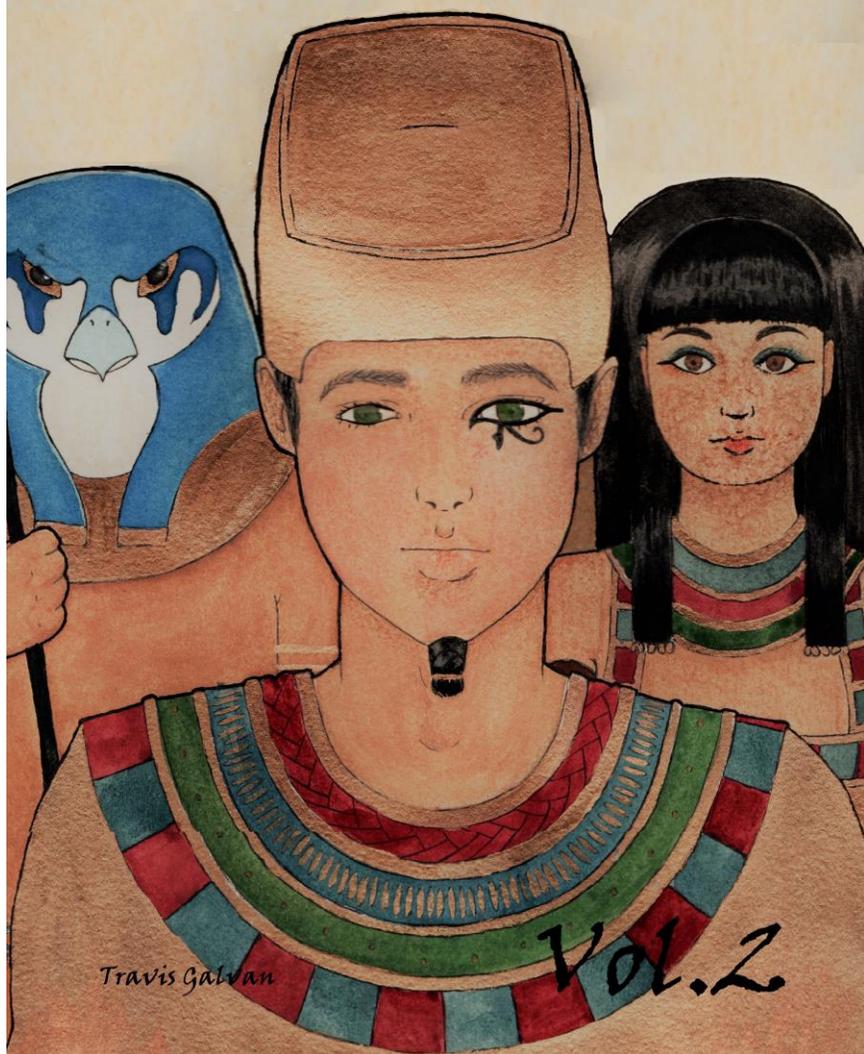


# Breaking Fates



Travis Galvan

Vol. 2

# *Breaking Fates*

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By Travis Galvan

# Contents

CHAPTER 1 .....	5
CHAPTER 2 .....	18
CHAPTER 3 .....	29
CHAPTER 4 .....	37
CHAPTER 5 .....	50
CHAPTER 6 .....	62
CHAPTER 7 .....	71
CHAPTER 8 .....	83



## CHAPTER 1

### THE HAUNTED FOREST

Ren chewed her lip as she watched the second hand make its journey around the face of the clock. When the dismissal bell rang, she slammed shut her book, grabbed her things, and ran out of the classroom, trying not to knock over too many of her classmates. There was no room for error in today's schedule.

The last stall in the girl's restroom was empty when she rushed in. She would normally ride home with Hannah, but she didn't have time to wait. She locked the stall and turned to the wall but hesitated to lay her palm against it. *Dang it! I gotta check to make sure.* She ducked and looked under the panel to see the other stalls were empty. *Good, no one saw me.*

She returned to the wall and placed her palm against her own shadow. In her mind, she played a long musical note, a low range F sharp, which she allowed to resonate through her whole body, all the way to her feet. As she did, her shadow gave way. She pushed herself into the void and through the wall. The other side appeared to be the very same bathroom she just left, but the color scheme had been converted to black and white and somehow reversed. The sound of students in the hall was gone. In fact, there was no sound at all, except that which she made herself.

The Shadow World felt unsettling, but it had always proven to be a safe place — for the most part. She returned

to the stall door, threw the latch, and shoved it open to see the shadows of several students entering from the hallway. In the Shadow World, only inanimate objects had a physical presence. All living things from Reality cast a shadow into the Shadow World. Nothing more. Similarly, back in Reality, Ren's shadow danced across the floor as she ran through the door, into the corridor.

On the Reality side of the veil, students made their exit through the exterior doors of the school. This meant their Shadow World counterparts would be open as well. Ren ran through as quickly as she could, taking flight the moment she reached the outside, heading directly south. She raced home at top speed and landed in her backyard, where she again placed her palm against her shadow on the wall, next to the backdoor. This time she played a midrange D in her head. The shadow opened again and she crossed back to Reality.

\*\*\*

Up in her room, Ren laid out her formal gown and placed the matching shoes on the floor next to the bed. She prepped her makeup supplies in front of the dresser mirror so they'd be ready to go at a moment's notice. The awards ceremony wouldn't be until eight o'clock. This meant she had three hours to train before she had to get dressed.

The winter solstice was two weeks off and she had to be ready to perform. There would be no second chances if she screwed it up because a screw up would mean someone died. As important as this awards ceremony was, it was nothing compared to the other responsibilities she bore. That said, she couldn't afford to ignore it. She had to appear to be a normal sixteen-year-old girl. She had won the school art contest every year since kindergarten and attended each subsequent award ceremony. Though her life had become a supernatural freak show this year, she couldn't let that affect her non-supernatural life events or people would become suspicious.

As she finished the last of her award ceremony prep,

she heard footsteps rushing up the stairs.

“You ready to go?” asked Bo as he ran past.

Ren heard her younger brother run down the hall to his own room to drop off his backpack. “Yeah! Be right out!” she replied as she grabbed a rubber band from her dresser. She pulled her long brown hair into a ponytail as she stepped out of her room.

“Yap!”

She looked down to see a small brown dachshund wearing a leather collar with a tag that read “Angus.” Glancing to the other end of the hall, she saw her brother’s discarded shoes and pants sticking partially out of his bedroom door. She laughed and insisted, “You’re wasting no time, are you?”

“Yap!” The dachshund turned to the wall opposite his sister’s room and passed into his shadow, vanishing from the hallway.

“And I thought I was in a hurry.” She followed him into the Shadow World, where she scooped him up and tucked him under her arm. As she ran down the stairs and out the back, she said, “Lan and Joey should be waiting for us at the nursery. I hope Dora likes them.” Again, she took to the air, this time southwest, toward Mansfield.

\*\*\*

Ren landed on the lawn behind Russel’s Nursery and pushed through her shadow on one of the large trees, back to Reality. She dropped her brother and started toward the rear entrance of the building and said, “I’ll be right back.”

“Yap!” the dog replied.

Sue lived in the home attached to the side of the nursery. Her family had owned the land for ten generations. She had been dating Ren and Bo’s father for several months. Ren expected her to be on duty in the nursery.

At seven feet tall, Lan was easy to find. He and Joey were looking around in the tools section when she entered from the back.

“Hey, guys. Have you seen — oh, there you are.” She

turned to Sue, who had been, up to this point, eclipsed behind Lan. “Bo’s waiting in the back. Are you sure it’s okay if we all go in now?” asked Ren.

“Yeah, I talked to Mom about it. She said she’s more than happy to help any way she can.” At five foot three, Sue was a little taller than Ren. Her bright eyes and smile made her look like a Filipino beauty queen.

“Awesome. If it’s okay, I’ll take them through the back.”

“That’s fine,” Sue agreed and craned her neck to look up at Lan. “It was so nice to finally meet you,” she said, offering her hand to shake. Her fingers only extended halfway across his palm. “You too, Joey.”

Joey took her hand in a far more conventional grip, gave it three gentle pumps, and said, “Thanks for helping us with this. We appreciate it.”

“It’s fine. Go on back. Oh, and Ren, I’ll see you at the ceremony tonight. I’m so excited for you!” Sue beamed.

Ren smiled, bounced three times, and beamed, “Thank you! I’ll see you there!” She waved as she led the others through the back and into the yard behind the store.

“Is this the part where we go into the haunted forest?” Lan asked as he ran his fingers through his hair and scratched the back of his head.

Ren turned and narrowed her eyes at him and asked, “Have you been talking to Bo?”

\*\*\*

There were ten trees in a row across the back of the yard. The one farthest to the right was downright massive. Each tree moving left got a little smaller. The final tree was as tall as the house. Bo stood next to the second smallest tree, wearing only a pair of midnight-blue leather boxer shorts with the word “Shadow” written down his right leg and “Dog” down his left, each in scarlet.

He tossed the Angus collar to his sister, insisting, “Since you have pockets.”

Ren caught the collar, shoved it into her back pocket,

and began, "Alright, boys, line up." She placed one palm against the tree. This time she played a high-end chord in her head. E, G, and B. As it filled her whole being, she merged halfway into the tree. With her other hand, she took hold of her brother and pressed him against the tree until he began to merge as well. She released him and the tree pulled him the rest of the way in. "Who's next?"

Lan looked hesitant and took a small step back.

Joey smirked, stepped forward, and volunteered, "I'll go." He took Ren's free hand and allowed himself to be pulled in by the tree.

"Okay, it's just me and you now." She held out a hand for Lan to take.

Lan looked at her hand and raised his eyebrow.

"It's not a haunted forest!" she exclaimed as she flexed her hand and reached for him. "Oh, come on!"

Lan stood nervously just out of reach before he finally huffed and said, "Fine!"

Unsure he would allow himself to be pulled all the way through, Ren activated her substantial supernatural strength and yanked him through the tree.

On the other side, she leapt onto his back so her head was next to his. Throwing her arm over his shoulder, she pointed out at Dora's retirement garden and exclaimed, "See! Does that look like a haunted forest to you?!"

Before them lay a peaceful meadow under a beautiful blue sky. A gentle stream made its way through the center. A kind-looking retired couple stood in the stream with their pants legs rolled to their knees, playfully splashing each other. The man was thin with curly blond hair and the woman looked like an older version of Sue. Bo and Joey were already halfway down the hill toward the stream.

"I may have been — misled." Lan blushed and bucked the girl from his back.

"OOF!" Ren landed hard but rolled and got up laughing, then took off running after the others. "Bo, you're a turd and you know it!"

He looked back at his sister and admitted, "Oh, definitely!" He smiled and ran toward the water, transforming

into his short-legged wolf form. As he did, the shorts he wore transformed with him, vanishing into his fur. Fully transformed, he had shorter than normal legs and small feet, despite having a normal size wolf head and body.

Bo leapt into the stream, then plowed into Phillip, knocking him into the water.

Phillip laughed and shook the water from his blond curls. He tried to climb back to his feet, but every time he got one foot under him, Bo pounced again.

Dora laughed and splash the two of them as they each tried to wrestle for dominance.

“Come on, Bo!” began Ren, who added, “We don’t have time for shenanigans. We only have a dozen practices left before Mesa Verde and we have to cut tonight’s short already.”

He made a snarky wolf vocalization and climbed out of the water, then shook his wet fur next to his sister.

She exhaled hard through her nostrils, clenched her fists, and grumbled, “At least I’m not wearing my dress.”

Bo moved to his human form, causing his Shadow Dog shorts to reappear. “Let’s get started. Dora, Phillip, this is Joey and the man-giant is Lan.”

Joey stepped forward to shake Phillip’s hand as Lan shook Dora’s. “Thanks for letting us practice here,” he said.

“This isn’t exactly what I imagined when Bo said the spirits of Sue’s dead parents lived in the trees behind her house,” admitted Lan, looking a little embarrassed. “This is a lot more — upscale.”

“Well, I like to call it home,” said Dora and squeezed his massive mitt of a hand with both of hers.

“You guys are going to have to come back with me for pie night. Every bite is literally the most perfect bite you could imagine,” insisted Bo with fists aquiver and a grin that showed all his teeth.

Dora finally released Lan’s hand, then stood straight with her hands on her hips and asked, “So, what do you kids need today?”

Ren pointed to the hills on the far side of the stream. “Could we get a cave over there? The mouth should be

about six feet wide and circular, set into a flat-faced wall. The inside needs to open immediately into a wide space, maybe the size of a gymnasium.” She paused and bit her lip, unsure if she would be asking for too much. After a moment, she worked up the courage to ask, “Um, do you think it would be possible to fill the cave with antagonists?”

“Antagonists...” murmured Dora as she furrowed her brow and ran her knuckle across her bottom lip a few times. “I don’t think that’s something I’d want to do. It’s fine for you to do what you do. That’s independent of me and my garden. My concern is, if I create that sort of thing here, it might want to come back at some point.”

“Oh. Well, crap. Never mind, then,” Ren conceded.

“Hang on,” interjected Bo. “I don’t think what we need necessarily has to be antagonistic. I think it just needs to create a greater challenge. I’m thinking, something like one of those tower defense games. The exercise is to get into the cave, capture our substitute monster, and get back out. To make that harder, we could fill the cave with, um, *flingers*, I guess you would say. Little guys who run around and fling stuff in random directions. The more of them there are, the more likely it is we’re going to get smacked by whatever it is they’re flinging.”

“Flingers I can do,” Dora agreed with a big thumbs up.

“Nice!” Joey clapped his hands once and rubbed them together vigorously. “So, who gets to play the part of our substitute monster first?”

\*\*\*

Ren stood across from Joey with a dim, vacant expression, until a pumpkin smashed her in the face and knocked her to the ground.

Joey, wearing nothing but a pair of shorts, similar to Bo’s, shrugged, shifted to his short-legged wolf form, and ran behind the boulders on the far side of the cave, away from the mouth.

“Uhhhh,” she moaned and wiped pumpkin guts from her face. *Whose bright idea was it to let Joey go first? Oh,*

*yeah, mine.* She was almost to her feet again when a small man-made of vines ran her down and kept going. She saw him sprout a watermelon for a head, then yank it off and lob it hard across the cave. *Ugh. I hate Bo's good ideas.*

As if on cue, her brother scooped her up and put her back on her feet. "Good, you're okay." He noticed her eye swelling and winced. "I'm sure that'll be fine by the awar— DUCK!" He grabbed his sister by the top of the head and forced her to bend over double, then jerked her upright. "Okay, you go around the right side of the boulders and chase him left. I'm going to go left and chase him right. Lan's coming down the middle. Okay, break!" He shoved her hard and took off the other way.

Ren came around the right side of the boulder and saw Joey waiting for her. She threw up her hand to shield her eyes from his gaze.

He turned and started running the other way. When he saw Bo coming from that direction, he stopped and leapt to get over the boulders, toward the main part of the chamber.

