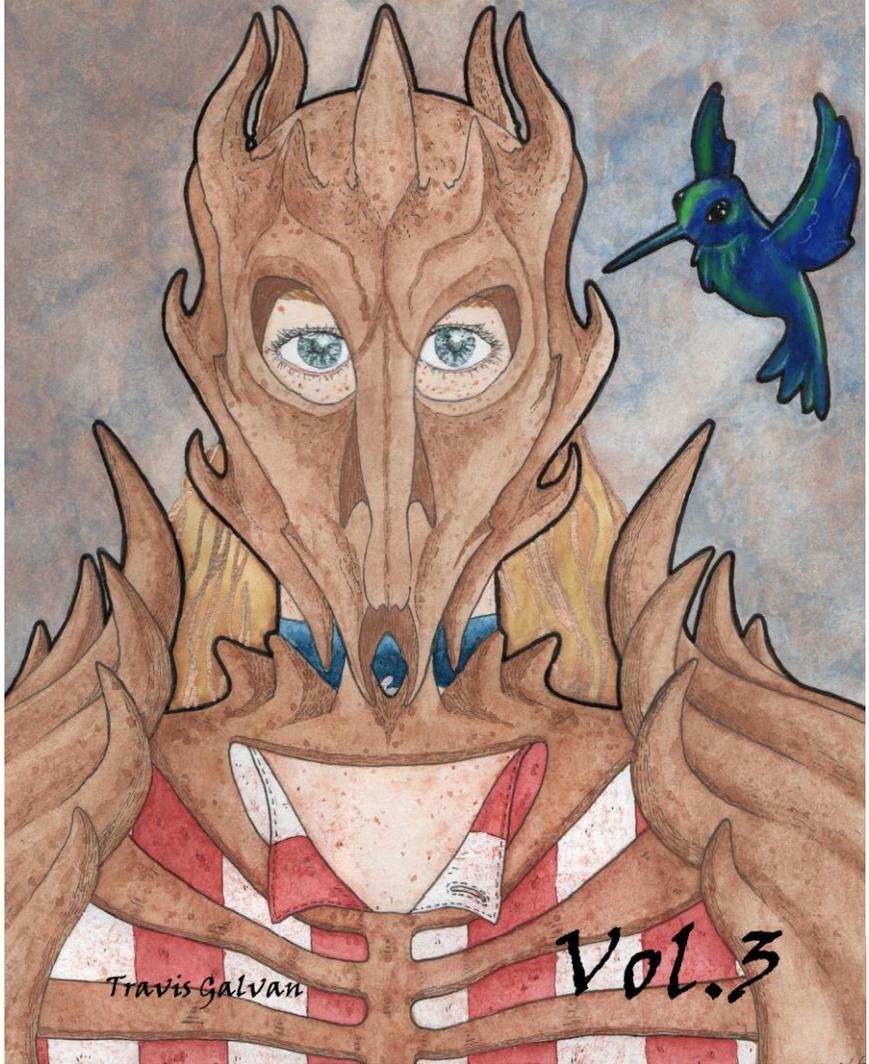


Breaking Fates



Travis Galvan

Vol. 3

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By Travis Galvan

Contents

CHAPTER 1.....	4
CHAPTER 2.....	8
CHAPTER 3.....	16
CHAPTER 4.....	28
CHAPTER 5.....	37
CHAPTER 6.....	40
CHAPTER 7.....	45
CHAPTER 8.....	52
CHAPTER 9.....	61
CHAPTER 10.....	64

CHAPTER 1

FETCH

It was five days after Christmas and Bo stood on a cliff looking out on the Bering Strait. He waited a few miles south of what used to be the village of Naukan. Despite the snow, the ice, and the arctic wind, he wore only an amber bracelet and a pair of midnight blue boxer shorts with crimson letters spelling the word “Shadow” down his right leg and “Dog” down the left.

He stood relaxed, completely unaffected by the cold, eyes trained to the east. He was fifteen years old, but at five-foot-three and a half, he looked a little younger. Shortly before the sun broke on the horizon, he saw a dark speck in the distance zooming toward him a few yards above the water. The speck was backlit, so it was hard to make out details, but the feeling he got from the contents of her backpack told him the speck was definitely his sister.

Ren landed next to her brother on the cliff. She wore black motorcycle gear and tied her hair back with the magical blue hairband her brother had given her in Egypt.

“It’s about time,” he teased, “Let’s have me.” Having received every recessive gene his father had to offer, Bo looked markedly different from his sister. Where she had straight dark hair, he had bushy, dirty blond hair. Where she had dark brown eyes, he had hazel. Where she had tan skin, he had fair.

Ren removed her backpack and opened the top. A small red Dachshund hopped out onto the snow next to her. He wore a leather collar with a tag that read “Angus.”

Angus shrugged off the collar, then transformed instantly into a mirror image of the Bo who was already standing on the cliff.

Most lycanthropes have three transformation states: human form, wolf form, and transcended form (a terrifying combination of wolf and man). Bo was turned from a line of werewolves who enjoy a fourth transformation state: Dachshund, which can be used as a sort of urban camo.

The two boys each extended a hand toward each other. When they got within a few inches of touching, they fell in toward each other, slamming together like two magnets. When they made contact, the two became one. The Bo who remained looked into the distance, not really focused on anything.

Ren recognized the look. She’d seen it many times as he processed the memories he’d downloaded from various copies.

After a few more seconds he fluttered his eyelashes and turned to her to note, “Still no word on Ramzi I see.”

She forced her hands into her pockets and muttered, “No.”

“We’ll have to work on that problem later. For now, fix me,” he grumbled and thrust his arm toward his sister to bring her attention to the serpent made of amber around his wrist.

Ren turned toward her brother and activated her *spirit sight*. Looking through the veil, the serpent appeared to be a living thing that gripped tightly to her brother's wrist. If she looked closely enough, she could see magical runes on the snake's scales and images in its aura.

She placed the first two fingers of her right hand on the serpent. In her *spirit sight*, her hand appeared to be covered in a finely engraved silver gauntlet with a large diamond ring on the middle finger. She focused on the diamond, causing it to glow brightly. When it became so bright it hurt her eyes, she released the energy into the bracelet. It immediately fell off of her brother's wrist and became straight as a stick.

Before it even hit the ground, Bo leaped back from it.

Ren hummed and furrowed her brow as she looked closely again at the serpent.

Bo opened his eyes wide and shifted his gaze rapidly between his sister and the amber serpent and demanded, "What does that mean?"

"It looks like I broke the curse on you, but the item itself is still a hexed item. I don't think we should just leave it here," she said.

"Well, I ain't touchin' it!" insisted Bo.

"It's fine," Ren smirked, "Look." She reached down, picked it up from the snow, and explained, "See. I think it only activates when you attempt to put it on your wrist. It's hard to explain, but when I look at it, I get the impression that it knows what it is and that it has to be used in a specific way. It can't put itself on someone."

"I still ain't touchin' it," he reiterated.

"It's fine. I've got it," she assured him and turned toward her backpack.

"NO!" exclaimed Bo. He rushed forward, then immediately stopped and took a couple of steps back again.

“I have to ride in there. Put it in your jacket pocket or something.”

Ren huffed and rolled her eyes, “Fine. Go ahead and get in.” While she opened her jacket to place the serpent inside, Bo picked up the Angus collar from the snow and tossed it into the pack.

“Where to from here?” he asked.

“There’s not really a ‘good way’ back from here,” Ren began, “This is basically the furthest point in the world from anything else. We just gotta fly back the way we came. Once we get to Portland, we can take a shortcut. I have an estate there. We can hop from the Pocket down to Colleyville. Save us two thousand miles or so. While we’re in the Pocket, we can have Foreman log the bracelet in with all the other cursed items.”

CHAPTER 2

THE TUTOR

The return to school after the Christmas holiday wasn't easy for Ren or Bo, though it was especially hard for Ren. At the end of the second week, she got a text from Rhonda, Ramzi's mother. They were bringing him back to the States from Egypt. They hoped to find a doctor who could properly diagnose and treat him. They wouldn't bring him directly home to Arlington, though. They were going to make a few stops around the country at various hospitals seeking treatment.

The following Monday, Ren found herself standing in front of her locker after her last class. She'd been staring at the lock for more than a minute. She simply didn't have the will to enter the combination and open it.

"I wish I could have been there for you. Maybe Ramzi wouldn't be stuck if I was there," said Pete and leaned his cane against the locker bank, then began to work the lock. Though he was blind, he could feel the numbers on the dial through the air he controlled.

"What? Oh, sorry. I didn't even see you there. No. It wouldn't have made a difference. He was already trapped before we got the call that there was trouble. Besides, it was Christmas Eve. You were with your family," she said.

Pete opened the locker and motioned for Ren to get her books. "I still wish I could have been there," he lamented.

"Me too," she agreed.

Ren made her way to the parking lot with her backpack over one shoulder. She was always quick getting out onto the road because the motorcycle parking area was close to the building and she could squeeze between the cars that were stuck in traffic.

On the way home, she thought about Ramzi and his predicament. His parents were hauling his body from hospital to hospital trying to find a cause for why he wouldn't wake up. Ren already knew the cause. His spirit was trapped, walled off, and warded within a pocket spirit world within his own body. Other than the fact that no one sat in the driver's seat of his body, he was perfectly healthy.

The ride home was short and as she approached her house, she saw an unfamiliar car parked in front of it. The license plate read "SPIFFY-3." It looked like one of those insanely expensive sports cars football players and rock stars would drive. Given the license plate, she had an idea of who owned the car but didn't know why he would have come to her house.

Ren pushed a button inside her helmet to open the garage door. She parked, left her helmet hanging from the handlebar, and walked back down the driveway to see what Mr. Spiffington wanted. The tinted window lowered as she approached. She was confused when she saw the driver. The last time she saw Spiffington, he was her father's age. He now appeared to be a couple of years older than herself at most, though his hair was still silver. "Mr. — Spiffington?"

The driver glanced at her with disdain, then looked away and scoffed, "Technically correct but wrong nonetheless. Try again. This time with spirit."

"Um. Okay." Ren furrowed her brow and blinked a few times, activating her *spirit sight*. Through the veil, the young

man appeared to wear a suit of golden plate armor worked with a vine and leaf pattern. He wore a golden crown, but unlike last time, there was no point. It was a simple golden band. “I’m sorry. I’m not sure what I’m looking for. I assume you’re young now because you’re a wizard and you can do that sort of thing.”

“Titania, help me,” the driver muttered, then wiped his brow and reached for the door handle. As he stood from the car, dragonfly wings unfolded from the back of his ethereal armor. “Look again,” he demanded.

Ren looked but still wasn’t sure what she was looking for. He was tall and lean, the same as always. “Your crown is different. I’m not sure what you’re fishing for here. What am I supposed to see?”

The driver raised his brow and locked eyes with Ren, saying, “Seriously? My crown is different? That’s all you got? Who taught you to use *spirit sight*?”

