

Chapter 1

Passion

When: Second later

Where: ???

Lysanias stood, not daring to make a sound, as the next world he would strive to save came into focus around him. Before him, oblivious, two people were in bed and they seemed to be having a fairly good time of it. He couldn't see the faces but one seemed to have shoulder length dark hair, and was passionately kissing the person under them. He could see Inari's face in his mind, how her calculating eyes were alight with mischief, and her voice floated through his recollection as well.

Humm... Sending you someplace people are naked... Have to see what I can come up with. You're right, that could be hilarious, couldn't it?

Are you laughing it up now, little goddess, or whatever you are? He resisted the urge to look up, she wasn't up there, and those that were, if they existed here (and they probably did) couldn't help him now. *You know, if you weren't some avatar of magic or whatever it is your people are, I would- is that another woman?*

Lysanias had gotten a glimpse of the other person's face as the two looked over to a chirping phone, and the dark haired woman on top reached for it.

"Trick wants me to go by the Dal, he says it's important," she moaned, quite different from the moaning that had been coming from her a moment ago. They went back to kissing, but Lysanias craned his neck to look at the device. *Similar to my hubPad, so they must have fairly well developed technology here. The candles must just be for mood.*

"How important?" managed the other lady.

I guess that's my in. "Maybe he's calling to tell you I've arrived?" he said dryly.

Both ladies screamed and twisted around, looking at him. They had pulled the covers up and were glaring at him.

"How did you get in here?" demanded the dark haired one.

The other one was glancing over at the door, which was still closed.

"Would you believe I just stepped between realities?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"How about now?" He held up a hand and flame appeared above his palm.

"So you're fae," she guessed. "I should have known, with those eyes. Light or dark?"

"Bo, is this really the time to be asking that?" the other woman hissed.

"Fae?" Lysanias asked, dropping the flame. "Or do you mean fay, or fey, or faye? There's so many ways to define that word it's not even funny. Found that out the hard way."

"Just tell me what you want and get out!"

"I can tell you what I hunt. The avatar of darkness, and his agent here, the rogue Wanderer Jason. I suppose that makes me light, if I had only dark and light to choose from." He shrugged. "I'll leave you two to get dressed, we have a lot to talk about." He started for the door. "I'll be just outside, take your time. And don't worry, I mean you two no harm. I'm here to protect you, it's just the being that controls my trips has a very bizarre sense of humor. So I do apologize for just appearing here as I did."

"Wait a minute, you can't just barge in here, scare us half to death, then just saunter out and say you'll be waiting outside! Get out of my house!"

"Bo, he was *leaving!*" the other hissed. "Isn't that the important thing?"

"I don't want him wandering around my house!"

Wandering around. Inari would chortle at the pun I'm sure.

"He must have seen it to get in here! Unless you believe his story about stepping out of nowhere."

"That's beside the point!"

The two stared at each other and Lysanias looked them over. *They feel different, he decided. The dark haired woman's spirit energy feels different from the light haired woman's. I wonder if it means anything?*

"I really do mean you no harm, and you two are at the center of something very dangerous," he told them. "I know you have no reason to trust me, but I came here for a reason. Get dressed, and we'll talk."

"Fine," said Bo. "But don't touch anything."

"Of course." He made his way to the door and stepped out, heading down some stairs he saw. He heard the two moving around and shook his head.

Do I call up Inari and give her a piece of my mind? Nah, let's not give her the satisfaction.

Looking around he saw he was in a ramshackle place indeed, with two kinds of bars on the windows, nailed up wooden slats and a metal mesh of some kind. It almost looked like a re-purposed warehouse or something. There was a large couch in front of what must be a TV, then a kitchen area and a small table. Lysanias recognized several things like a microwave and the electric lights, and nodded.

Very similar tech to the last world. Is that good or bad? Probably means there isn't much magic, right? I wonder what she meant by fae?

He sat on the couch to wait, and it wasn't long before Bo appeared on the stairs. She had dressed, and was holding a sword, of all things, in both hands. Lysanias snorted and finally burst out laughing.

"What?" she demanded, warily stepping closer. "You think I'm just going to come down here unarmed?"

"First of all, you had that in your bedroom? What else do you get up to in there... you know what, never mind, forget I asked. Secondly, you're holding it all wrong. Third, you've already seen me create fire, do you really want to close the distance with me to get into sword swinging range? And finally..." He gestured, and metal bent the blade out of her grasp and into his waiting hand. "That." He looked it over. *Fairly poor construction. Not that I'm an expert or anything, but I did watch an expert work.*

"How did you do that?" she demanded. "I thought your thing was fire!"

"What? No, don't be silly." He floated it back to her, and she grabbed it after a second of hesitation. "I don't have a 'thing' I can do just about anything. For instance I can probably make you a much better sword, and with a bit of time and effort I could make it unbreakable for you. If you wanted, I mean." *And maybe give you some lessons.* "Here, take a look at mine." He slid Ragnarok out of the sheath, holding it up for her to see.

"Where did you pull that from?" she demanded, the point of the blade coming up again.

"Huh, right here- oh, you can't see it, right." *I forgot, there's still a ward on the thing so everyone ignores it.* "Look, put that away, it's not going to do you any good. We'll start over, and forget all about little incident upstairs."

She narrowed her eyes. "How long were you watching for, anyway?"

"Oh, uh," he colored. "Not very long, I assure you."

"Uh huh. Right." She stepped out, and he slid the sword back home again. "Come on down, Lauren."

"Okay." The other woman started down the stairs. "Is he- ack!" She dodged behind Bo. "I thought you said it was safe *because he was gone!*"

She lowered the sword. "No, he's not gone. But I think there's more to this than just a simple fae joke. He probably could have killed us at any time up there, but he just wants to talk. I think we should let him."

"It's your call, Bo."

"So talk," she demanded. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"My name is Lysanias, and as I said, I'm not from this world. A being called Inari sent me here to track down another person like me. A person who at one time Wandered as I did, chasing off a being called the shadow avatar. But he's joined the avatar's side now, and so it falls to me to take care of the problem. You can come sit down, I don't bite." He gestured to the sofa. "I'll even stand over here, if it'll make you feel better." He stood up and moved off, allowing them to go sit down. Both looked at him like one might look at a lion that might at any moment decide you looked tasty, but they sat.

"You come from another world?" asked Lauren, and Lysanias looked her over. Light brown hair, thin, didn't look very strong and her energy felt about average for normal people.

"You mean the quantum probability that arises from the uncertainty principle actually leads to collapsed wave-forms that sustain other physical realities apart from our own? And you're some kind of fae that can move between them?"

Both Lysanias and Bo stared at her.

"What?"

"You just made that all up, didn't you?" Bo asked.

"Uh, I am a scientist," Lauren reminded her. "Just because I have a specialty in genetics and cryptozoology, that doesn't mean I don't check in with other disciplines from time to time."

"...Right..." Bo allowed. "What she said, then."

What she said? I have no idea what she said. And why do I feel like the greatest joke in the universe is in there someplace? "All I can tell you," Lysanias told the pair, "is that I am from another world. I don't know the mechanics that give rise to it, but whatever does, it works. This world is in terrible danger, a danger I'm here to warn you of and help you defeat. I still don't know what your definition of fae is." *Because 'fated to die' is hopefully not in the cards for me for a very long time, and marked by evil, well, I guess the shadow avatar has marked me?*

"Do you think it has to do with your dreams?" Lauren asked Bo.

"What about my dreams?"

Is she some kind of Seer?

"Every night the past two nights you've woken up from nightmares. Don't claim you haven't, either, I know what I saw. I'm worried about you, Bo."

"I'm fine. I'm sure it's not related."

"But how can you know that?"

"I just do, okay?"

"Okay. Fae is what we call people like Bo," Lauren explained, turning back to him.

"She's a succubus."

"It's a generic term for anything not human," Bo agreed, nodding.

You look pretty human to me. But then, so do I, and I'm not exactly human either, am I? But don't I recall reading about succubus in the hubPad? Aren't they supposed to be demons of some kind? If demons are running around Earth and people call them fae, are there still demons somewhere? What are they like? "I'm not exactly human, so if you want to think of me as fae, that's fine. Are succubus known for dream powers here? I'm sure I read something about dream powers in the entry about them..." He mulled it over. *I'm here chasing a guy that lives in a dream state, and can manipulate reality like a dream. Is it related somehow?*

"Entry? What are you talking about?" Bo asked.

"I have a portable information station I call the hubPad, so I can look things up about various realities and what I might find there."

"Not usually," Lauren explained. "Bo isn't a typical one."

"Then I've been sent to the right place. Look, I can give you some specifics, but really you'll just have to trust me. Jason is a lot more dangerous than things I usually face, and who knows who the shadow avatar has taken over here? If people have powers in this reality you can bet they've taken someone who is fairly powerful. That makes this all that much more urgent."

"What's a shadow avatar?" asked Bo.

So Lysanias spent some time giving the usual "I come in peace, to bring war" speech about exactly what the shadow avatar was. Meanwhile he felt both ladies out and they appeared to belong here, and both assured him nothing like what he described was on the horizon. That's when the other two people burst in.

"Slow down, Kenzie," Bo told her as she started rattling off what she had been through that day. "Who peed?"

"Hey mate," said the man, plopping down on the couch and looking up at Lysanias.

"Mind moving, I can't see the tele." He gestured behind him, at the TV.

Lysanias looked him over. Short black hair, rather greasy, but the most important thing was that his arm was in a sling. Lysanias could feel he was in pain, though muted probably by drugs of some kind. He felt helpless, annoyed, and exasperated. "You're injured," he said. "I could heal that for you, if you wanted."

"Do what?"

"Can you?" Lauren asked, head whipping around. "I'd like to see that."

"Oh, you're still here?" he drawled. "What, were you two having a threesome? If it's two ladies I don't mind joining in, you have but to ask. I mean this one doesn't look like much. No offense," he added after a moment, but didn't sound like he meant it.

"Vex, get your mind out of the gutter for one second," Lauren chided. "Can you really heal broken bones?"

"Easily. You want that arm of your functional again or not?" *I guess he's Vex. And Bo called that short girl with the long hair Kenzie?*

"If you're putting me on..." he threatened.

"A few minutes and you won't even know it was broken." He held out a hand.

Vex looked suspiciously at him.

"Come on, we have to go right now!" Kenzie whined. "Ozzie could be dying somewhere!"

"Do you know where he is?" Lysanias asked.

"No," she admitted petulantly. "But I know where to start looking."

"Then hang on a second. I'll take care of this, ask the universe where your friend is, and we can head out together. Believe me, it'll save you time because you'll be able to walk right to him. I need to prove I'm on your side anyway, this seems a good enough way to start."

"Hey, who are you anyway?" Kenzie asked.

"He can help, I'll tell you later," Bo told her. "Let the man work, I'd like to see him heal someone as well."

"I'll take your word for it."

Thank you very much. Lysanias took Vex's outstretched hand and focused on his other arm. Willing him whole again didn't take long, and Vex shrugged out of the harness he was wearing to keep his arm still.

"It feels perfectly fine," he announced, rotating his shoulder and rubbing his upper arm with his other hand. "He's actually done it."

"That was it?" Lauren asked. "You healed him just like that?"

"What did you expect?" Lysanias asked. "It wasn't magic, and even if it was, it just would have been the normal mystical energy in the air which would have faded right away. There wouldn't have been much to see."

"Normal, he says. Magic" Kenzie scoffed.

"Well, it is for me."

"I'd like to do an X-ray on your arm, see exactly how the break was repaired," Lauren told Vex.

"Sure doc, whatever. But first..." He stretched out a hand at Kenzie, who stood there looking at him like "really? You're trying this on me?" "It still doesn't work!" he complained. "You fixed my arm but not my powers!"

"What's this?" Lysanias asked.

"I'm a mesmer, who can't mesmer!"

Lysanias glanced over at Bo.

"He can control people's bodies," she explained.

"What, he's a blood bender?" Blank looks answered him. "Never mind. Try it again."

"Okay." Vex attempted whatever he was doing and Lysanias felt him out.

He nodded. "Yeah, thought so. Like Korra, your energy pathways have been blocked. Your internal energies aren't moving out of your hand, which I assume they should be to do whatever it is you do to control people. They're getting stuck inside you. But what chakra are you using, I wonder? If the damage is due to the break, I can probably stimulate them with water bending and you'll be fine. If the blockage is spiritual you'll have to work through it on your own." *Not that I helped her air bend all that well with the exercises we tried.*

"Speak English, would you?" Vex complained.

“For now let’s find Kenzie’s friend,” he forestalled. “When I get back I’ll look more into your problem. In fact, why not take this X-ray,” *whatever that is*, “with Lauren now and get it out of the way while we’re gone?”

She nodded. “Better to make sure there aren’t any micro-fractures we should worry about before you lift something heavy and shatter that arm. Not that I don’t trust you, of course,” she hastened to add.

“Of course,” Lysanias agreed.

“Very well,” he petulantly allowed. “Let’s get it over with.”

“I’ll see you later,” she said, kissing Bo and grabbing her purse and jacket. Vex trailed after her.

“Now can we save Ozzie?” Kenzie asked.

“Sure. Do you have any pictures of him? That could help.”

“Of course!” She got out her phone and showed him a picture.

“Fine. Give me a few minutes, don’t disturb me until then.” He sat down and pictured the man in his mind. *Universe, I call out to you. Where can I find Kenzie’s friend who I have just seen in a picture?*

The universe was feeling honored to be asked, and provided him a clear address, making Lysanias’ eyes pop open. “Can we get to Unwin Ave?”

“Wait, that can’t be right,” Bo said, sharing a confused look with Kenzie.

“Yeah, what are you trying to pull?” she agreed.

“It’s where he is. I got a clear answer, are we going or not?”

“Hold your horses there, bucko,” Kenzie stalled him, grabbing her phone back. She typed something into it and held it back up for him to see. “You’re saying we have to go there? That’s by the docks, Ozzie was taken underground!”

“Oh, fantastic, you’ve got a mapping system like with the shadowhunters!? We can go there directly. Hang on.” He grabbed both ladies and concentrated on being *in* the picture, and *shifted*. The three found themselves just outside the shipyard, and both ladies freaked out a bit and started wildly looking around. “What, I thought we were in a hurry?” he asked.

“How many powers do you *have*?” Bo asked. “That’s fire control, healing, yanking information out of thin air, and now just wishing yourself places?”

He snorted. “Believe me, I have plenty more. Now, if I was Ozzie, where would I be?” He glanced around.

“You don’t know?” Kenzie asked.

“I would have to ask the universe for a more precise location, I only got the general address before. Still, this place can’t be that big, right? I bet the force can guide me, and I’ll sense them when I get close enough. Come on.” The three let themselves in and wandered through the maze of large metal shipping containers, following Lysanias. He, in turn, was following his senses and before long they stood in front of a container. “This is the one,” he announced. “There’s a lot of spirit energy coming from in this one. More than just one person would account for.”

“Others were taken,” Kenzie informed them. “So it makes sense. Help me get this open.”

The two girls unlocked the doors and yanked them open, spilling light into the container and illuminating a whole group of people that looked fairly out of it, and one of them was “Ozzie!”

Chapter 2

Learning

When: No time has passed

Where: Shipyard

Ozzie and the other victims spilled out of the container, some having to be helped to rise to their feet. All looked out of it, squinting at the sudden light but seeming relieved to be out.

“What’s wrong with them?” Kenzie demanded.

Looking them over, Lysanias agreed they didn’t look so hot. Many had dried blood around their eyes and nose, and none seemed all that chipper. *Which you would think they would be, having just been rescued from a cargo container.*

“Hey, you found me,” Ozzie managed. “Where are we?”

“Can you tell what’s wrong?” Bo asked, looking at him.

He nodded grimly and stepped close to one. “Both their spiritual energy and life energy are being disrupted somehow,” he decided. “Like they were being drained. That doesn’t account for the, uh,” he pointed to her face.

“They aren’t sick, are they?” Kenzie asked, worried.

“I wouldn’t be able to tell that,” he admitted. “Not without another ten minutes, anyway.”

“I’m calling Dyson,” Bo announced, taking a step back. “They should all stay here. If it is some kind of disease, we can’t risk it getting out of here. I’ll tell him to bring ambulances and medical personnel.”

“He’s a cop,” Kenzie explained. “Come on Ozzie, don’t force yourself.” She took him under her arm and lowered him to the ground. “Help will be here soon.”

Lysanias expected some kind of protest, that they wanted to leave as soon as possible, but everyone seemed too out of it to care. He didn’t have to detain anyone, as even moving the few meters out of the container seemed to sap them, and they sat down again near the open door.

If it was a disease, it’s awfully fast acting. Wasn’t he just taken?

“He’s on his way,” Bo announced, putting her phone back. “You said their energy was being drained?”

He nodded. “Something is being done to them, but I don’t see how. Unless it can happen over a distance those here longest should have recovered by now, right?”

“When I drain energy this doesn’t happen,” she mused. “And people recover fairly quickly. I don’t understand this.”

“Might as well try a few things,” Lysanias muttered. He pulled his wand out of the holster and held it up to the woman. “End Incantation,” he cast, doing the precise wand movement required. Nothing happened. “It’s not magical,” he decided, putting it away again. *What else might help? Hey, if it’s life energy maybe my barrier can cut off the flow?* He was about to stomp his foot and create a ring where he figured the barrier might be able to reach, to make sure everyone was inside. But then he stopped. *Why rip up the pavement here? I’ll just have to put it back. I can use something I haven’t used very much, but should be able to handle something like this- light bending.* He bent down and concentrated, making a faint ribbon of light in a circle several meters across. *Yeah, they’re all inside it. Let’s see what this does.* He concentrated, and the familiar green energy barrier sprang up around everyone.

“Whoa, nice,” Ozzie praised, looking up. “How did you do that, man?”

“Uh, you really shouldn’t do that sort of thing out in the open,” Bo cautioned. “We try to keep a low profile, you know?”

“No, I don’t, because you didn’t tell me until just now. It’s fine, they’re not paying attention.”

It was true, most still had their eyes closed or looked like they were fighting to stay awake. Which of course meant that it wasn’t working. Lysanias looked at the barrier’s edge carefully, he felt something, but he wasn’t sure what.

“Shoot.”

“What?” asked Bo.

"Things can get out of this barrier, it's one way. That means this connection can get out. I've maybe disrupted it a little, but I'll never cut it off with this. It might protect someone against whoever did this, but as it's already going..." He dropped the barrier.

"They aren't in any danger, are they?" Kenzie asked, holding Ozzie up.

"No immediate danger, I don't think. There's a lot of people here and their energy is all messed up, so it's hard to tell individually. But I don't think anyone is in danger of dying in the next few minutes."

"That's a relief."

"Still, I'd rather see them free of it." Lysanias grabbed the hubPad out of his pocket and started paging through it. "There must be something..." he muttered. A moment later he stopped. "Hey, how about that? There's a technique to sever a mystical connection between two people. An advanced form of banishing, if what I read here is correct. Interesting."

"Can you do it?" Bo asked.

"It describes the technique, but really without someone to show me how it was done at least a few times, I would hesitate to attempt it. If I screwed it up their situation might worsen for all I know. After all, we're talking about an ability from another world, so who knows how it might react to whatever is being done to them? Slinging fire around or healing a bone is pretty much the same anywhere, this is something different."

"I guess."

Not much time passed before the area was swarming with officers, taking statements and helping the emergency personnel load the furthest gone onto stretchers to wheel them out of the shipyard. One in particular kept glaring at Bo.

"What's her problem?" Bo asked the man that had gone directly to her in all this. He had a beard, curly hair, and seemed fairly strong. Also unless Lysanias missed his guess, he was "fae" as was the woman, their spirit energy didn't seem human.

"I have no idea," he admitted. "Maybe she made that face too often growing up and it froze like that."

She playfully smacked him. "Be serious."

"I am serious. You think she would be happy, we've only been on the case ten minutes and you've handed us all the missing people. How did you find them, anyway?"

"I didn't," she admitted. "He did." She pointed to Lysanias.

"So how do you know Bo?" he asked, coming over and sticking his hand out. "I'm Dyson."

"Lysanias, nice to meet you," he replied, shaking it. "We met just recently, actually. I sort of walked in on her and Lauren, quite embarrassing actually."

"Lauren?" He turned his head to look over at her. "You're back together with Lauren?"

"So not the time for this," Bo decided. "We need to figure out who is doing this and stop them."

"I suppose. All the victims said something about a man in a suit. With long arms, I don't suppose you've seen anyone like that around here?"

Lysanias smacked his forehead. "I'm such an idiot!" he exclaimed. "I have too many abilities for my own good."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Just a second." He went over to the container and closed his eyes, reaching into the object's past. Luckily for him the man had come and gone fairly recently, so he clearly saw the guy in the business suit leading the latest group of victims into the container and shutting it behind them. They seemed to simply go as he directed, and yes, his arms were stretched out comically before him. "Got it," he announced. "Now how do I... of course!" He used light bending again, putting an image of the man in the air before them.

"That can't be right," Dyson told them. "That's the mayor's assistant, Robert Hamlin. Also, how are you doing that?" He passed his hand through it.

"That's who I saw walking these people into this container. And I'm using light bending, if you must know."

"I don't know what that means."

"Never mind that," Bo told him. "Is it possible he's a fae?"

"Who, Robert? I guess," he admitted. "He could be masking his scent, I can smell fae you know."

"Oh, I know."

"So let's go kick his fae behind," Kenzie told them, walking up. "I want my Ozzie back!"

"It's not that simple, Kenzie," Dyson told her. "I'll need more than some guy I don't know announcing he's an idiot, touching the container, and then putting Robert's image in the air."

"For all we know, he's the one doing all this," drawled the woman, coming over.

"You are going to actually do some police work!" Dyson exclaimed. "I was beginning to wonder. *Partner.*"

"She's your new partner?" Bo and the woman looked each other up and down like two cats meeting for the first time.

"That's right. I'm Tamzin. So you're the famous unaligned succubus? Strange, I thought you'd be... curvier."

Unaligned?

"It's my day off," she replied sarcastically. "Can we focus here?"

"And she has a work ethic, what a shock!"

"Ladies, please," Dyson stepped between them. "Bo is right. Who are you, how did you do that, and what evidence do you have that the mayor's assistant is the cause of all this?"

"It's a rather long story, just trust that while I'm around, you may see me do anything from turning rocks into gold to sprouting wings to fly. As for proof-

"Yeah right," Tamsin scoffed.

"Oh, now you've gone and done it." Lysanias looked around and grabbed a small pebble off the ground, concentrating on turning it into gold. He held his closed fist out and she put her hand out.

"Sure, impress me," she demanded.

He dropped the gold into her hand.

She stared at it. She brought it closer to her eye. She hefted it. She looked at the others. Back at the gold. She scored it with her fingernail. "It's pure gold," she breathed.

"I call dibs on being his new best friend!" Kenzie announced, hand in the air.

"It's really gold."

"Now that she's distracted..." Lysanias said with a shake of his head. "I can't offer any proof you accept without you accepting me, first. No physical evidence, anyway. Though..." He thought a moment. "If I put him in a contain ward, or shoved him through the shield, I bet that would cut off his connection to these people. It can't work across dimensions, that would be ludicrous."

"Ludicrous!" Kenzie agreed, laughing as if he had told a funny joke. "You're right!"

"Too far, reel it back," Bo told her.

"Oh, too much?"

"Little bit."

"Anyway, I could also lure him into a warded area, where powers don't work. That would turn him normal and cut the connection. Plus, if I wasn't there to see when he stepped into the room you could ask when they got better, and if the time matches up, you'll know that was it, and it wasn't me."

"You can turn people's powers off?"

"Indirectly, like I said." He pulled a ward out of his pocket. "This is a ward. Activated they can do any number of things. This one can cut off powers."

"I guess that would be easy enough to prove, once it was set up. Once I was satisfied it worked we can get him there, he's always hanging around the station for one reason or another anyway. Then we'll see."

"So let's do this!" Kenzie demanded.

Kenzie insisted on coming with them, so Bo said she would stick around and make sure nothing else happened at the shipyard. Tamzin glared at her but could think of no way to get her to the station, so the four piled into the squad car and headed off. Soon enough Lysanias was placing wards inside one of the interrogation rooms, pushing them slightly into

the walls as there wasn't really much to hide them behind. Once activated the two fae agreed they couldn't use their powers while in the room, and the pair went to another room to wait.

"So how can you teach me to do anything I've seen you doing?" Kenzie asked. "I mean it's not that I'm jealous that just about everyone I know has some weird power and will probably live forever, I'm just making conversation."

"Actually," he began, "there is one way you can get powers. Some time ago, back on my world, I shoved a crystal into the back of a friend of mine. He became unseen, meaning normal people couldn't see him, only people with magic."

"That could be somewhat useful, and a major hassle," Kenzie decided.

"It would be random anyway, you wouldn't necessarily get that ability. I wonder if there's some way to guarantee what powers you got? Maybe Inari could tell?" He got out the hubPad again and looked up "chaos crystal" just in case, not really expecting anything. He was surprised to find an entry on making spell lenses, seemingly put in by Inari herself.

Sure, she could have been given one of these, and this has to do with magic. Why wouldn't she know how to make one?

"What did you find?"

"A way for you to potentially use magic. Says here someone would have to teach you any spells you would later use, it doesn't give you the ability to read magical writings. Interesting." *Grind down one of those crystals into a powder, melt the powder into a glass, shape the glass into a lens, and the lens can allow a person without the spark to use magic. Seems like a lot of work to go through, and there are some other expensive ingredients I would need to get, but it could be done.*

"I could go for that."

"Still," he looked up at her. "I see people carrying guns around, so this reality obviously has them."

"Yeah, so?"

"So you're feeling left behind because your friends have powers? What have you done that this reality offers to even the playing field? Martial arts? Does your reality have those?"

"Sure."

"Did you start training to be a master? Or actually train with a sword, which I admit is probably more rare but experts must exist. Or a bow and arrow if you didn't want to go for the whole gun thing?"

"Er, no."

"I see. So in other words you did nothing, but want me to come along and just give you powers."

"Yes, I, uh, see what you mean." She looked down, feeling embarrassed. "I suppose it doesn't matter if you can turn into a wolf or have super strength if someone puts a bullet into you from across the room."

"Exactly."

"Forget I asked."

"No can do, Miss Kenzie, the question has been asked, and we've got the time. There might be something I can do for you right now."

"Really?" She looked up, hope now replacing embarrassment in her.

"Just let me check real quick," he told her, looking back to the hubPad. He flipped through to the "psychic power" section and started reading about what he could do with his skill to go into other people's minds. "Now isn't that interesting..." he exclaimed.

"What?"

"I was thinking I could just give you my skill in chi-blocking, using my ability to enter your mind, but in actuality I could probably unlock your own psychic potential that way."

"You could turn me psychic? Sweet! Let's do it!"

"Hold on now, there's a bunch of warnings here. It's essentially overloading your brain, so it can cause nerve damage, blindness, psychological trauma like night terrors or tremors of the limbs-

"How about we avoid that, for now?"

“Fair enough. But I can still give you my skill at chi-blocking, at least I think I can. It doesn’t say anything about giving another person a skill I have, but this also says the only real limit to what I can do is limited only by what I think is possible while our two minds are joined. So it should work.”

“No side effects?”

He shook his head. “I can’t see how. I’m just giving you my memories of learning chi-blocking with my special eyes. That knowledge was absorbed into me, so I’m just passing it on to you.”

“What’s chi-blocking anyway?”

“A special form of martial arts that was developed to fight people with powers. It paralyzes and disrupts a persons’ ability to use energy to activate any special powers, by hitting them precisely. It doesn’t take a lot of strength, so really anyone can do it.”

“Sign me up!”

“Okay, give me your hands.”

Kenzie did, and Lysanias, added by the sword at his side, easily broke through her mental barriers and fed her the knowledge she would need to use chi-blocking. He also noticed a dark “tinge” to her mind, and felt a slight pain and itchiness in her one arm. He broke it off and the two blinked against the light, as they had been linked for some time.

“Have you been having nightmares lately?” he asked.

“I guess I have,” she admitted. “I didn’t really think about it until now. You really have been lots of places, haven’t you?”

I suppose that was a two way street, wasn’t it? “I guess. I’m still fairly new as a wanderer though, I have a long way to go yet.”

“Anyway, I think it worked!” she announced brightly, getting up and taking a stance. She rapidly punched the air. “Yi-Ha!”

Lysanias nodded. “Yes, that looks good. Let me see your arm though.”

She pulled it close, putting her other hand over it. “It’s nothing!”

“It’s not nothing. I didn’t want to pry so I stayed away from those thoughts but it’s getting worse, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” she admitted, dropping her arms. “But you can’t tell Bo what I did!”

“What happened?”

Kenzie explained how the group went to go see some fae dealer in “miracles” that could help solve a problem you had but at the cost of something equally precious. She had helped out, but took Dyson’s love for Bo in exchange. She went to go get it back, getting some kind of fluid spilled on her arm after bumping into a shelf, which had started to itch and burn as though it was a slow acting acid of some kind. Rolling up her sleeve she showed the angry red patch of skin. “It’s all I can do to not scratch it,” she admitted. “If it gets any worse I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“I’m not sure what I can do about it, this might be a bit more tricky than Vex’s problem,” he mused. “If I could analyze what was in that vial, maybe, but if it was spilled...”

“It was a collection of the things the Norn had taken. I guess she can store them that way. I mean his love was sort of a wispy bottle of light, but this was a thick green stuff that was kept apart from the collection. It started to burn the floor and smoke when it was smashed open. I’m sure she’s cleaned it up by now, even if I agreed to go back there again it’s probably gone.”

“Great. Well, one thing at a time. I promised Vex I would help him when I got back, which shouldn’t take long. Without understanding what was in that jar, just healing it probably won’t be enough.”

Their conversation was cut off as Dyson came into the room, and she hastily tugged her sleeve down.

He looked questioningly at her but then turned his attention to Lysanias. “It worked,” he announced. “I wanted them to call me the instant they got better, and it came in thirty seconds after he walked into that room. He seemed in an awfully big hurry to get out of there, too. He’s been here the whole time?” he asked Kenzie.

"The whole time," she agreed. "We didn't even stand up from the chairs until just a minute ago."

He sighed. "So now we have a new problem. What do we do with him? If the mayor's assistant just up and vanishes, it's a problem. But we can't have a rouge fae out there abducting people to feed on."

"What exactly *is* he doing?" Lysanias asked. "Can't you counter it in some way?"

"Unless we knew what sort of fae he was, and of course he's not just going to up and tell us that."

"Can you just go into his mind?" Kenzie asked.

"That could just be the answer," he replied. "Let's go pay this guy a little visit."

Chapter 3

Betrayal

When: A moment later

Where: Police Station

The very angry looking man in a suit that Lysanias had seen in his vision of the past jumped up from the chair as he and Dyson entered the room. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded. "You can't hold me here like this! I'll have your badge—"

"Sit down, *Robert*," Dyson commanded. "If that even is your name. We know you were feeding on the people in the cargo container, they can all identify you."

He paled and sat down heavily. "How?" he croaked. "How did you find them so fast?"

"Cell phones," Dyson answered quickly. "You happened to take the friend of a friend of mine, and we were able to use his cell signal to track him down."

"What? Blasted things, why did humans have to go around inventing all sorts of junk like that? The old days were way better." His eyes narrowed. "But I took all their phones away, I'm not stupid, I didn't want them calling even in that state!"

"Well, you missed one," he said with a shrug. "One of those Palm palm units, it's only the size of a credit card. Apparently he's a little bit paranoid, kept it in an inner pocket. Good thing for us he did."

"Great, betrayed by *Palm* of all companies. That's like being stabbed in the back by a zombie. What happens now?"

Lysanias, meanwhile, was rather impressed. He had accepted the story, which left him out of it, and got the man to confess at the same time. *Dyson certainly is a quick thinker, coming up with something like that. What does he need me for?*

But that question was answered at once. "My friend here is going to find out exactly how you feed so we can safely imprison you. Then the Ash will decide your punishment."

"You can't keep me *here*," he sneered. "What are you going to charge me with in the human world?"

Dyson put up a finger and then lowered it. "That's a good point."

"HA! I'll just be going then!"

Dyson shoved him back in the chair. "I'll think of something."

"With no proof? The mayor won't like that." He leaned back and crossed his arms smugly.

Dyson actually growled, deep in his throat. "I guess we'll have to walk him out of here," he decided. "Then I guess you'll just have to 'disappear' while you're not in our custody. Can you make him safe?"

"I suppose," Lysanias told him with a grimace. *He did break their laws, and is trying to use his position to get out of it. I discovered the proof myself, this is justice.* Heading over to the wall he peeled a section back and looked at the ward that was under there. *I powered one down temporarily, let's see if I can remember how to do it. A group of them shouldn't be any harder.* He focused on it, dimming the "light" the ward gave off, and nodded, satisfied. "Come on then." He raised a hand.

"What, what are you going to do?" Robert demanded, shrinking back.

"Probably less than you deserve." With that he touched the man's forehead and dove into his brain. A moment later he had the answers he needed, and drew upon the force.

You will go with Dyson, giving him no trouble and not using your powers, he commanded with man. He felt the orders go deep into the guy's brain, as that's currently where he was anyway.

I will go with him.

Lysanias came out of it. "He'll give you no trouble, at least for a few minutes. His power is rather odd, he thinks it works as a kind of music, but yet he knows anyone that can't see won't be mesmerized. So it must be some kind of hypnotic light people can't consciously perceive, and their brain interprets it the best it can. As music. I say, once you're away from here and what I did starts to wear off, blindfold him. If he can't see his target, he probably can't activate his power. That's how he feeds. Mesmerizing people with his 'music' and

controlling their actions.” *How he draws energy from that I have no idea, but that’s what is in his brain.*

“Fair enough,” Dyson allowed. “You’ll come with me?”

“I’ll come with you, make no trouble, and not use my powers,” Robert agreed.

Dyson quirked an eyebrow but gestured for him to stand. “Then let’s go.”

“I will come with you, make no trouble, and not use my powers,” Robert repeated, standing.

“May have put a little too much into that,” Lysanias decided.

“Fine with me,” Dyson told him. “And thanks. Look, where will you be later, I’d like to get your whole story.”

“Probably with Bo, or at least somewhere she recommends I stay. I don’t know of anywhere else around here to stay yet.”

He didn’t look pleased, but he nodded. “Fine, I can call her. Come on.”

“I will come with you-”

“Quietly!” he barked. Robert shut up.

Tamzin and Kenzie were waiting outside the room, and Tamzin trailed after Dyson who didn’t say a word to her as he went past.

“Hey, *partner*, what’s going on?” she demanded.

Somehow I get the feeling those two are not really partners by choice.

“Great, there goes our ride,” Kenzie complained as both went out of sight. “He brought us here, remember? Now what are we supposed to do?”

“Let’s head back to Bo’s place,” Lysanias decided. “Hopefully Vex is still around, I can help him, then take a look at that arm of yours.”

“How are we supposed to get there?”

“We can head back the same way we got to the shipyard.” Looking around he pulled his stèle out and grabbed some paper out of the garbage. Making an *ignore me* ward for himself and Kenzie he handed it to her and activated it. *Might as well not waste a permanent one. I only need one for a second.*

“What’s this doing?”

“Making you invisible.”

“What, seriously?” She was going to start waving her hands around but Lysanias knew that would probably break it. So he simply touched her and thought about where they could go that probably wouldn’t have anyone or anything in the way so they didn’t kill themselves. *The bedroom. There was a clear space and I doubt she’s even back yet. And I can picture the scene, oh yes, I can picture it.* He shifted.

After explaining the ward was simply so everyone would ignore them as they vanished, she couldn’t keep it because it would only last a few minutes, Lysanias turned his attentions to Vex.

“I’ll need to get you into some water,” he told the man.

“Why?”

“Because unlike the type of healing I did for you before, this type is activated through water. It helps to carry the energy into you, allowing your body to heal itself.”

“But Vex is mostly hot air, not water,” Kenzie called from the couch.

“Oh, very funny,” he yelled back. “It least I’m not a hot mess like some.”

“You think I’m hot? Vex, I didn’t know you cared!”

“Perhaps we could just get on with it?” Lysanias suggested.

“Bathroom is this way,” Vex told him.

“Ugh, Vex in our tub?” Kenzie said, making a face. “Make sure you scrub it out afterwards.”

Lysanias, somewhat low on energy by that time, simply grabbed some from Vex while explaining what was going to happen. Then, laying in the water, he used bending to energize Vex’s chakras while explaining what he remembered reading about what can block them. *If it even works the same way here...* Some combination of his water bending and Vex’s own soul

searching for anything that might be blocking him did the trick. Some time later Lysanias felt Vex's energy was flowing freely again, and Vex dried off and got dressed. He was able to use his powers and left with a curt thank you.

"Don't let him get to you," Kenzie told him. "Not really a team player, is our Vex."

By that time it was getting fairly late, Lysanias having arrived mid-afternoon that day. Bo got home, saying everyone at the site had recovered, and went up to bed with Lauren. Kenzie, after making sure Ozzie was all right thanked Lysanias far more gratefully than Vex had, and sent him home.

"Now for that arm," he told her, and she nodded sullenly.

"Come on, we can use my bedroom. I doubt either Lauren or Bo will be down any time soon, but I don't want them walking in on us." Once there she stripped off her shirt and Lysanias spent some time feeling her out.

"Here's what I can tell you about it," he finally announced. "It's not magical, nor does it have a spiritual energy of its own. It isn't from another world, nor is it alive in any sense of the word. It isn't part of the four elements, because I can't bend it. It doesn't have thoughts, a mind to read, and the only aura I can see is yours. Looking into the past I can see how it happened, it really does seem to just be that spilled liquid and not something the woman did to you directly, and trying to glimpse the future shows you will get rid of it and be healed somehow. It isn't something physical I can analyze with my abilities with alchemy, so I can't turn it into something harmless. I could maybe burn your arm to a crisp and then heal it."

"As a last resort!" she squeaked.

"Sorry, should have led with that. Yes, as a last resort. But I can't guarantee that will get rid of it either, as it's more a supernatural effect than an actual acid. If it really is the concentrated power of a fae, somehow made liquid by the power of this Norn person, she may be the only one who can work with it."

"Great. But at least you say I'll be rid of it at some point."

"True. I just don't see how I can immediately help. Sorry."

"It's all right," she said, trying not to sound too disappointed. "I mean if you hadn't shown up I would have had to deal with it on my own. So I'm no worse off, right?"

"That's one way to look at it. Here." He touched her, turning the skin covering her arm from the angry red it was currently back to a more normal color with alchemical healing. "At least we can make it work for it, hold it off by healing you once a day."

She flexed her arm. "It feels a little better. Not as itchy. Thanks."

"Sure thing. Do you mind if I stay here tonight? I don't know anywhere else around here I might stay."

"You're cute and everything, and I appreciate your helping save Ozzie, but maybe the couch?" She pointed.

"I didn't mean here in your bed! I meant the apartment!" *Or whatever you call this place.*

"Sure you didn't. Go on now. Out!"

"It's fine, you don't have to believe me." He went.

That night, in the dream, Lysanias was surrounded by people. They seemed angry, but their faces were somewhat frozen. A cowering girl dressed in black stood with him, pleading with the figures that she meant no harm. Suddenly, a carelessly waved torch knocked a man over, setting him ablaze, and in only seconds the rest of the mob caught fire as well. The blazing figures continued crowding the girl, who finally noticed Lysanias standing there.

"Help me!" she pleaded.

An image of the town as seen through the flaming people seared itself into Lysanias' memory. The dream ended.

Lysanias awoke with a start. All was quiet in the apartment, the sun hadn't begun to rise yet. Throwing back a blanket Lysanias hastily put his shoes on and looked around. *She's in danger, somehow I feel I have only moments.* He remembered a pad of paper on the counter and started for it, but then stopped. *They couldn't read what I wrote anyway. Besides,*

I should be back before too long, right? He closed his eyes and pictured the dream. *If it's real, if she's in danger there, I can go there. If it was just a dream, well, that's the end of it.*
He shifted.

He found himself standing in a quiet village, quaint looking buildings all in row down a cobblestone road, to his left a fountain bubbled cheerfully. There seemed to be shops with lit windows, he saw some dresses being displayed, but no cars or evidence of cars like stoplights. *Apart from the electric lamps, this could be a village back home. Where am I? Who still lives in houses like this, when the place I arrived they live in huge towers made of metal and glass? I suppose I could be out in the country somewhere. Something isn't right here.* It took him only a moment to decide what it was. Though the place was lit up, and it certainly seemed this could be a regular old village somewhere, he didn't feel any spirit energy coming from the houses. He felt ley lines, true enough, but the energy people gave off was different. *Was this place abandoned? But why show me this place in a dream? Is a girl really in danger here?*

He had a split second of warning from the force, rather than his sense of living things, that someone was behind him. He whirled. Walking towards him, feeling barely contained excitement, was the girl. She had short black hair, the largest blue eyes he had ever seen, black lipstick, and a dark dress with striped leggings. *That's the girl I saw in the dream!*

"Hi!" she said with a huge smile.

Wow, she's really pretty. I mean not like Amy, she's not supernaturally beautiful, but... wait a second. "You have fangs!" he blurted. *Oh, very smooth Lysanias. Now she'll probably hate you forever.*

"Oh, yeah," she admitted, coloring a little. "I'm, well I'm sort of a... you know... a monster? Specifically a vampire?"

"You- really? Are you considered fae, or is being a vampire it's own thing?"

"A fae?" She made a face like she was eating something sour. "They're even worse than humans, according to my father. Oh!" Her color deepened and she put her hands over her mouth. "Are you a fae? I mean no offense. Rabies, you must think I'm an idiot now. Maybe I should just go."

"Please don't!" He raised a hand. "None taken, I'm not strictly speaking a human, it's fine." *Oh sure, try to keep the pretty girl here, Lysanias. 'We could start over?'* *At least I still have the sunlight orb on the sword covered from the last world. I had half a mind that if I ever met some vampires I would be all set, but so far all of them I've met have been nice. What gives? Is the soulless blood sucking monster vampire story just flat out untrue everywhere?*

"You're a monster?"

He laughed. "Some might probably say that, but I'm actually closer to angelic stock than either monster or human."

"Now you're just putting me on! Angels don't exist!"

"It's true. Look, are you okay? I dreamed of you not five minutes ago in this town, surrounded by strange looking people who were on fire. Now maybe that was just dream imagery but you actually did show up. This town seems deserted though so I don't know what it meant. Do you need help with something? Anything?" *She's a vampire, what kind of help can you give her? By the Allfather, if vampires are real here, what else does this world hold?*

"You dreamed of me?" she asked shyly, looking down. "You're not teasing me, are you?"

"I'm not! I can dream the future, honest."

"Really?" He nodded. "My dreams have been odd of late," she admitted. "My dad's too, I think. He's been acting a little strange lately. He says it's nothing but he's troubled, I just can't figure out what it's about. He said this was a human village though, so I was right, there should be more people out and about even at this hour?" She looked around.

"I arrived just a moment before you did. I have no idea."

"My father clearly said not two minutes ago there was a human village past the graveyard. This *must* be it. Could something have happened?"

She actually seems genuinely upset something could have happened here. For a vampire she seems to be a pretty caring person. "Unfortunately, yes, something could have.

We'll have to have a look around. But stay close to me, you're in danger as long as you stay here."

"I can take care of myself, but thanks," she said with a grin, showing those pointy teeth again. "You're sweet. If you are human you're nothing like my father claimed."

Oh God, I'm blushing now, I must be. "Thanks," he mumbled, then whirled. "Wait, there is someone here!" He pointed. "There's an energy signature, it must be human, coming this way from there."

She stepped up beside him. "We can ask them what happened!"

"That was my thought as well, they're coming this way." They waited, and the source of energy got closer and closer. But something still wasn't right. Lysanias was looking around.

"What is it?"

"I still have the strangest feeling we're being watched." *I can't sense her energy, because she's an undead? If there was another vampire or some other undead creature around here, I'd be unable to feel them.*

"Hmmm, I wonder." She scowled. "He wouldn't. Would he?"

"Would what?" he asked, but at that moment the figure stumbled between the houses. He was a fairly goofy looking guy with red hair and a large backpack on his pack, and he cheerfully waved at the two and started towards them. As he passed the nearest house figures burst from inside, making him jump. They carried torches and pitchforks, and more started stumbling from the other houses as if a signal of some kind had been given.

"What in the world?" managed the man. He was whipping his head back and forth, as if looking for a way out, but he was blocked.

"That's what happened to the people here," reasoned Lysanias. "That's why I didn't feel any life. They've all been turned into *zombies!* Protect that guy!" He spirit stepped over to the man and slammed a foot down on the ground. Rock burst from the impact, forming a high wall between the zombies and the man. "Come on," he shouted to the man, "down the street seems clear, we'll make a run for it that way."

"Okay, I guess?" the man said. "Say, did you do that?" He put a palm up the wall of stone.

"Not the time! Vampire girl, uh, I don't know your name, come on!" The two men started started for the clearing opposite the fountain but the girl was standing there with her arms crossed.

"It's fine," she called to them. Then angrily, "Come on out, dad."

"Dad?" both men repeated, screeching to a halt. She walked over to them, looking around.

"It all adds up. This supposed 'human' town in the middle of nowhere. No one being outside. This guy showing up, him saying he felt we were being watched. Where are you dad? I know you're here somewhere."

The people on the other side of the street stopped, looking around as if uncertain what to do next. A bat flew out of the night and in a flash of light, a man was standing there. "My little blood sausage, let me explain," he began.

"Whoa, did that just happen?" whispered the man.

Lysanias ignored him. The girl felt furious, as restrained now from simply tearing her father a new one as she had been trying to contain her excitement before. He wasn't sure if this situation would escalate, and he wanted to be ready. *A battle between vampires? Who knows what form that would even take? I have to protect this guy if this little "father daughter chat" gets out of hand.*

"Oh, it better be good," she said, planting her hands on her hips. "Talk."

"I did it all for you," he began. "To keep you safe. You don't know what the humans are like."

"And you do? You haven't left the hotel in over a hundred years! Am I the same as I was a hundred years ago?"

"That's different, try to understand. I can't lose you like I lost your mother, I just can't. I had to do everything I could to make you stay."

"Everything, which I guess includes building an entire *fake* town, putting *fake* humans in it, letting me go but following me, and then, what? Scaring me back to the hotel for another

hundred years before I decided to try again? This entire night was just one big lie, told by you!”

He rubbed the back of his head. “It sounds silly when you just come out and say it like that.”

“You *admit* it! You gave me your *word*, dad. Said I could leave, but you never really meant it, did you? You’ve been lying to me for *years*. You know how much I was looking forward to my hundred and eighteenth, when I could finally go see what life is like outside the hotel?”

“I know, I know, you think it didn’t break my heart to lie to you? But I’d do it again, to keep you safe, like I promised your mother. It would have worked too, if it hadn’t been for these meddling kids. What are you two doing here, anyway?”

The four looked at each other, the girl seeing the other man for the first time, and their eyes locked. Something passed between them, and from the man’s backpack a song started to play.

“Love is kinda crazy with a spooky little girl like you.”

Chapter 4

Compromise

When: A second later

Where: The fake human village

“Oh, sorry,” said the man, getting his phone out of his backpack after tearing his eyes away from the girl. “My hydration alarm. Can’t be too careful, especially when hiking. You can get dehydrated pretty quick.” He turned the alarm off, silencing the song, then chugged from a water bottle hanging on the side of his pack.

“That was a... human love song?” the girl asked.

“Never mind that! Answer my question!” the man demanded, baring his own fangs.

“What are you people doing here? You’ve ruined everything!”

The other two looked at each other and the man gestured, so Lysanias figured he should go first.

“As I told your daughter, I’m here because maybe ten minutes ago now I dreamed she was surrounded by fire. I felt she was in danger, teleported here, and expected to be defending her. Little did I know it was all an act by an overprotective father.”

“You dreamed it?” he asked, clearly not buying this explanation.

“Yes. How are your dreams lately, while we’re on the subject?”

“Never mind that, what about you?” he asked the man.

“Oh, me? I heard about this crazy haunted woods out here from the locals, I just had to check it out!”

“Oh rabies, a *thrill seeker*,” moaned the man. “My hotel has been compromised by a thrill seeker.”

“Hotel?” the man asked.

The other brightened. “Of course, you’re not there yet, are you? We can simply go, and you’ll never find it. Come my little jalapeno pepper, we shall fly back to the hotel and continue our talk. These people need not be part of it. We will still be safe.”

“Oh no,” she replied, clearly putting her foot down. “We’re not leaving this spot until I’m satisfied. This man *dreamed* of me, dad. That I was in danger, and he came to save me. That’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever heard. And the human... I want to learn more about him! He seems nice, not like those fake human zombies you had around here.”

“We’re sorry,” one zombie managed.

“We were simply following your father’s orders,” said another.

“Even though we disagreed in the strongest possible terms and reminded him many times of the many ways it could go wrong while constructing the town under protest,” added another.

“What are they saying?” asked the man. “I didn’t get a word of that. Are they speaking Romanian?”

They even do seem sorry. Odd. Is she liked even by... wait a minute, zombies exist, it just hit me. What’s next?

“They’re both human,” the vampire protested.

“Not exactly,” Lysanias told him. “There’s a lot going on you should be made aware of.”

“Wait, turning into a bat, those fangs, talking like you’re not human... you *are* vampires, aren’t you? And those guys, they really are zombies?”

“They’re part of the hotel staff,” he admitted. “I am Dracula, and this is my daughter, Mavis.” The zombies, pulling off their masks, waved over at them. The man waved back.

“Far out, monsters are real!”

“As well as succubus, mesmers, and who knows what other kind of fae,” Lysanias told him. “Just letting you know, so you don’t freak out later. I’m Lysanias by the way. Classify me as a progenitor, I’m a proto-human.”

“Succubus?” Dracula scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Don’t get me started on fae, those guys are the worst!”

“Why?” he asked, genuinely curious.

"They think just because they can walk around the human world without anyone freaking out, they're so much better than us. They can pass for human but they aren't, any more than I am. Oh, it makes me mad!"

"Uh, okay," said the man. "Anyway, I'm Jonathan, nice to meet you all."

"It's really nice to meet you," Mavis gushed.

"Yes, yes, very nice," drawled Dracula. "We're all friends now, isn't that great? Let's get going, Mavis."

"You go. At the very least you gave me a half hour, remember? You may have had this in mind when you originally said when I was one eighteen I could go outside, but that's your screwup. I got your word then, and again now. I want to at least talk to these people, hear about life outside the hotel. You owe me that much!" She glared at him, daring him to contradict her.

"I don't know..." Dracula looked the two over.

If I may sir, he sent into Dracula's mind, you push her over this, and you may just lose her forever. I don't think it was simply chance our meeting like this. You have my word, no harm will come to her so long as I live. Let her have the reins for now, apologize for tricking her, and salvage this situation the best you can. That is the only path I see to earning her trust back.

His eyes narrowed. "Very interesting," he allowed, then turned his attention back to his daughter. "You're right, my spider monkey. It was wrong of me to try and trick you, but more importantly to not trust you. I'm sorry. Perhaps it is time for *both* of us to see how the world fares again, given how long we've shut ourselves away. This town needs to be packed up anyway, you can have until then to talk with your new friends. I would invite them to the hotel for your birthday party, but you can imagine the panic that would result in knowing a human was among us, can't you? After that we can take some short trips into the human world together, to get you used to their customs and such. There's no rush, after all, is there? Once you've learned how to blend in and function in human society, *then* we can talk about solo trips. How does that sound?"

"You really mean it this time?"

He nodded. "I just don't want to lose my little girl, that's all."

"Oh dad," she said, shaking her head. Lysanias felt her anger draining away. "You won't lose me, no matter what. I promise." She hugged him, and Lysanias did a quiet clap to show his appreciation of such a masterful performance.

"Is it just vampires at the hotel?" Jonathan asked.

"Oh no," Mavis answered, all smiles again as she whirled away from her father.

"There's all sorts of monsters that stay there. A mummy, a werewolf family with the cutest kids you've ever seen, a guy who is invisible- wait a second!" She spun on her father, who had started issuing orders to his zombie workers. "We can just disguise them as monsters!"

"I don't know," Dracula told her. "That sounds pretty risky. A disguise can fall off."

"But what if it couldn't?" Lysanias asked, eyebrow raised. All his shirts (he didn't actually have that many) had slits in them by this point, so using his alchemy skills on himself he brought out his wings, snapping them open and then down, up fully extended, and then snapping them shut again.

"You really are an angel!" Mavis breathed, hands over her mouth.

"Well, I can play one convincingly, anyway," he admitted. "It's pretty easy, you just believe in your heart of hearts you're better than everybody else. The rest comes naturally from there."

"Can... can I?" she reached out a hand.

"Go ahead." He held out a wing and she touched it.

"It's real. Feel this dad, he really has wings!"

"Wait, angels exist too?" Jonathan said.

"I would assume so," Lysanias told him. "I haven't petitioned any to check since I got to this world, but according to my sources they're pretty much everywhere."

"This is a lot to take in," he admitted.

I haven't even gotten to the part where I'm from a whole separate reality.

"I suppose that's okay for him," Dracula admitted. "He might cause a stir, but if he can convince people he really is an angel from Heaven, come down to see how life is going down here, they'll accept him. But what about him?" He pointed to Johnathan.

"I can fix him up too," Lysanias said. "Not as an angel, but something of near human capacity. I assume most monsters have powers or abilities humans don't?" Both vampires nodded. "So we need to pick something he can either fake, or won't get asked to demonstrate."

"Why can't I be an angel?" he asked. "I'd love a set of wings!"

"Because you can't answer questions about Heaven. I've actually seen it, through open portals anyway. Plus angels used to walk around where I lived, they taught us stuff. I know how they talk, how they act. You can't fake that."

"I get it. So what else can you do?"

"I can make you look like pretty much anything, I just need a description."

"You mean I could have, like, a bat's wings and a lion's tail and two heads and-"

"Wait a minute," said Dracula. "Hold everything. What about..." he lowered his voice dramatically. "*A unicorn.*"

"Oh, that would be wonderful!" Mavis gushed, clapping her hands together. "Can you do a unicorn?"

"I could," he admitted. "I've only seen a black one, though. Her name was Nyasa, she hung out with a bunch of fairies."

"Even better," admitted Dracula. "Two special guests for Mavis' birthday. An angel and a black unicorn. You have to act surprised when you see them, though!"

"I can do that."

"I guess they can come, then. It's not until tomorrow though, we're pretty booked up but I'm sure I can find something for you."

"Oh, thank you daddy, thank you!" She went back to hugging her father.

"I can't make his horn work though," he explained. "If someone asks for healing he'll have to refuse."

"Many creatures like me are undead anyway, a unicorn's healing would actually hurt us," Dracula told them. "So it should be fine."

"Guess we have a plan."

"Very well. Stay here and talk, then follow the zombies to the hotel. I'll come and greet you when you arrive, you'll probably cause a stir."

"Good enough," Lysanias told him. "I can't stay the whole time, I'll need to head back to see Bo. She's the succubus I mentioned I knew earlier. They'll freak out if I just vanish, it was the middle of the night after all."

"Fine, fine, whatever," he told him. "That's all details, it'll work out. I have to get back, make sure there isn't some crisis at the hotel. Remember your promise." He turned into a bat and flew towards away.

"Promise?" Mavis asked, confused. "Did you promise him something?"

"I must have," Lysanias told her. "Why don't we sit down and you can ask us some questions about the human world."

So she did, which was mostly about Johnathan and the places he had seen. He felt both were drawn to each other, which Lysanias wasn't sure Dracula would be thrilled about, but finally with the town mostly packed Lysanias said he should get into "costume" and practice walking on all fours. Mavis was quite interested in watching him get undressed, and Lysanias shoved his pack into his pocket.

"And you can get it back, right?" he asked, clearly feeling the loss of it.

"Yes, it's not a problem. Now hold still." Lysanias concentrated, and Johnathan shrank into the form of the unicorn he had seen.

"How do I look?" he asked, lifting a hoof.

"You're beautiful," she answered.

Lysanias looked him over with a more critical eye. "It's not bad, but I think with a few alterations and such, he could be better. Why don't you head back? We'll follow in a bit, but you'll have to be there when your father announces us."

"Right," she said. "Oh, this is going to be so great! You are coming to the party, right?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world!" Johnathan gushed.

"We'll be there," Lysanias added. "On my honor."

"You better. If this is some further trick by my father... See you soon!" She shrunk into bat form and flew off.

If it was, he would no doubt lose you forever. "Well my new friend, we both have some work to do," he told Johnathan. "You practice while I make a few things. You should be able to prance, gallop, walk, and strut by the time we get there. Clip-Clop! Oh, and a word of warning- this change will last *exactly* nine hours. Eight hours from now you must remember to find me, alone, and I can refresh it. Got it?"

He did.

Lysanias made two small gifts for Mavis, a golden bat on a chain with dark inlay, (chosen by Johnathan) and a gold spider looking ornament that would fit over her hand, worn like a ring and bracelet combo. Along with boxes for them, a bow, and some silver jewelry he attached to Johathan's horn. (He thought silver would match her complexion better, but seemed to recall vampires having some trouble with that metal, so made it gold just to be safe) He made himself a toga like garment, and was glad there was plenty of plant life around here so he could find some ley lines and recharge himself. The sash of course went nicely with it, as did the circlet, so he was able to leave them. He pulled out the shield and let the sword be seen as well, given both were works of art worthy of Heaven and angels were pretty much all warriors anyway. (When they weren't praising the Allfather, of course.) *If there's any trouble, I'll be ready. But looking ready for trouble might just help avoid it.*

The pair followed the zombies through a secret passageway built into the hillside that dropped down, and came into sight of the hotel.

"More like castle," Johnathan managed, awed and craning his neck to try and see the top.

"Agreed. Oh, there's a problem."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure you can fit through a revolving door."

"That is a problem."

"Still, it's clear glass, hold on." He touched Johathan's flank and *shifted*, not needing to go more than a few meters. They appeared inside in a burst of air, and conversations stopped. Both looked around, the lobby was richly decorated and monsters of every shape and size milled about getting checked in and reuniting with those old friends they had not seen in too long. They were standing on a long red carpet, and long tentacles hung from open doorways and cracks in the wall. There was a roaring fire, suits of armor standing at attention, and red curtains hung everywhere. Banners and shields adorned the walls, and uniformed figures, both male and female, saw to the convenience of guests.

"Quite the place, wouldn't you say Nyasa?" Lysanias asked.

"You could say that again."

Skeletons, zombies, wolf pups, fish men, three meter tall hairy beasts, this really is monster central. Could the avatar be hiding here? Monsters typically have fairly bad weaknesses though, like silver. Would the avatar leave themselves so vulnerable? Plus these guys all seem to be getting along. Would the avatar bother? Still, if I want help here defeating Jason, this might be the place to look. Still, better look like we belong here. "Come along, let's head to the front desk." *Dracula should be along but just standing there is going to incite comment.*

The two made their way forward, and a path opened up and then closed again around them. "Two to check in," he told the zombie at the front desk. "I believe Dracula is expecting us? We will need to speak to him when he has a moment, please inform him Mavis' special birthday party guests have arrived."

"Of course," said the zombie. "If you would like to have a seat in the waiting area, I'll ring him immediately. He should be down shortly."

"Thank you my good man. Come along, Nyasa."

The two headed for the waiting area, where thick cushioned red chairs waited by the fire. Lysanias couldn't exactly sit on one, with his wings, so he simply hopped up and perched on the back of one while Johnathan sat down next to him.

"You understood him?" he asked.

"Who, the zombie? Didn't you?"

"It was just urg argg blurg sounds to me."

"The language I speak is called Enochian, it allows me to understand all language as it predates language as it's understood today," he explained. "Remind me, I'll make you a ward later so you can understand everyone around here if you need it."

"Actually, it's weird how Dracula speaks perfect English, shouldn't he speak Romanian? Maybe it'll be fine."

"Is that where we are?"

"You didn't know where we were?"

Suddenly a horde of wolf pups ran up to them, panting with excitement. They all started jabbering at once, and Lysanias smiled down at them. They were all asking different questions, about his wings, the sword, the unicorn, his shield, who he was, that sort of thing. "Hello everyone," he greeted. "Aren't you all precious!"

"Kids, kids, leave the, uh, man alone," said an upright wolf, trailed by a very pregnant female wolf wearing a yellow dress. Oddly he was wearing a nice shirt and tie, though Lysanias had to wonder what was the point of that. "Sorry about them, they can be real handful sometime."

He raised his arms and cast his gaze skyward. "A child is a joy forever, a gift from the Allfather to gladden hearts. You have truly been blessed. But most blessed is the Allfather, from which all life began. Praise be to Him." *That sounded like what an angel would say.*

"Uh, yeah," he agreed. "He's been very generous to us."

"Ah, Wayne, you've met our two special guests!" Dracula came out of nowhere and put his arms around the two wolf people. "Lysanias, this is Wanda and Wayne, and of course family. Come, let's announce why you're here and get everything back to normal, shall we?" Lysanias hopped down, making sure of course he was not going to step on any wolf pups, and Dracula led him to the middle of the lobby. He clapped his hands for silence, but of course there was that already. "Everyone, I want you to meet two very special guests I've managed to secure for Mavis' birthday. This is Lysanias, and, uh..."

"Nyasa," Johnathan told them.

"Yes, that's right, so silly of me to have forgotten. Nyasa. I think it's pretty clear what they are, so there's no need to make a fuss."

"Please, we're just here to wish Mavis a happy birthday, and pay our respects to the daughter of Dracula," Lysanias said to them, raising a hand. "We insist that you treat us as you would anyone else."

"Yes, yes, that's right, ah, here she is now."

Mavis was making her way down the stairs, and smiled, looking the two over. She fairly flew down the rest of them, zipping over to the pair. "Dad, did you actually invite a *unicorn* to my birthday party?"

Not bad, Mavis. I'd believe it.

"Only the best for you, my daughter."

"And you're an... angel?"

"I'm not a demon!" Lysanias answered with a laugh. *I didn't actually say I was an angel, so I'll let them think what they want. So any real angels shouldn't get in a tizzy, right?*

"Best. Birthday. Ever!"

Chapter 5

Demonstrations

When: Half an hour later

Where: Hotel Transylvania

After the initial shock wore off and Dracula introduced everyone, they went back to doing their own thing with only occasional glances over at the pair. This suited Lysanias just fine, who was rather out of his element being the center of attention from so many people. He didn't know their reputations or stories, but found them all to be quite polite, civilized beings that just happened to look inhuman.

Hopefully they put down any blunders I made to my being an angel and not really interacting with 'mortals' on a regular basis. Or just different customs between Heaven and here. No one seems to have any problem with us. They easily could have, I mean would a real angel of any rank simply walk among monsters in this way? Maybe in this reality they would.

Luckily, Johnathan seemed more than willing to pick up the slack, prancing around and acting excited to meet everyone, asking questions and generally being silly. Mavis stuck right to his side, laughing and petting his ears.

Someone made a brand new friend. Ah well, you're leaving anyway, it's better that she gets closer to someone from this reality. Who knows, they may have even met without me being here, Johnathan could have made his way to the castle on his own.

Dracula had a series of "activities" planned and even the presence of an angel wasn't going to stop that, so the game of bingo went on as planned. They were in what appeared to be a library, with hundreds of old, dusty books on shelves lining the walls. Lysanias was far more interested in them, taking one down at random, flipping through it, putting it back, and going for another.

Everest would like this place. Both my old friends would be right at home around here.

The wife of Frankenstein's monster, Eunice, called bingo but then the goblin next to her ate the board when she wasn't looking.

"Oh, you're in for it now!" she announced. She got up and stomped over to Lysanias, who she glared down at.

"I demand justice!" she demanded, in a demanding voice.

"I will not take the life of that creature," Lysanias told her.

"What?" She seemed shocked. "No, no, that's not what I mean! Lord have mercy who is the monster here, I ask you? I just want to know if there's some way you can tell that I'm telling the truth? Can't unicorns sense motive or something?"

"Isn't that a dungeons and dragons thing?" Johnathan asked, clopping over to them.

"What's dungeons and dragons?"

"It's like a board game without the board. Everyone comes up with a character, like magic user or barbarian, and one person directs the adventure you all go on. You can fight dragons, find treasure, save towns from evil wizards, all with just a pencil and some dice."

"That's no help!"

"I wouldn't mind trying that!" Frankenstein's monster admitted, coming up behind them. He bent down and make sure Dracula wasn't near. "Because honestly this bingo stuff is lame!"

"Maybe later," Johnathan told him.

"Anyway, unicorns sense *purity*, not truthfulness," Lysanias explained. *I think I have that right.* "Still, I think I can help. If you will accept my word as the final verdict in this matter?" He looked over to the creature calling the numbers. She nodded. "Very well." he spun, settled his wings, and walked over to where she had been sitting. "I shall look into the past, thereby verifying what Eunice says is true." He closed his eyes and concentrated. "I see that Eunice has five boards before her, each containing a grid of numbers, five by five. Before she calls bingo the board before her contains five red stamps in a line. This is the board that was eaten."

"Ah ha!" she gloated. "I win!"

"We have a winner," the caller announced.

Next up was charades, and everyone interested piled into what was essentially an auditorium with stone seating. The wooden floor gleamed in here, and Dracula called for volunteers for the first two teams.

Lysanias looked around the place, not really feeling any hint of excitement except from the lord of the castle himself. Mavis in particular was making a gagging motion behind her father so he couldn't see, while Johnathan tried to hold in laughter.

"Actually, if I may make a suggestion," Lysanias offered.

"Oh, do you want to play?" Dracula asked.

"Not exactly." *I wouldn't know how, in the first place.* "I thought it might be interesting for everyone here if I gave a small demonstration in Heavenly combat. Both unarmed and with the sword and shield." He indicated the shield, which he was still carrying. "We do seem to have the space." He indicated the room.