As he cleared the top of the boulder, Lan appeared in his transcended form, growing to fifteen feet of half-wolf-half-man fury. He tackled Joey, crushing him mercilessly against the wall of the cave.

Ren stopped dead in her tracks. Her eye, the one that wasn't swollen shut, open wide as it would go. She'd never seen him use his ability to grow that large before. *On second thought, I'm glad we let Joey go first. I'd much rather have my consciousness bumped out of my body temporarily than get smashed by Wolf-Hulk.*

\*\*\*

With a snarl, Lan stepped back from the cave wall and allowed Joey's limp body to fall to the ground. Just then, a watermelon smashed into the wall next to Ren. His head whipped around and saw her standing there. He could smell the fear on her. He heard Vulgar Tongue shouting at him from within his own head. The voice of his curse wanted the

heart and blood of the girl in front of him!

He threw out his hands, digging his claws into the stone of the boulder on his right, and the cave wall on his left. If the curse wanted control, it would have to fight for it.

Ren turned and ran, then started flying toward the mouth of the cave, dodging pumpkins and watermelons along the way.

Seeing her flee triggered Lan's chase instinct. He took off after her at full speed.

\*\*\*

Bo smelled Lan's pheromones change. He had lost control and now he was after his sister. *CRAP! I have to get in front of him!* Whereas Lan's curse allowed him to grow, Bo's allowed him to move between dimensions to the Shadow World, where he had another ability. Bo dove through a shadow into the Shadow World version of the cave. From there, he leapt over the boulder and picked a spot ahead of where he saw Lan's shadow on the floor of the cave. In his mind, he imagined a bright light behind himself, which cast his whole body, as if it were a shadow, forward into that spot, where he reformed.

As Lan's shadow passed under him, he reached into it and pulled him into the Shadow World.

Lan lashed out at Bo but caught only air as Bo teleported away as a shadow. Again and again, he chased after the wiry little teleporter and every time he slipped past. It was five minutes before Lan calmed enough to regain control from his curse.

\*\*\*

Joey awoke on the floor of the cave, behind the boulders. His crushed bones had healed while he was unconscious. He still heard the sounds of the flingers flinging their pumpkin and watermelon heads around the cave but didn't understand why he hadn't been carried out of the cave while he was out cold. He climbed the boulder and looked

around the room. The others were all gone, except for the flingers. *Did they just beat me up and leave me here?*

Joey shouted to deactivate the flingers, "Game over!" Once they stopped flinging, he leapt to the other side of the boulder and made his way out of the cave mouth. He found Ren hovering thirty yards out and twenty up. "What the heck?!"

"Lan lost his biscuits and came after me. I think Bo knocked him into the Shadow. It's been a while. I'm starting to worry," she explained as she descended toward him.

"Why didn't you use the talisman to command him to stop?" asked Joey.

"You know what? That's a fantastic idea. I wish it had occurred to me," said Ren, who smacked herself in the forehead with her palm. "Now I feel like a great big dummy." She pulled the cord around her neck and revealed the talisman. It was gold with the head of a wolf emblazoned on the front and some script she couldn't read on the back.

"You should practice using it on Bo a few times every day, so you'll remember to use it next time," Joey suggested.

"Ooh, I like the sound of that!" she agreed. "The last time I used it was when we all got back from the island."

Joey shrugged, "Well, now that I'm ambulatory, why don't you open a portal for me so I can go in and see if I can bring them back?"

She nodded vigorously, "*That* I can do!" She walked Joey to the wall next to the mouth of the cave and placed her hand against his shadow, then guided him into it. Just as the portal closed behind him, Bo and Lan walked out of the mouth of the cave, both wearing their leather shorts.

\*\*\*

Bo saw Joey and his sister to the side of the cave mouth. Joey's image appeared black and gray, which meant he was being seen through the eyes of Bo's Shadow World counterpart. "What are you doing in there? Hang on, I'll come get you"

\*\*\*

As Joey passed through his shadow on the exterior wall of the cave, he saw Bo exit the mouth. Next to him on the ground was a massive shadow, which must have been Lan. While Lan was nothing but a shadow on the ground, with no one around to cast it, Bo appeared as a physical person, lit in the same sinister shades of black and gray as the rest of the Shadow World. Joey was about to ask him to come get him when they locked eyes. The boy standing before him in the Shadow World was *not* his little friend. It looked like him, but it was clearly not him.

The Shadow version of Bo spoke in Vulgar Tongue, but it wasn't Bo's voice. The Shadow version's tone was profoundly malevolent. Every syllable a threat against Joey's life. "Why is this pathetic scum in my realm?! I'm going to rip this filth from my domain like guts from a goat!" he said and took several quick steps toward Joey.

\*\*\*

Bo started toward the exterior wall of the cave, so he could pass through his shadow but halted when he saw Joey take several quick steps and move to his half-wolf-half-man transcended form. "What are you doing? The game is already over."

\*\*\*

The Shadow Bo stopped, glared at Joey, and asked, "Does this excrement think it can fight me in my own realm?! The abhorrence has already lost!"

Joey's eyes grew wide and he turned to run.

\*\*\*

"Well, now where are you going?!" huffed Bo and looked at Joey's back as he ran away.

Ren and Lan looked confused.

“What’s going on?” Ren saw Joey’s shadow on the ground speed toward the entry tree.

Bo threw his hands up and admitted, “I have no idea! He just transcended and took off running, all freaked out.”

“Oh, my gosh! Never talk to anyone through your Shadow Version. That dude is pure evil. Remember the time he spoke to me? I had the exact same reaction.”

His brows shot up in realization as he said, “Oh, yeah — dang it. Now I’ve gotta go catch him.” He ran to the wall and dove through his shadow.

With Bo gone, Lan turned to Ren and asked, “Um — What happened to your face?” He pointed to her swollen and discolored eye.

“Friggin’ Joey!” she muttered.

“Joey punched you in the face?!”

She shook her head and clarified, “No. I snuck up on him, or at least I thought I had. At the last second, he spun and hit me with the whammy. Next thing I know, I’m trapped in this crazy dream where an angry top hat is chasing me all over a hilltop.”

“Joey always makes the best dreams,” Lan chuckled.

Ren gave him the stink eye, then continued, “Eventually, the hat chased me up a flagpole. That’s about the time I woke up on the ground with pumpkin guts all over my face. My defenses dropped when my consciousness fled to Dreamtime and one of the flingers got me.”

“Yowch! Don’t you have that award ceremony thing tonight?”

\*\*\*

When practice concluded, Ren and the others returned to the entrance of the retirement garden, where they found Sue waiting with her parents.

“Oh, my gulyay! What happened to your face?!” Sue exclaimed as she rushed to Ren and cupped her face in her hands.

“I got pumpkined,” Ren admitted.

“Poor thing,” Sue began, “Well, I can give you a

medicine leaf, but it won't be better until tomorrow and you'll have to wear a big bandage over half your face to cover it." She winced as she gently poked the puffy eyelid.

"Thanks, but I think I'd rather have a few pictures with a black eye than look like I fled an ICU. How about you give me the leaf after we get home tonight?" asked Ren as she gently pulled Sue's hands from her face.

## CHAPTER 2

### AWARDED

Ren arrived home in plenty of time to shower and prep for the ceremony. The most difficult part was figuring out how to apply makeup to the swollen eye. She applied and painfully removed her makeup four times before she got it right, or as right as she could get with an eye that was discolored and swollen shut. When she was done, she took a long, hard look at herself in the full-length mirror and grumbled, “I look like the mugshot of a redneck prom queen.” She clenched her fists, rolled her one open eye, and stomped out of her room.

Her father, Trey, waited for her at the bottom of the stairs. When he saw her properly, he said, “Puddin’, you look — um — beautiful — all things considered.”

“Thanks, Dad. You really know how to make a girl feel special,” she grumbled as she kept her jaw set low, passing him on the way to the garage. “Can we just go already?”

“Sure thing. Bo! Shum-on! It’s go time.” He turned and followed after his daughter to the garage.

In the car, Ren looked at her face in the sun-visor mirror, which she slammed shut as her brother opened his door to get in behind her.

“Wow,” began Bo, “Your eye is so swollen I can see it from back here.”

“Fantastic,” she muttered.

“You must look like the mugshot of a redneck prom

queen,” teased Bo.

Ren’s eye lit with fury as she spun to face her brother. “Just because you *can* hear everything that happens in that house, it doesn’t mean you should!”

“Ah, come on. You know it’s funny, you said it yourself.”

Ren slowly balled one of her fists in front of her face as she glared at her brother. “You know I can crush you, right? I can grab your little body and crush you like that thing that makes cubes out of Cadillacs.”

“Alright, you two!” chided Trey as he pushed the button to close the garage door behind them as they pulled away from the house. “That’s enough. Bo, tonight is your sister’s special night, and it’s bad enough she has a black eye. Don’t antagonize her.”

“Thank you, Daddy.”

“And no Bo crushing either!” added Trey.

Ren lowered her head and mumbled, “Sorry...”

“That’s better. Now, come on,” Trey continued, “We’re all going to have a great night tonight. We’re going to see all the submissions from all the other artists from across the district. They’re going to have music, and don’t forget they always have a top-shelf buffet at these things.”

“That’s what I’m talking about!” cheered Bo as he patted his father on the shoulder.

\*\*\*

The entrance hall of the convention center was set up as a makeshift museum. Ren found her best friend, Pete, standing with his parents next to his entry, which took third place. It was a remarkable sculpture that resembled a Mt. Rushmore of sorts. In this rendition, the heads of the presidents were replaced with those of Pete, himself, as well as his girlfriend, Hannah, their friend Ashley, and finally, Ren. Pete’s entry was particularly impressive because he’s completely blind.

“Pete! Mr. and Mrs. Dunn!” Ren called out.

“Hey, Ren.” Pete lifted one of his hands from resting

on the top of his cane to wave.

“Ms. Alonso. The big winner.” Mr. Dunn beamed at Ren as he extended his hand. “Someday, you’re gonna be famous and I’m gonna tell people, ‘I’ve known her since she was a little girl. She’s my son’s best friend!’”

“Oh, Ron. You’re going to give her a complex.” Said Mrs. Dunn as she tugged at her husband’s arm. “Ren, sweetie, what happened to your eye?”

“Pumpkin accident.”

Mr. Dunn raised his brow knowingly and said, “You really gotta watch out for pumpkins. We’ve had our share of pumpkin accidents at our house too.”

“Puddin, I’mma take Bo to get started on that buffet. If you see Sue, tell her where we are.” Trey put his arm around his son’s shoulder and guided him toward the food.

“Will do, Daddy-O,” said Ren, who looped her arm through Pete’s and turned to his parents to add, “I hope you two don’t mind, but I’m going to borrow Pete for a bit.”

“Not at all. You two have fun. I think we should probably follow your father’s example in regard to that buffet. Let’s go, Ron.”

“Yes, ma’am!” he agreed.

Ren waited for them to pass out of earshot before addressing Pete. “What happened with practice today?”

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that? What happened to your face?”

“Friggin’ Joey,” she whispered as she felt the gentle touch of several tendrils of air passing across her swollen eye.

“Oh, my gosh, it feels like you have a donut on your face!”

“Count yourself lucky you can’t feel color with the air. It’s pretty gruesome.”

“And you still can’t heal yourself with your angel ring thing?”

“I wish, but no. It doesn’t work like that. Sue can give me something, but it takes all night to work, so all I can do now is smile for the cameras and get ready to explain this black eye for the rest of my life to anyone who sees the

pictures.”

“Well, I’m glad my parents kept me home today. If Joey did that to you, imagine what he could have done to me!”

“No joke. You know how intense it is to work out with Bo?” asked Ren.

“Yeah.”

“Well, imagine that times ten when Joey and Lan get involved.”

Pete shifted uncomfortably and asked, “How so?”

Ren smirked. “If I told you, you’d never come back to practice.”

“Dang it, Ren, why did you tell me that?! I’m still barely over my Bo-phobia!”

“Sorry. If it’s any consolation, Joey didn’t do this to my face directly. I really did get hit with a pumpkin.”

“Oh! Well, that’s way better. Thanks,” snarked Pete.

Ren smiled, “They say sarcasm is a mark of intelligence. No wonder your grades are so good.”

“Count yourself lucky I’m not smart enough to keep away from this trouble you keep finding yourself in. I’m going to go ahead and eat. I’m hungry and all the sketches look the same to me.”

“That’s fine. I wanna have another quick look around. Maybe I’ll go stand by my picture and listen to what people are saying about it.” She took Pete by the shoulders, turned him toward the buffet line, gave him a gentle push, and announced, “It’s that way, blind guy, who obviously can’t see — because you’re blind.”

Pete stumbled forward swinging his cane side to side and shouted back, “Thank you, friendly sighted person!”

\*\*\*

Ren took her time to check out the competition. She thought several of them could have scored higher, depending on who was doing the judging. When she reached the rear of the entry hall, she saw her own poster sitting alone in the corner, away from the other works of art.

It was odd; the room was crowded, but only one person stood looking at the first-place entry.

The man was tall and lean, with a head of short silver hair. He wore a pressed, blue dress shirt with a black waistcoat. His tie was held in place by a dragonfly tie pin and his pocket hanky was monogrammed, "CS." He didn't say anything as Ren approached, just kept studying every minute detail of every cell of the poster, which was drawn in a fusion style, somewhere between a manga and a horror sketchbook.

After a minute of silence, he finally spoke but kept his eyes on the image. "Magnificent! Absolutely breathtaking. The moment I saw this, I knew you possessed rare talents."

"Thank you," she beamed. She wasn't expecting such high praise, which caused her to bob up and down on the balls of her feet. "How did you know I was the artist?"

He continued, seeming not to notice her question, "Take, for example, this cell here. You've been pulled through the veil into the boogeyman's own dimension. You see the chains and shackles below, you see the other boogeymen lurking in the distance, and you cling to the leg of the bed with every ounce of strength you possess."

"Yeah, it's good visual storytelling," she chuckled nervously. *This guy is talking like he knows it really happened.* Ren looked quickly over both shoulders to see who might be watching. For some reason, the rest of the room was completely ignoring this corner. There seemed to be an invisible line, which no one dared cross or even look past. She looked back to the man with the silver hair. He continued to gaze at the poster. *I've had my fill of getting sucker-punched today.* Ren activated her *spirit sight* and was immediately taken aback by the brightness of the man's aura. Viewed in the spirit, he appeared to wear a golden crown with a single point, as well as an elegant suit of golden plate armor, worked with a vine and leaf pattern. The backplate bore dragonfly wings, which folded down, out of the way. *Crap!* Ren activated her own *spiritual armor* and *enhanced strength*.

The man froze briefly, then smiled and continued

again, “My favorite part is this series of cells, here, where your brother...”

Ren cut him off, “Who are you? What do you want?”

“There’s no need to be rude,” insisted the man, who stood straight and turned to face her directly. “I’m here purely as a patron of the arts. My name is Chetwyn Spiffington.”