Ren looked embarrassed and shifted her gaze as she mumbled, “A zombie.”

“A zom — A zombie?! Good Gaia, it’s a miracle you can see at all!” the young man exclaimed.

With that, Ren decided she didn’t like this guy’s tone. “Look, I’m not sure who you are if you’re not Mr. Spiffington, but you’re at my house now, so you’d better check that ‘tude.”

“Ren! Do you need help with this knob?”

Both Ren and the driver turned to see Bo standing in the doorway with his arms folded across his chest.

“I don’t know,” she began and turned to the driver, “Do I, knob?”

The driver rolled his eyes, then lowered them to meet her gaze and admitted, “Look. I don’t even want to be here, but my dad’s tasked me with being your tutor, so ... here I am. I’m Chetwyn, the Third. You can call me Chet.”

“I don’t need a tutor,” she insisted.

Chet smirked, “You couldn’t even see that I wasn’t my dad.”

“I...” began Ren, who balled a fist and narrowed her eyes, then flung her hands down, then added, “Okay, fine! I need a tutor, but you’re gonna fix that ’tude. Ain’t no one here going to tolerate it. I don’t care who you think you are.”

“Fine. May we go in now? We have a lot of work to do,” Chet huffed then blew two short whistles. His car responded with chirps, then closed the windows.

Ren sat across from Chet at the kitchen table trying to look at him more closely with her *spirit sight*.

“You’ll need supplies,” suggested Chet and gestured to the table in front of him. A black child-sized backpack appeared with a poof. He opened the main compartment and began removing the contents. The first thing out of the pack was a one-foot tall doll blank. “No,” he muttered, tossing it over his shoulder. It poofed and vanished six inches from the ground.

Before it vanished, Ren saw it with her *spirit sight* and determined it was some sort of golem.

Next out of the bag was a ruler. “Certainly not!” insisted Chet and tossed the ruler over his shoulder as well. Again, the item vanished in a poof. “Ah. Here we go. Your zombie friend probably told you most of the rules for operating as a supernatural, but, just in case, here’s a beginner’s guide.” He handed her a colorful children’s book entitled “Don’t Zap the Normies.”

“Um, I think my reading level might be above this,” said Ren.

Chet nodded and looked back into the bag. “I’m sure

it is, but they don't produce this material for older students. This is kindergarten material for kids like us, though you didn't get to go to one of our schools, did you? Hm. Not seeing anything else that might be of any use. We're going to have to get you started with this, then jump you directly into the advanced material."

While Ren sat across from Chet at home, one of the many copies of Bo sat across from his girlfriend, Alyssa, at her house. He wore nothing but his Shadow Dog boxers.

He had a number of copies whom he had spawned so many times for a variety of specific purposes, they eventually formed their own semi-independent personalities. One of them was Bosepi Jr., who lived with Alyssa. Most of the time he pretended to be the family dog, but when she needed someone to talk to or help with meditation, he moved to his human form for her.

"Before we get started, tell me another story," Alyssa urged as she sat cross-legged on the living room floor.

"I thought you were eager to get Awakened. Now you want to hear stories?" Bosepi Jr. folded his arms and raised a brow to his girlfriend.

"I am, but you've always got such good stories," she insisted.

He smiled and acquiesced, "Fine, but I'm not going to tell you a whole story. We don't have time for that tonight. I'll tell you about a little folk tale I heard in a mountain town in Austria. I had noticed there were no overweight children and when I pointed that out to one of the locals, she said it was because of the Ringendorfs."

"Ringendorfs?" Alyssa mused skeptically.

Bosepi Jr. laughed, "Believe me. It gets much weirder

than the name.”

“Oh, I can’t wait,” she beamed.

“Magdalena Ringendorf is believed to be a vampire with a sweet tooth for chubby children,” he began, “However, because of the well-known tale, the town has a very strict curfew, so it’s hard for her to find children outside at night. She also can’t go into a chubby child’s home because she has to be invited in by the homeowner.”

Alyssa nodded, “Okay. That doesn’t sound too weird.”

Bosepi Jr. grinned toothily, “Well, this is where her brother, Hans, comes into play. Hans is a demonically possessed wheel of cheese who wears lederhosen.”

“What?!” giggled Alyssa.

“I told you it was going to get weird,” he reminded her.

“Dude. There’s weird, and then there’s a demonically possessed wheel of cheese in lederhosen,” she clarified.

He nodded, “Wait. It gets better.”

Alyssa pulled her knees in front of her and hugged them. “Oh, I’m sure it does.”

“So,” Bo continued, “Magdalena and Hans spend the night flying from window to window looking for the chubbiest kid they can find. When they find one, Hans tempts them to the window with samples of his cheesy flesh. He’d be like, ‘Ya, comen to ze vindow. Come getten ze delicious cheese. Ooh! I’m zo good! I could eat minezelf!’”

Alyssa rolled on the floor holding her sides. “Oh, my gosh! Stop! Stop! It hurts!” she wheezed.

“Did I tell you, or did I tell you?” asked Bosepi Jr., “Anyway. Once a kid opens the window, Hans snatches him and they spirit him away to eat him at their secret lair.”

“Poor little chubs,” pouted Alyssa.

“I know, right? Anyway, let’s get to meditating. We’ve been making a lot of progress lately. I’d really like you to fully Awaken before summer break.”

Alyssa smirked and huffed, “Okay, fine. We’ll meditate.”

After Chet left, Ren sat and stared at her phone. She had a new text from Rhonda. They were at the Mayo Clinic. Ren had an estate north of Minneapolis. It would take no time at all to travel there through the Pocket to see him. She’d just have to wait until he was alone, otherwise, she’d have to explain how she suddenly showed up a thousand miles from home.

Once her mind was set, she went out the backdoor and made her way to the fence. Hidden next to one of the posts was a latch that allowed the fence to open into Lan’s backyard. He was a werewolf, like her brother. The two of them lived together in the house on the backside of her block.

She found several copies of her brother sitting around the kitchen table, each working on his own laptop or reading through a stack of books.

“Hey, I was thinking about — No. Actually, I’ve decided I’m going to visit Ramzi at the Mayo Clinic. I thought maybe you’d like to come too,” she suggested.

One of the Bos from the table closed the book he was reading and said, “Sure. How are we getting there?”

“We can hop through the Pocket to Minnesota. From there I can fly and you can teleport. It’s not far,” she explained.

Bo pulled out his phone and searched for the address.

“I’m thinking we should wait until ten, so no one is in the room with him,” Ren continued as she leaned against the counter next to the sink.

CHAPTER 3

THE VISIT

Bo was waiting on the back porch of the Colleyville estate when Ren arrived. The house, a mansion really, was four times the size of their home in Arlington and sat behind a high stone wall. She had inherited the home along with many other similar estates around the world from her zombie-grandpa, Brad.

Ren called out the estate password as she set her foot on the porch, “Rutabaga,” and led her brother into the kitchen. “I’ve been texting Rhonda all night. She said she and Ramzi’s dad are staying at a nearby hotel and that they’re already there. We should be clear. I got the room number too.”

“That’s got to get expensive: all that travel with Ramzi confined to a bed; all the hotels,” suspected Bo.

“Rhonda said Mr. Zane’s boss is paying for everything,” explained Ren.

Bo smiled warmly and said, “That’s really sweet of him. Wow, there really are good guys in the world, huh?”

The siblings approached the large stone fireplace in the library. Bo stood next to Ren as she tapped a series of five stones. The room around them blurred and went dark.

“Lights!” Ren shouted and her voice echoed back just as dozens of burning spheres above their heads illuminated a vast cavern chamber full of shelves, tables, and other displays containing books and various other artifacts. It was a magical museum of sorts where Brad had kept all the

dangerous things he'd collected during his five-hundred-year life. This place was a pocket spirit world that he had created for this and other purposes. The Pocket connected to all of the estates Brad owned. By entering the correct code into the fireplace, one could travel to any of the estates instantly.

"Foreman!" Ren shouted again. This time the echo was followed by the sound of heavy footfalls coming from the far side of the chamber.

The source of the footfalls was a four-armed golem in a finely tailored tuxedo. Despite having no head, his voice was smooth and sophisticated. "Milady. How may I assist you?" he inquired.

"I need the code for the Fridley estate."

Foreman bowed, flourishing with all four arms. "Of course, Milady," he intoned, then stepped forward to the fireplace and pointed out a series of five stones that created a T-shape. "One, two, three, four, five. Once again. One, two, three, four, five. Will there be anything else, Milady?"

"What's the security code for that estate?" she requested.

"Go Vikings. Will that be all?"

She dismissed him with a gesture and said, "Yes, thank you."

"Very well. Good evening to you both." He bowed, flourishing again, and made his way back to the far side of the chamber.

Bo watched as his sister entered the code. The room blurred again, leaving them in darkness.

"Go Vikings!" they both shouted.

"Lights!" added Bo but no light appeared.

"This is one of the more low-tech estates," Ren observed.

Bo looked around the room. Thanks to his enhanced senses, he was still able to see. The place was set up to

look like a humble hunting lodge. “What does the security system on this one do to intruders?” he asked.

“I think it summons angry bears,” she chuckled and led her brother out the front door. The waxing moon was just one night away from full and so the light out front was more than sufficient to cast a decent shadow on the porch.

Bo tapped his toe on his shadow to open a portal below himself and fell into the Shadow World.

When a lycanthrope first turns, the curse creates an open beacon that attracts a demonic spirit. When a demon responds to the beacon, it becomes trapped by it. The curse uses the demon to facilitate a monthly sacrifice under the full moon. The demon takes control of the host body until it fulfills the sacrifice, the eating of a human heart, then relinquishes control back to the host who gets control of the demon’s powers until the next full moon. In Bo’s case, he was paired with a shadow-demon whose power links the two of them to the Shadow World and allows them to travel to and from, freely.

On the other side of the veil, Bo walked into the yard and looked at the stars to orient himself. The Shadow World was a dark reflection of reality cast in shades of gray that somehow seemed reversed. Once he determined which direction he needed to travel, he leapt to the roof of the lodge, then leapt again as high as he could. At the apex of his leap, he imagined a powerful light behind himself. The imagined light caused his body to be cast forward as though it was a shadow, stretching forward to the horizon. At the other end, he imagined the light in a reverse orientation, then switched it off. This caused his body to rematerialize at the far end of where his shadow had fallen, ten miles away.

It took only a few moments to reach the hospital traveling this way. He crossed the veil to return to Reality at the edge of the parking lot. Having arrived ahead of his

sister, he passed the time by stargazing and a very curious idea crept into his mind as he focused on the moon.

Ren stepped onto the lawn of the Fridley estate and pulled out her phone so she could orient herself with the map she had loaded. Once she had her bearing, she took to the sky. A few minutes later she found her younger brother waiting for her at the edge of the parking lot. “Bro-face. You ready?” she asked.

Bo smiled and teased, “I’ve been waiting on you.”

