

Parvenu

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'What a bunch of CRAP!' He thought to himself as he walked.

How was he expected to do a science project being teamed up with the ditziest bottle-blond cheerleader AND the dumbest mouth-breathing knuckle-dragging jock in the school?!

To top it off, both of them had 'extracurricular' commitments that made it impossible for them to meet, speak, or in any way coordinate their efforts. He knew, without a doubt, that he'd end up doing the entire project himself and that his two vapid, freakishly attractive, classmates would end up getting passing grades solely due to his efforts. Worse, he suspected that that was the teacher's plan, all along.

As he rounded the corner to his apartment, a chill ran up his spine.

His mom's car was in the driveway and the back hatch was popped open.

'Oh, no. Not again.' He thought to himself as he slowly approached.

He cautiously entered the building, and as he was walking up the stairs he spotted his mother rushing out of their apartment with a box in her arms.

"Pack up your room. We've only got until the end of the night." She said as she hurried toward him.

'Fuck!' He thought to himself.

Then the more optimistic part of him interjected, *'At least I won't have to do that science project, now.'*

* * * * *

Unfortunately, this wasn't unusual.

It had happened so many times before that he had lost count.

Every so often, things would go badly and they'd be forced to move, basically skipping out on their back rent, and finding a new place to live.

However, he usually had some indication that it was coming.

His mom would let it be known that she was having trouble meeting the bills that month or that they didn't have enough money to have both electricity AND food.

But this time there had been no warning.

Truth be told, recently he and his mother had been less and less communicative. And as he was growing older, he was becoming more independent. Although they lived together, they had been leading increasingly separate lives. They had reached a point

where they could go for a week or more without speaking to each other.

After filling a box, more or less out of habit, he left his room to find his mother frantically throwing kitchen items into a cardboard box, going from cupboard to cupboard taking everything out and either packing it, or throwing it in the trash.

He knew better than to question her at this stage of their packing. He had made that mistake before. Nothing good would come of it.

Mostly on autopilot, he walked down the stairs and deposited his box in the back of the car, then walked back into the apartment building to fill another.

As the shock wore off, numbness took its place.

His life was a series of frantic moves, made out of necessity.

There was no action, only reaction.

'Do what needs to be done, because there's no other choice.'

The few possessions that he owned fitted easily into the boxes that he kept flattened under his bed... the bed that they would most likely be leaving behind. He had worked this puzzle so many times that he knew where each thing belonged, and in which box. He sometimes wondered why he even bothered unpacking them.

As he set another box aside, he walked to the closet and began to take down his hanging clothes. That took all of a minute. He didn't have much clothing, and what he *did* have was worn and outdated when they had bought them from whatever charity warehouse store they happened to be visiting that day.

Fortunately for him, distressed out-of-date fashion was all the rage, these days. So he didn't have the stigma of being out of place amongst his classmates. In fact, he dressed better than some of them, with their fashionably faded and strategically ripped clothing.

"Are you about finished?"

A sudden surge of emotions threatened to overwhelm him at the innocuous question. He wanted to burst into tears... or rage. However, he didn't have the luxury of being able to do either. He simply tamped down his emotions and called in return, "Yeah. Just about."

* * * * *

He had never had a father.

'No big deal.'

But looking at the desperate way that they lived, he couldn't help but wonder how his life might have been different if his parents had decided to get married and live together.

It was a moot point.

He didn't even know his biological father's name. When, in his younger and more naive years, he had asked, his mother had either skillfully evaded his questions or, when

pressed, would adamantly refuse to divulge any information at all.

It didn't matter.

Such idle speculation served no purpose.

'It is what it is. Deal with what's in front of you.' He thought to himself.

As the car drove down the city streets, it occurred to him that he didn't know where they were going. Or if, in fact, they had any destination in mind. Would they be spending the night in some truck stop or roadside rest area? It wouldn't be the first time.

Despair welled up within him, threatening to overwhelm him, as he considered the absolute hopelessness of his life. He had no home, no foundation, no friends, no life to speak of, and no possibility of a future.

Just... reaction.

Like an animal in the wild, there was no thought for the future and no certainty of where his next meal would be coming from.

Only reaction.

Survival instinct.

While he was looking out the car window as the dusk gave way to the night, the thought came unbidden, *'Am I even human at all?'*

* * * * *

"Paul, there have been some things going on that I haven't told you about." His mother said, breaking the long, contemplative silence between them.

'Since you haven't told me ANYTHING, I suppose that's true.' Paul thought bitterly.

"I guess there's no easy way to say this..." She trailed off anxiously.

'Talk about an ominous lead in! Let me guess. You don't know where we're going? We don't even have enough money for dinner? Maybe you're taking me to sell me for medical experiments!'

'Please, let it be the medical experiments! At least they'll probably feed me!'

"I'm getting married."

'Wait.'

'What?'

"I didn't want to tell you anything about it before now because it was... well, to be honest, it was just too good to be true. I didn't want to jinx it."

'Huh?'

'Hold on.'

'Back up.'

'What?'

"I really meant to sit you down and have a long talk with you about this, but things ended up not working out that way."

'...no easy way to say this...'

'...getting married...'

'Then what? Did I miss something?'

"I mean, it's not like we *'have to'* get married, not this day and age."

'Whoah.'

'I'm pretty sure I missed something.'

'Stop. Rewind. Play. Thank you for your patience...'

"But when he found out, he asked and, I don't know... it just seemed right!"

'WARNING! - Vaguary reaching critical levels!'

'Assumption overload imminent!'

'Substantive input required! Substantive input required!'

"Found out what?" Paul was finally able to choke out.

Even as he said the words, they didn't seem to have any meaning.

'Is there someone else in here with me, speaking for me?' Paul thought to himself.

'Because, if there is, I'd appreciate it if you would tell me what the hell is going on!'

"In about six months, you're going to have a little brother or sister."

'...'

'???'

'What?'

"Well, to be honest, you're going to be getting a brother a little bit before that."

'Hold on.'

'What was that thing after getting married?'

'I'm sure I missed something important, there.'

"I mean, I'm not going to push you to accept him or treat him like your family, but I

hope that you two will get along."

'...getting married...'

'...little brother or sister...'

'...then, what was that next bit?'

"Like I said, I hadn't planned on things going like this, but the new property management company at the apartment complex isn't willing to work with me and I was kind of backed into a corner."

'Um, yeah. I know how that feels.'

'Now try it blindfolded... underwater.'

'Then you'll be close to what I'm feeling, right now.'

"Where are we going?" Paul asked in a voice that trembled a little more than he would have liked.

'Okay, that made sense.'

'The words seemed to have come out in the right order and everything.'

'I might actually get results with that one.'

"I was wanting to move more slowly, but when all this happened, it just made sense for us to move in together."

'Whoah! Hold it, there. You're losing me again.'

*'Did I miss it when you said **where**?'*

*'Or, for that matter, **who**?'*

"I mean, we had sort of talked about it, but decided to wait until after you'd had time to adjust to the idea."

'Me?'

'What idea?'

'Hey! Don't hang this on me!'

"Everything's going to be fine. Everything's alright."

'Um...'

'...yeah...'

'...sure it is.'

* * * * *

As they passed through the huge wrought iron gates, Paul immediately thought of a cemetery. Not that there were any grave stones or anything. It was just a big open,

immaculately kept, grassy field with a paved road meandering, somewhat pointlessly up and over a rise. But, to Paul, it seemed that that was how they designed the driveways in graveyards. Well, in the movies, anyway.

As they crested the rise, Paul spotted the large grey edifice as it stood all alone, jutting up in the midst of a perfectly kept lawn... or football field... possibly a golf course? There were no other houses in view as far as the eye could see.

'Hey!'

'Wait!'

'Isn't this what insane asylums look like?'

'They put them out in the middle of nowhere so the crazies don't disturb anyone else!'

'So far out...'

'So remote...'

'That no one can hear you scream...'

"He said that he'd leave the door open. Come inside. We'll come back out for our things, later." His mom said as she got out of the car.

Paul wasn't sure if he were really seeing what he was seeing.

'Are we going to live in a museum?' He thought as they approached the building that seemed to get even larger and more foreboding, the closer they got to it.

'People can't really live here, can they?'

'I can't breathe.'

The biggest doors EVER!

'Mansion?'

'Movie set?'

'Dream?'

'Nightmare?'

'e. All of the above...'

As his mom pushed one of the massive doors open, there wasn't any low, ominous creaking sound to foreshadow the atrocities to come.

'They'll probably edit that in during post production.'

'It's essential.'

"They're probably in the parlor. I think it's down here." Paul's mom said as she set off down one of the dimly lit grey corridors in the enormous granite monstrosity.

'If we're going to live here, I'm going to need a map.'

'Or GPS.'

'...and maybe a scooter.'

As his mom led the way into one of the rooms, she quietly asked, "Is your dad around?"

Paul walked in behind his mother and looked around to see who she was talking to. After a moment, he spotted a dark haired boy, about his same age, sitting on a couch.

"He asked me to wait in here for you, until you got here. He had a business call or something. He's in the study. He said that he'd be back in a minute." The boy responded casually.

"Paul, this is G. He's going to be your new brother." Paul's mom said, a little more cheerfully than seemed appropriate, under the circumstances.

The surprise on G's face was the first thing to reassure Paul all day.

At least there was someone who found the whole situation as ludicrous as he did.

'I wonder if they told him ANYTHING about what's going on?' Paul asked himself.

G got up off the couch and walked toward Paul with an easygoing, friendly expression. His entire posture was casual and unassuming.

"You need any help carrying stuff in?" G asked in a voice that wasn't just friendly, but even seemed to be a little bit hopeful.

'I don't know where I am.' Paul reminded himself.

'I don't know what we're doing.'

'I don't know who these people are.'

'However, over the years I have learned some important life lessons. One of them being, when someone asks you that question, you ALWAYS answer...'

"Yes. Thank you."

* * * * *

G and Paul walked down the dimly lit, intimidatingly huge, grey featureless hallway and out through the massive doors.

Paul opened the hatchback of their car and fished out a box, then turned to find G, standing with his hands out, waiting to accept it.

Paul handed it to him, then took out another of his boxes before starting back toward the enormous doors.

"It'll be easier if we go this way." G said as he started off in another direction, toward the side of the house.

'Since I don't have a map, I'll take your word for it.' Paul thought to himself as he followed.

"Is the rest of your stuff coming? Or are you going to have to go get another load?" G asked casually, as they walked.

"No. This is it." Paul answered timidly.

"Cool." G said simply, easily accepting his answer.

'No.'

'Not cool.'

'Pathetic.' Paul thought with an ache in his heart, as he continued to follow.

"If you don't like it here, I can show you the guest rooms, but they're kind of... sterile." G said with a bit of distaste evident in his tone, then continued, "Check out my room, first, and see if you want to stay out here with me."

As he was saying that, Paul could see where G was leading him. Around the side of the house, there seemed to be another, smaller house, connected by a little... what do you call those things that connect a spaceship to the space station? Never mind. It was a little glassed in hallway that connected it to the main house.

G opened some white painted double doors (of normal size) with glass panes throughout. Unaccountably, they served to put Paul at ease. Seemingly, it was the contrast between them and the enormous doors on the 'museum' that did that.

However, when they stepped through the doors, any illusion of a quaint little country farmhouse was suddenly shocked away.

The room was RED. (Redrum! Redrum!)

Actually, it looked like red velvet was used throughout the room to give it an almost movie theater or carnival feel. There were brass accent pieces and gold fringe in places that served to break up the intimidating color.

The next things to draw Paul's attention were the old carnival posters, seemingly hung haphazardly around the room, but it only took Paul a moment to realize that they were strategically placed, made to look as though their placement was random and slightly askew.

The posters were of faded, evil looking, demented clowns and advertisements for various 'freak show' attractions.

After seeing the sterile, grey 'museumy' main house, the contrast was a bit overwhelming.

As the details of the room finally seemed to settle into his consciousness, Paul came to the sudden realization that G's room was AWESOME!

* * * * *

The area they first walked into seemed to be a living room or a lounge. It was filled

with beanbag chairs, pillows, big puffy blankets and a variety of sofas. It looked as though a dozen people could easily settle into the space and chat comfortably.

"I didn't really think this through. I guess we can make it up as we go along. Just put your stuff anywhere and we'll work it out when we've got everything in." G said frankly.

Paul found an open spot behind one of the couches and put down his box.

G set his box beside Paul's, then led the way back to the deceptively innocent looking white double doors.

* * * * *

"Dad says that he pulled a few strings and that you'll be starting school with me tomorrow. So we won't be able to stay up too late." G said as they walked back toward the car.

'What?'

'School?'

'Seriously?'

'My whole life gets turned upside down and inside out in one day and I don't even get a day off to adjust to it?'

* * * * *

Once all of Paul's things were brought inside, Paul looked around uncertainly.

"I've only got the one bed in here, but I hardly ever sleep in it. You can use it, if you want." G said frankly.

"Where do you sleep?" Paul asked curiously.

"Wherever I happen to be when I get sleepy. Usually on a couch or a beanbag, in front of the TV. Sometimes I crash on the couch in the living room, back in the house." G said casually.

"Where should I put my stuff?" Paul asked cautiously, feeling that he was intruding on G's personal space.

"There's a monster closet in the bedroom. You can put stuff in there if you want. I don't use even half of it." G said, then got up off the couch and led the way into the bedroom.

* * * * *

Done in much the same color scheme as the living room, the bedroom was its own special variety of 'Dark Carnival'.

The twisted gold posts on the enormous four poster bed might be seen as gaudy in other circumstances, but they blended in perfectly with the red velvet and gold fringed tapestries and cords.

"It's over here." G said, drawing Paul's miniscule thread of attention.

When Paul looked into the closet, he was astounded by the fact that it was bigger than his bedroom had been at the apartment.

As G had said, the closet wasn't even close to half full. Paul not only had room for all his clothes in there, he could easily put all his worldly possessions in there... twice, without encroaching on G's space.

"I just thought of something. You seem pretty uptight. I'm not. If you can't handle being around me, just let me know and I'll help you move into a guest room in the house." G said seriously.

Paul looked at him with surprise at the statement, but appreciated G's honesty.

"I'm okay." Paul said sincerely.

G smiled at the reaction then, with a tilt of his head, indicated for Paul to follow him back into the living room.

* * * * *

Paul followed G's lead and ended up taking a seat on one of the couches.

"I've never been around someone as quiet as you before. It's actually kinda cool." G said with a smile.

Paul looked at him with a wide-eyed, inquisitive expression.

"I've never been the 'Alpha' before. So you're gonna have'ta be patient with me. I don't want to screw this up." G said honestly.

'Alpha?'

'Ooookay.'

"Anyway, this is my house. No one comes in here unless I invite them. So I can walk around naked or just in my underwear, if I want. Is that going to freak you out or anything?" G asked seriously.

'Okay. That kinda came outta left field.'

'But, I guess that I've been around naked guys in the locker room in gym class and it never bothered me...'

'Who am I kidding? I've nearly jerked my dick off thinking about the guys in the locker room!'

'I probably shouldn't share that fact with G, or I might have to sleep in a guest room in the museum.'

"No. That's no problem." Paul said, and was proud of the fact that his voice didn't crack or sound too high or anything like that.

"Good." G said with a smile.

'What the hell was that?'

'He smiles at me and I start feeling all gooey inside?'

'Oh, shit! I hope that doesn't mean what I think it means!'

'...'

'I want it to happen again.'

'...'

'I am so screwed.'

"I guess I should also tell you that I was in kind of a relationship for a while. It's over now, but it just broke up, so someone might still say something about it and it could get weird and uncomfortable. I'll just say sorry in advance, in case that happens." G said regretfully.

'I've never been dumped. So I don't know what that feels like.'

'Of course, I've never been loved, either.'

'...'

'I just want to see him smile again.'

"Are you okay?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Mostly, yeah. When they decided that they wanted to be a couple without me... I understood. I mean, it's not like I didn't see it coming. But it still hurt." G said honestly.

"They?" Paul asked hesitantly, wanting to confirm what he'd just heard.

"Yeah. A guy and a girl. We were a threesome for a while... for a few months, actually." G said, somewhat distantly.

"Are you gay?" Paul asked before he could catch himself. He knew that that was something that you *never* asked someone. He immediately regretted asking and wished that he could take it back.

"I guess that's up to you to decide." G answered him, and didn't seem to be the least bit rattled or offended by Paul asking the question.

Paul puzzled over G's response for a moment before he cautiously asked, "What?"

"It's your label and only you know what it means to you. I don't think of myself as gay. When I like someone and they like me back, we might decide to do stuff together, and some of that might end up being sex. It doesn't matter to me if it's guys or girls. Everyone just does what they enjoy and if things go right, we find things that we enjoy doing together."

'Overload... Overload... Overload.'

'An error has occurred. To continue: Press CTRL+ALT+DEL to restart.'

'If you do this, you will lose any unsaved information in all open applications.'

'Press any key to continue...'

"I've never had a girlfriend... or a boyfriend." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"Yeah. Well, I got an early start. I think most people our age haven't ever had the balls to try anything yet... at least, with someone else." G said simply.

Paul absently nodded.

"Have I freaked you out too much? Or do you still want to stay here?" G asked cautiously.

"I'll stay." Paul said absently. He didn't have to think about it. The decision had already been made.

"Good. I just got this really great classic anime that I've been wanting to check out. You wanna watch it with me until dinner's ready?" G asked hopefully.

"I should probably be unpacking." Paul said reluctantly.

"If we start unpacking now, we'll have to stop in the middle of it when dinner's ready. Besides, you look like you could use a break." G said honestly.

'A break?'

'Yeah.'

'At least.'

"Yeah. Okay." Paul said, then forced a smile at G to show his gratitude for the suggestion.

* * * * *

'First, there was some gruesome bloody violence, for no particular reason.'

'Next, this thing with tentacles was doing horrible, unspeakable things, again, for no reason that I could discern.'

*'Then, **after** the opening credits, we got to the freakishly big boobed schoolgirls piloting giant robots.'*

'That part actually seemed to make some kind of sense.'

'Of course, I could be wrong about that.'

'The way that the enormous cartoon boobs bounced and jiggled was strangely hypnotizing.'

"Boys, it's time for dinner." Paul's mom's voice called from the intercom.

"Good! I'm starving!" G said as he paused the video.

"Me, too." Paul said as he stood.

"Are you better?" G asked as he also stood and looked at Paul with concern.

"Yeah." Paul said with a smile, then continued, "It's funny, I already feel like I know you and I don't even know your real name."

"What makes you think my real name isn't G?"

"Is it?"

"No. My real name is Gwayne. The G was the only part of it worth saving." G finished with a grin.

"Good choice." Paul said, feeling unaccountably happy.

"C'mon. Food." G said as he led the way.

* * * * *

"Come on in, boys. It's on the table." Paul's mom said as she met them at the dining room door.

The amount of food on the table looked to be for more than four people, but Paul wasn't about to complain. And, from the look of it, neither was G. The layout seemed to be of restaurant quality and fit for any visiting dignitary. Everything looked absolutely *perfect*.

As Paul walked to the table and took a seat at one of the place settings, he looked around curiously.

There were no windows in the room, not that it would have mattered so late in the day at this time of year. But the lighting was such that it was focused entirely on the massive dining room table.

The rest of the room, with its grey stone walls and colorless adornments, seemed to fade into the darkness, as though it didn't exist. It was almost like they were sitting there, suspended in a void, separated from space and time.

"Are we waiting for Dad?" G asked cautiously.

"He said he'd just be a minute." Paul's mom said as she also took her seat.

"Famous last words." G said with a roll of his eyes, but made no move to serve himself.

"Sorry. But with the wedding coming so soon, there are certain things that have to be done immediately." A man said as he walked briskly into the room. The man looked fairly average, with dark hair and dark eyes. He was kind of handsome, and there was no doubt that he was G's father. But the thing that caught Paul off guard was the deep rich tone of the man's voice. It seemed to be far lower than one would expect of someone of his modest size. The sound sent a chill right up Paul's spine.

"D, this is my son, Paul." Paul's mom said proudly.

Before either could respond, she continued, "Paul, this is my fiancée, D."

'D?'

'Seriously?'

'G's father is named D?'

"It's nice to meet you, Paul. I'm sorry we couldn't do this in a more relaxed manner, but circumstances conspired against us." D said frankly.

The deep rich tone of his voice caused another chill to run up Paul's spine, but he was finally able to say, "Yeah. They'll do that."

When D laughed, the sound left Paul feeling stunned. The laugh was rich and deep and unaccountably sent a tingle of something like fear coursing through Paul's body.

"Yes. They will." D finally said warmly.

"So, Dad, what's the big rush on the wedding, anyway?" G asked curiously.

Paul was glad that he did, because he wanted to know, as well, but felt intimidated and weak in D's commanding presence.

"Go ahead and eat." D said casually, then continued, "We've decided that the best way to do this is to have the wedding on Halloween. Since the family will be meeting anyway, it seems like the perfect time."

As Paul reached to serve himself, he noticed that his hand was slightly trembling.

He couldn't determine if it had anything to do with fear, hunger, or perhaps other influences of which he was not aware.

"So you're going to have the wedding 'there?'" G asked to be sure.

D nodded his confirmation, then said, "But that doesn't relieve us of the burden of composing a guest list."

"Yeah. Good luck with that." G said with a grin.

"No doubt, someone will be overlooked and feel slighted. But we can only do our best." D said in resignation.

"Is there anything you need for us to do?" G asked curiously.

"Actually, yes. The two of you are going to be taken out of school a few days in advance of the wedding to allow for travel time and for finalizing arrangements when we arrive. Taking that into account, you'll both need to be fitted for suits for the practice dinners and receptions and such, five, I should think. So you'll need to see to that early to give the tailor time to get the adjustments made." D said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "Of course, all plans and dates are still subject to change at this early stage of planning."

"Can't I just wear the suit I already have?" G asked hopefully.

"You'll need more than one suit. Besides, I doubt that you would be able to put yours on, much less look anywhere near presentable in it. Please, Son, humor me." D said with a hopeful look at G.

"Okay, but you have to remember this when I get married. No whining. Just do it." G warned his father.

"Yes. That sounds fair." D said with a smile that revealed his delight at the thought.

"Is there any way that we can invite Nazy and Vinda to the wedding?" G asked hopefully.

"Isn't that going to be awkward?" D asked cautiously.

"Maybe, for a little bit, but they did what they felt like they had to do. Just because I was hurt by it doesn't mean that I don't understand. Besides, I'm really alright now, and I'd like to share something like this with them. Plus, they both like you, even if I weren't in the picture, they'd want to be there for you." G said honestly.

"I'll see to it that they're invited and, if they accept, I'll make arrangements for their airfare." D said with a smile of pride at his son.

'Ex Boyfriend and ex girlfriend...'

'...being invited to his father's wedding...'

'...Airfare?'

"Airfare?" Paul asked cautiously.

"The wedding's going to be on our family estate in Scotland, near Altnaharra." D said frankly.

Paul didn't know how to respond to that and felt that he was on the verge of overloading again.

'Mom's getting married...'

'..to the deep voiced guy...'

'...who, to be fair, seems really nice...'

'...in Scotland?!'

"How much have you told Paul about the family?" D asked his son curiously.

"Nothing." G answered honestly.

"After dinner, would you mind?" D asked in a leading tone.

"Me? You're sure that you want *me* to do it?" G asked to confirm.

"I have faith in you." D said with a slightly menacing grin.

"Great! No pressure." G said with a roll of his eyes.

'That can't be good.'

* * * * *

Following the dinner, Paul followed G back to his 'room', on the other side of the little glass hallway.

For some reason, that delighted Paul to no end.

'Houston, we're leaving the mothership...'

"So, what's the big secret?" Paul asked when they were back in G's living room, sitting on one of the couches.

G looked uncomfortable and quietly said, "We're not like other people."

'Wow! It's like I suddenly had a flashback of every sci-fi movie I've ever seen, like, all at once!'

Paul was surprised by the statement and cautiously asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

G let out a long sigh, then said, "It's complicated. Let's just say that my family... *our* family, is *interesting*."

"Interesting, like being good storytellers? Or interesting, like gathering on the full moon to drink the blood of virgins at midnight?" Paul asked cautiously, hoping that it would be taken as a joke... and that he hadn't inadvertently guessed right.

"Somewhere in between." G said gravely.

'I'd be really pissed off at him right now if he weren't in so much turmoil about telling me.'

'...'

'and so cute.'

'Wait, where did that come from?'

'Bad inner voice! Bad!'

"So, what? How is your family different?" Paul asked seriously, hoping that it would help G say what he needed to say.

"You know how every family has one person who's really freaky or eccentric?" G asked cautiously.

"Yeah. And if you don't know who it is in your family, then it's probably you." Paul said honestly.

'He goes in with the joke!'

'He shoots from center court!'

'It looks good...'

'It looks good...'

'And...'

'...Denied!'

"Yeah, well... every person in *our* family is like that." G continued, as though he hadn't heard.

"Like how?" Paul asked cautiously. He could tell how this admission of... whatever it was, bothered G.

'Oh, screw it! He is cute!'

'He's freakin adorable!'

'Sorry Inner Voice, you were right.'

"For example, Aunt Zennie is obsessed with ladybugs. Grandma Gruit believes that she's a witch, not like Wicca, but more Disneyish, like in Sleeping Beauty or Snow White." G said anxiously.

'Wait.'

'What?'

"Okay." Paul said hesitantly.

"Some of them don't seem to realize it, and the rest just accept it or even embrace it as part of who they are." G said urgently, as if willing Paul to understand.

'Okay, freaky people. Weird family. I guess it happens.'

"What about you, G? What kind of weird thing do you have going on?" Paul asked curiously.

"Telling you's no fun. You have to figure *that* out for yourself." G said as his anxiety finally gave way and he broke into a smile.

'Whoah! Was that a flirt?'

"Well, if I had to guess right now... Does it have anything to do with sex?" Paul asked speculatively.

'The ball's in your court.'

"Which answer would make you feel better?" G asked, not betraying anything in his expression.

'Nice return.'

"I'm not sure." Paul said honestly.

"Then don't worry about it." G said with a grin.

'The point goes to G!'

'I'm going to need to work on my game!'

'He's good!'

"Why did your dad want you to tell me about this?" Paul asked cautiously, he still didn't understand what was so bad.

"I guess to give you some time to prepare. The whole family gets together on Halloween, so that's why they're rushing to have the wedding then. One at a time, the

family's not *too* bad, but all at once... you might need to brace yourself."

'The whole family gathers for Halloween...'

'Yeah, nothing weird about that.'

"Is it really bad?" Paul asked carefully.

"Sometimes. I grew up with it and I know what to expect. But sometimes it's a little much, even for me." G said honestly.

"Well, all my life it's just been me and my mom. Even if your family's a bunch of eccentrics, I think it'll be nice to know what it's like to be part of a family, even for a little bit." Paul said sincerely and felt a little spark of fear at revealing so much to someone who was essentially a stranger.

'Not cool.'

'Some things shouldn't be said.'

'Now G's going to think I'm just a needy little pathetic worm.'

'...'

'I'm not. Am I?'

"As long as you don't look down on them and treat them like freaks, I'm pretty sure they'll love you." G said warmly. Paul was glad that G didn't capitalize on his vulnerability.

"I don't think I've ever looked down on anyone before." Paul said honestly.

'It's hard to look down on people when you're wearing someone else's castoffs and you don't know if you'll be able to eat dinner.'

"I know you'll be great."

* * * * *

After their talk about the family had concluded, the two boys remained sitting on the couch, just thinking their own thoughts and content to be in good company.

"I need to unpack." Paul finally regretfully said.

"Why?" G asked as he turned his head slightly, to glance at Paul with one eye.

"So I can have my clothes for school tomorrow." Paul said unenthusiastically.

"We wear uniforms, you can wear one of mine. From the look of you, I think it'll fit." G said honestly.

"Uniforms?" Paul asked cautiously.

"It's not too bad. You get used to it."

"How old are you, anyway?" Paul asked curiously.

"Fifteen." G said simply.

"Me, too. Do you think we'll be in the same classes?" Paul asked as he turned in his seat, so he was facing G.

"Maybe. We have a lot of really small classes, so they'll probably put you in whichever one is smallest, each class period. Don't worry. It shouldn't be too bad." G said frankly.

"I've had to change schools a lot. So I'm not too worried. But is there anything I need to know about, you know, like bullies or gangs or... anything?" Paul asked with concern.

"It's a private school, so no gangs. As far as bullies... I've never really noticed a problem, but I've been going there forever. If anyone gives you any trouble, just let me know." G said as he turned to mirror Paul's position and look him in the eyes.

"I may be quiet, but I'm not helpless. I can fight my own battles." Paul assured him.

"I'm not planning to fight. But if you have a problem and you let me know, then maybe I can help. I know just about everyone and I can probably sort it out without *anyone* having to fight." G said honestly.

Paul thought that over for a moment, then smiled and said, "Yeah. Okay."

'I don't know what to say, except... wow.'

'I've changed schools so many times that I've become numb to it.'

'But this... wow!'

"Wanna help me finish watching the anime? There's still a few episodes left." G asked hopefully.

"Sounds good." Paul said with a smile, then turned himself so that he could watch the big screen TV.

Paul's eyes finally drifted shut despite the barrage of bouncing, jiggling enormous boobs, giant robots fighting hand to hand, and the occasional party shot.

* * * * *

Paul woke to the most glorious sensation.

He was surrounded in warmth and security. He was being tenderly held and he had the sensation of being cherished.

Then, another curious sensation jolted him fully awake. There were lips gently kissing his neck.

Equal parts arousal and fear caused him to flinch.

"Sorry." G whispered as he pulled away slightly.

Although Paul's mind was still more there than here, he was 'with it' enough to realize what was going on, his reaction, right at that moment, could set the course of their relationship forever after.

What he did in the next few seconds would determine whether they were friends,

brothers or... something more.

*'Do the **guy** thing and act revolted.'*

*'Do the **friend** thing and brush it off as nothing.'*

*'Do the **brother** thing and make a joke about it.'*

"That was a nice way to wake up." Paul said in a raspy, low voice.

G pulled back a little more to look Paul in the eyes, but said nothing. His only response was to smile timidly, then climb out of their warm little nest.

'Right answer!'

* * * * *

"Get dressed. We need to go to breakfast." G said when he returned from the bathroom.

"I need to take a shower, first." Paul said as he unwillingly extricated himself from the blankets.

"We'll shower when we get back." G said simply, then added, "Food."

Paul smiled, and was relieved to find that his morning erection wasn't pitching *too* big a tent as he made his way past G and into the bathroom.

* * * * *

When they walked into the dining room, Paul was surprised to find that his mother had made a full, old fashioned, breakfast for them.

His surprise was short lived when he looked at the food laid out before them.

Although his mother wasn't a 'bad' cook, she had never exhibited any type of culinary artistry when it came to the presentation of their food.

'Cook it up, slap it on a plate.'

Even though Paul couldn't remember his mother ever saying the words, her philosophy was clear enough to see in every meal that she served.

However, here, every little sausage link was placed on the serving platter with mathematical precision. The eggs were displayed with an artist's flare, and even had the tiniest dusting of paprika to add that hint of color that brought the entire plate to life, making it a feast for the eyes. Even the glass pitcher of orange juice, slightly fogged with the tiniest drops of condensation, was nothing short of *perfect*.

D walked into the room and directly to his place at the table.

"How are you boys doing this morning? Did you get enough sleep?" He asked as he unfolded his linen napkin and placed it on his lap.

"Yeah. We even woke up before the alarm." G said happily.

"You'll have a few extra minutes to get ready. I'll be driving you to school today." D said

casually.

"What for?" G asked curiously.

