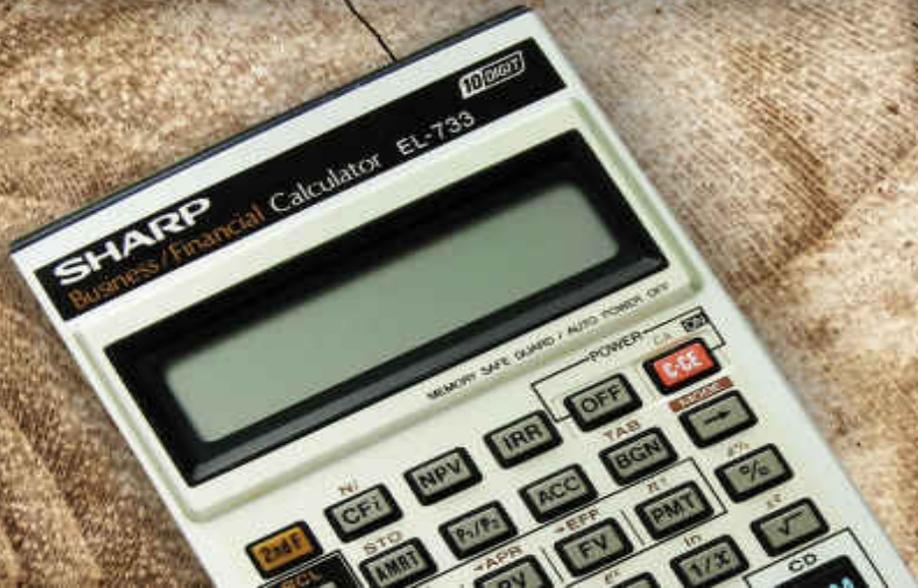




POSTHUMOUS
EDUCATION
Drew Hayes



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POSTHUMOUS EDUCATION

FRED THE VAMPIRE ACCOUNTANT #8

DREW HAYES

Posthumous Education
Fred the Vampire Accountant #8
By Drew Hayes

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Edited by Celestian Rince (<http://celestianrince.com>)

Edited by Erin Cooley (cooley.edit@gmail.com)

Edited by Kisa Whipkey (<http://kisawhipkey.com>)

Cover by A.M. Ruggs

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PREFACE

I almost certainly do not know you; however, I shall assume you are a lovely person, and it is my loss for not having yet had the opportunity to meet you. Still, I must assume you and I are connected in some way, for the works you are about to read are selections from a journal of my memoirs. I compiled these not in the belief that the stories within are so compelling they must be told, but rather because I found my unexpected life transition to be so shockingly uneventful—at least initially. I place the blame for my aggrandized expectations squarely on contemporary media filling my head with the belief that a ticket to the supernatural also put one on an express train toward coolness and suave charm.

This is simply not the case. Or at least, it was not my case. I recorded my journeys in the hopes that, should another being find themselves utterly depressed at the humdrum personality still saddling their supernatural frame, they might find solace in knowing they are not the only one to have felt that way. Given the lengthy lifespan of many of the people with whom I associate, there is no guarantee they will have passed on by the time this is read. Therefore, names have been changed as I deemed necessary.

So, dear reader, whom I suspect is a wonderful person merely in need of a bit of reassurance, take comfort in my tales of uneventful blundering. One's nature is hard to change; sometimes even death is insufficient to accomplish such a task. But be assured that, while you might find yourself still more human than anticipated, you are far from the only one. You will eventually discover that under the movie stereotypes, imposed mystique, and overall inflated expectations, each and every one of us is at least a touch more boring than our images would indicate.

And that is not a bad thing.

-Frederick Frankford Fletcher

AN UNEXPECTED
ENROLLMENT

IT WAS SHAPING UP TO BE QUITE THE BUSY TUESDAY. MY NIGHT STARTED with a literal *bang*, the sound of my wife Krystal yanking down a suitcase from a high shelf in our closet. Her job kept her traveling frequently, though thankfully the pace had finally begun to slow down compared to the months following our wedding. That was something a punitive situation, however, one which appeared to have run its course.

As Krystal packed for her latest outing, we puttered about and chatted. Despite the looming events on my docket, I'd learned over and over how quickly the peaceful moments could be shattered and made a point of appreciating them while they lasted. Finding time for the woman I loved was far more important than getting ahead on work—a lesson the living version of Fred might never have learned.

That might seem a strange idea to express if you are unfamiliar with my situation, so please permit a momentary digression, just in case. My name is Fredrick Frankford Fletcher, and several years ago, I was changed into a vampire. Krystal is a parahuman as well, the catch-all term for beings of a supernatural nature. Her job is with a place simply known as the Agency, the purpose of which is to keep all the various parahuman factions and entities playing by the rules of their various treaties.

Eventually, duty forced Krystal off to the airstrip where a secure plane would be waiting, and I was able to properly start my evening. As had become our tradition since moving into this new abode, I called out to Charlotte, the entity which now functionally *was* the apartment building around us, just as she'd previously been a manor house used as a bed-and-breakfast. Although her original body was destroyed in an attack by my sire

—a real piece of work named Quinn—we’d managed to save her essence. With funding from a dragon she’d worked for and the expert enchanting of some former clients who’d become friends, Charlotte was integrated into this new building, one that allowed her to house far more than my motley assortment of friends.

Those friends were the very subject of discussion once Charlotte manifested in her elderly woman form. She used many shapes and had been experimenting with new ones since the move, but she still seemed to favor this one for those moments she deemed “gossip time.”

“Lillian and Al have headed out to meet Asha at the Vadlethorn Estate,” she reported dutifully. “They used a car from the garage, so I can vouch for its safety. Neil and Albert are still off with Arch on their latest mission. No word back yet, but that’s business as usual with that bunch. Bubba and Amy are at Richard’s for some sort of job, and Gregor is currently standing downstairs, waiting for your next meeting.”

It had taken multiple attacks on myself and my friends, to the point of very nearly losing one of them, and discovering a conspiracy to wipe out my clan before we’d even known there was a threat, but I’d finally started taking security more seriously. Checking in to make sure everyone was safe and accounted for each night was only part of it. The apartment’s newly-renovated underground garage was under Charlotte’s control, which meant sneaking another bomb onto our vehicles required getting past her nigh omnipresent gaze. Same thing for sneak attacks, or any attacks in general should they occur within her boundaries.

Charlotte’s original body had been built with defense in mind as well, but no matter how talented the mages who made her might have been, they didn’t have the backing of a dragon. One who was going out of his way to make a good impression on Charlotte, at that, hoping to eventually poach her services for himself. Between Gideon’s spending and the incredible skill of the Clover twins, the Charlotte Arms apartments was arguably one of the most secure buildings in the entire state, if not region. It would take a lot more than potions and possessed murder-bugs to hurt her again, a protection that extended to those in her care.

Even Gregor relaxed a bit while we were under Charlotte’s watch, and it truly takes something to get a gargoyle acting less stiff. Whenever I emerged from under her roof, however, he’d fall into step shortly after, shadowing in case I got an urge to go darting off alone. Not that I ever tried

to do anything that foolhardy, of course. It was simply that we had the unfortunate habit of getting separated during our adventures. Such incidents only made Gregor more determined to stick close, and after the Turva clan tried to destroy the House of Fred entirely, I couldn't even protest in good conscience.

Although we might have won that exchange, it didn't take away the truths revealed: we were a potential target from threats we might never even imagine, let alone consider. Hence the new practices and mind toward security. We might not be able to control the world at large, parahuman or mundane, but we could still work to keep each other safe.

"Thank you, Charlotte. Is the usual meeting room available?" During the remodel, Charlotte's ground floor had been reworked. Offices for human staff that would no longer be needed were turned into general-use conference rooms, not unlike the shared-office fad that had been so hot in years prior. Despite her claim that it was to make the overall facility as functional as possible, part of me still suspected Charlotte had been thinking of us when requesting that tweak. Fletcher Accounting Services made ample use of the space, since meeting clients on Charlotte's turf offered an incomparable level of security.

"Cleaned and ready. Though your first appointment has been replaced."

That caught my attention. Clients canceled, or rescheduled, but replacement was an oddity, even given the usual eccentricities of parahuman clients. "The gentleman who ran the snow cone stand?"

"Mr. Giriot sends his apologies, said the matter was out of his hands," Charlotte reported. Working with Gideon had gotten her used to being more involved, a habit that had carried itself over when we moved into the apartments. Getting her to agree to take a salary had been a headache-and-a-half, but she was simply doing too much work to qualify as merely "pitching in." That might seem like a silly thing, if you're wondering what a magically animated building needs money for, but no amount of magic will dissuade the collection of taxes on her business and property. Krystal assured me that *many* have already tried.

Skimming over the scheduling app on my phone, I noted that Mr. Giriot had booked two hours of my time and had insisted on paying the consulting fee in advance. It was overkill for what I would have needed during an initial assessment, perhaps because it had never been a real meeting in the first place.

As I recalled, Mr. Giriot was fey-touched. Keeping track of a client's parahuman nature, in the event that they shared it, was an important part of the job. Different parahuman cultures had different ideas of what was polite; for example, when dealing with therianthropes, the general category for creatures such as werewolves, any attempt at small talk before stating the point of the meeting was seen as suspicious. Whereas a mage would often want to rant at me for minutes at a time about whatever concept or problem they were currently tackling, viewing attempts to steer toward business as dismissive and rude.

Fey-touched weren't too far off from general humans. To my understanding, they were descendants of half-fey, like Krystal's best friend and coworker, June Windbrook. While she was blessed with enough power to be an Agent, it seemed the magic diluted as it went through the bloodline. Fey-touched like Mr. Giriot had a natural touch of grace and charisma; some even held on to a knack for magic, although only at slightly above mortal levels.

"Did he send any word on who, exactly, would be replacing him?"

What remained undiluted about fey-touched, however, were the obligations that came with their heritage. Even from a literal world away, the greater fey powers kept those that served them in line. I doubted they were above using the fey-touched, given that I'd seen June herself wielded as a pawn, one that Hellebore had seemed all too willing to sacrifice.

"Nothing so far," Charlotte confirmed. "Do you want to cancel?"

"Very much so. I have a hunch this is going to be a lot more than just a budget meeting." With a resigned sigh—a habit left over from my living, oxygen-needing days—I began packing my laptop into its bag, which went into the briefcase that was otherwise ready to go. "Please ask Gregor to stand outside the door in case of any issues but keep the meeting private unless it becomes dangerous."

One of the many perks of living at the Charlotte Arms was the way in which her walls could halt as much or as little sound as she wanted them to, offering excellent space for confidential meetings or serene lodging. While she could technically hear everything within her walls, Charlotte was practiced in giving people their privacy, and her employment contract included confidentiality and nondisclosure clauses in case clients needed reassurance.

Curiosity nipped at my heels as I pulled my freshly-warmed blood from my sous vide machine, drinking some and pouring the rest into my enchanted flask, which kept it at an optimal temperature. Strange as the replacement meeting was, it only represented a small part of my busy night.

Since our scuffle with the Turva clan, more and more interest had started to come in for our services. I wasn't entirely sure if we'd impressed the parahuman community, or if we'd just proven that we wouldn't be immediately wiped out, but either way, something had shifted. Thank goodness Lillian had proven such an excellent hire, and Al a quick study. Without those two, I could never have handled the surge in demand. Even with their help, meetings filled up fast. I needed to expand again, but finding Al had been hard enough. There wasn't time to do another hunt for the rare parahuman with a true interest in accounting. Instead, I was making ample use of a vampire's minimal need for sleep.

By the time I was descending in the elevator, interest in my mystery meeting had been replaced by checklists of all the tasks I needed to handle before sunrise. I was so absorbed in my planning that I nearly jumped when the elevator doors parted to reveal a waiting Charlotte. This time, she was using the form that used to be a waiter and now seemed to work as a bellhop, doorman, or whatever other task demanded more muscle than the old woman would be expected to possess.

"Your guest has arrived." Charlotte graciously made no mention of my visible startling, simply stepping aside to let me depart the elevator. I took my exit, then automatically started walking toward my usual conference room.

"Should I be concerned?"

Her nod was almost too quick, like it had started mid-question. "Absolutely. I don't anticipate any physical altercation. However, I cannot envision a scenario in which this bodes well for whatever is to come."

We turned down a familiar hall. I spotted Gregor standing off to the side and offered him a silent nod of greeting. He returned the gesture, albeit more slowly, eyes all but burning a hole through the waiting door. Evidently, he'd seen the replacement client arrive and was not a fan.

Tempted as I was to ask what I'd be stepping into, I merely grasped the doorknob and pulled. I trusted Charlotte and Gregor to have my back if things went awry; plus, coping with surprises was part of the parahuman

package. There were also only so many opportunities to practice such skills safely, and I wasn't about to let one slip past.

I'd thought myself mentally prepared for anything; however, the figure waiting for me pulled my eyes a touch wider all the same. Sitting in a chair across the room was a man who all but radiated confidence. Understandably so. Handsome barely covered it; his tailored suit putting honed muscles on clear display. Even his smallest movements came with a sense of grace and surety. A fey-touched might be mistaken for a mortal, even among parahumans, but half-fey skew far closer to their magical ancestors. And this was one I knew on sight.

Waiting for me in the conference room was September Windbrook: Agent, brother of June, and ex-fiancé to Krystal.

“MR. WINDBROOK, TO WHAT DO I OWE THE PLEASURE?” SURPRISE OR NOT, this was still a meeting between Fletcher Accounting Services and someone who’d booked our time – I had a degree of professionalism to uphold as I entered the room and took my seat.

“Just September will be fine.” He leaned back in his chair, casually eyeing me up and down. Without having any clue what he was looking for, or if he found it, I opted to ignore the probing gaze entirely.

“Very well. As you prefer. September Windbrook, what can I do for you?”

His eyes finally steadied as he leaned forward, producing a metal disk from his pocket. Even if I hadn’t recognized it on sight, I could sort of... *feel* the object, despite our distance. Not quite a sensation akin to touch, more a knowledge that settled upon me the minute it was in my sight.

“A bargain was made between yourself and Hellebore, Seer of Winter. A deal in which I was chosen to act as arbiter, assessing the morality and legality of the favor requested. Hellebore has elected to call for what is owed and felt it would be most expedient if the entreaty came from me directly.”

“In that case, I believe I owe you an apology. It wasn’t my intent to get you further embroiled in our affairs, nor to have Hellebore sending you on these tasks.” Come to think of it, the last time Hellebore had reached out, she’d used September as the messenger as well. Was she needling me and Krystal, or did she just enjoy handing him errands?

That earned me a quizzical look and a slightly tilted head from September before he responded. “It is an honor to be called to service by

the royal court, regardless of the task demanded. I thought you'd be more concerned with what the favor being requested actually is."

"I'll admit, I am curious about what a being like Hellebore could possibly need from someone such as myself." Self-effacing seemed a prudent tactic to take when discussing the fey royalty of Winter. In truth, I did know of one particular talent I possessed that Hellebore couldn't replicate: acting as bait for my crazed sire, Quinn. He consistently showed up when I was vulnerable, targeting my friends as well. And Hellebore had made no secret of the fact that she was hunting him down.

September reached into his suit jacket and produced a brochure, laying it down on the conference table before us. I plucked it up and looked the page over. It appeared to be advertising a community college named Trestlevend University: quaint campus, stock images of smiling faces, and a few photos of books and protractors that felt a touch random.

By the time I looked up, September had set a small knife on the table. Since he'd been carrying it, that meant the metal almost certainly wasn't iron. Unlike most parahumans native to our world who were weakened by silver, fey couldn't abide the touch of iron. As a half-fey, September wouldn't be as impacted, but his carrying iron around would still be extremely unlikely, especially since it wouldn't be effective on any non-fey he encountered.

It also lacked the telltale scent of silver, which my brain picked up easily. Even though silver no longer injured me the way it did other parahumans, my instinctual brain still reacted to it as if it were a deadly threat. Considering how often silver was used as a tool by someone with murder on the mind, it wasn't a habit I was in any hurry to break, either.

"When you are ready, prick your finger and press a small amount of blood to the school's crest on the front."

It was a curious request, true, but working with the supernatural community quickly inured one to such oddities. "This isn't some sort of contract or anything, I trust?"

"Just a precaution that needs to be removed," September assured me.

Not exactly the denial I might have liked, but it would do. Taking the knife, I jammed it deep into my thumb. Vampires don't generally bleed in the same way as living creatures. Our blood is thicker, and harder to get out. Our bodies naturally cling to it, knowing it's what sustains us. After over

half a minute of effort, I managed to smear a dark red blob onto the front of the brochure.

As soon as my blood touched the surface, a change warped over the paper. While it still proudly advertised Trestlevend University, the photographs had been stripped of all their stock smiles and faces. In their place were creatures with horns playing volleyball, a pale figure studying in a library, a tentacled teacher writing on the blackboard.

The words had altered, as well. Instead of generic phrases about a long history of educational greatness, the brochure discussed the widely regarded mage program, its classes on blending in with human society, and the many social activities planned throughout the semester. That last bit struck me as unexpectedly normal, but it *was* still a college, after all.

“This is incredible.” I wasn’t able to keep the wonder out of my voice, mesmerized as I was by the notion of a parahuman college. There were very few places where we could exist without hiding our true natures, towns such as Boarback and events like CalcuCon being rare exceptions to our norm. The concept of a college dedicated to parahumans, where they could learn without the added burden of constant masquerading, struck me as an excellent one.

September, however, evidently misunderstood my meaning. “An admittedly complex enchantment, though they use a mass-production version. It attunes the page to the magic of the parahuman whose blood is placed on it. You could be reading that on the subway, and every other human will still see the original version. As would therians, fey, and anyone else who isn’t a vampire.”

Rather than correct him, I elected to steer the conversation forward, setting the brochure back on the table once more. “Very interesting. The college itself seems a marvel. I’d never heard of such a place existing. I don’t suppose Hellebore wants me to go look over their books and make sure they’re staying solvent?” Evaluating the finances of an entire college would be a massive undertaking, even for a small community school. Still, compared to the sorts of favors I’d imagined Hellebore requesting in my most fearful moments, I would take the task with a smile and whistle as I worked.

Of course, nothing was ever that easy. “Trestlevend is well funded by many entities who have an interest in its continued operation. What concerns Hellebore is the student who will be attending this next semester’s

courses. Pieris is a child of Winter's royals, one who has shown great promise in his rearing. As part of his education, Pieris will be attending Trestlevend for a brief time. It is akin to what you might call a semester abroad, an opportunity to widen one's understanding of the greater world by experiencing other cultures."

"I really hope this isn't a request to help guard or protect him." That statement was even truer than I hoped to be letting on, because so far as I could see, there would be nothing immoral about asking me to help keep an innocent safe, even though I was spectacularly ill-suited to the task.

That earned a small snort of laughter from September. "No, arrangements on that front have already been made. However, as Pieris is a royal of Winter, it is expected that he will be learning from the best. Trestlevend's staff is a somewhat eclectic collection. Some are highly regarded; others are seen as all that was available. Private tutors have been prepared for any subject where instruction is feared to be lacking. However, the teacher who usually covers accounting and specifics of human business has been unexpectedly called away and is unlikely to return until the following semester."

I resisted the urge to drop my head into my hands and groan, but the temptation was undeniable. It was plain where our conversation was now heading, not that September had been trying to play things aloof. "September, please tell me that this teacher had an unexpected windfall or the like, and not that fey-related forces left him sick, injured, or similarly incapacitated."

"Are you making an accusation, Mr. Fletcher?" His tone grew a bit sharper, though still stayed just on the right side of casual.

"I'm acknowledging the fact that Hellebore is highly adept at getting what she wants, and since it's growing increasingly clear she wants me at that college, I don't feel wrong in asking. Hurting someone just so I can take their place does *not* fall within what I would consider to be acceptable morality, and I hope you'd feel the same."

With hints of a smirk at the edges of his mouth, September nodded. "My understanding is that her services were requested elsewhere, by a client willing to pay her a high premium for the inconvenience, as well as offer the school compensation to hold her position. By the end of this semester, Professor Othman should have a substantial infusion to her retirement account after just a few short months of easy work."

That put my immediate concern to rest, which unfortunately only cleared the way for new worries to crop up. First and foremost was the obvious risk in what Hellebore was requesting. Going to Trestlevend meant leaving my town of Winslow, a place where I had an awful lot of friends watching my back. Merely residing somewhere other than Charlotte Arms put me at substantial risk, and the longer I was out there, the more likely it was that Quinn would get word.

Then again, a large part of me suspected that that was exactly the point of all this. If the college was anything like Boarback, then it would have a tremendous amount of security. Keeping mortals out and parahumans under control was no easy task. It would be the sort of place where Quinn would have to work to get access, all while Hellebore could lay ample traps of her own.

Still, I didn't attempt to reject the notion out of hand. Whatever Hellebore asked of me was likely going to be in this vein; my abilities as bait were the only real value I had to someone of her means. The situation was otherwise reasonable, if not favorable. Not to mention, I was genuinely interested in seeing an openly parahuman university.

"I should probably mention that I have very little experience speaking publicly and none in teaching, not to mention syllabus construction, coursework, or anything like that."

"Hellebore has heard you speak when motivated. She believes you capable of the task," September replied. "Professor Othman's curriculum and materials are available for your use. What Hellebore wishes is your expertise in human businesses, not your overall capacities as an educator."

He'd had those answers ready. Hellebore had evidently anticipated my concerns – which made me especially curious as to how September was going to counter the next one. "Much as I appreciate the forethought there, we still have a major hurdle with this plan. Business is booming. I can't ignore the customers who have already booked my time, and even if my immediate schedule were empty, I wouldn't be able to step away for an entire semester."

"On that front, it may be easier to show than explain. To do so, we would need to make the trip to your accommodations. The solution has already been put in place: a gift from Hellebore to balance out the excess of her request." Some of the stiffness left September's tone, a glint of

playfulness sneaking through. “Honestly, it’s worth coming with me just to see for yourself.”

Hellebore’s arrangements would surely be interesting, and most likely magical, but what piqued my curiosity far more was a chance to see the campus. Spending time in Boarback had been distinct and enjoyable. I was eager to see what other openly parahuman communities were like.

“I’ll admit, you’ve got my interest. Let’s compare schedules and see if there’s a good time for this visit.”

September checked his watch, a designer model that paired well with his outfit. “I believe we’ve still got several hours on the meeting I booked. If you’re willing, we can go right now.”

“It’s that close?”

“Oh no, quite a long way by conventional means. But as I said, Hellebore has made considerations for your situation.” September stood from his seat and looked to the door. “If you’d like to gather your guard, I’ll lead you on once you’re ready.”

It hadn’t escaped my notice that September called this meeting when most of my friends weren’t around, a voice of hard-won experience whispering that it would be a perfect chance to ambush me. Ultimately, though, I didn’t think he intended any violence. Hellebore didn’t want me dead; that took away a pawn in her game with Quinn. If I ended up dead in the process of her *winning*, however, I didn’t imagine it would give Hellebore any pause.

“Charlotte, please send word along to let the others know where they can reach me, should anything occur.” That handled, I went to the door and popped it open, finding Gregor waiting mere inches away. “Grab your protractor and bookbag, Gregor. We’re heading off to college.”

TO MY SURPRISE, SEPTEMBER DIDN'T LEAD US TOWARD THE HIGH-END sports car sitting out front, despite my certainty that it belonged to him. I'd assumed we were about to hop in for a ride to an airport—or more likely, a private airstrip where there were no records kept—then fly our way to wherever the college was. Instead, September took a crisp turn to the right and proceeded up the block, Gregor and I following a few paces behind.

My confusion mounted with every step. Not knowing about an openly parahuman university in general was one thing; having one be in my own town and slip past my notice was quite another. I might not be the most connected member of the supernatural community overall, but I *knew* Winslow, Colorado. I was friends with the head of the therians, had worked with dozens upon dozens of local parahumans by this point, and had even fought another vampire clan for the right to stay. How could an entire academic institution like Trestlevend exist without me having heard so much as a mention?

Our journey was mercifully brief. After only three blocks, we stopped in front of a newly renovated office building. Sleek glass doors framed by crisp white stone greeted us, along with the stares of three visible security guards stationed within the lobby. Paying their focused gazes no heed, September threw open the doors like he was making a grand entrance on stage. For most people, the motion would have looked ridiculous, but pairing it with a half-fey's charm turned it into an imposing gesture, like the lord of the manor was returning home and expecting perfection.

Gregor and I walked in behind him, our movements much more mundane. I did catch Gregor staring back at the security guards, though,

like he was the one watching them for threats. The guards seemed fit and hardy; however, I'd seen Gregor in combat. For their own sakes, I dearly hoped nothing physical occurred.

"September Windbrook, here for crossing."

My concern proved to be entirely unwarranted. The moment September's voice breached the room, the security staff relaxed, expressions visibly softening. Our nearest guard, a woman standing behind a desk, looked at something on her desk, then nodded.

"We welcome you, and your guests. Please allow my associate to guide you." She nodded to one of the other guards, a thick-shouldered fellow not far from their sole set of elevators.

Walking through the lobby, I kept hunting around for telltale hints of what this place might be, only to come up empty. No signs, no decor, just white stone with some sort of metal accents woven throughout forming the walls, ceiling, and floor. It was actually quite lovely, despite the sparse space. Minimalist, certainly, yet still designed with aesthetics in mind.

With my mind on appearances, a new detail did jump out at me. These guards weren't just fit, they were downright comely. Each one had standout good looks, and when they moved, it seemed a bit smoother than the way most humans shifted their bodies. Having worked with fey-touched clients like Mr. Giriot, I'd gained the perspective needed to recognize these signs for what they were.

The building was presumably run by fey, given its staff and their general deference to September. Add in that the fey definitely had the funds to buy and renovate property in a rising market, and it became an obvious fit. So obvious that I wondered for a moment if it was all a deception to make me think they were working for the fey, leading to some nefarious trick.

I confess, my incidents with the Turva clan and Quinn's attacks had led to a state of slight paranoia – although even that term is inapt, since I truly *did* have a malevolent entity out there trying to kill me. Still, I couldn't imagine Hellebore ever conspiring with my sire. I'd seen glimpses of her hatred for the man, and it was staggering.

No sudden attack came as we finished our walk through the lobby. The guard entered our elevator and punched a button for the top floor—number five. After a brief ride and a walk down a sparse hallway primarily decorated by rows of unassuming doors, we arrived at Room 538. Our

guard produced a small key, one that appeared to be glowing slightly, though that might have been a trick of the lighting. With a smooth turn, he opened the door, stepping aside so we could enter.

“Thank you,” I said while passing, receiving a nod in response. Once inside, I could see the room as a whole—what little of it there was. Bare walls and floor, no furniture, no decoration, not even a trash can. The only thing within was an archway in the far wall, leading to another room. Through the gap, I could see a few items scattered about, an old chair and a faded green rug among them.

September waited for me and Gregor to shut the door behind us, then stepped through the archway, motioning for us to keep up. Once in the new room, a sudden influx of scents assaulted my highly capable nose: leather from the chair, ash from an old fireplace, an echo of recent rain drifting in from the outdoors. After the spartan surroundings of the building overall, it was a striking shift, all the more so because I should have caught those smells from the other side of the archway. And that was before I realized the truly strange part of what I was smelling.

Namely, the fact that Winslow hadn’t gotten rain in over a week.

I had my suspicions, having experienced something similar when meeting with Amy’s mentor a few years past, but decided that confirmation was in order. “Did we just teleport?”

“Not as the word is commonly understood,” September replied. “Put simply, we used the fey realm to facilitate a shortcut.” Reaching up to the wooden door opposite our archway, he laid his hand on the rough surface. At his touch, a tapestry of symbols intricately woven across the surface flashed into view. I’d worked with the Clovers enough to recognize an enchantment when it was on open display, though this was an especially complex one.

“I... I guess I didn’t realize that was possible.” Although I’d been aware that fey like Al could travel through their lands and pop out somewhere else in ours, I’d never pictured it working quite so simply.

“Costly, but possible.” A series of *thunks* and *pings* came from within the seemingly wooden door before the glow finally flickered out. “Though the resources to maintain such a connection are considerable, Winter is prosperous. Should you accept the post, this path will remain open, available for use by your allies.”

Much as I liked to think of myself as being accustomed to dealing with magic, the casual mention of a portal that carved through space itself still demanded a moment to process. I'd never expected such an aspect of the offer – because who in their right mind would – but it did make the idea far more feasible. “I think I see now. Hellebore gets me for the classes, then I can pop back over after to stay on top of my work.”

September finally looked back from the door, shaking his head to the negative. “This path is open to your allies, *only* your allies. You would be staying here, on campus, in the educators’ facilities. I should also mention, this is not the measure that Hellebore prepared to deal with your business issues.”

“It’s a safety measure.” Gregor spoke rarely, which made his words stand out to me all the more when they manifested. “If your clan couldn’t get to you in an emergency, Hellebore knows we’d object to the whole concept.”

“Which would normally be a minor concern, except that you have a habit of listening to those in your clan more than most. Knowing Kr—the Agents watching would demand such a feature as well, Hellebore placed it in as a show of good faith.”

I made no mention of September’s near gaffe. The man was making obvious effort to be polite and deserved the same in turn. Besides, there was another matter tickling my curiosity at the moment. “Wait, was that whole building just full of portal rooms?”

“Far from filled. There are still normal building necessities, like offices for the staff and guards, janitorial closets, bathrooms, and so forth. Of the rooms that are designed for such use, only a small percentage are currently active. Although, given the building’s overall capacity, that does still represent a fair few portals.”

Despite September pulling open the door to another hall, I remained rooted, wheels turning in my head, reaching conclusions I wasn’t terribly fond of. “That building was newly renovated. I get that Hellebore has you making a strong pitch, but there’s no way I warrant *that* much effort. Why set up a portal hub in Winslow, of all places, let alone one with such a high capacity? Bigger buildings mean more overhead. There has to be a reason.”

Looking from me to the door, to my unmoving feet, to Gregor’s mighty stare, September let out a long sigh. “When one lives for millennia, it becomes prudent to plan for the future. Hellebore believes that Winslow is a

city on the rise. She expects it will see a continued growth of both the mundane and parahuman varieties. By getting in now, she can lay the groundwork, be ready to provide easy transport to those with the means or connections. Some of the older supernatural beings refuse to travel by technological means, never trusting anything the humans create.”

I wasn’t entirely sure how I felt about the idea of Hellebore opening up a magical commuter line for her friends only a few blocks from my home, but after mulling it over, I decided to set the matter aside. Chiefly because there wasn’t anything I could do about it. If Hellebore had opened an operation like this in Winslow, she would have had to get clearance from Gideon—maybe even the Agency, as well. And if the King of the West gave his okay, no other objections were likely to be considered. Not without provable merit, anyway, which my surge of uncertainty didn’t provide.

“Got it. I have to ask, though. If this isn’t the way I’m supposed to cope with work, then what is?”

“As I said, it is in your lodging area, here,” September reiterated. “To get there, we will first need to walk across campus. Fear not, it is still nighttime here as well, not that the sun will be a concern. Do brace yourself, though. A parahuman facility at night is livelier than during the day, and that is only truer when dealing with college students.”

The warning was one I knew I should be heeding, yet my brain refused to move past one of September’s earlier sentences, one still blaring out to me like a foghorn on a cloudy night. “What do you mean, the sun won’t be a concern?”

This time there was an undeniable smugness in his smirk before he turned his face back toward the door. “We have a lot to get through tonight. Let’s take it one item at a time.”

DESPITE KNOWING BETTER, MY MIND FILLED ITSELF WITH VISIONS OF historic buildings with climbing ivy, a storied belltower overlooking a sprawling campus, the air thick with tradition and learning. Those images were nothing like my own college experience—I'd attended a relatively small school to keep my costs manageable—but when faced with the idea of a parahuman university, it was directly where my brain jumped.

Stepping out from the room, my first thought was that a hidden space in the rear of what appeared to be a janitorial closet didn't make for the most stunning of first impressions. From a secrecy standpoint, though, it was an excellent choice. Were I to walk into the messy room stretched before me, the very last inclination in my mind would be to touch things, let alone explore—to say nothing of fiddling with a shelf of crusty old mop heads, where September was hitting a switch to close the door behind us once more. As it sealed, the symbols flashed, adding another layer of protection.

From the closet, we emerged into a worn, but well-kept building. It was a small place; after only a handful of steps, we'd reached the front door, finally stepping forth onto the true campus itself. There was a soft chill in the air—not like what I'd left at home in Colorado, but still far from warm. The scent of rain pressed down upon me, thicker now that I was outdoors, followed by a bevy of smells I could scarcely make heads nor tails of. A few were discernable—therian here, fellow vampire there—however, for the most part, it was like being in Boarback. There were just too many scents to sort.

As my nose took in the local scene, my eyes were awash in waves of green. The campus itself had mostly one-story buildings, with only a few

breaking that mold, one of which climbed all the way up to four levels high. Neither historic in appearance nor distinct in aesthetics, if anything it seemed to borrow more from office architecture than my visions of academia. But between those facilities ran grounds of emerald grass. Trees were also constant throughout the landscape, their sweeping branches and dangling petals drifting softly down. It was like someone had combined three-fourths of a community college with one-fourth of a forest, and the effect was downright beautiful.

“We’re heading this way.” September motioned toward one of the farther buildings, next to the lone four-story in view.

Scoping out the campus as we walked, I saw more of the same, quasi-industrial building style mixed with an absolute decadence of greenery. Far more interestingly, I also caught sight of a few students. Three centaurs and what I took to be another half-fey were dashing about in some sort of tag-like game, though from the way they were jumping and yelling at random intervals, there were clearly far more complex rules at play. The centaurs had a visible advantage in open running; however, none could corner or react at the speed of the half-fey, which appeared to even things out.

Further along, we passed a fountain with a giant, open stone book in its center, water spraying out from the top and edges. A cluster of students was gathered around, listening to a woman with blue-white skin and ears that held a distinct likeness to fins in their design. Curious as I was about what they were discussing, all the signs indicated that it was a class being held, and I certainly wasn’t going to make my first impression by rudely interrupting an in-progress lesson.

After a long walk past the fountain, we rounded the school library, which was handily labeled in giant lettering along the front entrance. Set before it was a courtyard area with long tables and benches, the sort that would make it easy to share books and notes. I knew that to be their purpose because several were in use at that very moment. The majority of students appeared human-shaped, which was not always a given with parahumans; some showed more distinctive natures than others. By this point, however, I’d hung around therians more than enough to notice the telltale physique and unusual power in their movements. Anyone who looked entirely human, I presumed to be a mage, of which there were a few.

I even noticed a vampire present. His head was plunged deep in a book, but once I caught sight of his pale complexion, my nose made the

confirmation. Sitting by himself despite the crowd around him, mind entirely focused on the task at hand, I felt an odd surge of kinship with this student, beyond our shared undead natures.

September's unyielding pace kept us trekking forward, and I caught sight of shadows racing along the ground. My brain stuttered at that, half-expecting a group of intangible beings to rise and greet us before Gregor tapped my shoulder, pointing to the sky. Looking toward the stars, I saw several winged forms flapping overhead; with focus, I was even able to pick out strains of conversation. It mostly centered on some new arrival to campus, but once I realized I was eavesdropping on students rather than flying creatures, I turned my attention elsewhere. Being able to hear distant conversations didn't make listening in polite.

The longer we walked, the more I comprehended the campus's true size. While it was hardly ostentatious, the grounds stretched on much farther than it appeared to initially, with yet more facilities creeping into view. Passing the gymnasium, my feet faltered for a few moments, stunned at the scale. Despite being only two stories, it was vast, taking up the same space as five to six of the other buildings, and was accompanied with a sprawling outdoor area visible in the rear.

"Why does a school this size need a gym that big?" I muttered, more out of an inherent curiosity than an expectation of answer. The overhead costs on a structure that size would be considerable—not the sort one takes on without reason.

"For much the same reason as there are so many buildings overall and a campus of this size to house them: specialization," September explained, tapping his left foot as he spoke.

I took the hint and started walking again; thankfully, this didn't curtail his explanation.

"Housing this many parahumans on a long-term basis requires a multitude of considerations. Those centaurs we passed earlier, for example. They need proper space to run daily, rooms configured with their shapes in mind, and a designated field to use for a restroom, just to exist here in a healthy manner. That doesn't include details like exercise for their human halves, classrooms, desks, and so forth. Multiply that by not only the usual collection of parahuman types, but also the rarer ones, and you arrive at a campus that, while small in terms of overall students, is comprehensive in its facilities."

It was a thorough answer, which I appreciated; however, my mind had gotten snagged on one detail in particular. “The staff here make the centaurs... do their *business*... in a field? As in, outside?”

Proving the power of a strong fey-ancestry, September managed to make an incredulous face undeniably striking. His attention flicked to Gregor, who said nothing, before composing himself once more. “Apologies. At times, I forget that not everyone has gone through the Agency’s courses on parahuman culture. Centaurs are not only part horse biologically, they also feel a greater kinship to nature and the cycle of life. The ‘business,’ as you put it, is a potent fertilizer, which they see as their returning nutrients taken back to the earth. Truthfully, they view our entire use of toilets as a bit blasphemous, and some of the more devout will kick them to pieces on sight.”

My wave of concern for the poor students forced to defecate in a field fizzled away as I considered the situation in a new light. Rather than being neglectful, the school was providing its students with what they needed to feel comfortable – also probably endeavoring to avoid shattered porcelain.

“I was not aware of that,” I admitted. “Though I’m glad to hear the school makes sure everyone feels at home.”

“There aren’t many places where we can manage this sort of coordination, but this school is an exception. This is largely thanks to communal respect for Headmaster Sequoin. When she speaks, important ears listen.” September shifted as he spoke and looked around when he said the headmaster’s name.

I did the same reflexively, catching a hint of motion some ways behind us. Keeping my eyes locked, I watched to see if it returned—perhaps a minion of Quinn’s striking before we were expecting it. After several seconds of nothing happening, I reminded myself that we were standing in a public space, and there might be any number of people walking around behind us. Besides, I was with Gregor and an Agent. If an attack came at that moment, the greater danger would be to the students around us.

Since September wasn’t sharing my flashes of concern, he was already walking by the time I got my bearings. Luckily, the destination wasn’t too far off. September led us to a three-story building that was almost a perfect cube, labeled Unger Hall, and walked through the front glass doors. Inside, on the opposite side of the entrance, sat a pair of people in chairs. One was huge, nearing the size of Richard Alderson, the largest therian I’d ever

encountered. Next to him, as if set as a purposeful counter, was a lean woman with a wide smile and sharp eyes.

“Professor Samuel Timmons. Professor Euranthia Glade,” September greeted each in turn as we entered, before motioning to me. “This is prospective Professor Fredrick Fletcher.”

“This is the guy I’ve heard about?” Professor Timmons had the voice I’d expect from a man of his stature, potent and piercing.

“I think he seems interesting. Not often we see a member of the undead in khakis, let alone a sweater vest.” Professor Glade’s words were kinder, despite coming from a mouth loudly chewing gum, yet I couldn’t shake the sense there was something predatory in her tone.

It was far from the warmest welcome, but I’d been braced for worse. Vampires didn’t have an especially beloved reputation in the greater parahuman world. The fact that we could feed on other supernatural creatures and gain some of their abilities would have been uncomfortable enough, without the worst of us openly treating other parahumans as prey.

“I’ve been amazed and delighted just by the opportunity to see this place. Thank you for having me, and for your work in helping those who seek to learn.”

That reply garnered a pair of knitted eyebrows from Professor Timmons and a smug grin from Professor Glade. “What did I say? Interesting. Hope you decide to stick around, Potential Professor.” She blew a bubble with her gum and popped it, as if to put a period on the point.

September took us past the entrance to a set of stairs, explaining as we went. “This building houses the general teaching staff, outside of those who need more specific accommodations. There’s only one entrance, which is watched over by at least one staff member. This is partly for safety, partly in case a student needs help, and largely to dissuade pranks from being pulled.”

“Pranks? Like flushing a cherry bomb down the toilet?”

“I... suppose that analogy works.” September let out a particularly long sigh. “Just presume that rather than being from a dated coming-of-age film, the pranks are being pulled by students with access to magic and supernatural abilities.”

Suddenly, a guard at the entrance made a lot more sense. Knowing what magic could do in skilled hands, I could only guess at the trouble sowed by those still learning the craft. I was so lost in my imaginings, in fact, that I

didn't even notice we'd arrived until September came to a sudden stop. We were on the second floor, standing in front of a room labeled 208.

“Apologies for the delay. Once inside, I can properly explain the measures that have been put in place. Be aware, Fredrick Fletcher, that what you are about to see is not a topic for general discussion. Hellebore has chosen to reveal one of Winter's great treasures to you, even placing it at your disposal. In these matters, discretion will serve you well.”

With that cryptic warning suitably delivered, September led us inside.

WE ENTERED TO FIND... AN APARTMENT. A NOT ESPECIALLY LUXURIOUS apartment, though there was a small living space, a kitchenette with microwave, a bed, a desk, and a modest bathroom. Plainly mass-produced, my guess was that most of the other lodging spaces in this building were much the same. There was one key difference I was soon to discover, as September shut the door behind us and locked it firmly.

Gregor kept a close eye on the half-fey as September moved into the living room, walked up to a blank patch of wall, and held his hand over it. A new cluster of glowing symbols manifested. However, this time, September didn't merely unlock whatever seal was in place. Instead, he waved me over, a cautious Gregor trailing steps behind as I complied.

"The fey realm holds a great many magics, more even than you'd be capable of imagining, living on this side. What you view as impossible, the fey may only consider difficult. However, even among such splendor, artifacts like this one are rare. I am going to attune this ward to you, Fredrick Fletcher, so that only you will be able to access the object inside. Although other protections are in place, any attempt to remove or damage the artifact will be viewed by all of Winter in an extremely negative light."

I gulped reflexively. Even with no physical need, the action was familiar and comforting. What kind of magic did they send that demanded such caution, and did I really want it in the place I'd be living? There was no sense in refusing without fully understanding the situation, though, so when September took my hand, I allowed him to press it up against the glowing patch of wall.

In a blink, I could now see a small alcove in front of my hand, where before there had only been an expanse of smooth white. Sitting inside was the most beautiful hourglass I'd ever laid eyes on. Rather than glass, it appeared to be formed from crystal, and sitting within was a sand so white and fine, it was as if someone had managed to grind up snow itself. Unlike most hourglass sand, it did not merely sit and wait. It was already flowing up into the top half, where it would swirl around in a complex pattern before snaking back into the bottom, creating a seamless, constant flow of unbroken sand.

"Gregor, would you be so kind as to step into the hallway and shut the door?" September asked. "Thirty seconds outside should be plenty."

My bodyguard shot me a questioning look, to which I gave a nod. Even with my recent uptick in worry, I couldn't imagine September attacking or murdering me under these circumstances. Putting aside the basic question of morality, there were too many connections tying him to the crime. Surely an Agent would manage a less incriminating method.

Once Gregor was out, September reached forward and tapped a small gem in the hourglass's center. The gem settled into a new slot, making a slight *click*. From his pocket, September produced a phone, the stopwatch app already loaded. He clicked it, and then we stood in silence, waiting for Gregor.

A full minute later, Gregor opened the door, and the gem snapped back to its original position. I stared blankly at September, the phone showing numbers, and my bodyguard. At last, understanding arrived, perhaps a bit more delayed than I would have preferred. "Gregor, how long did you wait?"

"Thirty seconds, as instructed."

Yet there was the stopwatch app, showing that it had been a minute.

"Gregor, once more, if you please."

Another look to me, paired with an accompanying nod, and Gregor closed the door once more. This time, September spoke as he adjusted the gem, taking it past the first notch from last time and setting it into the second. "Opening the door breaks the effect; it can only sustain itself in a small, contained space. Your locks have been reinforced and augmented to ensure proper privacy."

Again, the stopwatch app was used, and I watched as the numbers climbed higher. One minute, no Gregor. Two, still nothing. Only when we

reached two minutes and thirty seconds did the door swing in once more, resetting the hourglass in the process.

I could understand why September had made Gregor go out, rather than give me instructions and do it himself. It was hard not to doubt even my steadfast friend, who I knew would be precisely counting down the seconds. I'd seen magic pull some incredible feats before, but this was a step beyond.

"It's distorting time, isn't it?"

"Stretching and condensing," September corrected. He nodded to the moving sand within the hourglass. Sometimes, it would collect, growing into a dense section, where in other parts, it was thinned to barely a wisp. "Only within a very limited space, and not without consequence."

Sometimes, I missed having a heartbeat. In that moment, I was sure I'd have felt it slamming against my chest as I drifted, awash in imaginings of what such consequences might be. Keeping up his polite attitude, September didn't leave me wondering for long.

"For you, the time is still real. It passes, it accrues, it weighs you down. To any creature with a finite lifespan, this artifact represents danger along with opportunity. Use it too much, and you could age past your peers and family, even burn an entire life away. Hellebore warned me that many a great scholar and artist have been gifted its use, only to spend years of life in the span of weeks. Part of why it is so rarely offered anymore."

"Ah, now the extra security precaution makes sense. You expect any member of the undead to be sorely tempted, since we could use it without the downside." I wasn't wounded by the worry; given the power September was describing, they'd have been wildly irresponsible *not* to make sure it was well protected.

Vampires didn't age because we were already dead. Which meant the consequences of using stretched-out time were irrelevant. My mind recoiled at the thought of what Deborah, the member of the Blood Council who'd evaluated and guided me, could do with five times the hours to scheme and plan. And she was one of the few vampires whose judgement I somewhat trusted. If it were my sire... the fey were right to lock this away. My greater concern was whether it should be out in the world at all.

"With this, you should be more than capable of meeting the demands of your business and teaching classes, and still have time for decompression, as required." September's hand reached for the central gem once more. However, he didn't push it, only gestured to the slots where it would click

into place. “The first node is double-time, giving you twice as many minutes. Next is five-time, as you saw, then ten-time, and finally, hundred-time. Regardless of the setting, once the room is breached, it will collapse. If the door is locked, I recommend you not get trapped under furniture or magically stuck to the floor, especially on the highest setting.”

“Guessing those aren’t hypothetical examples?”

“As I said, there are reasons this artifact is so rarely allowed use. However, with both you and your bodyguard being ageless, the concern is minimal. Especially since it removes any reasonable barriers to fulfilling your favor.”

Ah, right. I’d gotten so absorbed in the school and time-magic that I’d nearly forgotten *why* Hellebore was going to all this effort. She wanted me in this apartment, away from Charlotte Arms and its constant protection, far from the friends who watched one another’s backs, exposed and vulnerable enough to make a tempting target.

Bad as that sounded, it could be far worse. Hellebore had given me a task that seemed useful, more than adequate resources to keep up with my own work and was ostensibly sticking me far from danger. The more I saw, the clearer it became that she’d taken a page from Deborah’s book—or maybe vice versa, depending on their actual ages—and had preemptively cut through all reasonable obstacles. After everything I’d seen, I wasn’t even sure on what grounds I *could* try to refuse. This wasn’t a job she was hiring me for; it was a favor I owed. One way or another, she would see it paid.

It was a lot to contemplate, but for the moment, another fact had more thoroughly captured my attention. “Gregor, you don’t age either?”

A curt nod was all the response he bothered with. The tidbit was hardly shocking. I knew his actual form to be stone-like, but even mountains eroded over time. Then again, mountains couldn’t heal—not that I knew of, anyway. An image of a mountain-sized gargoyle appeared in my imagination, and I found myself suddenly wondering how gargoyle growth worked. Did they stop upon reaching certain thresholds, or was it forever ongoing, like lobsters?

The unexpected knock jolted me out of my head and back into reality. Gregor was moving toward the door with his body held wide, making sure he’d block any attacks that came through. September was only a few paces

back, hands holding a short sword that had been nowhere on his person moments prior.

Slowly, Gregor pulled open the door, which parted to reveal the intrigued expression of Professor Glade, halfway through blowing a bubble with her gum. “Not even up there ten minutes, and excitement follows. Seems you’re going to be an interesting coworker, Mr. Fletcher.”

“The position hasn’t been formalized yet,” I replied, trying to politely avoid committing until I was sure.

“Then Heaven help us once you’re here officially. We just caught someone trying to sneak inside, and after a bit of pressing, the guy admitted he’s here for a vampire named Fred. Timmons went sniffing around outside. He’s pretty sure our uninvited visitor followed you across campus.”

With a twist of his wrist, September’s sword vanished, leaving behind a look of consternation that tried, and failed, to mar his feyish features. “Found so soon? No one should know of your arrival this evening. Only Hellebore, the headmaster, and I were aware of the night we’d visit.”

“Maybe he was tracking by scent?” Professor Glade speculated.

“Oh? Is the intruder a therian?” I’d been so blindsided by the professor’s arrival and announcement, I hadn’t even thought to ask about the parahuman nature of our unexpected guest.

“Not unless he’s some kind of deathrope. Our guy is a vampire.” Professor Glade’s casual tone was an ill fit for the sudden storm of terror that descended upon me at her words.

Someone had found me already. Someone clued in and connected, who could find out about the trip I hadn’t even planned for, and then sneak onto campus undetected. The pool of potential suspects was already worryingly low, and when adding the criteria of “vampire” to the mix, there was a single suspect who stood out above the rest.

Quinn must have found me yet again, and worse, was all alone with an unsuspecting professor.

I ALL BUT FLEW DOWN THE HALL, GREGOR STRUGGLING TO KEEP UP. SPEED was just about the only physical front where I had an advantage on my bodyguard, but it was an issue that rarely came up. In truth, I have no idea what sort of notion was in my head to drive me *toward* Quinn, except that when he was left to his own devices, someone I cared about often came close to death. First, he'd gotten Asha in the car-bomb before my wedding, then he'd managed to burn down Charlotte Manor. Whatever he was scheming, whoever he planned to hurt next, I knew I had to do *something* to stop him.

But when I burst through the stairwell's exit on the first floor, my sire was nowhere to be seen: only Professor Timmons, towering over a pale male who appeared to be in his early twenties. Short brown hair, medium height, dressed like it was daytime in the middle of summer with a tank top and basketball shorts. Hearing the door slam open, this mystery fellow turned, his face freezing up at the sight of me. The reaction was especially curious because I didn't recognize him, although there was something familiar in those features.

All I knew for certain was that unless he'd gotten ahold of some magical, shape-changing potion (which I made a mental note to ask Amy about), that definitely wasn't Quinn. In the time we spent staring one another down, Gregor arrived looking a bit sullen, with September casually strolling past a few seconds later.

"That was quick," Professor Timmons noted. His huge hand laid itself delicately on the presumed student's shoulder. "Keith here tried to slip past

Euranthia while I was in the restroom, thought he could avoid her. So if nothing else, he's learned something today."

