all, Steven almost lost his nerve, almost left for the sidelines again, but then Dalia spotted him and waved for his attention. He turned to face her for a moment, then looked around, taking in his surroundings. Dalia subconsciously mimicked this action. Now both of them knew that their group had chosen a corner far from the speakers, near a corner and out of the way of the main mass of dancing students. Steven immediately understood they'd done this for Dalia's benefit. He looked again at Dalia, who was signing something. He had no idea what she was signing, but he smiled and nodded anyway.

Thus, it ought not have been such a surprise to him that she grabbed his hand and pulled him forward, but it did surprise him, a lot. It took him a few more moments than usu-



al to realize that the music had changed, and Dalia was attempting to waltz with him. This went a little better once he understood what was going on, but not by much. He had no idea how to waltz, or even how to dance at all, really.

Dalia was struggling to dance with Steven. Even empathically blind for the night, she could tell he was like a deer in headlights, so stunned he could barely move. From how awkwardly he was moving, she didn't think it would have helped much if he was at his ease; she was getting a strong impression that he knew about as much about dancing as an arctic fox knew about the tropics. She also got the impression that he hadn't expected her to try to dance with him, and belatedly realized she'd used sign language at someone who had no idea of the difference between the sign for a donkey and the sign for a hole in the ground.

After the slow dance ended, Steven gratefully let go of Dalia's hands. But though she'd been afraid he'd skitter off like a scared rabbit, he stayed where he was and continued to dance with her and her friends for a while longer.

Even Dalia didn't know how long it was they'd been dancing when she got tired and wanted to sit. Speaking and signing at the same time, she asked Steven, "You want to sit down and rest?"

Steven nodded. Dalia asked the rest of her friends, and most of them agreed. They all went together to the sidelines to rest a bit. Only Brandon – with Kobalos on his shoulder – and Alvar continued to dance, but a few minutes later they joined the group, too.

"I'm sorry I was so awkward earlier," Steven said, "but I don't know any sign. I didn't know what you were saying."

"Yeah, I figured that out. Sorry," she said. She had taken one earplug out so she could hear her friends and Steven.

"Not a problem. I had fun." As he said this, he looked down at his feet for a moment before looking up at her again and adding, "I'd like to learn that sign language stuff. It'd be neat to be able to talk with you without anyone else over-hearing."

"Well Sally knows ASL too. And my younger sister Vedy, who starts here next year, knows it. And if we were out in public, someone else might know. In fact, now that I think about it... I wonder if there's any other ASL speakers in the school?"

Steven shrugged. "No idea. Doesn't bother me. Still sounds useful. Bullies wouldn't know it. Probably."

"Right," she said, switching into 'instructor' mode. "Well ASL is a lot simpler than English. Those of us who use it don't usually bother with a lot of the little connective words English has. When I said, earlier, 'You want to sit down and rest,' I only made five signs along with that: 'You'—she signed this and other example words as she said them—"want,' 'sit,' 'rest,' and the sign for 'question.' Signing takes more work than speaking aloud, so it's best to condense what you're saying to the smallest number of words needed to be understood."

"Oh wow, those signs you used look so simple. I mean, 'you' is just you pointing at me. 'Want' kinda looks like the gesture for 'gimme gimme,' 'sit' looks like a little finger guy sitting on your hand, and then the question mark drawn in the air. I don't quite get 'rest,' though."

“If you think of a movie vampire going to sleep in its coffin, does that help?”

Steven laughed quickly. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

Dalia was quite happy to give Steven this lesson in ASL, since she was starting to feel a little partied out. She wanted to do one more slow dance with Cally, so she paused the lesson to tell Cally to come get her for the last slow dance, then she happily spent the next hour or so teaching Steven American Sign Language. Of course, he only learned a little of it in that time, but before she went up for the last dance with Cally, they made plans to continue the lessons. They'd be going home June 8<sup>th</sup> of course, which was only about a month away, but neither of them minded. When the Beltane Bash was over with, Dalia even gave Steven her MMOTW ID so they could continue after school. (She hadn't wanted to risk forgetting later.)



*MONDAY, MAY 14<sup>th</sup> – Friday, May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

After reviewing heavily since the beginning of April, it was finally time for the end of year tests. These were drawn out over two school weeks because the last time they'd tried squeezing all the tests into a single week, one of the older students had broken several windows accidentally during a stress-induced mental breakdown – showering a couple dozen people with dangerous broken glass – and the school's insurance policy didn't cover that sort of thing.

The tests for the mundane subjects and for History and Civics were fairly boring and routine of course, while the magical subjects had practical tests as well as written tests. They did the written tests first, then the practical tests. Some of these were more interesting than others. Elementary Transformation Magic's practical test was getting a bamboo shoot to grow in a U shape without touching it, which was rather dull for most people.

Alchemy class, though, actually had them brewing several potions. First was a simple anti-anxiety potion, which was basically just a tea made of lavender, chamomile, and well-cooked rowan berries from a rowan that had been growing in Tirffiniol. Because of the danger of undercooked rowan berries, Mr. Marten provided pre-cooked berries for them to use in their potion. One benefit to this was that once Mr. Marten had visually confirmed that the 'potion' had steeped long enough, they were free to drink it. The only problem with this was that Aavraak and Kohana couldn't drink it, since they were both allergic to rowan; this turned out to be a common allergen for faeries.

After drinking their anti-anxiety 'potion' (the ones who could), they continued on to a headache relief potion that was made of feverfew, ginger, peppermint, and the bark of a magical tree called a Whispering Willow. This one was not for drinking unless you happened to have a headache and weren't allergic to aspirin, so Mr. Marten took sample bottles of everyone's potion for testing.

These potions were so simple that there was time in the hour to brew one more, one of the slightly harder potions they'd learned. This was a burn-healing salve, which was

made with aloe vera, lavender flowers made into a paste, and the pureed leaves of an Angelic Ash. The Angelic Ash itself had no healing properties, but Angelic Ash was a common ingredient in healing potions because it could magically supercharge the other ingredients in the potions, so in this case it was greatly magnifying and speeding up the healing properties of the aloe and the lavender, which themselves were already more potent than usual for having been grown in Tirffiniol.