"Well, I've already made all the arrangements for Paul to start school today, but I just thought I'd stop in to make sure that nothing was overlooked on his enrollment." D said frankly.

"Cool!" G said happily.

"Paul, I didn't think to ask earlier, do you have clothes for today?" D asked with concern.

"He can wear one of my uniforms. They should fit him." G answered for him.

"Remind me and we'll get him some of his own." D said seriously.

"I've got plenty. No rush." G said with a smile at his dad.

Although Paul was paying attention to what was being said, the majority of his attention was focused on the outrageously good food.

Suddenly, the thought came to him that what he was experiencing might not really be real.

The beautiful house, the loving family, the incredible food... they were all elements of the dreams that he had been having for longer than he could remember.

* * * * *

"I'll go first." G said as they exited the glass hallway and walked into G's 'room'.

'How does one verify the existence of reality?'

'And if reality isn't real, what do you do about it?'

'And, come to think of it, what's so great about reality, anyway?'

"What?" Paul asked as he broke out of his thoughts.

"I'll shower first, if that's okay." G said more slowly.

"Oh, um. Yeah." Paul said with distraction.

'Reality sucks.'

'If life is but a dream, so what?'

'It beats worrying about where your next meal is coming from, or if it's coming at all.'

"While I'm doing that, you can get your stuff together." G said as he led the way into the bedroom.

"Huh?" Paul asked in confusion.

'I've got an adorable, cute, incredibly friendly guy here, who cares about me.'

'And he's talking about showering.'

'Screw reality! Dreams rule!'

"Underwear, socks... I mean, you can share mine, if you want. But either way, you can be getting that stuff together while I'm showering. It'll just take me a few minutes." G said as he started to peel off the clothes he had been wearing the previous day.

"Yeah. Right." Paul said nervously, then turned and hurried into the closet, where his boxes were stored.

* * * * *

After gathering everything he might need for a shower, Paul walked into the bedroom in time to see G emerging from the bathroom, naked as the day he was born.

G's body was long and lean. Although he was obviously still a teenager, not having gained the muscle definition of an adult, his body was still nothing to be ashamed of.

As Paul's gaze drifted lower, he concluded that G had nothing to be ashamed of there, either. While he might not have the most enormous 'equipment', it was of a decent size and, quite frankly, an absolute beauty.

When Paul realized what he was doing, standing and staring at G's naked body, he quickly looked into G's eyes and received a warm smile in return.

"I'm just... gonna... go now." Paul stammered.

'Busted!'

"There's plenty of time." G assured him.

'He used to have a boyfriend.'

'So he's not gonna freak.'

'And him knowing that I'm interested... not a bad thing.'

Something about G's tone served to put Paul at ease. Feeling considerably less anxious, Paul walked to the bathroom and took his shower.

* * * * *

G's bathroom was nothing short of luxurious.

Paul was used to putting up with the lo-flo showerheads that barely farted out enough misty water to get him wet. The rainshower showerhead in G's bathroom made the experience of showering a joy.

As Paul was about to walk out into the bedroom, where he had left his clothes, he started to wrap the towel around his waist. But before he could cinch the towel, he thought better of it and hung it back on the towel rack.

'Come and get it!'

* * * * *

G looked up when Paul walked, naked, into the bedroom.

Paul was anxious about his probable reaction, but only slightly.

G broke into a grin, but said nothing. The look in his eyes was all that Paul needed. G obviously approved of what he was seeing. That was all that Paul needed to know.

'Phase one: Complete.'

'We've checked each other out. Everything passes inspection.'

'Phase two: Begin.'

* * * * *

The sensation of wearing the school uniform wasn't uncomfortable as much as it was unfamiliar.

Also, Paul couldn't seem to relax into the notion that he wasn't wearing 'his' clothes.

"Do you have to work today?" G asked his father as he drove.

"There may be one or two things that I have to deal with. But I'll mostly be focused on the plans for the wedding." D said frankly.

"I guess it's good that you don't have to go to the office and work from nine to five each day." G said with a smile.

"It's good to be the boss." D said with a self-satisfied grin.

Paul couldn't help but chuckle at the statement, having a Mel Brooks moment.

"Paul, I should have thought to ask earlier, have you noticed needing anything?" D asked carefully.

It wasn't the question, itself, that triggered the emotional reaction. And it wasn't the situation, of being driven to school, although that probably contributed. But something about D's expression of concern made Paul want to burst into tears.

'All I've got is the crap in the cardboard boxes.'

'Still, right here, right now...'

'I've got everything I need.'

'More than I dreamed of, in fact.'

"I can't think of anything." Paul was finally able to quietly say.

D glanced at him in the rearview mirror and the warmth in his eyes made Paul have to fight to contain his tears all over again.

* * * * *

"Excuse me, I need to get my son enrolled." D said as they walked into the school's office.

"I'll be with you in just a moment." The woman behind the desk said absently, without

even looking up from her work.

'Same old routine.'

'Sit.'

'Wait.'

'Eventually someone will get sick of looking at us and do the minimum required to pass us on to the next drone down the line.'

D's eyes went wide in surprise, then he took a small... incredibly small, phone out of his pocket and quickly dialed.

Paul wasn't surprised when he heard the ringing, but was curious when the ringing sound was that of a cell phone and came from one of the offices.

"Marsha. It's D. I'm here to enroll my son. Do you think you could see to it personally?" D asked seriously.

'My son?!'

'Not my step-son, not my girlfriend's son, not the creepy little guy who's perving on my son?'

'It must be a dream.'

'Please, don't ever let me wake up!'

A woman came rushing out of one of the offices, looking around frantically. When she spotted D, she quickly composed herself and hurried to help him.

Before she could speak, D calmly said, "Paul needs to be enrolled. I have a number of things that I need to attend to so, if you wouldn't mind terribly, could I just sign what I need to sign and pay what I need to pay to make it happen?"

'If I were going to dream up a dad, he'd be just as cool as D.'

'Truthfully, I couldn't have dreamed up someone as nice as him.'

'No. Not just nice...'

'...perfect.'

The woman seemed to be flustered by the suggestion, but finally said, "I noticed his paperwork waiting this morning when we came in. But we're not in the habit of enrolling students mid-semester..."

"Do I look like I care?" D asked flatly.

'Way to go D!'

'Do it again!'

'Do it again!'

That seemed to knock the wind out of her sails.

The woman, Marsha, took a slow breath to compose herself, then calmly said, "Why don't I get Paul placed in his classes? Then I can sort through his paperwork and see that he has everything he needs."

"Yes. Why don't you?" D said without expression.

'Zing!'

'Ouch!'

'That had to hurt!'

Marsha was stunned by his words for a moment, then she hurried away, back into her office.

Paul looked up at his step-father-to-be with wonder and a small amount of fear.

D smiled warmly at him and said, "After a certain point, there's no need to put up with self-important little bureaucrats. Commit your concern to the things that deserve it."

Paul slowly nodded, as if he understood what D were telling him.

'I don't think I've ever been in awe, before.'

'I didn't know it'd be this cool.'

"Here we go. I have a class schedule for Paul. Janice can walk Paul to his first class, so he can get started right away." Marsha said as she rushed up to them with a freshly printed piece of paper.

'How very fast and efficient of you, Marsha. It's a shame that you couldn't have done that without D having to roast your ass over the fire.'

D glanced at the woman behind the desk, who was getting to her feet and absently said, "If she has the time."

'Ow!'

'No mercy!'

Marsha handed the sheet of paper to Janice, then looked at D to see if he needed anything further.

After a moment to look over the sheet of paper, Janice quietly said, "I'll take you to your first class."

'Yeah. I can hardly wait.'

Paul glanced back as he was leaving the office to find D watching him, with an expression of warmth.

'I never, ever ever ever want to wake up!'

* * * * *

The teacher in Paul's first period class obviously wasn't used to being interrupted, and

certainly not by a new enrollment. But she seemed to take it in stride and indicated for Paul to take one of the unoccupied seats in the classroom.

As he listened to the lecture and tried to follow along with the examples on the whiteboard, Paul had no clue, whatsoever, what the woman was talking about.

He could tell that it was something vaguely resembling math or algebra, but it was so far beyond his understanding that he didn't even have a name for what it was.

* * * * *

The layout of the school was actually easy to follow and the numbering of the classrooms made logical sense, so Paul was able to follow his little class schedule without incident.

Unfortunately, that was the only thing that seemed to go his way.

As Paul moved from one class to another, he felt that he would need to understand a lot more about what they were talking about to even reach the level where he considered himself to be ignorant... at this point he was just plain stupid.

He didn't know the answers.

He didn't understand the questions.

The teachers could be up there speaking Kiswahili and he couldn't possibly have understood less of what they were talking about.

* * * * *

When it came time for lunch, Paul just followed the tide of students who all seemed to be headed in the same general direction. As he walked with his eyes cast down, he was feeling pretty disheartened.

"Paul! How's it going?" G asked happily as he approached.

"Not awesome." Paul said despairingly.

"What's wrong?" G asked with immediate concern.

"It's like being in kindergarten and trying to take college classes. That's how I felt today. I didn't understand anything." Paul said and was embarrassed to feel tears starting to well in his eyes.

Without hesitation, G pulled him into a hug and quietly said, "It's not that big of a deal. We'll get you a tutor to help you get caught up, then you'll be fine."

'Mmmm. That's nice.'

"But what if I'm not smart enough to learn all this high level stuff?" Paul asked in a whisper.

'Just keep holding me like this and I'll find a way to deal.'

"Don't even worry about that. Once you get all tooted, you'll be fine." G said with a grin.

"Tooted?" Paul asked as he fought to keep from smiling.

"Yeah, that's what a tutor does, he toots you. Once you're all tooted, you won't have any problems." G said confidently.

Paul couldn't help but laugh at the absurd reasoning and returned G's hug gratefully.

'Sweet, warm, cute and funny!'

"Hey, guys!" G said happily.

Paul turned to see a boy and a girl, their same age, looking at them with surprise.

It was at that moment that Paul realized that he and G had been hugging, in the hallway, in front of everyone.

"Nazy and Vinda, this is Paul." G said casually, as he turned to face them. Paul noticed that G kept one arm around him in a casual hug.

"Hi." Paul said cautiously.

"Remember? I told you about them." G said to Paul, seriously.

"Oh, yeah." Paul responded as he realized that they were G's former boy and girlfriend.

'Hate them.'

'They hurt G. They must be destroyed.'

'But G doesn't seem to be angry with them, and they seem kinda nice.'

'Okay. I'll let them live... for now.'

"Guys. This is Paul, his mom's going to marry my dad." G said frankly.

"Beth's his mom?" Nazy asked with surprise.

Paul was shocked by the question and asked, "You know my mom?"

"Yeah. She's been dating D for a couple months, now. I was hoping that they'd end up together. D needs someone." Nazy said frankly.

'A couple months?! Where was I during all of this?'

'Oh, yeah. Living my crap life and trying to get along at Ghetto High.'

'I wonder what else Mom's been up to while I haven't been paying attention.'

"How are you doing, G?" Vinda asked into the silence that followed.

"I'm okay." G said honestly, then casually added, "By the way, I asked dad if he'd invite you to the wedding. He already said that he would and that he'd pay for your airfare if you say that you want to go."

"Is that going to be alright with you?" Vinda asked cautiously.

'Thank you for asking.'

'You may live.'

G smiled at the question, then said, "Well, it's not about me. I know you both really like my dad, so whether I'm okay with it or not, you should be there to celebrate this with him. But honestly, I had a nice little brooding fit for a few days, and now I'm fine."

'G is so cool and so awesome!'

*'I don't think I've ever met **anyone** who was so incredibly cool about things.'*

"Good." Nazzy said with a smile, then added, "Let's go ahead and eat."

"Right." G said with a grin, then urged Paul to walk with him, maintaining an arm around him, much like Nazzy and Vinda, who were walking in front of them.

'So, this, whatever G and I have, it's not just going to be behind closed doors, where no one else can see it?'

'Scary...'

'...but good.'

* * * * *

Paul wasn't sure if it were something that Nazzy and Vinda had done, or if it were the fact that he had been seen with G, but for whatever reason, when Paul went to his first class after lunch, the difference was like day and night.

The classes weren't any easier for him to understand, but whereas before he had felt like an outsider trying to infiltrate a culture of which he had no knowledge, now he felt like he was a long lost relation being welcomed back into the fold.

No one had spoken one word to him all morning, but for the entire afternoon, people were walking up to him, introducing themselves, and offering him their help, should he have need of it.

The contrast was stark. The attention was a bit overwhelming... and somewhat intoxicating.

Paul had never been what you would call 'popular'. He supposed it was a side effect of his switching schools so often. Even so, he never really harbored a desire to be part of the 'in' crowd. The idea had never appealed to him. But now that he found himself in a situation where people seemed to notice his existence, he had to admit that he liked it.

* * * * *

"Are you up for a walk?" G asked as he approached Paul in the hallway.

"Yeah. I guess." Paul said with surprise at the strange question.

"There's a van that we can take to get a ride home. But on a day as nice as this, I feel like walking." G said happily.

Paul broke into a smile at G's infectious good mood and followed along.

* * * * *

When G had asked him if he were up for a walk, Paul had assumed that he meant emotionally or temperamentally, not physically.

It was a LONG walk.

Even so, there was a chill in the air which was invigorating and autumn was in full force, creating nearly breathtaking scenery.

When they finally arrived at the house and walked around to G's 'room', they were surprised to find a note taped to the double doors.

The note simply instructed them not to change clothes and come directly to the study.

G and Paul stopped long enough to deposit their backpacks, then hurried through the hallway into the main house.

* * * * *

"Where have you been?" D demanded as they walked in.

'Uh, oh. He's not happy.'

'It looks like now we get to see the dark side of D.'

'I hope it's not too bad. I really want to keep on liking him.'

"We decided to walk home. Have you been out there? It's beautiful!" G said seriously.

D's serious mood gave way to a smile and he quietly admitted, "I suppose it is."

'Wait.'

'What?'

'That's it?'

'I've seen kids get beat black and blue for a whole lot less.'

'G answers your question and you're fine with it?'

'I need some time to deal with this new concept.'

"What did you need us for?" G asked curiously.

"While I was making plans for our trip, Beth mentioned that she and Paul don't have passports. So I pulled a few strings and I have someone waiting to take their passport photos so we can get them rushed. We need to be going." D said as he stood from behind his desk.

"You don't have a passport?" G asked Paul in surprise.

'Give me a break! We were lucky if Mom had enough money for gas to get to work!'

*'Trips outside the **country** never really came up as a possibility.'*

'Not even in my wildest dreams.'

"I've never needed one." Paul finally responded.

From the expression on G's face, such a thing was nearly inconceivable to him.

'We're from two different worlds.'

'Do we have enough in common to make things work?'

'Will we care enough to try?'

"We can talk about it in the car." D said as he hurried past them.

"What about dinner? We're starving." G said quickly as he followed.

*'Okay. We **do** have things in common.'*

*'And G isn't hung up on the **rich and poor** thing.'*

'I need to learn not to be touchy about it.'

'We come from different worlds.'

'So what?'

'I mean, what fun would it be if we were exactly the same?'

"We'll pick something up in town." D said over his shoulder, then called into the lounge as he passed, "Beth! They're here! We're leaving!"

"On my way!" Paul's mother called as she hurried to join the group that was walking briskly toward the enormous front doors.

* * * * *

"I suppose that while we're out, we'd better go ahead and buy the things that we'll be needing for the trip. You'll need a variety of warm clothes to endure the climate on the Scottish highlands." D said frankly as he drove.

"It's not like we're going to be hiking to get there." G said frankly.

'Scottish highlands...'

'Oh. My. God!'

'This is going to be amazing!'

"No. But you still need to take the dank weather into account. Even inside, it's best to wear a few extra layers." D countered.

G reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"Would you mind taking Paul to buy his things? You know what he'll need." D asked his son hopefully.

'Buy things for Paul?'

'Like some big charity case?'

'Hold on...'

'Don't be touchy about it.'

'They're not saying that they need to buy poor little Paul new clothes because he doesn't have anything decent to wear.'

'We're going someplace cold. They're going to buy me warmer clothes. It's just that simple.'

'Chill.'

"Yeah. No problem. And I was wanting to pick up an OVA to go with that classic anime series that I just bought." G said with a grin.

'G, if I didn't love you before...'

'Oh crap! No, I didn't mean that!'

'Really!'

'I didn't.'

'...'

'Crap.'

"Those things will rot your mind." D said in a tone of long suffering.

"Most things that are fun will do that." G said in his defense.

Rather than respond, D glanced at Paul in the rearview mirror and asked, "How was your first day of school?"

'What?'

'Me?'

'What was the question?'

"He's going to need a tutor." G said seriously.

"Oh? Is something wrong?" D asked with concern.

"Only that he's expected to already know stuff that he's never been taught before." G said frankly.

"I'll make arrangements for that. You're both going to be out of school all next week, so I'll set it up for as soon as we get back." D said seriously.

'Just like that?'

'No screaming or threats about grades, just... Oh, I'll get you some help with that...'

'Freakin amazing!'

"You can hang in there for two more days, can't you?" G asked Paul casually.

Paul thought about how the second half of his day had gone, then quietly responded, "Yeah. I think I'll be alright."

"Good." D said with satisfaction, then thought to ask, "Paul. Adoption. Yes? No? Maybe?"

"Huh?" Paul asked in surprise.

'I think I missed a whole lot of something there.'

'I mean, did someone just bump the fast forward button and skip us into a whole new conversation without me noticing?'

'Adoption?'

"We can't do anything until after the wedding, but be thinking about it. Would you like to be adopted? Would you like to have your name changed? Let me know." D said seriously.

G broke into laughter at Paul's flummoxed expression.

'Adoption?'

"Way to go, Dad! Skip the foreplay and go right for the goal!" G said in delight.

"It's worked for me, so far." D said, then glanced lovingly at Beth, at his side.

"Ewww! I did *not* need that mental image." G said with a grimace.

"You're the one who brought up 'foreplay'." D said in his defense.

G thought about it for a moment, then turned to Paul and said, "I was hungry, until he said *that*."

'Adoption?'

* * * * *

The stop at the photographer's took only a few minutes. Apparently, D had been able to arrange everything in advance and all they had to do was sit for the actual pictures.

From there, they went immediately to a nice restaurant. After all their rushing around, it was nice to be able to stop and catch their breath for a little while.

There was a little casual conversation before G finally asked his father, "Where did you two meet? You never said."

"Three, no, I guess it was *four* months ago, now, Beth and I noticed that we seemed to take lunch at the same time and since we both tended to sit at the lunch counter,

more often than not, we'd be seated next to each other. We started talking. And one thing led to another..." D finished with a shrug.

"So Meg Ryan's right? It *can* happen just like that?" G asked with surprise.

'A Meg Ryan reference?'

'Does G, perhaps, have some viewing habits that don't revolve around big boobed schoolgirls and giant robots?'

'Then again, I don't know what Meg Ryan's been up to in the last few years...'

D and Beth broke into laughter at the same time at the question.

When their food arrived, the conversation turned to more general topics.

The shopping that followed was like a whirlwind.

The register totals were numbers that were beyond Paul's comprehension, but each time, G simply handed over his credit card as though it were an everyday happening.

Beyond that, Paul was overwhelmed by the sheer *volume* of what they purchased. He didn't have any idea of where they were going to put it all.

Finally, he concluded that D's car must be able to defy the laws of physics, because somehow, everything ended up fitting neatly into the trunk... or boot, as D referred to it.

As they were heading back to the house, Paul once again found himself questioning reality.

He had never before in his life had the experience of going into a store and being able to buy anything that caught his eye. Of course, he couldn't overcome a lifetime of conditioning, so he didn't really make any frivolous purchases. But, even so, being able to select the clothing and shoes that he wanted without regard to price was something beyond his wildest dreams.

G *did* have to nudge Paul a few times to get what he *wanted* rather than the cheapest option available. But, for the most part, Paul selected the things that he needed for the trip, picking out the color and style that he *really* wanted.

* * * * *

When they got back to the house, Paul was surprised to find that G had, indeed, bought the OVA that he had told his father about. It turned out that the DVD was a continuation of the classic anime that they had watched the previous evening.

At one point during the video, G shifted around on the couch and ended up with his head on Paul's lap.

It was totally innocent and Paul supposed that G might not even be aware of what he was doing, he was just trying to find a comfortable position.

After a moment to consider, Paul rested back, as his hand absently stroked G's hair.

More gore. More tentacles. More giant robots fighting. And, of course, more big boobed schoolgirls.

'Like the song says "Sweet Dreams are made of this..."'

* * * * *

The next morning, Paul and G woke, had breakfast, took their showers, then caught a ride in the van to school.

For whatever reason, Paul didn't feel the same anxiety that he had the day before about not understanding the lessons. Instead, he listened intently to the material that was being presented and started to get a sense of what they were studying... except the math. He still didn't have the first clue as to what that was about.

At lunch, he once again met up with G, Nazy and Vinda. Where their lunch the previous day had been slightly tense, today it was as relaxed as if the four of them had been best friends forever.

The remainder of the school day flew by, as Paul began to relax around his new classmates and started forming relationships with them.

As they walked out of the school and started walking toward the van that would take them home, G spotted his dad's car.

* * * * *

As soon as they got into the car, G cautiously asked, "What's going on, Dad?"

"The three of us need to get fitted for suits." D said as he pulled away from the school.

"Ungh. I was trying to forget about that." G groaned.

'I wonder if it's any more difficult than buying a pair of new pants...'

'Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever had new pants... just used pants that were new to me.'

'Oh, well. How bad could it be?'

"Do you think I'll ever hear the end of it if your great grandmother sees you at the wedding looking less than respectable?" D asked frankly.

"I suppose not. But I don't have to like it." G reluctantly agreed.

"I'm not asking you to like it. I'm just asking you to do it." D said frankly.

"It's a deal." G said, then let out a long sigh of resignation.

"Are you okay, Paul?" D asked with concern.

"I've never done anything like this before. Is there anything I need to know?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. Just stand still while your measurements are taken. That's about it." D said

frankly.

"Yeah. But first you try on about a dozen or so suits that all look just about the same to find the ones that you're going to get." G grouched.

"I'm sure it'll go faster if you're not insisting that you want to be a cowboy." D said with a barely contained smile at his son.

Paul leaned over in his seat to look at G, in the front passenger seat, with question.

"That's not going to be a problem, this time." G quietly assured his father.

Paul settled back into his seat with a warm smile at the thought.

'G as a cowboy...'

'...I bet that would be glorious.'

* * * * *

Getting the suits fitted wasn't as bad as G had let on.

It was worse.

They were in the tailor's shop for *hours*.

D insisted that they try on ALL the available selections, many of them, multiple times.

It wasn't until the end of it all that the tailor thought to mention that he couldn't guarantee that he'd have all the suits altered by the following Monday.

For a moment, Paul thought D was going to lose his cool. But instead, D calmly told the tailor that he would pay an extra one *thousand* dollars, over and above the price of the suits if, and only if, ALL the suits were ready to pick up Monday afternoon.

The dollar signs that appeared in the tailor's eyes were evidence that the suits would be ready and waiting for them.

* * * * *

As they left the tailor's shop, all three of them were tired, irritable and quite hungry.

"Can we stop for something?" G whined on the way to the car.

"What are you hungry for?" D asked in a less than enthusiastic voice.

"I don't care. Anything." G said in frustration.

"How about you, Paul? What sounds good to you?" D asked with a half-hearted attempt at a smile in his direction.

"Pizza." Paul answered immediately.

'Wait. Do rich people eat pizza?'

'Do they even know what it is?'

*'Well, if I'm going to expose them to one thing from **my** culture,*

this is a pretty good one.'

D seemed to consider as he climbed into the driver's seat, then turned to his son and asked, "Is that okay with you?"

"Anything." G reiterated.

"Pizza it is!" D said as he started the car.

* * * * *

When they arrived at the restaurant, Paul was surprised that it wasn't one of the fast food pizza chains. It was, in fact, an old fashioned, sit-down, Italian restaurant.

"Have we been here before?" G asked as they got out of the car.

"I don't think you have, but I've eaten here a few times." D said as he led the way.

Before they reached the front door, Paul caught the scent of something delicious. His stomach let out a loud growl to announce that it had also noticed.

"Mr. D! How good to see you again! Come, I have your usual table." The host said happily and immediately ushered them through the moderately busy restaurant to a secluded booth.

"A few times?" G asked his father curiously.

"Maybe more than a few." D said with a guilty smile.

* * * * *

The pizza was nothing short of perfection.

Paul ate until he was sure that he was going to explode. And, even then, he wished that he could eat more. It was just that good.

"I feel like I could sleep for a week." G groaned as they slowly walked toward the car.

"You've just got one more day of school, then you're going to be off for an entire week." D said as he opened his car door.

"Right." G said unenthusiastically.

"And don't forget that you're going to need to get your homework from all your classes, so you won't be behind when we get back." D said frankly.

"Ungh!" G said as he dropped into the passenger seat.

"Paul... I don't know what to say in your case. I think we'll just get you sorted out when we get back." D said frankly.

"I think I'll just take my school books with me so I can try to get caught up to where they are in my classes." Paul said thoughtfully, then added, "Except in math. I can't even figure out the first page of the book. I'm going to need help on that."

"Like I said, we'll work on getting you a tutor when we get back. But maybe, until then, you could get G to help you. He's always been good at math. Maybe he'll be able

to explain things to you." D said honestly.

"We can try." Paul said uncertainly, not wanting to commit G to doing something that he might not want to do.

* * * * *

"How are you doing?" Paul asked, as they finally walked into G's room.

"Okay, I guess. I just hate doing boring stuff like that." G said as he walked directly to his bedroom, shedding his school uniform along the way.

"Well, that should be it, shouldn't it? I mean, that was the last really boring thing that we're supposed to do, right?" Paul asked hopefully.

"No. There are probably going to be lots of really boring things, one after another, before this whole wedding thing is done." G said frankly.

Paul froze in place when he realized that G wasn't stopping his undressing.

"I'm not mad at you." G said as he turned to face Paul, then continued, "I'm not mad at anyone, really. I just... it puts me in a bad mood."

"Yeah. I get that." Paul said slowly as he watched G take off his underwear.

"Thanks." G said with a smile, then glanced down at his naked body before looking back at Paul and asking, "Care to join me?"

Paul nearly broke into laughter at the casually asked question, but was able to hold it back and instead answered, "Yeah. Okay."

* * * * *

Paul was nervous at first, but in time, he more or less forgot about his nudity as he focused more and more of his attention on the horrible Japanese cartoon that G had put in the player.

It was ghastly. And not in a gory or exciting way. The animation was annoyingly bad, the story made no sense at all, the dialogue was idiotic and it seemed to go on and on from one embarrassingly bad episode to the next.

As Paul felt himself drifting into sleep, he had to admit that he kind of missed the big boobed schoolgirls and their giant robots.

* * * * *

"Good morning." G said softly, causing Paul to open his eyes.

"Good morning." Paul said with a smile.

"You know, if we kissed right now, things might get kinda weird between us." G said frankly.

'Okay!'

'I'm awake!'

'I guess the ball's in my court.'

"I'm the uptight one. I think that if I were going to get weird about things, I would have done it by now." Paul said honestly.

'That was a nice, respectable return.'

'If I'm going to keep using tennis metaphors, I really should learn more about the game.'

"You've been close a few times, haven't you?" G asked with a smile.

"A few." Paul admitted.

"So it's okay?" G asked cautiously.

"Just, if it does get weird for a little bit, don't give up on me. Okay? It doesn't have anything to do with how I feel about you." Paul asked hopefully.

"What does it have to do with?" G asked curiously.

"How I feel about me, maybe... I don't know." Paul said honestly, then added, "I just don't want you to think that if I'm acting strange that I'm actually thinking 'Ewww gross!'"

"Yeah. Okay." G quietly agreed.

After a moment of staring into each other's eyes, Paul quietly asked, "Are you going to do it or not?"

"I guess I'd better." G said with a grin, then moved in to give Paul a delicate, gentle kiss.

A sudden blaring beeping sounded as soon as their lips met.

"What?! Do you have a virgin alarm?" G asked as he backed away.

Paul broke into laughter at the question.

G climbed over the back of the couch and turned off the alarm clock.

"We'd better get dressed and get in to breakfast." G said regretfully.

"This, first." Paul said as he climbed over the couch, then pulled G into a firm kiss.

* * * * *

After breakfast, G and Paul had their showers... separately... but each enjoyed the view when the other came out of the bathroom.

The fact of the matter was that they were on a somewhat strict timetable and didn't have time to do more than look.

At school, the morning passed without incident, the only thing on Paul's mind the entire time was the sensation of that kiss.

When the lunch bell finally sounded, Paul automatically went to the cafeteria where

he knew that he would find G, Nazy and Vinda.

As Paul walked into the cafeteria, there was a sudden roar of 'Surprise!'.

Yes, he was, in fact, surprised. He was pretty sure that his heart might have skipped a beat or two.

'What does a heart attack feel like?'

'What were the symptoms, again?'

Then he was uncertain if the surprise had been intended for him.

He looked around, there was no one behind him, and everyone seemed to be focused on him.

Nazy walked up to stand beside him, then said, "Paul. I'm sorry it took us a few days to put this together, but we just wanted to welcome you. Everyone! This is Paul, he's G's new brother. If you haven't talked to him yet, make sure you introduce yourselves!"

Just that moment, Paul would have been quite content to crawl under the nearest table and die.

"C'mon. We got you cake." Nazy said with a grin at him, then led him by the arm over to the table where Vinda and G were sitting.

"Surprise." G said with a grin.

"Did you know about this?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Vinda told me about it during second period." G said frankly.

Before Paul could question further, he was approached by a series of people welcoming him to the school.

* * * * *

Afternoon, after school, dinner... they all flew by.

Paul was riding the high of having a truly *good* day.

"It's nice to see you happy, like this." G said as they sat on the couch.

"I'm not used to feeling this way. How can I keep this feeling?" Paul asked curiously.

"Short answer, you can't. Life is full of hills and valleys. You just seem to have found a pretty nice mountaintop, today." G said with a grin.

"I'm scared that I'm going to wake up and find out that this was all a dream." Paul said honestly.

'There, I did it. If this is really a dream, then saying so will probably cause it to all come crashing down...'

'Is it too late to take it back?'

"Well, if that happens, then I guess that when you wake up you'll just have to work to

make it a reality." G said warmly.

"How do you do it? You seem to be happy pretty much all the time." Paul asked curiously.

"Wasn't that you who was with me yesterday, at the tailor's shop?" G asked cautiously.

Paul laughed, then said, "That would have made anyone miserable, even the perpetually happy G."

The smile fell off G's face, and Paul noticed.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked curiously.

"A smile doesn't always mean that you're happy. Sometimes it's there to hide that you aren't." G said quietly.

After a moment to consider that, Paul quietly asked, "Wanna talk?"

"No. Not really." G answered honestly.

"Wanna kiss?" Paul asked with an impish grin.

"Who's the alpha, here?" G asked with the beginning of a smile.

"You are. Without a doubt." Paul said before hooking an arm around G and pulling him close.

"Okay. Just so we're clear on that." G said before giving up his resistance.

'Dream or not, just as long as we get to keep on doing this, I'm fine with it.'

* * * * *

Although both boys might have been willing to do more, they were also equally uncertain if doing too much, too soon might damage or destroy their developing relationship.

In the end, they did nothing more than kiss. However, when they went to sleep that night, they *did* sleep cuddled together.

* * * * *

"It's Saturday. What are we supposed to do today?" Paul asked curiously, as he stroked G's head, which was laying on his chest.

"Whatever we want, mostly." G said frankly.

"Mostly?" Paul asked curiously.