"Why were you tracking Fred?" September asked, his distant, casual tone dispelling under the weight of an Agent's authority. "You've been tailing us since the library. Did someone ask you to watch Fred's movements?" Despite the size difference between Professor Timmons and September Windbrook, the half-fey was suddenly the far more intimidating presence in the room. That intangible charisma had taken on a deadly edge, adding a sense of palpable danger to his every word and action. I honestly wasn't sure if it was an aspect of fey-magic or an Agent trick, but it was undeniably effective.

"What? Asked me? Who do you think would—" Without warning, Keith's face became a thunderstorm of hatred, his eyes focused into twin lightning bolts. "Go to *hell*. I'd sooner rip my fangs out with silver tongs than help that son of a bitch for one second."

Oddly, that was what finally made it click for me. I didn't necessarily match that level of vitriol, but I could understand it. Especially as the rage-filled face before us snapped into place, far more recognizable in this form. When I'd last encountered Keith, he'd been nothing but a mindless weapon wielded by a true monster.

Some years ago, I'd been called out to do inventory in an Agency outpost, though that had turned out to be merely an excuse. The assignment had put me on Quinn's radar and well within his grasp, too tempting a target to pass up. My sire had been busy making more vampires and controlling them with the help of a magical artifact. He'd used his team to attack; however, thanks to Arch and a few other surprises, we managed to not only escape, but also to free the vampires under his thrall.

One of whom was now standing under the watch of a huge therian, glaring daggers at an Agent. Walking out between them, I held up my hands, signaling for peace. "Keith—that's your name, right?"

"Keith Rivera," he confirmed, tone noticeably less harsh than what September had received.

"A pleasure to meet you. I am Fredrick Frankford Fletcher, but most everyone these days calls me Fred. Tell me, Keith, am I correct that we've met before? On a frantic night that concluded in a basement fight?"

Whatever residual rage he'd been holding on to drained away, leaving the young man standing unsteady once again. Still, he managed a nod. "I'm

sorry. I shouldn't have bothered you. I just saw you walk past the library tonight and... I'm sorry. I can go."

"Not really how it works when you try to sneak in somewhere off limits," Professor Timmons interjected. "While we may not have erasers for you to clap, there's still a communal kitchen in here that's long overdue for a good scrub."

"If it's relevant, I don't believe the student intended on sneaking into the teachers' facilities. I was the object of his focus, to a distracting degree. Whatever you decide, I'd like to speak with him afterward." Turning my words to Keith himself, I tried to put on my best efforts at a reassuring smile. "I've wondered how you all have been doing since that night. Please, can we talk?"

Knocking the stairs door open loudly, Professor Glade finally rejoined us at that moment, visibly panting. "Jumping jiminetty! You are a speedy little trio. Feels like I'm back in my track and field days." Only after announcing herself did she seem to take in the room—and its tension—as a whole. "What's the deal? Does the kid know our new staff member or not?"

"We've met before, under unusual circumstances," I summarized.

"I... tried to kill him." Keith's gaze fell floorward, peering into a dark past I'd only witnessed a small part of. "It's all still so clear. I remember that night, all those nights, no matter how much I try to forget."

While that confession prompted Gregor into moving closer to me, it had the opposite effect on everyone else. September's intensity dispelled as he affixed an affable expression once more, and the formerly restrictive hand of Professor Timmons turned into a reassuring grip on Keith's shoulder. I wasn't sure if they'd been briefed on the details of my past or could simply see how much distress the young man was in; whatever the case, I was just glad for the change in atmosphere. When things get tense and people are scared, someone tends to end up hurt.

"September, how about you take Fred and his guest to go see the kitchen," Professor Glade suggested. "Samuel's going to want some snacks soon, so bring us back a few goodies, as well."

"You can also feel free to tidy up a little," Professor Timmons added. "I wasn't joking about that overdue scrub."

As the teachers retook their posts, September led us through a small door at the room's side, down a short hallway and to what looked like an office break room, only with an old stove, a sink full of dishes, and a fridge

installed. Cupboards lined the walls, and plastic tables with matching chairs were spread throughout the room, not that any of us went to sit in one. I couldn't imagine the seats supporting therians like Professor Timmons; Gregor would probably crash through the obstacle without even a pause. Gargoyles were incredibly dense, part of what made them so hardy, and sank like a stone when walking on snow.

I waited for a moment to see if September and Gregor would give us any privacy before realizing that that wasn't going to happen. For all we knew, Keith was putting on an act about hating Quinn, or had a magic stone jammed in his brain that would turn him murderous if we were left alone. Neither scenario struck me as especially likely, but then, I hadn't been expecting my car to blow up en route to my wedding venue either.

"How are you getting along here? Are there adequate feeding systems in place? Able to provide you with enough blood?" While nothing about Keith hinted at hunger, I felt compelled to check on the essentials first, of which there was none higher for a vampire. Even aside from keeping ourselves fed, having a steady supply was important to keep our thirst at bay. Deborah had given that lesson the hard way, making me feel the loss of coherency and control that came with too little nutrition. A hungry vampire was a danger to anything that could bleed.

"Huh?" The question was apparently not what Keith had expected, as he tilted his head to the side, processing for several seconds. "Oh, uh, yeah. They keep a good stock. I've never had any issues."

"That's good. Make sure you stay well fed, otherwise it's very unpleasant."

"I remember." The distant look flashed in Keith's eyes once more, his body pulling in on itself. "I remember being starved and ravenous, barely able to form thoughts. He liked us in that state, crazed and feral, snapping at anything that moved, so when he loosed us on a target, there was nothing to hold us back."

To that, I had no idea what to say. I'd suffered under Quinn, certainly. However, I'd never had control of my own body ripped away. Never had my agency stripped, my mind burned away by hunger, my very will turned to his means. I couldn't imagine the sorts of horrors Quinn had used his makeshift army to achieve.

"I'm sorry. That must have been... unbearable." With no clean conversational stepping point, I opted to steer us toward another subject.

“How are the others? Are any of them enrolled with you?”

The reaction I got wasn't quite as severe as what September had received earlier, but Keith suddenly snapped his head up with a pointed glare. “Why? What do you want with them?”

“To know if they're doing all right?” My reply came out as a question, I was so taken aback by the shift. “I left contact information with the Agency when they took you in, but no one ever reached out.”

His anger vanished as quickly as it had risen, uncertainty once more taking its place. “Yeah, they mentioned that at the time, but we didn't...” Another strange look, this time to Gregor and September as well as to me. “Mr. Fletcher, are you here to kill me?”

Odd a conversation as it had been up to that point, nothing had prepared me for that sort of question. I was momentarily stunned silent; September remained quiet and professional. It was Gregor, of all people, who verbally reacted, in a fashion.

My bodyguard laughed.

Not long or loud. In truth, it would best be described as a soft chuckle; however, to know Gregor is to appreciate the severity of such a reaction. It was unexpectedly comforting, reminding me that I hadn't suddenly gone mad, and yes, that sort of suspicion was absolutely ridiculous.

“Keith, setting aside the fact that I didn't know you were on campus until a few minutes ago, why would I wish you any harm? Yes, we fought the last time we met, but I'm fully aware that you weren't in control of your actions. Even ignoring the collar's magic, it sounds like he kept you too hungry to think straight. None of that is even a tiny bit your fault.”

“But it was a direct slight against you! We've learned how that works in vampire society. Then more and more rumors kept coming to us, about you facing down the Winter fey, hanging around with the Blood Council—even breaking a rival clan entirely. When I saw you walk past, I guess I just sort of panicked.”

It wasn't the first time tales of my unexpected adventures had been shaped into something more expected of a vampire. Part of me suspected it was Deborah herself, or a fellow member of the Blood Council, who were behind that trend. The supposed misunderstandings happened with odd consistency, and it fit well within their goal of keeping vampires an intimidating presence in the parahuman world.

“Keith, please listen and hear me well. Whatever rumors you’ve heard are just that. I haven’t been out seeking power, and even if I was, the last people I’d want to use it on are fellow victims of our deranged sire. Quinn is the one at fault for everything. He is where the entirety of my ire rests. For you and the others, I have only compassion and a desire to help.”

Silence stretched between us as Keith searched my face for any hints of subterfuge or deception. “You really don’t hold any sort of grudge?”

“Entirely the opposite,” I assured him.

“That’s... not what I expected.” He looked me over once more, this time lingering on the sweater vest I’d selected for the evening. “Nor are you, overall. I’m sorry, Mr. Fletcher. I might have let rumors and fear get the better of me. Maybe I should have known better; some of the stories were pretty far-fetched. One said your wedding was performed by a dragon, and another even said you’d met the director of the Agency in person.”

Just as I was debating whether it was wiser to laugh those stories off or explain the truth behind them, the kitchen door opened behind us, revealing the imposing form of Professor Timmons.

“Sorry, everyone. Time to wrap this up. Word just came down. Headmaster Sequoin heard Fred was on campus and wants to meet with him personally. Apparently, the King of the West is a mutual friend, and she’s heard a good deal about you.”

HEADMASTER SEQUOIN'S OFFICE WAS FAR FROM WHAT I'D EXPECTED. Rather than a stuffy chamber filled with old books and leather chairs, Headmaster Sequoin had made a space focused on indoor-outdoor living. Huge windows ran along the top of the room; sliding glass doors filled the bottom, most of which were currently open. Past them was a lovely courtyard with several trees and a small garden, scattered with a few stone benches. The indoor part of her office was white and bright, with a heavy emphasis on florals as an aesthetic touch, like the roses woven into her doorframe.

As for the woman herself, she was spectacularly unassuming. Physically, she stood a touch below average human height, with a sturdy frame and piercing eyes. Despite the outward signs of aging, like the wrinkles along her brow, her back was straight, and there didn't appear to be any weakness in her movements. So far as my eyes could tell, she was just a normal person cussing on the edge of being called elderly.

My vampire senses, on the other hand, were buzzing in terror. The instinctive part of my brain that thought in terms of predator and prey had lit up the moment I stepped inside the door, urging me to flee as fast as my feet would move. This wasn't like encountering the hostile aura of a dragon; more it was an unspoken sense of power, a weight in the air that felt like it could crush me on a whim. If Gregor was there, I'd have looked over to see if he felt it too, but my bodyguard was yet outside, waiting in the hall with September. This meeting was just for the headmaster and me.

"Mr. Fletcher. You have quite the set of achievements for one so young. Alliances with therians, victorious conflicts against the fey, survivor of

multiple assassination attempts by your sire, and that's without even touching on the collection of talents housed by your clan. After successfully humiliating and breaking the House of Turva, I would have expected you to pursue a new endeavor befitting of such ambitions. Instead, I find you on *my* campus."

"It is a lovely campus, at that," I added, unsure of what else to say. If Headmaster Sequoin knew all of that, then certainly she was already aware I was present at Hellebore's request. "Though it was never my intention to trespass. I was told to come here for a temporary teaching position. I take it you weren't expecting me?"

Her faded green eyes looked me over. Hands drummed on her glass desk, causing the small cactus near her computer to rattle. "Hellebore told me she was sending an interim professor to fill in. She made no mention that it would be you, specifically. I trust you're aware of your own reputation?"

"Unfortunately, I am. Please allow me to add that the rumors are distorted and often misconstrued, painting a far more aggressive picture than is accurate."

"Interesting." Her focus seemed to sharpen, and I felt as if my every motion was being seen and catalogued. "Not *false*, just distorted. So you didn't attack the House of Turva, show how easily they could all be killed, and then turn them loose like you had no fear of any reprisal?"

That was a tough one to dispute; technically, her words were entirely accurate. All except for one, I realized. "No, ma'am. I did all that, but it wasn't an attack, it was a *counterattack*. They attempted to kill a member of my clan. It is my sincerest hope that they learned the lesson and will not try it again."

"And if they do?"

Turning my head, I looked out of the office's multitude of sliding doors. Though there was a courtyard behind Headmaster Sequoin, the left side of her office hosted a pleasant view of the campus. I could see several figures walking and running about between the main buildings. "Based on your careful interviewing of me, it's clear you take an active role in keeping the students safe. Were a true threat to reach this campus, I expect that you would do what is necessary to protect them. I have no quarrel with the remains of the House of Turva, but I do have a responsibility to my clan, to the people who have put their trust in me."

“That is a more measured response than one might find in other leaders,” Headmaster Sequoin replied, though her tone didn’t necessarily imply that to be a compliment. “Although, it is not what I would have expected from the man described by modern myths. In truth, Mr. Fletcher, it isn’t even the rumors that give me pause. There are always whispers of some new magic or threat. No one talks about it, but the universal parahuman power is gossip.”

Shifting, she leaned forward, as if to see me better. “No, what I found genuinely concerning was when a message came from Gideon. The King of the West knew you’d be placed here and put in a good word.”

When she stopped talking, I took it to be a pause. However, as the moments stretched on, my confusion grew. “With apologies, I suspect there’s something I’m missing here. Why would a positive recommendation raise concerns?”

“Because of its source. The King of the West is not an altruistic entity, and while he and I respect one another, we differ on a great many fronts. The sorts of people Gideon tends to like are those of uncompromising ambition, ones willing to do almost anything for more power. He is a dragon, and therefore has a dragon’s sensibilities. While I don’t hold that against him, it does color the way I receive his recommendations.”

That was a point that demanded a moment of mulling. Did I want to explain the unusual circumstances of Gideon’s and my... even “friendship” felt too presumptive a term. It was most accurate to say that I was a resource he considered useful, one that had proven to be trustworthy when straits were dire. Beyond that, I doubted he’d have been as cordial if Sally Alderson, Richard’s daughter and the charge Gideon was always protecting, hadn’t taken such a shine to me and my friends.

But I didn’t dare mention Sally, even to someone who knew him. The fact that the King of the West was protecting a therian would raise enough questions. Heavens forbid anyone snooped around enough to learn the whole truth. Sally wasn’t just a therian; she was a therian who could turn into a dragon, making her a sacred figure among all dragon-kind.

“Gideon and I first met through his host, a man who I later managed to help save a good deal of money. Since then, I’ve taken other finance-related jobs for Gideon and some of his professional associates. Increasing a dragon’s net worth is one of the safer ways to stay in their good graces.”

“Interesting.” Headmaster Sequoin eased out of her chair, stepping slowly to the edge of her office, where the courtyard began. “Come with me.”

I rose from my own seat, walking over to join as instructed. Before I could reach her, Headmaster Sequoin had moved past the barrier, walking between the limited foliage of the courtyard. Following, I was struck by the flood of scents upon reaching the outdoors. Like the teleportation arch from earlier, these scents should have reached me inside. I wasn’t sure this was another rip in space, though. Something about the courtyard must keep it protected, sealed off.

Headmaster Sequoin finally came to a halt in front of a modest bench, big enough for three people or two therians sitting shoulder-to-shoulder. “Half of what I’ve heard about you suggests you’re a rule-flaunting maverick, building power in an effort to shake up the parahuman power structures.”

“It sounds as though the people spreading such rumors have never met the heads of those parahuman power structures. Having stood before representatives of the Winter Court and the Blood Council, I am keenly aware of how miniscule my abilities are in comparison. To say nothing of beings like Gideon, Sheriff Leeroy, and Director Waxwood.”

“You’re right about one thing: very few people have met such an assortment of powerful figures. Most parahumans don’t even know those names; they certainly haven’t broken bread with them. Even in your defense, you betray your unique experiences,” Headmaster Sequoin informed me. “Which brings us to the other half of the information I’ve gotten, which paints you as an incredibly reasonable, soft-hearted accountant. Not a person likely to live past a few years.”

In all my fretting over whether I should accept the job and do Hellebore’s favor, it hadn’t even occurred to me that I might not be *allowed* to take the position. How would that shake out, in terms of the favor I owed? Presumably, I’d still be left in debt, and to an unhappy Hellebore at that. Yet it wasn’t Hellebore’s face that appeared in my mind as I contemplated the notion of just going back home.

It was Keith’s.

I’d left word and contact information with the Agency, but not a single one of Quinn’s vampires had ever reached out. For years, I’d wondered about them: how they were faring, if recovery was going well. The silence,

I assumed, came from a desire to put that hellish experience behind them. Never once had it entered my mind that they'd be *afraid* to contact me. But more and more, I was realizing I should have accounted for that. I knew the rumors about me were already spreading back then.

Keith had approached me, though. There was a chance that if I stayed, he might be willing to talk more. I could find out how the rest of Quinn's victims were holding up, and whether or not they needed help. More than that, I might be able to offer some genuine guidance. Living outside the vampire clans could be a difficult experience, one I'd only made it through in thanks to my friends. Friends that Keith didn't share – yet.

“Headmaster Sequoin, I had no idea this university existed six hours ago. The very last thing I expected to be doing with my coming months was to be taking on the task of teaching, especially at Hellebore's request. However, in my time here, I've been fascinated by the experience, and I sincerely believe there is some knowledge I can offer that might help the students in their education. It is an opportunity I would, at the very least, like to learn more about. Nevertheless, this is your campus, and the safety of the students is your responsibility. I'm happy to answer your questions if it will help set any concerns about me to rest.”

“Oh, no need for that. You already showed me your character in the office.” It might have been my imagination, but I thought I saw a wily smirk on her face for a split second. “There is another category of people that Gideon likes—let's call it affection-by-proxy. You could have told me about how Sally is getting magic tutoring from Amy Wells, or spends Saturday afternoons visiting Charlotte Arms, or was helped by you during a therian kidnapping. Instead, you fed me hollow platitudes, rather than even mention her existence. You made a disadvantageous choice for ethical reasons. For now, that's enough.”

On instinct, I looked around for potential eavesdroppers. We hadn't said anything truly secret, but Headmaster Sequoin was dancing precariously close. She caught my searching and shook her head. “This grove is safe. It's why I brought you in before we continued. Not even the wind will carry secrets from here.”

Feeling a tad silly, I stopped jerking my head about. Headmaster Sequoin was looking at me, seemingly waiting. It appeared as if we were moving past the feel-out phase of the job interview, shifting toward a more direct discussion. Before that could commence, however, there was one

more point that needed to be clarified. She'd respected me for choosing ethics over ease before; I could only hope the attitude held constant.

"You should know, there is risk in keeping me around. I have a sound suspicion that the chief reason Hellebore wants me to take this position is the hope that it will lure my sire into attacking. A not-unfounded hope, either. Based on his historical actions, there is a very real risk that my being here could draw Quinn, as well."

"I appreciate the advanced warning, Mr. Fletcher, but if you join the staff here, please focus your energy on the students' education. Security is my concern. Quinn would not be the first to attempt invading this sanctuary, but if he can make it six steps onto campus, he will be the most successful. This school is *mine*. Its staff and students are under my protection. The only question you need to concern yourself with is whether or not you'd like to be temporarily counted among that number."

Sitting down on the bench next to her, I turned my mind from decisions to details. "Assuming I was interested in the position, what exactly would that entail?"

“I THINK YOU SHOULD DO IT.” KRYSTAL RAN HER FINGERS ACROSS THE BACK of my hand as we sat on the couch, a small yet constant gesture of affection.

“You do?” Hard as I endeavored to keep the surprise from my voice, a fair bit managed to seep in, earning me a short chuckle from Krystal.

As promised, September Windbrook had delivered me back to Charlotte Arms before sunrise. Upon arrival, I’d sent word out to everyone in the House of Fred, making them aware of the situation as a whole. I held off on specifying whether I’d accepted the position. I knew how I was leaning, but it was a decision that demanded talking over with someone I trusted. Besides, as my wife and partner, Krystal deserved a say in matters concerning my safety.

“Look, Hellebore is never going to let a favor go, especially not one she has plans for. As you said, this isn’t an especially bad one. Trestlevend is like Boarback, in more ways than one. I’ve never met the headmaster, but I’ve heard stories whispered around the Agency. She keeps the peace. Even if Hellebore is using you as bait, she’ll put you well out of reach.”

“The harder I am to get to, the less it would look like an obvious trap to Quinn,” I conjectured.

“That’s probably the thought process, and a waste of effort. Quinn’s so batshit paranoid, I’d bet he assumes everything is a trap. No one avoids capture for this long by luck alone, especially not from some of the forces he’s pissed off.” Krystal moved her nails from my hand to my arm, all the way up to the base of my neck. “Besides, you want to take it, don’t you?”

“I do.” The words came faster than I’d expected, especially considering my initial reluctance. “It’s a chance to learn a great deal more about the

parahuman world, to build connections with future allies or clients, and I genuinely feel I might have knowledge to offer at least some of the students.”

Krystal nodded, a knowing gleam twinkling in her eyes. “Ones who happen to also be vampires turned by a murderous asshole of a sire?”

“Am I that transparent?”

“Yes, and also, I know you pretty well,” she explained. “As soon as you mentioned this Keith kid, I assumed it was a given you’d want to take the job. Though I do appreciate you talking it over with me, I don’t have any concerns that you’ve missed. It’s obviously dangerous to play bait, but owing a favor to Hellebore isn’t safe either. So long as we’ve got an easy way to visit and Gregor is at your side, I think it could be workable.”

A weight came off my shoulders; much as I did want to take the job, Krystal’s opinion mattered to me. If she’d been set against it, or had spotted issues I’d overlooked, then I would have had to consider her concerns, even to the point of passing up the position. With her agreement, the only hurdles remaining were logistical.

“Well, then. What do you think of using Al as the go-between, dropping off and picking up any physical materials as needed? Since she’s of the fey, I presume she’d feel comfortable using their space-bending magic doors. Plus, I would need Lillian to stay here. As the senior associate, she’d be essential for taking client meetings in my absence.”

Rising from the couch, Krystal walked to our kitchen and plucked a piece of paper from a magnetic pad affixed to the smooth silver metal surface of our refrigerator. Plucking a pen from a cup of them on the counter, she returned to my side and scratched “*Transferred Duties*” along the top.

“Al is a good selection for the runner; she’ll get through a fey-controlled facility much faster than an unescorted vampire. And yeah, Lillian is the obvious choice to take over on the personal relations front, but are you going to be okay with that? This business is kind of your baby. You meet or contact every client personally—heck, you named it Fletcher Accounting Services, putting your name right in there. Are you sure you’ll be all right with handing over that much control?”

“Honestly... no,” I admitted. Hard as the words were to force out, I knew I had to voice them, and it would never be easier than with Krystal at my side. If the House of Turva had taught me no other lessons, I’d at least

learned the danger in ignoring issues rather than facing them head-on. “The very idea of it fills me with terrible worry and anxiety. I’ve put so much into this business—its reputation as much as its client base. But that’s part of why I want the job, too. It’s the only way I might ever manage to take a few steps back.”

Krystal shot me an odd look. “I’m surprised you even *want* to step back.”

“It’s more that I have to, for the good of the company overall.” I struggled to find the right words for my concerns. They were difficult to explain to anyone who hadn’t been ground down by corporate structures. “We’re getting too big. Big enough that hiring more employees alone isn’t going to be a fix for much longer. I’m going to need people filling the same role as I do, taking on managerial positions. The more we expand, the less personal interactions I’ll be able to have with each client, and that genuinely bothers me. But I trust Lillian, and I know she can do the work. This is a good first step: far enough away so I won’t be in her hair, yet close enough to help if there’s an emergency.”

That earned me a snort and a shake of her head, sending dirty blonde hair tumbling about. “I have to give it up to you, Freddy. Never would I have expected a freelance parahuman accounting service to take off like this. You built something incredible. It’s okay to feel hesitant about handing over part of the control. A lot of people would never even consider loosening their grip.”

“And they’d choke their company with it,” I added. “A good employee relationship is the same as any other relationship: it’s built on trust. I trust them to do the job. They trust me to be there when needed and to keep the business moving overall. If I don’t allow the ones capable of stepping up and handling more to have a chance to prove it, then they’ll rightfully take those talents to an employer that puts them to proper use.”

With a few quick strokes of the pen, Krystal wrote the first entry under Transferred Duties: “Hokey Speeches—Lillian.”

“Hokey seems a bit harsh,” I pointed out. “Plus, I feel relatively certain Lillian would refuse to make any. Maybe if you gave it to Al.”

“Freddy, I spend my workdays around egos, assholes, and endless jockeying. Hokey is exactly what I want when I come home. I love hokey, and cheesy, and sincere.” She proved the point with a kiss, which proved to be a more drawn-out affair than initially expected.

Our time was interrupted by a sharp knock on the door. Krystal smoothed down her hair as we parted, then reached over and gave mine a good mussing. She offered no explanation other than a playful grin before turning up toward the ceiling. “Charlotte, do you know who’s at the door?”

What I’d once thought of as Charlotte’s default form appeared: a young woman who’d traded the antiquated dress for a stylish suit. There was an unusual stiffness to her this time, though. “Deborah, of the Blood Council, formally requests to speak with you, Fredrick Fletcher, leader of the House of Fred.”

Krystal and I both froze, jarred by the unexpected visit. Deborah was not an enemy—in fact, she’d been helpful to me several times. However, that didn’t mean she was quite a friend either. Deborah served on the Blood Council, the ruling entity that oversaw vampires. She was on the side of our species as a whole, working to make the lives and power of all vampires greater, but that didn’t mean she was always on the same side as each individual vampire. If one inhibited the rest, she would cut that one away without hesitation. Much as I respected—even liked—Deborah, part of me lived in fear of the day when I’d be her obstacle, rather than her ally.

After a quick glance at Krystal for confirmation, I piped up. “Please let her in, Charlotte.”

My front door unlocked and swung open, revealing Deborah in a vibrant green track suit, one that went nicely with her eyes. It was a curious fashion choice for someone who typically took care with her appearance, though I’d have been willing to bet it still came from some sort of high-end designer.

Krystal put it more bluntly. “Holy shit, who skinned Oscar the Grouch?”

To my near-shock, Deborah actually appeared a bit frightened by the suggestion. “Perish the thought. I avoid those things whenever possible. Some of us still remember the feral ones that used to roam wild.”

Both Krystal and I stared at the intruding vampire, but it was my wife who found her voice first. “I really hate that I’m not sure if you’re screwing with us or not.”

“And a fine evening to you as well, Agent Jenkins,” Deborah replied, using Krystal’s official title. While she was Krystal Fletcher in her personal life, she remained Agent Jenkins on the job. “As for the ensemble: I confess, this is far from my typical fare, but we dress as the job requires.

I've actually begun to grow fond of the increased comfort. I may even look into having a less hideous version of these designed."

She stepped fully into my apartment, graceful and quick, though this display was only a drop in the bucket compared to her real capabilities. "Forgive the late calling, word just reached me about the opportunity you've been presented with. My understanding is that you have been offered a teaching position at Trestlevend University?"

Since denial was plainly pointless, I didn't bother entertaining the idea. "A temporary role, just for one semester while a professor is away."

"And what were your thoughts on accepting this role?" Deborah pressed.

Something was up. Deborah dropping by unannounced didn't fall outside her usual patterns. However, she'd clearly bolted over from another task. It was this that tipped off how important the matter must be to the Blood Council; they'd pulled the person I had a known rapport with just to make contact. The question was which way they were hoping I'd fall.

"Krystal and I were just discussing it, actually. Going over the pros and cons. Did you have any that you'd like to add?"

As Deborah stepped closer, the door softly closed behind her, Charlotte ensuring that we had our privacy. "Tell me, Fred, did Headmaster Sequoin happen to mention how many vampire professors have taught at Trestlevend since its founding?"

"She did not, sadly. I would love to learn more about the school's overall history." In fact, that was one of my top priorities, along with getting the business plans squared away.

"Well, that part will be a very quick snippet. The answer is none. No vampires have ever been allowed to teach there, nor are many of our kind admitted as students. The Blood Council has no formal treaty or association with Trestlevend, and with our reputation for preying on other parahumans, we're generally deemed too dangerous to keep around in great numbers."

No wonder Headmaster Sequoin had been so hesitant when meeting with me. I hadn't even thought to consider it, but housing so many supernatural creatures in one spot would be a temptation to certain vampires. One like Quinn in Trestlevend would be an absolute horror, seeing the institution as a buffet of parahumans to steal power from.

"Which is why the Blood Council would be greatly interested in you accepting this opportunity. Just do what Hellebore has demanded, and I'll

consider it a personal favor. If you can manage to open Headmaster Sequoin's eyes to the possibility of more vampire students, perhaps even a permanent staff member, then you will find the Blood Council itself in your debt. I'm sure I don't need to tell the leader of a barely-born clan how advantageous that could be."

For Deborah to come calling with such an overt pitch, the Blood Council must have been waiting in the wings for just such an opportunity. I wondered how long they'd been trying to get a vampire foot in the door at Trestlevend, only for Hellebore to jam my leg through it on her own.

That level of interest made me more hesitant to accept the role, except that I still had no idea where any of Quinn's other victims were. For all I knew, they could already be in other clans, several of which had extremely unpleasant reputations. Finding them, potentially freeing them, was the sort of enterprise that would be much more manageable with the Blood Council's backing.

"I can't make promises on how Headmaster Sequoin fills her school, but I'm willing to spend the next semester proving that vampires can safely serve as teachers." I stuck out my hand. Deborah shook it almost instantly.

"You'd better," she replied. "If this ends with us further from that goal, don't expect the others to react well."

Too late, I realized that of course that would be a flip side to the agreement, but our hands were already shaking, and my path was set. The best strategy I had to get through the next few months was to put together the best class I was capable of.

Just as soon as I figured out exactly what that entailed.

AN EVENTFUL
GUEST LECTURE

“THIS PLACE IS INCREDIBLE!” ALBERT, A ZOMBIE WHO HAD ONCE WORKED as my assistant and now wielded a Weapon of Destiny, had his head on a swivel as we made our way across campus, boxes held loosely in his arms. After more discussion and finagling of details, I had officially been accepted as an Interim Professor for the semester. My first class was set to begin the next day, so we were using the night to finish moving in.

“That library did look pretty impressive,” Neil agreed. The once overly-ambitious necromancer had grown up a great deal in the past few years, helped along by guidance from both Amy and Arch. He was examining the new environment with interest rather than dismissal, no doubt fueled in part by Albert’s enthusiasm. The two were best friends, with a bond so deep that Neil had refused to let even death stand in its way. It was losing Albert that had first set him on the path of necromancy and had eventually led to their reconciliation.

His mentor walked at my side, a few small boxes firmly in her clutches. Amy Wells was a mage, specifically an alchemist, of incredible renown. The flickers of green light manifesting around her and the purple tinge to her sclerae were side effects from potions, though I wouldn’t even know where to begin guessing as to what kind. Amy was, to put it mildly, one of the smartest beings I’d ever encountered. Her depth of knowledge regarding alchemy was vast and ever-growing, in part because she did things like test potions upon herself.

“You ever wonder how a burrito would taste if they put the filling on the outside and the tortilla in the center?” Amy smacked her lips midway through asking the question.

Of course, testing magic concoctions on oneself didn't come without side effects. For this night, Amy had evidently whipped up something to calm her nerves, which she'd managed with "chill to spare," as she put it. It wasn't as bad as the first night we'd met, when Amy had accidentally dosed herself to a near incoherent state, but she'd brought up the idea of stopping for tacos more than once.

"I really appreciate you all helping me bring over these supplies." My collection of goods for the semester wasn't abundant: largely clothes, with a sprinkling of office supplies for powering through work. Everything else, including sensitive client documents, was left in the care of Lillian and Charlotte. If someone could get to them through Charlotte's new and improved defenses, then I'd have much worse concerns than the whereabouts of lost documents.

In my own arms were a stack of boxes filled predominately by sweater vests and pants, with a few different shoe options worked in as well. I'd even packed an actual suit, just in case formality was ever demanded. Based on my own college experience, it seemed entirely unnecessary. However, I *was* the leader of a vampire clan. If the need for it arose, I'd much rather have the option of dressing up. Image meant a lot among the parahuman communities. A strong enough reputation, like Gideon's, could end conflicts before they even started.

Trailing a few feet behind us, scanning for threats sneaking up on the rear, was Gregor with the last of the boxes. He had a much lighter load than he was capable of handling—all items that could be dropped without damage if he needed to spring into action. At one point, I might have dismissed the concern, but after enough unwanted surprises, I'd learned there was wisdom in Gregor's way of thinking.

"Our pleasure," Albert replied with his usual enthusiasm. "I always wanted to check out college. Died before I had a chance to go. Didn't even get to do any campus tours."

"Plus, the magic department has been up my ass for years about doing a guest lecture." Amy mumbled the words more to herself than as part of the conversation, a small shudder shaking her spine. "Teaching one-on-one is fine. Talking to a whole room of watching eyes... yuck."

I hadn't pegged Amy as someone with a fear of public speaking; she tended to be vocal about whatever thought she had while in the moment. That was around friends, though. Thinking through it, I'd never seen her

address a large crowd. Public speaking wasn't the most commonly shared fear for nothing. No wonder she'd picked potions with an emphasis on lots of chill.

Our route was more circuitous than my first trip to Trestlevend, but it was a chance to see a wider range of the campus before I had to navigate it as a professor. Plus, Neil and Albert had been excited to check out the university from the moment I'd mentioned it. Both were around the right age for college, although undeath halted the aging process, and wielding magic slowed it.

We rounded a bend to find a large lake twinkling under the stars. Near the edge, students were gathered, a fire pit blazing with heat and warmth located in their midst. Further out, I saw several swimming through the chilly waters, moonlight gleaming off their scales. Yet everyone kept to the edges of the lake, for in the center was a stationary shadow. One look and the survival instincts of my vampire brain slammed into high gear. Whatever was in the lake's center, I apparently did not want to go diving and disturb.

"Wow." Neil's voice caught, struck by the unexpected sight. "I wasn't expecting anything near this."

"Myriads of parahumans means they all need specific environments. Making a merfolk go too long without a proper swim is like... eating a rock without mustard." Amy dropped the words as if she were bequeathing ancient knowledge.

"What about the cold-natured ones?" Albert asked. The winter air was chilly, but even a human wouldn't have required more than a sweatshirt. Hardly conducive to a being that lived in frozen climates.

Amy yawned, releasing a small blue cloud from her mouth in the process. "Temperature regulation is an easy fix. Just need an enchanted trinket." She pointed out to the splashing figures in the lake. "That's about comfort and happiness. Merfolk can survive without doing laps, they just grow unhappy. Like that movie with the whales in tanks."

For one terribly odd moment, I misunderstood Amy's reference, and my mind filled with images of orcas piloting giant tanks across a war-torn battlefield, firing heavy artillery at whatever poor soul had gone running from the site. After a few seconds, I realized she meant tanks as in large tubs of water.

I also found myself wondering if it was possible to get a contact high from potions, shaking the last image of combat whales from my mind. “Headmaster Sequoin seems to take her responsibility seriously. I’m glad to hear that that extends toward consideration for the students’ mental health, as well as the physical.”

Amy merely nodded, and Gregor stared on in his typical silence, but Neil and Albert both visibly flinched at the name. “Is something wrong?”

The pair exchanged a short look before Neil responded. “In our training with Arch, he’s said one of the most important parts of surviving is knowing when not to fight. The ‘run-list,’ he calls it. Part of preparing for that was memorizing a list of names, names of beings we’re *not* to challenge, offend, or directly engage with if at all possible. Gideon is on there, of course. As is Sheriff Leeroy, Director Waxwood, and anyone considered fey royalty. But the name you just used, Sequoin, that was among them as well.”

“Could be a different Sequoin?” Albert suggested.

My memory shot back to the headmaster’s office, to that crushing sense of power that emanated from her constantly. “I think Neil is in the right, but regardless, I certainly hope neither of you were planning on starting trouble with the headmaster. All the better if she’s terrifyingly powerful, since we’re counting on her to keep the campus safe.”

“Safety is an illusion brought on by complac – oh damn, anyone else just get hit by a burning desire for a peanut butter and jelly hamburger?” Amy’s attempt at wisdom was cut short by her own lack of focus, with some probable assistance from the stomach.

“We should get moving,” I suggested, though the sight before us was especially splendid. “After dropping everything off, we can go hunt down a dining hall.”

“Why, is someone hungry?” Amy scanned our friends, then the crowd around us, as if waiting for a guilty party to raise their hand.

I’d seen Amy scrambled before, and worse still than this; however, the extent of her impairment was starting to concern me. “Neil, do you know what potions Amy took tonight? She seems especially... alchemical.”

“Oh please, I’ve been higher than this on human materials. Bet you didn’t know it’s possible to make a liquor infused with cannabis and ecstasy.”

Ignoring his mentor, Neil shook his head. “Not the specifics, but I’ve seen her take this blend before. Leaves her spacey and relaxed. It’s what she uses to not get wound up before things that stress her out. Which you didn’t have to do in the first place. We could have just come and helped Fred move.”

“Listen, there are birds, there are stones, and there are bushes. Sometimes, one has to make critical evaluations based on the number of all factors involved and the necessary effort to strike each target.” Amy leaned back, so far that Gregor shifted slightly forward to catch her, though the limber mage proved capable of sustaining the uncomfortable position before snapping back to standing. “In other words, you gotta do what you gotta do.”

Sliding closer to me, Albert lowered his voice to a whisper. “When we asked why she agreed to give the speech, that’s all we got. Best guess is that it’s pressure from the higher-up mages.”

“What mage said they’re higher than me? Bring them out right now. We’ll see whose product packs more power.” Amy actually seemed to be looking around for a challenger, and her vocal objection had drawn curious gazes our way.

Not wanting to make a poor impression before I’d even had my first class, that seemed like a good indicator that we should get back to the task at hand. Finally moving on from the lake, we were once more on course toward my lodging for the next few months. Once there, I had unpacking to do, along with ample last-minute tweaks on the initial assignments. Most of it would be busy work, all in the effort of keeping my mind off the coming morning.

Facing down a class of parahuman students was going to be a challenge—of that, I had no doubt—yet shockingly, that wasn’t even the aspect that scared me most. Come dawn, I would be facing something I’d thought long ago abandoned in my past, a part of existence that was forever denied to me.

When morning arrived, I would attempt to walk in the sunshine.

STANDING AT THE EDGE OF THE DORMITORY'S DOORWAY WITH GREGOR waiting patiently nearby, I stared out into the brightly-lit world beyond. Warm morning light bathed the campus in a soft hue, gently sliding across every surface as the sun began its daily journey. To me, that warmth would normally be overwhelming—one touch would set my body ablaze. It had been that way from the very beginning, when I first tentatively touched the sun's searing light.

Old memories bubbled up as I stood in the lobby, safely shaded for the time being. Flickers of my early vampire days, struggling to understand what had happened, the rules of what I'd become. Of all things, it was my love of cinema that saved me. Knowing the classic vampire weaknesses gave me a sound starting point for what to avoid until it could be tested. Some had turned out to be bunk; I have no issues crossing running water whatsoever, unless there happens to be traffic on the bridge. But others, like silver and sunlight, had proven to be all too true.

Phantom pain shot up my arm at the thought of stepping outside. Memories of flash-fried fingers that slowly healed back to normal. That sort of pain across my entire body... at that point, I could only hope the end came quickly. Vampires couldn't go in the sun. It was a hard-etched truth in our existence, and nothing changed that. Not even Gideon's magic, which left me immune to silver, had any effect on the sun.

Yet according to Headmaster Sequoin, on her campus, I would suffer no ill effects. It had been covered as we settled logistics for my employment, though she wouldn't explain *how* such a thing was possible. The most I got was that the light had been "filtered," which explained nothing while

sounding expectedly mysterious. I did wonder if it was related to Amy's mentor, Cyndi, and her penchant for imported sunshine, but I still wasn't sure if that had been real, or just bluster. Headmaster Sequoin's claim would be much easier to test.

Professor Glade stepped out of the elevator, noting my position at the edge of the lobby. She was dressed smartly in crisply-laundered professional attire under a stylish tweed jacket, briefcase in hand. Though her stride never broke, she did whisper a bit of encouragement between pops of gum.

"You'll be fine. Good luck on your first day."

"Thank you," I called back, my words quiet in my own ears. It was as if they too were afraid of stepping foot outside.

Glancing down at my watch, I felt the unmistakable pressure of a schedule pressing down on me. If I didn't leave soon, I risked being late to my class. The professional in me balked at such a notion – and as a first impression, no less! Once more, my eyes lifted to the world outside bathed in that beautiful, terrifying light.

Steeling my spine and leaning forward, I extended my left hand, stepping ever so carefully forward. Inch by inch I advanced, until the first golden rays landed upon my pale flesh. I instantly winced, reacting to pain formed by memories before the real deal would even have a chance to announce itself. After that initial, self-induced jolt, though, I felt... nothing.

No, not nothing. Sunshine.

Before I recognized my own actions, I was shoving the rest of my hand forward, then the whole left arm, followed by the right, until at last my face broke out from under the building's cover. With that simple motion, I found myself standing in the morning light of the sun, not a single wisp of smoke or flicker of pain to be seen.

If not for the alarm on my phone, I could have stood there until dusk in utter joy. Years I'd spent trapped in the dark, knowing that this was forever lost. Yet there I stood, a vampire once again feeling the sun wash over them. It was a reminder that magic made almost anything possible, assuming that one could find the right one. Just as Quinn had found a way to tear apart Charlotte's original form despite its heavy protections, Headmaster Sequoin had discovered a method to make the sun safe for vampires. The power of possibility cut both ways.

At the sudden buzzer in my ear, reality reasserted itself, driving me from my reverie. Lovely as it was to stand in the sun, I had a class to reach. Besides, walking through the light seemed just as appealing as remaining stationary. I hurried to get moving, Gregor close behind.

Trestlevend University was quieter in the morning than at night. However, it was far from deserted. Even at this early daytime hour, I could see various students and staff walking about. Most could pass as human, the obvious parahumans were much fewer. Or perhaps these were the same students, employing some sort of magic or method to hide their true forms.

While Trestlevend was openly parahuman, many of the courses it offered were intended for those who planned on mingling with mortal society. Which meant that some students used this time to work on their disguises, attending class in the shapes they planned on presenting to the world at large. Headmaster Sequoin had warned me that as someone with ample experience passing among humans, I'd likely be asked for opinions on their efforts, and that I should be as honest as possible. Spotting issues now was much safer than being caught wrongfooted in the outside world.

Given the university's curriculum, there was no need for an entire building dedicated to their business program. It had a greater focus on history, culture, and above all else, magic. Not only the craft of mages – though they did have quite a program on that front, according to Amy – but courses on the location, identification, and use of enchanted items. Classes that dove into the origins of commonly-known parahuman types, hunting for commonalities between our various mythologies. I'd even seen one session offered by a "Ruins Explorer," with a description that sounded an awful lot like the author had watched *Indiana Jones* directly before coming up with their syllabus.

For the duration of my time as a professor, I would be in the Mortal Studies building. According to the class listings, my room was between *Delicate and Deadly: Fundamentals of Human Anatomy* and *Basic Beats: Introduction to Mortal Music*. The building itself was quite mundane, with no curious architectural choices, like a roof landing space for the winged students, or literally creeping ivy that shifted positions – both things I'd seen in my walks around campus.

Once inside, I began to suspect that this building had been made intentionally boring. There was something about the uniformity of everything, the polished yet predictable design. It all felt so very... human.

Turning that idea around as I walked through the freshly waxed halls, I could see a certain amount of sense to the choice. This was a place for preparing those who wanted to interact with mundane society. Giving them an appropriate setting was one small part in that process.

Despite my nearly late start, I'd made excellent time in crossing campus. Though I hadn't noticed in the moment, standing in the sun had apparently put a spring in my step. When one has a vampire's body and is capable of moving at exceptional speed, that little bit extra can have a pronounced impact. I made it to my classroom with fifteen minutes to spare, my bodyguard jogging to keep the pace.

In my first surprise of the day, I discovered that I was not alone. Already seated in the modest room were four seated figures, and one who was standing. One of them, I recognized immediately, given that we'd already met. The vampire named Keith was seated in the middle rows of desks, clad in a hooded sweatshirt despite the outside air's chill posing no true threat.

Another of the students was nearly as recognizable, despite us never having encountered one another. Just as one would be hard-pressed to mistake a person with fey blood for a half-fey, so too was there a sharp, noticeable difference in those with full fey ancestry, especially their royalty. I'd seen it up close with Hellebore. The flawlessness of their features moved from aesthetic to borderline alien, their movements like music set to the motion of the world. In this case, that motion was typing away on a smart phone. The young man wore a jacket with some designer label and gave me a long look as I stepped inside.

Next to him stood another fey, who appeared older than his compatriot. He was well-dressed, standing silent and still, observing every detail. Being around Gregor had taught me the hallmarks of a bodyguard, and this fellow was making no efforts to hide them.

Seated in the front row was a young woman wearing a pantsuit, her dark hair tight and an open notebook set before her. Visually, she appeared entirely human, and there were no telltale scents I could catch in the air. Possibly a small therian; larger frames and muscles were a trend, not a rule. Those who shifted into smaller animals tended to present slimmer builds.

Far in the back was a mound of purple and black hair, loudly snoring. Looking it over, I was genuinely bracing myself for how best to educate a

sentient blob of living hair when the owner turned and I realized it was just a sleeping student with a voluminous, and unrestrained, hairdo.

“You’re him?” The young fey man was speaking, his eyes measuring every piece of me and my ensemble. Given the khakis, sweater vest, and sensible shoes, I felt the outfit was entirely appropriate to academia. However, it was usually not what others expected when encountering a vampire.

“Interim Professor Fredrick Fletcher, here to teach Basics of Human Business.” From my briefcase, I produced a stack of syllabi. “I’ll go ahead and pass these out. Then we can give new ones to people as they arrive. Feel free to ask any questions, however, know that I might have to revisit the topic once the full class has arrived.”

“Looks like we’ve got an optimist,” the fey replied. “You think more people are coming to this? Mortal Studies isn’t exactly the hot thing on campus. I wouldn’t even be here if I had a say in the matter.” His eyes traveled to the guard at his side. Protector and observer, perhaps?

In the front, the attentive woman spoke up. “Don’t listen to Pieris. There’s always a reasonable demand for this class. Learning how humans do business is important for a lot of professions, and even if you don’t use it right away, the background looks good to potential employers.”

“Who told you my name?” the fey, apparently named Pieris, demanded.

“You arrived in a giant limousine that left a trail of ice in its wake and had a herald announce your presence the first time you entered a dining hall. Shit like that gets around.” Her neck suddenly grew flush. “I mean stuff! Sorry, sir.”

“Accidents happen,” I reassured her. “I fear my wife has inured me to the sounds of cursing, anyway. May I ask your name?”

“Valencia Ogden.” With the momentary gaffe forgiven, Valencia returned to her direct, crisp way of speaking.

“Pleasure to meet you.” I gave her a syllabus, then handed one toward Pieris. His guard intercepted, however, and took it with a nod.

From there, I brought one to Keith, who greeted my approach with a wary smile. After him came the sleeping student, who, up close, I could see was a young, human-looking woman. I left a syllabus on an empty, adjacent desk. Technically, class hadn’t started yet. This was her time to rest if she wanted it.

Minutes ticked by as the students silently read their syllabi. Two more joined – a thick-necked fellow presenting all the signs of a therian, and a sickly, thin woman with slightly glowing eyes. I kept waiting for more to filter in, but as the class’s start time drew closer, Pieris’s prediction seemed to be coming true. While six students struck me as low, especially for a classroom that had forty desks, I owed an on-time lesson to those who had arrived.

As the hour dawned, I shut the classroom door, leaving it slightly ajar. “I’ll leave this accessible in case we have any late arrivals. In the meantime ___”

“Late arrivals? You really don’t get it.” Pieris snorted, motioning to the few figures in the room with him. “This is already a niche class. Only a few degrees require it; the rest take it as an elective. Add in that it’s being taught by *you*, and the only students you’re getting are the ones who have to be here for their degree, the ones being forced into it, like me, and a couple who are curious about the vampire making so many waves.”

Staring at my nearly empty classroom, understanding thumped me in the back of the skull. Headmaster Sequoin wasn’t the only one who’d gotten wind of the exaggerated rumors surrounding my antics.

It seemed my reputation had beaten me to Trestlevend.

AFTER TAKING A FEW MOMENTS TO COMPOSE MYSELF, I SPOKE ONCE MORE. While the reputation complication was hardly ideal, it was a hurdle I'd grown practiced with dealing with over the years. "Much as I know the parahuman world loves a good rumor, I fear the ones you've all heard about me have been greatly exaggerated."

"So you didn't marry a crazy powerful agent?" That came from one of my later arrivals, the thick-necked fellow I suspected to be a therian.

I barely resisted the urge to wince. He'd picked an event I had neither the ability nor the desire to deny. "That one does happen to be true, Mr..."

"Arlo Urser," he replied.

"Nice to meet you. And yes, my wife is incredible at her job, but we work in very different fields. Krystal's accomplishments reflect upon her own efforts and abilities. I have been, at best, an enthusiastic supporter."

A *snap* rang out, and my eyes instantly skimmed over Keith and Arlo. As the parahumans I suspected to have augmented strength, they were the most likely to have accidentally broken something. As it turned out, however, the noise came from the front row, where Valencia had cracked her pen clean in half.

"Agent Krystal... Jenkins?" The words dripped slowly from her mouth, like she couldn't believe she was speaking them.

I didn't love that reaction, but there was little point in dodging the truth. Krystal, and agents in general, didn't keep low profiles in the parahuman world. The point of agents was for them to act as a deterrent, the threat of facing them meant to outweigh any desires to break a treaty. It was a harsh system by design; parahuman culture was built on the concept of power.

“I take it you’ve heard of her?” That was the hopeful option. My second guess was that Krystal had come for someone Valencia knew, which would undoubtedly cause friction.

Her head was nodding as Valencia took me in with fresh eyes. Less overtly cheerful, more analyzing, she looked me over from head to toe, as if expecting me to grow wings. That notion might have seemed sillier if I hadn’t seen Krystal do that very thing during some pre-wedding complications in the fey realm.

“Wedding an agent with that reputation is respectable enough. What I find far more fascinating is that Mr. Fletcher made quite an impression on my aunt some seasons past,” Pieris interjected. “Hellebore views you as a pawn.”

“Isn’t that a bad thing?” It was the first time Keith had spoken during the entire class; he’d been keeping his profile low. Head down, not drawing attention, he and the college-aged version of me would have been peas in a very tightly shut pod.

Pieris spun around in his seat, leveling a stare directly at his vampire classmate. “In many regards, absolutely, but it is also a form of compliment. Pawns have uses, even value. While Hellebore looks at Fred as a pawn, the fact remains that she *does* see him. The rest of you would be nothing more than background to her, as relevant as the cheap paint on these walls.”

“Very cool way to subtly work in the fact you’re fey royalty. Not obvious or egotistical at all.”

I looked around the room, hunting for this new voice, before my gaze landed upon the mass of hair in the back of the room slowly being pulled back to reveal an exhausted young woman. Bags were under her eyes, and there was an imprint of a pencil on her forehead; she’d apparently passed out on her writing implement.

“Fey have royalty?” Keith muttered aloud. I doubt it was intended for the room at large, but he was still getting accustomed to the supernatural world. One thing many parahumans had in common: excellent senses, such as hearing.