Ren blinked her one good eye several times, then asked, “As in — the SpiffyMart? You’re the guy who owns the SpiffyMart empire?”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but that eye of yours is...” He gulped and looked away before adding, “Unsettling. I want to look you in the face, but I don’t want to see — that. I mean, just think about it. This is ridiculous, someone like you walking around with a shiner at an event like this. I won’t have it. Here, take this.” He fished into the inner pocket of his waistcoat and pulled out a small glass vial. “Put a couple of drops in your eye.”

“What is it?” asked Ren.

“Vanilla extract. What do you think it is? It’s something to fix your eye.”

She took the vial, then inspected it closely with her *spirit sight*. After a moment, she thought to herself, *Well, it’s magical. I don’t see anything in the aura of it that might indicate it’s cursed.*

“Tonight would be good. Come on. I’m trying to have a conversation here and that eye isn’t helping.”

Ren uncorked the vial and huffed, “Fine.” She leaned her head back and allowed a few drops to trickle into the slit where the swollen upper and lower lids met. After a few seconds, her eye felt cold, then warm, then cold again, in a cycle. After another few seconds, she saw light slip in between her puffy lids. A few more seconds and the swelling was gone entirely. “Wow, that feels great,” she said as she patted the skin around her eye. The bruising was gone and it felt fine. “How’s the color?” she asked.

“I can’t tell. You have about thirty layers of makeup on it, but at least I’m not looking at a jellyfish on your face anymore. You can keep that. You seem like you need it

more than I do.”

“Mmm. Thanks,” she muttered.

“So, like I was saying before, I’m here as a patron of the arts. When this is all over, I would like to buy your poster.”

“Really? You think it’s that good?”

“I do. How much do you want for it?” he asked.

“Oh, well, it’s actually not for sale. As you might imagine, it means quite a lot to me,” she replied.

“What if I were to offer you five hundred dollars?”

“It would still not be for sale.”

“Five thousand?” he offered.

The number stunned her briefly and she thought, *Wow, five thousand! If I wasn’t already filthy rich, I would totally take that!* When she was able to speak again, she said, “Sorry, but it’s worth more to me than that.”

“Well played,” said Spiffington and raised an eyebrow at her in silent applause. “Five hundred thousand.”

Ren’s jaw dropped and she gaped at him for several seconds before she responded, “Wow! I didn’t expect this to escalate like that.”

“So, we’re in agreement? Five hundred thousand?” he asked and held his hand as if he were about to extend it for a shake.

Flustered, she shook her head and said, “No. I’m sorry, but it’s not for sale.”

He narrowed his eyes and slowly said, “Five million.”

“Mr. Spiffington, please stop. I’ve been trying not to say this, but I just don’t need the money.”

“You don’t need five million dollars?” he demanded crossed his arms and looked down at her.

“I’m sorry, but I really don’t.”

“How about a trade?” he countered. “Goods for goods, services for services?”

“What kind of goods and services?” she asked with curiosity.

He grinned slowly and replied, “I’m glad you asked. As you might imagine, I have access to all sorts of — goodies. My resources are essentially unlimited. And, I’m

also one of the top mages on the continent.”

“Is that so?” asked Ren.

“It is, and all you have to do is name your price.”

“Why do you want my poster so bad? What is it to you?”

“My dear, supernatural art of this quality is extremely rare, especially considering the characters depicted. Your artistic vision, your style, it’s basically its own form of magic. You’ve enchanted *me* and that is quite a feat.” He reached again, this time to the pocket on the other side and produced a business card. “To anyone else, this will appear to be a blank card. This is my direct cell number and email. Below that is my scry number and scry-mail.”

She looked at the second set of contact info. It was partially comprised of odd characters. “Scry what?” she asked.

“I guess you don’t have one. Never mind. Just use the cell. Now, if we’re done here, I’ll be on my way.” He gave Ren a curt bow and strode directly through the crowd toward the exit. As he crossed the invisible line that held the crowd back, people took notice of the first-place entry.

“Oh, hey, it’s over here!”

“Wow, check it out. That’s so creepy!”

“I can’t wait to see the artist on stage.”

\*\*\*

Ren found Sue as she made her way toward the event hall.

“Sue! Hey, Dad said to tell you he’s with Bo at the buffet already.”

“Of course he is,” she chuckled. “Hey, what happened with your eye? It’s all better.”

“Oh...” Ren looked over her shoulder before continuing. “There was a mage earlier. He gave me some magic eye drops.”

“Ren, you can’t just take magic drops from random wizards! There’s no telling what could have been in that thing.”

“He wasn’t just some sketchy dude with drops,” she explained, “He was, like, super-rich. He was actually here for me, to talk business. I think he cast a spell on my exhibit to keep people away from it so we wouldn’t be disturbed.”

Sue shook her head and said, “It doesn’t matter if he’s rich. You can’t just take drops like that.”

“To be fair,” Ren argued, “I looked at it with my *spirit sight* and I didn’t see any hexes or curses on it.”

“You can do that?” asked Sue.

“Well — I think I can. I certainly didn’t see anything *hex-ish* when I looked at it.”

Sue rolled her eyes and snarked, “That’s comforting. Alright, let’s go eat already.”

\*\*\*

Sue went to find Trey and Bo so she could drop off her purse while Ren saved her a spot in the buffet line. She returned a few minutes later, smiling ear to ear.

“Trey said they have sparkling mineral water! I love sparkling mineral water. The carbon dioxide is so good!” Sue beamed.

“You are so weird,” Ren teased.

“But you love me!” Sue countered.

“That’s true too,” Ren agreed.

\*\*\*

Back at the table, the boys had already finished eating and were reviewing the program to see the names of the winners. Trey and Bo sat side by side. Ren picked the seat across from her father. Sue took the last spot, to the left of Trey.

“So,” said Trey as he looked up from the program, “I hear you’ve been taking magic drops from strange wizards.”

Ren rolled her eyes and huffed, “I know, I know. Don’t take magic drops from strangers.”

“Don’t roll your eyes. You know I’m right.”

Ren lowered her chin and muttered, “I know. Sorry.”

"That's better. What did he want anyway? I know he didn't come all the way here just to give you eye drops."

"Oh, he wanted to buy my poster."

"Really? How much did he offer?"

"Five million dollars."

"Wouldn't that be nice," Trey laughed and shook his head. "But, seriously. How much did he offer?"

"Five million dollars."

"Five million?"

"Five million dollars."

"What?" demanded Trey.

"Five million dollars."

"Hold on. Let me rephrase that. *What?!*" he demanded again, though more forcefully this time.

"He offered me five million dollars for the poster."

"Why on Earth would he offer you five million dollars for a poster?"

"Apparently, it's just that good."

"Well, I knew it was good, but five million dollars good?! Holy Crappy McCrappiwicz! That's better than good! Who was that guy, anyway?" Trey wiped his brow and leaned in toward Ren.

"Chetwyn Spiffington, the founder of the SpiffyMart chain," said Ren.

"Whoa!" Bo slapped his palms on the table and turned toward his sister. "Spiffington is a wizard?"

"Well, he called himself a mage. I'm not sure what the difference is."

"Come on, have you guys learned nothing from my nerdy hobbies? The terms mage and wizard are fairly interchangeable, though a mage tends to be more oriented toward harnessing power through magical studies and self-empowerment, and wizards tend to be more mysterious." Trey saw Sue looking at him dubiously. "I've got, like, six hundred pounds of gamebooks in the garage. I know stuff, okay?"

Sue nodded, "Sure, you do."

"I do!" he insisted. "Anyway. So, when do we go pick up the cash? Do they release the poster to you here, or do

they send it to your school?”

“Oh, I told him I didn’t want his money.”

Trey’s eyes bulged, “*WHAT?!*”

## CHAPTER 3

### MONSTER IN THE CAVE, TAKE TWO!

Ren and Pete were the last two to arrive in the backyard of the nursery on Saturday afternoon. Lan waited next to the tree with a small gift in his large hand. He waved awkwardly as they approached.

“Hi, Lan. Why aren’t you in with everyone else?” asked Ren.

Lan looked a little sheepish as he said, “I was hoping I could talk to you real quick.”

“Sure thing. Pete, you go ahead inside. I’ll be right there.” She took Pete by his shoulder and guided him through the bark of the tree, into Dora’s retirement garden, then turned to the oversized gift bearer and asked, “So, what’s up?”

“I just wanted to say sorry for trying to kill you and eat your heart yesterday. I was way out of line.”

Ren comforted him with a smile and said, “No harm, no foul. I got out quick enough and Bo trapped you so you couldn’t do anything anyway.”

“Still friends?” he asked as he held his arms open, an invitation for a hug.

She stepped in and squeezed him hard. “Still friends,” she assured him.

After a few seconds, Lan backed away and handed her his gift. “I hope you like it.”

“I’m sure I will,” she insisted and lifted the lid to find a bar of chocolate and a note that read “*Sorry I tried to kill you.*”

“It’s perfect. Thank you.”

“Just so you know, I’m not going to use my transcended form anymore for our training. I’ve never been that great at resisting the curse when it wants to take over,” he admitted. “I’m a lot safer in wolf form. I’ll just do that from now on.”

“I appreciate that.”

\*\*\*

“Okay, now that we have Pete, we can form teams,” said Ren, addressing the group as they stood in front of the mouth of the cave. “This time Lan is going to be the designated monster. Pete, your job is to help the flingers defend him. Bo, Joey, and I are going to try to remove him from the cave.

Lan disrobed down to his transforming leather shorts and said to Pete, “Let’s go inside. Ren, give us ten minutes to strategize before you start.”

“That’s fine,” she agreed. “We’re going to have to do some strategizing of our own.”

Lan waved for Pete to follow and started toward the mouth of the cave. “I’ll call ‘game on’ to activate the flingers when we’re ready. Come in any time after that.”

\*\*\*

Ren activated her *enhanced strength* and *spiritual armor*, then took three deep breaths to calm her nerves. “Okay, Bo, you’re first, in and to the left. Joey, you’re next, in and to the right. I’ll go up the center and high. Go!”

Bo and Joey moved to their short-legged wolf forms and sped toward the mouth of the cave. As soon as Bo crossed the threshold there was a loud WHOOSH and a blast of air, which sent him flying back, over Joey and directly into Ren, knocking her to the ground.

Joey skidded to a halt before he reached the opening, then backed away and changed to human form.

“Ugh! Okay, that sucked,” moaned Ren as she pushed her brother off her and climbed to her feet.

“What was that?” asked Joey.

“That was Pete,” she grumbled and activated her *spirit sight*. “He created a wall of compressed air across the door. When you touch it, it bursts. Ah, crap! He’s done the same thing with patches all over the floor like landmines. I’m flying so it won’t matter for me, but you guys are going to have a rough time.”

Bo tilted his furry head and asked, “Rorororaow...”

“Bo, I’ve no idea what you’re saying. I don’t speak wolf.”

“He asked if you can tell us where they are,” explained Joey.

She shook her head and said, “They’re literally everywhere. Every couple of feet in every direction.”

Bo returned to his human form and said, “I can create a path, but you have to come right behind me before Pete has a chance to reform the bubbles. Ren, once you guys are in, you have to take out Pete or we won’t be able to move anywhere.”

“I can do that,” she agreed. “Or at least I’ll keep him too busy to re-create any of his bubbles. How are you going to create a path?”

“Everything here has a reflection in the Shadow World,” began Bo, “But do you remember what Pete said about the air in the Shadow?”

“He said it was dead,” she replied.

“Yes. I think I can trigger his bubble mines just by disturbing the ground in the Shadow, but since that air is dead it won’t explode on my side, so I can just keep running through,” explained Bo, who turned to Joey and continued, “So long as you stay right behind me in the line of explosions I set off, you won’t get launched. I’ll try to lead you directly to Lan. You hit him with the whammy and we’ll drag him out.”

“Okay,” Joey agreed. “Just watch my shadow and come back when it looks like we’ve locked eyes.”

Bo gave a curt nod. "Sounds good."

Ren clapped her hands and pumped her fists. "Monster in the cave, take two! And—Action!"

Bo leapt into the air and performed a perfect swan dive into his own shadow, vanishing out of sight.

\*\*\*

In the Shadow World, Bo ran headlong toward the mouth of the cave, making sure to kick up dirt with his toe so it would fly ahead of him into the bubble. As the dirt crossed the threshold, he saw it scatter but felt no rush of air. *Nice! Let's just hope the rest of this plan works the way we hoped.*

\*\*\*

Joey saw a patch of dirt fly toward the mouth of the cave, which then exploded in a WHOOSH of air. "Let's go!" he shouted and sprinted into the cave so focused on following Bo's shadow, he didn't see the massive pumpkin flying directly at his head from the side. It knocked him off his feet and to his left, where he hit the first air mine.

\*\*\*

Ren followed closely behind Joey, *spirit sight* active. The plan was working. She was gaining altitude to find Pete when she saw a flinger chuck a massive pumpkin. At first, it didn't look like the pumpkin was going to be a threat, then a thick tendril of air wrapped itself around the pumpkin and slung it around toward Joey.

He didn't seem to notice it before it took him on the side of the head and knocked him directly into one of the air mines on the ground, to his left. The explosion launched him into the air, to the right, where he landed on another air mine and flew back to the left again, where he, again, landed on a mine.

*Crap! I gotta find Pete!*

"Hey, Ren!" Pete called out. "Remember that time I

told you about the pumpkin I exploded in my garage?!”

Ren turned sharply to the right and saw Pete floating in a double bubble of woven air tendrils. Extending down from the bubbles were what appeared to be four giant spider legs made of more woven tendrils of air. In addition to the spider legs, there were dozens of other tendrils sweeping the cave, acting as his eyes and resetting the burst air mines.

“I never did get around to showing you how I did that trick, did I? Well, why not now?” Pete grinned, showing all his teeth.

Just then, a pumpkin dropped down within arm’s reach of Ren’s face and exploded, knocking her back and coating her with pumpkin guts.

\*\*\*

Bo thought he saw Lan’s shadow in the rear right corner of the cave. He paused to look for Joey but didn’t see his shadow on the ground behind him. *The heck? Where’d you go?*

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Joey finally smashed into the roof of the cave and fell flat on his back on a boulder, where he groaned in pain. *Worst plan ever!*

\*\*\*

*Sweet Moses! When did Pete get so good?!* Ren swooped and dodged as one of Pete’s massive spider legs attempted to swat her out of the air. Every time she tried to strike at him directly, one of his air bubbles would burst and send her flying away. By the time she could rebound, he’d have a new blast shield in place.

\*\*\*

Bo stuck his head through a shadow on the wall, to

look into the cave proper. Not finding Joey, he retracted his head and teleported to another part of the cave, where he peeked through again until he finally found him lying on his back on a boulder. He retreated into the Shadow, one more time, and teleported to the boulder, where he climbed through Joey's shadow and said, "Dude, nap time's over. I found Lan."

Joey grabbed him by the shoulder and groaned, "New plan. We both go into the shadow. We forgot about the flingers. One of them knocked me off your path. I just spent the last three minutes bouncing off every inch of this cave! I ain't doing that again!"