In Enchantment, Mr. Carling tested them on balls of light, making things fly, Banishing and Summoning (which were related to the flight spell), and changing the colors of balls of light. At the end of the test, Mr. Carling mentioned that next year, they would be focusing more on glamours than they had this year.

Of course the test everyone was looking forward to was Magical Self Defense. This test they were told on the A Day before it that they were to meet in the gymnasium, and that they would be starting at 3:30 – an hour earlier than usual, which meant they were skipping that day's second study hall. They were reminded of this by Mr. Rabe at the end of Transformation, so they all went toward the gymnasium after that class let out.

Knowing Mrs. Metaxas, nobody wanted to open the gym door when they got there. Dalia sent Doñela inside to scout. Doñela thought-spoke to her, *'Yes! Right away, Dal—OOF!'* Doñela had bounced off the door, and everyone had heard the sound of it, so there were a lot of startled noises from everyone in class.

*'The blessed thing is warding against telekinesis! That's new.'*

A few moments after that, Mrs. Metaxas arrived with a Middle-Eastern man with short hair and a goatee, whom it took a moment for Dalia to recognize as Mr. Safiq. Dalia glanced at Doñela without moving her head, and Doñela nodded; both teachers were real.

“Excellent wariness, everyone. Though with all that arguing, not much would have gotten accomplished, but that’s for the best. Better safe than sorry, of course.

“Now what we’re going to do for your practical test today is a bit of an obstacle course in the gym that I’ve set up. Each of you are going to go through it individually. By the way, today is going to be a triple period because testing for this class is more important than PE. Because there are so many of you, I’m going to have to split the group up to fit you all in today. Half of you will be going to a spare gymnasium down in the basement to test with Mr. Safiq here.”

She then had them stand in a straight line in alphabetical order and went “One, two, one, two, one, two,” and so on. Twos went downstairs, and ones stayed where they were. Despite her feelings about the basement returning more or less to normal, she was nonetheless relieved to be a one, even though Anastasia was a one as well. Most of her friends were going downstairs too, but luckily Alvar, Kohana, and Aavraak were up here with her, so she had someone to talk with while they waited their turns. Mr. Safiq guided his group toward the basement. Dalia waved goodbye to the friends she had in that group, and they waved back.

“Helping you in this test will be hidden weapons and tools. And yes, if you brought anything potentially useful already, you can use that too. This test will test both your

knowledge and your skill where relevant. Your goal will be to make it through the course to the opposite door, where Mr. Hoyt and Vice Principal Templeton will be waiting for you. And try to keep in mind, it's just a test. We will go through in alphabetical order."

It took some people longer to go through than others, but the longest it took anyone was 23 minutes, and most people were done in 15. Splitting the class had been a smart move, because even if everyone took 20 minutes, they were still within the 3 hour window. The worst that could happen was everyone taking 23 minutes or more, but anyone who was yet to be tested at the end of 3 hours could take the test after dinner was over. Everyone who went through the course was given a temporary spell to keep them from discussing it for four hours just in case.

Dalia's turn came when they'd been there for an hour and three quarters. It was just her, Kohana, and Aavraak left to go. Getting up from the floor, Dalia's friends wished her luck, and she stepped up to the door.

"Just remember, it's just a test," Mrs. Metaxas told her. "Also, I think you'll find the playing field has been leveled. Don't panic, it's an area-effect only, it'll pass when you get out the other end."

Confused, Dalia nodded and opened the door, stepping inside and closing it behind her. She immediately knew, then, what Mrs. Metaxas had meant, for Doñela and Tamir – both of whom had been nearby her – were now gone. Judging by the things they were saying, they had been shoved back inside of her body, and Doñela at least wasn't very happy about it.

*'Hush, you guys, unless you have something constructive to contribute.'*

*'Why didn't she shut us down entirely?'* Doñela asked. *'We might still be able to help you like this.'*

*'Maybe she didn't know how to,'* Tamir said. *'Or maybe she figured it would be unfair, or too stressful, to lock us out entirely.'*

*'It's not like you were too helpful the last time you got locked in,'* Dalia said.

*'Yeah well, you were kinda winging it yourself a lot,'* Doñela countered.

Mentally telling them to shut up, Dalia ignored them and focused on her surroundings. As soon as she did, her jaw about fell right off, she was so amazed. It looked, sounded, and even *felt* like she was standing in a dark, scary, creepy old forest at night. It was complete with hooting owls, howling wolves, glowing red eyes in the dark, and thorny brambles. She assumed this was intended to scare people, especially as it looked like a dead end, but she just stared at it like most people would stare at a gorgeous sunrise over the Grand Canyon.

"Awesome!" she said.

Once she remembered that she was trying to go through an obstacle course, she stood there trying to think what she would be doing if she felt threatened by this and still knew it was an illusion. Deciding she would use her iron horseshoe on a string in that case, she wondered if she should do that now. She was probably supposed to do *something* about the illusion, they'd been reviewing how to shatter illusions in class. But it was just so pretty! She whimpered at the thought



of destroying such a lovely illusion, even though it was probably tied to a rune block and could thus be reset; in fact, it would have to be, to be reusable for all these tests.

A second thought came up then, giving her hope: what if this illusion couldn't be shattered, and it *was* the obstacle course? There might be lesser illusions to break, like illusory enemies to fight. She dug through her purse to find something she'd gotten for Yule this year from her grandma Beladonna: a stone monocle made of rose quartz, which she strapped to her head like it was an eye patch. It worked like stone spectacles, but this way you could see illusions with one eye and see through them with the other. She hadn't really anticipated needing it, but had brought it with her just in case. She put it on now.

What she saw now was just a bunch of black walls. Taking the monocle off, she shifted her focus into her magic sight, and witnessed the illusions turn semi-transparent and monochrome, the black walls glowing with various runes. She wondered, then, if she'd get extra points for tearing the runes apart, or if she'd get in trouble for destroying it for the other students who had yet to go through the obstacle course. But then she remembered what had happened when she'd pulled apart one of the very simple paper soldiers, and decided it probably wasn't a good idea to go messing with runes powerful enough to make an illusion this amazing. Most likely the goal was shatter the illusion like they'd been taught in class. The runes were likely set to respond to that, and go out so they could be reset later. Besides which, pulling apart even one of the runes might destroy it beyond easy re-

pair, and that would feel to her like taking a flame-thrower to a Picasso.