“Fey have *true* royalty. Nothing like the pitiful impressions humanity cobbled together,” Pieris corrected.

We were barely five minutes into class, and already things had spiraled out of hand. I decided to try to right the ship before we drifted too far

askew. “Did anyone have questions about the syllabus? Clarifications on the required reading, maybe?”

Slowly, a thin hand from a figure at the back lifted up. It was the late arrival with the emaciated frame and glowing eyes, her arm tentatively extending an inch at a time. I pointed at her before it was all the way up, rather than force her to have to finish. “Go ahead. Please add your name to your question, though. It will help me get to know everyone.”

Her voice was a curiosity; it was undeniably soft, yet I heard each word clearly despite the distance between us. I was accustomed to picking up distant noises with my vampire hearing, but this was somehow different. It was a detail I might have given more consideration, if not for the actual question that was asked.

“I am called Lorian. Whispers have reached my people, stories of a vampire and a dragon working together. We know such a thing to be impossible, yet the rumors persist. Tales of a man with your name, and the King of the West.”

That got the attention of everyone but Keith, although Valencia was already staring at me about as hard as I thought she was able. “To clarify the most important part of that first, I would never claim to have worked together with Gi—the King of the West.” I barely stopped my tongue in time. Betraying my familiarity with such a figure would only invite more questions. “I have worked *for* him, because I had the right skills for the task at hand. The tremendous majority of which have all been accounting-based, exactly the sorts of skills we’re going to be covering in this course.”

“Uh, no.” The tired woman was staring at me now, absentmindedly rubbing at the impression of the pencil. “You’re full of shit. Dragons have a natural aura that sends vampires screaming in the other direction. Maybe you’ve worked for someone who serves the King of the West, if even that part is true.”

Strangely enough, I found myself facing an element I’d never considered dealing with in regard to my reputation: doubt. So often the problem was my accomplishments being overstated. I hadn’t given any consideration to the pitfalls of someone thinking me a liar. Normally, it would be a minor concern – I didn’t actually *want* people thinking of me as powerful – but in this case, it threatened to undermine my credibility. I was accustomed to working around rumors; losing my students’ trust would be a much more troublesome obstacle.

“You are partially correct,” I informed her. “While dragons do have that aura, and I can tell you firsthand that it is extremely effective, some can choose to suppress it when they wish. The King of the West is not just any dragon. He acts as a diplomatic force, meeting with other parahumans, including vampires.”

All of which was true. I just left out the fact that Gideon had claimed to learn that trick *after* I’d gained immunity to his aura from a drop of his blood. Given their reaction to hearing that I even knew such a famous figure, finding out that I’d drunk from him would destroy any chance I had of attending to the actual classwork.

“Also, I haven’t caught your name yet.”

“Teagan Stokes, and that still smells fishy to me.”

“Then by all means, you are free to disbelieve me, just as you are free to look into the matter and confirm I’m telling the truth. I have not come here asking for you to trust the rumors circulating about me. I’m here to teach you about human businesses. Does anyone have a question about that subject, or the class in general?”

To my genuine shock, Pieris raised his hand. After I nodded, he held up the paper I’d handed out. “Are we spending today’s session reviewing the syllabus?”

“That is the plan, yes. We can sta—” I cut myself off as I noticed Pieris rise from his seat, the silent bodyguard stepping back to make room. Folding the page twice, the fey stuffed it into the back pocket of his jeans, then took out a phone and began texting as the pair headed toward the door.

“I can read a piece of paper on my own. My deal forces me to show up for classes. This is a glorified getting-to-know-each-other session. Our time has better uses. See you next class, Professor Fred.”

Since I’d left the door ajar, they didn’t even have to bother with the handle, yanking it open and all but gliding through. I noticed Gregor and the bodyguard exchange a sort of knowing look, and then they were gone. By the time I’d turned back, another member of the classroom was packing up their things, and it was just about the last one I’d have expected.

Valencia was already halfway out of her chair, carefully arranged notebook and pens now jammed forcefully into her bag. “Me too. I gotta... I’m sorry.” Then she was gone, off like a shot through the door, so fast the poor woman nearly clipped Gregor, a collision that would have ended very painfully for her.

Odd as the departure had been, I wasn't yet willing to give up on our first class. However, I noticed Lorian and Teagan were both gathering their belongings, as well.

"Since it looks like this session is a bust, I'm going to head out," Teagan explained, evidently noticing my interest. "There's a guest speaker coming to talk alchemy, and I want to grab decent seats."

Lorian's explanation was less straightforward. "I glimpsed the inevitable and wished to keep at the forefront."

Part of me wanted to object at the exodus, but two of their classmates had already strolled out. It would be strange to suddenly make an issue of attendance halfway through the exit. Besides which, I'd shown up knowing some of the students might be uncomfortable with my presence. If they didn't want to be around, then I had no grounds to compel them to stay.

"All right, everyone. Seems like today is just going to be a write-off. *However*, starting next session, we will be moving on to the lesson plan. While I won't take roll, there will be information covered in the lectures that will show up on the exams. I'd advise either coming to take notes or making good friends with someone else in the class who will."

With permission officially given, Keith and Arlo started packing up as well. I busied myself with the stack of leftover syllabi. I'd made fifty, enough for every chair in the classroom, along with some extras for backup. What had been made out of preparedness now felt like arrogance. Had I really expected that many people to come to my class? I'd barely gotten six, one of which was open about the fact that he wasn't present by choice, and another whom I suspected might never be coming back.

How small did this class have to get before it was no longer tenable? According to Hellebore's favor, I was here specifically for Pieris, and he was the one student who had to keep coming. In theory, even if everyone else dropped out, I'd still be fulfilling my obligation. But I'd wanted to make more of this opportunity than just clearing a debt.

Keith was the last one out the door, lingering as if he wanted to chat, then darting out when I looked up from my stack of wasted documents. Seeing no reason to hang about in the classroom, I took my things and exited, locking the door behind me.

"Where to next?" Gregor asked. Since the schedule expected me to be teaching for a while yet, we had time to burn, though my destination was already set.

“How about we swing by the cafeteria and pick up something for Amy? One of my students reminded me that there’s a guest speaker at the alchemy department, and knowing her, I’d bet she’s got a bad case of nervous hunger.”

BY THE TIME WE REACHED THE ROOM IN FLAMEL HALL WHERE AMY'S lecture was taking place, the space was packed with students. They hadn't set her up in an auditorium, per se, but the room was sloped downward, allowing for stadium-like seating that gave everyone a good view of the teacher. Or in this case, the visiting alchemy specialist.

Many of the students had the human appearance of mages, though a fair few were obvious parahumans. I wasn't entirely sure if one's parahuman state precluded the practice of magic or alchemy; all the spell-casters I'd encountered were either human or dragon. While plenty of parahumans had mystical talents, those weren't called on through memorized words and gestures. Vampires couldn't wield magic, nor could the undead in general, as I understood it. Something about the energy used being related to life – a connection my kind no longer possessed, but that a therian or fey would have in abundance.

Although I could see Neil and Albert near the front, Gregor and I found open seats available at the rear of the room. In my lap rested a brown paper bag with several sandwiches, a snack Amy would have to wait to enjoy. She was already speaking with the professor behind a large display table. On it were beakers, burners, a miniature cauldron, a mortar and pestle, and many other implements I didn't recognize on sight. A small alchemic lab at Amy's fingertips – evidently, this presentation involved more than just a speech.

Fewer than five minutes after Gregor and I sat down, the short man with a long silver beard in an antiquated suit and bowler hat that Amy was speaking to waved his hand. Immediately, the room fell silent. Since I

hadn't been speaking, there was no telling if the effect was due to respect or magic. Either way, it was impressive.

"Silence, all. For those who haven't taken my courses directly yet, I am Professor Gert, head of the alchemy department. Joining us today is a prodigy in the field, a mage of incredible talent and accomplishment. Amy Wells holds many distinctions: she has created several new potion recipes that are now widely used, has pioneered developments in the realm of chemical reactions in parahuman neuroreceptors, and has even learned aspects of magic with instruction directly from a dragon. Please join me in giving her some applause, followed by your quiet attention."

Professor Gert got the clapping he'd demanded, though I wasn't sure if the request was truly necessary. The crowd seemed genuinely enthused to hear Amy speak; however, none made more noise than Neil and Albert.

Walking up to the desk, Amy looked out onto the crowd and gave a small half-wave. Even from this far off, I could see a faint emerald glow along her skin and through her hair, though what potion had caused such an effect, I had no clue.

"One sec." From her pocket, Amy produced the familiar form of a vial. Popping off the cap, she slammed down the yellow liquid in a single gulp, shuddering visibly from what I presumed was the taste. Flashes of yellow flared in her throat and face, rising until her brain was crackling as well, visible flickers spurting out from her ears. The effect eventually faded, though a faint yellow glow lingered in Amy's eyes.

"Much better." She wagged the empty vial for everyone to see. "I call it Portable Courage, though really, what it does is target and suppress the parts of the brain associated with fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. If you ever have to give a speech to a room full of young mages, I highly recommend keeping some on hand. But like all potions – all magics, really – there are drawbacks to using it. Anyone here want to take a guess as to why?"

A few students looked to Professor Gert; however, he made no move to correct his guest. Apparently, he was fine letting Amy run her guest session as she saw fit. Slowly, hands began to rise, and Amy was ready to pounce. "Yes, the guy with the bright shirt."

A young man in what was indeed a vibrant hue of electric green lowered his hand. "The altered mental abilities come with a tax on your physical body? Directed energy to the tasks has to come from somewhere."

“Not a bad theory,” Amy replied. “Wrong, but based on a solid starting hypothesis. That said, as you get more capable in your skills, you’ll learn to precisely direct where the energy for spells gets drawn from. It’s possible to infuse the potion with enough magic that virtually nothing gets pulled from the wielder, or to target an energy source like the body’s natural fat reserves. Calories fuel every other part of life – I say, why not use them for magic too? Plus, it helps me keep a consistent robe size.”

Hands rose once more as Amy surveyed her options. “Let’s hear from the woman in the hideous hat.” She paused for a moment, then shrugged. “Sorry about that, but at least you got a clue.”

Although the young woman in a huge, witch-style hat that was... well, a bit much... seemed momentarily taken aback by Amy’s words, her brow quickly knit together in concentration. “It... It makes you rude. No, that’s not exactly it. Unrestrained. You speak the truth, even when it’s not polite.”

“An answer as smart as that hat is ugly,” Amy pseudo-complimented. “It’s not a truth serum by any means, but I do have a sense of true impunity when I speak, like nothing could go wrong. Makes it hard to hold back my opinions and is why you probably won’t see this particular version in common use.”

“Are there more effective alternatives?” The woman with the ugly hat ignored Amy’s second barb, far more interested in the information being imparted.

Amy shrugged once more. “That’s a complicated answer. Does an effective alternative exist? My money says yes. Is it a known potion? Not on your life. The vast majority of specialists in our field hold their recipes closer than their children. What they sell is the product, never the means of creation. Details of what they offer and for how much are kept purposely vague, tricks to keep both mystery and prices high.”

Setting down her vial, Amy stepped forward, making eye contact with as much of the class as she could. Her eyes even swept all the way to my section, lingering only for a flicker of a moment. “The recipes that *are* widely available come from the early artists of our field, those who worked before commerce and power overtook the drive of creation. More modernly shared recipes come from alchemists like myself, those who want to advance the art as a whole more than our egos or bank accounts. One day, those of you who pursue this path will have to make a choice of which route

to take. Unfortunately, I know what the majority of you will choose, but it's my sincere hope that today might steer a few of you toward a better option."

Having known Amy for years, I was well aware of her views on magic as an art form and her general distaste for the money, politics, and power-grabbing nature of the mage community. I'd never heard her make the declarations so boldly, though, and in front of a room full of impressionable mages, at that. She wasn't kidding about that Portable Courage's side effects.

While a great many students stayed silent, a few even nodding in agreement, several seemed perturbed by her statements. One in particular rose to her feet: a woman wearing clothing with designer labels on prominent display. "That is utter nonsense. If alchemists gave away their recipes, they'd soon find themselves destitute. A small knack for making potions doesn't give you any level of insight into business, and certainly not enough to question a foundation of our economic strategy."

Professor Gert opened his mouth to speak, but Amy was faster on the draw. "Kid, I'm sure whoever bought you that fancy outfit had all kinds of opinions on how this sort of thing should work, notions I promise you I've already had to listen to ad nauseam. And to put a real point on it, what you think doesn't matter. Do you know why?"

"I'm not going to—"

"It's because you're weak." Amy had no interest in hearing what the student wouldn't do, plowing right ahead like she hadn't even spoken. "Pay attention, because this is a teaching moment. Parahuman society runs on respect, which is fueled by power. You know why I can stand here and openly denounce the way most other alchemists do business? Because I have coveted expertise, dangerous allies, and a deadly amount of knowledge. It might seem like I'm being an asshole right now, but this is a lesson I had to learn the hard way: no one will listen until you can't be ignored."

Although a bit harsher than my approach might have been, Amy's advice was indeed sound. I, too, had taken the harder road in understanding that lesson, and my naivete had nearly gotten my clan destroyed.

The woman she'd been speaking with was absolutely seething. "Weak? You dare call one from the line of Caordin *weak*." Her eyes were narrowed to mere slits, hands half-curved into claws, though only in a figurative sense.

She seemed to be on the verge of casting, yet Amy remained completely unbothered.

“You’re a Caordin? I thought they specialized in necromancy.”

For reasons I couldn’t fathom, that apparently was the final straw. Jerking a hand forward, the woman pointed a wavering arm directly at Amy, her voice reaching dangerous octaves. “That is it! I, Cassidy Caordin, challenge you to a mage’s duel. If power is so important, let’s see yours put to the test.”

Every eye was on the younger woman as her declaration hung in the air – even Professor Gert had stopped trying to interrupt. The attention flowed downhill like a river, arriving at Amy while the room awaited her response. Her expression was downright placid. It seemed the angrier the student grew, the calmer Amy became.

“Put to the test? You’re lucky I have a soft spot for mages with more guts than sense.” Amy’s own gaze flicked briefly up to where Neil and Albert were sitting, where her apprentice was visibly fuming that someone would dare question his teacher. “There are some out there who would accept the challenge and crush you painfully for showing such disrespect. The worst of the lot might even kill you outright, just to bolster their own reputation. After all, you declared the challenge. There’s no reason to hold back.”

Cassidy turned a touch pale at that, yet her hand remained extended. I wasn’t entirely sure if it was courage or stubbornness, but I was slightly impressed all the same.

“Holding firm, huh?” Amy, too, had noticed the girl’s hand wasn’t going down. “All right then, what the hell? I came here to give the people a show. First, we’re going to do the alchemy lecture I had planned. After that, you’ll get your satisfaction, Miss Caordin. I assume a necromancer of your station has her minions on campus?”

“Of course. A true mage is always prepared.”

“Perfect.” Amy once more looked toward her personal student, though this time, it was not for a quick glance. “Neil, you and Albert have got until the end of my lecture to get ready. Me beating up a far less experienced caster doesn’t prove anything.”

Amy redirected her attention once more to Cassidy Caordin, who was wearing a mix of triumph and confusion across her face. “Instead, you can take on my apprentice.”

THE REST OF AMY'S PRESENTATION WENT RELATIVELY SMOOTHLY. THERE was a small fire during her preparation of one particular potion, and the students nearly panicked when she demonstrated an especially potent illusion potion that briefly gave her the visage of a horrifying monster. Copious notes were taken and ample attention paid, yet as the end drew nearer, the excitement increased.

A great deal of stares were directed at Neil and Albert, whispers about who they might be flying through the stands. Neither appeared to pay the attention any mind. Instead, they were speaking softly between themselves, pausing only to applaud for Amy at appropriate intervals. When the presentation finally wrapped, there was no exodus from the room as with every other class. Rumps stayed rooted to their seats as their owners waited to hear about the match they'd been promised.

Professor Gert addressed the issue head-on; he had a no-nonsense attitude it was easy to appreciate. "As I'm sure you all heard, with our speaker now finished, there will be a mage duel occurring shortly. While Amy was speaking, I secured us a space in the physical training arena. Both challengers have half an hour to gather any supplies or tools they might require, then are to meet us at Field Twenty-One. Do either of you object?"

"Thirty minutes will be more than sufficient," Cassidy replied.

"I'm sure it will be plenty," Neil said. "But we'll probably need someone to show us where that is."

"If you follow the flow of students from this room, they will lead you directly to it. With those matters settled, class is dismissed." Professor Gert waved his hand; however, this was no spell, or at least not a magic one. It

did have an immediate effect, though, sending the students surging up from their seats and flooding toward the door.

By the time Gregor and I made our way out, Albert and Neil had long since powered past, though we did find Amy waiting for us outside Flamel Hall. It was a testament to the excitement over a fight that so many students raced past her without even noticing the guest speaker was there. Together, we made our way toward the physical training arena.

Upon first hearing the words, I'd assumed it was a technical term for the gym. What we approached turned out to be something much more encompassing, however. It was a vast chunk of land all sectioned off into huge plots. Several had grooves worn into them, along with excessive hoofprints, while others boasted deep gouges carved into the dirt, and a few appeared to have been smashed entirely flat. These spaces were clearly used by parahumans for activities that didn't fit indoors.

A couple of the spaces, including Field Twenty-One, had rudimentary stands set up, though they were nowhere near sizeable enough to contain the crowd that had flowed from Flamel Hall. Instead, people grouped up along the edges, forming a border of bodies, leaving just enough space for the challengers to approach. The stands were left largely unused, save for Professor Gert, who'd beaten us there and motioned for us to come join. Amy went and I followed, bringing Gregor along, as well. He elected to stay by the edge of the stands, rather than risk testing their durability against his density.

Only a few moments after settling in, I caught the scent of death and fur approaching. From elsewhere on campus, Cassidy was arriving, a small cadre of minions at her back. These creatures had been brought back from the dead, but not in their original forms. Cassidy mixed-and-matched the different pieces; a wolf with the rear legs of some sort of jungle cat and a horn on the front treaded only a step behind her. Armadillo bodies with the heads of jackals and legs far too long for their frame loped along, snapping at the air. Thick tentacles poked out from a huge turtle shell, slithering along the ground in a very unsettling manner.

All told, Cassidy had brought just south of a dozen creations, the smallest being sort of a hamster-scorpion amalgamation that zipped along her shoulders. The crowd parted upon her arrival, no one wishing to be too close to any of those oddities. She didn't merely walk onto the field, either. Cassidy indulged in a full strut. Creating and empowering so many undead

was by no means a minor feat. Her pride at least came from a foundation of skill.

It was another five minutes before Neil and Albert arrived, the pair of them jogging from a different direction than Flamel Hall, the latter holding a long item in his arms. The crowd gave them room, though it was nowhere near the withdrawal Cassidy had earned. In terms of initial impressions, her army had plainly been victorious.

“I thought you might not show up,” she quipped as Neil and Albert stepped onto Field Twenty-One, a large plot of torn-up grass where untold matches had visibly been fought already. If either of them was using ranged magic, I’d have been concerned for the crowd at the edges, but between two necromancers, things should be more melee focused. Besides which, I had to remember that these weren’t just kids standing around. They were capable parahumans in their own right; no one here was helpless.

“Realized we needed to pick up something.” Neil nodded to Albert, who unclutched his arms and revealed... a sword. Different than the one still worn upon his hip – The Blade of the Unlikely Champion – this was just a mundane weapon, albeit a well-made one.

Cassidy seemed as confused as I – and the rest of the crowd, based on the murmurs. “You made a detour for a sword? The same kind your friend already has on him?”

“What Albert wields can barely be called a sword. Having seen it in action, I’d describe it as closer to a magic made manifest, with a penchant for slicing. We aren’t here for a contest of magical items, though. This is a battle of necromancy. If you can drive Albert hard enough for him to draw that sword, it would be our loss.”

There was a slight rattle from the scabbard of the Blade of the Unlikely Champion; as I recalled, weapons of such power could be a bit possessive regarding their owners. Hopefully, it understood context enough not to hinder Albert for the slight of using another weapon.

“Make Albert draw...” Cassidy’s eyes widened for a moment as she took in the zombie at Neil’s side, seemingly for the first time. “Hang on, *he’s* one of yours? No way you raised a vampire. That’s beyond even the most powerful of our spells.”

That earned a fair few surprised glances, several sent in my direction, where only a confused expression was waiting for them – one mirrored on

Neil's face as he replied, "What in the sage's spellbooks are you talking about? Albert isn't a vampire."

"Centaur-shit. I'm a necromancer too. I know what to look for. That much magic concentrated in his body, the agency with which he moves and acts... the guy is obviously a vampire." Cassidy stamped a foot aggressively, advancing a small bit toward her opponents. "Now call forth one of your actual creations, or I'm going to get things started for us."

In response, Neil shook his head, then patted Albert on the shoulder. "If you're going to say things like 'I'm a necromancer too,' then you shouldn't immediately undercut them by displaying your lack of knowledge. Zombies can withstand a whole lot of magic in their bodies, and without the telltale concentration around the heart. That should have been your tip-off."

Of everything I'd seen so far, the mass of undead minions included, what impressed me most was Neil's demeanor. There was a time when Cassidy's barbs and accusations would have easily wormed their way under his skin, but on that field, they found no purchase. Neil was focused on the task at hand, secure enough in himself to set aside the potential distractions.

"Zombies might be able to withstand it, but it's a terrible trade-off of energy and effort. No sensible necromancer would put that much power into one creation, especially something as replaceable as a zombie."

A ringing of steel arrived at the end of Cassidy's words. Albert had drawn his mundane blade and was pointing it toward the undead minions still swarming around at her back. "That was unnecessarily cruel. No one is replaceable."

He lowered the sword until its point was facing downward, shifting his gaze to meet Cassidy's. "I'd expect a necromancer, of anyone, to understand that."

Despite Albert's tone being gentle, bordering even on kind, Cassidy's reaction was instant and visible. Back stiffened, eyes narrowed, entire body turning tense. "Someone get this fucking vamp—"

"Albert is a zombie, Miss Caordin." Amy had stood up, causing the stands to wobble slightly, and cupped her hands to her mouth as she yelled. "We can have a professor of necromancy come out to confirm it, or you can look to the man on my right, if you want to see how magic flows through an actual vampire."

That stole a good deal of attention and placed it on me. Thankfully, I wasn't novelty enough to distract from magical combat. After some quick

gawking, heads faced the field once more. Only Cassidy watched me for longer, her magical vision seeing aspects of my existence that I was happily blind to. Having drunk the blood of a mage and gained such senses before, I mostly found them to be distractions.

Finally, she was appeased, turning back to face Neil and Albert. “Fine, he isn’t a vampire. But that’s not like any zombie I’ve ever seen before.”

“Thank you very much,” Albert replied chipperly. “I’ve never seen anything quite like your creations either. What do you call those?”

“Homunculi. You take the best parts and make something better than that coward called Nature would ever be capable of.” With an unspoken command, her creatures shifted forward, inching closer to engagement.

Perhaps sensing that the time had come, or running out of patience, Professor Gert muttered under his breath and tapped his throat. When he spoke next, the words echoed all around us, without reaching a volume that hurt the ears. It was a spell I’d have paid dearly for when running large meetings.

“Attention, all. A mage duel is about to commence. Those standing close, be sure to have a warding spell engaged for safety. I will act as monitor, and if I call for a halt, you are to do so immediately. Victory comes from your opponent fleeing the field, declaring defeat, or being unable to continue. Any attacks that come after I call for a finish are not considered part of the duel and will be punished appropriately. Any questions?”

The only sound from the field was the low-pitched mix of growls, roars, and general noise coming from Cassidy’s minions. Albert and Neil shook their heads, the former taking two steps forward and bringing his sword to a readied position.

“In that case, let the mage duel commence!”

THE FIRST OF CASSIDY'S CREATIONS TO CHARGE WAS, APPROPRIATELY enough, formed from the body and legs of a rabbit. A snapping turtle's head rested atop, teeth added behind its already deadly sharp beak, the clawed arms of some manner of rodent reaching for Albert's flesh. Worse, it was fast, much quicker than any living rabbit could have managed as it darted across the battlefield. The beak flashed, chomping down in the direction of Albert's knee.

By the time those jaws closed, however, he'd already pivoted away. It was more than a dodge, too. Albert's reaction was a single fluid movement: momentum from his pivot transferred to the swing of his arm, which arched the blade down in a perfect slash through the middle of the creature. Even bisected, it continued to struggle, the front and back halves flailing about.

"Not bad. You're quicker than I expected." Cassidy tilted her head slightly, apparently issuing a silent command. Another homunculus bolted forward, this one with the body and head of a crocodile. Its legs had been replaced with those of some jungle cat, and hedgehog quills poked up from the entirety of its back.

This one lacked the rabbit-turtle's speed; however, it had tremendously more grace. The movements were unnaturally fluid, its dexterous legs speeding around that tank-like center body. When it charged Albert, the jaws didn't even open. It just barreled forward like the goal was to smash right through him. Again, Albert dodged. However, this time, the monster didn't just keep moving forward. Shifting on its back paw, the homunculus reoriented, spinning its jaws toward Albert once more.

A zombie's sneaker smashed down on top of those jaws, pushing them and the head attached to the ground. Albert kept his foot in place, pinning the crocodile as his blade swept across its limbs. A pair of powerful slashes and suddenly, its front paws were lying in the grass. Albert finally moved his foot, leaping over to the monster's rear. It tried to twist around, but with only its hind legs; the motion was too complex. Two more strikes, and the threat was immobilized.

"The trouble with using animal parts is that they still retain their original flaws. Things like it being much easier to keep a crocodile's jaws closed than it is to hold them open." Neil was still calm, but there was a touch of smugness in his smirk.

"Did you give your zombie sword-fighting lessons?" Cassidy demanded, sounding momentarily more perplexed than antagonistic.

"Of course not," Neil replied. "He chose to take them himself."

A cloud passed over Cassidy's features, despite the clear sky above. "That's enough warmup. Time to fight like necromancers." She clapped her hands together three times, muttering under her breath. Seconds later, her hands flew into gestures, weaving magic at a rapid pace. A dark glow formed around three of her homunculi, all of which surged forward without warning.

The smallest of them was a raccoon covered in what at first looked like long, thick hairs. Then it moved, and I realized dozens of spider legs were integrated into its body. Judging from the size, the arachnid had either been parahuman or Australian in origin, and even then, it took quite a few limbs to support the large animal's torso. The effect was pronounced, however, effectively forming a live, shrieking, snapping mouth.

Also in the mix was the tentacle-tortoise, which undulated along at a much brisker pace than before. Lastly was a large snake, with more snakes poking out from its back, like wiggling spines with flashing fangs. They were all on Albert in seconds, not only fast, but coordinated. Tentacle-tortoise went low, multi-snake struck for the middle, and the raccoon-spider leapt for his face, screeching all the while.

I braced to see what Neil would cast to even the odds, only to stare as his arms remained at his side. Albert, on the other hand, was a blur of motion. Using the flat of his blade, he knocked the leaping raccoon torso into the tentacle-tortoise, tangling the two temporarily. With a twist of his

hips, Albert spun away from the multi-snake's strike, though two of its back snakes successfully managed to rip out small chunks of his arm.

He paid them back with an upward slash, parting the main snake's head from its body. Turning back to the other two enemies, Albert was ready when they finally pulled apart, a quick strike taking the raccoon torso through the center. Both halves kept scuttling about after landing, though neither represented any real threat.

"Boost!" Albert called, shouting the word over his shoulder like it was second nature. In an instant, Neil's hands were moving, and I finally understood. He hadn't been standing around doing nothing; Neil was at the ready, waiting to enact whatever spell Albert had called for. The spell was cast so fast, I barely caught the motions. If Albert hadn't yelled, I might have missed it entirely. The telltale crackle of energy that ran through him a split second later, on the other hand, was much more noticeable.

Kicking the base of the monster to tilt it upward, Albert chopped away every tentacle that tried to grab hold of him, jamming his sword into the shell and swirling it around. The remaining tentacles thrashed about wildly. However, Albert held firm, wrecking the homunculus's inner workings. Undead or not, there was a point where bodies became so destroyed they could no longer hold magic. Evidently, the tentacle-tortoise reached that point, its limbs falling limp. When Albert extracted the borrowed sword, it was coated in some sort of thick yellow goop.

"It's been a while since I met anyone who favored putting their power into one creation, rather than spreading it out to more forces. You've giving that strategy a sound showing. I may rework some of my army to have a few stronger components, but this is where the flaw of using one minion shows itself. He can't defend against enough enemies, neither for himself nor his creator."

This time, Cassidy's hands moved more slowly; there was a gravity of deliberateness to each motion. When she finished, her fingers were interlaced as though in prayer. A dark glow emanated from each of her creations – those still behind her, as well as the ones that had been cleaved through. Near the edge of the field, I watched as the two raccoon-spider halves smushed themselves together with a stomach-turning *plop*. The dark energy coursed along the seam, and suddenly, it was whole once more.

"I've heard the saying: with enough raindrops, it's possible to drown a dragon. But that depends on how much rain you have, and the size of the

dragon's maw." Neil's eyes skimmed the ground, noting the repaired homunculi with steady detachment.

Cassidy didn't have a reply ready this time. Instead, she unleashed the storm.

All of her homunculi surged forward as one; even the pieces of the defeated foes tried to get in on the action. Neil and Albert fell in close, but with enough room for Albert to still swing his sword. The mage's hands were a blur, and seconds before the horned wolf could impale Albert, a shield of light flickered into existence, halting the strike.

"That isn't necromancy!" Cassidy seemed to be having a war between curiosity and accusation as she spit out the words.

It was Neil's turn to not reply. He was a nonstop font of magic, casting spell after spell while Albert met the homunculi's charge. His prior movements had already been graceful; with Neil's magic helping out, my former assistant was approaching the realm of the fey. The next few seconds were as much a dance as a fight. Albert wound his way through the opponents, sword never stopping as he avoided major blows and the flickering shield absorbed minor ones. Bloodless limbs flew as they were sliced away, every strike whittling down his attackers.

Of course, having numbers on her side meant that Cassidy was holding reinforcements at the ready. As Albert finished his counter, a new wave of creatures rushed forward, hoping to strike before he was rebalanced. To Cassidy's visible shock, Neil leapt forward, raising a hand as he completed another spell. Rather than affect Albert, a wave of energy washed toward the homunculi, halting them in their tracks.

Cassidy let out a guttural yell and narrowed her eyes, the frozen homunculi inching forward once more. It was no use, however. The delay had given Albert time to recover, and he quickly carved his way through the slowed opponents. Neil was only steps behind, scattering the pieces Albert cut away, making it harder for the homunculi to heal. The creatures might not die easily, but it seemed they couldn't regenerate flesh, only rebound to it. Probably why the tentacle-tortoise remained a motionless shell, even though the raccoon-spider had so swiftly recovered.

Although some of Cassidy's minions were still standing, the fight's outcome was becoming clear. Perhaps in terms of raw necromancy knowledge, she was superior to Neil, but on the field of combat, there was no contest. He and Albert had spent years training under one of the

Agency's top operatives, had honed their teamwork through all manner of simulated and experienced challenges. The pair didn't even look pressed by the attack; they were calmly working their way through the remaining homunculi.

Whispers ran through the students. Several sent glances back up to Amy, who'd orchestrated these events. Events that happened to lead to her apprentice getting to test himself against a peer in front of an appreciative crowd. Manipulating the day so precisely toward this outcome would be a stretch for most people, but I'd steadily learned never to underestimate Amy's intellect. Then again, I'd also walked in on her trying to make toast out of pancake batter after testing a particularly potent potion, so it wasn't as if she was beyond error.

Whether it was the muttering of the crowd or her own awareness, Cassidy was growing distressed, the looming specter of defeat pushing her toward panic. "Fine! If that's the better way, then so be it. I'm not done yet." Gritting her teeth, Cassidy tightened her hands, funneling more magic into her creations.

Except the effect was different this time. All of the homunculi pieces were coated in the dark glow, only now, it was moving: stretching out, grabbing hold, pulling closer. The few that were still whole broke down first, collapsing into piles of parts. Yet the disassembly was not long-lived. Seconds later, the pieces glommed back together, fusing joints and appendages that had never touched before. Less than half a minute was all it took for the almost dozen homunculi to forge themselves into a single amalgamation.

Standing at least nine feet tall, the hulking horror was painful to even look at, the faces woven into its body stretched into terrifying grimaces. With a cacophony of sounds that formed a semi-howl, it lifted several of the arms draping off its torso-mound and pointed them directly at Neil and Albert.

"Let's see... how you like... my—" Cassidy's barb went unheard as she slumped forward, collapsing into the grass.

For a fleeting instant, I hoped that was the end of things. But a necromancer's creation wasn't destroyed just because their creator had lost consciousness. Instead, they had no one to hold their metaphorical reins.

Without anybody to hold it back, the twisted terror charged at Neil and Albert, another hideous howl screeching from its many mouths.

“SHOULD WE DO SOMETHING?” I ASKED, STARING AT THE HOWLING monstrosity. With no necromancer to keep it controlled, I wasn’t sure what to expect, save only that there would be chaos and violence.

“Absolutely,” Amy concurred. Rising from her seat on our shaky stands, Amy cupped both hands to her mouth and hollered loud enough to be heard over the beast’s braying. “Neil, Albert, go kick that thing’s ass!”

It wasn’t the sort of action I’d had in mind. My original hope was that Amy would have some manner of potion that could paralyze or unmake the creature. But to her credit, Amy’s yell jolted Neil and Albert into action, the latter racing forward as the former started to cast. Three clawed limbs swung for the zombie, one hitting the ground so hard it sent a spray of dirt bursting into the air. Albert struck back, taking half of the nearest paw as payment for the attack.

No sooner had it hit the ground than the flesh started oozing back toward the main body, remnants of that dark energy still flowing through it. Whatever surplus magic Cassidy had channeled in before the attack hadn’t been exhausted yet.

Neil finished his spell just as the huge homunculus took a multi-footed step toward Albert. After an initial surge of speed, it suddenly slowed, just as a bolt of power burst forth from Neil. Again, that dark energy flared, pushing back against the necromancer’s attempted limitations. Sweat formed along Neil’s brow as his arms held their position, shaking slightly as he refused to yield.

“What is that energy it’s using?” I wondered aloud, more open speculation than hoping for an answer. The fight had grown so engrossing,

I'd momentarily forgotten just who I was seated next to.

"Cassidy's own magic, of which she had a truly incredible amount. That woman comes from a long line of necromancers, and is a genuine prodigy in the field," Amy explained, having retaken her seat. "She channeled pretty much everything she had into it, more than even a transformation on that scale demanded. The rest is now acting as a reserve."

As Amy enlightened me, Albert was making use of the slowed foe, sweeping his sword in slice after slice, hacking away smaller limbs and hunks of flesh – anything to make it use more effort on healing. Hard as he worked, the dark energy kept pulsing, reforming whatever Albert chopped away.

Without warning, one limb managed to accelerate despite Neil's magic, eliciting a sharp yelp from the necromancer. Albert had time to partially dodge. However, he was still clipped and sent spinning back. He bounced off the ground twice, and then rolled to a stop. Before I even had a chance to worry for him, Albert was back on his feet, dashing toward his foe. The massive homunculi wasn't the only one with undead healing capabilities.

Unfortunately, it held an undeniable advantage in terms of reach and power. Neil had started dripping sweat, the effort of binding this creature visibly weighing on him. If not for the ever-flickering dark glow, I might have thought it was a poor tactic, but I had a hunch slowing their enemy was just one part of Neil's plan. Since fighting the spell seemed to drain its magical reserves, just like healing, they were trying to chip away at its power from two fronts at once. This wasn't about going for an immediate win; they were laying the groundwork to make that move later.

Albert managed to take off three more limbs before the next speedy strike forced him to retreat. Another came on its heels; he drove the zombie back as he avoided the crushing blow. The entire body was moving faster now, its limbs breaking free with more regularity. Neil had held it back for an impressive amount of time despite the visible effort, but he was wearing down. While the glow around the homunculus had undeniably shrunk, it wasn't feeling any strain from fighting off his spell. Finally accepting the inevitable, Neil released the binding, calling for Albert to get clear.

No sooner did his hands fall than the small mountain of undead flesh surged toward Albert, no longer content to be on the defensive. Racing around the side, using his sword to slash around the creature's body as he moved, Albert scurried around, avoiding the attacks. At first, it was a close

thing, but as the seconds ticked by, Albert's speed picked up, until I finally realized what was going on.

Neil had switched tactics; rather than slowing the homunculus, he was empowering Albert. Although this wouldn't drain the monster's magic, it did give his friend the best chance at survival. Plus, Albert wasn't resisting the enchantment, greatly lessening the stress on Neil to maintain it.

With an already nimble swordsman's speed and skill suddenly amplified, the homunculus's limbs struck only air. Albert wove his way through them, blade flowing like a silver river as he struck ceaselessly. The pair of undead minions were locked in a stalemate, one unable to hit, the other unable to deal any lasting damage. It was a temporary one, however. Eventually, Neil's magic would run out and Albert would slow, or the homunculus's reserves would empty, and it could be successfully carved apart.

What ultimately broke the standoff turned out to be neither scenario, in fact. Of all things, it was the sounds of an unconscious body stirring that drew one of the combatants' attention. Still lying on the ground where she'd fallen, Cassidy let out a small groan and shifted slightly. A minor movement, yet the reaction it caused was anything but.

Releasing a new howl filled with rage and bloodlust, the monstrosity suddenly bolted. Albert made no move to dodge, as his enemy was racing away in an unexpected maneuver. No doubt he was having the same wonder as the rest of us. Was it trying to flee, survive until Cassidy fully awoke, or something even stranger?

Amy was up again and shouting, but there was nothing fun about it this time. "It's going for Cassidy! It broke free and doesn't want to be bound again!"

In that moment, the entire battlefield shifted before my eyes. What I saw was no longer a mountain of flesh running toward its creator for protection. In its place was an unnatural horror attempting to crush a young mage. Neil and Albert both remained frozen for a bare moment after Amy's scream, understanding the implications and adjusting their strategy to match.

"Albert, time to lose!" Neil's hands snapped into a flurry of movement as he began to mumble once more, spasms rocking his body as he dug deep for another spell.

Using his enhanced speed, Albert cut a blistering path across the field, managing to get ahead of the homunculus. Planting his feet, Albert stood directly between Cassidy and her rampaging creation. Neil's spell concluded, dropping him to his knees – not unlike his opponent, though he'd managed to at least stay conscious. A crackle of light ran across Albert's skin, a direct contrast to the dark glow of his enemy.

Even with the spell in place, I feared to watch what came next. There was so much mass barreling toward Albert, and Neil had already been running low. How much power had he managed to put into this final spell? Would it really be enough to halt something that large before it could crush Albert and Cassidy both?

Onward came the monstrosity, an endless howl rising from its many gnashing mouths.

In response, a harmonic tone split the air, causing everyone present to recoil reflexively. Something in the magic that connected us recognized that sound, and the danger it represented. I could no longer see Albert; the mass of moving flesh had blocked him from view. Instead, I watched as the seemingly unstoppable mound began tilting to the sides. Yes, both sides at once. It had been sliced clean down the middle. The dark energy tried to reattach the two halves, but this cut was different. It refused to heal, to be unmade. This was no simple slice made by a mundane sword.

As the homunculus parted, Albert came into view once more. His borrowed sword lay at his feet. Clutched now in his hands was The Blade of the Unlikely Champion, a Weapon of Destiny that had chosen Albert as its wielder, and one he'd clearly made great strides toward mastering. Turning the weapon horizontal, Albert slashed once more, turning the two pieces into four.

Evidently, that was more than the remaining magic could handle. The dark glow finally fizzled and went out. The formerly cohesive flesh fell away. Without magic to keep it bound, it was just a pile of corpses. Albert stood over them all, waiting and watching, until Neil slowly made his way over and clapped his friend on the shoulder, assuring him it was over.

While the rest of those in attendance might always wonder who started the cheering first, I was privy to seeing its inception. Popping a small green potion, Amy started to hoot and holler, her voice manifesting several feet away. She stopped and restarted. This time, the sound came from a new location, those in her last one joining in. Soon, she didn't need to keep

pushing. The crowd had found their voices and were putting them to use. Applause, whistles, and lots of good old-fashioned screaming filled the air.

Neil paid it little attention, reaching down to help the still-recovering Cassidy up from her prone position on the ground. Despite the distance, my vampire ears were sharp enough to pick out their words, with a bit of extra focus and lip-reading for context.

“What... what happened?” Her face took in the scene as a whole, paling as she gazed at the mound of once-undead bodies. “Oh no. Oh no, no, no. I lost control. Grandmother warned me so many times, but I was sure I could manage.” Visibly shaking, Cassidy scanned the field, hunting feverishly. “How many people did it hurt? *Please* tell me no one was killed.”

Whether it was the loss, or seeing her own limitations, Cassidy had cooled considerably from her fervor in the classroom.

“No lives lost, and outside a little exhaustion, I’ll be fine. Are you okay? Bottoming out your magic like that is really dangerous.” Neil lifted Cassidy to her feet, where she held onto him for stability. It occurred to me that Albert might have made more sense for this task, as he wasn’t weary like Neil, but it seemed there might be more than practicality at play.

“The bigger danger was in what I let loose, not that it seems to have mattered.” Surveying the remains of her army, Cassidy shook her head. “I lost the tombstones out of this one.”

“Technically, we took the loss,” Albert pointed out. “Neil said it was your win if I drew my real sword. I couldn’t have stopped that thing on my own.”

For the first time, Cassidy’s eyes fell upon the blade in Albert’s hand, wincing at the amount of magic meeting her eyes. As her gaze moved, it landed on the spot where she’d been lying, only a few feet back from Albert and the remains of a charging homunculus. Seconds later, she looked back, examining both Albert and Neil in a new light. “I notice you said you couldn’t stop it, not that you couldn’t beat it.”

“Didn’t get a chance to find out,” Albert replied humbly.

“Perhaps we should call this a draw, then. Good reason to have a rematch one day.”

“I’d be all right with that,” Neil agreed. “I’d also love to talk necromancy in general, if you have the time. You’ve got some great tricks.”

Cassidy smiled – nothing like the fearsome grins of earlier, yet not without a danger of its own. “Your efforts were quite impressive, as well. I

expect we can learn plenty from one another.”

It was a nice moment, tainted only slightly by a mounting suspicion in the back of my brain. “Amy, tell me again, why exactly did you take the guest-speaking role today? Did you happen to know there was a necromancy prodigy in the class who was around Neil’s age?”

That earned me a few claps on the back, as Amy leaned in close enough to whisper, “I’ll neither confirm nor deny what you’re implying, but I do love to multitask.”

BY THE TIME MY SECOND CLASS ARRIVED, I HAD FORMULATED A PLAN. First, I'd categorized the elements of the situation that I could control against the ones I couldn't. My being a vampire, for instance, was an unchangeable aspect. Anyone whose issues with the class stemmed from that would have to find another professor. There wasn't anything I could do to alter the magic keeping me undead, rather than fully dead. Similarly, I'd resolved myself to make peace with the curious elements, like Valencia's strange escape. If she chose to talk with me about whatever was going on, I'd be there to listen, but otherwise, it seemed best to respect everyone's privacy.

There were, however, parts of the problem that *could* be remedied. At the top of the list was demonstrating to the students how valuable the class actually was. Pieris had mentioned it being niche, and while only he had to stay the entire semester, it was my sincere hope that I could show the others that their time would be well spent.

I'd seen firsthand how many parahumans out there ended up with crap deals and terrible contracts, simply because they didn't know any better. The parahuman community had a habit of insulating itself – not unreasonable, considering humanity's general reaction to anything slightly different, let alone magical. But there was no avoiding the human world entirely, and sooner or later, a person in my class would end up making a deal with someone used to far shrewder business practices. If I did my job right, then when that day arrived, they'd have some financial fangs of their own to bite back with.

All of that started with capturing their interest, though, which was why the students filtered in to find a guest speaker sitting with me at the front. Amy had generously agreed to make the trip back, not-so-coincidentally escorting Neil along to have another necromancy chat with Cassidy. She maintained that the pair were simply excited to finally have a peer at their own skill level, never betraying how heavy her hand had been in their introduction. I still had suspicions, but not a shred of evidence beyond how well everything had worked out.

Pieris and his bodyguard were the last to arrive, stepping into the room on the heels of Teagan, who'd gotten three steps in from the door and frozen solid upon seeing Amy. I felt pretty positive the wild-haired woman was a mage, so Amy Wells would be something of a celebrity to her, even before the antics of some days prior.

Despite my fears, everyone had returned for the second session. Lorian and Arlo were in their same seats, relatively unchanged from the first day's events. Keith had moved slightly closer to the window – perhaps he was trying to make the most of sitting in the sun. Teagan eventually dropped down in the same area as last time, while Pieris slid into an open seat near the exit. Valencia's shift was the biggest, having moved all the way to the far rear of the class, a direct contrast to her seat in the front row on day one.

With the full class assembled, I rose from my desk, shutting the door with a quick nod to Gregor, who was waiting in the hall once more. "Last time we met, it was brought to my attention that this class is seen as having a limited purview of usefulness. 'Niche' is the way I believe Pieris helpfully described it. Before anything else, I feel it is my fundamental duty to help you comprehend that understanding the basics of human business, the prevailing species out there *doing* business, will have measurable positive impacts on your life."

"So, you finagled a lauded mage to come play pitch-woman?" Teagan interrupted. "No offense to Mage Wells, big fan, but an old baseball player I liked shilling insurance doesn't actually make me think it's a good bargain."

"Well, here's a newsflash: I'm not just a shill for the Fred Club for Finance. I'm also a member." Amy's rebuttal earned a few polite laughs and far more blank stares. "Okay, clearly that one is too old for you all; going to skate past that before I have to dwell on my own age. The point is, Fred didn't have to ask me to come give you any kind of sales pitch. He wanted me to come talk to you about my own life and experiences, ones that led to

me seeking out his help. Because, like many of you, when I was getting formally educated, I believed the hype about how these sorts of classes were boring and pointless.”

The snap from Amy’s finger rang through the room with unnatural force; I even saw Gregor peek in through the door’s window. When it finished, all eyes were on her hand – or more specifically, on the finger pointing directly at Pieris.

“If any of you are still thinking about walking out, then this is a chance to learn how the parahuman world *really* works. And he’s all the proof you need.”

Stares turned to confusion on almost every student’s face, save for Lorian, who remained placid, and Pieris, who appeared borderline smug. I wasn’t entirely sure where Amy was taking things either – we hadn’t talked about any of what she was saying – but I trusted my friend. Whatever she was up to, I was certain there was a purpose behind it.

It was the big arm of Arlo that eventually went up. “I’m used to being behind, so it doesn’t bother me to ask what I’m pretty sure we’re all thinking: what does that mean?”

Lowering her arm, Amy adopted a far more conversational tone. “Funny how so many of the higher-ups talk about these classes like they’re wastes of time, don’t you think? Of course, they’d either have to have taken the courses themselves to know that or are just repeating hollow rumors. When I was a young, trusting soul and started signing contracts, the terms were outrageously poor, weighted so that it was nearly impossible to ever become fully independent again.”

She took a step closer to the students, her intensity growing alongside her proximity. “Now, by this point, I hope you’ve been taught that correlation does not prove causation. However, it is still an interesting situation: younger parahumans are constantly discouraged from seeking out the sort of information that would make them harder to control.”

A sharp gasp from the rear of the room broke through Amy’s speech, as Valencia looked at Pieris again. “But a member of fey royalty, someone who is highly likely to hold a position of power, has been told this class is *mandatory*.”

“Here’s the thing about so-called ‘human business’: that’s a term used for anything more complicated than a handshake bargain. It’s so handy, shoving all notions of red tape, contractual traps, scaling debt, and whatnot,

under a nice, boring title like that. Never mind just how many supernatural organizations make use of those ‘human business’ tools. What parahuman would want to learn such boring concepts? Aside from dracolings, of course, one of the most financially powerful forces in our numbers.”

While I hoped I was doing a better job of hiding it, Amy’s words rattled me nearly as much as they did my students. I’d seen firsthand how many poor business practices were baked into parahuman society, the disdain with which they treated things like basic bookkeeping. Was it possible that attitude had been placed there intentionally? Slowly trickled down from the higher-ups, turning their own people against the tools that would have given them more equal footing. From the way I’d seen some parahumans treat those under them, the idea wasn’t impossible.

It was a huge leap, though, and the sort of thing I doubted could even be proven, let alone by someone such as myself. Much like the budding friendship between a pair of necromancers, the most I had were my suspicions, unlikely to ever be confirmed.

“That sounds like a lot of conspiracy nonsense,” Pieris replied. From anyone else, the comment might have gained traction, but coming from the mouth of fey royalty, it only served to add weight to Amy’s point.

She made no effort to defend it, giving a full-bodied shrug. “Maybe so. I’ll even do you one better: probably so. But make no mistake, I’m absolutely right about one thing: this area of knowledge is a blind spot that *can* be taken advantage of. We can dig up countless mage contracts to prove that point. Whether you want to remain helpless or gain the tools to fight back is entirely your decision. I made the wrong choice out of ignorance, and it cost me. You won’t have that excuse.”

With that, Amy retook her seat, giving me a pointed stare to indicate that I should tag in. The start of class hadn’t gone quite as I expected, but Amy had certainly delivered on helping me impart the value of what was being offered. A little too well, in truth. I hadn’t considered a great deal of what she was hinting at, and it was far from a good time to sit and process such ideas. Putting them momentarily aside, I set my focus where it was meant to be: on the students sitting in my classroom.

“I recognize that the education you receive here will not be as glamorous, interesting, or exciting as what your other courses can offer. While I enjoy dissecting the minutia of data and details, such is not the case for everyone. I won’t do you the disservice of pretending there are ways to

make it all fun—some of it will indeed require tedious, hard work. What I *can* promise is to make sure you understand how all of it is relevant.”

I gestured toward Amy. “Grasping the basics of contracts and debt accrual will be essential to anyone here training as a mage. Therianthropes will want to gain a firm grounding in the basics of tracking inventory and logistics; keeping a tribe fed is one of the largest undertakings their leaders tackle, and anyone with those skills has a much greater opportunity for advancement.”

Some chairs away, I saw Arlo’s head rise by several inches, his eyes snapping up to the front of the room.

“Anyone with an extended life span, to say nothing of ageless parahumans like myself and other vampires, needs to have a solid understanding of compound interest if they dream of financial independence, or perhaps eventual luxury. Those with ambitions of leadership will want experience in balancing the needs of a growing group, not to mention tracking income versus spending.” I paused, looking over the group as a whole, but lingering on Pieris for a moment. Unable to leave or not, I had a duty to try to teach him while he was in my class.