"Dad might have something planned, especially with us leaving next week. But I don't think he's said anything to me about it." G said honestly.

"Let me out. I need to pee." Paul said as he started to sit up.

"Kiss first." G said with a grin.

Paul obliged with a quick kiss, then hurried to get off the couch.

* * * * *

"So, Dad, do you have any big plans for today?" G asked, once they were all seated around the dining room table.

"I have about a thousand little odd and end things that I need to get put in order before I leave." D said honestly.

"I meant, do you have any plans *for us*?" G asked frankly.

"Not a plan, so much, but if you wanted to, we could go out and play with the trains this afternoon." D said with a smile.

"We haven't done that for a while, and Paul hasn't seen them yet. Yeah. Let's do that." G said happily.

"What do you guys say we do that after lunch?" D asked with an honest smile.

"Yeah. We'll be there." G said confidently.

Paul watched the exchange silently. Although he hadn't ever personally played with anything like model cars or trains, he'd seen them before. He never could figure out what anyone could find to enjoy about them.

"Did you boys remember to get all your school work for while you'll be gone?" Beth asked curiously.

"I got mine." G said simply.

"I'm still not to the point where I'm able to do the lessons that they're assigning, right now. But I brought my books so that I can maybe get closer to being caught up before we get back." Paul said seriously.

"I've already talked to the school and they know that I'm going to be hiring a tutor for Paul, so they'll be willing to be flexible until he's had a chance to catch up." D interjected.

"Paul, just be sure to let us know if you need anything, alright?" Beth asked her son gently.

"I will." Paul assured her.

'It's weird. It's not them yelling at me, telling me that I need to get better grades, or else. It's me, saying that I'm going to handle it and them offering their help and support.'

'I think this is beyond any dream that I could have come up with...'

'...an alternate reality, maybe?'

* * * * *

At lunch, both father and son seemed to be excited by the prospect of playing with their trains, which increasingly baffled Paul. He was happy enough to tag along, if

nothing else, to enjoy their enjoyment. But he fully expected that after a few minutes that he would probably be bored.

"You're going to love this." G said as he led the way out the back door of the house (which happened to be normally sized), and across the expanse of wide open lawn.

"Where are we going?" Paul asked curiously.

'Down the rabbit hole?'

'Through the looking glass?'

'Note to self: Beware the Red Queen.'

"It's right over there, that out building." D said as he pointed.

The building was just coming into view, having been on the other side of a slight rise.

"How big is this place, anyway?" Paul asked as he looked around.

"Just over a thousand acres." D said casually.

Paul didn't have any way of responding to that because the scale of it was too immense for him to really comprehend.

* * * * *

When they walked into the building, it took a moment for Paul's eyes to adjust to the much dimmer light. But when his eyes finally *did* adjust, he had to blink his eyes to confirm what he was seeing.

Trains.

Real, full sized, trains.

On tracks.

"These are steam engines. One of these days, when we can spare the time, we'll go ahead and fire one up for you and take it out for a spin." D said cheerfully.

"A spin?" Paul asked in astonishment.

"Yeah, this track runs all the way out to the lake at the far side of the property." G said happily.

"Lake." Paul parroted.

"Hey, Dad. Is it okay if I fire mine up?" G asked hopefully.

"That's fine. But remember that you have to stay out here with it until the pressure's down to a safe level. You can't just walk off and leave it." D said firmly.

"I won't." G promised, then turned to Paul and quickly said, "Come on!"

Paul glanced at D uncertainly, then walked to follow G across the large building to the far side of the second steam locomotive.

'Their train set is made up of real trains.'

'Real, actual trains...'

'Just how freakin rich are these people?!'

* * * * *

By the time Paul joined him, G was already working to get a fire started.

"What is it?" Paul asked cautiously.

To him, it looked like a church's pipe organ and one of the steam locomotives had sex... and this thing, whatever it was, was the resulting offspring.

"It's a calliope. It's real! Dad bought it for me and we restored it." G said proudly.

"What do you need for me to do?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Give me a minute to get the fire started, then you can start handing me firewood. Mine's woodburning, instead of coal." G explained.

'Yeah, because burning coal in your pipe organ would just be silly.'

* * * * *

When G said that he was ready, Paul brought him pieces of wood so that G could feed them into the base of a large cannister which looked something like a primitive water heater. And, from what little Paul knew about steam engines, that's probably what it was.

G kept checking the gauges of the thing until he finally announced, "It's ready!"

"Ready for what?" Paul asked cautiously.

G flashed him a huge grin, then ran around to the other side of the wagon and opened a panel to reveal something like a piano keyboard.

Before Paul could do much more than register the fact, G began to play.

The first steam whistle to go off nearly made Paul jump out of his skin and pee his pants simultaneously. He had never in his life heard such a loud noise.

When the next whistle went off, in a different pitch, Paul realized that what G was playing was a legitimate musical instrument, albeit, an insanely loud one.

As he listened, Paul flashed back on the 'Dark Carnival' motif in G's room and thought that the calliope fit in with it perfectly (and loudly).

When G finally finished, he walked to Paul and said... something.

"Huh?" Paul screamed in response.

G rolled his eyes, then said something else.

"Huh?" Paul screamed again.

It was only then that G realized that Paul wasn't kidding.

G chewed his lower lip for a moment as he considered what he should do, then took

off running, to the other side of the building.

"Huh?" Paul called after him.

'If this were a dream, that would've woken me up. No doubt.'

'So, I guess that's settled.'

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Paul?" D asked with concern.

"It's still ringing, but I can hear you now." Paul said honestly.

"Next time, he'll have to move the calliope outside before playing it. Even without the noise problem, depending on which way the wind is blowing we can get smoked out of here." D said honestly.

"He's not mad at me, is he?" Paul asked cautiously.

D chuckled, then said, "He's probably worried that you're mad at him... for destroying your eardrums."

"No. I'm glad that he shared that with me. Just, next time, I'll have to remember to wear earplugs or something." Paul said honestly.

"I'll see to it that we have some on hand before the next time." D assured him.

"Thanks for taking me out here and showing me this." Paul said sincerely.

"Remember, next time, I'm going to get you to help me fire it up. We're going to take this thing for a spin." D said happily.

"Yeah. Sounds good." Paul said with a smile, then added, "I'd better get back to G before he thinks that I'm mad at him or something."

'Even if my mom weren't going to marry him, I'd still want him to be my... I don't know if I'll ever be able to call him that.'

'But if I were ever going to call anyone that, I would want it to be him.'

* * * * *

As they walked into the living room of G's 'room', G quietly asked, "Are your ears still ringing?"

"Yeah. But it's better than it was. Don't worry about it." Paul said with a smile.

"I'm sorry. Okay?" G asked anxiously.

"Okay." Paul said with a reassuring smile, then moved in to give G a firm kiss.

The kiss didn't last that long, but the hug that accompanied it continued on and on.

"I'm okay. Really." Paul quietly soothed.

"I never want to hurt people." G said as he enjoyed the hug.

"You bring joy into the life of everyone who knows you." Paul said softly.

"Maybe you don't know the *real* me." G said in almost a whisper.

"And maybe I do." Paul countered gently.

'I could stay like this forever.'

* * * * *

That night was more about comfort than passion.

There was the occasional kiss, but mostly holding each other through the next animated series that G wanted to share with Paul.

This one was better than the last one. Not great, but better.

* * * * *

After waking, the boys went to the main house to find breakfast on the dining room table, along with a note, telling them that D and Beth were going out for the day.

Paul looked at the food on the dining room table, all of it still piping hot, and wondered, not for the first time, who had prepared it.

"That's cool." G finally said, then asked, "What do you want to do today?"

"I don't know. What sounds good to you?" Paul asked in return.

"Let's get naked and watch videos." G said with a smile.

"We did that a couple nights ago." Paul said cautiously, not sure if he were missing something.

"Yeah. And it was nice, wasn't it? Wanna do that again? All day?" G finished with a smile.

Paul thought about it for a moment, then said, "Yeah, that actually sounds kinda great."

G smiled with accomplishment, then tucked into his meal.

* * * * *

For as tranquil as Sunday had been, Monday came as something of a rude shock.

Since they would be leaving for the airport early on Tuesday morning, all their packing and preparations would need to be taken care of that day.

At breakfast, D reminded the boys that they would need to go to the tailor's shop later in the day to pick up their suits.

Beth then added that she was going to need to stop by the bridal shop for her wedding dress.

That caught Paul by surprise.

Although he had intellectually known that his mother was getting married in less than

a week, somehow the reality of it didn't kick in until she talked about her wedding dress.

* * * * *

Paul and G weren't too worried about needing to pack for the trip until it actually came time to do it. That's when they came to the realization that Paul didn't have ANY actual luggage.

For all the times Paul had moved from apartment to apartment, he had always done so using cardboard boxes and plastic bags.

As soon as the discovery was made, they returned to the main house and Beth realized that she, too, had no luggage, whatsoever.

Although D suggested that Beth drive the boys into town to get the luggage and that G use his credit card to pay for it, Beth was kind enough to point out that D needed to be present to try on his new suits at the tailor's shop.

With that decided, everyone went to work, doing as much as they could, within the constraints of their individual circumstances, until it was time to go into town.

* * * * *

Along with getting the luggage and picking up the suits and the wedding dress, G also suggested that they take a moment to buy a few 'comfortable' things to wear during their trip. At first the adults resisted the idea, but G finally won them over by reminding them about how long they would be traveling, not only in the air, but also waiting in one airport after another, for their connecting flights to depart. It's miserable enough to have to do it at all, but it's that much worse when you have things binding, chafing, riding up, falling down or refusing to stay fastened.

When they got back to the house, it was a mad dash to get everything done that they needed to before the end of the night.

As soon as the last suitcase was packed and put on the stack by the front door, the boys collapsed on the couch, in front of the TV. Something was playing, something animated, for certain, an anime, most likely, but Paul was too exhausted to even pay attention to it.

Both Paul and G automatically snuggled together and almost immediately fell into a restful, and much needed, sleep.

* * * * *

They were up well before sunrise, but due to all their hard work the night before, they had time to enjoy a delicious and satisfying breakfast before having to load the car and leave for the airport.

Once again, Paul wondered who had prepared their wonderful meal, and very nearly asked, but when D started outlining their proposed arrangements for the day, it slipped his mind.

* * * * *

Paul was nervous.

Although he wouldn't admit it to anyone else, since he had never flown before, he didn't know how he was going to handle the experience.

The first flight was, by far, the most terrifying.

Part of that was the fact that it was his first flight.

But to compound the anxiety, they were taking a commuter flight to a larger, regional airport. The little two-engine mosquito of a plane seemed to jump and drop, tip and tilt, for no apparent reason.

When he first got onto the plane, Paul was very careful to school his expression and not divulge just how scared he was.

By the time they landed, he didn't care who knew, and he wanted to kiss the solid, unmoving ground beneath his feet to celebrate their landing.

The wait time between the commuter and the commercial passenger jet wasn't terribly long. The parents had time to sip some coffee and the boys were each able to enjoy an insanely sweet, hot, gooey cinnamon roll that was similar in size and weight to a newborn baby.

* * * * *

By the time they landed at the next airport, Paul was more or less a seasoned traveler.

Of course, it could be that the amount of sugar he ingested at the previous airport was enough to nearly put him into a coma. Either way, Paul's anxiety was nearly gone and he was able to relax enough that he fell asleep for part of the flight.

It didn't hurt that they were traveling first class, so they didn't have to suffer some of the discomfort that other passengers, farther back in the plane, might be experiencing.

At this airport, they stopped for a while to have a nice relaxed early lunch, mainly because they had two and a half hours before their next flight was supposed to take off.

Paul was beginning to understand what G had meant about traveling being miserable. But he had to admit that it would be that much more so if he were wearing uncomfortable clothes.

* * * * *

As they started their trans-atlantic flight, Paul took one of his schoolbooks out of his carry-on luggage. The boredom of travel had finally driven him to it.

The seven hour flight from New York to London provided Paul plenty of time to work his way through several subjects and begin to get a foundational understanding of the classes that he was enrolled in.

At one point, about three hours in, G even borrowed one of his class books, just for something to do.

Of course, all schoolwork was temporarily suspended when the inflight movie started. It turned out to be a comic book superhero movie, as so many were of late. But the best part about it was that neither Paul nor G had seen it before.

It wasn't *exactly* the same as anime, but it was closer than Paul would have expected.

* * * * *

When their flight arrived in England, it was well after dark and late, at least according to the local time.

That was perfectly fine with Paul.

Even though he had done very little in the way of physical activity that day, he felt as though he could easily sleep for a week.

D had already arranged everything, so their limo driver was waiting for them and very skillfully and professionally attended to their luggage.

* * * * *

Paul was surprised that when they got into the back of the limousine, that there was a picnic basket waiting for them, filled nearly to overflowing with all kinds of delectable treats.

As the limo ride wore on, Paul better understood *why* the food had been provided. They kept driving and driving, for nearly two hours, before finally arriving at their hotel. If the driver hadn't provided the basket of food, all of them might well have withered away to nothing.

* * * * *

The hotel room was posh, no doubt.

The staff were courteous and accommodating.

Paul and G couldn't really find anything wrong with it, except... that they had been given separate rooms.

So, that night, as tired as they were from traveling, and as nice and comfortable as their beds were, neither of them slept worth a damn.

* * * * *

Beth was full of good cheer the next morning, nearly 'glowing'. D was happy to see that she was happy. The boys... not so much.

Neither slept well. Neither was in a good mood. And they both gave the same blank disbelieving stares at D when he announced that they were going to spend the day touring London. With looks alone, they questioned D's fitness as a father, his sanity, and his value as a human being.

Nonetheless, they dutifully carried on with preparing. They had breakfast in the hotel, then piled into the limousine to see the sights.

Paul's mood brightened as he began to get into the spirit of the occasion. It took

longer for G to come around, but as he watched Paul's childish wonder grow, he warmed to the experience.

They visited the Tower of London, saw Westminster Abbey, Big Ben, and St. Paul's Cathedral, and even witnessed the Changing of the Guard ceremony at Buckingham Palace.

As the day drew to a close, they were all well and truly exhausted, but in a good way.

* * * * *

Paul had just finished climbing into bed when he heard a light tapping on his door.

"Come in." He said quietly, hoping beyond hope that it was G.

There was a long quiet moment, then the door opened just enough for G to peek inside.

"Is it okay if I come in?" G asked uncertainly.

'Silly question.'

"Yeah. Of course." Paul said with a smile.

"I'm not... I mean, I don't *need* people. I'm okay being alone..." G said with difficulty.

'G being uncertain is a rare sight.'

'I'm honored that he trusted me enough to allow me to see it.'

Paul tried to restrain his smile as he said, "Why don't you climb in here with me and tell me about it."

"Okay. Yeah." G said with a grin.

* * * * *

The wake up the next morning was rude and unwelcomed.

Regardless of their activities in the previous days, the fact of the matter was, it was just too flippin early.

As each of them dragged their zombified selves down to the restaurant to have breakfast, it was apparent that none of them wanted to be up, right then.

"We have to catch an early flight. There should be a car waiting for us when we arrive, and that will take us to Darroch Castle." D explained between sips of coffee.

"Castle, as in, a *real* authentic castle?" Paul asked to confirm.

"It's been our family home for... a while, now. My parents and grandparents live there, to oversee the place. And one day, when we're ready to retire, your mother and I might end up moving there, too." D finished with a smile at his bride-to-be.

"Really? That's your family home? You don't sound Irish." Paul said in confusion.

'What's that look for?'

'Did I say something wrong?'

"Scottish... there's a difference." D said with a wince, then continued, "Our family's from Darroch, but I was born and raised in the states, just like G was. We return to the Scottish highlands every so often, as we are able, to visit with family and restore the sense of having a foundation, of knowing where we came from."

"Must be nice." Paul said under his breath and flashed a dark look at his mother.

'Yeah. I'm looking at you.'

'Even if you won't tell me about my dad, what about my grandparents or other family? It's not possible that we just sprang into existence out of nothing.'

'I want a foundation, too. I deserve it!'

"Us sitting here, sipping coffee, isn't getting us any closer to Darroch." D said, not sounding to be much more enthusiastic than the others around the table.

* * * * *

Both boys were asleep before the limousine had left London, which was for the best.

Beth and D talked quietly about their plans and occasionally one or the other of them would stop and look with pride at their sleeping boys.

* * * * *

"You can't be serious. We're flying on *that?*" G asked when he got out of the limousine.

"Unless you can think of a better way for us to get there." D told his son frankly.

Paul alternated between pale white and pale green at the sight of the small plane.

'Oh crap!'

'Not again!'

'Please don't make me!'

"This made more sense than flying commercial. I chartered this flight so that we could transport all of our luggage and not be restricted by anyone else's timetable." D said seriously, then a look of question came over his face before he continued, "Why am I explaining this to you? Just get on the plane."

G rolled his eyes, then started walking to do as he was told.

"Is this thing safe?" Paul asked nervously.

"Yes. I promise." D said with a warm smile at the frightened boy.

'Okay. This once. But if you get me killed, I'm never going to trust you again!'

Paul tried to gather his courage, then followed G toward the small plane.

* * * * *

The flight was no more or less harrowing than the commuter flight had been on Tuesday. The prop engine plane seemed to jump and drop, pitch and yaw to the whims of the winds. Paul's gasps of fright and white knuckled grip on the armrests might have been funny in other circumstances, but G was unable to find any humor in the situation. About a half hour into their flight, G finally gave up his concerns about the probable reaction from the parents and leaned in to give Paul a reassuring kiss and cuddle him.

Paul's mother was a little bit surprised by the development, but D simply took gentle hold of her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

It turned out that G's kiss was all that Paul needed to break him out of the cycle of fear that he'd been trapped in. G had essentially 'blown his mind' which, under the circumstances, turned out to be a good thing.

* * * * *

"I don't remember this airport. How far is it from here?" G asked his father as they got off the plane.

"I don't know in miles, but I'm estimating two to three hours by car." D said frankly as he watched their luggage being unloaded.

"That's a lot faster than usual. We should get there while it's still light out." G said thoughtfully.

"That's my hope." D said with a smile at his son, then quietly asked, "About you and Paul... are you two..."

"Are we what, Dad?" G asked impatiently.

"Getting in too deep?" D asked with concern.

G thought about it for a moment, then quietly said, "Yeah. It looks that way."

"Remember, that I'm here if you need me." D said as he looked his son in the eyes.

G smiled at his father's reaction, then responded, "I know. Thanks."

* * * * *

"G has heard this before, but it won't hurt for him to hear it again." D said, then paused, since their driver seemed determined to find every pothole in northern Scotland.

'That doesn't sound like something good.'

"Where we'll be visiting is kind of remote..."

"...kind of." G chuckled at the understatement.

'Well, we've been driving for about half an hour and haven't seen another living soul. If this isn't remote, I'm afraid of what is.'

"It's a fourteenth century castle but, not to worry, it has been outfitted with a few of the 'conveniences' of the modern age." D said with a grin at G, then continued, "What I wanted to warn you about is, don't go off on your own. The Scottish highlands are strangely deceptive. It's incredibly easy to become disoriented and lost. And the weather is wholly unforgiving. Even when you're following a path or staying within sight of the castle, it's possible that a sudden mist or storm will come up and leave you with no points of reference for you to get yourself back to safety."

"If this were one of those old black and white horror movies, this is where he'd be warning us about the ghosts." Paul said to G with a grin.

'Yeah. So I've watched a lot of black and white horror movies. We couldn't afford cable.'

D smiled at the comment, then said, "The ghosts are family. You don't have to worry about them."

'Was it just me, or did he say that a little bit too seriously?'

"What about Nazy and Vinda?" G asked suddenly.

"What about them?" D asked cautiously.

"Where are they? I thought you were going to invite them to the wedding!" G asked anxiously.

"You're only just thinking of this *now*?" D asked incredulously.

"I've had a lot on my mind." G said defensively, then asked, "Are they coming?"

"I made all the arrangements for them. Nazareth and Ravindra should arrive tomorrow afternoon or early evening. That will give them a chance to rest before the wedding ceremony." D said frankly.

"Oh, good. I just know that they really wanted to be here to see you get married." G quietly explained.

"Don't worry. Everything's been taken care of." D said confidently.

Paul was only marginally aware of the conversation. His attention kept being drawn to the breathtaking countryside outside his window.

* * * * *

Before long, both the boys were fast asleep as their drive continued on and on.

Beth and D sat, holding hands and watching their boys sleep. There were many things that needed to be done, and many more that needed to be discussed. But in that peaceful moment, neither wanted to do anything to disrupt the tranquility that they were feeling.

* * * * *

"Boys, we're here." D said gently, not wanting to wake the boys too abruptly.

"Already?" G asked sleepily.

"Check your stomach, I'm sure that *it's* not saying 'Already?'." D said fondly.

"I think it's still asleep." G said groggily.

"Paul?" Beth asked gently.

"Five more minutes." Paul grumbled.

D smiled at the response, then said, slightly louder than necessary, "Welcome to Darroch Castle."

Paul's eyes opened suddenly and he looked around with excitement.

In his wildest dreams, Paul couldn't have imagined a more picturesque location. It truly *was* a fourteenth century castle, nestled in amongst some of the most beautiful scenery in the world.

'Oh my freakin God! A real castle! Not a movie set or a reproduction, but a real castle!'

"G, would you take everyone inside while I show the driver where to put the luggage?" D asked his son hopefully.

"Yeah! C'mon! I want you to meet Grandma and Grandpa!" G said with uncharacteristic enthusiasm.

Paul smiled at his happiness and followed along.

'It makes me happy to see him happy.'

'Is that too syrupy?'

'I don't care. It's true.'

"I'll be in in just a moment." D assured his bride-to-be, then gave her a kiss before going to attend to the driver.

* * * * *

As Paul walked through the dim corridors, the thought came to him that the castle wasn't really all that different from the 'museum' back home. The walls were made of rougher stone than the smooth polished granite, but the overall effect was just about the same.

"Grandma!" G said joyfully as he ran into the great hall. The room was enormous and Paul couldn't help but flash back, yet again, to the old black and white horror movies.

"G! We didn't expect you this early. You've grown like a weed, you have." G's grandmother said with delight as G hugged her.

"D said that he was going to try that new airstrip that they opened earlier this year. It seems to have shaved a few hours off the travel time." An older gentleman said as he approached.

"Grandpa!" G said happily and immediately switched his hug.

Beth and Paul were watching the scene before them unfold with matching smiles.

'This must be what he was like when he was five years old.'

"Mom, Dad, I'd like for you to meet my fiancée, Beth and her son, Paul." D said as he walked into the room.

"Well! Look at you! Aren't you a pretty little thing. And I hear that you'll be havin a wee baby soon." D's mother said warmly.

"Yes, Ma'am. In about six months." Beth said timidly.

"Beth, Paul, may I introduce my parents, my father, J and my mother, B."

"You're kidding!" Paul blurted out in astonishment.

'Oops! Mouth, you're not supposed to start working until I tell you to.'

'But still, G's grandparents and D's parents are J and B?'

'Well, I guess that means that there's only twenty-two members of the family left for me to meet.'

"That's short for Jason and Beatrice." B said with a grin at him.

"Jay and Bea... Okay, I guess." Paul said reluctantly, not quite willing to accept it fully.

'That makes sense, Jason is J, Beatrice is B, Gwayne is G... so what's D's real name?'

"Your grandmother is taking a nap, right now. You'll be able to visit with her, later." D's father, J said with a smile.

At Paul's look of confusion, G explained, "He was talking to Dad about my great-grandma, Grandma Gruit."

"We'll have time enough to catch up on things. Just now you probably need to be resting up after your long trip. Come along, let me show you to your rooms. Everything should be ready." B fussed.

"Thanks, Mom." D said warmly as he followed behind her.

* * * * *

"I hope you boys won't be minding if we put you in a room together. We've got the whole family showing up in the next day or two." B asked as she slowly led the way up an enormous staircase.

"That'll be fine, Grandma." G said as he fought to restrain his smile.

*'Yeah. We'll find **some way** to make it work.'*

The place was big, huge in fact, and there was no doubt that the castle was, indeed, centuries old. But Paul couldn't help but notice that it was also immaculately clean.

"Boys, once we've been shown to our rooms, I'm going to need your help carrying up the bags." D said seriously.

"Okay, Dad." G answered easily.

"It's just down here. We even have electricity in this wing, now." B said happily.

"Dad's really getting the place fixed up." D said in an impressed tone.

"He's doing his best to make this old place functional. We don't have a lot of the new-fangled conveniences, but we have what's important." B said, then walked to a massive, nearly twelve foot tall, door and lifted the latch before forcing the door open with her shoulder. She fumbled just inside the door and turned on the light switch before stepping aside to allow everyone else to enter.

"It's beautiful." Beth gasped as she walked into the room.

Paul had another horror movie flashback as he cautiously scanned his surroundings.

"I'm glad you think so, dear. This will be your room." B said warmly.

"Thank you. I love it." Beth said excitedly.

"Boys, your room will be just across the hall." B said as she turned back toward the door.

"When's dinner? Paul and I are hungry." G asked hopefully.

"Well, you've just missed lunch and dinner's not for quite a while. When you're done helping your father with the luggage, why don't you come to the sitting room and I'll have a snack all laid out for you." B said warmly.

"Thanks, Grandma!" G said happily, then gave her another hug.

While he was doing that, Paul walked across the hall and lifted the heavy, cast iron latch on the door.

He did as B had done and pushed the door with his shoulder to open it. The weight of the door was nearly as astonishing as it's size.

The huge double doors back at the 'museum' didn't even compare.

He was surprised when he walked into the pitch black room. It took him a moment to remember to feel beside the door for the light switch.

When the lights came on, they revealed a very tidy, very elegant room. All that was missing was Boris Karloff, Lon Chaney and, of course, Bela Lugosi.

"Come on. Let's help Dad so we can eat." G said quickly from the doorway.

"Right behind you." Paul said as he turned to follow.

* * * * *

Paul had the sense that the luggage had gotten heavier since they had packed it. He also came to the realization that high ceilings meant more stairs. Those two things combined assured that when they finally found their way to the sitting room for their meal, that they were well and truly hungry.

"I thought I'd find you here." D said as he walked into the sitting room with Beth at his

side.

"This is where the food is." G said unrepentantly.

Paul might have smiled at that if his mouth didn't already have a prior commitment.

"Beth and I need to go into town before it gets too late. Would you care to go with?" D asked casually, letting it be known with his expression that he didn't have a preference in the matter.

G looked at Paul and received a shrug in response.

"I think we've traveled enough for a while. We'll stay here." G said for both of them.

"Try to stay out of trouble." D said to his son with a smile.

"You know me." G said with a grin.

"That's why I said *try*." D responded, then turned to leave.

* * * * *

"Do you want to go exploring?" G asked Paul with a grin.

"What? Like where?" Paul asked cautiously.

'Didn't D say something, just a little bit ago, about not getting into trouble?'

"I don't know. Let's see if we can find any secret rooms or a dungeon or anything like that. How often do you get to explore *a castle*?" G implored.

'Interesting point.'

"Haven't you been here a bunch of times?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yeah. But whenever I was here before, Dad thought that I was 'too young' to be left unattended. Now that I'm finally old enough, I want to check things out!" G said hopefully.

*'I'm not sure if **this** is the way to get your father to see you as being mature enough to be trusted.'*

"Yeah. Two teenagers exploring a fourteenth century castle on their own... what could go wrong?" Paul asked with a smile.

* * * * *

"Maybe it *used to be* a dungeon." G said as they looked around the basement room that they had discovered.

"Yeah. And *maybe* the castle was attacked by washers and dryers and this is where your family chose to imprison them." Paul retorted.

"Shut up." G grumbled, then led the way out of the room.

Paul smiled at the reaction as he followed, enjoying their exploration.

* * * * *

"No dungeon, no dragons, not even a troll. What a letdown." G said when they returned to their room.

"Actually, I'm kinda okay with not finding any of those things." Paul said honestly.

"Yeah. Still, I grew up remembering this place with all the rooms that I couldn't explore. I've been dreaming about that stuff all my life. Now I'm here and... I guess it's disappointing." G said frankly.

"I guess at some point you have to give up on magic." Paul said regretfully as he sat heavily on the bed.

"I wouldn't go *that* far." G said as he sat beside Paul.

"What would you like to do, now?" Paul asked curiously. There wasn't any innuendo behind the words, just a simple, honest question.

After a moment to consider, G finally admitted, "A nap sounds *really* good right now."

"That's all I needed to hear." Paul said as he kicked off his shoes then scooted over on the bed.

A moment later G was snuggled in at his side.

As they were both drifting to sleep, G whispered, "All of this is magic."

* * * * *

Paul was awakened with a kiss.

"Just like in the fairy tales." Paul thought as he opened his eyes.

"Did you have a good sleep?" G asked with a lazy smile.

"Wonderful. And waking up like that was even better." Paul said happily.

"I was thinking that maybe, if it's not dark already, we could go exploring outside." G said hopefully.

'I'm pretty sure I remember D saying something like, to not do exactly the thing you're talking about doing.'

"Your dad sounded kinda serious when he said that stuff about us not leaving the castle." Paul said anxiously.

"*Our* dad. And that's not what I was talking about. There's a courtyard inside the castle walls where we can go without having to worry about getting lost." G explained.

'I can work with that.'

Paul thought for a moment, then broke into a smile before saying, "Yeah. That sounds good."

"We'd better hurry. It's not going to be light for much longer." G said as he stood.

It took a little effort for Paul to get up from the incredibly comfortable bed, but he was eventually able to catch up to G in the hallway.

* * * * *

"Toad!" G said happily as they walked into the great hall.

Paul was puzzled by the exclamation.

G ran across the room and hugged a small boy that Paul hadn't noticed.

"Paul, this is my cousin... *our* cousin, Toad." G said happily as he finally released the smaller boy from his hug.

'Are you sure it's not T?'

'No, of course not. That would be silly.'

As much as Paul wanted to ask about the name, he held his curiosity in check and simply said, "Hi, Toad."

The boy appeared to be about eight or nine years old and had the same dark hair as G's, although a little longer and somewhat wavy.

The boy looked at Paul, then slowly closed his large, dark eyes then, just as slowly, reopened them.

'Well, he's not exactly a hookah smoking caterpillar, but I think we're almost in that neighborhood.'

"Are your parents here?" G asked as he looked around.

Toad slowly looked upward, then turned his gaze back toward G.

"Yeah. They're probably tired from traveling. I'm glad you're here. Paul and I were about to go out to the courtyard to explore. Do you want to come with us?" G asked hopefully.

Toad slowly closed and reopened his eyes again, apparently in response to G's question.

'The kid communicates with eye movements?'

'Curiouser and curiouser.'

"Okay. You're probably tired, too. Maybe next time." G said with a smile, then moved in to give the boy another enthusiastic hug.

"I love you, Toad. Remember that." G said quietly, before releasing the boy.

Before Paul could formulate anything to say, G turned to him and quickly said, "C'mon. Let's go."

* * * * *

"Can't Toad speak?" Paul asked as they walked through nondescript corridors.

"Yeah. He can talk if he wants to, he just doesn't like to, sometimes." G answered casually.

G seemed to like the boy and accepted him just the way he was. Paul supposed that that was all he really needed to know. Besides, G *had* warned him that the people he'd be meeting might be a little... *peculiar*.

* * * * *

It seemed as though the courtyard led to another part of the castle that was no longer being used.

Not only was it getting too dark for them to do much more than a cursory inspection from the outside, but it was getting bitterly cold, too.

By the time they got back inside the house, Paul was incredibly grateful that they had taken the time to buy new warm clothes for their trip. Although he had been cold before, Paul couldn't remember ever having experienced what he would call 'bone chilling' cold.