She sighed, resigned to what she was going to do. First making a mental note to ask Mrs. Metaxas if she could have a copy of this illusion to take home with her, she tossed the horseshoe at the illusion. It shattered, and Dalia pouted at the blank black walls for a few moments before pulling the horseshoe back to herself by the string, and moving on, not even noticing there was another horseshoe on the ground in one corner, this one with no string attached.

After this initial illusion she had to shatter, there was another one that made her feel like she was falling. In a panic, she dropped her horseshoe, it shattered the illusion, and she landed on a cushioning enchantment on the floor before dusting herself off and moving on, using her magic vision to watch for potential booby traps. Before leaving the room, she spotted a tool in one of the corners. Investigating it, she saw it was a grappling hook on a rope, so she grabbed it and slung it over her shoulder.

She wound through some tunnels into a room. Once getting into the room, she saw some kind of glow that she didn't recognize coming from a person ahead of her. She saw them just well enough to get scared and lash out at the glowing light with her Will. There was a sound like an old fashioned flash bulb going off and the person she was now running past was giggling, their hair standing straight up.

Dalia climbed a ladder in the next room to continue on. At the top of the ladder, she found some black salt. She had some with her already, but she took it anyway and moved on. It was a good thing she did, too, because in the next room

was a person dressed as an elf. She tossed a pinch of the black salt at them; when they backed off, she moved on.

Dalia soon found out what the grappling hook was for. There was a gap to get across, and since she didn't know how to levitate herself yet (nobody had gotten that far), she tossed the grappling hook up to the rafters and swung across. She tried to get it back down again, but didn't know how, so she left it.

In the next room there was a locked door. She looked around for a key, and found one. It was hanging from the ceiling over a chasm. It looked very deep; it probably wasn't, but she didn't know how high up from the floor she was, so she didn't want to risk a sprained ankle or worse trying to find out. So she looked around for something to grab the key and pull it over with. Finding nothing she could use, she took the horseshoe on a string out of her purse and was about to try to use that to retrieve the key when she had another idea. She put that back and used a summoning spell with her wand. Soon the key was being pulled on its string to where she could grab it. She carefully removed the key from the string, using it to unlock the door...

...which led to the outside corridor where Mr. Hoyt and Vice Principal Templeton were waiting.

"Sixteen minutes and 12 seconds," Ms. Templeton said. "You may now consider yourself dismissed from class for the rest of the day. The only rule is don't go bothering the people who haven't taken the test yet. There's a spell on the test room that prevents you discussing it until we're sure we've gotten everyone tested, but still, FYI."

"Thank you, Ms. Templeton," Dalia said, smiling at her. She then left to go find her friends.



*FRIDAY, JUNE 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018*

Mrs. Metaxas had been amused at Dalia's request for a copy of the 'spooky night-time forest' illusion; amused enough that a couple weeks later, she dropped off something at Dalia's dorm room that looked like four door-sized wooden panels wrapped in a stack with wire. The wood was black, and there were runes on it.

"Not the original, of course, but an early draft. I originally messed up the runes for this one, and it was easier and faster at the time to toss it out and try again than try to repair it. But you talked for ten minutes straight about that illusion, and with such awe and reverence, that I decided to repair this first draft and give it to you, since it was taking up space anyway. I don't know what you'll do with it, but it's yours now."

"Thank you, Mrs. Metaxas!"

"You're welcome, Dalia. So out of curiosity, what *are* you going to do with it?"

"Oh, I'm gonna take it home with me. I have a room above my bedroom it would fit in. I'd have to have someone shadow-walk it in there for me, though. It wouldn't fit through the doorway otherwise."

"I see. Well I'm glad to hear it will be appreciated. I am rather proud of it, after all. I just never thought I'd meet a

child whose reaction to it was anything other than fear. But after what happened on Samhain, I guess I shouldn't have been surprised," Mrs. Metaxas said with a smile.



*SATURDAY, JUNE 2<sup>nd</sup> – Friday, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

It was the final week of school for them now, and a lot was going on. Tests were over, but teachers were giving them homework to do over the summer to keep in practice, as long as they didn't practice their magic where mundanes could see it. (Unless those mundanes were authorized parents or other authorized family members.) They also got their yearbooks, personal copies of Picture Day photos, and copies of the class picture – Dalia grinned at her class picture, since everyone but a few of her friends was giving her a wide berth because of her Devil Tree bracelet. She grinned even wider at her Picture Day photos, with her box braids festooned with skull-shaped beads, and her porcelain vampire fangs in the photo.

Since classes were winding down, not teaching much new except a few things aimed at getting them ready for next year's classes, there was a lot less schoolwork and a lot more time to sign each other's yearbooks. Along with signing the yearbooks of her main friends, she also signed Steven's yearbook.

Thinking about the last few months, and about how she'd signed his yearbook, it occurred to her that he was a friend as well, but a more casual friend. Unlike her other friends, he wasn't in SABOT, he wasn't in any Banners except

for Bengal Tiger, and the only class he and Dalia talked in much was PE. Since the Beltane Bash, they'd been spending more time together because she was teaching him American Sign Language, but they didn't talk much beyond that, since they were both sort of shy and quiet. Dalia liked it. She loved all her friends, but most of them talked a lot, and she found herself talking a lot around them, but sometimes she just liked the quiet.

During that last week, she invited Steven to B12 to just hang out. She explained what she was hoping to do during this time, making it plain that she didn't mind if they ended up talking, if he really wanted to. After all, spending time with just a single friend at one time was still easier than being in a larger group of friends. She had changed a lot over the last year, from someone who was quiet and anxious to someone who... was still quiet and anxious, but had a bunch more friends than she'd ever thought possible. There was a time when she'd thought having one friend – Sally – was a miracle. Now she had *nine*, five of which were pretty close friends.

When Steven came to B12 for several nights that week, they sat there in comfortable chairs, quietly reading, occasionally having a few minutes of conversation before going back to reading. Judging by Steven's smile, he was enjoying having a friendship that was quiet and casual, too. And the best part about B12 was that there was a bowling alley across the hall in B11 that Doñela could spend time in, so she wasn't pestering Dalia.