“I don’t know all of you very well yet, barely even more than your names, so I can’t speak to how all these lessons might be individually relevant. But there is information worth knowing here, and if you share your respective goals with me, I’ll do my best to give you the best resources for each of them. If anyone present still does not see the value in this course, please feel free to exit at any time.”

On instinct, I tried to hold my breath, before remembering that the act of moving my chest was only habit. Stopping didn’t have any effect, aside from making me more aware of my own tension as I waited for the slightest indication of movement. After a full ten seconds with no one heading for the door, I released my lungful of tension.

“In that case, why don’t we get on to the day’s lesson? Since we have Mage Wells with us, she’s graciously offered to tell you about the startup business she recently founded.”

Amy was already on her feet, pulling disposable cups with lids and straws from a simple-looking pocket on her coat. “We start my lesson where I started my business: daytime daquiris!”

AN IMPROMPTU

FIELD TRIP

IT HAD TAKEN SEVERAL WEEKS, BUT I WAS FINALLY BEGINNING TO FEEL comfortable in my temporary role. Work at my campus home was flowing smoothly thanks to the extra hours in each day, classes were going soundly, and we were even wrapping up our first big class project. I got along reasonably well, at minimum, with all my students and had even managed an amiable dynamic with Keith, Teagan, and Arlo.

I hadn't managed quite the same ease of conversation with the others; however, I felt that they were steadily warming to me. Even the haughty Pieris was toeing a line of general respect. And more importantly, the students were doing well. After being convinced the class actually *had* value, all of them had taken the work seriously and had learned a great deal from their efforts.

Soon, I'd have a chance to see just how far they'd come. Wrapping up my last bit of work for the morning, I readied myself to face the day and exited my room, breaking the temporal bubble that offered me so much extra time. I could see why the fey kept such tight control over the item; already I could feel how much I'd miss it when my time at Trestlevend was done. Even contained within a single room, there was just so much that could be accomplished with near-unlimited hours. It might have been the first period in years where I wasn't feeling pinched for minutes.

Thanks to the extra time, I was rested and freshly showered despite the multiple stretched-out days I'd just spent buried in work. One of the first details I'd learned about using the fey device was to make sure and activate it during the daytime if I wanted to sleep. Whatever magic allowed vampires to pass out during the day was apparently tied to the sun's position

itself, not to some sort of internal rhythm. If I stretched time at night, then there was no sleep to be had, but during the day, I could nap as I pleased. Gregor was already waiting outside my door when it opened; he knew my schedule down to the second.

Making my way to the lobby of Unger Hall, I paused long enough to chat with Professor Salvero, a shape-changing educator who this week favored an avian aesthetic with feathers protruding from his skin, and Professor Gert, who was doing some manner of tinkering with the coffee pot. Considering he was the teacher of alchemy, I elected not to grab a mug on my way out. This wasn't the day for unpredictable magical effects.

Stepping out onto campus, I paused briefly to savor the sunshine on my skin. When the end of my tenure at Trestlevend arrived, I would deeply miss this perk, even more than the time-dilation tool. A supposedly impossible experience for any vampire, I was permitted a stroll in the day's early light. Part of me desperately wanted to ask Headmaster Sequoin how such a thing was possible, even if it was beyond my means. In trying to work on looking at longer-term views, I considered the possibility that I might one day have the resources to replicate such a magic, if I knew how it worked.

Since I hadn't encountered the headmaster around campus, it remained nothing more than a curiosity, one I put out of my mind upon reaching my destination. Not yet to the classroom, I'd instead reached the innocuous building where those using fey teleportation would be exiting.

In no small part thanks to my ample supply of free time, I'd arrived early, allowing me a moment to sit on a nearby bench and enjoy the morning. Gregor stood silent watch nearby, though I noticed he'd selected a scenic spot, as well. My hands itched for action. Under normal circumstances, a phone would already be out, emails to be checked and small bits of work to be squared away. But there was nowhere to put that energy now, as the work had all been handled entirely. It also occurred to me that perhaps this was a good chance to work on reining in such instincts. While I took pride in being hard-working, life held a great deal more than just accounting. It was good to put the job aside and simply exist for a few minutes.

My day improved even more when the door banged open and three familiar forms stepped out. Bubba, Lillian, and Al had arrived – my special guests for today's classroom session. Since the students would be

presenting proposals for their own hypothetical secret-parahuman businesses, I wanted to offer feedback from experts in various fields. Bubba worked for Richard Alderson, head of our city's therians, managing all manner of logistics. His prior experience working as a truck driver had proven an excellent steppingstone, and if there was anyone who could spot problems in theoretical supply lines, it would be him.

Lillian, aside from her own experience at Fletcher Accounting Services, had served as perhaps the only gentle touch in the Turva clan during her years there. She'd been in charge of socially inclined tasks, like attempting to spy on me, as well as supportive roles, such as helping new vampires ease into their changed lives. Her experience managing people vastly dwarfed my own, and I expected it would be invaluable in considering any hypothetical employees in these proposals.

Al was something of an odd fit among this group, as she didn't technically have expertise in any field I was aware of. What she did have, however, was a long history of attempted employment at human enterprises. Due to her natural magics as a pixie, the world was constantly shifting slightly around her: breath mints turning into glittery rock candy, or a mug of pens into (thankfully) unlit sparklers. It had led to her constant termination, as such frivolity would not be tolerated in the vast majority of cubicles, but in the process, Al had experienced a wide variety of environments and industries. Given the range of possible jobs my students' projects might cover, Al would hopefully be able to offer insight no matter what the businesses were.

"Been too long." Bubba gave me his usual engulfing hug with a strong thud on the back, and Lillian was only a step behind with her own embrace as Bubba moved on to hug Gregor.

"We've missed you," she told me as we parted. "Charlotte sends her best, and word that all is going well. Despite her assurances in email, she seems to think you're still worrying."

"It's hard not to worry when I can't ask in person." Moving on to Al, she greeted me with a handshake. I'd learned this wasn't out of a lack of affection, but more out of consideration. Whoever she hugged inevitably came away covered in glitter, despite Al keeping none of it on her person.

Her eyes traced up into the sky rather than scanning over campus, widening steadily as they rose. "Butterscotch and gumdrops. I always wondered how this place worked." After no one else spoke, Al finally

seemed to realize she was the only one enraptured. “Ah, right, guess you all don’t know what I’m talking about.”

Lillian and I shook our heads, while Bubba gave a verbal “Nope” in response. Al opened her mouth, but was distracted by the sudden swaying of a nearby tree. Especially odd, since I hadn’t noticed any wind. After a few long seconds, Al tried again. “I think it might be best if I kept it to myself for now. Hidden things are veiled for a reason.”

A tad ominous, though given the sway Headmaster Sequoin held over her campus, it was perhaps not the worst inclination. While I might be clueless as to whatever Al had seen, I had a strong suspicion on *who* had done the hiding. “In that case, why don’t you all catch me up on how things are going at home?” After Al’s declaration, our options for a smooth conversational transition were limited, so I opted to just push past and get it done.

It was nice to hear about the daily scuttlebutt of life in Winslow, the small details that never get conveyed over text or phone call. I learned a coffee shop on the corner had finally folded, a nearby stop sign was being turned into a traffic light, and a recent storm had knocked out power for the entire block. Save, of course, for Charlotte Arms, whose continual power was explained away as emergency generators. I soaked in the simple conversation, allowing it to take me home, if only for a moment.

Too soon, the five of us reached my classroom’s building, and I had to say farewell to the sunshine as we made our way inside. Despite being over half an hour early, I heard voices coming from behind my door. Stepping through, I found what must have been the dream of every educator across the world: all my students had arrived early and were working to set up their presentation.

“Good morning,” I greeted, still standing in the doorway, feet frozen in surprise. “I see everyone’s getting a jump on presentation day.”

“Our desire to impress you has pushed us to new limits, demanding that we dedicate ourselves in whole to this act of education.” If the sarcasm dripping in the tone hadn’t let me know the words were less than genuine, the fact that Pieris had spoken them with a mocking smile would have.

“Some us *are* trying because we want to learn, you dick,” Valencia snapped, before seeming to realize all at once that she’d once again cursed in the classroom. Clearly eager to change the subject, she offered up an explanation. “We all got to talking a few classes ago, and *someone* seemed

to think he was a lock for the best grade in the class on this project. Enough that, when called out, he put up a cash prize for anyone who does better.”

Given what I knew of fey finances, and the effort with which my pupils were focused on their posters or PowerPoints, the sum had to be sizable. I wasn't quite sure how I felt about it, overall. The results were hard to argue with – never had I seen the entire class tackle an assignment with such gusto – but the process left me somewhat unsettled. Still, it had occurred outside my class, and they were all adults. How they conducted their finances was ultimately their own business.

“Well then,” I said, stepping the rest of the way in and clearing the doorway. “It's a good thing I brought in a panel of experts to assist me with the evaluations.”

Behind me filed in Bubba, Lillian, and Al, with Gregor halting at the doorway, though he did continue to watch, so I left it ajar. I prepared to introduce them to the class, but a stunned voice caught me by surprise.

“You!” Pieris was on his feet, a silvery-white glow surrounding him as his right arm pointed directly at Al.

“What the cinnamon gum!” Al yelled, a crackling green power suddenly flowing forth around her.

Before I could think to react, Pieris's bodyguard was on the attack, zipping directly toward Al, a small club suddenly in his hand. He was incredibly fast, so quick that Lillian barely had time to shove the pixie to the side, receiving a blow to her head that rang through the room. Gregor smashed through the doorway in a spray of splinters, but he wasn't able to catch up with Bubba's fist, which buried itself into the bodyguard's stomach.

“What are you – no!”

Spinning around, I was just in time to see Al still stumbling forward, trying not to get toppled by Lillian's shove. In her wild quest to control the momentum, Al had staggered over to Pieris. With a step that was more trip than choice, she tottered forward, her green-swirling energy smashing onto the silver-white of his.

The instant they connected, my world dissolved in a sea of sound and light.

SLOWLY, MY SENSES RETURNED. COLD CAME FIRST; I WAS LYING ON A chilly surface. Shifting, I felt the rough texture of stone rather than the smooth surface of my classroom floor. Hearing my movement, it dawned on me that my ears were working, as well. I just hadn't noticed because of the oppressive silence all around: no crackle of electricity humming in the light fixtures, no shuffle of footsteps from nearby rooms, not even the soft, rhythmic breathing of other people.

That last realization sent me into a near panic until I'd blinked the spots from my eyes and realized it wasn't that everyone else had perished in the blast. While I still didn't feel thrilled about discovering I was in an unfamiliar room by myself, compared to the visions that had filled my mind in that brief span, it was a welcome relief.

The room itself was peculiar, formed largely of stone with only the occasional metal accents. It reminded me of the sets from old castles and temples in films of times long past. Beneath me was a pile of shattered splinters, some of which were embedded in my sweater vest, from some item that had evidently been destroyed by my arrival. Given the bevy of other wooden chairs scattered around, I had a solid hunch as to what the object had once been. A better question was who these seats were for, or why they were strewn so chaotically throughout the room.

There was also the obvious, blazing quandary burning in my mind: what in the heavens had happened? That, of course, opened the door to all the associate sub-questions that came along with it. Where was this room? Was I even on campus anymore? Had the others come, too? If so, were they together, or alone?

At the realization that my students might well be just as alone and confused as I was, my feet pointed themselves at the room's sole exit. While I was far from agent material, or any sort of combat expert, I did have a somewhat worrying amount of expertise in the field of surviving such surprises. The kids didn't have my experience, and who knew if they'd been dropped somewhere dangerous or not. As their teacher, I'd accepted a degree of responsibility for these students. This was well outside the expected parameters, but I had no intention of abandoning them nevertheless.

Unfortunately, my noble sentiments were thwarted by a lack of any direction. Upon leaving the room, I'd found myself standing in a stone hallway, which soon led to a chamber with five other halls extending forth. Picking one at random, I pressed on, having to occasionally blink and refocus my vision. Whatever that explosion had been, the effects were long-lasting, but steadily receding. Although my hearing wasn't enough to offer up any sounds as clues yet, sooner or later, I was bound to catch *something*.

My route eventually culminated in another chamber of six hallways, then another. Occasionally, I would pass a cluster of rooms in the hall: one lined with beds, another filled with stone chests, and the third hosting a decorative pot large enough for someone to sit on. Deducing each room's purpose was simple enough, and though I tried to give the third one a wide berth, there wasn't a whiff of anything unpleasant left behind. Either the pots had been cleaned just before this place emptied out, or it had been left for so long that there was truly nothing left.

The linking of the halls and lack of labels made me suspect that this place was designed to be purposefully confusing. After confronting a rival vampire clan, I'd taken an interest in defensive options we might be able to incorporate into Charlotte, ensuring that her new body didn't meet the same fate as her old. Labyrinthian layouts were one of the first options I'd read about, buildings organized in such a way that invaders would find their forces lost and split-up. Each of the six-way intersections was a point for potential separation, and with housing located in the halls themselves, defending forces could hole up for as long as they needed, waiting in ambush.

Of course, it could also be that whoever had built this place simply had a fascination with the number six. Until I knew more about where I'd been

sent, or what this building was, everything was sheer conjecture, a way to keep my mind away from the mounting fear of what might be happening to the others.

My sole comfort was that I'd yet to see *any* signs of life whatsoever. If it meant the kids were still safely back in the classroom, that would be for the best, but I'd also be happy if it just signified that we were here alone. So long as no one was in danger, we could find our way together and sort through whatever happened. Al and Pieris were bound to have some insights, seeing as the explosion had come from them.

After the third hallway intersection, my pace increased from brisk walk into a run. I was taking too long, and as I saw it, there was either no threat to disturb and I could indulge in a noisy method of movement, or there *were* threats lurking who would be alerted by my path. In that case, it was all the more reason to run, potentially drawing attention away from my students.

More of the rooms flew by as my speed increased. I popped my head in each: they all proving to be equally abandoned. When I finally burst into something new, I almost whooped with joy. That triumph soon soured, however, as I realized that the empty rows of weapon racks and barren boxes didn't hide hints toward my mystery. What was more, this room had no other hallway extending. It used only a single doorway, like the place where I'd entered. This marked a dead end, meaning I had to try my hand at backtracking.

Returning to the most recent intersection, I gently tapped my thumb under one of my own fangs, drawing a dark patch of thick blood. It came slowly and healed fast, but that was fine. All I needed was a dab. Smearing it next to the doorway I'd just exited, the dead-end path was now marked. Even if I lacked information to start with, I didn't plan to waste what I gathered by rechecking the same areas twice.

That was my intent, at least. Within seconds of my finger touching the wall, the blood had soaked into the stone. Sniffing, I caught a few lingering whiffs in the air, nothing more. Every bit had been pulled in, wiped away. My memory flashed back to those rooms with the pots, and how there hadn't been even the slightest bit of scent. All the empty halls I'd assumed were abandoned, but what if these walls could wipe away more than just blood?

What had been a jog turned into a sprint as I barreled forward, met constantly by the unnatural silence. My vision had been steadily recovering,

and I had a hunch my ears were working well, too; the issue was that these walls might be eating sound, just as they sucked in blood. Wherever we'd ended up, they wanted invaders disoriented and disorganized; cutting off useful noise was one more way to sow confusion. The trouble was, I couldn't imagine someone building a place with this many passive defenses and not including a few active ones, as well.

I still stuck my head in each room I passed, unwilling to risk rocketing by the very people I was searching for in my panic, but to no avail. I hit another dead end – this time, what appeared to be a stone kitchen, complete with a massive fireplace and spit. No students, though, forcing me to backtrack once more. So it went until I hit something new, an aspect I'd yet to encounter thus far.

A slope. Sure and steady, my path's incline was rising, leading me upward. I slowed down, not wanting to dive right into a trap and take myself out of commission. The soft glow of light beckoned from ahead, and for the first time, I realized that I'd been in darkness since arriving. Between the recovering vision and overall confusion, I hadn't even noticed the lack of illumination. For a moment, my feet faltered, wondering if I should press on. What if the students were back there, stumbling around in the dark? After a moment's hesitation, I concluded that with no other leads to follow, I should at least investigate the light. It might well have drawn in the others already.

Reaching the top of the slope, I could see light streaming in from a set of windows. Despite an initial urge to rush forward and scope out the surroundings, I hung back. Until I was sure we were still on Trestlevend's campus, sunlight had to be treated as deadly. Inching my way forward, I found the nearest source of direct light and extended a pinky. The instant it hit the light, I flinched, but that was only out of a fear of pain that never manifested. My finger remained unmarred, and I added the rest of my hand one piece at a time, relief flooding my brain.

If the sunlight was safe, we had to still be at Trestlevend, and that meant the students shouldn't be in too much danger. Letting out a long sigh, I tilted my head back, taking in the massive room. Aside from my entrance, which was set into a back wall, there was another doorway up ahead. This was the first room I'd encountered with an actual door in it. The metal was bronze in appearance – it might well have been bronze, for all I knew, though I didn't think that was a standard door-making material. It was

situated at the top of a slope that continued through more of the room, rings of stone seats stretching out at various heights around it. Tiered-seating, not unlike what some of the modern classrooms in Trestlevend used.

My gaze continued rising above the doors to a series of etchings carved into the dark stone walls. These were painted a sharp white in contrast, with splashes of vibrant red mixed in on occasion. The nearest one showed the figure of a human-like being, save for the snout, ears, and pronounced muscles. Symbols ran along different areas of the illustration in what I had to assume were words in a language I didn't know. It was all very curious, until I caught one of those distinct splashes of red.

It was drawn directly through the figure's neck, with red symbols painted next to it. Hoping against dwindling hope to be wrong, I turned to the next illustration. This one was a creature with tentacles extending from various places, and its slice of red was in the left of its torso. That compounded my worry, but it lacked what I needed for confirmation. Spinning around, I did a scan of the whole room, quickly finding what I was looking for.

They'd given this one a place of prominence. It was behind me, one of the first illustrations someone would see when entering through the higher doors. Fangs at the mouth, claws on the hands. A red slash through the neck, a red dot over the heart, and a red sun shining overhead.

These were guides on how to kill different parahumans. I was standing in a classroom dedicated to the destruction of our kind. My mind reeled at the implications. Why would a place like this exist on Trestlevend's campus? I jerked my head to the window, suddenly eager to see where it was we'd been deposited. I had quite a few questions for Headmaster Sequoin.

Over a minute later, I was still at the window, staring in shock. It was my own fault, really. Unique as Trestlevend's properties were, I'd forgotten that there was one other place where I'd been able to walk in the sun. It hadn't been quite the same as what I recalled, for the same reasons I could survive its warmth at all. The sun in question wasn't ours, not truly, nor were the lands it shined upon.

All I could see from the window was brambles. Miles and miles of dense, sharp thorns eagerly seeking flesh to pierce. An impossible sight, had we still been on campus. But this was the land of the fey; they had room to spare.

There's no telling how long I might have been stuck in that stunned stupor, if not for a sound that finally reached my ears, yanking me back to the situation at hand.

Unfortunately, that sound was a scream.

I NEVER DID FIND OUT WHAT THOSE DOORS WERE MADE OF, BUT I LEARNED they weren't much of an impediment to a motivated vampire on the move. After wandering around in the silence and uncertainty, my brain filled with all manner of horrible visions about the fate of my students, I'd have been running just for the chance to find someone else. Given the terror of that scream, I moved with every ounce of speed I could manage.

Without even realizing I'd done so, my legs were tensed up and, as soon as I tore through the door, blasting me forward with a standing leap. Although not as pronounced as when I'd first drunk it, ever since sipping the blood of a therianthrope named Alonso, my body had gained a propensity for jumping. Usually, I'd have expected such effects to have faded entirely after several months, yet this blood was particularly persistent.

The extra oomph meant I hit the ground moving at a sprint, barely even noticing that the halls now had minor decorations like rugs and framed paintings of people in armor. I hit a split in the path, hesitating for a moment, before noticing faint sounds of exertion coming from the right. Whether my hearing was fully returned, the sound-limiting only existed in the lower levels, or I'd just gotten close enough for none of it to matter, I had genuinely no clue. Not until later did it occur to me that the noises themselves might have been a trap, along with the scream.

Hurling my way along, I accidentally smashed a wooden door off its hinges; stopping at those speeds could be a bit tricky. Any concern over damage to the property fell away as I took in the scene before me. Chains hung from the ceiling, dozens upon dozens, each with a weapon at the

bottom. Rather than dangle lifelessly, the tools of battle whipped through the air, swinging and slicing, smashing and striking. They were uncoordinated, often getting in one another's way, which was likely the reason the two figures in the center of the storm were still alive.

Lorian and Arlo huddled back-to-back, the latter having tapped into his therian nature by shifting into a hybrid form. Arlo appeared to be a werebear, with dense fur covering thick muscles, his sharp claws and teeth flashing as he struggled to block the deadlier blows. Although shifting offered more strength and durability, the cost was that Arlo had become a bigger target in the process. Lorian was pulled in close, using the bigger man as a shield while she waved her hands, somehow sending an impending dagger off course. A mace swung down toward her head, and before I could call out, Arlo shifted, taking the strike with his shoulder instead. Seeing that, understanding clicked.

Arlo's size wasn't a detriment at all. He'd shifted to a bigger form specifically so he *could* take more hits, ones that Lorian might catch otherwise. While I didn't know her particular parahuman nature, she almost certainly didn't have a therian's level of endurance or recovery. Painful for Arlo might be deadly to Lorian.

The bigger man shifted forward, trying to inch their way to freedom; however, several chains shot forward, encircling his leg and dragging it back. This trap wasn't content with the idea of allowing prey to escape, and evidently, it had enough strength to haul around a huge therian.

My legs tensed, and I very nearly shot into the fray before realizing how little help I could offer. Without any way to break those chains, or the weapons on them, I'd be a sitting duck, not even large enough to act as a shield, like Arlo was. Still, as a spear drove itself through the side of Arlo's leg, sending a spray of blood onto the floor, I knew I couldn't stand there and watch them suffer.

After what felt like far too long, it at last dawned on me that I *wasn't* under attack, despite being in the same room. That thought lit the flame of action. I spun on my heels to search the walls. Since I'd come in through another way – the direction in which I assumed any defenders would be holding their position against invaders – my hope was that there would be some way to deactivate the attacking chains.

Sure enough, there, by the now-empty doorway, rested a series of stone switches built into the wall. Set vertically, five metal rods poked out from

their slots. Out of the five, three were in the up position, while two were left down. “I’m going to try turning it off, but I don’t know what will happen! Please be ready.”

Only waiting a moment after my announcement, I grabbed the switch set in a down position and yanked upward. The metal protrusion didn’t want to move, but I wasn’t asking, and weak for a vampire is still quite strong by human standards. Eventually, the switch gave, rising upward to join the other three. As it did, I felt a surge of heat in the room.

Every chain had started to glow a faint, dull red, as did their weapons. Given the smoke I saw rise from a sword slice on Arlo and the mounting heat, it wasn’t hard to deduce that I’d made things worse. I rushed to fix the error, but not before a coordinated swing of four swords came sweeping for Arlo’s head.

All four were suddenly sent scattering after a wave of Lorian’s hand, though she slumped against Arlo for several seconds afterward. Evidently, that trick had taken a lot out of her, but it was enough. Now that I understood the switches, I worked fast, moving each one to the down position. They were just as hard to move in either direction; if humans had operated these, they must have done so in teams.

Turning off the closest switch rotated the weapons, shifting them so that the blunted ends were facing Arlo and Lorian, rather than the more deadly points. Lowering the next one halted the attacks entirely; the chains merely waved along through the air, as if dancing. Arlo took a tentative step forward, only to get swiftly yanked back, but I was already working on that one, as well.

When the final switch lowered, the chains at last went still. No waving or shifting, they simply hung there like a strange display method for someone’s weapon collection. This time, when Arlo stepped forward, his effort wasn’t countered, and in seconds, he’d bolted through the rest of the room. It wasn’t until he reached my side that I realized Arlo was carrying Lorian; he’d scooped her up gracefully in the charge.

“Thank you,” he panted, slowly catching his breath. I wondered how long they’d been stuck in that trap, fighting without pause. Long enough to wind a therian, which was likely why Lorian seemed so drained. Even as Arlo set her down, her footing was unsteady. I offered an arm for support, which she accepted.

“Yes, please accept our great appreciation. For a moment, I feared our journey was at its end.”

Before my eyes, Arlo was shifting once more, shrinking back into his human form. While still large, he wouldn't be smashing his head against the doorframes or walking sideways through the halls. “We came to in what I think was a big bathing room, but that's based on recollection from watching late-night documentaries while half-drunk. Lot of spaces for shallow pools and spouts. None of them were working, though. Followed some halls until we ended up here. How about you?”

I quickly recounted my own experiences so far, hesitating only when I reached the point in the tale regarding that unsettling classroom. Tempted as I was to spare them from such a brutal discovery, this room proved that there were indeed active defenses to be wary of. Knowing this facility had been occupied by those seeking to kill parahumans might give them the extra bit of caution that proved lifesaving.

Still, nothing I told them elicited the same level of outright terror as the revelation that we had somehow ventured into the lands of the fey. Arlo looked as though he'd been dunked in a bucket of ice water, and since I was helping support her, I could feel the shivers run through Lorian.

“My parents whispered tales of the fey lands when I was young, told me they were always perilous but could be managed under proper guidance. The one thing to never, ever do in the realm of the fey is become lost.” Lorian left the last part implied – the fact that we were in precisely that predicament.

“Thank goodness, then, because I know exactly where we are. In a giant stone building surrounded by a sea of brambles. See, not lost at all?” Though my words were for Arlo and Lorian, my eyes danced around, upward to the sides, as if searching for an unseen listener. Magic in this realm was wild and potent; I wanted to make sure to firmly establish that we were very much *not* lost, thank you. We were exploring a new area.

It's possible the panic had started somewhat getting to me.

“Well then, where are we headed?” Arlo asked.

“Since we know the direction you came from ends, we backtrack and head down the left split. I'd like to explore up here before we try going into that basement again.” As I spoke, Lorian rose to stand on her own feet, her panting having largely subsided. Arlo looked the same as he had before class started, save for the cuts in his clothes. Therian recovery was always

impressive and would probably come in handy again before the day was done.

After sitting on that thought for a few moments, I set my jaw and prepared to broach an uncomfortable topic. “While I don’t wish to break anyone’s privacy, given our circumstances, would you both be comfortable telling me about your general parahuman abilities? Knowing what we’re each capable of could prove essential in finding a safe escape.”

The two students shared a brief look, then Arlo spoke. “I’m a therianthrope, as you saw. My animal form is a bear. Pretty standard stuff: strong, tough, heal fast. I do it better than some, but still about what you’d expect.”

Lorian was a little less forthcoming. “I am... our old names have been lost to the ages. Now, we are called the cerebred. While the magic of most parahumans integrates with the body, ours focuses on the brain and the mind.”

“Aren’t those the same?” I asked.

“In many ways, yes, but not in all. The brain is the physical, the matter within my skull. The mind is the endless existence generated by that physical organ. The cerebred’s gifts allow us a great deal of influence on both, though some may have talents in particular directions. Illusions, suggestions, manifesting mental force, all are within our purview. We were once among the most feared and deadly of parahumans.”

Although her words spoke of grandeur, there was a note of shame in Lorian’s voice. Given the nature of her abilities, I could imagine that some of her ancestors had undoubtedly lost themselves to the call of temptation. “Do you have any sort of weakness we should be on the lookout for? I know it’s silver for most parahumans, just don’t want to be surprised.”

She gave me a long look, exchanging another glance with Arlo, as well. “Silver affects me as it does most, though in truth, it is not what I would call the cerebred’s greatest weakness. That would be the creatures who proved resistant to the effects of our gifts, but not to the lure of stealing them. Ones who could sniff out the truth of our natures no matter the illusions conjured. Beings who hunted a once-thriving society to the brink of extinction, wielding our power as their own.”

Now I understood why this was the first time I’d seen Lorian use her gifts, and only in a life-and-death situation. There was one parahuman

species capable of what she'd described, a type I had no doubt would behave exactly as recounted.

Vampires. Lorian's people had been hunted down and drained by vampires.

CONVERSATION DIED OUT AFTER THAT REVELATION. “SORRY” DIDN’T REALLY seem to cut it for such an atrocity, though I’d had no more involvement in the act than Lorian herself. Yet the information weighed on me heavily. I’d always known vampires had a fearsome reputation and had gotten to meet a few individuals that proved why it was warranted. But hunting another parahuman species to the brink of extinction just to temporarily steal their abilities... that wasn’t the actions of a few lone vampires. It betrayed the collective will of our species, and the horrid lengths many were willing to go for a few scraps of power.

Our journey led us into two more trapped rooms as we explored: one filled with holes dripping a yellow acid with a stench that felt like it was searing my nostrils even at a distance, and another where the wall fired off blasts of flame. Since we entered both rooms from their exit points, we were spared the experience of being ensnared in the traps, which was especially good in the fire room. All three of us watched the flames burn for a few moments, none speaking the uncomfortable realization aloud.

If Arlo and Lorian had come through this room rather the chained weapon chamber, they’d already be dead. Fire was ancient, primal. It would devour a magically enhanced body as happily as a mortal one. Whoever had built this place had more than just capture in mind. After seeing that display, our trip altered its pace. In the halls, we moved faster, while slowing down substantially upon nearing a door. Seeing the danger present made us eager to locate the others and keep ourselves alive.

Finally, after a myriad of turns and dead ends, we heard a faint rumble come from the far end of our current hall. Hustling around the bend, I found

a door with smoke leaking out of the edges. Tempted as I was to kick it down, being in an enclosed space with a possible inferno on the other side felt a tad like challenging fate. Gregor could have slammed it open without a second thought, whereas I had to motion for Arlo and Lorian to get farther back, just in case. Once I was sure they were safe, I threw a hasty kick against the door, smashing the knob clean off, before executing a swift retreat at top speed.

I wasn't hounded by a wave of feet or flurry of traps, so my steps halted soon after they started. Smoke was coming out of the room, but just smoke. No fire appeared to be tagging along. More importantly, snippets of voices carried out through the open door. Reversing course, I dashed through the entrance. If our friends were within, excellent; however, if these were unfriendly entities, it was better I find out before my two students had a chance to see for themselves.

Vampire eyes weren't nearly so helpful with smoke as they were with darkness, but thankfully, it had already started clearing, and the open door was helping things along. Waving my arms around to disperse the cloud, I spotted a cluster of people near the center of the room. They were gathered around what looked like a sort of modern art piece, based on its hazy outline. As I drew near, several figures spun toward me, one even raising their fists.

"Who dares approach?"

Relief surged through me as I moved my arms even more frantically, now trying to show that I meant peace. Pieris's voice carried a distinct authority despite its youth; it was one that I was overjoyed to hear. "That would be your professor, Fred. I've also got Arlo and Lorian trailing a bit behind me."

"That's the last of them, then," Teagan's voice announced. Now that I was getting closer and the smoky forms came into better view, I could make out her voluminous mound of hair. "You three must have ended up somewhere really out of the way."

A sudden weight landed on my shoulder – light, yet unmistakable. Glancing down, I was shocked to find Al standing there in her diminutive form. Yanking on my ear, she pointed, adjusting my route slightly. Moving up toward my ear as I walked, Al whispered directly into my ear canal – perhaps the only way to manage private verbal communication among so many parahumans.

“Everyone is safe for now, but Gregor and Fidealous just threw themselves onto a nasty-looking device before it exploded, so you’ll want to check on them. I’m very sorry about all this. Never ever did I intend for it to happen, not to you or your students. But Fred, Pieris is going to ask about how we know each other. Please say it’s through June Windbrook, and don’t make any mention of my employment. I promise I’ll explain everything once this is over. He just *can’t* find out.”

Since I lacked the ability to whisper back, I could only nod, a gesture Al was sure to feel given her position partway in my actual ear.

“Thank you.” With that, she was gone again, which was just as well, since I’d drawn close enough to see the rest of the group. As promised, everyone was present. Lillian’s and Bubba’s clothing was a bit battered, but they both looked no worse for wear. Pieris, Valencia, Keith, and Teagan were all huddled nearby, though the fey royal held himself slightly apart from the others. That only left Gregor and Pieris’s bodyguard – presumably the Fidealous that Al had mentioned – neither of whom I could see.

Not until my attention turned to the piece of modern art did I discover the two missing bodyguards. They’d been encased in some sort of gummy gray material that had all but entirely encircled them. A rogue hand was poking out here, an elbow there. Fidealous had gotten lucky enough for his head to be exposed, offering a way to breathe. While I wasn’t sure how necessary air was for fey, it was better to have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it, as the saying goes.

Gregor’s limbs were moving through the goop slowly and surely. Unfortunately, the material was malleable enough to shift with him, keeping my bodyguard largely trapped. Around Fidealous, sections would suddenly solidify, further locking down his movements. It was a rather ingenious trap, circumventing the brute force so many parahumans had access to. I wished there was a way to scrape some off and bring it to Amy; she’d probably have a field day playing with such a material.

“Would someone be so kind as to bring me up to speed on the situation? I’ve learned this building is within the fey realm, filled with traps designed for parahumans, and little else. Still not even sure how we got here.”

“You can blame that Summer pixie for our sudden sabbatical,” Pieris snapped. “Royal fey from other lands are kept apart for good reason. Aside from the potential ramifications should a spat break out, the protective magics woven upon us become agitated and unstable around one another. I

am defended from the magics of Summer just as she is from the gifts of Winter, so when such shields fight directly, it is akin to two magics ripping one another apart. The effects are *always* unpredictable.”

“Your bodyguard was the one who attacked her first,” Keith pointed out.

Pieris snorted. “He was attempting to drive her from the room while also placing himself as a barrier between our magics. Had her defenses halted him rather than getting entangled with mine, we wouldn’t be in this mess. Though I do admit, even by our standards, this is unusual. Breaking into the fey lands is not a minor act. The only way this should be possible is if a nearby gate between the realms already exists.”

“They’ll go on like this for a bit. It’s been a battle of blame-tossin’ since we got here,” Bubba said, walking over with Lillian. Both gave me hugs as greetings, which I was more than happy to reciprocate. To my rear, I heard Arlo and Lorian getting closer. We’d finally managed to regroup. Now, it was time to focus on escape. After we helped Gregor and Fidealous, of course.

Lillian noticed me staring at the pair. “When we came into this room, there was a big cauldron with chains wrapped around the lid, kind of an old-fashioned pressure cooker. The bodyguards both ran toward it, smashing the thing open before it could reach full force. Pretty sure the ideal version of this trap has it spraying the goo all over the room, locking everyone down and leaving them to suffer before being finished off.”

“Suffer?” They didn’t look happy, and Gregor would have been in dire straits if he needed air, but I wasn’t sure how the term applied here.

“I touched one of the hardened sections that Fidealous is chilling; the effects are weakened due to everything else mixed in, but that goop is partly made of silver.”

Suddenly, the trap before me seemed far more diabolical. It was pure fortune that a fey and a gargoyle were the ones captured – neither had the common parahuman weakness. Most of the others would have been in a state of torture with the silver-infused material covering their whole body. My mind flashed back to that classroom once more, a reminder that this was a place built around killing parahumans.

“Does anyone have thoughts on how to free them?” My eyes drifted over to Teagan on instinct. Amy had set a somewhat unrealistic bar for the capabilities of a skilled alchemist.

It was Pieris who fielded the question, however, shoving his way past Valencia as he approached our guards. “The solution is a simple one. Both of their efforts are required to escape. Although, in this case, I will intervene to speed things along.” Reaching out, Pieris set a finger on the gray goop. At his touch, it hardened, just like the areas around Fidealous, only this one didn’t stop so quickly.

Spreading from that single fingertip, a wave of cold surged through the material, turning it distinctly solid. In seconds, the entire mass was stiff and unmoving. At a glance, it appeared as if he’d made the trap even more effective; however, that was soon dispelled by a mighty *crack* of a huge chunk breaking away. Where it had been, Gregor’s arm now wiggled free, hand diving down to tear away more of his trappings.

Without the trap’s gooey aspect, brute force was a viable tactic once more, and Gregor had strength to spare. As he worked his way free, I compared notes with Bubba and Lillian, getting a sense of their trip so far. It was more of the same, a mirror of our journey since I’d found Arlo and Lorian. Hopeful as I’d been upon leaving the basement, it was looking more and more like these top floors were the same as below, only with the addition of traps. So far, the only anomaly I’d found was that classroom, and I didn’t think it was a coincidence that getting to it was supposed to require breaching at least one trap. The more I thought it over, the clearer it became that I had to go examine that place more closely; it was the best hope for a hint at our location so far.

Unfortunately, with the group reassembled, there was little hope of my visiting it in private. I was going to have to drag my students into that terrible room, watch them see the illustrations guiding others on how best to kill parahumans like them, or their friends, or families.

These were not the lessons I’d been hoping to teach as an interim professor.

MY STUDENTS WERE UNCHARACTERISTICALLY SILENT UPON ENTERING THE classroom. Each instantly looked up to the ceiling, exactly where I'd warned them the disturbing material would be. They were searching for themselves, I was sure, or other parahumans they knew. Guides for our murder, illustrated in plain view, a constant reminder to any who set foot in the room.

“No fey.”

The words jolted me, along with several others in the room. Valencia was glaring, but not at the depictions of death surrounding her. Instead, her intense expression was focused on Pieris, who was looking around with a rare expression of uncertainty.

Double-checking for myself, I discovered she was right. The walls held illustrations for killing all manner of parahumans, but the fey were not among them. By the time I glanced back, Pieris had advanced on her. “If you have something to say, then out with it.”

“This place is in the fey realm, uses silver in its traps, and has a room that’s a cheat sheet for killing every major parahuman except the ones they’d be most likely to encounter here. Pretty weird omission, unless the people in here were fey themselves.” Valencia took a step toward him, prompting Fidealous to edge closer in response. “It sure looks like we stumbled our way into some sort of secret fey academy for slaughtering the supernatural. What do you have to say about it?”

Pieris’s back remained stiff for several seconds before the boy deflated. In that moment, he truly looked young, the ever-present authority falling away momentarily. “I... don’t know. These traps, they are *not* fey traps.

Such crude implements would be the shame of any who used them. Yet there is also no denying a facility like this could not exist in our lands without the direct aid of our kind. This place... the more I see, the more it unnerves me.”

An audible *click* rang out just as Pieris finished speaking, drawing all eyes over to Bubba, who was fiddling around with a section of stone in the room’s center. The tiny sound was swiftly overshadowed by a series of *booms* as entire sections of the floor began sliding away, forcing Lillian and Arlo to hop back, nearly bowling over Lorian and Teagan in the process.

The floor parted to reveal a spiral stone staircase heading down. It appeared to stretch on for a ways, even farther down than my initial explorations had led. Wherever this took us, I had a strong suspicion it wouldn’t be the same area as my arrival basement.

“How did you find this so fast?” I asked Bubba, the wonder in my voice quite apparent. It was a large room; even the center floor section was wide enough to accommodate our entire group with elbow room to spare. Yet Bubba had spotted the secret switch in the time to took me to ogle the ceiling and two of my students to start an argument.

Rubbing the back of his neck as if embarrassed, Bubba motioned down to the spot on the floor he’d touched. “That switch stone was laid in all wrong and came up a skooch higher than the rest. When the rest is flawless, imperfections have to be intentional.”

Several loud stomps yanked my focus over to the staircase, where Gregor had planted himself in front, blocking off Teagan and Arlo from approaching. “I go first, with Fred and his colleagues.” The gargoyle’s head turned with the usual steady but unhurried speed, finally stopping when he’d locked eyes with Fidealous. “You take the rear with the students.”

“An acceptable arrangement,” Fidealous replied, standing at his usual proximity to Pieris.

It was a sensible split, since both bodyguards would want to be near their charges. Furthermore, as adults, we should be the ones taking the lead. Having Fidealous in the back would ensure that nothing snuck up behind us. The reasonableness of the suggestion didn’t keep Teagan from immediately objecting, however, only to be met with the silent treatment from Gregor and Fidealous both.

With the marching order set, we made our way down the stairs, me directly behind Gregor despite his grumblings. After the first few steps

down, a light shone behind us, Teagan muttering a few words and rubbing her hands on a glowing floppy hat that I was sure she hadn't previously been carrying. Donning the headwear, she effectively illuminated the passageway, a handy help for those who couldn't see in the dark.

Our trip down took a fair while, long enough that I was sure we'd gone past my initial basement. When the stairway finally came to a halt, we were staring down a tunnel with a curve. Not slowing for a moment, Gregor continued ahead, possibly afraid someone would try to rush into danger if he didn't get there first. I kept at his heels, eager to put my superior senses to good use. It was just about the only help I had to offer in situations like these, and I was determined to pitch in however possible.

Upon reaching the turn in the tunnel, we stepped through to find it immediately opened up. We were at the top of a grand staircase, nothing like the functional version that had carried us from the classroom. The stairs themselves were a finer material than the stone used so far—something resembling marble, with gleaming metals inlaid at various intervals. Stretching out from the stairs were walkways branching out into the room, which was really more of a vast hall.

A hall stuffed to the brim with books. We'd walked into what had to be one of the largest libraries I'd ever seen. Stone bookcases fused to the floor ran all over, with more built into the walls themselves. Behind me, I heard the students arrive, several letting out gasps at the sight. None of us had prepared for something this... *pleasant*, not after the traps and the murder-classroom.

Gregor started forward once more, checking as he went for any unseen traps. With each step, he tensed, ready for an adversary to pop out, only to be greeted by peace. The dutiful procession was interrupted halfway down the stairs by the sound of Fidealous calling out, "My liege, please stay close!"

Several of us looked back to find Pieris had ducked down one of the branching walkways, his bodyguard hurrying to catch up. That evidently broke some intangible seal, as the other students scampered off to explore like they hadn't been navigating potentially deadly traps less than an hour prior.

"We may as well look around, too," Lillian suggested. "More eyes to hunt for an exit, or an explanation. Something about all this sets my fangs on edge."

A familiar weight landed on my shoulder just before Al gently yanked my collar, guiding my eyes up back the way we came. I didn't understand why until my eyes rose past the entrance we'd stepped out of, noticing for the first time that there was a symbol carved over the tunnel's exit. A dagger, sunk into a crescent moon that was dripping blood.

"Think that might be a clue?" I asked, pointing up to the symbol. I was braced for shock and terror, for someone to tell me we'd unknowingly entered the domain of an unfathomably deadly opponent. Instead, the etching was met with confusion.

"Has to be, though damned if I've ever seen that before," Bubba noted.

"New to me," Lillian added. "The style isn't especially unique – lot of blood-soaked weapon motifs out there – just never run across that particular one before."

I turned to Gregor, who shook his head. Since Al wasn't whispering anything, I took that as her having nothing to add, though it was becoming readily more apparent that we needed to chat. Lillian had already suggested splitting up, so that seemed an ideal opportunity.

"Suppose we'll have to keep looking, then. Let's try to touch base regularly, though, as a safety precaution." Knowing it would surely be pointless, I pulled out my cell phone and confirmed there was indeed still no signal. Since I had it in hand, I snapped a quick photo of the dagger-moon symbol for later research. "Maybe we come back here every ten minutes or so?"

I got nods from both Lillian and Bubba as they jogged off, while Gregor remained diligently at my side. Trying to send him away would be wasted energy, so instead, I simply picked a path and started walking, skimming the books as I went.

One thing became immediately clear: I wasn't going to do much casual reading while down here. Not only did the titles make no sense, roughly three-fourths of them used letters I wasn't familiar with, more like collections of strange symbols than any sort of alphabet. Of the few that were technically legible, most read like gibberish, collections of vowels and consonants smashed together in a way unlike any language I'd encountered.

"Al, I'm not going to ask about your past, why Pieris called you a royal fey, or anything of the sort. You've been an excellent employee and a good friend in our time together; that's what matters to me. However, if you have any pertinent information on our current predicament, location, means of

escape, or the like, I would *very* much appreciate being brought up to speed.”

Rather than remain a weight on my shoulder, Al fluttered into view to my left, floating there for only a moment before she regained her usual size in a soft flash of light and glitter. “I wish I did, Fred. I truly do. Pieris isn’t the only one put off by this place. Since neither he nor I feel the sway of our seasons, we must be somewhere in the Endless Between. Who would build such a facility there, or why, is entirely beyond me. All I’ve got is one theory regarding our arrival.”

“That’s one more than me,” I admitted.

“Pieris was right about us coming here: jumping this many people to fey lands is difficult, almost impossible for us to manage normally. The thing is, you and I know there *are* fey gates on campus, so in theory, the explosions should have shunted us to them, if anywhere. For us to end up here instead, I’m fairly certain it means there was always a path through our realms between this building and Trestlevend, and that’s what our incident tapped into. That’s good news in the sense that if I’m right, there should be a way back somewhere in here.”

Her phrasing implied the existence of bad news, and it took me a scant few seconds to realize what that was. “But it also raises the question of why Trestlevend, a university for parahumans, would have an entrance to this place hidden through the fey realms.”

“You might want to have a chat with the headmaster after we get back. A polite one, though, just in case.”

I was about to agree with the sentiment when a rarely witnessed incident occurred. Without danger or prompting, Gregor spoke, calling me over. “Fred, come see this.”

It seemed that while Al and I were chatting, Gregor was sweeping our surroundings, checking for traps before they could spring out and strike at his unsuspecting charge. Yet it wasn’t a hidden switch or deadly fire nozzle he was pointing at – instead, it was a book. Bound in dark leather, this was one of the few with letters I could read. However, the script used took effort to decipher. Inching closer, I worked my way through them one by one, realizing the first letter was a *V*, then an *A*, and an *M*. By the time I reached the *P*, I knew, but my work continued until the end regardless. When it was done, I said the word aloud, my hand moving toward the book of its own volition.

“Vampyr.”

PART OF ME EXPECTED A TRAP TO SPRING THE MOMENT MY HAND connected, or for the book to surge to life and attack, or to transform into some sort of deadly serpent – none of which came to pass as I peacefully plucked the tome from its resting place on the shelf. It had an unexpected weight to it, and the feel of the cover was curious: clearly leather, but not like any I'd felt before. A much too logical part of my mind suggested that perhaps this was hide from a creature I'd never encountered, and I had to quickly shake a mental flash of that killing classroom.

Opening the book, I was met with... gibberish. That was how it looked to me, at any rate. There were words from half a dozen languages visible at a glance, only some of which I faintly recognized. Some sort of code? But why have it in a library, a place meant to be easily accessible? The more I studied the pages through, the more I began to suspect it wasn't quite the cypher I'd first expected. It was more that someone had altered their language of choice with every word they wrote, meaning that the only people who could read such an account were polyglots with expansive knowledge. Or potentially someone using magic.

"Al, do you know of any spells that allow someone to read any language? Just whether they exist or not."

She contemplated the question for several seconds, running slender fingers along her sharp chin. "Not that effect, exactly, but I know of one that enhances your recall to absurd degrees for a day; enough that you could learn all the languages needed and handle the translation. Comes with a horrendous backlash, though. I've heard it compared to a wrathful migraine that lasts for days. Most people go with a spell using intent translation."

Reaching over, she tapped the page I was currently examining. “Language is tricky. There’s a lot of nuance and tone. Plus, it’s always changing based on how people use it. Magic isn’t really much better than most internet options for altering the text itself. What it can do is reveal the intent of the writer’s words, what they were trying to convey – something that doesn’t require a specific language to come through.”

“Thanks, Al. That gives me a few ideas.” Dutifully, I flipped through each page, skimming over them all for any legible phrases, only to reach the end without any success. Shutting the book firmly, I tucked it into the back of my khakis, cinching my belt tightly to hold it in place. Whatever was in this tome, I wouldn’t be uncovering its secret this second. But now that I knew there was a magic that could help, the book could be perused again later. I even had a backup plan, should that fail.

I was reasonably certain that Deborah, the Prudence of the Blood Council, had been around long enough to speak at least a few of these languages. Knowing her, I wouldn’t be stunned to learn she was fluent in all of them. Deborah liked to use her time wisely, and she’d hinted at a tremendously lengthy life.

With my prize stowed, we began walking once more, searching for any clues or exits. What met us instead were books. So many books. Shelves upon shelves, rows upon rows – it genuinely boggled the mind how vast this library was. In terms of scale, it was comparable to facilities I’d been to in the downtowns of major cities, except those had been built to service thousands of people. For our temporary prison to have so many books, they either had far more people here than we realized, or they’d been collecting these books for a very long while.

If this building was in our realm, I wondered how it would have fared. Bugs and rot would surely have devoured much of what remained after so long, yet here it was, pristine. Then again, I had no idea how long it had been abandoned for, or even if it was truly empty. We hadn’t managed to explore all the nooks and crannies just yet, and this place seemed to delight in catching us by surprise.

“Everyone, come over here!” Arlo’s powerful voice rang out, jolting us out of our quiet exploration and into action. I kept pace with Gregor, as there was no distress in the tone, which allowed Al to match our speed, too. Just as we drew near the others, she appeared to vanish, dropping back into her diminutive pixie size.

The others were already present, gathered around Arlo and Lorian, who were pointing at a pair of bookcases formed in the wall. I leaned in closer, trying to find what they'd found so interesting, and realized that neither was gesturing to the cases themselves. Rather, they were pointing at the space between them.

It took me a few seconds to realize what I'd seen. They were pointing to *space* between the bookshelves, something none of the others had. Stone filled in every gap, even the room between shelves, except for this particular pairing.

"How in the heck did you two manage to spot this?" I asked.

"S'like your friend said: when everything is flawless, the inconsistencies stand out." Humble words aside, Arlo's chest was puffed out in pride, visibly pleased with the good work he'd done.

Lorian nodded. "And our professor has impressed upon us the importance of keeping up with small details."

"It's an excellent find," Lillian complimented. "But does anyone know how to open it?"

Raising both arms into a powerful flex, Arlo showed off his impressive physique. "Between this many therians and vampires, there's no way some door can stop us."

Before I could coach caution, Bubba stepped forward, slapping the younger therian amiably on the back. "There's a man who understands that sometimes the simple solution is best." Pausing, appearing as if new thoughts were just forming, Bubba tilted his head back. "'Course, we know for a fact this place uses traps. Dangerous ones, too. There's a chance one's rigged up to this, ready to spring should someone open it improperly."

It was such a gentle correction that I wasn't even sure Arlo realized he'd gotten one. The young man had his eyebrows pushed together as he considered the point. "Maybe we should check for a switch first, like the one upstairs."

Most of us were already doing just that, visually combing our surroundings for any sign of something out of place. Lorian and Bubba started using their hands, running fingers softly across every surface. A very real part of me feared the switch might in fact be somewhere entirely different in the library – whoever built this place came across as paranoid enough for such a feature.

Thankfully, after nearly ten minutes of searching, Keith found something. One of the books didn't come away when pulled. Instead, it began sliding out, like it was locked into place by some unseen mechanism. After he brought it to our attention, we quickly repositioned before attempting to activate anything.