\*\*\*

*Dang it! I gotta be able to hit him faster, but he knocks me so far back.* Ren looked down and spotted a watermelon flinger. *That's it!* She dove for it, dodging Pete's spider legs all the while. As it sprouted its next melon, she snatched it off its shoulders and set a course back to her opponent. "Incoming!" she shouted as she let loose with the watermelon, which triggered his blast shield. The melon shot back toward her but passed over her shoulder as she swooped in for the kill. She saw a panicked look on his face as he extended tendrils of air, hoping to gather enough volume to create a new shield before she could close the distance. With a burst of speed, she reached him before he could contract his tendrils into a new shield, and delivered a right hook to his side, plowing through his inner air shield and smashing into his ribs.

"Ooooffff!!!!" He buckled around her fist and lost control of all his air. The rapid decompression of hundreds of air mines blew everything out of the cave that wasn't a part of it, including Ren, Pete, Lan, the flingers, and all the busted fruit they'd flung up to that point.

\*\*\*

"Okay, when I saw him, he was just around the corner

of this boulder. On three I'll open a portal and we'll jump through," said Bo and held up three fingers.

Joey held up a hand to pause the count and asked, "What about air mines?"

"I don't think they would put any directly around him so he'd have room to fight if we managed to get close enough."

"Good point. Okay, go ahead."

"One — two — THREE!" Bo slapped a big shadow with his palm to open a portal, then he and Joey leapt through to the other side. "Gotcha, you — um — he's not here."

Joey frowned and walked around the boulder. The cave was completely empty. "Did we miss the big fight?"

\*\*\*

Ren swung her arm and the bodies of half a dozen flingers flew off her. She had managed to hold onto Pete through their ejection from the cave. The two of them were covered in pumpkin guts and watermelon slush. She shouted, "Game Over!" and sat up.

Dozens of flingers untangled themselves from each other and quietly made their way back into the cave.

Pete gripped painfully at his side and groaned, "You guys are hardcore."

"We try," said Ren as she placed her hands on him and, looking down with her *spirit sight*, saw the ruby ring on her left-hand light up, then pour its healing energy into Pete's injured side.

After a few seconds, his face went from wincing in pain to relieved. "Can I make a quick comment here?"

"Sure," she conceded.

"Getting hit like that was way worse than I thought it was going to be."

Ren shrugged awkwardly and admitted, "I'd like to say it gets better, but it doesn't. It always sucks. You just have to commit to trying to ignore the fact that it sucks so much."

"That's not comforting," muttered Pete.

“I know. I don’t want you to feel like you have to go to Mesa Verde if you don’t want to, but I’d really like you to. You’re actually a lot more powerful than I thought you were and we could really use you. But if you’re not comfortable taking this sort of risk, I’m not going to hold it against you. Bo will, though. He’s going to hound you mercilessly for the rest of your life. No pun intended,” she joked as she punched Pete in the shoulder.

“Thanks for not breaking any bones that time,” he joked as he used tendrils of air to blow off the majority of the pumpkin guts and watermelon slush that coated him from head to toe.

“Ugh!” Lan sat up, twenty feet closer to the mouth of the cave and scooped mush from around his eyes so he could see. “What happened? Was there a fight? I don’t remember hitting anyone.”

Ren and Pete laughed and made their way to him just as Bo and Joey made their way out of the mouth of the cave.

“What the heck happened? Why are you all so messy?” asked Bo as he tried to avoid the bigger chunks of mess.

Joey shook his foot to fling off a big wad of pumpkin guts and joked that, “It looks like the cave threw you up like a bad fruit salad.”

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **WE'RE GOING IN!**

The subsequent week went quickly. They drilled a different scenario with a different combination of players on teams each day. There would be no telling what to expect on the other side of the portal on the solstice, so they had to practice as many different scenarios as possible. Whatever was on the other side had been stealing the souls of the unborn for centuries, but Ren wasn't about to let that continue.

Pete's parents had noticed a huge difference in his behavior. Those "MMA lessons" (or so they had been told) had really made an impact on his home life. The biggest difference was that he was usually too exhausted to give his parents a hard time about anything. He just wanted to shove some food down his mouth and go to bed. Besides that, Ren continued to coach him on how to better butter up his folks so they would bend more easily to his will. After several days of intense buttering, Pete asked his parents if he could take a few days to go on a little vacation with Ren and Bo. Despite the fact that the date conflicted with Festivus, his parents agreed.

Trey and Sue would also spend Festivus without the

kids, but that's when the winter solstice came, and with it, the interdimensional interloper at Mesa Verde. In the absence of the kids, Sue decided to keep the Festivus spirit alive by throwing a party for her employees at the Nursery.

\*\*\*

School had already let out for winter break, so the kids didn't have to worry about playing hooky for the Mesa Verde trip. Bo sat on Ren's bed as she readied herself to travel.

She pulled on her denim jacket and dropped various items into the pockets she had sewn onto the inside. "What are you taking with you?" she asked.

"Just a change of clothes and my shifting shorts." He kicked off his shoes, then laid back and rolled side-to-side on the bed, rubbing his face on her blankets.

"You're doing it again," insisted Ren.

"Doing what?" he asked without noticing what he was doing.

"You're rolling."

He stopped and sat up, and admitted, "Ah, crap. I am, aren't I? Sorry. It's a habit I picked up as Angus."

Ren shook her head and tried not to laugh. "Why do you even do it?"

"Because it feels so *good!* It's way better as a dachshund, though."

"Yeah, well, if you're going to be doing that sort of thing, do it in your own bed."

He grinned, "Fine. So, what's all that stuff you're putting in your pockets?"

"Some helpful items for just in case. I probably won't use most of it, but you never can tell. I got a pocketknife, a compass, some duct tape wrapped around a tube of lip

balm. The air in Pete's bubble gets really dry and I don't wanna chap up. Uh, I got a lighter, a marker, a little paracord, and my SpiffyDrops."

"SpiffyDrops?" asked Bo as he raised a brow and cocked his head.

"Yeah, those magic drops Spiffington gave me," explained Ren as she pulled the vial from her breast pocket and showed him before returning it. "I only used a couple drops to fix my black eye before. There's plenty left. I figure if I get another good smack to the face like that, the drops'll come in handy."

"I'm just glad I don't have to worry about that. My face always goes back to pretty on its own," Bo teased.

She smiled and shook her head. "You are so your father's son."

\*\*\*

They flew out the night before the solstice, so they could talk shop with the locals and get their battle strategy worked out ahead of time. The Arlington team already had a playbook, but they thought it would be wise to compare notes with the Mesa Verde pack to make sure they had the best plan possible.

On the way, Bo got curious about Pete's ability to navigate long distances while flying so fast. "Hey, we're going pretty quick here. How do you know you're not going to run us into the side of a mountain?"

"I stretch out tendrils of air miles ahead to make sure the path is clear. That also helps with the speed." He attempted to use his hands to help explain the physics behind his flight as he continued, "The tendrils form, well it's kind of like a tunnel in the air. I draw out as much air as I can from inside the tunnel so I don't have so much wind

resistance passing through it. As we go along, I collapse the tunnel behind us. Don't want a plane crashing into it later. With air jets alone I could probably only get up to four or five hundred miles per hour. Fine for short trips. But for a long haul like this one, I take the extra time and effort to create a flight tunnel for us."

"So, your bubble is kind of like one of those cases they use at the bank drive-through. You shove it into a vacuum tube and it gets sucked along to the teller inside the building."

Pete smiled and nodded, "That's exactly it."

\*\*\*

Thanks to the use of Pete's flight tunnel, the trip only took an hour and a half. They landed on the same spot where Bo had fought Gemini. Bo moved to his wolf form and howled to announce his arrival.

As he did, Pete adjusted the air to amplify the sound of the howl.

He howled for about ten minutes, then he heard a reply howl far in the distance.

Bo and his counterpart echoed each other once every couple of minutes, as the counterpart got closer.

When the counterpart arrived, he shifted to human form, wearing a leather loincloth. He was Native American and stood about the same height as Joey. "Shadow Dog, I'm glad to see you and your friends returned."

Bo moved to human form as well to reply, "Stone Paw, my man. We've been looking forward to it."

Stone Paw saw Bo's Shadow Dog shorts and commented, "Nice. I see you managed to fashion yourself something to wear while you change."

"Actually, I had a friend who knew how to tan and

work leather, so it worked out really nicely,” said Bo as he turned and modeled his shorts. “Oh, hey, I recruited the two other guys from my pack. This is Joey, and the titan is Lan.”

They stepped forward to shake hands and greet their host.

Stone Paw looked up at Lan as he shook his enormous hand and marveled, “No wonder Shadow Dog fights so hard. He’s got to if he’s going to survive in *this* pack!”

“Actually...” Joey interjected. “He’s the one who helps us up our game. He’s fierce.”

“Well, let’s hope that ferocity pays off tomorrow. I have a place not too far from here, hidden in the cliffs, where the others are waiting for us. I can lead the way if you guys are ready for a run,” Stone Paw suggested as he gestured into the distance.

“No offense, but I’m not much of a runner,” Pete admitted as he made a lifting motion with his palms up. The wind swirled around each of them and lifted them into the air. They moved closer together, then he caught them in a bubble for travel. “Which way do we go?”

Stone Paw looked at Pete with astonishment and asked, “Are you the one doing this?”

“Yes, I am,” Pete affirmed.

“I was under the impression you were blind. I always figured it was the sister who had the power to levitate *you*,” Stone Paw admitted.

“Yes, I am blind. No, she doesn’t levitate me. I levitate myself just fine.”

“How can you tell where you’re going?” Stone Paw asked.

“I have an excellent sense of touch. Just point. I’ll get us there,” Pete insisted and lifted them higher into the air.

\*\*\*

Stone Paw directed them to one of the Anasazi sites and pointed Pete to what appeared to be a blank cliff face. When they approached, Stone Paw placed his fists together, then pulled them apart. As he did, the cliff face opened to reveal a cave and he said, "You can park us in there."

Pete pulled into the cave, dropped the bubble, and said, "Wow, this place is pretty well hidden."

The group walked farther into the cave, which opened into a wide chamber. Stone Paw had formed chairs around a stone table in the center. Atop the table was a miniature recreation of the site where the Dark Power would create its portal and summon the Gila monsters to go out and find their victims: women who had recently become with child.

Stone Paw spoke briefly with his pack before bringing the conference to order. He directed everyone to sit around the table. "Shadow Dog and his friends have returned for the battle," he said as he gestured toward Bo and the others.

"We wouldn't miss it for the world. You've seen these two before, my sister, Ren, and this is our friend, Pete. We also have Joey and Lan, from my pack. They each have different abilities, but we'll get into that more in just a bit. First, I have to ask, this has been bugging me since the last time I saw you guys. I have to know, how did *this*..." Bo gestured vaguely in the direction of Stone Paw's pack. "Happen? I mean, Stone Paw, you and Blue Waters obviously come from the same background. Probably from a reservation around here, but Dream Catcher is an Asian kid, Gemini is a big white dude, and Embers is black."

"Ah, come on. You've got a black guy," Embers insisted sat up straight and pointed at Pete. "Are we not allowed to have a black guy?"

"That's not what I'm saying," Bo said defensively. "I'm

just curious as to how such a diverse group got together.”

“Diverse?” Embers balked. “Look who’s talking. Two of your pack aren’t even werewolves. You’ve got Wind Chime Stevie Wonder and...” he motioned toward Ren. “I don’t even know what you are. I’m guessing a witch or something.”

“I’m an angel, thank you very much!” insisted Ren.

Embers gawked at Bo and added, “You have a friggin’ *angel* and you’re wondering why we’ve got a black dude?! Seriously?!”

“To be fair, I’m curious about the Asian kid and the white guy too,” Bo shrugged.

“Alright, let’s don’t get our leather shorts in a wad,” Stone Paw grumbled as he slapped his hand on the table, causing the whole room to shudder. “We can talk history later. Right now, we need to focus on the matter at hand.”

\*\*\*

The ten of them sat around the table, going over battle plans until the sun came up. When planning was done, it was time to rest for the long night that awaited them. Stone Paw caused ten cups to rise out of the stone table, one in front of each of them. Blue Waters walked around the table and waved his hand over the cups. As he did, each cup filled with a clear, blue liquid. When all the cups were filled, he explained their purpose, “This’ll help us to sleep through the day so we’ll be well-rested for the night ahead of us. As we sleep, it’ll also bring our spiritual energies into harmony. We will be more focused as individuals and as a team. It’ll better allow us to anticipate each other’s actions.”

The eight lycanthropes downed their cups without hesitation. Ren and Pete eyed theirs a bit more warily, giving it a sniff before taking a test sip. Satisfied it was probably

safe, they finished off their cups as well. They could feel the effect of the liquid coming on quickly. Their thoughts became clouded and they knew they had to lie down soon. Bo's fortitude was stronger than that of his sister and friend and resisted the effect long enough to carry them into the corner. He moved to wolf form and used himself as a furry pillow for his sister. The others shifted to wolf form as well and piled around them to sleep.

As she slept, Ren discovered the liquid had another side effect. She and the others all went to the same Dreamtime, where they took the opportunity to run through the dozen or so different plans they had worked out. They needed so many plans because they still had no idea what their enemy could do or what he even looked like. Because of the lack of real knowledge on their enemy, the plans were somewhat general in their purpose. One plan was geared toward fighting a handful of near-human-sized opponents. Another was designed to fight one gigantic creature. Yet another plan was geared toward fighting an army of small but powerful critters. In the end, it was all just a best guess, but at the very least, practicing together gave them the advantage of being able to work together effectively.

The entire group awoke as the sunset. They were all fully alert the moment their eyes snapped open. They were also hungry. None of them had eaten since the previous night. Blue Waters returned to the cups, refilled them and said, "Drink this. It'll satisfy your hunger and nutritional needs, as well as give you an energy boost through the night."

This time around, neither Ren nor Pete hesitated to drink.

"Hey! That's really good!" Ren beamed and gave Blue Waters a thumbs up. "Sort of tastes like cinnamon."

Pete rubbed his stomach and grinned, "I feel like I just

ate a whole plate of cinnamon nachos.”

“Wow, I feel great!” Lan exclaimed.

“Me too,” Joey agreed, “We’re totally gonna do this!”

Embers approached Bo and extended a hand, saying, “Hey, sorry about before. No hard feelings?”

“Nah, man. We’re good. I was just curious because it looks like it would be a really interesting story.”

“That’s cool. If you’re really interested, Gemini and I were on a couple’s retreat in the area last year. We were touring around to find a place to build a tiny-house off-grid homestead.”

“Really?! My dad’s always watching YouTube videos about tiny homes and campers. He loves that stuff. Do you guys have a channel?”

“That’s cool, but nah. Anyway, there was a rogue werewolf who kept coming out here every full moon to hunt. Because of the way Stone and Blue handle the full moon, they were never able to stop her.”

Bo raised his hand and asked, “How do they handle the full moon?”

“That’s a trade secret. Let’s just say they’re not around to tend their territory on that night. That’s why it was such a big deal when we found you marking around here.”

“Oh! That makes so much more sense now. Okay, go on. Rogue werewolf,” insisted Bo.