A couple days before their last one, they got their final grades back. Dalia did pretty well in most of her classes, mostly getting A's and B's, including A+ in both Crystals

and Art, but got a C+ in Alchemy and a C in Music. This didn't much surprise her, she didn't have a head for Alchemy. The simple potions they'd brewed in the final test had likely saved her from getting an F. As for Music, she couldn't stand singing in front of other people, and didn't play any instruments.

She wasn't alone in her grade woes. Sally had gotten a C+ in Alchemy as well, but otherwise got A's and B's. Brandon's weak class was Math (C+), but otherwise he was doing pretty well; she made a mental note to see if Vedyā would tutor Brandon in math. On the better side, Brandon had an A+ in Transformation Magic. Kohana was just above average on most things, getting low A's and middle to high B's on others, but surprised Dalia with an A+ in math. Though Kohana had been spending a lot of time on MMOTW with Vedyā, so maybe she was getting help there? Vedyā was a math whiz.

Cally's worst classes were Music, Alchemy, and Transformation Magic, with C's in all of those classes. Transformation was a C- in fact; Cally attributed it to having the opposite of a green thumb. The only other friend of hers who told her their grades was Aavraak, who had failed Math. Seems she was struggling because the human way of doing math was very different from what she was used to. Aavraak had also just barely managed to pass English, which was hardly surprising given that she had barely even spoken it at all when she first came to Fae Springs.

Easing her friends' burdens a little, the winner of Mrs. Metaxas's little yearly contest – and thus the prize of a protective talisman and a book of defensive spells – was Sally. It

had been a close one between her and Dalia, and Sally had won by just two points.

For all that was going on that last week, it wasn't easy when the 8<sup>th</sup> finally came. This was the last day of school, they were all going to pile into the buses out of here that afternoon, all of them except Kohana and Aavraak, who were being picked up by their parents. Dalia made sure she had MMOTW usernames for every single one of her friends, especially Cally. Sadly, Kohana did not have a computer, but they both had phones. Kohana lived in Canada, though, so that meant it was technically an international call, and thus more expensive. Dalia's family could more than afford the charges, though.

"I'm going to miss you all," Dalia said as they all stood on the other side of the cliff from the school, waiting for the go-ahead to get in the bus and leave.

"I shall miss you too," Aavraak said. The others repeated this sentiment. Even Sally and Brandon did, though that was aimed at the others, not Dalia.

"What are you going to do this summer?" Dalia asked them all.

Aavraak answered first. "I shall be continuing to learn oil painting from my nonda. She and I are of the H̄lehq caste, the caste of artists. As you are no doubt aware from Art class, I am skilled in many media of drawing and painting, but oil painting is one I have yet to learn fully."

"Our dads are taking us to the Winchester mansion this summer," Alvar said.

"Is that the one with all the weird secret passages and false staircases and stuff?" Cally asked.



“Yes,” the triplets said in unison.

“What about you, Cally?” Sally asked.

“Mom says she's gonna get a refresher course of some kind overseas. She wasn't very specific, which makes me think it's that dark magic school in Hungary, but I don't know for sure. Dad and I don't have any plans yet, but that could change. Dalia? What about you?”

She shrugged. “We always go to several Renaissance faires, and FaerieWorlds in August.”

“What's FaerieWorlds?” Kohana asked.

“It's a music festival and market event in the Portland area, sort of. It's a bit off in the woods. Mostly full of mundanes who think they're magical or just love fantasy, but it has some middle-spectrum witches and full witches that attend, as well.”

“Oh that sounds amazing! Wish I could go,” said Kohana.

“I think that can be arranged, if your mom is fine with it. I know Vedyia would be thrilled to see you more often.”

“Really? Wow! Well I have something else to look forward to, now!”

“Middle-spectrum witches?” Brandon asked.

Sally answered this one. “People who are too magical to be mundane, and not magical enough to be fully qualified witches. They usually have enough magic to sense things mundanes can't, see through some glamours, and to do things like defend against spirits, and other subtle magics. But the more obviously magical magics like casting visible glamours, levitation, transformation magic, and most combat magic are usually beyond their abilities. Because of these

facts, they rarely get told about the greater magical world, unless they're born to a magical family."

"Oh, okay. Thanks for the info."

At that point, the bright sunlight darkened momentarily in front of most of them, and Morgana Ravenstone stepped out of the shadows with Vedya, before the shadows returned to normal. The moment Kohana saw Vedya, she ran forward, shouted her name, and gave her a huge hug.

Then, as though this was some sort of cue, two other things happened as Kohana was still hugging Vedya: an antique-looking brass and chrome-colored car popped into existence, and a spout of foxfire appeared, depositing Mrs. Sato there. As Aavraak waved at her nonda, Kohana looked up at her mom, blushing.

"Mom! Hi. Girls, Brandon, this is my mom."

"These must be the friends you mentioned, Kohana," Mrs. Sato said, smiling.

"Yes, Mum," Kohana said, then introduced them all.

"I am so pleased you have so many friends, Kohana. Such close friends, who know all of you and love all of it. And who is this lovely young lady you were hugging?"

Blushing deeper, Kohana said, "She's my friend Vedya. Adopted younger sister of Dalia."

Vedya was far from the only one of them that caught that she'd said 'friend' rather than 'girlfriend.' Nobody said anything, because they all knew it might not be safe to point it out. Homophobia was a thing, after all, and could get people killed.

"You've mentioned her before as well," Mrs. Sato said. "I believe you said she wasn't in school yet."

Kohana nodded. "She came by unexpectedly. To see me before I left, I think. She and I... our friendship is thanks entirely to Dalia's laptop."

Dalia said nothing, but wished suddenly that she could give Kohana a laptop of her own. But if Kohana was as poor as Dalia thought she was, that would be pointless, because they wouldn't be able to afford an Internet connection. And a Witch's Internet connection was even more expensive than a regular one, and required a thaumelectric bridge anyway.

"Vedya Ravenstone, I understand you helped my daughter out when she had her little fire incident at this 'Snow Ball.'"