Fidealous and the students were a good ways back, almost on an entirely different walkway. Gregor was at our front, as he would be the one to try using the switch. Bubba and Lillian were behind him, with Al and I making up the final pair. It was hard not to feel a touch embarrassed, being put to the rear as I was, but if anything came through that door, then we needed our strongest defenses at the forefront, ensuring that the students had time to escape. That definitely didn't include Al or myself.

Only when everyone was in place did Gregor slowly begin pulling the book along its track. He went carefully, inch by inch, until it reached the edge and... stopped. We waited, bodies tense and nerves tight, as a whole lot of nothing happened. Finally, Gregor pulled once more, a bit harder this time. The book came a touch forward and settled into some unseen groove with a soft *click*.

Hidden mechanisms fired to life as the bookcases slid to the side, revealing an archway leading into a sight I'd grown much too familiar with: another hall. Similar to the one we'd taken after the spiral stairs, this one only went for a short while before taking a turn. What lay beyond was a mystery.

Slowly, we advanced, Gregor in the lead and Fidealous trailing with the students. My bodyguard went around the corner, and seconds later called out, "Halt." I suppressed a wave of panic. If Gregor was calmly asking us to stop, it wasn't likely he'd just fallen victim to some deadly device. Yet my fear spiked once more as the gargoyle came back around the corner. His expression was off, which in itself said a great deal, given his usual stoicism. Worse, as best as I could guess, the emotion peeking through was revulsion.

"You should see this before the young ones."

My worry was defeated by curiosity and the knowledge that Gregor wouldn't ask me to do anything unless he believed it to be a safe action. Following him around the corner, I heard Lillian and Bubba calling back to the students, telling them to hang on for a few minutes. Once we saw the

hallway ahead, however, all my attention was suddenly dominated by the scene before me.

It was undeniably beautiful, in the sense that the mural running along the ceiling, walls, and even the floor had been painted by a master hand. The detail was mind-boggling, down to the strands of hair and drops of blood. Unfortunately, such artful skill only made the scenes depicted all the more horrifying.

Stakings, stabbings, decapitation, fire – and that was only what I saw on my first glance. Figures clad in white and red, each boasting the symbol of the dagger-moon we'd spotted in the library, gleefully did their vicious work. It was testament to the artist how well they'd captured the savage joy in the figures' eyes, their rapture at the work being performed.

If vampires were capable of throwing up, I'd have been sick.

Not just for the mural itself, but for what it depicted. These people weren't protecting themselves from parahumans. They were hunting them, finding and killing innocent beings for the crime of simply existing. And based on the artist's interpretation, they'd loved every minute of it.

There was another detail which stuck out to me, even amidst the painted torment. All of the people wearing that symbol appeared human. In fact, I didn't see a single fey pictured, be they among the aggressors or the victims.

Gregor and I walked further down the hall. The horrific scenes continued all the way – an impressive artistic feat under different circumstances. Soon, we arrived at another turn, and this was where the art mercifully came to an end. Gregor took it first, and I followed a few seconds later, more than ready to gaze upon blank stone walls once more.

Sadly, such was not my fortune just yet. Rather than art, the space ahead of us was covered in visible traps. Holes in the ceiling, nozzles in the walls, slits along the ground, and most prominently of all: silver. Silver threads hung from the ceiling and dangled from stone outcroppings, filling almost every area with an inescapable presence.

Were that all, Gregor and I would have turned and headed back, sparing anyone else from witnessing the mural we'd seen. But past the silver and the traps was a single archway at the opposite side of the room, one with a strange shimmer obfuscating where it led. Although the ones I'd used for transportation to and from Trestlevend lacked the obscuring shimmer, I recognized a fey portal on sight. That recognition sealed our fate.

If we wanted to get back to our own realm, it meant braving the final trap room. A room I suspected was designed to kill every parahuman who entered.

“IT’S BAD,” LILLIAN SURMISED, EXAMINING THE EXIT ROOM FOR HERSELF. After Gregor and I trekked back to the group, we brought Lillian, Bubba, and Al down the hall of the horrifying mural, leaving the students with Fidealous. All of them were unsettled by the paintings, but it was the obstacles blocking our exit that were the real problem.

“That much silver would at least slow down most parahuman species out there, if not leave them writhing on the ground. Without you, Gregor, and the fey, I’m not sure we’d have any hope of getting through.” She kept turning her head, examining the room from new angles, hunting for a way through.

“My big question is what triggers all those traps?” Bubba wondered. “Presumably the humans running this place used the exit, too, otherwise why go to all the trouble to keep parahumans from following? Is there a set path that won’t set off any traps, do they react when someone moves too slow, or is there some magical parahuman detection system?”

Thinking back on the facility so far, I shook my head. “We haven’t seen anything like that, and these seem like people who would have put it to use if they could.”

“Unless they saved it for the point where it’d be most effective,” Bubba countered.

Heavy footsteps sounded from nearby, the unmistakable sound of Gregor advancing. “I will determine the method of activation.”

Plodding out into the sea of silver threads, Gregor kept his pace steady, unbothered by the shiny material. Gargoyles lacked that particular parahuman weakness, along with our more prodigious healing capabilities. I

wasn't entirely sure how or if those facts correlated; Gregor was never one for long chats. He made it roughly ten feet across the room before the first trap activated.

Streams of green-yellow goop burst from the ceiling, pouring through the room before oozing down grates in the floor. Plenty of it ran along the silver threads, coating them as they slapped against Gregor, burning away his jacket and shirt wherever they touched. He quickly retreated, moving with unexpected swiftness, and tore off the outer layer of clothing.

A few seconds later, the acid stopped. Gregor approached once more, this time going at a snail's pace and halting regularly. He followed his exact route as before – down to the steps, so far as I could tell. At the point just before he'd encountered the acid, Gregor picked a new direction, walking to the left instead of forward. He made it an extra three steps before the acid started to rain once more – too slow this time, as the gargoyle was already retreating.

"It appears the trick is a particular route, rather than a set pace," he reported, bits of his shirt still eroding as his dense skin remained unbothered.

"All right, let's take stock for a moment." I mentally tabulated our assets and challenges, one of which felt far more considerable than the other. "We're not entirely helpless here. Three members of our group are fey, plus Gregor and I have a silver immunity of our own. That means we have five people capable of passing through the threads unimpeded. If we can find the right route, it might be possible to carry the others across. Five silver-immune people to haul seven others who are vulnerable. Some people could haul two at a time or make a double trip."

"But we'd need the route first," Al pointed out.

To that, I could only offer a shrug. "Just working out options as we go."

Reaching up, Gregor started to unbutton his already halfway-wrecked shirt. "I shall acquire the path."

"Hang on, there. Some of those traps are pretty potent. I saw you hide the wince when that acid first hit. One of them might be able to kill even you, so let's not risk it." Fluttering in the air, Al lifted her hands, then looked over to me. "I appreciate the fact that you've never pried, never asked me about more than I wanted to tell. But I'm pretty sure the wrapper is off the sucker on my big secret, so there's no reason to hold back. I think,

in truth, I've trusted you enough to share this for some time. There just wasn't any particular cause. Until today."

Placing her hands together, a green glow engulfed Al, spreading out to the room around us. I saw movement in the shadows, strange undulations, but when I focused, the source was gone. Al's glow intensified, and I heard her mumbling as she strained.

"You gummy worms think some wards can stop me? I saw the brambles outside. I know there's plants around us. We might not be in my season, but these are still fey lands. By the name of *Alstroemeria* and the Court of Summer, I command you to **grow!**"

Whatever invisible force was holding Al back, she broke through, as suddenly movement erupted from the shadows – or more specifically, from the gaps in the stone. Slits used for drains, spouts intended to shoot fire, all turned into entrances for a myriad of thorny plants that heeded Al's call. They shaped themselves into humanoid figures, replicas of Al in her human-sized form.

Assembling the flora-army before her, Al made a motion, and the first started forward. It moved at a steady speed, keeping an easy-to-track path as it went. When the flame spouts activated, the plant-Al died without a sound, burning away to ash in seconds. The next in line stepped forward, unbothered by the prior plant's demise.

"I never knew you were capable of such magics," Gregor commented, a rare compliment to the woman who'd just saved him a very unpleasant bit of trial and error.

"No joke. Yankin' that much plant matter from so far away, and through this place's wards... that ain't no small feat." Bubba watched as the next human-shaped plant took a slightly different path, yet was also torched.

Although Al's glow had dimmed, it still shone with green light as she sent the third pawn to its unlucky task. "I won't be casting much else anytime soon, but being a royal Summer fey does have some perks, especially when we're sort of on my home turf."

While I could only imagine what wonders she might manage were we in the lands of Summer, Al's help was still more than I'd dared to hope for moments prior. "With Al's plants mapping the path to safety, our next step is figuring out how to get people through. Anyone have a better idea than carrying?"

I was met with shaking heads and blank stares, so it seemed we would indeed be going with the plan to haul our silver-vulnerable parahumans along. “All right then. Gregor, would you be able to carry some of the lighter students at once?”

“They do not need to be light,” he essentially confirmed. “I am more limited by my number of arms than by strength.”

“Then I think it’s time we brought them in on the plan.” I headed back down the mural hallway, leaving Al to work on her mapping while I returned to the others, who I noticed had inched their way forward.

The kids were holding up well, yet I could see the way stress was slowly wearing on them. Teagan was rocking on her heels, Valencia had a dazed stare, and Keith seemed jumpy, head swiveling around constantly. They’d held up incredibly well considering the situation, but the reality of our dilemma was starting to settle in.

After explaining what we’d found, the general plan, and urging ample caution so as not to rush forward once they saw the exit, I took a moment to prepare them for the visual assault they’d endure first. None seemed especially concerned by my warnings, which was about what I’d expected. As a concept, the mural didn’t sound so terrible – it was just gore-laden art.

Once we entered the hall itself, though, silence reigned. A terse, stiff, bitter silence as they absorbed the horrific images. A muffled thump from behind me prompted a sudden stop, and I spun around to find Fidealous holding Arlo’s clawed hand several inches from gouging out a particularly brutal scene of several bound therians.

“This place is a trap on many levels. Consider your actions, and if they were prompted by your own agency, or were prodded into motion by these very pictures you seek to destroy. Give them what they want, and you likely doom us all.” The slender fey man released Arlo, having stopped his blow with little visible effort.

Although he rubbed his wrist, Arlo gave the man a nod. “Thanks. They almost got me with that one.”

“Take heart,” Pieris chimed in, a hardness to his tone that I was unprepared for. “When our escape is complete, I will ensure this blight is sought out and scoured from the fey lands. I know not how it came to be here. Only that its time is limited.”

With the dustup behind us, we made it to the exit chamber without issue. There, I discovered that in the time we’d been gone, Al had been

busy. Trails of sap ran along the stone floor, weaving about at seemingly illogical points, doubling back and round before finally reaching the archway at the other end of the hall. Most of the gooey liquid had been absorbed, but the shiny residue was still easily visible, especially with how much had been piled on.

There wasn't much else to do by then but decide the pairings for who would be carried by whom. Due to his size, we paired Bubba up with Fidealous; having seen the fey bodyguard halt a blow from Arlo, I felt confident he could handle the large therian's heft. Arlo went to Gregor along with Lorian, which I felt would partially balance out the weight load, not that Gregor seemed at all concerned. The rest were split up evenly: Teagan and Pieris, Al in her larger form with Lillian, myself and Keith, with Valencia left on her own.

To our surprise, she claimed that the silver would pose no issue, though she declined to offer any further explanation. She was put toward the middle of the running order, just in case help was needed.

For once, Gregor didn't take the lead. Since we could only move on the path, whoever was in front determined the maximum pace; having our slowest member up front made no sense. Instead, he took the rear, with Fidealous in the lead, Pieris holding Teagan right behind at his insistence. Similarly, I was near my own bodyguard in the rear of the procession. If anything went wrong up ahead, I'd have a chance to see and potentially help.

Keith sounded no protests as I lifted him over my shoulder into a fireman's carry, despite how undignified it no doubt felt. Teagan was making her own annoyance quite clear, though it might have had more to do with who was doing her carrying. The others went up with only minor complaints; there were no better pitches for an escape method, or we'd have happily listened.

Unfortunately, the one thing we couldn't fix was the pain. Silver hurt parahumans, and the more magical in nature we were, the worse it got. Teagan was essentially a human attuned to magic, capable of wielding and carrying small amounts within her, which was why she'd fare reasonably well. On the other end of the spectrum were beings like Keith, Lillian, and I: corpses kept animated entirely by magic. Silver tried to return us to our natural, non-magic state of being – in other words, regular old dead people.

For anyone not immune to silver, the trek would be a grueling one, hence why we'd placed our faster people at the front. Getting through faster meant less suffering for our passengers. When everyone was in place, Fidealous held up his free arm and silently counted down from five. Upon reaching the last finger, he started forward, earning a sharp hiss of pain from Bubba as they entered the sea of silver threads.

The first section went perfectly to plan. We traced the sap-covered path that Fidealous ran along, everyone keeping close and out of harm's way. Our trouble was, the longer we were in there, the worse it was for those being struck by the silver. Teagan apparently caught a painful angle, as she let out a sharp yelp and jerk in reaction. It wasn't bad, and Pieris was able to compensate quickly, wobbling only a little. Yet that little bit of motion was enough to collide him with an already distracted Valencia, who went tumbling forward, landing on her hands and knees.

Hands that were, unfortunately, distinctly off the safe, sap-coated path.

MY EYES WHIPPED ABOUT, RAPIDLY TRYING TO DISCERN WHAT TRAP Valencia had activated. If it was anything that sprayed fire, everyone aside from Gregor would be roasted. Mercifully, the only singe marks I noticed were further up, to the left. Instead, I heard something heavy shift above us. With no idea of what was coming besides the direction, I took a gamble. Lunging forward, my hand closed around Valencia's ankle. I yanked her back, being careful not to pull so hard it caused injury, but otherwise putting all focus on speed.

Even at that, I was nearly too late. A half-dozen pointed metal rods dropped heavily from above, shattering the stone on impact. Had Valencia still been in the spot where she fell, her body would have caught at least two of the pseudo-spears, more if her limb placement was unlucky.

The young student drew in a sharp, strained breath. "Thanks, Professor. Pieris, watch where you're going!"

"My regal footsteps were not the issue. Send your complaints to the squirming mass in my arms."

Teagan merely rubbed the tender spot on her neck where the silver had caused her to squirm. "Sorry. Every now and then, it feels like some of these are especially potent. I wonder if they coated them in alchemic agents."

Had we not been in a situation where movement was paramount, my feet might have frozen at the implication. That seemed entirely up the alley of whomever had laid these traps, and we'd never even considered the possibility. Worse, I especially had no excuse for such an oversight. Amy Wells had been among the first parahuman friends I made – if anyone knew

the dangers of applied alchemy, it was me. Unfortunately, given both our position in the room and the overall predicament, our only option remained the same:

Press on, and hope any damage received could be mended once we were safely back in our own realm.

Fidealous and Bubba were moving quickly; all that held the bodyguard back was a desire to remain near his charge. To that effect, he was only ever a few steps ahead of Pieris, whose pace increased along with Teagan's squirming. The others weren't wiggling, and I didn't have to waste time wondering why. The presence of Keith, tense and softly whimpering on my shoulder, was a constant reminder of what everyone without silver immunity was enduring.

Each of us who were carrying another endured a similar auditory experience, so it was no wonder our pace picked up. Listening to someone suffer was bad enough; when it was a friend, the feeling grew exponentially worse. We wanted to be out, through, and done.

It was a well-intentioned sentiment, with unfortunate results.

At a certain point along the route, the path narrowed to the point where most of us could only pass through by walking with one foot directly in front of the other. A minor test of balance that would have been a slight speedbump, if not for the extra bodies several of us were carrying. Fidealous moved past the obstacle swiftly, despite having Bubba balanced on one shoulder the entire time. Pieris and Teagan were next, the fey keeping a close pace.

It was Al and Lillian who caused the problem. Even in her larger form, Al wasn't especially big, and while she did have more strength than her lithe form would imply, it didn't change the unwieldiness of carrying Lillian. The effort forced her to slow down, which in turn, left us bottlenecked at the narrow point. Overall, Al did well, despite the occasional wobble. She was nearly to the end when a rogue shift in Lillian's weight mid-step caused Al's leg to change trajectory. Not by a lot, just enough to send it to the side of the sap.

Gurgling from the ceiling was all the warning we received, an opportunity Al used to leap forward, taking Lillian with her, getting clear of the narrow path and the nearest section of grates overhead. Valencia had been directly behind them, and she kept her position, scrambling forward right along with Al. Behind me, Gregor was already retreating to the

normal-width section. I attempted to follow; however, my positioning left Keith and me in the centermost point of the area.

Eyes darting up to the ceiling as I ran, the first glimpse of yellow-green goo sent my gaze sailing south. More of the acid, potent enough to wound Gregor on contact. There was no telling what it would do to a pair of vampires before we got clear. I might have been at a loss for ideas, if not for the dense annoyance jostling the small of my back with every step.

Grabbing my stolen tome, I whipped it up, grateful for the once-cumbersome size. Most of the book was used to cover Keith, though I did ensure my own skull was protected, as well. Me losing motor function from an eroded brain stem would do neither of us any favors. The book was in position not a moment too soon. The acid rained down, causing an audible sizzle as it struck.

I soon learned the book worked, at least temporarily, as no rogue drops pierced through. That was little comfort to my exposed hand and elbow, sadly. While my legs were catching occasional droplets, it was nothing compared to the soaking my fingers were enduring. Within seconds, I was certain they were down to nothing more than bone.

Mercifully, the combination of my speed mixed with pain and terror meant that Keith and I emerged from under the assault in short order.

“Are you okay?” I couldn’t even offer the poor boy any respite. Even if the acid was behind us, the sea of silver threads remained.

“I have... endured... worse.” The words were tense and clipped, but Keith offered me a shaky thumbs-up as he suffered.

“We’ll get you out of here soon.” I checked over the narrow path, happy to find the acid was slowing. Soon, we’d be able to cross it once more.

In the meantime, I examined my book and hand, what little remained of both. As suspected, my fingers were mostly bone, though flesh was already reforming. The book itself had fared roughly the same, with huge chunks eroded away. Since I’d put the cover facing the acid, all that remained were a small section of pages near the end, where the acid hadn’t reached yet. I yanked those pages free from the binding, then set the remains carefully to the side. Folding the few unmarred pages and tucking them in my pocket, I finished at roughly the same time as the acid sputtered out.

This time, we crossed the narrow section without issue, rejoining the others as they navigated through the trail of sap. Although there were a few

more close calls, we eventually reached the platform with the archway, which Pieris was already examining.

“It is my belief that this gateway will be safe to use,” he announced. “Although I feared they might attempt to lay a final trap, it seems whoever made this for them was clear on the dangers of tampering with what one does not understand. The gate is fey magic, and not easily meddled with.”

“But we don’t know where it goes,” Valencia pointed out.

“I said the gate would be safe, not the destination.”

“We’ll have to risk it,” I interrupted, going so far as to step forward. “Staying in the silver isn’t an option, and neither is going back. Does anyone have a way of communicating across realms? A method to let the others know it’s safe?”

Wordlessly, Fidealous set Bubba down, then looked to Pieris, who responded with a short nod. That was all it took. The man darted forward, passing through the gate before any of us could protest. Several seconds passed as we stared in stunned silence, broken by Pieris only a few moments later.

“The destination is safe. Everyone through the gate.”

Ordinarily, there would have been a good deal of discussion before stepping into a magical portal, but half our number shivering in pain added a sense of urgency to our actions. Taking Pieris at his word, we all raced through the arch one at a time, eager to put this place behind us.

As I entered, the world seemed to shift and expand, a tapestry of colors and sounds enveloping me from all directions. Although I’d never tried it, the experience was how I’d always envisioned taking LSD, based on the depictions in popular culture. My trip was short-lived. Seconds after entering, I found myself once more stepping into reality.

It was a jarring transition, largely because of the room in which I appeared. Its style was similar to the place we’d just left, only with different types of stone and metal – not to mention, a lovely lack of silver. But whereas the other version had been untouched by time, this room was in shambles. Scraps of old cloth, a few splinters of former furniture, half-collapsed walls – in one section of the room, I could see a large tree root pushing through the broken stone, my first hint that we were somewhere underground.

More imposing than the strange room, however, was the woman waiting in its center. Headmaster Sequoin stood with her arms crossed, a severe

expression in place, Professors Glade and Gert a few paces behind. Gert was already digging in a satchel, and he rushed forward at the sight of our wounded, promptly producing a poultice for the pain.

“Interim Professor Fletcher, please account for your whereabouts over the past several hours.” Sequoin’s tone was absolute, and since someone was already tending to the injured, I had nothing better to do than answer.

Starting from the explosion of fey energies, I recounted our journey. While I tried not to dwell on the more disturbing aspects with the students still in earshot, I did make sure to recount them faithfully. Whatever that place was, whoever had run it, we were better served being prepared.

To my mounting surprise, Headmaster Sequoin showed no surprise, or even concern, as the tale went on. It wasn’t until I reached the ending that she spoke.

“Very well. Thank you for your service in keeping our students safe. Given the extraordinary circumstances you were thrust into, it sounds as if you returned everyone to campus as quickly and securely as possible. I see no need for any disciplinary actions at this point.”

Apparently, that was all that needed saying, because Headmaster Sequoin turned and started for the pair of large doors at the rear of the room.

“Are you *fucking* kidding me?”

The only thing that stunned me more than the words echoing through our closed chamber – words that had been yelled directly at the headmaster of Trestlevend – was the person from whom the sounds had come. Of all people, it was Lorian who was raising her voice.

“Do you know how terrifying that was? The amount of fear, worry, and pain I’ve been choking my way through for hours? We got zapped to another realm, nearly killed by traps, waded through a room stuffed with silver, and all you’ve got to say is, ‘Nobody gets punished.’ How about an explanation? Or maybe an *apology* that this happened on your campus.”

Lorian was panting, her hands noticeably shaking. Headmaster Sequoin had already stopped walking, but when the torrent ended, she turned and looked Lorian over more carefully. “Yours was always the hardest lot when around groups teeming with emotion. That anger doesn’t belong to you alone. The rage flowing through your peers fuels your own. This is an aspect you must learn to control, though it has its uses.”

Lifting a hand, she pointed to the gateway we'd exited. "You are disturbed by what lay beyond that door. Good. It shows you have, at the barest, a sense of self-preservation. The order that once used those grounds was a scourge among parahumans, culling our kind without any hesitance or consideration. They had a grounds here, a grand base that concealed their true home in the fey realms. When they were struck down, the land was repurposed and put to use, both as a way to spite their legacy and as a means to bury it. Breaking such connections is beyond even me, so instead, I guard the gate. I *am* sorry you saw that place, child. A great deal of my effort has been spent trying to avoid precisely that."

Headmaster Sequoin resumed her walk, and this time, there was no shout to stop her. Lorian appeared drained, the inner fire from before suddenly burned out. She slumped to the ground, helped down by Professor Glade, who was making the rounds behind Professor Gert.

While Lillian and Bubba rested from their silver exposure, Al made her way over to my side.

"Just wanted to see if you had any questions about... you know... while things are quiet for a moment."

The "you know" here was clearly Al's status as a royal fey. "I'm sure you have reasons for concealing your identity. I'm more than happy to listen, if you ever want to talk about them. But I don't intend to pry with questions, outside of logistics and extenuating circumstances like a sudden teleportation."

"Thanks. When you get back, we can sit down and go through everything. It might be nice to actually talk this over with someone." Her expression took an unusually serious turn as Al looked across the chamber to Pieris. "Now, if you'll excuse me for a moment, I need to go chat with a fellow royal fey. The headmaster might not be able to do anything about the connection point to our realm, but we've got access to more specialized resources."

Al approached Pieris, keeping a careful distance as she did. This time, Fidealous didn't rush at her, so all in all, it felt like progress. A small amount, given the day we'd endured, but at least it hadn't entirely been for nothing.

Jamming my hands into my pockets, I heard a crinkle and remembered the pilfered pages. Once time allowed, I'd have to hunt down a linguistics

expert and see what could be gleaned from the remains of the ancient tome. It would have to wait, however.

First and foremost, my duty was to make sure everyone recovered. Some scraps of a lost book could darn well wait until after.

A HECTIC

HOME COMING

AFTER MY FIRST FEW MONTHS OF TEACHING AT TRESTLEVEND, I'D FALLEN into something of a pattern. Weekdays were dominated by my class and keeping up with the business, these tasks made possible by making ample use of the time-distorting tool I'd been loaned. Its use took some getting used to, however. It was incredibly disorienting to spend hours polishing up a lesson plan, only to step out for some fresh air and see the sun had barely twitched. Then again, every time I stepped into sunshine, part of me still expected to burst into flame.

On weekends, I'd often get a visitor from home, both to keep me updated on life and to act as an extra pair of eyes. The fact that Quinn hadn't yet acted didn't make me safe; he was a man happy to wait for the right opportunity. Thanks to her hectic schedule, Krystal had only been able to pop by briefly, but as I entered the lobby of Unger Hall – the teacher's dormitory – on a Friday morning, it was with a spring in my step. My wife had gotten a long weekend off and would be coming for a real visit. Thankfully, we were accustomed to spending time apart, due to the travel requirements of her own job, but I was well past ready to spend some time with the woman I loved.

“Uh oh, Fred's smiling. Did someone jam giggle powder in the vents again?”

Seated in our lobby were Professors Glade, Timmons, and Salvero, all drinking mugs of coffee made by our overworked machine. Glade and Timmons looked much the same as they had on our first night's meeting, whereas Professor Salvero still favored an ever-evolving aesthetic. This

week, he was wearing features that made him look as if a lizard had slithered its way into the gene pool.

The comment had come from Professor Glade, however, whom I greeted with the same cheery grin she'd made note of. "I hardly think of myself as being naturally sour. Is it so surprising that I'm excited for the weekend?"

"A weekend, sure. *This* weekend, nah." She studied me closely, blowing a large bubble with her gum as she did, evidently taking note of the confusion I made no effort to hide. "Oh my stars and garters, he doesn't know!"

"Surely someone spoke to him about the traditions?" Professor Salvero said.

"Let's start at the beginning," Professor Timmons suggested, setting down the coffee cup that looked like a toy in his oversized hands. "Fred, you do know this weekend is homecoming, right?"

That much, I had indeed registered. Between the decorations, discussions, and demonstrable rise in school spirit, I'd have required a focused effort to avoid the information. "Of course. The game is tomorrow, correct? Truth be told, I've never been much of a football fan, or sports in general, but I did want to show support."

Professor Glade patted Professor Timmons on the shoulder before turning her attention to me. "The beginning was definitely the right place to start. Fred, we don't have a football team. Too much passing; it gave the parahumans with speed a huge advantage. The game we play is called scrumble, sort of a precursor to rugby. Not really the point, but wanted to correct that before you said it in front of a student."

"Thank you. That's very considerate," I replied.

"To bring us back to the main issue, this weekend is homecoming." Professor Salvero took a sip from his coffee, a bit dribbling from the sides of his currently too-wide mouth. "During which it is considered a tradition of good fortune to engage in lighthearted pranks around campus."

Thinking back, I vaguely remembered my own college having something similar. There was some hubbub during my attendance when a class had gone a step further than the tradition of surrounding a statue of our mascot, Endurance the Owl, with half-full beer bottles, as if to imply it was struggling with a heavy drinking issue. On the occasion in question,

obscene rubber dolls and undergarments were added to the scene, painting an even more lascivious picture of our mascot's off-hours activities.

"That goes on at most colleges, to my understanding."

"Maybe so, but most colleges aren't populated by students with access to magic," Professor Timmons countered. "Last year, someone stole every single squirrel out of the forest and stuck them all in my class. Do you know what happens when a storm of pissed-off squirrels rains down on a room full of unsuspecting therians? Absolute chaos is putting it mildly. I think maybe one desk survived."

"I was outside when the condiment tornados swept past, and in a form with lots of crevices, too. Spent weeks cleaning ketchup out of... places." Professor Salvero shuddered, then ran a finger along the pseudo-scales coating his skin. "That's why I picked something smooth for this year; easier to clean off after."

Professor Glade nodded in appreciation at the wisdom. "Try being a history instructor. People are already one good excuse away from cutting up in my class. At least the last one used tiny enchanted Trojan horses to interrupt, keeping it on topic. They drove themselves around until someone got curious and picked one up, then suddenly *poof*: cloud of stink powder."

As the stories mounted, so too did my concern. Pranks were one thing; parahuman pranks appeared to be on an entirely different level. I could understand how it would happen – a bucket balanced over an open door had limited scope when so many of us had enhanced senses, reactions, or both. Then there was the natural instinct of younger people to push, exploring their limits. But it still left me with a fresh bout of nerves at the idea of facing my class.

"I'm very grateful for the warning, today might have been quite confusing without it."

"Oh no, that wasn't the warning, just the setup," Professor Glade corrected. "The warning is that new and interim professors get it the worst. Sort of the campus version of getting jumped into a gang."

Sound from the stairs beckoned my attention as Gregor arrived. Though at a glance he seemed the usual degree of stoic, I could spot small signs indicating annoyance, and not without merit. In my excitement over Krystal's visit that morning, it might have slipped my mind to wait for him before heading down. Not the first time I'd made such an error, though it had been a few weeks since the last slip-up.

“Excellent timing. Gregor, we were just learning about Trestlevend’s tradition of homecoming pranks. We’ll have to be extra thoughtful in our reactions today, wouldn’t want to panic and inadvertently cause injury.” My concern was less that Gregor would run away and hurt someone than it was he’d put a huge stone fist into a perceived threat that turned out to be little more than a student casting illusions.

In an uncharacteristic display, Gregor snorted and replied, “I’m well aware of the issue. But if you’re just finding out now, that means you didn’t warn Krystal?”

At his words, I felt my whole body freeze. Gregor was a bodyguard. The only way he’d actively engage was if my life was threatened. Krystal, however, was an agent. She fought the mindless kind of monsters, as well as the sentient ones that had gone too far. If some random storm of squirrels got thrown at her, I feared the woodland population would see a sharp decline. Far worse would be if the students involved got injured.

New speed surged into my limbs, and I snatched up my phone, hurriedly navigating to saved numbers. It started to ring and I took hope until the rings eventually gave way to voicemail. I left a quick warning about the pranks on campus, along with a request to call me back for more details.

I wrapped my call just in time to hear Gregor speak again; evidently, he was feeling especially chatty this morning. “Who is it Trestlevend is playing in these games?”

The professors stared at him for several seconds before Salvero finally spoke up, albeit slowly. “Other teams.”

“But not from other colleges,” Gregor replied.

I finally saw what he was getting at and realized I should have wondered the same thing by this point. “Trestlevend is the only openly parahuman college in the country, right? So we can’t be playing scrumble with other college teams.”

“Wow, you don’t even follow the minor-league scrumble scene?” Professor Timmons admonished. “There’s a lot of teams these kids’ age. Trestlevend sponsors one, and that’s what the students play on. Homecoming is when we play our rivals, the Omaha Grackles. The Trestlevend Termites have a long history of duking it out with them, and the score is pretty even.”

Despite suspecting there wouldn’t be a satisfactory answer waiting, I couldn’t help myself. “Our team is the Termites?”

Professor Salvero took a pointed sip of his coffee. “Headmaster Sequoin wanted something terrifying.”

My next thoughts on the subject were swiftly lost as a ruckus was raised from the front. Banging, shouting – it sounded as if someone were trying to barge through a door using noise as their lockpick. Although I started forward on instinct, seconds later, I paused long enough for Gregor to get in front. Bit by bit, I was learning to let the man entrusted with my safety do his job.

Thanks to my delay, Gregor reached the door slightly ahead, yanking it open to reveal a scene straight out of a horror movie.

The woman was leaned up against the glass, still banging and hollering despite the absolute rivers of red running all along her body. Chunks of flesh were missing, claw marks carved deep into her stomach, and a hunk of metal was poking out from her mess of blonde hair. At first glance, I couldn’t imagine a more horrible sight to find waiting for us, but that was only until her head tilted back far enough to see the woman’s face. Because it was not just a bloody stranger that had been dropped on our dorm’s doorstep.

It was Krystal.

MY WAVE OF TERROR AND CONCERN LASTED ONLY AS LONG AS IT TOOK ME to realize that something was missing. A very specific something, an element so crucial to the scene that my brain demanded I take notice, regardless of whatever sat before my eyes.

There was no smell of blood.

From what I could perceive visually alone, I should have been staggered by the scent of blood, yet all I caught was whiffs of sugar, food-coloring, and other various chemicals – the components one might commonly find in costume blood.

“Alas, my dear Krystal, clearly gone before her time. I shall observe a mourning period of no fewer than three days before returning to the dating scene, now armed with a tragic story of love cut short.”

Her expression of pain warped swiftly into a stink-eye aimed pointedly in my direction. “Three days?”

“I aimed for something as believable as your effects.” With a smile, I tapped my nose once, then leaned down and helped Krystal to her feet. My hands came away sticky and red, possibly not the best aesthetic for a known vampire in public view.

“Cut me a little slack. I learned about the prank situation after getting here. Saw some kids trying to make a goat levitate.” From her jacket pocket, Krystal produced a slip of white cloth, running it over her blood-soaked body. Wherever it went, the red liquid and make up were pulled cleanly away, leaving what remained unsullied.

On reflex, I looked out to campus, searching for the act in question. “That sounds more like a prank on the goat than anyone else.”

“Oh yeah? Go stand under it for a bit. Let me know who the joke is on.”

That new perspective sent a shudder down my spine as Krystal continued cleaning up. She wasn't thorough enough to get every bit, but after a few minutes, she at least looked like someone who'd gotten hit by a splatter of paint rather than a savaged corpse. When she was done, my wife offered me the cloth, which I used to wipe off my own hands easily. Whatever the material was, it appeared as pure as when she'd started, and left behind a smell vaguely of oranges.

With Krystal once more presentable, we made our way inside. After a quick round of greeting with the departing professors, off to presumably start the work of their day, Gregor followed as I led Krystal up to my suite to drop off her bag and give her a quick tour. Although we didn't use it in the moment, I showed her the time-distorting hourglass that made my trip feasible.

Krystal was one of the few people I knew who could also make use of the item without fearing a sudden bout of aging. She remained young and healthy no matter how the years wore on, her lifespan enhanced by the literal devil trapped within. Until she passed the inherited hitchhiker on by giving birth to a daughter, Krystal would live indefinitely; she would have to be actively killed for her life to end, and that was no easy task.

But stretching out time couldn't compete with the call of adventure, of a new campus to explore and trouble to discover. Once her stuff was out of hand and my temporary home properly seen, Krystal was all but dragging me out the door, eager to view more of Trestlevend's campus.

I was happy to oblige, showing off the splendid sights of my temporary home. We started by heading off to the lake, where several pranks were already on full display. Ice statues of various creatures and species floated along the surface, arranged to appear extremely suggestive in their positioning. Further out, a school of fish were swimming through a reverse waterfall shooting up from the lake's center, firing up into the sky before coming back down with a splash. Near the shore, I spotted several students floating in what appeared to be soap bubbles, bashing on the barriers until they popped.

“This place is so much more fun than where I got a degree,” Krystal muttered. “Our teachers got up in arms because someone made a snow-dong in the middle of campus.”

“*Someone?*” She could try to slip it by quickly, but I knew my wife.

“The best Resident Advisors they could find never made me crack. I’m not confessing now.”

Though that did make me chuckle, my mind was picking through details, realizing something peculiar about the timeline of Krystal’s life. “Wait, why couldn’t you have come here? Didn’t you discover your parahuman nature midway through college? This would seem the natural place to finish out an education.”

Sitting down on the soft grass of the riverbank, Krystal patted for me to join her. I did, albeit only after scanning the sky for floating goats. Gregor was keeping his head on a constant swivel, as always, but some threats warranted extra precaution.

“When I first discovered my power, control was far and away my biggest concern. That’s why I went right into training, heading down to Boarback to learn from Sheriff Leeroy. By the time I had it, all my focus was on the Agency; I banged out the rest of my degree as quick as possible in my spare time. Even if I’d been academically inclined, it would have meant temporarily breaking ties with the Agency. We’re not allowed to attend Trestlevend.”

A question of “why?” withered on my tongue as I watched the students freely causing mischief. I wasn’t quite so new to parahuman society as I’d once been; this was a puzzle I had all the pieces to solve for myself. Agents were the boogymen of the supernatural world, enforcers who upheld the treaties for peaceful parahuman coexistence. A sadly necessary tool, they were an unwelcome presence in such a relaxed environment.

“Since Headmaster Sequoin can protect this place on her own, she doesn’t have need of agents, and their presence would scare a lot of students.” My mind flashed to the face of Valencia, one of my own students, when she’d learned Krystal’s name. Since then, Valencia had proven herself to be the most fastidious among the class, yet there was an undeniable wariness in how she looked at me. It was something I’d grown accustomed to as a vampire, though this was a new variety: someone who was not afraid of me, but of the woman I’d married.

“That’s the downside of cultivating a terrifying reputation: can’t turn it off just because you want to go dick around at college for a while.”

“At least you can walk around incognito,” I remarked. “Here, you’re just the guest of Interim Professor Fletcher, the hippest new teacher around.”

Krystal's laughter drove away what little sense of solemnness had gathered. "I don't think cool teachers call themselves 'hip.' Hell, I don't think they did that even when people actually used that word. Remind me to ask Arch next time he's around."

Leaning back and enjoying the sunshine, Krystal let out a soft sigh, then checked her watch. "Do we need to get moving soon? I know you've got a class to teach, and you aren't the type to play hooky."

"If anything could motivate me to give it a try, it would be spending time with you." Stretching my own legs with her, laying a hand atop Krystal's as I shifted position, I too reveled in the warmth of the sun. "Several of my students let me know in advance that they wouldn't be able to attend today; they're involved with extracurricular organizations that are part of the homecoming events. Since we'd be down more than half of an already small class, and I had a visitor coming, I elected to make it a free period for everyone."

"Why, Freddy Fletcher, did you actually plan a day off work to have more time with me?"

I tried to shift away on reflex, but her hand held me pinned in place. "It was really the best use of everyone's time, considering—"

My words were cut short as Krystal kissed me deeply, no concern at all for the youthful onlookers who, in fairness, did seem to be paying us no more than minimal attention. When we finally parted, she held my face close. "Seriously, I know how rare it is for you to put work aside. Don't think I miss, or fail to appreciate, these kinds of gestures."

"You have to fight constantly for extended periods of time between trips home. Making the most of them is the very least I can do."

Giving me one more quick kiss, Krystal released her hold. "Now that we've established how lucky we are to find such considerate partners, how about we go see your classroom?"

"Really?" I motioned to the lake still firing fish up from its center. Against all logic, the number of fish spraying up was increasing, meaning that the force was somehow pulling them in across the lake's depths, or they were willingly swimming into it again and again. Perhaps it was the aquatic equivalent of a roller coaster. "There's a lot more interesting stuff on campus to look at than my classroom."

"And we'll get to it, but I want to see where you're clocking in and shaping minds. In fact, while we head over – Gregor, would you mind

rustling up some secure lunch? Freddy can get by on blood, but some of us have to make sure that what we eat hasn't been tampered with."

My bodyguard's eyes went from Krystal to me, then back. I could all but hear his series of thoughts as he processed the situation. Although this was technically leaving me unprotected, not even Gregor would claim to be more dangerous than an agent, and Krystal was highly regarded among them. If something came for me that she couldn't stop, he wasn't likely to be of any more help.

Plus, it seemed fairly obvious that she was trying to get us some privacy, and Gregor was more adept at reading between the lines than his stoic countenance would indicate.

"I'll locate a trusted source and wait on your call."

That was all Gregor said before marching off. I wasn't entirely sure where he was heading, but it was the opposite direction of my classroom.

Krystal was on the move, as well, slipping around me and pulling us from the lake. "He's gotten a lot better about taking hints."

"Gregor strives to be his best at all times; it's one of his most admirable qualities," I replied. "Although, I'm not sure the hinting was necessary. He would have understood that we wanted time alone."

That drew forth a tantalizing cackle from my wife. "You're so adorable. The hinting wasn't for Gregor's sake. It was for yours."

Pausing our stroll, Krystal ran her hand up my arm to my neck, where her nails gently raked across my skin. "Imagine how embarrassed you'd have been if I just went and said I wanted to see the classroom so we could have some fun as professor and student."

Were I still physical capable of blushing, my whole body would have burned red. Being intimate with my wife was one matter; talking about such things... it was never especially part of my nature, and being undead hadn't changed that.

"I suppose I can see the appeal in showing off my workplace," I finally managed to spit out. "Although, I feel compelled to point out that there are some real issues with the power dynamic in that fantasy."

"Oh, I know." In a quick movement that most human eyes would have had trouble tracking, Krystal popped the glasses from my face and set them on her own. Since both of us had exceptional vision, they were purely aesthetic, and she made my humble frames appear downright fetching.

“And I fully intend to lecture you about it at length, while we find something you can do for extra credit.”

To say that I was momentarily dumbstruck wouldn't have been inaccurate; my feet led us toward the classroom on autopilot. I might have walked us both there without ever taking in a single aspect of our surroundings, if it were not for what happened as we passed a particular decoration.

There are few things like an unexpected explosion to bring one suddenly back to their senses.

FLEETINGLY, MY MIND FLASHED BACK TO THE EVE BEFORE OUR WEDDING. To the terrible night when Asha's mortal life had reached its end, a car bomb left by Quinn sending shrapnel carving through her body. I scoured the landscape for any hint of incoming threat, only to somewhat relax when I caught sight of multicolored smoke rising near a decorative fountain.

Realization slowly sank in as I considered the situation. Quinn was arguably ostentatious, but he'd never favored any color besides blood red in his works. Plumes of blue, yellow, green, and purple hinted at something more whimsical, such as students putting together a prank.

Nevertheless, the sound *had* been worryingly loud. "Excited as I am to show you my classroom, we should go make sure no one is hurt."

"Duty before pleasure," Krystal agreed. "I'm also curious what the hell they're up to."

We shifted course toward the fountain, a lovely piece I'd seen on my first day at Trestlevend. A pair of intricately carved hands along the bottom were lifting up a large book, streams of water firing from different sections at various times. It had been titled "The Spring of Knowledge" on an ornate plaque near its base, one that was all but invisible through the swirling colored smoke.

As we drew closer and focused our attention, I became aware of voices in the mist. Familiar ones, at that.

"I thought you said this would be *covert*." The voice was strained and nervous, probably the last student I'd have expected to find in such a situation.

“I said it *should* be covert,” corrected a far more relaxed tone. “Not like I’ve ever tried this recipe before.” This one, I was much less surprised to hear.

“Um, hey, remember how you said you wanted to know if anyone got close? Well, I hear footsteps coming from over there.” The third voice was somewhere between the two: far from cavalier, yet not audibly keyed up, either. Also unexpected – this one limited our options for a stealthy approach.

Clearing my throat, I spoke loudly, as if the fog were dampening sound, as well. “Is everyone all right in there? We heard the explosion and wanted to make sure there were no injuries or other issues.”

A bout of silence seized the group, broken moments later by a voice cheered with recognition. “Professor Fred, is that you?”

“Yes, Keith. Why don’t you all head toward my voice, and we can talk about what’s going on together.”

Keith had been the third voice of the group, yet the younger vampire was the first one to step into view, a sheepish expression fixed in place. Next came the second voice, and presumably the person most responsible for the slowly dissipating smoke: Teagan. The mage of my class offered a soft nod of greeting as she appeared.

Last came the first voice, the ever-concerned Valencia. Her face was far past sheepish, reaching the point of outright shame. “I’m so sorry, Professor. We didn’t mean to cause any damage. I knew it was a bad idea, but everyone kept talking about doing pranks and traditions and I just—” Valencia’s torrent of words halted without warning. She’d been speaking as soon as she came into view, gaining steadily clearer sight. Eyes locked on Krystal, Valencia’s jaw stopped mid-motion, and she appeared to shrink in on herself.

“Like our resident overachiever said, it’s just a prank that went a little awry,” Teagan said, taking over when it became clear Valencia wasn’t going to resume. “I’m trying to brew a potion that will animate the fountain statue, make the pages actually turn, maybe even get the fingers to move. Our first effort left room for improvement.”

With the smoke finally dissipating to the point where I could see what they’d been working on, a miniature cauldron came into view. Next to it was a plastic folding table and an arrangement of jars holding various liquids, powders, and gooey ingredients I was happier not easily

identifying. Years of friendship with Amy had taught me to recognize a mobile alchemy station on sight, though hers typically had more craftsmanship.

“Well, this is just downright adorable. Look at you little mischief makers, swinging for the fences. Are you all pals from Freddy’s class or something?”

At the sound of Krystal’s voice, I realized that my manners were failing me. “Everyone, this is my wife, Krystal. Krystal, this is Keith, Teagan, and Valencia: students from my class.”

“*She’s* your wife? I’d ask if you were rich, but the outfits answer that for me.” Teagan offered me a thumbs-up. “Talk about swinging for the fences.”

“Freddy’s charms aren’t as overt as others, but I assure you, he has quite a few attractive qualities of his own. Not to mention, I kind of think sweater vests are cute.”

“Do you now?” I asked, attempting to arch an eyebrow and managing a middling result, at best.

“What can I say? They grew on me.” Her hand found its way into mine and offered a strong squeeze. Were it not for the students watching, I daresay we might have gone for a kiss; it was a lovely moment.

One that the younger parahumans found less entrancing than us, however. “Is this what normal couples are like?” Keith wondered aloud. “My folks typically just used yelling for everything.”

Teagan shot the vampire a brief look of pity before adopting her normal detachment. “Normal is a relative term, especially among the supernatural.”

“They weren’t parahumans, just assholes. There’s a reason I was out on the streets when...” This time, it was Keith’s turn to awkwardly end a sentence, though his faded out rather than use the abrupt cut Valencia’s had.

Waving her arms around to clear the multicolored mist, Teagan waded through the remainder of the smoke, back to their alchemy table. She peered into the cauldron, then plucked one of the jars from the table and poured half its contents inside, resulting in a long *hiss* and a pillar of white steam that shot directly upward. Once it had cleared, she looked back to her two pranksters-in-crime.

“Cauldron is cleaned. You ready for round two?”

Keith’s eyes shot to me, while Valencia had been actively trying to look at Krystal without actually meeting her gaze since first catching sight of my wife. “Seeing as the prank described doesn’t purposefully endanger any

student or staff, I see no reason to involve ourselves in a sanctioned school tradition.”

In truth, I saw an abundance of reasons – property damage alone would make a compelling case. But this was Headmaster Sequoin’s school. I was merely a guest on the grounds. Whatever her reasons for allowing such widespread mischief, it wasn’t my place to undercut them; not unless someone’s safety was at risk.

“If... if it’s really okay... then sure.” Keith moved like he expected me to spring forward and declare the whole thing a trap, inching his way over to Teagan, who was already adding ingredients to her freshly cleaned cauldron.

Valencia shifted as well, though her motions were more distinct. One step at a time, she slowly made her way backward, gaze never moving away from Krystal for even a moment. The risk of such a tactic was the lack of sight to her rear, which led to Valencia backing directly into Keith, who’d finally come to a halt a few feet from the table. As soon as they touched, Valencia let out a brief shriek that made me jump, Krystal tense, and Teagan dump a few extra shakes of the powder she was pouring into the cauldron.

“Sorry, I’m so sorry,” Valencia stammered out to Keith, embarrassment enough to break whatever spell she’d fallen under. “I was... I just got... distracted.” Hiding her face, she swung around to the other side of Keith, putting his body between herself and Krystal.

If I hadn’t seen her grow distant at the mention of my wife’s name, I’d have sincerely wondered if there was some sort of aura interaction occurring, such as the way dragons naturally drove off vampires from being in their presence. Even after moving to the back of the classroom, Valencia was dogged in her dedication to the material, her hand first up almost every time I asked a question. For her to be so effectively cowed by the mere sight of a woman who meant her no harm, there was clearly a lot more going on than I’d been aware of.

Much as I might have liked to ask Krystal for clarification, her focus was on the students and their steadily smoking cauldron. Wisps of blue and yellow were already rising, a sliver of green just starting to appear. My wife had drawn a few steps closer, but stopped advancing when Valencia twitched back. “Teagan, wasn’t it? This seems like an impressively complex spell for a student. You must have extensive prior training.”

“That’s calling a manticore a mantis,” she muttered, quiet enough that I wondered if the words had even been intended for the rest of us. Especially since her next ones were back to normal volume. “It’s a tough nut to crack; animating the motionless is usually more of an enchanting specialty than an alchemy one. But that’s what makes it worthwhile.” She added a few drops from an oddly-shaped bottle, and a plume of purple smoke joined the other three colors.

Valencia took a deep breath and held it, a not-so-subtle hint that we had come to the step that generated the prior failure. Teagan’s motions were more delicate now, as well, her hands steady as she reached into a cloth pouch and produced a single pinch of white dust. Sprinkling it across the surface of the cauldron, we all watched as the colors twisted together.

At first, they seemed to blend, but then the battle began in earnest. Purple expanded outward, trying to open aggressively. Yellow and green poured into the gaps that had been opened, devouring the violet entirely. Yet as they’d been busy with purple, blue attacked from the rear, overwhelming the pair in their moment of distraction. In seconds, only blue remained, a dark blue that seemed to shift and swell in hue.

Satisfied, Teagan lifted the cauldron with her bare hands, walked the three steps over to the fountain, and dumped out its contents. The brilliant blue liquid streaked briefly through the air before depositing itself with a *splash*.

Our focus stayed locked on the fountain, so that when the first page started to turn, we all saw it. Cheers erupted from the students and Krystal. I offered up my own applause, as well; watching the stone pages flip through the air was a fascinating feat indeed.

Teagan dropped her cauldron back on the table, wearing a grin that openly broadcast her intentions to gloat. Which is exactly when we all felt it. Subtle, yet growing, and utterly undeniable.

A rumble. The ground beneath our feet had started to groan.

FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE ARRIVAL, I DEARLY WISHED WE HAD SOME IDEA of *where* Trestlevend was actually located. Arriving via fey teleportation meant we had no context for things like whether we were in an area where earthquakes would be common or mudslides – even avalanches – might be common, or if we were being protected from the elements. Knowing that the very sunshine in the air could be rendered safe, there was no telling what was possible.

“Anyone see what that is?” I glanced over to the students, who appeared to be having trouble staying upright. Keith was handling the shifting ground best of them all, his enhanced dexterity offering solid footing. Valencia was staying somewhat steady, whereas Teagan appeared to be one bad wobble from going headfirst into the fountain.

I was over there before consciously recognizing the danger; mage or not, taking a dive into a potion-filled fountain was bound to be bad for her. Thanks to my physical gifts, I was able to cross the distance with ease, catching Teagan just as she began tottering dangerously close to the edge and pulling her back to safety.