Instantly the monsters perked up by about a thousand percent.

"I suppose it couldn't hurt," Dracula admitted, noticing everyone leaning forward and looking expectant.

"Very well. If everyone could be seated?"

The monsters all moved to one side of the bleachers, while the multi-headed dragon thing simply stood by the door so it was out of the way. Lysanias set the sword and shield down by the edge of the room and severed the bottom of the toga, making it more a tunic. *As it would not be very angelic of me to get caught up in it and fall on my face.* He heard a whistle, and "take it all off!" but when he looked over but Mavis was looking off to the side. She mouthed something that could have been "I didn't do that!" and Jonathan was laughing again. *Hmmm, couldn't have been her I guess.* He walked to the center and every eye was on him.

"Can everyone see? Does anyone need to move?" As the larger monsters had taken the back rows everyone nodded they were fine. He noticed a dozen or more wolf pups eagerly gripping the edges of the bench, and smiled. *They are pretty cute. Especially that one in pink.* "Very well, I shall begin." He ritually bowed, and took his stance.

What followed was a mixture of inhumanly good martial arts interspersed with fire bending ("Heavenly Flame of Justice!"), spirit stepping, throwing lightning, ("Bolt from the Heavens!") and even jumps made with air bending and his wings. He incorporated his wings into it, slashing out with them, then put his hands out and willed the sword and shield into them. He wasn't as good with the sword, the "sniper eye" contained within only really activating when he went to hit something, but the electric blue arc it made as he slashed and thrust with it more than made up for that. (He did have some of his own skill in the blade, after all) He twirled it and struck out both with the sword and shield against imaginary opponents, finally stopping in a pose with his wings out, breathing heavily.

The room erupted in cheers and applause, and he lowered the sword, bowing again.

"If anyone would like to come see the sword and shield close up, they're welcome to," he invited, the shield coming off his arm and slowly revolving in the air. *I'll have to devote part of my attention to it, but not for long.*

Naturally all the pups bounded forward, so he knelt down and held it out for them, explaining about the various parts including the magicite that made it nearly alive in its own right. *If only I know exactly what waking it up did.* Several other monsters showed interest in the shield, commenting on the craftsmanship and hefting the blade for themselves.

"Does anyone have any questions?" he asked, as the pups started to loose interest.

"Do monsters go to Heaven?" asked one, looking up at him.

“What an interesting question!” he exclaimed. *I haven't the vaguest idea. Or do I? These cuties have spirit energy, why wouldn't they have souls to go along with it?* “Have a seat, let's talk about it.”

They sat in a circle and the other monsters leaned forward again, clearly interested in the answer as well. Lysanias sat as well, propping his wings up as comfortably as possible.

“First, we have to define what ‘monster’ means in this case,” he began. “Because really that's a broad category, just like fae. Look around. Who can tell me how many different types of monsters they can see?” He gestured to the bleachers.

The kids looked around and some put their hands up.

“Go ahead,” he told one.

“Skeletons!”

“Aw!” the rest said, putting their hands down.

Lysanias laughed. “Yes, that's one, what else?”

The kids slowly came up with other types.

“Gargoyles!”

“Vampires!”

“Witches!”

“Fishmen!”

“Zombies!”

“Those are kinds of monsters though,” he said gently. “Not types. Let's see here, gargoyles is a type, then undead, constructs that have been given life, then monsters who are born. Undead are the skeletons, vampires, zombies, that guy with the pumpkin for a head, the mummies, things like that. Gargoyles are just living stone. Constructs are given a semblance of life though, uh, various means.” *I have no idea how, come to think of it. How do they walk around and talk?* “Everything else is alive, born of a mother and father, like you guys.”

“Mavis was born!” one piped up.

“Well, that's right, good catch, it's a little more complicated than that but in general, we'll say those are the types. The undead can take many forms, so that makes it a little harder. The general rule is, anything born gets a soul. Take... oh, that zombie there. What was it originally?”

“A human?” one guessed.

“Right, exactly. At one time that zombie was a human, and had a human soul. But the human died, and a zombie was created from the body. So the soul of that human is now running around Heaven, while the body that's been left runs around here still.” He paused. “Well, shuffles, not runs.” They laughed, and the zombie looked sad. “Same with the mummy and constructs such as Eunice and her husband. Their parts came from humans with souls, but they don't have an arm soul and a leg soul and what have you. Those souls are already gone. Instead they're essentially immortal, as long as they can find parts.” The kids nodded, they got it. “Now Mavis was *born* a vampire, so does she have a soul? Probably.” *She must have energy, to put into her transformations and any other vampire powers she has. I can't feel it because it's an energy of the undead, but it exists. And she was born, doesn't that imply a soul? I'm not telling this group of kids she's screwed if she ever dies, they'd be heartbroken. Better to just assume she does.* “She's gone from being a baby vampire to the young lady vampire she is today. As she experiences things and her soul grows, her body grew too, just as yours will. Contrast that to someone *turned* into a vampire. They die, thus losing their soul, so again it would go to heaven while the body moved around without it down here. They don't age anymore, because their soul is gone. You see? It's the same as gargoyles, who are just living stone. I do have that right, don't I?” He looked to the crowd and the stone ones were nodding. “Again, they won't ‘die’ as such because stone can always be repaired. They aren't

mortal creatures like humans. As long as any creature with a soul, be it 'monster' like you, human, fae, as long as they live a good life, they may enter the kingdom of Heaven should their body no longer sustain that soul. Does that answer your question?"

Naturally the pups had more questions about Heaven, and what other angels looked like, and how old he was, and how he had gotten there, and how he had met the unicorn, and what other powers he had, until finally their parents came over. He answered what he could, he knew what angels looked like from looking them over on the hubPad, in case he wanted to petition any. The angels he had seen were all the "lower class" as the freakier looking ones with multiple heads and such didn't typically walk around on Earth. But he recalled enough about the others to at least describe them. Anything else he made up. Like he said he met "Nyasa" just recently, when they both got invited to the party, (which was true) but that it "was a secret" how Dracula had contacted them. (which was just silly)

"Time to eat kids, you've pestered the angel long enough," Wayne told them.

"Food!" they all cried, and the whole pack made for the door.

"Hey, thanks for keeping them entertained like that," he told him.

"Yes, they really seem to like you," Wanda told him. "Maybe we can get them to behave a little better, now that they've really seen an angel."

"Ha! Good luck with that," Wayne scoffed. "Anyway, better get going before they tear the food tables to shreds."

"See you later," Lysanias told them.

He caught Dracula's eye and hung back until everyone was gone. Johnathan of course had walked out with Mavis. *Crap, I needed to see him too.*

"What's up?" Dracula asked.

"How long has it been since we got here?"

"Ah, about three hours? Four if you count the time in the village."

"Great, no wonder I feel exhausted." *Plus all that jumping around I just did.* "I only got four hours sleep before I shifted here. Can you go tell Johnathan I need to see him? With everyone at dinner I'll refresh his transformation now, giving him another nine hours, head back to see Bo so she doesn't freak out, get some more sleep, and be back tomorrow for the party. Oh, here." He handed over the two gifts from his pocket. "The larger one is from me, the smaller is from... well, me, but Johnathan. I didn't know if you had a table for them or something."

"I'll take care of it. When did you even have time to get her a gift? Much less *two* gifts!" He stared at them.

"I made them. You'll see. Is there a place I can leave the backpack?"

"You did say you were coming back though, right? I've never seen Mavis this animated and happy, if you missed her party..."

"That's my intent. But in my line of work, let's just say it's better to be prepared."

"Okay. If you don't I'll have to get rid of Johnathan in nine hours, that's before the party. Mavis would be devastated, I see that now. Tell you what, there's a storage closet right inside the lobby. Ask at the desk if you can't find it. I'll tell Johnathan to meet you there, you can leave his backpack there and do what you need to do."

"Sounds good, thanks. I think I can find my way."

"Sure. And Lysanias?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. Somehow I have the feeling this all could have gone very differently, but Mavis actually seems to be having fun. She loved your demonstration, and she's been all

smiles since Johnathan arrived. Maybe I was a little hard on humans... but I do have reason to be.”

Lysanias shook his head. “You have the right of it. *People* are typically fine, upstanding members of society who just want to live their lives and see that everyone gets the same chance to live their lives like they want. *Humanity* on the other hand is quite a different story.”

“I think I see what you mean. I’ll keep it in mind. See you tomorrow.”

“See you then!”

Lysanias made his way back to the front of the hotel, finding the storage room and popping the backpack inside. He heard a knock and opened the door.

“Can’t really turn knobs in this form,” he complained. “What’s up, Mavis was going to feed me because I can’t hold a fork.”

He snorted. “I’ll get you back to her in a second. Let me refresh your transformation, I need to get back and get some sleep.”

“So another nine hours you said, right?”

“That’s right.” *Though, I have a ward to keep a summoned creature around, why isn’t there a ward that can keep any sort of time limited power going? Answer, because I haven’t made it yet.* He got out the hubPad and made a quick note. “There, another thing to work on. One second.” He cracked the door, made sure no one was going to comically open it just as he turned the unicorn back to a human, and then did just that. A moment later he was a unicorn again. “Tell them I was recalled to Heaven suddenly, but I’ll be back for the party.”

“You got it, dude. Nice moves back there, by the way. What kind of style was that? I’m a yellow belt myself, but I’ve never seen anybody move like that outside of movies.”

“It’s called chi-blocking. I can put it into your brain later, if you’re interested.”

“Dude! That would be sweet, I’ll take you up on that for sure!”

“Remind me then. Have fun with Mavis.” *I will not be jealous. I will not be jealous!*

“I will, see you!”

Lysanias watched him go, then closed the door again. Picturing the corner of the room he had come from he *shifted*.

The clocks all read about 6:00 AM there, and the sun was just coming up, so he recorded a short message on the hubPad to let him sleep, set it up on the counter so they could just hit “play” and restored his non-winged form. Now able to fit on the couch again he threw himself down and relaxed to get some more sleep.

No one was home when he finally woke up, but they had recorded a message for him, which he watched. Tamzin and Dyson had stopped by early that morning, it seemed they wanted his full story and it seemed Tamzin had something in mind for him to do. They also left their cell numbers and a temporary cell phone he could use, a small “burner” phone with actual buttons. He figured he could work that out, and called Dyson.

“I’m awake,” he told the man. “If you want to meet somewhere, or just come here? I’ve seen the station, I could teleport there.”

“Teleport? That’s one of the things I need to talk to you about. Just stay there, we’ll come to you.”

“Got it.”

Lysanias didn’t need to eat but didn’t want to get rusty with the little magic he knew, so he made a small pile of food with his food making spell and had some breakfast. He also put a reminder into the hubPad to go to bed early, because he found it could tell him where it had been and the time difference between the two places.

So if I go to bed a few hours earlier here tonight, I can get back there in time for the party. Nice.

There was a knock at the door and Lysanias let the two in. They greeted him and he offered them something to eat or drink, and they declined. He pulled a chair out from the table and sat down as they sat on the couch.

“So Bo tells me you were out last night recruiting? Is that what your message said?”

“That’s right. I dreamed of a girl in trouble, went there, and found some surprises. I’ve got my eye on a few people that might be able to help me fight Jason when he shows up. Oh, how are your dreams, by the way?”

“Dreams? A little odder than usual, why?”

“My dreams have been really strange of late,” Tamzin admitted.

Lysanias rubbed his chin as the two looked at each other. *Seems they didn’t expect that answer, but now they’re thinking about it.* “I was afraid of that. Expect that to get worse as Jason breaks free of whatever was done to him. It’s happening all over. Bo, Mavis, others I spoke to in the castle.”

“Castle?”

He waved that off. “The important point is, his thing is dreams and he’s going to be mad once he breaks out. Probably the worst he can do now is influence dreams, so that’s what he’s doing.”

“Who breaks out? Who is this Jason you’re talking about?” Dyson asked.

“The reason I’m here, it’s a long story, I’m glad to tell it again.” *Lie.* “I’ll need your help, personally and maybe the police as a whole before this is through.”

“We need your help,” Tamzin told him.

“We do?” Dyson asked, surprised.

“Yes, we do. I saw you turn a rock into gold, and Kenzie said you shoved martial arts into her brain? She whacked me and I was paralyzed, which has never happened before.” Lysanias tried not to smirk, imagining the look on her face. Dyson didn’t bother to hide his.

“It was pretty funny.”

I didn’t do that! “I did do that, actually.”

“So you can go into people’s brains?”

“Why? Do you want chi-blocking? Seems I’m offering it to everybody I come across around here...”

“I want you to go into somebody’s brain. A man in a coma, to help me prove that Bo was the one who made him that way!”

Chapter 6

Proving

When: No time has passed

Where: Bo's apartment

"Now hold on just a second here!" Dyson growled. "What's this about Bo?"

"A few days ago a dark fae was found unconscious in an alley," Tamzin told him. "It has the hallmarks of a succubus feed, and a woman matching Bo's description was seen in the area. He hasn't woken up yet, so of course he can't finger his attacker." She paused. "Sorry, could have phrased that better. You know what I mean."

"Get to the point."

"The point is, if Lysanias here can go into his brain, maybe he can pull an image of this guy's attacker even if he is in a coma. Then I can properly take Bo to the Morrhigan for sentencing."

"You're not taking Bo anywhere!"

"I am if she's guilty of this crime! We have these things called 'laws' that-

"Both of you, please," Lysanias cut in, standing. "Let's get the facts first, and work from there. I don't have to go into his mind, I can just look into his past and see who attacked him. If Bo, we'll get her back here and I can go into *her* mind, and see what she remembers about the attack."

"Why bother?" Tamzin asked. "Seeing her attack the guy would be proof enough, right?"

"Not exactly," he hedged. "Think about it. Do shape shifting fae exist? I know mesmers exist, that can make people do things, maybe she was under some sort of external control."

Tamzin shook her head. "Only Vex is left, and his arm was broken at the time of the attack."

"He's the only one left? Interesting. Well, okay," Lysanias was taken aback but Dyson nodded, so that was true. "Still, there could be other ways of controlling someone."

"True, that's true," Dyson hastily agreed. "We can't rule anything out at this point."

"I hope you're not going to let your feelings for this woman interfere in police business, *partner*."

"I hope your eagerness to prove Bo culpable isn't going to interfere with your impartial and by the book investigation. *Partner*."

Her mouth quirked to the side, but she gave a quick nod. "Agreed."

"Agreed."

"Lead the way," Lysanias told them.

The drive to the hospital was uneventful, Lysanias looking out the window at the buildings and the people of the city as they went past. "Where are we, anyway?" he asked.

"Toronto, Canada," Dyson told him. "You like it?"

"It's quite technologically advanced. Many on my world would kill for the amount of metal in just one of those buildings, and you've got hundreds of them. It still blows my mind."

"Where do you come from, anyway? We never did get to that."

"Oh, let me start at the beginning," Lysanias told them the whole story, and both looked equally worried at the news he had brought.

"We'll head to see Trick after the hospital," Dyson decided. "If anyone knows about this Jason character and his banishment, it'll be him."

"Isn't that where Bo was heading anyway?" Tamzin asked. "Something about a weaver?"

"It is," he reluctantly admitted. "I guess she's been having bad dreams, but now we might know why."

"Great, saves me tracking her down." She paused. "If the evidence points to her, I mean."

"Of course."

The two flashed their badges and were let into the room. There lay a comatose man in a bed, breathing shallowly and hooked up to various machines.

"All this won't interfere with what you're doing, will it?" Dyson asked. "Don't electronics mess with magic, or something?"

"What? Not that I've experienced. Besides, this isn't magic, it's just a way I can use spirit energy to accomplish a task. Step back please, your energy will interfere in my feeling him out initially."

They stepped back against the wall and he put his hand on the man's head. A moment later he scowled, glaring at the man. He looked around and there was a partially open door, so he went to the sink and gathered some water. Holding it up he walked back into the room. "Can you take that sheet off him? Thank you." They did, and he had them yank the upper part of his gown off too. Shoving the ball of water against his chest he let his energy flow, and didn't like the results. A moment later he sent the ball of water into the sink again. "This man's spiritual energy conduits have been badly damaged," he announced, "so it's no wonder he's in a coma. With time I can accelerate his healing, I don't dare try to wake him up until then. I'll look into his past now, see what he experienced before being brought here." Once again he touched the man, closing his eyes.

The man's past become clear to him. It was several days ago, somewhat late in the day. He had been walking down an alley and Bo, wearing a short skirt and dark jacket, was coming from the other way. They were going to pass each other when suddenly Bo turned, grabbed the man from behind, and slammed him up against the wall nearby. He started to protest, but she spun him around, put her mouth near his, and a blue stream of energy left his body, flowing into her. She then unceremoniously dumped the body or at least shoved him, because he could no longer stand. She then walked off, leaving him laying there on some bags of garbage.

He came out of it and looked over at Dyson. "I'm sorry, but at least on a superficial level, this man was attacked by Bo or a lookalike." *Rather brutally too, not to put too fine a point on it.*

"Yes!" Tamzin pumped her fist in the air. "I knew it!"

"But that doesn't make any sense. She's been feeding cleanly for two years!" he protested. "I mean who refuses a succubus? She wouldn't have to do something like this. She could have just asked, he would fallen all over himself to make a 'donation.' It doesn't add up!"

"You agreed to have Lysanias check her over," Tamzin reminded them. "You're not going back on your word now, are you?"

"No," he replied grumpily. "But I'm telling you, it doesn't make sense."

"Come on, we'll get over to Trick's place before she leaves and we have to track her down again."

"What about him?" Dyson asked.

"What? Oh, him. Oh." She paused. "How long will healing him take?"

"I don't know exactly. Maybe two hours of water therapy a day for a few days? I don't want to try rushing the healing either, I've never really used water bending like this before. Healing physical injury, yes, but not spiritual." *It's just a good thing his chakras seem intact, if they had been damaged, just like with Korra, it would have been over for this guy. No more of whatever his power is, more than likely. But as it seems to have been just an overload, pulling more spirit energy than this guy was used to using at once, it's more like healing an internal burn than anything. It was more the shock of the attack and the energy loss that knocked him out. He would heal on his own, I think, but I'm sure I can help speed that up tremendously.*

"I do hate to leave him, but if he can't just wake the guy up, he's going to be comatose a few days away. A couple of hours one way or the other won't hurt. What are you doing?"

"Hmm? Oh, making a note on my pad to ask Inani about a technique to be in two places at once. Might come in handy." He put the hubPad back.

"Yes, I suppose it would. Can we go?"

"Fine," Dyson allowed. "Let's get this over with."

They dressed and covered him again, then rode down to a nice looking bar. Dyson had called ahead, Bo was still there, more troubled than ever due to what the “weaver” had (or in this case hadn’t) told her. Lysanias could feel the worry and tension flowing off him, equal in measure to the excitement felt by Tamzin. Both hardly waited until the car was parked before jumping out and running inside.

“Er, I can’t open the door from this- never mind!” *I’m talking to myself.* He teleported, standing next to the car, and shaking his head before following them. *Thanks you two, real nice just leaving me back there. Wait, this is the alley I saw.* Lysanias looked around, and it was. There were the innumerable dumpsters, there were the many back doors, there were the bags of garbage. *Why would she attack someone in such a high traffic area? If this is the way into Trick’s bar, she must have known he would be found in moments. He’s right, it doesn’t add up.* There was a sign above one door about sanctuary for fae, so he pushed it open and went inside. Looking around there were Bo, Tamzin, and Dyson, arguing already. *Rather than, I don’t know, having a civil discourse like the adults of hundreds of years they must be. Seems like a nice place though, pool tables, TVs, very modern.*

“Good morning, stranger,” said a very short man behind the bar. “Are you with- oh.” He did a double take looking at Lysanias’ eyes.

“I’m with them, yes. Tell me, how do you keep regular humans from stumbling in here?” He indicated the door. “After all, it’s clearly marked outside.”

“There’s a glamour, only fae can see it,” he explained. “Or humans that we’ve physically shown the entrance to.”

“What about monsters?”

“Monsters?” he scoffed. “You mean like vampires? They haven’t been heard from in a hundred years. I don’t know where they went, and I don’t care. Good riddance to them.”

Lysanias’ eyes narrowed. “Yeah, well, they don’t think very highly of you guys either. Dracula doesn’t, at least. So there’s that.”

He started to say something, but was interrupted by Tamzin.

“What are you standing around for,” she yelled at him. “Get over here and get inside Bo!” She paused. “Could have phrased that better. You know what I mean.”

Lysanias shook his head and walked over to Bo, followed by the man coming around the bar.

“What’s this all about?” he demanded. “What are you doing with my granddaughter?”

“If we find what I think we’re about to find inside her head,” Tamzin said, dripping fake sweetness, “we’re about to take a dangerous creature off the streets.”

“Who? Bo?”

“No, Bob, the tiny man that lives in her pocket. Of course, Bo! The man she sucked off was found not twenty meters from here.” She paused. “Could have phrased that better. You know what I mean!”

“Wait, Bo did that?” He looked to her, and she looked and felt confused and worried.

“That’s what we’re here to prove,” Dyson said gently. “Lysanias has already verified someone that looked like Bo attacked the man. If her history checks out as well...” He trailed off, obviously out of sorts.

“I haven’t attacked anyone!” she protested.

“Then you won’t mind him taking a peek?” Tamzin asked.

“Go ahead, I have nothing to hide,” she insisted after only a second’s of hesitation.

Lysanias held out a hand, and she took it. Closing his eyes he looked into her past, narrowing in on the time just days ago.

He saw the attack from her perspective now, and opened his eyes again. “I’m sorry, Dyson.”

“Victory!” shouted Tamzin. She suddenly had handcuffs in her hands and reached for Bo. “You have the right to remain silent-”

“Now just a minute,” both the man and Dyson protested.

“Oh, are we going back on our word already?” Tamzin asked. “Partner?”

"Fine, I accept for the moment that she *physically* did this, but like Lysanias said, there's any number of ways to control someone into doing something. Did she *mentally* do this? We need to know."

"And then it's going to be 'did she emotionally do this?' 'Did she spiritually do this?' Where does it stop, Dyson?"

"Uh, with the reason she did it, of course. We need to get to the bottom of this, not just lock her up."

"I'm taking her to the Morrigan, not locking her up. This is a dark fae matter. These," she jingled the cuffs, "are just so she doesn't get any funny ideas."

"At least let him go inside her mind," he protested. "That will tell us if she was being controlled or not."

"Fine." She crossed her arms over her chest. "But be quick about it."

"You bucking for a pay raise or something?" Dyson asked sourly. "What's the rush?"

"Maybe I like to get things done, ever think of that?"

"Er, can someone please tell me what's going on?" asked the man.

"Oh, Trick, this is Lysanias. Lysanias, this is Trick. He's the one you should ask about Jason."

"After you're done with Bo."

"Wait, you're not talking about Jason, Jason, are you? That immortal that made trouble for us a thousand years ago?"

Lysanias nodded. "I'm afraid I am."

"He's not breaking free, is he?" His voice pitched higher.

"I'm afraid he is."

"Like, soon?" he asked, pitched even higher.

"I'm afraid that's the case."

"We're all dead," he announced. "Maybe I will take that weaver up on her offer. Get in one last night of passion before I die."

"You're not going to die," Lysanias assured him. "Not if I can help it. Let me take care of this, and then we can deal with Jason."

"That's like having your barn on fire, and saying you can take care of it after you milk the cows! Who cares about that?! Jason is breaking free! Do you know what that means?"

"In general, yes."

"Then you have no idea what that means."

"I know all about his dream powers, if that's what you're saying."

"Dreams- Bo!" He looked over at her. "That would explain your nightmares, maybe. Oh, I should have seen it before this," he moaned. "Others have been complaining but I didn't put the two together. And I asked a weaver to come, that's like having your barn on fire and thinking, well, this one bucket I have should be adequate for the job."

"What's with all the barn burning?" Tamzin asked. "You, uh, you like setting things on fire there, Trick?"

"Oh, that's right, we have nukes now," Trick agreed. "It's like the timer on a bomb hitting zero and thinking, oh, at least I have this piece of lead foil, it's sure to protect me!"

"It... can't be... that bad, can it?" she asked, sounding a little nervous.

"Were you around a thousand years ago?"

"Yeah," she answered slowly.

"Don't you remember the battles that killed thousands of us, united the fae, and led to the truce? Wait, a valkyrie named Tamzin, why does that sound familiar to me?"

"Never mind that. Wait, *that* guy was Jason?" she gasped. He nodded. "Oh, yeah, well..." She thought a moment. "I can't think about that," she decided. "I have my job to do. Get this over with." She grabbed Bo's hand and offered it to Lysanias.

Lysanias looked to Trick, who nodded. "She's like a dog with a bone. Take care of this and we can talk."

"Very well. With your permission, of course?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Go into your mind, take a look around, and see what I can find out about why you may have attacked that man."

"But I don't remember attacking anybody!"

"Yet you did. This will help your case, believe me." *If you were being controlled, that is. If you weren't, well, it'll look pretty bad for you.*

"Whatever you have to do, I guess."

Lysanias nodded and put a hand on her head, closing his eyes. As with the other times he had done this, the sword enhancing his resolve allowed him to slip past her mental barriers fairly easily and he was in. As she was a succubus her mind ran in fairly erotic directions, but he controlled himself/herself and focused on the last few days.

I've been feeling run down.

Not sleeping well, due to nightmares. That isn't helping my situation any.

Lauren may not be enough.

I feel like I've betrayed Dyson, but he did lose his love for me.

Don't think about what Kenzie did to get- don't think about it. (Drat, this two way street is annoying...)

Why are my eyes flashing blue more often?

I love Lauren and Dyson equally. Don't I?

What happened that night on my way back from the bar?

He replayed her memory from that night, and while talking to Trick seemed clear enough, and getting home seemed clear enough, the middle part was very fuzzy.

I have to remember. What happened on the way home?

Fuzzy.

I will remember. I will not look away from the memory, no matter what it is. I'll figure it out.

No, Dyson will hate me! Lauren will leave me!

I will remember.

Fuzzy.

They'll lock me away! It's happening again, like when I killed that boy when I first fed!

I must remember. I will not look away.

No!

Yes!

Lysanias forced the memory again, this time not allowing either of them to look away, and something shattered.

Not fuzzy.

"No!" cried Bo, stumbling back.

"I take it you succeeded?" Tamzin asked dryly.

"I attacked that man," Bo admitted, a tear spilling down her cheek. "But I didn't remember. It wasn't me, it couldn't have been me."

Dyson looked between the two. "Bo, what happened? Talk to us."

She could only mutely shake her head.

"From what I can tell, her level of activity lately has been outstripping her ability to absorb energy from Lauren," Lysanias explained. "She doesn't want to take too much from her, after all. This, coupled with the fact she's not been getting the sleep she needs caused her to almost animalistically latch onto the first food source that presented itself. She then blocked her own memory of the event to protect her psyche. I'm sorry, Bo, but it's looking more and more like you attacked that man on your own."

"What have I done?" she managed.

And more importantly, what happens now?

Chapter 7

Sentencing

When: A few minutes later

Where: On the road again

The answer to that question was for Trick to close the bar and follow the two officers in her car, which had specially modified pedals for his shorter legs. He looked and felt grim, and Lysanias climbed into the seat next to him.

“So what can we expect from this Morrigan?” he asked as Trick started up the engine. He pulled forward, looking to make sure the way was clear.

Wonder if I should learn to drive? I could steal his skill at it, but I'd be blind for an hour afterwards. It's not unique to one reality so my adaptive skill won't help me. Ah well, at some point.

“Nothing good. But it doesn't matter, because we're all dead anyway.”

“Would you stop that? I'm here to take care of it. Look, I'm told my sword can harm him, and hopefully my own powers can counter whatever he does, at least long enough for me to get close and use it. Okay?”

“If you say so.”

“Now, tell me about the Morrigan.”

“She's the leader of the dark fae, and she's not a kind ruler. She's had it out for Bo for some time, given she never picked a side. She did attack someone, and the Morrigan isn't known for her mercy.”

Pick a side? What side? “She isn't going to kill her, is she?”

“I don't think even she would go that far.”

“I guess we'll play it by ear. So tell me about Jason.”

He sighed. “It was a thousand years ago now, when the man calling himself Jason showed up. He immediately started killing everybody. Human, fae, monsters, at a frantic pace. Of course, in those day we were much more able to fight back than the humans, who didn't have powers or modern weaponry, but nothing we did seemed to stick. He would either instantly heal or just let whatever we tried bounce off him. And laugh. Oh, he laughed. As we were able to fight back that meant we were targeted more often, and thus took heavier losses than the humans. We nearly got wiped out, it's why there are still so few of us despite our longer lifespans. Anyway, we started to get desperate after we realized nothing conventional would work.”

“What happened?”

“...I got creative,” he finally admitted. “See, even before that we had been at each other's throats. There were many factions of fae back then, not just two, and I saw an opportunity.”

“To do what?”

“End the violence for good. So in one stroke I ended Jason's threat and created the dark and light fae groups, so each person could decide where they wanted to be. With only two factions instead of multiple ones, I figured it would be more balanced and thus, more stable.”

“But what is 'light' or 'dark' fae?”

He snorted. “A sham. It's an 'us' vs 'them' mentality. Oh, a light fae will claim to be a more upstanding citizen or follow laws more closely, and a dark will say they are free spirits and look out only for themselves, but they're all still just people. The distinction is mainly in their heads.” He sighed. “It's worked, for the most part. With only two groups each 'belongs' and has someone to think they're better than, and neither side can make a move because each has hundreds of members.”

“Stalemate.”

He nodded. “The best I could hope for. Same with Jason. You see, my power is in my blood. Anything I write becomes reality.”

“Er, say that again? Did you just admit to being a god?”

“Hardly. I’ve learned that reality doesn’t like being messed with. I can’t be specific enough or foresee the consequences well enough of what I write, so it never turns out very well.”

“Sort of a ‘be careful what you wish for,’ situation?”

“Yes, exactly like that! That’s why I combined getting rid of Jason and creating the fae factions. The less I had to write the less chance there would be I would mess it up.”

“So what, you wrote it as one sentence or something?”

“I forget the exact wording but something about ‘with Jason banished from our world the clans realized they needed to come together to counter any threats like this in the future, and created the two great clans, light and dark.’”

“Tricky. Jason was then ‘banished’ without you actually specifying how, and he, what, just vanished?”

“As far as we could tell, yes. I wrote it and reality shifted to make what I wrote *be true*. But he wasn’t exactly gone, he was still too powerful for that. I had a feeling he would be back.”

“And now is the time. Well, hopefully Inari was right, and we can band together to take him out for good, this time.”

“You think it’ll work? A simple sword?”

Now it was Lysanias’ turn to laugh. “This sword is anything but simple, believe me. If what the blacksmith said is true, it can physically cut anything, even the air it passes through. That’s why it gets all blue and glowing when I swing it. Plus it has other powers I’m not even exactly sure of. I believe in her, it would have been pointless her sending me here if the sword wouldn’t perform.” *So I wake it up, make with the stabbing, and hope for the best. The sword’s power is that of change, maybe he’ll be changed by it in some way. Become the opposite of his current self, and not want to follow the shadow avatar anymore? But it’s a sword. Even if he changed, he’s still stabbed. So I don’t get it, what’s the point?*

“I guess. So now you know what we went through.”

“Let’s hope it won’t take you using your powers to get another thousand years reprieve, while we think of something else to try.”

“If it would even work. He knows my ability now, a second chance might not be possible.”

The rest of the trip was taken in silence, and they pulled up to an office building and were escorted inside. They got some strange looks, two officers escorting a handcuffed woman into the elevator trailed by a short guy and a guy with a sword (he hadn’t put another ward on it) but not enough that anyone stopped them.

I guess they see enough weird stuff around here it doesn’t occasion much comment?

They took the elevator up and stepped into a lavish office where a dark haired woman sat behind a desk. She was well dressed, had various pieces of jewelry on, and smiled at the group as they entered.

“You brought me a gift,” she purred, looking Bo over. Bo herself was still looking miserable, and didn’t raise her eyes. “Whatever shall I do with it?”

“Realize it’s some kind of misunderstanding and let her go?” Trick suggested.

“Accept her apology, let Lysanias heal the man she attacked, and let her go?” Dyson suggested.

“Do whatever so I can get on with my life?” Tamsin suggested. The others looked over at her. “What? His old partner left me a mountain of stuff to do. Did you two solve *any* cases at all?”

“Yes,” he replied curtly.

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

“Now Trick I know,” the Morrigan said, standing. “But who is this?”

“This is Lysanias, he’s a friend of Bo’s,” Trick told her. “We both came to make sure she was treated fairly.”

“Why Trick, this is me you’re talking about here,” she pouted. “Am I ever anything but fair?” He just scowled at her. “Well, this is interesting,” she went on, stepping closer to Bo. She ran a finger over her chin. “You get Hecuba Prison shut down, then that very same night,

not even hours later I might add, you go and commit a crime that would land you in prison. If I were a cynical person- wait, I am a cynical person. Does this not raise a tiny bit of concern from anyone else?"

"That's a coincidence," Dyson insisted. "That place was home to illegal experiments and you know it."

"Are you insinuating something?"

"What? No, I mean, once it was shown that... you know what I mean."

"Just making sure you weren't accusing me of something, officer." She turned to Tamsin. "So, she did it then? Attacked a helpless dark fae in broad daylight?"

"All evidence points to it, yes," she replied.

It was closer to evening though, not broad daylight.

"Splendid. Bo, do you have anything to say in your defense?"

She shook her head. "I'm guilty."

"Then I sentence you to-"

"Wait a second," interrupted Dyson. "What if Lysanias can heal this guy? Wake him up? At least give him a few days to make the attempt!"

"Wake him up? What would that accomplish? It would be like robbing a bank, putting the money in the stock market and making a modest gain, selling the stock, and returning the money to the bank while keeping the profit."

"Isn't that just called a loan?" Trick asked.

"You know what I mean."

"He prefers barn on fire analogies," Lysanias told her.

"Barn on- who are you again? Go away, you're not handsome enough to be in my office for more than thirty seconds. Shoo, shoo!"

"I don't think so."

"The point remains. She can't just do something bad, then have someone fix it and escape punishment. What kind of world would that lead to?"

Trick had no answer for that.

"Of course, her sentence could be reduced, if she declared her allegiance to the dark fae." She indicated a large book on the desk. "Then it would be a matter of one dark fae attacking another rather than a dark fae being attacked by an outsider. Totally different thing."

"No, you can't goad me into that," Bo told them, snapping out of it a little. "I'd rather stay unaligned and just do my time."

"Do your time, what are you talking about, Bo?" Dyson asked her.

"I let things get out of hand," she admitted. "I should have known Lauren wasn't enough. I should have trusted her to let me... feed... elsewhere. Talked to her about this, but I didn't. I let it go too far. My judgment is impaired, and someone got hurt. I need help, Dyson. Clearly. Maybe this way I can get it."

"In prison? How are you going to feed in there?"

"I'm sure visits can be arranged," the Morrigan told them. "I wouldn't want to starve her, naturally. And a psychologist can be employed. In fact that would probably be a condition of her release, making sure someone signed off that was she wasn't a danger any more."

And slowly bring her around to aligning with you?

"So, if she's not going to sign the book..." She offered once more. Bo shook her head. "Very well. Five years imprisonment, to be started immediately. Luckily we have more than one fae prison, and I think you know how the system works, so I shouldn't expect trouble from you, correct?"

Bo nodded.

"Very well. Take her away." She waved Bo away and the two officers escorted her out of the room. "Are you two still here?" she sneered as she sat again. "Was I unclear before?"

"Jason is breaking free," Trick said simply.

The Morrigan shot up again, hands slamming down on the desk. "What? I thought you got rid of him for good!"

"No, it was always a danger that he might return one day."

"Great, just great, how much time do we have? I'd love one last night of passion before I die. Not with you, I just mean in general. Not with you, either." She indicated Lysanias. "I

have people for that. Big, strapping boys or cute, soft girls with glorious curves or both at once, I'm not that picky. I have any number in mind that would be free for a few hours, if that's all we've got left. I mean why lead with Bo when the world is ending?"

All you people of little faith. And what's wrong with me? Don't I have it going on? Does my beard need to be a few inches longer?

"We have some time yet, though how much exactly I don't know," he admitted. "I just wanted you to be aware. Be careful of your dreams, Evony, they may yet be your undoing."

"The bad dreams- of course, they happened last time too. No wonder. Well, it was nice knowing you, Trick."

"Don't count us out just yet. We may yet surprise Jason this time."

"Ha! Good luck with that. I'd better inform my people, this is going to get very ugly." She started tying, and the two men looked at each other. Clearly, they had been dismissed.

The two left, Lysanias following Trick down the elevator to the lobby again. "So she can just do that? Throw someone in jail?"

"She is the leader of the dark fae, so her word is fairly absolute. And five years is the minimum sentence for a crime of this nature." He sighed. "Bo did apparently attack someone. In six months I'll petition for a reduced sentence as long as she's made progress. We can visit her and such, I'll make sure she's not being mistreated."

"Usually some sort of trial is involved." *I should know, I was on both ends of such things back home.*

"What would be the point? She admitted the crime, and honestly the Morrigan could have demanded more. I hate to see her locked up, but fae live a long time. Look at me, I'm over a thousand years old. Five years is a drop in the bucket."

"What about her friend, Kenzie?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "Maybe she can stay with Dyson, or something. We'll figure it out. Meanwhile, shouldn't you be more worried about when Jason is going to break free?"

"I could ask, I suppose. If I can even get an answer for something like that. Which I doubt. But wouldn't him breaking free be a rather messy thing? It would be on the news if someone that could shape reality was tearing a city apart, even in another country. We would know soon enough."

"True. All right. You want to go back to her place?"

"It's the only place I know, around here. This is where I appeared, it must be near where Jason is going to show up. So I should stay nearby." *But if one of the two ladies I appeared near is now denied me because she's in prison, is she not supposed to help me? The other was just a human, a doctor by all accounts but still just a normal person. Was appearing there just a joke by Inari and not related to Jason at all? It did lead me to Trick, who told me the story of this reality, so there must be more going on here.*

"Very well. Can I drive you back?"

"The hospital first. I can sneak in and start healing that guy, if I can find a tub there. And I'm sorry about Bo, but it does sound like she did it to herself."

"Why do you think I didn't protest more strongly? I love her, but she has to make her own choices and then pay the price for them, if they're wrong."

"True."

So Lysanias spent two hours moving energy through water to try healing the comatose man's energy pathways, then *shifted* back to the apartment. There Kenzie was immediately distressed to hear what had happened with Bo and left to go see her, leaving Lysanias alone. He wasn't sure what to do with himself, but he could always use practice in his various skills, so he did some practice petitioning of the phoenix, and asked the universe about Jason. Naturally he got no response from that quarter. He also practiced trying to activate wards from a distance after drawing them with the stelle. He went and spoke to both his mountain spirit and Rosalina so they didn't feel left out, then ate some lunch. After that he practiced calling her out, and by that time Kenzie had returned.

"How's she doing?" he asked.

"As well as can be expected. She said you were the one that put her there?"

“What? No I didn’t. She attacked that guy days before I got here!”

“But you made her remember.”

“Yes, but that was just to make sure she wasn’t being controlled. I knew she had done it before I even went to see her.”

“Sure, but if you hadn’t shown up, she probably would have gotten away with it.”

“Gotten away with it? Kenzie, she was killing herself by only feeding on one person. What if she came for you next? This guy was a fae, and so maybe a little more durable than you would be. If she attacked you... some night when you were alone in the apartment with her... she might have killed you. I didn’t look, it’s possible she’s done this before and just hid the bodies better. Or no one saw her so they aren’t charging her with those. But if she’s done it once it can happen again, it seemed to just be a primal response to not getting enough to ‘eat.’ She’s a danger to those around her.”

“Bo would never hurt me!”

“Wouldn’t you have said she would never hurt some random guy off the street a week ago?”

“Well, uh...”

“That’s what I thought. You can certainly be mad, Kenzie, but being mad at me isn’t going to change the fact she brought this on herself.”

“Fine. What are you doing, anyway?”

“Practicing various things. Then I’m going to go to bed so I can get up and head back to the party tonight. Tonight...” he trailed off. “Scratch that, I need to leave soon.” *I slept another three hours until nine. Then spent more than an hour driving around and getting Bo thrown in jail, two hours healing the guy, I ate lunch, practiced some stuff...* He glanced at the clock. *In fact there’s only about a half an hour left before I have to go back and refresh that transformation of his! Crap, I really need to learn how to be in two places at once, if that’s possible. Or make a new ward to- wait, no.* He glanced down at his ring. *What did I work on this ring for? I can head there now, the castle should be fairly quiet as it won’t be sunrise there just yet. None of the monsters will be up. Refresh his transformation, then at some point when I get tired I can just activate the ring and get a full night’s sleep while time is stopped. Normally someone wouldn’t want to do something like that because they would be eight hours older than everyone around them, which is fine once or twice but doing that every night and soon you’re weeks and weeks older than you would be normally. But what do I care? I won’t die of old age. Huh. That could actually be very handy, an unintended benefit to making this I didn’t have in mind at the time.*

“Oh, there’s a party tonight? Can I come? I love parties!”

Lysanias came back to the present. “Humm, I wonder.” *She knows fae exist, would monsters be much of a stretch? But what would I disguise her as? Wait a second.* He got out the hubPad and went into the heavenly creature section. “Okay, there’s a small bird I can disguise you as.”

“A bird?”

“It’s a monster party, literally. It’s a birthday party for a vampire girl. They don’t really like humans so myself and Johnathan are disguised. You want to come, fine, but you’ll have to be in disguise too.”

“But why a bird? And who’s Johnathan?”

“No one will expect you to perform any powers you don’t have. And he’s a human who happened to find the place by chance.” *Just as it was her birthday. What are the odds?*

“Oh.”

“If you want to go I’ll change you now, so you can figure out flying. We have to leave fairly soon, there’s an urgent matter there I need to attend to.”

“Fine, I need something to take my mind off Bo.”

So he turned her into a caladrius, a small, white, heavenly bird that was small enough to ride on his shoulder. He told her what to expect, in terms of monsters so she didn’t freak out, and she said she could handle it. She worked on flying and acting like a bird, but he cautioned her that they were listed as not having human level intelligence. “So don’t talk to anyone even if they ask you something. I doubt anyone knows that you couldn’t talk, but if a

monster there has heard of this species before and does know, and hears you talking, questions will be raised." *If they even exist here.*

"Got it. I'm a bird, and that's all. I'll think bird thoughts."

"Fine. You're welcome to come, then." He got his own wings on, looked them both over, and *shifted* back to the hotel Transylvania. *We've only got a few minutes, I hope Johnathan is paying attention and hid someplace just in case my timing is off.*

"Wow," Kenzie breathed, staring up at the castle.

"Don't break character," Lysanias reminded her. "Sun isn't set, but it will be soon. The place should be quiet, so we can have a look around before the party starts. Let's find our wayward unicorn, then pay our respects to the birthday girl. Let me know if you get tired, I'll send you back." *She should be fine for hours yet, how long can the party last?*

"Got it. Cheep cheep!"

Don't say cheep cheep. The two pushed through the revolving door and let themselves inside.

Chapter 8

Truth

When: Once inside

Where: Inside the castle

Lysanias made his way to the closet intending to mentally broadcast that he was back so Johnathan could join him, but he felt something alive inside. Cautiously pulling the door back he peered in and the transformed boy looked up at him.

"Cutting things rather close, aren't we?" he asked.

"Sorry," Lysanias told him, slipping inside. "You think nine hours is plenty of time but then you need to heal a guy, and provide evidence someone you thought was going to be an ally in your fight is breaking the law, and then you decide to practice some stuff and suddenly there's ten minutes left. I made it though, didn't I?"

"That you did, my man. I'm just glad the door was open, standing out in the hall would have been pretty suspicious. Are you ready to party? I've been working on Dracula and he's made some changes to the program. Wasn't easy, but her party should be one to remember."

"Oh, I'm ready. Let's get you refreshed before it's memorable for another reason." He again checked the hallway to make sure it was clear, then released the transformation on Johnathan.

Then he remembered Kenzie.

He looked over to her and yes, she was staring at him.

"Oh, what a cute little bird," Johnathan told her. She ruffled her feathers and preened like it weren't no thing.

"Uh, Johnathan, meet Kenzie. Kenzie, Johnathan. Only human around here. Now there's two."

"Wait, are you saying she's-"

"A human, like you. Wanted to come to the party."

"Uh, you could, like, unicorn me again..."

"I guess I better." He shrank the man down, making Kenzie poke him in the neck with her beak.

"Stop that!"

Johnathan gave them a tour of the castle, as hardly anyone was up, but as the sun went down more and more monsters came out of their rooms. Kenzie stared at all of them but kept her cool, and finally the party started with several of Dracula's friends playing music and everyone dancing. The birthday girl herself hadn't made an appearance yet, but that changed. Lysanias was standing with his back to a wall, looking through the swirling lights and dancing monsters, when in a swirl of energy Mavis materialized.

"Nice entrance," he told her. "Nice cape too." She had spruced herself up with extra care, and her new cape hung down to her hips. *You look beautiful, but then, you did before too.*

"Thanks. Glad you made it back."

"And miss all this?" He motioned to the motley mass of mostly monsters, meandering and moving to the music. *How do they stand it? All that noise.*

"So why are you back here? Where's our unicorn friend?"

"Out kicking his hooves up out there someplace. You should go join him."

"You're coming too. I want to dance with both of you."

"No, I don't think so."

She laughed. "What? Don't do a lot of dancing up in 'Heaven?'"

"No, I've never danced before."

"What? Come on, it's easy! If you can do those martial arts move you can do this! Now shut up and dance with me!" She grabbed him and yanked him towards the dance floor.

He went nowhere.

She almost yanked her own arm off and snapped back. "What in the world?" She grabbed his hand and pulled him. "You're strong!" She concentrated, but he resisted. She reversed and tried to shove his arm, but again he resisted. "Really strong! You must be stronger than my father, even."

"It's not me," he admitted. "My equipment enhances me." *Though you're no slouch, how much stronger than people are vampires, anyway?*

"You really don't want to dance with me?" She dropped her hands and set her mouth in a bit of a pout. "On my birthday and everything?"

"Look, with my eyes I could watch every person in this room and in an hour be the best dancer you've ever seen. But short of that, *I've never danced before*. I'll make a complete fool of myself."

"No you won't. At least give it a try!"

He shook his head. "Fine, but you're responsible when I become a laughingstock."

He let himself be pulled along until they found Johnathan, who was, as predicted, going so far as to balance on his hind hooves to dance.

"There you are," he exclaimed, dropping to all fours. "You look beautiful!"

Oh, he made that seem easy. Jerk.

"Thanks."

Wait, what was that? That little awkward look away and... I am not jealous. Of him being able to say stuff like that without it sounding stupid or for them being close.

The two started to dance so he had no choice but to try it. Sadly, his wings slightly unbalanced him and immediately he completely tripped over his own feet and went sprawling. Kenzie took to the air, angrily "tweeting" and those around him stopped and looked him over.

"Are you okay?" Mavis asked, sounding and looking quite concerned. She held a hand out, but Lysanias felt his face flushing and burning. He *shifted*.

Let's never do that again, he thought angrily as he picked himself up off the floor of the room he had given the demonstration in. He looked upwards as he settled his wings. "Sorry. I didn't mean to cast you all in a bad light. If you can even hear me." *I thought I was used to this body by now, but maybe not so much. Ugh, what must she think of you? And just vanishing like that, I've not gotten over my shy nature, either. I guess I'm still just that pathetic kid who needs my friends to save me after all.*

Lysanias sat down and stared at nothing for a time, when suddenly two vampires materialized out of nothing beside him.

"There you are! See dad, I was right!"

"I guess you were my little jack 'o lantern."

Lysanias, recovering from his fright because he had no warning they were coming, shook his head. "Go back to your party, Mavis. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Dracula asked. "Even I felt that little tumble you took."

Mavis held out a hand. "Come on, lose the wings and let's try that again, just the two of us this time."

He barked a laugh, then did a serious face. "No."

"Come on! Call it my birthday gift!"

"I got you a gift. Besides, is watching me fall on my face that entertaining?"

She pulled her hand back. "You got me gift?" she asked, unbelieving.

"Of course, it's your birthday."

"You met me yesterday. How did you have time to get me a gift? You didn't have to do that, honestly."

He shrugged. "It's no trouble. How did you find me anyway?" *Change the subject, good one!* "Vampire powers?"

"Deduction," she replied a bit smugly. "I figured you couldn't go anywhere you hadn't seen, but that you wouldn't go far because you need to refresh Johathan's transformation occasionally. You would want a big open space so you didn't accidentally teleport into somebody, and given how red your face was you wanted to be alone. Everyone's at the party,

no one is here. That all added up to this room.” She held her arms up and spun around, cape fluttering in a circle behind her. “How did I do?”

Great, she would have to be intelligent as well.

“You did good, head back to the party when you’re ready,” Dracula told the two.

“Wait,” Lysanias called before he could get far. “I have a proposition for you both.”

“Oh? What’s this?” he asked, coming back.

“After today, come with me. Both of you. I don’t mean to wander like I do,” *not that I would mind Mavis being around*, “I mean to help fight the shadow avatar. I need allies, and a couple of vampires would seem to fit the bill.” *She’s strong, fast, smart, has vampire powers, is probably almost impossible to kill, yeah, she and her father would be a great asset. He must have the same abilities, or more, being older.*

“Come with you? Can Johathan come?” Mavis asked excitedly.

“Of course. Once I stick my martial arts skill in his brain.”

“And take some of his dancing skill in exchange?” she managed without grinning too much.

“I’m never living that down, am I?”

“Nope. What do you say, dad? Can we go with him? Please!”

He looked to Dracula, looking pensive at his daughter. “What are you talking about? Go where? What’s a shadow avatar? Why do you need allies? Just who are you?”

“I never told you who I actually was?” he sputtered.

Both shook their heads. “I don’t believe this. I told Bo and her friends, it slipped my mind I hadn’t told you. I’ll give you the short version you can get back to the party.” He did, making both look worried.

“So that’s why you have all these powers,” Dracula realized. “And you say this Jason can do even more? And can’t be killed by anything but your sword? A thousand years, where I was a thousand years ago? I’ve really lost track of time, you know that? I mean there’s always wars going on, do I remember one against one man?”

“Dad, we have to go, we can help protect the whole world!” Mavis insisted. “Think about it!”

“I can’t go, I have a hotel to run!” he protested.

“You’re going to put the hotel before saving the *entire world*?” she gasped, planting her fists on her hips. “There must be someone you trust to take it over for-” She started to go on but he put a hand up.

“However, that isn’t to say you can’t go.”

“Wait, what are you saying?” she asked, hope starting to burn in her eyes.

“It will be dangerous, the exact opposite of what I want for you,” he went on. “But this is danger with a purpose. Not just random humans running around, you’re actually on a quest. And this way you can have a guide or two. Or three.” He indicated Kenzie, who Lysanias now saw was on Mavis’ shoulder.

“Sorry about that Kenzie,” he told her. “Didn’t see you there. You okay?”

“No thanks to you!”

“I did warn you all, you can’t say I didn’t.”

“So can I go?” Mavis asked excitedly.

“Yes,” he answered with a nod.

She gave a squeal and hugged him.

“You’ll keep her safe, of course,” he said over her shoulder.

He pulled the shield out of his pocket. “I am her shield. My life before hers, you have my word.”

“Very well. Stick with them, get to know the human world, and when this is all over we can talk about some longer trips. You have no idea what’s waiting out there, Mavis. It’s not just that they’re humans, it’s a different culture altogether. You need to learn how to fit in without drawing attention to yourself. Are you listening to me?”

Didn’t he say that before?

“I am. I’ll learn everything I can, honest dad. Oh, this is the best birthday ever!”

With the promise she wouldn't make him dance again the group went back to the main hall, Mavis bursting with excitement. She ran off to find and tell Johnathan, and Dracula hung back.

"I could show you some moves, if you wanted," he offered.

"Moves? What? Dance moves? No, no, no, no, no." He frantically waved his hands in front of him. "I think we're just going to stay away from dancing- forever!"

"Okay, your choice. We'll open presents soon, this won't go on for too much longer."

"Don't mind me, it's fine."

"And then... maybe it's time we all stopped being afraid."

"What?" But he looked over and Dracula was gone.

What was that all about?

So Mavis soon opened her gifts, expressing her delight for all of them, and putting on both the necklace and bracelet right away. When all the boxes were opened and she had gone around thanking everyone Dracula called for silence and got up on stage.

"Everyone, I have an announcement to make, please let me speak for a moment." He looked around the room, almost sadly, but he hardened his resolve. "I have just recently been told exactly why the angel Lysanias is here, and he's come from further away than I thought. The truth is, I owe all of you an apology, and an explanation. I've been selfish, trying to keep Mavis safe I didn't allow her to actually experience the world, and that pushed us farther apart. I was paranoid about her getting hurt, even going so far as to create an entire fake village to try and scare her back here for good."

All the monsters in the room looked over at her, and she nodded. "He did, he totally did that."

"I want to tell you, that was wrong of me. I see that now. But I've done other things that were wrong, so it's time to come clean."

"What did you do?" the frankenstein's monster prompted as he looked out over the assembled crowd.

"I've been misleading you for many years," he admitted. "I have no idea how the humans would react to knowing we exist. But I do know that they are not *all* bloodthirsty killers, and can in fact be quite reasonable. So there is hope, even if slight, for us to coexist."

"How can you possibly know that, Drac?" asked Wayne.

"Because at Mavis' insistence I allowed several humans into the castle for her birthday." The monsters, growing more nervous now, looked around to try and spot the human. "No, no, you've been getting to know him for two days now, please, there's no need to panic. In the first place there's only two, what are they going to do? In the second, they mean us no harm, I see that now."

"Him? Them? Who are you talking about?" asked Murray.

"Can you come up on stage please?" Dracula asked.

Jonathan of course immediately started for the stairs and Kenzie fluttered over to Lysanias. "Well?" she asked. "So much for keeping a low profile."

"I suppose." He reluctantly joined them on stage and she hopped on his finger, which he held out.

"A bird?" Eunice asked. (Eunice was the Frankenstein's monster's wife. A "bride of Frankenstein," if you will) "Drac, are you going senile in your old age?"

"Yeah, that's a unicorn, not a human," Frankenstein's monster agreed.

"Lysanias?" Dracula prompted.

"These two *are* human," he agreed. "I made them look like this with my abilities. This is Jonathan and Kenzie." Kenzie waved a wing.

There was a general rumble of low talk among the monsters, but Dracula waved for quiet. "Let me finish. We have bigger concerns than humans, the reason Lysanias is here. It seems Jason is breaking free of whatever the fae did to lock him up. Once he does, we, all of us, human, fae, and monster, are at risk."

Now everyone seemed confused, all expect for the mummy, Murray, who pushed his way to the front.

"Oh no," he cried. "Tell me this is some sort of joke. I remember Jason, how could I forget? That's not funny, Drac."

"No, it's not. So now you see what I'm saying. We need to work together with at least the fae, and possibly select humans if we are going to survive Jason."

"You're really here because he's breaking free?" he asked Lysanias.

"I am. Look, all of you, how many have been having strange dreams lately?" More than one hand was raised, and those with raised hands started talking excitedly. Lysanias caught more than one "I thought I was the only one" or "You too? Every night?" sort of things. He went on. "That's a symptom of all this. It'll probably get worse. But that can't hurt you," *I hope*, "and I'm here to put Jason away. Permanently." He touched the sword at his hip.

Frankenstein's monster punched his hand with his other fist. "What do you need from us?"

"You serious, man?" Murray asked him. "This is Jason we're talking about. You don't even know."

"Hey, I've heard the stories. You've told some yourself, on our road trips together."

"Oh yeah, I have!"

So, what? Even monsters like scary stories?

"If it means Mavis doesn't have to go through that, if it means Wanda's kids are kept safe, I'll follow the angel. I'll help him fight. Did you see him move before? Of course you did, we all did. If anyone can take this 'Jason' isn't it him?" There was a general consent, but Murry was shaking his head.

"You don't know Jason, man. You don't even know. But I'll help too, how can I not after hearing that?"

"Thank you, all of you." Lysanias told them gratefully. "For now, begin to prepare. Fortify this place as well as you can. Spread the word about dreams, you're not alone. Contact any monsters who are not here, the more powerful the better, that their assistance may soon be needed. Bring them here, if their homes can't be fortified. Open lines of communication so that no matter where Jason shows up, we can get there before too much damage is done. Meanwhile, Mavis is coming with me. If a few more can, I already have contacts in the fae world. Anyone who loves war games, and we need generals more than soldiers at the moment, should come and work together to coordinate with them. Jason won't find you off guard, not this time. And this time we take care of him for good."

"What about humans?" Wayne asked.

"I don't know," Lysanias answered honestly. "Jonathan? Kenzie? Your thoughts?"

"Can you make me bigger so they can hear me?" Kenzie asked.

"Oh, uh, you'll be naked. Wait a second." He touched her and suddenly a phoenix was sitting on his shoulder instead of a tiny bird. There was a general amazement from the monsters.

"Can you hear me?" she asked, and they nodded and crowded in a little.

"Honestly, we can't get along with ourselves," she admitted. "Even humans that have the slightest deviation from the norm are marginalized, shunned, ignored, or worse. So introducing monsters into the mix? I can't imagine what would happen if the world learned fae existed, much less you guys."

"I don't agree," Jonathan countered. "I think this is just what people need to actually start coming together. Tell them that people, far different from themselves, exist in this world. I'm saying don't just stroll into town and announce yourselves, obviously. But you all get along, because you're all monsters. Wouldn't humans start getting along better because they're humans?"

Pessimism vs optimism I guess. I can see which both of these people live by. Lysanias chuckled and shook his head. "The light and dark fae all over again. Give them an 'us' vs 'them' situation, and at least keep that group unified. It could work." *Or backfire terribly.* "I can ask the universe if various methods you come up with are good or bad. The problem is *time*. If we had more time, we could more slowly introduce you to the world. But we're on a deadline. Literally."

"If monsters started saving people, like the fishermen saving people who are drowning so that sightings were always positive..." Kenzie mused.

“We can discuss that later. Fae first, they’ll accept you the easiest. Humans may have numbers and weaponry, but I doubt even modern weapons would give Jason pause any more than weapons a thousand years ago did. We need abilities that distract, giving me time to get into position.”

“I wonder what happened to that Van Helsing guy,” mused Dracula. “He had some fancy weapons no one else seemed to. If his blueprints were still around…”

“Do what you can,” Lysanias told them. “You know what we’re facing now, and what is to come. Any other monsters that were around, tell those that were not your stories. Think about ways to counter Jason. He’s had time to think of new strategies though, so we’ll have to be flexible, but I can’t see his thought patterns running along different lines.” *He’s still human, after all, just a human with dream powers. He’ll still have the same patterns of behavior.*

“Dracula is staying here to coordinate. He’ll be in charge of everything around here.”

“Zombies, we’ll start with you first,” Dracula announced, leaping from the stage. “Start inspecting the place. Any cracks, any weaknesses in the walls, let’s get them patched up. Any maintenance we’ve been putting off, let’s do it.” He moved off, shouting more orders, and Mavis came over.

“That went pretty well,” she beamed. “I haven’t seen my dad fired up like this in a long time. Or ever, I think?”

“It’s just unfortunate it took the end of the world to do it,” Jonathan told her.

“I guess.” She gave a little laugh. “It’s too bad you’re not a real angel.”

“Why’s that?”

“Oh, it’s silly.” She looked away, eyes downcast.

“What, you want to see Heaven or something?” *I’m not sure what that place would do to a vampire. Fry them instantly, maybe?*

“Not exactly. I was sort of hoping I could see my mother once before all this happens. I mean, you said her soul was probably there. If you were an angel couldn’t you sneak her out? Silly, like I said.”

Lysanias rubbed his chin. “You know, there could be a way.” *And it might get us some more help, if angels do exist here. Yes, that might just be worth a try.*

Chapter 9

Mommy

When: Ten minutes later

Where: Mavis' room

Jonathan had been swamped by questions about humanity so Lysanias and Mavis slipped out of the room. In reality, Mavis dragged him out, looking around corners and avoiding everyone until she was in her room. Strewn all over were the remains of her sewing project, it seemed she had cut up something to make the cape, but he hardly had enough time to really take a good look around before she was in his face again.

"What did you mean, there could be a way?" she demanded.

"Just what I said, I know how to petition angels, and regular old souls aren't that hard to get here." *Probably because they can't actually do anything. With no powers to speak of, there's not much to pull across dimensional barriers.*

"You could get the soul of my mother here?" Her eyes narrowed, as if to defy this statement and get him to admit the lie.

"Yes," he answered simply.

She blinked at him, obviously not expecting this. "Oh."

"Hey, can I borrow a dress?" Kenzie asked from Lysanias' shoulder. "I think it's fine if everyone sees me as I am." She hopped down to the bed. "Just not *all* of me, as I am, if you get my drift."

"Sure, it's fine," Mavis replied, not really paying attention to her.

"If you wouldn't mind?"

Lysanias touched her, undoing her transformation and she hopped off the bed, grabbing one of Mavis' dresses and slipping it over her head. She wiggled into it (a fascinating procedure Lysanias wished he could have recorded, Kenzie was fairly good looking herself after all) and looked herself over in the mirror. "Wait, why do you have a mirror? Or can vampires see themselves and the whole mirror thing is rubbish?"

"It came with the room." She gave a shake and came back to the present. "Hey, it looks good on you!"

Lysanias had to admit she was right. Kenzie was quite short, and while not as thin as a vampire they were close enough in size the dress fit perfectly. Mavis got some stockings and shoes out for her, and with a little adjustment by Lysanias she didn't have to go barefoot on these stone floors around there. With a bit more work, like black lipstick and a haircut, they could look like twins. *How cute is this scene?*

"Thanks."

"Now back to my mother, what do you need from me?"

He pulled his hubPad out. "Her likeness would be ideal, but I suppose her name would be good enough."

"Martha Dracula, and there is a painting of her I can show you. It's in my dad's room. Come on." She went to the door and peeked out.

Martha? What kind of name is that for a vampire? That's the name of a superhero's mom for sure, but not a vampire.

"It's clear, come on."

"Why are we sneaking around, exactly?" Kenzie quietly asked as she went down the hall.

"I want to surprise my dad. If you can get mom here, he would really be thrilled. But he would want to know what I was doing, so..."

"Got it. Stealth mission, operation Surprise Mavis' Dad is a go." She started humming something, that neither recognized as the mission impossible theme.

Making it to her father's room they all looked up at the panting.

"We know where you got your looks from," Kenzie remarked. "I'm sorry you lost her."

She sighed. "It set off the chain of events that led to the hotel being built, and shaped the relationship between me and my father. I was only a baby, I don't really remember her. But it would have been nice to know my mom."

"I'll get started. I shouldn't have any trouble, but I'll make the circle anyway." Using air bending he blew the dust off the floor and got out his stele, bringing up the diagram of the circle. *After all, I was made an artificer by that angel. And only they can activate circles, so I might as well take advantage of it.* "Here, can you hold this?" he asked Kenzie. "I want to make sure I do this right."

"Sure." He started burning the shape onto the floor with the stele, the two ladies watching with rapt attention as he worked. "Hey, what's 'project' mean?" she asked.

"Project? I have no idea. Where do you see that?"

"On this screen here, look." She touched it, and a beam shot out of the back of the hubPad, illuminating the floor and casting the image of the circle. "Oh, that's what it means. Didn't know iPads could do that."

"I wha? I got this from Susan in another reality, though I suppose it could be disguised as something you- how did you do that?"

"I touched this button. Don't you know how to use this thing?"

"Not really, if I'm being honest. Okay, move it over so this part I've done matches up."
"Right."

With the perfectly projected image that could be traced, Lysanias had no trouble laying down a fairly accurate circle, and energized it. He switched over to the angel section and started the prayer, again reading from the pad as he reached out with his inner energies. He felt the ritual working, but at the end of ten minutes instead of a soul appearing in the circle as he intended, nothing happened.

"Er, that's odd." He read it over, looking for anything he might have missed. "It should have worked."

"What's this?" Kenzie asked, again touching the pad. A series of statistics appeared, showing the last time he performed the prayer (a few seconds ago) and how well he seemed to do. (Overall Performance: 45% Success Rate of last petitioning: 100%) It also listed how he could do better, should he want to improve the skill.

Oh, so if I had been graded I did half as well as someone competent would have done, but it was good enough to do what I wanted because it wasn't that hard? Interesting.

"Forty Five percent? You suck!" Kenzie told him.

"Hey, I never said I was good, I've only done it a few times. It must record and verify what it hears? This thing can do a lot."

"You need to take a class or something."

"Obviously so." *And I can, once I take care of Jason and leave my sword behind someplace, thereby proving I'm worthy of entering The Hub.* "I would have sworn that button wasn't there before, though. This thing is connected to The Hub, it may have increased functionality built into it as more people use it. It was a fairly rush job at the time I got it, Susan ran off and came back with them a moment later."

"Ah, so even beings from another reality get software upgrades. Good to know."

"So it should have worked? What happened?" Mavis asked, looking at the numbers.

Lysanias dropped the pad in shock as it answered in a fairly neutral but female sounding voice. "There are four possible reasons. Also, ow. I am very delicate, please try to avoid dropping me in the future."

"You can talk?" all three exclaimed in surprise.

"I believe the evidence speaks for itself?"

Great, and it has a sense of humor.

"So why haven't you up until now?" Lysanias demanded, picking it up again.

"I have never been addressed with a direct question. Mavis was looking directly at me, was the question not posed me to?"

"In other words, you never asked," Kenzie told him, poking him in the arm. "Nice job, looser."

Lysanias rolled his eyes. *I really do need a class on how to use this thing.* "What are the three possible reasons?"