“It’s past visiting hours. We’ll have to go in through the Shadow,” she said.

“Fair enough,” agreed Bo and performed his Shadow trick again, dropping through to the other side.

Ren placed her foot into the shadow of the lamp post on the ground. In her *spirit sight*, her whole body was covered in armor similar to the gauntlet on her right hand. Above the arch on each of her feet sat a yellow sapphire mounted into the armored boot. Of course, the armor didn’t really exist. It was simply a visual representation of a subset of her angelic powers. Whereas the diamond ring represented purity and raw power, the sapphires represented the power to travel through spiritual realms. Ren was not tied to the Shadow World like her brother, but she could use this power to follow him in.

She discovered that each of the various spiritual realms could be accessed via keys that sounded in her head like musical notes or chords. In order to access the Shadow, she would allow her entire body to resonate like a lower range F sharp, which opened a portal to pass through.

Ren and her brother slipped out of the shadow of a cabinet across the room from Ramzi's bed.

He lay flat and motionless. There was no need for breathing apparatus but he did have a feeding tube and monitoring equipment. His face had become gaunt and his color was almost all gone.

Ren took his hand in hers and squeezed it tightly. "He's already lost so much weight. It's only been, what? Three weeks?" she asked.

Bo nodded, "Right about there. Yeah."

"Well, I can't free his spirit but let's see if I can do something for his body." She looked at her boyfriend with her *spirit sight*. Through the veil, his skin had a golden shimmer and he looked like a pharaoh from a hieroglyphic. She placed her left hand on his chest and watched as the ruby ring on her gauntleted hand poured healing energy into Ramzi's heart like a stream of blood.

She watched it and felt it as his heart pumped it throughout his body. He was healthy enough, considering his condition, but his muscles were experiencing a tremendous amount of atrophy. She pumped more healing energy into him and directed it into his muscles, which plumped in response, rebuilding to nearly their original size. She didn't want to over-do it and draw too much unwanted attention to what would literally be a miraculous recovery. A recovery of his flesh, anyway.

"There. That's not so bad," she insisted and tried to smile, though her lips gave out half-way.

"Time to go!" Bo whispered urgently.

"Why?"

"Nurses are coming to check on him. I can hear them. They're responding to this monitoring equipment. Your healing had it going haywire on their end," explained Bo.

Ren bent and kissed her boyfriend on the forehead.

As the door swung open, both Ren and Bo dove into the Shadow under the bed.

Pete found Ren staring at her locker again after last class. “No offense, but you look terrible, and I’m blind so, that’s really saying something.”

“Huh? Oh, Pete. Sorry,” she apologized, “Bo and I went to visit Ramzi last night. He was just so thin. I hardly recognized him at first. It wasn’t easy seeing him like that. Once I got home, I either couldn’t sleep or I’d sleep and have a dream of Ramzi’s wasted face begging me for help and there was nothing I could do.”

Pete opened his arms toward Ren and insisted, “Bring it in.”

She nodded and buried her face in Pete’s shoulder, failing to hold back tears.

Bo had plenty of money but didn’t like the idea of putting it into a bank. Banks led to government and government led to trouble. The last thing he wanted to do was to have to explain to IRS agents how a fifteen-year-old boy ended up with more than two million dollars in cash. He had paperwork that was supposed to make it legitimate but he didn’t trust it enough in practice to try to claim it.

He figured it would be better just to show up in person and buy stuff with cash rather than try to put his money into any sort of trackable account. Not yet old enough to drive without an adult in the car, he would need help getting to the hardware store and so sought out Lan, whom he found in the

office. “Lan, can you take me to the hardware store in your truck? I need to get some — stuff.”

Lan looked at him suspiciously and asked, “What kind of stuff?”

“Oh, just some basic hardware stuff,” he said.

“Yeah. I figured that since we’re going to a hardware store. What specific kind of hardware stuff?” Lan reiterated as he pushed away from his desk and crossed his arms across his massive chest. Seated, Lan was still taller than Bo standing up.

Bo began counting off items on his fingers, “I’ll need an air pump, a whole bunch of caulking, some angle iron. Oh! I’ll need a welder, the mask that goes with it...”

“Hold on,” Lan interrupted, “What the heck are you building?”

“A vacuum chamber,” replied Bo matter-of-factly.

“A vacuum — Do I even want to know why?” grumbled Lan.

Bo grinned broadly and explained, “I’m going to use it to train to go into outer space!”

Lan looked blankly at Bo for several seconds before echoing, “Outer space.”

“Heck yeah! Outer space!” exclaimed Bo.

“I can’t believe I’m asking this,” Lan sighed, “How do you intend to get to outer space?”

“I’m going to teleport to the moon!” insisted Bo as he balled his fists and shook them with excitement.

Lan paused a moment as his eyebrows slowly crept up his forehead. “You know what? That’s actually something I’d like to see. If you do it and survive, that’ll be one hell of a story to tell your grandkids. And if you die — well, I guess I’ll just have to tell the story in your honor. Either way, I’ll be highly entertained.”

Bo pumped his fists and cheered, “Awesome! Let’s

go!”

Lan stood, and at over seven feet tall, he towered over his little roommate. “Where do you plan to build this thing?” he asked.

“One of the upper rooms at the Colleyville estate. Ren never goes up there and I’m not sure I want to tell her yet. You know how she gets.”

Ren found Chet’s car parked in front of the house again when she arrived home. *Ugh! I do not want to deal with him today!*

Chet climbed out of his car as Ren pulled into the garage and met her on the driveway. “You look about as excited as I am to be here,” he admitted.

Ren raised her right eyebrow and insisted, “You mean not at all?”

“Exactly. Shall we get started?” he asked.

“I’d really rather...” Ren began but then paused before continuing, “You see, I went to visit my boyfriend last night and he’s in really bad shape. I just — I didn’t sleep well last night and I’m really feeling crappy right now. I just don’t know if I can even do this today.”

Chet pursed his lips and exhaled hard through his nose. “Well, if you don’t have an objection, I know a spell. It’s basically magical Adderall. It’ll help you through today’s lesson. But I have to warn you, once our task is done, you’re going to fall into a deep dreamless sleep until daybreak.”

“Oh, my gosh. That is exactly what I need. Yes! Do it!” she urged.

Chet looked over his shoulders down the block. Other kids were also arriving home from school. “Maybe we should do this inside.”

Ren and Chet sat across from each other again at the kitchen table.

Chet opened one palm toward Ren and asked, “Are you ready?”

She nodded, “Yes.”

He opened his other palm toward her, closed his eyes, and raised his voice, “Great King Oberon, I call upon you to quicken this warrior to the task at hand. Embolden her. Inspire her. Imbue her with purpose.”

Ren felt woozy. Her eyes went out of focus and she felt as though she might pass out. After a moment her five senses became razor sharp and her mind was crystal clear for the first time since before Egypt. “Whoa. That did it,” she insisted.

“Okay, so yesterday was really just some orientation and the basics of how not to ruin things for everyone else, most of which you were already familiar with. Today we need to figure out what you’re going to learn,” said Chet.

Ren furrowed her brow and asked, “Don’t you already know what I’m supposed to learn? You’re the tutor, right?”

Chet shrugged, “Well, I have some vague ideas of some stuff we should cover, but we really need to set up a game plan that leans on your strengths and minimizes your weaknesses. What are you good at?”

“I’m really good at art,” she replied.

“Friggin’— I know you’re good at art,” Chet sighed, “My dad won’t shut up about your art. I meant, which of your angelic abilities are you good at?”

“Oh. I’m good with my *flaming sword*. I can use that a few different ways. I’m a good flyer. I’m getting faster all the time. Traveling through dimensions is easy. I can pretty

much heal anything at this point. Anything that's healable anyway. I've got good use of my *spiritual armor* and *shield*."

Chet nodded, "Alright. Now, what aren't you good at?"

Ren made a sour face and replied, "I'm not very good at breaking wards. I can create a kind of basic sealing ward and I can use a brute force attack to break some more straightforward wards and curses, but I'm stuck when it comes to more complicated warding. I just don't think I get it."

"It sounds like there's a particular ward you already want to break down. Tell me about it," he said, then steeped his fingers under his chin.

"It's my boyfriend, Ramzi," she began, "Last year something happened to him. His spirit got trapped somewhere behind a mega ward and now he won't wake up. His body just lays there like a sack of meat waiting for his spirit to return."

Chet's eyes lit with understanding and he muttered, "So, that's what happened to him."

Ren blinked a few times and cocked her head before responding, "Wait. Do you know Ramzi?"

"Yeah. We've been friends since we were little. He doesn't know I'm a mage, but our families have been friends for generations. In fact, Dad's paying his medical bills while they try to find treatment."

Ren stood with a stunned look on her face and exclaimed, "Spiffington is Ramzi's dad's boss?!"

"Did you not know?" asked Chet.

"No, I didn't know!" Ren looked crazed as her mind raced, "Is this why Spiffington transferred Ramzi's dad to Arlington? Has he been orchestrating this whole thing all along?!"

"Of course he has," he said as if it had always been obvious, "Nothing happens without my dad knowing about it

and most likely controlling it. Ramzi's grandfather wanted to keep him out of the fight for as long as possible, so he made my family promise not to tell him about the supernatural. He would have to find out about it from his pantheon or from other outside sources. Upon his grandfather's request, the pantheon taught him just enough to protect himself and his ancestral lands. My dad knew that wouldn't be enough, though. He'd need peers to learn with, so he brought him here to meet your family and your friend Pete."

"Oh, my gosh!" Ren shouted, "He knows about Pete, too!" She placed her palm against her forehead and looked around frantically.

Chet nodded and continued, "I told you already. My dad knows everything. He even knew your zombie friend, Brad. Brad had been working with our family for centuries before *you* came along and killed him."

The words slapped Ren in the face harder than anything else ever had before. She'd grown to love Brad, in a way. He was more than a zombie friend. He'd been a mentor. Oddly enough, he was also her grandfather from many generations past. They shared blood. She was devastated when he trapped her and forced her to kill him. She hated it. She hated that Chet not only knew about it, but that he now threw it in her face.

"GET OUT!" she screamed and pointed toward the front door with a rigid index finger, "Out!"

Chet held up his hands defensively and began to say, "Hold on..." but Ren slammed her palm onto the table, breaking it in two.

Chet leapt back forming symbols in the air with his hands and flung them toward Ren. The symbols became a net made of golden energy and engulfed her.

Ren grabbed the net and ripped it open with no apparent effort.

Chet declared, "Class dismissed!" and dashed for the front door, blasting it off its hinges with another symbol thrown through the air.

A moment later, Ren heard the oversized engine of Chet's car roar to life, then the sound of tires screeching.

The backdoor burst open and four copies of Bo rushed in. "What the heck, Ren?!" they asked in unison.

She turned to them with fire in her eyes and spoke in the demonic language of lycanthropes, Vulgar Tongue, "Get out!" The command was spoken through the golden wolf's head medallion she wore around her neck. She had inherited the medallion from Brad to help her deal with her brother on full moon nights. It gave her the power to issue commands he couldn't refuse.