To my rear, a bloodcurdling scream rang through the air. Despite the unsteady ground at my feet, I swung around, making sure to put Teagan behind me, blocking her from the source of danger. Deep down, part of me was already bracing to encounter Quinn, sure that he’d found a way to use the chaos and slip onto campus.

Instead, I found myself looking at Krystal, arm still extended in a helping motion. Below her, Valencia cowered on the ground, hands wrapped around her head, knees tucked in close to her chest. It wasn’t often

that I saw my wife stunned, but in that moment, her expression was one of genuine bewilderment.

“Your student started to pitch forward, so I tried to catch her before she fell.”

Without warning, the rolling of the ground intensified, nearly sending me for a tumble, as well. “Krystal, take Teagan. Keith, give them a hand. You’ve got more raw strength. I’ll help Valencia.”

Moving carefully forward, I inched my way closer to the still-shaking form on the rattling ground. Dropping to a knee, I leaned down, gently offering a single pale hand. “Valencia, we need to move. Whatever is happening, it’s getting worse. You can’t stay here.”

“She’s going... to eat... me!” The words sputtered out between gasping breaths; unless I missed my mark, Valencia was experiencing a panic attack. However, the next phrase gave me something of a scare myself. “Just like... she ate... Grandpa.”

Whatever rumors had reached Valencia’s ears, they’d clearly left her with a terrifying image of Krystal, one that was overpowering her sense of reason and self-preservation. This was an issue that needed to be dealt with, just at a more opportune time.

“Miss Ogden! We are in the midst of a magical event, one where your safety is in danger. If you cannot move yourself, I will be forced to carry you from here.”

After a few more seconds of silent shaking from Valencia and a very potent rumble below our feet, it was clear that she was too far gone to register the situation. Scooping her up, I ran as fast as I dared. The ground was no longer just shifting: it had begun to split. Sudden fissures sprang into existence as I bounded across the landscape, my student cradled carefully against my chest.

No more than twenty seconds after I grabbed Valencia, a rift opened in the spot where she’d been cowering, the ground breaking apart into shifting mounds of earth that parted into a hole easily large enough for us both to plummet down. If the need to move my student to safety hadn’t already offered enough motivation to hustle, the notion of being trapped underground would have lit a flame beneath my heels. Getting stuck in a place like that would be a truly endless torture.

Vampires don’t die without access to blood. Instead, we suffer: physical pain, a consuming desire to feed, even mental degradation. An endless,

deathless existence of only torment. Perhaps I did manage to find an extra bit of speed in my escape, after all.

Finally, we reached more stable ground, though tremors from the fountain still rippled below my feet. Valencia's shaking had somewhat subsided. My hope was that the sudden escape had broken whatever trance she was lost in. I caught sight of the others nearby; Keith was offering Teagan a steadying arm, while Krystal looked at the ongoing event with visible scrutiny. Swinging wide of my wife, I brought Valencia around to her classmates, laying her gently down on the ground.

"Teagan, do you have any idea what could have gone wrong?"

"Exactly what I've been asking myself since the ground got uppity," she replied. "And honestly: no. I wasn't kidding around. It was just an animation spell. Maybe a little more potent than normal thanks to some accidental overpouring on an ingredient, but that still shouldn't have changed the fundamental magic. Unless I animated the entire planet, I have no idea how my potion caused this."

"Is Valencia okay?" Keith interrupted, kneeling down next to the still curled-up student.

I wasn't entirely sure what the answer to that was, in truth. "So far as I can tell, she's uninjured. This reaction isn't based on something physical."

"Hey, Freddy, you might want to take a look at this."

Krystal's voice pulled my attention to her, then past. I followed her gaze back to the fountain and the chewed-up terrain around it. Cracks had begun to spiderweb along the side of the fountain, its great stone edifice marred beyond the point of all but the most magical of repairs. A few moments later, that issue became moot, however.

The fountain shattered entirely, hunks of stone flying in all directions, some even weakly thudding down near where we were standing. Had everyone stayed in proximity to the fountain, I didn't want to imagine the impact those shards would be hitting with. I knew that at least Teagan was susceptible to bleeding out, potentially Valencia, as well.

Yet stunning a sight as it was to see the fountain shatter, that had absolutely nothing on what followed. From the ground came a pair of slender tubes connecting to the hands and book, rising from the earth like twin spears until suddenly, a crook appeared, a slight bend in the tubes as they sent the book and hands higher into the air.

Arms. They were a pair of massive stone arms, connected to the hands and book that had been the fountain's centerpiece. Seconds after I made that deduction, the first strands of stone hair peeked up from the dirt. Sure enough, the head of a wizened old man, complete with flowing stone beard, pushed its way out from the ground, even as more of the arms fought their way free.

"Putting it out there right now: no way was my potion powerful enough to grow a goddamn underground statue." Teagan might have managed to say something flippant; however, not even she could keep the awe entirely out of her tone. We were watching an incredible sight, even among the standards of the supernatural.

"Kid, if I thought for a second you'd managed something like that – by accident, no less – I'd already have our best recruiter on the line." Eyeing the rising giant, Krystal did shoot Teagan a needling glance. "Although, animating something that big is still pretty impressive."

Teagan shook her head. "It would be, if I had any idea how it was happening. There wasn't anywhere *near* enough power in that potion to give movement to something that size. Even just animating the hands and book was at the edge of my limits."

When the next voice came, it was so soft I nearly didn't notice. I would have missed it entirely if not for my enhanced hearing.

"It must have had its own magic," Valencia muttered.

"Its own magic?" I asked before stopping to consider the source of the speaker, or whether the words had been intended for the group as a whole. Not my finest moment of etiquette, but I will say, a giant stone person bursting from the ground nearby does tend to be a distraction.

I feared Valencia would reply with silence once more; however, her head slowly poked out from under her arms. "Some items and places have magic in them, either created and forgotten or formed naturally. If the statue was already there, and had its own magic, maybe it used Teagan's spell as a catalyst."

"The statue is like a big patch of oil, and my potion was the match." Teagan rubbed her chin briefly, then nodded. "Makes more sense than any of the ideas I was working with, even if part of me was holding out hope I'd just discovered an amazing secret talent."

Though it was impossible to ignore the steadily rising form, now past a pair of stone shoulders covered by a robe of the same material, I split my

attention between it and Valencia. Slowly, she seemed to be coming back to herself, though the way she kept scooting away from Krystal made it clear that the source of the issue hadn't yet been solved. Much as I wanted to help my student through this difficult time, I didn't expect it would be a quick fix, whereas the statue issue was only growing steadily worse.

Breaking past the shoulders had evidently been a key point in the ascension, as the figure was now rising at a far more rapid pace. A torso emerged, stretching high into the sky while the earth churned below. As the legs rose nearer to the surface, the effect of their efforts became all the more evident. While the rest of the statue remained motionless, save for the book's still-turning pages, its legs were ceaseless. Step after step, they kicked through the ground, fighting to rise higher.

The first time a knee popped through, it sent a spray of dirt blasting into the air. Then it was gone, back below the surface for a few seconds before its twin performed a similar feat. Something about catching a sudden mound of dirt to the cheek was enough to break me from its spell.

"What should we do about this?" I asked, struck by the realization that soon the statue would no longer be stuck in the ground.

"You wouldn't have coincidentally picked up a way to stop a giant stone person from doing whatever they like, huh?" Krystal turned to me, waiting for a reply. After I shook my head, she looked to the students, causing Valencia to vanish under her arms once more. "What about you three, any tricks to beat a rock colossus?"

Neither Keith nor Valencia said anything, but Teagan pulled a few glass vials from a pouch at her side. "A few that might slow it down. For a very limited amount of time."

"More than I was hoping for," Krystal admitted. "If someone can reach the headmaster, that would be ideal, though something tells me she'll know about this sooner than later. Until then, I think the best we can do is act as runners, making sure to clear people out of its path before this thing can go stomping through them."

With a sonorous *pop* that thundered across the campus, the statue finally freed its first foot from the damp earth, setting it atop the splintered grass. Now in possession of a spot with true leverage, it only took one mighty step for the stone book-bearer to haul itself entirely to freedom.

As it stood fully upright in the sunshine, it became easier to appreciate the statue's level of detail. From the wrinkles around the eyes to the tiny

tears at the hem of the rocky robe, something about the man conveyed a sense of realness that was off-putting. Had it been fashioned with such precision out of adoration, or was this even truly a statue at all?

For the brief moment after it emerged, the statue remained still, and I allowed myself a fleeting hope that all it had wanted was to work itself free. Then, with an unexpected show of grace, it turned on its heel and began marching with purpose. After one glance at the direction it was headed, I could certainly understand the appeal for a stone being whose only possession was a book, but we still had to try to stop it.

Because the giant statue-man was on a course directly for the library – and the myriad of students inside.

“SHOULD ONE OF US GO LOOK FOR THE HEADMASTER?” I WAS MATCHING pace with Krystal as we ran, the other three students trailing behind. Keith could have kept up, if not passed us, but he was occupied with helping to haul Teagan along. Mercifully, the statue had set something of a leisurely pace – although even the casual gait of such huge legs demanded that we jog to stay in front. “I know you said she’ll find us eventually, but this really feels like it should be brought to her attention.”

“If we knew for sure where she was, I’d be beating a path there myself,” Krystal agreed. “Running uselessly around campus won’t be much help. There’s going to be plenty of that as soon as this thing catches attention.”

On that front, progress was already being made. With my sharp senses, I could spot students farther off pointing at the spectacle. Unfortunately, they were regarding it with mirth rather than concern, probably assuming such a thing to be obvious illusion. If any came close to investigate, they’d learn the hard way just how real it was, as the giant footprints now marring the campus grounds could attest. Krystal was right: until we knew where Headmaster Sequoin was, our efforts were better spent warning people away before they got crushed.

Falling back slightly, I matched pace with Keith, Teagan, and Valencia. While Krystal sent me a curious gaze, she maintained her position at the front of the pack. It was evident that her proximity to Valencia had caused the student fright, and a panic attack here could lead to a fatal statue-stomping.

“Keith, I have to ask a question, and I’m afraid it may come across as indelicate, so please know that this comes without judgement. Have you

been drinking blood from any other parahumans?”

Despite my warning, his eyes went wide, and his face filled with panic, his gaze darting from me to his peers.

“I... um... can I ask why it matters?”

“Because we need the fastest of us to break out ahead and start evacuating the library,” I explained. “Parahuman blood is far more potent than the normal stuff, imparting a bit of its owner’s power to the vampire who drinks it. I buy my blood from approved Agency sources, ensuring that it was given by willing and compensated donors. The same Agency I presume is your supplier. While I’ve never asked about anything other than human, my suspicion is that they offer that, as well.”

Somewhat soothed by the explanation, Keith managed to wrangle out a response from his nervous tongue. “I’ve also only bought human blood... but I have drunk from another parahuman recently. A willing one!” That last bit was hurriedly tacked on. If Keith had still been capable of blushing, I feared the young man would have been lit like a burning apple.

“Was it one who improved your physical strength and speed?” In deference to his visible embarrassment, I avoided follow-ups on the nature of how he’d obtained said parahuman blood. So long as all parties involved were consenting, it was none of my business, and I didn’t suspect Keith of lying on that front. In our months together, he’d proven honest to a fault.

That got me a nod of reply, so I took up the conversational baton. Behind us, the steady thud of heavy footsteps served as a constant reminder that time was limited. “Teagan, if you’re all right with it, may I help you in Keith’s place?”

“Nah, to hell with this.” From her pocket, Teagan produced a glass vial and tilted it back. I was so accustomed to seeing Amy do the same that I barely gave it a second thought. However, there was quite a bit of difference between the workmanship of a mage-in-training and that of an experienced prodigy constantly testing her limits. In a sudden fit of motion, Teagan surged forward on her own. The sputters of green light spitting from her back and heels were a tad concerning, as was the fact that she turned her head and projectile vomited without losing a step, only barely missing Valencia in the process.

Since he no longer had to worry about helping our slowest member along, Keith took off, blasting ahead of us, then Krystal, as he tore toward the library at top speed. With Teagan now magically augmented and Keith

giving it his all, Valencia had become the slowest among us. I kept pace with her, making sure she wouldn't fall too far back, studying my student for signs of another attack. Taking stock of our numbers, and the relative proximity of the statue, I wasn't sure what any of us could do, or how one person more would make the difference.

"Valencia, it's entirely understandable if you want to break off and head for safety."

I expected a muted, half-distracted response, but evidently, something in my words struck deep. Her head whirled on me, an emotion approaching ferocity etched into the angry tightening around her forehead and eyes. "And why am *I* the one you assume wants to cut out, leaving everyone else behind?"

There was something in the question that I was missing, a pointed implication that made little sense. Rather than fall back on simple assurances, which might be misconstrued in the unknown context, I opted to reply with the truth. "Because you're the only one who visibly recoils from the presence of my wife. Being around Krystal is plainly distressing, and I have no desire to see you suffer."

Whatever winds of anger she'd conjured fled Valencia's sails, nearly causing her to lose a step. Nevertheless, she swiftly regained her footing, her jaw setting in a way she typically only wore when I was passing out exams. "I'm not... I *can't* be somebody who bails when things get tough. Just don't let her get near me when no one is watching."

"Miss Ogden, I can assure you that whatever concerns—"

"Freddy, can you hustle up?" Krystal called back over her shoulder. "I see people ahead and need vampire eyes."

Giving Valencia and Teagan last glances to be sure they were moving fast enough, I hurried ahead, soon reaching Krystal's side. Off ahead, I saw a group of students gathered around what appeared to be dozens of plaster pumpkins. Clearly, they'd been hauled out for some manner of prank, and it was a plan apparently good enough to fight for.

Although we were too far even for my hearing to pick up details, I could spot Keith standing among them, arms flailing wildly as he gestured back in our direction. Or, more accurately, in the direction of the enormous stone statue sauntering toward them. Based on the way several figures were laughing and pointing, they clearly saw the colossus approaching. Maybe they thought it was all illusionary, or made of a light foam, or a dozen

enchanted pigeons wearing an elaborate costume. The one thing they didn't seem to consider was the possibility that the approaching behemoth was real, and all of them were standing in the path of danger.

"Cluster of students hanging out. They don't seem to think there's anything to worry about, though Keith is giving his all to convince them otherwise."

"Figures," Krystal muttered. "The only person who thinks they're more invulnerable than someone in their early twenties is that same person with supernatural powers added into the mix. Any chance you could play the professor card and get them to listen?"

Visions of swaggering up to the students and building an instant rapport swam through my mind and exited just as quickly. I knew my strengths, and social guile was not among them. "I'm an interim professor of a class with six students, three of which are already with us. Most of them probably don't even know I'm on staff."

"Pretty much what I was afraid of." From within her jeans pocket, Krystal produced a small trinket the size of a lighter. In appearances, it actually *was* a lighter, assuming one ignored the careful script of arcane symbols etched into the base. She twirled it between her fingers, even as we ran ahead of the meandering giant. "Freddy, when I use this, you should be ready to catch that student who's afraid of me. I'm not sure what's setting her off, but this is likely to be a contender."

"Thank you for the warning. And I'm sorry about how she's been reacting."

While Krystal shrugged, I noticed the way her eyes shot back toward Valencia, if only for a flicker. "No apology needed. It's not like she doesn't have good reason to be afraid."

"Be more fair to yourself," I interjected. "While the job you do does come with violence and a fearsome reputation, those are tools you only use as defense to protect yourself and the parahumans who want to live peaceful lives under the various treaties' safeguards."

"Thank you, Freddy. The sentiment is sweet and appreciated. But I didn't mean she had a reason to be afraid of agents. I was talking about me, specifically. Pretty sure she's right. I *did* eat her grandfather."

Apparently, the shocked look on my face asked the obvious question before it could be voiced, as she added one tidbit of explanation. "Not every parahuman dies from sunshine and decapitation."

Before I could ask any more, Krystal surged ahead in a burst of speed. By this point, we'd run long enough that the cluster of students was in view for even those with normal vision and were close enough to be heard if any of them were willing to shout.

Lifting the trinket, Krystal pressed it to her throat. When she spoke next, the sound ripped through the air, drowning out even the rhythmic thud of enormous footsteps to our rear. It was as if the words were being yelled from directly next to me, and from the way I saw the crowd wince, the effect was just as potent at a distance.

“Get out of the fucking way! This is Agent Krystal Jenkins, and the giant stone tagalong behind us is entirely real and happy to grind you all under its heels. If any one of you is still blocking the way in ten seconds, I'll reach in there and start moving bodies myself. Now **go!**”

Whether it was the force in the final word, the ferocity in Krystal's voice, or the reputation of agents in general, her efforts worked. Several students took off running without a moment's hesitation, their earnest sprint breaking the crowd's collective resolution. Still at far-too-sedate of speeds, they moved away from the giant's path.

Meanwhile, Krystal's predication had proven true. At the sound of my wife's voice hollering in her ear, Valencia lost her focus, tumbling forward, likely to end up in a heap. Since I was forewarned, her journey forward came to a careful halt as I hauled Valencia back up. The young woman's fingers gripped my forearm like it was the last handhold over a precarious cliff. There was a lot regarding this situation that I didn't fully understand, and that was a matter that needed rectifying.

A task to handle later, when we didn't have a giant stomping along after us.

Keith was already moving again, and as I drew closer to his position, I understood why. Still a ways off, but undeniable in the distance, the library was already visible. Given what it had taken to move just a small crowd to the side, he was going to need every second possible if there was any hope of evacuating such a large building in time.

And if he couldn't, then I genuinely wasn't sure what our next move might be.

BY THE TIME WE DREW NEAR THE LIBRARY, I COULD SEE A SMALL CROWD out in front, gathered around a wildly gesticulating Keith. A *very* small one, unfortunately; nowhere near the amount I would have expected to see if the building were entirely emptied out. Glancing through a window, I spotted students studying and sitting around, not a care in the world despite the huge stone man stomping his way over.

Coming to a halt, Krystal examined the situation, took a deep breath, and began snapping off orders. “Valencia, go help Keith try to get everyone moving. Teagan, tell me every potion or tool you’ve got that might slow this thing down for even a step. Freddy, make sure no one wanders too close by accident; I’m going to need some room to work.” It was only then that she turned around, looking back to the approaching statue. “At this point, our only shot is to hold it off as best we can, ideally impressing the very real danger onto everyone so they get clear. Someone here is bound to know how to alert the headmaster.”

While Teagan began dutifully digging through her pockets, an only recently recovered Valencia dug her heels into the grass. “I already told Professor Fred. I’m not going to flee—”

“Do you think Keith was running away?” Krystal shook off her leather jacket, revealing a conspicuous lack of weaponry. Although she had a few knives strapped on, the constantly present firearm was absent, presumably not permitted on campus. “Getting people to safety isn’t some blowoff task; it’s the most vital part of this entire process. I’m telling you to do the important work while the rest of us fight to buy time. We’re just playing distraction. You’ll be saving people.”

My student wavered, visibly tempted to keep arguing, but the growing rumble of approaching footsteps underlined just how right Krystal was. After a few seconds, she tore off toward Keith, eyes fixed on the unmoving crowd. Hopefully, the two of them would find a way to get people going in time.

The tinkling of glass signified Teagan producing the last of her “useful” potions. “This one can be used to make an instant mud puddle, this one forms a huge mound of taffy that is inhumanly sticky, and this one slightly shrinks stuff, but we’d need a few swimming pools of it to coat the book-bearer back there.”

While Teagan unpacked, Krystal had been busy unsheathing a particularly long, pointed knife, holding it delicately. “I think I can make it work. Real quick, you two. Valencia isn’t watching, right?”

After confirming that she was still running toward Keith, Teagan and I both nodded our confirmation.

“Good. This probably wouldn’t have helped what she’s going through.” That was all the warning we received before Krystal stabbed herself with that long dagger. She brought it up from a low angle, sliding expertly between her own rib bone and piercing right to the heart. Then the blade was out, the scent of blood briefly touching the air.

On its heels came the smell of ash and sulfur as Krystal’s life-threatening wound sealed itself shut. Claws formed along her hands and fire sputtered to life at the edges of her hair. The power of a devil, one of the most powerful beings from outside our world, had been sealed away in one of Krystal’s ancestors generations prior. A power that lay largely dormant most of the time, until Krystal’s life was endangered: that was when she drew from the devil inside her, growing strong enough to survive.

Although, against this particular opponent she was in a bit of a pinch. What I had to imagine was even more vexing was the fact that Krystal quite possibly *could* stop the advancing statue. When rescuing June from the scheming of other fey – the very incident that had indebted me to Hellebore – I’d gotten a glimpse of Krystal’s true abilities as she fought a walking natural disaster and made it scream in pain. Unfortunately, I’d also learned that using her power to that degree was incredibly destructive – not the sort of tactic that could be used with lots of flammable buildings and people nearby.

Still, even in this form, Krystal was a force to be reckoned with. Dashing toward the statue, her speed was blazing in comparison to minutes prior. Smoking footsteps remained in the grass where she had strode. She reached the behemoth far sooner than I would have preferred: while we'd been preparing, the statue was still always advancing.

Evidently counting on that, Krystal tossed one of Teagan's vials down in its path, an easily predictable left foot coming down directly on top. I couldn't hear the shattering glass over the sound of impact; however, I did see the pink-purple ooze bubbling up between those stone toes. When the leg moved again, it tore up a tremendous chunk of earth with it, the goo refusing to let go and the might of the statue too great to stop. But as the foot came down again, the taffy was smashed out, glomping on to even more ground. The mound on the leg was growing; whether it would matter remained to be seen.

Using the same trick again, Krystal tossed a second vial, this time putting a trap in the path of the right foot. When it landed in exactly the spot she'd expected, there was an audible noise: a distinct, wet *slurp* as the foot sank partway into the muck. She wasn't done yet, either.

No sooner was the foot stuck than Krystal flew into a frenzied attack. Her dark claws lashed out, slicing away chunks of thick stone as the building aura of fire around her darkened the rock's edges. All of it focused on the ankle of the temporarily trapped appendage. Size be damned, Krystal was trying to tunnel her way through, cutting off the foot in the process. A crawling statue would offer a lot more time to work with.

At that thought, I glanced back over to see how the evacuation was proceeding. In a mix of good and bad news, there was indeed a steady stream of students leaving the library, which then stopped to gather along the front steps for a better view of Krystal's battle. I tried to take comfort in the fact that this was still progress – they could run out of its path much easier than they could escape a building being torn apart – but it was hard not to notice the way so few paid either Keith or Valencia any mind.

Another damp noise tore through the campus as the stone foot finally pulled free. Whipping a hand around, Krystal smashed the final potion against the hole she'd carved into its ankle. As Teagan had promised, a small portion of the ankle did indeed shrink. What I hadn't considered was that suddenly altering the composition of a central, weight-bearing point would have effects of its own.

When the right foot came down again, heavier than normal thanks to the altered balance from its debris-coated left, a *crack* rang out loud enough to be mistaken for thunder. The foot's back half had snapped away entirely, leaving the toes suddenly precarious. With one foot covered in debris and another barely holding together, the statue started to wobble.

"Flaming broomsticks. Did she really stop that thing with just my three shitty potions?" Teagan's jaw was hanging open slightly as she watched the colossus totter under the efforts of what should have been no more than a tiny annoyance.

"Years of experience, a keen mind, and a magically enhanced physique were part of it, too, but your potions undoubtedly played a key role today, yes." I refrained from pointing out that such would have been the case regardless, since Teagan was also the one who'd brought our strolling statue to life.

We watched on, waiting for the statue to finally tip over... and found that it refused to tumble just yet. Unsteady and relentless, the foot caked in taffy, dirt, and grass came down once more, the back leg wobbling, yet remaining upright. Looking everything over, I realized that even if Krystal knocked it down, there was a point of no return where the book-bearer would come crashing down onto the library.

A library still packed with people, many of whom were gathered up along the front steps, enjoying what they obviously took to be mere entertainment. Keith and Valencia were doing their damndest, even swaying a few to move on, but they were ultimately two easily ignorable voices in a crowd.

My mind churned, hunting for a solution. Krystal was out there giving all she had to buy us time, renewing her attacks on the injured foot. We *had* to hold up our end, as well. But what could make them move, when a huge stone man striding toward them elicited only delight and interest? What would cut through the presumptions of pranks, driving home the danger they were in?

Examining the crowd, I spotted the telltale tomes of mages and muscular therian bodies; they were always easy to spot. The others had natures that were entirely concealed, or so odd I had no reference for what they might be. My eyes landed on Valencia, briefly; the sight of her stirred Krystal's words from earlier. She'd said that not every parahuman died by

decapitation and sunlight, which was very true, indeed. But we did have one nearly universal weakness.

Fire.

With the exception of demons, devils, and dragons, every other parahuman I knew of was vulnerable to fire. Demons and devils channeled flame naturally, leaving them immune, and dragons breathed the stuff out on top of being incredibly durable. As for the rest of us, even those without a distinct vulnerability lacked a resistance. Fey, therians, mages, vampires, even magical constructs like Charlotte – all of us could burn. And those of us with animalistic instincts recognized it on a deep, fundamental level.

“Teagan, I need you to get as much water between the statue and the library as possible. Garden hoses, buckets, magic – whatever the fastest method is without putting yourself in danger.” Jogging off, I moved closer to Krystal, still holding a careful distance. Part of it was fear of being crushed, but even more so, I knew the real danger would be coming shortly.

Waving my arms, I waited until they snared Krystal’s attention, then cupped my hands and yelled to be heard over the gulf between us. “Turn up the fire! We need to get them moving.”

She paused only long enough to give me a short nod, indicating that the words had made it. That was all I needed to turn away, running back toward Teagan at top speed. But not even vampire speeds could outrun the wave of heat that washed over my back – not painful, yet hardly gentle. It hurtled onward, past Teagan’s shocked face and into the crowd at the library.

Startled expressions replaced the entertained ones, followed by looks of concern. While I couldn’t see Krystal, given that she was directly to my back, I could feel the increasing heat burning and see the growing shadows stretching out before me. She was putting on a show, which was exactly what I’d hoped for.

A parahuman crowd might not treat a living stone giant as a threat, but a fire... fire would always be taken seriously. To my immense relief, large sections of the crowd finally started moving farther off, getting out of the statue’s way.

That relief was cut short, however, as a loud *boom* shook the ground so hard, I was sent flying through the air before landing unceremoniously in a heap.

SCRAMBLING BACK TO MY FEET, I SPUN AROUND TO FIND A HUGE, BOOK-shaped chunk torn out of the ground. It was hard to tell if the statue had fallen or had tried to crush Krystal beneath its tome – regardless, the huge book had partially dug into the grass, sending a shockwave that rippled the dirt. A corner of it was broken away. I could see visible charring along the stone’s edges.

Eye-catching as a half-keeled giant was, though, it had nothing on my wife.

Last time I’d peeked at this form had been through a magically enchanted sheet of ice acting as a TV screen. Although it provided better detail, the sense of awe was somewhat muffled in the process. Krystal wasn’t yet at the point she’d reached when rescuing June – only two black-feathered wings extended from her back, and the dark armor didn’t extend to her entire body, mostly manifesting along her head and torso. Based on how much heat was already pouring forth, this was probably as far as she was willing to go with people in the area. Even the horns were shorter than I recalled.

Not that it mattered one lick to the watching student population. The ones who hadn’t already started hustling at the first wave of heat finally got moving, a few audibly shouting in terror. Devils were mythical beings among parahumans, known to be incredibly powerful creatures that were all but impossible to kill. Between the appearance Krystal was showing and the fire blazing all around her, it was enough to fill the students with at least a sense of caution.

Most students, anyway. With the outer crowd finally moving, I expected Keith and Valencia to head inside and start spreading the word. While Keith did exactly that, Valencia was standing stock-still, unmoving as she watched Krystal carve a bubbling streak of melted stone through her opponent's calf. If her claws were longer, she could have taken the limb entirely, but the giant truly lived up to his name.

Stranger still, before my eyes, I saw the wound start to repair, the edges slowly mending back together as they worked toward the wound's center. Because of course it wasn't enough that we had to stop a colossus made of rock before it could crush innocent students, we also had to face one capable of regeneration. Twisting my gaze, I saw the edge of the book had partially grown back. Sure enough, it was fixing whatever Krystal broke, slow and steady.

Worse, the statue was rising back to a standing position, face still pointed right at the library. There was finally a flow of traffic exiting, just not fast enough to reassure me. If the statue advanced, it would still crush untold people while smashing through the building. Furthermore, Krystal would have to dim her fire the closer they drew, or it might put bystanders at risk.

A splashing across my shoes momentarily stole my focus from Krystal's frenzied attack on the statue's right heel. Teagan had somehow located and hooked up a garden hose, blasting water across the grounds between Krystal and the library. As the lone person still standing in that no man's land, I was caught in the spray, though only cursorily. There was simply too much ground to coat it all.

The familiar *thud* of a foot coming down told me that the space we were defending had just shrunk as the statue's trek resumed. Krystal was slowing it down, her endless frenzy chipping away at the giant's legs; but without letting loose dangerous levels of power, she couldn't outpace the size and healing.

With that single step, its arrival seemed all but inevitable. There had to be something I could do to help, rather than stand around uselessly. Obviously, approaching the giant was out, as vampires were quite combustible, but I could still help Keith with emptying out the library. If people were willing to accept our aid, we might be able to sprint out a fair few in time. I just wasn't certain we could get to everyone.

Spinning around to run back, I nearly collided with Valencia, who'd been slowly walking closer while I was preoccupied. Her eyes were trained on the spectacle before us, steps coming unbidden, like she was lost in a trance. Our narrowly avoided collision shook her slightly, enough to notice my presence. She blinked like someone leaving a trance before finally focusing. Even then, her attention wavered, her gaze drifting back to Krystal.

"She's so strong." The words were a mix of reverent and terrified, a sentiment I entirely understood considering the scene before us. It was an odd twist in her dynamic with Krystal, but also the first potentially positive one I'd seen.

"This is her still holding back. I've seen Krystal fight a monster the size of a mountain that was constantly spitting snow, and she sent it running."

"Why would she be holding back?" Looking around, almost as if remembering what was happening around us, Valencia glanced back to the slowly evacuating stream of students.

My student seemed to shake off the idea, but I was there to drive it home. "She's restraining herself so no one gets needlessly injured. Our goal was to protect everybody, remember?"

"*Your* goal," Valencia corrected, spine suddenly straightening. "That woman is walking around with a devil inside her. There's no way she'd care about a bunch of strangers. You don't understand. I know how corrupting those influences can be. I've seen what happens. Even just the power of half-demons turns good people... it changes them. And what she has is supposed to be hundreds of times worse."

All at once, I knew Valencia's parahuman nature. It helped that I had some history, having met one of her kin already in my dealings with the Agency. The way she'd instantly recognized Krystal's name was a tipoff in itself, as was her lack of concern for silver. But more than anything, it was the most mundane of tells. Even standing close enough to feel the heat as we were, Valencia wasn't sweating, not even a glisten.

As I stated earlier, fire affects almost every type of parahuman. My known exceptions were dragons, who would definitely not reel and run in the face of a perceived enemy; devils, who wouldn't be surprised by Krystal's limited display of power; and demons. Or half-demons, like the Agency logistics man I'd dealt with named Roderick.

“I can’t tell you whether Krystal’s power comes with any special sort of temptation. If so, she’s never shared it with me.”

“It *does*. They all do. It starts off small, when we first learn to feed, then grows steadily. The more powerful you get, the harder it is to accept life’s challenges, or even inconveniences, as necessary. Why suffer through them, when you have the strength to do as you please? If that’s not enough, then just get more powerful, and on and on, until it’s the middle of the night and there are screams coming from the basement, but you cover your head and pretend not to hear—”

Moving slowly, ensuring that I could easily halt if she showed any signs of resistance, I wound my arms around Valencia in a gentle embrace. Given the way tears were leaking out of her eyes and words barreled forth, all signs indicated that she needed some form of comfort and reassurance. No sooner had the hug begun than Valencia all but collapsed against my chest, fingers tightening against my sweater vest.

“The demon-blood makes us bad. I know it does. My grandpa was such a sweet man. He wouldn’t... not on his own. It was the blood. It had to be our blood.”

There was a tremendous amount to unpack in all that, none of which I felt qualified to handle. Unfortunately, a fresh wave of heat and more heavy footsteps served as a fine reminder that our position couldn’t be held indefinitely. We needed to move, and sooner rather than later.

“I won’t pretend to understand everything you’ve endured, or the nature of your condition. It is entirely possible that a demon lineage brings with it some manner of corrupting influence. What I can say with absolute certainty is that if such an issue does exist, it isn’t insurmountable. There are half-demons working as agents, using their abilities to help protect other parahumans. Just as there are vampires among their ranks, ones who choose not to live as predators, despite what our own instincts might whisper. Temptations or not, the choices we make are still our own. *What* we are does not define *who* we are.”

Releasing her, I swung my body wide, letting us both have a good view of Krystal’s fight. Those legs were definitely aiming for her as they came down, the smaller steps of attack prolonging the statue’s journey. Flitting between and around with incredible speed, Krystal lashed out as each leg landed, gripping ahold and letting loose torrents of concentrated flame,

burning away layers of stone even as they reformed. It was a race, and one she couldn't win without setting the whole area alight.

“Krystal’s nature took everything from her. The life she’d known, the family she had remaining, the future she’d planned for. It would have been nothing for her to slide into anger and resentment at the world for thrusting such a curse upon her shoulders. But instead, Krystal channels that horrifying might into something she believes in: fighting to keep this world a little safer. Stopping would-be monsters and tyrants from destroying the peaceful lives of innocent people, mortal and parahuman alike.”

“You say that like it’s easy,” Valencia remarked, a new, unfamiliar expression slowly working its way onto her face.

“Then that was my failing, because I expect nothing could be further from the truth. Living like Krystal demands courage and conviction in quantities I can’t even fathom. I could never knowingly step in front of danger the way she does, like it’s the most natural reaction in the world. My point wasn’t that resisting the lure of power and living in ways we can be proud of is easy, only that it is *possible*.” Patting her shoulder in a not-so-subtle direction, I started easing us away from the approaching confrontation. “But only if we live to see tomorrow, so let’s start helping Keith evacuate some students.”

To my relief, Valencia started moving. However, I quickly realized it was in the wrong direction. Jaw set, eyes steady, Valencia was marching directly toward the woman she’d been avoiding all day. That there was also a still-advancing stone behemoth coming her way seemed a point worthy of consideration as well.

“Wait! What are you doing?” I tried to follow, but a fresh wave of heat drove me back. This blaze wasn’t coming from Krystal, however. The flames were rolling off Valencia.

“The idea of doing this sort of thing terrifies me, too,” she admitted, feet moving forward despite her own words. “My knees are literally shaking. But I really want to believe you’re right, Professor Fred. That I have the chance to write my own future, not just follow the same cycle I’ve seen. So I’m tackling this problem the same way I learned to study my way into a full scholarship, the same way I led my chess club to victory, the way I got comfortable with public speaking. To steal one of Grandpa’s favorite jokes: tell me, how do you get to Carnegie Hall?”

She was bolting before I could manage a syllable, the flames intensifying as she ran. Although her pace slowed when a stone foot came down in close proximity, she redoubled her efforts after the falter, joining Krystal's attack with fire of her own. Between the two of them, they began to outstrip the stone's regeneration, creating a melted seam along the foot. It was only the start of a granite amputation, but the progress was undeniable.

"Practice." I muttered the answer to myself as I backed away, unable to safely stay in proximity to the approaching flames. Practice was the joke's answer, the explanation for Valencia's accomplishments and even her actions in the moment. Despite a fear that left her near incapacitated multiple times, my student drove herself forward, fighting a seemingly impossible battle, simply so she could practice doing the right thing. To say that I found the show of character impressive would be a categorical understatement.

By the time I reached the library, Keith was well past the entrance, somewhere deeper in the building's bowels. While Krystal and Valencia combined were wearing down their opponent, it was still very much approaching and would soon reach a point where even falling could cause damage. Considering that I was at little risk from simple blunt force trauma, I opted to head in after Keith and help with the stragglers. Better I be inside if it crashed down than someone who didn't heal broken bones in minutes.

Just as I was stepping forward, however, a new rumble shook the ground. This was not the thump of heavy footsteps, nor the boom of newly-kindled fires. It was a steady thrum that wound beneath our feet. That was the only warning I had before five roots thicker than my torso – roughly on par with Bubba's – shot out from the earth. One skewered each of the statue's limbs, with a fourth piercing right through its stone heart.

"Interim Professor Fletcher. Perhaps you'd care to explain what's going on?" With that voice, the root attack made slightly more sense, even if I didn't grasp the specifics of how it functioned.

Although the statue only had a few strides left to spare, Headmaster Sequoin had arrived.

NO ONE APPROACHED THE RESTRAINED STATUE AS I EXPLAINED THE DAY'S events. Most were hurrying back into the library or across campus, only a brave few staring at the reclusive headmaster from a distance. Keeping things concise, I ran through stumbling upon the prank-in-progress, how it had gone so suddenly wrong, and the general effort put toward keeping students safe until help could arrive. Through it all, Headmaster Sequoin remained steadfast and stoic, as though I were going through the university's toilet paper inventory rather than detailing the rampaging antics of a stone giant.

As I explained, Teagan and Valencia focused on putting out the remaining fires, while Krystal worked on bringing herself back to human form. The comedown from her transformation wasn't instantaneous; it would take a couple of hours for her to fully shift back. Keith had ventured off a few minutes prior and returned with a massive cloak he set down near her, keeping a safe distance from the remaining flames.

"Sounds as though everyone's had quite the exciting day so far." Headmaster Sequoin's gaze shifted, landing on the three students who'd started things. Each one stiffened, like they could feel the headmaster's attention weighing on them. "As the prank in question held no destructive intent, I don't think we need to treat this as a malicious act. However, I do hope a lesson has been learned on the importance of properly assessing every object before enchanting it. You never know when one might have lingerings of older magic that could affect your spell."

All of them nodded, with Teagan even managing a "Yes ma'am" in the softest tone I'd heard out of her yet. Something told me that if Headmaster

Sequoin had told those in the library to leave, they would have sprinted to comply.

“If it’s not prying, can I ask what the story with this statue is?” None of the students would feel comfortable posing such a question, Krystal was occupied, and I knew we all dearly wanted some explanation. “Teagan’s spells shouldn’t have had the power for this, even if it did go wrong.”

For the first time since her arrival, Headmaster Sequoin’s expression shifted slightly, hints of a smile tilting the edges of her mouth. “Trestlevend was not always as you see it now. In fact, it has changed hands many times. Certain prior owners held firm notions on the importance of security. When I... took this role, I kept a few measures around, stowed safely out of harm’s way. This one, it seems, wasn’t secured quite well enough.”

At her words, I felt a rush of relief for Teagan. If her magic had been powerful enough to accidentally conjure an animated, self-healing stone giant, her life would get exponentially more complicated. Drawing that level of attention in the parahuman world largely led to trouble – a scenario I’d experienced firsthand. Since the statue was already designed for defense, she’d evidently done little more than give it a magical jump-start. Still impressive, given the scale, but not the sort of talent that would see her suddenly spirited away to be “offered” employment under a powerful parahuman boss.

“I’m guessing that’s where the roots came from, as well?”

“Trestlevend has many secrets, some better hidden than others.” Surveying the scene once more, Headmaster Sequoin nodded, and the roots began to move. Sliding forward, they somehow left the grass undisturbed as they pushed the stone giant backward, starting its return to the fountain. Even more amazing, as the roots moved, I watched the ground that had been burned by devil-fire and stamped by massive stone feet reform, fresh grass being laid atop the ashes as the dirt smoothed itself out. Headmaster Sequoin wasn’t just putting the giant back; she was mending the damage it had caused.

“Students, you may resume your pranking. The situation is handled.” She followed the moving roots, but apparently, the outright shock on my face gave her pause. “Interim Professor Fletcher, do you have a comment?”

“I... with respect... it just seems hard to believe that after a near miss like that, you don’t want to shut things down.”

That earned me a huff which might, under the right circumstances, have been called a laugh. “There are many such near misses every year. Why do you think it took me so long to reach you? Other pranks have gone awry in more immediately destructive ways.”

“So then, why allow it? Let alone encourage it?”

“Because magic *is* dangerous,” Headmaster Sequoin replied flatly. “Gift and curse, tool and tinder, salvation and destruction. That is a fundamental truth every parahuman must understand for themselves. Children experiment and test boundaries; it’s part of how they grow up. Today is when many learn the consequences of treating magic like a plaything – a lesson that is far more survivable when it comes under my protection, rather than out in the world at large.”

Pondering the way prank day was orchestrated, I realized what she’d done. Parahumans were encouraged to work together, to push their limits and think about creative uses for their talents, all without a single grade being offered. How much work had gone into some of those displays we saw earlier? And how many had gone wrong, giving the students an ultimately harmless scare?

“The chaos is the point,” I surmised. “You want them to get a taste of it, under safe conditions.”

“If nothing else, the next time they see a huge rock-person striding toward whatever building they’re in, I bet those students evacuate with a lot more haste.” Headmaster Sequoin resumed her journey, trailing the roots as they drove their prisoner back to its underground cage.

I noticed that, while keeping the statue immobilized, the roots weren’t imparting any lasting damage. With how easily they’d punctured the dense body, it had seemed they could easily turn it to rubble, yet if anything, the roots were careful as they moved. I had a strong hunch that the next time I walked past the fountain, the hands and book would be back in place, as would the hidden body buried below. It was, after all, a defensive measure. As Headmaster Sequoin herself was trying to teach the students, in our world, sometimes such things were unfortunately necessary.

My attention shifted back to the students, only to find that they’d finished dousing the last of the fires, helped in no small part by the ground smothering the flames as it healed itself. Keith was rolling the garden hose back up, while Teagan sorted through a handful of vials. Valencia, however,

had seemingly vanished. That was my impression anyway, until I glanced toward Krystal and found the odd standoff that was occurring.

Valencia and Krystal were staring at one another. The latter was largely hidden by the voluminous cloak Keith had provided, yet the burning fire of her eyes pierced through.

“Do you know who I am?” There was no hiding the shakiness in Valencia’s voice, but the fact remained that she did get the words out – already a vast improvement from their earlier interactions.

“Outside of being Freddy’s student and your nature? Sorry, but no.” Though her words came out raspier than normal, Krystal still managed to project a gentle tone from within her cloak.

“Right... of course you wouldn’t recognize me. I was hiding the day you came. Down in the basement, where I wasn’t supposed to go. My grandpa’s workshop, he called it.” Valencia paused, pulling in a deep breath. “I stayed hidden when he ran down the stairs, so shocked, I didn’t think to call out. Then you were there, and I was too scared to move. You talked, he said something, and then... your jaw...” Her words gave out as Valencia shut her eyes, breaths coming in swift and shallow now.

“Him, I remember.” Krystal didn’t shy away from the accusation, nor did she admit any sort of blame. Only a statement of fact.

“Do... do I want to know what my grandpa did?”

The hood of the cloak was shaking instantly, without a moment of hesitation. “Absolutely not.”

Valencia didn’t protest; it seemed like she’d probably known that answer before asking. Just from the tidbits gleaned so far, *I* very much didn’t want to know the details. For his granddaughter, it would be so much worse. “Then tell me what he said, before you struck. I want to know my grandpa’s final words.”

“Sorry, but it’s been years. I don’t recall the specifics that well,” Krystal admitted. “As best I can recall, it was a rant about how what he was doing was necessary. A small sacrifice for greater power, power that could be used to make amends for the cost. To be honest, I hear the same spiel so often, it all runs together. Once people decide that lives can be managed or balanced like numbers on a spreadsheet, everything goes downhill pretty fast. My advice: remember your grandfather at his best. Take his wisest words and let those be the final ones.”

Although her hands tightened into fists, Valencia appeared to accept this answer. That didn't mean she was done, however. "Professor Fred told me that there are half-demons in the Agency. Is that true? Do you have methods that keep us restrained, stop us from going bad?"

This time, her question was met by silence, at least initially. Only after a long pause, made all the more awkward by Krystal's hidden face, did she respond. "Would I be right in guessing you've never talked with a half-demon outside your immediate family?"

"Yes. Grandpa was first generation. I'm the only one of the third who inherited our nature."

"Then how about I set up some conversations with a few of those half-demon agents you were asking about? They can answer questions about your particular challenges much better than I'll manage."

"I think I would like that very much. Thank you." Whether Valencia ran out of courage, control, or energy, she turned and fled from the conversation, racing off onto campus.

I stepped forward to follow, but Keith was already out ahead of me, Teagan trailing a few steps behind. Staying my foot, I watched as they pursued and caught up to Valencia in short order. She didn't appear to rebuff them, the trio falling into step together. However they'd begun the day, it seemed they'd be ending it as friends.

Making my way toward Krystal, I had to keep a slight distance, as even now, she still put out noticeable heat. Hopefully not enough to cause sudden combustion, but it was hard to entirely get the notion out of mind. "How are you holding up?"

"Mostly trying not to be pissed off," she grumbled, far less authority in her voice now that there was no one else around. "Parahumans cut off from others of their kind can end up getting strange ideas about how things work. Her grandfather made some unforgivable choices, and it sounds like the family's solution was to put the blame for that on him being a parahuman. I mean, I understand; it's hard to accept that the people we love sometimes do terrible things. But that means every other half-demon in the family now has an instilled belief that something is *wrong* with them."

"I can certainly see how that would lead to trouble. Valencia appears to have quite a bit of turmoil around her parahuman nature." As I replayed their exchange in my head, a detail suddenly stuck out. "Wait, how can

Valencia be a third-generation half-demon? Wouldn't she be one-eighth demon?"

Krystal's chuckle was mildly terrifying as a touch of fire flowed through her voice. "Half-demons are tricky. The potency decreases through generations, just not in the way you'd expect. The children of a human and demon pairing will all be half-demon, but the children of those half-demons have about a fifty-fifty shot of inheriting the nature. Third generation, one in four, and so it goes. We have reports of seemingly non-magic bloodlines spitting out an occasional half-demon because even severely diluted, they still carry the potential."

As I digested that, my eyes roamed over the campus, where I could still see the giant's form moving farther away. Already, students were filing back into the library, and a group outside had produced a new batch of plaster pumpkins. Evidently, the interrupted prank from earlier was back on.

"Occasionally, I let myself think I've gotten used to the supernatural world. Then we have a day like this, and I realize how little I truly know about it all."

"Give yourself a little slack. There's a lot to learn, and you've only been at it for a few years. We've both got plenty of time to see it all." Tilting the hood of her cloak back, Krystal blew me a kiss that produced a small spout of flame. "And speaking of time, don't think I forgot about our trip to your classroom. Shouldn't take me all day to get shifted back. Have to use our time wisely; after word of the giant statue spreads across campus, Gregor is bound to come looking."

Thankful for the umpteenth time that I couldn't blush, I returned the fiery kiss with a wink of my own. "After that spreadsheet analogy, you won't find me in need of convincing. Why don't we swing by a dining hall on the way, then? I know you're always famished after taking that form."

"That's one of the things I love about you, Freddy. You've got a good mind for the important details."

THE COMMENCEMENT

I READ OVER THE TEXT AGAIN, DOUBLE-CHECKING TIME, PLACE, AND WHO would be in attendance. It was, technically speaking, good news. After over two months without any substantial progress on my stolen pages from an ancient book about vampires, I was getting some help. When I'd finally reached out to Deborah about the item, including a few digital images for context, I'd hoped she might put me in touch with a researcher, or perhaps be able to decode the pages from the pictures alone.

Instead, I received instructions to keep the pages safe. Then, only days later, the text arrived: a notification that Deborah would be joining me on campus, given permission from the headmaster herself, utilizing with some specialized means of transportation. There were no details on how, exactly, all of this was happening, only on where I should be waiting to meet her.

Much as I respected Deborah, and even liked her on a personal level, it was always a bit risky to have her around. Although she wasn't the most powerful parahuman I'd met, I often considered Deborah the most dangerous. She approached every situation and opponent as if it would be a desperate fight for her life and prepared accordingly. Most with her strength grew lazy or arrogant; Deborah never stopped thinking like the vulnerable human she'd once been. It was this incredible level of forethought and caution that made her such a good fit for the role of Prudence on the Blood Council.

Still, she was also the person who'd taught me how to feed, how to control my thirst when it rose, along with many other basics of being a vampire. Deborah had gone to bat for me and my people when she didn't have to; she'd offered fair deals at times when she could have bled us dry.

So even as part of me worried about her arrival, another piece was glad to see a friend.

The fact that her arrival was set for the first night all year that Gregor would be reporting to Gideon, meaning he'd be away for several hours, was something I found to be curious, yet not worrisome. If Deborah wanted to kill me, Gregor's presence wouldn't impact that plan either way. More likely, she simply didn't want anyone else around when looking over pages from an ancient tome regarding our kind.

Noticing the clock, I saw it was time to depart. With my fey time device inactive, the seconds were flowing as they should, so I hustled out my door and down to the lobby. Professor Glade was the only person present, eating a dinner of sandwiches clearly grabbed at a nearby dining hall. She gave me a friendly wave as I passed, which I returned while watching the woman take out half a sandwich in a single bite. Evidently, someone had missed lunch.

Outside, the last vestiges of sunlight were fading on the horizon. I wondered if Headmaster Sequoin had offered to let her step into the daylight and Deborah had refused, or if the chance had never been on the table to start. Part of me hoped it was the former. I hated to think of Deborah missing such an opportunity; if it was by her own choice, then at least she'd been given the option.

I followed the instructions provided, which led me not toward the building with the fey gateways, as expected, but to a small grove of trees near the very edge of campus. When I got close, symbols in the grass caught my attention. Someone had etched a circle of arcane runes into the ground, and fairly recently, given the mounds of dirt still nearby.

Although I found it curious, I could also understand why Headmaster Sequoin might not want a vampire of the Blood Council using fey passages. There was bound to be some politicking involved for one in Deborah's position to travel along fey pathways; this was probably the easier, if more roundabout method.

Only a few moments after sunset, the runes along the ground flared to life. Brilliant flashes of blue, purple, and green interwove to form a shifting tapestry of color. The sight had me transfixed, until the colors brightened without warning, obscuring everything within the circle from view. As the light faded, a familiar form could be seen.

Deborah dusted off her tailored outfit; a glittery residue was settling from the air, and she clearly wanted no part of it. Stepping out of the circle, Deborah shook my hand, then yanked suddenly, pulling me in close for a quick hug. “There’s the graverobber of the day. Those pages stirred up something of a racket back home, you know. It took a direct order from Control to keep Claudius from trying to tag along.”

My eyes may have bulged in momentary horror at the thought. Claudius served a position on the Blood Council as well, his title being Wisdom. The mage-turned-vampire was eccentric, to put it lightly, with minimal interest in people skills. His passion was knowledge, research, and new discoveries, topics at which Claudius absolutely excelled. That it had taken direct action from Control, the head of the Blood Council whom I’d only ever spoken to via phone, meant that Claudius was especially keyed up.