"Er, yeah. I did. I have a ring that makes me fireproof, and a belt that lets me levitate."

"And knowing this, you had no problem following Kohana when she got upset when the bullies teased her for having no date, and flew her to a lake to cool off?"

Vedya briefly glanced sideways at an anxious-looking Kohana, then said, "It didn't happen quite that way. I was concerned for her, and followed to see how I could help her. Then she sneezed and burst into flame. That's when I acted."

Dalia glanced from Kohana to Vedya to Mrs. Sato and back again. In truth, Vedya had completely forgotten about the fact she'd been wearing those rings still, and nobody could have guessed what was about to happen. If Vedya had decided to leave the rings home, which most people would do, she would be dead now. Dalia was feeling a strong pressure to blurt this out, which she was resisting. She didn't know what Kohana had told her mother, or why.

Mrs. Sato was a smart woman, though. She was looking shrewdly at Vedya. "Why did you have your rings on, anyway? I thought you were here at the dance as somebody's date? Wouldn't so many rings look a bit gaudy for a formal dance?"

"They're charmed invisible, Mrs. Sato. I wear them pretty much everywhere. It's become a habit."

"But they would still be on your fingers, a date would still feel them on your fingers, right?"

"Yes."

"If you left them on for this dance, that suggests you knew your date would know of them and wouldn't mind when they felt the rings. So... would it be safe to say you did not remember you had the rings on when you followed Kohana? That you would have died if you had forgotten to wear them?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Kohana. Why didn't you tell me you have friends willing to risk their lives for you?"

"Mrs. Sato," Vedya said, "there is no possible way I could have known what was about to happen. So as far as I knew, there was no risk. Even after the September incident, I had no way of guessing foxfire could be so powerful, at least not coming from a two-tailed kitsune who is a child."

"Oh. Well... I am still thankful Kohana has friends that care so much about her. Especially friends who continue to care for her even after dodging a bullet like that."

"I don't concern myself as much with what could have been as with what was, and what is," Vedya said.

"Mum, can Vedyá come over for a sleep-over sometime this summer? Her parents can pull people and things through the shadows, so we wouldn't need to drive anywhere."

Mrs. Sato blinked, and looked at Morgana. Morgana smiled her usual close-lipped smile and nodded. Turning back to Kohana, Mrs. Sato said, "I don't see why not. Except... well... your family is rich, isn't it? I mean, it's just that we don't have very high-quality food at home."

"Yes, we're wealthy," Vedyá said. "But Shimá was probably even poorer than you two when she was growing up. At least you two have electricity, garbage pickup, and paved roads. Shimá didn't even have that much. So she teaches us about thrift, and we've had whole months where we ate like we were poor. We got enough to eat, but my point is that we're not above eating a casserole made from boxed mac and cheese and a can of tuna. Even for our normal meals, I don't think we've ever eaten anything that others would consider 'rich-people food.'"

Mrs. Sato's eyes went wide, and she looked at Morgana with an expression of solidarity.

"I'm not Shimá, that's what my children call Nizoni, my wife. I'm called Maddy. And my husband Orpheus is called Papa."

"Oh."

"But yes, Nizoni lived the way Vedyá describes. She grew up on a very impoverished Navajo reservation. It is thanks to Nizoni's brilliance with runes that we became wealthy."

“Mum, they're not like other rich people. They're nice. They volunteer to help hungry people in need, they tip generously, and—”

Mrs. Sato interrupted with a jovial laugh. “Okay dear, you don't need to give me the sales pitch. I heard more than enough. Yes, your friend can sleep over some night this summer, at least once. We can work out the details later over the phone.”

“And can Dalia come, too?”

Dalia blinked. She hadn't been expecting that at all. But she supposed she should have, since they were friends after all, and would be far apart from each other for three months.

“That's fine too, my love,” Mrs. Sato said. “Just... let's not get carried away. You do have a lot of friends, after all.”

Morgana said, “We would have no qualms about hosting our own sleepovers at our house as well, so our daughters could see as many of their friends over the summer as possible. We could arrange transportation as well, where necessary.”

“Oh, how kind of you. Thank you, we're very grateful. And as I said, we can work out the details later.”

Morgana glanced behind Mrs. Sato. “It appears that it is soon time to leave. You had all better finish your goodbyes for now.”

In a near frenzy of tears and running around, they all said goodbye to each other again. Somewhere in all the chaos, they managed to say goodbye to Aavraak as well, and brief introductions to her “nonda,” the same older Goblin who had dropped her off last September. But all too soon, or so it felt, Kohana and her mom were away in a flash of foxfire,

Aavraak and her nonda were in their car, which then disappeared in a blink, and everyone else – including Vedyā and Morgana – were piling into the bus.

Another wave of farewells happened again after the bus finally stopped in a closed-off parking lot behind the bowling alley that the Goblin Market was in. This, then, was apparently their drop-off. This made sense to Dalia; they could let the various families filter out slowly, making it look like ordinary business traffic.

With that, the school year was over, and the summer beginning.





## Epilogue: Dead Ends

*Thursday, June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

NURSE ISHIKAWA WALKED into the private room of the infirmary as she had since March, checking the patient's IV, her vitals, and checking for bedsores – not an easy task on a being covered in fur. This was one of those peculiar things about her patient; by all rights, an unconscious tanuki should be in animal form all the time, but she kept switching back and forth between her animal form and her human form in her sleep every twelve hours, as regularly as clockwork. It had been so peculiar that Nurse Ishikawa had needed to call in for some special medical books about tanuki. The books said that comas were like that for tanukis, but Nurse Ishikawa had never been sure whether this was actually a coma or something else entirely.

Nurse Ishikawa also checked her patient's brain wave activity. This stat had changed several times in the last four weeks, she wasn't entirely sure what it meant, but her patient hadn't shown any signs of waking up yet despite these odd fluctuations in her brain wave activity. Thus, the nurse paid it little mind.



All of the usual things done, Nurse Ishikawa levitated her patient with an artifact designed for hands-free levitation, using one of her wands to direct the process of cleaning the fur and skin of her patient, her kitsune magic being spells floating in her body that were activated by her activation phrases, not the usual human style wand magic. Humans were hardly the first sapient race to use wands, after all.