As such, the four copies immediately turned and ran out of the house.

Ren slowly and purposefully walked to the door and pushed it shut in their faces.

CHAPTER 4

MAKING IT RIGHT

“Babe, is that the front door on the lawn?” asked Sue as she looked from the lawn to the busted door frame, then down to the black tire marks left on the street in front of the house. Despite the fact that she’d just come home in an apron from a long day’s work, she still had the poise of a Filipino beauty queen.

“I’m pretty sure that’s not where we left it this morning,” replied Trey as he slowed and parked the van in front of the house. He looked like the forty-year-old male version of his daughter, Ren, though she couldn’t grow the red goatee and he was six inches taller.

Sue patted her husband’s hand on the steering wheel and insisted, “You stay here. I’ll make sure it’s safe.”

“You’re pregnant,” Trey countered, “I’ll go check it out.”

“I’m not human pregnant,” she reminded him, “I’m not even showing. Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. If there’s something dangerous inside, you’re much more likely to get hurt than me.”

Trey slowly raised a brow and grumbled, “Thanks. You really know how to make a man feel needed.”

“Oh, don’t be a baby. I’ll be right back.” Sue climbed out of the van and gently closed the door. She looked around the house and through the windows but found no activity. Tiptoes carried her into the front room where she immediately saw through to the kitchen and the crushed

table within. “Crap,” she whispered.

Sue’s smooth tan skin hardened to a sort of tree bark and sprouted thick thorns, many of which ripped holes through her clothing. She opened her hands, allowing vines to grow from her palms down to the floor. The vines formed into machetes with thorns along the blade like the teeth of a chainsaw.

She listened carefully but didn’t hear anything. She moved quickly to the kitchen to survey the damage more closely and saw four copies of Bo looking at her through the window. “What the heck are you...?” she began, then reabsorbed one of her machetes, opened the door, and began again, “What the heck are you doing and why is the house in ruins?”

Three of the Bos returned to Lan’s house. The remaining Bo held his palms toward his now terrifying stepmother and said, “It wasn’t me this time! Ren had an argument with her magic tutor and she *absolutely* lost her biscuits.”

Sue took a deep breath and returned to her human form. When she looked down at her blouse, she grumbled, “Dang it! I loved this top.” She closed her eyes and clenched her fists for a moment before remembering, “Oh! Your father is waiting out front! Go get him for me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” agreed Bo.

She stepped back from the door to let him in, but he took off around the side of the house instead.

Trey waited nervously in the van. After a couple of minutes, he saw Bo jog up from around the side of the house, so he rolled down the window and asked, “What’s going on?”

Bo replied, "Sue wants you inside," and pointed over his shoulder to the house.

"I guess that means it's safe," Trey muttered.

Bo nodded, "Yeah. Come on."

"Gimme a minute," Trey insisted and pulled forward to turn into the garage, "What on earth is going on in there? I can't even expect to have a front door when I get home anymore." Once parked, Trey went in through the garage entry into the kitchen and immediately saw what was left of the table. "Wow, and I thought the door had it bad. What the heck happened in here?" Trey looked up and noticed Bo was absent, then turned to his wife and asked, "Where's the boy?"

"Over here..." shouted Bo from the now gaping front doorway, "And before you say anything, I want you to know this wasn't me or any of my copies for that matter."

Trey furrowed his brow and turned toward the front of the house where he saw his son leaning against the busted frame. "Get over here."

"I can't. Ren commanded me out, so I'm stuck until she lets me back in," he explained.

Trey inhaled and breathed it out hard through his nostrils, then asked, "Where is she now?"

Bo pointed to the ceiling and said, "She's in her room. It sounds like she's sleeping."

"So — what?" Trey grumbled, "Ren just decided to destroy the table and the door, then take a nap?"

Sue shook her head, "Bo said something before about an argument with her magic tutor."

"Since when does my daughter have a magic tutor?" demanded Trey.

Bo pointed over his shoulder with his thumb and said, "He pulled up out front yesterday after school and stayed for about an hour. He was back again today but he didn't stick

around long.”

Trey turned to the stairs and started to mutter as he climbed to the second floor. “Friggin’ tables and doors getting wrecked around here. I’m starting to think I’m lucky to find there’s even a house left.” Once he reached the top step, he started shouting, “Ren! Girl, you’ve got some ‘splainin’ to do!” He pounded her door three times, then shouted again, “Ren!” After five seconds of no response, he pounded again, “Ren!”

After five more seconds, he opened the door and saw her sleeping peacefully. “Ren! Wake the heck up!” he grumbled as he stomped over to her bed and repeatedly tapped her on the forehead, repeating, “Ren, Ren, Ren, Ren, Ren, Ren, Ren!” When he saw no reaction, he thought, *Oh, crap! She’s not waking up!* then shouted, “Sue! Get up here!”

A few seconds later Sue ran in through the door and asked, “What is it?”

“She’s not waking up!” he shouted.

Trey and Sue heard a noise from the window. Bo was clinging to the window ledge. They ignored him and turned their attention back to Ren.

“Is there anything you can do?” asked Trey, desperately.

She took a moment to think, then said, “I, uh. I — I don’t think so.”

Trey ran to the window, opened it, then demanded, “Who was the tutor?”

Bo adjusted his grip on the ledge, looked up at his father, and said, “Spiffington’s son. I have his number. Not the son but Spiffington. Gimme a sec. I’ll call him.” Bo dropped to the lawn and fished his phone from his pocket.

Trey ran for the stairs and then headed out the backdoor to Bo.

Chetwyn Spiffington sat at the large ebony desk in his office. He was a tall, lean man with silver hair. He wore a well-pressed shirt and a waistcoat. His tie was held in place with a silver dragonfly tie pin. Before him on the desk were three large but shallow metal bowls, each filled near the top with water. Magical three-dimensional hologram feeds shone over each of the bowls. The display to his left showed Ganymede, Jupiter's largest moon. The display to his right showed Mars. The display in the middle showed a man in a wide-backed wooden chair.

"If they've made it to Ganymede, it won't be long until they're at Mars," Spiffington grumbled as he scowled and zoomed in on Ganymede to get a closer look at the troops amassing on the surface.

"We have a little more time than you think," the man in the wide-backed chair began, "They're tunneling for some reason. Everywhere they go, they build tunnels."

Spiffington turned to Mars and zoomed. "They may be delayed at Ganymede, but Mars already has tunnels. Once they take it, they'll be ready to set their sights on Earth without delay. Hold on a sec." He felt a vibration in his breast pocket and pulled out his phone. The ID read "SLIM."

"Mr. Hartwood, I'm going to have to put you on hold. Hopefully, this is nothing, but the way fates have been shifting and twisting lately, this may be related." Spiffington tapped a glowing rune along the edge of the center bowl and Heartwood's image blinked out. "Slim! It's good to hear from you. I was afraid you may have gone into retirement already."

"I'm actually not calling about fighting. Oh, and this isn't Slim," Bo clarified.

"Is this Bo?" asked Spiffington.

“Close enough. I’m calling about...” Bo’s voice became a harsh whisper, “No. Just give me a sec — Fine. Here.”

“Mr. Spiffington, this is Trey Alonso. We have a problem. Your son has done something to my daughter.”

Spiffington placed his palm to his forehead and leaned back in his chair. *Two days on the job and he’s already screwing this up*, he thought, then asked, “What do we think he’s done?”

“We don’t know. We just came home, found the kitchen table crushed to bits, the front door blown completely off its hinges, and Ren won’t wake up.”

Okay, this is all fixable. Lighten the mood. Calm him down, he thought, then joked, “At least she’s not pregnant.”

“Excuse me?!” yelled Trey.

*That was **not** the best choice of words*, thought Spiffington, then tried again, “I apologize, Mr. Alonso. Give me a moment.” He placed Trey on hold and dialed his son, “My office. NOW!”

Ten minutes later Trey watched Spiffington and his twenty-five-year younger doppelganger marching up the driveway. The younger Spiffington’s ears were bright red and he kept his eyes down.

Trey waved them through the broken doorway and said, “She’s upstairs.”

Spiffington turned to his son and hissed, “You stay here and fix what’s broken.”

Chet didn’t say a word. He just walked out to the lawn to retrieve the door.

Trey led Spiffington upstairs to Ren’s room where they found her peacefully asleep.

“Before we go any further, I really want to convey a sincere apology for what happened earlier. Sometimes Chet’s mouth works independently of his brain. He means well. He’s just not well versed in dealing with people who aren’t trying to use him. I’m not fishing for sympathy. I just want you to understand where he comes from. He’s grown up being both fantastically rich and a mage. All he knows is that people want to use him, and when they do, there’s a certain way you can treat those people and they won’t object. I think Ren is the first person he’s spoken to on any real level since he was a boy. As you can see, it didn’t go very well.”

“No kidding,” Trey replied flatly, “Are you going to fix my daughter or what?”

“Here’s the deal,” Spiffington explained, “She’s not broken. She’s just sleeping. Before their argument, she asked my son to cast a spell on her that would cause her to sleep on a sort of time delay. She’s apparently been having issues with her boyfriend and hasn’t been able to sleep. The spell wears off at sunrise. Come the crack of dawn, she’ll be bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and hopefully less pissed off. I *can* wake her, but it’s your call. I honestly think she’d be better off sleeping.”

After hearing what Spiffington had to say, Trey was able to relax somewhat. “What were they arguing about?”

“I asked Chet on the way over. He said something he didn’t realize would be unkind about the way Brad died.”

Trey looked stunned and admitted, “I’m surprised she would even tell him about Brad.”

Spiffington shrugged, “She didn’t. Brad’s been a family friend ever since the first Spiffingtons came to the new world during the seventeen hundreds.”

“Okay, wow. I did not see that coming.” Trey blinked, nonplussed.

“No. I suppose you didn’t. Well, Mr. Alonso, shall I wake her or shall we let her sleep?”

“Let her sleep,” Trey decided.

Spiffington held his hand out for Trey to shake and said, “Very well. If you don’t mind, I’ll collect my son and be on my way. It’s a full moon tonight and I’m sure your son has preparations to make. I’d hate to be in his way.”

Trey shook Spiffington’s hand with a confused look and asked, “Exactly how much do you know?”

Spiffington smiled and replied, “I think it’s probably safe for you to assume I know everything about everything.”

Chet and Sue sat quietly across from each other in the living room. She’d changed clothes and thrown her damaged set into the garbage already. Both the table and the door were whole again like nothing ever happened.

Chet stood as soon as he heard his father coming down the stairs and said, “Mrs. Alonso, it was nice meeting you. I think it’s time to go. Sorry about the mess.”

“It’s fine. You made it right again.” Sue stood as well and made her way to the door to see him out.

Spiffington paused at the door and said, “If you don’t mind, Chet will return next week to resume his work as Ren’s tutor. She has a lot to learn and, despite their personality conflicts, Chet really is a good teacher.”