“Like I was saying, we were on a retreat, camping around here on a full moon when we heard screaming coming from a nearby campsite. We came running, but by the time we got there, she had already killed Dream’s parents and brother. He was torn up too. She looked like she was just a wolf to us, so we attacked her with a couple of logs from the fire. At some point, I had already taken a bite, then she latched onto Gem’s neck, so I just jumped on her and tried to pry her jaws open with my hands. I used to wear

a lot of silver back then. Anyway, I'm sure you can figure out what happened next, once I got my hands on her."

Bo winced, "Yeah. I can guess."

"Blue found us the next day at the hospital," Embers continued, "He was supposed to kill us. That's what you're supposed to do if another werewolf turns someone in your territory, but he didn't have the heart."

"Can I say something?" asked Bo.

"Sure, go ahead," said Embers.

Bo dabbed at a tear forming in the corner of his eye and said, "I love you guys!"

Ren leaned in toward Pete and asked, "What the heck, dude? When did they become bros like that?"

"It's the drinks," Blue Waters explained, "It has them functioning on a simpatico wavelength. It's going to help once the fighting starts."

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At the cliff dwelling site, Pete took his position high in the air. He stood on four giant spider legs with two primary defensive bubbles and four blast bubbles, which he held at the ends of thick attack tendrils. It was decided early on it would be best for Pete to avoid direct contact in the battle. He would be more useful to the team in a supporting role. It was his job to keep an eye on the battle from above and provide defense to those on the ground. It seemed likely, as long as Pete didn't take any obvious offensive actions against the enemy, he would probably be ignored, allowing him to continue to help the others without risk of injury to himself.

The rest of the team assembled on the ground. Ren scanned the area with her *spirit sight*, looking for the portal opening, which hadn't yet appeared. The others stood

around in their wolf forms to keep warm while they waited for the portal to appear. They waited diligently, concentration never wavering. She attributed her persistent attention to the drink Blue Waters had provided when they woke.

At the exact moment between sunset and sun up, Ren saw a bright yellow light appear in the center of the canyon, five feet off the ground. It was a wobbly sphere, only two feet in diameter. Thin wisps of white energy poured out of the sphere and shot out along the ground in all directions. One stream ended abruptly, not far from the portal. It went into a crack, under a large boulder, which stuck out of the ground. After a few moments, a Gila monster came out from its winter resting spot. Ren saw the wisp of energy still connected it to the portal. It wasted no time heading off toward the nearest town.

“This is it, everyone!” she shouted as she ran to the portal, holding her hands out, one above and one below the portal to mark its location for the others. “It’s not big, you’ll have to leap into it here. Once everyone is in, I’ll follow you through and make sure everyone gets out with our problem visitor. Alright, we’re going in!”

Pete stayed put while the lycanthropes dove into the portal one after the other. All in, Ren followed after them, noting the entrance tone for this realm was a lower range minor chord, but she didn’t pay much attention to it. She didn’t have any intention of returning after tonight.

On the other side, the team found themselves standing within a stone ring, ten yards across. Evenly spaced around the ring were what appeared to be eleven wingless stone gargoyles, each sitting in a position similar to the Sphinx and measuring three feet tall at the shoulder. Their mouths gaped wide, each displaying a different colored crystal the size of a gallon milk jug. The crystals glowed and pointed directly at the portal.

Beyond the ring, with its back to the group, stood a large dark creature. It wasn't possible to determine if its exterior was skin, scales, or fur because its blackness was so complete. It had no definition beyond its silhouette. It was difficult to get a sense of depth while looking directly at it, but they could tell it was near a huge rectangular stone block, about twenty-five feet out from the ring, because it was manipulating a series of crystals on the surface of the block. The creature itself stood near twenty feet tall, shaped like a badger, but its head ended in a large hooked beak, rather than a short snout.

Wisps of white energy flowed up, off the crystals at the top of the huge block, high into the air, then down into the portal. It looked like the same energy that remotely controlled the Gila monsters. Far beyond the ring in every direction were desolate, black, lifeless mountains. Not black like the creature nor as sinister in appearance as the Shadow World but with a Cimmerian milieu that would have brought despair to the group had they not been bolstered by Blue Water's elixir.

Ren looked at the portal. She knew that if they were going to bring the twenty-foot hulking beast, the portal would need to be much bigger. "Go get him," she whispered and the rest of the team moved to their transcended forms.

Gemini divided into two and snuck up behind the badger-thing.

Ren placed her hands on the portal. She could feel the tone of Reality playing gently, produced by the crystals surrounding the portal. She focused her mind and increased the volume. The portal grew in size accordingly.

At the same time, crystals on the huge rectangular block lit up. The badger looked from crystal to crystal in confusion, giving some of them a little jiggle or a twist. After a few seconds, it turned to see what effect the flashing

crystals might have had on the portal and was immediately tackled by all nine lycanthropes. They struck high, knocking it over. It slammed into the block, crushing some of the crystals to dust. Energy exploded from the top of the block and the wisps of energy came to an abrupt end. The eleven crystals in the gargoyles flickered and Ren felt the stability of the portal wavering.

“Bring him quick! I don’t know how long I can hold the portal open this wide!” Ren managed to push the portal to a diameter of fifteen feet, which should have been plenty to bring the badger through, as long as they could keep it on its back.

Bo clamped the beak shut while the other lycanthropes held it along each side, running full bore toward the portal.

The badger was so shocked at the sudden attack, it hadn’t yet acted to defend itself, and it certainly didn’t expect to get pulled through the portal. It wasn’t until it was waist-deep into the portal that it finally realized it was being abducted. It kicked hard and two of the lycanthropes holding its legs went flying. However, Bo had a strong grip on the head and continued to pull it through into Reality.

The badger had just finished passing through the portal as the two thrown lycanthropes rebounded.

“Wait! Don’t go back yet!” Ren shouted at the two, who were both the same werewolf, Gemini. “I’ll hold the portal, you destroy the crystals around the circle so no one can reopen the portal from this end!”

## CHAPTER 5

### TEMPEST, SERAPH, TITAN, WHAMMY

By the time Ren and Gemini returned to Reality, the other lycanthropes had already begun the battle. The badger-thing had made it back to its feet, but Bo was still attached to its beak. He held it under his left arm, in a grip like a headlock. With his right arm, he clawed at a place on the head where there should have been an eye, though it was hard to be sure if there was one since there was no clear definition on the shape of the body.

The badger-thing attempted to claw at Bo, to pry him off its face, but Bo was much stronger than he appeared. The badger-thing was also hindered by the other four lycanthropes, who clung to its arms and chest, trying with all their might to bite, gouge, and strike as hard and deep as they could.

Lan moved to his short-legged wolf form and grew himself to the size of a rhino to latch onto the badger-thing's side, reducing its mobility.

Ren and Gemini joined the melee. Gemini came around the back and struck it low behind the legs, causing it to topple. As it landed on its back, Stone Paw caused a spike of stone to rise from the ground beneath it, to impale it.

At the same time, Ren crashed down into its chest with a power dive. The force of the strike caused it to flail so wildly, Bo, Stone Paw, and Dream Catcher flew off in random directions.

Joey jumped onto its chest and tried to look into its eyes, but it didn't seem to have any. He leapt down and shouted his frustrations in Vulgar Tongue, the language of lycanthropes, which he spoke out of necessity since he was in his transcended form and unable to speak English, "I can't send it to Dreamtime. It has no eyes!"

The badger-thing took only a moment to recover. It grabbed Blue Waters and Embers from its chest and threw them at the cliff face with all its might.

Embers had set its hand ablaze when he was grabbed, though it didn't appear to notice.

The two lycanthropes flew like speedballs toward the cliff face. Luckily, Pete caught them with tendrils of controlled air and set them safely on the ground.

Dream Catcher surrounded its head with dazzling lights.

Ren saw its beak swing down toward her and tried to fly away to avoid a direct attack. She didn't quite make it and was snatched out of the air by a powerful burning hand, which threw her at the same spot where it had tried to throw Embers. Pete managed to intercept Ren as well and released her into the air with a gentle toss.

"It's not affected by my illusion!" Dream Catcher shouted in Vulgar Tongue.

Pete tried to bind the badger-thing with thick bands of air, but it was too strong.

It was back on its feet, trying to stomp and kick Gemini while attempting to pry Lan's massive jaws from its side. It was their job to limit its mobility and ensure it could never keep a sure footing during the battle.

Embers leapt onto its shoulder and did his best to turn its head into a bonfire.

It grabbed him and flung him again toward the cliff face.

Bo, Joey, Stone Paw, and Dream Catcher slammed into the badger-thing's back, causing it to stumble forward. As it did, Stone Paw caused another spike to shoot out of the ground to crash into the badger-thing. The four of them sunk their claws and teeth deep into the badger-thing, which leapt into the air to land on its back.

It had intended to squish the four against the ground, but Pete managed to slip in three of his blast bubbles, which forced the badger-thing back to its feet, as though it had bounced on a trampoline. It immediately jumped again, this time Pete got his remaining blast bubble under it. The air provided some cushion, but the four still got squished.

The badger-thing rolled off the lycanthropes and stood on all fours, head still ablaze from Ember's attack.

Ren darted in low and fast, then, with all her strength, shot straight up beneath the badger-thing's beak. The uppercut made a loud crack and the badger-thing did a full backflip from the force of the hit.

It landed hard, then got to its feet, shaking its head. Once it regained its bearings, it looked for Ren, who it found quickly enough, coming back for another punch.

Though Pete had already reformed his ranged attack bubbles, he didn't have time to move them into position to help Ren.

As she approached for her next strike, she was intercepted in the air by the badger-thing's claw, no longer on fire, which sent her flying toward the cliff face. Ren left a crater in the wall but managed not to break any of her bones. She had put up her diamond defense shield in time to protect her from the impact. Looking down again, she saw

Blue Waters and Embers circling back for a sneak attack. She also saw her brother and the others, who had been squished, getting to their feet.

The Geminis attacked the badger-thing's legs and feet repeatedly. Finally, the badger-thing pulled a tree from the ground and swatted them aside like a couple of hockey pucks. With them out of the way, it threw the tree like a spear at Ren, who blocked it with her diamond defense again, causing the tree to shatter around her.

She pressed forward in her flight, to get close enough to punch the badger-thing again.

The badger-thing came in for a swing, but it was deflected by one of Pete's blast bubbles. Ren slammed deep into the badger-thing's chest, sending it stumbling backward, again to run into one of Stone Paw's spikes. Bo was up and ready to fight and saw the badger-thing stumbling. He came at it with a power leap to strike it in the center of its back.

By this time all the lycanthropes were on their feet and fighting, though they were no closer to defeating the badger-thing than they were when they first pulled it into Reality. The badger-thing had been badly beaten, clawed, bitten, and burned, yet showed no sign of disability or fatigue, nor did it seem to bleed. Their tactics were effective at keeping it off balance so they could land more successful strikes against it than it was landing against them, but in the end, it seemed to be a stalemate, which was going to force them to change strategy. If they couldn't find a way to do enough damage to it to seriously harm it and kill it soon, they would be forced to trap it.

Ren thought she might be able to harm it if she could use her *flaming sword*, but the last time she formed it, Nahlia had taken over her body. Just thinking about the sword made that part of her mind shift uncomfortably. She wasn't sure she would survive another reemergence of that

personality. She needed to relearn to form her sword without thinking too hard about her previous incarnation.

“Everyone, back away!” she shouted. *If I’m going to form the flaming sword, I need to be too distracted to even think of her.* “I’m going to have to fight it alone. I think it’s the only way we’ll be able to win.”

Through their common sense of purpose, which came from Blue Water’s elixir, everyone got the sense that she was right and they had to let her fight alone.

“Bo,” she continued, “If I can’t beat it, trap it in the Shadow World.” As everyone scattered, Ren whistled loudly.

The badger-thing turned to see why its enemies had suddenly fled. As it did, it took a large boulder right in the face. It shattered against its beak, causing it to stumble and wipe at its face. When it looked up again, it saw Ren hovering at head-level just out of striking range.

She dared the badger-thing to come for her with a gesture of her hand. Then, in a blur, she zipped past the badger-thing’s head, cracking it across the beak in the fly-by.

The badger-thing was stunned at her bold tactic. It turned to face her again. With guile, the badger-thing dug under a boulder with its toes, then kicked to fling it at Ren, who used her diamond defense to block it. The boulder shattered around her, leaving a cloud of dust in the air. The badger-thing’s fist came through the cloud and slammed directly into her, sending her to the ground in a heap. While her diamond defense hadn’t protected her from the badger-thing’s fist, it did protect her from the ground. Her *armor* soaked enough of the force from the fist that she wasn’t badly stunned or hurt by the impact. As she looked up, she saw Bo making a run for the badger-thing. “No! Bo, I’ve got it!” she insisted.

He stopped and backed away with a snarl.

The badger-thing placed both hands on its belly and

laughed, though it sounded more like an oddly disturbing bird call. Then it dove for Ren, looking to swat her into the ground with an open palm.

Ren managed to put up her diamond shield again, but the badger-thing continued to swat at her, over and over. Sometimes she managed to dodge, but mostly she had to block it with the power of the diamond ring, which existed only in ethereal form in her spiritual image. She tried punching a few times, but the badger-thing kept her cornered against the cliff so she couldn't fly to pick up enough momentum to do any real harm. She knew she only had to slip up once and the badger-thing would have her. Over and over, she dodged and blocked.

Then, without even reaching for it, or realizing she was trying to form it, the *flaming sword* ignited above her hand. The blade burned two and a half feet long, made of white and yellow flames. In her *spirit sight*, the hilt appeared to be the same silver handle she had seen on her hip so many times before. To everyone else, though, she didn't appear to hold anything. To them, a bright flame in the shape of a blade rose from her empty hand. After all, much like the ethereal diamond ring, the sword didn't actually exist. It was merely a spiritual manifestation of the power within her.

Seeing the flaming sword, the badger-thing stopped striking at Ren and took a quick step backward to reevaluate its enemy. After a moment, it stepped forward again and swung at her.

She held the sword to block the attack. The blade penetrated all the way through the hand, causing the badger-thing to cry out in agony.

It pulled its hand away, taking several steps back.

In the moonlight, Ren saw black blood, the same absolute black as the badger-thing itself, spill to the ground.

She didn't want to lose the advantage or give the badger-thing time to come up with a new strategy. She immediately dove at it and, with one wide swing chopped it in half. More blood spilled and she chopped it, again and again, severing the legs, arms, and head from the body. The pieces came to rest all around her. She roared into the night, soaked in the black blood, then took several deep breaths before saying, "Alright, I think I got it!"

Everyone cheered and clapped, then Ren was suddenly tackled to the ground. She struggled against her attacker. It was a smaller version of the badger-thing, about the size of a large bear. Six more quickly rose up from the ground. All the pieces Ren chopped from the badger-thing had changed to become a smaller version of the original.

Everyone rushed back to the fight, making sure each of the parts had someone to fight it. Pete remained above to provide defense support as necessary, throwing down ranged attack bubbles to help the team.

Ren felt Nahlia moving around in the back of her mind.

The entity, who lived repressed within her, grew slightly.