She slowly and carefully returned her freshly cleaned patient to the bed, and began to make notes on the patient's chart. The chart of course listed the patient's only known name – likely an alias – but she still thought of the tanuki as a Jane Doe, since she wasn't awake to tell them what her actual name was.

Nurse Ishikawa finished with the chart and put it back in its usual place. She turned to leave the room when she heard a cough. She froze and turned to face the patient, who looked the same as ever. Still, she did some more scans. Heart rate rising, blood pressure up, brain waves definitely shifting toward the alpha and beta wave spectrum. Of course, it wouldn't be the first time the patient had woken up. The first time she'd woken up, she'd been screaming so much she'd had to be sedated. It was unclear if she'd been awake in any capacity the time young Dalia Ravenstone had connected with her mind, but it seemed clear now that the patient was waking up, especially since she was glowing and morphing into her human form six hours ahead of schedule.

Her wand at the ready, Nurse Ishikawa prepared herself mentally for anything, but mostly for the patient to start screaming and needing to be sedated again. She watched the corpulent bronze-skinned and black-haired woman roll

around with her eyes still closed, moaning a little. For a few minutes the moaning slowly increased in volume and frequency. Then her eyes snapped open.

The Jane Doe patient was looking around the room with terrified eyes. Her heart rate and breathing were increasing rapidly, and it was clear she was near panic.

“WHERE AM I? WHO ARE YOU? WHY AM I IN THIS BED? WHY AM I RESTRAINED?”

“Please calm down, ma’am. I am Nurse Ishikawa, and you are in the infirmary of the Fae Springs Private School of Magic in the Ossruc region of Pandrol. Specifically in the country called Prokaat. You’ve been in what appeared to be a coma for the last several months, and you’re restrained for your own protection because the only previous time you woke up, you were thrashing around and screaming.”

“I promise I won’t thrash. Can you take the restraints off?”

Nurse Ishikawa removed the IV first, then said a spell, and the magic holding her patient broke.

Visibly calming down a little, the woman said, “Wait, did you say ‘the last several months’? So it’s 1995? I missed out on both Christmas *and* New Year’s?”

“Um... no, I’m sorry, but it’s 2018.”

“Twenty—what? That’s not funny. Not funny at all.”

“I’m not joking. What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Not... not joking? Right, sure. Last thing I remember? Um... I was on my way home from a trip to Earth. San Francisco, California.”

Shining a light in first one of the woman’s eyes, then another, Nurse Ishikawa asked, “What’s your name? And do

you remember who the President of the United States was when you were on your trip?"

"What? Oh right, testing to make sure I've got my wits about me. My name is Johanna Szarvas. President? Um... not sure. I don't get to Earth much. I think it's still Bill Clinton. Or, well, it *was* Bill Clinton, if it's '2018,'" she said with sarcastic air quotes around the year number. "Hey, if it really *is* the far-off future year of 2018, do we have flying cars yet? And who's the current President?"

Ignoring the second question because the woman had been under enough stress as it was without answering *that* particular question for her, Nurse Ishikawa said, "No flying cars yet. You said you were on your way home after visiting Earth. Where is home for you?"

"I live in Traafklin, it's a village about 10 miles from Oroskaatz. Unless of course Traafklin has grown to a city in the last 20 years," she said, still sarcastically.

"Again, I assure you I'm not joking. I can bring you a newspaper if you'd like proof."

"Oh sure. Did I time travel, then? Freeze solid in arctic ice? Get abducted by aliens?"

"No. You... really don't remember, do you?"

"Remember what?"

"You... you were iron-bound."

Johanna silently stared at Nurse Ishikawa, a look of dawning horror on her face. "You... me... iron-bound? Really?"

A sad look on her face, Nurse Ishikawa nodded. "The iron-binding was using your body most recently to attack our school. First targeting faery students, then going after

several human students when they figured out who was behind the attacks. We brought in an expert on iron-bindings, a former iron-bound faery herself, to free you. You've been unconscious almost the entire time since being freed."

"No, no, no... this is a bad dream. I'm dreaming I'm 24 years in the future, after having been a slave all that time. I'll wake up any moment now."

Grabbing a remote, Nurse Ishikawa turned the TV on to the channel with the TV listings, which had the time and date displayed on it. She managed to turn it on just a few seconds before the date changed from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup>.

Staring at the TV in horror, tears streaming down her face, Johanna said, "No, it's not true. IT'S NOT TRUE! It *can't* be true! I have a husband! I have *children*! I WANT TO WAKE UP NOW! WAKE ME UP, I BEG YOU!"

Johanna tried to pinch herself with her right arm, but she'd barely moved it when she screamed in pain.

"My arm! It hurts! It hurts!"

"That was the arm the iron-binding was in, I'm afraid. It got in some irreversible nerve and other tissue damage before it was killed. Your right arm is probably going to hurt for the rest of your life, if you decide to keep it."

"If I decide to keep it? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that it might hurt less if you get it amputated."

"*Might* hurt *less*? Meaning it'll always hurt either way?"

"Yes, that's what I mean. It will hurt a lot, and I doubt it will ever be very functional again."

Johanna put her head back and stared hopelessly up at the ceiling, tears still pouring from her eyes. "My children... my husband... I've been gone from them for so long. I wel-

come this pain in my arm, it might distract me from the greater pain in my heart.”

“They could still be living there. Now that we know where you come from and what your name is, we can have someone go find out.”

“Yeah, maybe,” she said, not sounding very hopeful. “But I’d like to be alone now.”

“Alright. But you’ll still be monitored. The expert who freed you will want to see if she can recover any memories of your last 24 years.”

“NO! I don’t want to remember any of that!”

“I’m sure she can find a way to recover the information without forcing you to relive any of those memories consciously. Our expert is 1000 years old and has quite a broad set of specialties.”

“Just leave me alone!”

“Right. I’ll give you a few hours. Do you want the TV on or off?”

“On. I need the noise.”

“Of course.”

Nurse Ishikawa closed the door quietly behind her, leaving the poor woman to grieve, or whatever it was called when you found you’d been separated from your loved ones for almost a quarter century. No, “grieving” sounded about right, now that she thought about it. She decided she would wait to tell Kira about this development until the morning.