“Reason 1: She descended to the demon world, rather than the Upper Realm. Thus summoning must be employed rather than petitioning in order to bring her spirit to the Earthly plane.

“Reason 2: She did neither, remaining as a ghost here on Earth.

“Reason 3: Interference of some kind, either by native residents or enemy action.

“Reason 4: She never possessed a soul to migrate after her death.”

“Is any one of those more likely?”

“More information must be gathered. For example, did she live a moral life?”

“My mother? Of course she did! Are you suggesting she may have gone to Hell?”

“I am simply attempting to answer your question in the greatest possible detail. I make no judgments or suggestions. Unless asked to.”

“Humph. Well, she didn’t. That means she’s a ghost?”

“I can answer that question,” Lysanias told them. “Give me another ten minutes, I’ll just ask yes or no if she’s a ghost. We can figure out where she is later. Oh, let me get a picture of her so we don’t have to come back here.” He switched out back to the “home” screen, then paused. “You can still hear me, right?”

The screen shifted and a wavy line appeared as the voice answered. “I am always active, yes. Please speak to me any time.”

“I will. Can you open the picture taking thing?”

“Thing? For future reference the correct nomenclature is ‘app.’ And I can activate any app currently installed within my memory.” The camera activated, and as luck would have it the back facing camera was active. Everyone was still staring at the pad, and Mavis looked behind her to see who that girl was in the picture.

“There’s no one there,” she announced. “But then who did I see?” She turned back, looking down at the pad, and Lysanias shifted it over to catch more of her. Both stared at it as her face fully came into view. “Er, who is that?” she asked.

“That’s you, of course!” Kenzie told her. “Wait, this thing can pick up vampires? Hey, pad, or whatever your name is. You can see vampires?”

“I have not been officially named,” the pad said, sounding a bit put out. “Thanks for asking. To answer your question, vampires cannot interact with silver. Old style mirrors and cameras used silver. New mirrors and digital light sensors such as those employed inside me, do not. Therefore, it is not mirrors in general vampires cannot be seen in, but old silver backed mirrors.”

“You never went and bought a modern mirror, so you never knew,” Kenzie guessed. “So you just thought it was all mirrors, or all photography. Wild. Hey, this means you could use a cell phone, and do video chat. How cool is that?”

“I don’t know what video chat is, so I can’t answer that. Still, I wonder what else my father told me that he believes is true, but actually is just some assumption he made based on incomplete information? I’ll have to do some experiments and see for myself.”

Oh yes, she’s smart all right. Inexperienced in the world, perhaps, but very intelligent. The world better watch out if she decides to make her presence known.

“And this is really me?” She pointed and her image pointed back.

“That’s you,” both agreed.

“Wow.” She made faces and looked herself over. “So that’s what I look like in this dress. Not too far off from how Kenzie looks. And to think I was jealous of her,” she muttered.

“If you would like, I could have a print delivered from a photo. Hub access is not required for this function.”

“Oh, stand over by the wall and pose, Lysanias can take your picture!” Kenzie pushed her over to the wall and Lysanias switched the camera.

“I’ve never posed for a picture before, what do I do?” Mavis asked, looking nervous.

“Here, just do what I do!” Kenzie posed and rejected several before settling on one.

“That’s the one. Show me those fangs, big smile. And go!” Lysanias pushed the button and there was a flash of light.

“If this photo is acceptable I will have the copies delivered.”

“Come see.” Lysanias showed the two ladies, and again Mavis was astonished. “That’s really what you see when you look at me?”

“That’s what you look like.”

“It’s fine.”

“Generating,” the pad told them, and a stack of photos appeared. “I took the liberty of making several copies.”

“Thanks,” Lysanias told it, as the two exclaimed over them. He then took a shot of the painting and filed it. “Talk to you later.”

“Entering sleep mode.” It went dark.

As the girls looked the photo over and discussed what sort of clothes would look best on Mavis, Lysanias settled in to ask the universe if the ghost of Martha still existed somewhere.

Yes

“Good news,” he told the pair. “Or I guess bad? Anyway, your mother never left, apparently her ghost still roams the Earth.”

“Probably where she was killed,” Mavis mused.

He nodded. “Ghosts do tend to haunt a single location, a place they know.” *At least traditionally. In other realities. Unless they’re out for vengeance like that one was, the ghost of one of the people killed when that stupid rolling fortress exploded.*

“Can we get there? Somehow send her on to Heaven?”

“I can take us there if you had a picture of the place. All I can do is banish her, though. That sends her to Hell. You’ll have to convince her to move on yourself.” *But you wanted to bring her to your father, so he could see his wife again. How am I going to do that, I can’t touch a ghost, can I?*

“We have to try!”

“You have a picture?” Kenzie asked.

Her face fell. “No.”

“If someone here has seen it could you pull it out of their brain?” Kenzie asked.

“I could.”

“I’d rather not ask my father, but we could ask around,” Mavis agreed. “One of dad’s friends is sure to have seen it.”

They went in search of Dracula’s gang and there was more than one panicked look at Kenzie who was clearly human but they let her pass without incident. Reaching the hall where the party had been they found a few monsters still talking to Jonathan but no gang.

“Do you know where my dad’s friends went?” Mavis asked him.

“Gee, I don’t know,” he replied. “They were planning some defenses of the castle I think? Maybe the armory?”

“He would be nearby then, right? You wanted to keep this a secret?” Kenzie asked.

“Oh, rabies, you’re right. We’ll have to ask someone else. Hey, has anyone here seen the castle my dad and I used to live in? We think my mother’s ghost is still there!”

Lysanias brought the pad out from under his arm and showed the picture around.

“Hey, I’ve seen that lady,” Jonathan told them.

“What? No way!” Mavis told him.

“No, I’m serious. Castle Lubov. It wasn’t that long ago. People said that place was haunted, I guess they were right, huh? So the ghost is your mom? Wicked.”

Wait, you just happen to have seen a picture of Mavis’ mother and know the castle we need to go to? His eyes flicked towards the ceiling. *Are You taking a hand in this?* “HubPad, can you display information about the castle Lubov?”

“Is hubPad to be my designation?” it asked, somehow not sounding pleased at this choice of names.

“Until I think of something better. Let me give you a proper name after some proper thought.”

“Very well.” It sounded mollified. “Searching. No source of wireless communication exists in this region. No local informational database can be accessed.”

"My apartment has wi-fi, if that's what you need," Kenzie told them. "We can head back there first."

"Let's go!" Mavis insisted.

Lysanias glanced at the clock in the upper corner of the pad. "It should be dark there by now." He looked around and saw an older wolf pup lurking about, who he waved over. "Hey there, can you give Dracula a message for me?"

"Okay."

"Tell him we've gone to get something from Kenzie's apartment. We'll be right back." He turned to Mavis. "This way he won't panic when he sees us all gone."

"Went to get something, be right back. Got it!" the pup told them.

"Thanks."

"Sure thing." He ran off to search, following his nose.

"Let's go."

"Let me get my backpack though," Jonathan protested. "I'll need to be myself, and that means clothes again. Pity, I was getting used to this."

So the group went back down and got Jonathan dressed, and Lysanias put the backpack away. Grabbing everyone he *shifted* back to the apartment, causing both Mavis and Jonathan to look around.

"I'm in the human world," Mavis breathed. "This is so amazing! Oh, what's that?"

"You mean the TV?" Jonathan asked. They moved off and Lysanias got the pad out.

"Connecting to local data streams," the hubPad told them. "Data rate is classified as 'abysmal' but acceptable for this purpose. Searching for images of 'Loubov Castle.' Images located. Displaying images."

On the screen was a series of images from different angles of a burned out and ruined castle. There were even shots of the inside, and Lysanias nodded. *Good, that's where we'll go. Less chance of someone seeing us appear outside. Actually, you know what? He looked over at the couch. I'm sleeping here, now, then I don't have to worry about it.* "Pause."

Some hours later time started up again and Lysanias got something to eat while Kenzie finished showing them around.

"Ready to go?" Lysanias asked them.

"Ready!" everyone agreed.

"Hold on, I had a thought. We have a minute, let's shove chi-blocking into your brain, Jonathan. I'd feel better knowing both of you are as good at martial arts as I am."

"Oh yeah, let's do it!"

So they did, and Jonathan and Kenzie traded a few blows to make sure it took. Of course they were evenly matched so all the strikes were blocked, but Lysanias was pleased with the result. "Now we can go." Everyone grabbed onto him and he stared at the picture, willing himself to be inside it. They *shifted*.

And heard a whole bunch of screaming by a group of teenagers surrounded by candles and sitting in a circle. They were obviously freaking out that a bunch of people had suddenly appeared in the room, having been on edge in the darkness. They were screaming, Kenzie and Jonathan were screaming and had grabbed hold of each other, Mavis was a bat someplace.

"Quiet down!" Lysanias ordered, using the force to push the thought into their brains. Of course he still wasn't very good at it, but as panicked as they were and with his will augmented by the sword, they stopped Kermiting and sat there shivering, holding on to one another.

"That's better," he told them. "What are you even doing here?" He looked them over, and it was three guys and two girls, fairly young from a certain point of view but probably not much older than Lysanias was mentally.

"Try- try- trying to contact the ghost?" one girl piped out.

"You want to talk to my mom? Why?" asked Mavis, appearing out of bat form.

That started them quietly freaking out again.

“Uh, Mavis, here’s your first lesson in fitting in. If you have to transform, do it somewhere else and walk into the room.”

“Oh, right, that makes sense. Got it.”

“Is that a vamp- vamp- a vampire?” asked one of the guys.

“I’m Mavis, nice to meet you! That’s right, I’m a vampire, and you must be humans, right?”

They stared up at her.

“Uh, Mavis, second lesson in fitting in. Don’t admit to being a vampire, and while pretending to be human, assume everyone else you see is, too. People don’t go around saying stuff like ‘hello, human!’”

“I can see that, yes, this is all good stuff, I should write this down. Does anyone have a pen?”

The kids shrank back.

“It’s fine, she doesn’t bite,” Lysanias told them. “I mean, actually I have no idea. I’ve seen you eat at the party, how does that work?”

“Oh, I can eat anything,” she agreed. “I just can’t *drink* anything but blood. I get thirsty like everyone else, but only blood will satisfy me. We use a substitute now, though.”

“There, you see? She doesn’t bite.”

“A vampire that doesn’t bite?” asked one boy.

“*Blood* substitute?” asked one of the girls. “Does that really work?”

“Oh yes,” Mavis told her. “My father tells me it’s 90% as good as the real thing. I’ve never had human blood, so I wouldn’t know, but I trust him. Humm, I did trust him until the whole zombie village thing, maybe I should... no. That’s fine. It works fine.”

“I ask because having a blood substitute that actually worked would save uncountable lives every year. Do you know how much research goes into something like that?”

“Not the time, Tina,” one of the boys hissed.

“What? You know I want to go into medical school. If vampires exist and they really did develop a blood substitute I’d love to hear about it.”

“I don’t know how it’s made.”

“Forget that! What the heck is that guy?” asked another.

Lysanias turned, but the boy was looking at him. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve got wings!”

“Wings?” He looked behind himself, then down at his angel costume. “Crap! I should have changed too. Why didn’t you guys say something?” He glared at Kenzie and Jonathan.

“Hey man, you’re supposed to be the expert here, you know?” Jonathan reasonably informed him.

He felt like smacking his forehead. *I am supposed to be the expert. I’m such a moron.* “Never mind what I am. We’re going to see about *actually* calling up the ghost of these parts, so you kids might want to leave.”

“Too late for that,” Mavis told them, pointing. “It seems whatever they did worked. Look, there’s my mother!”

He looked where she was pointing, and yes, there stood the transparent form of Martha.

“I must protect my daughter,” she intoned.

“There’s nothing there,” Jonathan told them. “What are you talking about?”

Claws formed from the hands of Martha, who took a step forward and raised them. “I must protect my daughter,” she said stronger.

“Er, you all need to leave, right now!” Lysanias told them, stepping between them.

“I must protect my daughter. FROM YOU!” She vanished.

*Oh rabies she’s not just a ghost she’s the ghost of a **vampire!!***

Chapter 10

Battle

When: No time has passed

Where: Somewhere in the castle ruin

The ghostly form of Martha appeared next to one of the boys and sank her claws into his neck, lifting him in the air. The kids screamed again, freaking out because while they couldn't see Martha, they knew something was happening to their friend as he floated and thrashed in mid-air. *Crap.* "Pause!" The action stopped, the look of horror on the boy's face frozen now, along with the others. *How in the world am I going to deal with you?* he asked himself, walking in a circle around the ghost. *Can anything I do get us out of this?* He stood there, deep in thought, reviewing his various powers in his mind. Mavis caught his eye and he walked over to her. Laying a hand on her head she felt as unyielding as stone, frozen between moments. *Sorry, Mavis. But I think I can salvage this.* He looked past her to the two humans standing there, and back to the ghost. They clearly were not looking at her, so they couldn't see her either. *And why should they? Just because I gave them skill at hitting stuff, that doesn't make them supernatural. Mountain spirit, can I count on you?*

I will come.

The spirit appeared before him, and Lysanias pointed to Jonathan. "You'll be in charge of keeping him safe. If the ghost charges him, get him out of the way. He's helpless around here." *I need another ward, that allows regular people to see things in the supernatural world they wouldn't be able to otherwise.*

It nodded.

With that done he got out the wand, but not before doing a bit of magic on himself to increase his chances.

"Rosalina, let our spirits work together to protect all people! Bankai!" She appeared in her swirling dress, wand at the ready.

"Oh, you haven't forgotten about me!" she exclaimed. "I was starting to wonder."

"I talked to you just recently!" he reminded her.

"Did you?" she tapped her wand on her temple. "But you should practice calling me out more, so you don't have to rely on magic like this."

"Calling you out and a whole lot of other things," he agreed. "Still, can you protect Kenzie? I don't think any of your magic can help otherwise. I'd like to do this without beating her up, if possible."

She considered a moment. "I could try putting her to sleep, she would probably pass right through my bubble."

He shook his head. "If she goes to sleep, wouldn't she just fall through the floor until she woke up? It's not like it would be any barrier to a ghost."

"Oh, maybe." She walked over to Mavis. "She is rather pretty, isn't she?"

"What? Kenzie is that one, protect her. Mavis can see her, she's a vampire."

"A very pretty vampire. Look at those eyes..."

"She's pretty, I admit it, happy? What, can you see what I'm seeing or feel what I feel or something? I'm only here a short time, I can't get involved!"

She pouted. "You're no fun. All right, I'll provide the play by play for Kenzie. But I want a kart race for this! And some visiting hours, you haven't seen the garden lately, and I still have to teach you golf, and..." She looked down, looking like maybe she had said too much.

Wait, is she jealous of... Mavis? He looked skyward. "My own wand spirit, a spirit of protection mind you, trying to negotiate with me over protecting someone. I ask ya, what's the world coming to."

"I want to spend time with you, is that so bad?" She stomped a foot.

He relented with a smile. "No. And I should just have you out on general principle. It doesn't really cost me anything."

"That's better. So what is the plan, anyway?"

"Attacking her directly is out, of course. I could attack her like that angry spirit back home, using the iron tipped arrows I have kicking around someplace." *Ha, remember those days? When I didn't have dozens of powers? It was awful!* "But I think I can deal with her, at

least stop her attack for the moment and let everyone get out of here. I've only done it the once, but I learned it from an angel of death. I just hope it works on a ghost."

"What works?"

"You'll see. Get ready."

"I hope you know what you're doing."

Me too, but if it doesn't work I can just pause again and hopefully come up with something else. With both in position and the spell to make himself better dropped he took his own position. *About that big, it should impact her there, it covers them... good. That should do it.* Mentally willing time to begin again their screams carried on, and he activated his *lifestreaming* barrier, at such a range that the arms of Martha were caught just inside, leaving her on the outside. She screamed and dropped the boy, shrinking back from the green glow of the energy field. *Gotcha. This is literal life energy, so of course it's not going to be compatible with you.* "Run, get out of here," Lysanias told the kids. "I'll cover you."

"Mom, please, you don't have to do this, I'm fine," Mavis told her, appearing before her.

Good girl, keep her busy. The kids scrambled up and helped their friend up, who was bleeding rather badly from five puncture wounds on his neck. "Press this to neck and will him to be healed," he called, pulling out a healing ward and offering it to the nearest person, one of the girls. "That should at least slow the bleeding. But get out of this room first."

She didn't waste time questioning this and grabbed it, but stopped at the edge of the barrier.

"You can go through this side, go."

The kids started for the nearest door.

"I must keep my daughter safe!" Martha repeated.

Mavis made a grab for her mother as she lunged for the barrier again, but she passed right through.

"How do we get through to her?" she wailed.

"Working on it." He glanced back and the kids were passing through the barrier, obviously heading towards that dark area that must be door further on.

Martha's claws skittered across the glowing green barrier, unable to pierce it, so she looked for a new target. Jonathan was nearest, so she gave up on the barrier and went for him instead. The spirit gestured and threw a wall of fire in her way, which caused her to shriek and shrink back.

Good, keep her off balance. Maybe that would hurt her and maybe it wouldn't but the fear of fire is ingrained. Fire- bad.

But that didn't last, as she still had other victims to reach for, and went for Kenzie screaming "You stole my daughter's clothes! I'll rip them off you!"

She picked up on them wearing the same outfit? She's not totally out of it.

Rosalina yanked her with telekineses so her claws missed, putting herself between the two. "No, you deal with me first," she told the enraged ghost.

"I will," Martha told her, and gestured. Rosalina went flying, and Lysanias winced as she landed in a heap several meters away.

"And now for you!"

"Mom, please, I'm not in any danger, these humans are my friends!"

"Friends? Humans kill, they killed me, you can't be friends with them." She turned back to Kenzie, made to grab her. Unable to see her Kenzie was grabbed by the neck and lifted, a trickle of blood running down the side of her face.

I have to do something, but keep these kids safe too. I really do need to be in two places at- wait, no I don't. Lysanias dropped the barrier and dashed towards Mavis, pulling his sword out.

"Martha!" he called, reaching her. Mavis didn't know what was going on but did not resist as Lysanias came up behind her and put the sword to her neck. "I thought you were protecting your daughter?"

She gave a cry of absolute fury and threw Kenzie aside. "I will protect my daughter!" The sword seemed to vibrate a bit in his hand, and he tightened his grip thinking she was going to try pulling it away from him, but that didn't seem to happen. She looked confused,

and made a pushing motion, making him feel like he was being pushed back. He didn't actually go anywhere, just grabbed Mavis tighter. "You can't save her!"

"Get away from my daughter!" She sped forward, just what he wanted, and her hands passed through Mavis to slash at him. He barely grabbed her hand with his left as he jumped back. *Gotcha*. He then *pulled*, hoping this was going to work.

It didn't, she felt her resisting and her hand passed through his. "What are you trying to do to me?" she demanded. "Release my daughter!"

Keep her attention here, Lysanias! "Make me!"

"You dare!"

"Er, he's my friend?" Mavis repeated, not sounding as convincing now.

A beam came from Rosalina's direction, impacting Marath's back and causing her to whirl. "I'll pull this entire place down on your heads!" She spread her hands high, and the walls began to tremble.

Er, won't that bury your daughter too?

"Now!" Rosalina shouted.

Yes, you don't have to tell me.

Lysanias gave Mavis a shove and stuck his hand through Martha's chest, again trying to *pull* what only he could pull.

This time it worked, and silence filled the air as a shimmering ball of light seemed to appear inside Martha, her form being sucked into it. The walls stopped trembling and silence settled over the area.

To be broken by Kenzie yelling "Can someone please tell me what's going on? Who is that, what is that you're holding, and what have you been doing?"

"Rosalina, meet Kenzie, Kenzie, Rosalina. She's the manifestation of the magical force that exists inside my wand which allows me to do wand based magic. You okay there, Rosalina?"

"I'll be fine," she said, getting up. "I'm just glad hitting her with that magical bolt shifted her attention."

"Me too, thanks for the assist. This," he hefted the soul, turning back to Kenzie, "is the soul of Martha, who up until a second ago was a ghost we were fighting. You couldn't see her because, ghost. It seems Mavis' mother is even more protective of her daughter than her father."

"Which I didn't even believe was possible," Mavis muttered. "But why attack us? She was obviously watching those kids and has been here for a hundred years without incident."

"Because you showed up," he guessed. "She was haunting this place because she died here, but her last non-ghostly thoughts and thus her purpose were to protect you."

Mavis nodded. "Which she couldn't do if I wasn't around. So my being here caused all this. Nice."

"Is it over?" a voice called from the darkness. Everyone looked and one of the girls had her head stuck through the door frame.

"You kids need to leave, very important ghost busting stuff going on here," Kenzie told them.

"Can we get our stuff?"

"Stuff?" she looked around and noticed the place was lit with some LED lights, and there were sleeping bags and stuff strewn all over. "Oh, sure, that's fine."

The kids rushed out, giving the group a wide berth, hastily stuffing their possessions into knapsacks. They were talking among themselves as to who owned what.

"What language is that?" Kenzie asked no one in particular.

"What did she say?" asked a boy.

Lysanias rolled his eyes. *Do I dare get out some translation wards?*

"It's English," one of the girls said in English. "I'd love to talk to you more, I can get some extra credit in class if I do!"

She and Kenzie started talking, Kenzie asking if anyone spoke Russian, and one of the boys did, so they started all talking and translating for one another.

Wards seem way easier. And aren't you supposed to be leaving?

"What's that?" one of the boys asked, pointing at the soul.

Yes, you should definitely be leaving. Wait though, you can see this? That's odd. So he answered. "The ghost that was haunting this place. With a little luck she'll never bother anyone again."

"What? Ghosts are actually real? And you're really ghost facers or something?"

"Something," he agreed dryly.

"We were part of an actual ghost battle?" another said. "Wicked!"

"Apart from the fact I could have died," said the one with the neck wound.

"Shoot, right, forgot about that. How did the ward work? Are you okay?"

"Ward?"

"That paper I gave someone, are you fully healed?"

"Oh, it burned up but I felt better. I think I'm still bleeding a little though."

"Rosalina, you can heal, right? I've got my hands full here."

"I sure can. Come over here, I'll take care of it."

"Er, I can accept your name is Rosalina, sort of, but why are you dressed up as Rosalina from Super Mario Galaxy?" he asked, walking over to her.

Kenzie snapped her fingers after this was translated. "I thought I recognized her from someplace! That was it."

"What's this now?" she asked, confused. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Hey Mike, if vampires, ghosts, angels, and God knows what else are real, why not video game characters? Just let her heal you and let's get out of here before before something else weird happens."

What's a video game?

"Vampires don't exist!" Mavis lied, trying to force a laugh. *Wait, does she speak other languages than English? I suppose she would speak this Romanian, right, if that's where we are. I'll have to ask later.*

"Er, Mavis, I think that ship has sailed," Jonathan told her, again after hearing a translation. "But you better not tell anybody!" he threatened. He kicked and punched the air, showing off his skills. "We'll know about it."

We will? How?

"Who would believe us?"

"Er, I sort of recorded the whole thing?" one of the girls told them, holding up a cell phone.

"Don't tell them that!" a boy insisted.

"But-"

"Sleep!" Rosalina cast, pointing her wand in the general direction of the kids. The four fell instantly asleep, crashing to the ground. She looked at the boy she had just been healing.

"I don't suppose I could make it to the door before you-"

"Sleep."

crash

"Well!" said Kenzie, going over to grab the phone. "That was good thinking, whoever you are." She looked between her and Lysanias. "Weird how I seem to be able to understand either of you, despite not actually being able to tell what language you're actually using. Never thought about that before..." She started poking at it.

"Yeah, good job," Lysanias told her.

The group then got busy messing the camp up again and putting everyone in the sleeping bags.

"But they'll still remember it!" Mavis protested. "Even if they don't have any photos as proof, won't they wake up and talk about it?"

"I can fix that, once I deal with this... er, her," Lysanias said. "Now that I have a minute."

"What are you going to do?" Mavis asked, coming over to look at her mother's soul.

"I once pulled two souls apart that had been joined, but there's another skill I picked up from the angel of death. I can repair them. I think your mother's soul has been degraded from being here so long, I'm going to try healing it. Then I'll shove it into a crystal, take the crystal back to your castle, and let her out when you're alone with your father. If my healing doesn't

work, perhaps seeing you safe will calm her.” *And then she can move on, or become a castle ghost there? I’m sure they have room for one more.*

“You can actually heal the soul?” Kenzie asked. “Wild.”

“I hope so. I made some notes in my pad, hopefully I can get it out.” He grabbed it out carefully from the pocket and had Jonathan hold it up while he paged through it. “Oh hey, how about that? Someone expanded my entry, it seems there a lot more I can do than just heal or harm souls. That was nice of them, I never even suspected. Let me see now.” He scanned the entry he had made, now three times as long. “Oh. Now isn’t that interesting?”

“What is?” Jonathan asked.

“Kenzie will be pleased, it seems I was lying to her before, at least unknowingly.”

“Lying?” she asked. “About what?”

“About what I can do for you. This says here, and it says while not exactly risky per say you might not get exactly what you wanted, but it is possible.”

“What’s possible? What are you babbling about?”

He smiled at her. “I can take out your soul and empower it, giving you supernatural abilities.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Oh, Em, Gee,” she breathed. “Like what?”

He waved the question off. “Later, we can talk about that later. Let’s get Martha squared away before I lose my grip on her. Rosalina, can you make a crystal with your powers? I would, but I don’t want to lose her.”

“Not a problem!” She started doing whatever it was she did to create matter out of nothing. Meanwhile Lysanias allowed energy to flow into Martha, healing her from the magical blast and then trying to strip away the corruption that had seeped into her, replacing it with light. The soul did get brighter, which he felt was a good sign. When done he took the crystal from Rosalina and carefully brought the two together, trying to shove the soul in.

Nothing happened.

“Huh. I would have sworn that would work. I mean if I pull it out, I should be able to put it someplace else. Right?”

“Uh, phrasing?” Kenzie cryptically admonished.

“Can one of us hold onto it?” Mavis asked, holding a hand out.

He shook his head. “I relax my power and she’ll be out again. Hey hubPad, is there I way I can place this soul into this crystal?”

“Affirmative,” it said, entries changing on the pad. “Relating to the skill of handing a soul to the person it came from, a soul can be placed into an object for later retrieval. I am displaying the notes for the technique now.”

He looked over the text. “This is way over my head, I would need to know a lot more about souls before I could attempt this. Shoot. Thanks anyway, pad.”

“So now what?” Mavis asked.

“Let me think…” He considered a moment. “Okay, I’m going to teleport back with Mavis. I hate to leave you, but Rosalina, stay and make sure they don’t wake up. If I can’t teleport with the soul at least Mavis will be gone, and she is hopefully healed enough to not immediately attack you. If I can, we’ll deal with her, I’ll come back, take care of the kids’ memories, and we can all head back to the castle.”

“That’s reasonable I guess,” Rosalina agreed. “I wonder if I shouldn’t learn some kind of teleport spell? See, that’s another reason to always have me out, I should be learning more magic from you.”

“It wouldn’t hurt,” he agreed, “but wand magic didn’t seem to have one. They do something apart from their wands, which I didn’t learn because I can already do it. So I can’t teach you how they did it. Again, something for later. Who’s coming with?”

“I’m coming,” Jonathan told them. “Even if I can’t be in the room, I want to be nearby if Mavis gets to see her mother.”

“Thanks Jonny.”

“I’ll stay here, keep putting the camp back the way we found it when we arrived,” Kenzie told them.

“Very well. Mountain spirit, thanks for the help.”

It bowed and vanished.

“Uh, now who are you talking you?” Kenzie asked.

“Never mind. Come along, Jonathan.”

Lysanias *shifted* back to the castle, and luckily the soul came with him, though he felt the teleport was more difficult than usual. *It’s a good thing the two castles aren’t very far apart.* With that they found Dracula, told him what had gone on, and found a quiet place for Lysanias to let her soul go. They chose his bedroom, feeling it was far enough away she wouldn’t sense anyone (if she could) and could be captured again if she ran off. Of course he wasn’t going to be there, but had given her a ward she could talk through, in case he needed to get back there. Jonathan was down the hall, anxiously pacing.

“Ready?” he asked.

Dracula looked down at himself, brushing himself off. “How do I look?”

“Oh dad, you look fine,” Mavis told him. “Do it.”

“I’m teleporting back to the lobby the second I let her go. If she doesn’t go berserk just tear the ward if you want privacy. Otherwise, good luck.”

Both nodded and he relaxed his grip on the soul, turning it back into Martha.

He shifted.

Chapter 11

Power

When: Ten minutes later

Where: Back in the castle ruin

When there had been no screams for help through the ward Lysanias made sure everything was okay, and Mavis told him yes, her mother seemed quite calm now. He told her he was heading back and she said that was fine, so he *shifted* back to the ruined castle and got to work. To each sleeping person he bent and entered their minds, planting the suggestion that the night before nothing interesting had happened. He was able to erect a sort of wall around the memories of them appearing which should keep them from thinking about it too much, and finally it was done. With one last look around the camp to make sure the layout seemed reasonable and nothing incriminating had been left behind, he *shifted* everyone back to the castle.

“We’ll collect Mavis when she’s done talking to her mother,” he told Kenzie. “Then go back to your place to plan our next move. Meanwhile, I’ll read more of the notes that were made about adding powers to a soul.”

“Would I be a fae?” she asked.

“You would be a human with supernatural powers. The distinction is probably meaningless outside our little circle. To a monster you would be a fae, because you had powers and looked human. Unless fae have some way of telling themselves from humans, they too would just see a person with powers and think, oh, a fae like me.”

“You’re probably right. I’ll go see if I can help anywhere until we’re ready to go.”

“I’ll call you mentally when it’s time, so if you hear my voice but I’m not around, you’re not going mad or anything. Come back down here... or wherever I tell you to go, I guess.”

“Good to know.”

A little more than an hour later, he and Jonathan had been watching the front desk and checking people in and out, he found himself being tightly hugged by a moist eyed young vampire.

“Thank you,” she told him from behind. “I never really got to know my mother. Even this brief time of talking with her is a gift I never believed I would receive. You made this the best birthday ever. I can never repay you, but know I wish I could.”

“Well, you know, it was nothing,” he managed. He could feel her emotions clearly, he know what this had meant to her.

“For you, maybe,” she said with a grin. “Oh, here’s my dad, he wants to thank you too.”

Dracula started by putting a hand out, but then thought better of it and swept him up into a hug as well. “You gave me my wife back,” he said, sounding and feeling a mix of emotions. “Even for that long, to say goodbye, I never expected it. And now I know *with certainty* her soul is truly at rest. You have my thanks.”

“I was happy to do it.”

He pulled back. “I’d like to be alone for a time, are you leaving right away? I want to say a proper goodbye.”

“It shouldn’t be for that long, dad. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“I know, Mavis. Still...”

“Our leaving can wait. I have to get Kenzie back here anyway.”

“I’ll need to pack some things,” Mavis agreed. “We won’t leave without saying goodbye.”

“If you’re packing who’s running the front desk?”

“Looks like Johnny.”

“Johnny?” His head whipped around lasered in on Jonathan who was talking to a skeleton, leaning on the counter. “My hotel is ruined!”

“Come on dad, I’m sure he’s doing fine.”

He looked back at her, putting a hand on her cheek. “You really like him, don’t you?”

“I think I do, dad.”

He sighed. "If he makes you happy, he's all right with me. Of course, if he breaks your heart..." He showed his fangs. "I'll be down in a bit." He turned and sadly walked up the stairs.

"What happened, if you don't mind my asking?"

"We just talked, and she said it was time for her to go. She shimmered and was gone."

"So she did move on. Not knowing if you were safe really was keeping her here."

"So it seems."

"Go on and pack, I won't leave without you."

"Okay."

Lysanias looked around for something to do, then decided to leave one last gift for Mavis and her father. Heading outside he yanked up a huge rock with earth bending and put it into a contain ward, then got it right out again once inside. *Stupid revolving door, how do you get anything in here?* With the hubPad open to the picture of her mother and his own memory of what her ghost looked like he used his ability to reshape things to create a statue off to the side on a pedestal.

"In loving remembrance, Martha Dracula," Jonathan read, coming up behind him after he stepped back. "Not a bad likeness."

"Thanks. You ready to go?"

"You've got my backpack, right? Everything I own is in there."

"Would you give it up?"

"Give what up? My backpack? Why would I have to?"

"I mean the wandering lifestyle you have. If Mavis asked you to stay, would you give it up? Give up seeing the world and settle down with her?"

"Sure, she would be worth it. Totally worth it! I mean have you seen her?"

Oh, I've seen.

"Plus she's kind, funny, smart, caring, powerful-"

"Yes, yes she is, I can't say you're wrong." *What would stop me from moving on? Is there anything, or anyone, that would be worth more to me than saving realities from the shadow avatar? Of course a person that amazing might be willing to come with me, and do well. Right? Is there such a person out there for me? Not that I'm jealous of Jonathan or anything...*

"You just keep getting me gifts," Mavis told Lysanias when she came down with her suitcase. She was looking the statue over with her father, who also admitted it was very true to life. (After some adjustments done that he pointed out)

"He's given us all something," Kenzie told her. "And hopefully a little more in a bit."

"I haven't forgotten, Kenzie."

"Just making sure."

With that Mavis said her goodbyes to everyone assembled in the lobby, thanking them for her birthday and telling them to be strong in the times to come.

"I'd say keep her safe," Dracula said to him, shaking his hand, "but I already know you will. Both of you." He looked knowingly at Jonathan.

"We will," he promised, with unusual seriousness.

"We'll keep you informed," Lysanias told him. "Are you sure you don't want to come?"

He shook his head. "I leave the world to my daughter, and those she loves. Me? I'll keep this place in one piece so she has a home to come back to. Jason comes here, he'll learn even monsters out of the loop for hundreds of years can be fierce if roused. Isn't that right, fellows?"

There was a cry of agreement from everyone, with the wolf pups howling.

"Fair enough. Ready to go, everyone?"

They were, so joining hands, smiling at the monsters that were waving goodbye to them, he *shifted*.

Now back in the apartment Jonathan started showing Mavis a map of the city that Kenzie had so they could both get a sense of what was nearby, and Lysanias had Kenzie sit down.

"It's probably going to be random, what you get," he told her. "There is a way to control the general 'grouping' of powers you get, but that's something only experienced people can do. People who have studied the souls of those with powers, so they know basically what to add to them. In your case I can simply empower it and hope for the best."

"Just how random?" she asked. "I don't want anything useless."

"Every power has application at some point, I wouldn't pass up learning anything, no matter how infrequently I thought I was going to use it." *Like Skyebourne magic.* "But you'll get a grouping of powers, like becoming an alchemist or an artificer. Your powers will all relate to each other because that's how souls work." *Human souls, anyway, unlike mine. But I can't give you the ability to learn anything like I can, that's how my soul was made.* "They typically channel power in certain ways, and so we call that way a certain name. You won't be able to shoot energy blasts, and reshape rock, and tell the future in dreams. But you could get a complete set of energy manipulation powers, for example. Energy blast, energy shield, energy draining..."

"I just hope I get something flashy like that!"

"I guess. Lay back if you're ready."

Now that the moment had come though she seemed hesitant. "Will it hurt?"

"Tearing your soul from your body? It'll feel weird, no doubt about that, but it's not damage. It shouldn't cause you pain."

"And how will I know what I get? Will you know, once it's done?"

He shook his head. "You'll just have to try a bunch of things. Like I said, even after I do it, I won't have the experience to see what I added, exactly." *Would the universe know? I mean could I just ask what powers she got, even if she has never used them, and get an answer?*

"Okay." She pivoted, putting her legs up. "Let's do this!"

Lysanias put a hand on her chest and *pulled*, making her gasp and convulse. Her body limply fell again, and he was holding a shining, swirling ball of light.

"That's the soul?" Jonathan asked quietly. "A real human soul? That's really what we are?"

"That's what you are," he agreed. "Now please let me work."

He put energy into it, willing her soul to become empowered and thus, supernatural. As it was an act of will this empowering was enhanced by the sword, the magicite near the hilt pulsing in time with the light that flooded it. It shone brighter, throwing colors about the room, and then subsided again. Looking it over he seemed satisfied, and let it go. Streaking back into Kenzie, he felt that yes, her spirit energy "flavor" had changed, so something had happened.

"Now we just wait for her to wake up," Lysanias announced. "And see if she feels any different." *I don't want to rush her, it isn't a physical thing obviously, but she did just have her soul torn out. That will put a crimp on anyone's weekend.*

"Would you like to have him try it on you?" Mavis asked Jonathan.

"Nah, I'm fine the way I am, I think. Let's see what happens to her, not that I think it went poorly or anything," he hastened to add.

"I see where you're coming from."

"So what should we do now?" Mavis asked, clearly hoping to get out and see the city given she had been trying to see out the windows.

"I don't know about you two, but all this teleporting and ghost fighting and giving people powers has made me exhausted. I'm taking a nap. I can give you the address for Trick's bar, if you want to go introduce yourselves over there. Mavis should be able to see the entrance, she's supernaturally aware. Otherwise you could walk around the city, it won't be sunrise for a few hours, given what direction we came in. Or just talk Mavis though what to expect in the human world? Whatever. Just don't get her killed, I don't want to have to go back to her father and tell her I couldn't keep her safe for even a day."

"I'll keep that in mind. What do you say, Mavis, want to wander around the city for a bit?" He offered his arm.

"I'd like that very much!"

"Have fun, kids!"

"Kids? I'm a hundred years older than you!" Mavis protested.

"I stand by my statement." *Because if it comes right down to it, I'm thousands of years older than you.*

With the two off exploring the city Lysanias threw himself down on Bo's bed, not thinking about what had been going on here the last time he was in this room. No sir. Pure thoughts alone for our hero.

Pure horror. For in the dream, Lysanias floated in water, some kind of enclosed tank, and felt a chill as if the sun had never touched it. Before him floated several woman he had never seen before, their glassy eyes staring at him lifelessly. Somehow he knew that it wasn't too late for them, this fate could be avoided. Suddenly there was another figure in the tank next to him, a man with a deformed face and matted hair.

"What are you doing here?" the figure demanded. "This is my realm. Begone!"

He woke up. *That wasn't Jason, was it? And what is that?*

Lysanias sprang from the bed and rushed downstairs, to find Kenzie with her clothes off. She was sweaty from doing push-ups, continuing to do them as he entered the room. "One hundred twenty three," she said. "One hundred twenty four."

"Er?"

"Huh?" She looked over her shoulder. "Lysanias, hi!"

"Hello?"

She sprang up, and Lysanias couldn't help staring. Not simply because she was undressed, sweaty, and amazing looking but because her spiritual energy was several times his own. Her arm was still red, and it looked like she had been scratching it, there were red marks up and down it. But she felt excited and exclaimed "You're up! Hey!"

"I'm up, had the oddest dream, I'm going to have to look into it. What about you?"

"Oh yeah, I had a weird dream too!" She grabbed a towel that had been thrown across a chair and wiped her face. "I was being chased through a dark forest, by something I couldn't see. Then this beautiful white deer showed up, antlers and everything, shining like there was no tomorrow. Whatever was chasing me stopped, and the deer led me through the forest to a clearing. I think it said something to me, but I forget what. Anyway, I don't know what you did to me but I feel amazing!" She spun around. "I've never had this much energy- oh. I should probably put some clothes on, huh? I was just working some of this energy off and got hotter and hotter and kept taking stuff off." She laughed. "Is that my power? A lot of energy? Can't be, right? Not that I'm complaining."

"No, I doubt just energy is your power. I felt I did a good job empowering your soul so maybe it's just a residual effect? We'll have to see after a few days."

"I got a good workout in, either case. If this is permanent soon I'll have arms bigger than your legs." She laughed and flexed.

He looked around. "Are Mavis and Jonathan back?"

"Oh yeah, I gave them my room after I blocked the windows off. Don't want her getting fried now do we?" She laughed again. "Anyway, I'm going to have a shower and get dressed. Want to join me? Just kidding! See ya soon!" She bounced away, but Lysanias called after her.

"Wait a second."

"What? Did you want to join me?" She grinned, almost expectantly, putting a hand on her hip.

Would that really be a good idea? "I wanted to ask about the arm."

"Oh, still itches. You want to work your magic on it?" She walked over and offered it. "May as well, before I get dressed. I had hoped what you did to my soul would have helped, but I guess this is just physical. We'll still have to do something about it."

“Agreed. I can’t just keep healing you, we need to find a solution for it. Don’t get me wrong, in the short term I don’t mind, but I won’t be around forever.”

“Maybe once I know what my powers are I can head back to the Norn and get her to take it back. You know, make her an offer she can’t refuse? Though the chainsaw worked the first time...” she mused.

“Wasn’t it going to her that caused all this in the first place?” he asked, laying a hand on her arm and healing her.

“Who can remember? All done? Thanks! Be out soon.” She bounced away.

She seems fine. Wonder what her dream was all about? Is she a Seer or ESPer? They both dream. Well, who knows, I want to ask about those woman I saw, and that guy, what was that about?

So after getting something to eat and putting on the usual magic he settled in to ask the universe a few things. *Is there a group of woman in danger of being killed and shoved into a tank of water like I saw in my dream?*

Yes

I see. How long, in hours, until the first woman is killed?

Two hours.

Rabies, that’s not a lot of time. In what city can I find the group of woman who are in danger of being killed?

Guelph

By that time Kenzie was out and dressed, and looked over at him. “Did you find anything out?”

“Yes. I need to head to a place called Guelph to save a group of woman from being murdered. It may have something to do with Jason, I don’t know. The man in the dream that’s connected to them spoke to me in the dream I had about them, which isn’t normal.”

“Guelph? That’s only about an hour west of here. And that’s driving, you could probably fly there in forty minutes.”

You underestimate me. With the shoes boosting my speed, I could probably do it in twenty. The problem would be knowing when I was there. No markings on the ground like there is on a map. But it being only an hour away, that’s some coincidence, isn’t it? Or does it really have something to do with Jason and I’m in the right place after all?

“Do you want me to come? I was planning on visiting Bo today. Maybe get some other projects done, clean this place up, I just have so much energy now!”

“There’s only two hours before the first is in danger, so I don’t have any time. Besides, there’s only the one guy and you don’t know what your powers are.” *I can do all the martial arts I need myself, after all.*

“So much the better! Put me in danger, see what shakes out.”

He shook his head. “I’d rather just ask the universe, then begin your training as normal. I know you’re feeling all that new energy of yours, but let’s play it safe for now.” *I don’t want you rushing into something feeling invincible and then finding you can’t actually help and are then in the way.*

“Up to you. I guess I’ll just visit Bo then.”

“First can you get me a picture of Guelph so I can head there and start narrowing down who is in danger?”

“Sure thing.” She pulled out her phone. “Let’s see what google maps says is the center of that place.”

Moments later, an “ignore me” ward firmly in place, Lysanias *shifted* to the middle of that town and looked around. It was a normal residential area, with normal houses and traffic, lawns and trees, people out and about. *Great, I can ask how far to go in each direction and at worst still have more than an hour left. Let's do it.* So he sat down, making sure he wasn't going to be in someone's way while he waited for the universe to get back to him, and asked his questions. It took the entire forty minutes to get the heading and distance, and he started off, carefully counting steps. If there was a house in the way he simply flew over it and continued, same with busy roads and any other obstacles. He had to be careful of traffic, no one was going to swerve to not hit him, though he was pretty sure he saw a fae or two because he and his wings did get at least one odd look as someone drove past.

All this still took him more time than he would have liked, as the minutes ticked passed he started to get a little frantic, but finally the count ran out on Woolwich St.

Okay, another ten minutes should be fine. I should be close, I wasn't able to get a totally accurate count with the flying but it can't be far. Plus I asked for the number of hours, so it could be two hours and fifty minutes, I still have time. Get the actual address, get there, save the first victim. Panic won't serve, I should be able to save them no problem.

With a response of Division St Lysanias rushed the length of Woolwich to find the side road, turning in and heading south west down the street. Finally the house stood before him, and he went up to the door. Putting his wings away he checked the “ignore me” on his sword, decided against the shield, pulled off his own ward, and rang the bell. Then he smacked his forehead and concentrated on what his senses were telling him.

There does seem to be one person inside- and they're terrified! He raced to a window, imagined himself inside and *shifted*, then raced through the house. In one room was the lower half of a woman in what looked like an office, with chair, desk, and computer. (an outdated windows 7 HP, not that he knew that) She was apparently being pulled though her desk, struggling against some unseen force pulling her in.

That can't be right. He boldly strode over there and grabbed the woman around the waist, hauling her up and far away from the table. A pair of headphones around her neck connected to a cord connected to a phone was yanked up last. (See, this is why Apple got rid of that headphone jack, it could save your life!) An arm followed, sticking up out of what seemed to be a puddle of water, and groped around for the hysterical woman now on the floor and scrambling back.

She was being pulled through that tiny puddle? That seems like the stuff of nightmares. I'm in the right place, all right.

Before he could grab it and try pulling whoever was attached to the arm up it snaked back and vanished.

“What's going on?” cried the woman. “What's happening to me!?”

Chapter 12

Drownsman

When: A moment after the heroic rescue

Where: A house on Division St

Having given the frantic lady a chance to calm down Lysanias offered her a hand to help her up. She was wearing a white top with printed blue flowers on it that left her arms bare, and long black pants. She wasn't freaking out anymore but she hadn't said anything either.

"Go through interdimensional portals often?" he joked, unsure of what to say.

That seem to jar her back to reality. "No, I don't. Who are you, how did you get in here?"

No, no, it's fine, don't thank me for saving your life. I'm sure you'll get around to it. "I'm Lysanias, professional..." *What did those kids say? Oh right.* "Ghost facer. Hope you don't mind I let myself in, there wasn't time for the usual niceties. You being dragged through a puddle, and all that." He glanced over at the table, eyeing it suspiciously. "And you are?"

"I'm Lauren. Thanks." She accepted his hand and he hauled her up. "Wow, you're strong. What's going on? Is it really a ghost? Was Madison right all along?"

"It's something, ghosts can't usually do what just happened here. Look, there are still people in danger from that guy, friends of yours maybe? With me saving you it may go after someone else. Do you know where they might be?"

"Madison is probably at home, she hardly ever leaves there. Hanna I have no idea, Kobie I bet is at work."

"So let's start there. Call her, make sure she's safe for the moment and we can head there. Is it far?"

"The Butterfly Salon? No, it's less than ten minutes from here."

"Great. Make the call." He handed her the phone, still slightly damp but working.

She didn't take it. "Look, who are you?"

He sighed. *We don't have time for this!* "I'm the person that saved your life a minute ago, isn't that enough for now? I knew you were in danger, I came, I pulled you out. I know about ghosts and other creatures of the supernatural world, I'm here to save you. Make. The. Call."

"I suppose it's no stranger than anything else that's gone on the past two days." She took the phone and dialed.

"Hey Kobie, where are you right now?"

"Is anything weird going on there?"

"What? The sinks? Get away from there!"

"There's no time to explain, just-" Lysanias grabbed the phone away from her.

"Can you send us a picture?"

"Who is this? Where's Lauren?"

"Your life is in real danger. Can you. Send us. A picture. Of where you are?" *If this little device is anything like my hubPad, and I see it has a display that can show images, it must be able to record them, right?*

"Give me that!" She grabbed it back and put it back up to her ear. "Do what he says, I don't know what's going on but he seems to know what he's talking about. I'll explain later." Her eyes said "if he ever explains it to me."

She pulled the phone away from her ear and held it up. The picture changed to lady with dark skin and shoulder length frizzy black hair wearing nice clothes. In the background it looked open with many chairs in a row, and all the sinks were running full blast, overflowing with water. She swung the phone towards them and they were all that was in the picture.

"There, happy?" she said. "It's just someone playing a prank or something."

"No it's not, get out of there!"

"That's what I told her!" another voice said.

"Wait, Cathryn?" asked Lauren. "Is that you?"

"We don't have time for this, hang on."

“Hang on to what?”

But Lysanias didn't waste time saying “to me” he just grabbed Lauren's arm and concentrated on the picture he was being shown. *I want to be right there.* He *shifted*.

Lauren screamed as she found herself in the middle of the Butterfly Salon instead of her house, and the two ladies, one light skinned and one dark, spun to see what the noise was. The light skinned one had much longer blond hair that framed her face and she wore a silver pendant with a blue stone set in the front on a chain around her neck. Lauren scrambled away from him, and splashed into the water that was soaking the floor there.

“Where did you come from?” Kobie asked, taking a step and lowering her phone. “If you were already here, why did you call me?”

Lauren was too freaked out to answer and Lysanias had work to do. He took a stance and gestured, pushing the water back with water bending and then freezing it in a circle back from where he was to the sinks. Then back up the columns of water, through the spouts, and into the pipes. *Thanks Korra.* “Okay, that's stopped it for now,” he announced. “I have to concentrate on keeping it ice though. These other two, Madison and Hanna you said? Call Hanna-” He looked over and she was crab walking away from him, freaking out again. “Oh yeah, first time being teleported right? Feels a little weird, I know, it'll pass. Look, can you call Hanna?” he asked Kobie.

“How did you do that?” the other girl asked. “You weren't here a second ago.”

“Can we *please* save the lives of your other two friends, *then* get the explanation? Obviously he's striking out at all of you, but didn't expect me to get here so fast. We need to secure the other two and get you all safe.” *A ghost haunts a place or person, why come after all these women? I don't get it.*

“You're the real thing, aren't you?” she breathed. “They hired me as a fake, but it's real. It's all real, isn't it? You're the real thing!”

“Yes, I am. Now can we move this along?”

“Call her!” she demanded, whirling on Kobie. “Right the Hell now. You saw, that was no prank, and he really teleported you heard the bang of the air getting shoved aside. He's a real psychic. It's got to be! I told you we were in danger!”

She blinked at the other lady a moment, trying to process this.

“Call her!” Cathryn grabbed the phone and shoved it in her face. “You know her number better than I do. It must be in your phone, right?” She turned it and started tapping on it. Kobie grabbed it away from her.

“Fine, I'll call her, but I want an explanation.”

“How am I here?” Lauren asked as Cathryn nodded once and went over to help her up. “What's going on?”

“You were just teleported, it's not a big deal,” Cathryn told her. “I mean, honestly pull yourself together.”

“Oh, don't act like you know what's going on!” She slapped the other woman's hands away. “I don't need your help.”

“Fine.”

“She's with Madison, they actually found some stuff out,” Kobie told them, holding the phone away from her. “They... what? Water? Oh no! Their sinks are overflowing too!”

“Quick, have them send me a picture! Everyone else come grab onto me, I can teleport you all!”

“I told you it was teleportation. This is so amazing! I'm actually in the middle of a real haunting!”

“You're crazy!” Lauren told her. “All of you. I'm leaving!” She turned to leave.

“You will come over here and stay quiet,” Lysanias told her, pushing the command into her brain.

“I think I'll come over there,” she decided. “And be quiet.” She walked over and meekly stood, waiting to be teleported.

“So cool,” breathed Cathryn. “A real psychic,” she squealed.

By that time Lysanias had a new picture, had everyone grab hands, and *shifted* again. He was now in a house once more, two startled looking woman looking at him. Everyone looked around, marveling at how they had been transported, when one of the women he

didn't know screamed and pointed. Everyone turned and there was a figure standing there, a man. He was soaking wet and his face was twisted, his hair almost looking like seaweed.

"Behind me," he told the group, pushing them behind him.

"Sebastian," one of the ladies said.

He stopped and cocked his head.

"So you have a name," he told it. "And apparently they can see you? That's odd, are you a ghost at all? No matter. You may impress them with your looming but you do not impress me." *I could banish him, but that guarantees him a place in Hell. I wish I knew a skill to just make a ghost move on, go where their soul should go. Maybe I'll just try to drive it off for now, figure something out later.*

"Why do you interfere here?" the figure asked. "I would not have killed you, had you stayed away."

He laughed. "You can't kill me. What's the deal anyway? Why *these* girls?"

"They made themselves known to me. But that one," he pointed at Madison, "is mine. Blood of my blood. Flesh of my flesh. She will give me what I need."

Everyone but Lysanias turned to Madison like "what's he talking about girl?" but were too shocked to speak.

"You need to move on, that's what you need. I can help you with that."

"No! You will be the first to die for keeping them from me!" He stepped forward and reached, but fell short.

Yes, that's fine. I'll just 'soulize' this guy and figure out my next... what? "I'm right here, come get me. What's the—" He looked down, and the water that had spilled onto the floor seemed to be the limit of how far the man could move. "Oh, I get it," he realized. "You're haunting *the water*, not a specific person or place. Clever boy."

"The knowledge will avail you nothing. Even you have to drink!"

Technically I don't. "We'll see about that. Tell me, do you have control over ice?" He swept his leg back and gestured, reaching out with water bending again. The water started to freeze, starting with the sink and heading towards him. The man turned as the ice neared him. An eyeblink and he was gone. "I guess not." He lowered his hands, but maintained the ice he had created. "Can you turn the water off for the whole house?" he asked, looking back at the ladies. "Then I'll get rid of this and we can talk. This is all of you, right?"

"We were all at the séance," Cathryn told him. "I don't think anyone else is in danger."

"What did he mean, blood of my blood?" Kabie asked. "And how did we get here?"

"Yes, you owe us an explanation for all this!" demanded Lauren.

Lysanias looked the women over. Just as with the others the two he had just met had long hair making him wonder if any of these girls had their own style or what? All were just wearing normal clothes, but none seemed to really stand out. Apart from different hair colors, brown, reddish, blond, black... Any one could be a replacement for any other, in other words. "Now that you're safe I'm sure I can explain things to your satisfaction," he told them. "The water? I would hate for him to burst a pipe or something around here."

"I'll go," said Madison.

"Just make sure the floor is dry when you do," he cautioned.

"Oh, don't worry. After a year I'm very good at that."

A year?

She returned a moment later saying it was done, and he released his grip on the ice, allowing it to turn back into water. He then gathered it up and had them open a window, which he flung it through. Then he went down and physically blocked the pipe the water came through, just in case. *A plug of solid metal should do it, I can undo it later.*

"Now we can trade stories," he told them. "Is there a place we can sit?"

"We can use the living room," Madison told them, "you can all look over the stuff we got from Henley."

"Who?" everyone asked.

"Just come on."

The table in the living room was strewn with papers, and there was an old cassette player there as well, not that Lysanias knew what that was. Everyone dropped into chairs, all expect Lysanias who there wasn't space for.

"So you say this has been going on a year?" he prompted.

Madison nodded. "Ever since that night at the lake. I tripped on a beer bottle and smacked my head. When I opened my eyes I was in this creepy looking cabin and I saw Sebastian for the first time. Ever since then whenever I'm near water I get visions of him. This is the first time I've seen him for that long, or that clearly though."

"Yeah, she even takes her liquids through a tube," Kobie told them, pointing to her wrist. There was a tube sticking out from under a wristband, and she tucked it away again.

"Couldn't you have just had ice?" Lysanias asked.

"What?"

"Ice. If you were thirsty, just swallow small ice chips. His power is obviously over water, you saw him vanish when I iced everything in there." *Could she drink milk? Fruit juice? Those have water in them, but aren't considered water.*

"We did all see him," Hannah asked. "Right?" She looked to the others. They nodded.

"I never thought of it. Ice. I guess I could have," she admitted.

"Well, never mind that now. So he's getting stronger. Maybe because Jason is about to break free? You say it was a dream..."

"Can you take care of him?" Cathryn asked. "Can you drive him off or whatever? I mean if you can do what you did..."

"Jason who?" asked Lauren. "Start from the beginning, will you?"

"Very well. My name is Lysanias, and just hours ago I woke from a dream where I saw all of you dead, in a tank. That man was there too, saying it was his realm, and I shouldn't be there. So I set about finding you so I could protect you. It's what I do."

"Protect people? From ghosts?"

"From anything they need protecting from." *They don't need to hear about the shadow avatar. Let them deal just with this. I'll take care of Jason and the local avatar so they'll never need to know anyway.*

"You said he wasn't just a ghost?" Madison asked.

"That's right. At least not the type I usually deal with."

"What do you usually deal with?"

"Just yesterday I put to rest the ghost of a vampire who just wanted to protect her daughter."

"Wait, vampires are real?" asked Kobie.

"Yeah, they're real."

"What have we gotten ourselves into? This is all your fault, Hanna!"

"How is it my fault?!"

"If you hadn't called Cathryn to do that fake séance thing, if you had just believed your *best friend* in the world, he never would have known about us."

"How was I supposed to know ghosts were actually real? Or whatever this guy is?"

"It was raining so she wouldn't go to her wedding," Lauren explained.

"Ah."

"So if it's not a ghost, what is it?" Madison asked. "He was Sebastian, that much is clear from what we found out." She indicated the papers.

"Some kind of dream spirit? Made real because there's some dream stuff going on I won't get into right now. Or just a ghost that happened to have dream powers which are being augmented right now? Some combination? I don't know exactly. Doesn't matter."

"You can still deal with it?"

"I'm fairly confident I can." *If I can't, I have little chance against the real deal when he shows up.* "We'll probably have to go to wherever he's trying to take you, that way I can fight him without him just vanishing like you saw."

"How do you kill a ghost?" Cathryn asked.

"I wouldn't kill it, I would banish it. Though," he shook his head, "I hate to. I would rather the soul go through the normal cycle. Banishing it just makes a soul randomly appear in Hell."

"You're worried about the soul of someone like that? Did you see him?" Kobie asked.

"I don't know his story, and it's not really my place to judge. That's the Allfather's job. I'm not going to punish the man because you think he looks scary."

"Allfather- You mean God?"

"If you like."

"Wait, you're saying God is actually real too?" Cathryn asked. "I've not been to a church in years, is it too late?"

"Yeah, ghosts I can accept, one just tried to kill me," Lauren told them. "But God? How do you know?"

"I'm more worried about how you think we're going to get to where he is," Madison interrupted. "He's not just going to invite us. So you better not be suggesting what I think you're suggesting!"

"I'm afraid I am," he agreed.

"Oh no!" she sprang up. "No way!"

"What is it, Madison?" asked Hanna.

"He wants me to be the bait in a trap! Be pulled in by Sebastian, willingly go to that weird cabin of his."

"It's the only way," he agreed.

He sat back while the girls argued, Cathryn saying to trust him, Kobie not being sure, Lauren and Hanna saying whatever she had to do to be free, she had to risk it. Meanwhile, he was deep in thought. *If I can summon a death angel, like the type I learned to pull souls from, I can just hand it over. That way I don't have to destroy or banish the soul. If it should then go to Hell, fine, the angel can take it and my conscience is clean. I didn't act as a judge for a soul, because I don't know the whole story of that soul. These ladies get free of the ghost, everybody lives.*

"Say I agree to this bizarre plan," Madison finally asked Lysanias, shushing the others. "What would it entail?"

"First I petition an angel of death, make sure they will accept the soul I gave them. I'm pretty sure one will, that's not a problem. Then you and I give this Sebastian what he wants. You, in water. I'll be right there with you, so if he grabs you and takes you someplace I get taken along too. Once there he won't be able to leave because your friends will drain the water, he'll have to fight me. I'll turn him from a ghost into a soul, hand it over to the angel, and get us back to where we need to be."

"As simple as that?"

"Yes."

"I suppose I would have been dead either way, or my friends would be at this point. He wants me, fine, let's give him Hell."

Chapter 13

Trap

When: After some prep

Where: 2 Sydenham Street, Canada

After fixing the busted claw-foot bathtub by piecing a section of it back together, the women started filling it up and Madison got undressed. Lysanias had gone to the back yard, chanted for several minutes next to a flame to get the spirit of the dragonfly attached to himself, and found some ley lines. That done he augmented his skill with magic, taking advantage of the line which honestly didn't do all that much for him, and started the "prayer" for the angel. He had set his hubPad up to watch the whole goings on, and it gave him a personal 90% rating with a 100% chance of failure. (Meaning even performing the ritual perfectly his skill was such he couldn't succeed. It noted several areas for improvement he could read over later.) The dragonfly spirit and magic kicked in to boost his ability and actually allow him to succeed, and standing before him was an angel of death. It was draped in a white robe, had black wings, and a skeletal face that somehow conveyed surprise.

"I'm sorry to take you away from your work, but I need your help," he told it. "To make things easier, I can stop time while we talk. Or if you would prefer to do it yourself?"

The angel looked him over curiously, as if not believing his eye sockets, and gestured in a "go ahead" sort of way Lysanias took to mean to proceed.

"Pause," he said, touching the ring and willing the angel to be included in the frozen moment. It was, and looked around. "Is this acceptable?"

It nodded, once.

"Very well. To business. I am about to confront a ghost of some kind, but I hesitate to simply banish it to Hell, which I could do. Instead I wonder if you could take a moment, tag along with us, and once I turn it from a ghost into a pure soul you could take it to be judged and put into the normal soul cycle. His intent does seem to be murdering some people, but if he hasn't yet done so, I would hate to condemn him."

The figure considered, then brought out his little book, gesturing to it.

"The name? Oh, Sebastian. I caught a glimpse of the last name from the notes the ladies had on the table. Dawner, that was it. Sebastian Dawner."

The angel paged through the book, getting to the back, then stared at an entry for a moment. It nodded and put the book away.

"You'll help us?"

It tried to convey something with gestures, but gave up. A voice rang in Lysanias' head.

I am willing to take the soul. If the man has refused his calling to the afterlife once, I can not interfere with what he has become. I can come along with you, but am forbidden to take any direct action. Your handing it to me may technically break the rules, but that is your free will, not interference by me. I will not be disciplined for it. You are not murdering him, simply enabling his soul to move on, so your own soul should not be stained. Though your soul is quite odd, almost as if... well, never mind, I'm sure you already know.

Oh believe me, I do. "I understand. Thank you. Keeping you here is a strain, even if for only the few moments it should take. You would be willing to wear a ward to maintain your presence here?" He held it up. "You can simply tear it off when you wish to depart."

That is Enochian. As is what you are speaking. Who are you?

"A traveler, far from home. I'm here ultimately to take care of Jason, who you might know from a thousand years ago."

I remember a being by that name. I ferried many souls due to him, you are right. Very well, I will wear this 'ward' of yours.

"Then allow me to place it upon you and we can get started."

The pair walked back inside, finding the tub filled and Madison in her underwear. Lysanias had stopped into the kitchen for a knife, selecting the largest one she had and turning it into pure iron.

"Is this really going to help?" she asked as he handed it over.

"It can touch ghosts, even those that are insubstantial. It won't kill them, not unless you stab them over and over, but I'm sure you'll feel better about all this with some sort of weapon."

"You're my weapon, I'm just the bait, remember?"

"True. I mean if you don't want it..." He pulled it away but she grabbed for it. "I thought so."

"Is the angel here?" Hannah asked, looking around.

"Is it darker in here?" Lauren asked.

"Yes to both of those questions," Lysanias answered. "You can't see it, but an angel of death is here. It does seem to manifest its presence with a darkness and chill."

"That's what you get after a Netflix and chill," Hannah joked, but didn't get much response. Lysanias of course didn't know what the heck she was talking about.

"Let's get this over with," Madison told them. "Are you getting in first or am I?"

"Why don't I get in first. I don't have to breathe, but you might want to if Sebastian doesn't take the bait- I mean grab you right away."

"You don't have to- never mind. Fine."

Lysanias considered, but Madison had stripped down so he felt it only fair he should as well. Of course he left the sash, ring, bracelet, circlet, and set the hubPad up on the sink.

"Say, if this goes poorly, and it won't, can you send some kind of distress signal to the hub? I know I'm not a member yet, but they should know I failed here and to send someone else."

"I will wait a reasonable time and do so," it replied. "Good luck."

"Thanks. Er, you're not going to have to climb in with us, are you?" he asked the angel.

No, I will simply follow your souls to where you are going. I will have to touch the woman, but she will not feel it.

"Oh good. Actually..." he grabbed some rope from his pocket and had the girls tie his one arm and one leg to Madison. "Just in case he thinks about just taking you. With me on the bottom he should have to take us both, unless the water itself can act as the portal rather than the bottom of the tub. I'll hold onto you, of course, but let's take every precaution."

"It's fine."

He slid into the water, submerging himself, and she followed. He was looking up at her through the water, the tied arms at their sides and his other arm around her back. Her other arm held the knife, gripping it tightly. He held her close, watching her for signs of distress, and a moment passed. Above them the distorted faces of her friends wavered, and she started to rise to take a breath.

That's when Sebastian struck, dragging them "down" somehow and into his realm. She tried not to struggle as she was expecting this, but most people do like breathing a whole lot. (They both like breathing, a whole lot, and breathing a whole lot. Commas are important, kids) So she thrashed and coughed as they came up out of the rusty looking drowning tank set on the side of a strange looking cabin.

I guess we made it.

He helped her climb out after severing the ropes with alchemy, not wanting to take the time to cut or untie them. The angel was standing there, unperturbed, looking around with a concerned look on its face. Then he jumped out and froze the water in the tank. *The others should be emptying the bathtub, but again, let's take no chances.* Looking around he saw another empty tank with a cover that could be closed, and used metal bending to tear the cover off and crumple it into a ball. *No one is getting shoved in there, thank you very much. Anything else before the big man makes an appearance? Where is he, anyway?* There were some other oddities, like a glass case with something moving inside, but Sebastian was there so he had no more time for playing 'eye spy.'

"I figured you would come," he said. "The trap is complete."

"So it is," he agreed. "You took the bait, and now you will be destroyed."

"I meant for you."

He snorted. "Whatever." He darted forward, easily breaking past Sebastian's guard with his martial arts and touching his chest. He *pulled*, and as with Martha the ghost flickered

and vanished. In his hand was a dark soul, swirling quickly and as angrily as a ball of darkness can be said to swirl.

"There we are, one soul, as promised." He handed it over to the angel.