* * * * *

By the time dinner was served, Paul was beginning to wonder about what kind of family his mom was marrying into. Upon entering the dining room, Paul had been introduced to Toad's parents, Kathryn and Horst, or 'Kat' and 'Horse' as they liked to be called.

Then, of course, there was Grandma Gruit. G hadn't been exaggerating about her in the slightest. She was thin and elegant with a permanent look of disdain etched on her face. When she spoke, it was with the greatest care and Paul couldn't help but get the sense that she was carefully choosing her words in an attempt to conceal her nefarious plans. She wasn't rude or threatening in any way, but one thing was for sure. Never, ever, under any circumstances, would he accept an apple from that woman.

The food that was served was a bit... old world, for Paul's unrefined tastes. It wasn't bad. He had no doubt that it was perfectly prepared in every detail. It's just that the *style* of food wasn't something that he was accustomed to.

Through the course of dinner, J and B kept the conversation going, filling people in about the goings on of absent relatives.

Paul couldn't force himself to pay attention to the talk about people that he had never met.

At one point during the meal, Paul looked across the table and found Toad smiling at him.

When Toad noticed, he immediately turned his attention back to his eating.

But Paul caught, in that one small glimpse of a smile, why G liked the boy so much.

* * * * *

"What do you think is taking your... our... *them* so long?" Paul asked G quietly as they went up the stairs.

"I think they went to town to get all their wedding stuff set up. I don't have any idea of what all is included in that, but it probably takes a while." G said frankly.

"I guess so." Paul said noncommittally.

"And there are some people in town who don't actually *like* us much. So that could slow them down." G added thoughtfully.

"Are we talking torches and pitchforks?" Paul asked cautiously as he stopped outside their bedroom door.

'Unfortunately, that mental image came to me a bit too easily.'

"More like trying to screw us out of our land and our money. I really don't know too much about that but Dad keeps up to date on it. You can ask him about it sometime if you want." G said as he lifted the latch and shouldered the door open.

"No. I guess I'm just nervous." Paul said as he followed G into the room.

"Is the weirdness getting to you, too much?" G asked with concern.

'Bing. Bing. Bing. Got it in one! Tell him what he's won, Johnny!'

"A little, maybe. I mean, I like your family. Everyone's been really nice. But you were right, those people aren't normal." Paul said frankly.

"From what I've seen of it, normal's not all it's cracked up to be." G said frankly.

Paul considered that for a moment before nodding his agreement.

'I grew up normal.'

'Every day of my life, so far, has been normal.'

'So I can say with some certainty, normal sucks.'

"And just so you know, you're doing fine. You're a little bit quiet, but I think everyone understands that. Just get to know them and pretty soon you'll see that most of them are alright." G said reassuringly.

*'I'm glad to know that I'm **passing**.'*

'Wait. What?'

"Most of them?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Well, yeah. Uncle Pear is kind of a douchebag. And if I ever shook hands with Cousin Teek, I'd be sure to count my fingers when I got my hand back. But besides them, I think everyone's pretty decent." G said thoughtfully.

'Good to know.'

'Filed for future reference.'

"What about Grandma Gruit? Do you think she'd ever really hurt anyone?" Paul asked carefully.

"Yeah. But only if they gave her a reason to. Otherwise, she just polishes her mirrors and makes her potions, just like any other grandma." G said with a smile.

Paul wanted to laugh, but found that he couldn't.

* * * * *

Despite the nap in the car and another one in the afternoon, both boys were tired enough to fall asleep before their parents had arrived back at the castle.

The next morning, the boys woke to find that they were still dressed in their clothes from the day before.

"Where's the bathroom?" Paul asked curiously as he looked around the room.

"I don't know. I guess we'll have to go exploring to find out." G said as he sat up in bed.

'You don't know? Aren't you supposed to be the fountain of all knowledge?'

'Fountain... Don't think about the water... trickling, tinkling, splashing...'

'Oh crap!'

"I'm okay with exploring, *after* I've used the bathroom." Paul said honestly.

"I don't know where the bathroom is in this wing of the house. I haven't stayed here before. But if you really have to go, right now, then you can just use the bathroom downstairs." G said simply.

'Here are our choices, we either run, right now. Or we can wait a minute and float down there.'

"Yeah." Paul said as he slipped on his shoes.

"Hold up. I gotta go, too." G said quickly.

* * * * *

After their business was taken care of, G and Paul returned to the wing of the house where their bedroom was located, and did eventually find a very nice bathroom at the end of the hall. They didn't know how practical it was, considering that it was the only bathroom for seven bedrooms, but supposed that considering the alternative, it wasn't too bad.

They enjoyed a nice breakfast with Grandma B and Grandma Gruit, although Paul was careful not to leave his plate unattended in Grandma Gruit's presence, even for an instant. It's not that he didn't trust G's assessment of her, but he felt that it was best to err on the side of caution.

After breakfast, they decided to attempt another exploration of the ruins at the far side of the courtyard. However, about five minutes in, the frigid cold convinced them that the ruins were perfectly fine left undisturbed.

It wasn't until just before lunch that they caught up with their parents. Both boys

were surprised to be told that they were expected at a practice ceremony in the great hall, promptly at five. When they inquired further, they were told that it was going to be a plainclothes run-through of the ceremony to get everyone's placement and cues sorted out before the actual ceremony the following night.

Neither boy complained, and although they wouldn't admit it to each other, both of them were kind of excited about being included in the ceremony.

* * * * *

With all the eccentricities of G's family, lunch was surprisingly unremarkable. People were laughing and talking and sometimes talking over each other. Everyone in the family that Paul had met, so far, attended the lunch as well as a few that he hadn't. It turned out that with so many people carrying on so many different conversations, that he didn't get the opportunity to be introduced. That actually suited him just fine.

At one point during the meal, Paul caught Toad smiling at him again and he automatically smiled back. This time, Toad continued to stare at him for a moment longer before shyly looking away.

The arrival of Nazy and Vinda after lunch was something of a surprise to Paul. He had actually forgotten that they would be coming. But once the surprise had worn off, he was genuinely happy to see them. Not only were they people that he at least had *something* in common with, in that they went to the same school and were also his own age, but most importantly, they weren't part of the family, so it didn't feel like it was just him against everyone else.

Paul and G helped Nazy and Vinda take their things up to their room, while doing so, everyone gave a dramatic retelling about their experiences while traveling.

When they went down to the great hall together, it was nearing time for the wedding rehearsal. Nazy and Vinda weren't taking part in the ceremony, but they were asked to sit back where the guests would be and let them know if they could see and hear well enough.

Paul was mostly just standing around, waiting to be told what to do. When that time finally came, he didn't like what he was told.

"You want me to walk up the aisle and drop flower petals?" Paul asked incredulously.

'Flower child?'

'Do you want me to wear a ringlet of flowers in my hair and sing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star when I get there, too?'

'Damn it, Mom. I'm fifteen!'

"Well, D is going to have G serve as his best man, and I wanted you included in the wedding, too." His mother explained.

"Mom. I'm giving you away. I don't care what the ceremony says about it, I'm your family, that's my job. If you need someone to throw flower petals, why not ask Toad. I bet he'd do a good job." Paul said firmly.

Beth looked at D for a moment with uncertainty, then finally asked, "Would you like to

walk me up the aisle, too?"

"Yeah. I'd like that." Paul said with a smile.

'Whew! Crisis averted.'

'Sorry, Toad.'

'I'll find a way to make it up to you.'

"Do you want me to ask Toad for you?" G asked his father quietly.

"No. Let's just skip the flower petals. Just my luck, someone would slip and fall on them and break their neck on our special day." D said honestly.

"Maybe he could be the ring bearer." G suggested carefully.

"If he eats it, you're going to be grounded... forever." D said firmly.

"Toad will probably be happier just *watching* the wedding, anyway." G said quietly.

* * * * *

Once everyone's roles were defined, all of them took their places.

"Where's Uncle Neese?" D asked as he looked around.

"He probably fell asleep, again." B said in frustration as she went to look for him.

"Maybe we should have someone else perform the ceremony." D said anxiously.

"Great-great-Uncle Neese is the oldest member of the family. Unless he declines, it's his rightful honor." J said seriously.

"Is he a minister or something?" Paul asked his mother quietly.

"We had the *legal* wedding before a judge, yesterday, when we were in town. We'll be having the wedding *ceremony* tomorrow night." D explained.

"And you don't have to have any special certification or anything to perform the ceremony." Beth added simply.

"I found him." B said as she helped an extremely elderly man into the room.

"Are you alright, Uncle Neese? We don't have to do this right now if you're not feeling up to it." D said frankly.

"I'm feeling fine, I just went to the kitchen because I wanted a pickle." Uncle Neese said as he tottered along, toward the front of the room.

"Okay, everyone, take your places! To begin, Uncle Neese will already be up here to officiate..."

* * * * *

"Way to go, Paul!" Nazy said as soon as the practice ceremony was over.

"Yeah. Way to speak your mind!" Vinda added happily.

As G approached, he didn't say a word, but the look in his eyes told Paul everything he needed to know. Knowing that G was proud of him made his world feel complete.

"So, did someone say something about us having food after this thing? I'm starving." Nazy asked seriously.

"Yeah. It's probably already on the table. This way." G said as he led the way.

* * * * *

Paul, G, Nazy and Vinda stayed up later than any of them really needed to, but it was refreshing to have some lighthearted fun among a group of friends.

It was a somewhat unfamiliar thing for Paul, given his previous circumstances, and that night he decided that he very much *would* like to become used to it.

* * * * *

Paul woke with G curled into his side and felt that the world was honestly a beautiful place to be.

Although his stepfather-to-be appeared to have more money than God, the money played such a small part in their daily lives that it really wasn't a consideration. The way that D accepted him and seemed to care for him filled a void that Paul had carried all of his life.

Then there was G. Paul couldn't deny his feelings any longer. He was in love. But the strange thing was that after meeting Nazy and Vinda and hearing about their former relationship with G, Paul had come to the realization that his relationship with G wasn't the center of his world. If something happened that they didn't work out for some reason, Paul would be sad, of course, but in time, he would be fine. And, hopefully, they would be able to maintain some sort of friendship as G, Nazy and Vinda had done.

Finally, there was G's family. There was no doubt that the people were crazy as bedbugs. But they were all so nice and accepting of him, a total stranger, and welcomed him into their family. It would be the height of ingratitude for him to do less than accept every crazy insane last one of them.

"You're thinking loud enough to wake the dead." G mumbled into Paul's chest.

"I was just thinking about how much I like your family." Paul said as he began stroking G's hair.

"*Our* family. Go back to sleep." G said as he snuggled in a little tighter.

"*Our* family." Paul whispered as he closed his eyes.

* * * * *

There were about a million things that needed to be done to prepare for a wedding. And all of them appeared to be being done by people rushing in different directions.

"Watching them, rushing around like that, makes me tired." Vinda said with a sigh.

"You'd better not let them hear you say that or they'll put you to work." G said frankly.

"You know, I'm going to spend one of my weekend days here with you and the other on flights trying to get back home in time for school." Vinda said with a glance at him.

"Are you sorry you came?" G asked, quite seriously.

"No. I really want to be here. I'm just saying that I'm going to be wiped out when I get back." Vinda said frankly.

"When are we going back?" Paul asked curiously.

"I don't think Dad ever said. We might want to check with him about that." G said thoughtfully.

"Nah. What fun would that be? Let it be a surprise." Paul said with a grin.

"Um, you've got an excuse and a tutor. I'm going to have to make up whatever I missed." G said frankly.

Paul turned to Nazy and Vinda before saying, "He's always so serious."

"Cold cuts for lunch! Make sure you eat your fill, dinner is the reception following the ceremony." B called out as she rushed across the room, carrying a potted plant.

Nazy glanced at Vinda and extended his elbow as he asked, "Shall we?"

Vinda broke into a grin and placed a hand on the elbow as she said, "We shall."

G and Paul both chuckled at the performance as Nazy and Vinda slowly walked away, with regal bearing befitting a reigning monarch.

G smiled at Paul as he quirked an eyebrow, then raised his elbow.

Paul grinned at him then followed Vinda's example and allowed G to escort him into an elegant, refined, cold cut lunch.

* * * * *

The frenetic activity before lunch was nothing compared to what followed.

People that Paul had never seen before kept appearing and all of them seemed determined that theirs was the most important job in the entire wedding.

"C'mon. It's time for us to get into our suits." G said, snapping Paul out of his mental wandering.

"It's still over an hour away." Paul said distractedly.

"Yeah, but we have to get naked, then get dressed. If we go, *right now*, we might be able to work one more step into that process." G said urgently.

Paul broke into a smile, then said, "Let's hurry."

'That's why I love him.'

'Yeah. I said it. I love him.'

'Hopefully, soon, I'll find a way to say it aloud.'

* * * * *

In the short time that Paul and G had been 'together', they hadn't ever really *been* together. They got naked, they kissed, they snuggled... and the next thing they knew, they were waking up.

When they got up to their room, both of them shed their clothes almost before the door was closed.

"Who did that?" Paul suddenly asked, when he saw that their suits had been laid out on the bed for them.

"Dunno." G said before moving in to give Paul a long, firm kiss.

Any further questions fled Paul's mind as he became lost in the sensation of long *naked* kiss.

Thanks to their recent period of celibacy, both were exceptionally ready to take things to another level. So, as things arose, they were dealt with in short order. Admittedly, things were a bit awkward. But with luck, they were going to have the opportunity to perfect their technique in the days, weeks, months and years to come.

* * * * *

'Seven bedrooms.'

'One bathroom.'

'Seriously?'

*'It doesn't sound all **that** crazy, until you take into account that all the people in all seven bedrooms are trying to get ready to attend a wedding... at the same time.'*

Paul had rediscovered his nervousness before making his way downstairs.

People were still milling around, still gathering, so Paul had time to collect himself.

It wasn't as though *he* were the one getting married, after all.

In fact, all he had to do was walk his mother up the aisle and stand aside. It's not like he had any words to memorize or anything to do.

"Are you ready?" G asked as he approached.

"Yeah. I think so. Have you got the ring?" Paul asked carefully.

"Yes. Dad's asked me, like, six times already." G said with a slight roll of his eyes.

"Look at this! It looks like you're having an old fashioned Halloween wedding! I guess my invitation must have gotten lost in the mail!" A woman said theatrically as she entered the room. She was wearing a burgundy colored full length gown that was covered with glittery jewels.

"Oh, shit!" G gasped when he saw the woman.

"What's wrong? Who's that?" Paul asked with concern.

'The woman didn't look strange... comparatively.'

'She did seem to have an excessive amount of jewelry of all varieties, but... again... if you looked at the rest of the guests in attendance, she wasn't even a blip on the weird-o-meter.'

"That's my mom."

"I hope you don't mind, but I let myself in." The woman said as she sauntered into the room. Truth be told, as tight as the dress appeared to be, her choices were probably to either elegantly saunter, or inelegantly shuffle.

"You're not welcome here, M. You know that." Grandpa J said as he stepped forward.

'Wait. Hold it right there.'

"Your mom's name is M? Seriously?" Paul asked incredulously.

"Shhh... watch." G said anxiously.

Grandpa J stepped forward, presumably to show her to the door.

"Get away from me, you... insect!" M spat with disgust, then popped open a paper fan that she'd been holding and fanned it once in his direction.

Paul couldn't believe his eyes when J was blown off his feet and thrown back nearly the length of the great hall.

At the same time, a rather... *abundant* woman stepped forward as did D's mother, Grandma B.

"It doesn't have to be like this, M. You can just leave." B tried to reason with her.

'I can just leave.' M repeated in a mocking tone, then angrily said, "Tried that. Didn't work. Thought I'd try something else."

M swished her fan in B's direction, but two little kids... or something... flew threw the air in the blink of an eye and got in the way.

Both of them were hit by a gust of wind and blown back. But B was unharmed, being shielded as she was whisked away by the woman wearing red with black polka dots.

Paul couldn't help but glance back at the two little girls, not only to see if they were hurt, but also to try and determine *what the hell* they were.

As both little girls impacted the far wall, Paul realized that they both had wings. Then, in an instant, they were perfectly normal looking, full grown women.

"What's going on here?" Paul asked disbelievingly.

"We're witches." G answered absently, focusing most of his attention on his mother.

"Come on! I thought you'd put up more of a fight than this! I brought something for all of you. And once every last one of you is dead and forgotten, then I can *finally* get on with my life." M said, drawing Paul's attention forward again.

A skirmish line, of sorts, had formed. Paul didn't know most of the people, and some

had so drastically transformed that he couldn't make out who they were.

A black swarm gathered in the air behind M, and it looked for a moment like it might simply consume her. But instead, M waved her paper fan in that direction and the cloud of insects dispersed. A moment later, the robust woman wearing red with black polka dots lay sprawled on the floor.

"Aunt Zennie!" G gasped in horror.

"Rot! Wither! And Burn!" Grandma Gruit shrieked as she set fire to a little doll that she was holding.

"Oh, please!" M scoffed, then absently flicked her fan in Grandma Gruit's direction. In an instant, Grandma Gruit was flying across the room. Fortunately, for her at least, she landed on three other people.

A swarm of bats seemed to come from all directions at once. M was able to repel them, but not with as much ease as she'd been able to dispel the other attacks.

"That's better. What else have you got?" M asked with a maniacal grin.

Both of Toad's parents rushed at M from opposite directions. Toad's father, Horse, seemed to have increased his body mass by about half, and all of it was muscle. On M's other side, Kat had transformed into some sort of werecat creature that was primarily fangs and claws.

M took a step back and with one broad swipe of her fan, both attacks were immediately repelled.

"STOP!!!" A child's voice bellowed, then the unmistakable sound of... well... puke.

Paul turned in time to see Toad being rushed away by some of the adults. He looked a little different, like he had thicker, bumpier skin. But he appeared to be unharmed.

"You little monster!" M howled in disgust. Apparently, Toad had been able to projectile vomit on her from about twenty feet away.

"Why are you doing this, M? There's nothing left between us. There's no reason for this." D said as he stepped forward.

"You!" M screeched in rage, "You stole my life! And I'll get it back when you're dead!"

"Yeah. That makes sense." D said dubiously, then made a casual gesture toward the folding chairs. Immediately, about a dozen of the chairs seemed to come alive and all of them started scampering toward M, almost like spiders, closing in on their prey.

"No. No. I can't have that." M said as she used her fan to blow the chairs away.

"M... Emmaline, listen to me. You need help. We can get you help." D said in a voice that was trying to sound calm and patient.

"I DON'T WANT YOUR HELP!!!" M exploded in fury, then took out a small dagger and started making slashing movements in D's direction.

Cuts started appearing on his chest and forearms, although he was at least ten feet away.

"Don't hurt him!" Nazzy screamed as a transparent humanoid figure rose up through the stone floor, as though it had no substance. But as soon as the zombie's feet were above ground, it became fully solid and started moving toward M.

A strange sound drew Paul's attention and he saw Vinda reading from a small book. Chanting, actually. Even as she spoke the words, a misty form was coming into being before her.

"Looks like you've brought in some new blood." M said as she looked from Nazzy to Vinda. First she took hold of a talisman from around her neck and held it in the direction of the zombie. As soon as she did, the zombie dropped to the ground and stopped moving. Next, she took a ward off her belt, and waving it in Vinda's direction, dispelled the spirit before it was fully formed.

"Fortunately, I know what to do with blood." M said with a smile of self-satisfaction.

"Cheesy, Mom!" G said from Paul's side in a bored tone.

Paul turned to look at G and was shocked to see that G's face seemed to be painted, like a clown... a dangerous, nightmarish, clown.

"Oh, baby. Don't be mad at Mummy. I'll be done with this in just a minute, and then we'll be able to start our new life together."

"Um, no." G said, then made a grand lifting gesture with his hands.

As he did, flames started to rise up all around M.

"I should have known..." M said in a tone of long suffering as she took another amulet from around her neck, this one looking like a little crystal ball. She waved the little crystal dramatically as she said, "Clear from my sight that which is unreal." In the space of a heartbeat, all the flames had disappeared.

"Kids..." M said dramatically, then turned suddenly and thrust the dagger in G's direction, or she would have if two small demonic imps weren't biting into her arm and twisting, like dogs with a chew toy.

"Get off of me!" M screamed as she tried to swipe her fan at them. Although the fan did have some slight effect, it didn't convince them to stop what they were doing.

"Whoever's the summoner, she's vulnerable to demons! Summon more!" Great-great-Uncle Neese called out urgently.

"That's all I can do! I haven't summoned anything in fifteen years." Beth called in return.

"Mom?!" Paul asked in surprise.

"We'll talk later." Beth said as she kept her attention on M, who was slowly gaining the advantage over her imps.

"Demons! Of all the things..." M said in frustration as she finally got the second demon to release.

A barrage of ladybugs, animated chairs and a table, another zombie (perhaps the same zombie, hard to tell), and a ghostly wraith all moved in to attack M

simultaneously.

"I don't think so!" M said as she used a broad swipe of her fan to clear all her attackers away in one move.

"Now, let's start with you." M said as she turned her attention toward Beth. "I can't have you summoning anymore demons, can I?"

"No." D said as he hurried to shield Beth with his own body.

"We won't let you hurt her." G said as he moved to his father's side.

"Fine." M said with a shrug. "I'll just kill you all, then."

In that moment, Paul saw the people he loved, gathered together, bravely facing their extermination.

Rage rose up from deep within him.

It was a rage filled with everything he always wanted but could never have.

That rage was brought forth, into physical being, as everything good in his life, everything worth living for, was now being threatened.

It was time for him to take *action*.

A howl from the depths of hell flowed out of his mouth as the earth started shaking and flames started rising from different points around the room.

"STOP HER!" A deep voice growled and Paul was surprised to find that it was his.

"Yes, master." Another voice responded, with sickening clarity.

Then a demonic entity rose up from a fiery pit that had appeared in the floor and grabbed M from behind.

Paul knew that the demon had been summoned by him and would follow his orders. Uncertain of what to do next, he turned to look at G with question.

When Paul tried to take a step, he realized that it wasn't that simple. It appeared that he would have to learn how to walk on hooves.

"What should I do with her?" Paul asked G uncertainly and was once again surprised by the deep gravelly tone of his own voice.

"Oh, baby. You know that mummy was only kidding, don't you? I would never ever hurt my iddle widdle baby." M told her son in baby talk.

"Go to hell." G said with disgust.

"You heard him." Paul said to his demon.

"Summoned, I come to serve. It will be as you say." The demon said reverently, then descended into the flaming pit he had emerged from, carrying M with him as she kicked and screamed, all the way down.

As soon as the demon was out of sight, the floor returned to its normal appearance.

"Paul... Wow. I mean... Wow." G said in amazement.

"How do I stop... this?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Just put it back where you got it from. Remember what it was like coming out, and just put it right back in there." G said confidently.

Paul looked at his claw-like hands, then reached up and felt the horns on his head, trying to remember the feelings he had felt.

"How is this even possible? Even a witch, born with a natural talent for summoning, can't call up a demon on their first try. It takes *years* of practice." D said in amazement.

"Paul probably has the summoning talent because of me. It runs in my family." Beth said nervously.

"Even so..." D said with a shake of his head.

"Add to that... You see, Paul's father..." Beth said reluctantly.

"What about him? Who is he?" Paul asked firmly.

"I can't tell you his name. You might accidently summon him. Trust me, you REALLY don't want that." Beth implored him to understand.

"My father is a demon?" Paul asked in surprise.

"Yes. And that's why my family didn't want to have anything to do with me... *with us*. I'm a summoner who summoned, and became pregnant by, a demon." Beth said honestly.

"I can see why a family of summoners might have a problem with that." D said frankly.

"When I found out that I was pregnant, I made sure to banish him back to the demon realm before I lost my ability to do so." Beth continued to explain.

"Hey, I tell you what." D said as he put an arm around Beth and pulled her into a gentle hug.

"What?" She asked cautiously.

"I'm willing to overlook your ex if you're willing to overlook mine." D said hopefully.

Beth looked at D with surprise, then broke into a smile as she said, "We have a deal."

"So, you still wanna get married, then?" D asked hopefully.

"Absolutely." Beth said warmly.

* * * * *

It took a while for everyone to get things in order again.

Remarkably, no one was seriously injured.

There were a few bumps and bruises, but nothing that would impede the ceremony.

Several people made a point of telling Toad what a brave and wonderful thing he had done. That's when Toad's parents revealed that Toad's vomit attack on M was toxic and would have disabled her, if it had had enough time for the neurotoxin to take effect.

* * * * *

As the music played, Paul walked his mother up the aisle, in his bare feet and what was left of his shredded suit.

After he presented his mother to her intended, he stepped back and looked past D to find G looking back at him.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here to join this couple in matrimony. Do you, Elizabeth Hiller, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?" Uncle Neese asked solemnly.

"I do."

"Do you, Aloysius Darroch take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do."

"I now pronounce you man and wife." Uncle Neese said happily.

A cheer rose up from all assembled as the couple kissed.

* * * * *

"Aloysius? How did he get 'D' from Aloysius?" Paul asked G quietly.

"I kept the 'G' in my name because that's all that was worth saving." G said in a leading tone.

"Okay, I get it. If nothing's usable in the first name, you skip to the last." Paul said with a chuckle.

"Yep." G said with a grin, then rhetorically asked, "Half-demon, huh?"

"Yeah. It looks that way." Paul said frankly.

"I guess that's the end of me being the Alpha." G said regretfully.

"No. You'll always be my Alpha." Paul said firmly.

"Always?"

"Forever." Paul said with certainty, then sealed it with a kiss.

And They All Lived Happily Ever After

Parvenu 2: All Hallows' Eve

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"Well, even though we went through a rough patch, everything seems to have turned out alright." D said as he approached the boys with Beth at his side.

'A rough patch? I'd hate to see what he considers full-on chaos!'

"All's well that ends well." G cheerfully supplied.

"But that's the best part. This is only the beginning." D said warmly as he cuddled Beth to his side.

"Are you alright, Paul?" Beth asked gently.

*'Am I alright about finding out that my biological father is **literally** a demon?'*

'Am I alright about watching everyone I love almost get killed?'

'Am I alright about finding out that everything that I always believed to be true turned out to be lies?'

"I'll have to get back to you on that." Paul slowly answered.

"By the way, have you had enough time to think about adoption? Yes? No? Maybe?" D asked curiously. His seemingly casual tone was in stark contrast to the seriousness of his question.

Paul couldn't help but smile at D's directness and quietly answered, "Yes."

"Good." D said with satisfaction, then a curious look came over his face before he hesitantly asked, "Was that 'yes', that you've had enough time? Or 'yes', that you want to be adopted?"

Paul laughed aloud at the question, then said, "Both. And before you ask, the answer to your next question is also, 'yes'. I *do* want to have my name changed."

"Good. I'm glad." D said sincerely, then quietly added, "I'll get to work on that as soon as we get back to the States."

"Okay." Paul agreed as G put an arm around him and hugged him tightly.

"Right answer?" Paul asked with a smile.

"Very right." G assured him as he continued to unabashedly hold him.

* * * * *

Once D and Beth had moved on to talk to some of their wedding guests, Nazy and Vinda approached as one and Nazy immediately asked, "A demon, huh?"

"Is that a problem?" Paul asked cautiously.

"A problem?! That's the most awesome-cool thing EVER!" Nazy nearly yelled.

Paul looked at G uncertainly.

"Demons have fanboys. Don't ask me why." G said simply.

"Are *you* a demon fanboy?" Paul asked with a grin.

"I never was before, but I'm beginning to understand the appeal." G said warmly.

"I just think it's wonderful that you're one of us! I don't like having to be careful about what I can and can't talk about." Vinda said frankly.

"I'm just glad that you decided to be my friends anyway, even when you thought I was... normal." Paul finished quietly.

"Well, of course we were! If G likes you, then we kinda have to like you, too." Nazy said frankly.

"We'd at least have to try." Vinda agreed, then quickly added, "But I guess it's just good for us that G wouldn't like someone who was a jerk."

"So, from the look of it, you *just* found out about witches when G's mom showed up and the magic started flying around." Nazy said speculatively.

"Yeah. I had a feeling that something was off... but I probably could have explained that away as having to do with being in a fourteenth century castle on Halloween." Paul said frankly.

"Where is everybody going?" Vinda asked suddenly as she looked around curiously.

"The reception! We're missing the food!" Nazy yelled.

Paul and G shared a smile at his reaction.

As Nazy and Vinda hurried away, G put a hand on Paul's arm to hold him back and quietly asked, "Are you really alright?"

"There's a lot that I don't understand and I'm a little bit scared of what I'm going to find out. But as long as I've got you and my mom and your dad... I think that I'll be okay." Paul said honestly.

"Good. We'd better hurry up and get in there before Nazy hogs all the eye of newt." G said with a grin.

"You're kidding? Aren't you?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Probably."

* * * * *

There was no doubt that the meal was a celebration. The center of the table was heaped with every kind of food imaginable... and then some.

Everyone in attendance was chattering amiably with everyone else while they ate.

Paul was a little bit overwhelmed by it, seeing as he'd never been around ANY family before. But he was also grateful that none of the family were making a big deal over his transformation earlier.

'I'm a demon... well, a half-demon.'

'I don't even know how to be a half-demon. What do they do?'

"When we're done eating, how about we find someplace private where we can do some magic?" Nazy suggested hopefully.

"Paul and I did some exploring, yesterday. It looks like there are lots of good places that we can go where no one will bother us." G assured him.

"Just make sure there's lot's of room. My zombies need room to move around." Nazy reminded him.

"This place has, like, a thousand rooms. We'll find a good one."

'They all seem so casual about it. I guess it wouldn't hurt if I asked them some questions.'

"Can each of you do only one kind of magic, or is there magic that works for everyone?" Paul asked curiously.

"Vinda? This is more your thing than ours." G said frankly.

"Yeah. Let Vinda explain it, she understands it best." Nazy confirmed between bites of food.

"It's not that hard." Vinda said with a roll of her eyes, then looked at Paul and explained, "It comes down to your power, your natural ability and your control. There are spells that call for more power than I have, so when I try them, they fail. There are spells that are too different from my natural ability, so those usually fail, too. And the worst is when you cast a spell that *doesn't* fail, but you aren't strong enough to control it. Then just about anything can happen."

G nodded, then said, "Some people's primary ability is transformation, so their magic really only works on them."

"Well, some of them can do 'basic magic', but they're usually pretty weak at it." Vinda gently added.

"What's 'basic magic'?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Alignments, tangentials, lagoriths..." G said in a bored tone before noticing the 'totally lost' expression that Paul was wearing.

"The 'basic magic' is a collection of simple spells that most witches can do. They're nothing flashy, but they can make life easier." Nazzy said simply.

"Right. But the more complex the spell, the more likely it is that you won't be able to cast it, unless it falls into your specialty." Vinda said seriously.

"Try thinking of it like a tree. You're on a branch, I'm on a branch, Nazzy and Vinda are each on a branch. The trunk is where the basic spells are, that most witches can use. Nazzy and Vinda's branches are both close together, since they're both summoners. But their specialties are different enough that they can't use each other's spells... You haven't crossed over yet, have you?" G asked curiously.

"Not yet. Maybe when we get stronger." Nazzy confirmed, then thoughtfully added, "Once he gets some training, Paul might be able to use some of our spells, too, since his ability seems to be rooted in summoning."

"I don't know if 'demon summoning' works differently or how far removed it is. I've never even met a demon summoner before." G said frankly.

"Are they rare?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I don't know. They could be. I just know that we don't have any in our family." G said frankly.

"Until now." Nazzy added with a smile.

"And I guess you should know that 'demon summoners' have kind of a bad reputation among some groups of witches." Vinda reluctantly said.