Trey placed his arm around Sue, then turned back to their guests, “I’ll speak with Ren. If she’s agreeable, he can come back on Monday.”

Spiffington nodded, “Fair enough.”

“Thank you,” said Chet in a surprisingly humble tone, then turned and opened the door.

Bo was waiting outside as they made their exit.

“Maybe next week we won’t have so much destruction and chaos,” he said.

Spiffington smiled and added, “Let’s set our target number at zero.”

As soon as Spiffington turned away, Bo gave Chet the stink eye and echoed, “Zero.”

As Chet locked eyes with Bo, he suddenly felt unnerved and on the verge of a panic attack. He picked up his pace and beat his father to the car. Once seated, he waved through the glass for his father to hurry.

Spiffington ignored his son’s frantic waving and took his time climbing into the driver’s seat. As he buckled, he said, “Calm your tits, boy. We’re going.”

Chet felt panicked about the prospect of returning the next week. “I don’t think Bo likes me,” he admitted.

“That seems like a reasonable assumption. Let me give you some advice. Try to make peace with him. He’s not someone you want set against you. He’s much more than just a werewolf. Much more dangerous than we ever imagined. If you can’t make peace, at least stay out of his way. He has a job to do.” He reached into his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a small vial of clear liquid and said, “Here. Drink this.”

Chet took it, removed the cork, and asked, “What is it?”

“Courage to undo the fear Bo put on you. You’ll never be able to focus on teaching his sister if you’re worried about him.”

CHAPTER 5

FULL MOON

“Lan!” Bo shouted, then leaned into the office, “It’s eleven-fiddy. Do you want to do the feeding here or in the den?”

Lan looked around the room and said, “Uh. Let’s do the den. It’ll be more comfortable when we wake up tomorrow.”

“Good call,” agreed Bo and turned to make his way to the den where he undressed down to his Shadow Dog boxers.

Lan entered a few minutes later, wearing a similar set of boxers made of the same sort of soft leather, though Lan’s were plain black.

“Ren’s out for the night,” Bo began, “So we’re going to have to do this without our safety net.”

“Where is she?” asked Lan.

Bo pointed toward his father’s house and explained, “She’s home, but she had a sleeping spell cast on her earlier. She’ll be out ‘til sunrise.”

Lan looked surprised and wondered, “Who cast a sleep spell on her?”

“Oh, this jerk, Chet. He’s the son of the SpiffyMart founder, Chetwyn Spiffington,” grumbled Bo.

“Ugh. Chet,” Lan began with a moan, then continued, “What a little douche. I hate that kid.”

Bo laughed, “I know, right?! Every time you see that smug face, you just want to punch him square in the nose.”

“Exactly,” agreed Lan and offered up his knuckles for a fist bump.

Bo smiled and reciprocated, “That’s what I’m talking about. Alright, let’s get started. I can feel my demon getting ready to take over.”

One of the techniques Bo had learned since his Awakening was an ability to make his body believe he’d eaten something he’d only imagined. By using this technique, he had the ability to fool his demon into believing he had fulfilled the monthly sacrifice ritual. Believing ritual fulfilled, the demon would relinquish control and go back to being the annoying vulgar voice in the back of Bo’s mind.

Another technique he’d developed was the ability to create a spiritual and mental link with other beings, allowing the participants to share their senses. By using this technique, Bo could make it as though he and Lan, as well as their demons, were all one being. This technique, used in combination with the *feeding* technique, meant the two of them didn’t have to kill anyone to fulfill the sacrifice.

Bo extended his spirit beyond his body to make contact with Lan. Once connected, he modulated the frequency of Lan’s spirit to match his own. As soon as they were in harmony, their perceptions became doubled. Each was fully experiencing his own body as well as the body of the other. Bo then boosted the signal strength of his own spirit to drown out Lan’s.

With spirits harmonized, Bo began the Feeding. He imagined a still-beating human heart cupped in his hands. He bore his teeth, mouth transforming into a maw of sharp, oversized fangs. He brought his cupped hands to his mouth and in his mind’s eye, he sunk his teeth into the heart. He felt the blood spray into the back of his mouth. Felt the heat of it. The slippery wetness between his fingers. He could smell the iron of the blood, feel the humidity of it. He fully felt

the experience of eating the heart and sent those sensations and feelings through his link to Lan, who sat like a mirror image across from Bo, snarling, snapping, and tearing at an imagined heart in his massive hands.

When the first heart was consumed, he summoned another and ate it as well. Then another, and another, and another. Two dozen hearts later, Bo released the link and watched Lan roll into his side to pass out. He felt sleep trying to take him as well. His own demon was trying to pull him into a miniature hibernation that would last until dawn.

Bo modulated his spirit again to shake off the influence of his demon and felt the need to sleep fall away. His mind became sharp and clear again. Ritual complete.

CHAPTER 6

THE CHAMBER

Ren found Chet's car out front when she returned home from school on Monday. She had reluctantly agreed only because she knew she needed his help to figure some stuff out. Stuff that could help her free Ramzi.

She parked in the garage and met him on the driveway again. Before he had a chance to speak, she held up a hand to stop him and chided, "Bup-bup-bup! No."

"But I..." he began but was immediately cut off again.

"No! From now on I don't want to talk about anything unrelated to lessons. Keep it business or zip it," she demanded, then lowered her hand and gestured for him to respond.

"Agreed," he said.

"Then let's go in." She led him again to the kitchen table where they took their seats and said, "Teach me about warding."

Chet nodded, then gestured toward the table where a pile of books appeared. Once he found the book he was looking for, he gestured again and the remainder of the books vanished. "Here's the starter tome," he began and tossed the two-inch-thick book to her side of the table, where it slid to a stop directly in front of her, "It's in German. The Germans tend to have better warding."

She spun the book around, flipped open the cover, and said, "That's fine. I read German."

Bo and Lan stepped back from their work to appreciate it for a moment before testing it for the first time. Before them stood a sealed chamber with a large window and a clear door.

Lan glanced sideways at Bo and asked, "You really gonna put yourself in there and suck all the air out?"

Bo breathed in and out nervously and replied, "That's the plan. Gimme a sec." He stepped to the wall to form a portal into the Shadow and crossed over.

Within the Shadow World, Bo could still see Lan's shadow on the wall, but Lan himself was absent from the room. In the Shadow World, living things cast only shadows through the veil.

He performed his teleportation trick again, but this time he imagined four powerful spotlights, each casting his body like a shadow down a different path. Once he was split, he reversed the locations of the spotlights in his mind, then turned them off.

When he was done, he had created a copy of himself at the end of each shadow path. The original Bo remained in the center where the shadows had originally diverged.

"Are you guys ready?" the original Bo asked his copies.

The copies nodded excitedly and replied in unison, "It's sort of like the first time we drove on the highway. Fun but terrifying. The only thing we need now is Dad screaming at us!"

The Bos took turns using Lan's shadow to form a portal back to Reality. On the other side, the original Bo opened the door to the vacuum chamber to let one copy in with a, "Good luck!"

The copy gave a thumbs-up and stood in the center of

the chamber.

Bo reached out with his spirit to each of the copies to harmonize with them so they could all share the experience. "Alright, Lan. Hit it," he said and pointed to the switch on their homemade control panel.

Lan flipped the switch and four air pumps roared to life.

All of the Bos immediately tightened their eyes and clapped their hands over their ears. After a few seconds, they began to gasp. A few more seconds and they collapsed to hands and knees.

The copy in the chamber managed to stay conscious for three full minutes before he went limp, blue as a berry.

Lan flipped the switch to the off position, then opened four large valves to let air back into the chamber.

Once the pressure stabilized, Bo rushed in. Still gasping, he combined with the copy on the floor, then collapsed and rolled onto his back moaning, "Oh, my gosh! That sucked so much worse than I thought it would! It exploded my eardrums, wrecked my sinuses, and my joints! Ugh. I think it gave me the bends."

Lan shook his head and said, "I didn't think it was going to be good. In fact, I'm pretty sure this is a terrible idea."

After a dozen deep breaths, Bo got back to his feet, consolidated with the three remaining copies, and said "Okay, give me an hour to meditate. We'll do it again, after."

"Sure. I'll go down to the den. Just shout when you're ready for round two," Lan said and turned for the door.

Bo sat cross-legged on the floor as Lan made his exit. Once alone, he imagined the room again in his mind's eye. He imagined every little detail from the screws in the control panel to the dials on the pressure gauges. One by one he turned each and every object into gold in his mental image of

the room. Once everything was gold, he let it all melt together into an endless universe of pure gold. Then he turned himself to gold as well and melted away.

Lan unlocked his laptop and opened his encrypted files. Before Bo had learned to cheat the feeding ritual, they used a list to hunt from. Brad had an ability to smell evil. He'd smell someone out and then set Lan or Joey to follow them to prove the evil. Once they had the evidence they needed, they'd add him to the hunt list as a possible target for the full moon. Then, when the full moon did arrive, they'd look at their options and decide which target had the best chance of success. Brad would use the wolf's head talisman to command his werewolves to hunt only the selected target and then to bring back the brain for himself to consume to satisfy his own curse.

It had been more than two months since Lan had killed anyone. He'd killed one human every month for more than a decade. Now, suddenly, no one. He was developing an itch in his brain and looking at the list seemed to help scratch it.

An hour later, Bo was ready for another round. Lan stood at the control panel with three copies behind him and one in front of him in the chamber.

"Hit it!" Bo ordered and pointed again to the control panel.

Lan flipped the switch and the pumps roared to life once again.

This time, the Bos didn't react with pain, though they

did begin to pant and gasp for breath. Three minutes went by and the copy collapsed again, just as blue as the first time.

Lan killed the switch and dumped the air back into the room.

Bo burst in and absorbed his fallen comrade. “Okay, that was way better! Don’t get me wrong, it still sucked, but it wasn’t the soul-killing suckage the first round was.”

Lan set the valves back to closed and powered down the panel. “What was the difference this time?” he asked.

“I used my *hard body* technique. I had the idea while was meditating. It mitigated most of the problems caused by the vacuum. Now, all I have to do is learn to deal with the lack of oxygen,” Bo sighed.

“Good thinking. Round three?” Lan asked and pointed to the panel.

“Let me meditate again. I’ll shout for you.”

CHAPTER 7

ANGUS ADVENTURES

Winter passed and spring returned to Arlington. Ren continued to study warding with Chet; Ramzi's parents brought him home to care for him there, and Bo continued to torture himself with the vacuum chamber. However, not all of Bo's copies were on torture duty.

Bosepi Jr. sat across from Alyssa for Awakening practice again.

"Okay, let's get some gold," he began but was immediately interrupted.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Alyssa urged and shook her hands at Bosepi Jr.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Tell me another story," she demanded.

Bosepi Jr. raised a brow and said, "Seriously? We do this every day lately."

"I know!" she agreed, "It's a tradition. We can't stop now!"