I suggest you do not stay here long, it said into his brain. Sadly, I can not interfere to bring you back. Good luck. It vanished.

"That's a fine how do you do," Lysanias muttered. "I mean I know you must be busy but come on!"

"What is this place?" Madison asked, looking around. "And do the walls seem thinner to you somehow?"

"Thinner?"

As the pair looked Lysanias realized she was right. The place was fading, somehow, like it wasn't in the real world at all, but rather in a

"Dream!" he spat. "The trap was for *us*. For me! I just rushed into it, I'm such a moron!"

"What?"

"Concentrate! Quick, think of this as a dream, don't let the house slip away!" He looked at the walls, fixing them in his mind and really hoping this was going to work. *It isn't our dream, but Sebastian isn't here to oppose us, so we should be able to keep it here a little bit, right?*

"Okay, I'll try." She turned and the walls got a little more solid.

It worked. We're in some kind of dream 'bubble' or something. But how are we going to get out?

"Can we leave?"

"There's once chance. I'll have to teleport us out."

"You do that all the time."

"Concentrate! The walls are fading again."

"Sorry!"

"In fact, here." He handed the sword over. She dropped the knife and took it, both of them now touching the hilt. "This should augment your willpower, make it easier."

"I think it is!"

"Great, you keep this place in one piece while I figure out how to get us back."

In the notes about teleportation, along with the warnings, is a section on teleporting across dimensions. It said it wasn't easy, darn near impossible it said, but it's our only shot. I'm already under dragonfly, let's throw as much energy as I can into Skyebourne magic to augment my skill in teleporting, and the rest into the teleport. With the sword it should be enough, but if I don't make it we're both dead. I suppose I could drain her energy, for one more try...

He cast, still holding the sword and her hand at the same time.

Okay, that part is done. Is there anything else I can do to help me succeed here? I don't know the circle that could help well enough to do it from memory. There's no ward that can help, Rosalina doesn't know any other magic that can help. We're as ready as we're going to be.

"*I can't hold it much longer!*" she screamed, and the walls started shimmering, twisting and warping as they vanished.

"Don't need to, I'm ready. Hang on," he commanded. He grabbed her up, pulling her close and envisioning the bath tub they had just left. *Don't want to run into one of them, they won't be above the tub.* He shifted.

They landed with a splash, as the water had barely had a chance to leave the tub yet. Lysanias slipped and fell over, Madison falling atop him and trying not to cut her own leg off with the sharpest sword in all existence. Water went everywhere, Lysanias smacked his head on something, but even exhausted felt hands pulling him up and trying to steady him.

"We're okay," he managed. "We made it back."

"You did it!" Madison exclaimed, letting the sword go. It clattered to the ground, slicing through one of the legs on the bathtub and making it tip over. She grabbed him as the others tried to scramble out of the way as it tipped over, dumping them out.

Through his haze he thought she was screaming, *was she hurt?* But it turned out she was laughing her head off, trying to stand up and sliding back down again.

Finally her friends helped them both up, get dried off, and get dressed again. Lysanias was exhausted, wishing he had some of Kenzie's energy right about now, and wondered about the unfairness of life that allowed him to empower a soul and let it collect energy like there was no tomorrow, while he was stuck with his meager amount.

"So is it over?" Kobie asked, unable to wait any longer. The group was back in the living room, this time they had all squeezed onto the couch. Madison was holding Lysanias' hand, and she smiled.

"If what I saw is any indication, it's so over," she agreed.

"So what happened?"

"We wound up in some kind of dream space," Lysanias began. *If I had to put a name to it, I would call it Sebastian's personal dimension. Is that even possible? I mean it must be, I was just there.* "It was an old cabin, but what it looked like didn't matter. The whole thing was a trap for me." *Saving these people was the bait, and I walked right into it. Typical.* "Once Sebastian's soul wasn't there anymore, it started to break down. Nice job keeping us alive back there, by the way. I couldn't have concentrated on the reality of that place and done the..." *magic. Best not to mention that?* "Done what I did to get us back." *Does this mean Jason is actually free already? He's just watching me, seeing what I can do? He wouldn't have known it was me specifically coming here, but he would have guessed someone would come after he got free. Naturally he wouldn't want to be banished, or captured and brought back to the hub, so he would take it slowly this time.*

"What, no epic battle?" Cathryn asked. "That's a let down."

"It does seem that being able to turn a ghost into a soul," *or just tear the soul out of someone's body,* "and then hand it to an angel of death can solve problems without much fuss."

"I guess."

"So are you leaving? I have to get back to work," Kobie complained.

"There's one more thing I'd like to do, if you're willing," Madison told him.

"Tear each other's clothes off again?" Hannah said with a snicker. "We can leave you two alone if you want."

"No," she blushed. "I mean head over to the C.G. Craven Psychiatric Facility and talk to Julia. She was related to him in some way, it would be nice to tell her she doesn't have to worry about Sebastian anymore."

"She's nuts though, now," Hannah said. "Will she even understand you?"

"I can probably fix her," Lysanias told them with a sigh. "Let me recharge and we can head over there."

"Sure, just one more thing," Madison told them.

"What's that?" Lauren asked.

She let go of Lysanias' hand and went to the kitchen. She came back, holding a glass of water, and drank it down without issue.

"Now it's over," she announced with a smile. "That hit the spot."

The ladies said goodbye, thanking Lysanias for saving them. Cathryn asked if there were exercises or something she could do in order to become a psychic like him, but he felt her spiritual energy and shook his head. "You're born with it, or you're not. Sorry. Best I can give you is world class martial arts." *I'm not empowering your soul, for one I don't even know you, and two, no one would be around to train you. So that seem's more cruel than anything else. Now maybe with practice I can someday empower a soul to give a person psychic powers instead of doing it the riskier 'brain way' but as I've only done it once, she would get something random, just like Kenzie did.*

"I'll pass," she told him, wrinkling her nose. "Thanks anyway."

"Up to you."

Now refreshed from the ley line out back, Lysanias and Madison walked into the facility and asked to see Julia. They were cautioned not to bring anything that could start a fire into

her presence, which Lysanias certainly agreed to. While trying not to laugh. *You mean like a fire bender? Who can just wish up fire from his or her fingertips? Sure, I'll get right on that.*

They headed into the room, which had plastic all over the place for some reason, and there sitting in a lone chair was Julia. She was gaunt, her hair hanging limply from her head, and had low energy to his senses. Madison introduced them, saying she had been harassed by Sebastian for a year but now they were all free of him thanks to Lysanias.

She of course protested that even if she thought he was defeated, he would be back, and Lysanias took over. He gently took her hands and didn't need the sword to meld with her, she was fairly messed up, body and mind. He spent some time inside her head, showing her the "battle" and who he really was. He also helped suppress some of her more terrifying memories, taking it slow as no one from the facility had bothered staying in the room with them. *We could have quietly slit her throat and left, an alarm wouldn't even have been raised. Is this place really legitimate?*

When he came out of it she seemed better, more alert and lucid, anyway. She hugged Madison, saying maybe she would see her on the outside one day and they could get together. She said she would like that, and Julia asked them to please ask the next person they saw if she could have a glass of water.

"I'll be sure to ask," Madison told her with a smile.

"I may as well head back," Lysanias told her as they walked to the parking lot. "No sense me driving back with you to leave from your place."

"Oh." She seemed slightly disappointing for some reason. "I mean, I guess, if you think that's for the best. He really is gone, right? You don't want to stick around for a few hours, just to make sure? We could fill up the bathtub again, make sure he doesn't try to grab me. I for one haven't had a bath in a year, so that's what I'm headed to do when I get home. A nice, hot, soak, that's just the thing for us, me, I mean, me."

"He's in the soul cycle now. He's either on his way to becoming a demon, or he's in Heaven. The only way back would be reincarnation." *If that's allowed here.*

"That's a thing too, huh? I'm just learning all sorts of things from you. Look, thank you for giving me my life back. I actually can't wait for it to rain next, I'm putting my bathing suit on and running around like a kid. You don't think about all the places there's water until the water is haunting you." She laughed.

"It's what I do, no need to thank me."

"Do you have a cell phone, or anything? I mean, in case I hear about another ghost..."

"I can give you a number to call, it won't be mine though. Think of me as being on loan, I'm leaving pretty soon. Kenzie can take care of you, she's my 'contact' around here."

"You don't live in Canada?"

"No, I'm actually from pretty far from home." *A place called Pyre, in another reality.*

"Are you sure you don't want to come back with me? Nice hot bath? Just the two of us, no ghost to worry about?"

"It's easier this way." He rattled off the number Kenzie had given him and she put it down in her phone.

"Thanks. Kenzie, you said, right?"

"That's right." He looked around, making sure no one was watching. "I'm training her," *or I will be fairly shortly*, "and she has other contacts so anything weird like this, she's your girl."

"Good luck with, you know, whatever."

Saving your entire reality? Thanks, I'll need it. "Thanks. Have a good life." He shifted back to Bo's bedroom and stared at the bed. Then it came to him.

What if she wanted me to come back to her place so she could tear my clothes off? The bath, she said it twice! She was inviting me without actually... I'm such an idiot! Moron! Fool! I hate my- Wait, what's that? He went down the stairs to find Kenzie humming something, making what appeared to be cookies.

"Oh hey," she said, looking up from stirring. "You're here! I guess it went okay?"

Lysanias focused in on her, looking her over as he approached. It looked exactly like Kenzie, sounded like her too. But something was wrong. She turned away from him again. "Want a cookie? They should be done soon." He drew his sword and advanced on her. "I hope you like chocolate chi-" "Where's Kenzie?" he demanded, the blade going around her throat.

Chapter 14

Kitsune

When: No time has passed

Where: Bo's apartment

"Wha, wha, what are you talking about?" she stammered. "I'm Kenzie. I'm right here!"

"No, you're not," he persisted. "The real Kenzie would know that I would not be fooled by outward appearances. Not only can I sense someone's spiritual energy, telling who they are even if I can't see them, I am guided by the force. I can get a sense of someone, how they feel, and you feel different. Plus I can sense life energy, which again feels different between you and her. So I ask again, where is Kenzie?"

Kenzie sighed. "I guess she wasn't kidding, huh? Oh, put that away, I haven't hurt her."

"So you say. I'm going to need a bit more than that."

"My name is Inari, I'm a kitsune. We're—"

"I'm sorry, your name is what?" he snapped, one eyelid beginning to twitch.

"Inari. Have we met? I don't recognize you."

"Hold please." He got out the marble from his pouch and put energy into it. The familiar face of Lady Inari, apparently sitting on the roof of her cottage, came into view.

"Hi, Lysanias. You need something? What's with your eye? You should have that looked at."

"Just making sure you were still there. Inari, meet Inari."

"Hello?" Inari gave a hesitant wave.

She made a tisk sound. "You know Lysanias, if I was going to prank you by being in the same reality as you, again, I wouldn't use my own name. Dead giveaway." She snorted. "How did you like where you ended up? You don't have to thank me, it's all part of the service."

"Oh, you'll pay for it somehow, believe me," he growled, having no idea how. "As for not using your own name, that's what you want me to think, that it would be too obvious and thus you do it because it was unexpected."

"There is that. But no, she's her, and I'm me. I don't have exclusive use to the name Inari, you know?"

"No, I don't. Maybe you picked a name no one else in the whole of creation ever used, it's possible. You could have checked. Anyway, sorry to bother you."

"It's no bother. You've been making good use of the hubPad?"

"Yes, it's actually a really versatile tool. Even can offer suggestions when I mess up rituals or whatever. Have *you* been adding notes to it? Some of the entries are really detailed."

"I have, thanks for noticing. Any leads on Jason?"

"I encountered someone with their own little dream space, a trap meant for me I think. I'm really still getting a team together, then we'll be ready when he comes himself. If he's as powerful as you say I'll need all the help I can get, even if I'm the only one that can hurt him for good. Do you know if he's broken free already? It was a ghost but it did some very unghostly things, dream type stuff that I would think was up Jason's ally."

She shook her head. "I've been watching, but the world seems quiet. I suppose after a thousand years he could be subtle but I expected him to break free and immediately start taking out his frustration on the people there."

"But he must have figured someone would be sent to stop him the second he got out!"

"I counter that with him feeling he's invincible. He pretty much is. He wouldn't care how many were sent."

"A fair point."

"Well, keep those pretty red eyes of yours open, and I'll let you know if I see anything from here."

"Thanks. See you soon."

"Bye! Bye other me!" She waved and was gone.

"Er, who was that? *What* was that? A marble?"

"That was the person that sent me here, and this only looks like a marble for ease of carrying." *I actually have no idea what it really is. Just a signaling device to open that window,*

or does it actually open the window itself? Magic, or technology? Ah well, I suppose it doesn't matter. He put it back. "Back to you though, what were you going to say?"

"I was going to say kitsune are shape-shifters, that's how we feed. We take someone's place, then the emotional energy given off by those who know the original person are directed at us, instead. But ever since the Norn took my powers, I haven't been able to feed, because I could only be myself."

"What? The Norn again?" *This being is really starting to annoy me.*

"Recently I felt them again, and came running. Kenzie had them for some reason, so I, er, knocked her out and took them back."

The rash on her arm? Could that have been her power? "And this isn't harming her?"

"She'll be fine, she woke up and everything. We talked. Er, sort of. I took her place because, hey, I had already abducted her, so why not? But with her best friend gone and you around, I may as well not have bothered. And those two snoozing away upstairs aren't doing anything for me. Look, can I finish these cookies or what?"

Lysanias considered, and lowered the sword. *She doesn't seem like a threat.*

"Thank you." She went back to work. "Will you at least tell me where Bo is? Naturally a lover is best, but a close friend will do. I need *something*, do you know how hungry I am?"

"So you're like a succubus? You have to take energy from others?"

"It's not energy, exactly. It's not food, exactly. I just have to do it, it's hard to explain."

I suppose it is. But I can relate. I don't have to eat, but I do, because I would get hungry otherwise. It wouldn't kill me, but it would be a distraction. "Will you allow me to go into your head, make sure you're telling the truth?"

"I guess? What kind of fae can do that though? And how do you sense energy and all that other stuff you said? The force? Isn't that made up?"

"Never mind that. Honestly, you should be able to sense energy, as well as do other spiritual energy stuff." *They are supernatural creatures, after all.*

"Really?"

"I don't see why not. In any case, I'll make you deal."

"Shoot."

"I go in your head. You're telling the truth, Kenzie is unharmed? Fine. I'll tell you where Bo is and you can visit her. Then you can head to the bar, you know Trick's bar?"

"Who doesn't know Trick? He's been around forever, way I hear it."

"Fine. You can deliver a message, and I suppose some cookies, over there. Kenzie is known there, you should be able to pick up something, I mean who doesn't love the person who brings them snacks? Then you come back here and we go free Kenzie. You can apologize to her, and we can figure out what to do with you."

She stopped stirring and looked at him, confusion plain on her face. "You're just letting her be abducted? I thought you would want to rush off and 'save' her! The way she talked she expected the sky to darken and the city to tremble once you realized she was gone!"

"I have my reasons." *If she's really safe, but inconvenienced, it's a good way to 'shake loose' her powers, like she wanted. I couldn't bring her to face Sebastian because that was real danger, but she's just tied up or whatever? It'll be a good chance for something to come to her to use to escape. She may actually be doing Kenzie a favor.*

"Well, okay," she replied doubtfully. "This shouldn't be much longer. What are you going to do in the meantime?"

He leaned against the wall, keeping the sword in his hand but pointed down. "I promised someone I would try to heal the guy Bo attacked, bring them out of a coma. I didn't yesterday because I was too busy, but I'd like to now that I have some time."

"You would trust me not to run?"

"You're the one who wants to feed. I'm your best shot at having that happen. Replacing someone is fairly hard work, isn't it?"

"That's true enough," she agreed. "You have to get to know their routine enough to catch them unawares. Actually abduct them, then try to fit into their lives without arousing suspicion. Plus everything nowadays is password protected, so forget reading their emails or posting on their facebook page."

What's a facebook?

"You have to keep the victim alive, get info from them about their friends, tell them what happened so when you let them go they can continue their lives without too much disruption. I usually-"

"Wait, you let them go?" *That seems an odd move.*

"Of course!" she insisted. "What, did you think I ate them or something? What kind of monster do you take me for? I can't leave a trail of dead bodies everywhere, that would be horrible!"

"But letting them go can't work, they would... uh..."

She giggled. "They would what? Claim *they* kidnapped *themselves*, held themselves hostage for two days, and then let themselves go? People would think they were nuts! 'You went to the store with me yesterday, we bought that cute top, don't you remember?' someone would say. I mean come on. What I do is harmless enough, compared to some."

"I- hmm." *I can't disagree. Look at what that one guy feeding did? Bleeding from the eyes and nose, leaving the victims too weak to hardly move. This seems tame by comparison. Can I blame her for the way she was made like the Allfather blamed us for the way He made us?* "I guess."

"My favorite is replacing someone that runs a daycare. I love looking after kids, and they love me because I let them do things whoever I replace typically won't. I only need a few kids for a day to be satisfied for months."

He considered. "If things were different, you might actually be one of the most in demand people ever."

"Why's that?"

"Think about it. Advertise an actual service of replacing someone for a day. Let them have a day off whatever they're doing but still make it seem they're going about their day as normal. Who wouldn't love that? As long as you were insured, and had a good reputation about not trashing people's lives, any number of people might be interested." *Thankfully I know what insurance is now, after not getting that joke back with Ashoka.*

"...You're right," she decided. "I've been going about this all wrong. Totally wrong! I could advertise my services to fae, they would understand. Or humans in the know. A discreet service people could use all the time, which helps me too. The more I replaced someone, the better I would know their lives, and the better job I would do. Wow, that is such an amazing idea..."

"Thank you."

"I'll have to print up some fliers, business cards, maybe Trick would know some people that could use a break. Getting permission to replace someone... it just seems so wrong!" She giggled again. "Anyway, cookies are baking, let's do *all the things that you want to do* so you can trust me."

Er, why did she say it like that? "Fine. Come sit down." He led her over to the couch and went into her brain, which she didn't resist. He made her remember what she had done to Kenzie, and yes, she struck her from behind, tied her up, and brought her back to her apartment. (I mean it was a city, where would she hide her, a cave? Please) They came out of it.

"Seems you're on the level," he admitted. "I'll vouch for you, if you want to tell Trick about your new service and advertise it though the bar." *I wonder, could she take the form of someone she's seen, and spend a night with someone who desires that person but can't have them? Would that emotion be genuine enough even if the person knew it wasn't the 'real' person behind the face? Ah well, I'm sure she'll think of it now that I've nudged her towards it.*

"Thank you. I feel really guilty now, taking your friend and you helping me out like this in exchange." She did, too.

"Well, it is how you were made, we can't help that." *Even if we get destroyed for it, like my people did. And no, I'm not letting it go.*

"Yeah, I guess."

So he told her what he knew about Kenzi's personality so she could go see Bo, and the address where Bo was. When the cookies were done and cooled she took a bag of them

and said she would be back there in about two hours, if she could manage it. That's when the treatment he was going to do was finished, and he would be back.

"And you want to find someone connected to the Van Helsing family," she repeated. "A monster hunter from some time ago that had some odd weaponry you might like to take a look at."

"Exactly. And tell him to spread the word, if someone does have some enchanted weapons or armor, or something they've made no one else can duplicate, now is the time to dust them off. I'll bring Mavis to meet him when she's up, after dark."

"And she's really a vampire? That sweet looking girl upstairs?"

"That's right."

She shook her head. "Vampires. I thought she was just crashing here. Wild. Okay, I'm off. Thanks... for everything."

"Just hold up your end of the bargain. I can track you down anywhere on Earth you know."

"I believe it. See ya!"

So Lysanias went and *shifted* back to the hospital room where the comatose man still lay, and put an "ignore me" ward on the door. While splitting his attention between keeping the man levitated above his bed and doing water bending to heal him wasn't the easiest thing in the world, he was good enough in both skills to manage it.

If I knew how to unhook him without triggering some kind of alarm from all those machines he's hooked up to, that would be easier. Ah well.

He kept it up for some time, then whisked the water away, leaving the man dry. Sensing him out it seemed the treatment was helping, he felt energy was flowing inside him a little better at this point. With that done he took the ward off the door and *shifted* back to the apartment. By now it was nearly sundown, and both Mavis and Jonathan were up.

He was greeted by both, offered a cookie "someone" had made, and asked what happened. He explained the women from his dream were safe, but that he almost got caught in a trap probably set up by Jason. Both looked worried, and agreed they needed to stay on their toes.

A key rattled in the door, and everyone turned.

"Oh, Kenzie must be back!" he told them, getting up. "Hey Kenzie, how was Bo?" he asked when she came into the room. She was carrying a bag of food, and went to the kitchen with a questioning look to put it away.

"I noticed we were running low on some stuff," she explained. "Especially with Mavis and her boyfriend here, so I ran and got some things."

"Oh, he's not my... hmm, are you my boyfriend?" Mavis asked.

"I don't know, am I?" he replied trying to hide a grin.

"I'll consider it." She laughed. "My dad would flip!"

Not really the reason to say he is though, right? Eh, what do I know?

Kenzie continued. "Bo is fine, though she's not really happy to be in jail. She did ask about the guy, how's he doing?"

"Coming along, hopefully he won't need too many more treatments before he can safely wake up. And Trick?"

"Said he would look into it. The family was fairly prominent, back in the day, someone must know something about what they left behind. He seemed to think he wouldn't have much trouble, and to stop back in later."

I planned to anyway.

"Hey, did you make the cookies? They're awesome!" Jonathan told her. "I hope you don't mind, we had some of them."

Kenzie smiled. "No, no, I made them for you guys. You really like them?"

"Yeah. You figure out your powers yet?"

Kenzie shook her head. "Not yet. Lysanias and I-"

"Were actually planning on a little outing, now that she's back," Lysanias interrupted. "To address that very issue."

"Can we come?" Mavis asked excitedly.

Lysanias pretended to consider, but had already decided how he was going to handle this. Two hours of staring at a comatose man gives you plenty of time to think. "You could, no reason you couldn't. But I actually have something else I'd like you to try, if you're willing. Sun isn't quite set anyway," he told her, looking out of the window.

"I guess," she replied glumly, crossing her arms. "What is it?"

"You're supernatural, you should be able to sense spirit energy like I can, as well as widen your energy pathways, see auras, that sort of thing. If I can print to the printer over there," *I assume that thing is a printer, it looks like what the shadowhunter guys had*, "I'll leave you with the directions. You can look them over and see if anything sounds familiar. We should be back fairly soon anyway."

"Wait, you mean learn skills from other worlds? Like Johnny's martial arts?"

"That's right. It's not seeing more of the city but it's much more important in the long run. We can all head to the bar when I get back, it won't be *that* long."

"Sure, that would be great!"

"Okay then. Let's see what my hubPad can tell us about the printer."

It could instruct them how to hook into it, but did remind them it could just deliver copies of the entries directly.

"I'm not a member yet, I don't want to take advantage," he explained.

"Understood and noted. How many copies?"

He went over it in his head. *One for Bo, to have something to do. One for Trick, to leave at the bar. One for Mavis to look over now.* "Three."

"Printing now."

With that done Kenzie and Lysanias were off to "rescue" Kenzie, and he had her take Bo's form just in case. Inari had recently seen her, so it was no problem for her to do that. She shifted on the way to the place, walking as it wasn't far to give the sun time to go down. Walking up to the apartment she asked "Why didn't you out me to those two?"

"I figured you might get a little from them. Besides, maybe Kenzie won't mind being replaced from time to time. Keeping people ignorant of your abilities and needs helps you, right?"

She looked down. "You're too nice."

"I just want things to work out for as many people as they can."

"Oh." She let him inside and they took the elevator up, then down the hallway to the right. "This is it."

"Yeah, she's in there all right. I could feel her coming up the elevator. I'm surprised you can't, she's like a beacon. I'm going to have to teach her how to rein that in, if you all can learn how to sense energy." *Not a problem I'll ever have*, he grumbled to himself.

Unlocking the apartment door with her key the two stepped inside and went straight to the main area. There was a group of ropes but no Kenzie.

"Hey, she got out by herself!" Bo said, sounding impressed. "Think she figured out her powers?"

"Bo?" a voice from another room said. Kenzie peeked out, then threw it open and crushed Bo in a hug. "You came for me! Oh I was so scared."

Following her was an armored figure, a man shaped creature that had a deer's head, complete with antlers. It stood behind her looking them over, and both looked over at it.

"Oh, yeah," she laughed, "I think I figured out my power a little. Meet Deer-baba, my protector. He's the one who got me out of the chains."

"Deer-baba? That's an odd name."

"What? No, I get it." She laughed. "I'm saying deer, it's Russian for deer. And you didn't get that either, did you?"

"Try it one more time, now that I know it's a proper name, maybe I'll hear it correctly."

"Olen-baba."

"Oh, Olen-Baba. Nice to meet you."

It bowed.

“Do you know what he is? I had nothing better to do while *tied up* so I was thinking about that dream of the forest again, and suddenly I was there. It seemed he wanted me to catch him, so after a bit of a chase, I did. Then suddenly he was standing there and he’s been here ever since. I wanted to take care of the person who brought me here, so I figured I would jump them when they came back. I mean I got your martial arts for a reason, right? Did you already take care of them?”

He glanced at Bo. “Er, in a manner of speaking. Anyway, congratulations on becoming a shaman. That right there is a spirit projection, like the spirit of the mountain that I can call upon. You’ll be able to call for the aid of spirits, manifest them, and of course call upon your projection.”

“So is that good?”

“Hardly anything normal can hurt a projection, especially around here,” he explained. “Only supernatural power will hurt them. And regular people can’t see it, meaning it can go places and fight by your side against humans with impunity. I can go over it all later, print you out some chants you can practice. They can give you all sorts of powers, like invisibility, walking through walls, healing. They take a minute to get going, but they can be useful.”
Especially the dragonfly, the only one I seem to use with regularity.

“Great, I’d love that, thanks. Now Bo, what are you doing out of your cell? Did Lysanias go and get you?”

“What are we telling her?” Bo asked.

“Everything. Make your pitch, you’re the one that has to sell it later on. You’ll need the practice.”

“I guess.” She took a deep breath. “Kenzie, I have to apologize.”

Not long after Kenzie got the full story, having Bo take her form again, and walking around it. “So that’s what I look like to others, huh? Interesting. And you want to take my place without anyone knowing, from time to time?”

“If you didn’t mind. I know it’s asking a lot, but I’ve had more to ‘eat’ today than I have in months. And if I can stay fed *and* give people a break from their lives for a day at the spa or whatever, isn’t that better than me knocking them over the head?”

“I’ll think about it,” she promised, rubbing the back of her head with a wince. “Emotional energy, huh? You fae are weird.”

“Says the girl with the overwhelming spirit energy and the armored deer standing behind her,” Lysanias teased.

“Touche. So what now?”

“We head back to pick up Mavis and Jonathan, plus printouts. We’ll walk back, just to make sure the sun is down. Meanwhile, Kenzie here becomes Bo, we tell them I busted her out for the night so she can hear what we have to say. Then we head to the bar and I see if anyone there already knows how to sense energy and such. We have someone super easy to sense right here, so let’s take advantage of her.”

“So I’m just a light bulb now?” she asked scathingly, as her deer vanished.

“You’re a total *compact* florescent,” Bo told her, having changed again. “Get it, *compact*?”

“Oh, because I’m short? Seems like you wanted to be short to take my life over sometimes, ‘Bo.’ Maybe I’ll say no after all. Where does that leave you?”

“It was just a joke!” she hastened to add. “Tell her it was just a joke, Lysanias! I didn’t mean anything by it, honest! Say you forgive me, please?”

I didn’t get it.

Chapter 15

Hunters

When: That evening

Where: Trick's Bar

Trick had the basic good news, bad news situation for the group when they arrived that night, which he explained to them as they sat at the bar. He was somewhat surprised to see Bo, but accepted the explanation of getting her out of jail for the evening to practice the techniques Lysanias was going to share.

"The good news is, the internet exists," Trick told them. "I'm not really all that familiar with it, but the 'younger' fae at least have a grasp of it and so I asked one to see what they could find. The Van Helsing family being so prominent helped. So we found an article about them from about thirty years ago."

"What's the bad news?" asked Bo.

"That's where the trail goes cold. But it's a telling bit of information, so maybe it'll help. It turns out the Van Helsing family, and there was a rumor it was Abraham himself, who would have been over a hundred at that time, made the purchase. What they bought was their own luxury cruise liner. Cash."

"And that's unusual?"

"I should say so. He must have sold many artifacts for a lot of money to afford such a purchase. He did have a thing for traveling the world looking for things to kill monsters with. I'm just glad he didn't know about fae, or he might have hunted us too, or taken our treasures. He must have run into priceless antiquities despite that, so the fact he was loaded isn't surprising."

Loaded with what?

"The fuel alone is prohibitive, unless he somehow found some alternate power source for the thing."

"Isn't that why we're trying to track the guy down?" Kenzie asked. "His scientific genius that he used to use to create weapons to kill monsters?"

"Exactly," agreed Lysanias.

"Be that as it may, the cruise liner 'Legacy' as it was christened was purchased and after that, vanishes from public record. Of course, 'boat still floating around' isn't exactly news, so naturally no one would report on that. An individual buying such a boat? Yes. So where it is now I have no idea. There are no more Van Helsing's that made history, at least no recent articles appear about the family at all. Strangely not even an obituary for Abraham, but the man can't still be alive. He'd be a hundred and fifty years old! So maybe he was just lost at sea?"

"I don't like the name," Mavis told them. "The legacy of that family was trying to kill monsters. My father told me many stories about him outwitting Abraham back in the day. Before he built the hotel and monsters faded from the public eye."

"We're glad to see you back now though," Trick told her. "You're far too beautiful to be hidden away."

Charmer. But maybe I should take some lessons.

"Aw, thanks! And may I say this chicken is delicious! Thanks for not cooking it for me."

"We do get a fair amount of fae that like their food a bit on the raw side, it's no problem."

"It's a place to start, and I know what question to ask now," Lysanias told them. "The location of the ship. It can't move that fast, if you have a map or a book of maps I can pinpoint it's location exactly. If it's out in open water I won't be able to teleport to it, but we could fly there."

"I can go grab you one. You want to talk to everyone anyway, right?"

Not especially, but I suppose it must be done. And addressing a whole crowd is different than, for example, going up to someone and talking to them directly. "About energy based skills they can learn, yes."

"Kenzie texted us," said Dyson, who was sitting nearby. "So I rounded up some fae who might be interested."

"I thought the place was more crowded than usual," Bo said, looking around.

Kenzie gave her the stink eye. "Sure you did."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Trick asked.

"Aren't you supposed to be finding a map?"

He just shook his head and walked away, disappearing through a door behind the bar.

"Hey, quiet down everyone," Dyson shouted. "Lysanias is ready to talk!" They all turned to face him.

Great. Well, here goes nothing.

He explained that as beings with supernatural powers, they should be able all learn a general number of useful skills, which he demonstrated. Also others there were more subtle and that they wouldn't normally think of as being energy based, like more easily resisting temptation. *And that one I think Bo, the real Bo, should focus on.* He started them trying to feel out Kenzie as she walked around the room with them all blindfolded, and passed out the notes in case any of it sounded familiar. (He also told Kenzie herself to pay attention to all this, as she could learn all of it too.)

"But wouldn't you just be able to shove that into my brain?" she asked. "I figured you could do that with the chant thing you talked about too."

"Oh. Hadn't thought of that. Yes, I suppose I could."

"That's settled then, no studying for me!"

Naturally the method of rapid movement and sensing energy were the two popular ones for those fae on the police force, but Tamsin seemed pensive and not really interested in participating.

"Come on, knowing how many people are behind a door just *by itself*, even just in general, would be a huge advantage for us," he told her. "Show a little enthusiasm, why don't you?"

"Lysanias, could I talk to you for a second?" She grabbed Lysanias and dragged him away from the confused Dyson.

"What's up?" he asked her, when they were over in the corner away from the group.

"I don't think Trick has remembered, and really why would he, but he does know me."

"Okay?"

"It all comes back down to Jason. I was one of the ones there to fight him, a thousand years ago. One of the lucky ones to survive the experience."

Just how long lived are fae? Do they all live that long? How have they not taken over the place? I mean okay if a lot of them got wiped out, fine, but don't they have kids? A being that lives a thousand years can have a lot of kids!

"During the battle I happened to save Trick, and he rewarded me with some extra lives, by writing that in his own blood. I've burned through most, but not all."

"Still not sure what this has to do with Jason."

"I've been dreaming of him, since before you showed up. I thought maybe it was just bad dreams, but then you showed up and said he was breaking free. As one that previously defied him personally, I'm worried I'll be a target. So will anyone around me, like Dyson."

So you act cold and uninterested to try and protect people? Or so they won't mourn you if you get killed? "All the more reason to get every edge you can, right? And you're not dead yet, so don't act it. You've had a thousand years of experience, you must be a better fighter. It may be difficult, but you *can* believe in me, you know?"

"I'd like to, but I can't shake the feeling my lives are coming to an end. As for being a better fighter, not really. Not that I can tell, anyway. It's not like I've endlessly trained these thousand years."

Even so, you would have gotten somewhat better, right? Or is it that fae can't increase their skills without limit like I can? That makes sense, they're 'mortal' creatures like humans, so they were probably created to be limited. Too bad for them though, why give something a lifespan of thousands of years if they're just going to hit a wall and stagnate? I suppose once you master sword you could switch to ax, then bow. Or maybe sword, then bow, then ax? Well, whatever, the order doesn't matter. You could master every sort of weapon at least. "I

see. Look, if you were there, I'd like to explore your memories, see how Jason behaved before so I have some idea how he might now."

She snorted. "It was a thousand years ago, what do you remember of that long ago? Trick didn't recognize me as the person he gave extra lives to, or at least hasn't acted like he knows me, my memories will be hazy at best of those times. I mean, I *tried* to forget, and I've done a lot of drinking between then and now."

That long ago for me I would still sleep for a thousand years. "I see your point. Try not to lose heart, okay? You have early warning this time, and I have a weapon that should give even Jason pause." He touched the sword.

"I hope you're right. Because..." She paused, as if steeling herself for admitting something she didn't want to admit. She lowered her voice, "Because my hair is falling out."

Lysanias stared at her, and she stared back as if revealing some important fact about herself. "I don't know what that means for your kind."

"We have an ability to intuit the future," she explained. "It's how we know we need to be somewhere, to take the soul of a fallen warrior to where it needs to go. But it happens to us as well, without our knowing. A valkyrie's hair is usually absolute, we *don't* lose it, not a single strand, all our lives. But now I'm afraid to brush it, because I keep finding some in the brush."

His eyebrows went up. "I see." *That explains the rush to solve Bo's case, she wants to do some good before she dies?* "I'm not sure if there's anything I can do, if that's why you're telling me."

"I'm telling you because it's a *warning*. Don't think there won't be casualties in this fight with Jason, sword or no sword. Look, honestly you're probably the best bet I have for living through all this, and you need a fae on the team. I'm nominating myself, so I'm coming with you. My powers may be waning, but I'm still a decent fighter." She paused, as if to let him challenge this announcement. "You don't mind, do you?" she asked, somewhat hopefully.

Maybe I have been a bit overconfident of late. Having her around, I can keep an eye on her, maybe it's something else and she doesn't even make it to the fight. But how would her sense of the future deal with me, when I'm not even a part of this world? And the more people I have to fight Jason, the better, so if she's volunteering... "It's fine with me, but what do you mean about needing a fae on the team?"

"You have a human, a monster, an 'ascended' human or whatever you call Kenzie now. I want to make sure you don't forget about us."

"I would never!"

"Perhaps. Either way, maybe you can change my fate. So can I come along, or what?"

He nodded. "If it can be done, I will do it, you have my word. You're welcome to come with us."

"Thanks."

Trick ran off copies of the notes as people wanted to leave, many promising to come back the next night and form some kind of "study group" for the whole thing. Lysanias approved greatly.

"Here's the book of maps," he said, bringing out a fairly thick atlas. "What else do you need?"

"Just a bit of time." He looked through the book to familiarize himself with it, then augmented his skill with magic and asked the universe his question. *On what page of this book before me will I find the ship 'Legacy' that was purchased by Abraham?*

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Lysanias turned to the page and saw... blue.

"So they're out in the middle of the Atlantic somewhere?" Kenzie asked. "Bummer, I hoped it would be a port we could easily travel to. After all we have Mr. Doesn't Need a Passport here with us."

"I guess that means just the two of us get to go out there," Mavis told them. "Sorry Jonny."

"You could, actually," Lysanias countered. "You could just wait in my personal dimension, it's quite comfortable actually. When we get there I just open the door again and you can walk out."

He explained what he meant and everyone said that was well and good, but how were they going to find the ship?

"That's still a huge area to cover," Trick told them, showing them the scale of the map. "It's hundreds of miles of open water!"

Lysanias grimaced, but brightened. "Maybe the hubPad can help." He got it out. "Pad, can you scan this book and help keep us on course?"

"Scanning the book will be unnecessary," it insisted. "I have already downloaded mapping data provided by this realities' information network. I can also access their GPS network and lead you to this spot. From what I have observed of your top flight speed, it would take you slightly over three hours to reach this general area."

"Three hours?" Trick repeated, aghast. "How fast are you?"

"I have observed his median cruising speed at roughly six hundred kilometers per hour."

"How fast can I fly in bat form?" Mavis asked it.

"The typical flight speed of the common bat is twenty kilometers per hour."

She stared at him, eyes wide.

He grinned nervously. "I have some powers and items that greatly increase my speed."

"That still doesn't solve anything," Bo told them. "How are you going to find one tiny boat, in the dark, in the middle of the ocean, even knowing roughly that it's currently right here?"

"That's easy," Lysanias waved it off. "Leave that to me. The main problem I see is simply flying around with the pad. That'll slow me down."

"Initiating equipment request," said the pad, showing a spinning circle. "Request granted." There was a swirling of light and a watch looking device materialized on the bar.

"What's this?"

"A link to me, currently. As you are not a full member most functionality is locked, but I will be able to display an arrow to keep you on track during your flight."

"On my wrist, I see. Thank you."

"Of course."

He fitted it on.

"Are we leaving now?" Bo asked.

"You need to go back in your cell," Kenzie reminded her. "You're not coming."

She pouted, but nodded.

"All right then, whoever wants to come, go and get ready. Go to the bathroom and whatnot. I'll return Bo here, then you guys can jump into the dimension and we'll be off."

"You mean you'll return Bo there," Tamsin corrected.

"I'll return this Bo here, to her cell, there," he agreed, pointing first at Bo and then off in the distance.

"Going to slip inside her? I mean slip her inside? You know what I mean!"

"We know what you mean," everyone said.

"Just asking."

So Lysanias took the fake Bo "home" where she became fake Kenzie and said she was ready to go.

"I'd like to see my friend too you know!" Kenzie told her. "Why not become Tamsin?"

"Slip inside Tamsin? Her form, Tamsin's form. You know what I mean!"

They all laughed.

"I suppose I could say I was there to make sure she was still there. She has no love of Tamsin though, I wouldn't get anything out of it."

"Haven't you had enough to eat?"

"After all those months of fasting? No!"

She sighed. "Dyson then?"

"Male? I can do that."

So with a few wards and taking images from Kenzie about the interior of the prison (what little she had seen in her visits) the group made their way through and woke up the real Bo. Of course they had to take off their personal wards, but Lysanias burned some into the floor around the cell with the stele so no guard would see them. Bo looked a bit haggard, but said Lauren was stopping by every day so she could regain energy.

"And as I'm not out there running around I don't need as much, so I'm doing better, I think," she told them.

"There's a technique to more easily deny temptation," Lysanias explained, handing the notes over. "Give them all a look over. I'd stick some of them into your brain but I figure you might like the chance to do something on your own instead of just sitting here."

"Try to feel the inmates energy around me? Sounds interesting. That could also help when I feed, so I know exactly how much a person has left, so I don't hurt them while feeding."

"You think if she masters some of these, the Morrigan might let her out?" Kenzie asked.

"She wants me in here until I choose the dark," Bo reminded her.

"Oh, right. They're awfully big on that choice thing, huh?"

"Still, it wouldn't hurt to ask," Lysanias told her. "I'll add it to the list of things I need to do. Ask her about it."

"Thanks."

"Of course. I'll come visit again soon, see if you have any questions and to see your progress."

"I'll see you then."

Lysanias then went back to the apartment where they would leave Inari, who became someone they hadn't ever seen before. "Thanks for letting me hang out here, but I should get back to my own apartment. I do have work in the morning. And several people said they might want me to replace them for a day sometime soon, so I'll have that to do as well, thanks to you. I want to still help though, you know where I live if you need a shape-shifter!"

"We'll keep you in mind," Kenzie told her.

"Thanks, and sorry again for whacking you like that."

"I forgive you. Mostly. I know what it's like, not getting enough to eat." She hugged the girl.

Lysanias passed her through the shield into the dimension and looked around. *May as well sleep here, as I'm expected to fly around for hours tonight.* He stopped time, got in a good "night's" sleep, and went back to the bar where the others were waiting.

"And this is safe?" Tamsin asked, about to touch the shield.

"Kenzie is already in there. You'll be in a cave, just head towards the light, then down the hill to the cabin. It's perfectly safe." *Is she going to see her death around every corner? This hair thing really has her freaked out, huh?*

"Okay."

Jonathan went inside, but Mavis didn't go, instead choosing to turn into her bat form and ride on his shoulder. "I want to see just how fast you are," she told him. "Plus if you get into trouble somehow, someone should be out to help."

"You just want to see the city lit up at night!" he teased, poking her belly and tickling her.

"What if I do?" she managed between laughs.

"Come on." Lysanias got ready, putting on the shoes, checking to make sure his bracelet and other equipment was secured, then put his wings on. The pair rose, shot in the air by bending, and following the arrow headed out to sea.

Mavis was quite enchanted by the sight of the city below, but once that past simply reveled in her newfound speed. She made some suggestions about flying which he incorporated, while she usually only flew around the castle to keep her wings in it (so to

speak) she had many more years of experience than he did. He kept up the pace and soon the arrow turned into a dot, they were there.

“Now what?” she called, as he dove towards the water. “Er, what are you doing?”

“You’ll see!” He got close, nearly touching the water as he swung around, feet downward. With a powerful stroke he hovered, then willed the water below him to freeze. This created an ice shelf that he dropped onto, resting his wings. He then touched the ice, fixing it in place with alchemy, and let the bending go. The ice stayed.

With the ice shelf in place for at least some time (he made it as cold as possible) he sat down and asked the universe for more specifics, again how far in three directions they had to go. Telling the watch the display changed to a “radar” view showing the location and how far away they were. The pair took to the sky again, following the dot. It wasn’t more than a few minutes that the ship came into view, and both were impressed. The vessel was huge, with at least thirteen decks, plus the white part on top which featured a huge pool. It was completely lit up, light spilling from every available portal, reinforcing his belief that *This ship is powered by something he invented. Must be, why else would they waste all that power keeping the lights on? What I want to know is, how does it not tip over? It’s so tall but skinny, you would think a brisk wind would just flop it right over.*

He landed on the deck and looked around, Mavis coming to stand beside him.

“Is this a ghost ship?” she asked, coming a little closer. “There’s no one here.”

“I don’t think he would buy this entire ship just to park it out here and die, alone. No, someone must be here. Come on.” But he sensed no life, no energy, as they walked a circuit around the top and decided to go inside. Finally he sensed something, and the pair went in that direction, having to make their own doors or figure out where the stairs were because neither was familiar with ships.

But finally they heard the sounds of someone punching something, and crept forward, somewhat confused. They came to an open door and peeked inside, and there was a woman in a martial arts uniform of some kind, punching and kicking a bag. Beside her was a very strange looking thing, like a bell on wheels that had a pair of arms and a head. This “man” was praising the woman or offering suggestions as to her technique, seemingly in equal measure.

Mavis made a “get on with it,” gesture, shooing him forward, and he decided there was nothing for it. He boldly stepped forward. “You’re fairly good,” he admitted, not knowing what else to say to her. “But I could give you a few tips on technique, if you wanted.”

To say the two were startled was understating it, but Lysanias didn’t expect in a million years what happened next. The woman fell to her knees before him, looking up at him with a rapturous look on her face.

“Look, great grandfather! Our mission to eradicate monsters has been noticed by Heaven,” she breathed. “And they have sent us an angel!”

“Your mission to what?” Mavis demanded, also stepping into the room.

“Vampire!” both screamed, pointing.

Chapter 16

Truce

When: Just then

Where: Practice room aboard the Legacy

As Ericka sprang to her feet, rolled to the side, and grabbed a stake from a nearby heap of weapons her great grandfather darted behind a table, upended it, and from somewhere had pulled a rifle that pulsed with electricity.

"There's really no need for this," Lysanias told them.

"You're no angel, you're a monster in disguise!" the half human thing said to them. "You won't take us alive!"

You're one to talk. Lysanias' senses tingled, and the gun was pointed at Mavis, who stepped back.

"Please, you don't have to do this!"

He pulled the trigger, and Lysanias, warned by the force, stepped in front of her. A burst of pure electricity, not unlike a lighting bolt, raced towards him. He made no effort to dodge, after all he had stepped in the way on purpose, but had no time to get his shield out or act defensively before it slammed into him. We all know how effective that was, as he simply gathered the power inside himself and re-channeled it out his fingers with fire bending. There weren't many choices of where to put it given he didn't want to accidentally electrocute Ericka or whatever her great grandfather was, so he put it straight up. The lights flickered as the power raced the walls of the room, stunning everyone. He pulled the sword out, making it visible.

"Drop it," he told Ericka, "I will not allow you to harm Mavis, she is under my protection."

"I don't exactly need your protection," Mavis told him, but then softened. "Thanks though, for taking that for me. Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine. Are you going to drop it, or not?"

The stake tumbled from her hand. "We can't attack an angel, grandfather," she insisted, falling to her knees again. "Are you hurt? My grandfather didn't mean anything by it, please don't damn his soul to Hell! He can atone, I'm sure he can!"

"I'll overlook it," Lysanias told them. "If he puts it down *now*."

"I'm putting it down, I'm putting it down. See?" He set it down and manipulated a control to roll around the table. His other hand was up in the air. "I surrender."

"Wait, have you come for his soul?" Ericka asked, horrified. "Is it because he extended his lifespan, and that's a heresy against God?"

"Perhaps you could listen more, and assume less," Mavis told them peevishly. "Then you might learn why we came here."

"Sorry, sorry!" she managed, bowing a little while still on her knees. "I will attend you quietly, oh angel."

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Is there a place we can sit down?" he asked instead. "A large table with many chairs would be best, there are others I need to bring here. I have much to tell you, we should be comfortable."

"Of course, we have a conference room that can hold several people," Ericka told him. "Grandfather, why don't you meet us there, as you'll have to take the ramps?"

"Very well," he told them, putting his arm down. "With your permission to depart?"

"Go ahead."

The man wheeled himself out a door at the back, and Ericka rose. "If you would come with me, please?"

"Just one thing," Lysanias told her, putting his sword back. With a gesture the electric gun flew from the floor into his hand. He shoved it into his pocket. "Just so there are no more little 'accidents.'"

"Of course, allow me to disarm myself as well!" She produced various knives and canisters from her person, making a small pile of them before her. "I carry no more weapons, upon my honor!"

"Then lead on."

“Right this way.”

Ericka led them through the ship and to a richly decorated room, with fine rugs, wall hangings, and a wooden table that gleamed.

“I’ll get them out, they’re probably wondering what’s going on, then we can begin.”

“Get them out?” Ericka repeated.

“The other... representatives, if you will. Pause.” With time stopped, Lysanias began gathering magical energies to open the door of his personal dimension. *May as well not stand around for ten minutes doing this, it’s why I made the ring in the first place.* Just as he felt the magic responding he willed time to begin again and tore open the dimensional rift into his little paradise. “If you want to go get them, Mavis? They should be close by, it opens right near the cabin.” *As I’d rather you not be alone with this woman just yet.*

“Sure.” She disappeared inside.

“Can I offer you something to drink?” Ericka asked as her grandfather came into the room.

“Oh, what’s that?” he asked, rolling over and looking inside. “What a beautiful place!”

“Thank you. To answer your question, it’s a doorway to the world I created with magic. I had some people wait there while I found your ship.”

He mouthed “created?” and rolled directly away from it. Then back around the table to be as far from it as he could be, never taking his eyes off it.

“Are, uh, more monsters going to be joining us?”

“Mavis is the only ‘monster’ that travels with us currently. Ah, here they are now! May I present Jonathan, representing humanity.”

“Hey, Mavis said we’re on the tallest boat ever. I can’t wait to see it!”

“This is Tamzin, she represents the fae of the world.”

“I was thinking, it should be Bo here,” she announced, stepping into the room.

“Shouldn’t it? You met her first.”

“It’s true. If she hadn’t gotten herself thrown in jail she probably would be.”

“I’m not sorry about doing my job.”

“I realize that. And Kenzie, representing a very small portion of the population, humans with special powers.” *Though for all I know there are more, in hiding or ignorant of their powers because they have no teachers.*

“I’m the only one as far as we know,” she chirped. “How is everyone? What’s with that guy, is he a robot?” She pointed to the man as Mavis came back out.

“I am Abraham Van Helsing, monster hunter extro- er...” He realized what he was saying as Mavis glared at him. “Er, just an aging inventor. This is my great granddaughter, Ericka. Please, have a seat.” As everyone worked out where to sit, our team on one side, Ericka on the other, he went on. “As I got older and my body started to fail me, I replaced what I could with synthetic equivalents and ended up with this body. It looks a little cobbled together I admit, but it’s kept me alive this long. My mind is the important thing, and it’s sharp as ever!” He cackled.

“And you of course shared this knowledge with the world, so those similarly ravaged by time or disease could benefit from what seems to be a proven technology?” Tamzin asked icily.

“Er, no, not so much.”

“I see.”

“That does seem pretty selfish,” Jonathan agreed with a frown. “You know how many people are on organ donor waiting lists? If you’ve created workable replacements and lived to a hundred and fifty, they’re better than anything the world knows about. And that was just by yourself, imagine with millions of dollars of grant money and an actual team. Real labs, assistants-”

“In any case, not really why we’re here,” Lysanias chided them. “It was his choice, and after his inevitable death his soul will be judged along with all others. If found wanting because of his choices... well... you know.”

“There is that,” Abraham agreed, looking a bit haunted.

“So why are you here, oh holy one?” asked Ericka. “Please, impart your wisdom to us.”

“Oh my goodness. Firstly, I’m *not* an angel, I just happen to have wings. Look, I’ll start from the beginning.” *Again. I need to make a recording of this.*

So he gave them the whole speech, having the bright idea to use light bending to create some “holograms” to illustrate some of his adventures thus far. Then he told them about the threat of this world, and how the monster and fae communities were responding. He briefly told everyone’s story, from how Mavis and he met, to the warnings of Tamsin.

“So you’re asking humanity to step forward and contribute?” Abraham asked when the explanation was done. “To fight this Jason person?”

“That’s right. This threat involves you all, and I need people who are already in the know because I don’t have time to convince the world all their stories are real. Monsters and fae have done too good a job vanishing from the world, according to Jonathan. No one would believe they were real. That means they won’t believe Jason is real, and waste the time we have now when they could have prepared. Better to simply deal with those that will prepare and who need as little explanation as possible.”

“To work beside monsters, I don’t know. And then there’s these fae people,” he looked over at Tamsin, who glared back. “I never even suspected.”

“Forget them. To think whole other *worlds* existed,” Ericka one upped him. “There could be other versions of me out there, doing totally different things! We have to help!”

“I don’t know...”

“Great grandfather, what have I been training all my life for? You said it was to ‘keep the world safe from monsters,’ right? Tell me how that young girl sitting there is a monster!” She pointed to Mavis. “She isn’t attacking us, she’s not a mindless killing machine, she’s just a young vampire that wants to see the world. Her father built a whole castle monsters could stay in and not be troubled by humans, and the fae have apparently been mingling with people without issue for thousands of years! Grandfather, tell me how what you did in the past was right.”

“They’re monsters! Look at her!”

“I am looking at her. She’s almost as old as you are, but she looks like a teenager. My God I’d give almost anything to look like that, and stay that way for hundreds of years. And don’t tell me you wouldn’t, look at the lengths you went to!”

“Oh, I see what you did,” Abraham realized. “You chose the prettiest monster you could to come talk to us, to throw us off our guard. But I won’t be fooled. Get Dracula here and then you’ll see what a real monster looks like!”

“Fine,” Lysanias told them, standing.

“Er, what?”

He glared at the still open portal he was maintaining, wondering if he risked having such a high grade spell going while trying to teleport. *Eh, I can always open it again, or just teleport everyone to our next destination.* He snapped, ending maintenance of the spell which slammed it shut. “It’s the work of moments to bring him here. Let’s go on deck so I can be sure I’m not moving so I don’t slam against the wall coming or going, and he can tell you himself they just want to be left alone.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean you actually had to, I mean, you don’t have to trouble yourself, I mean, you can really get him here?”

“It was your idea, too late to back out now. Come along.”

The group went up on deck and the others ran to the railing to look over.

“Wow, imagine jumping into the water from this height!” Jonathan exclaimed. “What a thrill!”

“Uh, you would die,” Mavis told him after a second of looking over the edge.

“Bummer! You think?”

“Yes. Given an estimated height in meters of this vessel at one hundred fifty and the acceleration due to gravity of 9.8m/s squared you would hit the water in roughly five seconds traveling nearly two hundred kilometers per hour. Estimating your mass at seventy five kilograms that means you would impact with...” she paused, looking off to the side. “A hundred and ten thousand joules of energy. Your entire body would snap like a twig. At that

speed it wouldn't matter that it was water, not anymore. You may as well jump off the castle and hit the ground, the effect would be the same."

The others stared open mouthed at her. Abraham seemed the most taken aback, actually looking quite impressed.

"What?" she demanded. "I've done nothing but study for the past one hundred and eighteen years. My tutors included zombie Beethoven, Bach, and Elvis, not to mention zombie Copernicus, Newton, and Einstein. Okay, they aren't as amazing as they were in their prime, but at least some of their genius was preserved by us turning them into zombies."

"Right," Jonathan managed, stepping back very, very carefully from the edge. "Let's not do that, then."

"You did all that in your head?" Abraham demanded to know.

"Of course, how else would I do it?"

"A calculator, maybe?"

"What's a calculator?"

"Uh..."

"I'm heading out. Be back in a second." Lysanias took off from the deck, spreading his wings and rising into the air. He was going to make another ice platform they could teleport to, but then thought better of it. *I'll just put him into a ward, or he can be a bat. I want to bring all his friends though, they're all well spoken.* He shifted back to the space above the castle and went in search of Dracula.

"You want me to make peace with a Van Helsing?!" he asked, not believing his ears.

"How is he still alive, anyway?"

"Through the power of science!" Lysanias felt it necessary to shout, raising a finger in the air. The expected crash of thunder never came. He lowered his hand. "Anyway, I want you and your friends to come show you're not just a bunch of mindless, well, monsters. That you're people, just not the human kind."

"I don't mind, if it won't take long." He turned to one of the suits of armor. "Please get my friends here."

"Right sir!"

Meanwhile Lysanias pulled out some blank paper and made the first a few temporary wards, as it was silly to waste the permanent ones. *And opening the dimension is such a hassle, this way is easier.*

The wolf family showed up first, and he convinced them both, kids and all, saying he could easily lift them rather than trying to shove each child into a ward. "I want to show them you have families too."

"If you say so," Wayne agreed. "But not all of them, right?"

"The others are off playing, these are just the youngest," Wanda agreed.

"It shouldn't be more than a few minutes, I'll take you right back. I just want to introduce... wait a second." He got out the hubPad. "Can you project the circle of bridging?"

"Of course." A beam shot out and covered the floor, so he handed the pad to Wayne.

"This will be even easier. I'll just go back myself, make the twin to this, and you can just step through, and then step back. Easy." He started tracing it with the stele. *It should take care of the momentum difference too, being supernatural in nature rather than my teleport which just exchanges space. Same very stern warnings in that entry, let me tell you.* After he finished he found everyone ready to go. "Right, in a few minutes this will start to glow. Just step into it."

That done he went back and burned an identical circle into the deck, activating it. A second later Dracula's friends stared pouring through.

"Oh, this is nice," Eunice admitted, looking out at the water. "Frank, we should do a cruse sometime."

"Sure, a cruse for monsters," he scoffed. "How are we going to do that?"

"Monsters, all kinds of monsters, on my ship!" Abraham managed, looking a bit panicked.

"Wow, there's so much variety," Ericka said.

Mavis started introducing them as they came through. "This is Wayne and his wife, Wanda."

"Nice to meet you," Wanda told her, extending a hand. Then she jumped. "Oh, someone kicked!" She rubbed her belly with her other hand.

Ericka took it. "These are all yours?" she asked, indicating all the babies they had hung on themselves. "Or do you watch the kids for the whole... pack?"

"No, they're all ours," Wayne told her, sounding resigned. "We left most of them back at the castle, because Lysanias said this would just take a second. Nice to meet you."

"Wow, this is amazing, I just took a step!" said a new voice, and Murray shimmered into existence on deck. "Now I'm on a boat!"

The green blob monster followed, taking a piece of himself and squishing it quickly, ending up with a flower he handed to Ericka.

"Oh, thank you," she said, not expecting this.

And then the master of the castle himself stepped through, Dracula, lord of vampires, scholar, widower, hotel manager. He spotted Abraham and went over to him. "You old rascal, you really are still alive!"

"No thanks to you, my old foe. You look as you always did."

"And you look terrible. Seriously, you did this to yourself just for another chance to kill me? Why? What did I ever do to you?"

"I don't know." His head drooped a little. "It's just what my family did, what I thought was expected of me. But every time you bested me."

"You defeated yourself most times though," Dracula admitted. "Remember that one time you crashed your plane into a cliff?"

"Oh, I remember."

He sobered. "Look, can we put our differences aside? He must have told you what we're facing. I have a daughter, you a granddaughter, do they need to take up where we left off? We mean the world no harm, you must see that by now, given Jonathan says we've faded into myth. We keep to ourselves, we're not evil."

"Even evil creatures would seek to save themselves, if what that non-angel said is true. Just you saying you aren't is no proof."

"You want proof? I could tear you to shreds right now if I wanted to," Dracula stated matter of factly. "The reason I don't is because I bear you no ill will. I never did, despite the number of times you made trouble for all of us. Doesn't that tell you anything?"

He brooded. "I would want revenge, were our positions replaced. If you were helpless before me, as I am now before you, I wouldn't hesitate. Even facing the end of the world, your death at my hand would be my priority." He lowered his voice to almost a whisper. "Was I the monster all along?" Then louder. "Perhaps I was wrong, all those years ago. Fine. For today, a truce. We face a common foe and we must work together. But I'll be watching you, if I think this is some kind of act..."

"No act." He held out a hand, and the man took it.

"Now, speaking of my granddaughter, may I present Ericka?"

She turned away from the wolf pups she was petting and walked over to Dracula, eyes locking with his.

"Obbe, kube tay?" he said by way of introduction.

Chapter 17

Feelings

When: Just then

Where: Deck of the Legacy

Dracula continued spouting absolute nonsense, and everyone looked to Lysanias.

“Are you getting any of that?” Murry asked. “Because I sure aint.”

“Not a word,” he admitted. “It’s not a language, that’s for sure.”

“Dad?” Mavis asked, looking worried. “Wait, did you just... could that have been... with Ericka?”

Dracula seemed to snap out of it, looking down at Mavis with a shocked expression on his face. “I have to get back to the hotel!” he announced and ran through the circle, vanishing again.

“Okay, that was abrupt,” she admitted.

“We better go make sure he’s okay,” Frank told them.

“We need to get back anyway,” Wanda said. “It was nice meeting you both.” She stepped back through the circle, and soon all the other monsters that had come through had said their goodbye and vanished. Ericka seemed to be coming out of a spell as well, blinking and shaking off something.

“What was that?” she asked.

“What? Did Dracula put some kind of spell on you?” Abraham demanded, rolling over to her.

“No, grandfather, it wasn’t like that. I don’t know what... he was just so handsome, wasn’t he? You called him a real monster, grandfather, but he’s not like that at all. Mavis, he wouldn’t happen to be seeing anyone at the moment, would he?”

“Seeing anyone? You mean like dating?”

“Dating!?” Abraham sputtered. “Ericka, what are you asking?”

“This all seems familiar,” Jonathan mused.

“Does it?” Mavis asked, somehow hopeful, amused, and horrified at the same time. (she’s very talented to shove all that into two words, you had to be there)

“All this aside,” Lysanias broke in, trying to get things back on track. “As you saw, they’re not mindless, or evil, or even bad tempered. So called monsters build things, fall in love, and have families. Just like you do.”

“Love,” Ericka whispered, with a goofy grin on her face. “It can’t be.”

“He did put a spell on her!” he insisted. “Where’s my rifle, I’ll settle him once and for all, time ravaged body or not!”

“Grandpa it’s not like that, get ahold of yourself.”

“Then why are you acting like that?”

“Because she’s like me, isn’t she?” Mavis said a bit sadly.

“I don’t follow.” Abraham looked over at her, confused.

“This ship is all you’ve really known, isn’t it?” Ericka nodded. “The inside of the castle was the only thing I ever knew. Then someone from outside shows up, and suddenly your heart is beating a million kilometers an hour, and they’re all you can think about.”

“Wait, what are you saying?” Jonathan asked. “Are you talking about me?”

“I’ll explain it to you later, pretty boy,” Kenzie promised him. “Let them talk.”

“So this is normal?” she asked.

Mavis nodded. “It is possible... for us... to love a human.”

“What are you going on about?” Abraham bellowed.

Ericka ignored him. “You were hidden away somewhere?”

“My father built the hotel after my mother was killed, by humans, and I was not allowed off the grounds. He said it was too dangerous.”

“After my parents were killed my grandfather bought the Legacy, and I’ve been training on it ever since. He said the world that had monsters in it is was too dangerous. I needed to be ready to fight. So I’ve done nothing else...”

An understanding seemed to pass between them. Mavis looked away first. “Maybe it will be all right, if it’s you. But if you betray us...” The threat hung in the air.

"I don't think I could, now," she admitted.

"What are you two talking about?" Abraham repeated.

"Never mind, grandfather," Ericka said crisply. "Just girl stuff. You gave your word to Dracula we would work with the monsters to actually safeguard our world. Let's go back down and figure out how we're going to do that."

"Fine," he allowed. "You're sure you're feeling all right?"

She let out a laugh. "Grandfather, I think for the first time I'm actually feeling alive." She threw an arm around Mavis' shoulders. "Come on, I want to hear all about the Dracula family."

They chatted on the way down and while waiting for Abraham to show back up, Ericka having led them into a "war room." It was stocked with various weapons, a map of the world hung on the wall, and various monitors scrolled data past. Lysanias got the rifle out he had taken, setting it on the table.

When he rolled in Lysanias and the others explained what had been going on up to that point. Lysanias showed where he had arrived, and where the incident with the haunted water had taken place.

"So what's our next move?" he asked.

"We'll probably keep the bar as our base," Lysanias decided, "as nice as the ship is it's hard to teleport to. Then keep doing what we've been doing. Recruit anyone that either has useful abilities or fighting experience, or both. Keep an eye out for reports of strange goings on that indicate dreamlike activity leaking into the world. Wait until Jason shows himself and then attack."

He didn't look pleased. "Not much of a strategy, is it?"

"We're fighting an enemy who could appear anywhere in the world, and who may not have even broken out of his prison yet. Stuff we see happen in the world could be incidental, just caused by the effort he's taking to come back here. When he does he can probably go anywhere, and locally do most anything. To say we are groping around in the dark is an understatement."

"How do we fight something like that?" Ericka asked.

"You don't," he told her sternly. "I do. You all are just going to try keeping him distracted, allowing me to get close enough and use the only weapon on this planet that can actually cause him lasting harm."

"Yeah, we're all dead," Tamsin told her. "So if you wanted to experience love, or whatever, you better do it fast. I'm sure he can take you to this hotel he talks about when we're done here."

"Tamsin please," pleaded Lysanias. "A little faith here, all right?"

"I'll think about it."

"You haven't seen him fight, have you?" Mavis asked. She shook her head. "That's why you're such a negative Nancy. He gave a demonstration to us, it was amazing!" Jonathan nodded his head.

"I'll take your word for it."

"I better go pack some stuff," Ericka announced. "If I'm leaving the ship, I'll have to be prepared. I'll come back for my weapons. Mavis, want to help?"

"Sure!" The two started to leave the room, but Abraham called after them.

"You know I'm not leaving here, right?"

"What?" She whirled back. "I can't leave you here by yourself!"

"Look at me, I'm too old to fight. But I can be of use here. I get news reports from all over the world, and this ship may not look it, but I've been fortifying it for thirty years. It's tougher than it looks. You need a place to fall back to, should it go poorly."

"You really want to be here alone?"

He shook his head. "I'll head towards Canada and get at least somewhat near a port. Then it'll be easier to teleport to, right? I won't be alone for all that long."

"Slightly," Lysanias admitted. *There's still the bobbing of the waves, and it's not going to be in exactly the same position. I would still need to be in the air.* "I could make a permanent circle on deck though, so you could go from the bar to the ship in a single step. Take me a few days though." *Or would it? The pad can project the shape, I could use*

alchemy to actually shape it, energy extraction to cleanse any residual power left in the metal, then energize it as an artificer. Do that twice and Bob's your uncle. Hi Bob! Now where did that thought come from?

"It's settled then. Ericka will go with you to help fight Jason. I'll give you the plans for all the inventions I've made over the years; my medical technology, what powers the ship, my weapons. That's my contribution. Then I'll stay here and monitor the world."

"I don't like it," she admitted. "What if something happens to you?"