'That doesn't sound good.'

"Not that we're like that!" Nazzy quickly interrupted.

"Right." G confirmed, then playfully added, "Some of my best friends are 'demon summoners'."

Paul smiled at the declaration.

"It's not like they're hated or hunted or anything like that. Some people just look at

their type of magic as being a little 'blacker' than they're comfortable with." Vinda said seriously.

"So, they think that we're evil?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Mostly." Nazzy said with a casual shrug, then quickly added, "But not everyone thinks that way. Some of us really respect that you have such a cool and powerful ability."

"Fanboy." G said to Nazzy with a smirk.

"I think that the people who disapprove see your specialty of magic as being evil. Not you." Vinda patiently corrected.

"Big difference." Nazzy huffed.

"Nazzy, you summon *zombies*. Some of the 'Rainbows and Unicorns' crowd look down on you just as much as they look down on demon summoners." Vinda said frankly.

There was a long moment of silence, then G quietly said, "Try not to worry about it too much. Most witches today know that the power you're born with is the luck of the draw. It's really only the hoity-toity bunch who pay any attention to that."

"Yeah. Since they're born with sparkly fluffy bunny magic, they think that they're better than everyone else." Nazzy said wearily.

"Are there a lot of witches like that?" Paul asked with concern.

"I don't know. We tend to travel in different circles. Let's just say that I know that there are *some* of them around." G said frankly.

"From what I saw during the fight, I don't think we have any fluffy bunnies here." Nazzy said frankly.

G laughed, then said, "No. The closest we have to that are my cousins Grace and Wanda and during the fight, they were out there, defending Grandma B."

"Which ones were they?" Paul asked cautiously as he tried to remember the details of the battle.

"In their fairy forms, they look like little girls with wings." G said simply.

"I remember them! That was brave of them to jump out in front of that attack." Paul said seriously.

"Yeah." G agreed, then continued, "Most of us are stronger and more resistant to damage in our transformed states... well, except for me."

"I don't know how strong you are, but you sure do look awesome." Paul assured him.

G seemed to consider for a moment, then smiled and said, "I guess that's almost as good."

'I won't let anyone hurt you.'

Before their conversation could continue, the sound of a spoon clinking against the side of a glass drew everyone's attention.

Paul turned to see D standing with Beth at his side.

"I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of you for sharing in our wedding. The preliminary excitement notwithstanding, all of you helped to make this day special for us as well as making it one of the more 'memorable' weddings in recent history." D said warmly.

A few chuckles floated around the table at D's playful words.

"To add to the joy of this day, my new wife's son has accepted my offer to adopt him and has also chosen to accept our family name. Everyone, please join me in welcoming Paul Darroch into the family." D said in a booming voice.

A round of applause rose up and a few of the more vocal members of the family let out 'woops' of joy.

'Maybe not being part of a family wasn't so bad.'

'At least it was quieter... and I didn't have a room full of people looking at me.'

Paul could feel his face reddening and had to fight the urge to crawl under the table.

Unexpectedly, G reached over and put an arm around Paul, then gave him a firm kiss on the cheek.

As much as Paul wanted to hide before, *now* the only thing that he wanted was to simply cease to exist.

"Starting a new family and a new life can be a challenge. Knowing that all of you are supporting us will help to carry us through the hills and valleys that are to come. Thank you, all of you, for standing with us." D said sincerely.

'Okay. I guess when he puts it like that, maybe having a family isn't so bad.'

Paul watched as D and Beth walked, arm in arm, away from their place at the table and out the door.

As Paul noticed various people around the table getting up from their chairs, G quietly said, "Let's go."

"Where to next?" Paul asked curiously.

"Let's go find a place to do some magic." G answered simply.

"I need to go back to our room and get some more shoes. My other ones didn't survive the wedding." Paul said quietly.

"Sounds like a plan. You ready?" G asked with a smile.

Paul looked around and saw that Nazzy and Vinda were expectantly waiting for his agreement.

Just as he was about to answer, Paul's attention was drawn by two people approaching.

"Welcome to the family, Paul. We're so glad to be having you." Kat said warmly.

"Thank you." Paul shyly responded.

"If this family function proceeds like most, we're probably going to be gathering into groups and catching each other up on what's been going on with our individual families and reminiscing about days gone by." Horst added.

Paul was rather proud of himself for not visibly cringing at the declaration.

"I'm having the feeling that, at a time like this, Tadhg might enjoy your company more than ours. Would you be minding if he joined you for a bit?" Kat asked hopefully.

Paul was confused for a moment, but then saw Toad peek one eye from behind his father's left side.

"We were planning to go to one of the unused rooms and practice our magic. Is that going to be a problem?" G asked cautiously.

"No. Not at all. Tadhg has just started learning his spellcasting. Although he's made respectable progress with his natural ability, I think it might be good for him to witness others who have progressed to the next level. It will show him what he will someday be able to achieve." Horst said thoughtfully.

"If Toad wants to go with us, we'll be happy to have him." G said easily.

"Thank you, G. I'm hoping all of you will be having a wonderful evening." Kat said warmly.

"Enjoy your walk down memory lane." G said with a slight smirk.

Horst squatted down to look his son in the eyes and quietly said, "Your mother and I will be in the sitting room, right over there, if you need us."

Toad slowly closed, then opened his eyes.

"Good. Have fun." Horst said before engulfing his son in a firm hug.

'Yeah. That's what a dad should be.'

* * * * *

"Do you know where we're going?" Paul asked cautiously, enjoying the feeling of wearing shoes again.

Despite their previous explorations, Paul found that he didn't recognize the wing of the building that they were entering.

"No. But I think that we're far enough away from the great hall that we probably won't run into anyone else. We should be able to use any of these rooms." G said as he continued walking.

That being said, Nazy walked to the nearest door and cautiously opened it.

After a moment, Vinda hesitantly asked, "What is it?"

"Dark." Nazy said frankly.

Vinda rolled her eyes, then patiently asked, "Why don't you turn on the light?"

"That's what I'm trying to do. I just can't find the light switch." Nazy said as he continued to feel along the wall inside the door.

"They probably don't have electricity in this part of the castle yet." G quietly offered.

"Oh. I didn't think of that." Vinda said with surprise.

"If we have to go to a part of the castle that has electricity, then we're probably going to be close to other people and get interrupted." Nazy said cautiously.

Paul's eyes were drawn by a movement. He watched as Toad walked past Nazy, into the dark room, all by himself.

A few seconds later, there was a flash, then a warm glowing light shining out through the doorway.

"Or we could just use magic." G said with a grin.

"I should have thought of that." Nazy grumbled before walking into the room.

* * * * *

"Good work, Toad. Thanks." G said appreciatively as he walked into the large empty room. Paul noticed that the room was as bright as though it were being lit by the noonday sun, but at the same time, there wasn't a light *source* anywhere in evidence.

"What do you think this room was used for?" Vinda asked curiously as she looked around.

"I don't have a clue. In fact, I don't think that I've ever been in here before." G said honestly.

"Do you think it'll be alright if we do our magic in here?" Vinda asked cautiously.

"Yeah. As long as we don't make a mess, I don't think anyone will care." G said speculatively.

"Do you want to go first?" Nazzy asked G cautiously.

"No, you go ahead. Once you've got your zombies up and running, I can do my thing." G assured him.

"Thanks." Nazzy said appreciatively.

Paul watched curiously as Nazzy seemed to freeze in place.

The transformation wasn't as dramatic as some that Paul had witnessed earlier, but now that he was paying attention, he could see the color drain out of Nazzy's skin until it became an unnatural looking pasty white, with blue veins beginning to show through.

The next thing Paul noticed was the color fading from Nazzy's brown eyes. The brown turned first to hazel, then to blue. The color became lighter and lighter until it was such a pale blue that it was nearly white.

When Nazzy reached out his arms, Paul reflexively took a step back.

"Don't worry. Nazzy's got good control. You won't get hurt." G quietly assured him.

Before Paul could think of what to say in response, he saw a glowing figure start to emerge from the floor in front of Nazzy.

Paul could see Nazzy straining as he slowly lifted his arms, trying to pull the man-shaped figure up through the stone floor with the force of his will.

Just as had happened in the great hall, during the battle, as soon as the transparent glowing figure was completely above ground, it stopped glowing and became fully solid.

"Nice! You're getting a lot better at that." G said in an impressed voice.

Nazzy wilted with relief as he let out a slow gust of breath.

"By the way, where do you get the zombies from? Is this one of my relatives?" G asked curiously.

"I really don't know. I just do the summoning and I guess whatever 'remains' are closest answer my call." Nazzy said thoughtfully.

Paul blinked in surprise as he realized that what Nazy was doing might easily be thought of as 'desecration'.

"But this isn't 'resurrection', it's 'reanimation'. Even if this *is* one of your ancestors, I'm not messing with their soul or disturbing their rest. This is just the meat." Nazy said frankly.

'Thanks for the clarification, Nazy.'

'Remind me not to bury anyone that I care about anywhere near you.'

"So, Paul, what do you think? Pretty cool, huh?" G asked with a smile.

Paul didn't want to lie, but in this instance he also didn't want to tell the whole truth. So, instead, he formulated a question to hopefully divert the conversation.

"Will the zombie do whatever you say?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah, mostly. But I can only give it one or two word instructions. If I try to do much more than that, it usually just stops and won't do anything." Nazy said frankly.

"How hard is it to send it back?" Paul asked curiously.

Nazy smiled, then made a quick gesture with his hand.

The zombie immediately became transparent and sank through the floor.

"Did it go back to where you got it from? I mean, like, back to its grave?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah... maybe... possibly... actually, I have no idea." Nazy finally admitted.

'That doesn't make me feel a whole lot better.'

"Vinda, do you want to go next?" G asked curiously.

"Yeah. I can do a little one, just to show Paul what it is that I do." Vinda said easily as she took a small book out of her back pocket.

"I'm going to summon another zombie while she's doing that." Nazy said quietly, careful not to disturb Vinda as she began chanting.

G nodded either his agreement or his acknowledgement.

Paul watched Vinda carefully, to see if he could detect any type of transformation as she read aloud.

Although he didn't see any change in her appearance, her voice seemed to have gained an 'echoing' quality and no matter how closely Paul tried to listen, he couldn't seem to make out the words that Vinda was saying. He was certain that she was

speaking in some language that he wasn't familiar with, but what he was hearing was different. Her words were somehow muffled or slurred to the point that he couldn't distinguish an identifiable sequence of sounds.

Paul lost track of time as he continued to watch.

Even though he had been looking at her the entire time that she had been reading aloud, he hadn't noticed the formation of a slight aura of light surrounding her. When he finally realized that it was there, he wasn't completely sure if he were really seeing it or not. It was the sort of thing that seemed like it might disappear if he blinked his eyes.

A wisp of smoke began to rise into the air.

As Vinda finally stopped reading, she smiled at the five or six inch ribbon of smoke right in front of her.

"What is it?" Paul asked cautiously.

"A ghost." Vinda said proudly.

"Of a person?" Paul asked uneasily.

"Probably, yeah." Vinda said simply.

"The ghost of who?" Paul asked, although he wasn't sure that he really wanted to know.

"I don't know. I can't communicate with the little ones, like this. But if I call up a bigger one, I can ask them for their name." Vinda said seriously.

"Is this another one of G's relatives?" Paul asked nervously.

'I guess I can see why she's Nazy's girlfriend.'

"I don't know... maybe." Vinda reluctantly admitted, then tried to explain, "I use the spell to summon the type of spirit that I want, to come and do my bidding."

"What would you ask it to do?" Paul asked quietly.

"A little one like this? Not much. I could get it to knock on a window or ring a bell. It *might* be strong enough to blow out a candle, but that would be pushing it." Vinda said thoughtfully.

"What good would that do in a fight, like at the wedding?" Paul asked curiously.

"Oh, that! No, I wouldn't summon a ghost like this for battle." Vinda said quickly, then explained, "At the wedding, I was trying to summon a wraith. They're a type of spirit that's good at fighting."

"I don't know anything about wraiths. Is that a kind of ghost, too?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yes. It's just like a regular ghost, but angrier. I use my summons to focus on their anger to bring them here, then I tell them who to attack." Vinda said seriously.

"What are you going to do with this one?" Paul asked quietly as he looked at the little ribbon of smoke slowly twisting in front of her.

"I'm going to send it back to where it came from. I just called it up because this spell is a fairly easy one and I wanted to show you my ability." Vinda said, then made a gesture with her hand as she muttered a simple phrase at the ghost before her.

As soon as the words were spoken, the little bluish-white twist of smoke dispersed into nothing.

'That was...'

'...sad?'

'...disrespectful?'

'...unforgivable?'

'Or maybe I should just start thinking of this as the new normal.'

Paul looked toward G and noticed that he was looking down at Toad.

"Do you want to show Paul your ability, too?" G asked gently.

A slight smile crossed Toad's lips, then he slowly closed, and then opened his eyes.

"Just don't poison anyone." G warned him.

Toad sat down on the floor, then started taking off his shoes and socks.

Paul looked at G with question to receive a shrug in response.

It took a moment before Toad was ready, but when he finally stood, he looked at Paul with a shy smile.

Paul smiled in return.

In a flash of movement, almost too fast for Paul to see, Toad was across the room, in a crouched position.

"How'd he do that?" Paul asked without thinking.

"You'd have to ask him." G said with an impish grin.

Paul watched Toad carefully, then blinked when Toad seemed to have vanished.

"Up there." G said as he pointed upward.

Paul followed G's pointing finger and was surprised to find Toad hanging from one of the rafters, nearly fifteen feet overhead. His webbed toes appeared to be almost like fingers, holding on to the beam.

He couldn't help but notice that Toad's appearance had changed. Toad was still recognizable as being himself, but his skin appeared to be slightly darker and... honestly... just what one might think of as being appropriate for a toad.

In one fluid move, Toad dropped from the rafter to land in a crouch, right in front of Paul and G.

"Nice moves!" G said appreciatively.

"Yeah! That was great!" Paul said sincerely.

Toad looked up at them, then slowly closed his eyes, then just as slowly, reopened them.

* * * * *

"Paul, do you want to go next?" G asked hopefully.

"I don't know how to make it work... or if I even can." Paul said honestly.

"From what we saw you do at the wedding, it looks like you can bring them up, but the big question is, are you going to be able to put them back?" Nazzy said seriously.

G nodded his agreement, then added, "But even if you don't summon anything, you can at least try out your magical form."

"My what?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Your magical form. Right now, since you're new at it, you'll probably have to transform to do any magic at all. But once you learn how to control it, you *might* be able to do magic in your human form, too..."

"I'm not human?" Paul asked with surprise.

"No. You're a witch." Nazzy said simply.

"A half-witch, actually." G gently corrected.

"Right. But as far as I know, it should work about the same." Nazzy said consideringly.

G shrugged, then turned to Paul and said, "From what I've heard, there used to be a lot of different kinds of witches, and a lot of them didn't look human at all. But thanks

to natural selection, I guess it worked out that only the most human looking witches were able to make it to the twenty-first century. I've heard stories about a lost tribe, hiding out and remaining separate from the human world. But the only witches that I've ever *met* can pass for human."

"We look like them as a natural defense, so that they can't easily identify us and hunt us down." Nazyzy added.

After a moment to consider, Paul quietly asked, "How do I make it work?"

"You know, after the fight, when I told you how to put it back? Now you just do the reverse and pull it back out." G said instructively.

"Remember, there's a lady present." Nazyzy said with a grin.

Vinda glanced in his direction, but since she was in the middle of chanting another spell, she didn't verbally respond.

"Go ahead, Paul. You can do it." G said encouragingly.

"Hold on." Paul said as he sat down and started to take off his shoes.

"Good idea." G said with a grin.

"Toad taught me that." Paul said with a smile and a wink at the younger boy.

* * * * *

Once Paul had his shoes and socks off, and was back to standing, he cast his mind back to the rage and determination he felt when he saw his loved ones being threatened. He remembered the physical sensations as the horns broke through the skin of his temples.

This time, he was able to feel the creeping sensation as the different parts of his body began to transform.

"Whoah!" Paul suddenly yelped as he had to fight for balance.

G and Nazyzy immediately hurried to steady him on his hooves.

"You got it?" G asked cautiously as he continued to hold Paul's arm.

"Yeah. The whole 'standing' thing is a lot more difficult when you don't have toes." Paul tried to explain, then realized that his voice had dropped about three octaves.

"Looking good." G said with a smile as he stepped back.

"You must be about six and a half feet tall." Nazyzy interjected.

Paul looked around and realized that Nazyzy was right. He was significantly taller than

he had been in his 'human' form.

"What do I do now?" Paul asked cautiously, still surprised by the sound of his own voice.

"Just hold it there for a while. Maybe walk around a little bit and get used to your new body." G said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. And while you're doing that, I'll pull up another zombie." Nazzy said as his skin started to go pale.

Paul glanced at Toad, who was looking very toad-like in his transformed state, then looked at G inquiringly.

"Yeah. Here it goes." G said quietly.

G's coloring began to change, becoming something similar to the face paint on a clown. Paul noticed that his dark hair seemed to become even darker, and was becoming longer and more 'shaggy'.

The 'painted' smile that covered a large share of his face could be classified as nothing other than a smirk. All of G's facial features were 'painted on' and grossly exaggerated. The overall effect was demented and disturbing... and slightly erotic. Paul found that he couldn't look away.

'Spectacular!'

"My primary ability is illusion. But if the person I use it on doesn't know that, then it can become real to them." G said frankly.

"Huh?" Paul asked in confusion.

"One of my best things is fire. If you don't know that the fire is an illusion, then your body will react to it as if it were real. You'll get an actual burn from it." G explained.

"Oh." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Let's see what I can do..." G trailed off as he slowly looked around the room.

Paul watched G carefully, still unable to tear his gaze away.

Once G had decided what he was going to do, he seemed to brace himself for an incredible effort, then started to slowly raise his hands, much as Nazzy had done when summoning his zombie.

Suddenly, all around the room, portions of the floor seemed to fall away and flames began to emerge. One by one, the gray stone walls were covered with red velvet tapestries with ornate gold patterns embroidered on them.

Paul turned and was surprised to find that the room, which had been completely

empty a moment before, was now furnished with luxurious furnishings. Admittedly, most of them were red and gold, but there was no hint that they were less than fully real.

"That's about it." G said quietly as he lowered his hands.

"That's amazing." Paul said honestly.

G smiled at the praise, then explained, "You can't sit on the chairs or feel the heat from the fire yet. From what Dad says, I'll probably be able to make my illusions more real as I get older and more powerful."

"So, does that mean that eventually you'll be able to create anything that you can imagine?" Paul asked in wonder.

"Not exactly. Nothing that I create is permanent. It all fades away. So even if I'm able to make 'real' things someday, they'll only last for a little while." G said regretfully.

"But can you make something like a sword?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah. With something simple like that, I can even make it feel like it has weight and substance."

As proof, G held out his hand and a moment later a sword appeared in it.

"And if you used it on someone, would you hurt them with it?" Paul asked slowly.

"If they didn't know it was an illusion, yeah. Probably." G said simply, then admitted, "I've never actually *tried* stabbing anyone."

"What about a gun?" Paul asked thoughtfully.

G glanced at the sword in his hand and it immediately became a gun. "But I haven't figured out how to do the chemical reaction of the gunpowder to make it fire."

"What about something like a laser gun?" Paul asked curiously.

"I don't know. I never tried." G said honestly, then the gun in his hand transformed slightly into a futuristic looking pistol style weapon.

G pointed it toward the wall and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

"Maybe if I understood more about lasers I could make one that would work. But if the person who I was firing it at knew that it was an illusion, then it probably wouldn't matter because then they'd know that it couldn't really hurt them." G said regretfully.

"But if you can make the things you imagine become real, then maybe your laser would really be able to cause damage." Paul said reasonably.

"I don't know... Maybe."

"Hey, G. Let's do a swordfight." Nazzy said excitedly as he held out his hand.

G smiled and his laser transformed into a sword as another sword appeared in Nazzy's outstretched hand. It was obvious to Paul that this *wasn't* their first swordfight.

Paul carefully began to back away, then noticed Toad looking up at him.

"Do you want to come up here where you can get a better view of the battle?" Paul asked with a grin.

Toad seemed to disappear in a flash, then Paul felt a slight weight land on his shoulders.

As Paul and Toad watched, Nazzy and G began fighting each other very dramatically.

Although the sensation was foreign to him, Paul was fairly certain that Toad was holding onto his horns as he was standing on his shoulders.

'Real or not, this is amazing.'

Paul supposed that the stakes weren't quite as high as they appeared to be, since both of them knew that the swords were illusions and that they couldn't really get hurt by them.

Even so, the sparks and clanging sounds when the swords clashed were spectacular and the fight was exciting to watch.

A movement on the other side of the room drew Paul's attention and he saw a zombie slowly walking, in search of some unknown thing.

Paul then glanced to the other side of the room, where Vinda was still sitting cross-legged, reading aloud from her small book.

She had already been reading far longer than she had when summoning 'the wisp', and Paul wondered what she was trying to bring forth this time.

* * * * *

The sword fight had gone on for nearly ten minutes, but eventually both G and Nazzy were tired of the fight and agreed to call it a draw.

As G joined Paul and Toad at the side of the room, Paul quietly asked, "Is this what it's like? Is this how we live our lives?"

"This is us playing and showing off for each other. I think I know what's bothering you." G said as he looked up at Paul, then farther up at Toad, who was still on Paul's shoulders.

"What's that?" Paul asked cautiously, not entirely sure that he wanted to know.

"*What* you are might have changed, but *who* you are hasn't. You're still you and your life is still what it was before. Now it's just this, too." G said assuringly.

'What?'

'Is Meredith Baxter Birney about to come out here and try to convince us to have a dialog and explore our inner conflicts?'

'Oh, well. He's cute and he cares and he really means it.'

'I can think of worse things.'

"Hey! Paul! What do you think of this?" Nazy called out from across the room.

Making sure to turn his whole body, so that Toad could see, too, Paul looked and smiled at Nazy and the three zombies that he had walking in a tight formation.

When Nazy saw that he had their attention, he bellowed, "Behold! My army of the undead!"

"An army of three?" G asked with a smile.

"It's one more than I could do two months ago." Nazy said in his defense as he left his 'army' and crossed the room to join the others.

"I guess so." G chuckled.

'No matter how you look at it, that's pretty cool.'

'I wonder what I could do.'

"Do you think I should try to summon a demon?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. I think that you should talk to your mom before you try something like that. You might be able to pull them up, but putting them back is a whole other story." G said frankly.

"Yeah. And if one of my zombies gets loose, it's probably not going to cause too much trouble. Demons... yeah, let's not do that." Nazy said frankly.

'Right.'

*'Releasing hell on earth is a **bad** thing.'*

'Got it.'

"I did it!" Vinda exclaimed happily.

Everyone turned and saw Vinda, still sitting cross-legged on the floor, with a fully formed, six foot tall ghostly apparition floating right in front of her.

"Wow!" Nazy said in amazement.

"Way to go!" G said appreciatively.

"What is your name?" Vinda asked the spirit before her in a strong, firm voice.

There was a long silent moment as everyone waited for the answer.

"Who are you?" Vinda asked, sounding to be quite a bit less sure of herself.

Again, they waited.

"Um... hold on. This isn't right." Vinda said nervously.

"What's wrong?" Nazy asked with immediate concern.

Vinda muttered a quick phrase, then waited for a reaction.

Nothing happened.

She raised her hand, then made a quick swiping gesture.

Still, nothing happened.

"What is it?" G asked cautiously.

"Oh, crap!" Vinda said anxiously, then picked up her book and started flipping pages.

"What's up, Vin?" Nazy asked as he hurried to her side, being careful not to step through the ghost that was hovering in front of her.

"He won't answer me... and he won't go back." Vinda said as she found the page that she was looking for.

"What should we do?" Nazy asked quietly.

"Don't worry. I've got this." Vinda said firmly, then began to read from her book.

As she was reading, the ghost slowly turned, then began to float across the room.

"Vin?" Nazy asked anxiously.

Vinda glanced up from her book with an expression of frustration, then went back to reading at an increased pace.

"Whatever you're doing, it looks like your ghost isn't going to wait around for you to do

it." G said reluctantly.

Finally, Vinda stopped reading and quickly stood as she said, "I should have realized that it's Halloween. It's the best night of the year for summoning spirits, but it's also one of the **worst** for sending them back."

"What should we do?" Nazyzy asked helplessly.

"Follow him! Don't let him get away!" Vinda said as she hurried across the room.

"Come on!" G said to Paul and Toad.

"Go on ahead. We need a minute to put our shoes back on. We'll catch up to you." Paul said as he fought to return to his 'human' form.

With one quick jump, Toad was crouched beside him, and a moment later he was hurrying to pull his socks on, right beside Paul.

* * * * *

Paul and Toad hurried out of the room and into the hallway.

They stopped, frozen in their tracks, looking for anything that would indicate where the others might have gone.

Suddenly, the scuffing of footsteps sounded and Paul fought to determine where the sound had come from.

Toad took firm hold of Paul's hand and began to urgently pull.

Since Paul didn't have any reason to favor one direction over another, he let Toad guide him.

* * * * *

They hurried down one corridor, then another.

Paul was sure that they were lost, but still had no reason to question or discourage Toad.

One thing he *did* absently notice in the rush was that although the lighting in the hallway was much dimmer than that of the room they had been in, he still couldn't find a source for it.

'Even though it isn't obvious, there's magic going on all over this place.'

'And unless I'm severely mistaken, the inside of this castle is a lot bigger than the outside.'

'What have I gotten myself into?'

As they came to an intersection of hallways, Toad suddenly stopped and was obviously listening for another clue.

Paul strained to hear anything and finally just barely heard what sounded like a footstep in the distance.

As soon as he heard the sound, Toad was urgently pulling on his hand again, guiding him away.

* * * * *

As Paul and Toad turned a corner, they just barely caught a glimpse of G and Nazy walking into a room.

Paul and Toad hurried to follow.

It took a moment for them to arrive at the doorway, but when they did, they stepped into a furnished room that looked like an old, forgotten library.

"I didn't know if you guys would be able to find us." G said with a relieved smile.

"Toad must be part bloodhound. I didn't have any idea of which way to go, but he stayed right on your trail." Paul said with a proud smile at the younger boy at his side.

"I think we've got it cornered!" Nazy called out from a doorway at the side of the room.

"Good. Just let us know if there's something that we can do." G called in return, then turned his attention back to Paul and said, "Paul, I don't know if you've been introduced. This is my Cousin Teek."

The older teenage boy was sitting in one of the chairs reading a book, and Paul wasn't sure if the boy hadn't been there a moment before or if he just hadn't noticed him.

"My first name is Lennox, you can call me Lenn." The boy said in a low voice with a pronounced Scottish accent.

"It's nice to meet you, Lenn." Paul said as he recalled G's earlier warning, which implied that 'Cousin Teek' was known to be something of a thief.

"I saw you at the wedding. Not many people our age are as strong in their magic as you are. That was impressive." Lenn said with a surprising lack of emotion behind his words.

Paul didn't get the sense that Lenn was being insincere, but more that the boy wasn't comfortable expressing emotions.

"Thanks." Paul said gratefully.

"Shit!" Nazy yelled from the next room.

"That doesn't sound good." G said as he glanced toward the door, then turned back toward Lenn and said, "Vinda let out a ghost and she's having trouble putting it back. Do you want to help us catch it?"

"Really?!" Lenn asked with surprise.

In the minute or two of being in Lenn's company, Paul got the sense that seeing Lenn express a true emotion was probably a rare thing.

"Yeah." G confirmed, then cautiously asked, "Are you alright?"

"Not really. My parents have been having problems for a while, now. When we were packing to come here, my dad said that he wasn't going to come with us. And then he said that when me and my mom get back, he'll be gone." Lenn said quietly.

"Okay. That sucks." G said simply.

Paul couldn't help but smile at G's forthright manner.

'G wears his emotions out in the open, for all to see.'

'He doesn't hold anything back.'

'That's part of why I love him.'

'Yeah. That's right. I love him.'

"Stop it!" Nazy yelled, just as the bluish-white ghost emerged from the side room and moved in a direct line for the door to the hallway.

"How?" G called as he hurried toward the door.

"I don't know. Get in it's way or something." Nazy said as he met up with G.

Vinda ran out of the side room, obviously having trouble trying to read aloud while walking at the same time.

"Maybe ghost chasing will help to take your mind off of things. Do you want to?" Paul asked as he felt Toad pulling on his hand.

"Yeah." Lenn said as he started to stand.

"Come on."

* * * * *

Although Paul, Toad and Lenn started out a few seconds behind, they were easily able to catch up to G, Nazy and Vinda, who were rushing down the hallway.

"Crap! It got away!" G called out in frustration.

"It's got to be in one of these three rooms." Nazzy said reasonably, then decisively added, "Vinda and I will take this one."

G looked around the rest of their group and seemed to be uncertain.

"Toad and I have been a good team so far. We'll take the second room." Paul said simply, then guided Toad to walk with him, not waiting for G to agree.

"It looks like it's you and me, Teek... I mean, Lenn. Come on." G said as he started toward the third door.

* * * * *

As Paul and Toad walked into the room that Paul had chosen, they noticed not only that it seemed to be another library, but also that it was currently occupied.

"Sorry. We were just..." Paul began to say, but was interrupted.

"Come in and join us. We're just plotting and scheming for tonight." A comparatively young woman said pleasantly.

"We really can't stay..." Paul began to say.

"You're Paul, D's new son, aren't you? I'm Isobel, this is my brother, Gilles. Here's my mom and dad, Grace and Rhiseart and my Aunt Wanda." The young woman said pleasantly.

"Have you seen a ghost come in here?" Paul asked suddenly, hoping to wedge his question into Isobel's relentless introductions.

After a moment to consider, Isobel looked at him and said, "A ghost? No. We haven't seen anyone or anything since we came in."

"Then we need to go. We've lost one and we need to hurry up and find it." Paul said in a rush before the young woman could start talking again.

"Welcome to the family." Isobel chuckled, then watched as Paul and Toad hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"If all your relatives are like her, it's no wonder you don't talk." Paul said absently as he walked with Toad toward the room that G and Lenn had gone into.

Toad looked up at Paul with an amused smile and delight dancing in his eyes.

* * * * *

As they walked into the next room, they noticed that Lenn and G were talking to a pair of men, one of whom appeared to be in his fifties and the other much older.

"Paul, this is my cousin... our cousin, Mungo and his dad, Uncle Iain." G said with an air of formality that indicated to Paul that these were people that G respected.

"I'm sorry to interrupt." Paul said to the men, then looked at G and asked, "Did you find the ghost?"

"No. He didn't come in here." G said simply.

"Then we'd better go and help Nazy and Vinda." Paul said decisively.

"Go on. I'll be right there." G said calmly.

Paul didn't expect the response, but could see that G was worried about something having to do with the two men. He was being unusually calm and gentle in their presence.

"I'll go with you." Lenn said quietly as he stepped away from G's side.

Paul gave a simple nod, then turned to leave.

As he was walking out the door, he just barely heard G quietly asking, "Are you okay, Mungo?"

* * * * *

Paul felt a sense of urgency building within him as he rushed down the hall, past the room where Isobel was located and on to the final room, where Nazy and Vinda had gone.

Stepping into the room, it was obvious that it was a game room, or more precisely, a billiard room.

Nazy appeared to have the ghost backed into a corner and was standing before it with his arms outstretched as Vinda hurriedly read aloud from her book.

When Nazy heard Paul and the others enter the room, he reflexively turned to see who had joined them.

In that instant, the ghost made its move, slipping past Nazy and floating across the room.

"Shit!" Vinda screamed as she turned and started to follow.