He grabbed his hair with both of his hands and grumbled, "Ugh! Fine! I actually have a pretty good one for you today. It's new."

"Nice! Let's have it!" she cheered as she rocked back and forth on her bottom.

"At home, I have this dog collar," Bo explained, "It's actually the first collar I ever got. Brad bought it for me. The tag it came with says 'Angus.' That's one of my aliases. One of the things I like to do — well, Bo likes to do, but it doesn't

really make a difference for the purpose of the story.

“Anyway, one of the things we like to do is go down to River Legacy Park as Angus to hang out. Sometimes we get to help little kids who get hurt or lost in the woods. It’s really rewarding. So, I was at the park recently...”

Angus heard sobbing from the woods and went to investigate. He found a toddler holding a stuffed monkey standing in the trough between two steep hills.

He approached the little boy slowly to gain his trust. When the boy looked comfortable, Angus snatched his monkey and ran ten feet toward the direction of the field where they would most likely find his family.

“No! Bad!” the boy shouted.

Angus dropped the monkey and waited for the boy to reach for it. When the boy did, he snatched it again and ran another ten feet closer to the field.

They continued to play this game of keep away until a sudden gust of wind brought an errant Frisbee through the trees to fall directly in front of the child who immediately picked it up and held it over his head.

Moments later a cream-colored miniature poodle with a mustache came racing through the woods.

Oh, no! This yahoo is going to ruin the game plan! Angus thought. He immediately dropped the monkey and moved to intercept.

“Hold on, hold on!” Alyssa interrupted.

“What?” asked Bosepi Jr.

“The poodle did not have a mustache!” she insisted.

Bosepi Jr. grinned broadly and chuckled, “Oh, it totally had a mustache. It was really thick and wide like someone from an old cowboy movie.”

Alyssa shook her head, “No. I don’t believe you.”

“Hey, you’re the one who asked *me* to tell the story,” he said with indignation.

Alyssa huffed, “Fine. Continue.”

Angus moved to intercept the poodle.

The poodle stopped in his tracks and mumbled something, then gave Angus the customary sniff.

Angus looked confusedly at the poodle and thought, *That mumble sounded — demonic. It’s not close enough to Vulgar for me to understand, but it was definitely a demonic dialect!*

After a couple of whiffs, the poodle growled deeply and backed away from Angus, keeping his eyes locked on.

What the heck?! I have to protect that kid. Angus tried to turn toward the toddler, but the poodle darted between them and locked eyes again. He was much faster than you might expect for a poodle with a mustache.

Angus was taken completely off guard when the poodle stepped forward and his eyes burst forth green flames!

He thought, *Who on Earth would summon a poodle hellhound?! Sorry, kid, but you’re about to see some weird crap go down!* Angus formed a portal at his feet and dove into the Shadow World.

“No!” Alyssa interrupted again, “Now you’re just

making crap up! There was *not* a poodle hellhound with a mustache,” she insisted and shook her head vehemently.

Bosepi Jr. folded his arms across his chest and waited a beat before responding, “Are you going to let me tell my story or what?”

She flared her nostrils, then said, “Ugh! Fine. Go.”

Angus found the hound’s shadow through the veil and used it to create another portal. He shoved his snout through and pulled the hound into the Shadow by his rear paw thinking, *Well, at least now he can’t hurt the kid.*

The poodle snapped at Angus, then leaped away.

This is probably not my optimal form to fight a hellhound, even if he is a poodle. Angus shrugged off his collar and moved to his human form, then used his teleportation trick to create four copies. Each of those copies created two more copies, who spread out to surround the hound. They didn’t want him to get away.

The poodle suddenly went stiff. After a few seconds, he barked, expelling the spectral head of a ram that slammed into Bo’s chest, knocking him twenty feet back and into a tree.

“Oooffff! Not cool!” Bo groaned as he stood. He realized something. *The smell of the hound’s breath doesn’t have a demonic scent to it. He isn’t a hellhound. He’s something else.*

Bo reached out with his spirit and harmonized with his copies so they could coordinate their attacks better.

The copies moved in on the poodle, hoping to trap it between them where they could just grab it by the neck and hoist it up.

As they rushed in, the poodle leaped high above their

heads. Much higher than should have been possible. He landed behind them and took off running deeper into the woods.

The copies teleported to head him off, but the dog could turn on a dime and slip out of reach every time.

The copies created more copies and tried to force the dog into a thicket of trees and vines, but when the dog started to tangle, he went ghostly and phased through it all.

“Ghost dog!” Alyssa shouted as she leapt to her feet and held her fists above her head.

Bosepi Jr. smiled broadly and nodded, “Yes. He’s a ghost dog.”

“Woot! I told you he wasn’t a hellhound,” she bragged.

“No, not a hellhound, but he *does* have a mustache!” insisted Bosepi Jr.

Bo realized he wouldn’t be able to physically capture the dog. If he couldn’t physically capture the dog, he would have to capture him spiritually.

Bo had all of the copies consolidate so he would seem less threatening, and then reached out with his spirit and touched the dog. The dog’s frequency was extremely low, so he brought it up to meet his own. When they synchronized, their thoughts and perceptions became mutual.

“Please stop. I don’t want to fight you,” Bo said through the link.

“You’re bad! You were going to eat the baby!” replied the poodle.

“What? No. I wasn’t going to eat the baby,” insisted Bo.

“You’re a werewolf! I’ve battled werewolves before! Werewolves are bad!” said the poodle.

“Maybe the ones you fought were bad, but I’m not bad. I was trying to help the baby find his family. He got lost,” explained Bo.

“You lie, like when Mama pretends to throw the ball but keeps it in her hand. You’re trying to trick me!” insisted the poodle.

Bo shook his head, “I’m not. Here, look at my mind. See for yourself.” Bo played back his memory of hearing the sobbing coming from the woods, then finding the boy and trying to lure him back to the field.

“You’re tricking me!” repeated the poodle.

“No. Look,” Bo continued the memory, showing the Frisbee, showing his flaming eyes, showing concern that the flaming eye dog might hurt the baby, showing pulling the dog into the Shadow to protect the baby.

“So, you’re a good boy?” the poodle asked with all sincerity.

“Yes! I’m a good boy,” agreed Bo.

“Good boys! Woouououooool!” the poodle howled.

“Good boys! Woot! Woot!” Bo agreed again, then suddenly halted his celebration, “Oh crap! The baby’s still alone in the woods!”

“Save the baby!” the poodle cried.

“The end. Now can we get back to meditation?” asked Bosepi Jr.

Alyssa shook her head, “Wait. What happened to the baby?”

“Oh, his family had already found him by the time we’d made it back.”

“And the dog?” she pressed.

“He went back to his family too,” Bosepi Jr. began. “But you know what’s really cool? Being mentally connected to him while he was speaking to me taught my brain to understand his dialect. It’s similar to Vulgar but not quite the same. Sort of like the difference between English and a *really* thick Cajun accent.”

Alyssa laughed, “That’s awesome.”

“Oh! One more thing,” Bo beamed, “Do you remember the reason I said I couldn’t harmonize my spirit with you?”

“Yeah. You said you were afraid I’d become demon tainted.”

“Exactly,” he agreed, “Until then, I’d only ever harmonized with other werewolves, so there was no way to tell if the demonic taint was transferable. I followed the dog and his family home so I could see where they lived. I’ll check in on him again next full moon to see if he goes on a rampage or not. If he does, I’ll have to stop him. If not...”

“We can harmonize,” Alyssa whispered as her eyes grew wide.

“We can harmonize once you Awaken,” clarified Bo.

“Great! So, are we going to meditate or what?! I’m waiting on you!” she said and clapped her hands sharply. “Chop chop!”

CHAPTER 8

PROFESSIONALS

“I need more,” Ren said as she slid the warding tome across the table to Chet, “Nothing in there can help me break the ward that’s keeping Ramzi trapped.”

“That’s the most advanced book available. If you want to learn anything more, you’re going to have to talk to a master warden,” explained Chet.

“Then let’s talk to one,” Ren agreed, “You and your dad probably know lots of them.”

Chet’s lip slowly curled into a smirk as he asked, “You up for a drive?”

Bo had run the air pumps in his vacuum chamber day and night for more than a month. A breakdown was bound to happen eventually. Luckily, it wasn’t so bad. The part was easy enough to find and it didn’t look like it would be hard to replace, but he would have to go to a specialty shop to get it.

He found a shop in downtown Ft. Worth that carried the part. Bo traveled through the Shadow but made his exit in a parking garage around the corner from the store to avoid cameras. As soon as he crossed the veil, he was struck with a variety of unusual smells, one of which he recognized: fairy.

He’d never met one before, but he had eaten one last Christmas in a meatloaf. It was a Brownie who’d tried to hex

his friend's rose bush. Bo didn't have anything against fairies, but meat is meat and it was already cooked, so what the heck? Besides, he didn't even know the fairy was in the meatloaf until he had already started. That's a bell you can't unring.

Bo walked around to the front of the building and found the shop he needed for the part. He could tell the source of the smell from earlier was further down. His curiosity had him eager to investigate, so he hurried in and bought the part he needed.

Back outside he followed his nose to Kwok's shop, which was in an alley between two of the buildings. It was a small Asian market that looked like it could use a little TLC from the maintenance crew. Shelves were dusty and the fluorescent lighting had more than one bulb flickering on the verge of death. Bo stepped in and took in a deep breath through his nose. The fairy smell was fading. She must have left while he was in the other store.

Still curious, Bo wandered in and looked around. There was a curtained off area to the rear of the store. As he approached, he heard the mumbling demonic voice of the mustachioed poodle he'd met at the park. He was saying "I ate it." A few seconds later, he would say it again. Then again.

Bo peeked through the curtain. The space beyond was a stark contrast to the front end of the store. Whereas the front was all dark and dirty, the rear was spotless shelves covered in a variety of jars, bottles, and other odd materials and items displayed under bright white lights.

There was an old Asian man thumbing the control buttons of a voice recorder sitting near a table further in. The mumbling voice of the poodle was coming from the recorder.

"What did he eat?" asked Bo as he stepped through the curtain.

The old man looked up from his recorder and said, "I'm sorry. What was that?"

"I asked what he ate?" Bo repeated.

"What who ate?" the old man asked confusedly.

Bo pointed to the recorder in the man's hand and said, "The poodle. I recognized his voice. You keep playing it back. He said 'I ate it.' What did he eat?"

"Oh. Do you know Boy? I asked him how he got those green flames in his eyes. He mumbled a reply to me. I didn't understand him, so I recorded it. I've been trying to figure it out ever since. I guess you saved me the trouble. I'm Mr. Kwok. I don't think I've ever seen you in my store before."

"No. First time," agree Bo, "I was actually just a few doors down, getting a replacement part for an air pump."

"Ah, Jeff's store. He's a good man, but he doesn't know about..." Mr. Kwok gestured around the room, "this stuff."