~ FIN ~



## Glossary/pronunciation guide:

*NOTE FOR NAVAJO WORDS:* Some of these pronunciations will be approximations, as Navajo is a tonal language with a lot of sounds that don't occur in English, or which can't really be described. Also note that letters with single accents on them are tonal indicators; *á* = high tone. *a* = low tone. *áá* = rising tone. *áa* = falling tone. In pronunciation brackets, rising tones will be indicated with CAPITAL LETTERS. And double letters (*ii*, *ee*, *aa*) in Navajo are the same as single letters, but held slightly longer.

**Aashabahk [ah shah bok]** – One of the Faery races, specifically one of the group of races known as lilin. Like all lilin, Aashabahk are skin-changers, having a human form and a bird form, usually a raptor. Aashabahk both eat the emotion of hope and cause hope to increase in those around them.

**Ævintýrichor [eye ven tear ee core]** – One of the Faery races. Extremely old, extremely powerful, extremely knowledgeable. Humanoid, usually have horns. Their blood is so purple it's almost black.

**Abuela [ah-bway-lah]** – Spanish word for “grandmother.” Dalia and her siblings call Grandma Kahina Ravenstone this.

**Annwn [ah noon]** – One of the Faery worlds.

**Basilisk** [baz-il-isk] – A two-legged, partially feathered reptilian creature native to Tirffiniol, resembling a cross between a chicken and a small dinosaur. Their gaze can knock people out, and the parts of their bodies not covered in feathers emit a strong acid that they use to protect themselves and their nests. Basilisks come in a range of sizes, but the biggest are no taller than three feet tall at the shoulder.

**Celt** [kelt] – The Celts were a culture of various tribes native to Europe. Some of their culture remains, including words and music.

**“Chase the sleepy man/woman out of your bed”** - Navajo reservation slang, basically means “make your bed or the sleepy man/woman in your bed will be calling all day long for you to join them.”

**Diné** [dean-AY] – Navajo word for their own people (“Navajo” being a name foisted on them by outsiders). Since their term for their language is “Diné Bizaad,” it can also be used to refer to their language.

**Familiar** – A familiar is an animal that has developed a telepathic and/or telempathic connection with a human being. This connection allows the human and animal to be aware of each others' thoughts and feelings, and even to use the sensory organs of the other to gather information. This connection also gives the animal increased intelligence, and the human may or may not develop traits similar to their familiar.

**Fairy/Faery** = Magical non-humans of various species with origins from another universe, such as Goblins, Gnomes, and kitsune, who hail from Tirffiniol. This is distinct from “extraterrestrial,” a broader term that also includes



people from other planets in this universe. But in the Ravenstone universe, the only extraterrestrials are fairies; so far, Earth has not been visited by aliens from outer space. This means that encounters with aliens are actually encounters with fairies.

**Fear inducement** – A type of magic that allows the user to telepathically detect the victim's greatest fear, and even to use it against them by creating hallucinations of that fear. It is generally considered a dark art by the witch community, though some individuals use the power for good. Part of why it is considered a dark art (aside from the obvious) is that – like telepathy and telempathy – it is extremely difficult to detect when in use.

**Gaelic [gal-ick]** = A language from Ireland, the UK, and parts of Europe such as France. The language name refers to the people known as the Gauls.

**Gyehmahl [gyeh-mall]** = A name.

**Kitsune [Kit-soon-ay]** – One of the Faery races. Skin-changers, they have a human form and a fox form. They are naturals at fire magic and illusions. Knowledgeable witches believe they look like foxes because they are related to foxes that slipped through the Veil into Tirffiniol thousands or millions of years ago, became tuunderfeerf animals, then evolved into something new.

**Kwanj [kwainj, rhymes with strange]** – One of the three sexes of Goblins.

**Krevjavroq [krehv-jayv-rohk]** – A Goblin city near Fae Springs.

**Locs** – Proper term for what are commonly known as “dreadlocks.” The term “dreadlocks” is racist, because the ori-

gin of the term was white people calling the loc style “dreadful locks” which got shortened to “dreadlocks.”

**Nimá [nee MAH]** – Navajo word meaning “your mother.” In this story, it is only used occasionally in reference to Nizoni.

**Pentagram** – In this story’s context, a five-pointed star made of overlapping lines, which can be drawn without lifting your pen from the paper. It is a religious symbol, symbolizing in ancient times the four earthly elements (Air, Earth, Fire, and Water) and the fifth element of Spirit. The prominent point, when pointed upwards, then represents spirit above all the world. The pentagram was also used by pre-Renaissance Christians to symbolize the five wounds of Christ on the cross. Those in the know about the original symbolism of the pentagram will know that when the point faces downward, it usually means “focusing on the body over the spirit.” (Though opinions vary.)

The pentagram also serves as a protection from dark and even demonic forces. This was especially true among Christians prior to the Renaissance. Its mistaken association with Satanism was likely due to people in the Renaissance era claiming to be summoning demons, which they would supposedly contain inside these protective symbols so as to not be killed or possessed by the demon, as the pentacle was in wide use by Christians prior to that time – used almost as much as the crucifix was – and then suddenly fell out of favor after the era of supposed demon summonings.

**Pentacle** – A pentagram contained inside of a circle. This form of the pentagram is now most commonly associated with the modern religion called Wicca, but the penta-

gram and the pentacle are ancient symbols, and can be used by anyone. Even some modern Christians have been known to use the pentagram or pentacle, like the pre-Renaissance Christians before them did.

**Samhain [Saw wen]** – Old Celtic holiday celebrated around October 30<sup>th</sup> to November 2<sup>nd</sup>, depending on the year. It celebrates the passing of the autumn into winter as part of the Wheel of the Year. In modern practice, it is considered the Witches' New Year, and is the time of year when spirits of the dead are said to be most able to cross over into our world, thus is often celebrated to honor ancestors and/or deceased loved ones.

**Shádí [shAW-dEE]** – Navajo word, means “my older sister.” Vedyá calls Dalia this.

**Shadow-Fax** – A form of artifact-induced shadow-walking that sends a letter or package through the shadows automatically from one shadow-fax box to another. Even people who don't know how to shadow-walk can use a shadow-fax box.