Her eyes opened in terror as she thought of her personality being wiped away again. Then, the angel diminished and returned to the tiny space she occupied at the back of Ren's consciousness. Relief washed over her and a new realization occurred to her. "Stone Paw, come help me here! I think I know what we need to do with these guys!"

One of the Geminis ran to Stone Paw and took over his fight so he could go to Ren.

"Alright, as I chop this guy to bits, you encase each part tightly in stone," commanded Ren as she sliced off one of its arms, then pointed to it and shouted, "Seal it!"

Stone Paw caused a stone case to rise out of the ground to trap the arm, which then compressed to hold it more tightly, removing any maneuvering room it might have within.

Ren inadvertently splashed everyone with the black blood as she hacked the smaller badger-things to bits. No one gave much consideration to this at first. Then, as the lycanthropes started to take injuries, they noticed they were no longer healing. Their wounds remained open and bleeding. By the time Ren and Stone Paw finished carving up and packaging the one they were fighting, several of the werewolves had taken significant injuries, though Bo and Blue Waters managed to avoid injury altogether, due to their fighting styles.

Ren moved on to help Dream Catcher next. He was the most badly injured with a deep slash of claw marks that ran from his neck, down across his chest and around his side. He was losing a lot of blood. Three on one made it much quicker to chop it to bits this time, and Stone Paw sealed the pieces as they hit the ground.

That done, Ren told Dream Catcher to step out of the fight. Next, she moved on to the badger-thing that was fighting one of the Geminis. He had taken a deep cut to one of his arms, which hung limp at his side. His elbow also appeared to be bent the wrong direction. Ren and Stone Paw made quick work of this one as well.

Suddenly, the remaining badger-things realized they were losing the fight because of Ren. All four turned and ran for her. Pete knocked them back with blasts of air. Bo, Lan, Joey, Blue Waters, Embers, and the other Gemini had to make a tactical change from trying to fight the badger-things, to trying to hold them back.

Embers had deep cuts on his face. They were bloody but not debilitating. He also had a few minor cuts on his

arms and chest, but they were inconsequential. The badger-thing he was fighting was entirely aflame, though it didn't seem to care. Ren chopped it to small pieces and moved on to the other Gemini. He had deep scratches on his back that he received while attempting to wrestle his opponent to the ground. Again, Ren carved up the badger-thing and Stone Paw sealed the pieces away.

The last two went down with relative ease, especially the last, which Lan had pinned to the ground, face first.

Once the last of the pieces was sealed away, Ren went to help the most badly injured. Dream Catcher, who looked like he was about to pass out, was first. If he hadn't remained in his transcended form, he probably would have died already.

"Hold still. I can heal you," said Ren as she placed her hands next to his wounds and poured the healing energy of her ruby ring into the deep cuts. To her surprise, they didn't heal. "Why isn't this working?" she demanded as she tried to feel as much empathy as she could for Dream Catcher to boost her healing power, but his wounds remained open. She looked down at her hands and realized, "It's the blood! It's some sort of a hex to prevent healing."

Ren focused on her diamond ring again and used it on the blood, which was all over herself, to counter the corruption of the blood hex. In a flash, the blood was gone from her. She touched Dream Catcher and dosed him with her anticorruption light as well. The black blood vanished and he was forced to human form. Ren was about to attempt to heal him again but saw his wounds already creeping closed.

In turn, she cleared the black blood from each of the lycanthropes. Any injuries they sustained quickly vanished, though they did leave obvious scars.

Once everyone was treated, she circled the battle

area and made sure to wipe out any trace of the blood from the ground and surrounding vegetation. There was no telling what it might do if it were allowed to remain.

“Alright, guys, do me a favor and line up all the badger-thing parts for me. There’s one last thing we need to do to them,” suggested Ren as she gestured toward the ground in a line.

Bo grinned at his sister and added, “At least I’m not the only one who thinks we should pee on them.”

“No. We’re not peeing on them!” she insisted. “There’s something I can do to lock them in. We don’t want them to break out over time.”

“Really?” asked Bo.

“Yeah. I think Na—um—*she* suggested it to me during the fight.”

“Okay, that’s a little scary,” added Bo.

“You ain’t kiddin’,” Ren agreed and knelt over the first stone case to view it with her *spirit sight*. Much the same way she would activate her ethereal ruby ring on her left hand for healing, allowing the red healing energy to pour out into a patient, she activated the ethereal diamond ring on her right hand, allowing the pure white energy to trickle down to her fingers. She used this energy to paint angelic script across the stone case, a sort of entrapment spell to hold the creature until the end of time.

While she worked on sealing each container with her script, Stone Paw created a deep cave in the cliff face at ground level. As each of the pieces of the badger-thing was processed, one of the lycanthropes carried it to the back and placed it against the wall. It took more than an hour to process all the cases.

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When all the stones were sealed, Stone Paw closed the cave and hardened the cliff face to resist erosion. “With the proximity to the Anasazi ruins,” he began, “Along with the fact that this location is so remote, it’s highly unlikely anyone will ever attempt to dig here. I think the remains should be safe for a long time.”

“You’re probably right. However,” said Bo, dressed again in his traveling clothes. “You’re always welcome to call. Send me a message if you think there’s another incursion during the next solstice. We’ll be back again to help you if you need us.”

Stone Paw held out his hand to shake and asked, “Are you off so soon?”

“Why, do you have another interdimensional monster you need killed?”

“Actually,” Stone Paw continued, refusing to release Bo’s hand. “We were hoping you’d stay for a few days. You and your friends. You can stay at my house.”

“Hmm, sounds interesting,” he admitted as he turned to his sister and friends to ask, “What do you guys think?”

“Ah, come on. My wife is a great cook and we throw a pretty wild Festivus,” Stone Paw bragged, still squeezing Bo’s hand tighter than was strictly necessary.

“Festivus, you say,” Bo beamed.

“I’ve already got the aluminum pole set up next to the fireplace,” he added.

“Alright, we’re in,” Bo agreed and was allowed to reclaim his hand.

Ren attempted to object with, “Bo, we’ve got...”

But Bo wasn’t having any of it and cut her off with a, “Shush! I said we’re in. Seriously, though, who do you think is going to have the better Festivus? To be perfectly honest, I’m not looking forward to airing my grievances with a bunch of Sue’s employees. If we stay here, we can have some real

fun.”

“Oh, fine,” she huffed. “Pete, you can go home if you want.”

“Are you kidding me? Festivus here is going to be way better than anything I’d get at home. Grievances with my mom go on *all* night. She usually has to have an intermission between me and dad.”

“Then it’s settled! Shadow Dog, Tempest, and Seraph are coming for Festivus.” Stone Paw pulled Bo under his arm and turned to the others.

“Tempest?” Pete echoed.

Embers patted him on the back and asked, “Did you prefer Wind Chime Stevie Wonder?”

Pete shook his head and insisted, “I’ll take Tempest, thanks.”

Ren quickly added, “I think I’m okay with Seraph, too. I don’t want to be known as ‘The Witch’ or anything like that.”

Stone Paw nodded solemnly and declared, “Excellent. Then that’s what we’ll call you when we tell your story.” He turned to Lan and Joey and asked, “Titan, Whammy, should we set plates for you as well?”

“Will there be meatloaf?” Lan asked.

“Of course!” answered Stone Paw.

Joey slapped Lan on the shoulder and cheered, “We’re in!”

## CHAPTER 6

### SWEET CHRISTMAS

The next few days were one big party with Stone Paw and his family, as well as the other lycanthropes. Unsurprisingly, Lan won the feats of strength. It was a much-needed vacation from all the troubles they had to deal with on a daily basis back home. However, there was one thing they had to get used to: at his house, Stone Paw was called George. Gemini was called Henry. Blue Waters was called Bruce. Dream Catcher was called Will, and Embers was called Junior.

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The kids got home at four in the morning on the twenty-fourth. Pete slept over until noon, then left for home. He was a little reluctant to go. His life was so much more interesting when he hung out with the Alonsos.

Ren shouted an encouraging “Butter!” to him on his way out.

“Butter, I got it!” Pete agreed as he pulled the door shut behind himself.

It was Trey’s turn to make breakfast. The kids waited

at the table with their heads resting on their arms. Their sleep schedule was mixed up from the last few days. After a few minutes, Trey served eggs, bacon, and toast. Groggily, the kids lifted their heads and picked up their forks.

“So, how was your trip? I got your texts that you won, but they were rather short on details. I see none of you came back dead or even grievously injured. That’s good, right?” asked Trey.

Bo perked up as he began to regale his father with the story of the battle of Mesa Verde, “It was pretty awesome. First, we crossed over into another dimension and kidnapped the monster...”

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Christmas morning came and the whole family had gathered around the tree long before the sun came up. It had always been a tradition that everyone would wake at one or two in the morning, open presents, then go back to bed and sleep in late. This morning, Bo acted as gift bearer, handing out gifts to everyone from the pile at the base of the tree. Things had been hectic for a long time, and no one had much time for shopping, so there weren’t many gifts to go around. They decided, since presents were few but thoughtful, they should open them in some sort of meaningful order. The presents Ren gave would all be opened first.

Bo set his sister’s gift to their father in front of him on the floor.

It was a sleeping kit that included earplugs, a blackout mask, and an orthopedic pillow. “Oh, Puddin’, you shouldn’t have. But since you did — um — why?” asked Trey.

“It’s so you can sleep better. I know that sometimes we get in and out at odd hours and I don’t want you to have

to suffer any more than you already do. I also know you have back problems sometimes, so I got you the extra-good pillow.”

“Aw, you’re so sweet. No wonder you’re my favorite daughter,” Trey beamed.

Sue received her gift next: a photo album half-full of pictures of Trey and the kids. “Oh, Ren, this is so nice. I love pictures. I should take this when I go to see Mom later,” she insisted as she flipped through the pages. When she reached the halfway point, where the pictures ended, there was a note that read:

*To be filled with pictures that  
include you, because from now  
on, we always want to include  
you*

Sue sniffed and dabbed her eyes with the sleeve of her pajamas. “This is the sweetest gift anyone could give.”

Ren came to sit next to her and hugged her tightly before Bo opened his gift.

In the box, he found a gift card, which was sitting atop another box. The gift card was for the new pet store that had opened in the shopping plaza across the highway. “Nice! Now I can get those chew toys I’ve been eyeballing,” he chuckled.

Inside the next box was a set of new clothes and a note that read:

*To be used in case of emergency.*

“Double nice!” added Bo. “Lately, my clothes aren’t as durable as they used to be. This is perfect. Thanks.”

Next, Bo handed out the gifts from his father. Ren

opened hers first. It was a book of famous places to visit in the United States. “Wow, this looks — colorful,” she said.

“It doesn’t look like much at first,” Trey began, “But in your hands, it’s quite a remarkable gift. You can go anywhere you want, anytime you want. I know we never really had much time to travel before, but now you don’t need as much time. If you want to see the Grand Canyon — *bam* — you go see the Grand Canyon. You want to see the Statue of Liberty — *bam* — you go see the Statue of Liberty. What you have is freedom. There are so many places I wish I had visited when I was younger. Now you have the opportunity to see all those places and I don’t want you to waste it. Take a look at that book later, then just go somewhere and be amazed.”

“You’re right. Thank you, Daddy. You’re the greatest,” she beamed as she hugged her father and kissed him on the cheek.

Sue opened her box next. Within it, she found a gold bracelet with a dolphin for the clasp. She had told Trey she liked dolphins, like her mother before her, but she regretted she could never get near them because of the saltwater of the ocean. “Oh, honey, it’s beautiful.”

“I got it for you, so you could be near at least one dolphin,” he explained.

She sniffed and dabbed again, then squeezed Trey thoroughly.

Bo opened his gift. Again, it was a book. However, this time it was about the power of forgiveness.

Trey explained, “I got that for you because I know you’re having some problems with things in your life you can’t control. I don’t want those things to hurt you for the rest of your life. I’ve read that book before and I really think that if you read it, you’ll be more comfortable just being the you you are today.”

“Thanks, Pop,” said Bo, looking a little uncomfortable. “I’ll read it.”

Sue’s gifts were next. “Bo, why don’t you go ahead and open yours first. I want to see your reaction,” she beamed in anticipation.

He tried to put on a happier face and pulled his box into his lap. “Sure,” he agreed and untied the bow on the top of his present. At the bottom of the box, he found a single seed. A look of confusion rolled across his face, then embarrassment as he realized he didn’t understand the gift. “Um, sorry. What’s up with the seed?”

“It’s for you to swallow. It’ll find its way to your appendix on its own and grow, just a little bit. Once it’s ready, you’ll be able to talk to the tree that lets you into Mom’s retirement garden. She thinks you’re a really sweet boy and wants you to be able to come by and visit anytime you like. Whenever you do, she’ll bake you a pie. How’s that for a gift that keeps on giving?”

“Wow, that’s the best gift a boy could ask for. Thank you!” Bo ran over and threw his arms around her.

She squeezed back with surprising strength.

After a moment he grunted and said, “Ooh, you’re tougher than you look.”

“And don’t you forget it, Mister!” she teased.

“Okay, my turn!” insisted Ren.

“Alright, go ahead.”

Ren tore off the bow and pulled the lid off the box. Inside, she found a thick glass jar, with a label that read *FOR BOO-BOOS*. “What is it?” she asked.

“I’ve noticed you have a habit of getting beat up, so I made some extract from my healing leaves and put it in the jar for you. It won’t heal a wound as quickly as one of my leaves because it doesn’t have my living energy to direct it. What should take a leaf one day to heal, the extract should

heal in two or three days. Make sure you keep a bandage on it, so it doesn't wipe off."

"Oh, that is so thoughtful! Thank you." Ren hugged her, then grunted as Sue squeezed back and exclaimed, "Whoa, you are strong!"

Bo laughed and clarified, "I wasn't joking!"

"No, you weren't!" Ren agreed.

"Alright, it's my turn now. Let's see what I got," Trey insisted as he opened the box to find a jumbo pack of extra-thick, support socks and four pairs of dress socks in various colors. With an earnest grin he said, "Woman, you are good. A man can never have enough socks."

"Well, I've seen you take your shoes off. More often than not, I see one of your toes looking back at me," she teased. "I figured you were probably due for a new batch."

"You were so right," Trey agreed. "Thank you!"

It was finally Bo's turn to see his gifts opened. "Sue, why don't you go ahead and open yours first?"

She opened her box. In the bottom was a slip of paper, which she pulled out and read aloud, "*Whatever you need done, just write it on the back and leave it somewhere I'll find it.*" How, um, thoughtful. Thanks, Bo."

"I was thinking about it for weeks, but I have absolutely no idea what to get women in general, much less a Tree Sister. I figure you'll probably get your gift's worth out of that. I'm good for heavy lifting, deliveries, finding lost items, whatever you need basically."

"Then you'll see this again soon," she insisted. "I need some landscaping done at the store and it'll require some heavy lifting."

"I got you covered," he assured her with the wink and the gun. "Dad, you're next."