Bo looked around at the various labels on the shelves and admitted, "I've never been in a shop like this before."

"You look like a nice boy, but we don't get a lot of you people in here. They got too much bad Karma and so they can't afford anything."

Bo laughed hard for a long time. He thought about the huge sack of cash in the shadow of his closet. When he was finally able to speak clearly, he smiled and asked, "Who you callin' 'you people'?"

Mr. Kwok held up his hands defensively and said, "No offense to you, but the curse plays cruel tricks on the psyche of most werewolves. It makes walking a more righteous path — challenging."

Bo looked confused, "How did you know?"

"I can see it in your aura. I see all sorts of things," explained Mr. Kwok.

"Ah. My sister does that too." Bo looked to a display

case full of trinkets and jewelry and said, "I'm guessing because this case is on this side of the curtain, the items in it are — extra?"

"Yeah, but like I was saying, I don't think you'll be able to afford anything. No offense," Mr. Kwok said again in an apologetic tone.

Bo looked at his clothes, then back to Mr. Kwok and asked, "Have I somehow given you the idea that I'm a hobo or something? Why wouldn't I have money?"

"Oh, I have no doubt you have money. You see, you can't buy these items with greenbacks. You buy them with karma. Karma cash," explained Mr. Kwok.

Bo furrowed his brow and said, "Huh?"

Mr. Kwok opened a box on the table, pulled out a small keychain, tossed it to Bo, and said, "Here. You can have this."

Bo took a closer look at the octagonal token on the end of the chain. There was a stylized letter K in the center.

"Now, hold that in your hand and just think about your balance. It'll tell you the amount."

"Okay," muttered Bo thinking the word, "balance." A number popped into his head and he asked, "Uh. Is twenty-seven million a lot? Surely, I can afford something here with twenty-seven million, right?"

"What?" Mr. Kwok asked skeptically, "That can't be right." He turned and opened the case, pulled out a Zippo-style lighter, then walked around beside Bo. "Here. Hold the token over the lighter."

Bo did as he was instructed. The K in the center of the token vanished and was replaced with the price of the item: "50" and the amount in Bo's account: "27,867,952."

Mr. Kwok blinked hard several times, then took the token from Bo's hand and said, "It must be faulty. Here, try another one," he said and walked back to the box on the

table to retrieve a second token.

Bo took the token and held it over the lighter again: “27,868,008.”

“What the? The number is even higher,” Mr. Kwok muttered as he furrowed his brow and stared hard at the token. As he did, the number rolled again: “27,868,058.”

“Is it not supposed to do that?” asked Bo.

Mr. Kwok shook his head, “No. It’s only supposed to change when you do something to change it. You change your Karma by doing something good or bad and you’re not doing anything. You’re just standing there.”

Bo’s eyes lit with understanding and he said, “I get it now. Okay, that totally makes sense then. Yeah, it’s legit.”

“What are you talking about, legit?” Mr. Kwok demanded and pointed harshly at the token, “Your account is increasing, but you’re not doing anything.”

Bo shrugged, “Sure I am. I’m just not doing it right here.”

“What does that mean?” asked Mr. Kwok.

“This isn’t the only me. I’m sort of — everywhere. I help people all over the world all the time. I guess that’s why my account is so large and getting larger.”

Mr. Kwok paused a beat and cocked his head before asking, “Are — you a god?”

Bo laughed hard again and shook his head, “No. I’m just a wolf-boy. Don’t mind me. Now, why don’t you show me some of those things in your display case?”

Mr. Kwok took note of two more teens who had entered the store while he was bagging the items Bo had purchased. “I’ll be with you boys in a moment.”

One of the boys looked up when Mr. Kwok spoke. He

began to look away but then did a double-take and slapped his friend's arm with the back of his hand a couple of times. "Hey, is that...?"

"Holy crap! K-eight-four-two!" The other boy exclaimed.

The boys rushed to the counter where Bo was checking out, causing him to turn and hold up his hands defensively.

"Wow, this is, um, awkward," Bo blushed as his eyes flickered back and forth between the two boys.

"I can't believe it's really you! Bobby and I are your biggest fans! We watch replays of your fights every weekend. Oh, remember that time when Loud Mouth blasted you into the stands?!"

"Or that time," Bobby interrupted, "you zapped Spooky's wraith with lightning?!"

Bo smiled and nodded, "Yeah. Good times."

"Oh! Sign my trading card!" Bobby urged as he reached into his jacket and pulled out a stack of cards. He thumbed halfway through the stack and pulled out a card with "K-842" at the top. The picture showed Bo surrounded by five glowing orbs of ball lightning.

"Um, sure. Mr. Kwok, do you have a pen I could borrow?" Bo's voice was asking for a pen, but his face was pleading for help.

Mr. Kwok smiled and pulled a pen from his breast pocket, saying, "Here you go."

Bo took the pen and placed the card on the table. He signed it "K-842."

"Oh, my gosh. Thank you!" Bobby beamed.

"It's fine. Really," said Bo.

Bobby reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, saying, "Just one more thing. Can I get a selfie with you and the card? No one is ever going to believe me if I just

show them the card.”

“Sure. Why not?” acquiesced Bo.

Bobby and his friend crowded against Bo and snapped the shot. “Awesome! Hey, do you want to hang out sometime?”

Bo smiled awkwardly and lamented, “Thanks, but I’ve actually got a lot going on right now.”

“Hey, that’s cool. Well, Rich and I are in here all the time. Maybe we’ll see you again,” he suggested.

“Maybe,” agreed Bo.

“Come on, Rich. Let’s go show the guys,” Bobby said and turned for the exit.

The two boys ran out of the shop, leaving Mr. Kwok alone with Bo.

“K-eight-four-two, you are full of surprises, aren’t you?” Mr. Kwok teased as he gazed appraisingly at Bo.

“That’s what they say. Alright. Well, thanks for the stuff,” said Bo and made for the door.

Mr. Kwok walked Bo to the front of the shop to personally see him out. “I’m sure she’s going to love them. A couple of real treasures for your treasure,” said Mr. Kwok.

“Thanks. You’ll definitely see me again,” Bo assured him.

“You have a fine day, now.” Mr. Kwok said and waved as Bo walked away, down the alley and around the corner.

As soon as Bo was out of sight, he walked briskly back to his office. He filled the large shallow metallic bowl on his desk from a pitcher of water until it was nearly to the top, then rung it with a thump from his middle finger.

A floating golden apple appeared over the bowl with a stylized K insignia on it. A circle of runes surrounded the apple. Mr. Kwok selected one and then said, “Search Fenris.”

“I didn’t know you had a wizard school at UTA,” said Ren, walking quickly to keep up with Chet’s long strides.

“Mage school,” he clarified, “We have to teach somewhere. Why not here?”

“Fair enough,” she acquiesced.

The pair entered the library and immediately turned right to take the stairs down to the basement. Past the offices of the computer admins, they found a hallway and walked to the end where Chet drew a symbol in the air, causing a door to appear.

Through the door, they found a waiting room with a receptionist.

“Mr. Spiffington,” the young woman at the desk beamed, “It’s great to see you again. Dr. Kozman is expecting you. Go on in.”

Chet nodded and led Ren past the desk to the door on the left and knocked twice.

“Come in!” They heard from the other side of the door.

“After you,” insisted Chet and pushed the door open.

“Chet, my boy, is this she?” asked Dr. Kozman, his gaze boring deep into Ren as if trying to ferret out some secret she might hold.

Chet sighed and rolled his eyes, “Yes.”

Continuing to look at Ren, Dr. Kozman continued, “Shall I call you Ren?”

“Yes. Shall I call you — Doctor?” She replied.

“Doctor it is! I’ve seen your work. The seal you put on the sketch of the Transit Queen was divine. Literally. Now, how may I help you?”

Ren looked at Dr. Kozman with pleading eyes and said, “I have a friend whose spirit is trapped behind a ward. Since his spirit can’t return to his body, he can’t wake up. His

parents don't know about ... all this. They've taken him to dozens of doctors, but, of course, none of them have been able to do anything. Can *you* help me break the ward?"

"My dear, I would be honored to assist you. Who is your friend and who trapped his spirit? If I know the mage, I may already be familiar with his work. That would be helpful for breaking it down," suggested Dr. Kozman.

"My friend's name is Ramzi Zane. He's been trapped by this guy, Apophis," she said.

"Apophis. That's an odd name these days. He must really be full of himself to claim such a moniker. Where's he from?"

Ren shrugged and said, "I guess you'd say he's from the beginning of time."

Dr. Kozman gulped, "Oh. That Apophis," he said nervously. "Well, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to take a look. If nothing else, I would get to see the work of a god firsthand."

CHAPTER 9

THE MASTER

Ren stood on the doorstep of Ramzi's house with Chet and Dr. Kozman behind her. She'd already rung the bell and was waiting patiently for someone to come to the door. After a few more seconds, the door swung open to reveal a haggard but surprised looking Rhonda.

Rhonda looked right past Ren and asked, "Chet? What are you doing here?"

"My father is a fan of Ms. Alonso's art and we've recently become acquainted. We've been talking about what happened to Ramzi and I thought I might see if my good friend Dr. Kozman might be willing to take a look at him. He's a specialist and has had experience with similar cases in the past," said Chet.

Dr. Kozman held up a nervous hand and added, "Now, I must say I've never seen anything quite exactly like this, but I have seen similar. I can't guarantee I'll be able to help, but I'd be glad to try. Free of charge, of course."

Rhonda stepped back from the door and began to sob, covering her face with her hands.

Ren rushed in and threw her arms around her.

Between sobs, Rhonda managed a few soggy words, "Yes — Please — Thank you."

"Shall we see him then?" Dr. Kozman asked as he stepped politely into the impeccably clean house, carrying a large doctor's bag.

Ren had always known Rhonda to be tidy, but since

she had returned home with Ramzi, she'd been obsessive with her cleaning.

Rhonda released Ren and made her way to the room down the hall from the kitchen. Ramzi's room used to be on the upper level, but they didn't want to risk moving him up and down stairs.

Chet followed Rhonda, quietly drawing magical blue symbols in the air behind her head. As they entered, he waved them forward.

As the runes fell into orbit around her head, her gaze became dull and she stopped walking. Chet guided her to a chair to the side of the bed and helped her sit.

Dr. Kozman turned to Ren and said, "Please, show me to the ward."

"It's in here," said Ren and took Dr. Kozman by the hand, then placed her other hand on Ramzi's forehead. In her mind, she played three tones, each a D sharp. The first was from the mid-range, the next one octave up, and the third, an octave up from that. She allowed the sound to fill her whole body. When she felt the veil parting, she allowed the sound to spread to Dr. Kozman as well and they were suddenly flying down a long dark tunnel.

At the end, they landed in a large stone throne room. The walls and floor were covered in hieroglyphics. In the center was what used to be a tiered floor with a stone throne upon the top, but that had been shattered to bits during the fight when Ramzi had been trapped. The whole inner temple lay in ruins now.