“Did you all find something of interest in the images?”

“Oh no, it’s what we *couldn’t* see that has him in a tizzy.” Deborah released her hug, stepping toward campus and taking a long gander at the sprawling grounds. “Something about those pages is enchanted. The magic seems to stop reproductions from being read. Claudius is fairly sure the original design was to thwart other spells from stealing the information, but it works just as well on digital images.”

It was an unexpected and interesting detail, though I wasn’t quite sure why it would be so enticing. Pondering the situation for a moment, I thought about things through a more modern lens, switching out enchanted pages for an encryption password. “People usually protect things of value. If the author didn’t want the pages to be read by just anyone, then Claudius is assuming that means there’s something on them that others would want to see.”

“One of the things I enjoy about our time together: less explaining than with most younger vampires.”

I appreciated the compliment, and motioned out toward the middle of campus. “If you’d like to get right to it, I reserved a small room in the library. Assumed that would be preferable to trying to look them over while contesting with bouts of wind.”

“By all means, lead the way. I’m ecstatic to see the legendary Trestlevend campus. You know, I’m the first member of the Blood Council to ever be allowed on site?”

That surprised me. Headmaster Sequoin had never shown any negative disposition toward vampires. Aside from myself and Keith, there were several others on campus as well, though we were easily one of the smaller parahuman presences around. Perhaps her predecessor had held different opinions?

“That’s unexpected. I’d thought the headmaster here would be more open.”

“Oh, she’s fine with the low-ranking or clanless vampires hanging around, but anyone with actual power has to steer clear. We’re not technically affiliated with supporting this place – though, ask me how welcome we were during the founding process sometime – so the Blood Council has no official stake in Trestlevend. Hence why I had to come through using some modified fey magic she sent along. Publicly speaking, this night never happened.”

I halted at once, quickly scanning our surroundings. “Should we go somewhere more private than the library, then? What if you’re seen and recognized?”

That prompted a loud laugh from Deborah, who regarded me warmly. “I love that you think I’m such a recognizable figure, but most parahumans, even vampires, have very few dealings with the Blood Council, or those who serve on it. Besides, the key point was avoiding my leaving any sort of *official* trail, which we have.”

“I suppose.” We started moving once more, Deborah gawking at the sights as I once had. Our pace was slow, unhurried. Neither of us had anything to do besides work on the pages currently tucked in the messenger bag slung over my torso. It was a rather peaceful moment, and sadly as short-lived as all such instances seemed fated to be.

It was just as we passed one of the outer dormitories, housing the poor souls with the longest walks to campus, that her tone suddenly turned somber. Tracking her eyes, I saw her watching a group of students examining a small patch of unnatural flowers, celebrating some unseen success.

“Fred, there’s something else we need to talk about tonight,” Deborah informed me. “I’ve been speaking with the others on the Blood Council, and there’s a... story we think it’s time you hear. I’ll let you decide whether we tackle it before or after the translation work; whichever way keeps things moving along. The story isn’t a pleasant one, but it also doesn’t

demand any action on your part. It's just something you're better served hearing."

A sense of deep foreboding settled over me. Even if it was just a story, Deborah wouldn't give it such gravity without merit. Whatever would be said, she knew there was a strong chance I'd be bothered, at the least. Yet nowhere had the option to simply not listen been presented; instead, I could only decide when the information would be imparted. Knowing myself and how I best focused, this unfortunately demanded patience.

If I accepted at the start, then my mind would inevitably dwell upon whatever revelations were offered. On the other hand, with nothing concrete to latch on to, the worst I'd be able to do was imagine troublesome predicaments – easily dismissed distractions, since I knew they had no foundation in reality.

"I think it's best if we focus on the pages first. Since you're only here for the night, and a physical presence is required to read them, we should make the most of our time."

Another chuckle from Deborah, though this one was far more subdued. "So responsible. On the topic of pages, maybe I should steal one from the headmaster's book and have you come speak to—"

Deborah was interrupted by an explosion of roots tearing up from the nearby ground, spearing directly for her. They struck only air as she reacted instantly, dodging out of the way at speeds I couldn't even track, let alone hope to match. In an instant, her friendly countenance was gone, replaced with a hard expression and furious eyes.

We didn't have to wonder for long about who the culprit was, as she burst into view from out of the ground itself. Held aloft in the air by a connected series of thick roots, Headmaster Sequoin glared down at Deborah and myself with unmasked outrage, fury a near tangible force rolling off her diminutive form.

"How dare you attack an invited guest!" Deborah snapped, clearly uncowed by the headmaster's display.

"You use your pawn to sneak onto *my* campus, and then think to declare yourself a guest?" Headmaster Sequoin's eyes narrowed, her voice growing eerily steady. "There is no mercy in my soul for invaders."

More roots exploded from the ground, appearing from all directions. Worse, each and every one of them rocketed directly towards Deborah's heart.

THE ROOTS SKEWERED EMPTY AIR, DEBORAH ALREADY SEVERAL FEET FROM the spot by the time they arrived. She wasn't content to merely dodge this time, either. In a flash of motion, Deborah closed the gap between herself and Headmaster Sequoin. Since the smaller woman was held aloft by her roots, Deborah was forced to make a snap decision: climb or jump.

She elected to leap, blasting off the ground with incredible force. Unfortunately, once aloft, Deborah had no means of reorienting, whereas Headmaster Sequoin had total mobility. Demonstrating unseen grace, the headmaster slid out of the incoming vampire's path, twisting around so she could land a blow on Deborah's side. When the hit landed, I was completely unprepared for its impact.

Deborah was sent hurtling almost horizontally from the force, saved from being flung halfway across campus by the tree that blocked her route – and a few broken bones based on the sound on impact. The fact that it wasn't *all* her bones, or that the hit hadn't turned her into paste, was a testament to Deborah's own durability.

“Stop this!” I waved my arms and yelled, trying to break through the fog of rage guiding Headmaster Sequoin's thoughts. “She thought you offered an invitation for this visit. We both did!”

In seconds, I found several of the roots still growing out of the ground pointed in my direction, the tips looking even sharper from this angle. “Invited? That's why she used an item of fey magic to slip between their barriers at a specific weak point, one she shouldn't have even known about without ample research. No, Fred. Perhaps you're truly a witless pawn, but Deborah could only manage this with intent.”

Headmaster Sequoin moved closer, and I realized my earlier impression of the roots holding her aloft was incorrect. The roots weren't merely holding her, they were growing directly into her, merged seamlessly with her flesh. Frail as she still appeared, I now knew that one blow would be all it took for her to end me. I wasn't even as tough as a regular vampire who drank from parahumans, let alone a member of the Blood Council.

"The gem I used to come here was delivered in the same package as the letter offering me passage." Deborah's voice mercifully drew Headmaster Sequoin's attention once more, leaving me swiftly forgotten. Although she moved with a slight limp, the Prudence of the Blood Council was not so easily beaten. "A letter bearing *your* official seal, I might add."

"I'd expected better lies from one of your age. My seal rests in my office, and it has most assuredly not been used on any missives to a member of the Blood Council." Headmaster Sequoin raised an arm, and I saw the ground all around Deborah quivering like water. The next attack was going to be big, enough that even Deborah might have trouble dodging, especially before her injuries healed.

I tore through my brain, hunting for a detail to offer up, something that proved our story. Just as Headmaster Sequoin's open hand started to form a fist, the words flew from my mouth, only half-understood even as I uttered them. "The rune circle! There was a rune circle waiting for her."

Although the ground kept churning, Headmaster Sequoin's hand paused, and her head turned back toward me. I didn't need any more encouragement than that to continue, brain hurriedly piecing together what instinct had noticed.

"When Deborah came over, she didn't just use an item. There was a circle of runes waiting for her, in the place you called a weak point. She couldn't have made them herself, since she wasn't here yet, and I've never shown the slightest amount of talent or passion for magic. *Someone* had to make that circle of runes. Maybe the same someone who invited Deborah in the first place?"

"That's ridiculous," Headmaster Sequoin snapped, though she still didn't attack, confusion slowly overtaking anger as the seeds of doubt were planted.

"Then what do you propose I did – sneak onto campus to create an arrival point, so I could sneak *back* onto campus once Fred was here? A plan which assumes I slipped by you unnoticed. Clearly ridiculous, given

how fast you found me tonight.” Deborah crossed her arms, refusing to move despite the still-shifting dirt around her.

Eyes darting between us both, Headmaster Sequoin suddenly got an alarmed look on her face and rose into the air, lifted easily by her series of roots. She crested past the nearby trees along the campus border, spearing up into the night. Then she started back down, only at a far faster rate than she’d risen. When Headmaster Sequoin landed, it was neither fury nor confusion that dominated her expression.

It was fear.

“Who... who could do it? Who knew enough?” Her mutterings spat out soft and furious, clearly not intended for either of us, who she seemed to forget about for several seconds. When her focus found us once more, it lingered on Deborah. “You were the distraction, something to keep me too occupied to notice.”

“To notice what?” I asked. “Is something happening?”

“Oh yes, Fred. Something is very much happening. Despite my layers of defenses and security, an unknown party managed to break into the sanctum of Trestlevend and reactivate its old defenses, ones like your large friend under the fountain.”

My mind flashed back to the stone behemoth it had taken so much effort to merely delay. That was just *one* example of these defenses? “What? Why would they do that when there are students on campus?”

“Students I’ll have to busy myself protecting, alongside dealing with a member of the Blood Council, keeping me too occupied to hunt for the culprit.” The more she talked, the heavier Headmaster Sequoin’s tone grew. “This was planned. A scheme to remove me from the goings on of my own campus – and worst of all, I see no way to defy it. My primary duty is to defend the students and deactivate the defenses once more. To do so, I will have to enter the sanctum myself, and the path is not an easy or quick one.”

“Then why not go there right now?”

Using the same hand she’d held up when trying to end Deborah, Headmaster Sequoin pointed to her instead. “Because no threat the defenses can offer is comparable to a member of the Blood Council. Do you have any idea the loss of life she could cause if left unattended? I expect the chance to bring her to campus was just what our perpetrators were waiting for. A threat so big that even seeing through the scheme, I cannot ignore it.”

“You know, I’m starting to get the impression that somebody has played me.” Deborah smiled, a grin that under different circumstances would have sent me running as far and as fast as my legs would carry. “Using a member of the Blood Council as a pawn... yeah, I’m a little pissed off now. Enough to happily throw a spanner in their works.”

Approaching Headmaster Sequoin, Deborah gave a modest bow. “In compensation for the unwitting breach of protocol tonight, I do hereby offer my services in the defense of Trestlevend and its people, on behalf of the Blood Council.”

“I’m supposed to trust you that easily?” Headmaster Sequoin seemed skeptical, yet her attention kept darting toward the center of campus. She plainly wanted to settle this soon.

“You can trust that, if nothing else, I would not hold a position on the Blood Council if my word were not considered dependable. And that I would far rather spite the person who attempted to use me by becoming your asset than spend more time dodging would-be stakes.”

I expected more contemplation, but apparently, Headmaster Sequoin was ready for action. “Fine. Come with me and help out where you can. If you try anything, don’t expect mercy or patience. I have time for neither. If, at the end of the night, you have indeed aided Trestlevend’s defense without incident, then the slight of trespassing is forgiven and we have no enmity.”

Rather than instantly departing, Headmaster Sequoin walked over to me and offered a sheet of paper. “Fred, message your class and tell them to meet you somewhere safe – just not Unger Hall. It has protections to keep students out that I don’t have time to disable. But first, go by your room and get the... time management tool. These are directions Tem left for its other uses, one of which is creating a powerful defensive barrier. Grab it, then gather all the students you can on the way to meet yours. Hunker down, activate the barrier, and stay safe until order is restored.”

“And I’m being so good, I won’t even ask about the clearly mysterious object you’re both referring to,” Deborah added, still standing where Headmaster Sequoin left her. If Amy ever invented a potion that allowed for private conversation among parahumans, I was certain she’d make a larger fortune than even Gideon.

“Thank you, Headmaster, for the help, and for giving Deborah a chance. You won’t be disappointed putting the safety of those you care for in her hands. I never have been.” I accepted the paper from Trestlevend’s

Headmaster, looking it over and taking a photo with my phone for safety. The content reminded me of instructions for working an overly-complicated piece of electronics – which, oddly enough, put it well within my range of experience. Before life as a vampire, I’d entertained a largely solitary existence, one where I enjoyed fine cinema enough to spring for an above-average viewing experience and all the complicated setups such equipment entailed.

“We’re going,” Headmaster Sequoin announced. “Fred, be sure, be steady, and keep your wits about you. While I cannot imagine Quinn would have been able to lay such plans as to manage all of this in the scant time you’ve been here, I also know he has a reputation of making the most of such opportunities. With my attention split and the old defenses active, I won’t be able to offer any protection.”

“Don’t worry. Fred is a lot more capable than he lets on,” Deborah chimed in. “And he knows better than to go out and be killed with a debt to the Blood Council still on the books. He damn well better stay safe out there.”

“I’ll do my best. You be careful, as well.”

Headmaster Sequoin started to run toward the heart of campus, the ground swelling and shifting as she did, literally pushing her along with every step. Deborah kept pace through raw speed, matching the headmaster’s mounting momentum step for step.

As for me, I did as instructed and emailed my students. Texting would have been preferable, but I’d never instituted any sort of class call list, an oversight of emergency preparation I was now kicking myself for. Since we needed a familiar spot that would be easy to find, I told them to meet in our usual classroom. Taking stock of my position, I figured out the most direct route to Unger Hall and took off.

While I didn’t have magically moving ground or the power of a vampire who’d lived for multiple millennia, my pale form still cut through the night at impressive speeds. I could only hope it would be fast enough to keep all my students safe.

MY TRIP TO UNGER HALL WAS BRIEF, THANKS TO THE PACE I WAS SETTING. However, that didn't mean it was uneventful. Stone pillars had risen from the ground, some nothing more than broken hunks of rock while others crackled with an unsettling energy. I steered clear of the active ones on instinct, a notion that proved sensible when I watched a bird drop down to land on a glowing pillar, only to fall over, unmoving. At best, they were pillars of paralysis, which I absolutely did not have time for.

Aside from the pillars, I caught a few more oddities sluggishly moving about: what appeared to be a ten-limbed stone spider with swords for legs was crawling out of an underground hole, several of the buildings had grown stone appendages that were waving in front of their entrances, and then there were the towers.

Like larger versions of the pillars, these looked to have held up far better from what I could see. They too were rising; however, it was a much slower process. Of the two I ran past, both were only partway exposed, more gradually emerging bit by bit. Considering how they thrummed with a similar energy to their smaller cousins, I very much hoped that Headmaster Sequoin got the campus under control before we witnessed their purpose.

I didn't encounter too many students in my travels, and those I saw were already sprinting away from danger. With Unger Hall being meant only for teachers, we weren't near any of the more popular student facilities. Most of them would be deeper in campus; I'd likely start seeing more crowds once I was headed toward the classroom. That was my hope, at least, considering I'd be creating one of the few protected places on campus. I needed to reach as many students as I could.

But first, I had to actually procure the device that would keep us safe. Although Unger Hall now hosted four giant stone eyes – one on every side of the building, along with stone teeth poking out of the doorways – they didn't come crashing down as I bolted through. I expected those were the student-stopping defenses Headmaster Sequoin had mentioned, and I could definitely understand why she didn't want me to try to bring my class here. Those rocky chompers looked capable of cutting through even the largest of parahumans in minimal bites.

Since I'd gotten through unbothered, my pace didn't slow. I hit the stairs in a sprint and bolted up them; there are few boons to cardio-based endeavors that rival not needing to breathe. I slammed through my door without a moment's pause, ready to grab the fey artifact and not lose any unnecessary seconds in the process. That ambition failed instantly, however, as I slammed to a halt in shock at the sight before me.

My room was *not* unoccupied, as expected. Inside was Professor Glade, outfit noticeably more rumpled than when I'd seen her barely an hour prior. She too was surprised, staring at me as her hands were wrapped carefully around the fey time-dilating artifact. One that shouldn't have even been visible without my presence. Not only had Professor Glade been touching it, but I suspected she'd put it to use. The messy clothes indicated she'd slept in them since we last met, and I spotted dirty dishes in my sink, something I would never leave lying about.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

Credit to her, Professor Glade barely missed a beat. “About time! Headmaster Sequoin sent me here to grab this magical doodad when we couldn't find you. She says it can help with the chaos on campus. Damn thing is warded against anyone besides you and September Windbrook moving it though, so come here and give me a hand!”

If I hadn't known for absolute fact that her version of events was impossible given the time frame, I might have believed her. There was a sincere urgency to those words, enough that part of me wanted to help despite being aware it was a sham. In that moment, I realized I couldn't entirely trust anything Professor Glade said. I'd never be sure if it was true or not.

I started forward once more. “Then let's bring it to her. There's no time to delay. It's getting progressively more dangerous by the minute.”

As it turned out, I was not nearly so adept at deception as Professor Glade. I'd nearly reached my colleague when her hand rose to her mouth, followed by a burst of air. Gray particles moved like smoke through the air, winding their way into my nose and mouth as if drawn there. Upon contact, my entire body froze. I was still as death, mercifully halted in a position of balance so I didn't go tipping to the floor. It was an effect I'd seen once before, only Krystal had been the one using it on a different vampire at the time.

Graveyard dust. Not merely dirt from a cemetery: this was a specialized compound using incredibly specific soils, herbs, and alchemic compounds. One whiff was all it took to paralyze even the most powerful of undead. I'd procured some for our assault on the Turva clan, and it had been among our costliest purchases. Yet Professor Glade had the rare material tucked away in reserve, despite the fact that she visibly hadn't expected me to arrive. It was my first clue that I was facing someone far more dangerous than I'd first assumed.

Sadly, the realization did me little good as I stood there, motionless. Professor Glade let out a sigh and stretched her back leisurely before pulling up a dark bag from her feet. "It's nothing personal. I know someone saying that while robbing you seems a bit silly, but that doesn't make it untrue. I don't particularly care about you, Fred. This was just too nice of a prize to pass up."

She patted the magical artifact, which still rested securely in its alcove. "But the wards they used are even better than expected. I was finally able to engage it and get myself more time, yet it still wasn't enough to break this thing free. In that way, I'm glad you made it."

From within the bag, Professor Glade produced various vials and curious materials. Taking out what appeared to be a long strip of slightly glowing gauze, she doused the material in a blue liquid, covering it from end to end. "I need a few things from you to pop this out, some physical, some information-based. When I wrap this around your neck, it will release your head from the paralysis. Once I do, we're going to chat, because I have a few questions that need answering."

I, of course, said nothing, nor reacted in any way. Even forceful glaring was denied to me; my eyes and eyelids as unmoving as everything else.

"Maybe you'll be tempted to use that opportunity to talk me out of the robbery, or to not answer, or lie. Go for it. Have a ball. Take all the time you

want. It's not me you'll be hurting. I'm leaving here with this artifact, and once I do, I have no need to keep you bound. So, the more time you waste, the less you have for scampering across campus to reach your classroom. So the longer we chat, the more defenses reactivate, and the deadlier Trestlevend becomes. "

There was something familiar about the way Professor Glade commanded a situation. It was similar to Deborah, but built more upon cunning than raw power. The familiarity tickled my brain without managing to produce any tangible connection. Regardless, it wasn't as if I could signal my compliance or refusal, so she wrapped the gauze around my neck. As promised, I slowly felt everything from the wrap upward return to my control.

"Did you activate the old defenses?"

"Given what you've seen so far, does it seem like I did?" Professor Glade countered. "While you mull that over, tell me, in what season was your first kiss?"

The nonsensical non sequitur had me so baffled, I answered somewhat reflexively. "I think... spring? It was around May, when school would soon be letting out for summer." Shaking off the strange question, I focused on the one she'd posed to me. Did it seem like she'd been the one to reactivate the defenses? When I thought it over... no, it didn't.

I'd seen Professor Glade when leaving Unger Hall before my meeting with Deborah. There was barely enough unaccounted-for time for her to have reached Headmaster Sequoin's office and get back, let alone break through whatever defenses had been in place. Given that she'd clearly been in this room working for a long while, she'd either activated the defenses remotely, or Professor Glade wasn't working alone.

Blowing a bubble with her gum as she worked, Professor Glade sorted through a sack of small gems before selecting a light green one with hints of gold woven throughout. "Do you typically start walking with your left or right foot?"

Having somewhat gotten a mental balance, I didn't have so snappy a response to this query. "I'm not sure. It isn't something I've ever given any thought to."

"Understandable, but I'm going to need that answer all the same. Try to mentally step forward and see which leg wants to move," she encouraged.

I closed my eyes, trying to do as instructed; however, I refused to let the time pass in wasteful silence. Professor Glade knew what was going on, and I needed to as well. “Why do these questions matter?”

“It’s the way fey key their locks. Parahumans change appearances too easily, and even blood seals can be fooled by the right magic. Theirs are more customized. It locks onto certain aspects about *you* as a person. Little details that, when paired with other measures, form a lock that’s nearly impossible to crack. I thought I could manage it, but all I did was figure out which answers I needed.”

“But I’ve never told anyone these things,” I protested. “I don’t even know the foot one.”

“As I said, it bonds to those aspects. It does not ask about them. If *you* think it’s bothersome, try being the one trying to break through them.”

In a way, I was, since I had to figure out which leg I naturally led with. After several mental scenarios, I felt certain it was the left. Part of me contemplated lying, but Professor Glade was standing there, a picture of patience. It might have been a bluff – I probably wouldn’t have been able to discern the difference – but ultimately, that was irrelevant. I *was* on a clock; even lacking the fey artifact, my students would still be safer with help around.

“Left leg,” I answered, watching carefully as Professor Glade dug about in a different container from her bag. “You realize that the artifact will likely burn through all your years. September warned me, anyone who ages will find it to be a curse in the end.”

“Oh, trust me. I am fully aware of every detail about this treasure,” she purred, eyes caressing the gleaming artifact. “When we planned all this, I signed on just for the chance to raid Trestlevend’s inner vaults. Headmaster Sequoin has squirreled away quite a few lovely relics down there. But *this*, this was something I couldn’t pass up. Fey magic skirts the edge of what we consider possible, and this is one of their most potent pieces. I’m going to make tremendous use of their treasure, and while the concern is appreciated, I won’t be getting old anytime soon.”

Her hand came out of the container, this time holding a blue marble, which she set down next to the gem. “You see, Fred, in multiple senses, I have all the time in the world.”

“WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?” I ASKED, DETERMINED TO GLEAN SOMETHING from our exchange.

“Exactly what it sounds like. I don’t fear aging any more than you do. Less, perhaps. I already have more practice watching the years slip by.” Finally selecting the gem that evidently corresponded to a left-legged step – a square green bauble, it turned out – Professor Glade set it next to the first. “Next question: how do you feel when you look up at the stars?”

I stared at her, waiting for a smile or a wink, some sort of acknowledgement of how odd and esoteric the queries were growing. Instead, I received only the same patient smile. At every turn, she was ready to remind me how little she cared about delays, whereas *I* could feel the passing of each second acutely.

“Humbled and overwhelmed, I suppose?” That spurred more digging in the bag, which I took as an opportunity to scramble for more information. “You mentioned switching goals to steal the fey’s time device and implied that you were already planning some sort of scheme before learning about it. Did you get a job here just for a robbery?”

“One of the advantages of endless time you’ve yet to put to proper use: we’re able to invest years, even decades, on any given task,” Professor Glade replied, producing a small yellow pearl from her bag. When she set this one down, the gem wobbled slightly and made a brief, off-pitch squeak.

Instantly, it was back in her hand, being looked over from every angle before Professor Glade turned her focus back to me. “This one is wrong, but not by much.” She examined me closely, eyes lingering on my sweater vest

for some while. Her next words were more muttered than directed toward me. “Only a few years turned... maybe you haven’t even realized it yet.”

“Realized what?”

“That’s not how you feel anymore.” Professor Glade tapped my chest, the sensation reaching me despite my complete inability to move anything below my neck and the enchanted gauze upon it. “You’ve changed, and while those might once have been the sentiments conjured by the stars, they aren’t what comes forth any longer.” Her fingers kept tapping my chest, rhythmically, like the beating of a heart.

Or the ticking of a clock.

I’d have loved to complain about the sheer ridiculousness of our conundrum – that I was being told my feelings upon gazing at a starry sky were somehow wrong, according to the discernment of a magical lock on a magical fey artifact. But the steady beats on my chest were a reminder of time slipping, so instead, I closed my eyes and struggled to picture a vast sea of stars.

Putting Professor Glade, Trestlevend, even my students momentarily out of mind, I let the scene wash over me, feeling the tremendousness of the greater universe. I expected a sense of vastness and overwhelming size to fill my mind, but instead, I found a different sentiment seeping through.

“Comforted. That’s what I feel when I look at the stars.”

Her hand dove back into the bag. “Interesting. Why comforted instead of humbled?”

I wasn’t sure if that was part of the lock’s requirements or just idle curiosity, nor did it really matter. Professor Glade had me entirely under her thumb, and we both knew it.

“I used to feel small compared to the grandness of existence, but back then, I was also alone. Nowadays, I spend so much time around beings of incredible-to-impossible strength, it’s sort of nice to remember that we’re *all* miniscule when compared to how much is out there. Even dragons are smaller than suns.”

That earned me a small chuckle, and for a horrifying moment, I thought Professor Glade was about to correct me. Instead, she nodded while extracting a similar pearl to the first, only this one a pale blue. “I’ll have to remember that line. Don’t use it around an actual dragon, though. I fear they’ll hear a challenge and try to grow themselves, or shrink our sun.”

When she put down the blue pearl, there was no wobble or noise, meaning it had apparently worked. Part of me wondered if she really even needed the answers; theoretically, she could try out various stone sequences until finding the right match. It would take an ungodly amount of time, but we did have time-dilation magic easily at hand. Recalling her rumpled appearance and the dishes in the sink, I realized that that very well might have been exactly what she was doing when I entered.

“You’re really okay with just robbing the school and fleeing, leaving the campus in upheaval? Haven’t you been here for five years? Cover or not, the students have to mean something to you.”

“People die, Fred. Live long enough, you realize how absolute that truth really is. If not today, then in fifty years; maybe a couple hundred, if they’re lucky.” She met my gaze, then looked away after several seconds. “Besides, I don’t expect things to get too far out of hand. While we might have caught the headmaster off guard, she’ll regain control before the night is done.”

“And who is ‘we,’ exactly?” I asked, wondering if another of the professors was in on the scheme.

That earned me a new smile, one I very much did not care for. “In good time. For now, I think we’re to the final question. Snow, or rain?”

My mind flashed back to the land of ice where Krystal and I had met with Hellebore, the frozen palace where I watched my wife-to-be battle a tremendous monster to free her friend. “Rain. Definitely rain.”

Professor Glade quickly produced a small, flat metal disc the color of wheat and double the size of a quarter. Laying it next to the gems, a subtle shift in the air could be noted, almost like a crackle of power flowing between the items. Satisfied, Professor Glade produced a small knife from her pocket. I already had a strong suspicion as to what that was for. I just hoped she only needed a blood sample, or to cut off something nonessential, such as a pinky.

If that sounds like a somewhat casual attitude toward a potential maiming, please keep in mind that vampire regeneration renders such injuries to the level of inconveniences, rather than life-long conditions. So long as I didn’t lose anything that would hinder my reaching and protecting the students on campus, it would be worth the pain to get free.

My face tensed nonetheless as Professor Glade unsheathed the knife and twirled it deftly between her fingers. Again, something in my head tickled at the familiarity. She noticed the shift in my expression, however, and

halted her dexterous display. “Good instincts, though a bit early. Soon. We’re just not to that part quite yet. First, we’ll need some blood from the new owner.”

Lifting the knife, Professor Glade brought the edge to her lips, slicing directly into the soft flesh. Blood sprang forth immediately, coating the tip of the knife as well as running along her mouth and teeth. Pulling the blade, she continued slicing, first the top lip, then the bottom. The bottom half of her face was so stained in blood that I couldn’t even see the wounds. They were lost in smears of red.

Rather than focus on the artifact, Professor Glade stepped closer to me. Her free hand cupped my chin, studying my face, before her eyes darted down to my left hand, where I wore my wedding band. Turning my head slightly, she planted a bloody kiss directly on my cheek.

The scent soared up my nose, rousing my instinctual thirst. Luckily, I kept myself full specifically to avoid empowering such urges.

What struck me after pushing past the allure of fresh blood was the sensation of those lips. They had felt entirely whole, as if the cuts had never happened. That was why I couldn’t see any wounds; it wasn’t that the blood was concealing them. They’d already healed.

Except her blood smelled entirely human. I wasn’t able to discern a parahuman’s nature from the scent of their blood alone, however, there was a distinct difference between normal humans and those touched by magic. Even mages carried an unmistakable tang in their veins. I’d never encountered a supernatural creature who smelled completely human yet could heal with vampiric speed... almost. There was *one* exception, a face that flashed to mind, suddenly accounting for the other moments of familiarity.

Sadly, even the glory of my revelation was lost, as before I could speak up, Professor Glade ran a finger along the bloody lip-prints staining my cheek. This close, I could smell something more wafting on her breath, a scent largely covered by the constant presence of gum. Pungent, nauseating, it almost reminded me of sulfur, though even for parahumans, that was an odd snack of choice.

“Since I’m being kind enough to let you go, do me a favor in kind. If you live through the night, tell Archie that kiss was for him. Let him know I’m still out here, whenever he gets sick of the straight and narrow.”

Arch, the man who was Krystal's fellow agent, along with Neil and Albert's trainer, was the only other person I'd seen with human-smelling blood and parahuman healing. Unfortunately, I still didn't know what, exactly, his abilities were, past speedy mending and a long life. Since he was a friend, it had never seemed particularly important, until I found myself facing his immoral equivalent.

Taking the knife still coated in her blood, Professor Glade carefully pressed it into my cheek, the same spot where her own blood stained my flesh. The pain was muted thanks to my undead body, but not denied entirely. She held the weapon in place for several seconds before withdrawing it slowly, allowing our bloods to intermingle as best they could. Despite vampire blood being more akin to ooze due to its thickness, some did manage to hold on to the knife that reentered my vision.

"Sorry you had to feel that. Your breed might have better speed and strength, but it's been centuries since I last knew pain." Her gaze grew suddenly distant. "There are days I think I might miss it. Silly idea, right?"

"Hundreds of years is a long time to spend feeling numb."

"Oh, I still feel the good stuff just fine," Professor Glade corrected, shaking off whatever sentiment had taken hold. Laying the bloody knife next to the gems, she pulled several stones with arcane symbols etched onto them from within her seemingly endless bag, placing them around the other items.

Hands raised, she started muttering in what sounded to me like gibberish, yet clearly had purpose. First, the stones started to glow, then the gems, and lastly, the blood. It slid from the knife onto the fey artifact, enveloping the item in a cascade of rippling light. There something like a *pop* that snapped through the air, and then, the lights were gone.

As easily as grabbing a drink from the counter, Professor Glade picked up the supposedly un-stealable object, placing it in a dark, open sack that had been sitting on the floor. Wrapping it up, she lifted her bundle, an expression of sheer satisfaction on her face as she slowly loaded it into her bag of supplies.

Before I could make any sort of demand for freedom, Professor Glade tilted my head back and poured the rest of the blue liquid she'd used on the gauze down my throat. A tingle ran through my limbs, and suddenly, I felt fully restored, able to move freely once more.

"Best of luck," she said, letting go of my head and making for the exit.

“You’re not worried I’ll take the artifact back?” I could cross the distance between us in a blink; if she really was like Arch, then she’d have human limitations. As a vampire, I should have the edge, enough at least to grab a bag and run. Except, that was the exact sort of thinking that led to people underestimating Arch.

“Not in the slightest. You’re moral, you’re smart, and you’re experienced. Moral means you can’t waste time screwing around with me when there are students in potential peril. Smart means you know I wouldn’t let you go unless I had a plan to deal with any counterattacks. And experienced... experienced means you know this night isn’t over. The last thing you need is to turn a bystander into an enemy.”

Just like Arch. So much more dangerous than she’d ever appeared to be. Professor Glade didn’t even wait for me to reply. She just walked out the door and down the hall, as if daring me to stop her.

Instead, I bolted past and down the stairs. What was supposed to be a swift errand had taken far longer than expected. I had to get to my classroom, to the students I hoped were safely waiting there. Artifact or no, I’d promised them protection. I’d just have to find some other way to keep everyone safe.

At least I had the run over to come up with an idea.

SADLY, AS I DREW NEAR MY BUILDING, NO SUDDEN BOUTS OF INSPIRATION struck. That may have been in part because my run required active observation of various hazards, leaving little time for pondering. Stone creatures now roamed across the campus, such as the sword-legged spider visibly cutting up the grass with every step some distance off. I wondered if the huge statue under the fountain had risen once more, or if Headmaster Sequoin had put that one down for good.

Aside from the roving sentries, more of the crackling pillars had appeared, though I noticed that a great deal of them were smashed. Dented kegs lying near the rubble of several told me that the students hadn't been entirely passive during the attack on campus. The odd energy from the pillars might be dangerous to approach, but a heavy object paired with parahuman might could shatter even magical stone.

More concerning were the larger constructs: those towers that seethed with similar energy. It felt like they were building toward something, not that I had any clue what that might be. My entire focus was on reaching my classroom as fast as possible, which required taking routes near some of the other campus buildings. That earned me strikes from several stone appendages, but thankfully, by the time they landed, I was already gone – the upside to cutting a furious pace.

I saw almost no one else out, be they student or faculty, which I hoped meant that everyone had hunkered down somewhere safe. The lack of bodies lent credence to that idea, yet I didn't dare take too much refuge in it. Even if they'd gotten somewhere secure for the moment, that didn't

mean that location would stay protected. No one was truly safe until the campus was back under Headmaster Sequoin's control.

When the building at last came into sight, I breathed a sigh of relief. Although it had a few stone eyes and limbs, like most other facilities, my classroom's building had not sprouted teeth, nor was it swarmed with stone monsters or other adversaries. Blasting through the doors and up the stairs, I burst through the classroom door so fast that everyone reacted in surprise, thinking they were under attack.

Fidealous put himself between the door and Pieris, Valencia dove to the floor, Arlo picked up a desk-shield while Lorian hid behind him. Teagan was rooting around in her pockets, and Keith just stood there looking shocked. The entire class had made it: more than I'd expected or dared hope to see. Letting a small measure of relief seep through my bones, I walked the rest of the way inside gently, no longer storming around.

"My apologies if that startled you. I was hoping to arrive here sooner but got unexpectedly detained. Given the situation, I feared the worst and hurried over."

"Yeah, on that note, what the flea-bitten fuck *is* going on?" Arlo asked, slowly lowering his desk. "First, we get an email about showing up here. Then you don't show, and the whole campus loses its shit."

I very nearly missed it – the detail which didn't align quite right. Between the compounding surprises of the night, not to mention the mounting threats, it would certainly have been understandable to overlook such a minor matter. But my brain snagged on the detail that was slightly off, meticulous even when I tried to focus elsewhere.

"Wait, you mean the campus went crazy, and then I sent an email."

"Um, no, Professor Fred. Arlo is right," Valencia confirmed. "We got it this afternoon: mandatory class session, starting just after sunset. We've been here watching the campus out the window and texting with other students."

Just after sunset – meaning they were arriving in this room around the same time I'd been meeting with Deborah. A metaphorical chill ran down my spine. Someone was playing us all like pieces on a gameboard, moving us precisely where they wanted, at the times they desired. The question was why? Why bring my students together, making it theoretically easier to keep them safe? How did that help whatever heist was afoot?

Regardless, I didn't like the idea of being directly where an apparent enemy wanted us to be. That said, I also wasn't sure that leading them around campus was the safer choice. Without the fey artifact, I had no special defensive magics. One mistake is all it would take to see a student seriously injured, if not worse.

"I do not appreciate being pulled from my evening frivolities," Pieris interjected, stepping out from behind his bodyguard. How dearly I would have liked my own bodyguard's help; Gregor's absence had proven especially troublesome tonight. Not that I imagined it was by any accident. Whoever had set this in motion had waited until he'd be gone. Every bit of it was planned, and worse, succeeding.

"A delectable feast now sits cooling, and bottles of wine go undrunk, all because you decided to abuse your rights as an educator to force this session. Were my grade not imperiled, know that I would have never bowed to such a demand." Pieris was in a real huff, which I found oddly comforting. At least some things could still be counted on.

Yet his accusation also brought me to an unexpected crossroad. I could pretend to have written the original email and keep the students calm, or tell them the truth so they were better prepared for potential danger. It was a brief dilemma; while younger than me, each was still an adult. They had the right to know that danger loomed and to decide for themselves how to react.

"The good news is, I didn't write that email, so there is no class tonight. The bad news is, I have no idea who actually wrote it, or why they want us here. Did anyone receive a second email from me, later in the evening?"

Although their faces had turned concerned at the odd revelation, each head still shook side-to-side, confirming that no email had made it through. Whoever had sent the first one probably cut off my access. I'd have been far more befuddled by the "how" of it all, but Professor Glade's actions proved that this was an inside job. Compared to turning on ancient, defensive magics, messing with someone's email seemed a relatively minor task.

"Okay, then, I think we need to move. Maybe not across campus yet, but I really don't like being in the exact spot where someone else wants us to be. Let's find an empty classroom to hunker down in while we figure out our next step."

Fidealous was already heading toward me, motioning for Pieris to follow. "Caution is wise. A dance is afoot, yet we know not the motions.

Thoughtless action is a fine way to get stomped upon by a foot that might not have paid interest otherwise.”

I appreciated the vote of confidence and opened my mouth to say so. However, the next words to reach our ears were not mine, nor did they belong to anyone in the classroom. They rose up from outside the window, easily discernable thanks to the bullhorn being used for amplification. Worst of all, though, was the voice that carried them. Smug, sure, and instantly recognizable.

It was the voice of Quinn, a madman of a vampire, my sire, and the very man I’d been put out as bait to specifically draw.

“My dearest Fred, so sorry to bother you during class, but I think we need to have a word.”

Keith’s eyes widened in shock, but no one else in the room reacted beyond staring at the window in confusion. To them, it simply sounded like a random stranger choosing an odd medium to reach out through. None had any idea how dangerous that man was, but that wouldn’t be the case for long.

“I’m sure you’re thinking something along the lines of ‘Golly gosh and gee, but if I go talk to you, who will stand around uselessly pretending to guard the students?’ Well, don’t you fret. I already made arrangements for that. You actually *do* get to be a protector today, Fred. Because if you’re not out here in the next five minutes, I’ll set off my bombs hidden in the building. These are real nasty pieces of work, too. Lots of fire. Much more than I used on Charlotte.”

That was why my students were all gathered in a single place. As much as it made them easier to defend, there was also an inherent vulnerability when clumping forces into a single target. Quinn had brought them here to use as hostages. Professor Glade, knowing Trestlevend’s policies and the headmaster’s go-to tactics, must have figured out that this was where we’d be sent in the chaos. Hadn’t she even hinted that I should head here, without knowing I’d already messaged my students?

Unfortunately, understanding the mechanics of such tactics didn’t alter my options in the moment. I’d have loved to write Quinn’s threat off as a bluff, but he’d proven more than capable of using explosives already. First, there was the bomb that ended Asha’s human life, then the alchemical flames that devoured Charlotte’s original body.

Even assuming we survived an initial blast, the flames would kill everyone except Valencia, and perhaps the two fey – innocent people whose only crime was in taking my class. I couldn't let that happen, even knowing that we were playing right into Quinn's hands. He'd penned me in well this time. No matter how I turned the situation over, there wasn't any other option.

I had to go face Quinn. It wasn't a scenario where I liked my odds; however, I took far less pleasure in imagining the room of faces before me suddenly cast in flame. Quinn was my problem, my burden, my responsibility. No one else was going to suffer at his hands when I could prevent it.

"Everyone, I'm heading out. When he's distracted, see if you can sneak away. I don't trust him not to set off the bombs while we're talking, just for kicks. Whatever you do, don't get close. Quinn is a lunatic, but a very capable one. The last thing you want is to draw his attention."

My students looked at me with a combination of sentiments, pity and gratitude being the most dominant among them. Though they had little context for who Quinn was, it was clear I would not be walking into a pleasant situation.

But when I turned toward the door, a pale hand grabbed my arm, bringing me to a halt. Keith was holding me back, a storm of emotions raging across his face before finally settling on determination. "No. You're not facing him alone. I'm coming, too."

"It's too dangerous—"

"I know the danger, Professor." Keith let go of my arm, yet held my gaze, his eyes unflinching from the challenge ahead. "Better than you do. I've seen Quinn at work. I've stood there and done nothing while he... I'm *not* standing by again. He doesn't control me anymore. Today, I'm going to prove that. To myself as much as to him."

A FLOOD OF ARGUMENTS SURGED THROUGH MY MIND, METHODS BY WHICH I might convince the young man before me to turn onto another path. None of them held up under the intensity of his stare, however. Keith's determination was set, and at the end of the day, I had no real authority to stop him besides the threat of a failing grade. So, at the very least, I'd make sure he went about it in a smart manner.

"If you are absolutely set on coming along, make sure to hang back, and stay behind me whenever possible. Quinn has historically proven pretty focused on me. Odds are decent I'll be the target of his wrath. Even if it eventually comes to a fight, our main job is to keep him busy so that everyone else can get away. That means we avoid conflict and stall for as long as possible, and if things take a dire turn, you should have a chance to escape."

"I don't want to—"

"Quinn can kill us both easily," I interrupted. An admittedly rude act; however, sometimes a situation calls for expediency over etiquette. "Deep down, you already know that. He is devilishly cunning and far more physically powerful than most vampires I've met outside the Blood Council. There's a chance he's here for torment over killing, but if not, then you dying here doesn't help either of us. Escape with the others, tell my clan what happened. They'll take care of you from there, I promise."

He nodded, and while I would have loved to talk the issue over more, our clock was steadily ticking down. Seeing as I didn't trust Quinn to not set a few bombs off as incentive to hurry, we weren't going to push the

deadline. Upon seeing the discussion was settled, I hurried out the door, Keith only a few steps behind.

As we descended, I heard the others up above, trickling out into the halls. Fidealous was taking the lead, which I took comfort in. Someone with his capabilities should be able to guide them well, and hopefully handle any threats they encountered. But all of that was predicated on me being able to distract the murderous vampire long enough for them to slip away.

On the ground floor, I approached an exit, my hands pausing before touching the metal knob. While I'd put on a brave face for the students, in truth, I was utterly terrified. Quinn was far from the most powerful parahuman I'd encountered, yet he easily remained among the scariest. It was a mix of ruthlessness, insanity, and effectiveness that made the man so terrifying. Unhinged as he seemed, Quinn's continued existence was proof of how skilled he really was. There was no shortage of powerful entities hunting for his head.

Giving Keith one last look, I pushed my way out, hurrying forward in case the exit was near any stone appendages that might have grown off the building. Fortunately, the area was clear, though I did spot some rubble in the grass nearby and a chipped section along the building's edifice. Those were mere diversions, though. The true subject of my attention was the one-armed vampire standing casually in the open, a bullhorn resting at his feet and large electronic device in his hand.

The device reminded me of the remote controls for the large, motorized airplanes often flown by especially devoted aviation enthusiasts. It had more buttons, though – an array of easy-to-reach switches all within flipping distance of those pale fingers. Each one was likely meant to represent a bomb. Whether there were actually that many planted or not was a mystery. Quinn was a mix of trickery and threat, never to be fully trusted in any situation.

“Still set on the sweater vest, I see.”

“They're comfortable and fashionable,” I replied, resisting the urge to look over my shoulder and check on Keith. Showing too much concern for the student would only turn Quinn's focus toward him. “I don't suppose you're here in the hopes of getting an education and turning over a new leaf?”

As I spoke, I strained my senses, attention on the building I'd just exited. The others were making their way down at a steady rate, pausing

occasionally as Fidealous ran around the area ahead. It took me a moment to realize he was sweeping for traps, a threat I hadn't even considered. But luring me outside while my students blundered into peril was exactly Quinn's cup of tea. I just hoped he hadn't had time to set up anything too elaborate.

"Oh, I am indeed here to plunder the treasures of academia – or at least, that was the original plan. Then, lo and behold, who should wander across my path but an old friend. That changed things, you see. New treasure is tantalizing, but settling old debts always takes priority."

Given the speed at which my students were moving, I would have to keep Quinn talking for a while before they'd be clear. Fully aware of his love for monologuing, I leaned into it, hoping that the right prompts would keep him engaged. Whatever came when the chatting was done, I wanted to delay it for as long as possible.

"Seems like you threw away a lot of effort just for me. I'm flattered. Though I have a hard time believing that Headmaster Sequoin has any treasure that's really worth all this."

"She is nothing more than a forgotten guard dog standing atop a trove of tools and information. Those who once dwelled here were experts in combating all manner of parahuman species. Their research into our natures and history was unparalleled. Efforts built upon our destruction, yet the information contained within could just as easily be used for our betterment." A twisted grin suddenly burst onto Quinn's face, madness twinkling in his eyes. "My newest Beauregard was to be a creation of true beauty. And if, in the process, I should learn ways to better deal with my parahuman pursuers, then all the better."

As best I could tell, the students were a third of the way to the ground floor, making their way down steadily. Reasonable progress: I only wished they could move faster. I also heard Keith shifting nervously from side to side, but so long as Quinn's attention stayed on me, he'd hopefully be in limited danger. "That's a very believable explanation, yet I find myself skeptical. While I might believe that was the plan for most megalomaniac vampires, you've earned something of a higher standard."

It was, in truth, a pure gamble. I had no idea if the prize he was after warranted that much effort or not. But Quinn loved few things more than gloating, so if there was even a chance he might have had another aspect to the plan, this would give him an opportunity to talk about it.

Quinn's chuckling was a deeply off-putting sound, as was the way his already-worrying smile stretched even wider. "Hoisted by my own ethic of excellence. Fair enough. I was planning to save this nugget to drop later in the conversation, but you've earned it. You're right, Fred. I wasn't just hoping to find 'some' information in the archives of those who once dwelled here. The murderers of our kind were quite crafty and resourceful. There are rumors they even found a way to kill a devil-bonded, such as that pesky wife of yours."

For a very brief, very stupid moment, I felt the tug of baser emotions driving me toward violence. Thankfully, I was able to keep a cool head, reminding myself that threats against Krystal were comically unlikely to be seen through, whereas the cluster of students counting on me to play the distraction was in far more tangible peril.

"Well then, I suppose I'm not sorry that I knocked your plans off course. Though, I do think even if you'd found a theoretical way to end Krystal, that the task might be easier said than done."

"Taking her from you would have been quite the delicious torment," Quinn agreed. "But taking you from her should be almost as satisfying. To lose a loved one is no small pain. Their absence is a constant ache, impossible to forget. Quite akin to a lost limb, really."

His eyes danced down toward the stump that had once been his other arm. Ordinarily, an injury like that would have healed in minutes, but the magical fires of Krystal's devil-form had sundered it completely. One more grudge he was looking to pay back.

"They're starting to get close to the ground floor. Don't you think it's time to get on with this already?" Quinn asked suddenly, his gaze briefly wandering to the building behind me and Keith.

"More interested in playing with strangers than messing with me?" I was plainly scrambling, trying to yank his attention back as I grappled with the realization that he'd been tracking my students as well. There was no way that boded well for them.

Quinn looked back at me, something new in his eyes. It was my first clue that something was horribly wrong. Given what had happened so far, there was no reason for Quinn to appear to be openly triumphant.

"So sorry, Fred. Not every part of the conversation was meant for you."

I smelled the silver only an instant before the blade plunged into my spine. Me toppling to my knees came not from the pain and paralysis that

should have been flooding through me, but rather from sheer shock. I couldn't believe the truth of our situation, even as Keith strode past my crumpled form, stopping directly in front of Quinn.

Lowering himself to a knee, Keith delicately took the elder vampire's hand, kissing it on the knuckles briefly. "As you have ordered, my liege. So, it is done."

"Rise, my dutiful child," Quinn commanded. "I have to say, when I went to all the trouble of conditioning Keith's brood, laying orders and triggers, I never actually expected an opportunity to use them. But there was a chance you'd take some in, and the potential for an unknown operative in your very home was just too good to pass up. Still, some have made themselves useful since being 'freed' several years ago."

Gently, Quinn patted Keith's cheek as best he could, still holding the bomb remote carefully. "The trick to getting past Agency detection is a relatively simple one: the subject must not realize the compulsions still buried in their subconscious. A little classic mental conditioning paired with the right potions, and they never even know they're my double-agents until called upon, like Keith here."

I had no idea what to do. My body wasn't actually paralyzed, but Quinn didn't need that advantage to overwhelm me. This was about watching me suffer. If I surprised him, what would that accomplish? How would it help my students? And that wasn't even touching on what to do about Keith.

"Did you enjoy having a younger vampire to teach? As one who has refused to embrace his capacity as a sire, it must have been a new experience." Quinn turned Keith around, having him face me. "I hope you two had plenty of time to bond, for you to see the admiration in his gaze, to experience the satisfaction in watching your knowledge travel down to the next generation, where it would spread onward into the future."

Something in Keith's eyes wavered as he stared into mine. I wasn't sure if it was guilt at the pitiful sight of me, a crack in the wall of conditioning that held him bound, or an echo of Quinn's own twisted delight. I didn't know, and I never would.

The blade flashed so fast I barely even saw it. Hopefully, that meant it was too quick for Keith to feel. His body fell forward, head landing only inches away. With Keith gone, there was now a clear view of Quinn, his remote control having been traded out for a three-foot long blade. One that

now had a very faint hue of red on the edge, where it had sliced cleanly through a vampire's neck.

“Now, let's see you find a way to save *this* one at the last moment.”

VAMPIRES DON'T TURN TO DUST WHEN WE DIE, STRICTLY SPEAKING. Deborah once explained to me how it all worked; how, in essence, our bodies just decayed at incredible speeds. As corpses animated by magic, the return to our natural state is violent and unbalanced once we lose that connection – essentially a leap to the end of the decomposition process. Although the effect does appear similar to turning into dust or ash when used on an older vampire, the younger ones haven't been exposed to nearly as much magic, meaning the process isn't quite so instantaneous.

All of which meant I had to watch Keith dissolve into nothingness over the course of a minute rather than in seconds. Everything else fell away. I couldn't even hear the other students moving through the building, let alone dare to look. Quinn was right: there was no last-minute salvation to be had this time.

Had I not already been battered about by the man twice – and that was only counting when he physically showed up – I might have entertained notions of charging at Quinn, bolstered by the might of vengeance. But the divide between us was simply too vast. Quinn pursued power relentlessly, whereas I perpetually avoided it. Thankfully, even as I remained kneeled on the ground, lost in sorrow, Quinn was enjoying my suffering too much to interfere. After going to so much trouble to see me wrecked, the man was savoring his victory.