Before Paul could fully assess what was going on, the ghost slipped past him and into the hallway.

"Don't let it get away!" Nazy called out as he started running toward the door.

Lenn was the first into the hallway and took off in a dead run to chase the ghost.

Paul and Toad ran out next, followed closely by Nazy and Vinda.

"Did it get away from you?" G called out from the doorway farther down the hall.

"Not yet." Paul called in return, not slowing his pace.

* * * * *

"He went in here!" Lenn announced as he pulled open a large, but strangely plain looking iron door. Most of the doors in the castle were somewhat ornate, engraved with patterns or outfitted with some type of interesting hardware. This one was conspicuous in its bland normalcy.

As Paul hurried into the room, he was stunned by the size of it.

The room was astoundingly enormous, not only in width and length, but also in height.

The ghost was travelling across the expanse at an impressive speed.

"What is this place?" Paul asked as they ran across the room.

"If I had to guess, I'd say it's the throne room." G said as he finally was able to catch up to the others.

"Really?" Paul asked with surprise.

"I don't know. Like I said, it's just a guess. But what else would you do with a room this size?" G said honestly.

Before Paul could formulate an answer, the ghost disappeared through a closed door.

Lenn was the first to reach the door and quickly pulled it open.

* * * * *

"This isn't good." G said as he recognized where they were.

Paul could hear the sound of voices, not very far away.

"He went this way." Lenn said urgently, opposite from the direction that the voices were coming from.

Paul suddenly realized that they were in the hallway just off the dining room, where the reception had been held. He couldn't quite get his mind to wrap around the fact that they'd come full circle and were back where they'd started. But he was happy to realize that the ghost hadn't decided to go to the dining room and expose their transgression.

"What's down this way?" Nazzy asked as he hurried to follow Lenn.

"The kitchen and pantries and stuff like that." G answered.

"He went in here." Lenn said as he turned suddenly and stepped through a doorway.

The rest of the group followed, and all of them came to a sudden stop when they found that the room was occupied.

There were about a dozen people present, sitting around a large, plain table and none of them looked to be under sixty years old.

"Did anyone see a ghost come through here?" G asked loudly.

One of the few people that Paul recognized, Uncle Neese, pointed to a door at the far side of the room.

G led the way with determination, the others following.

"Is there a problem?" A woman asked with concern. It took a moment for it to register to Paul that the woman was G's Aunt Zennie. Being seated across the room, her red dress with black polka dots wasn't immediately evident.

"We accidentally let something out and we need to be sure that it gets put back. That's all." Paul assured her as he paused, hoping to do some damage control.

"I don't think any of us here have an aptitude for dealing with spirits, but I wish you luck on your endeavor." Aunt Zennie said sincerely.

"Thanks." Paul responded before hurrying with Toad out the door that Lenn, G, Nazzy and Vinda had already passed through.

* * * * *

Paul hurried through the adjoining room and as he stepped back out into the hallway, he nearly walked face-first into the ghost that was travelling directly toward him.

It veered away at the last moment and sped off down the hall.

"We almost had it!" G exclaimed in frustration as he took off running again.

Paul could feel himself getting tired, but started running anyway, joining the others.

* * * * *

"That's not good." G said as he stopped outside a doorway.

"Why not?" Paul asked as he stopped beside G and fought to catch his breath.

"That's the 'vault', where they keep the family silver. That room's supposed to be locked at all times." G said seriously as he tried to see into the darkness.

"Is there another door out of there?" Paul asked cautiously.

"How would I know? Do you think they'd ever let me go in there?" G asked frankly.

"No. There isn't another door." Lenn said simply, and sounded confident in his assertion.

"How do you know that?" G asked suspiciously.

"We've been around this room on all sides. Unless there's an exit through the roof or the floor, there's no other way out. And since this is supposed to be a vault, I seriously doubt that they'd put trap doors or secret passages in it." Lenn said reasonably.

"Can't it just go through a wall, like it did with the closed doors?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. At least, probably not. Walls are boundaries that are put into place in the physical world to restrict movement. Over time, the physical walls become spiritual walls, which is good, because that way not every spirit roaming the earth can walk into your home whenever it wants to. Besides that, the walls not only provide limits, but also structure. Without them, the spirits couldn't navigate the spiritual world. It would just be an expanse of nothing, not even ground to walk on." Vinda said seriously, then thought to add, "It would take a ghost with superior awareness and power to push through a spiritual barrier like that."

"So we can just wait here and not let it get out, right?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yes. We'll block the doorway and Vinda can recite her spell to send it back. The spell should work as long as the ghost is within the sound of her voice." G said confidently.

That being said, Vinda sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the doorway and took a few deep breaths before beginning to read.

The others gathered behind her, side by side.

All of a sudden, there was a clatter of something falling inside the vault.

"Should we go in and see what's happening?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Anyone who goes in there is taking the chance of getting blamed if anything's broken or missing." Lenn warned him.

"He's right. As long as we're all out here together, we're all each other's witnesses." G confirmed.

"Should we get someone with a key to come here and lock it up?" Paul asked quietly.

"Yeah. But not until after Vinda's gotten rid of it." G said firmly.

All of a sudden, the ghost was standing right in front of them.

It didn't hesitate to pass right through G and Paul, who were standing side by side.

'Just when I thought that things couldn't get any weirder...'

"Gross! I didn't think it'd do that!" Paul said with revulsion at the sensation.

"Aww Man! Now I smell like old people!" G said with disgust.

"Let's go after him!" Nazy said as he started to run.

Before G could follow, Vinda put a hand on his shoulder to hold him back.

"Do you know who that was?" Vinda asked hopefully.

"A ghost! What more do you need to know?" G asked as he fought not to break away from her and run after Nazy.

"Well, if I know its name, then I'll be able to send it back a lot easier." Vinda said patiently.

"No. I don't know." G said firmly, then snapped, "Come on!"

* * * * *

"Did you see which way it went?" G asked as he caught up to Nazy and Lenn.

"In there." Nazy said as he indicated the door that they were approaching.

"That's the kitchen. When we get inside, Lenn and I will go right. Paul and Toad, go left. Nazy and Vinda, go up the middle." G said decisively.

'That's my alpha.'

* * * * *

As Paul hurried into the kitchen, he was as surprised as any of the others at the sight of Grandma Gruit with a slightly younger man, sitting with her at a table. From his appearance, Paul surmised that he was probably in his sixties.

"Are you responsible for this?" Grandma Gruit asked as she indicated the ghost that had stopped at her side.

"Yes, Ma'am." G said as he stood forward, to speak for the group.

"Thank you." Grandma Gruit said with a gentle smile at him.

Paul realized in that moment that a smile seemed to be completely out of place on her usually tightly controlled face.

"In case you haven't been introduced, this is my late husband, Ewan. He's also Tamhas' father." She said as she indicated first the ghost, then the man across the table from her. "What a wonderful Halloween gift. Thank you all."

Puzzled looks flashed around the group, none of them knowing how to respond.

"Are you going to need any help sending him back when you're done visiting?" G asked cautiously.

"I'll see that he gets home." Grandma Gruit assured him.

"Oh, well... It's nice to meet you Great-Grandpa Ewan. I'm G. We're just going to go... now." G stammered.

Since none of the rest of them had anything to add, they followed G out of the room in silence.

* * * * *

As the group meandered down the hallway, in the general direction of the great hall, Paul quietly asked, "What are we supposed to do now? Go to bed?"

"No. It's Halloween. If anyone has a family member who isn't a witch and doesn't know about us, they'll probably be going to bed now. The rest of us are going to wait until 'Night's Noontime' for the *real* celebration."

'I don't know if he's trying to be spooky and give me the creeps...'

'But after everything that's happened, I'm really okay with it...'

'Bring it on!'

The group walked out of the hallway and around the staircase to reveal the expanse of the great hall.

It looked as though everything from the wedding had been cleared away.

"Shouldn't we tell someone about the vault?" Lenn asked cautiously.

"Oh, yeah. Grandpa J is probably around here, somewhere. He's the best one to tell about it." G said decisively.

There wasn't any debate or even looks of question. The group simply followed along.

* * * * *

"Would you be here in search of a snack?" Grandma B asked warmly as they walked

into the dining room.

"Actually, we were just looking for Grandpa J." G said honestly, but couldn't help himself and glanced at the variety of snack foods on the massive table.

"I'm thinking that he's in the sitting room... although I can't be sure. You never can tell with that one." Grandma B finished with a chuckle.

"Maybe we could stop for something to eat, first?" Nazzy cautiously suggested.

"No. We need to talk to Grandpa J." G said firmly.

Nazzy looked regretfully at the vast expanse of food, but didn't argue.

* * * * *

"Tadhg, did you have a good time?" Kat asked, when she noticed the group walking into the room.

Toad firmly held her gaze for a moment, then slowly closed his eyes, then just as slowly reopened them.

"That's wonderful, that is! I knew you'd be having fun. You've always been more socially attuned to the older crowd." Kat said as she pulled him into a hug.

Paul couldn't help but smile at the physical expression of caring that Toad and his mother shared.

"Grandpa J, we were just down by the kitchen and the vault door was open." G said urgently.

"You didn't go inside, did you?" Grandpa J asked cautiously.

"No. None of us did. I just thought that you'd want to know." G said seriously.

"Good. The last thing we need tonight is to have to deal with a curse." Grandpa J said frankly, then thoughtfully said, "It's strange, only someone who knows the wards should be able to unlock that door. I wonder who opened it." Grandpa J said thoughtfully.

"Well... the ghost of Great-Grandpa Ewan opened it. He seemed like he was kinda in a hurry and didn't close it again when he left." G said reluctantly.

"Dad's ghost is here?!" Grandpa J asked with excitement.

"Yeah. We left him in the kitchen with Grandma Gruit and Uncle Tamhas. Grandma Gruit said that she'd take care of him." G said cautiously.

"Well, Dad would certainly know how to nullify the wards. I'll go and check on that door now, then I'll stop by the kitchen for a visit." Grandpa J said as he stood from his

easy chair.

G smiled as his grandfather excitedly left the room.

After a moment, Nazyzy walked to G's side and put a hand on his shoulder.

G looked at him curiously.

"Food." Nazyzy whispered.

G smiled, then responded, "I like that plan."

* * * * *

"G, your father was suggesting that you might be willing to help us out at the celebration tonight." Grandma B said in a rush as she approached him at the dining room table, loaded with snack foods.

"What did he promise that I'd do?" G asked cautiously.

"He was thinking that you might be willing to cast an illusion over the great hall to make things a bit more interesting for the celebration." Grandma B said hopefully.

"Interesting? Do you want it in flames or something?" G asked as he glanced at Paul to see if he might have any idea of what she was asking.

"No. No. Not flames. But the folding chairs look a bit... plain. He was suggesting that you might be able to come up with something a little more... showy." Grandma B said hopefully.

"I don't know. That's an awful lot of detail. And if I'm off, then someone could miss the chair when they go to sit down and there isn't a chair hiding out under my illusion." G said thoughtfully.

"If you're not up to it, we'll still be able to manage. Your father just thought that this might be an opportunity for you to be able to make a contribution and show the family how practical your ability can be." Grandma B said frankly.

'Hold on a second. I see what you did there.'

"It'll take me a little bit to get it all sorted out in my head. Am I going to have time?" G asked cautiously.

"We'll make the time. We've never done much in the way of decorations, and I think it will add a nice touch to tonight's celebration." Grandma B said warmly.

"I don't know if it'll work, but I'll give it a try." G said reluctantly.

"Maybe your new brother and your friends will be willing to help you get everything set up to your liking." Grandma B suggested as she looked at Paul, Nazyzy, Vinda and

Lenn.

'Look at her go!'

'Grandma B knows how to work it!'

"Do you guys want to help me?" G asked hopefully.

"Sure. If you'll tell us what we have to do." Nazzy answered easily.

'Why not? It'll be good to have something to do to help out.'

Paul nodded his agreement.

"Let's go see what we have to do." G said cheerfully as he started walking toward the door.

Nazzy and Vinda automatically followed.

Paul looked at Lenn and quietly asked, "Do you want to help us?"

"I don't think that my magical ability will be of any use." Lenn said frankly.

"I doubt that they're going to need any demons summoned to get the job done, so mine won't be any good, either. But we can still help move chairs and stuff." Paul said seriously.

"I'd better not. If people see you hanging around with me, they might start thinking that you're like I am." Lenn said quietly.

"Bad reputation, huh?" Paul asked simply.

"For the last couple of years... I did some stupid stuff... Now everyone thinks that that's who I am." Lenn said regretfully.

"My life has changed so much in the past two weeks I can't even tell you all of it. I didn't know anything about witches or magic or... myself, really. All of a sudden, everything changed, like, all at once. Maybe that's what you need, too." Paul suggested cautiously.

"What do you mean?" Lenn asked curiously.

"You told us that thing about your dad. Maybe you could use that big major change in your life as an excuse to make other changes. Decide how you want things to be, and then try to make them be that way." Paul said slowly.

"I don't know. I feel like if I try, that I'll just make a big mess of it, just like I always do." Lenn said as his eyes welled with tears.

'Oh, poor little me...'

'Oh, well. Honestly, when your life goes to shit, sometimes you need that.'

'But once your pity party has run its course, it's time to put your testicles to good use.'

Paul sat down in the chair next to Lenn's, then said in a quiet but firm voice, "You made mistakes. Guess what, you're going to make more. Accept it. That's life. Move on. The thing with your dad, that sucks. It's not fair. Guess what... That's life, too. Move on. Like it or not, what happens next is up to you. You need to change what you can, and deal with what you can't."

After a moment, Lenn cautiously asked, "Are all Americans as brash as you?"

"No. In fact, I'm not usually like this. Most of the time I'm quiet and I just react to whatever's happening to me. But sometimes that doesn't work and I have to stand up for myself. Right now, I can see that you're hurting. I know what that's like. Be who you want to be. Live like you want to live. Will things be perfect? No. They're probably going to suck. But as long as you keep going and you don't give up, you can make things better."

"Is that what you did?" Lenn asked cautiously, seeming to be on the verge of believing that things *could* improve for him.

"I tried to." Paul said simply, then reluctantly admitted, "I guess, to be honest, my life was pretty crappy until two weeks ago. But I didn't *live* like my life was crappy. I went to school and tried to make the best out of each day, no matter how bad it was. Sometimes things would get tough and it'd get me down, but I wouldn't let it *keep* me down. I guess that's what I'm really saying, shit's going to happen. Deal with it. Get over it. Keep moving forward."

'Cue theme music, possibly something by Chumbawamba.'

"When things were really bad at home, sometimes I'd go out and... steal things." Lenn quietly admitted.

"Yeah. That sounds like one of those 'cries for help' that you're always hearing about." Paul said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "How about next time you feel like doing something like that, you make a *literal* call for help?"

"What?" Lenn asked in confusion.

"Call me. I can't promise that I'll be able to help you figure things out, but at least I can listen and tell you that I agree that 'whatever it is' sucks and things like that." Paul said frankly.

"Paul, G's figured out what he's going to do. We could use some help with the chairs." Nazy said as he approached.

"Okay. We'll be right there." Paul said easily, then looked at Lenn with question.

"I'll do it." Lenn finally said.

"Good." Paul said with a smile, then added, "Come on."

* * * * *

As soon as Nazzy, Paul and Lenn walked into the great hall, G quickly asked, "Will you guys start setting the chairs up over there? We're going to put them in a semicircle so that everyone can see the front."

Paul could see what G was saying and immediately went to work.

"Make sure you leave about a foot of space between the chairs. That way I can make my illusion look right." G said anxiously.

"Are you going to be able to keep your illusion up that long? You have a time limit, don't you?" Nazzy asked as he started setting up chairs.

"I don't know. I'm going to try. If my illusion fails in the middle of the ceremony, it won't really hurt anything." G said thoughtfully, then quickly said, "Lenn, would you space those out a little bit more?"

"Right." Lenn responded, then began readjusting the chairs that he had already positioned.

"How's this?" Vinda called from across the room.

"Could you move that row back a little? I'm going to need plenty of room to envelope each chair in an illusion.

"Are you going to be able to do this many?" Nazzy asked uncertainly.

"There's only one way to find out." G said frankly.

"I mean... there's so many of them..." Nazzy tried to explain.

"Yeah. But I'm going to put the same illusion on every chair. So I'll be doing the same thing over and over, not a bunch of different things, like I usually do." G fought to explain.

"Yeah. But still, there's so many." Nazzy said as he continued to carefully space his chairs.

"It'll work or it won't. If the whole family has to sit on plain old folding chairs, we're no worse off than if I hadn't tried." G said honestly.

"I guess not." Nazzy reluctantly agreed.

"Is this right?" Lenn asked uncertainly.

G looked at the area where he was working and finally said, "Yeah. That looks great."

"Are you going to do anything besides the chairs?" Vinda asked curiously.

"We'll just have to wait and see what I've got left to give once the chairs are done." G said frankly.

"I wish there was something that I could do to help you." Paul said honestly.

"You're doing it." G assured him.

Paul smiled at the response and renewed his efforts.

* * * * *

"How are things going in here?" Grandma B asked as she slowly walked into the great hall.

"Pretty good. How are we doing for time?" G asked as he looked around.

"A few people have shown up, but I'll be keeping them out of your way until you're ready for us." Grandma B said seriously.

"Is this enough chairs for everyone?" G asked cautiously.

"Yes. Probably more than enough, since the little ones have gone to bed by now." Grandma B said with a smile.

"Then I guess I'm ready. Would everyone stand back?" G asked as he also backed up, so that he could get a clear view of the entire room.

Since Paul didn't know which chairs G was going to change first, he watched carefully for whatever was going to happen.

All of a sudden, one of the chairs near him seemed to reform itself into a new configuration. A moment before it had been a plain gray folding chair, now it looked like a handcrafted work of art. The legs were engraved with long flowing patterns which terminated in 'feet'. The seat cushion appeared to be a lush velvet with gold embroidery. The back of the chair was low, and also had a cushion, embroidered in the same elegant style. At the top of the back, the golden wood was styled into ornamental filigrees that perfectly matched the pattern of the cushions.

'G isn't just a witch, he's an artist.'

As Paul looked up from the nearest example of G's work, he saw that well over half the chairs in the room had been transformed.

He held his breath, not wanting to take the chance of making a sound and interrupting G's concentration.

When the last chair had transformed, Paul looked at G with concern.

From G's expression, there was no doubt that he was feeling drained, but Paul saw the determination in his eyes as he looked around the expansive room, then dramatically raised his arms in a grand lifting gesture.

Suddenly tapestries began to appear and incredible gold and crystal chandeliers dropped from the ceiling.

Beneath their feet, red carpeting appeared, which was the same warm tone of red as in the chair cushions.

"G, that's wonderful, it is. You've done much better than I expected... better than I could have imagined." Grandma B said in wonder as she looked around the room.

"I'm not done yet." G said in a determined voice.

Paul wanted to object. He could see how far G had pushed himself. But he knew better than to interfere with G's achievement.

'I'm right here with you.'

'I've got your back.'

'Be the alpha.'

G turned to face one of the few walls that didn't have a tapestry covering it.

A beautifully crafted frame appeared. Then within the frame a murky darkness started to form.

Everyone waited to see what was going to happen next.

But nothing did.

"I can't do it." G reluctantly admitted as the frame faded into nothingness.

"What were you trying to do?" Nazyzy asked curiously.

"I was going to make a window. I've figured out how to make illusions that look like you're really seeing outside. As long as you're looking through the window, from that one fixed point of view, it looks like I've created the whole outside world." G said wearily, then added, "Creating all the other illusions must have been too much."

"I can make a *real* window, if that's what you want." Lenn cautiously offered.

"How's that?" G asked with interest.

"My magic is all about invisibility. I can make a section of the wall invisible so that you can *really* see outside."

"Can you undo it if it doesn't turn out right?" G asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Can you put the window frame back, like you had it?"

"Here you go." G said as he looked at the wall and the golden frame reappeared.

Lenn stepped forward and put both of his hands flat on the wall, then he seemed to lose himself in concentration.

As Paul watched, Lenn began to fade from sight.

Only the slightest transparent image of him remained in place, braced against the stone wall.

Suddenly, the wall began to go dark and seemed to be dissolving.

"Almost..." Lenn said with effort.

Paul glanced at him and could still see his vague outline.

"That's it." Lenn said with accomplishment.

Paul looked out the 'window' and all he could see was infinite blackness.

"That's not quite what I had in mind." G reluctantly admitted.

"We've got this." Nazzy said as he stepped forward.

"What's that?" G asked hesitantly.

"Well, since Toad isn't in here, I think that Vinda and I can shine some light on the situation." Nazzy said confidently.

"Fairy lights, you know, for stars?" Vinda asked cautiously.

"Sounds good. Go ahead, I'm going to go for an overall aura." Nazzy said simply.

Vinda nodded, then began to quietly chant.

Nazzy held his hands out and his skin color began to fade.

The increasing light outside the 'window' drew Paul's attention. The nighttime world of the Scottish highlands began to unfold before his amazed eyes.

"Don't be making it too bright. This is supposed to be a midnight celebration." Grandma B warned them.

"How's that?" Nazzy asked as he lowered his arms.

"Eerie." Paul whispered.

'I guess that sometimes being the alpha doesn't mean doing it all by yourself.'

'Asking for help isn't admitting defeat.'

'It's getting the job done.'

'What could be more alpha than that?'

"Good. That's just what I was going for." Nazzy said with a grin, then turned to G and asked, "Do you think a few zombies on the front lawn might help to set the mood?"

G's eyes went wide and he suddenly asked, "Did you remember to send your zombies back?"

"Oh crap!" Nazzy said in realization.

"I'll go with you." Vinda immediately volunteered.

Nazzy glanced at G apologetically, then quietly said, "We'll be right back."

* * * * *

"Should we go with them?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. They'll be fine. Besides, I'm betting that they're probably going to appreciate having a few minutes alone together." G assured him.

"Oooh. Isn't it lovely?" An elderly woman exclaimed as she slowly walked into the room.

Paul looked past her to see many other members of the family entering the great hall.

"D's son, G, was the one to do the decorations." Grandma B said proudly as she gestured toward him.

"This is so nice." An older man said in amazement as he looked around.

Paul put an arm around G and hugged him tightly to express his pride in him.

"Let's go ahead and sit down, so that we can save some seats for Nazzy and Vinda." G said quietly.

Paul took one last look out the 'window' and marvelled at the eerie, yet beautiful sight of the Scottish highlands bathed in moonlight.

* * * * *

G seemed to be fixated on his illusions and was carefully looking at every detail to make sure that everything looked right.

When Paul noticed Lenn walking by, he quickly said, "You can sit with us if you want to, Lenn. We're just saving these two seats for Nazzy and Vinda."

"Thank you." Lenn said quietly as he sat down.

"G hasn't told me much about what's going on tonight. I know it's some kind of celebration, but that's about it." Paul said frankly.

"It's really just a family gathering. We do it on Halloween because we're witches and it's one of our high holidays, but that's mostly just tradition."

Paul slowly nodded, then hesitantly asked, "What are we going to be doing?"

"Nothing." Lenn answered simply, then at Paul's look of surprise, he explained, "This is a celebration of family and magic. So the different family groups get together and each one does a performance to show the family what they've been able to achieve."

"Are you going to be doing something like that?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. This is just for the adults. Every now and then, one of the kids might be brought in to help out with their family's demonstration. But for the most part, we're just here to sit back and enjoy the show." Lenn said honestly.

Paul thought about that for a moment, then slowly said, "When Toad came to do magic with us, his dad said something about him getting the chance to see what he might someday be able to achieve."

"I've never had it put to me that way, but that sounds a lot better than saying that we're not invited to participate."

"Since I've never been around this stuff before, I'm really interested to see what they're going to do." Paul said with a smile.

"You're going to love it." G said from Paul's other side.

Paul smiled at him, then asked, "So, does this mean that everyone in the whole family is going to get up to perform?"

"No. Some people have abilities that you can't really show off, like Grandma Gruit. She does spells, potions and charms. She can do some really awesome stuff, but I don't know how she could really show it off in front of people." G quietly explained.

"Some other people need special things for their magic to work. Great-Uncle Iain is like that. If he's beside a lake or a pool of water, he can do really incredible things with it. But standing here inside the castle, he can't use his magic much at all." Lenn added.

"Yeah, and there's some who just don't want to get in front of people, like Mungo." G said seriously.

"Is that what he was worried about, when we saw him before?" Paul asked curiously.

"No. Mungo's kind of... fragile, I mean, emotionally. He doesn't do well in large groups of people. Uncle Iain took him to a quiet place to calm him down after dinner and to prepare him for tonight." G carefully explained.

"For some reason, I thought that being a witch would mean that you wouldn't have problems like regular people." Paul said absently.

"Nope. If you hit us, we cry. If you cut us, we bleed. Of course, then we'll turn you into a toad, but that's beside the point." G finished with a smile.

"After meeting Toad, I can think of worse things to be." Paul said frankly.

"He's grown up a lot since the last time I saw him." G said admiringly.

"Everyone! May I have your attention!" Grandma B called out from the front of the room.

G quickly looked past the staircase toward the hallway to see if Nazy and Vinda were on their way back yet.

"Should we go after them?" Paul asked cautiously.

"If we did, we'd probably walk in on something that we shouldn't." G said frankly.

"Oh. Right." Paul said as he realized what G was saying.

"I know that you haven't come all this way to listen to my banter, so I'll just ask Great Uncle Neese and Aunt Zennie to come up here and get us started." Grandma B said before stepping aside.

"What's Grandma B's magical ability? Do you know?" Paul asked curiously.

"Do you remember what Vinda was telling you about basic magic?" G asked in return.

"Yeah."

"Grandma B is a master of that kind of magic. Not only can she do the really basic stuff that just about everyone else can do, but she can do bigger and better versions of those spells. Think about it, with her magic, she keeps this entire castle clean, lighted, pest-free, warm and probably a dozen other things that I've never even thought about." G said seriously.

"Wow." Paul whispered as he watched Uncle Neese and Aunt Zennie slowly making their way to stand before the family assembly.

"First a wedding and now this. What a remarkable and wonderful day this has been. Add to that the fact that my brother Ewan is able to join us and it truly is a reason to celebrate." Uncle Neese said with a warm look toward the ghostly figure accompanying Grandma Gruit, Grandpa J and Tamhas.

Aunt Zennie stood forward, wearing red with black polka dots, as usual, and dramatically said, "This is our custom. This is our way. Let the celebration begin."

As she said the words, a swarm of thousands of ladybugs rose up from all around her. Aunt Zennie made a few hand gestures and the swarm moved to engulf the entire gathering, covering them with a living dome. All the ladybugs were moving in the same counter-clockwise direction and Paul found the sensation dizzying.

"As my daughter has said, it has begun." Uncle Neese called out firmly, then raised his hands upward, in what Paul was beginning to think of as a 'summoning' gesture.

Paul tried to follow where the ladybugs were going and realized that they seemed to be flying into the black polka dots on Aunt Zennie's dress. Within a minute, all the ladybugs had vanished. The dizzying swarm that had engulfed them all was simply... gone.

Before Paul could begin to process what he was seeing, a cloud of black started to rise up from behind Uncle Neese, emerging from his shadow on the floor. As soon as Paul saw them, he froze in place.

Bats.

Hundreds of black bats started fluttering up into the air.

Paul didn't have any logical reason to be afraid, but he was.

Something about the creatures had always been off-putting to him and seeing them in the flesh made it that much worse.

Uncle Neese made a thrusting gesture toward the assembled family and his bats responded.

Just as with Aunt Zennie's ladybugs, the bats surrounded the family gathering and all of them seemed to be flying in the same direction.

"If any of your relatives are about to summon spiders, tell me now. I'll leave." Paul whispered firmly.

"I don't know of anyone who does that, but if someone turns up, I'll be right behind you." G assured him.

When Uncle Neese lowered his hands, all the bats returned to him. The living cloud of bats moved as a single being and seemed to disappear into Uncle Neese's shadow.

Applause started on the other side of the room, then seemed to catch on to everyone

else.

"What you've just seen were examples of mass summoning and control. That's *really* hard to do." G said seriously.

Paul could imagine that it was.

"What did we miss?" Nazzy asked as he and Vinda rushed into the room.

"Bats and ladybugs. They just started. We saved you seats." G said as he indicated the empty chairs beside him.

"Thanks." Nazzy said appreciatively.

"Did you get all your zombies put to bed?" G asked with a smile.

"Yeah. They were right where I left them. No problem." Nazzy said happily.

"Uh oh." Paul said when he saw who was getting up to perform.

"What's wrong?" G asked with concern.

"Toad and I met Isobel before... I tell you what, just wake me up when she's done talking." Paul said frankly.

'Or in the morning, whichever comes first.'

"That's Isobel, alright. You know, I don't think I've ever heard her brother, Gilles, speak. I wonder if he can." G said thoughtfully.

"He probably wonders if he can, too. If he's always around Isobel, he's never going to get the chance to find out." Paul said with a grin.

"I guess you already know who Grace and Wanda are, so that's everyone." G said frankly.

"I know their names, but I don't know which is which... witch." Paul finished with a smirk.

G rolled his eyes at the terrible pun.

'Give me a break! Sometimes you just have to go for it.'

"The one with the darker hair is my mom, Wanda." Lenn said quietly.

"There's something I don't understand. Does your specialty of magic come from your parents or is it always a completely random 'luck of the draw'?" Paul asked curiously.

"It's a little of both. Families tend to have similar abilities, but every now and then

something can pop up out of nowhere, that no one ever expected." G explained.

"There's been a few divorces caused by that." Nazzy interjected from G's other side.

"Yeah. When two summoners pop out a weather witch, questions will be asked." G confirmed.

"But what do you think's going to happen with our sister? Your dad makes inanimate things come to life and my mom summons demons... how is that going to work?" Paul asked curiously.

"We'll just have to wait and see." G said simply.

"Who did the spell on the room, again?" A voice called from the front.

"I did." G immediately responded.

"Thank you. It's lovely. This is going to make everything so much nicer." She said gratefully.

Paul looked at her, then asked, "That's Grace, right?"

"Yeah, she's Gilles and Isobel's mom." Lenn confirmed.

Paul had been keeping an eye on the front and was surprised to see the only man up there suddenly shrink into a tiny, skinny little five year old boy.

"Gilles is like G, he doesn't get stronger when he's transformed." Lenn said quietly.

"What's his power?" Paul asked curiously.

"He's becoming a master of curses. From what my mom says, he's got a real talent for it." Lenn said frankly.

Before Paul could think of what to say, Wanda, Grace and Isobel all suddenly became smaller, much like Gilles, except that they had wings.

"Their clothes changed." Paul said suddenly.

"What?" G asked from his other side.

"When they transformed, their clothes changed to fit them." Paul said seriously.

"Oh, yeah. That's not something that I've ever had to worry about, since I don't change size when I transform. I know that it's a basic spell, but there was never a reason for me to learn it." G said frankly.

"I have a clothing spell, but I don't think it'd be much help." Lenn said seriously.

"How's that?" Paul asked curiously.

"I have a spell that makes my clothes turn invisible when my body does... I doubt that you'd want something like that." Lenn said quietly.

"Um, no. Thanks. I can't see me having a need for invisible clothes." Paul said honestly.

"There are lots of members of the family who have physical transformation abilities. I bet that most of them use basic spells to adjust their clothes so that they don't have to worry about them getting ripped up." G said frankly, then motioned toward the front, where Wanda, Grace and Isobel were flying around above Gilles at a dizzying speed.

"I'd throw up if I had to do that." Lenn said absently.

"Yeah." Paul responded as he watched, then smiled when he saw that Gilles had taken out a wooden flute and began to play.