"Okay, then." Trey shook his box first, to hear if it might be another slip of paper or something more

substantial. It sounded only slightly more solid than paper. Satisfied, he opened the box. At the bottom, he found two laminated three-day passes to the big anime convention in Dallas. “Oh, that’s awesome! Thanks! Now, the only question is, who do I take with me this year?”

Bo pointed to the bottom of the tags and said, “Names are already on the passes. They’re for you and Sue.”

Sue hadn’t seen the passes and looked a little confused as she asked, “Huh? Where are we going?”

“Bah, he’ll explain later. Ren, it’s your turn!” Bo nudged his gift closer to his sister.

“Alright, this should be good,” she said. The box was obviously too big and heavy to be a slip of paper or passes. She opened it to find a black deluxe travel backpack. It had one spacious main compartment and many other utilitarian pockets and compartments. The extra strong straps were designed for comfort. “Wow, this is a really nice backpack.”

“But wait, I’m not done giving,” teased Bo. “Check inside this pocket right here.”

Ren reached in but didn’t find anything. “It’s empty.”

“Or is it?” asked Bo. He reached into the pocket and pulled out a fancy compass, then put it back in.

Ren checked the pocket again, but it was still empty. “What did you do with it?”

“Hmm, maybe you should check this pocket over here,” he suggested and pointed to a larger compartment on the other side.

Ren reached into the compartment, but it was empty too. “Nothing.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, then reached into the compartment Ren had just checked to pull out some sort of technical-looking instrument with a viewing piece that kind of looked like a little telescope. He grinned, then put it back inside the compartment.

Trey pointed with a confused look and asked, “Was that a sextant?”

“Yes, it was,” replied Bo, who directed his sister to check it again with a gesture.

She reached into the compartment again, but it was still empty. “Where the heck are you putting all this stuff?”

Bo smiled broadly and said, “I was thinking about that problem I had to solve at the hospital with Joey that one time. All of a sudden, I had a great idea. Any normal schmo can stash something in a backpack, but you and me, we can stash stuff into the Shadow within a backpack.”

Ren blinked a few times, then looked down at the bag. She reached her hand into the first compartment, then pushed her hand into the shadow of the pocket and found the compass. “You little genius,” she beamed as she pulled it out. “This is fantastic!” She then checked the other pockets, pulling out the sextant, as well as a book on celestial navigation using a sextant and compass, and a bunch of atlases for various parts of the world.

“Now you can go anywhere in the world and never get lost. Even when you’re out in the middle of the ocean with no land in sight, you should still be able to find where you are and where you’re going. You could even stash Sue’s boo-boo balm in there,” Bo suggested.

“This is some pretty expensive stuff, Bo. How did you pay for all of it?” Trey asked in wonder.

“I wasn’t supposed to say anything, but since he’s gone now, I guess there’s no harm. This was all subsidized by Brad,” admitted Bo, who turned to his sister and continued, “I was telling him my idea for your present before the island trip, after our first Mesa Verde trip, and he thought it was a great idea. He wanted to help me make it perfect, so he grabbed a wad of bills from his petty cash box and told me to buy the best of everything.”

“Aw, that was really sweet,” Sue cooed as she leaned over and squeezed his hand.

“Is it weird that I miss him?” asked Ren as she laid the sextant across her lap. “I mean, yes, he was a zombie and, yes, he spent months manipulating me and Bo. It’s just, despite all that, every once in a while, you’d be having a conversation with him and he really made you feel like he was on your side. Then you find out something like this and you’re like, ‘why would a zombie even care?’ But he did. I think he really did care about us.”

Trey shrugged and said, “No. It’s not weird. It’s just — complicated.”

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **THE NEW GUY**

New Year's Day came and went, and the kids were back to school the following Monday. The normalcy of attending classes felt surreal. It was as if "normal" life had become a sort of dream-like fantasy they fell into for eight hours a day, then went home to the reality of flying through the sky, teleporting through alternate dimensions, lifting cars, and dealing with horrific monsters.

At first, it took a great deal of effort to even care about school again. If there wasn't such a necessity to portray a normal life, they would have quit before Valentine's Day. However, with the onset of spring came a renewed interest in school and classmates. Dances and other events drew their attention back to their non-supernatural friends. Driving lessons also brought Ren's attention home. Trey signed her up for online driver's education so she could learn on her own schedule. Because of state requirements, it would be fall before she could get her official license. When Bo turned fifteen in April, he signed up for driver's education as well, though it would be a full year before he could get his license, because he would need to turn sixteen first.

That was, however, just the weekdays. On weekends,

the Alonso kids, usually with Pete in tow, put Ren's travel gear to good use. By the time school let out in the first week of June, they'd already seen thirty-two of the wondrous destinations from the book Ren's father gave her for Christmas.

The first thing the family did, as soon as the kids got home from the last day of school, was board an international flight. Destination: Bohol, Philippines. Though it wasn't exactly the island her ancestors came from, it was close enough. Sue wanted to be married someplace special, and Bohol was an island paradise where she would finally be able to see dolphins in the wild. Being so close to the saltwater made her nervous, but it was worth it. The wedding ceremony was small but beautiful. Afterward, Bo rode around the bride and groom on a buffalo, throwing rose petals into the air.

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Ren stood in line to pick up her class schedule on the first day of school, but she wasn't looking at the clerk. She was looking at the boy exiting through the doorway behind her. She'd caught a glimpse of him with her *spirit sight*. There was something extra about him.

"Sweetie, that boy doesn't have your schedule. I do," the clerk snarked as she held out a slip of paper to Ren.

Still distracted, she didn't hear the clerk. *Why does his aura look like that*, she wondered.

The next student in line, a curly-haired blonde, gave her a nudge and said, "Girl, take your schedule!"

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry," said Ren, flustered, then finally took notice of her class schedule. "Sorry. I think my mind may still be on vacation. Thank you." She took her schedule and turned for the door.

“Hold up!” the blonde exclaimed as she tugged at Ren’s jacket sleeve.

“Dibs!” blurted Ren, then winced apologetically and added, “Sorry, Ash.”

Ashley scrunched her face and balled her fists and grumbled, “How did you know I was going to...?”

“Because I know you,” she teased and shrugged. “He’s cute. What else would you have said?”

“Well, I could have...” Ashley pursed her lips tightly and looked like she was about to say something but then threw her hands down, turned to the clerk, who held out her schedule, and huffed, “Fine. You win.”

“Aw, come on. You didn’t even talk to him. I’m the one who introduced myself.”

“I said fine already,” grumbled Ashley.

Ren laughed and made for the door, “Love ya! Gotta run!”

As she hurriedly walked, she looked down at the slip of paper to see her first class was AP Chemistry.

This was Ren’s senior year and she knew the layout of the school by rote. She didn’t need a map to know her first class would be near the back corner of the school. As she walked, she had plenty of time to think about the boy at the schedule desk. *What was that all about?*

She rounded the corner by the library, where she saw her younger brother coming the opposite direction.

He held a map in one hand and a class schedule in the other. A group of girls followed him, whispering amongst themselves.

She almost missed him because a taller boy was walking in front of him. Today, his dirty-blond hair was a little more unkempt than usual.

“Bo! I just saw something...” Ren cut herself short. She didn’t want to talk about things of a supernatural nature

where Bo's group of followers might be able to overhear, but she didn't think she would be able to wait until after school.

"Hey, yeah, that's great. Do you know where I can find Mrs. Harmon's geometry class?" He didn't look up from his map as he tried to orient himself in the hall.

"Yeah, end of the hall, make a left, it's on the left, but wait..." She paused a moment, suddenly realizing she was looking up, rather than down, then asked, "When the heck did you get taller than me?"

"About four or five months ago, around my birthday. Alright, I gotta go. Thanks."

"No! Wait!" She placed a hand on the talisman that hung around her neck and spoke in Vulgar Tongue, "There is a new boy named Ramzi. I met him a few minutes ago. He just moved here from Egypt. He's kind of tall with dark hair and really beautiful green eyes."

Bo replied in Vulgar Tongue as well, "Wait a sec. You're seriously using the talisman to tell me about a boy with beautiful eyes?"

"It's not the eyes that are the point," she insisted. "I looked at him with my *spirit sight*. His skin had a golden shimmer to it and he looked like a pharaoh from some old hieroglyphic."

"So, let me guess," began Bo, "You want me to beat him up like I did Pete."

"No, I don't want you to beat him up! We don't know anything about him. Just keep your eyes open for me. Did you bring the spirit-seeing glasses?" asked Ren.

"Yeah, they're in the shadow of my backpack," he replied as he tugged on the strap around his shoulder.

She gave him a thumbs-up and continued, "Alright, if you see a gorgeous Egyptian boy with green eyes, try to see if you can take a peek at him with the glasses." Noticing the girls in the hall behind Bo, she inquired, "Are they going to

follow you like that all year long?”

“Nah, probably just this week. Once they realize I’m with Alyssa, most of them should move on.” One of the benefits of lycanthropy Bo enjoyed was that his pheromones were supercharged. It made him irresistible to those of the opposite sex.

Just then, a tall boy walked up behind Bo and placed a hand on his shoulder.

Bo turned and looked to see who it was. “Bubba! Holy crap, did you have a growth spurt or what?”

“I’m six-three, dude!” he beamed as he posed for Bo, then asked, “Hey, do you know where I can find Mrs. Harmon’s geometry class?”

Bo nodded, “I’m headed there right now. Let’s go.”

Bubba looked down at Bo with curiosity and asked, “Hey, what was that language you and Ren were speaking?”

The two boys headed off to geometry, leaving Ren to find her way to chemistry.

Along the way, Ren saw Pete and his girlfriend Hannah ahead of her in the hall. They looked like an odd couple. She was a six-foot-two basketball player, and he was half a foot shorter. She wanted to tell Pete about Ramzi, but she couldn’t in front of Hannah. She’d have to wait for a more opportune moment.

As luck would have it, he went into AP Chemistry and Hannah continued down the hall.

Ren hurried in after him so they could take seats next to each other. She grabbed him by the arm and began to drag him to the back of the room as she whispered, “Pete, we need to talk.”

He allowed himself to be yanked along, flailing his cane. He accidentally hit one of the other students in the head as Ren pulled him down the aisle, to the last two seats in the back. “Sorry about that!” he shouted apologetically.

“It’s something we’ll need soundproofing for,” she insisted as she lowered her voice.

He gathered some of his tendrils of air around them and caused them to form a soundproof bubble. “Okay, go ahead.”

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Over the course of the next three hours, Ren contemplated how she would get close to Ramzi. She didn’t share any other classes with Pete, so the next time she would see him would be at lunch, which would be a good opportunity to see Ramzi again as well.

Normally, Ren would go with Hannah, Pete, and Ashley off campus to eat. Hannah’s little car wouldn’t exactly accommodate a fifth or a sixth if Bo’s lunch schedule lined up as well. The increasing complexity of Ren’s life was making it more difficult for her to allow time for her non-supernatural friends. She would have to stop having lunch with Hannah and Ashley for now. Ren had known for a long time, she would have to make concessions as she reprioritized her life to keep her friends and family safe from the unseen world. Her friendship with both Hannah and Ashley had already become strained. She didn’t have time for them the way she used to, before she found out she was an embodied angel, before she inherited a secret fortune worth billions of dollars along with her own pocket spirit world, none of which she could tell her non-supernatural friends about. It all had to remain a secret, or she, along with all her friends and family, could be in great danger.

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When class let out for lunch, Ren found Pete and

Hannah heading into the parking lot.

“Hey, guys! I’m going to see if I can have lunch with that new boy, Ramzi. You two go on to the Mucho Bueno without me today. Besides, I think Ashley’s still a little grumpy about this morning. She’d probably rather not ride with me anyway.”

Hannah looked down at Ren and asked, “What happened?”

“It was that new boy. I called dibs on him. She was planning to call dibs too, but I beat her to it,” Ren admitted.

Hanna laughed, then whispered, “She’ll get over it. You have fun with Ramzi. Make sure you tell me all about it.” She pulled Pete under her arm and started toward her car, where she saw Ashley was already waiting, chewing on a lock of her curly blonde hair.

Ren walked quickly to the lunchroom. In the far corner, she saw Bo sitting with Bubba and Alyssa, his girlfriend since junior high. Also at his table was the group of girls from the hall, plus enough additional girls to fill the rest of the table and the table next to it. *Bo may be cursed, but he’s never going to have to worry about popularity. Sheesh!*

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When class let out for lunch, Ramzi set out for his locker to drop off books. Unfortunately, the class he just finished was right across from the cafeteria and his locker was on the other side of the school. The round trip would take a good portion of his lunch hour. He would have to get creative to find a way to make lunch more convenient. He had too many books to hang on to from his previous classes. There would be no way to carry food at the same time without looking like a circus act. Dropping the books at his locker was a necessity.

As he walked, he thought about how different this school was from his school in Egypt. He thought about how the students behaved toward the teachers. He thought about the cute girl with straight dark hair and smooth tan skin, who he met in line to get his class schedule. *What was her name? Ren? Yes, that was it.* He could tell she was trying to flirt a little. It was flattering. More than anything, though, he couldn't help but think there was something familiar about her. He had a feeling that buzzed around in the back of his head that hinted at recognition, but unless she spent any time in Egypt, he was sure he had never met her before. Then again, not all the thoughts and feelings that buzzed around in the back of his head were his own.

Ramzi had finally made the trek to and from his locker, and back to the cafeteria. He looked around for a place to sit as he entered and noticed two boys sitting in the corner, completely surrounded by girls. Though one of the boys was very tall, they both appeared to be underclassmen. However, that didn't seem to provide any discouragement to the girls who swooned, completely enthralled by every word the shorter boy spoke. *Whatever that guy is doing over there, he's doing it right.*

There weren't any open seats on that side of the room, so Ramzi shifted his attention to find a spot somewhere else. As he turned, he spotted that cute girl again, walking toward him.

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After ten minutes, Ren became concerned the new boy had either left campus for lunch or had lunch next hour. She was relieved when he finally entered the cafeteria. "Ramzi! Hey, it's nice to see you again. Would you like to sit with me?" she asked with a warm smile, trying not to seem

like a stalker. This time she wouldn't turn into a mush brain. *He's not just a cute boy, he's something else. Keep your head in the game, Ren!*

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"I would love to." Now that he was looking at her again, Ramzi was sure he had never met her before today. Nonetheless, the feeling of familiarity in the back of his head came back, stronger than before. He followed her to a table on the opposite side of the room from the crowd in the corner. "I was just thinking, maybe I met you somewhere before today. Have you ever been to Egypt?"

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Ren noticed he spoke with a slight accent. It seemed to add to his charm. "No. Never been to Egypt. Maybe I just have a familiar-looking face." She wondered why he would ask such a question. However, when she thought about it for a moment, she had a feeling that buzzed around in the back of her head that hinted at recognition, but she was sure she had never met him before.

Then again, not all the thoughts and feelings that buzzed around in the back of her head were her own. There weren't any specific memories, but Ren did notice some amount of knowledge leaked into her own mind from the repressed mind of the angel she hosted. Sword fighting, for example. In this life, she was taught by Brad. Though he was an excellent instructor, it wasn't entirely his teaching that caused her to achieve the level of master within a few short weeks. It was a sort of muscle memory from her past life, which was reawakened when she practiced with him.