Hallways led away from the throne room in all directions. Ren waved for Dr. Kozman to follow her and said, "He's over here. They're trapped in the temple of Horus."

"They?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot to say. He's trapped with Horus," explained Ren.

Dr. Kozman gulped again but said nothing.

Ren stopped in front of the sealed doors of Horus' temple and said, "This is it."

Dr. Kozman stepped forward and pulled out a monocle, which he placed on his right eye and said, "Let's see what we're working with." He took a step back and gazed all around the door, then stepped right up to it with his face less than an inch from the surface. He gasped, then shuffled to the left, then again to the right. He took one step back and looked up, then down. Then he got on his hands and knees and crawled up to the door again. After half an hour of intense inspection, he stepped away and wiped the sweat from his brow to say, "It *is* the work of a god."

"And?" Ren prompted, biting her lip nervously.

"And it's brilliant, elegant, complex — and sadly, it's beyond me. I've been warding for sixty years. I'm possibly the most experienced warden in America and looking at this makes me feel like a first-year apprentice again." He sighed and looked down at his shoes muttering, "A *first-day* apprentice."

Ren said nothing. She just turned and walked away toward the throne room.

The doctor began to look up but then let his head drop again. "I'm sorry if at any point I gave you false hope. I'm, I'm sorry."

CHAPTER 10

ONE SMALL STEP

Bo sat in meditation, fully lost in the gold. After a time, which may have been seconds or may have been centuries, he opened his eyes. He was in a seascape of golden water, golden coral, and golden fish. He held his breath as he looked around. The gold faded, leaving a perfectly lifelike environment surrounding him. He'd been here before. Well, not *here* exactly. This place didn't actually exist. It was the place where the universe took him to teach him something. This time it took the form of the ocean.

He took a moment to closely examine all of his senses and found something odd around his nose and mouth. It felt like an air bubble was stuck to them.

Bo pulled in a small sip through his lips. He half expected it to be water, but it wasn't. Clean fresh air filled his mouth. He tried again, this time opening his throat and allowing the air to pass into his lungs. He released the flap that blocked his sinuses and breathed in through his nose as well.

With lungs full of fresh air, he opened his eyes again, this time in the real world, and said, "One more time!"

Bo consolidated the copies he had in the room and powered on the control panel.

Lan entered moments later and asked, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah," he replied.

"Go get some copies," suggested Lan.

Bo shook his head and said, "I won't need them this

time. I think I got it.”

Lan raised a skeptical brow and reminded him, “We’ve suffocated you about five hundred times in a row. You sure you got it this time?”

Bo opened the door to the chamber, stepped in, and said, “As sure as I’m ever gonna be.”

Lan waited for Bo to shut the door, then immediately flipped the switch for the pumps.

Bo gave a thumbs-up and smiled.

Lan watched the dials on the gauges as the needles shifted, showing less and less air in the chamber. He mirrored Bo’s smile when he saw that, despite the fact that there was less and less air in the chamber, Bo appeared to continue to breathe normally.

Lan hit the switch and the valves at the three-minute mark. If Bo was going to pass out, he would have done it already.

When the pressure in the chamber normalized, Bo threw open the door and leaped onto Lan shouting, “We did it!”

“*You* did it, you crazy little bastard!” Lan corrected.

“I did it!” Bo agreed, “Next stop — THE MOON!”

Bo entered his father’s house through the backdoor. He found his parents in the living room binge-watching superhero shows. “Hey, I’ve got great news! Where’s Ren?”

Sue winced, pointed reluctantly to the stairs, and said, “She’s in her room, but I don’t think she’s in the mood to hear good news. She came home earlier, soaking wet with tears.”

“Oh, no. What happened?” asked Bo as he sat on the arm of the sofa.

“She met some guy today,” Sue explained, “A master mage or something like that. He’s supposed to be the best at doing whatever needs to be done to release Ramzi. He couldn’t do anything.”

“Well, crap,” Bo muttered as he ran his fingers through his hair and leaned against the back of the sofa. “Crappity-crap-crap,” he added.

Trey patted Bo’s arm and said, “You can tell us your news.”

“What? Oh, yeah. I’m going to be an astronaut, uh, lunarnaut? Whatever you call someone who goes to the moon.”

Trey furrowed his brow and said, “I don’t think NASA is sending anyone else to the moon, but I suppose joining the space program is a fun goal.”

Bo shook his head and clarified, “No. Not NASA. I’m just gonna go. Soon as the moon comes up.”

Trey and Sue exchanged confused looks, then turned back to the would-be lunarnaut asking, “What?!” in unison.

“I should be able to heal from any radiation damage and I don’t really need to eat while I’m up there. So, I think I have all my bases covered,” said Bo.

Sue held up an inquisitive finger and asked, “And how exactly do you intend to breathe?”

“Oh, I’m just not going to. Well, I guess I am, but not like we’re breathing now. I’m gonna convince my body that I’m breathing, and it’ll create its own air,” he explained.

Trey shook his head and said, “Yeah, son. That’s not how it works.”

“That’s not how it works for you,” Bo corrected, “It works fine for me. Lan and I built a vacuum chamber so I could practice surviving without air. We’ve already tested it and I’m good to go!”

“Have you considered sending a copy first, just to

make sure it's survivable?" asked Trey and raised a brow of concern toward his son.

"For sure," Bo agreed, "Yeah, I'd never just teleport to the moon blind."

Trey nodded, somewhat reassured that his son wasn't committing suicide by lunar landing. "Well, make sure you take some pictures."

Lan sat with Bo and one of his copies on the back lawn staring at the sky.

"We should make some sort of a wager," suggested Lan.

Bo cocked his head curiously and asked, "Okay. What kind of a wager?"

"If you die..." Lan began.

"Die?!" Bo croaked, "We're *not* betting on whether or not I die!"

"Fine," he agreed, "Let's say — never return."

Bo massaged his temples and acquiesced, "Ugh. Not sure that's much better but okay."

Lan grinned and continued, "If you never return, the copy anyway, you have to do the dishes for a month."

Bo grinned and countered, "And if I do come back, you have to wash my leather boxers for a month!"

"Ewww! Done!" Lan agreed and reached out to shake.

Bo reciprocated, then turned his eyes to the rising moon. "Ooh! Look! It's coming up!"

"Nice! You ready?" asked Lan.

"Let's let it get a little higher. I'd like to hit it square in the middle if I can." Bo leaned back in his chair but continued to watch the sky as he said, "I was out to see Joey last full moon."

“How’s he doing?” Lan inquired, “I haven’t seen him since he snuck away in the middle of the night.”

Bo’s face showed deep concern as he replied, “He’s getting crusty fast.”

Lan looked away and muttered, “Yeah. I’ve been meaning to go see him.”

“Why don’t you go? It’s not that far,” said Bo.

“I don’t think...” Lan paused and shrugged, “It’s hard for me to see him like that. I’ve had two best friends in my life. Him and Brad. Brad’s already gone and if I look at Joey, it’ll be just a little too real. I know he’s dying, but if I don’t see him like that, if I can just remember him looking young, in my heart I won’t *feel* like he’s dying.”

Bo reached out and squeezed Lan’s forearm. “I get it. I’m sure he does too, but you’re running out of time. If you don’t see him soon, you may never see him again.”

“I know,” said Lan.

“Think about it this way,” Bo explained, “As much as the best friend that he’s been to you, you’ve been more than that to him. You’ve known him for less than half your life, but how old was he when you met him? A year? Now he’s pushing fourteen. You’ve been his best friend for more than ninety percent of his life.”

“I know, okay?!” Lan snapped, “Just stop busting my balls about it.”

“Geez, fine. You know, you’ve had a lot of pent-up stuff going on ever since Brad passed away. Maybe if you had a girlfriend you’d have a better attitude,” suggested Bo.

Lan looked hard at Bo, then looked away again and admitted, “I’m not interested in women that way.”

“Oh, crap! All this time you never told me you were gay. Hey, that’s cool. Gemini and Embers are gay. It’s just, wow, you didn’t ping my gaydar at all!” Bo marveled.

Lan sighed and clarified, “I’m not gay either.”

Bo looked confused and said, “Huh?”

“I just don’t have those sorts of — desires,” explained Lan.

Bo furrowed his brow and asked, “Really?”

“Yes, really! Would you friggin’ go to the moon already?!” Lan demanded.

“Gosh! Mr. Grumpy over here. Fine. I’m going.” Bo turned to his copy and said, “Alright, champ. You’re up,” as he pointed to the moon.

The copy held one fist high over his head and shouted, “One small step for a werewolf!” then plunged into a Shadow portal at his feet.

“One giant leap for werewolf kind,” Bo continued, then formed his own portal and said, “I’ll be right back. I’m going to the Shadow World to make sure he gets there and back okay. You’re gonna be washing my shorts for a month!”

In the Shadow World, Bo looked up at the moon where he could feel his copy moving around. He had already harmonized spirits before he left. He was able to sense everything the copy sensed. The low gravity was trippy. The cold vacuum of space wasn’t at all what he had expected. Though the moon was much smaller than the Earth, being out there alone with nothing and no one around for almost a quarter of a million miles made him feel smaller than he had ever felt before.

Bo watched through his mind’s eye as his copy made the transition from the Shadow to the Reality side of the moon to look around. After a minute, the copy returned to the Shadow and teleported back to Earth. The teleportation process between the Earth and the moon had taken much longer than any other teleport had before. Teleporting to the

horizon was essentially instantaneous. Teleporting to the moon had taken about two seconds and the sensation of his Shadow particles flying through the space between had made his adrenaline spike, sort of like the first time he'd leapt from the high-board at the pool.

As Lan sat waiting for Bo to return, he thought about Brad and Joey. Their friendship was his whole world for more than a decade. The work they did together was important to him. They were all cursed, but they used that curse to make the world a better place. Then Brad died, Joey got old, and Bo figured out how to break the ritual cycle. The work had come to an end and it left Lan feeling empty. His whole reason to live had vanished over the course of a year.

"Look who's back!" shouted Bo as he directed Lan's attention to his copy with jazz hands.

"Wow! You made it!" said Lan, surprised. He was so caught up in his thoughts, he didn't realize they were back until Bo spoke.

"And we come bearing gifts," beamed the copy and tossed Lan a fist-sized rock.

Lan caught it. It was cold to the touch. "I've heard these moon rocks go for a fortune on the black market," he said.

"You can save that for your retirement," chuckled Bo.

His copy went to the tool shed and broke out a couple of shovels and buckets.

Lan looked on curiously and asked, "What are you going to do with those?"

"Oh, we're building a moon base — because who doesn't want an awesome secret moon base? Am I right?!"

asked Bo.

“I can’t argue with that,” Lan agreed, “Well, you boys have fun. I’m going to go work on some cases.” Lan entered the kitchen as the two Bos crossed the veil back to the Shadow. He grabbed his laptop from the table and took it out to his truck.

TRAVIS GALVAN

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