Flickers of memories flashed through my mind, a twinkling vial of magical blood from Sheriff Leeroy shining brightest. If I had taken the blood when it was first offered, would this still be my situation? Could I have stopped that sword if I were fast enough? Just behind the memories of

the vial came Asha's face, however. Had I taken the offer, that blood wouldn't have been around when she so desperately needed it.

It was thoughts of Asha and the night where she nearly died that brought me somewhat back to myself. Terrible as the moment of initial explosion had been, things would have been far worse if I'd lost myself to panic. Quinn may have just murdered one of my students, and that was a tragedy I expected to carry with me for years untold, but it was no excuse to forget my duty to the rest of the class. Quinn had taken one. I'd be damned if I let him have the rest.

Unsteadily, I lifted my head, finally meeting Quinn's overjoyed grin. "*There* it is. You have no idea how hard I've worked to see that face. It's insufferable, Fred, the way you persist and endure. I'd hoped that under all that meekness was a simmering cauldron of resentment and potential. Instead, you're nothing but a fearful mouse with a streak of impeccably good luck. Too bad for you; sooner or later, planning eventually beats fortune."

Talking. I had to keep him talking. Slowly, in fits and starts, my brain regained its functionality after the sudden shock. Realizing I had no idea where the other students even were at this point, I focused my senses, surprised to discover that they were clustered together on the ground floor. If they were that close to the exit, why not run?

Except, of course, for the deadly vampire I was supposed to be distracting. Quinn still thought me paralyzed, but I could use that to my advantage only once. The best time would likely be when the students actually emerged; however, I had no way to signal them that I was still able to move. As I struggled to find a solution, the sounds of one approaching reached my attentive ears.

He was so swift, there was barely any time from the moment I heard him moving to the instant the silver dagger Keith had left in my back was ripped free, hurled some distance away into the grass. Fidealous hadn't even broken stride while freeing the blade from my spine. He continued racing toward Quinn, wearing the most expressive look I'd yet to see on the fey's face. Fidealous was furious, and somehow, I didn't imagine all that rage came from Keith's murder.

"Vile betrayer!" I wasn't sure where the blades had come from, but Fidealous was wielding them both expertly, carving through the air around Quinn as my sire deftly dodged, laughing gleefully all the while.

“Winter sent one of their little pests. How adorable.” Fast as the fey moved, he couldn’t quite match Quinn, who continued to avoid the myriad of strikes, albeit stepping back slightly in the process.

Hands on my shoulders nearly had me shrieking in surprise before I recognized the familiar scent of Arlo. Grabbing hold of me, he raced back to the building, easily dragging my smaller form along. As we ran, I could see Fidealous fighting desperately as he and Quinn danced along the ground, scattering the dusty debris that had once been a person named Keith.

It was only when we slammed into the building’s lobby, where the others were waiting, that I forced myself to stop being mired in despair. Sad as I felt, the students were experiencing far worse. I wasn’t sure how much they’d seen, but it was clearly enough. Expressions were painful combinations of fury, terror, and loss. Lorian was silently crying, Teagan sat slumped in a heap, Valencia stood near a pair of freshly punched holes in the wall, and even Pieris wore a distant, uncertain expression.

Helping me to my feet, Arlo stepped back, affording me a look at his own face, tears running down it freely. “Professor... what do we do?”

“We go get that son of a bitch!” Valencia yelled, a distinct flare sparking in her eyes. “He killed Keith. We all saw it. End of discussion.”

“Like hell it is,” Arlo snapped back. “I liked Keith plenty. He was dating one of the other therians I run with, so we hung out a fair bit, and he seemed like a good dude. That doesn’t mean I want to get murdered in his memory.”

Valencia stomped her foot, cracking the floor’s tiles. “With all of us, we can—”

“Die,” Pieris interrupted, his voice a cold wind over Valencia’s mounting fire of rage. “We can walk out there and be executed, just like Keith was. Even that may be optimistic. He was at least granted a clean death.”

“Between Professor Fred, Fidealous, and us students, there are seven of us and one of him. Plus, your bodyguard is already handling him solo,” Valencia argued.

Pieris shook his head, slow and deliberate. “Fidealous is an incredible talent that has been honed to his full potential. Although he is of common origins, the man is able to fight some of the weaker royal fey to a draw. Yet

even he is battling desperately just to hang on. Do you have any idea of who it is out there right now?"

He didn't even let her try to guess. The dam had broken, and Pieris's own fears were finally set free. "That monster is a tale whispered to fey children, stories of the prince-thief who'll snatch you away, a warning to be ever careful of the bargains we make, and a caution to never, *ever* trust a vampire."

At the last bit, his eyes swung to me, and I was surprised to find compassion peering out from behind them. "Although perhaps we would be better served judging by the character of the individual."

"So, we're screwed then?" Teagan asked, finally pulling herself up from the floor.

"No, you're not." I was far from over what I'd witnessed, but the severity of the situation had forced me to pull it together, at least until the students were safe. "We stick to the plan. I'll head back out and help Fidealous distract Quinn. I won't be able to add much to the fight, but he'll probably want to drag out whatever he's got planned for me. Get out of here the instant you can, and don't look back. Run toward the center of campus, find Headmaster Sequoin. She should be able to keep you safe."

"He'll kill you, too," Lorian muttered, words only reaching me thanks to my vampire hearing.

Walking over, I gently patted her shoulder. "There's a fair chance he won't. Quinn loves to see me suffer, and if I'm dead, then that's the end. Making me watch a student die while I watched helplessly... that seems like the sort of experience he'll want me to live with for a while."

In truth, I suspected Lorian had the right cut of things. While Quinn did love to watch people squirm, tonight he'd finally managed the torment he'd been trying to achieve since my wedding. This was his moment of victory, and there was only one logical way to cap things off. Still, whatever he intended wouldn't be slow, not if Quinn could possibly help it.

My nose lit up at the sudden scent of blood filling the air, and I glanced around in panic, afraid we'd been attacked during our short reprieve. The source soon became evident, though, as Arlo extended his forearm toward me. A carefully made cut ran along it, the edges already starting to heal.

"Vampires get stronger from the blood of parahumans, right? That's how it worked with Keith and Kimberly. Well, no offense, Professor, but

you need all the help you can get.” Arlo moved closer, bringing his arm within drinking distance.

“That’s very kind of you. However, I don’t expect it will be necessary. Quinn has augmented himself to incredible levels with blood I can only guess at. It’s not a divide so easily crossed. Besides, you need your strength for running.”

“I’ve got stamina to spare, thanks. I’d much rather you have a little extra in the tank. And to be honest, it’s not entirely altruistic. We watched through the window as that man killed Keith, even after he showed he was a loyal lackey, just to hurt you. Do you really think he wouldn’t grab some of us to twist the knife deeper?”

A whole new wave of terror washed over me, and evidently, I did a poor job of hiding the sentiment, as Arlo nodded and lifted his arm closer to my mouth. “Exactly. So please drink, Professor. Because you being a little bit stronger or faster might be the only thing that keeps him too busy to bother with us.”

Again, flashes of Sheriff Leeroy’s vial appeared in my mind. This was no limited resource to save for a rainy day, however. Only blood from a therian, offered freely to provide necessary aid for a looming battle. If I’d been stronger or faster, would it have mattered for Keith? I didn’t know, and never would. But I could certainly make sure that if such requirements were needed to save the rest of my class, I didn’t fall short.

Watching carefully for any signs of objection, I sipped from the wound in Arlo’s flesh, feeling the crackle of power race through me as the blood rushed down my throat. I kept the feeding brief, not daring to risk him being in any way limited or woozy as the students made their escape.

Just as I pulled away, another arm shoved its way into view, this one bearing the pale flesh of Teagan. It, too, had a small incision, though hers was far more contained, as mages lacked the rapid healing of a therian. Again, I drank, once more careful to take only as much as was necessary.

When Teagan finished, I found Lorian standing in her place, tears still flowing without pause, even as she pulled out a small pocketknife. I reached out, pausing her hand. “Are you sure about this? The gesture means the world to me, but with your people’s history regarding vampires... please don’t feel in any way pressured. The others have given me plenty.”

Despite my words, Lorian pulled her hand free and sank the knife into the side of her arm, producing a thin cut that bled easily. “Whatever lies

between our ancestors, this power, this blood, is *mine*. Including the right to share it when I see fit.”

Her blood was unlike anything I’d ever had before, there was an almost insubstantial quality to it. I took even less than with the others – in part because Lorian’s slender form had less of it to spare – yet it felt no less potent.

Although Valencia stood nearby, she made no move to offer me her blood, nor would I have expected her to. Feeding on the blood of demons was neither wise nor healthy; their magical composition apparently didn’t match well with ours. Instead, she embraced me with a strong hug, letting out one soft sob while no one else could see before pulling back, mask of anger once more hiding the depths of her pain.

I thought that was it; however, before I could leave to face Quinn once more, another figure blocked my way, the one I’d been least expecting.

It seemed Pieris had something else on his mind.

“YOU KNOW THAT WON’T BE ENOUGH TO STOP HIM.” HIS GAZE WAS STEADY, far heavier than the normal dismissive glances sent my way.

“I do. That’s why stopping him was never the goal. Just keep him busy enough for you all to get away.”

Pieris shook his head, letting out a deep sigh. “Even that is ambitious beyond your means. Detestable as he is, Quinn hasn’t survived this long without power and cunning. Were you both on equal footing in terms of physical might, he would still have a substantial advantage – for ruthlessness, if nothing else.”

“I understand the odds, Pieris.” Straining my ears, I could still hear the sounds of combat from outside. Unfortunately, it sounded as if one of the fighters was slowing down. That would be Fidealous, who might have impressive stamina, but couldn’t match the endless endurance of an undead. Bit by bit, he would start to lose his edge, while Quinn would remain as deadly as ever.

“Then you should realize that for all your purported intentions, if he turned his attention toward us, you’d never be able to intervene. Not with the gap between you.” Seemingly from thin air, Pieris produced a blade similar to the one Fidealous had been wielding. Pressing the tip into the palm of his hand, blood began to pool, blood with a somewhat blue hue and a scent quite unlike anything else, though it did remind me of a pine forest.

The blood oozed out, unnaturally slow, remaining in Pieris’s cupped hand as he continued. “Fey blood is not like that of denizens from the infernal plane. In truth, vampires can drink our blood, and the boost they receive from it is incredible. However, the effects fade faster than with

other parahumans, and once they do, there is a severe price to be paid. The body's existing magics, like the one that keeps you alive, are disrupted and drained. In the weakest of cases, this leaves the vampire unable to move for several hours. The blood of a royal is exponentially more potent than that of a regular fey, as we are more deeply bonded to the magic of our realm. That means the effects, and consequences, are increased proportionally.”

Squeezing his hand, Pieris gripped the palmful of blood. When he uncurled his fingers, there was a red orb with hints of blue in its place – the blood, frozen perfectly solid. “One of the most important edicts I have been handed is to never, under *any* circumstances, allow a vampire to taste of my blood. But any with ambition to wear the crown must know when to heel, and when to lead. I've gotten the cut of you over these past weeks, and I don't expect you'd use this power when you needed it, given the cost. So instead, I will simply say: use this if *we* need it.”

He handed over the orb, which I accepted after only a moment of hesitation. My nose didn't latch on to the scent, nor did my instincts buzz. It was not, so far as my vampire brain considered, the sort of blood I was hardwired to crave, which, in effect, made it just one of the many other countless scents around me that were easily ignored. I tucked the ball into a pocket, then shook Pieris's hand while it was still being stuck out there.

“It was a pleasure teaching you.” I let go and faced the others, meeting each one's eyes, knowing that I couldn't afford to tarry. “All of you. I'm sorry I wasn't able to save Keith, but I have no intention of losing another student. Run fast; don't look back. You all have bright futures ahead, and I'm not letting Quinn get in their way.”

Then I was gone, moving before my courage failed me. Racing back through the building and out to the front, I found a wounded Fidealous dodging yet another punch from Quinn, a blow that looked like it could shatter bone. I based that conjecture largely on the broken bones Fidealous was ignoring: two on the left arm, and a rib poking through his torso, though that one was already sliding back into place before my eyes.

“My, my, look who's returned.” Quinn darted away from Fidealous, giving the fey much-needed breathing room as he shifted his focus toward me. “And with the scent of a few new bloods lingering around him, too. I'd like to think you took the plunge and drained those students of yours dry, but I've finally learned to accept the sort of failure you are.”

In a burst of movement, Quinn shot toward me, throwing another huge punch. It was so big and obvious, in fact, that I had no trouble dodging to the side. Quinn's fist connected with empty air, and something odd rippled through his joyful demeanor. Twisting, he threw another punch, this one markedly faster. I stepped to the side while blocking, managing to turn aside the majority of the force; what remained only hurt my arms for a few moments before swift healing negated it.

When I saw Quinn's face next, however, it had undergone a rapid shift. Gone was the cruel joy and the wicked grin. In its place was a picture of frustration tinged with rage.

"What did you *do*?"

The words confounded me so much, I was nearly unprepared for the flurry that came next. Quinn unloaded, using kicks, fangs, and his arm in a symphony of coordinated movement I had no hope of matching. Instead, I simply weathered the storm, dodging and blocking where possible, letting the blows to less important body parts pass through. While far from a pleasant experience, I was doing precisely what I'd intended: keeping Quinn occupied.

I caught the distant sounds of movement from the other side of the building but didn't dare let my attention stray for long. Quinn's assault finally ended in an unnerving scream as he retreated several steps, openly glaring at me.

It was only then that I realized the truth. Something *was* different. I could track every movement Quinn made; his speed no longer left me struggling to keep up. The blows, while painful, weren't shattering my body the way they had with Fidealous. I'd grown stronger from my students' blood, and the effects were still increasing.

Soft glows around Quinn's body alerted me to the magical items he was storing – I could see the magic in them, just like the last time I'd drunk from a mage like Teagan. An instinct told me to shift right, and I did, just as Quinn thrust his arm forward like a spear aimed for my heart. The sharp fingernails pierced only air as I easily avoided the strike, my body feeling distinctly lighter than before.

"It was the Blood Council, wasn't it?" Quinn's extended hand flattened out as he swung it for my neck, missing once again. "They fed you the blood of something ancient, knowing that I might show up."

The more we moved, the surer I became. Quinn was definitely still stronger and faster than me; however, it was no longer the equivalent of a pro-baseball team taking on their little league equivalents. We were comparable, which meant I'd taken an absolutely staggering leap forward in terms of overall power. Pairing that with what I suspected were psychic insights courtesy of Lorian's blood, and I was managing to hold my own in terms of defense.

And that was *really* pissing Quinn off. Truth be told, he still had a substantial upper hand, even with my boosts, but rage was making him unfocused and sloppy. If he were coming at me using the efficiency he'd fought Fidealous with, I could easily let a critical blow slip past.

From the sheath on his back, Quinn brought out his sword, the one that had been used to kill Keith. I could still see the red stain along its edge, and while anger tried to sink its teeth into my mind, I kept focused on my true task. I'd failed to save Keith; getting upset wouldn't change that, but it might very well keep me from saving the students who could still be helped.

"All right, Fred, you want to be a threat? I'll treat you as one. But before you die, I'll have you tell me what it was they fed you. Unless you've drunk from a dragon, there's no blood that should offer that much power."

"Actually, dragons aren't the magical ceiling you might think they are. I've met two parahumans who everyone much more knowledgeable than me agrees are stronger than even Gideon." Banter was a waste of time, so I was more than happy to play along. Every moment of chatting took the students further from Quinn.

"Pity they aren't here to save you." In under a second, Quinn closed the gap between us, blade swinging at incredible speeds. Unfortunately for Quinn, with only one sword, his avenues of attack were far more predictable than his full-body assault. Between my increased speed and twinges of instinct, I was able to avoid that first swing and most of the myriad that followed.

The few cuts that did land barely had time to register before they were healed. For all his efforts, the only success Quinn had was in cutting up my sleeves and bits of sweater vest. At every turn, he was getting angrier, the thrusts that should have torn through me instead missing by less than inches.

At last, he appeared to realize the current tactic wasn't working. Stepping back, Quinn surveyed our surroundings, which gave me a chance to do the same. Fidealous was gone; hopefully, he'd managed to catch the students and was guiding them to safety. Quinn was a massive threat, but he was not the only danger currently on campus.

"Impressive, I have to say. Whatever they fed you must have been transcendent. Yet I didn't catch a hint of it before you entered that building." Quinn's eyes scanned every bit of me, like he was hunting for something, lingering briefly on my left pocket. Reaching into his jacket, Quinn tapped an unseen object, but thanks to Teagan's blood, I could see the magic drain out as he did, meaning he'd activated some sort of enchanted implement.

"As far as you've come, you're still not quite as fast as me, though. I wonder, how many limbs will I need to hack off before you tell me what I want to know?"

Quinn's intent came to me as a surge of instinct, the strongest one I'd gotten yet. As it trickled through my brain, I felt like there was a bit more with this one. For a fleeting moment, it was as if I could see the battlefield the way Quinn did: the variables he was assessing, the pressure he was ignoring, the prize he was eyeing. Understanding, instinct, or borrowed psychic powers – whatever the confluence of factors, I was almost certain I knew what Quinn was currently after.

When he started to run in the direction my students were escaping, I was already on the move. It was meant to be a surprise that threw me off, leaving me to stand there in shock as I realized the "limbs" he'd been threatening were not my own. As I ran, my hand dove into my pocket, producing the red orb of frozen blood Pieris had provided. The power of a royal fey, only a single gulp away.

That was when Quinn struck, the effects of his enchanted object finally revealed. Moving *far* faster than he had moments prior, he was on me in a blink. With all I had, I fought to get the orb into my mouth. My arms strained, but Quinn had dropped his sword to clutch hold of my forearm. We stood there like that, struggling for control. I poured all my resolve into moving the orb a fraction of an inch closer, my tongue flicking out in efforts to lick the side. The image was, admittedly, tremendously undignified. Which only made it all the more believable to my audience.

Ultimately, Quinn was still stronger than me, even with only one arm. Pulling the hand back and leaning forward, he chomped down on the orb, taking three of my fingers off in the process. I fell away as his grip released, my severed digits already regrowing at incredible speeds. Quinn, meanwhile, was smacking his lips theatrically, rubbing his throat.

“Fey blood? No, not just that... royal fey blood, from a *primary* line?” Panic struck Quinn in a sudden flare of understanding. “Damn it all! I have to take precautions before the afterkick.”

“You should be more careful about accepting random blood from strangers.” I flexed my newly restored hand, then climbed back to my feet. After getting the intuition that Quinn wanted the source of my so-called secret power, I’d bet on his impulsiveness to go for the blood once it was in view. My own efforts to eat it were all about making him focus on getting it down, rather than wondering what it was.

“Don’t be too smug just yet. This couldn’t be further from my first encounter with the blood of a fey. I’ve got countermeasures prepared, and plenty of time before I’ll need them.” Quinn’s mouth opened to reveal his fangs on full display. “Certainly long enough to drain your students while you watch, helpless to stop me.”

For once, it was my turn to laugh in his face. “I wouldn’t be too sure about that. You’re not the only schemer that’s been at work here. It’s no coincidence that I’m on this campus. I was put here as a pawn. Now, I still don’t really grasp most of what’s at work, but I do feel pretty darn sure about one thing: the fey don’t go around giving away their power. Not unless it’s part of a trap.”

THERE WAS ONLY ENOUGH TIME FOR A FLICKER OF DOUBT TO PASS OVER Quinn's face before he suddenly grabbed his chest and fell forward. His already pale skin was turning chalky, flecks of blue appearing and vanishing like the shifting of a light. "What... is... this...?"

"The blood of a royal fey, who I suspect was betting hard on this exact sort of outcome." I'd thought about it myself, earlier in the evening; my nature was to reject more power, while Quinn's was to snap it up reflexively. With him also being stronger and more ruthless, there were precious few versions of this night where I'd be able to eat the orb before him. If Pieris actually wanted me to take the blood, he'd have insisted I gulp it down before ever entering my sire's sight.

Quinn started coughing violently, spraying blood across the grass. The moment it touched the air, my nose knew this wasn't the blood of Pieris – at least not solely. There were too many types to distinguish, but therian and human were especially dominant, beaten out only by a curious third scent I couldn't identify. Each cough sent another bout of blood bursting forth to stain the lush grass.

Despite his weakened form and fountains of ejected blood, Quinn refused to yield. Staggering up to his feet, his hand shot into his jacket, brushing nearly every enchanted object he'd brought, activating them all at once. With a new surge of energy, he ducked down and snatched up his sword, its tip aimed for my throat. "I've still got enough time to finish our little bout."

In that moment, I truly wasn't sure which of us would prevail. Visibly impaired or not, Quinn had unleashed a torrent of unknown magical effects, just one of which had briefly elevated his speed to incredible levels. Against

so many, there was a good chance I'd still turn out to be the weaker of us. I angled myself so the fleeing students were to my back; if Quinn wanted to finish with a bang, he'd have to aim it at only me.

The rumbling at our feet, however, filled me with a sudden sense of optimism. "I'm not so sure you actually do."

Nice as it would have been if Quinn dutifully remained to face a true opponent, his survival instincts hadn't been dulled quite that much. As he raced off away from me, I saw him activate his final items, flickering out of view, only to reappear farther off, and then again, before he was gone.

Seconds later, huge roots tore up from the ground. They were covered in flecks of stone and what looked to be greenish blood, a furious Headmaster Sequoin riding the roots like a surfboard on the waves. To my surprise, Deborah was still with her, her outfit noticeably more beaten up than when we'd last talked.

"Where is he?" The Prudence of the Blood Council was at my side in a blur of movement, face visibly warring between concern and fury.

I pointed in the direction Quinn had gone, and Deborah was off like a shot, not that I held out much hope that she'd find him. Of all the things Quinn excelled at, getting away could be argued as his greatest specialty.

Headmaster Sequoin, however, descended from her perch atop the roots and strode over to me, looking down, taking note of my condition. "While restoring the campus to proper working order will take time, the defenses have been deactivated. Are your students all safe?"

"Most of them got away," I replied, once more pointing, though this was in the opposite direction. My tongue felt thick as I tried to continue, like I was moving it through a mouth of half-set concrete. "But... Keith..."

Looking down, I saw bits of dust swirling in the breeze. The pile that had once been his remains was down to little more than a thin layer sitting atop the grass. It had only been minutes, yet he was already scattered to the winds, returned to the earth from which he'd come. Ashes to ashes.

Dust to dust.

I'm afraid my recollection at this point grows a bit spotty. My reaction to the weight of seeing my student killed in front of me had been held off by sheer necessity; giving in would only have led to more lost lives. But with Quinn gone and safety attained, my mental reprieve was at an end. Accounts from Deborah and Headmaster Sequoin both described it as temporarily giving over to the stress and trauma of the day's events.

The truth is, I broke down completely.

The guilt, the fear, the selfish thankfulness that I was still alive – it tore through me. Crying is a tricky task for vampires, with our physiological particularities. Tears or not, though, we're still capable of weeping. That was a truth I learned with absolute certainty the night Trestlevend was attacked.

My next cohesive thoughts came with the taste of mint and the scent of early spring. I was sitting in Headmaster Sequoin's office, though propped up might be a more apt descriptor. She stood over me, her small form still intimidating, with a teacup pressed gently to my lips. I drained some more and felt cool calm flowing over my battered brain. The pain was still there, yet more distant, like I'd had time to grow used to the ache.

"The rest of your students are safe," she informed me, handing over the teacup and taking a chair opposite my own. "Fidealous was able to herd them away from any dangers until the defenses halted. They recounted the details of your engagement."

Relief swelled in my chest, burst an instant later by the reminder that only five of my six students were counted in that statement. Still, it was far better than hearing that any of the others had been hurt. "Thank you. For telling me. For saving me. For..." My hand tightened on the cup, which I realized was in fact wooden and painted, not ceramic. Durable, too. It held together without issue, despite my newly enhanced strength. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I couldn't save him. Quinn had him all twisted around inside, and I never had a clue. If I'd known, if I'd been smarter, or faster, or—"

"Fred, what happened tonight was a tragedy, but please try to keep some perspective. You are not so fundamental or powerful an existence as to hoard all the blame for yourself. It was the Agency who failed to pick up on the mental conditioning Keith was subjected to. It was Hellebore who put you into play, providing Quinn with the temptation for torment. And it was me who overestimated my capabilities and promised safety to all who came here, only to fall short."

Sinking deeper into her chair, some of the intensity left Headmaster Sequoin, who appeared far more tired all of a sudden. "My knowledge is vast beyond mortal comprehension, yet I still struggle when dealing with people. Professor Glade was one of my most trusted staff members; she'd proven her loyalty and dedication at every turn. To think she was in league with a termite like that all along – it leaves me shaken. Which is good,

frankly. After tonight's failing, I *should* be shaken. I've gotten complacent. If nothing else, these events have reminded me of when I took this compound to begin with, and the reasons behind it."

More of the soothing tea washed down my throat, cooling my pain and helping me focus. "It was some sort of facility for the organization we saw in the fey realm, right? The ones who were hunting parahumans?"

"We weren't called parahumans back then. English itself was a still distant concept. The organization wasn't the first of its kind, but they were unique in their obsession with knowledge. Most who hunted our kind focused on the scale of violence; these killers sought to hunt efficiently. Find the weaknesses and exploit them. It began as a notion which allowed them far greater success than their peers, and it grew into an obsession that would ultimately be their undoing. In their hubris, they sought to find and capture my mother."

Headmaster Sequoin paused, pointedly waiting until I took another sip of tea before continuing her tale. "It was a task well beyond impossible, yet they were undaunted. Since efforts to find her yielded nothing, they turned their attention toward the seven daughters cut from her own branches. When moves were made toward my youngest sister, I stepped in. They had learned a great deal in their studies yet were naught but babes before me, even then. I came prepared, and they fell like wheat in the field. Repurposing this place afterward felt appropriate. A haven of knowledge. A proper shrine to Mother."

"You built something incredible," I replied. "Truly. Havens of any kind are rare for parahumans, let alone places where they can exist so freely, away from the trappings of power plays and politics."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, because after tonight, I've found myself unexpectedly short-staffed. I'll need to replace Professor Glade, and just so happen to have an interim professor who has done exceptional work. More so, after what I've seen this evening, I know that he would always act with the good of his students in mind. Any interest in making your tenure here more permanent?"

Impractical as it was, I still found the idea tempting. With a remote setup, paired with Lillian and Al as feet on the ground, it would be possible to keep my business running, albeit at a reduced capacity. Krystal had been entranced by Trestlevend and already traveled frequently; she'd probably jump at the chance to live here for a spell. The image of us sitting in the

sunshine, looking out at the lake, was one I clung to for as long as possible, finishing off the last of my tea.

“That is an incredible and generous offer, but it’s one I’m afraid I have to decline.”

Her expression remained largely composed, though her head did tilt slightly. “Never thought I’d see the day a vampire turned down regular access to sunlight.”

“I will miss that perk greatly, as well as the campus itself, the faculty, and especially my students. But it is because of them that I have to decline. Quinn’s not going to stop. He’s proven that over and over these past few years. Sooner or later, he’ll try to hurt me again. When that happens, I can’t be working at a school. I can’t turn all those people into potential bystanders.”

Slowly, Headmaster Sequoin nodded. “And if I assured you that could never happen, it would mean I’ve truly learned nothing from tonight’s tragedy. Very well, Fred. I certainly can’t fault your reasoning. But we’re long-lived beings. When the situation changes, know that you’ll be welcomed back.”

“I appreciate that more than you know. If it’s all right, I’d like to stay until morning. See one last sunrise.”

“Happily done. I expect Deborah will be keeping you company for a time, anyway. She’s waiting in the next room, though don’t worry about being overheard. Not even vampire ears can reach through these walls.” Rising to her feet, Headmaster Sequoin motioned for me to follow. We walked to a window, staring together out at Trestlevend.

Bands of parahumans roved across campus, clearing rubble out of the way, helping those who were injured, and smashing apart anything that looked mildly dangerous. It wasn’t these that Headmaster Sequoin was looking at, though. Her vision was skyward, to the twinkling stars shining overhead.

“Would you like to know how I manage the sunlight trick?”

“Very much so,” I admitted. “I’d just assumed it was a closely guarded magical secret.”

“Oh no, not much of a secret at all. If anyone can replicate this tactic, they are more than welcome to try.” Reaching out, she took hold of my hand, something like a crackle of energy passing between us. “The secret is

that you were never actually getting pure sunlight. I filtered out everything harmful and passed along the pleasant parts.”

Overhead, the sky shattered, a tapestry of stars torn apart into tiny sections, like thousands upon thousands of images layered directly next to one another. A wind blew across campus, rustling the sky, and I finally understood.

All of Trestlevend, and the surrounding area, was under a canopy of leaves so vast it blotted out the sky. Just before Headmaster Sequoin removed her hand, taking the vision as well, I twisted around and caught sight of a tremendous trunk. It shimmered out of view the moment our hands parted.

“As I said, I’ve been rooted here for a very long while. We dryads can get quite robust, if given time to bloom.”

WHEN I EMERGED FROM HEADMASTER SEQUOIN'S OFFICE, DEBORAH WAS waiting. In a flash of speed, she had her arms around me, hugging tightly. While not exactly distant, Deborah had never been the most affectionate of people, marking the importance of such a gesture. Letting go, she took me by the arm, leading me down the hall.

“Not that you’ll be surprised, but Quinn got away. I’m sorry.”

The most I could manage was a nod. As she said, it wasn’t surprising, yet the news landed like a punch to the stomach all the same. Quinn was still out there, free to plot and scheme until he was ready to strike again.

“I’ve gotten the official and unofficial stories while you were recovering,” Deborah continued. “As well as reached out to certain influential members of the fey realm. Since you seemed in desperate need of good news, I confirmed with Hellebore that your favor has been paid.”

“That’s it?” My experience with the fey had prepared me for trickery and games when it came time to get the favor declared as satisfied. Their reputation for aggressive negotiation had proven well-warranted in our dealings together.

Deborah permitted a slight smirk to appear on her otherwise composed expression. “There may have been a bit of initial huffing, but since I had multiple accounts of you not only attempting to stop Quinn but protecting fey royalty while risking life-ending injury, she didn’t push hard. At the end of the day, Hellebore got what she wanted.”

“Quinn escaping to reappear another day?”

Our walk came to a halt at a small seating nook in front of a series of paintings, ones showing Trestlevend through the years. Paintings of a newly

finished campus, already sprawling in size, hung next to modern versions of the same campus, each rendered in equally loving detail. Deborah sat, motioning for me to do the same, and I complied.

“Today was not a small victory, Fred. It may very well be the beginning of Quinn’s end. But there was another story I wanted to tell you during my visit. If you don’t mind, let’s start there.”

“By all means. I trust you.” I did, too. It wasn’t particularly wise, perhaps; I understood the role Deborah played for the Blood Council. She was an incredible diplomat, capable of understanding people, treating them in ways that made them feel supported and encouraged. In other words, she was an expert in getting people to trust her, despite the Blood Council’s deadly reputation.

Yet she was also a friend who’d come through for me and my clan time and time again. Perhaps trusting her *was* a mistake, but I’d far rather err on the side of believing in someone who’d been there for me than dismiss her contributions.

“Centuries ago – which must sound like a long time, but we’re only talking a *few* centuries here – there lived a mage. He was a rare talent, and a good man. Using his gifts, the mage devoted himself to the study of healing, to creating potion recipes and spell-structures that deeply influenced modern medicinal magics. Some of his recipes are still in use today. It was that devotion and focus on healing which made his fate especially cruel.”

Deborah’s eyes lingered on the paintings before us, especially one showing a large crowd clustered up in the front of campus, celebrating some unknown event. “This mage was well liked, even beloved, by many parahumans his work had saved. He found a partner, a wife he loved dearly, and together, they had several children. By all accounts, they were quite a happy family, until the mystivin virus, better known as the Plague of Mages.”

“Plague of Mages?” My interruption was inadvertent, the words slipping out on their own.

“It sounds nicer in Latin, but the name is certainly accurate,” Deborah explained. “Did you ever wonder why it seems like humanity used to know about magic, given the breadth of it in our histories and legends? Although the secret was never fully out, some magical knowledge was far more commonplace, simply due to the number of mages in the world. Humans

learning to wield their newly found gifts are rarely subtle, after all. The Plague of Mages changed everything.”

I was starting to put the pieces together just from context alone. “Sounds as if this mystivin virus reduced the mage population?”

“That it did. The mystivin virus was a very specific kind of disease, one that latched on to the physiological differences between mages and humans. A virus altered by magic itself, yet designed so that the mundanes and most parahumans would be unbothered.”

“It was created artificially?” She hadn’t said it outright, but with such specific parameters, there were only so many potential explanations.

To that, Deborah gave a shrug. “No organization has ever claimed credit for the deed, though that’s of little surprise. The Plague of Mages was too effective. It upset the worldwide balance of power in ways we are still seeing to this day. More so, the pain mages suffered left wounds carved into their collective souls. If they ever find the culprit, open war will be declared without hesitation. Even if it were to destroy what remains of them.”

She looked away from the painting, back to me. “To explain the depth of their hatred, we must return to my story. The Plague of Mages appeared and spread without warning, tearing through the community as a whole. Our tale’s mage, with his breadth of knowledge and focus on healing, spared no effort in searching for a cure. He scoured not only solutions found in spells, but the capabilities of other parahumans, hunting for a key in their immunity. Mages were a type of parahuman, after all. Surely with a bit of nudging, they could be moved from the virus’s path. He was tireless, giving all he had to save his people, yet the world demanded still more. Eventually, his family caught the plague.”

I didn’t care for where this story was heading, especially not knowing what had prompted Deborah to start the telling. I didn’t like the sense of empathy I felt for this conspicuously unnamed mage. Nevertheless, I listened attentively, certain that she wouldn’t be telling me all this without reason.

“The mystivin virus was an oddity in that it both sought out magic, yet magic could also defend against it. Stronger mages were able to suppress the worst of the disease’s effects within their own body, some holding out until the fever broke entirely. It was the younger, weaker mages who fell faster. Ones only a few years behind in their development than your friend Neil. An entire generation of potential all but snuffed out. That is why the

magicians carry a grudge that cannot ever be forgiven. And that is why the mage in our story was driven to desperation.”

Deborah lifted her left hand, then held up a single finger. “His wife went first. Despite societal pressures to sire strong magicians, he’d married for love, a woman with minor magical talents whom the virus took in days.” Another finger went up. “Then their family started to fall.” Another finger, and another, until Deborah had only her thumb still tucked out of sight.

“The mage had made a great number of friends, garnered favors with parahumans from all walks of life – not unlike yourself. When tragedy struck, his allies arrived in full force to help, offering their knowledge and gifts in any way possible. The mage had grown beyond desperate, chasing wilder and wilder theories as he hunted for a means of salvation. For a time, he thought the fey held the secret, before resolving the differences in our natures to be too great. It was undead, and their immunity to all disease, where he decided his one chance lay. Specifically, he set his sights on vampires, seeking a way to guarantee someone would turn. And with time running short, he believed a breakthrough had been reached.”

My mind jumped ahead, and I felt like my stomach was about to send the tea bubbling back up, before remembering that vampires lacked that capability. “Oh no. Please don’t tell me he tested it on his remaining child.”

“Of course not. Remember, we are talking about a good man,” Deborah reiterated. “The mage thought it possible to ensure a turn with the right combination of potions in a human’s bloodstream supplementing the process. Since he truly believed his method to be viable and capable of saving his son, there was only one ethical test subject he could use. Calling in a few of his favors, the mage had himself turned.”

Without warning, Deborah smiled, though there was a distinct tinge of sadness paired with it. “I was there to see it, along with Claudius. Neither of us performed the act, but such an experiment aroused the Blood Council’s obvious interest. Skeptical as we were, it was hard not to feel a rush of optimism when it worked. The mage arose, his inherent connection to magic lost, along with his fear of the plague. Claudius and I returned to Control with the experiment’s notes. Believing his procedure to be proven successful, however, the mage wasted no more time. His last child, a boy at the end of his teens, was fading fast. Acting swiftly, he repeated the experiment, determined not to lose anyone else he loved.”

“But it didn’t work,” I surmised. Deborah nodded, confirming that this time, my guess had been accurate.

“No, it did not. We later learned that the mage’s potions turned out to have no discernable impact on the process either way. He’d just been among the lucky few. His son, however, was not. Despite how many you might meet bearing his name, the real Beauregard never became a vampire.”

I’d known the mage in the story was Quinn, yet that final detail caught me by surprise. Twice he’d had a flunkie using that name. I’d thought it mere habit, or laziness, not the mourning act of a broken soul. “It doesn’t excuse the things he’s done.”

“Nowhere near it,” Deborah agreed. “I didn’t tell you this story so you’d have empathy for Quinn. I did it for several reasons, one of the most important of which is to show that ‘goodness’ is not an inherent, inalienable factor. It is the summation of choices we make each and every day. As you and your clan grow stronger, your choices will have broader impacts. After what we saw with the Turva clan, I think one day, the decisions you all make could have far-reaching consequences. Better you hear a cautionary tale now than turn into one later.”

“What are the other reasons?” I probed, not about to let such a pertinent detail slip past.

“Giving you insight into your enemy, helping you grasp Quinn’s particular methodology, and making sure you understand what you’re dealing with. The good man who helped all those people has been dead for hundreds of years. What rose in his place is a being who has been completely broken. Quinn hates humans and parahumans alike for our immunity to the plague that took his family. He delights in our suffering. Just about the only thing that remains of who he once was is the brilliant mind and love of experimentation. There is no making peace with Quinn, no finding a common ground or reaching an accord.”

I could see the smile he’d worn after decapitating Keith, hear his laughter ringing in my ears. Before that night, I liked to think I would have argued with Deborah, that surely there was some way back for him. “I believe you. I’m just not sure what to do about it.”

“After tonight, all you should need to do is lay low while the situation resolves itself. But seeing as Krystal has arrived on campus and is barreling up the stairs as we speak, I’ll let her fill you in on the rest.” Deborah

chuckled at my look of surprise, tapping her ears. “Drink a little parahuman blood, and you already forget which of us has the keener senses.”

Hopping out of my chair, I faced the stairwell just in time to catch sight of Krystal barreling out the door. She slammed into me like a rocket, and we held one another as I embraced the woman I loved after one of the worst nights I’d ever experienced. By the time I looked up again, Deborah was already gone.

PACKING WAS A SLOW AFFAIR, IN PART BECAUSE OF KRYSTAL'S PRESENCE giving me a much-needed distraction, but also because I was in no great hurry. Classes were cancelled for at least a week as the campus was repaired, which most of the students had taken as free license to party amongst the rubble. The transition from danger to revelry might have seemed swift by human standards, but parahumans lived a more dangerous existence, and as such, learned to celebrate when the opportunities presented themselves.

The rest of them had little cause for mourning, thankfully. Despite the chaos on campus, Headmaster Sequoin and Deborah had been hard at work putting down the most aggressive of the threats. The students had pitched in as well, from shattering crackling pillars with thrown kegs to smashing apart the smaller automatons with well-placed traps. For all the dangers parahumans faced, we were plenty capable of dealing out our own.

“—and shove them all up his ass!” Krystal's rant on her latest vision of Quinn's fate was winding down as I placed several pairs of socks into my suitcase. My eyes traveled to the conspicuous hole in the wall where a fey artifact had once been positioned.

“How am I not on the hook for that?” The words came at the same time as the realization. Fey were ruthless bargainers and never failed to exploit an advantage, but I'd lost possession of an ancient treasure they'd been hesitant to loan out in the first place. Hellebore should have been stringing me up by my spreadsheets, yet instead, she'd called our debt square?

Krystal followed my gaze, noting the empty alcove. “Ah, yes. There *was* a bit of bluster about that one, as I heard it. But Headmaster Sequoin

argued in your favor, pointing out that the artifact was placed in your room. You never officially accepted stewardship over it. That would have come with certain rights to the artifact that the fey didn't want to extend to an outsider, but the reverse is that they can't charge you with its loss when you were never really its keeper."

"That sounds like a minor technicality for such a major loss," I countered.

"Hellebore was in a good mood. Tonight, she got what she wanted."

I finally turned from the vacant alcove, folding a button-down shirt to join its brethren on a carefully stacked pile. "Deborah hinted at something similar. Since I doubt Hellebore cared enough about one vampire to take joy in Keith's death, it wasn't that. So, what happened that has put the fey in such a cheery disposition?"

"The blood," Krystal replied, her tone suddenly serious. "You were right about the blood being a lure for Quinn, just lacking context for how major a move that was. Have you ever wondered how he's so strong, even though he's not very old by vampire standards? How he avoids detection, despite so many with magical means hunting him? Because *I* did, and I started asking questions. Enough to find out his not-so-secret source of strength. Fey blood. Or, to be more precise, the blood of a royal fey."

On reflex, my head started to shake before I thought better of it. Still, that explanation did present issues that needed addressing. "We can't drink the blood of the fey, as I understand it. Not without potentially deadly consequences."

"Not straight from the vein, no, but there are alchemical methods for treating the blood and making it safe to consume. It goes without saying that the fey are viciously against this process and respond in brutal fashion whenever they discover a culprit. They spare no expense, even calling in useful favors if it means a chance at drawing their prey out into the open."

Thinking back, I was fairly sure June Windbrook had mentioned something about the blood being treatable back when she'd first explained the issue to me. It was a minor detail in a chaotic day, yet I found myself regretting not making more note of it. "How does giving him more blood help us?"

Krystal gave me one of her grimmer chuckles. "Oh, that wasn't just blood; it was augmented, specially altered blood. Blood designed to attack and destroy any other fey blood in the system, then embed itself in the cells

and wait, in case more arrives. As of tonight, Quinn's strength will begin rapidly fading, and no amount of fey blood he drinks will bring it back. Sooner or later, he'll lose whatever obfuscation is keeping him hidden, and at that point, it's just a matter of who gets to him first."

Much as I wanted to believe it would really be that easy, history had taught me otherwise. And when people like Quinn got truly desperate, they lashed out without hesitation, eager to wound anything nearby in their final moments. Even if he was weakening, that only meant he'd be all the more willing to do what survival demanded.

"Until he's dead, we triple down on security. I'll reach out to Gideon and see about employing more members of the Slateclaws as bodyguards for every member of our clan. Speaking of, I assume Gregor was stoically furious at the news?"

"Less stoic than you might have expected. He punched a dent in the sidewalk. Turns out, there was no summons from Gideon tonight. The current top theory is that Quinn set it up in advance to get him out of the way."

Something about that struck me as off. Getting me alone was sound, tactically, but Quinn had rarely shied away from the chance to add potential corpses to the count. If anything, Gregor would have been one more person I cared about to threaten; he'd never acted as though the gargoyle presented a legitimate threat. "I'm not sure that sounds like Quinn."

"That's because it wasn't him." The new voice at the edge of my doorway startled me, causing a slight jump, before I recognized the familiar tone of Arch. Another agent like Krystal, he stood noticeably shorter, with the scent of a recent cigarette clinging to him as always. "The woman going by Euranthia Glade was the one who sent the fake summons. I recognized her handiwork."

Krystal was on her feet, looking as confused as I felt. "What are you doing here? Was there another threat on campus?"

My mind reeled at the idea – more excitement was the very last thing I needed. Thankfully, Arch shook his head, confirming that peace still reigned for the moment. "I'm called in every time 'Euranthia' pops up, though usually, she picks a less cumbersome name. Headmaster Sequoin and I are going to have a long talk about her time here at Trestlevend. With luck, I can get some sense of what her next target might be."

“She knew you.” In all the madness of the night, I’d forgotten about Professor Glade’s farewell. The mark was lost in smears of blood and dirt, but I remembered the kiss, and the message along with it. “She asked me to tell ‘Archie’ she was waiting, whenever you got tired of the straight and narrow.”

There was little reaction from Arch, only a small nod. “Anything else?”

“A kiss on the cheek, after she sliced open her lips.” One more detail poked through, a lingering scent that burned at my nose. “And sulfur, I think. Her breath reminded me of sulfur.”

Krystal looked like I’d jammed her with a live power line, nearly leaping off the ground. “It was *her*? She was here, working along Fred the whole time?”

“Between the breath and the message, I’d say so. Getting Gregor out of the way fits, as well. She realized he’d be killed trying to stop Quinn, so removing him from battle was the safest tactic,” Arch agreed.

I was fully braced for them to continue talking around me, as happened with work subjects sometimes; however, Arch soon turned his focus back in my direction. “That’s why I came by. To apologize to you, Fred. I never expected my past to complicate your lives.”

“It’s okay,” I assured him. “My own life has caused bother for you many times over. I’ve got no room to hold a grudge over experiencing the same. And it sounds like things might have been worse, if Professor Glade hadn’t been involved.”

“She takes pains to minimize collateral damage. That doesn’t mean she’ll shy from it when necessary.” From his pocket, Arch produced a cigarette, though it remained unlit given our indoor location. “You know, I hate these things. The taste, the burn, the way the smell sticks to my clothes. Can’t stand them.”

Stepping forward, he entered my room, crossing the distance between us. “You’ve only seen a captured devil, Fred. The alternative is far more terrifying. Their power is on a level that only our strongest parahumans can match. And the magic they can wield? It makes impossibility nothing more than a meaningless word. So long as one can pay the price.”

Arch came to a stop in front of me, then leaned in. “Deals with a devil are far from being only a metaphor. Bringing one over, even for a few minutes, is an unbelievable undertaking. But a desperate man is not to be underestimated. Those rare few who are touched by such magic, even if

they don't make the bargain itself, are marked. Reminded with every breath of the realm from which they draw strength.”

This close, his breath washed over my face and nose. For the most part, it was the same cigarette smell he always hosted. Except this near, I could catch the faintest whiff of something under the smoke, a stink that had been purposely buried beneath one of the few smellier options.

Sulfur. Arch's breath had an unmistakable tang to it.

“Arch... who was that woman?”

“My first love. The kind you'd sell your soul to save.” A rare smile shone on Arch's face, as sad as it was nostalgic. “But people change. The longer we live, the truer that holds.”

Stepping back, Arch headed for the door, pausing to exchange a few quick words with Krystal, mostly assuring her he'd send word if there were any leads. Given his general demeanor, I didn't get the feeling Arch had very high hopes on that front.

Once he was gone, I got back to packing, slowly filling up my suitcase with the essentials. I hadn't brought much to Trestlevend, knowing that it was an impermanent situation. Yet I still found myself sad as I bundled my professorial life together, preparing to leave it behind. I'd enjoyed this stint in another career, although it was nowhere near enough to supplant my love of accounting. Nevertheless, it was fascinating to see the different ways in which my knowledge could be used, and I had found teaching to be deeply rewarding.

In another life, I might have jumped at Headmaster Sequoin's offer. However, even if Quinn weren't a danger, I had no desire to return to a class of five students where there should have been six. It was beyond me, the grief still too fresh, the memory too vivid. I'd been holding the same set of khakis for over a minute when Krystal's arms closed around me, pulling me in close.

After a few minutes, my packing resumed, though Krystal was still close at hand. As an agent, she'd seen more death than I could contemplate. Sometimes, she filled the room with rants and chatter; other moments, she fell silent, simply holding me while I grieved. Brash as my wife could seem much of the time, she also possessed an incredibly gentle side, even if it was only let out on select, specific occasions.

Eventually, it was done. My suitcase full, I took Krystal's hand and walked with her out into the early morning sunshine. Much as I would miss

feeling the heavenly warmth, there was a comfort from being with friends that would be even more pleasant awaiting me in Winslow.

I'd have thought I wanted nothing more than to be home, until I saw the group barring our path.

Valencia charged me first, barreling into my stomach with a hug that might have bruised a human spine. "We were afraid he'd killed you!"

Arlo was close behind, throwing two big arms around the pair of us. "Not going to lie, it looked rough for you out there." Teagan managed to squeeze in on the side, and Lorian squirmed through with her slender frame. Only Pieris resisted the group hug, though he gave me a polite nod.

Headmaster Sequoin watched the students dogpile me from the side of the path. "When I informed the class of your departure, they insisted on a farewell."

"A 'see you later,'" Teagan corrected. "Because Fred's going to come back here one day, right? He still knows more about boring human stuff than anyone else, and we've got a lot to learn."

Looking at the expectant faces around me, there was really only one answer I could find. "I'll have you know that some people find the cataloguing and sorting of data to be a very compelling topic. Perhaps we need to spend more time on the subject, next time I'm able to spend some time here."

"And instantly, I am filled with regret." Teagan's smile told a very different story than her words.

Slowly, I extricated myself from the pile of students, Headmaster Sequoin pulling them off toward another task, allowing me to make my exit.

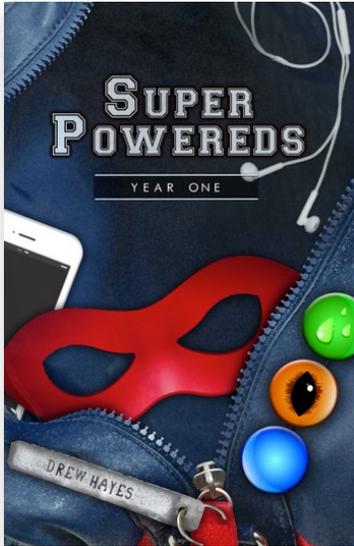
The rest of our walk was peaceful. However, before entering the building where a portal would take me home, I turned and gazed at the sunny Trestlevend campus one last time.

"Going to miss it?" Krystal asked.

"I am. A great deal more than I expected. But these places are not embodied by the campuses themselves, rather the lessons we carry with us from them. And in that regard, I expect Trestlevend will be part of me for a great while to come." I kissed my wife as we stood in the sunshine, taking care to savor the moment, more aware than ever of just how fleeting such joy could be.

When we finally parted, I turned to the building's door with a spring in my step. Interesting as college had been, it was time to go home.

OTHER NOVELS BY DREW HAYES



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Drew Hayes is an author from Texas who has now found time and gumption to publish a few books. He graduated from Texas Tech with a B.A. in English, because evidently he's not familiar with what the term "employable" means. Drew has been called one of the most profound, prolific, and talented authors of his generation, but a table full of drunks will say almost anything when offered a round of free shots. Drew feels kind of like a D-bag writing about himself in the third person like this. He does appreciate that you're still reading, though.

Drew would like to sit down and have a beer with you. Or a cocktail. He's not here to judge your preferences. Drew is terrible at being serious, and has no real idea what a snippet biography is meant to convey anyway. Drew thinks you are awesome just the way you are. That part, he meant. You can reach Drew with questions or movie offers at NovelistDrew@gmail.com Drew is off to go high-five random people, because who doesn't love a good high-five? No one, that's who.

Read or purchase more of his work at his site: DrewHayesNovels.com