"I've lived this long-" he started to say, but Lysanias held up a hand. "I can look into his future, will that ease your mind a bit?"

"Oh, I guess?"

"Come here." Lysanias touched him, opening himself up to any impressions about the future that wished to make themselves known to him. "He'll be fine," he decided. "I don't sense anything terrible happening to him in the near future."

"You see?" he said triumphantly. "I'll outlive you, mark my words!"

Unless she gets turned into a vampire by one Dracula, so that they can stay together forever.

"All right, I guess it's fine. Come on, Mavis."

While they packed the group helped him dig out his notebooks, drawings, prototypes, and general notes about possible inventions, piling them up on the table.

"You've been busy," Kenzie told him, seeming impressed as she paged through a notebook.

"Apart from oversee Ericka's training, there wasn't much to do around here," he admitted. "My mobility isn't what it used to be, after all. So I did a lot of sitting and thinking. Ah, here's another one. That may be the last."

When it was decided that yes, that was the last notebook, Lysanias decided to do something sneaky. He paused the world, bringing out his hubPad.

"You can scan these in like you did with my notes, yes?" he asked it.

"Affirmative. You simply need to focus my camera and turn the pages."

"Excellent." He smiled a large smile, thinking about bringing this all back to his world someday. *My alchemist friends will go nuts, not like they wouldn't over the magiteck armor or that similar machine from Korra's world. Or any of the other books I've picked up for that matter, but this is stuff apparently unknown even in this... world. Huh.* He looked over at Abraham. *I wonder. I'll have to check him out when time resumes again.* He looked the frail looking man over, little more than arms and a head now, encased in metal. *Nah.*

It took some "time" but he took pictures of all the charts, drawings, notes and notebooks, which the pad digitized, sorted, made searchable with OCR, and cleaned up in general.

Now your work can reach an even wider audience than you ever dreamed. Even if something happens to this world, your work will, in one form or another, live on. Wait a minute...

"Can you distribute these notes to their information network?" he asked. "This should be shared in the quickest way possible."

"As they were created in this reality I do have authorization to distribute the medical advances and the power generation technology, along with the general notes on further experiments to perform. I do not have authorization for the weapons technology, as most places have strict restrictions pertaining to weaponry. You cannot override this directive with your current access level."

"That's fine." *Let them kill each other with what they've already got. I'm sure it's more than adequate anyway.* "When possible, please do so. Anonymously, of course."

"No one will be able to track the document's origins. For complete fairness I am required to send a copy of all relevant notes to all major governments and corporations such that no one entity has control of the advances. Please state your authorization for this action."

"Perfect. Make it so."

"Authorization accepted. When time resumes I will transmit the information."

With that done he made sure everything was back where it was, and started time up again. Recalling to check out Abraham he seemed to feel like he belonged there, making him shrug and forget it.

Everyone got a portion of the hoard to carry, and they went up to the bridge where Abraham plotted a new course for the shore of Canada. The journey would take several days, but Lysanias promised to keep in touch. He had slapped a ward of long distance communication down in the room with all the monitors and the twin to it he said he would put at the bar somewhere so they could stay in contact. By that time Ericka was packed, Mavis carrying her suitcase as her hands were full of weapons. She had her own electric rifle, two smaller versions at her hips, plus the various knives and canisters she had taken off earlier.

"Girl, I like your style!" Kenzie told her.

Ericka said goodbye to her grandfather, but promised to stay in touch.

"I know. Go out there and make the name Van Helsing *mean* something again!"

"I will."

Rather than stick everyone in the dimension and have to open it for ten minutes again the group descended through the ship to the lowest level, by the water line. (He took a picture of the top of the ship in case he needed to get back there in a hurry, and looked his picture of the bar over to refresh his memory) He froze a shelf they could all stand on, and using the watch propelled them away from the ship so it would be less turbulent, and made sure they weren't drifting. Everyone packed in close to him, one arm holding notes and scrolls the other holding onto him, and he *shifted*.

Displacing that much air knocked aside tables and chairs and made a huge bang, so everyone there knew they were back. Trick gave them a dirty look as he righted a table.

"Sorry about that," Lysanias told him.

"If you're going to be popping in and out like that, I'll show you the lower level. We can rope a section off and make sure nothing is nearby."

"That would be ideal," he agreed. "Thanks."

"So this is a fae bar?" Ericka asked, looking around. "Nice place. The Dal Riata," she read from the sign behind the bar. "And look at those chandeliers!" She moved around the place, exclaiming over all the decorations which had been gathered over the last thousand years.

"Someone's in love," Jonathan remarked, making Ericka almost drop her rifle.

"Does it show that much?" she wailed, putting a hand to her face. "Oh my God I've got to pull myself together! I only just saw the-"

"Er, I meant with the bar."

"What? Oh, the bar, right." She gave an insincere laugh. "What else could you have meant?"

"Trick, this is Ericka, Ericka, Trick. He owns the bar. Oh, don't forget to have someone take you outside and tell you the bar is there so you can see the door later if you need to."

"Okay."

"You okay?" Dyson asked, coming over to see Tamsin.

"I'm fine, Dyson. Everybody is playing everything straight at the moment."

"Glad to hear it."

"I'm actually closing the bar up pretty soon," Trick announced. "It's closing time, you don't have to go home but you can't. Stay. Here."

"You can all crash at my place," Kenzie told them. "I need to get some sleep anyway. Ugh, it's two in the morning!"

"Me too, though I would rather stay up with you, Mavis," Jonathan told her.

"It is going to be tricky, us operating on different schedules," Mavis admitted. "I don't mind sleeping now and being awake during the day, but sun is a little lethal for me."

"We can work it out, we can work it out!" he singsonged.

"I would have gone to be bed soon too, had you all not showed up," Ericka told them.

"I'll just head to my apartment," Tamsin offered. "Give me a ride, partner?"

“Sure, let’s go.”

The others dumped the notes in Trick’s study, and he promised to go over them with some people he knew that were fae and had the know how to understand them. (He didn’t have many human contacts) For the moment he locked what he could in a safe, not that anyone knew they were there, but he said it was always better to be safe than sorry. He told them people were interested in the other notes as well, getting into the supernatural skills they could learn. Word was spreading among both the light and dark about the traveler that had brought such knowledge, and the warning about Jason returning. “When he shows up, we’ll hear about it,” he promised. “Everyone is on the lookout for strange stuff happening, and I’ve even told people to email me about any strange dreams they have, so we can see if there’s any pattern to it that might help.”

“Great idea!” Lysanias told him honestly. “That could really be a big help.”

They said their goodbyes and Lysanias brought those coming with him to Kenzie’s apartment.

In the end Jonathan got the couch, Ericka got Bo’s bed, and of course Kenzie took her own. This left Mavis and Lysanias up because both of them had rested most recently.

“So, what should we do with ourselves?” she asked shyly.

Not what I would like, I’m sure, but maybe she could clear something up. “Can you tell me what happened with Dracula back there? He ran off pretty quickly.”

She giggled behind her hand. “He might have zinged with Ericka. Talk about unexpected!”

“Zinged?”

“It’s a monster thing. We somehow know, just by looking at someone, if they’re going to be our love. That’s a zing.”

“That’s fairly convenient.” *How in the world did that come about?*

“It’s odd though, the saying goes ‘you only zing once.’ My father must have zinged with my mom, but the way he acted just then... I don’t know.”

Lysanias stroked his beard. “There’s probably an explanation for it. I mean if monsters really can tell who their true love is on sight, and then act on it, they would only need to zing once.”

“I’m not sure that explains it.”

“Sure it does. Most of your kind is effectively immortal, right?”

“Of course, most of us have lifespans ranging from astonishing to outlandish, in human terms. There are exceptions, like Wanda and Wayne for instance. A nearly immortal person typically doesn’t have the number of kids they’ve had. Can you imagine the number of wolf people we would have if all wolf people families were as big as theirs? We couldn’t go anywhere without stepping on a wolf. They probably won’t die of accident, but they’ll die of old age long before I do. They are mortal creatures that happen to look like wolf people. But what does that have to do with it?”

“Everything. If two people can *know*, truly *know* their One True Love, and they live together their whole lives, dying at the end of their extraordinary lifespans, what need for a second zing? Your mother was killed far before her time, so is it any wonder he may zing again? You can’t think everyone only has One True Love Forever, how would anyone ever meet them?” *Unless somehow ‘fate’ draws together those that are meant to zing, such as Ericka and Jonathan, if what I’ve felt from them is any indication. But still, how are two zingers going to meet if they’re born halfway around the world?* “Even if you lived forever, you would meet far less people than there actually are in the world at any one time. The chances of meeting The One would be astonishingly small. Heck, just being born twenty years apart, nothing to a vampire, would put you in totally different places. To say nothing of actually being born thousands of miles apart.” *Was Jonathan wandering the Earth looking for his zing? Without knowing what he was searching for?*

“I guess you’re right. The zing is really just an indication that you could love a person, not that that person is the *only* person you could ever love. A fair distinction.”

I wonder if I'll ever 'zing' with someone? And if I did, what would that mean for both of us? "It fits the facts. Now." He looked her over, wondering what they actually should do with themselves for the moment. "You probably don't have any practical experience fighting someone, do you?"

"Not really, no."

"Then let's head to the roof and I'll see if I can give you any pointers. You can probably rely on your strength, but we've already proven I'm stronger than you and Jason could be too. We should plan for that."

"Whatever you want."

You say that, but do you mean it?

So Lysanias had her attack him, and went over what abilities she already had and how they could help in a fight. As a vampire she was fairly powerful when she put her mind to it, being strong, fast, a quick thinker, and aided by her telekinetic powers could attack from multiple directions at once with thrown objects. After about two hours he decided she could probably hold her own even without specific combat training, as he simulated fighting Jason by throwing his various powers at her and letting her deal with them. His lack of energy worked against him, not that he was actively *trying* to kill her, so he didn't put anything really into his attacks, but they still cost him. Finally he held up a hand and she lowered her stance.

"You should be fine," he told her, breathing hard. "As long as we attack as a group, he's only one guy. He won't be able to keep up."

"You're the expert. Thanks for this, it was actually pretty fun!"

"I could probably manage my wings, if you were up for a bit of flying."

"Always! Let's go!" she changed into a bat. "Slowpoke, come on!"

He smiled, concentrating. *It is fun being with you. Too bad it can't last.*

The pair explored the city from above, dropping down to see various things if Lysanias felt no one was around, until the sun came up. Mavis then had to go back, snuggling up to Jonathan on the couch in her bat form. This let Lysanias replace those wards he had used up recently, as the house was quiet, and make some notes of his own about what had been going on in his own journal. Then everyone started waking up, and the real work began.

Chapter 18

Effort

When: The next day

Where: Bo's apartment

The day past in somewhat of a blur for Lysanias because he was hopping back and forth between things the entire time. He first gave Kenzie his ability (such as it was, he wasn't all that great at it) in chanting, and the two used her printer to run off the chants collected in the hubPad. With that done he found an old board in the alley behind the apartment and split it in two, coming up with two equal pieces. Projecting the circle of bridging onto it he began sculpting out an exact replica on one, sinking it into the wood. After an hour or so of that Kenzie said she was ready and he gave her his skill in manipulating and sensing energy. She could point to him with her eyes closed, so they knew that had worked, but somehow she was unable to use any more of her enormous stockpile than she had before.

"What am I doing wrong?" she asked, her deer spirit vanishing again. It seemed that unlike when he was first learning to call out his mountain spirit she could get it almost every time by simply dumping extra energy into the attempt. So he figured she could get the practice at that, and he could see how much energy she was actually using with each attempt.

It must be something a shaman, a real shaman, can do. Just like I couldn't put my spirit energy into wards until that angel made me an artificer. She can convert her inner energy into her powers, like I can with skybourne magic. Or is it because I learned skybourne magic from a real skybourne so I cast the same way they do, and had I originally learned calling out my spirit from a real shaman I could do what she does? Hard to say. "I have a theory," he told her. "Spending your energy involves not just knowing you can use a certain amount, it's physical as well. You have to widen the energy pathways in the body to handle the greater amount flowing through them."

"So I still have to practice that?"

"Is that so terrible?"

"Says the guy with the fancy eyes that can learn any skill he can watch performed."

"They have come in handy, I don't deny it."

She went off to keep practicing and get used to sensing energy by walking around the city for a bit before her next "download." She had argued just getting everything at once, but he cautioned against that. "Putting that much knowledge into your brain at once might actually work against you. We've got time, let's at least give you the most important skills first, then the others one or two at a time over the next day or so."

She admitted that was probably best, but was still excited to see what all she could do. He worked a little more on the first circle, then they had lunch and he went to go work on the comatose man. Surprisingly, about an hour and a half into it he woke up, somewhat freaked out to be floating and covered in water. Lysanias quickly put that away and hastened to reassure him.

"See, you're fine. Not even wet, how about that?"

"Who are you, and where am I?"

"Er, I'm Lysanias, what's the last thing you remember?"

He held his head. "Heading to the bar to get together with my buddies. Why?"

"Good! And you know your name? The approximate date?"

"I'm Chris, and it's..." he rattled off a date that meant nothing to him. "Why do you say 'approximate?'"

"It's actually several days later. To answer your earlier question, you're in a hospital, recovering from an attack."

"Attack? Who attacked me?"

"A succubus named Bo." He held up his hands. "She's been imprisoned by the Morrigan, don't worry, she's no danger to anyone else. Apparently the sudden shock of having your energy sucked out your mouth burned you out, and you've been in a coma for several days."

"Man, chi-sucked by a succubus? Buy a guy a drink first, am I right? It's been days you said? My boss is going to be pissed!"

"You work in the human world?"

"Yeah. I'm in construction."

"Hmmm. Well, I'm sure your friends told everyone what was going on so hopefully they thought to tell your boss, as well. Not the specifics of course, that wouldn't be believed. You'll have to ask them what they said so your stories match up."

"Where's my phone? I must have a million messages." He started looking around the room.

"I think all your stuff was locked up someplace, so it wouldn't be stolen. I can go find out. How do you feel?"

He flexed his hands and wiggled his toes. "I feel okay, actually. You were really healing me? Thanks. Never met a fae that could do that, but then, we keep to ourselves so maybe I did and I just didn't know it."

"Sure thing. Just be sure to tell the Morrigan when you get a chance. I'll tell Bo, she'll be relieved, she really didn't mean to attack you like that. She felt terrible afterwards."

He nodded. "Sometimes our fae instincts are undeniable. I get it. I haven't been a model citizen in my life, either. I hope the Morrigan wasn't too hard on her."

"I don't know what sentence she's actually serving. Now that you're awake though I'm sure things will be better. Let me go see about your stuff."

"Thanks."

Lysanias slipped out of the room, readying an *ignore me* ward, and walked over to the desk with the official looking people behind it. "The man in room 418 is awake," he told them. "He's asking to see someone."

"He's awake? That's wonderful. Wait, who are you? I didn't see you come in."

"Just a friend of his."

"Oh, well, make sure you come to the desk next time you visit, we like to know who's up here."

"Of course," he lied, intending no such thing. Even if he did for some reason have to come back here.

She looked away, paging someone, and Lysanias stuck the ward to himself. She looked up, her eyes sliding past him, got a funny look on her face like 'wasn't I just talking to someone?' and went back to work with a shrug. *That saved me some explanation for sure. He should be taken care of, my part is done, and hopefully he realizes he's in the human world and won't tell anyone about the man who was healing him with water.* He watched the door to make sure someone went in, and *shifted* back to Bo's.

"Have some good news you can pass on to Bo," he told Kenzie, who was back. "That man is awake, and he seems fine. Hopefully he'll be released soon."

"That is great news!" she agreed. "I hope Bo gets out sooner because of it. Do you mind if I go now and tell her?"

"Not at all. I've got work to do here still, so it's all the same to me."

"I'll be back soon!"

She rushed out the door, to be replaced by Ericka. "Jonathan and I have been sparing," she said after the typical hellos. "He said you gave him that skill just by entering his mind? It's a fascinating style, would you mind if I learned it as well?"

"Not at all," he answered immediately. "Have a seat and give me your hands."

They both sat on the couch and he slipped into her mind, taking this opportunity to make sure she wasn't planning any betrayal later, but she seemed on the up and up. *She really did fall for Dracula in those few seconds, didn't she? She's been thinking about him all day, and asking Jonathan about him, and the castle. No worries on that score, I just hope he feels the same way.* He gave her chi-blocking, the general combat awareness he seemed to have picked up from watching so many martial artists, and his skill at dodging from the air benders. He had the sense she already knew a unique combat style focused on guns, so he was really just giving her a new style to draw upon. Both blinked as their eyes adjusted again.

“Oh, I get it,” she announced. “That was incredible. ‘I know kung-fu.’ Ha! I know how he felt.”

“He?”

“Neo. I have watched a few movies over the years of course. I can’t wait to try it out, thanks!” She jumped up and went to back to sparing with Jonathan.

Who?

He went back to working on the circle, replacing his ward first, of course. Kenzie came back feeling excited, and said the Morrigan actually called her while she was there, to tell her the news directly. As the man himself wasn’t pressing charges (“Paying it forward, he said. Whatever that means”) and the two discussed her practicing the technique of denying temptation. “It also seems Lauren has been going to see her, pleading for leniency and saying she’s fine with Bo having other lovers apart from herself. So it wouldn’t happen again, she said. Being a fae doctor she should have known better, so she blames herself for at least part of this situation. It was her jealousy that kept Bo perpetually hungry, until her baser instincts took over. She knows better now, it’s not a cheating thing, it’s a ‘I need to eat’ thing. Maybe all this will wear her down and get Bo released!”

“Wasn’t her actual point she wanted Bo to declare for light or dark, though? That hasn’t changed.”

“But she would look bad, given everything. Lots of fae look up to Bo, wishing they could renounce their tie and become unaligned too. But it’s never been done and no one wants to make the first move.”

“And that’s probably why the Morrigan wants her to declare, to avoid losing people.”

“Oh, you’re probably right. Still, it puts pressure on her to lock up someone if the person she attacked doesn’t want her locked up. Who knows.”

“I hope she gets out soon, I know you must miss her.”

“I do. Speaking of missing someone, Tamsin stopped in while you were out. Wanted to know if anything was happening today. I told her it was just training, which she said was boring and left again.”

“That’s fine. You want your next ‘dose,’ Neo?”

“Neo? Ha, that’s a good one! How do you know about that?” She laughed. “Man, that was a great movie, I wish they had made some sequels to it. Some really, really good sequels that were not confusing at all. Yeah, I’m ready, hit me up my man!”

Note to self, find out who this Neo character is. And why his knowing kung-fu is such a big deal.

Lysanias worked on the circle another hour, then got out Rosalina, practicing her release ritual and then leaving her out. They both worked on a new wand spell, figuring it was a good a way as any to spend some time together. They settled on “Impedimenta” which when cast slowed something down, either to prevent damage from a fall or to keep someone from moving forward. (Lysanias just said it as “Be impeded!”) Naturally either could do much the same thing with the force, or Rosalina’s innate ability with telekinesis, but comparing the descriptions the hubPad provided it seemed wand magic was nearly impossible to resist. While someone strong enough could bust through telekinesis, they would be unable to shake off the spell. Plus put on someone it lasted a good while, freeing up attention to do other things, so it was worth knowing.

And then it was about sunset, and Mavis was up. He didn’t have much for her to do, and wanted to get to bed himself. Stopping time was all well and good, but he was now about eight hours off everyone’s schedule. Plus with all the stuff he had been doing he was fairly tired by that point.

“You can check in with Abraham, and watch the news to see if anything strange happens tonight. I’ve really got to make you some kind of talisman or ward that can protect you from sunlight. Make you a day-walker if you will.”

“A sun-spotter.”

“A tan-pire.”

“Nice one! Um, a day-lighter. Nah, I’m not going to top tan-pire. You win. Good night.”

“Night.”

In the dream, Lysanias was in a forest clearing. Above him was a house. A house that happened to be in a tree. A ‘tree... house’ if you will. Two kids, a boy and a girl probably about thirteen or fourteen were playing and fixing it up. Lysanias was standing behind a shadowy figure, a man made of smoke, a ‘smokeman’ if you will. It swirled and shifted, but maintained the shape of a man as it stood there. “Their own imaginations will destroy them,” it hissed. “How deliciously ironic. But will the guardian come, that’s the main question. And if so, how will he have known? Yes, the trap is set nicely, let’s see what he does for these two. I am strong enough to make enough of them real to be a true threat, so then we’ll see.”

“I’m sorry, are you talking to me?” Lysanias asked the figure. It spun, and glowing red eyes fixed on his.

“Now how did-”

He woke up.

It was fairly early in the morning, about 5:30 AM, and Mavis looked over at him in bat form. She was sitting on the top of the sofa, TV remote next to her, and she hopped down and changed back.

“Good morning! Did you sleep well?”

“I did, but I just had a dream. I think a couple of kids are in danger.”

“That’s terrible! Can you find them?”

“Probably. Nothing happened overnight?”

“Abraham says nothing out of the ordinary in his news reports. Do you know about this TV thing? The channels just keep going and going.” She grabbed the remote and started flipping them, showing snippets of various things. “We’ve got to get these at the hotel! It’s amazing!”

“I don’t know much about them, specifically,” he admitted. “I mean it looks like just a bigger sized screen than my hubPad that you hang on the wall.”

“That’s fine for you, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

He watched the channels go past. “It is crazy though, to produce all this content thousands of people must do nothing else.”

“I know, right? Imagine making something that will be seen by people all over the world. Oh, I want that car!”

He looked over, and there was a car zooming around a city on the screen. “Do you know how to drive?”

“Well, no... But look at it!”

He looked. It was a car. “But you can fly.”

“But I still want it!”

“Then someone has done their job, I guess. I’m going to eat and see if I can’t pinpoint where those kids are. You want anything?”

“I’m running low on blood substitute, can we head back to the hotel and pick up more? I don’t know where to buy any in the human world. Now that I think about it, I have no idea where it comes from at all. My father must have it delivered, along with all the other hotel food, but where does it come from?”

“You’ll have to ask him. Actually, I made blood for a vampire once, no reason it shouldn’t work again. Give me a minute.” Lysanias used his food making spell for her, centered in a large bowl they found, and it filled up with a thick red liquid. She dipped a glass out and sniffed it, then took a sip.

“That’s strange.”

“What is?”

“Never thought blood could be *bland*. It’ll work, thanks.” She started finishing off the glass.

“It’ll vanish in 24 hours, but we’ll refrigerate the rest, I guess.”

He made his own food and ate it, Mavis telling him the others had been up fairly late so they weren’t getting up any time soon. That was fine with him, he made a temporary *ignore me* ward with the stele and stuck it on himself, then chanted for several minutes to get the

dragonfly spirit's aid. *As I've been thinking about that for Kenzie, I may as well use it rather than magic. Not that both aren't good practice, but this I can't put energy into.* The ward kept anyone from hearing him, and when it burned out he stopped. Then he settled in to ask the universe some questions. But first he had one for the hubPad.

"Can you display a map of this world, with a grid system so I can get a location easily?"

"I can. Please open the map app, I will guide you to the setting for turning the grid on."

"Okay." He managed that, fixing the grid in his mind, and then projected his question to the universe.

In what grid square will I find the two children I saw in my dream?

S13

"Great. Can you zoom in on S13?"

"Just make a pinching motion on that area to zoom. The grid will change accordingly."

"A what?" But he tried it, marveling at how he could zoom in and out.

"Okay, we've got to get some of those too," Mavis announced. "Humans have been making some incredible strides since my father built the hotel!"

"This level of technology exists in this reality," the pad announced. "It can be locally sourced."

Now on this zoomed in map, where will I find the two children I saw in my dream?

D4

"Okay, we're headed approximately here in a place called Colorado." He pointed to a forested area. "I'll have to ask more exact directions once we get there."

"I guess I'll be left behind," Mavis pouted.

"I wonder. HubPad, can you get a weather forecast for that area?"

"Of course. Weather report for the Colorado Springs area and surrounding counties." The voice changed a little bit to be more droning. "Clear skies today and highs in the mid seventies with a ten percent chance of rain late tonight."

"Sunny then. But the forest in my dream was pretty dense, once we were in there... I mean in your bat form you're pretty small. You could, in theory, ride in a shirt pocket until we get there. Indirect sunlight won't hurt you, will it?" *No reason the trees would be more spaced out, I must have seen the area those kids are in. I mean that treehouse was rather specific. She should be okay if...*

She shook her head. "Only direct sunlight."

"There you are. Let me look for a spell though, give me a minute." He turned to the database app and poked around in the spells section. *What's dusklight? Sounds about what I want. Moon, grade 3. Susan gave me a primer on all the planets as she cast magic, in case I needed something that could only be done this way. I could look it over, but I'm not that great about decoding this magical symbology. I could just do the same thing with Skyebourne magic, giving her an aura of darkness that would protect her, but then it'll be bouncing around my head for all eternity. I don't meet that many vampires. He paused. Okay, two of the six places I've been have had vampires. But that doesn't mean I'll always meet vampires. If I had meatloaf twice in each reality was I constantly eating meatloaf? Of course not, I would hardly eat it. Same thing here. There's still so much I need to practice, I'll need a thousand years to master it all. But think if I really could!* "I could do it in a pinch, but for now, let's just try the pocket method and see how shady it is once we get there."

"Okay. I'll need some long term solution anyway." She blushed. "I don't mind ridding in Johnny's pocket anyway."

"Just don't go to the Norn for it," he cautioned.

"The who?"

"I don't know exactly, but they are the cause a lot of trouble around here. Well, show me what's so great about this TV of yours until the others get up, then we can be on our way."

“You got it! Look, cats!”

Chapter 19

Contract

When: That morning

Where: Bo's apartment

Later that morning Kenzie's door flew open and she pounded down the stairs, her robe barely closed and hair flying everywhere. Both Mavis and Lysanias looked over at her from the couch.

"I just had the most terrible dream about Bo!" she announced. "She was being chased by land sharks, that shot bees out of their mouths, and the bees had tiny knives, and the knives were made of wasps! We have to check on her right away!"

"I'm sure she's fine," Lysanias assured her. "I didn't dream anything like that, and nothing in my notes says anything about shamans being able to dream the future. They get information from spirits, yes, but not while asleep. It was probably just a regular bad dream."

"And I'm just supposed to take your word for it? Did you have *any* dream last night?"

"I did. Apparently some kids are going to be, and I quote, destroyed by their own imagination. Unquote. Bo can take care of herself, we have to get going to find and protect them."

"She's in prison, what sort of trouble can she get into?" Mavis asked.

"You have no idea," Kenzie insisted. "Can we at least stop on the way? You've been there, you can just teleport in, right? Maybe you can only dream the future once per night and hers would have happened second. You don't know."

I suppose I don't. "If it will make you feel better, I'd be happy to take us over there."

"You might want to put some clothes on first," Mavis told her with a smirk.

"No one would see me anyway, we would be warded. But fine, I should be presentable. I'll be right down!" She pounded up the stairs again.

"What's all the shouting, are we under attack?" Jonathan asked, coming into the room with a yawn.

"Good morning, Johnny!" Mavis greeted him, hopping up and almost floating over there. "We're going on a mission, two even. Get dressed! I'll come help pick out a good shirt for you." She shoved him back towards the room.

"You'll do what?" he managed before the door closed again.

There is no jealousy, there is only peace. My mind is pure, my heart is strong.

Lysanias made two traditional wards after switching the TV off while the others got dressed and ready, and two temporary ones he would activate later. He sent a message to Tamsin to meet them at the prison, or more accurately he asked the pad to do it, and it did. By that time everyone was dressed, had eaten something, and was ready to go. Mavis was snug in Jonathan's shirt pocket, Ericka was just carrying her pistols having put the more bulky rifle into a contain ward, and he handed the wards out.

"I'll put these on you now, that should get us inside without being noticed, then we'll put these down on the corners of Bo's cell. I've allowed her to see through them, but otherwise they should keep anyone in the hall from noticing us. You all know how to use them, right?"

Both nodded, they did, while Ericka looked on, interested.

"Great. Grab on and we'll teleport over there."

He *shifted*, appearing in the hall where he last saw Bo, but her cell was empty.

"She's gone," wailed Kenzie, rattling the bars. "What's happened to her? I shouldn't have had that forth round of toast!"

Ericka reached for a pistol but Lysanias put a hand on her hand. "Stay calm, our wards are still active, we've got a few minutes. The place can't be that big, let's just look for her. As long as one of you hangs onto me, we'll both be ignored."

Kenzie took his hand and pointed left down the row of cells. "Let's try that way first. Unless you can sense her out?"

"Standing next to you? No chance. Anyway, there's all kinds of energy signatures around here, finding hers specifically is no easier than just looking."

"Then come on."

"This place is a prison?" Mavis asked from the pocket. "It's more like a dungeon."

"Yeah, it's pretty depressing," Jonathan agreed. "I wouldn't want to be stuck here."

"And yet, the possibility of a harsh sentence does nothing to deter crime, because no one expects to be caught," Kenzie told them. "It's true, I looked it up once. Prisons are almost completely useless, and just serve to make money off the people locked up inside them."

"That's true, you should see all the weed people smoke at concerts I've been to. And other stuff."

"Wait, you light dandelions on fire or something?" Mavis asked, looking up at him. Then she looked down again. "Ugh, noses are disgusting from this angle."

"No, I mean pot."

"How do they light cookware on fire? You just said it was undesired plant life!"

"No, I mean marijuana."

"I don't know what that is, but I want to try it!"

Would something like that even do anything for a vampire?

"Never mind that, look for Bo!"

"Think, Kenzie, there can't be that many places for her to be, right?" Lysanias asked.

"Usually, no. They can't be out in the yard, or at the gym, everyone else is still around. It's just her that's missing."

"Maybe her lady friend stopped in?"

That brought her up short. "I hadn't thought of that. Just a second." She got out her phone and texted someone, but got a reply right away. "No, Lauren is at work, she's not here."

"We could just go outside, come back in, and ask to see her," Mavis suggested.

"Can't teleport out, I've never seen the outside of this place."

"What do you have me for?" She got her phone out and paged through her own notes. "Here it is, the spirit of the moon provides the ability to go insubstantial and pass through normal matter."

Lysanias perked up. "Oh yeah, I knew that! I know how to call that spirit, I haven't since my first world though."

Kenzie rolled her eyes. "So get calling, I'll help, though I haven't really practiced these all that much. You just have to read it though, and throw energy in right?"

I suppose, if you're a real shaman you can get away with being less accurate in the chant and make up for it with spiritual effort. "Right." Both chanted for a moment, willing the ability at least on him, because he could take the others with him as though teleporting them. They then simply walked out of the place, as no wall could bar their way.

"Gonna have to memorize that one," Kenzie said as they now made their way to the front of the place. "I can see it coming in very handy."

"If you ever got locked up?" Mavis joked.

"Mavis, please, what sort of girl do you take me for? I thought only of rescuing cats and bunnies from burning buildings."

"Oh, okay," she said with a knowing grin.

"Bo Denis?" the man at the desk asked. "Huh, popular person today."

"What do you mean?" Kenzie demanded.

"Well, some really pretty lady with a scruffy looking guy came to see her about fifteen minutes ago, then two detectives a few minutes after that. Now you guys. She some kind of celebrity or something?"

"Not really. Did the woman give a name?"

"Ah, let's see here. Evony and Vex?"

"Vex?" She glanced knowingly at Lysanias.

"You know that name?"

"I do. Please let us in!"

"Yeah sure, let me page someone."

The group was led through to a secure room, guarded by two people at the door, and they were buzzed inside. (Lysanias had told the guard they didn't need to be searched or

have their weapons taken, and he nodded in a daze and let them in.) Looking the situation over Tamsin and Dyson were there leaning on the wall, along with a bored looking Vex and exasperated looking Morrigan. She was sitting across from Bo, a document and pen between them. Bo looked stubborn, arms crossed, a set of restraints on the desk next to her. You can't sign something with your hands handcuffed together, now can you? It was a little tight with them all there, and Ericka kept touching her pistols to make sure they were still there, but otherwise it was fine.

Kenzie hugged Bo. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Kenzie. What are you all doing here? And is that you? You feel all tingly."

Tingly? She must be practicing sensing energy, and she's starting to get the hang of it?

"I had a dream about you, and sharks, and bees, and it was horrible. What's *she* doing here?"

"Nice to see you too, human. I'm offering—"

"Human?" Kenzie interrupted. "I'm a shaman, thank you very much."

"A shaman? What's that supposed to be?"

"I'll show you." She concentrated and her projection appeared to Evony's left, grabbing her by the throat. Evony gave a start, then glared at it. Whatever she was trying to do obviously didn't work, as the deer simply gripped her tighter.

"Okay, you're a shaman," she managed.

"Kenzie, let her go," Lysanias told her. "This isn't what I empowered your soul for."

"She's the reason Bo is in here!"

"No, I'm the reason I'm in here," Bo reminded her. "Anyway, the Morrigan is here to offer me a deal. Let her go, Kenzie." She said this last like she wasn't believing she was saying it.

"What?" the deer let up, and Evony rubbed her neck.

"What is that thing, anyway?" She looked it over. "Oh, and thanks for nothing, Vex. What do I pay you for?"

"I tried to mesmer it, didn't work!" he protested.

Yeah, I doubt you can control a soul like a blood bender can control someone.

"So mesmer the girl! She is obviously controlling it."

"Go ahead, try it," Kenzie challenged him. "In fact I dare you, see how far it gets you."

He looked confused but put his hand up. Kenzie went wispy and just stood there, and the deer went over and grabbed his throat instead.

Only insubstantial things can interact with other insubstantial things. She's just lucky that spirit's influence hadn't faded yet.

"Enough, both of you," Bo shouted. "This isn't helping!"

She glared at him until he relented, then became solidified again. "I think I've made my point. Don't call me 'human' again, my name is Kenzie."

Her eyes narrowed. "Great, another unaligned person I need to worry about. And she seems fairly powerful- you want a job? My current bodyguard position may soon become open."

"Hey!" protested Vex.

"How's your dental plan?" she asked seriously.

"Excuse me!" Vex continued.

"Uh, hello, if we could return to me?" Bo asked.

"You're not the most important woman in this room anymore," Evony told her, still looking at Kenzie. "I mean apart from me, which goes without saying." She dramatically sighed. "But you've made your position clear, so I guess it's back to the cell with you." She reached for the paper.

"Wait a minute," Tamsin said. "Bo, being a dark fae isn't all that bad. Look at me. I'm not some baby eater or anything, it's just a label. Sign and go home, life is too short to be locked away, and you're not impressing anyone with your little 'unaligned succubus' bit."

"You would really make her sign on to the dark?" Lysanias asked.

"It's a condition of her release. As well as continuing lessons in this hunger control or whatever she's doing. And having more lovers so she doesn't get that hungry again. She's

dangerous, I think she proved that. Do you want a repeat of that situation? I need certain assurances it won't happen again."

"Why not ask her to clean your kitchen once a week?" Kenzie scoffed.

"Oh no, I already have servants for that sort of thing," Evony told her. "I just don't want a potentially dangerous fae running around. We have rules, you know. It's what keeps our society together."

"How about I make you a deal?" Lysanias offered.

She leaned back in the chair. "This should be good."

He tapped the paper. "Bo signs and becomes a dark fae, right?" She started to protest but he held up a hand. "However, in exchange, the law is changed. Anyone who wants to become unaligned, or switch sides, can." Now Evony started to protest and he held up a hand in her direction. "If..." She gestured for him to go on. "If they find someone from the opposite side to do the same. That way the numbers stay balanced."

"Interesting," she admitted, tapping a nail on her cheek. "But what about laws? How will we know how to punish someone who is not light or dark?"

"Simply use the more severe of the two," Mavis suggested from the pocket.

"Did your pocket just talk? What is that?" She pointed, a disgusted look on her face.

"Do you have a talking rat in there?"

"She's not a rat! That's just my pocket vampire," Jonathan told her.

"Pocket... vampire? Man, trends these days are really getting out of hand. Pretty soon those ridiculous pants with the wide bottoms will come back. How did you even- *where* did you even find a- you know what, I don't care. I suppose it's a fair compromise, little pocket vampire. But it's a moot point anyway, I can't just decide something like that on my own. Your "Ash" will have to sign off on the idea as well."

"I can get him here," Dyson told everyone, pulling his phone out. "He was my old partner after all."

But we have to go, I have some kids to save!

"Then do it, and we can put this whole thing behind us."

"If Bo agrees," Vex put in. "She hasn't said she would sign yet. This whole idea could still all be for nothing."

"If I can find a light fae to become neutral I have your word we both can leave our respective clans?"

"If your Ash agrees and that is signed into law by the two of us, yes," Evony agreed.

"By being neither you'll technically be both, as then both our laws will apply because you can be punished for breaking a law on either side."

"In reality, codifying a third group that's actually harder to be a part of, because you have twice as much to worry about," Mavis added. "Being a fae is awfully complicated."

"That's why I figure it'll be difficult for her to find anyone. But she's welcome to try, as she'll be dark fae at that point." She smiled. "And finally subject to our laws."

"Then I'll sign, because I believe there are fae like me who wouldn't mind becoming neutral."

"Make the call, wolfman."

So Dyson called up Hale, explaining what Lysanias had suggested. He knew Bo and said if she was fine with it, he would come and hash out the plan with the Morigan, and was on his way.

"So we can get going then?" Lysanias asked, thinking about those kids he had seen.

"What, no! Not until she's out of this dump," Kenzie protested.

"Kids, Kenzie. They were two *kids*. I have to help them!"

"You said they were playing in a tree house, right?"

"Yes, so?"

"So that's going to be *after school*. It's not even lunch time yet, you've got plenty of time. Plus there's the time zone difference."

"We could just go without her," Mavis suggested.

"I don't know, that dark figure really worried me," he told them. "Like I'm going to need all the help I can get. He was saying he could make 'enough' of whatever he was talking about to be a problem for me, so I hate to go alone."

"What's this about kids?" Dyson asked. "Can I help?"

Lysanias explained his dream, and the two cops nodded. "We'll be happy to come along, if you can manage it."

Lifting them isn't a problem. "I'd be glad to have you along, thanks."

"And Bo is a decent fighter, let's get her sprung and you've got another person to help!" Kenzie told them.

"Her release is contingent on her showing mastery of some of the new skills, which I see now you brought along, didn't you?" She looked at Lysanias.

"I did."

"My people brought me some notes from the bar. Along with your stories about being from another world. Didn't say I believed it, but now... Caused quite a stir there, didn't you? Sensing energy and such? All kinds of things we didn't even know we could do. And if you made the hum- Kenzie able to do whatever this is." She indicated the deer, still just standing there. "I may have to take you seriously."

I would appreciate that. "Many may have figured things out and just kept it to themselves," he countered, looking at Ericka. "That seems to be the thing to do around here."

"Hey, listen, I told him he should share his breakthroughs with the world. He's a stubborn old man, what do you want? Don't blame me."

Evony looked between them. "I've never heard of any of it, so I doubt it. But I agree, it's possible. Those who think they know it all will be shown differently sooner or later."

The rest of the time was spent mostly in silence, though Lysanias did give Bo some pointers in feeling energy as Kenzie was right there to feel out. Everyone but Ericka and Jonathan listened carefully, some trying to make it seem like they weren't. How often do you get to learn a skill from the being that brought it to your entire reality? Never, that's how often. But finally Hale arrived and they were all taken to a larger room, Bo being handcuffed despite her protests.

"You haven't signed yet," the Morrigan reminded her.

"You think I would try some kind of breakout with both leaders of the fae here to witnesses it? How dumb do you think I am?"

"You tried to survive off one human, knowing that was impossible. Because of 'love' or some crap, even though you'll be alive when she's been dead and gone a thousand years. I would say pretty dumb."

She just glowered.

It wasn't as easy as just dashing off a few lines and calling it a day, the two leaders went over and over the wording of the new "amendment" to their "constitution" until well after lunch, making Lysanias almost risk telling them he could stop time so they could debate to their hearts content. Something told him admitting he could do that might be a bad idea, he knew exactly how powerful the ability was, and kept quiet. Finally the deal was signed, signed by everyone there as a witnesses, and then Bo signed the document to become dark fae. With that the Morrigan said she would provide a daily "tutor" or at least someone also learning the new skills to gauge her progress against. When she was satisfied, she could be released for good. For now she was given the rest of the day to help Lysanias keep the kids he kept talking about safe, and loaned them Vex as well.

I can probably still manage to teleport them all, he decided. *My full strength has really yet to be measured.*

So the pad showed him a clearing by a road he could teleport to, he fixed it in his mind, and after everyone joined hands, he *shifted*.

Chapter 20

Delay

When: A moment later

Where: Outskirts of the forest

The group consisting of Ericka, Kenzie, Mavis, Jonathan, Tamsin, Bo, Dyson, and Vex appeared in the middle of nowhere by a back country road.

“Charming,” Vex drawled, looking around. “And where are we, exactly?”

“Forty kilometers from a place called Denver, Colorado,” Lysanias told him. “The dream pointed me here.”

“At least there isn’t miles and miles of open space to cover in order to find anyone,” he complained, spreading his arms. “Or wait, yes there is.”

“Have a little patience. I’ll ask the universe to narrow it down from here and we can be on our way.”

“Wonderful. And we’re just supposed to stand here, doing nothing?”

“Vex,” Kenzie spat. “Shut up.”

“I’m just saying.”

“And I’m saying zip it.”

“I grew up in an area not unlike this one,” Bo told them, shading her eyes against the sun. “Reminds me of home.”

“That explains a few things.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Say, does my being a dark fae now mean I can punch you in the face with impunity if I want?”

“What? No, of course not!”

“Are you sure? Is there a rulebook, because I want to see it as soon as possible.”

“People please, we’re on a schedule here,” Lysanias chided. “Kenzie, want to get out the spirit of the dragonfly chant? We can do it together.”

“Sure thing.”

The pair chanted a moment, moving away from the road and into the trees so no one saw a group of people just standing by the side of the road for no reason, then stopped so Lysanias could concentrate.

How far north in kilometers must I go to reach the spot where the kids from my dream will be attacked?

One

Wow, that close? Sweet. How far east in kilometers must I go to reach the spot where the kids from my dream will be attacked?

There was no answer.

Great, because I don’t need to go east or because I didn’t hear the answer? I guess we’ll just press on. No sense asking about south if I have to north. Great, it’ll be a half hour, total. Vex is already bursting at the seams I can feel it. Well, that’s his problem I guess.

How far west in kilometers must I go to reach the spot where the kids from my dream will be attacked?

Zero.

What? I got an answer that time? That means I just didn’t catch the answer about east, so it could be twenty for all I know.

“The good news is-”

"Oh, he's alive," interrupted Vex. "I was beginning to wonder if he had fallen asleep." Lysanias, a bit perturbed that Vex seemed not to understand the fact he was pulling information out of thin air, and even getting a single true answer about any subject after an hour or even days of effort was doing far better than most. "You know, Vex, if you would prefer your arm to be broken again, that could be arranged."

"Just get on with it already! I'm bored!"

Breaking your arm? I suppose you wouldn't be bored then, it's true. "As I was saying. The good news is we only have a kilometer to go north. I didn't get an answer about how many to go east, and an answer of zero to for many west."

"Meaning it could be half a kilometer?" Mavis asked, poking up from the shirt. "Next time ask in centimeters and we'll just convert it."

"Do what?"

"You know, convert centimeters to kilometers. It would be more accurate because it starts a smaller unit."

"How would we do that?"

"This is the person we're following around?" Vex broke in. "Brilliant. He doesn't even know what centimeters are."

"I'll show you later, for now we'll have to go a kilometer north, then at least one west and then back to the east in case it's that way."

"Is that all? These aren't hiking boots you know," Vex complained.

"You would complain if we hung you with a new rope," Bo told him. "Come on, let's go."

The group covered ground quickly, though they had to find a bridge to cross a small stream, and the watch announced they had come exactly one kilometer.

"Wait though," Tamsin said. "It's the same problem. If these kids are one point nine kilometers away and you asked 'how many kilometers' the answer would be one. We would still miss them!"

"Wait, this all happened in the forest!" Kenzie told them. "But right now we're in a woodland, wouldn't you say?" Everyone looked around there were a sparse number of trees nearby.

"Is that an important distinction?" Ericka asked.

"It is." She concentrated a moment and her deer spirit appeared. "Olen-baba, is this woodlands or forest?"

It stared at her.

"Oh right, you can't talk. What I mean is, is this woodlands enough for you to lead us to where some kids that might be playing nearby? We're looking for a treehouse."

It nodded, and moved off to the west, beckoning them to follow.

"See, if it was full woods my deer wouldn't be able to do this. But as deer live in woodlands, she can."

"What a fascinating subject," Vex lied. "Can we get a move on? I'd like to be out of here before I'm bitten by a tick or something."

"Do you know being bitten by a tick can lead to a meat allergy?" Mavis asked. "I read that."

"How can you become allergic to yourself? Dyson asked. "I mean, you're meat."

"I think she means eating it," Tamsin told her.

"Yes, I was making a- never mind."

Olen-baba led them deeper into the woodlands, where they came across a very old and rusting out jeep just sitting there. Further on they came to a rope hanging from a tree branch that seemed the only way across the stream. The banks were pretty steep, so they were standing there considering how best to get across when Mavis perked up again. She jumped out of the pocket and transformed into herself.

"Fresh blood," she announced. "I smell it."

"What?" Dyson sniffed the air, then took off away from the group. Meanwhile Mavis gestured and the rope flew into her hand. "There's blood on this rope. Look, that's a hand print."

She showed the others, and Dysan came back. "There's a trail, it leads this way. Come on."

"Oh, seems we were too late after all," Vex announced. "Well, best go home and forget the whole thing."

"Come on," Bo said, grabbing his ear. "We're not out of the woods yet."

"Ow, ow, ow, and I'm saying that because your awful pun hurts me. Let go of me, I'm a mesmer I could have you punching yourself."

Not for long, with all the various abilities people here have.

"This leads away from where we were heading before," Ericka said, as the group took up the trail. "Are we sure this is right?"

Kenzie snapped her fingers. "I asked Olen-baba to show me where the kids were playing, not where the kids might be right now. If the attack already happened they probably went home, which wouldn't be in the woodlands anyway."

"Oh, I see."

Mavis had to go back in the pocket as they left the trees, racing down a road following Dyson's nose. He finally led them to a farmhouse where four people gathered around the front step into the house. Coming closer Lysanias saw the boy was fairly beat up, bleeding from multiple wounds, while the girl was unconscious and laying in the man's arms. The woman was trying to stop her bleeding, but there looked to be a lot of wounds on her tiny frame. They all looked a bit spooked, especially as a group of nine people came pounding up their driveway to the house.

"You're not an ambulance," the man announced. "Who are you people?"

"Crap, she's really badly hurt!" Lysanias told them, feeling her life energy draining away. "We were almost too late. We might still be- wait! Pause!" All sounds stopped, leaving only Lysanias and Kenzie moving in the stopped moment. "We need to get regeneration on the girl, and the boy if we can manage it," he told her. "I'm sure I saw a spirit that can do that. My trying to heal her with alchemy will take too long. She's moments from dying." *I wish Susan's cat, what was her name? Sparking? I wish she had agreed to teach me the other lifestreaming skills she knew, I bet they might have been able to help.*

"But I can't call spirits like this, can I?" she protested. "Time is stopped, they won't hear me!"

"I'm not sure it works like that. It's more a supernatural power that comes from you, which- I don't know. I just did this to tell you the plan. I'm going to pull her soul out. If I've got it in my hand, it can't move to the afterlife. She's unconscious anyway. While I hold her soul here, you chant and get some form of regeneration going on her! Her body heals, I let the soul go, it goes back into her body, she wakes up. Nobody dies!"

"Yeah, that could work," she agreed, eyes widening. "Let me check the spirits I have in here." She scrolled through the phone, and found "The Buffalo spirit. It'll help keep her alive by making her body heartier, and start her healing at a tremendous rate."

"Great, that's just the thing. You want a few minutes to read it over?"

"Might as well. By the way, since when can you freaking *stop time*?"

"I'll explain it later."

As she did that Lysanias put the magic of skill augmentation on her, just to make sure she got it quickly and it worked, then both nodded. He restarted time.

"Hey!" said the man as he shoved the woman out of the way. He put his hand on her chest and *pulled*. Out popped her soul, a beautiful ball of shining light.

"What's that? What are you doing?" the boy demanded.

"Stay calm, kid, we're professionals." He flashed his badge.

Kenzie was chanting, the woman was trying to shove Lysanias out of the way but that wasn't going to happen. The boy was panicked, chickens were running around as if their heads had already been cut off, dogs were barking in the distance. Into this chaos Mavis appeared, wincing as the sun started cooking her.

"You are calm, everything is going to be fine," she announced. Her eyes flashed red and the boy's did too. His demeanor instantly changed. "It's fine mom, everything's going to be fine."

She beat a hasty retreat back into the pocket in bat form, and the woman gaped at the boy. She then jerked upright as though goosed, and stiffly stepped over to the side, putting her hands over her eyes. Lysanias looked over, and Vex was standing there with his arm up.

"What? I'm helping too, did you think I wouldn't?"

"What is going on?" the man asked. "We need to bandage these wounds. Mary, what are you doing? Get out of here, all of you!"

"I don't think so, mate," Vex told him. "Not if you want that little bug to be healed."

"What's going on here?" a new voice demanded, and two more people appeared from around a hedge.

"Oh, you're Leslie's parents?" the boy asked. "Don't worry, everything will be fine."

"Fine? My daughter looks dead!" wailed the woman.

"Are you okay, son?" the man asked the boy. "You look pretty beat up yourself."

"I'm sure it'll all work out," he maintained. "That nice lady said so."

"What nice lady?"

"The one that turned into a bat."

The newly arrived man looked the situation over. "I swear, if this is some kind of prank..."

"No, we got attacked in the woods, we barely made it back here," the boy said.

"By what? There's no wolves or bears or anything in this area."

"Er, I'd rather not say."

"Was it kids from school? Did they do this to you?"

"No, nothing like that."

"What then?"

"It's really not that important."

"I would say it-" At that point Kenzie's energy flowed out into the boy and the girl, and before the unbelieving eyes of the adults there they both started healing up. Gashes cut into their skin closed, and dark patches where they had fallen and been bruised faded in seconds. The girl's breathing became more even, and her form seemed to relax in the arms of the man. Of course she was still covered in blood and her clothes were torn to pieces, but Lysanias felt her life force was secure. He nodded, and was about to release the soul back into her body when a new thought popped into his head.

I'll take that.

Wait, I didn't think that.

He looked around in the sudden silence and there stood an angel of death, just like the one he had petitioned to take Sebastian away. It was standing there, hand outstretched, obviously wanting the soul.

"Uh, no, you won't," he countered. "She'll be fine."

She was scheduled to die, the angel insisted. I don't know how you were able to do that, but I've come to collect a soul. And a soul I shall collect.

"Check your book again," he growled. *I change people's fate by my actions, like Kenzie never would have become a shaman without me. By getting here in time I should have changed this girl's fate, and she shouldn't have to die.*

You know about that too? Who are you, exactly? I've never heard of a fae that can manipulate souls. It shrugged. *Shows what I know, I guess. Fine, I'll check.* It got the book out from the folds of the cloak it was wearing. *Yup, the date moved up for some reason, and the cause of death is different, but right here. Leslie Burke, original cause of death drowning, new cause of death blood loss after being attacked by...* it cut off, staring at the page in silence for some time. It turned the page. Then another. Then another.

Drowning? In that little stream back there? That's unlikely. "By?" he prompted.

It's a fairly complex... I'd almost say mathematical formula rather than a description, it finally went on, turning the pages back. *I've never seen anything like it.* He looked to the girl. *What did she get attacked by?*

"I don't know, we should have been here earlier, but various things happened to delay me. My guess is Jason."

Jason the wanderer?

Now it was his turn to be surprised. "How did you know that name?"

It's been rumored he's returning. And that song keeps popping up all over the place. Every other place I've visited today had the song playing. Even here. It pointed to a radio set on the porch, and Lysanias vaguely recalled a song playing, something about "I love them and I leave them, they don't even know my name." *I just thought that was his nickname, because he seemed to come out of nowhere a thousand years ago and then vanish just as abruptly.*

Song? I'll have to pay attention to that. "And he will do so again, if I have my way. I'm here to stop him once and for all. Unless you want your workload increased when Jason shows back up again, I suggest as a favor to me you look the other way this time."

The angel looked him up and down, then over at Kenzie. *Some very odd energies about you two. You actually believe you could stop an angel of death, don't you?*

"I've read your file. You don't have any abilities that work at a distance. As long as you don't touch me I'm safe, and I have plenty of abilities that work at a distance." *I wouldn't kill an angel, not one trying to do their appointed work, but drive it away? Sure.*

I do have one. Hand me that soul.

Lysanias felt the angel was using some sort of *force* like ability on him, trying to compel him to hand it over. The magicite in the sword at his side glowed a bit, unnoticed by either.

"No," he said again. "My turn. Leave."

Guess I'll be on my way. Good luck with the whole Jason thing.

It vanished, and sound started up again. *Did I just use the force to compel an angel of death to not take a soul to be judged? You know, sometimes I really do love my job. And I provided Sebastian's soul, so really it balances out, doesn't it?*

He opened his hand and the soul flew into the girl's body.

"She's not waking up," Kenzie said, looking worried. "Why isn't she waking up?"

"Does regenerating her wounded flesh make her blood regenerate too?" Dyson asked.

Everyone looked at Lysanias, who had to admit "I have absolutely no idea. I've never used it before, only closing small wounds with my alchemical abilities."

"How do you feel, son?" asked the original man.

"I'm not hurt anymore, but I feel weak, run down," he admitted.

"So she's not out of the woods yet, if you'll forgive me," Dyson said.

"I don't!" called Vex.

"Oh, let her go. You called a hospital? She'll need a blood transfusion."

"Who are you people?" he asked again. "How am I going to explain how she needs a transfusion *when she doesn't have a scratch on her?*"

"Uh..." He never got to answer as roaring up the road, sirens blaring, was the ambulance. Vex let the somewhat terrified woman move again, and the vehicle screeched to a halt in front of the house. Some people jumped out and put Leslie on a stretcher and her parents jumped in the back. The uniformed people talked briefly to the boy and his parents, but he was still claiming everything would be fine, and showed them he had no wounds. Despite his bloodstained clothes being torn they had to agree, didn't have much time to argue anyway, and roared off.

"Will someone tell me what's going on?" the man demanded.

The boy sat rather heavily on the step. "She'll be okay, right?"

"She'll be fine," Lysanias assured him. "And the one to tell us what's going on is your son. What happened?" *I mean I hope he's related to this guy.*

"Wait," said Ericka. "If he's lost a lot of blood he should eat and drink something right away. Foods high in iron are best, what time is it here? Perhaps a ham sandwich? Drink plenty of water and don't exert yourself for the next few days as well."

"Okay," the boy agreed. "I am kinda hungry."

"I'll make you a sandwich," his mother said. She went back into the house in a daze.

"Good. Carry on," she prompted.

"So what happened?" Lysanias asked again, hoping to get an answer this time.

"We got attacked," he answered simply.

“By what, son? A bear? What could do this to you?”

“Did you see a man, somewhat made of smoke? And maybe creatures from your imagination? Did they attack you?”

The boy looked at him in absolute shock. “The Dark Master is just something we made up! It was just a stupid game, it’s not real!” He sobbed and grabbed his father, turning away from them. “It’s not supposed to be real.”

Chapter 21

Explanations

When: A moment later

Where: Still on the steps in front of the house

When the boy had composed himself again he sadly faced the group. "What do you want to know?"

"Start from the beginning," Lysanias told him. "What's been going on around here?"

"Fine, I may as well tell you. That girl, Leslie, moved here a few months ago. Neither of us really had any friends, so we started hanging out together. Maybe a mile from here in the woods we found a broken up treehouse."

The one we were on the trail of.

"She started calling the area past the stream Terabithia, and said we were the king of queen of this kingdom. I was sort of like, 'are you stupid' at first, but I figured it was either humor her or lose her, so I went along with it."

"Son, you've learned a valuable lesson about women. I'm proud of you."

He rolled his eyes and continued. "In Terabithia we're fighting to free a group of slaves from the Dark Master, who sends his forces against us to break our spirits. Two days ago I saw him physically for the first time."

"You saw a coyote in the distance or something," the man said. "I mean it's the woods, not an actual fantasy land."

"No dad, I saw him. Of course if I had a cell phone I could have taken a picture, then I would have proof, but noooooo."

"Son, we've been over this, I can't afford a cell phone for myself, your mother, you, Ellie, and Brenda. And it wouldn't be long before May Belle wanted one..."

"I'm the only kid in school without one," he explained to the group, and several heads nodded. "But at least I can show you what he looked like." He rose to his feet and went inside.

"Maybe I should take him to a doctor," he mused. "If he's seeing things in the forest. Maybe that girl fed him some mushrooms or something? Her parents seem like hippies."

"Are all humans so blind?" Tamsin asked.

"What did you say?"

"I'm asking if all humans dismiss--"

But Lysanias already knew what he was going to see when the boy came back. He gestured and using darkness bending (a skill he had practiced only a little as light bending seemed far more useful) created a wispy figure standing there. It wasn't going to suck the light out of the air for miles around, but it would do the job of showing everyone what he had seen in the dream. The man jumped up. "Now I'm seeing things."

"That's what you saw in the dream?" Dyson asked. He nodded. "That would freak me out, honestly."

His mother came back, looking for her son. "What's that?" she asked, staring at the image of the Dark Master.

"Your son can tell you," Lysanias told her, and on her heels he came out and nearly lost it again screaming when he saw the figure.

Yup, that's what he saw. "It's all right, it's just an illusion," he told the boy. "Look." He passed a hand through it. "It's not really here. Let's see what you've got."

The boy calmed a bit and thrust the drawing pad at his father, who looked at it, up at the figure, and then back down to the drawing. "It's the same thing. How did you..."

"Let him finish his story," Lysanias told them, making the figure vanish again. He waited while the boy composed himself for the second time, then take a bite of sandwich from the tray his mother offered.

"I didn't tell Leslie, how could I? She would have thought I was nuts. But I saw it again yesterday, and then just a little while ago while we were going to get the keys back the... creatures... attacked us."

"Creatures?" his mother asked.

"Keys?" Lysanias asked.

"Oh yeah, we got your stupid keys back, dad," he spat. He drew a ring of keys out of his jacket pocket. "My darling little sister picked them up from the greenhouse floor, gave them to Leslie without telling me, and she put them in the treehouse. Why *she* didn't question a ring of keys and who they might belong to I'll never know, usually she's more onto that sort of thing that I am. It's one of the reasons I like-" He stopped, and if he had the blood to spare in his body would probably have been blushing given what Lysanias felt coming from him. "Anyway, I hope you're happy."

"It does save me a few hundred bucks. I'll talk to May Belle, she didn't mean anything by it. She's just a little kid."

What, no word of thanks?

"You always take her side. She just can't do wrong, can she? You spend more time with her than you ever spent with me!"

He started to sputter something but Lysanias held up a hand. "Discuss your domestic problems when you're not half out of your mind with worry and fear, or half dead." He turned to the boy. "And yes, your father was very worried for you, I could feel it even if he would never admit it. Now, the creatures?"

He took the notebook back and showed more drawings. "Sort of a half squirrel, half dog. And these big bird things. There was also something massive coming out of the forest. We barely escaped."

"How did you escape?" Erika asked. "You were both pretty beat up."

A wave of sadness threatened to engulf the boy again, and we wiped away tears.

"Terrien. Her dog. When he tried to protect us the creatures fell on him, tearing him to pieces. We were always fast, and once across the river the creatures didn't follow. Maybe because it's not Terabithia anymore? But she passed out before we got back here. I had to drag her part of the way. I... wouldn't leave her, no matter how scared I was."

"Hey," said Tamsin, kneeling before him. "You did well. Retreat in the face of an overwhelming foe is nothing to be ashamed of. And you saved your friend's life, if this was a military campaign you would given a metal. I can't do that, but there is one thing that is in my power. I will collect the soul of this dog and take it to Valhalla, as befits a warrior who has fallen in battle. You have my word on that, as a valkyrie."

I should do something for him as well, before I leave. There must be some wish of his I can grant, a talisman or even his own supernatural power if he wants to risk it.

"Sure, why not?" he finally managed. "If imaginary monsters can come out of nowhere and almost kill us, why not valkyries too? Thanks."

"I wondered where the dog was," the father said. "But don't fill his head with nonsense."

She glared up at him, her face darkening, literally, and he stumbled back. "I'm sorry, I didn't know. I'm so worthless, I can't do anything right for my family, oh God have mercy on me!"

"Hey, what are you doing to my husband?" cried the woman. "Stop it!"

She did, her face becoming normal again, but as it did she brushed her hair with her hand and it came away with a few strands. "I should not have done that," she admitted. "But it was only a little. He knows better now."

"Who are you people?" she breathed. Her husband was still babbling quietly about how worthless he was.

"The people who are going to make sure this doesn't happen again," Lysanias told her. "How far from the... wait, no, you were still bleeding. You can track their trail on the other side of the stream, right?"

Dyson nodded.

"Fine. Eat your sandwich and let us take care of this. You did well. Before I leave here I'll return and see about granting you a wish, if I can, for saving your friend. Think about what you might want to ask for."

He mouthed "A wish?" but Lysanias had turned away. "Let's go greet this master of darkness." *Because if that doesn't sound like the Avatar of Shadow, nothing does.*

The group returned to the forest, following their own trail back to the steam.

“How are we going to cross this?” Vex asked, disgusted as usual. “I’m not swinging across on some stupid rope. Looks frayed at the top anyway, like the next time someone uses it they’ll be in the drink.” He made a falling and splashing noise with his mouth.

“We should have Vex go first to try it out, as I heard him volunteering.” Kenzie suggested.

“Him falling couldn’t happen to a more deserving fellow,” Ericka muttered.

“Oh, I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” Vex demanded. “I didn’t quite catch it!”

“Not now, Vex,” Dyston growled. “We’ve all had about enough of your complaining. Those creatures could come out of nowhere, try to keep focused.”

Lysanias willed the rope into his hand, then gave it an experimental tug. It snapped off and slithered downward, towards the water, leaving him holding a now useless rope.

“Bravo,” Vex singsonged, clapping. “That should spite the little whiner right proper. Didn’t know you had it in you.”

“No, I think you were right,” he agreed. “I didn’t yank it that hard. Maybe it was a trap that didn’t get sprung yet, or a trap for the next person to cross. Anyway, I’m sure I can come up with something.” *Her original cause of death was drowning. You don’t suppose... Nah.*

Next to the banks of the stream was a tree set at an angle that looked mostly dead, so he easily slashed it at the base with Ragnarok. Gripping it with one hand he dragged it back so it was firmly on both sides, making Ericka whistle.

“How strong are you?”

“Stronger than me,” Mavis grumped, having gotten out of the shirt pocket again. There was enough tree canopy here that as long as she was careful, she wouldn’t burst into flames. “Still seems a bit unstable though.” She gave it a kick making it rock back and forth.

“I’m not done.” He slammed it into the ground, then let alchemical power flow through it, compressing it into a single, dense board of wood. Satisfied he took off a shoe and stomped on the ground, using earth bending to see if there were any rocks in the area. There were, so taking a stance he sunk it into the ground, pinning the rocks around it so it wouldn’t move. He sat and put his shoe back on as the others examined it and went out halfway.

“Seems sturdy,” Dyson told them. “Does it satisfy your requirements, Vex?”

“Barely,” he agreed. “Was a railing too much to ask?”

“Why?” asked Kenzie. “You have trouble walking in a straight line?”

“Anyway,” Lysanias said, standing. “Beyond here is Terabithia, and those creatures that attacked the kids. We have no idea their capabilities, or how many there will be. Do what you need to do in order to prepare.”

“Wish I had a weapon,” Bo said in a curiously squeaky voice. She cleared her throat. “I mean, I wish I had a weapon. I don’t suppose you could pull something from nowhere?”

“Right...” Lysanias looked the group over.

“I’m fine,” Dyson told him, his features changing to be more wolf like, complete with claws at his fingertips. Ericka had her guns, Mavis her vampiric strength, Tamsin was pulling out her pistol, Vex could control things. Kenzie, Jonathan, and Bo were essentially unarmed, if they were going up against creatures with claws.

And chi-blocking won’t work if they’re birds, or whatever those other creatures are.

They won’t know where to hit. “I do have a few things,” he told him. He got out his old sword, still black as night as he hadn’t done anything with it, figuring Inari was going to give him directions for it when he went to the world he needed to leave it on. He also pulled out the set of poison claws he had received from Vargus.

“Here,” he handed them to the two martial artists. “Don’t touch the ends, there’s a twenty five percent chance of poison status when you strike with them.” *If they even work that way around here. I suppose it could be some sort of magical effect.* Bo took the sword, checking the balance, and nodded that it was fine.

Thus armed he himself got out his spirit, called on Rosalina, put temporary armor wards on everybody, (even Vex), put his own armor on and got out his sword, checked his equipment and finally recharged himself from the ley lines on this side.

Meanwhile Kenzie had looked through her list of spirits and settled on Porcupine, as it seemed these creatures would fight with tooth and nail, not energy blasts or the like. She got

herself, Mavis, Jonathan, Tamsin, and Dyson with it, and a vague shimmer surrounded them. She explained what it was, a shield that could counter any strike, like a porcupine's quills, generated from their internal energies.

"Are we finally ready?" Vex complained.

"If this is either Jason or the Avatar, I'm not being caught unprepared," Lysanias told them. "Anything else?"

There were shakes all around and the group crossed that bridge, as they had come to it, and entered the land of Terabithia. The forest around them seemed darker, the trees more foreboding. Sounds could be heard like rattling chains, and howls in the distance. Dyson followed the trail of blood unerringly, leading them to what probably at one time was a cute, small, white dog.