**Shadow-walking** – A form of magical transportation that involves sending persons, animals, or objects through the shadows. Can also be done via mists, or by hiding from observation and then closing your eyes.

**Shadow-walk portal** – Another artifact-based form of shadow-walking, using an artifact that creates a shadow portal to another paired portal device.

**Shimá [sheem-AH]** – Navajo word, means “My mother.” Dalia and her siblings call Nizoni Hatathli-Ravenstone this.

**T'éénzíid** [TAYn-zEEed] – Diné (Navajo) for “You wake up!” (Capital letters after initial letter are high tones. Also, the T' is T pronounced with a pop of air, and don't forget double letters are held longer; that applies here, too.)

**Telepathy** [tell-ep-uth-ee] – The ability to send/receive words, images, or other thoughts between two minds without the use of language. People with this skill are called telepaths. The skill is also known as “telepathic powers.”

**Telempathy** [tell-em-puth-ee] – The ability to send/receive emotions and other feelings between two minds without the use of language. People with this skill are called empaths. The skill is also known as “empathic powers.”

**Tirffiniol** [Tear fin ee ul] – One of the Faery worlds, the one easiest to get to from Earth.

**Tsiyyeel** [sih-yAY-ul] - The name of a traditional Navajo hairstyle. (Hold the “ih” in “sih” longer than normal.)

**Tuunderfeerf** [Toon dur fear-f] – A human who has, whether by accident or by heritage, become overly acclimated to Faery by becoming a Faery human, complete with the associated weaknesses against iron and certain herbs.

**Veil, the** – Short for “the veil between the worlds.” It is a relatively recent term used to refer to the trans-dimensional energy barrier that keeps the different universes apart from one another. When working properly, only witches and fairies can detect it. It is known, however, to fluctuate and allow things to slip between worlds by accident, and this fact has been utilized by witches and fairies to slip between the worlds on purpose. On Earth, the Veil most readily slips people into Tirffiniol, though other realms like Annwn are not unheard of. The Veil has even been reported to cause people

to slip backwards or forwards in time, usually on a temporary basis.

**Zee, zeer(s), zeerself** = Genderless pronouns. When used, “zee” replaces “he” or “she,” “zeer” replaces “his” or “her,” “zeers” replaces “his” or “hers,” and zeerself replaces “himself” or “herself.” (Note: This is the author's own variation on an existing genderless pronoun set.)



## Names

Note: As these names come from different languages, how they are spelled does not necessarily reflect how they are pronounced. There's nothing as wild as Gaelic pronunciations (where words like 'sidhe' and pronounced 'shee') in the fantasy names, though.

**ASÍS [AH CEASE]** – A surname of Spanish origin.

**Bonewits [bonn-uh-wits]** – A surname.

**Calandra [Kuh-lawn-druh]** – A name of Greek origin.

**Cally [Kal-e, rhymes with 'Sally']** – Nickname for 'Calandra.'

**Chooli [Choo lee]** – A name of Navajo origin.

**Dalia [Doll yuh]** – A name, in this case from the Hebrew. Pronunciation may or may not be correct.

**Doñela [Dohn-yay-lah]** – A Spanish name.

**Joaquin [Wah-keen]** – A Spanish name.

**Maddy** – What Dalia and her siblings call Morgana Ravenstone.

**Nizoni [Nih zone ee]** – A name of Navajo origin.

**Orpheus [Or fee us]** – A name of Greek origin.

**Persephone [Per-seff-uh-nee]** – A name of Greek origin.

**Raul [Raw-ool]** – A name of Spanish origin.

**Sutekh** [**Soo tek**] – A name of Egyptian origin.

**Vedya** [**Ved yuh**] – A name harking from India.



## For gnomish language:

(Ones marked with asterisk \* are sometimes seen in other languages,  
too.)

(Please note that accented letters in Navajo indicate tonal stress and not  
a difference in pronunciation.)

AY = AY AS IN SAY, pray, weigh. í = ee

ai = I as in I/eye o = Oh as in goat, boat, moat

u = oo á = Ah as in baa, la, maw

e = eh er = er as in word, bird, heard

I/i = Ih; the i as in “is” ae = A as in cat, bag, and “al.”

au = ow as in “cow,” “sow,” and “chow.”

áá = Same as á, but drawn out longer.

ĵ = S as in treasure, pleasure, measure, or j from the  
French journal.

Ĥ / ĥ = Makes a sound like trying to get a popcorn kernel  
out of the back of your throat. (\*)





## For ævintýrichor language (Hehvehwesh):

◊ = VOICELESS VELAR fricative. Makes a sort of hissing noise. Found in words like the Scottish word “loch.” But in this language’s case, sounds closer to the first sound of the parseltongue word for “open” (◊ahsee’eth) in the Harry Potter movies.

S’s in this language tend to be more sibilant than in English.

Double S’s (ss) are even more sibilant, as well as drawn out.

Double A’s are drawn out a couple seconds. In fact, double letters are almost always drawn out for at least one second. Triple letters are drawn out even longer.

Dashes ( - ) are used to separate syllables, and have no sound.

Apostrophes are used to connect two words together. For instance, if done in English, the word for eel would be fish’serpent.

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[1] É = ch. Ā = A saying its name, like in American English words like “pray” and “day.” Á = Ah as in “saw” or “baa.”

◇ = voiceless velar fricative, like the CH in the Scottish word “loch.” Ů = Oo as in food, rude, and intrude. Ō = O’s name, like in English ‘go,’ ‘flow,’ or ‘grow.’ Ē = Same as ee in English words like week. Double-s’s (ss) are extra sibilant like a snake hiss. The hyphens and apostrophes are just syllable separators to make it easier to read. Two vowels together like ēē are pronounced separately. Thus Késsēél = Keh-ssee-ehl

[2] Pronounced “Zaats-nah Zvoh-boh-dah”



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## About the Author

Highly eccentric neo-pagan, autistic, transgender woman with depression and anxiety. An empath and former telepath (a gift lost during childhood) with the ability to read people's hearts to figure out if they're good people or not. The author strives to improve the world, increase representation in fiction, and support minority authors whenever and wherever possible.

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