"Here they go." G said carefully as he kept his focus on the performance.

The three little 'fairies' were flying faster and faster and even though Paul was all the way in the back, he could feel a breeze being generated by them.

All of a sudden, Paul could see a miniature tornado beginning to form.

"If we were outside, a *real* five year old could probably do that, but to create a tornado inside a building takes a lot of power and skill." Lenn said informatively.

The three 'fairies' landed just as Gilles played the last notes of his little tune.

Applause started up and Paul joined in. Even though he didn't know exactly how much time and effort went into planning such a thing, he could easily believe that what they had done was worthy of praise.

All four of the 'performers' returned to their adult forms and seemed to be pleased with themselves as they went back to their chairs.

A man stepped forward and seemed to have a bit of swagger in his step.

Paul didn't know who he was but felt an automatic dislike for him. He didn't know if it were the obviously fake tan, the gaudy gold jewelry, the really bad comb-over or a combination thereof.

"That's Uncle Pear." G said unenthusiastically.

"The douchebag?" Paul asked to confirm.

A yelp of laughter sounded from Paul's other side.

He looked at Lenn curiously.

"It's not that you called him that, but that you came to that conclusion without even meeting him." Lenn tried to say past his laughter.

"G warned me about him, yesterday."

"Oh? Did he warn you about me, too?" Lenn asked cautiously.

"Yeah."

"What did he say?"

"That you steal things." Paul said simply.

"Oh." Lenn said quietly.

"Well, you do. What's the big deal? You said that you're not going to do that anymore. I believe you. I think we're good." Paul said simply.

"Is that all he said?" Lenn asked cautiously.

"Yeah. It was a warning, just the same way that I'd hope that *you'd* warn me about someone who might hurt me." Paul said seriously.

Lenn slowly nodded, then pointed toward the front of the room before saying, "Never believe one word that man says. He will use you until there's nothing left for him to take."

"Okay... I'll remember that." Paul said with surprise.

'Cue theme music reprise.'

Paul noticed that Uncle Pear had transformed into some grotesque overly muscled rabbit-human hybrid thing.

"He looks scary but if you do so much as say 'boo' to him, he'll run away crying." Lenn said frankly.

"Good to know." Paul said as he watched Uncle Pear change back to his usual appearance.

Paul wasn't quite sure which was more disturbing and finally decided that his forms were equally unpleasant, each in their own way.

* * * * *

"Here we go, I think you're going to like this." G said when he saw who was getting up in front of the group.

"Who's that?" Paul asked curiously, since he was sure that he hadn't been introduced to either of the elderly couple who were standing.

"That's Great Aunt Euna and Great Uncle Paden. I'm not sure, but I think that Great Aunt Euna is Grandpa Ewan and Great Aunt Deoirdh's sister." G said thoughtfully, then added, "I'm going to drop the Greats and great greats. If you want to know how many generations back they are, just ask."

"Okay." Paul automatically agreed, then cautiously said, "I remember Grandpa Ewan, but who is Great Aunt De... however you say it?"

"She's Uncle Neese's wife... late wife. As far as I know, she's not here." G said seriously.

Paul slowly nodded, then turned his attention forward, since it seemed like the elderly couple were just about ready to do... whatever they were going to do.

Between one moment and the next, the man, Uncle Paden, was suddenly replaced by a large angry looking dog.

"That's one of the full transformations that I was telling you about." G whispered.

While Paul watched in wonder, Aunt Euna began to deform into a hideous beast that Paul could only describe as a 'hag'. Her wart covered skin had turned a sickening shade of green and her hair had become a tangled mess of white, sticking out in every direction. Her gnarled hands were dangerous looking claws and every breath she took was a sickening wheeze.

"In a fight, they would both use their transformed physical forms. Neither one of them have any offensive magic... at least, that's what Dad told me. I've never really talked to them much, since I'm not from their family line." G said simply.

"Toad's their great grandson." Lenn added.

Paul nodded as he watched the dog and the hag both snarling at the family.

A moment later, Paul watched carefully as they began to return to their regular 'human' forms.

By all appearances, they were an extremely elderly couple. No people Paul had ever met appeared to be less threatening.

The applause seemed to rise up from all around him and Paul enthusiastically joined in.

"Imagine it, being that old and being able to do a complex transformation like that. It's really amazing." G said admiringly.

Paul hadn't been around such things long enough to know what an accomplishment it was, but he trusted G's assessment of the situation.

Another elderly couple stepped forward. They weren't quite as old as Aunt Euna and Uncle Paden, but they were certainly somewhere around retirement age.

"That's Uncle Gawain, I'm named after him!" G said quickly.

Paul smiled at the announcement.

"He's Uncle Paden and Aunt Euna's son. He's with his wife, Aunt Coira." G said informatively.

"What are their abilities?" Paul asked curiously.

"It's best to wait and see, but I'll tell you that they're both able to transform. This is one of those cases where it runs in the family." G said frankly.

Without much prelude, the man began to increase in size. His hair grew incredibly fast and within a matter of seconds, he had transformed into a classic werewolf.

Paul sat in amazement.

He could feel his heart racing at the sight.

'Without a doubt, Uncle Gawain is amazing.'

'I'm glad that G has a namesake who is worthy.'

Paul had so much of his attention focused on Uncle Gawain that he had almost forgotten Aunt Coira.

A movement caused Paul to look away from the impressive sight of Gawain for a moment and he was stunned again.

Aunt Coira had transformed into a black bear.

No matter how impressive the werewolf was, seeing them side by side, it appeared as though Aunt Coira could probably defeat Uncle Gawain in two minutes or less.

When the applause sprang up, Paul automatically joined in.

He was frankly in awe. The animal transformations were beyond anything that he could have ever imagined.

*'Thank goodness that I watched all those black and white movies, otherwise I would have been **totally** unprepared.'*

Aunt Coira and Uncle Gawain changed back to themselves and Paul once again noticed that their clothes appeared to be unchanged after the transformation. He resolved himself to do further investigation so that he wouldn't have to stop and take off his shoes every time he wanted to transform.

When the next group stepped forward, Paul smiled, since he recognized two of the three.

"Is Toad here, or did he get sent to bed?" Paul thought to ask.

"He's right there." G said as he pointed.

"Who's the other guy with Toad's parents?" Paul quietly asked G.

"Uncle Lachlan, he's Aunt Kat's brother. They're Uncle Gawain and Aunt Coira's kids."

"How many generations do we have here?" Paul asked hesitantly.

"Four, I think." G said consideringly, then quickly added, "At least, above ground."

Paul tried to fight down the smile at the response to his question.

"Do you think anyone from your family will do anything?" Lenn asked G quietly.

"Grandpa J might. Most of the rest don't have anything to show. They do charms or they're drainers." G said thoughtfully.

"Drainer? What's that?" Paul asked cautiously. He didn't like the sound of that.

"Just what it sounds like, their power is to steal your power. Aunt Kyla can use the power that she steals, but not at full strength and she has to know their spells. Her mom, Aunt Lyall, can steal your power, but she can't use it." G said instructively.

Before Paul could respond, he saw Kat, Horst and Lachlan stand in a row, obviously ready to show their abilities.

Kathryn transformed first, becoming a werecat creature that was both beautiful and deadly. Once her transformation was complete, Horst began to grow into an enormous mass of muscle. Whereas Uncle Pear's transformation gave the impression of 'muscles for show', Horst's muscles had the appearance of 'muscles for beating anything in his path into a bloody pulp'. The third and final member of their group then began to grow and hair began to sprout from just about everywhere at once.

It took a moment for Paul to recognize the creature that Lachlan had become. Much like Kat and Horst, his transformation appeared to be halfway between 'human' and something else. In his case, he seemed to be a half-gorilla.

"I bet you weren't expecting that." G chuckled from his side.

Paul looked at him for a long moment before responding, "I doubt that *anyone* could have predicted *anything* that's happened to me in the past eight hours."

"Safe bet." G said with a grin, then turned his attention back to the show.

After turning back to their 'human' forms, Kat, Horst and Lachlan went back to their seats.

There was a long pause that followed and people started whispering to each other,

wondering if everyone had had their chance to present.

Paul was looking around and was surprised to see Grandpa J and D walking down the staircase.

One by one, the other attendees noticed that they were approaching and fell silent.

When D was finally at the front of the gathering, he looked around, then said, "I hope you realize how much I love all of you. I love you enough to interrupt my wedding night."

A few chuckles went around the room.

"G, great job on the decorating. You outdid yourself." D said appreciatively.

"I had help." G called in return.

"Dad asked that we provide the closing entertainment for the night, so let's do this." D said with a smile, then gestured past the crowd, toward the dining room.

Several of the dining room chairs began scampering into the great hall, under their own power.

A moment later, a collection of coffee tables, ottomans and comfortable cushioned chairs from the lounge followed.

Laughter began to spring up around the room as everyone watched the furniture playfully frolicking.

Paul felt a tremor, as if there had been a distant explosion or an earthquake.

A moment later, he felt it again and looked at G with question.

"It's Grandpa J." G said simply.

As Paul was about to ask G what he meant, he caught sight of a living statue, slowly walking into the great hall under its own power.

"Grandpa J can animate stone... but only if it's carved to look like a living thing." G said slowly.

"So your dad can make a chair walk, but your grandfather needs something that looks like a living thing?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah. And from what Grandpa's told me, the way his works, he can kind of give his statues a 'taste of life' so that he doesn't have to tell them, like, 'step, step, step', he can just say, 'go in there' and they'll know how to do it." G said seriously, then added, "Dad actually has to tell his things every step of what they're supposed to do. He's more like a puppet master."

Paul looked back at the collection of furniture 'playing', then looked at D curiously. Now that he was paying attention, he could see the level of concentration that D was using to control every action of every piece of furniture.

The ground shook as the statue took another step and Paul began to realize just how big the thing was. From a distance, he had known that it was big, but now he estimated that the thing must be at least fifteen feet tall.

The statue took one more step, then stopped, freezing in place. It took a moment for Paul to realize that the pose that the statue had stopped in was one of bowing with respect.

"That's it! Thank you everyone. Goodnight!" D said loudly.

"Let's shut it down." G said decisively, then asked, "Nazzy and Vinda, will you undo your lights?"

"Sure." Nazzy said, then looked at Vinda and waited for her to be ready.

They simultaneously made gestures toward the window, and the moonlit scenery turned into complete darkness.

"Lenn, are you ready?" G asked hopefully.

As an answer, Lenn looked toward the window and concentrated. In the space between one moment and the next, the seemingly open space was replaced by a solid wall.

"Here it goes." G said as he raised his hands, then dramatically let them fall. As he did, the chandeliers, the tapestries, the beautifully ornate chairs and the carpeting all vanished, replaced by gray stone and folding chairs.

A round of applause sounded, acknowledging the wonderful job that G had done.

"You did good." D said appreciatively as he approached.

"Are you going to need any help getting everything put back?" G asked cautiously.

"No. I've got it." D said as he glanced at the furniture.

Paul watched in wonder as everything slowly turned and started to go back to where it had come from.

"You two should get upstairs to bed. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day." D said frankly.

"What's happening tomorrow?" G asked cautiously.

"We're going to be travelling back to the States." D said frankly.

"You could have given us some warning!" G yelled.

"That's what I'm doing right now." D said with a grin.

"We're going to need to hang around here for a little bit to clean up and put the chairs away." G said as he looked around.

"Don't worry about that. I'll get it." D said with a glance at the folding chairs and a simple gesture of his hand. In unison, all the unoccupied chairs began walking themselves over to a place along the wall and folding themselves.

"Thanks, Dad." G said with a grin, then looked to Paul and asked, "Are you ready?"

"If we're leaving first thing in the morning, then I'd like to say goodbye to Toad." Paul said honestly.

"Yeah. Me, too." G admitted.

Paul then turned to Lenn and said, "I live with G, you know how to get in touch with us, don't you?"

"Yeah." Lenn assured him.

"Anytime, day or night, if you need to talk, one of us will be there for you." Paul said firmly.

"Okay." Lenn responded, then thought to add, "You can call me, too."

"We will." Paul promised.

"So, it sounds like we'll all be flying out together." Nazyzy said from G's other side.

"Yeah. I can think of worse things." G said with a grin.

"I doubt that I'll get much school work done on *this* trip." Paul said as the group started walking.

"You're not going to need it anyway." G said simply.

"Why not?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Well, now that you're 'one of us', you're going to get to see the *real* school." G said with a smirk.

After a moment to consider, Paul finally said, "I can't wait to get started."

The End

Parvenu 3: Otherland

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Chapter 1

Paul was still coming to terms with being a world traveller. Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined that he'd ever have an opportunity to do anything like visiting another country.

Even so, the next challenge before him was to adapt to a whole new way of life... and beyond that, a whole new state of being. His disorientation was compounded by the fact that he had only just arrived back in the United States the previous evening.

Sitting in the car, Paul tried to focus his attention on what D was saying to him. "It may take a little arm-twisting, but I'm sure that I'll be able to get your status changed this morning so that you can get right to your classes. Who knows? Maybe you'll be placed in some classes with G."

"Is that okay with you?" Paul asked his newly adopted brother with concern.

A roll of G's eyes in Paul's general direction before turning his attention forward again was his only acknowledgement.

'It's not that G accepts me that makes me feel good.'

'It's that he's so certain of it that he wouldn't dignify the question with a response.'

"There's a good chance that Nazareth and Ravindra will probably be in your classes too." D added.

"I couldn't even keep up with regular classes. I don't know how I'm going to do in... what do you call it? Witch school?"

"We just call it school." G said with an affectionate grin at him.

"Try thinking of it like transferring from the general education to the college prep courses. You'll be expected to learn different disciplines but the format is basically the same." D said frankly.

"Except that I'll be learning about magic and spellcasting and..." Paul trailed off anxiously with freshly renewed panic.

"How did you end up doing with the math classes, before we left?" G asked in a tone of voice that demanded an answer.

"I never even got the first clue about what they were talking about." Paul said despondently.

"So, no matter how good or bad things go today, you're no worse off than you were before." G said reasonably.

I thought about that for a long moment, then quietly responded, "Yeah. But at least I know the basics in regular school."

"Paul, you have nothing to base your expectations on, so I can understand that you're feeling uneasy."

'Uneasy? Ya think?!'

'See: Understatement.'

"Although I'm not on staff at the school, as the parent of an active student, I like to keep abreast of current policies and procedures."

Paul cautiously nodded that he was following along with what D was saying.

"Every year the school has a small number of students admitted who have only just awakened to their powers and need some help to come to terms with being exposed to the greater world. The school has experienced people and well proven procedures in place to help new students, just like you, exactly in your situation."

"But what about me being a half... you know." Paul asked reluctantly.

"Although it's not necessarily common, it's not unheard of. I wouldn't go around announcing it to everyone you meet, but if people find out, they'll probably look upon it as a curiosity for a day or two, then forget all about it." D said frankly.

"Who knows, maybe if you're lucky the people who find out will be demon fanboys, like Nazy." G provided with a smile.

"I don't know if that's better or worse than people not liking me because of what my biological father is." Paul said honestly.

"When you get past all the magic and secrecy, I'm sure that most of what you'll be facing is the same kind of thing that you'd face at any other high school." D explained.

'Oh? You mean living hell?'

'That's all you had to say.'

""It's going to be living hell", and I would have understood.'

* * * * *

"Hopefully I'll see you in class." G said as they walked into the school, then he quickly added, "If not, I'll see you at lunch."

"I'll see you then." Paul said quietly as he watched G walk off in another direction.

After a long silent moment of walking down the hallway, D quietly said, "It'll be alright. I'll see to it."

"Thank you." Paul said sincerely.

He still believed that it was going to be horrible, but it meant the world to him that his adoptive father would take the time and trouble to try and make things better.

* * * * *

When they walked into the office and the woman behind the desk jumped to her feet to attend to D right away, Paul couldn't help but smile.

"Mr. Darroch, how can I help you today?" Janice asked eagerly.

"It seems that my son has had a change of status recently, so I'd like to see that his schedule is updated accordingly." D said diplomatically.

"My son." I'll never get tired of hearing him say that.'

"Oh? I see. Well, since your son is already enrolled, that shouldn't be any problem. I assume that he'll be needing an *evaluation* before his placement." Janice said in a leading tone.

"Yes. Although I have some inkling of what it will reveal, I believe that a professional evaluation of Paul's strengths will assure that he will receive the most appropriate education." D said seriously.

"Yes. Dr. Williams is very thorough in his evaluations. I'll personally see to it that your son will be scheduled to have everything that he needs to succeed." Janice said eagerly.

"While I'm thinking of it, Paul's mother and I were married day before yesterday..."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you." D said with a courteous smile, then continued, "Paul has expressed a desire to have his surname changed to Darroch, so I was wondering if it would be possible to reflect that in his school records. It may take a day or two to get all the official paperwork in line, but it seems as though it would be least confusing for all involved to have his name listed on all documentation as 'Paul Darroch' from this point forward."

"That's no problem. Although his original name will still be listed in the computer until we receive the official paperwork, all his class schedules and such will show his preferred name." Janice assured him.

"Thank you." D said with another hint of a smile, then asked, "What else will I need to do to get Paul's status changed?"

"Nothing. Paul is already enrolled, so all I have to do is make the status changes to his file and wait for the results of the evaluation." Janice said confidently.

"Then I'll leave you to it." D said simply, then turned to Paul and said more quietly, "Don't hesitate to call me if you have *any* problems at all."

"Okay." Paul agreed, feeling inordinately pleased at his new father's show of concern for him.

'I don't know if this is what all dads are like.'

'But I think that maybe this is what all dads should be.'

While Paul and D were talking, Janice darted behind her desk for a moment and made a quick call.

"Dr. Williams is expecting you. His office is just next door, down the hall on your right." Janice said as she hung up the phone.

"Thank you again. You've been very helpful." D said gratefully, then pulled Paul into an unexpected hug.

Paul didn't know how to react to that, but took a moment to appreciate the wonderful feeling.

"Have a good day." D said quietly as he released Paul.

"You too." Paul said warmly.

Paul watched as D left the office.

He took a moment to collect himself, then forced himself to follow, taking the next steps on the path to his new future.

As anxious as Paul had been earlier, he now had the sense that there was a chance that things might *possibly* turn out alright.

* * * * *

Paul walked into the office to find a rather imposing figure waiting for him.

"Dr. Williams?" Paul guessed.

"Good morning. And who might you be?" The large black man asked as he stepped forward to shake Paul's hand. Paul wasn't sure, but he took the man's accent to be Caribbean in origin, possibly Jamaican.

"My name is Paul Darroch, but it still might be listed as Paul Hiller in my file." Paul said quietly.

Dr. Williams walked to his computer and typed in a brief inquiry. He read the results before turning and asking, "Do you understand why you're here with me today?"

"It sounded to me like you were going to test me or something to figure out what kind of magic I should be studying." Paul said frankly.

"I will be evaluating your strengths and presenting my findings to the educators. They will make any decisions regarding your studies."

"So, what do I have to do now?"

"Come back to the examination room and let me have a look at you. After that, I'll have my assistant run a few tests, then I'll send you back to the administration office so that they can schedule your classes."

"Is it going to hurt?" Paul asked as he reluctantly followed.

"Most certainly not! I use only the latest and most advanced diagnostic spells and charms." Dr. Williams said firmly.

Something occurred to Paul and before he could think better of it, the words just slipped out, "You're a witch doctor."

Dr. Williams looked at Paul with surprise at the revelation, then considered his words before carefully saying, "That could be taken in two distinctly different ways, one being the fact that I am both a witch and a doctor, and the other referring to me being a practitioner of a particular type of ancient magic, derived from centuries old tribal customs and beliefs."

"I'm sorry..." Paul began to say, but was interrupted.

"As it happens, I am both." Dr. Williams continued.

Paul looked at him with surprise.

"I don't know anything about your ancestry, so I can't presume to draw any parallels between us. But in the magical practice of my own culture, most commonly referred to as Vodou, witch doctors used various ritualistic methods to inspire them to achieve the desired results. Onlookers would see a particular ritual and believe that it was those actions that caused the magic to happen. In fact, some of the witch doctors themselves didn't understand that the ritual was only there to inspire the desired emotion to allow the magic to coalesce in the proper way." Dr. Williams said as they

walked into the examination room. He finished by gesturing toward an elevated bed, indicating for Paul to take a seat.

"I don't understand." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"Different magics require different emotional states. If your spell requires concentration and you attempt it with passionate resolve, the spell will be more likely to fail. Likewise, if your spell requires passion and you attempt to cast it solemnly and ritualistically, it will also be prone to failure. You need to be in the proper frame of mind for your magic to work predictably." Dr. Williams carefully explained.

"I kind of thought that it just... happened when you wanted it to." Paul said weakly.

"That's why you're here, so you can learn what is required to make the most use of the gifts that you've been given." Dr. Williams said with a smile of accomplishment, then pulled a large multi-colored magnifying glass on a swing arm from beside the bed and started looking at Paul through it.

After a moment, Paul cautiously asked, "What do you see?"

"Your aura. This reveals a person's magical essence, if you know how to interpret what you're seeing." Dr. Williams said slowly as he examined Paul carefully.

Paul waited, not knowing if he really wanted to know what the doctor could tell about him.

"You're a cambion, aren't you?" The doctor asked as he carefully moved the magnifying glass aside.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what that is." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"A half-demon. I can make out some prominent infernal influences in your magic." Dr. Williams quietly explained.

"Oh, um, yeah. You can really see that, just by looking at me with that thing?" Paul asked anxiously.

"As I said, it's there if you know what to look for." Dr. Williams confirmed, then continued by asking, "Is this your resting form?"

"I have no idea what you're asking me." Paul said honestly.

"When you wake up in the morning do you look like this, or do you have to change yourself into a more 'human' looking form to go out in public?" Dr. Williams asked seriously.

"No. I wake up looking like I do right now." Paul quietly answered.

"Good. Then, have you learned how to make yourself transform?"

"Yes. I mean, it happened by accident the first time, but I've learned how to make it happen when I want it to since then." Paul rushed to explain.

"Would you mind changing for me now?" Dr. Williams asked hopefully.

"Okay. But I'll need to take off my shoes and... I don't want to mess up the uniform that G loaned me. I'll probably need to take it off, too."

"Go ahead. No one will interrupt the exam." Dr. Williams assured him.

Paul reluctantly got off the bed, then started undressing, feeling uncomfortable under the doctor's clinical gaze.

As Paul was undressing, Dr. Williams quietly said, "Although not many cambion's attend our school, it isn't unheard of. I don't think we have any currently enrolled, but all the staff have the experience of helping someone of mixed parentage."

Paul stepped out of his pants and carefully folded them, then placed them on the foot of the bed.

"I think I'm ready." Paul said nervously, standing in front of the doctor, wearing only his underwear.

"Go ahead. I simply need to see your manifestation so I can determine if any special accommodations will be needed in your training."

"Like what?" Paul asked as he gave the internal 'push' to start the change.

"For some, it is wise to have a fire extinguisher close at hand. For others, it's necessary to be in a wide open location, well away from anything fragile." Dr. Williams said casually as he watched Paul growing taller and gaining body mass as well as horns.

"This is about it." Paul said in his much lower voice, and once again had to adjust his balance as he fought to remain standing on his newly formed hooves.

"Very nice. You seem to have reasonable control of your transformation and your resulting demonic visage appears to be temperamentally stable. There are some who, after years of training, are never able to achieve this state. You're starting off with quite an advantage." Dr. Williams said approvingly.

"Does that mean that some people go crazy when they transform?" Paul asked cautiously, still feeling uncomfortable with Dr. Williams watching him.

"Some, through no fault of their own, will cause magical eruptions while they struggle to transform; fire mostly. Once transformed, there are those who are 'feral' for lack of a better term. They lose the ability to use their higher reasoning." Dr. Williams said informatively.

"To be honest, when I'm like this I feel like I want to *use* my strength. I want to beat and break and tear through things. Standing here and being quiet is making me antsy." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"That's perfectly normal and natural." Dr. Williams assured him, then absently added, "You can change back and dress now, if you would like."

"Thanks." Paul muttered, then immediately reverted to his 'human-looking' appearance.

"As I have said, I play no part in assigning your academic requirements, so I can't make any promises on that front. But I feel safe in saying that in the course of your training that you will be given tasks to perform that will challenge you, thereby satisfying some of your more primal urges." Dr. Williams said as he walked to the nearby computer and started typing.

"Tasks? Does that mean that you're going to be training me to... do stuff, like jobs?" Paul asked cautiously as he dressed.

"Not specifically. You're not going to be groomed to be a 'fighter' or 'assassin' or anything like that. You'll be trained to use your strengths and overcome your weaknesses so that when you leave here, you'll have the skills you need to pursue whatever course in life that you choose."

"I guess it's my, um... normal, upbringing that made it sound to me like you were training a team of superheroes... or villains." Paul said timidly.

"I suppose that there might be some parallels in our training techniques. We encourage students to learn to use their abilities in concert with others to achieve greater goals than they could on their own. But in the outside world that's called 'teamwork'. It's an important social skill to develop. And to be honest, witches have a tendency to isolate themselves. So we do our best to foster the social skills to minimize that." Dr. Williams said frankly.

Paul looked himself over to be sure that he hadn't missed anything while dressing, then he looked at Dr. Williams uncertainly.

"Just remain here and my assistant will be joining you in a moment to do some tests. They're nothing invasive or embarrassing, I promise you. They'll simply gauge your magical aptitude to aid in your placement." Dr. Williams assured him.

"What about the *cambion* thing? I didn't know about witches at all until a few days ago, so I don't know how things work. How big of a deal is it?" Paul asked cautiously, remembering D's advice from earlier.

"That's going to be up to you. I'm sure that there will be those who will look down upon you if they find out. But for others it will be a point of interest that will make them want to get to know more about you. If you let people know, there will undoubtedly be consequences, but try to keep in mind that not all consequences are negative." Dr. Williams said before leaving the room.

Paul hoisted himself back onto the examination table and sat for a long quiet moment as he tried to assimilate all that had been revealed to him.

'I'm a cambion.'

'So what?'

'I'm still me.'

'In fact, I'm more me than I've ever been before.'

'I'm not trying to fit myself into a mold that wasn't made for me.'

'I'm becoming the person I was born to be.'

* * * * *

At the end of testing, Paul didn't know anything more than he had at the beginning.

Dr. Williams' medical assistant, Indra, was pleasant enough, but also completely professional as she went about her duties.

At one point, Paul was asked to hold a wooden ball in his left hand. He did so and sat still and silent as Indra intently watched. At some cue that Paul couldn't determine, Indra seemed to be satisfied and told him that he had done well.

There was another point where Indra asked him to sit still as she held a ziplock bag of something that looked like mercury over his head. She didn't ask him to do anything, she just held it there until she was satisfied, then put it away and made more notes on the computer.

Near the end of their testing, Indra took him into a different room where a box of about fifty rocks sat on a table. She led him to the box and asked him to sort them. When he asked her 'into what', she said that that was the test and left him to do it.

A few of the rocks were crystals, but most of them appeared to be uninteresting, ordinary rocks. Some were rough, some rounded, some large and others small. In the end, Paul divided them into five categories, with just a few odd stones being in the fifth. He didn't really have names for the categories, but certain stones just seemed to go together.

When Indra returned, she seemed unaccountably pleased with his method of sorting and happily entered the results into the computer.

Following the rock sorting, Indra left the room and Dr. Williams returned a few minutes later. All he really said was that the testing was concluded and that Paul should return to the administration office and wait for them to assign his new class schedule.

Paul thanked the doctor and shook his hand before leaving.

* * * * *

As Paul walked into the office, Janice immediately noticed and told him, "Mrs. Bright is evaluating your test results right now. If you'll have a seat, she'll join you in just a minute."

"Thank you." Paul stammered with surprise. Her suddenly solicitous behavior made him wonder if Marsha might have had a little talk with Janice regarding 'customer service'.

'Who am I kidding?'

'This is what it's like to be D's son.'

'He's respected and admired. And no one who knows who he is wants to piss him off.'

'This seems like something that it would be really easy to abuse.'

'I'll have to watch out for that.'

* * * * *

"It looks like you came through the testing unscathed. I hope it wasn't too unsettling." Marsha said as she walked out of her office, carrying some papers.

"It wasn't bad. I just didn't understand the point of most of it." Paul said honestly as he stood to greet her.

"We test for several things. Most of them won't have anything to do with you, but we test just the same in the event that you might have a particular talent that we should be aware of." Marsha said, then indicated for Paul to have a seat.

Before Paul could ask for an example, Marsha continued, "I've created a new class schedule for you, based on your strengths. You'll have your academic classes and foundational magics before lunch each day. In the afternoons, you'll be in your specialty class, learning the skills and control for your primary ability."

"What's my primary ability?" Paul asked cautiously.

Marsha referred to the paperwork in her hand, then said, "You seem to have an aptitude for fire, so you'll be receiving a foundational study course in that. Once you've mastered the basics, you'll be encouraged to go into a more specialized subset."

"Oh. Okay." Paul said hesitantly.

"As often comes with fire, your specialized field of magic would seem to be based in wizardry, more specifically necromancy. It turns out that we have a rather talented group of students in that specialty this year, so you should have ample opportunities to work with others and benefit from their accumulated knowledge."

"Is it going to be a problem that I don't know what I'm doing? I mean, I didn't even know about witches a few days ago." Paul asked anxiously.

"That's actually fairly common. But at least with Mr. Darroch being your father, I know that you'll be getting the support you will need at home. Some aren't so lucky." Marsha finished regretfully, then continued, "No matter. The teachers all understand that new students many times won't know the basics. I've even heard it expressed that some of them prefer that, since it means that the students won't have to 'unlearn' bad habits or erroneous knowledge from previous, inadequate teachings."

Paul slowly nodded that he understood what she was saying.

It actually served to put him somewhat at ease, knowing that there were other students who started out further behind than he already was.

"Since second period is nearly over, I'll have Janice walk you down at the start of third period and introduce you to your teacher. Your morning classes will be different from day to day but every afternoon you'll be attending your primary training." Marsha said pleasantly.

"What's my next class going to be?" Paul asked cautiously. He wanted to brace himself.

"Magic theory. The professor sometimes gives lectures on procedures or theories. Other times, the class will focus on the bookwork required for your afternoon class. Every student in the class will likely be studying a different thing, learning the specifics that they'll need to know for their practical application course in the afternoon."

Paul nodded dumbly, somehow both understanding and not understanding at the same time. Either way, he couldn't think clearly enough to form a coherent question.

"This actually works out quite well. You'll have the opportunity to do a little preparation before you're thrust into a lab situation where you might be expected to perform."

"Do you mean that I'm going to have to get up in front of everyone and try to do magic?"

"No. Not everyone. You'll most likely be teamed with other students with similar or complementary abilities so that you'll be able to work together and support each other. You may have to 'perform' in front of them, and your instructor, of course, but not the whole class."

"Oh. Okay. I think I can do that."

"Don't worry. If things aren't going well, just let a member of the staff know and they'll work to help you. We're all here for that singular purpose."

'How many times have I heard someone say crap like that before?'

'And how many times did it turn out that they were saying it to justify the shitty job that they were doing?'

'They say something like 'we're here to help you', then turn a blind eye when three guys jump you on the playground and steal your money.'

'They watch people be horrible to each other, both teachers and students, and they don't do a thing.'

'Considering our first encounter, I don't have any reason to believe what Marsha is telling me...'

'...but for some reason I kinda do.'

'At least, I'm willing to give her a chance.'

"I'll do that. Thanks." Paul stammered.

Marsha smiled at his response, then glanced at the clock before saying, "If you're ready, you can go with Janice now. She'll show you the entrance to the hidden part of the school."