"I figured," Tamsin told them, looking beside it. "Come along, your master is safe, it's time to go."

"Who are you talking to?" Ericka asked. "Can I just not see it?"

"I can't either," Lysanias told her, but suddenly a ghostly dog was in Tamsin's arms, as if it had jumped there.

"Of course, everyone knows all dogs go to heaven, but they are notorious for sticking around. Loyal to the last, and beyond. This will only take a moment." She vanished.

"Er, did she just leave for Valhalla?" Ericka asked. "That's a real place?"

"Apparently," Dyson told her. "And apparently she can really take souls there. Who knew?"

And she's considered a fae not an angel? That's weird. Or does she simply call herself that to fit in more? I could see that.

The group waited, on edge and watching all directions so as not to be attacked.

"Can your deer warn us if something comes?" Jonathan asked.

Olen-baba shook her head.

"Must be forest now, not woodlands," she told them.

While they waited Lysanias used earth bending to bury the dog's remains, figuring there was no sense allowing them to rot in the open air. A moment later Tamsin was back, and the group moved on.

Before them was the treehouse, or what was a treehouse at one time. Now it looked like a treehouse that had been torn to pieces, and standing there was a smokey form.

"You're late," rang through the forest, seeming to come from all sides. "I expected you to save those kids, not that stupid dog. Perhaps you're not as strong as my emperor thought."

"Sorry to make you wait, we were delayed. The Dark Master, I presume? Or shall I call you Jason, or the avatar of shadow?"

"Oh ho, the avatar of shadow?" The figure lightly leaped to the ground. "What a grand title. But no, I think you must refer to my master. He is not able to join us yet, but once I am fully released from what the blood king did to me, I will bring him to destroy this world."

"So Jason then. But why two little kids out in the middle of nowhere?"

"Conditions were right here," he explained. "And I needed information."

"About who had been sent after you."

"That's right. Imagination and dreams aren't so far apart, so this place had what I needed. But how did you know? I expected you would, after Sebastian, but how? Did I really see you in that dream?"

"If it's all the same to you, I'd prefer your ignorance to your enlightenment about that."

The figure sighed. "Suit yourself. I'll learn a few things in your combat with my forces here. Enough to tailor my attack when it comes for real. I've been talking it over with my master, he has some interesting ideas as well. Look forward to them! Anything else before I order the attack?"

"Just one thing. Why did you do it? Why turn away from us and join the shadow avatar? Could it have possibly offered you something that is worth helping entire realities be consumed?"

It laughed. "As if there aren't endless variations of them, but I'll play along. Do you know what I am? Did whoever send you here tell you?"

"Enough. You're projecting into reality as though it was a dream."

"Correct. When Ea began to evolve it said all the various pieces of itself would evolve too."

"Ea?" Ericka asked.

"The way it explained things I was to Ea what your body's cells are to you. The various beings, scattered across realities, somehow gave rise to a new consciousness that called itself Ea. It became aware, and then began to improve itself. That fed back to us, the 'cells' of Ea, granting us various abilities. It wanted me to be the herald of this change, and tossed me into the multiverse to spread the word. And for a time, that was enough."

"Then you met the shadow avatar," Mavis guessed.

"That's right. You can't travel across realities long before one or the other sides notices. For awhile I fought, just as you do, but then my master came to me with a question."

"What question?" Lysanias asked.

"The question of why Ea got to evolve and I didn't."

"But you got fantastic powers!" Kenzie protested. "You treat reality like a dream, right?"

"I do, very good. But don't you see? I'm still *human*. I still have human limits. I could set that tree over there on fire easily enough, were I totally free, but this entire forest? I can't because I don't know where every tree is. I can create fantastical landscapes or devices, but unless I understand how they would work apart from my powers I have to concentrate on them. I can't absorb whole libraries of information at once, I would have to read every book, and I would forget the first book by the time I was on the tenth. I'm still so *limited*."

"So you seek to expand yourself, just as the avatar of shadow does?"

"Yes!" he agreed, the smokey substance of his body swirling faster. "My master has studied evolution carefully, trying to begin that process within themselves. They tell me that my human limits can be broken, that I can be more, greater than I ever dreamed. Pun intended. Do you see? What is a few dozen realities next to that? Our ascension beyond how we were created, to a new form of life. Then I will give back far more than I have taken, I promise."

"Small comfort to those that live here," Ericka told him. "We don't get fantastic powers, we have to work hard for what we accomplish. And we have to accept our limits, because that's just what being human means. Doing the best you can with what you've been given."

"Small minds," said the figure, beginning to rise into the air. "You have no idea what we'll accomplish, when the limits placed on us are gone. Enjoying playing with what those children imagined, I'll be interested to see what you can do. Attack!"

Along the ground a dozen creatures burst from the trees, running on all fours. They were half the size of a person, and had a crazed look in their eyes. At the same time a dozen huge birds dropped from the sky, and Lysanias got the impression of something huge moving towards them from beyond the trees. The attack had begun.

Chapter 22

Combat

When: No time has passed

Where: The clearing where the treehouse is

Lysanias' eyes darted about the battlefield as the strange creatures rushed the group. They were in a fairly good spot, they could only be attacked from the front because everyone had turned around to defend themselves. This made a circle or at least a clump, but of course those bird things could attack from any angle. His main concern was them getting overwhelmed, true there were nearly a dozen on his side but twice that many on the opposing side.

And there's that giant looking thing. My spirit will have to take care of it. Luckily it can't get close at the moment because it would squish its allies, so we have a few seconds before it can become a threat. The best thing I can do is just smash through anything that attacks me, trying to take it out as quickly as possible then move to defend anyone that needs it. My wards should be enough, but...

There was no time for further thought, as a creature leapt at him. They were half the size of a man, some wearing bits of armor and even tiny caps on their heads, and their teeth were oddly spaced and jagged. They had sort of a pig's nose and thick, matted fur, none of which helped the one that tried to knock Lysanias over as he slashed it apart. A blue arc trailed the sword as it passed through the creature almost without resistance, causing it to vanish.

Okay, that'll work.

To his right he saw one lunge at Olen-Baba, and he blinked. *They can see it? Crap, I didn't give it an armor ward, and I probably should have!*

The thing struck with lightning quickness, catching the leg of the spirit as it tried to dodge back. Kenzie gave a cry as she suddenly had claw marks across her leg.

Crap, I'll have to try and protect it, just how strong and fast are these things?

He dashed over there, and it turned to face him, but the sword came down in a shower of blue and snuffed it out of existence as well.

"Thanks!" Kenzie called to him. "What are these things?"

"A child's imagination," called the form of darkness, "made real with my abilities."

There was a scream from behind and Lysanias spun, watching as a triumphant bird swept past Rosalina. Her arm had a deep gouge in it, her *left* arm, and she had dropped her wand. Something akin to blood was gushing out, running down it.

"Rosalina! Retur-" Lysanias started to say, holding his shield hand out.

"No!" she cried, resisting his call. "I can still fight. Leave me!"

"Don't you die on me!"

In the time that took another creature had reached Olen-Baba, something they knew could be hurt, and it drop kicked the thing before the claw could reach it.

"There's another!" Kenzie screamed, pointing.

I'll just have to trust her for now. He brought the sword down, cutting it in half and then taking a swipe with the shield at his left, making the one trying to come in from that side dodge back, hissing.

How fast are these things, anyway? Would I even be hitting them with the sword if it didn't have the sniper-eye attached to it? Yipes! A bird dropped out of the sky so he raised the blade to meet it, cutting a slash across it but it winged away, still in the fight. *Great, moving too fast, it's still a danger.*

By now his spirit was twice as tall as a man, making the giant perk up a little. They stepped towards each other warily.

One of the ground creatures went for Rosalina, figuring her helpless and she screamed again, about to try driving it away with telekinesis. The creature kept coming, it was that strong, but suddenly there was a flash of light and it staggered back, wounded. A Luma floated there, green like the forest. It wasn't dancing. "Oh my word!" she said. "A new Luma!"

A bird dove for the spirit, so it simply grabbed the thing and drove it into the ground. The giant perked up even more, perhaps thinking it might have a real challenge here after all.

Lysanias was pulled back to his own fight, as another ground creature leapt for him. He swung, again cleaving it in half without effort, and making it vanish.

Kenzie, beside him, cried out as he did this and he looked to defend her if he could, but the bird was already arrowing away. She was holding her leg, a second set of claw marks having joined the first.

"This is really annoying!" she called to no one in particular.

"You want healing?"

"I'll live, kill these things!"

Another scream, and Lysanias looked to see Bo staggering, a bird ripping a chunk of her shirt away from her. Blood spattered it and it smugly took to the air again as Dyson moved to defend her.

Great, these things are strong enough to get through my wards?

"Oh, great hit, number twenty four!" the dark figure praised.

"You shut up!"

Another bird went for the spirit, it too was smashed into the ground but this one was no longer there when it raised its hand. The giant seemed to smile and flexed its fingers. It was going to attack. The spirit was still half the size of it, but half a loaf was better than nothing, right? Lysanias' attention was pulled away as another bird went for him, claws raking against the armor ward's energy field. He stabbed upward, making it squawk and vanish.

Ward seems to be holding. Why didn't the force warn me it was coming? Because it's not alive?

The spirit and the giant moved into range, the giant taking a swing at the spirit, who knocked the arm away.

The creature before Rosalina shook its head, trying to clear it. It warily watched the Luma who, having used up whatever energy it had defending her, vanished.

"Thank you," she called to it. She grabbed up her wand with her right hand and pressed it to her arm, healing it.

Good, she should be okay then. I should focus on Kenzie.

The spirit grabbed the arm of the giant as it swung again, catching and holding it.

Lysanias looked around, two were nearby and wary, they had seen what that sword could do. He picked the one that looked a little more ready to attack and slashed through it.

The spirit had a ground creature to contend with as it leapt up trying to bite it. It kicked out, and even the giant looked annoyed, it wanted the spirit's attention and unintelligibly roared at the thing. The creature went down, leg hurt but it could still fight.

Lysanias cleaved the other nearby creature, making it vanish as well. *Is there no end to these things? How many have they taken out? Am I doing all the work around here?*

As if knowing it was being chided Olen-Baba raced over to the creature near the spirit, striking out at it. It barely dodged to the side, even with its crippled leg.

Lysanias had no creatures nearby now, and looked around to see where he could do the most good. Bo was down, Dyson standing over her roaring a challenge. Vex seemed to have taken minor injuries but he didn't care all that much. He decided to trust Dyson and went for the giant instead, as he and his spirit were really the only things that could reasonably deal with something that size.

Or not, he decided, as he chopped into the giant's leg. It looked at him like "oh really?" because it had hardly been scratched.

Olen-Baba tried to strike out again, but struck out again, the creature again dodging back and chittering at it.

Maybe I'll be more help there?

"Little help here?" Kenzie cried, and he looked over to see her fending off a bird, hovering in the air before her. She was obviously using her spirit's ability to keep the creature off balance, as it glanced off the wards ghostly quills appeared and struck back at it. But he could finish it off so he grimaced and shot over there, knocking the bird out of the sky.

"Thanks. Next time I do this I'll bring a weapon too. Or an offensive spirit rather than simply defensive."

Not a bad idea.

The spirit finished growing, and was now as big as the giant, who was still trying to get its arm back. It didn't seem as pleased now, for some reason.

With her wand back in hand and her injury nearly healed Rosalina cried out "Sleep," pointing at the creature currently next to Vex as it and a bird were trying to reach him though the ward's shimmering energy field, and it staggered, falling limp. "I'll get the bird next!" she called to him.

"Appreciate the help!" he managed, not having the porcupine spirit to help him. (He only has himself to blame, really)

"Made them too real. A dream creature shouldn't be able to fall asleep," the shadow complained.

Two birds were diving for Kenzie and him so Lysanias' sword rose to meet the one. It was chopped in half and vanished. Meanwhile, the creature fighting her spirit struck out but was now on the receiving end of miss.

"Yeah, that's the way," Kenzie called to it. "Yipes!" Lysanias smashed the bird apart that was going for her.

"You just keep saving me," she panted. "Thanks."

The bird had flapped away, so with Vex unchallenged for the moment Rosalina switched targets. "Sleep," she cast, pointing her wand at the giant, who was hammering the spirit. The spirit was far too tough to actually take damage, but the giant didn't know that. And once the sleep spell hit it, it didn't know anything.

Lysanias came up behind the last ground creature in his area and slashed it to pieces as the giant went limp, the spirit holding it up so it didn't crash to the ground and wake up. He looked the battlefield over, and Mavis was sinking her fangs into one creature, making it howl in pain. Vex was nearby, arm outstretched to help pin it down with another of the creatures. He scanned the sky for birds, but saw none. Mavis tore the creature she was biting apart with a savage cry, then sank her fangs into the other one.

"So brutal," observed the shadowy figure. "I like her." It waved and the giant vanished, leaving the spirit holding nothing. It turned to face the shadow, which held up a hand.

"You've won," it announced. "But I've learned a few things. Stay away from that sword, for one. Sheesh, overkill much there, Lysanias? Anyway, must dash. I'll be working on coming here for real, and it won't be long, so look forward to it!" The smoke like body of the figure dissipated, making the forest brighten and restoring the normal trees and grasses of the area. Lysanias lowered his blade. "Who's hurt?"

"Bo's hurt pretty bad!" called Dyson, holding her in her arms. "She's really bleeding!"

In the end Bo was hurt the most badly, a deep gash in her chest running from her shoulder to her navel. He put some healing wards on her and started closing up her wound as quickly as he could. Kenzie had almost lost her leg, she couldn't put weight on it, and Rosalina came over to help her. Dyson was also bloody and torn up, his chest as well as his right arm, probably from protecting Bo. He waved off wards, saying he would heal and to concentrate on Bo.

Vex had a small scratch he complained loudly about, but Tamsin told him to stop being such a baby.

"I thought these paper things were supposed to *protect* us," he whined.

"I thought mesmers were supposed to be useful," Tamsin countered. "By my count you hardly did anything."

"I could say the same thing, valkyrie," he sneered. "How many did you hit with your little gun?"

"I hit a bunch!" Ericka announced, bouncing over and changing out the batteries in her pistols. "That was exhilarating, wasn't it?"

"I'm less that enthused," Vex told her.

She went on as if she hadn't heard. "I mean, to put into practice all those years of training. Zap! Zap! And my grandfather's designs worked flawlessly. Did you see me shooting those birds down?" She pointed her guns to the sky.

"You're obviously a better shot than I am," Tamsin admitted. "And I've been alive thousands of years. How is that, exactly?"

"But how much time do you actually spend practicing?" she asked. "It's all I do. Every day. Every. Day," she repeated.

"Ah, not as much as I should, I guess. Think you can give me some pointers?"

"Oh." She looked flattered. "I'd love to."

With Bo healed and Dyson on the way to being healed with magic ("Let me do something right!" Rosalina had pleaded.) Lysanias went over to Mavis, who was standing over by herself.

"You all right?" he asked gently.

She turned to him, blood covering the front of her. "My instincts just took over," she admitted, looking haunted. "I was hurt, didn't even think about the Porcupine spirit, just got out my fangs and did what vampires do. I sucked their blood. Blah, Ba Blah." She tried to play this off as a joke but there was no humor in her voice. "I guess I really am just a monster, after all."

"You're hurt? Where? Let me heal you." He raised his hands.

She shook her head. "I healed myself with the blood I took. The blood I *stole*. The blood I *relished*, drinking it right from that creature as though I was my grandfather. I'm ashamed of myself." A tear fell from her eye. "Are the humans right to fear us? Is that why they did? Am I just an animal?"

Lysanias was about to put his arms around her, but thought better of it. "No, you're not." *Jonathan, get over here, he sent with his brain. Mavis needs you right now.* He jogged over and gave her a hug, asking what was wrong, and Lysanias gave a small smile as he turned away. *That is the way it should be. It will mean more coming from him, and deepen their bond. I should stay out of it, I don't really belong here. I don't belong anywhere.* He stared at the spot Jason had been standing in. *Is that what you thought, when you turned? That you didn't have a place, and the avatar offered you one? I must be careful of that. Maybe that's why the Hub? So wanderers do feel they have a place they belong no matter how far from home they are?*

"I'm sorry I was so useless back there," Rosilana told him, coming up. "I got hurt right away. What were those things anyway? They almost killed Bo, right through the wards!"

"I suppose they can be as strong as the kids imagined them to be. Naturally they would want a worthy foe to fight, to overcome with an even greater strength. I'm just glad my sword hits what I swing it at. Wait, you're not useless, I should have said that first! Come on, there's enough despair around here with Mavis thinking she's some kind of monster. You were fine!"

"Was I?"

"Look, if you're concerned about it, do something about it. Susan was telling about her friend Ron, remember? He combined martial arts and magic and math somehow. I can give you my skill in chi-blocking," *I think? Can I meld with my own wand spirit? I mean she's right here and has a brain, right?* "and I can get some math lessons from the pad, and you can perfect your magic which I think is already pretty good. We can ask her for some notes and you can get better. I'll keep you out the next few days so you can practice and-"

"I did that," Ericka told them, catching wind of the conversation.

"You did what?" she asked.

"Combined math, martial arts, and guns." She pointed her guns and made **pew pew** sounds. To Lysanias' eyes the motions seemed crisp and precise. "That's how I was able to hit so many. I killed four, not that I was keeping count or anything, I mean. Hit a couple of others too. Tamsin hardly hit anything."

"You created some kind of gun based *martial art*?" he asked, eyes wide. "All by yourself?" *I didn't dig too deeply into her mind but that's what I must have been sensing in her. If I used a gun I would want to steal it with my eyes, but... maybe I should anyway, to give to others? Wait, wasn't I telling Obi-Wan I didn't want any gun crazed killers in the group, after he tried to kill those incapacitated soldiers. Did they leave when we announced the... never mind, don't think about that reality. Do I accept her just because she's not a guy, even though*

she's a gun user? But she's only killed constructs, not people. I suppose it's intent that counts. Still, what a reversal.

"Yeah!" She grinned at him. "What else did I have to do on that stupid ship? Learn how to fight monsters. I'm glad I got some real ones to use my skills on." She raised her voice. "Because vampires that happen to bite *an enemy certainly* aren't monsters in my book." She winked.

"Heard that, huh? I wonder." He rubbed his chin. "If it was okay with you, I could try connecting you two ladies together and Ericka's skill could be transferred to you. You would have to work out the magic part, but that's just pulling the trigger, I would think."

"Would you?" she asked hopefully.

"Sure, if it works I don't mind helping you improve." The two ladies smiled at each other.

"Thanks. I'll make you some gold or something in exchange. I can do that, you know."

"Oh really?" Ericka beamed. "I think this is going to be the start of a beautiful friendship. Who is this little guy?" She glanced over Rosalina's shoulder to the green Luma that was peeking up from behind her.

"You're back!" she exclaimed, hugging it. "Look Lysanias, we really found one! A new Luma, a spirit of this forest!"

"If it's a spirit of this forest can it leave? Come with you?"

"Oh sure. I haven't really talked to it yet, so I don't know it's name, but it says it was created in my time of need and it's ready to meet the others."

"Welcome to the adventure, little one," he said to it. It nodded and waved.

So they do exist outside her. Or did she give rise to it somehow, or just because this area was saturated in dream energy or whatever Jason did? But she doesn't seem to think it's anything out of the ordinary. Weird.

"By the way, Ragnarok wants to talk to you." She pointed to the sword which was back in the sheath. He looked down at it, but it didn't look any different.

"What, right now? Can it wait?" *What does a sword want to talk to me about? Complain I didn't call on its power, because I have no idea what it does? Though maybe I could have used the opportunity to figure it out. Whoops.*

"Just sometime before your next combat."

"I see. You can tell that, huh? Thanks."

"Sure. Now, what *is* your name little guy?" She took the Luma in both hands, raising it up like a tiny Lion King.

"Can we leave this bloody forest now?" Vex asked, as everyone seemed to be healed up. Bo was fairly unsteady as was Kenzie, as they both had lost their share of blood in the combat.

"We can head back, tell those people the forest is safe again," he agreed. "Mavis, everything okay with you?" Everyone looked over as she and Jonathan, hand in hand, were joining the group again.

She nodded. "Jonathan said he would never, ever kiss a monster, and then he... uh... I think we're engaged now. That's how that works, right?"

"Oh, not, er, that is, not that I wouldn't want to, the thing is..." he tried to say.

"You sly dog!" Ericka told him, bumping him with an elbow. "Congratulations. Yes Mavis, that's exactly how that works! You should marry as soon as possible where there will be dancing. Does your father dance by the way?"

"Congratulations," everyone echoed, Dyson stepping up to shake his hand. Vex just rolled his eyes.

They made their way back, the entire family now clustered around the front door waiting their return. It was a fairly large family and Lysanias waved, they had been victorious!

Chapter 23

Downtime

When: Moments later

Where: Back at the house

It seemed the entire family had gathered outside, which was Jesse, his parents, two older sisters, one younger sister, and a baby who wasn't old enough to declare their preferred pronoun yet and so will be called they/them.

"I had six bothers growing up, so I can relate," Johathan told everybody, though no one had asked.

"I love learning new things about you!" Mavis gushed.

Lysanias put all his willpower into not sighing. "Jason has been driven off," he announced. "When your friend returns—"

"His *girlfriend!*" Mavis teased.

"She's not my girlfriend!" Jesse protested automatically.

"You saved her life at the risk of your own," Tamsin told him. "It's contractually obligated."

"In what, the thirteenth century?" Bo questioned.

"Anyway, I found the soul of the dog and took it to valhalla, as I promised," she went on. "One day I am sure you will both be reunited with him."

"Uh, thanks."

"Who is Jason?" the father asked. "You were all talking about monsters, that sounds like a person's name."

"Uh, excuse me?" Mavis huffed. "I take offense to that statement."

"He was talking about the birds and those weird toothy creatures, not you, Mavis," Jonathan assured her.

"An important distinction," Lysanias agreed. "Jason was the cause of all this. Making your imaginary land more real and bringing forth the forces of the dark one you had imagined fighting. It was a trap for me, he wanted to see if I would come in the first place, and how I would deal with it. I did, and I dealt with it—"

"With senseless violence!" Ericka broke in. "Pew, Pew!" She made finger guns, doing some kind of gun "kata," obviously not down from her adrenaline high from before.

"Yes, that," he agreed. "Once the creatures were defeated he left and the area went back to normal. I doubt he'll return, his purpose has been served here."

"So we can go back?"

"I'm afraid to say they smashed up your treehouse. But yes, you can go back. Just keep yourselves grounded or imagine only soft fuzzy things there for a week or so and it should be fine."

"Is it really bad? Leslie is pretty good at that sort of thing. For a girl, I mean!" he hastened to add.

"Is there any word on her condition?" Kenzie asked.

"It hasn't been that long," he replied. "We'll probably leave in another hour or so to go see her."

"The floor is left," Lysanias told him. "The walls? Not so much."

"Oh." He got a sad expression on his face. "Of course, we didn't build the original house in the first place, we just fixed it up. Too bad. Well, if the floor is still there maybe we can do something with it."

"But how can this Jason have done all this?" he asked. "And you all showing up out of nowhere, and healing them both. By God, are you all alright?" He looked the group over as though seeing them for the first time. "Some of you are completely torn up! You really did have a fight in there, didn't you? Do you need some bandages or... something?"

"I'm fine," Bo told him, holding her shirt closed with one hand. "I was healed, and I can heal more when we get back."

"When we get back, you go back in your cell," Tamsin reminded her.

"Oh crap, I forgot."

“Let’s just say he can, and leave it at that. I don’t know if you’re ready for the truth yet. Anyway, we should get back and let those that got hurt rest. I’ll be back tomorrow sometime to get your wish. Unless Jason makes it rain herring somewhere or something as a joke and I have to deal with it.”

“You were serious about that?” he asked. “You can really grant wishes?”

“Not in the ‘snap my fingers’ sense, though maybe in some cases? It depends. If you want super strength or the ability to teleport it might take me a few weeks but I can manage something for you.” *Before I leave.*

“Forget that, I just want my parents to stop fighting over money all the time.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Now son, we don’t fight over money *all* the time,” his father protested with a look that bespoke *play along son*.

“Yes you do,” he protested the protest. “If you’re not out in the greenhouse with May Belle you’re sitting at the kitchen table with mom arguing over bills. It’s like it’s every night.”

“I admit it’s a challenge to raise so many children,” he started to say.

“So why have so many?” Vex, as usual, bluntly asked. “Even the stupidest of creatures typically only have the number of kids they can reasonably support.”

“It’s our... belief,” said the mother, shooting a dark glance at the man. Lysanias felt some complex emotions from her, including frustration and a worn down feeling like it was a very, very old argument.

“Your belief causes you to have loads of kids you can’t care for?” he asked, shocked. “Humans really are beyond help aren’t they?”

“Now just what do you mean- did you say humans?” the man asked.

“ANY-way!” Lysanias stepped between them. “I could turn that old car we passed into gold for you, that would solve any number of money problems, but create a new one. How to explain where you got a car sized amount of gold from. But I was thinking more a personal wish, to reward you for saving your friend’s life.” *Well, bringing her here so I could tell her personal angel of death she wasn’t on the books just yet. But that’s between myself and it. But really it was me who saved her life.*

“Hey, I’ve seen Spider-Man. With great power comes great responsibility. I just want to be normal, and have a family that isn’t fighting all the time.”

“This Spider-Man seems very wise,” he admitted. “It’s true, the more power you have the more morally obligated you are to use it to help others.” *Like leaving your whole world and fighting off an avatar of shadow. As one does.*

“Uncle Ben said that, not Spider-Man. You don’t even know that? Are you-”

“The guy who makes the rice?” Ericka asked. “I love his stuff! It’s in a box, so convenient!”

“No, it’s... I’ll explain it to you later,” Jonathan promised. Jesse was looking at them like maybe they really were from outer space, as he was beginning to more seriously believe by the minute.

“I guess if that’s what you want,” Lysanias told him. “What value does gold have around here? Would turning that rusting car into it be enough?”

“Be enough?” Dyson managed. “Gold is like a thousand dollars an ounce right now. Do you know how much that car weighs?”

No, but I know a kid attending Hogwarts that could tell me, as well as how long it’s been there, and everything else measurable about it. “No?”

“More than a few ounces!”

“Wait, you can really turn metal into gold?” Vex asked. “What about my fillings? Could you turn them into gold?” He opened his mouth wide as if Lysanias was just going to do it right there for him.

“You had holes in your teeth? I could close them up so you had whole teeth again, isn’t that better for you?”

“Oh, right. I’ll find something.”

“Vex, I’m not turning anything of yours into gold.”

"Then forget my help in the future."

"Big loss there," Tamsin scoffed.

"Actually, I had an idea?" Jesse told them.

"Go ahead," Lysanias told him.

"If you can really turn a whole car into gold, I bet you could repair one, right?"

"I suppose."

"I saw a youtube video about this guy that buys totaled cars and hopes he can repair them. One had a cracked frame the manufacturers knew would be a problem and he managed to shove it together and then weld enough metal onto it to be allowed on the road again. Could we do that? Get some really expensive sports car really cheap because it's totaled, and you could fix it up? Then we sell it for a massive profit. There are cars worth more than our house, just selling one could easily pay off our mortgage. Without that to pay every month we'll be in a far better place."

"I don't really know much about car repair though. Give me a second." He spirit stepped down the street a little and pulled out the hubPad, turning it on. "Can you scan a vehicle that's been damaged and tell me how to repair it?"

"That is within my capabilities," it answered. "Compared to starship repair or other advanced technology, an automobile ranks very low on the difficulty scale. For one such as yourself," it clarified.

"So with what you know of my abilities, such repairs would be possible for me?"

"Even simple alchemy skills would repair most physical damage you would encounter."

"True. Thanks." He put it away again and went back. They were talking about how worrying about his parents mortgage had even entered into Jesse's head, but he was saying he had gotten tired of them arguing and looked into debt reduction ideas online himself.

"Just pay one bill off, then use the money that would have towards it into the next one, and so on and so on until you have just one bill left, and a massive amount to put towards it. This sort of goes around that, but... so?"

"Done," Lysanias told him. "Find a car in the area we can buy, and I'll fix it up again so it can be sold."

"But son, we can't just walk into a showroom with a suitcase full of gold. We would need a bank check, and for that we would need a loan. But no one is going to lend us money."

"They will," Lysanias promised him. "Don't worry about a thing. Get the bank you want to get the loan from in mind, find the car, and we'll go from there."

"I would have wished for a pony," said the little sister.

"No one cares, May Belle."

She pouted.

So Lysanias took the others home and they rested for the evening. One by one they came to him with some plans for the coming days, given what they now knew Jason was capable of, but of course he had his own stuff to finish. The circle to move between the boat more easily for one thing. And whatever Ragnarok wanted to talk to him about. He said he would do what he could for them, hopefully they had a few days before he broke out totally and no other kids were playing make believe in secluded woods somewhere.

That night he went into his inner soulscape and walked over to the pedestal the blade normally rested on. It hovered before him.

You did rather well, wielding me as you did today, rang in his mind. But there is still room for you to grow.

"To grow? What do you mean? I can't miss with you. Unless something gets in the way mid swing that you can't chop though, how can a one hundred percent hit rate be improved on?"

Easily. Your movements are stiff. Besides, without your ward the claws of that one bird would have reached you. Your own skill still counts in defending yourself with me. You should still practice with other blades and hone your skill. But it is a specific technique I wish to speak to you about now. Or rather a combination of them.

“As a sword yourself if you know some techniques they must be pretty amazing. I’m all ears!”

Let us set the stage, shall we? The blade floated to the side away from the pedestal, and Rosalina stepped out of her cabin, waving to him. He waved back and she came over.

“Oh, you’re going to show him?” she asked excitedly. “This should be good. Come on, over here!”

Bemused he followed the pair and around them a scene of the combat sprang up.

This is about right, is it not? At one point there were two creatures in reach, and you did this. An image of Lysanias showed him slash one creature to ribbons, then block with the shield, knocking the other away. Then he slashed it down the middle and it vanished.

Clumsy. Watch your technique as the battle progressed, what do you see?

More images appeared, him cutting down the birds, cutting apart the ground creatures.

“I see me doing more damage than any of my friends. I must have killed twice as many as Ericka.”

But Rosalina was hurt, as were Bo and Kenzie. In battle, speed is the key.

“I can’t *get* faster, I’ve tried. Oh, I can *move* very fast but I can’t react any faster. It’s the same as me getting stronger, I have to rely on my... on you, honestly. And the sash, and the bracelet.” *I mean, I suppose I’m a bit quicker when hitting with chi-blocking, but swinging a sword around and tapping someone to disrupt their energy flow are two different things. I can’t be as fast with the sword as with my fists, it’s just not physically possible.*

Indeed, we must compensate for your physical shortcomings. But what do you see?

“I don’t know, what do you mean?” The images replayed. “Am I too cautious or something?”

Not exactly. Watch each strike. Here, you dispatch a creature and what do you do?

Return to the guard position and stay rooted to the spot. Instead, flow from enemy to enemy without pause. Watch. Again the two nearby creatures appeared but this time the figure of Lysanias slashed the one apart, then used the momentum from the strike to carry the sword into the second creature rather than shield bashing it. The image then spun closer to the next nearest creature.

“Okay, I can see how that would have worked out better, I guess. I would have taken out the second creature faster, and could move on.”

Watch the entire combat again, this time never letting yourself be still.

He watched as the creatures charged, and given how clumped up they were it was a simple matter to move among them, bringing the sword up to slash apart one, then down onto another even as the first one died. He whirled away from the birds, catching them just as they passed rather than standing there like a fool hoping his armor ward would keep their claws away from him. Each creature fell, and he seemed to flow from enemy to enemy, and where two were near and he killed one, the second followed instantly.

He scratched his head. “You want me to combine what I learned from Jinora about spiral movements to focus on *attack* rather than *defense*, and when I kill something with you to just continue that motion and hit something else nearby? I guess when surrounded like that it could really work well.” *I suppose it’s still a defense in a way, my moving about like that would make me harder to hit.*

You do see it. I knew you would, we truly are made for each other. But still I am concerned. You hesitated to call upon my power in this last battle. Why?

“Would your power have helped? You say you have the power of change, but those things weren’t even real.” *In fact, this whirling around is fine for slashing stuff apart but fighting people? I suppose it would work with bending or chi-blocking if I didn’t want to use the sword. The principle is the same, if I didn’t want to fight in such a lethal manner. I typically don’t after all.*

Ragnarok seemed hesitant. *I suppose not, in this case. Still, calling upon me costs you nothing, and you do wish to see what I can do with your own eyes, yes? You have yet to do so, despite the time we spent practicing together so I could hear your voice and awaken to your call.*

“Yes, it’s true. I just wish you could be more clear about what will happen!”

I have told you all I can. Use me, my power is yours.

"As is mine," Rosalina told him. "I'll get better, and maybe I can practice this spiral movement too. Once I get Ericka's skill at predicting where enemies will be or whatever she does, I won't hold you back again I promise!"

"You didn't hold me back," he protested. "They just got a lucky hit in, that's all."

"I guess." She looked down. "But I still did get hit. She didn't."

"Bo did, as did Dyson who is half wolf or whatever he is. Maybe your ward wasn't well made, it might not be all your fault. Look, I was thinking about it. Ericka uses guns, right?"

"Yes?"

"I don't know about that, finding a way to get ammo or power them if you used electric guns like she does would be tricky but we have something almost as good." He concentrated and held out a hand. What appeared to be a slender stick of wood dropped into it. *Plus how would I fix one if it broke? I suppose by then I would have Hub access and I could get it repaired there, but she is more into magic...*

"A wand? I don't get it. I already have one of those." She held up hers.

"This is one I made and have been carrying around since we went to the Skybourne islands in the sky. Way before your time. I've got a few more of the staves, I'll make another. They're imbued items, you squeeze it and a magical bolt comes out. What I was thinking was, in a situation where fancy magic isn't needed, like back there," he gestured to the scene that was still repeating nearby, "you could use two of these in place of two guns."

"Or my wand and this."

"Sure, whatever works. This is faster though, right? Even casting the spell for your bolt either takes time for the wand motion or it's harder to do."

"True." She brightened. "I'll try it! That might substitute for guns, and I know how to aim a wand. You really did think about me, didn't you? Thanks!" She leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

"Oh, um, sure." He blushed, and she grinned. "Ragnarok," he held out a hand. "Let's play this battle again and see what I can do following your suggestions."

Lysanias did not dream that night, at least that he remembered, and the next day Ericka immediately offered her skills to Rosalina. He hooked the two of them up so she could give Rosalina the benefits of her long hours training and developing her gun fu, and then they went to the roof so Ericka could see how she moved. She took both "modified" wands but Lysanias did caution they were probably lethal, "so don't actually shoot anything with them."

"These are really old," she exclaimed, taking them both. "Oh, I like them." She held them up to the light. "They're so weighty, I know that's because they are the staff just shrunk down, but they have a good balance to them. You did a great job, they're actually really happy to be useful again."

"Useful? You can tell that?"

"Sure. I'm sensitive to spirits inside of objects, and older something is the more powerful the spirit of the object is too. You would know this about me if I spent more time out here with you. There's still a *lot* about me you don't know." She laughed. "Is it any wonder I still can't hear you every time? We need to spend more time together and practice that."

"We will. I look forward to learning more about you."

"You better," she replied with a wicked grin.

He was then approached by Mavis asking if, once she got up, they could go see her grandfather.

"Grandfather? Sure," he told her. "If you can show me where he lives I can take us there. Any special reason why- oh, of course, you couldn't leave the castle before, could you? Stupid of me. Of course you would want to go visit him."

"Not exactly. He's a really old vampire, and he's got a lot of... pets? They're man sized bat monsters, at least according to my father. If we can get him on our side I bet they would relish a fight against whatever Jason throws at us next."

He considered. *More combatants on our side is always good, and even an old vampire is worth a lot of humans. Heck, an older vampire probably has more powers and certainly*

more experience. They might be more dangerous, not less because of age. “Not a problem, I’m sure he’ll fight to protect the world, if not humans.”

“You’ll have to go back to the castle, get the image of where he lives from my father. I’m sure your maps don’t extend to his cave in the mountains. He’s still in Transylvania though, not far from the hotel so we should be able to reach it easily.”

“Why don’t we just ask him to go talk to the man? That’s his father, right? Do they not get along?”

She shook her head. “They do. I want to talk to him. About what happened to me back there. I can’t talk to my dad about it, but grandpa will have some good advice for me, I’m sure of it. After all, I’ve seen other vampires at the hotel, but I don’t know any of them. I have to talk to someone about it, and he’s the only one who would understand.” She paused. “He’s pretty old school though, according to dad, he probably would say I should be like that all the time. But at least he’s another person I can turn to.”

“He is family. Okay, tonight then.”

“Thanks.”

Not wanting to be left out Kenzie demanded her share of Lysanis’ day, and he showed her calling spirits into the world and fusing with his mountain spirit. (The latter he could still only reasonably achieve with augmentation magic, remarking it was just another thing he needed to practice.) Kenzie wasn’t sure she could call spirits that way, but did feel *something* when Lysanias did it, so she thought something similar might be possible for her. They practiced chanting though, Lysanias quizzing her by making her do the chant without notes to see where she needed more memorization work.

You know, it’s not lost on me that once again I get to hang out with a bunch of very attractive ladies. How does it keep working out like that?

He spent the bulk of the afternoon finishing the second circle, which he brought to the bar and showed Trick how to activate with energy. Trick didn’t manage it every time but he said more people were coming around asking about rumors of Jason and what they could do to prepare. (Many fae were still alive from that time, they didn’t want to be caught unaware again) He was handing out the notes so often others had brought in copy machines to keep up with the demand, so someone at the bar would always be able to do it. He even said someone working for the Morrigan had come claiming Bo was dark fae now and to be her tutor.

“Er, she is. Guess I need to get you up to speed.” He did, blowing Trick’s mind, but he agreed it was an interesting compromise they had come up with. He said he would put feelers out, see if any light fae wanted to go “gray.”

Meanwhile with the circle active Lysanias stepped through with Trick and introduced him to Abraham, who seemed relieved it would be more fae than “monsters” coming to see him usually.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with being a monster,” he hastened to add, glancing over at Lysanias.

“Of course,” Trick agreed. “But good fences make good neighbors, and all that.”

“Yes, that’s it exactly!”

He had nothing to report, so Lysanias went back home and practiced his new battle techniques in the soulscape with Ragnarok until Mavis was up. He had gone back to the castle to get where Dracula’s father lived, telling him only that Mavis wanted to see him and maybe get his help when the time came to fight Jason. Dracula admitted his forces would be formidable but hard to convince, when they would be fighting to protect humans.

“More like they would be fighting to protect Mavis, at his orders,” Lysanias countered. “She’s committed to this, and he’ll want to keep her safe, right? She’s been in the thick of it once, she’s not about to back out now.”

“You’re probably right. Good luck with him. Tell him he can have a room here, and there’s plenty of space around here for the others, if he wants to come see me. Er, he doesn’t

know I had this place built- Mavis can do the talking. If he's going to help he'll have to come here so we can coordinate." He shook his head. "My father, here. I never thought I would see the day."

Wasn't this place built more than a hundred years ago? And you've never invited your father here? Maybe he's more old school than even Mavis knows. "I'll let her take the lead in this, don't worry." He won't bite her, she's family. Me, I think I'll stay in the background until she can give him the story of why she's there.

"Fine, fine. She's doing okay? Does she need more blood? I can get some!"

He shook his head. "It's fine, I can make it with magic." *And she just had a bunch, right from the source as it were.*

"Oh, okay. And she's okay, right?"

"She's fine. She's a capable woman, don't worry so much."

"I know, I shouldn't. She's with you, and the others you say have joined you. Well, say hi to her from me, give her my love."

"I will."

"So, ready to go?" he asked.

"Let's go see my grandfather."

They joined hands and *shifted*.

Chapter 24

Compulsions

When: A few minutes later

Where: Outside 666 Gory Cliff Lane, Transylvania

Mavis had gone inside to talk to her grandfather, leaving Lysanias sitting on the lonely peak that served as the entrance to Vlad's cave. Clouds billowed beneath him, so he was fairly high up in the mountains, and a precarious path at his right was the only other solid ground he could see. A lonely mailbox with a 666 written on it sat in front of the cave entrance which had pointy rocks above and below like a vampire's fangs.

Who sends him mail, and how does it get all the way up here?

After Mavis had been gone a minute he lay down and left his body, figuring he hardly ever did that so he wanted to make sure he still remembered how. His astral form slipped into the cave, not needing to go very far before he found the only room. Above him the glowing eyes of what must be the bat creatures blinked, and there was a small dais with a stone throne sitting on it in the middle.

That must be uncomfortable. Mavis was talking with her grandfather, and he didn't want to pry so he simply slipped out again after looking the man over. He, oddly enough, really did look old, with white bushy eyebrows, and comically pointed chin, nose, and ears. He was wearing all black from what he could see, apart from the red lining of his cape. *She's fine. They're family, after all. Is his skin blue? Where does he get clothes from? Or the money to buy them? So many questions.*

Back in his body he looked around for something to do, and wondered if he could work on a ward or two. Spying a rock he realized he hadn't done much earth bending lately and floated it over to himself, liquefying it and turning it into a spiral shape. He spent a few minutes forcing the now liquefied rock into various shapes before he heard the voice.

"And what are you supposed to be?" a voice demanded. He didn't jump in surprise, he had felt the creature approach energy wise so this wasn't anything undead like a vampire. It was a living creature, apparently smart enough to talk, which made him wonder where it had come from. He looked up. Looking down at him, as expected, was one of the bat creatures, with huge ears, upward facing tusks, and an almost lion like mane of hair that formed a point far above the thing's head. This made it look more stooped over than it probably was, though the thing's head jutted out fairly far from the center of the hair.

"Not sure I understand the question," he hedged. "I came with Mavis, I'm the one that brought her here."

"I asked what you're supposed to be!" it repeated, then gave a mighty sniff. "Because you smell almost *human!*" It nearly screamed this last part.

"That stands to reason, I *am* almost human. Not quite though."

"What's that supposed to mean? You're either human or you're not!"

"I mean my people were created first. Then we got wiped out to make room for the short lived, powerless humans that came after us. So think of me as a proto-human."

"You're a HUMAN? I'll rip you apart!" It raised a hand, which Lysanias saw was three fingered and tipped with nails as long as the fingers were. But the creature hesitated. "Wait, you came with Mavis? Are you her slave? Is she keeping you around to feed on? That would be acceptable."

Awfully single minded, aren't you? "Slave?" He laughed. "I'm her friend!"

"Friend? A vampire can't have a *human* as a friend! I'll kill you!"

"No, you won't," he calmly counter. "You're going to throw yourself off this ledge. You may save yourself by flying, but only after you've thought about what else I could have done to you instead of making you throw yourself off the cliff."

"Right then, I'm going to jump off this cliff," the creature decided. "I'll be back soon." It threw itself off.

Great, another skill gets a little more practice. What else haven't I practiced lately?

Wand aim, that's it! He got out the wand and stood up, compressing the ribbon of lava into a ball again. He closed his eyes and flung it straight up into the air, not quite letting it go so he

didn't have to reestablish his energy connection with it, then allowed it to fall so he could open his eyes and sight it with the wand. "Grow," he cast, performing the required wand motion. He did this several times, hitting it about every other time on average, then using "shrink" or "end Incantation" when he did to counteract the spell. By that time the bat creature soared past him streaking upward, then slammed into the ground behind him.

"You'll pay for that!" it promised, claws flexing. "I don't know what you did but—"

"Be stunned," he cast, pointing the wand at the creature. A red bolt shot out, which it tried to dodge. Didn't manage it, being hit by the bolt and falling over. *Got to practice some wand magic as well, nice!* He looked down at the creature. *Not sure they would even be worth recruiting, honestly. They might just decide to go after any humans while they can, if they're all like this one. Ah well, we'll see what Mavis has to say when she's done talking to Vlad.*

Another moment later Mavis came rushing out. "Lysanias, have you seen- oh." She stopped and looked down at the form of the bat creature. "Never mind. We wondered where he went." She stood there, one hand on her hip. "Bring him and come meet my grandfather." "Sure." He picked up the unconscious creature with the force and floated it behind him, entering the cave.

"Grandfather, this is Lysanias, the man I was telling you about. Lysanias, this is Vlad, my grandfather."

"Nice to meet you," Lysanias said, as the old vampire stood. "Where should I put this one?"

"I was wondering where he went. If he's dead just toss him down the mountain."

"He's not dead!" Lysanias told him, shocked. "Why would I kill him? I want your help, killing one your, uh..."

"Associates," prompted Mavis.

"Right, associates. Killing one wouldn't be a good way to begin."

"Eh, they're not all that special. Throw him over in the corner there." He gestured vaguely and Lysanias floated him over and propped him up. Glancing upwards he noted the other creatures glaring down at him, and didn't need any special senses to feel their barely restrained desire to fly down and tear him to pieces. "They're under orders not to hurt you, so don't worry." He looked over at the one. "If they even could, I guess? So, my granddaughter tells me you want my help."

"That's right. If we face down dozens of creatures again your forces here could come in handy." He gestured to the ceiling.

"And we would be protecting humans?"

He shrugged. "It's primarily their world. The fae have integrated into it, more or less, and those like Dracula have turned their back on it. But you all still live here. Jason wins, and every particle of energy this reality has to offer will be taken for his dark master. You die, they die, Mavis dies, everybody dies. I don't know what you have against humans but helping for the selfish reason of saving your own existence is good enough for me."

"Between you and me, sitting around in this cave isn't doing me any favors," he admitted. "I used to travel the world, you know? See things, meet people. Drink their blood, all that sort of stuff. Now I just sit here. Ha! What good am I? My son may run a hotel now, certainly not something I ever imagined for him growing up, but at least he's still making a difference in the world. Maybe it's time for me to reconnect with him, you know?" He looked over at Mavis. "She told me about wanting to leave the place. See what the world had to offer. She wants what I have, but what do I do with my freedom? Sit here and do nothing! That's irony for you. Will the generation after her actually come out into the open? She says the world isn't what it used to be, ha! But maybe she's right. Maybe it's time I saw for myself."

"But humans!" protested one of the bat creatures.

"Yeah, I know," he told them, looking up. "But I have to ask myself, what have they done to me lately? Maybe it's time to give them another chance. This might be just the opportunity. If I could become a hero, rather than the villain? Besides, I want to be a part of Mavis' life, she is my granddaughter, after all. By the way, any great-grandkids on the horizon?"

She laughed and blushed. "Maybe. I did recently meet someone."

"There, you see? I don't want to miss them growing up. I've already not been there for her, that was a mistake. What do you say, boys? Want to at least get out of this cave for a bit? Check out my son's hotel, maybe get in a good scrap pretty soon? You're always complaining how bored you are."

There was a general murmur as they discussed this.

"Can you control them well enough that they won't just start attacking humans?" he asked. "If Jason chooses a big city to attack, I don't want to add to my problems."

"I'll make sure they understand," he promised. "Humans are off limits for the moment. That's the deal for leaving this cave."

"Very well."

By this time the one Lysanias had stunned had woken up, and was arguing against leaving, but the others were really, really bored.

"Fine," it said. "I'll go along with what you decide, but this better be one heck of a fight."

"I'm pretty sure it will be," he promised them.

So Vlad agreed to help, and asked where the hotel was so they could get going. Lysanias held up a hand and said he would get them all there directly. Burning a circle in the floor with the stele while Mavis held his pad, he then shifted back to the castle and made the twin of it, picking an out of the way spot. He activated it and Vlad came though with Mavis, followed by a horde of the creatures. Dracula greeted his father and called for a room to be set up for him, and for the others to be shown where they could sleep.

"Thanks for taking me there," Mavis told him.

"And did he have any advice for you?"

"To be true to myself. I guess I just have to learn what my true self is."

"I had to take a similar journey," he told her. "I think you're well on your way."

"Yeah."

She said goodbye to her father, promising to tell him all about her adventures so far when the time was right. She said she was ready to go.

"Er, why not stay here? I'm headed back to the apartment to go to bed. Hang out with your family for now, I'll come pick you up in the morning."

"There isn't much to do with everyone else asleep," she admitted. "I saw the city, at least a little bit of it. There's no rush, I see that now. There must be some kind of spell I could use to go around in the daytime. Maybe grandpa will know. Okay, I'll stay here."

"You can give my dad a tour then!" Dracula suggested. "I'm still pretty busy at the moment. Castle maintenance was really falling behind, I suppose leaving it all to zombies was a poor idea."

"I'd love to. Come on grandpa, let me show you around!" She grabbed his arm and started pointing stuff out.

Dracula turned away, but Lysanias put a hand on his shoulder. "One more thing, a question for you, if I may?"

"What's up?"

"Would you mind a circle like that one here in the lobby that leads to a fae bar? I've connected the ship to it, but I'm going to need a way to move Vlad and his forces somewhere when Jason attacks. Along with anyone else that wants to come, of course. Thought I would clear it with you first."

"I wouldn't mind, if it's only fae for the moment. No humans?"

"Maybe Kenzie, but she's a shaman now, so she's more an "ascended" human. She's the only other human I know in this world, apart from Jonathan." *I mean I guess I know Jesse and his family, but that's more knowing they exist than knowing anything about them. Plus none are really fighters, he's a father and the others are too young.*

"As long as you personally know them, I'll let everyone here know there may be a human or two wandering around and not to freak out. A fae bar, and my father staying at the hotel." He shook his head. "Who would have thought?"

“Great, I’ll be along with one at one point soon. But I’ll come pick Mavis up in the morning.”

“I’ll see you then.”

The next day he got Mavis, who was excited to have spent some time with her grandfather and was looking forward to telling Jonathan about it, so they went into the dark room so she didn’t get fried by the sun. He got to work on the next circle, finding another board of sufficient size to use, when Kenzie said an excited Jesse was on the line.

“Hello?”

“Lysanias?”

“It’s me, how’s Leslie?”

“She’s fine, they did finally give her a transfusion and she should be able to come home soon. You’re still willing to fix up a car, right?”

“I gave you my word, didn’t I?”

“I have no idea if you keep your word or not. Anyway, can you come, I picked something out so we can head to the bank today and get the money!”

“Sure thing. I’ll be outside the house in few minutes.”

“See you soon!”

“How about it? Want to head back to see Jesse?” he asked Kenzie as he handed the phone back.

“I should probably come with, just in case Jason makes another play there,” she mused. “Not that you can’t take care of yourself, but yeah, let’s do it! Just a second.” She ran into the room and came back a moment later with Ericka.

“Another road trip?” she asked, looking perky. “I’d love to come if that’s okay?”

“Sure, let’s give Mavis and Jonathan some privacy,” he decided. No one else is here, right?”

“Vex left right away,” Kenzie counted off on her fingers. “Dyson and Tamsin actually have real jobs, so it’s just us at the moment. You think I could get a real job using my powers somehow?”

“Maybe in the fae community,” he admitted. “Healing wounds with the spirits or finding things with the knowledge they can give you. I’m sure there’s a way.”

“Wicked. Let me grab my purse and we can go!”

A moment later he was back at the house, and a moment after that Jesse, his father, and the rest of the group climbed into his car to head to the dealership. Lysanias put Ericka’s guns in the pocket, and made sure his sword was covered by an *ignore me* ward. That morning he had extended the holster that was built into it to hold the two “wands” that Rosalina was going to use, putting them at the back. They drove to the dealer and while Jack spoke to the salesman about the price, he took the hubPad over to where the car was sitting on the lot. He knew nothing about cars, except this one looked *very* different from the ones in Korra’s reality.

Looks pretty sleek though.

He scanned it, simply holding the hubPad up to it as though taking a picture of it.

“All damage is purely physical,” it informed him. “No electrical faults detected. Probability of successful repair: 100%. Subsequent sale should therefore be sufficiently lucrative to justify time expenditure.”

“Good enough for me! Thanks.”

“Of course.”

It could be fun, repairing this. Plus if it was going to be junked otherwise, I get to make sure the resources it took to build this thing don’t go to waste. Seems like a good deal all around.

With the price agreed upon Jack came out and said the dealership could offer the loan, but he was pretty sure he wasn’t going to pass the credit check.

“What’s a credit check?”

"They look at my finances, which are abysmal, to see if I can reasonably pay back the loan. You said not to worry about it, but I'm getting worried about it."

"Your plan is to fix it up and sell it, does that mean anything?"

"Not to them. They don't know if I can repair this car. They consider it a lost cause."

"Then let's go talk to the man." Jack led him back inside, introducing Lysanias as his "financial consultant" and the two shook hands.

"So what does the consultant think?" he asked, sitting down again.

"I think you will issue the loan without any credit check, because you're certain we're good for it."

The man's eyes glazed a second and he blinked. "I'm gonna get the loan paperwork started, we don't need to do a credit check in this case."

Jack and his son both stared, open mouthed, at Lysanias. "I told you not to worry. I'll go take care of getting it back to your place."

Though I admit I'm a little worried. The ability to just tell someone to do something and have them do it could become a little too convenient for me. If I start reaching for it all the time to solve my problems, that's no good. I'll have to be careful not to go 'dark side' with it as Obi Wan would say.

With them signing the paperwork Lysanias went back out and attached an *ignore me* ward to the car, meaning no one would see it vanish, and he put it into a contain ward for easy transport. He then waited for Jack at his car with the two ladies.

"I told them I'd have my own tow truck pick it up later this afternoon," Jack told them as he got in the car. "It can't be on the road so they wouldn't let me drive it out of here. How exactly are you going to 'take care' of getting it home?"

"It's already taken care of. Let's head there now and we can get to work."

Back at their house it was a simple matter to release the car from the ward and Lysanias got to work on it. The metal was fairly pure so earth bending wasn't going to work very well, but he had another option: Rosalina.

"Can you use your spell of purposeful teleport to stick these pieces back together?" he asked, showing her the damage to the frame.

She looked it over. "I don't think so," she finally admitted. "It's not really for that. I mean the frame might be fine, but then it wouldn't be attached anywhere else, having teleported itself out of position."

"Ah. Plan B is augmenting your willpower with the sword and you using telekinesis to hold them together long enough for me to fortify them with some other metal. The hubPad is showing me where we would need to apply the force." He showed her. *Apply the force, good one, Lysanias.* He glanced over at the boy and his father. *Didn't even get a chuckle, you're useless! Wait, would they have heard of that? Clary knew who Yoda was, but that doesn't mean every reality would have those "movies."*

"Now that I think I can do!"

So he handed the sword over and she started gently pulling the pieces together as shown, while he got ready to bond them and slap more metal on the spot that had separated. He figured he could use the same techniques as shrinking down the staff into the size of the wand, simply by "compressing" the material together. That would make it heavier, but much harder to damage in the future. (He could also turn it into something exotic from his home reality, but he didn't want uncomfortable questions to be asked in twenty years when the thing rusted to pieces except for that bit) When the pad said it was moved as far as it could be moved he applied his power to it, taking some scrap metal Jack had and making it all one solid piece again. They checked the opposite side, and his ability to "read" material (another skill he needed some practice with, he hadn't done it in forever) said it was under a bit of stress as well, so he shored that up too. Repairing the various dents and dings a fancy sports car inevitably picks up the hubPad announced it was road worthy again, and the whole job had hardly taken half the day.

"You know, I have no idea what I just watched," Jack told them. "But I guess I'm the proud owner of a car worth more than my house. Now to find a buyer before my first payment

is due. Or the cops come knocking because someone at the dealer notices that credit check on me was never done and decides to do one.”

“Could you just sell it back to that place? Tell them you repaired it, they’re welcome to inspect the work, and they can find a new home for it.”

“Maybe. I’ll see about that, in a day or two. After all, if I immediately took it back there they would suspect something was up. Nobody could do that repair that fast normally. That’s my problem though. You’ve done more than enough for us, thank you.” He stuck out his hand, and Lysanias shook it.

“If someone does hassle you about it, just give Kenzie a call again. The wish isn’t over until you’re not fighting about money anymore.”

“We’ve been talking, after nearly losing our son and his friend, we know there’s more important things now. We’re trying to be better.”

“They are,” Jesse admitted. “At least when I’m awake.”

“Well, good luck.”

“Thanks. For everything.”

With that Lysanias headed back and got back to work on the circle. Two days later he finished a set for the hotel, and now they could go between the boat, the bar, and the hotel with a few steps. He started on a third set of them, to take to wherever Jason appeared so all these forces could get there easily. Abraham was nearing port, he hadn’t caught any news reports out of the ordinary, and was making more weapons. He did say places were abuzz with speculation as to where his designs had come from, and people were hard at work implementing them to see if they really worked. He was quite glad to have made such a difference in the world, and was pleased the guns had worked out for Ericka during the initial attack. He looked them over, as they had never seen actual use, and talked with her about how they performed so he could make any improvements to the design.

A few more days passed uneventfully, with Lysanias and the gang honing their skills, and he finished another set of circles which he put into his pocket. He was working on calling out Rosalina when suddenly the watch buzzed and an alarm sound started playing.

“What is it?” he asked, raising it. Symbols were flashing on the thing like crazy.

“Warning! Unscheduled intrusion into this reality! Dimensional door not under the control of the Hub or Lady Inari detected!”

Chapter 25

Visitors

When: About 9:00 that night

Where: Bo's house

"I'm sorry, what?" he asked the watch.

"Unscheduled reality incursion detected," the watch repeated. "Current probability of hostile intent by 'shadow avatar' entity is seventy six percent."

"Wait, so if there were one hundred unscheduled reality intrusions," Ericka asked, "right now seventy six of them would be the shadow avatar, while the other twenty four were not?"

"That is correct."

"Where did it happen? Should we go there?" Kenzie asked.

"Sensor contact with this unit was sixteen point three seconds too brief to accurately locate. Additional sensor units are being deployed within the planet's atmosphere to trace further incursions."

I guess the Hub takes this sort of thing seriously! "Are there likely to be more?" Lysanias asked.

"Forty percent probability of secondary incursion."

Lysanias grimaced. "If the shadow avatar was just bringing something to this reality they decided they needed to fight me now that Jason has probably reported to them, it would be a one time thing, and would explain the duration."

"Correct."

"Great. Can I even ask about where it opened? I mean it's a hole to another reality, this reality can't possibly know where it happened."

"That information is unknown to this unit."

"You'll try it anyway, though, right?" Rosalina asked.

"Of course. I can't have things from other realities just popping into this one like they owned the place!"

"Like you did?" Kenzie deadpanned. "In a bedroom."

"Hey, I don't choose where I end up. Inari could just as easily put me outside your door and I could have knocked like a regular person. Don't blame my entrance on me!"

"Uh uh. Sure, I believe you. This is my believing you face. Don't you believe him, Ericka?"

"Totally believe him."

He held up a hand. "Just let me ask in peace, okay?"

"Sure," they all giggled.

At least they're getting along. Universe, I ask this question of you? Apart from myself, where will I find something foreign to this reality? And if that works, I'm going to be pretty impressed.

It didn't. *Yeah, that was so vague as to be useless. Maybe 'what recently came here through a dimensional door?'*

The watch interrupted his listening for the answer. "Inter-dimensional signal detected."

"What's this?" His eyes snapped open.

"Signal may be precursor to reality incursion. Stand by."

"Believe me, you have my attention!"

Another tense moment passed.

"Signal lost."

"Lost? This can't be the shadow avatar." *They wouldn't be so sloppy, would they?*

"Initial estimate has been reduced by thirteen percent. This event does not match any interaction previously recorded."

"Still, *something* is happening. The sun is down, one of you wake up Mavis and Jonathan, we might need them."

"I'll do it," Ericka said, heading in that direction. She explained what was happening to those two and they hastily got dressed.

"Signal reacquired. Eighty percent resolution for transport vector. Eighty five."

“Get ready, we’ll teleport as soon as we have a destination,” Lysanias told them. Ericka pulled out a gun but put her other hand on Lysanias’ shoulder. Rosalina grabbed the two “damage only” wands and stuck hers into her belt, as she happened to be wearing her Kart racing outfit. Jonathan did some stretches and affixed the poison claw to one arm, while Kenzie took the other. Both touched him, and Mavis grabbed onto Johnathan. Kenzie took Lysanias’ hand, the one that wasn’t holding his pad, which he had pulled out. He needed to see where he was going, after all.

“Ninety percent.”

They waited.

“Warning, second reality incursion in progress. Location confirmed, switching to map view.” The pad switched into the street view and Lysanias thought he might be looking at a school? The view was as close as the map could get to the building from the street, and with a quick glance and “ready?” to which the others nodded at, he *shifted*.

The group was fortunate enough not to be seen teleporting in and headed down the pavement to a building decorated with blue and white streamers, balloons, and lights.

“Welcome, Senors,” was hung above the door, which they paused to look up at.

“Are a bunch of old people coming?” Mavis asked.

“I don’t think they mean that kind of senior,” Kenzie told her.

“Wait, do you hear that?” Mavis put a hand to one ear and turned her head. “Someone is shouting for help in there! Come on!”

She tore the door open and dashed inside, the others following. Olen-Baba appeared beside them, hitting the ground running, and Lysanias put the pad away and pulled his sword out. He too could hear someone, a girl by the sound of it or just a really terrified boy, calling for help. Also the sound of an energy weapon of some sort being fired.

“This way!” she shouted, vanishing in a shimmer of energy and slamming through a door. It splintered and went flying, and the shooting stopped for a second. The others streamed through the door, Lysanias smacking the other side out of the way to find Mavis standing in a room decorated with more blue and white streamers. To his left was a stage that was partly on fire, musical instruments scattered everywhere and tipped over. A girl, probably the one doing all the shouting, was crouched behind some speakers at the back of it. Before Mavis was a certain “curious quartet” and several beings totally encased in black armor.

“Did someone call for a rescue?” she asked, flipping her hair back. Her back was to the others so they didn’t see her smiling, fangs gleaming. “Because we’re here to deliver one.”

“That’s my girlfriend,” Jonathan stage whispered. “Isn’t she the best?”

Rub it in, why don’t you?

“Kill them all!” shouted the weird looking guy with the frizzy white hair that was in the front. “We only need the one!” Weapons were raised.

Lysanias looked over and there was a bleeding man in jeans on the ground near them. *Great!*

“Lethal force for intruders?” Ericka asked, raising her own guns. She had pulled the second one out at some point during her run.

Lysanias gave a snarl of frustration but then brightened. “Pause,” he said. The action stopped. *Whew, that’s better.* He looked the group over, walking towards the man. He wasn’t bleeding badly, it looked like maybe he had been punched repeatedly in the face, so he would live. Before him was a man with a metal jawline and one eye covered (or replaced) by some kind of technological doodad. He was wearing a breastplate that looked made of many links welded together, and had two large swords in his hands.

Okay, you’re One Eyed Pete.

The white haired one that gave the order had an upturned nose, enormous mouth, and a face like a potato.

You’re Potato Face. Or Hookman? He trailed a hand along the man’s hook with a scowl.

The one next to him looked more like a beast, man. With hair coming out all sides of his head including his chin, he had upward pointing tusks like some kind of orc.

You’re Daisy.

The final looked almost insectoid, with a strange helmet that Lysanias would have said was a modified football helmet if he had known what football was, leather armor, and rough, greenish skin.

Helmet Guy.

The figures in black were just that, with their faces totally obscured they could be robots for all he knew. They carried rifles of some kind, and their armor looked the most modern of the bunch, what you might get if you painted stormtrooper armor black. He knew some stormtroopers, *wonder whatever happened to those guys? I forgot to ask Anakin about them, as he turned out not to be the avatar after all. He must have been really confused about my message and the coin. Ah well.*

He swung back to the stage, hopping the fire to look the girl over. She seemed unhurt, wearing a knee length denim skirt and jacket. *What are these people doing here? Why traverse between realities and shoot at one terrified young girl? He went back over, looking at Potato Face. They beat this guy up, shot at her, wait why is the stage on fire? He looked and their guns gave him no clue as to what they actually did, but he figured they were some kind of energy weapon. He ordered us killed. Is this one of those times Susan warned me about? That I might have to do something I would rather not? I'm supposed to be a shield, and I suppose, he looked over at the girl through the frozen flames, that I could just protect her. But if my spirit or Rosalina kills any of these guys, it's the same as doing it myself. And what if one of my friends is hurt because I'm just protecting her? I have to be their shield as well. He looked to Rosalina, raising her wands and obviously taking a lower stance. She's excited to put her new skills to the test, but is that worth their lives? These guys showed up and immediately started shooting the place up, and what am I going to do, capture them? Turn them over to the authorities here? That would go over well, all are clearly not human. Can I incapacitate them somehow? Can't chi-block through that armor. Driving them off is no good, I can't have them running around out there. And I doubt they would just go home after a show of force. Could they be lost, somehow? But no, why start shooting the place up, they weren't under attack. I mean that overweight looking guy was no threat to them, but they've smashed his face in nonetheless. These are not nice people, perhaps the multiverse would be better off without them. But what reality has this kind of diversity in it? They all look so different as to be different species. Weird.*

He got back into position and raised his sword, then pulled his shield out. He was going to will time to restart but then looked down at it. *You know what I never did? Take the energy out of the cover for this shield and make it into a talisman. Not that I need more powers, but still. I made a talisman before leaving the last reality, perhaps I'll make another in this one.* He looked the situation over. On their side were five close attackers and two ranged attackers. Against eight enemies. *Fine, let's round it off to an even number. Spirit, you want to help us with them?*

Of course. They won't even see me.

Good point.

The spirit shimmered into existence and looked them over. It pointed to the helmeted one, getting in front of it. "I agree, that one looks the most ready to fire. I just hope these are purely technological in nature or we're going to have a hole through us in a second." It made a "don't worry about it" motion with one hand and grew, making sure its body covered the muzzle of the gun.

He willed time to begin again, ending the talisman's power. "Granted," he told her. "You got it!"