Ramzi furrowed his brow and acquiesced, "Maybe

you do. Hmm. Well, I'm sure it's nothing anyway. So, what did you bring for lunch?" He pulled a plastic container from a paper bag and popped off the lid.

"You know what? I didn't bring anything. I'd originally planned to lunch with another friend, but he's already gone. I bet my brother can get me something. Hold on, I'll be right back."

Ramzi watched as she made her way into the corner to talk to the shorter boy with all the girls. After a short transaction of words, the boy stood, said something to the crowd, and a dozen girls leapt to offer her their lunch. She took a few moments to pick and choose the items she wanted and then returned to her seat.

Ren noticed Ramzi looking confusedly back and forth between her and her sibling. "Oh, that's my brother, Bo. I'll introduce you some time."

"Is he in the mob or something?" he asked with a wary look.

"Oh, he's just really good with girls. You'll notice that about him. If we were to go someplace we'd never been before, someplace no one knew us, Bo would still be surrounded by girls. He's kind of cursed that way," she chuckled. When she looked up to see if Bo had heard her, she saw him looking back from across the room, shaking his head.

"That doesn't seem like such a bad curse," Ramzi mused.

"You might change your mind about that if you knew the whole story. Anyway, so why did you come to the States?" she asked, hoping to change the subject.

"My father has a consulting job. He's hardly ever home, though. He has to travel most of the time. He moved me and my mother here so he wouldn't have to fly all the way back to Egypt to see us. Most of his work is here in the

States.”

“Sounds like you have lots of time to yourself.”

Ramzi shook his head and suggested, “Not as much as you might imagine. So, what does your father do?”

“He’s an artist. He puts on art shows a couple of times each year. Sometimes he sells the art afterward, sometimes he gives it away. He gets grant money from someone rich. That’s where we get most of our living money. My stepmother runs a plant nursery. It’s been in her family for generations. She’s pretty great.”

“What about your mother?” asked Ramzi, then immediately winced and looked away. When he turned back, he bore a look of embarrassment. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“Oh, it’s okay. She disappeared when I was little. We’re not sure what happened to her.”

“That’s terrible. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

Ren shrugged it off, “Oh, it’s fine. It’s been more than ten years. I’m a big girl now. I can handle it,” she assured him with a smile and patted him on his forearm. Turning, she looked at her brother again for a moment, who she noticed wore the wire-rimmed glasses from their great-grandfather’s secret study. The glasses would allow him to see spiritual projections.

Seeing Bo with the glasses reminded her of what she saw earlier that day in the office. She wanted to get a closer look, now that she was sitting right next to him, so she activated her *spirit sight*.

“Whoa, did you just feel that?!” exclaimed Ramzi as he shuddered and looked around. His green eyes seemed intense.

Ren deactivated her *spirit sight* and asked, “Are you okay? You look flushed all of a sudden.” She knew it was no coincidence he reacted to her power.

“Yes, I guess so. It was just for a second, it felt like all the hairs on my body stood on end.” He rubbed his arms with his palms to push the hairs back down.

Ren looked at Bo again, who was still looking at Ramzi with the glasses. “Well, I’m sure it was probably nothing. So, what are you doing after school?”

He continued to look around but with less enthusiasm and admitted, “Probably just homework, then more of the nothing I’ve been doing since I got here.”

“Well, not anymore!” insisted Ren. “You’re coming with me and my friends after school. Where do you live?”

“Just two blocks north,” he said as he began to point, then hesitated as he oriented himself and swung his arm around to the left.

“I live three blocks south. Are you gonna walk home?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Then meet me out at the stoplight on the corner. I’ll go with you to your house to meet your mother. Then you can come with me.”

## CHAPTER 8

### AFTER SCHOOL SPECIAL

After his last class, Bo found Alyssa at her locker, packing the things she would need for homework. As it had been since the start of the school day, girls gravitated toward Bo in the hall. He could tell Alyssa felt uncomfortable about it because many of those girls were popular upperclassmen. He leaned in close and spoke softly, “Hey, don’t worry about all these girls. They’ll go away soon, just like in junior high. You’re the only one I want to spend my time with.”

She smiled, but they both knew it was fake. “I’ll feel better when they’re gone,” she huffed.

“They’ll be gone. You’ll see. Ooh, speaking of gone. I need to get out of here. I’m meeting my sister and her new friend Ramzi. I’ll meet you before school tomorrow, right?”

“I’ll be there,” she agreed, this time with a genuine smile.

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Bo was first to the corner because he didn’t have to stop at his locker. He kept most of his books and other materials in the Shadow within his backpack.

After a few minutes of waiting, he heard Ren and Ramzi coming. She was telling him her father's 'elephants in the refrigerator' joke. They finally made it to the corner as she was giving the punchline, "Because there's a VW Bug parked out front!" she laughed and grabbed Ramzi by the elbow.

Bo clapped his hands once and rubbed them together. "So, where are we going?" he asked.

"Oh, Ramzi, this is my brother, Bo. Bo, this is Ramzi," she said as she gestured back and forth between the two of them.

Bo reached out for a handshake and said, "Hey, nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you too," said Ramzi, then asked, "You're the boy with all the girlfriends, right?"

"Nah, just one. The rest are just wannabes. So, north, right?" asked Bo as he pointed up the block with both hands.

"Correct. This way. My house is just a couple of blocks ahead, then down on the left." Ramzi motioned up the block with an open palm.

Now that he was close, Bo took in a deep breath, hoping he might be able to discern something from the way he smelled, which would help him figure out what he was. He took his time to analyze the scents as they walked along the sidewalk. He could smell the foreign soil, still clinging to his shoes. The scent of the spices his mother cooked with were still in his hair and clothes. He smelled the mildew from when he went into the boy's locker room for his locker assignment. There was a chemical smell on the edge of his shirt from the science room, where he leaned against one of the tables. Very faintly, almost imperceptible by even Bo's keen sense of smell, there was another scent, which reminded him of Ren. It wasn't Ren's scent, but it reminded him of her. "So, do you have any brothers or sisters or pets?"

“No, I’m an only child and my father doesn’t like animals. Right now, it’s just me and my mother. My father comes home a few times each month. He stays for two or three days, then he’s gone again.”

“Do you miss him when he’s gone?” asked Ren in sympathetic tones.

“At the risk of sounding callous, no, not really. It isn’t that I don’t love him. It’s just that it’s always been this way,” he replied.

“So, what do you like to do for fun? Ren and I were into MMA last year. Our teacher died near the end of the year, though, so we’ve kind of been on a break from that.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your teacher, but I’m not familiar with that term, MMA. What is that?” asked Ramzi.

“Mixed martial arts. Some people call it ‘cage fighting.’ It’s really popular these days,” Bo explained. However, that was just to cover up the fact that he and Ren hadn’t actually studied MMA. The classes were their excuse to get away from their non-supernatural friends so they could work on developing their supernatural abilities. Though, to be fair, they did learn how to fight as a part of their training.

“Seriously?” asked Ramzi, turning to Ren. “I have a hard time imagining you fighting. You appear to be so proper and dainty.”

“Don’t let her pretty looks fool you,” Bo laughed and clapped Ramzi on the shoulder. “She could kick your butt six ways to Sunday before you knew what hit you. She’s a lot tougher than she looks.”

“I’ll have to remember that,” Ramzi noted with a skeptical grin.

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Two blocks later and around the corner, the trio

walked up the driveway at Ramzi's house. It was a two-story stucco with a red tile roof. The lawn was well kept with short hedges in front of the street-side windows.

"Nice house," said Ren and gave Ramzi a thumbs up.

"Thanks. I think it's a little big though. We have four bedrooms and only two regular occupants. It gives my mother a room for her craft supplies, and we converted one of the extra rooms into a movie theater."

Bo examined the exterior of the house and breathed deeply again. "Why did you get such a big house if you didn't need it?"

"Oh, it was sort of a package deal with my father's current assignment. Arlington is central to his boss' operation, so he wanted him based here. The house is owned by the company. Come inside." Ramzi opened the door and led the way into the kitchen, where his mother was pulling cookies out of the oven. "Mom, these are some of my new friends from school. This is Ren and Bo is her younger brother."

"Well, hey there. I'm Rhonda. I was just baking some cookies for Ramzi. You're welcome to have as many as you like." She set the cookie sheet onto the counter to cool before she took off her apron and went to the refrigerator. "Would you guys like something to drink? We have lemonade, root beer, and filtered water."

She wasn't what Ren expected at all. She was tall and blonde, with porcelain skin. *Well, now I know where he got his green eyes*, she thought.

Bo stepped forward and said, "I'd love some lemonade."

"Me too. I hope you don't mind me saying so," Ren began, awkwardly. "But you don't really look all that Egyptian."

Rhonda laughed, then replied, "No, I don't mind. I'm

actually from right here in Arlington. When my husband told me he got assigned here, I got really excited about moving home.” She poured two glasses of lemonade and one glass of milk. She handed the lemonade to the visitors and the milk to Ramzi.

Ren took a sip from her cup, then explained, “We were hoping, after our snacks here, we could take Ramzi with us. We wanted to introduce him to our friend Pete. He lives closer to our house.” She suddenly opened her eyes wide and waved her hands toward Rhonda. “Ooh! I’ve got an idea! Since it’s just the two of you, why don’t you meet us at our house tonight for dinner? I think we’re having spaghetti, or as my dad calls it, ‘super sketti.’ It’s his secret recipe.” She paused for a moment, then held up a finger. “Oh, do you guys eat—kosher—or whatever it is Muslims call it? I know, for the most part, the rules are similar.”

“It’s called halal and, no. We were part of the minority of non-Muslim families in Egypt. Ramzi attended a small Christian school. That’s another benefit of coming home. Sometimes it’s hard being an oddball in a culture with strong traditions you don’t observe.”

“Okay, whew. That’s a relief. The super sketti has some pork in it. I didn’t want you to be surprised at the last minute by anything that might cause problems later,” Ren admitted, wiped her brow jokingly.

“Well, that’s very thoughtful. Most people wouldn’t think to ask. Ramzi, I like this girl.” Rhonda raised her hand to shield her mouth as she turned to her son and continued, “And she’s cute too.”

Ramzi turned to Bo and asked, “Does your father do this to you too?”

“Relentlessly,” grumbled Bo. “Hey, I think those cookies are cool enough.” He grabbed two cookies and handed one to his sister.

“So, can I go?” asked Ramzi, looking at his mother with pleading eyes.

“Sure, that’s fine,” agreed Rhonda, “Ren, have your father call me if it’s okay for us to come to dinner tonight.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. Here, I’ll leave you my dad’s name, along with our address and phone number.” She pulled a scrap piece of paper from her backpack and wrote down the particulars. “Here you go. The address is really easy to find.”

Rhonda’s brows shot up when she saw the name on the paper. She looked carefully at Ren’s face, then asked, “Trey Alonso? Did he grow up here in Arlington?”

“Yeah, why?” asked Ren.

“Because I think we went to high school together. Gosh, now that I think about it, you could be his little twin sister. You look so much like him,” Rhonda marveled as she closely inspected the features of Ren’s face.

“Seriously? You went to high school with our dad! That’s crazy, and, yeah, people always say I look like him. He tells me that’s why I’m so pretty.”

Rhonda laughed and shook her head. “Yeah, that’s Trey. Okay, sure. Ramzi, go put your stuff in your room. I’ll pack these cookies into a sack for you to take. I’ll call Trey in just a bit to see if he remembers me.”

Ramzi beamed a bright, “Thank you!” and ran to his room.

With Ramzi gone, it occurred to Ren that she could reactivate her spiritual sight to inspect his house for supernatural clues. She scanned the room, along with Rhonda, but found nothing spiritually out of place. When she heard Ramzi coming downstairs, she released her sight. “You ready to go?” she asked.

“Yes!” he replied.

“Alright, honey. I’ll see you in a bit.” Rhonda waved as

the three kids made a hasty exit.

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The kids made small talk about classes, teachers, and fellow students as they walked. When they passed the school again, Bo had the idea to test Ramzi. “Hey, this is taking too long. We need to get to Pete’s, then to dinner, and I don’t want to spend all my time walking. How do you feel about running?” He briefly switched to Vulgar Tongue and said to his sister, “It’s a test.”

“Sure, I can run. What was that last bit? I don’t think I understood you,” admitted Ramzi as he tilted his head.

“Oh, it was nothing. Let’s go.” Bo led the way with an aggressive pace. One of the benefits of lycanthropy was seemingly endless endurance. He could run full speed all day long, and when he finally stopped, he wouldn’t be winded, just hungry.

Ren kept pace easily. Not because she had the same sort of endless endurance as her brother, but because she found a way to cheat at running. She would activate her *flight* ability to reduce her weight and give herself a push forward. This allowed her to run much faster and longer than normal while exerting very little effort.

Each of the siblings noticed Ramzi kept pace easily. After a couple of blocks, Bo increased his speed to a level few runners would be able to keep up with for more than a few dozen yards. Ren could, of course, and to his surprise, so could Ramzi. Bo finally let up a few houses short of Pete’s. As they stopped to walk, the three of them took notice of each other. After a run like that, they all should have collapsed were they normal humans. None of them did.

Ramzi looked back and forth between Ren and Bo, then commented, “You two are surprisingly good runners.”

“You should see me swim,” joked Bo as he made doggy-paddling motions.

“We’re good runners in our family. Fast legs. My dad said when he was a small boy, he could jump rope so fast, it looked like his legs were still on the ground and the rope was passing through them. Then he got old and lazy. Now he gets a little winded if he runs up the stairs too quick, but we love him.”

Bo patted Ramzi on the back and suggested, “Maybe you should try out for the track team. You’re a pretty good runner too.”

Ramzi looked at his feet and said, “Oh, no. I’m not interested in sports like that. I don’t like to be in front of crowds.”

Bo arched a brow and looked at his sister, who returned an arched brow of her own.

“Here’s Pete’s house,” said Ren and led the way to the door to ring the bell.

After a few seconds, Bo smelled the air from within the house. Pete had sent a tendril of air to see who was standing on his doorstep. Suddenly, Bo saw the hair on Ramzi’s arms stand on end.

He rubbed his arm to make the hair lay back down and swiveled his head, as though looking for something.

“You okay there?” asked Bo as he looked him in the eyes to discern what he could from his expression.

Ramzi’s eyes changed from green to a deep brown. Within the pupil, it had become reflective, like the eye of an animal. He took a few steps back and stiffened as he looked at Bo.

“It’s us, Pete,” Ren shouted through the door, not noticing Ramzi’s change in posture. “We brought our friend Ramzi with us.”

The door popped open quickly. Pete already knew

exactly who was on his doorstep. He just had to pretend not to, to keep up the pretense of being blind.

Ramzi's attention shifted quickly to Ren, then to Pete. He stiffened even more, like a deer in headlights.

Bo placed his hand gently on Ren's arm and spoke in Vulgar Tongue, "He can see us."

TRAVIS GALVAN

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