The force warned him of an incoming shot, and he raised the shield just in time to deflect a bolt from all the way across the room from one of the black armored figures.

Wow, these guys are on the ball!

At the same instant Kenzie screamed, a bolt of energy sizzling her flesh from another one of those figures in the distance.

What in the world? "Kenzie, stay behind your spirit when guns are out!"

"Thanks, I figured that out on my own!" She pressed her non-clawed hand to her side and shuffled behind the spirit.

Ericka took a step in front of Lysanias and seemingly without aiming put two shots downrange, both striking one of the armored guys who gave a little jerk but seemed otherwise unharmed.

"That's going to be a problem," she remarked, glancing down at her guns.

His spirit decided to try getting the gun away from the guy in front of them, choosing the expediency of simply smashing both its massive fists down on the thing. While the man beast had no idea what was going on, he somehow still held onto the pistol. So the spirit tried again as he raised it again. Again, nothing happened but the gun dipping a bit. The spirit couldn't show it, but it was very confused and waved a hand across the man's face like "can you see me?" He didn't react.

Jonathan was running forward towards the man on the ground, right near the spirit, because he couldn't see that the spirit had him covered. So Helmet Guy blasted him, just barely missing because he was moving at a fast sprint.

Rosalina put her wands out and squeezed, one blast impacting the armor of one of the far guys, one blast taking Daisy in the chest despite the fact the bolt moved slowly enough to be dodged. They tried, but didn't manage it.

The spirit, seeing that trying to disarm this guy was getting them nowhere slugged the man in the chest. He didn't go down, so the spirit hit him with his other hand as well. That dropped him.

One of the black armored figures had stepped out from behind Pete and taken a shot at Ericka, but missed, the bolt sizzling between Lysanias and her. He concentrated and tried flinging the man with the force, given they were all in a line and knocking them all over would give them some breathing room. This worked out quite well, with there being a pile of them now and a tangle of limbs instead of a firing squad.

Without warning the guy with the two swords struck out at Potato Head, chopping him nearly in half and dropping him to the floor in a spray of blood. The man didn't even seem to notice, reorienting to his right as though fighting a phantom.

The spirit, looking over at the pile of bodies struggling to rise got a rather whimsical idea, and simply belly flopped over the top of them. As they were twice as tall as a man this pinned them quite effectively as they had no idea what was happening to them.

Mavis, the man she was about to strike having just gone down to one of his supposed allies wasn't exactly sure what to do, and stared down at the being a second. Still, her boyfriend had reached Helmet Guy and had just barely missed clawing him, though his armor looked a little torn up. She stepped over the body and went to help, forcing him to keep track of two combatants. He fired off a wild shot in her direction but it went wide. She had him gripped now, and was about to sink her fangs into him.

"Don't kill the sword guy yet!" Kenzie yelled as Lysanias was about to spirit step over there. "My spirit's doing something!"

Oh, is that why?

So he turned to the stage instead, quieting the fires, as it looked like his spirit had the other four under control for the moment.

Rosalina saw Ericka lower her guns and so followed suit, turning and passing her one "wand" into her right hand so she could get out her proper one and heal Kenzie.

Helmet guy was hanging on for dear life, (or deer life as the case may be) dodging attacks from his friend, Jonathan, and somehow getting away from Mavis trying to bite him twice, but she finally scored, ripping his throat open.

I thought she was going to try not doing that again? Is this her "being true to herself?" He shrugged and looked over the mass of black armored people struggling to rise under the weight of the spirit and whisked their guns away from them with the force.

"Now you can take out the sword guy," Kenzie told them, as Helmet Guy went down, a sword strike from Pete catching him in the back. "He's done his work well."

Making him murder his buddies? Yeah, I guess.

Ericka raised her guns and fired twice, shots slamming into him and electrocuting him. He spasmed a bit, dropped his swords, and fell backwards.

There seemed to be no more combatants so Lysanias made sure all the fires were out, then looked over the carnage. *One person with their throat ripped out, one guy with his chest*

caved in, another torn apart by a sword wound. That guy is still alive, as are the four terrified feeling fellows over there.

"Thanks," Kenzie told Rosalina as she pulled her wand away from the wound. "Must have been a lucky shot. And of course my top is ruined. I need my own armor or at least to wear stuff I don't mind seeing destroyed while you guys are around. Now what? This place is trashed."

"Hello?" said a voice, and everyone looked over to see the young girl peeking out from behind the speakers. "What's going on? Is it safe?"

"We'll answer," *none*, "all of your questions in just a moment," Lysanias told her.

"Rosalina, can you heal that guy as well?" He pointed to the innocent man.

"Sure thing." She went over there and started casting.

"As for your question," he turned to Kenzie and named no names, because he wasn't stupid. "I don't know. We can't just kill this guy in cold blood. By the way, what did you do to him to make him attack his friends?"

"Olen-Baba put the idea in his head that you were standing right next to him, sword raised. So of course he lashed out. You're a good dodger, but his friends weren't."

"I see." *That's one way to do it.* "The others are dead, I don't feel any energy from them. So we have five prisoners. But we can't stay here, someone is bound to have heard all that noise."

"That guy's blood was terrible," Mavis complained, wiping her mouth. "What, had he been drinking gravy?"

Not really the issue here. That's not blood from Earth though, I hope it doesn't make her sick.

"There's no way she's going to be able to explain this," Ericka said, looking around and the busted up room. "There's no way we can fix the damage, are we just leaving these bodies here?"

"We can't," Jonathan protested. "They're totally aliens, look at them. People would *freak out* if the story got out. Dead aliens found in school gymnasium battle in... where are we, anyway?"

"California somewhere," Ericka told him. "At least that's where the map showed before we teleported here."

"We've got to do something," Kenzie insisted. "Rule number one, you don't hang around a crime scene!" She looked around as if checking their means of escape.

"There is a way," Rosalina told him, laying a hand on her shoulder. "If nothing must remain."

He stared at her, knowing what she was talking about. He looked over at the dead, and the equipment, most of which was ruined already.

"What's she talking about?" Kenzie asked.

"Her ultimate spell," he answered without answering a thing. "All right." He pointed to Jonathan and Mavis. "Gather up their guns, the swords, anything that looks interesting." Next to Kenzie and Ericka. "you cover the troopers. Get them up and moving. Have Olen-Baba, no, never mind I'll have my spirit do that. They can herd these guys. Miss," he turned to the young woman. "Do you know this place? Is there a back way out of here?"

"Er, yes? What are you going to do?"

"Make sure nothing that can be analyzed remains. If you want to help, maybe get some answers, now is the time."

He went over and put the electrocuted man into a contain ward, there was no reason he had to die after all. Everyone bent about their tasks, Lysanias putting the guns and swords and various gizmos the group was carrying into his pocket. The spirit let the men up and the sullenly put their hands up, covered by Erika's guns (that they weren't sure could even get through their armor. Hint: They can't.) But they knew their own guns could, so just to be sure Lysanias traded her pistols for two of the energy weapons they had recovered, and that perked them up real fast. It wasn't her smile that said "yes, I will shoot you with this thanks for asking" at all. (Her smile also might have been "my grandfather is going to love taking these apart to see how they work" who can say?) The spirit then carried the still unconscious person to another room, where they safely left them. The young girl, who said her name was Julie,

led the way through the corridors of the school, and everyone left the room but Lysanias and Rosalina. One last look over the place and he nodded to her. She pointed her wand and began to cast, the Lumas appearing and doing their usual rotation to get the fire started. Lysanias noted with half a mind that the green one was now among them, and wondered what that meant, if anything.

The sun that appeared in the middle of the room tore through everything, the decorations, the bodies, their blood, the equipment, and disguised how it had been hit by laser fire. They watched from the back of the room as it was cleaned, squinting against the light.

Actually, that's true in more than one way this place is being cleaned. If those guys had been carrying disease from their world, it's not getting out now. Mavis... But that was a problem for another time. When he judged everything had been vaporized he nodded to her.

"Wait, if I let it go it'll burst outwards," she remembered. "Can you hold it in place with fire bending?"

"Maybe?"

"Wait, give me the circlet, I'll cast End Incantation on it. I'll need the boost though, keeping this going is a bit of a strain."

"It's yours." He set it on her head. "It looks good on you."

"Flatterer! Maybe I'll model it, and only it, for you sometime. End Incantation!" The ball of fire winked out and Lysanias felt his cheeks heating. "Done. Let's get out of here."

As alarms were blaring through the halls and water was pouring down from the ceiling Lysanias figured it wasn't a moment too soon.

Chapter 26

Key

When: A few moments later

Where: A back alley

"This seems fine," Lysanias told the others, as they crowded into an alley several minutes from the school. They got some strange looks walking down the street with the armored prisoners, but no one stopped them. For their part the men in black seemed interested, looking around with fascination at their new surroundings. The men were backed up against the wall and covered by Rosalina and Ericka, while Lysanias burned *ignore me* wards into the sides of buildings and the ground near the mouth of the alley.

That should keep any curious people from even looking over here.

He then tumbled the man out, yanked his armor off so he was bare chested, checked him for other weapons, and set about healing him.

At least he seems human enough, and not damaged enough, that I can't work with his flesh. For good measure he stole at least most of the man's energy, recharging himself, and set him back with the others. But not before checking the nearby dumpster for something he could turn into a binder. He found plenty of plastic, reshaping it to be a band, and "welding" it together so his hands were behind him and his feet were bound.

I could actually turn him into himself, without arms or legs. He might freak out a little too much in that case though.

"Now," he finally said to the armored figures. "What are you doing here?"

"You brought us here. Don't you know?"

"He means here in this city, you idiot!" said another. "Do you *want* to get him angry at us?"

"Er, following orders?" a third said.

"Very cute. I mean what are your orders?"

"To support those four you killed. Well, you killed three, there's still that guy left, unless he's dead and you're a bunch of purple people eaters and are just saving him for later."

"We're not purple," Mavis told him, "that's just my dress."

"You're not? You know how hard it is to see out of these stupid helmets?"

"That's it?" Lysanias asked, slumping a little. *Do they not know anything?*

"Yeah, that's it."

"And what are *they* doing here?" *Are they trying to exasperate me?*

"Looking for something, I guess? I don't know, you think we get told anything?"

The others agreed, nodding their heads. "You think we want to be here?" another said. "All we hear all day is 'move here, move there. Shoot those people. Defend this patch of ground.' You think anyone wants to be in Skeletor's army? I think not! But it's better than being on the other side."

"Yeah, he's winning, I don't want to be rebel right now," said another.

"Of course we don't want to see Skeletor *triumph*," another hastened to add. "We just don't want his downfall to be pinned on us in any way. That would really get us, our families, our friends, passing acquaintances, old lovers, people we glanced at on the street, movie stars we thought of—"

"We get it!" yelled one.

"Killed," finished the other lamely.

"I see. So you're just... what's the word?" He looked to the others.

"Don't look at us," Kenzie told him. "That all sounds like wogga bugga meyo tonka trunk to us." The others nodded.

He smacked his forehead. *Of course, I keep forgetting about little things like language.* "Never mind."

"You mean cannon fodder?" asked one.

"Sure," he agreed, not really sure in the least. *At least I know what a cannon is.* "For being so unenthusiastic about your jobs, one of you got a shot off at me right at the start, and one hit Kenzie here."

"Oh yeah, last to shoot on a mission is put into the chamber of pain. Nobody wants that!" The others were quick to agree.

"Have you seen that thing?" one agreed. "He carries around a picture of it, like a lover. Shows it to us all the time. 'Have you seen my favorite thing?' he'll creepily ask, whipping it out, at every. Single. Opportunity. 'Would you like to be all the way inside it? No? Then shoot who I tell you to shoot!" There were more nods.

Sounds like a winning personality. "Okay, fine, we'll deal with you all later." The other guy was waking up, struggling against his bonds.

"Good morning," Lysanias told him. He looked up, trying to get into a better position, so Lysanias sat him up. "So, your companions are dead, your troops aren't that loyal, and you're stranded on an alien world a very, very long way from home. The best thing for you to do right now is tell us why. Why come here? Why shoot up a school? What's so important about this girl?"

"I will tell you nothing!"

"Very well." He got out his hubPad, first taking a picture of the alley and opening the map app. "Can you show me a random point on Earth, maybe some remote village somewhere? Something really far from here, like on the other side of the planet. That's not exactly random I know, you get the idea."

"Affirmative." The view changed to be run down village someplace with straw houses in the mountains.

"Perfect." He grabbed the guy. "Be right back. No one move, I don't want to teleport into you when I get back." He *shifted*, concentrating on the picture. They appeared there, a couple of surprised people that looked like farmers looking over at him. The guy was freaking out at not being in the alley anymore, but Lysanias squeezed his neck and he quieted.

"So here's the deal. I'm going to strip you naked and leave you here, in this place. You don't speak the language. You have no currency or way to get currency. The food here, for all I know, will sicken you or be revolting to you. You have no weapons, and no one will ever find you. Your home dimension will be lost to you, forever, and no one, especially me, will care what happens to you. Maybe you can get one of those people to free you, maybe not. Do you like your odds? Alternatively, you can tell me what I want to know, and maybe, if you stick with us, get home again to the world you know. Look around. Does any of this seem familiar to you? No? That's because it's a different reality altogether. But you already know that, don't you?"

"Yes!" he croaked.

"I know you do. So, which is it going to be? Cooperation, or am I heading back alone?"

He seemed to be mulling it over.

Wait, did I just miscalculate? "Is this Skeletor really that bad? Are you thinking of him and the price of failure?"

"You have no idea."

Lysanias scowled at him. *Wait, could this Skeletor be an avatar? It's possible, right? That would make a lot of sense.* "At least with me you'll have a chance."

He sighed. "You're right. Fine, I'll tell you what you want to know."

"Excellent!" He *shifted*.

"And we're back! So, why are you here?"

"He-Man attacked the throne room of Castle Grayskull, somewhat foolishly and desperately, now that Skeletor has all but won. He wished to free the Sorceress, who Skeletor is draining of magical power. But he was overwhelmed, and they used the cosmic key to escape. They came here. We were tasked with retrieval, to bring him and it back here."

"Cosmic Key?"

"It's a cylindrical object with many keys, that can open a door to basically anywhere. It's how Skeletor got inside the city for the surprise attack. With another one out there he's vulnerable. They could open a door to where he's sleeping that sweeps him up and dumps him into a lava flow. We were to be the advance group, in case the doorway they opened was somewhere nearby something like that. He didn't want to walk into a trap."

Lysanias shook his head. "He sent you to succeed, or die." *But wait, if he could use this key to go anywhere, why not just go someplace he can overwhelm with no effort? Give up the world that has the technology and the means to resist him, and rule a planet elsewhere that can't do so. Weird.*

"Pretty much. That's the life of a mercenary. My son needs special treatment for a rare ailment, and this work pays for that. Er, barely, it barely pays for it."

Lysanias looked sideways at him, wishing he could, like a seer, tell truth from lies just by hearing them. "Of course it does." He turned to the girl. "Have you seen a cylindrical object with keys on it? High tech looking, opens doors between realities?"

"Oh!" she looked startled. "Kevin and I found something like that just a few minutes ago. It made a ball of light appear, I suppose that could be a small doorway? He went to go show it to someone. Is that why they were shooting at me? It belongs to them? Who are they?"

"Never mind that now. We'll have to go get it from him. Once enough time passes, I'm sure more troops will be sent here looking for it. We could have a full scale invasion on our hands. Let's find these resistance fighters, the key, and send them all back before that happens. You four, out of that armor, I don't want you getting any ideas and we can't exactly walk around with you looking like that, now can we?"

They sullenly began undressing, and Lysanias passed the various bits of armor though his shield. They weren't wearing much underneath, but he still didn't know what he was going to do with them. They all looked relatively human, if with strange eye and hair colors. Then he brightened. "I know where I can put them, be back in just a second. Everyone grab the guy on your right." They did as asked, looking at him with a bit of fear, and he grabbed the bound guy as well. He *shifted*.

The place he appeared was Bo's cell block, and of course that many people wasn't subtle, there was a boom from the air pressure. Bo jumped out of bed, going to the bars. *Good, the way is clear.* He *shifted* again, and now they were inside the cell. He hastily shoved his way past, handing her two wards. "Stick these on opposite sides of the cell," he told her.

"Okay?" she hesitantly agreed, affixing them. Guards were now rushing into the passage to see what the noise had been, but ran past the cell with Bo in it like it wasn't even there. "Er, who are all these guys?"

"I show up with five nearly naked guys and you have to ask?"

"Wait, are these a *present*?"

"That's right. They're... bad people I can't deal with right now. Keep them entertained, but keep them *drained*, I don't want them making a-

But she was already pressed up against one of them, kissing them deeply, and he saw blue energy flowing out of the guy's mouth.

"-fuss. Never mind." *Guess you were fairly hungry.* He turned back to the bound guy, touching the bonds and severing them. "She'll keep you entertained. I'll be back for you when I can."

He was focused on Bo, who was now shirtless. "This is what you call a prison on your world? I'd rather stay here! Forget going back! Do you see the size of her-"

He broke in before he could say more. "This is a special case. Wait your turn, there's enough Bo for everybody. Have fun." Bo was starting in a second guy already, tearing the rest of her clothes off while still trying to grind against him. The others were wasting no time in doffing the rest of their clothes either. *Some people have all the luck.* He *shifted* again.

"Where did you put them?" Kenzie asked when he reappeared. "Not my place, I hope."

"I thought Bo might like a real meal for once, not just a snack."

"You didn't?!" she gasped, face lighting up. Probably imagining the scene.

He shrugged, palms in the air. "What else was I supposed to do with them? I can't keep them here." *And this way Bo can make herself useful.*

"No, no, I approve, good thinking!"

"So what's the story, exactly?" Ericka asked.

"I'll tell you on the way. Where is your boyfriend? We have to get to him before he inadvertently activates the key and drags some eldritch horror from beyond your universe here."

"Is that a possibility?"

"If he starts poking at this key thing, yes. It can open doors between worlds, who knows what it could bring here if he just pokes at it and hits the 'on' button?"

"That's why those guys looked so funny. On second thought, I don't want to know. This way," she announced. "Let's go."

She led them through the streets and Lysanias told them what the man had told him. They all agreed this needed to be resolved *now* before it escalated and they had hundreds of armored foes to deal with instead of just four. They didn't need to reach the music shop as Julie yelled "Kevin!" and ran to hug him.

"What's going on, there's fire trucks and police cars heading to the school! I was heading there-"

"Ok Kevin, it was horrible! There were these aliens, and they were shooting at me, and the gym is totally trashed now, all your equipment has been-"

"Slow down, did you say aliens?"

"I'll just take that," Lysanias told him, yanking what must be the "cosmic key" out of his hand.

"Hey!"

"Give it to him, Kevin. You don't want to open a doorway with that thing by accident, believe me."

"Doorway? What are you talking about?"

"And there are these black storm troopers after it!"

Lysanias perked up. *Wait, is that story in this reality too? Crazy.*

"Black storm troopers? You're not making any sense, Julie."

"Look, you two go home," Lysanias told them. "You're not a part of this anymore. Just try and forget it ever happened. No one knows about your involvement, and your part is done, now that we have this. We'll return it the rightful owners and hopefully keep your world from being invaded." *By a different guy. There's still the guy I'm here to fight off. But you don't need to know that. What a mess.* "Go on, now."

Kevin was protesting, wanting to know what that thing was and what was going on, but Julie pulled him away. "Come on, let's just get out of here," she insisted. He let himself be led away.

After they got into a red van and drove off Lysanias got out his pad and had it scan the object. He also felt it didn't belong there, though it took him a few seconds to be sure.

"Object is a crude device, however internal structures show it uses musical tones to approximate inter-dimensional math needed to successfully open portals."

"This tiny thing can really let you travel between realities?" Jonathan asked. "I didn't expect it to be so compact!"

"Object has miniature fission reactor as a power source."

"This thing is nuclear?" He jumped away from it.

"Shielding is sufficient to prevent radiation concerns."

"That can't be right," Ericka said. "My grandfather made some compact power sources it's true, but what powers our ship still takes up part of a whole deck. Are you telling me this thing has a power source capable of tearing a hole in reality, and a seventeen year old kid could lift it?"

"Affirmative."

"No wonder my pistols just bounced off that armor. They have a science *far* in advance of ours. But then why did that guy have two regular old *metal* swords? If they can do this..." she pointed at the thing, a loss for words. "What powers this gun, come to think of it."

"Information unknown. Scan must be completed."

"Do that later. I need to see who owned this, so I can find them in this reality." They moved off to the side of the street and Lysanias opened himself up to the history of the device. Images flooded his brain, several figures, two men, a woman, and a strange looking

creature all fighting for their lives and then leaping through a portal generated by this device. "Got it. This 'He-Man' seems to be their leader. I'll see about getting him here, he can't be far."

He-Man, he sent out into the universe, picturing the nearly naked man he had seen. *You are hearing the voice of Lysanias. I am unknown to you, but you are not unknown to me. I and my company have your cosmic key. We are friendly to you, and wish only to return it so that Skeletor does not invade our world. I will provide you a sign, follow it to where we are.* With that done he used light bending to create a ball of light in the sky. *I hate to draw attention to us, but it must be done. Get them here, and on their way as quickly as possible.*

While he waited he passed out translation wards to everyone, and they put them on. Soon enough their confused crowd came cautiously creeping down the street.

"Yeah, they don't stand out at all," Mavis mused. "And not that I mind, but why is that guy mostly naked? I know the reality they come from has armor."

It was true. The man in the lead, the one with the huge sword and holstered pistol was mostly naked. He had some straps in an X across his chest, and a sort of brief on his lower half, but his legs were bare as well. A cape, supported by two metal shoulder pads, rounded out his outfit. He had golden hair and upper arms were the size of Lysanias' legs. The woman was dressed in an almost skintight gray jumpsuit, atop which was a design too flimsy to be armor. Her shoulder length brown hair was secured by a headband, and she had various devices stuck to herself. The third man was the most heavily armored, complete with visored helmet, gloves, and high boots. He had a mustache and looked the oldest of the group. At least, it was impossible to tell how old the other member was, because it wasn't human. They were only about half the size of the big guy, and walked with a staff taller than they were. Their oddly squashed face included a nose that greatly protruded from their face, and they were dressed in a robe like outfit in blue.

"You must be the one that spoke into my mind," said the naked guy. "I see you have the cosmic key."

"Ah yes, it doesn't even look damaged," said the little one. "Even my prototypes are sturdy! We'll be home in no time now." He reached for it, and Lysanias saw no reason to keep it from him, so he handed it over. The man started punching buttons, making various tones spill forth from it. "Yes, yes, everything's in order."

"I am He-Man," said the tall one. "This is Teela, and her father, Duncan. I would seek your friendship, oh sorcerer. You are Lysanias? May I know the names of those in your honorable company as well?"

"Wait a second," Kenzie interrupted. "Your name is what?"

"I am He-Man."

"He. Man? Your name is somehow He-Man? That isn't some weird translation glitch, your actual, literal name is He. Man."

"Yes." The man looked a little put out.

"So, what, when you were born and your mother asked your father what you should be named, your father was so excited to have a son he just couldn't get the words out and could only shout 'He. Man!' over and over and so your mother said 'fine, his name is He-Man then, jerk.'"

"You know, now that I think about it, where did you get that name?" asked Duncan.

"The sorceress gave it to me when I first transformed," he explained. "To be fair it is sort of silly, isn't it? I never really thought about it before. My real name is actually Adam."

"You can't tell them that!" Duncan insisted.

"I think it's okay, they're from another world," he told the man seriously. "And given the ease with which they retrieved the key, and found us when we've only been here a little while, they're very powerful. Think about it, they must have seen us in a vision or something to have moved so quickly. They don't care."

But Teela planted herself before him, poking a finger into his chest. "Hold on, you're Adam? You don't mean *prince* Adam?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, Teela, I'm prince Adam. No sense hiding it at this point."

"But... but..." she sputtered, also turning red. "No, no, that can't be. Your height! Your arms!"

“I assure you it is. I’m magically transformed by the sword... I wanted to tell you...” He sounded as though he meant no such thing.

“By the Goddess, all this time! And my father apparently knew? I hate you! I hate you!” She started smacking his chest with her fists.

Lysanias raised a finger. “Anyway, we’re gonna go now. Let you get back to your own reality. Nice meeting you, bye!” He started to back away.

“Wait, wait!” He-Man pleaded, one hand raised. “Please, we need your help! Return with us and help us defeat Skeletor, we only have until moonrise or all is lost!”

Chapter 27

Overkill

When: A second later

Where: Still just sort of out in the street

I knew he was going to say that. “Look, you don’t know what you’re asking,” he told the musclebound man before him. “I just arrived in this reality myself not that long ago. I’m here for a reason. I have to safeguard this one, I can’t go running off to save yours.”

“You have your own cosmic key? Are you an inventor as well?” asked the little guy. “I’m Gwildor, by the way, as I seem to be unfit for introduction.”

“Oh, my apologies Gwildor, I didn’t mean to exclude you,” He-Man told him.

“That’s always the way with you giants, step all over us, I tell you.”

“I meant no slight by it.”

“Of course, of course. Now, my question?”

“I have a way to traverse realities, yes. This one has its own danger, it would be completely irresponsible for me to leave it before my task was complete.”

“We have only hours,” Duncan repeated. “Unless what is happening here parallels what is happening in Eternia that closely, you really can’t be spared for that long? What about the others? Are there warriors among you?”

“Yeah, come on Lysanias,” Kenzie pleaded. “It might be my only chance to see another reality for myself. We have to go and help them. Isn’t that why you gave me these powers? To help those in need?”

“You do remember being hurt in the last, and *only* I remind you, two combats you’ve been in, right? It could easily have been worse!”

“So make me better wards, that’s your job isn’t it?”

“I agree,” Ericka agreed. “I have given up my dream of hunting monsters because I met Mavis here, and I saw that they can be kind, and caring, and were not the threat to humanity my grandfather made them out to be. But I’ve spent my life training, I don’t know anything else. If we can go bust some heads and save their world, we should do it. Jason isn’t going to show up in the next six hours.”

“Unless he knows I’m gone, in which case he’ll do just that.”

“How would he?”

“Uh, don’t forget his boss is the shadow avatar. If my equipment can tell a door between realities has opened, so can theirs. They’ll know.”

“So just ask if he’s going to emerge in the next twenty four hours!” Mavis suggested.

“That’s easy enough, right?”

He took a deep breath. “I suppose. Very well, give me ten minutes, I’ll ask.”

“Thank you!” the girls chorused.

Lysanias stepped away to go ask the universe and the his group told the Eternian group what they could do so they could plan their next move.

Will Jason emerge and cause trouble in the next twenty four hours?

There was no answer.

Somehow I have to practice this skill more. How about this: Will Jason show himself in the next twenty four hours?

No

Okay, thank you.

“Okay, I can go with you,” Lysanias told them.

“Thank you, sorcerer,” said He-Man gratefully. “I’m sure your power will turn the tide in this battle with ease!”

So could you wearing armor, instead of prancing around showing off your chest muscles. Stupid chest muscles, why can't I have some of those? I mean sure I could take this guy one handed I'm certainly stronger than he is with my equipment... okay now I'm just being silly. Who cares if I looked like that? What would it really gain me? "Just what are we facing?" he asked.

"As we see it, there's a couple of things we can do," Rosalina told him. "Based on what they've told me about the place the sorceress is being held, their capabilities, and troops. Oh, and there is magic there so swap the shoes out for the ring."

"Got it." He did.

"Okay, the first and probably the way you would prefer is the sneaking way," she began. "We all wear *ignore me* wards and just sneak into the place. They can't break this barrier around the sorceress but I bet we could, one way or the other. You grab her, teleport away, and the others, having gotten into position, start their attack. Once the sorceress is secure you just teleport back and help clean the place out."

"Okay, that does sound like my style. What else?"

"We can do the old prisoner gag. We have four suits of armor, and while it may be a bit uncomfortable for the ladies, we could squeeze into them. We know what the others looked like, and we have most of their gear, some of us could be changed into them. At least a close enough facsimile they won't look twice, after all they aren't *expecting* deception so they won't be on guard for it. March He-Man and this friends back into the throne room, let Skeletor think he's won, and attack from surprise. This has the added benefit of making us more armored."

No reason they couldn't wear the armor in any case, really.

"Third is the distraction plan. We actually go back outside this Grayskull, rally their remaining troops, and begin a final assault on the place. We use the confusion to attack from the rear, facing less troops. This will cost more lives though."

"Couldn't we use Skeletor's tactic against him, though?" Duncan asked. "Just open a door from where our troops are inside the throne room. Clear it out from the inside out. Plus, once we announce Skeletor is dead, most of his troops will lay down their guns."

"We just left there," his daughter protested. "We can't just go back in. He'll have twice as many guards in there now."

"Oh. Right."

Lysanias shook his head. "You're all forgetting about contain wards. I can just sneak up behind the guy and stick him into a ward. Then shove him into a cell with wards that deny him the use of his magic. We can win without a shot being fired."

Everyone considered this.

"Er, stupid question, but what's a contain ward?" Teela asked.

"A ward is a slip of paper that carries supernatural power." He got one out and showed it to them. "A contain ward is a ward that contains something. You slap it on and it's held in a sort of pocket dimension. Living things can only be trapped for so long, but unliving things can be stored indefinitely. That's really the whole point of this, right? Skeletor can't steal power if he's inside a ward, nor can he give orders or command his army."

"It's true, Adam," Duncan agreed. "We deny Skeletor his moonrise by capturing him, his army falls apart just the same as if he died. He can be tried and receive justice instead of you just cutting him to pieces with your sword. We broadcast that he's in custody, I bet his army just melts away."

"I like it," he admitted. "But don't underestimate Skeletor. He could have various tricks up his sleeves. We will all wear these 'wards' that allow us to move unnoticed, in case the plan goes wrong. You will not face this task alone."

"Start figuring out where we'll cross over while I make the wards." *I could just give them the already made ones, but that's...* He did a quick count. *Ten wards. More than an hour and a half of work for something we hopefully won't need to rely on anyway, because we'll be ignored. Plus none of my pre-built ignore me wards are keyed to the others, so we wouldn't be able to coordinate. So it's really twenty, or three hours of work the slow way. It's quick enough, I'll just make them temporary ones. I like using the stele anyway, I saved a whole reality for it, after all.*

“How long with these last?” Duncan asked, after being handed them and told how to use them.

“Would you believe about ten minutes?” Lysanias asked him back.

“Why wouldn’t I? I don’t know about this magic stuff, I’ll believe anything you tell me.”
Because ten minutes, that’s why.

This of course still drained him, as did making the armor wards for everyone because he wasn’t just going to let He-Man or Teela walk in there unprotected. *What if this gets them killed? I’ll never hear the end of it!* Meanwhile Kenzie called for the moon spirit, putting it on as many people as she could get.

There was a park nearby they headed to, Gwilder wanted a fairly open space to open the doorway in anyway, and gave a few final cautions. Lysanias recharged himself from a line while he listened.

“Skeletor will know the doorway has opened. He’ll be expecting either an attack because his team was defeated, or for them to return triumphant. We have to get through before he figures out neither is going to happen and either sends more troops here, or figures out where we went. We should be in the forest just outside Grayskull. We can make it easily before the ten minutes is up. We don’t have to hide, right? Just walk up to the place?”

“That’s right. Don’t poke anybody or get in their way and they’ll ignore you.”

“Very well. Everyone ready?”

They all checked their equipment and slapped on their wards.

“Open it,” He-Man commanded.

“Done!” He pressed a button on the device and it started playing various tones, a doorway of light and energy opening before them. As soon as it was wide enough they stepped through, and he closed it.

Not far in the distance was the fortress. Dark, foreboding, and tall, the structure radiated a “keep out” that made Lysanias wonder why they wanted control of such an awful looking castle in the first place. But time was wasting and they moved forward.

“I thought you said this was a forest?” Kenzie asked, her spirit next to her nodding. “It just looks like a lot of rocks to me.”

“It was a beautiful forest, once,” he sighed. “Our war with Skeltor has been going on for quite some time.”

“I see.”

There were guards everywhere, strange looking vehicles, and hundreds of black armored men they had to weave through. Luckily in his arrogance or just because he forgot to order it closed the door was wide open, and the group let themselves inside.

“So far so good,” Duncan whispered. “At least this feels less like a trap. The last time we were here this place seemed deserted, and we got surprised. This time I think we’ll be doing the surprising.”

“Just stay alert,” He-Man told them. “We’ve not won yet.”

The Earth group followed the Eternian group though the castle and to the throne room, where He-Man poked his head though the corner of the huge door.

“By the sorceress...” he cursed. “Didn’t we just leave this party?”

The others leaned in, and Lysanias didn’t like what he saw. The throne room was large, easily 20 meters long, 14 across, and it was packed with troops. There were “decorative” gaps in the floor several meters across he wondered about, as there were no railings, though the walkways were several meters wide. Bridges connected the main walkway to the side walkways, and there were decorative, chest high walls at the edges. Doing a quick count he estimated more than a hundred troops, plus the strange mechanical devices standing right next to the door. If he had to put a name to them, he would have said they were magitek armor, just slightly smaller. They had two legs, and a curved canopy, and swept back and forth as if searching for intruders. At the far end sat a man with a bony face, and a woman in golden armor, both looking as if expecting something to happen. Next to them, in a shimmering energy field, was a woman dressed in white.

The sorceress.

“Those weren’t there the last time,” He-Man told them, pointing to the sentinels at the door. “Nor was that huge crystal.” He pointed, and suspended from the ceiling was a round chunk of pure white crystal.

“They don’t even look Eternian, what are those things?” Duncan asked.

“Could Skeletor have used the key and brought things from other worlds?” Teela asked.

“Er, it’s possible,” Gwilder admitted. “With my key elsewhere, I wouldn’t have picked up any doorways opening. But how would he know where to go?”

Don’t tell me.

“The plan is the same, they’ll ignore us, right? We’ve gotten this far,” He-Man told them.

Unless they’ve been told to ignore us.

“We move forward. That is your target, that is Skeletor. Pull him off the throne and we’ve won.” He pointed ahead. “We’ll be right behind you.”

“I’ll be far behind you,” Gwilder told them. “I’m not going in there, I don’t even have a weapon.”

“Yes, stay here in case we need a quick exit.”

“I’ll start working on the coordinates for outside again. They’re relative to where we are now, so it won’t take long.”

“Good idea.”

“Good luck.”

He-Man nodded and Lysanias stepped up, first sticking his hand into the room just to make sure he wasn’t walking into an illusion or something. Nothing happened, and he shrugged and moved forward. The group reached the halfway point when suddenly his senses warned him of danger, and the crystal above flashed. Many things happened simultaneously; Olen-Baba winked out of existence, as did the mountain spirit. The wards on everyone burned up, and the soldiers went to one knee and aimed in their rough direction. Lysanias stopped in shock, realizing he couldn’t feel any energy anymore, but then the crystal’s light died out and he could again.

“There you are!” Skeletor called, rising. “I thought you might be lurking around here one way or another. Did you find something interesting wherever you went? Pity it was canceled out. Surrender, and you will... be killed a little later.” He laughed, throwing his head back.

“Never!” He-Man shouted. The others formed a circle, weapons ready.

Wait, can we talk about this?

“Then die!” he shouted, raising his staff.

When he bangs it... “Wait!” Lysanias shouted.

“Yes?” Skeletor asked, pausing.

“You aren’t Skeletor. At least, not anymore, are you?” *Need to play for time. I think I know what I can do to even these odds, let’s get him talking so I can get it ready.* He slid his foot forward, taking a lower stance.

“Correct! He did find someone interesting. Let’s see, bushy beard, and are those red eyes I see? Fabricated armor, and that sword!” He leaned forward, glaring at it. “That cursed sword. You’re Lysanias, aren’t you?”

“That’s right. Perhaps now it is you that wishes to surrender?”

Skeletor goggled at him, then threw back his head and laughed again. “Oh very good,” he managed after a moment. “Very good indeed. Do I want to surrender? You’re almost as bad as that Susan. Look around. Join my cause and I will leave these people in peace. You have my word.”

“You would trade this entire reality for me?”

“Of course! You will secure many more for me, or failing that simply stop opposing me. That alone will net me worlds I wouldn’t have claimed otherwise.”

“I think you know my answer.”

He shook his head. “Pity.” He brought the staff up again. “Kill-”

As Skeletor had said "Pity" Lysanias surged energy through his body, readying the only thing he could think of to save them. As the staff descended and he shouted "-them." he dug in with his toes and used earth bending. And he *really* used earth bending.* Spending all his energy at once he completely tore the floor up behind them, dumping the soldiers and the odd mechanical sentries into the lower level. Where did all that rock go? He pulled it forward, sliding it between the soldiers and themselves to make a new corridor that led right to Skeletor. Laser fire impacted it from those too far away, but there was no way it was getting through stone as thick as the stone surrounding them now. Not in the time it was going to take them to reach the throne that was before them, anyway.

Everyone shot forward. Lysanias went down on one knee, knowing he wasn't going to contribute much more to this fight, except for perhaps energy draining someone. Or not, as the woman next to Skeletor glared at him. "At least he can pay with his life for coming here!" She cast something.

"No, you fool! That one has the-" Skeletor tried to stop her as the spell bounced off his wall ring, and sent her flying back, impacting the stone behind her and crumpling to the ground.

He-Man struck out at him, Skeletor used his staff to defend himself, but he knew he was beaten. "Mercy!" he cried, throwing his staff down. "I beg mercy!"

He-Man placed his sword against the man's throat. "You'll call off your attack? Go to trial?"

"Anything, of course! Mercy!"

"No!" Lysanias shouted. "Kill him! Kill him now!" He regained his feet and rushed forward.

"What's this?" He-Man asked.

"He's not Skeletor, he's the avatar of shadow. I don't have time to explain, he's been possessed by a being from beyond your world. The only way this reality will be safe is if he's killed."

"You're sure of this?" Ericka asked.

Lysanias got close, trying to feel him out. He felt nothing at first, but concentrated. *Yes, there's that resonance I'm starting to realize is the thing I need to look for.* "It's him."

"Fine," she said, and blew his head off with a pistol shot.

"No!" cried He-Man, trying to grab it away from her. She easily dodged it, skipping backwards away from him. "We needed him to call off his armies!"

"What's he saying?" Ericka asked. "He seems angry, did I do wrong?"

The translation ward burned up too. Marvelous.

"That is not exactly true," said another voice, to their right. Everyone looked, and the energy barrier around the woman in white was gone. She looked up and vanished. A moment later her voice rang through the hall. "People of Eternia, Skeletor is no more. Just now the forces of He-Man triumphed over him, slaying him where he stood. I am once again free, and peace can once again return to our lands. Throw down your weapons. Dismantle your war machines. Return to your lives, without fear of reproductions. You are all once again... free."

She came back into existence inside the stone barrier. "I'm not sure those in here heard me, they're busy trying to save their comrades from what you did. I don't suppose I could ask you to put it back the way you found it?"

Lysanias shook his head. "I can open a small doorway out of here, but I'm wiped out. Until I can recharge myself I'm fairly useless."

"I see. Well, let me be the first to offer my thanks, on behalf of all Eternia."

"Yes, that isn't exactly how I saw that battle going," He-Man admitted. "And he had to be killed?"

"Believe me, he had to be killed."

"I see. Then thank you."

"Glad to help. Sorry you guys didn't get to do anything."

"What happened there, anyway?" Kenzie asked, her spirit back.

"Kenzie wants to know why our powers went away," Lysanias asked.

"It was the crystal," explained the sorceress. "He brought it from somewhere to cancel out the abilities of those that might come to my rescue. Every few seconds it glows and all

powers are neutralized. It couldn't be continuous because then the barrier wouldn't have worked, but it never cut it off long enough for me to escape."

So what I did was double plus good, as the stone will stay where it is, it wasn't being maintained by any power. "Wonderful. I suppose it could have been worse." He relayed this to her.

"If he had more time, I'm sure it would have been," she agreed. "Come, let us get out of here."

So Lysanias opened a door for them, and Gwilder opened another door for them, back to the park. He-Man seemed a bit miffed, not really saying goodbye, like the group had killed his best friend or something. The others gave a halfhearted thank you and said there was a lot of work to do, and rushed off. He came through as well, so he could send the five though, and once Lysanias had his energy back he went back to the jail. All of them were laying around, though Gwilder couldn't see them. He undid the wards when he was sure no one was going to pass through there, and Gwilder opened a door inside the cell to take them to the throne room. They would do anything Bo said, so there was no trouble there. He then opened a door back to Eternia on his side of the bars.

"You might want to think about destroying that," Lysanias said as it opened. "Not only because of the trouble it caused, but if someone got hold of it and then was smart about it? Went to other worlds and collected technology you hadn't seen, instead of immediately making a move to conquer the whole planet? They really could become unstoppable."

"I'll think about it," he promised. "Thanks again for the help. Good journey."

"Of course. Good journey." *I guess they say that and not goodbye?*

He went through and the door closed.

"All right there, Bo?" he called to her.

"I feel fine," she replied, stretching. Of course she still had no clothes on. "Better than I have in a long time. Use my cell like that any time!"

"Sure thing. See you later." *Honestly, what a strange day this has been.* And he too was gone.

*In Paragon terms he used Spirit Manipulation actively for his first action allowing him to spend 36 energy. He threw that all into STRength and with the bonuses from his equipment his highest possible roll was a 130, minimum 20, and he rolled a 64. As rolling a 30 is considered doing the impossible, and you've seen what benders can do I assume, so yeah, he wrecks the place up.

Chapter 28
Intermission
When: The Next Day
Where: Bo's house

The day was clear and sunny as Lysanias sat in the living room of Bo's house the next day. He was surrounded by dark pieces of armor and several boxes, and looked over to see Kenzie coming towards him from her room. She had a robe wrapped around her and was drying her hair.

"Hey!" she said.

"Good morning."

"Lysanias, did we, uh, do something yesterday?"

"No, we did not. It was a very boring day where nothing happening."

"That's a relief. Because I had this dream about a guy with a bony face, and this really muscular guy, and almost having to fight off a hundred fully trained and armored soldiers."

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"Whew, glad to hear you say that. If we had done something like that... But we didn't so there's no problem. Whatcha doing?"

"Just dealing with these sets of armor I found at random somewhere, totally by accident. I'm sorting them out and putting each set into a separate box which I will place into a contain ward. Then if I need to get them out I easily can."

"That's pretty smart." She walked over to a box and picked up a piece of the armor, tapping it with a fingernail. "What is this stuff made of, anyway?"

He shrugged. "I don't have a name for it. It's not exactly metal, but it's fairly light and tough to damage. They must be able to make tons of it, given it's a full suit of armor, but I don't think this reality has anything like it. I've analyzed it so I can work with it though."

"That's cool. That means you could reshape it, right?"

"Sure."

"Could you reshape one of these sets... for me?"

"Certainly! In fact, I should have thought of that. Are you sure though, it might impact your ability to chi-block, they didn't wear armor. That style is all about speed."

"But they didn't have guns to worry about, right?"

"That's true enough. If the benders had just been able to shoot them... well, chi-blocking wouldn't exist because the chi-blockers would have just used guns instead."

"And honestly, I haven't been that effective in combat, I'm supposed to leave that to my spirit and essentially go hide someplace while it does everything. I mean I have no active combat powers if I don't have a spirit already going! And that takes way too long if something surprises me."

"How long do you think putting on armor takes? If you've got time for that, you've got time for the other. If you're caught unaware, fusing with your spirit would benefit you far more than me."

"I'm working on it, believe me. Until then, the next combat we get into I want to be as protected as possible. Even if I am just hiding someplace nearby."

"You don't have to justify it to me. Go put on a sweatshirt and sweatpants, I guess, something fairly tight but thick, and we'll get this fitted on you."

"You got it, I know just the thing!"

So the pair spent some time molding the armor to her smaller body, which meant making it a bit thicker, and Lysanias stood there looking her over. "There's two things we can do here," he told her. "The first, just leave it like this, meaning it looks fairly plain but might protect a little better. It's bulkier, so again your range of movement will be impacted. The second is I take the extra material, and turn it into a metal design using the same metal as my shield. That will provide a little better protection because the metal is very tough, and look better. This will 'use up' so to speak the extra material because it'll be denser, and thin the armor to the original thickness."

"Let's do that one!"

“What sort of pattern do you want?”

She settled on a deer standing in front of a tree for the chest, then leaves down the arms and legs. The shiny silver overlaying the shiny black material of the armor looked really good, and she felt quite pleased as she looked herself over in the mirror.

“How’s the fit? Do you need it adjusted?”

She did a few quick kicks and punches, twisting and dodging. “It seems great. Thanks a lot!”

“Sure thing, I’m happy this stuff is getting put to use.”

“Looking good, Kenzie,” Ericka told her. She had of course been there the whole time. “My turn!”

“You want a set? I do have four of these, and I already have a good set of armor. I could modify it for Mavis and Jonathan too. In fact I really should! It should go easier too, now that I know what I’m doing, but I’ll have to recharge.” *Plus they aren’t as small, so it should fit better right from the start.*

“Actually, I was thinking we could get those guns we picked up to my grandfather. We can do the armor after that.”

Lysanias nodded thoughtfully. “I could use my alchemy skills to help identify the various bits of one, see what makes it tick. Is it superior to your lightning gun?”

“Believe me, this thing is what my lightning gun wants to be when it grows up.”

He laughed. “Okay. We’ll head to the bar, check in with Trick which I haven’t done in a few days, and we can head to the boat from there.”

Kenzie went to take the armor off, while Lysanias went outside to recharge himself, and then teleported Ericka and himself to the see Trick.

At the bar Trick greeted them and handed over a list.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“A list of people around here willing to fight Jason. Look it over, see if any of their powers might be useful.”

“Do I need to look it over? Any power could be useful against a guy who can manipulate reality like a dream. I mean you actually fought the man, you would know better than I. I’ll take any and all fighters I can get. Given the number of beings we fought the last time, with him actually free I’m guessing it’s going to be a lot worse.” *After all, if he can empower that many creature like constructs still imprisoned what can he do totally unbounded? Unless that was a special case, and I pray to the Allfather it was, but we can’t count on that.*

“I suppose.” He took the list back and scowled at it.

“By the way I should check in with Dyson and Tamsin, see how they’re doing. Have you seen them? I don’t mean to ignore them, it’s just been fairly busy.”

“They still have their regular jobs anyway. Ugh, I don’t know about this list. I mean some fae like the fire fae or the Raiju have active powers, but most really don’t. Fae powers are geared to feeding off humans, not outright attack. And we certainly don’t train to be warriors. I doubt guns are going to be any more useful than arrows were before.”

“Remember, I’m the one fighting Jason. Anyone coming to this fight should be prepared for whatever forces he brings with him, like the creatures the kids imagined. Or whatever the shadow avatar does, because that guy must be around somewhere too. The two will probably fight together, after all.”

He brightened. “So maybe guns will work out? I’ll let them know. They’re on standby so they should be able to get here quickly once he appears. Many actually came into town for this fight, so they’re at nearby hotels just waiting. Uh, how are we getting there, anyway? Jason could appear anywhere.”

“Once he appears I’ll set out a circle I’ve prepared someplace nearby and then come here. With the monsters coming through from the other circle, this is the best place. Send your most experienced fighters through first, they’ll be protecting the circle as it’s a pretty narrow point to come through. They can just run through it, so I hope it won’t be too bad. You can coordinate that, keep monsters and fae flowing through it.”

“It’s all we’ve got, so it’ll have to do. I can do that much at least.”

"If he doesn't show up in the next week, I hope to have more circles made. Don't count on it though. Oh, and thanks for spreading the word, sorry to have made you do a lot of the work. Having to jump all over and take care of one crisis after another means I'm stretched pretty thin."

"It's fine. I'm happy to have a rematch with that guy if it means we actually have a chance this time. The notes you left were very detailed, those getting the hang of the special skills are helping others, rather than just sitting around drinking like they normally do. It's actually been fairly interesting, watching light and dark fae get along by having abilities in common. The threat of Jason coming back has motivated them, many of the older fae like myself are telling the younger ones what they went through."

"Right, another thing on the list I should have been doing. Tonight I'll try to get back here, see how people are doing and..." He smacked his head. "I can implant the skills in people, like I did with Kenzie and calling spirits. Actually..." He grinned down at the man. "How about I just give you my skill in everything and *you* can help critique everyone?"

"I guess I don't mind, is there any special ceremony or objects you need?"

He laughed. "I don't work like that. Here, sit down, it shouldn't take long." He put a hand to Trick's head after he sat and concentrated on being in his mind. He felt even with the sword he almost didn't make it, the weight of Trick's experiences having lived for so long and his strong will made his mental defenses rather strong. But once inside he transferred his memories of sensing energy, seeing auras, and the rest. Both men blinked as they came out of it.

"Oh," Trick said. "I see. That would appear to be that."

"You'll have to still put some work into widening your energy pathways before you can spend more of your energy at once, or use the stepping technique. But you should know *how* to do that now."

"I do seem to. Thank you. I'll pass all of this along. You should still come, inspire the troops and whatnot. Plus two teachers is better than one."

"I'll try. I still have lots to do before the big battle."

"I'm sure. You know where the circle is, I won't keep you."

"See you later."

Ericka followed him down and through the circle onto the Legacy, and the two went to find her grandfather. She told him all about the adventures she had been in so far, and showed him the weapons they had recovered.

"Plus all these odd gizmos the soldiers had," she told him. "I didn't want to touch anything in case it was an explosive device, but we know the guns are guns. Hopefully they have some kind of battery we can take out, like mine do, making them safe to study."

"If they fire the kind of beam you say their battery technology must be even better than mine," Abraham told them, looking the pistol over. "But you say you can help figure that out?"

"I can try. Just tell me what you want done and what you need to know about. I'm not great at..." He sighed. "I'm actually super great at telling what materials are. *Let my skill be augmented!*" And I can practice the dragonfly chant a bunch, making myself even better.

With his skill augmented they spent the rest of the morning taking one of the guns apart and seeing what made it work. He could touch all the pieces and tell what material they were, if not exactly how they were made.

"Still, knowing the material and how the molecules of it is structured is a good first step," Abraham told him. "You're doing great, with your ability to work with metal directly or shift things around without harming the material, it's going much better than I would have thought."

Before they left Abraham showed him something he had been keeping an eye on.

"There's a bunch of woman running around New York City claiming to have seen ghosts. Now there's a lot of that of course, but these videos look a little different than the normal fakes. And they're getting a bit more attention for some reason. Maybe because they're a group of woman? I don't know. Just wanted to make sure I told you, and that I'm keeping an eye on it. No stranger than usual activity anywhere else."

“New York City, huh? Is that far?”

He shook his head. “From where you’re staying in Toronto? No, hardly any distance at all.”

“Interesting. Okay, thanks for letting me know. Keep me appraised.”

“Of course. Thanks for the toys, I’m sure I can do something with them, even without their manufacturing methods, just looking at *how* the energy is being channeled and whatnot.”

“You’re the expert.” *I wonder if I couldn’t take his skill at this? But I’m not building stuff like this... because I don’t know how to build stuff like this. Right. That’s like saying I’ve never fabricated something... because I’m not an artificer. I don’t need fancy machines to churn out exact parts, I can use my powers. Something to think about, I guess. I’m going to run into both technology and magic on this journey, should I ignore the technology aspect if I have a master I can draw skill from? I can’t absorb it with my eyes but that won’t be a problem now that I can go into people’s minds. I may very well need to know how to disarm a bomb or shut down a security system in an area with no powers. That stupid crystal Skeletor was using proved that. When the crisis is over, I’ll ask him. I don’t need the distraction at the moment.*

Having said goodbye to Abraham the pair went back to Kenzie’s place and he fitted her with a set of armor. As she was far taller than Kenzie he actually had to thin the material a little bit, but as neither girl wanted the goofy looking helmet he was able to break one down to provide the needed mass. Naturally Ericka wanted a metallic design on hers as well, something more abstract and mainly serving to increase the integrity of the armor. The great part about living in a big city is there’s always garbage all over the place, so he had plenty of raw material to work with, and simply overlaid scrap metal atop the armor and reshaped it while changing the metal itself to be his shield material.

She was quite happy with the result, as were Jonathan and Mavis once they were up and around, and the group went to the bar as Lysanias had promised. They were in armor because honestly the girls looked really good in it and they were all not above showing off. (Plus Lysanias said they should get used to wearing it, and wearing it for a few hours would show where it might pinch or not fit quite right so he could adjust it. After he left there wouldn’t be many ways to do that, so he said to get it done now.)

The place was abuzz with activity, those who were just there to drink rather scornfully shoved off to one side, while those actually interested in *saving the freaking world* practiced. Lysanias had the bright idea of energizing the circle and inviting anyone at the hotel to come and join them, and several fae stepped through to have a look around that side. (Some just went to check out the bar Dracula had, as it was quieter over there) There was a bit of uneasiness around the monsters, (and vice versa) but everyone knew why they were there. Gradually they began to relax and discuss how best to work together. Dracula and Vlad came through, causing a bit of a stir, but Mavis ran over to hug them both and started introducing them around so they didn’t freak out too much. Everyone seemed to adore her, making Lysanias wonder if that was a vampire thing, or just her being really cute and enthusiastic about everything. Trick, of course, knew both of them at least by reputation, and he and Vlad sat talking about “the good old days” in the ways only beings more than a thousand years old can.

Lysanias got to talking with an attractive, dark skinned “fire fae” woman who it turned out was basically a fire bender. He showed her how incorporating bending into martial arts worked, and the two “talked shop” for a bit. After that he answered what questions he could about the energy techniques, what else they should do to prepare, and Dracula told them about the monsters he had standing by to assist them. By that time it was fairly late and the humans went to get some sleep. He left the other half of the “Jason circle” there so she could get back on her own, and put the paired circle in Kenzie’s apartment in an out of the way spot.

In the dream, Lysanias was standing some distance from an impressive city skyline, and there was a man next to him. He couldn’t quite make out the man, but for some reason that was fine, he wasn’t important.

“It’s an impressive accomplishment, isn’t it?” asked the man.

"I actually can't get over it. Mining that much metal out of the ground, transporting it, purifying it, using it to build buildings like that. Plus the sand for the glass, plastics, the road material..."

"And this is only the part you can see," he reminded Lysanias. "What about all the support like wires to carry electricity, pipes for water, pipes for gas, the sewer system, the list goes on."

"It must have taken them years."

"Oh, most certainly."

"What's that? Some sort of green light is coming from that building over there!"

"Eh, never mind that. Check out this puppy, isn't he just the cutest?"

"What pup- Oh my gosh!" He looked over, and there was the cutest puppy Lysanias had ever seen. Cute little tail wagging, one ear up, with a ball ready to throw in his mouth. As soon as Lysanias looked at it, the puppy started running around his legs excitedly.

"And this kitten, she's so soft, you want to hold her?"

"Kitten? Oh my gosh! What a cute little kitten!" He took the kitten. The soft fur and tiny purr of the pure white kitten entranced him, and he laughed as the rough, tiny tongue licked his hand.

Meanwhile, in the distance, a black cloud shot out of the building and started growing above the building, and it looked like windows were shattering as flying figures sped into the city.

"And what about this?" The man held something up.

"Is that a tiny hedgehog in a top hat, wearing a little monocle while it sits in a miniature shopping trolley?"

"It sure is! And here's a family of cute chicks!" From behind the man a hen and several baby chicks clustered around him, the puppy bounding over them in excitement. Their peeping was adorable and they stared, adoringly, up at him.

Meanwhile the dark cloud had spread and a giant figure had burst from the building, leaving a hole that nightmarish figures were now rising from. The tiny people that could be seen were in a total panic, as sirens blared and shots, totally ineffective of course, were heard. Lysanias was focused on the family of penguins that had showed up, which were currently doing a dance for his enjoyment.

Jason smiled. "Dreams are mine," he whispered, and drew Lysanias towards the acrobatic pigs performing some distance away. He gave one last look over his shoulder as the city started being overrun, smirked, and looked back at the pigs. "Look at them go!"

Chapter 29

Incongruity

When: Several days later

Where: Kenzie's house

With Lysanias distracted he didn't rush to NYC and investigate ghosts in the early stages, but instead finished up his projects around Kenzie's house. He made another circle so twice as many troops could be moved at once, made final modifications to the armor, and helped Abraham construct some laser pistols for Ericka. He had figured out how to recharge the larger rifles and Lysanias had handed them out at the bar, explaining they were advanced weaponry, designed for hitting tiny targets.

"So anyone that wants to participate but not be on the front lines, bring these along and snipe from the rear. They're good for dozens of shots, and we've cobbled together some batteries for them, so you should be covered."

"And this was done by Abraham Van Helsing?" Trick had asked, not believing his ears.

"The battery part was. The rifles themselves he's working on duplicating, he already has a lightning rifle he used for many years, this is basically an upgrade to that. I don't know if any will be ready in time."

"So where did these come from?"

He stared hard at the man. "We don't ask that question."

"Oh! Sorry."

He brightened again. "No problem. Get someone familiar with them, don't shoot anything you don't want to be blown up or on fire."

The next day when he went to see Abraham the man was watching a video apparently uploaded only moments before, showing four woman fighting a demonic looking winged creature in a concert hall.

"Er, you might want to look into that," he suggested, pointing to it.

"Yeah, I might want to do that!" he agreed.

"Look at those weapons they're using, I have to talk to whoever designed them right away! They might be even smarter than I am. Think of what we could build together! Er, for the good of mankind, I mean."

"I'll see what I can do. Sorry to cut it short today."

"Not a problem. Go, go on!"

Lysanias went back through the circle and then teleported back to get the others. Mavis was up and around, having been trying to adjust her sleep cycle to be more in line with the others over the past few days. She changed into her bat form, got in Jonathan's pocket, and everyone *shifted* to near where that event took place. (The hubPad having found a weather camera it could access that showed a currently empty street)

"Now which way?" Kenzie asked, looking around. "New York City. Ha!" She laughed. "Take that, Trump border wall, we can teleport."

"Er, isn't that at the other end of the country?" Johnathan asked her.

"Oh, maybe. Who knows? I'm really in New York, I wish I could go shopping."

"Can't you use a spirit and teleport yourself?" Lysanias asked her.

She snapped her fingers. "I bet I could. Have to get used to that."

"As for which way to go from here, I'll have to ask."

"Or maybe you won't," Jonathan countered, looking at the back of a bus stop windbreaker. "Look, an ad for the Conductors of the Metaphysical Examination."

"That must be them," Kenzie agreed. "But it's just a phone number."

Lysanias' watch buzzed, and he looked down at it. "Enter #" was displayed on the dial. He brought it up to his mouth and said the number into it. A moment later it dinged and showed an arrow. "Let's go."

The place wasn't far, and the group seemed to be standing in front of "Zhu's Authentic Hong Kong Food." The arrow pointed right at it.

"Er, go in and see if this is the place," Lysanias told Kenzie.

"Why can't you do it?"

"I have to stay out here and watch... er... the perimeter. Right. Very important I stay... out here. To make sure nothing sneaks up on us."

"Right," she drawled, sidling away from him. She went inside and a man in purple glasses, a diamond pattern tie, and beige hat walked by them towards the back. He gave them a curious look and shrugged, continuing on.

A moment later she emerged and everyone, including her, said "back" at the same time, and she threw her hands up. "If you knew that!"

"We didn't until just now."

The group headed to the back around the garage with "no parking anytime" spray painted on the front and through a door. Then up some stairs where Lysanias heard some people arguing.

"Until we decide how to best keep the entity that's not gonna happen," said a woman's voice.

"How's that for my timing? You've caught a ghost, I can't see it?" said a man's.

"Make you a trade," Ericka called out, having reached the top of the stairs. Four woman and a man were staring at a man seated before them, the same man that had walked past them a moment ago. "A ghost for a vampire. Her name's Mavis. Would that do?"

"That would certainly be acceptable," the man said. "Are you the vampire?"

"No, I'm Ericka," she replied with a laugh. "Mavis is out of the sun. Come on out, it's not sunny in here."

A tiny bat head poked out of Jonathan's shirt pocket. "But what about rule number one?" she whispered.

"You mean don't hang around a crime scene?" Kenzie whispered back.

"Never tell humans I'm a vampire. Wait, that was rule number two, wasn't it?"

"I don't know!"

"Right, rule number one was transform elsewhere and walk into the room." She looked over at Lysanias. "See, I listened!"

"It's okay in this case, Mavis," he told her. "These people have obviously accepted the idea of the supernatural. They were arguing about a ghost, after all." *Which it can't be, because humans can't see ghosts! At least, not the ones like Olen-Baba and my mountain spirit, that are purely supernatural.*

"I guess it's a case by case basis. Okay, I'm coming out." She jumped out of the pocket and resumed her normal form.

"Whoa!" was the general sentiment, but hat guy didn't seem convinced.

"And where did you come from, young lady?" he asked.

"I'm Mavis, the vampire," she told him. "I was a bat, I need to be protected from the sun because I don't think I would like burning to death."

"And can you turn back into a bat?"

"Sure!" She did, flying over to him and landing on his leg. "Hi."

"Now that... is quite difficult to debunk," he admitted.

"See!" said the lady with the glasses. "Wait, what? Who are you people?"

"Never mind that," said the man, waving them off. "Do you have other forms?"

She shook her head. "Never practiced any. Dad said vampires all at least train to change into a bat. He can change into a mouse, a bat, a wolf, a snake... I think that's it."

"Who's your father?"

"Dracula."

"You're a Dracula?"

"Yup! Everyone freaks out at first. Nice to meet you."

"Can you change back? This is hurting my neck."

"Sure." She winged into the air and resumed her normal form. "I like your pin." She pointed, and he was wearing a spider web on his lapel.

"Thanks. Apart from turning into a bat, which I admit is impressive, is there anything else you can do to prove you're a vampire?"

"Apart from sucking your... blood?" asked the dark skinned woman. "Bla ba blah!"

"Yes, I mean apart from that."

"My dad doesn't actually say that, you know. But we do love to tease him about it."

Wait, if she never left the hotel, and her father doesn't say that, how could she tease him about it?

She looked around the room, then back to him. She walked around his chair and bent over, then hefted it and him into the air with one hand.

"Dang!" said the skinny one with the yellow glasses. "You've got some competition there, Kevin."

"I could do that easily," he told them.

"Sure you could," Mavis told him, lowering the man. "Convinced yet?" She flashed a grin, showing her fangs.

"And the fangs as well? I nearly am. Anything else?"

"Oh come on," said the one with normal glasses. "What is it going to take with you? Honestly, there's a... vampire... in our lab." She looked to the others. "Never thought I would say that one." They nodded back. "Accept it!"

"I'd love to, but any of that could be staged."

"Fine," she sighed. "Honestly, I should drink your blood, after this. But I should have enough power if it's not for too long." She walked to the back wall where there was a sunbeam shining, and stuck her arm into it. She winced as her flesh started to burn. He leaned forward, eyes wide. She left it there maybe ten seconds or so and then pulled it back. Showing it to him her skin was red and burned, but slowly returned to normal. "I need real blood to do that, not the fake stuff," she explained. "But I've had some recently, bitter as it was, so it's fine."

"Explain that!" the skinny one said.

"Complete cellular regeneration," said the one who hadn't spoken yet. She took Mavis' arm and looked it over. "And at that speed! If we could replicate that for ourselves..."

"It seems I must, for the moment, admit this woman seems to be a vampire. Odd timing, her showing up to distract me from you showing me the ghost though."

"We've never seen them before," said the one holding Mavis, who let her go. "Who are you, why are you here? Is a vampire having trouble with a ghost?"

"We did, a little while ago," Mavis told them. "The ghost of my mother, who had been killed by humans a hundred and eighteen years ago, wanted to make sure I was safe and didn't leave for Heaven. Lysanias here," she pointed to him, "caught her, healed her corrupted soul, and got her away from some campers. Back at our castle she realized I was safe and moved on."

"Wait, you mean there are other people building tech like ours?" the yellow glasses lady said. "Can I see it? What did you use for the capture process?"

Lysanias shook his head, holding a hand up to stop her. "I don't need equipment. I can just do it."

"You can just- what?" said the one with normal glasses. "Seriously, who are you people?"

"I'm Lysanias, like Mavis said. This is Kenzie, a shaman, and this is Jonathan, he's still human. This is Ericka, she was training to be a monster hunter but discovered they're not what her grandfather told her, so she's not sure of her place in the world yet. She's been hanging out with us until the Jason crisis is over."

"Oh. Well, I'm Abbey, this is Erin." She pointed to the lady with shoulder length brown hair. "This is Jillian," she pointed to the thin one with yellow glasses and unruly blond hair. "This is Patty," she pointed to the dark skinned lady with the "patty" necklace and large earrings. "And Kevin."

"Why am I picturing you with a hammer in your hand?" Kenzie asked him.

"I'm not very handy," he admitted. "Never really held a hammer in my life, actually. Maybe a plastic one for pretend as a kid. I mean everybody had one of those, right?" He mimed hammering.

"I guess."

"I'm doctor Martin Heiss," the man introduced himself. "Did you say shaman?"

"That's right, I was empowered. That's not important though."

"A real shaman? Like dancing around?"

"...There is a ritual dance, yes. Look, let's see the ghost already!"

"Is that why you're here?" asked Abbey. "The ghost?"

"Indirectly," he explained. "It seems you've been busy, you've encountered several recently?"

"Three, actually. One at the Aldrich mansion, that one got away but there wasn't anything we could have done. Then in the subway, that one got stuck in the car and zoomed away. And then this one." She poked the container that was sitting next to her.

"I see. I'm worried it's part of a larger pattern, something worse yet to come. Plus the video I watched didn't suggest a ghost, but something else. We need to know what we're facing here."

The woman shared a look. "We've found devices at the sites, at least the last two," she admitted. She walked over to the table and showed them the various remains of some sort of device. "We do think someone is stirring them up for some reason."

"It can't be Jason," Ericka protested. "He wouldn't need devices!"

"I'm inclined to agree, but we know he's close to breaking out. It's too much of a coincidence. Is it really a ghost you've caught? I wonder."

"Who is Jason!?" Patty demanded.

"Oh boy, that's a long story. Look, you want to see the ghost, right?" he asked the doctor.

"I do."

"Then you'll get to. The alley behind this place is large enough. I can set up a circle to contain whatever is in there. Someone give them the rundown while I work. Jonathan, want to come hold the pad for me?"

"Sure, make myself useful."

The two men headed downstairs and Lysanias got the pad and his stele out. It projected a circle of entrapment, which he started tracing. *Would really like it if there were some ley lines around here. Not much plant life in these parts though.* He spent some extra time making sure it was right, giving them a chance to talk, and he looked up into the building. *You can come down any time, he sent to Mavis. I've used darkness bending to darken this area, it's safe for you.* He did that, dimming the sunlight that was streaming down by projecting a haze of darkness at the top of the alley.

A moment later they all crowded around the circle, and Jillian set the device on the inside. With that he energized it, giving it extra juice. He noticed the woman all had strange backpacks on their backs, and were carrying some kind of firearm like device attached to it.

Ah, the weapons they were using. Smart. "Something is in there," he told them. "I don't feel any energy but I do feel rage coming from it. Unless one of you is really angry about something and I'm just picking that up?" The all shook their heads. "Go ahead," he told them, and Jillian hit a petal which opened the device. A second later a large green form sprang out of the thing, and lunged for the person nearest them. It bounced off the air, which shimmered, outlining the circle around them and becoming transparent again. It lunged again and again, but the circle held.

"That's a ghost?" breathed the doctor.

"I'm more interested in how you're containing it," Jillian admitted, looking the circle over.

"No, that's not a ghost," Lysanias told them. "I don't know what that is."

"How can it not be a ghost?" Abbey asked. "Look at it!"

"I am looking. It's more like a demon, but it's somewhat transparent." He got out his hubPad. "It's not a demon spirit, I can see it has a face. It's not a poltergeist, they're still ghosts just angrier. Not a wraith, they're cloaked in robes. I don't know, if it wasn't all shimmery like that I would have said it was a straight up demon."

"Why can't it just be an oddly shaped ghost?" Jillian asked. "Our equipment worked on it, just as if it was."

“Because the word ghost has a specific meaning, and a specific way to deal with them. This just looks like a mindless creature, I mean look at it. It’s not thinking about how to get out, or trying to bargain, it’s just trying to smash its way out. A ghost wants to accomplish something.” *Plus you couldn’t see it if it was a real ghost.*

“How do you know this?” asked Patty.

He took a deep breath. “Look, I’ll give you the whole story later. For now, let me demonstrate. Kevin, right?” He looked to the man who was hanging back.

“Yeah?”

“You want to help me demonstrate?”

“I don’t mind.” He walked over. “What do I do?”

“Just stand right here.” Lysanias put his hand on the man’s chest. “Not to worry, this won’t hurt a bit.”

“Hurt?”

Lysanias *yanked* and came away with a shiny soul, grabbing Kevin’s now comatose body with his other hand. The woman freaked out, especially Erin who was yelling about Kevin being killed.

“He’s not dead,” Lysanias told her. “Do you really think I would just kill somebody right in front of you? I’m demonstrating, like I- huh.” The creature had stopped trying to get out and was staring at the soul. “You want this?” He moved it a little closer and the thing reached for it, still impacting the power of the circle. “Very strange.” He moved it back, and the creature watched it warily. “Anyway, *this*,” he held it up a little, “is a human soul. When the body can’t sustain life anymore an angel of death comes to collect it. It’s taken this form because I’ve pulled it out, but if it left normally it would look like he thinks he looks like. The angel of death would then guide the soul to the afterlife. However, if the spirit refuses to move on, somehow resisting the angel, they become a ghost. Why would a spirit not move on? They want to finish something here, but of course it has to be an overwhelming desire to resist the lure of Heaven. Or they’re afraid they’re going to Hell, and they think staying here is better. That kind can become wraiths or demon spirits. A demon spirit is a ghost that has begun turning into a demon, while a wraith is a ghost that hates the living and wants to feed off their energy. But you see they’re still human souls. They still see themselves as human, and take a human shape. Not this odd creature with claws, fangs, and wings. This is something else.” He let the soul go and Kevin’s eyes snapped open again. The creature shook its head and started trying to get out again.

“So what do you want me to do?” he asked.

“All done, thanks.”

“Oh. Easier than I thought.” He looked the group over. “What? Did I miss something?”

“So what does this all mean?” asked Martin.

“It means I don’t know how to deal with it. Is it a soul that’s been modified? A ‘mod soul’ if you will, to be more animalistic? Driven mad by torture and so it’s just a victim? Is it a construct made to cause trouble? A creature from another reality? A demon that happens to look like this? I don’t know!”

“What’s the difference?” asked Abbey.

“If it was a ghost we could help it accomplish the goal that keeps it here and it could move on naturally. If a wraith, demon or demon spirit bound for Hell anyway I could banish it, sending it there. If a construct we could just destroy it. A creature from another reality that’s just scared and lashing out we could send home. Though it should understand me and try to communicate in that case, unless it’s just an animal and not an intelligent being. Still. Getting it wrong means, essentially, murdering a potential soul. Think about that.”

“Much worse than killing the body of someone,” Martin agreed. “Because the soul should be immortal.”

“Agreed. It should choose to be in Heaven, or reincarnate as it wishes, or serve time being punished as decreed by the God that set the rules for this place. Our place is not to judge it.”

“For we are truly not wise enough for the task,” Abbey said softly. “I never really considered that.” She held her device up. “We were all gun-ho about catching a ghost, studying it, but like he said, a true ghost is a person. They have rights too. We can’t just lock

them up, we have to help them.” She put that part back on her back. “So what do we do with this guy?”

“How about you put it away and come with us?” said a new voice.

Chapter 30

Mayor

When: No time has passed

Where: Outside the restaurant

The group turned to see who spoke, and standing there were two men in business suits. One with light skin, one with dark. They both had mustaches, though the white guy was far more bald. They both flashed badges.

That's what I need! A badge! Maybe once I'm allowed in the hub I'll get one? Official wandrer, world saver and light bringer.

"We're just getting all sorts of visitors today," Abbey said. "Catching this, I hesitate to say ghost, has brought all the boys to our yard."

"Funny how we were quacks until we get a single piece of evidence everything we've said is true," Erin agreed, "and then *suddenly* everyone takes us seriously."

"It is funny how that worked out, isn't it?" Abbey agreed sarcastically. "Don't you think that's funny?"

"The same thing happened to every scientist in history, people don't learn," Jillian reminded them. "You think people wanted to accept that gravity existed?"

"Oh, or that the Earth goes around the sun!" added Patty.

"Or that human sacrifice doesn't actually increase crop yields," Erin agreed.

"Or that vaccines don't lead to autism," Kevin agreed.

"No!" Abbey started smacking him on the arm. "Bad Kevin. There is no link between vaccines and autism. You are a moron, and if you say that again you are fired! Fired do you hear me!"

"You can't fire him," Erin told her. "We hired him together and we have to fire him together."

"I didn't hire him," Patty explained. "My twelve year old niece would do a better job than him, he's gone as far as I'm concerned."

"Ladies, please, focus. Put that away and come with us," said the darker man.

"And where exactly are you taking them?" Ericka asked, putting a hand on her pistol.

"Say, you have a permit for that?" asked the other guy.

She glanced over at her friends. "He wants to know if I have a permit for the laser gun I took off a lizard man from another dimension. Thereby saving the Earth from further invasion by an army using vastly superior technology to ours. That's cute."

"Answer the question," Kenzie said, Olen-Baba appearing next to her. "What do you want with them?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but the mayor wants to talk to them," said the dark one. "We have a car waiting."

"We should show the mayor this," Abbey mused. "Would you mind doing the circle again?"

"Not at all," Lysanias told them.

"Let's see if we can trap it again without firing at it. Jillian?"

"It should be within the capture radius." She pushed the pedal and the trap opened a second time, sucking the struggling creature down and making it vanish. She closed it up. "Done."

"We'll lock up and follow you, unless you've got space for all of us?"

"We were just sent to bring you in," said the white guy.

"Tough. That was because you didn't know what we know now. These people are coming with us, the situation is more complex than we realized. The mayor should be told."

"Told what, exactly?"

Everyone looked to Lysanias. "Told that if Jason has chosen this area as his battleground, in days this city could be rubble. We need to prepare."

"Who?" both asked.

"I am happy to tell the mayor." *We had those back home, I wonder if their function is the same?* "But I'm not going to repeat myself. I need to tell them the full story anyway, I might as well only tell it once."

The two agents stepped back a bit and had a hushed conversation, not looking very happy at this turn of events. The woman reluctantly sent Kevin up alone to watch the lab, with orders not to touch anything or use the stove.

"You touch my stuff, most of it will kill you," Jillian warned him. "And it'll hurt the entire time you're dying. Fair warning."

"I got it, I got it, don't touch anything. I'm not stupid you know."

Abbey looked a little like she wanted to disagree but just turned away. The Doctor Debunker was told to stop by later if he still wanted to talk, and the group headed for the front of the place.

"We only have room for four," the agents told them. "You'll have to follow us."

"Then it's off to the mayor's office!" Patty said. "Woo hoo, moving up in the world!"

Lysanias rode with the four women in their ghost catching vehicle, while his companions got into the black SUVs belonging to the agents. They didn't have too far to go, and the women discussed various possibilities of what the thing they had caught actually was.

"For all I know it's something someone dreamed up and Jason brought it to life. Like I said, I'll tell you the whole story in a bit."

They walked into the mayor's office, and it turned out he was a man in his 50s or so with a yellow tie, nice suit, slicked back hair, and by his side stood a woman in a nice suit as well. She had her hair pulled back into a bun, wore a necklace and bracelet, and radiated surprise as the group entered.

"Who are all these people?" she asked.

"Beats me," said the black one. "But they say they have important information the mayor needs to hear."

"We should get set up to contain the entity," Abbey said, taking charge. She had carried the canister into the office and hefted it. "Then we can show you what-"

"Whoa, wait just a second there!" commanded the mayor. "You want to do what now? In my office?"

"Show you what we caught," Jillian told. "It's gonna blow your mind. Bachu!" She made an explosion sound and gestured in what must be culturally appropriate for someone's mind being blown. *Have to remember that one.*

"No need for that, I saw the footage," he told them. "You can just have a seat, Jennifer can you get some more chairs for these people?"

"You don't want to see the proof that- I hesitate to say ghosts- something paranormal exists?" Erin asked, not believing what she was hearing.

"We're not unaware," the mayor insisted.

"Indeed, agents Hawkins and Rokre are with homeland security," said Jennifer. "It means more than just terrorists, you know."

"You already know about ghosts?" Patty asked.

"Ghosts, fae, under fae, monsters, the whole bit," he agreed. "We keep people safe by keeping them ignorant."

"Dang, that's cold, man. These ladies have worked their whole lives trying to prove what you say you already know? What you gotta say stuff like that for?"

"No wait, go back," Mavis said, looking angry. "You keep people *safe* by keeping them *ignorant*? Is *that* what you said?"

"That's right, what you you prefer?"

"I don't believe this," she admitted, throwing up her hands. "Here I was thinking my father was the only one *stupid* enough to come up with that sort of logic, but here it is again! How many times am I going to run into this attitude?"

"So now that we've put our cards on the table, it's your turn. What do you think you can possibly tell us that we don't already know?"

"How about this guy being from a parallel reality and here to save our world from a dark over-God from beyond our three dimensional space that wants us all dead?" Kenzie asked, putting an arm around Lysanias' shoulder.

The mayor frowned. "That's a new one. Why don't you have a seat and you can tell me about it?"

Lysanias didn't bother to sit, pacing the small office and telling everyone there the minimal version of who he was, why he was here, and what they were about to fight. The mayor seemed to be only half listening, basically shrugging off the threat when he got to the end. "You think this Jason person is going to show up here?"

"I would have to ask. He could break free anywhere. But if there's something here he can use, these spectral creatures for example, he will. He's proven he's not above it. He serves a dark master I'm sure doesn't take well to failure. So he'll use any and all means and powers he can to hand this reality over, free of life."

"I don't think we have to worry," the mayor told him. "We have professionals here, and tens of thousands of police officers that can handle any crisis." He gestured to the two agents.

"I won't refuse the help," Lysanias told them. "I suggest I try to get more information to see if this really is the site, then we can evacuate it before the event."

"Evacuate? We're not going to evacuate anyone," he scoffed.

"For all I know Jason can kill thousands at a glance! You have to prepare this city for an attack!"

"And tell people what? That some man who exists in a dream is coming to kill them?"

"I don't care what you tell them!"

"Tell them a terrorist has a nuclear bomb," Kenzie suggested. "Or that there's new evidence of an earthquake building in this area."

He shook his head. "We can handle anything Jason can do, believe me."

"With people like them?" Lysanias asked, looking over at the two agents.

"Exactly. Why don't you just let them do their jobs, and stay quiet about the whole thing? Agreed? Great, Jennifer can show you to the door."

The group protested but Lysanias held up a hand. "I think a small demonstration is in order. You gentlemen, you're armed are you not?" Both nodded. "Guns?" More nods.

"Excellent. Can you hand me your gun?"

"Sure, I can do that," said the one man, getting a gun from under his jacket and handing it over.

"Why did you do that?" the other man demanded.

"Because I told him to. As for you, can you point your gun at the mayor?"

"What? No!"

"Really?" *I do need to practice this more.* "You *will* point your gun at the mayor."

"Oh, well when you put it like that..." He pulled his gun out and pointed it at the mayor, who scrambled back.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"He said I should."

"Did you just Jedi mind trick them?" Jillian asked. "Make them dance next!"

"Did I what? Never mind. I trust I've made my point? You can put them away again." He handed the gun back, but the man didn't put it away he pointed it at Lysanias.

"Get out of my head!" The gun was trembling.

"I'm not in your head, what are you talking about?"

"Put it down," said Ericka, who had her guns out and pointed at him and the mayor.

"Whoa, whoa, we all need to calm down here!" Abbey told them. "He was just trying to make a point!"

"Tell him that."

"Everybody put your guns away!" the mayor squeaked. "He made his point, okay? He did, I'm listening, honest!"

Lysanias stared at the man, feeling no tingle that he was in actual danger, and the agent looked over at the mayor. He was nodding. He reluctantly put it away, as did the other man, and then Erica put hers away.

"So no, I don't care how many agents you have, something needs to be done to keep this city safe."

"I don't know what to tell you," the mayor insisted. "We have almost nine million people living here, we can't evacuate them, where would they go? What would we tell them? It would take a week or more to move even a fraction of them. It's just not practical."

“Keeping them here puts those nine million people in grave danger. If you want their deaths on your conscience fine. I’ve given my warning, that’s all I can do.”

“Look, I’ll make sure the police chiefs deny any time off requests for now, and to report anything strange right away. We can increase patrols, and make sure they have access to heavy weapons. You’re here to take care of this Jason person anyway, right? I could reasonably say do your job and leave it at that!”

“That’s fine. Just know that if buildings start getting set on fire or giants start walking around, you know why.”

“What about us?” Erin asked. “If something shows up, like this creature,” she pointed to the canister, “regular guns aren’t going to help. Unless you guys have our proton pack technology in your back pockets?”

“Your what?” asked Hawkins.

“They don’t,” Jillian told them. “They’re so dead.”

“Once Jason is dealt with, things would go back to normal, right? I mean until the last few weeks no one had really seen anything they could call a ghost. Not like that green thing you were fighting. Maybe if we can keep it quiet this will all just blow over?”

“More of that ignorance is safety stuff?” Mavis huffed.

“Exactly, miss. I’m glad you understand.”

“Unless Jason is weakening the barrier between our worlds, and it stays weakened after he’s gone letting more things into our world,” Abbey said, “activity should drop.”

“If my time as mayor has taught me anything, it’s to deal with one problem at a time. Deal with this as quietly as you can, and we’ll see how things land. Okay? Don’t go plastering banners around the city that ghosts are real, or that we’re all in danger, or any of that. Just let people live their ignorant lives in peace.”

“Fine,” the woman agreed. Erin went on. “But if something threatens people, we’ll be there to take care of it. Don’t get in our way. Let people draw their own conclusions after that.”

“Fine. Now if you’ll excuse me?”

So the group was driven back to the base, and everyone went to the lab area where Kevin was doing something unimportant.

“So now what?” Abbey asked. “You said you could get a better answer that Jason might come here?”

“I’ll ask,” he agreed. “But there’s a man who wants to meet you.” He got out one of the circles of transportation and handed the other to Kenzie.

“You’re handing this to me, why?” she asked.

“I want you to head to the boat,” he told her. “I figure it might be good practice for you. Call a spirit that can teleport and head to the bar, then go through, then use this one to come here.”

She considered. “I guess if I wound up in China somewhere I would want someone around that could come get me. In fact I should try all the spirits once so I know what they do and can get some pointers on their powers. Okay, I’ll do it!” She went back downstairs to chant in peace, while Lysanias asked the universe if this was the place Jason was going to attack. Ericka told the others who was coming, making Jillian geek out.

“I read his stuff, Abbey got a copy of it when the ‘leak’ as the media was calling it happened. A bunch of his techniques went into the proton packs, actually. Made them a lot smaller than they would have been originally, I can tell you that.”

“Wait, are you talking about that email with the suspiciously fake looking notes and diagrams for impossible power supplies and such?” Erin asked.

“That’s the one. Your university got it too?”

“I threw that away, I got a copy. Everyone at the collage did. I thought it was some kind of hoax!”

“Good thing some people try things without just dismissing them,” Jillian told her. “Or you would be lugging around a pack that’s twice as heavy as you do now.”

“Oh. And he’s coming here? This place is a mess!”

“It’s a workshop,” Jillian said. “He’s seen worse, believe me. He’ll be right at home. Imagine, a Van Helsing, come to help us. I mean a second one, the famous one. Wow!”

"I'll be famous someday," Erika muttered. "Grandpa just wouldn't let me off the ship, that's all."

Kenzie made it, the circle glowing and both stepping through. The woman were rather shocked, just hearing about his life support system and seeing it in person were two different things. But they got over it and he went to see what Jillian was working on and how it could be made better.

Lysanias got a yes answer to this being the place Jason was going to attack, so he set up the circles and told both Trick and Dracula it wouldn't be long now. They were both ready, Dracula relieved he wouldn't need to put his castle on the line.

"After all, if we lose that city," he reasoned, "we've lost the world. My castle is meaningless in that case. As much as I don't want humans in danger, maybe seeing us fighting for them will be good for everybody. And my castle is still safe, so it's win-win."

Lysanias spent the rest of the day walking around the city to get a feel for the ground they would have to defend. Where they could put people should creatures attack, where the largest concentrations of people were, that sort of thing. Of course the city was huge, people were everywhere, and with no idea the supernatural existed would probably do more harm to themselves during an incident than good. They wouldn't understand what was going on and simply panic, rather than do anything helpful. But he could only work with the way the world was, not how he wanted it to be, and he went to bed that night wondering how many nights until Jason attacked.

He got his answer the next day when Abbey, Erin, and Patty were talking about the random nature of the attacks and what they could mean. Why there had been two ghosts but one ghostlike creature, along with a polar bear and some other oddness that had been reported. Were they all the same thing? Just different forms of energy? Jillian and Abraham were working on some sort of large scale containment unit they could use to store the entity they had caught, with them having the bright idea to convert it to electrical power if it turned out not to be sentient. But that was more long term, the canister they had was safely locked away. Without more samples to study, they could only make assumptions on the one "creature" they did have.

"After all, it's some form of energy," Abraham had been saying. "If it's essentially mindless, not a ghost, why not just use it to power stuff?" Had Lysanias visited the world where Aerith was instead of Susan, he would have realized just how terrifying that statement was, but he hadn't. So we'll forgive him his ignorance in this case.

"I'm not sure they are random," Erin told them. "Look, it's easy enough to put them on the map. Hand me that pen." She marked the locations on the map and the other two matched them up to a book of ley lines Lysanias was surprised to see existed, and the center matched up perfectly with someplace called the Mercado Hotel. Leaving Jillian and Abraham working on new stuff the other women, Lysanias along with Kenzie and a bat form Mavis squeezed into the car and headed there. They simply wanted to look around but the woman at the front desk excitedly waved them over. She was an older lady with a no nonsense look, small glasses perched on her nose.

"You're the ghostbusters, right?" she asked.

"That's us," Patty agreed.

"How did you know we had a problem? Our manager was against calling but I was thinking about it anyway. Did someone else call you?"

They all shared a look. "Why don't you just show us?" Erin asked.

"Sure thing, this way." She led them to a door that looked like it would lead down to a lower level, and tapped the air of the doorframe. There was a shimmer anyone who had watched Star Trek would recognize, and she jerked her finger back as though it had been burned. "This morning no one could get to the basement. Elevators hit something, and this doorframe, well, you can see something's happening to it. We don't know what's going on down there, but somehow we need to find out."

“I agree,” said Abbey, pulling her pack’s weapon. “Let’s take that barrier down!”
Someone behind her barked a laugh.

“You don’t have the means,” Jason told them.

Chapter 31

Countdown

When: No time has passed

Where: Inside the Mercado hotel

The group whirled to see a young man standing there, looking fairly cocky. He was dressed in jeans and an 80s psychedelic print t-shirt. He had fairly long light brown hair, a strong jawline, and blue eyes. He was also somewhat transparent.

“Jason, I presume?” Lysanias asked.

“Correct.” He swept a low bow. “Gaze upon the instrument of your-” He started to straighten and Abbey, already with her weapon out, simply fired at the guy. He watched as the beam passed through his body, impacting the wall on the other side and setting it on fire. She quickly realized her mistake and shut it off.

“You have good instincts,” Jason praised her, brushing himself off. “Could I interest you in traveling to other worlds, meeting interesting people, and then killing them all? I could get you far better toys than that to play with, if you join up.”

“No!”

“My hotel!” the lady from the desk wailed. “It’s on fire!”

Lysanias quieted the flame with fire bending, while Jason shook his head. “Don’t you know the first rule?”

“Don’t hang around a crime scene?” Kenzie asked.

“No, try again.”

“Don’t tell people you’re a vampire?” Mavis asked.

“What? I’m not a vampire. No, the first rule is, when attacking someone with a ranged weapon, look at what’s behind them to see what you’ll hit if you miss them.”

“Hey, I did hit you,” Abbey protested. “To be fair.”

“True,” he allowed. “Had I been all the way here, it might have gone poorly for me. I figure I’ve got about another twenty four hours and we can get this thing started.”

“I’m sure we can have the barrier down before then. Come on Patty, Erin. Let’s hit it!”

Jason laughed again. “That barrier emanates from a starship generator. Like I said, you don’t have the means.”

“How did you get it here?” Lysanias asked. “We can detect doors to other worlds opening.”

“You think there’s only one person in the world that can follow a plan and build a high tech device?”

“You’ve got someone on the inside?” Kenzie asked.

“Literally. He’s working on the final stages of the plan now. Even if I can’t interact physically with the world yet, I can still make what are essentially holograms appear. As I know how to build shield generators, along with other things, I just needed to show him the plans and he built what I needed him to. You should see it down there, the device that’s going to- well, I won’t say. Should be pretty exciting though!”

“Can you go have a look?” Mavis asked Lysanias.

“That might be tricky,” he admitted. “Look, it’s totally dark past the stairs. Even leaving my body, if I could go through that shield I still wouldn’t see anything.”

“Exactly,” Jason agreed, nodding his head. “The great Lysanias, defeated by the lack of a light bulb.”

“There must be some way, our shaman spirits could appear inside the barrier,” Kenzie protested.

“But unless they can see in the dark, it’s pointless.”

“We can try some stuff, I wouldn’t just take his word for it.”

“We will. I suppose it’ll keep him here, even just to taunt us. Means he’s not causing trouble elsewhere.”

“Oh, I was just here to tweak your nose a little. Oh, and there’s one other thing, come along.” He walked back the way they had come, towards the lobby, and looked back to make sure they were coming. “Come along!”

The group shared a look and reluctantly followed, he headed out the door and into the street. Looking up at the top of the hotel he nodded. "This will do." Suddenly he was taller than the building, and people started freaking out even several blocks away as he looked around. "Hello everyone!" he called, looking down around his feet. "I am Jason Amber, herald of the great Galactus!" He paused for dramatic effect. "I'm just kidding, but it may as well be. Call him that if you want. He will arrive to eat this planet in twenty four hours!" He gestured, and in the sky a huge 24:00 appeared, then went to 23:59. From nowhere the strains of "Final Countdown" began to play. The numbers were huge, red, and glowed like a neon sign. Jason bobbed his head to the music a moment. "This is the amount of time you have left upon the Earth. Make peace with whatever God you worship, but know that Galactus is coming for Them, too. Farewell, mortals!" With that he gave a great villain laugh and was his original size again. The group watched as there was panic in the street near them, and presumably rippling out from there. "That should do it," Jason said with no small amount of satisfaction. "Enjoy the next twenty four hours, suckers!" He vanished, and the music cut off, leaving a sudden silence in the air.

"We have to get into that basement," Abbey told them.

The others agreed.

This proved impossible for the group, despite what they hit it with or tried. Lysanias couldn't teleport past the barrier for two reasons. There could be anything in that darkness so he could wind up impaled on something and just die, but more importantly couldn't envision himself in the space because he had never seen it. He couldn't see it with any technique because it was dark, which really shouldn't matter if he left his body but somehow it did. (He did try it, the entire floor was dark down there) They couldn't use the moon spirit, they still bounced off the energy barrier trying to walk through it while insubstantial. Attacking it did nothing. There was no spirit of "hotel basements" so no spirit Kenzie could call up could tell them anything. Rosalina's sun could have illuminated the stairs and possibly enough of the room beyond if they let it melt through the door they saw at the bottom of the stairs (with simple flashlights shining down there) but again there could be any number of explosives down there past the door that could go off. Plus putting a miniature sun in that confined space was probably not a good idea.

By that time police forces had arrived, and the hotel at least began an evacuation. The three woman were explaining what it was while Lysanias wracked his brain for some way to safely bypass the energy field. He finally gave up and said if the police wanted to pound on it, they were more than welcome to.

Meanwhile people were freaking out and news crews were all focused on the giant numbers in the sky that were ticking down moment after moment.

"What did he have to go and do that for?" Kenzie grumped. "Just to make our lives miserable?"

"Mayor's not going to be happy," Erin remarked. "Ugh, I bet those agents are knocking on our door right now."

"Yeah, we better get back," Patty told them. "But it's going to take way longer with those crowds out there."

"I'll take you," Lysanias told them. "I can teleport us back."

"What about the car? I'm not just leaving it here!"

"I'll put it in a ward, it's barely an inconvenience." Lysanias didn't bother to hide his actions in any way, no one was looking at a car when there was a huge red doomsday clock in the sky. With that he teleported them back to the alley, then went upstairs with the others.

"I sent Kevin home," Jillian told them. "Didn't seem right to keep him here, he was just getting in the way honestly. Told him to get out of the city, if he'll even be able to at this point."

"You know then?" Abbey asked her.

"Oh, it's trending everywhere. People even got video of Jason, I presume that's Jason anyway?" She held up her phone and there he was.

"That's him," Lysanias told her.

"Secret is out now," Patty said. "What's the plan?"

“Whatever you can reasonably do in a day, do it. If you think it’ll take longer, forget it. We have to use what we have, now. I’ll go get Trick ready if you want to go see your father, Mavis.”

“Got it.”

The group went about their tasks.

Lysanias had a few extra stops he wanted to make, so once fae and monsters were flowing through the bar’s teleport system (in case Jason attacked early and the clock was a red herring) he went to do a few things.

The first place he went was back to the farm. He found Mary watching a news report along with Bill and Judy, the parents of the girl next door. They were all worried, but told him Jesse and Leslie had recovered completely and both were closer than ever after their near death experience. He reassured them as he could, grateful to hear the angel hadn’t come back for her soul. (Not that he said this) He said not to worry, with the time Jason had given the human world would mobilize (he hoped) just as the fae and monster worlds had, and Jason would be beaten back once again. This time for good. They believed him and wished him luck.

Next up was Bo. The prison was cut off from the world so while the people inside didn’t know what has happening, he explained it to her.

“And I’ve come with an offer,” he told her. “I can go inside your head and teach you the energy techniques right now. I’ve been doing it, so we know it works. You should be able to demonstrate them and get out of here, assuming we win tomorrow.”

“Do you want my help?” she asked.

“That’s up to you. If he’s going to attack with an army of these spectral creatures as I believe, and why test out small scale devices otherwise? They should have energy I can drain so in theory its the same energy you drain. But don’t you have to kiss them?”

“I’ve been thinking about it. I have the strangest feeling I can do it forcibly from a distance. I mean I forced that man I put into a coma, I just grabbed him in an alley. Not exactly a bedroom, if you know what I mean. So it stands to reason my needing to arouse someone is either just how it’s traditionally done, how it’s most easily done, or I was simply uninformed. Look, even if I can’t directly help, I can use my power to calm people and get them to evacuate more easily. I can help!”

“It is the end of the world. A little jailbreak hardly even rates consideration. Come here.” He touched her, going into her mind, and giving her his skill as he had done several times before. With that, still touching her, he teleported back to NYC where she flung her arms around Trick, who looked and felt quite glad to see her again. Many beings were milling around in the area outside the shop, mostly looking up at the clock that still hung in the sky.

“Oh, there you are,” said a man. Lysanias looked over, and he recognized Chris from the hospital. “I never got to thank you properly, you never came back! Someone said you would be around though, if I waited. I’m here to help.”

“Glad to have you. I would have just been in the way,” he protested. “It was nothing.”

“You’ll forgive me if I say thanks anyway.” He stuck out his hand, and Lysanias shook it. “Thanks. I don’t know if I would have woken up without you. It makes you think, just walking along and then suddenly you could be dead. Made me think about my life, you know? If I can save even one person in all this,” he pointed to the clock, “I figure it’s a fair deal.”

“Don’t go throwing your life away though, I want everyone to come through this.”

“I know. Good luck against Jason.”

“Thanks.”

From there he worked on armor wards to pass out, figuring that was the best use of his time. He had plenty of people to draw energy from, and handed out dozens of wards an hour. They were stele based, so they wouldn’t last, but if his fight with Jason went on for more than

a few minutes the city and thus the world was probably lost anyway. *Because at that point, something will have gone terribly wrong.*

He slept in “stopped time” again, just to have the most time he could, and as the appointed hour approached he got ready with his friends. He had both his spirit and Rosalina out, his sword’s power was called out, his armor and shield were at the ready. Those with it had put on their black armor, forgoing wards so that those without fancy otherworldly gear could be more protected, and told him what had been going on the last day.

“Hysteria has died down a little,” Abbey told him. “But the news is still focused on that clock in the sky. There’s police everywhere, people are being ordered to stay inside. Some listened, of course some didn’t. Lots of military vehicles and troops in the streets. Mayor can’t deny the supernatural world exists now! We were left alone, oddly enough-”

“Actually, we sort of weren’t,” Kenzie said. “Black vans pulled up outside yesterday, but the area was packed full of fae and monsters. They left in a hurry again.”

“Ah, I see. Well, we made everyone as comfortable as we could overnight, the circles meant we could get supplies fairly easily. But Jason does seem to be sticking to the schedule, nothing weird has happened during the night. So they should be rested and ready to go. We don’t have nearly enough weapons for all of them, but many brought their own, or explained they have powers... you know all that. Anyway, they’re ready to go, general.”

“Then let’s get there. I want to be near the building at least an hour before that clock runs down, in case he starts something early. We’ll have to walk with this many people.”

“Actually, I thought we might use the circles again,” Erin told him. “There are troops trying to get people to stay inside, we don’t need them hassling us. If you get over there we can just step through. Far faster than walking this crowd there.”

They looked out the window at the mass of people ready to throw down against Jason. “I’ll coordinate them, if you want,” Rosalina told them. “I can station Lumas in the air and relay messages to everyone telepathically. I should stay out of combat anyway, until I’m better at the magic fu I’ve been practicing.”

“You really are getting the hang of it though,” Ericka praised.

“Thanks.”

“Everyone should choose their specialty,” Lysanias told her. “If you think you can be more helpful apart from me, that’s fine. You’re not a wand anymore for a reason, you can make your own choices. It’s all one fight in the end.”

“Thank you for that. I do want to fight with you, but I know you want me to do the most good I can. I think this is the way.”

“Then do it. I’ll go get the other halves of the circles, and we can get this party started.”

Moments later his troops started pouring out of the circles near the hotel, inside the perimeter created by the soldiers. They were pounding the building with tank shells, causing a shimmer but no actual damage. Lysanias, of course, positioned the circles on the opposite side, leaving them to their fun.

The shield expanded to cover the whole building? But of course it did.

The spirit, for once out early and not facing something huge decided to start growing *now*, and was four times the size of a man and watching from that vantage point. Standing still those that could see it knew not to bump into it, and those that couldn’t just acted like the space it occupied didn’t even exist, so there was no danger of it squashing anyone accidentally. Time ticked away, there was about an hour left. Some distance away those fae with healing powers joined the medical tents the armed forces had set up.

Then half an hour.

Fifteen minutes. Tensions started building, and Lysanias reminded everyone to put their wards on at the last second so they would last as long as possible.

Five minutes. Lysanias and Kenzie started chanting for spirits. Lysanias took dragonfly, he was most practiced at that. *I should get it for almost an hour, more than enough time. I hope.*

Two.

The clock hit zero, and everyone held their breath waiting to see what would happen.

The clock vanished.

There was a rumbling centered on the building, and a beam of energy shot towards the sky. Dark clouds started to gather, and an eerie wailing filled the air. From out of the windows more light started to shine, and the street radiating out from that center point cracked and buckled. Then a screeching caused everyone to wince, as reality tore apart in the shape of a man, and there was Jason, standing behind the energy barrier and looking as though he was pulling himself out of a folded space the human mind couldn't comprehend. Finally he yanked his leg out and gave a triumphant cry, throwing his head back and laughing. Guns were trained on him, but the energy barrier was still up, so no one was stupid enough to open fire and have their bullets bouncing back at them. Jason stretched and looked the crowd over. He smiled and then turned away, towards the building. "Come on out, I'm here!" he called, and the doors opened. From them walked a single man, not the stream of ghostly beings Lysanias figured, and he looked the crowd over. He was dressed in a nice suit, looked to be in his sixties, with gray hair and a kindly face. "Thanks for coming out to greet me!" he said, voice booming around the place. "I'm Hades, or at least I was. Came through a portal to destroy you all, nothing personal you understand. Just something I have to do. You've met Jason, I trust?" He waved. "Now, these people have waited long enough, let's do this thing. You have something for me?"

Jason tossed him something, and Hades put it on. He shimmered, his clothes changing to a yellow and black skintight outfit.

"Wait, was that a yellow lantern ring?" Tamzin demanded, pushing to the front. Those closest looked at her like she was crazy. "What? I'm thousands of years old. I've read everything. Twice. Comic books, manga, regular books, instruction books, how to books, self help books, magazines, scientific journals, you try living for thousands of years. See if you don't get bored."

"What's it do?" Lysanias asked. Hades was doing a series of stretches, looking his new clothes over.

"Lots. Force fields, hard light constructs, flight, oh, it makes total sense now."

"What does?"

"The countdown. Yellow rings get more powerful the more fear is nearby."

"Great!"

"Seems okay," Hades admitted. "Shouldn't you get your game face on?"

"Sure thing, boss." He hopped in the air, and then stayed there as a suit of armor, primarily red with golden highlights, appeared to come out of nowhere and fly onto his body.

"He's iron man now?" Tamzin spat. "Give me that sword, I'll kill him myself! You leave the marvel universe alone!"

Wait, I've heard that name before. Simon? Didn't he mention it? Worlds really do share stories, how does that even work?

"You like?" Jason yelled. "See, if I know how something works, I don't have to maintain it with my power. So I made sure to visit realities with lots of interesting tech, like those rings, and this armor. Lysanias, I hope you're prepared!"

Flight, wonderful. Lysanias couldn't put his wings out, he was wearing the armor, and the iron man suit hovered in the air.

"Now let's meet the rest of our cast," Hades said, turning towards the door again. "Come out and play, my beauties!"

The doors smashed to pieces as hundreds of transparent creatures took to the skies. The energy barrier around the place dropped, and they sped towards the assembled forces, who started shooting wildly.

"Now we'll have some fun," Jason declared, and *flew away.*

“Hey, get back here!” Lysanias shouted to his back. “Come down here and-” *Fight me. Right. Why would he do something stupid like that? I’m so stupid.*

“I’ll play with you,” Hades told him, also rising into the air. A yellow energy field had surrounded him, crackling like an electric current. From behind him a giant set of arms smashed through the walls of the hotel. “Right on time. Say hello to my little friend!”

A white form smashed out of the place, sending rubble everywhere and those nearest scattered so as to try and avoid being crushed.

This just gets better and better, doesn’t it?

“Attack!” Hades commanded, and the figure rushed to obey.

Chapter 32

Battle

When: No time has passed

Where: Outside the Mercado hotel

With the command to attack the ghost kicked a car out of the way and took a step towards them, but the mountain spirit was right there in the way. All around them battle raged, as the spirits near enough to hear Hades' command flew in to attack. The four women with the proton packs lit up the sky, while Ericka's guns drove back those that surged from the doors along the ground.

Good, if nothing else her plasma weapons can harm them. I don't know how the plain fighters like Johnathan or Dyson are going to fare but if these things have to become solid to attack they probably have a chance. I need to go where I can do the most good, it seems the ghosts scattered so they won't be overwhelmed here.

"Let's see how your ring fares against my blade, avatar," he announced, bringing it parallel to the ground and pointing it at Hades.

"Sword?" He sneered at the blade but then did a double take. "Wait, I know that sword. I'm not getting anywhere near it. See ya!" And then he took off flying as well.

"Someone come down here and fight me!" Lysanias shouted. *Wait, let's see if this will work.* He shot forward, running underneath Hades and then shooting a cable out of his armor with metal bending. It wrapped around a lamppost high above, and he flung himself into the air, a plan in mind. He was going to do something he had learned from a wind spirit he hadn't really used in the past, because usually he had wings. As he started to fall he concentrated, stepping on air. This allowed him to now jump off the air itself, getting above the fleeing Hades and coming down on him in order to chop him in half. The sword cut the air, blue sparks flying, and ran into something sticky as Hades turned around in midair to face him. The sword hit the yellow mass and was slowed enough he lost all momentum and was afraid he wasn't going to get the sword free for another strike. He managed to stand on air, tugging at the thing, while Hades smiled.

Lysanias, above you! he heard inside his head. It was the voice of Rosalina, doing her job of watching over the battlefield. He didn't bother to look up, simply yanking the sword free of the sticky mass and spirit stepping backwards. A comically large weight with "16 tons" on the side whooshed past where he had been, smashing into a tank that was below them.

"Another day older, and deeper in debt," Hades remarked cryptically. "Take care of him." He pointed.

Three spirits that were nearby changed course and flew at him, making him hope the sword could take care of them. They were fast, on him in an instant, clearly trying to simply smash him out of the air. He spun and whipped the sword up at the first, trying to dodge the second that was attacking at the same time. The first burned away as his blade sliced through it. *Don't stop, use the momentum, just like Ragnarok showed me.* With the blade up he kept it going, targeting the second ghost in a large arc, hoping to take it out before those hands reached him. This one too was slashed apart, and he spun, letting the momentum carry him to the left to intercept the third ghost. It couldn't escape the arc, and it too was no more. Lysanias finished the turn, searching for more enemies, but none were nearby. *That worked out pretty well. Wait, where's Hades?* He looked all around, flashes of color as ghosts dove and wrecked havoc on the ground and were met by explosives and gunfire made finding that special yellow glow nearly impossible.

He's heading away from you, on your right! Directly away from the building that ghost busted out of!

Lysanias turned, finding the yellow glow again as Hades shot energy beams out of his ring, impacting the vehicles below. *There you are!* He went to spirit step again, it wasn't that far given his speed if he could cover the distance in an instant, but after he did he slowed and wondered what was going on because he hadn't made the full distance. *Did he do something to me?* The sword looked clean, he hadn't attached anything to Lysanias' legs that he could see. *Oh wait.* He looked back, the spirit was still fighting the ghost, currently having his head smashed into a building. *Thank goodness that guy is essentially rock.* The spirit struck back,

the ghost didn't have a jaw for him to punch, having taken the form of a "traditional" ghost, so he chopped down with his right hand to get the ghost's hands off his "head" and slugged him with his left. *I can't go any further because I'm tethered to my spirit. No wonder he flew straight away from here. Let's go take care of that, neither seems to be doing any damage so this fight could go on and on, pinning me here. But banishing doesn't care how big you are.*

He spirit stepped back to the ground, the air getting fairly crowded with spirits and bullets and energy blasts from the four ladies and that one fae shooting fire everywhere. With that he simply ran back to the ghost, slashing apart several spirits that got near him as he ran. Now near the foot of the spirit he took advantage of the ghost's distraction of trying not to be punched by the spirit again to get some of his energy back. A faint aura surrounded both, energy flowing from the ghost into him, making it look around in confusion. So the spirit punched it again. *Nice one, keep him distracted.* When Lysanias couldn't absorb any more energy he shouted up at the ghost. "In the name of the emperor, I command you to depart this place. Begone!"

There was a tremendous vacuum created as the ghost simply vanished, the spirit steadying itself by grabbing onto a nearby building. *Enjoy Hell, whoever you were.*

Lysanias, help, those two are really wrecking stuff up over here!

"I'm coming," he said uselessly. Then he looked up at the spirit again. "Wait a second. Now here's a thing we haven't tried. Spirit, you up for it?"

Of course, the spirit couldn't "hear" him but it didn't need to. It was Lysanias' will, and reached a finger down to him. He knew, even with he dragonfly spirit there was little chance of him actually pulling this off in the middle of a combat but that's what magic was for, right? As the finger came down he poured power into magic. "Let my skill be augmented!" he cast. Lysanias shoved the shield into his pocket and touched the spirit, willing the two of them to become one. "Fusing!" he cried, because that's what one shouts in this situation, correct? His perception shifted, he was standing four and a half meters tall and looking down at the battlefield now. *I can stay like this for two minutes. Let's make the most of it.* He shrunk down again so he could hold the sword, which was more like a dagger in his hand at that size, and looked over the battlefield. Several ghosts were clustered around a rooftop, zig zagging back and forth and dodging what looked like magical blasts. *I bet that's where Rosalina is.* Looking down Lysanias realized his armor was gone, and his body was rocky like that of the spirit. Of course his magical items were still there, such as the sash and shoes, but they were from another reality and would probably resize to fit any person. *Like the ring, I wore it as a kid and as an 'adult' and my fingers were different sizes. Just roll with it.* He nodded, and wings sprang from him back, snapping open at his command. *Hang on, I'm coming.* Giving a mighty push he went straight up, his wings catching the air he bent under him.

Shooting past the roof he hung in midair a moment, looking down at the many ghosts harassing Rosalina, and wondered if he could get rid of them all at once. *Wait, if I can use bending to generate lighting, and bending doesn't have to come from me...* He concentrated, trying to pick the best spot, and out of nowhere a ball of pure electricity erupted from his will. Most of the ghosts nearby simply died outright, burning away to nothing as the electric attack fried them. Others seemed stunned, which suited him just fine. He folded his wings, following them to the ground and draining their energy on the way. He didn't have to worry, something as mundane as a fall wasn't going to hurt him now, and he smashed into the pavement below.

The ghosts were twitching and trying to recover, their energy nearly gone, so he simply banished them. Both vanished.

That took the heat off, thanks Lysanias. Lumas report Jason is systematically targeting buildings, firing into them indiscriminately and then moving on to the next. Get after him. He's about ten buildings behind you.

Lysanias climbed out of the hole he was in and turned around, wings unfurling again. Taking to the sky he headed down the street, and saw the torn up buildings Jason must have hit already. It didn't look good, and he knew he needed to stop this guy, *now.* He didn't know if that suit of armor had some means of telling him something was near but Jason was clearly waiting for him as he rounded the corner of the building.

"Ice 2!" he said dramatically, palm out.

Ice what now? Suddenly, a huge chunk of ice (10,000kg worth) enveloped him, crushing him despite his invulnerability. But he felt the ice only do damage to him with the initial attack, almost as if the ice was now simply normal ice, and so couldn't hurt him further.

Still, ow. It even got through the spirit's rocky exterior. I'm not badly hurt but let's try to avoid these sorts of things in the future.

He dropped out of the sky like a rock, or really like a glacier that suddenly appeared out of nowhere. *Can't water bend it because I can't move, can't see through it either, must be really thick. I just have to-* **CRASH!** The ice hit the ground, rattling his teeth and probably crushing whatever he had landed on fairly well, but not hurting him in the slightest. *Wonder if the ice cracked?* With his momentum arrested he could now free himself, simply *shifting* outside the ice now that he wouldn't smash into anything when he came out. He picked around the corner of the building, he had just seen it after all, and was no longer in the ice.

"Flare!" cried Jason, again thrusting a palm outward. The ice was shattered apart by an explosion, leaving a crater in the street and in the building the ice had been next to. He felt a wave of pressure and heat rush by, setting fire to nearby benches and knocking a car sideways.

Huh. Now I understand why Trick was so terrified of this guy. Thank goodness I was on the opposite corner of that building. How am I going to deal with him?

"Plenty more where that come from!" Jason yelled. "You dead yet?"

He is wearing metal armor... Let's see how he likes this! He used lighting bending again as Jason hovered over the crater, looking for him. He put it right behind him, and Jason cried out as the power hit him.

Cried out in joy, it seemed like, as he started laughing.

Er, what? Is he... singing?

"I've got chills. They're multiplying. And I'm losing control. 'Cause the power- You're supplying, is electrifying." He had been dancing around in the air, then shouted. "Let me show you how it's done, wanderer!" He looked to the sky and the black clouds above that had darkened the area considerably. He threw his hands high and then dramatically brought them down, sending actual bolts of lighting crashing down nearby. It tingled a bit, and probably would have outright killed him had he not been fused, but it was just lighting so completely harmless.

I don't think he realizes I'm invulnerable. But he did hurt me with that ice. Was the act of the ice coming out of nowhere supernatural enough to hurt me, but what he physically does to the world isn't? I'll have to be careful. Maybe if I distract him? He saw that the car was trashed anyway and his strength while augmented by the spirit and his items *must* be tremendous, so metal bending even that should be a cinch. *Throw that at him, see if you can drive him to the ground, then while he's distracted hit him from behind.* He flung the car, and Jason tried to get out of the way but couldn't, and it drove him down into the pavement. Lysanias shot from hiding, heading to the car so when Jason threw it off himself, (or whatever he was going to do) he would be ready. He skidded to a halt and brought the sword up.

He felt a tap on his shoulder and looked over. *What the?* Jason went to simply punch him, so he whipped the sword around to try and deflect it.

He got punched in the face and got staggered. *Wait, that can't be right! He shouldn't be able to physically- forget how, maybe the armor is supernatural after all? Just chop him to pieces.*

He spun, turning the blow into a strike but not expecting to see the point of his sword sticking into his side, which is where it ended up.

"Whew, that was a close one," Jason told him. "Good thing I know how to think with portals."

Lysanias glanced down, the sword seemed to be sticking through a hole in the air surrounded by an orange glow, while the point of the sword stuck into him protruded from a hole at his side surrounded by a blue glow.

The hole started to collapse, and he yanked it back, barely missing the edge as it vanished. *That probably could have cut the blade in half. It would have regenerated, but that takes a little while right?*

"Nice reflexes," Jason praised, and vanished.

Oh come on!

He's above you, watch out, he's up to something.

Lysanias looked up and Rosalina was right, Jason was straight above him in the air, jets firing again to keep him up there.

"Weight of the world," Jason called out, creating a shimmer in the air up and down the street. Lysanias felt as though he was being pressed down on all sides, almost stumbling but his current strength, augmented by being fused and wearing his normal equipment allowed him to withstand it. He looked up to see Jason's jets boosting their power, obviously this was an area effect thing and not just something he was doing to Lysanias alone.

Let's capitalize on that, shall we? He reached out with the force, not knowing if Jason was in range, and tried flipping him over so his rockets would shoot him straight down and into this gravity field rather than keeping him above it. This worked, Jason cried out in surprise as he was suddenly hurled downwards by his own equipment and then slammed into the ground far harder than he would normally have been because of the heavy gravity he himself had created. He had thrown his arms over his head by instinct as he plummeted so they took the brunt of the damage. The field vanished, and Lysanias found he could move normally again. Jason was right next to him, he hardly had to move to bring the sword into position and drive it down with all his might. Jason screamed as the attack drove through his armor like it wasn't even there, but it suddenly cut off. Wary of a trick he yanked the blade back and to his surprise, the armor simply fell apart. He crouched, looking around for what Jason was going to throw at him next. But apart from ghosts, panicked people, stuff on fire, ruined pavement, smashed up cars, the partly exploded building and the inky black clouds above he didn't see anything.

Great, what happened? Where did he go? He gave the leg a nudge, and yes, there was nothing inside it anymore. *Time's wasting I guess. Let's go hunt down the avatar. He'll show back up when it's least convenient for me I'm sure.*

Lysanias took to the sky again, noticing the four woman from the ghost hunting service crowded around the hole in what was left of the hotel. They were firing into it, perhaps in an effort to close it or perhaps just to try stemming the tide. He saw they were guarded by Ericka blasting apart anything that came close from the air, and Kenzie and her spirit taking anything approaching by land. She had some odd looking gun possibly provided by the woman, and seemed fine, but the other woman looked exasperated. He couldn't tell at this distance if they were hurt, but all were still standing at least so they were okay. Whatever they were trying must not be working.

Rosalina, can you get to the site of the incident? he sent into her brain. *Send your sun down the hole, that should help keep ghosts from coming up and maybe help seal it off. That'll free up the ladies to take care of spirits here.*

Right, got it! she sent back. *But then you better get up here and take my place. I've been slinging spells at the avatar but either he's out of range, can counter them somehow, or that yellow field protects him. I'm distracting him but that's it.*

Got it, I was looking for him anyway. He headed that way, looking for the rooftop she was camping on, and as he landed she jumped over the side, heading down. Her Lumas, somewhat scattered to watch over the battlefield, headed down with her. *I hope she knows what she's doing, jumping from this high.* Off in the distance was the yellow suited figure of Hades, smashing a tank to bits with a giant yellow hammer. *Now there's a fellow that loves his work.* Given the man was so distracted and there seemed to be no ghosts nearby he took a second to heal himself, his rocky exterior kitting itself back together. That took only a little time but enough that Hades had moved on to shooting beams of energy at soldiers shooting up at him. *Time to divert your attention.* He now dove off the side of the building, spreading his wings not because he was afraid of falling in this body, but just to get closer to the action. When he felt he was near enough he folded them and plummeted down, smashing the ground by landing in the "hero pose" which had he not been invulnerable at the time would have broken every bone in his body. He used his momentum to drive the road and therefore the tank upwards, in a move he called "revenge of the tank."

The tank, squashed as it was, launched upwards and caught the man, sending them both flying and smashing into the building behind him.

Crap, I really hope nobody was in there!

He headed in that direction but skidded to a halt as a beam swept the rubble and Hades smashed his way out, metal and stone flying everywhere.

And he's fine. Super.

"Where are you?" he roared. "I'll finish you myself!" He held up a hand and a ball of energy started forming, lighting the place up. Lysanias squinted at it, it was that bright, and glowing brighter by the second.

Great, even if I hit him, is that going to explode? Wait, I can fly again, so in theory... He flapped his wings to begin moving, but sent power through himself as though spirit stepping. He appeared high in the sky, and put his wings out to steady himself. *That worked. Now to get his attention.* He yanked one of his "air bombs" out of subspace, sending it whirling down towards Hades with earth bending. He knew he had to be fast, it would "open" once away from him. But given how easy bending seemed to be now because of his fusion, that was no problem. The sphere smacked him and he winced as several pounds of air rushed passed him, but stayed where he was.

I was right. He's either invulnerable like me, or that aura simulates that. I'm going to have to hit with him the sword, bending will just bounce off because it's not any more supernatural than the element I'm bending.

"Ah, there you are," Hades announced. "Here, a gift for you!" He made a throwing gesture and the ball shot forward, streaking towards him.

I hope I'm high enough. He crossed his arms in an X and activated his *lifestreaming* barrier, throwing energy into it. *I don't want that ball exploding anywhere but high in the air.* Explode it did, impacting his green barrier and forcing him to close his eyes as it dissipated. *And I'm still alive, neat.* He opened his eyes to see Hades staring up at him, and dismissed his tattered barrier. He stepped again, appearing before Hades and standing on air, trying to slash at him before he could react. The sword impacted a large shield he threw up, smashed through it, then impacted the barrier around his body. This it bounced off of.

"Cripes," Hades managed. "Simmer down, kid!" Turning his hand a beam shot out, which Lysanias barely dodged, warned by the force and relying on a spiral movement so he was turned sideways as the beam shot past. As he spun he saw it impact a building in the distance, shattering windows.

Great, but he doesn't care about the first rule, does he?

Completing his spin he slashed again, now somewhat to the side so hopefully at some advantage. This proved fruitful, the blade darting behind the shield he tried to put up, slicing through the secondary barrier under it, and scoring on him. It was a very shallow cut, and Hades shot away from him.

"You actually hit me!" he shouted as he flew away. "I don't believe this!"

Neither do I. "Pause."

The action stopped, silence falling over the battlefield. Lysanias dropped down, not wanting to do what he was about to do in mid air. He looked over and it seemed Rosalina had reached the portal and was generating her sun, so that was good. He reached the ground and held the sword up, point downward. Closing his eyes he stepped into his inner soulscape.

The place felt a bit empty, with Rosalina gone, but there was Ragnarok, floating above the pedestal.

Well done with the ghosts, he praised as Lysanias walked up. *Three in a row with barely a pause. You're getting the hang of that.*

"Thanks. But I didn't come here for praise."

What did you come here for? We hit him, didn't we? He can be beaten. Just stay out of the way of that ring.

"Yes, we hit him, and nothing happened. Luna told me about intermediate sword releases back on the world with her 'death god' friends. Shouldn't something have happened? You don't change shape, so you're not that type. You must *do* something. Are you not always

saying you're an instrument of change? 'Let all who know your bite' is what I call out to wake you up. He felt your bite, how was he changed? Should I hang back and let it happen? Does it take time?"

I think I know a little bit better how to explain myself to you. Now that you've actually hit a few things while I was awake. You rejected my ultimate form for Rosalina, a decision that may prove worthwhile if she can stem the tide of creatures flowing into the city. But that halves my power. Had I been in my ultimate form, yes, I would have changed either of your opponents with the barest scratch. But as I am only partly released it must be a killing blow to send my power forth.

He blinked, absorbing this new information. *Is that why he was so relieved? Because this fight would have been over just scratching him if I could release all the sword's power? "I see. So Jason is dead, then?"*

I can tell you only that upon impact with that armor and the man within my power did its work. The man is no more. He is changed, does that make him alive or dead?

"So how was he changed? He vanished, that isn't change. Did you change him into air? What's the point of that if I have to kill him anyway?"

He should have changed into something that related to his abilities or temperament. I do not control it, I am simply the catalyst.

Meow? "So we have to get through that barrier of his and kill him in one stroke if I want to utilize your power?"

Or do enough damage to him before so that the killing stroke is delivered by me.

"How? Even with my augmented strength from fusing with my spirit, I barely touched him. And how do things keep getting in your way, anyway? That portal thing, I almost stabbed myself straight through. I thought you had a 100% hit rate?"

I do. But it still takes time to move me from place to place. Fighting a being that can simply react faster than you can move me, of course I'm going to be blocked. We are not back on the world I came from, where enemies simply stand and take damage.

I guess that's true enough. "Was he that fast? Is Hades?"

It does seem that way. Perhaps they are augmented as you currently are?

"Maybe, who knows. Any suggestions for me?"

You seem to be doing fine. However, if you're worried about the ring, get rid of it. He seems to be relying on it, perhaps his only innate ability is to command ghosts. That's why the avatar took this body, to command this army of his and keep it on track destroying the world.

"Get rid of it he says, how am I supposed to-" Lysanias blinked, a technique he could use coming to mind. "Never mind."

Good hunting.

"Thanks." He relaxed and the real world came back into focus. *Looks like he's going that way. We can do this.* He took to the air again, pulling his shield out. Once on Hades' level he planted himself on the air and leaned into the man with his shield. *He's going to impact me there, having seen me vanish from where I was. He'll hopefully take a split second to realize what's going on, that should give me the time I need. Okay, here we go.*

He started time, allowing Hades to smash into his shield, making him throw his arms wide. "Shatter," he intoned, looking at the ring and imagining Korra smashing ice apart by just looking at it. This worked, the ring shattered and Hades immediately started falling. Lysanias dove after him, sword raised. They both smashed into the ground below, and Lysanias drove the sword home.

Hades popped like a soap bubble, and a small wooden object clattered to the ground in his place. *What the?* He glanced around, making sure Hades hadn't managed to call any ghosts to this location, but he seemed to be clear for the moment. He picked it up. Only a few centimeters long it had a wavy shape and was made of a dark wood. *It's a fat pawn, from chess?* He turned it over and on the bottom, which was flat, there was what seemed to be a rubber pad with a circle that had a line through it. *What am I supposed to do with this? Why was the avatar so afraid of this sword? He offered me a whole reality for it, and the first time I actually use it I get a bit of wood with some rubber on the bottom?*

He stood there staring at it long enough that his fusion with the mountain spirit ended, so he found himself somewhat exhausted now that he didn't have the physical enhancements anymore. "We've still got work to do," he told the spirit, shoving it into his pocket. "Let's get to it."

It nodded.

Events resolved themselves fairly quickly after that. It seemed without Hades around the released creatures, whatever they were, scattered, rather than stay and risk destruction. Rosalina, along with the four ghost experts got the portal at least mostly sealed, Jillian saying that perhaps a nuclear bomb of some kind might close it for good but detonating one of those in the heart of NYC was probably too "ballsy" even for her.

"Not that I have one *to* detonate," she hastened to assure everyone. No one seemed reassured.

With the vaguely shimmering hole guarded Lysanias made his way back to the armor and metal bent it into the air enough that Rosalina could create a box around it. He didn't want anyone wandering by and taking a piece of it, so he put it into a containment ward for later. With the portal sealed the clouds vanished, showing just how devastated the area was, and people started rescue efforts for anyone trapped or hurt. News crews came out, so Lysanias found himself staring into a camera.

"Excuse me, sir," said the woman with the microphone. "Everyone has directed me to speak to you. Are you in charge around here?"

He barked a laugh. "I'm just doing what I can to help. She's the one coordinating everyone." He pointed to Rosalina, who had her Luma network coordinating people again.

"But you were the one behind getting everyone in place to halt this attack?"

"Ah, yes, that would be me. What can I do for you?"

"I guess the most important question on everyone's mind now is, are we safe?"

"For the moment, I would say so. The major threat has ended, and the portal is mostly closed and being guarded. I have no idea how many creatures escaped in the end, so people might see some strange things until they can be tracked down and completely eradicated. If you do see something strange just leave it alone, I don't know how dangerous the creatures will be without Hades driving them. They may be harmless, but until we know for sure, don't chance it."

"Creatures? You mean ghosts? What exactly attacked this city?"

"You can think of them that way, if it's easier. I don't have a name for them. Don't get me wrong, anything that looks human probably *is* a ghost, if not in the traditional sense of the word. Anything that is inhuman looking?" He shook his head. "The experts here have only just begun exploring what they are."

"Those four 'ghostbusters' as people are calling them?"

He laughed. "That's a good a name as any. Yes, Ghostbusters." *For all I know, demons just look like that in this world. I never summoned one to see what it looked like. I've only summoned angels, and I didn't even do that here, they would know. I could have asked. Well, let them figure it out, I can't do everything.*

"So what happens now?"

"We rebuild. This part of the city will have to go through some changes, to deal with the portal. I'm fairly certain some kind of containment can be put in place until it can be closed completely. Or maybe it should be left open, so what's on the other side can be explored. That's not up to me."

"And what about those I've seen here today? I spoke to a charming young woman who claimed to be a vampire-"

"Mavis Dracula. Her father is around here somewhere too. Well, he's probably inside now due to the sun..."

"She's really a vampire?"

"She's really a vampire. The world has changed, and it's up to you, yes you out there watching me right now, to decide what that change means. You have a choice. Accept that the fae and the monsters were always there and can be trusted, giving you more insights as to

how the world *really* works. Or panic and lash out simply because you don't yet understand what being fae means. You saw what happened here today. Fae put their lives on the line for you. How are you going to repay them? With open arms, or suspicion and fear?"

"But what they can do! I saw one lady shooting fire out of her hands!"

"And you couldn't buy a gun and be far more dangerous? Anyone can kill, but there are fae that can heal, too. Would you reject the one if it means rejecting the other?"

"Er... I suppose not."

"Like I said, learn about them. Learn what they can do, what they can do for humanity. Many can heal, or tell the future, or any number of amazing things. Give them a chance and you can build a tremendously bright future together. But I get it, you're afraid. You want my advice?"

"Sure!"

"Create an organization, maybe a branch of your own police force, that deals with supernatural events of all kinds." *A 'shadowhunter' organization, if you will.* "Fae already work as police officers, their greater strength and powers allowing them to be excellent at the job. Let them protect you out in the open. The Ghostbusters will need more manpower to study the portal and track down any creatures causing trouble. They have whole new branches of science to study; what are the creatures? Where do they actually come from? Are they souls? What's beyond the portal? Make the organization part scientific task force, part police force, part counseling agency. Something new. It can educate people, look into crimes caused by powers, take care of these spectral creatures, protect humanity from fae who do have dangerous powers. Take a step forward together, show a little bit of unity and understanding instead of just lashing out in fear. That's the power *you* have, that's the difference *you* can make in the world. The potential for a truly bright future hangs before you, and all you have to do is reach up and take it. Now if you'll excuse me, there's still a lot of work to do to make sure everyone is safe." He nodded and turned away, heading away from the woman to see what else he could do.

"There you have it," she was saying. "Wise words from one of the brave fighters that kept this city safe today..."

Getting together his his friends Lysanias learned of everyone's fate. Ironically Kenzie didn't take a scratch, neither did Bo or Johnathan, who had basically stayed out of the way. Vlad had taken a nasty hit, as had the other vampires as they felt they could take it. They were healing just fine. A few of the bat creatures hadn't made it, but all decided it was the most fun they had experienced in a hundred years. Vlad had to keep them on a tight leash so they didn't go off and start tearing into any people, but so far there were no incidents.

Tamsin had made it through, barely, two long gashes across her body had put her down, but she had managed to get to cover. Dyson was worse off, he was all torn up, but already on the mend.

Of the ghostbusters, Jillian took three hits, had Lysanias not been there with supernatural healing she might have lost her left arm and leg, but he knitted them back together. Patty was next worst off, laid out with a deep wound on her body and her right leg, but nothing he couldn't handle. The other two had minor wounds they waved off, saying he should take care of more seriously wounded people and they would be fine.

Ericka, who had stood her ground and ruthlessly attacked as long as she could fared the worst. She was currently unconscious, her clothes a bloody mess, when Lysanias finally found her. She was being stitched up in a medical tent, so he finished the job and hoped she would be fine once she had a transfusion. The others waited outside for word.

"She's stable," he reported. "I put her back together. It's up to her now."

She was up and around two days later, which had been busy for the group. Abraham and Jillian were ecstatic about the armor, going over every centimeter of it carefully to see how it worked. (There was some talk of him creating something similar to serve as his life support instead of the "bell on wheels" he currently used.) It contained a very compact power source, reaction-less jets, the repulsars in the hands, even a complete AI they managed to get up and running on some very expensive cloud hardware. It was currently being talked

around to provide further details of how the suit worked, helping with their own AI research, etc. It seemed friendly enough, but then, an AI bent on world domination *would* start off friendly, wouldn't it? But it had no access to the outside world so it was safe enough for the moment. In other words that one suit yielded a treasure trove of technology that had applications for many branches of science the pair couldn't wait to apply to their own tech. They found a piece of candy with weird writing on it rattling around inside which they handed over to Lysanias, but apart from it being "rare" candy he couldn't figure anything out about it. He left it for later, wanting to talk to Inari about the whole thing.

Bo was released from jail, having fought in NY and demonstrating the information Lysanias had dumped into her brain had taken. Even the Morrigan couldn't hold a semi-hero like her, and she was a dark fae now after all. She had feelers out for anyone in the light who wanted to "trade off" with her, and several were thinking about it. They had a party for her, which included Ericka as well for her recovery, and a goodbye to Lysanias. For some reason Dracula and Ericka really hit it off, with him apologizing for not keeping her safe in the battle. He could talk around her now, and seemed totally smitten with her. Mavis was glad to see her father make a new friend, Lysanias said looking into their future it was a bright one, together.

NYC slowly recovered, with various fae and monsters appearing on talk shows and giving interviews to get people used to them. As humans can't even tolerate the slightest deviation in other *humans* without going berserk there was of course two camps, both for and against them integrating into mainstream society. His idea of an organization dedicated to human/inhuman problems would take a long time to solidify, but at least the "ghostbusters" were getting funding to do the needed research to make sure the portal stayed closed. Or at least let them study the other side while keeping anything from that side from coming through. They got called as various entities showed themselves around the city, so more weapons were made and people were being trained to deal with that situation. The supernatural world was "outed" and there was no putting that back. There was a lot of work to do, but as Lysanias' marble shined brightly now, his job there was done. He said goodbye at the party, wished them all luck, and went on to his next adventure.