Thanks to Marsha's assurance and words of encouragement, Paul was able to honestly reply, "I'm ready."

* * * * *

When Janice led Paul down the hallway, just past the cafeteria, Paul was surprised to realize that he hadn't noticed another hallway being there before.

Before Paul could formulate a question, saying as much, Janice said, "There's a ward in place which encourages those who don't already know about this wing of the school to overlook it."

"So you don't have to cast a spell directly on a person for it to work?" Paul asked curiously.

"Look here." Janice said as she walked to the entry to the hallway and pointed out an ornamental filigree pattern along the wall, so bland and beige that it was barely noticeable.

"This is where the spell has been placed. If you look carefully at the pattern of the design, you'll begin to see the disguised text of the spell. Those who approach are drawn to turn their attention elsewhere. Just knowing that it's here negates the effect."

As they continued their walk, the class bell sounded.

Within seconds, students emerged from the classrooms up and down the hall, making their way to their next classes.

"You'll be getting a double block class today before lunch, so you should have plenty of time to discover some new things that you'd like to try when you reach your practical lab setting. Just keep in mind that everyone is different. We all have our own talents and interests. You will likely be asked to learn and practice some things that don't interest you. Please accept that it's part of the learning process and that once you've learned the basics, you'll have more opportunity to pursue those things that *do* interest you." Janice said as they walked.

When they arrived at one of the classrooms, Janice knocked on the open door, then cautiously said, "Professor Ortega, I have a new student for you."

"I recently noticed that I still had one empty desk in my classroom. This must be divine providence." The professor said warmly as he covered a teapot with a quilted cover.

Despite any fear that Paul might have been harboring, the man's jovial nature served to put Paul at ease.

"It must be." Janice said with a barely restrained smile, then continued, "Professor Ortega, this is Paul Darroch. His status was just changed from regular classes."

"Does that mean that you only recently became aware of the existence of the greater world?" Professor Ortega asked Paul curiously.

"Yes, sir. About three days ago at my parents' wedding, in Scotland." Paul said uncertainly, since it seemed like it had been so much longer.

"Since you've been enrolled in my class, can I assume that you've discovered that you have a supernatural ability?" Professor Ortega asked curiously.

"Yeah. Well, you see, I kinda summoned a demon..." Paul muttered uncomfortably.

"At the wedding?" Professor Ortega guessed.

Paul reluctantly nodded.

"That must have been quite some event." Professor Ortega chuckled good naturedly.

"It was. But no one seemed to be bothered too much by it. My new cousin, Lenn, said that more marriages would probably work out if the old ex-wives and ex-girlfriends were dragged off to hell as part of the wedding ceremony." Paul said a bit anxiously.

"He might very well be right about that." Professor Ortega said with a laugh, then turned to Janice and said, "I was just about to have some tea before my next class begins. Would you care to join me?"

"No, thank you Professor. I need to get back to the office." Janice said gratefully, then turned to Paul and said, "Here are your daily class schedules. Be sure to come to the office if you have any questions or concerns."

"I will." Paul promised.

"If you will excuse me, have a good day." Janice said before hurrying away.

"We have a few minutes before the next class group will start arriving. Would you care for a cup of tea?" Professor Ortega asked as he removed the quilted cover from the teapot and began to pour a cup for himself.

Although Paul's first impulse was to refuse, mainly because he didn't particularly like hot tea, he couldn't help but feel that spending a few relaxed minutes in the professor's company might end up being a rare and valuable experience for him.

"Yes sir. I'd like that. Thank you."

"May I assume from your surname that you are related to Mr. Darroch, who is such a prominent figure in the community?" Professor Ortega asked as he handed a filled cup of tea to Paul.

"Yes sir. At least, now I am. He married my mom a few days ago." Paul said quietly before taking a sip of the tea.

"I can't say that I know him personally, but I've heard only favorable things about him."

"I haven't known him that long either, but from what I've seen so far, there's no one else that I'd rather have as a father."

"It's good that you get along. It's not always the case with blended families."

A group of three students walked into the room and made their way immediately to their desks.

After another sip of tea, Professor Ortega said, "As I recall, Mr. Darroch has a son about your same age, doesn't he?"

"Yes. His name is Gwayne, but everyone calls him G."

"Yes, of course. He's a close friend to some of my students. I hope that you and he get along as well."

"He's the brother that I always wanted." Paul said warmly, then noticed more students filing into the room.

"Very good. Many times students who don't have satisfying or supportive homes have trouble learning the basics of magic. Having so much turmoil in their lives makes it difficult for them to form a solid foundation. From what you've told me, you shouldn't have any such worry."

"I grew up not knowing anything about magic or witches, so I feel like I've got a lot to learn. But as far as having people at home who support me, I think I've got that covered."

"If they will provide you the support, I will be honored to provide whatever knowledge you are lacking. It will be up to you to put these things to good use."

"I'll do that." Paul said sincerely, then noticed that more of the class had joined them.

Professor Ortega held out his hand and Paul gave him his teacup.

After setting the teacups aside, the professor said, "If you'll take a seat over there, we will begin."

* * * * *

Paul was happy to see that Nazy and Vinda were in his class. He looked around and recognized a few other people from the lunchroom, but was disappointed to find that G wasn't among them.

The class bell sounded as Professor Ortega took his rightful place at the front of the room.

"Everyone, if I may have your attention. As you may have noticed, we have a new student amongst us this morning. It is my hope that you will share some of what you have learned so that he may participate with you on your own level."

Paul was understandably uncomfortable being the focus of so much attention, but had been through the experience enough times that he wasn't too terribly bothered by it.

Thankfully, Professor Ortega began his lecture after that and Paul settled in to listen. Most of what the professor was talking about was general and theoretical, Paul found that he was able to follow what the professor was saying reasonably well.

The professor spoke of the balance of forces and the relationship between spellcasting and the spellcaster's emotional state. Although Paul was no nearer to being able to actually cast a spell, he was at least beginning to understand some of the basic theory behind it all.

* * * * *

The class bell rang and Professor Ortega told the students to enjoy a few minutes break before returning to the lecture.

A few members of the class left, presumably to visit the restroom. However most of the students remained in the classroom and gathered into small groups to talk quietly amongst themselves.

"You made it! So, what do you think?" Nazzy asked as he and Vinda approached.

"It's great so far, but where's G?" Paul asked curiously.

"I think he's got Sorcery this period. We were in class with him earlier and he was really worried about you." Vinda said somberly.

"Yeah. It was all he could talk about." Nazzy added.

"What can you tell me about what we'll be doing after lunch? I don't know what to expect." Paul said honestly.

"That's going to be up to Professor Ortega and whatever teacher he assigns you. Most times they'll team a new person with some of the advanced students and let them work together to get him caught up." Vinda said frankly.

"Do you think that I'll get to team up with you?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Probably not. Neither one of us has any talent for demon summoning so we probably wouldn't be of much help to you. Professor Ortega will probably team you up with someone closer to your specialty." Vinda said seriously.

"Does that mean that there are other demon summoners in this class?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Nicholas." Nazzy and Vinda said in unison.

At Paul's questioning look, Nazzy explained, "There are a couple others but Nicholas has a demon imp that he keeps with him during class. Even though other students have been able to summon demons, Nicholas is the only student in our year who's been able to consistently summon and control one."

"I guess that sooner or later I'll have to do that, even though the idea of commanding or controlling someone sounds totally wrong to me." Paul said honestly.

"I doubt that Nicholas feels that way about it, but I think that most *decent* people question the ethics of how they use their magical gifts." Vinda said seriously.

"I thought demon summoners were rare. In fact, I remember G saying that he'd never met one before." Paul said slowly.

"He might not have." Nazzy said frankly, then explained, "People like us, who use the 'darker' magic, usually don't go around telling people about what we can do. I mean, when we're outside of school and we're sure that we're around people who will accept us, it's a whole different thing. But here, some of the 'fluffy bunny' types will try to shame you for being anything that they're not. It's best not to reveal too much outside of your class group."

"Besides that, Nicholas isn't very sociable... or friendly." Vinda added with a withering look.

"Right. And with G being so happy and carefree all the time, he's kind of the opposite of Nicholas." Nazzy agreed.

"And even if they did meet, G wouldn't have any way of knowing that Nicholas is a demon summoner. Being in our class doesn't really tell anything about your ability except that it's based in Wizardry." Vinda explained.

"Yeah. As far as I know, Corabeth can't summon anything at all, but she's one of the best students in the class." Nazzy added.

"If she can't summon anything, what can she do?" Paul asked curiously.

"I know there's a word for it, but I don't remember what it is. She creates this 'wall of force' or something. It's really impressive." Nazzy said with a smile, then looked up when the class bell rang.

"I can't wait to see it." Paul said as he noticed that the others in the classroom were breaking away from their little groups.

"We'll talk more at lunch." Vinda assured him.

"Yeah." Paul responded with a smile as he watched Nazzy and Vinda return to their desks.

* * * * *

Professor Ortega's next hour of lecture had to do primarily with 'field manipulations', which Paul didn't understand in the least.

When the class bell rang, heralding lunch, Professor Ortega called for Paul to stay behind for a moment.

"Yes sir?" Paul asked as he approached, noticing that Nazy and Vinda had stopped to wait for him by the door.

"Mr. Darroch, I just wanted to be sure to let you know that when you return from lunch, you will be working with Mr. Gilbert and he will let you know what will be expected of you during your practical class time. I will, of course, be present in the classroom, but in more of an advisory than a teaching capacity. Should you have any need of assistance, please feel free to seek me out." Professor Ortega finished with a sincere smile.

"I will. Thank you sir." Paul said respectfully.

"Go on now. You wouldn't want to keep Mr. Couleigh and Miss Sodhi waiting." Professor Ortega said warmly.

"Yes sir. Thank you again." Paul said before joining his friends at the classroom door.

* * * * *

As Paul walked out of the classroom, Vinda quietly said, "Remember that we're going to be around normal people in the cafeteria. Make sure that you don't talk about magic while we're in there."

"I don't think it'll be a problem. I don't know anything yet." Paul said honestly.

"Don't worry. You'll get there." Nazy assured him.

"How did it go? Are you alright?"

Paul turned and smiled as he saw G approaching. "I'm fine. All I've had to do is listen so far. No one's asked me to *do* anything."

"Good. Just hang in there. I know that you're smart enough to learn everything that you need to. You just have to give yourself a chance." G said confidently.

As they turned the corner to the cafeteria, Nazy said, "Paul is in our class group. We're going to have class together every afternoon."

"That's great! I was worried that you might get put into a class where you didn't know anyone. Having Nazy and Vinda will help you out a lot." G said honestly as they automatically got into the serving line.

As Paul looked over the food selections he couldn't help but say, "I can't believe how you guys eat here. At my last school, the food tasted more plastic than the wrappers it came in."

"I've heard that before. But since this is the only school that I've ever been to, I don't have any way of judging for myself." Nazy said frankly.

"So have you known about... stuff... since you started school?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yeah. I know that some parents pretend that they're normal around their kids but mine never did that. I went to a 'special' elementary school, it's run by the same people that run this place; that's where I met G and Vinda. After elementary school, we all started going here." Nazy said frankly.

There was a long silent moment as everyone made their lunch selections. Once they all had their trays filled, they made their way into the dining room and easily found an unoccupied table.

"Paul?" A boy's voice asked as they were all settling in.

Paul turned and had to search his memory for the name of the boy that he'd spoken to once before.

"What's up, Curtis?" Paul asked cautiously, hoping that he was remembering the boy's name correctly.

"I thought you must have moved away or something. You went to school for a few days, then all of a sudden you just stopped."

"Yeah. Well, the reason I started going to this school is because my mom met this guy who lives here and she decided to marry him. We just moved into his house. I was gone last week because their wedding was out of town."

"So you're back now? You weren't in class today." Curtis said suspiciously.

"Yeah. I was having some trouble before, so they tested me and decided to move me to another class where I might be able to do better."

"I noticed that you looked kinda lost when you were here before."

"I never *did* figure out what those *ordinal* things were that the teacher seemed to be so excited about."

"Introductions?" G asked quietly.

"Oh! I'm sorry. Curtis was in one of my classes before the wedding. Curtis, this is my new brother, G and our friends, Nazy and Vinda." Paul said quickly.

"It's nice to meet you." Curtis said as he looked at the group, then his focus seemed to stop on G as he said, "I've seen you around at lunch, but I don't think that I've had any classes with you."

"Yeah. It's a big school." G said easily.

"Would you like to have lunch with us?" Vinda quickly offered.

"If you're all friends, I don't want to get in the way." Curtis said uneasily.

"Paul's still new to the group. Having a friend of his join us will kind of even things out." Vinda said cheerfully.

Curtis glanced at Paul and quietly asked, "Is that okay?"

"Yeah. Go on and get your food. We'll save a seat for you." Paul assured him.

"Okay." Curtis said happily, then to the whole group he said, "Thanks!"

* * * * *

"What was that all about?" Paul asked Vinda as soon as Curtis was out of earshot.

"Just what I said. We three are old friends, so I can see how you might feel outnumbered sometimes. Curtis seems nice and I thought that maybe he'd enjoy hanging out with us." Vinda explained.

"But he's not a... you know." Paul urged her to understand.

"Neither were you, at least as far as you knew, before last week and you were always welcome to sit with us. You and Curtis each have a lifetime of believing that the world

works a certain way. The only difference is that you recently discovered that that was wrong." Vinda finished with a smile.

"So it's okay that he's not like us?" Paul asked as he glanced to be sure of where Curtis was in the serving line.

"It's fine. We'll just talk about normal stuff when he's around." Vinda assured him.

"While it's true that we don't have any 'normal' friends, that's not because we don't like them or don't want to associate with them. It's just because we don't really get a lot of opportunities." G said frankly.

"And we don't really have a lot in common." Nazzy quickly added.

"That's right. Just because of who and what we are, we have to grow up differently from *them*. It doesn't make us hate them or anything, but I think the differences make it more difficult for us to find common ground to get to know each other." Vinda said thoughtfully.

"I think I get it. If Curtis is my friend, then I can act kind of like a bridge for you to maybe give you enough in common so that he can become your friend too?" Paul asked speculatively.

"If it works out that way, then great. But if not, then he'll just be someone else that we can invite to sit with us at lunchtime." Nazzy finished with a smile.

"So, what are you guys talking about?" Curtis asked as he set his tray on the table.

"You." Vinda said with a grin.

"What about me?" Curtis asked warily.

"Paul was just making sure that we weren't trying to prank you or something mean like that by inviting you to sit with us." Vinda said simply.

"I hope you told him that you wouldn't do that." Curtis said cautiously.

"No. There are a few other people around here who've cornered the market on that kind of behavior. But we've only known Paul for a couple weeks, so I can understand it if he hasn't completely figured us out yet." Vinda said with an easy smile.

"Thanks for watching my back, Paul." Curtis said gratefully.

"I've got you covered." Paul assured him.

'So... they want for me to be their friend AND have friends of my own besides them?'

'What kind of witchery is this?'

'...'

'Okay. Maybe I do need more friends if I'm making snarky jokes to myself.'

* * * * *

The group ate their lunches and talked for a few minutes about general topics.

Finally it was G who said, "Curtis, I've been going to this school forever and I haven't seen you around here before. Are you new here too?"

"Well, yeah. My family moved here during the summer and heard that this 'private' school was really good, so I started here this fall." Curtis said uncomfortably.

"So when you saw Paul on his first day, you could relate to what he was going through?" Vinda asked speculatively.

"Yeah. From what I can tell, most of the people here are like you, they've been going here for years. No one seems interested in getting to know someone new." Curtis said regretfully.

"I can't speak for anyone else, but I know that when we have a new person in one of my classes, I usually don't want to get too close to them because if they moved here all of a sudden, then they're probably that much more likely to turn around and move again." G said seriously.

Paul couldn't help but nod in agreement. He had been the one moving away 'all of a sudden' for most of his life.

"I hadn't thought of that." Curtis said honestly.

"Well, you don't have to worry about Paul moving away. I think our parents are going to be together for the long haul." G said confidently.

"I wish I could say that I'll be staying, but it's not really up to me. If something happens and my dad has to relocate again then I'd have to move. I don't really get a choice in the matter." Curtis said regretfully.

"I know how it is, Curtis. I've had to move so many times that I can't count them all. And every time I'd have to move it'd be just a little bit harder to try to get to know new people and a little bit easier to let them go the next time that I moved." Paul said honestly.

"This is only the third time that we've moved, but I think the thing that makes this time worse is that I like it here. The school's nice and the food's good and if you guys really don't mind me hanging around with you... the thing is, I can't let myself enjoy it too much because it could all end at any moment." Curtis said anxiously.

"Newsflash: Life's not fair." Paul said simply.

The others around the table looked at him with surprise.

"Once you accept that, maybe you'll be able to enjoy what you have for as long as you can have it." Paul added, directing his statement mostly at Curtis.

"But what do I do if they suddenly have to move again?" Curtis asked desperately.

"I wish I could give you some advice about that, but when you have no foundation, no security, all you can really do is deal with it the best way that you can. For me, sometimes that means feeling bitter and resentful. Other times it means feeling nothing at all." Paul said frankly.

"But you're better now that you're here, aren't you?" G asked Paul cautiously.

"It's not that simple." Paul answered regretfully, then explained, "When you move from place to place, always wanting a 'real' home, eventually it becomes impossible to believe that such a thing could ever happen to you. Even though my brain knows that I have a stable home now, in the back of my mind there's this thing that's warning me not to get too comfortable, not to allow myself to get too attached."

"Yeah. That's exactly what it feels like." Curtis said quietly.

"What can I do to make you feel like you can stay here?" G asked anxiously.

"Nothing." Paul said simply.

'Hey, you guys wanted to be my friends.'

'Here it is. This is the real me.'

'I don't have all the answers and certain things do bother me.'

'If you can't handle it, I need to know now.'

Nazzy, Vinda and G looked at him with surprise as Curtis nodded his understanding.

"It's not like I have my bags packed and I'm ready to leave at a moment's notice. I've just never known what it feels like to be someplace that I could really call 'home'. Every place that I ever lived was temporary, so I don't know how I could talk myself into feeling like I've found something permanent." Paul tried to explain.

"I don't mean to disagree with you, but you actually *do* have your bags packed." G reminded him.

"Oh, yeah. That's just because we got in so late last night." Paul admitted, then added, "But I'm not planning on leaving. I'm just saying that it's not in my nature to believe that I'll be staying. My life has taught me never to believe that because I'll always be disappointed."

"It's almost time for the bell. What's your next class?" Curtis asked as he gathered everything onto his tray.

"It's a lab class. I haven't had it before, so I really don't know what to expect. But Nazzy and Vinda are in the class with me, so I'm not too worried about it." Paul finished with a smile.

"Oh. I was kind of hoping that you'd be having history next. I know we wouldn't be able to talk or anything, but maybe it would be less boring if I wasn't in there facing it alone." Curtis said honestly.

"Misery loves company?" G asked with a smile as he stood and picked up his tray.

"Yeah. I guess so." Curtis chuckled.

"Well, you may have to suffer through history class on your own, but you don't have to think of yourself as being alone. Why don't you plan on having lunch with us again tomorrow?" G asked pleasantly.

"Yeah. I'd like that." Curtis happily agreed.

"We'll see you then." G said, then carried his tray to the drop-off window. Nazy and Vinda were soon to follow.

As Paul was standing, Curtis quietly asked, "Is it true, what I've heard about you and that guy?"

"What's that?" Paul asked as he picked up his tray.

"That you were hugging in the hallway and that he's, like, your boyfriend or something." Curtis said anxiously.

'Oh no.'

'Please don't ask me any questions about being gay.'

'I've only been officially gay for one week.'

'I'm not very good at it yet.'

"I don't see that it matters except when we're alone, but yeah, it's true." Paul said cautiously.

"I just wondered. You hear stuff and I wasn't sure." Curtis said slowly.

"Does it bother you?" Paul asked curiously.

"No. I think it's good that you two can be honest about who you are. I'm not... you know, like you. But if I was, I think that I'd like to be like you... I mean, I'd want to face it and not be ashamed and hiding it." Curtis stammered.

"I'm gay. G is my boyfriend. I've got no problem with you knowing that. And it looks to me like you've got no problem accepting it. Now that we've gotten all of that out of the way, how about we not make a big deal about it?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I just wanted to be sure so I wouldn't say the wrong thing and find out that what I thought was true really wasn't." Curtis babbled.

"Fair enough. And not everyone has the guts to just come out and ask about something like that. Thanks for doing that." Paul said sincerely before picking up his tray.

"Yeah." Curtis said with a smile as he followed.

'That. What Curtis just did. That's what friends do.'

'If they want to know something, they ask you, even if it might hurt your feelings.'

'I wonder if G, Nazy and Vinda realize what a good guy he is?'

'Is that why they invited him to join us?'

'Nah. They just see my friend.'

'And that's enough for them to include him.'

Paul caught up with Nazy and Vinda just outside the cafeteria.

"Did you two have a good talk?" Nazy asked as they began to walk.

"Yeah. He asked if G and I were boyfriends." Paul said simply.

"Do you think he's interested in you?" Nazy asked suddenly.

"Or G?" Vinda added curiously.

"No. I don't get that vibe from him at all. I think he just wants to understand what's going on."

"So what did you tell him?" Nazy asked cautiously.

"The truth. Everyone whose opinion I care about already knows, so why bother trying to hide it?"

"Good point." Vinda said easily, then indicated for Paul to turn right at the next intersecting hallway.

"Any last words of advice before we go into class?" Paul asked anxiously.

"Some people are just too full of themselves. Don't let them get to you." Nazy said frankly.

"That bad, huh?" Paul asked slowly.

"We'll just have to wait and see who you get partnered with, but yeah, it'll probably suck." Nazy regretfully informed him.

Paul nodded that he had heard as they walked into a large central room.

* * * * *

As Paul walked into the oversized meeting room, he could feel the stares of everyone on him.

The students seemed to have formed into small groups, talking quietly amongst themselves.

"Professor Ortega is probably meeting with the teachers. They're usually a few minutes late." Nazy said quietly.

"Don't we have any desks or anything?" Paul asked curiously.

"We have tables in our work rooms." Vinda explained as she pointed toward a series of closed doors.

"We usually meet out here for a few minutes, then break into groups to do our work." Nazy added.

Before Paul could think of a response, Professor Ortega led a group of teachers into the room.

"Today while you're doing your exercises, I'm going to ask that you keep in mind how you're balancing the forces at play. Your instructors are going to be paying particular attention and offering their advice." Professor Ortega said to the entire room.

Paul noticed that everyone had silenced and were paying him their full attention.

"Mr. Gilbert, Mr. Spencer, Miss Watson and Mr. Darroch, if you'll stay behind with me everyone else can begin their practice exercises." Professor Ortega said firmly.

"Don't worry. You'll be fine." Nazy said quietly, then gave Paul's shoulder a firm squeeze as he passed by.

Paul was actually surprised at how comforting Nazy's words, actions and general attitude were to him.

It took a moment for him to get his mind back on track, but when he did, he cautiously made his way to the front of the room as everyone else seemed to be scattering in different directions.

"Mr. Darroch, may I present Mr. Gilbert. He will be your instructor while you're in my class." Professor Ortega said as he indicated a thirtyish man at his side.

"It's nice to meet you." Paul said timidly, even though it wasn't *entirely* true.

"A pleasure for me as well. Would you prefer that I address you as Mr. Darroch?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

"No, thank you. Paul will be fine."

"Very well, Paul. Have you had any formal training before this?"

"No. I didn't even know about magic before last week."

"Has anyone warned you about the powers that you will be accessing?"

"No. No one's said much of anything about it."

"You will be opening doorways, which will be your responsibility to close. You will also be drawing beings onto our plane of existence and you will be responsible for the consequences of that."

"If it's so dangerous, then why teach me?"

"Because it's far more dangerous for you to have the power to do such things without training in how to use it responsibly." Mr. Gilbert said frankly, then continued, "These two are going to be your teammates, Nicholas and Amelia."

Paul turned to see two of his classmates looking back at him. Before he could say anything, Mr. Gilbert continued, "I will need your help to get Paul up to speed."

"Shouldn't he be placed with someone nearer his own level?" Nicholas asked derisively.

'What a dick!'

"Perhaps Professor Ortega is trying to determine if what you have is really an exceptional understanding of the material or if your ability to summon is a fluke." Mr. Gilbert said simply.

"Can I summon Frederick now?" Nicholas asked coldly.

"Yes. I think that Mr. Darroch might benefit from a demonstration." Mr. Gilbert said as he gestured toward one of the doorways surrounding the room.

Nicholas gave a huff of exasperation, then stalked away at a deliberate pace, leaving the rest of the group behind.

"Amelia has demonstrated an aptitude for a variety of the disciplines of Wizardry. I believe that she will be a valuable resource for you to draw upon." Mr. Gilbert said as the group followed Nicholas more slowly.

"Don't expect me to do your work for you." Amelia said bitterly.

'I don't care if she's a girl. She's a dick too!'

"I won't." Paul said slowly, not understanding her immediate animosity toward him.

* * * * *

By the time Paul had entered the study room, Nicholas already had a metal cabinet open and had placed candles around a diagram on the floor. He was currently drawing symbols around the diagram with chalk.

"Can you light the candles?" Amelia asked Paul as she broke away from the group and walked to another metal cabinet.

"Sure. Where are the matches?" Paul asked as he looked around.

Amelia rolled her eyes at him before opening the second cabinet.

"I believe that Amelia was asking if you had the knowledge and precision to magically light candles." Mr. Gilbert explained.

"No. I haven't learned anything about magic." Paul said honestly.

"According to what Professor Ortega told me, you have the aptitude for fire, so it shouldn't take long for you to learn the skill."

"What do I have to do?"

"While Nicholas is preparing, I'll show you the proper form. Once you've learned that, I'll give you the incantation." Mr. Gilbert said then demonstrated a hand gesture which resulted in a small flame appearing in his palm.

Paul tried to duplicate the movement, but found that it wasn't as easy as it looked.

"Watch me, I'll show you the individual movements more slowly." Mr. Gilbert said patiently.

This time, Paul was able to mimic the movements exactly.

"The next part is what might take some time. I'm going to say the incantation aloud, and you can repeat after me. Once you've mastered the skill, you should be able to say the incantation in your inner voice, so all that anyone will see is the gesture. In time, you may reach a level of proficiency where the gesture becomes unnecessary."

"Inner voice?" Paul asked slowly.

"Yes. I can't speculate on what it's like to be a mundane person, but among witches it's not uncommon to have an inner voice that we can use to internally incant a spell." Mr. Gilbert explained.

"How do you make a flame appear on a candle instead of in your hand? Do you change the incantation or gesture or is there something else?" Paul asked curiously.

"That's a very intelligent question which leads us to the third part of the lesson. If all it took to cast a spell were words and actions, then a mundane person would be able to do it. The third component is your magical *will*."

'Oh, that's right. Dr. Williams was saying something about that.'

"When you use your inherent magic, you offer up a piece of your personal magical energy to fuel the spell. Some call it your spirit or soul, others look upon it as an ectoplasmic reservoir that you can tap into. When you perform the gesture and say the words, at the same time you will be directing your *will* to make the desired result happen. If you're focused on your objective, you will get the result that you want. If not... notice that we have a plentiful supply of fire extinguishers around the room." Mr. Gilbert said as he gestured toward a few of them.

"Dr. Williams said something about being in the right state of mind when you're using magic; that certain types of magic require different moods or attitudes. At least, that's how I understood it."

"Yes. Although that theory isn't universally accepted, my own experience would seem to bear it out."

"What kind of attitude should I have?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Fire tends to be fueled by your passion. Being tired, bored or indifferent will negatively impact your spellcasting. If you're enthusiastic, you'll have a greater chance for success."

"Since this is all new to me, I don't think that a lack of enthusiasm will be a problem."

"I agree. You appear to have more than enough for this situation."

"Let me see if I've got this right." Paul said, then performed the hand gesture.

After watching, Mr. Gilbert said, "Yes. That should produce the desired result."

"Okay, what are the words?" Paul asked hopefully.

Mr. Gilbert said a short phrase which sounded somewhat poetic in its cadence. It was in an ancient language that Paul couldn't identify from the tone and inflection of the words, but within him there was a recognition. Although his ears heard the strange foreign language, Paul's mind registered the meanings beneath the words.

Paul began to make the gesture with his right hand as he said aloud, "I summon flame. Do no harm. Be here, not there. It is by the power of my will. I command it to be so."

Before Mr. Gilbert could react to Paul's translation of the spell, a small ball of flame appeared in Paul's open palm.

"Are you sure that you've never had any training in spellcasting before?" Mr. Gilbert asked in surprise.

"No. Never." Paul confirmed, then nervously asked, "How do I make it stop?"

"The flame in your hand is created entirely by your will. Withdraw your will for it to be so and it will extinguish." Mr. Gilbert said calmly.

It took a moment for Paul to trace the tendril of his internal power lending itself to the external manifestation, but once he identified it, he was easily able to stop the flow. He watched with a smile of accomplishment as his little ball of flame simply ceased to be.

"Mr. Gilbert, we're ready." Nicholas interrupted.

"Allow me a moment to verify your diagram, then I'd like for Paul to try to light the candles." Mr. Gilbert said decisively.

"Do you really have to check the diagram *every single time* I do it?" Nicholas whined.

"Yes. I do." Mr. Gilbert said firmly, then explained, "What you're doing is dangerous and regardless of how highly you think of yourself, you *are* capable of making mistakes. It is my responsibility to act as a safeguard."

Nicholas snorted derisively, then muttered, "Whatever."

After a moment of looking over the diagram, Mr. Gilbert turned to Paul and asked, "Will you try to light the candles?"

"Sure." Paul said, then looked around at each of the candles surrounding the seven pointed diagram before internally saying the words of the spell.

'I summon flame.

Do no harm.

Be here, not there.

It is by the power of my will.

I command it to be so."

All seven candles lit simultaneously.

The teacher and two other students looked on in awe at Paul's achievement.

"You didn't speak the words or do the gestures." Mr. Gilbert said slowly.

"I decided to try doing it like you said and did them in my head." Paul said simply, then cautiously asked, "That was alright, wasn't it?"

"That was *exceptional!*" Mr. Gilbert enthusiastically assured him.

"Can I summon Frederick now?" Nicholas asked belligerently.

"Yes. Go ahead." Mr. Gilbert said as he guided Paul to take a few steps back.

Chapter 2

The first thing to catch Paul's attention was that the deeper Nicholas got into his spellcasting, the bluer his skin tone seemed to become. There were also some minor ridges formed framing Nicholas' face, like the first buds of slowly emerging horns, but they weren't enough to obfuscate his identity.

Paul was mostly able to follow along with the spell that Nicholas was casting on the diagram drawn on the floor. There were a few misspoken words and one entire passage that was self-contradictory and therefore completely useless. But in the end, Nicholas was able to set his power free on the diagram and a small opening seemed to appear in the floor, although Paul could sense that it wasn't a hole in the floor so much as a hole in reality.

As soon as the hole was open, Nicholas began chanting an entirely different spell which was harder for Paul to understand. The language wasn't a problem so much as the convoluted grammar and strange inflections that Nicholas used. Paul could tell that he was 'summoning' something, but the details of what he was seeking were vague, at best.

Finally, after some minutes of Nicholas repeating his demand for whatever it was 'to come forth and serve his will', a small reptilian creature emerged from the hole in the center of the diagram.

The little creature might be a foot tall, if fully standing, but it tended to stay in a crouched position, hissing and spitting. Its tiny horns, teeth and claws looked as though they might be dangerous, although not necessarily deadly.

A part of Paul looked upon the demon imp with disgust, which held a desire to just stomp on the putrid little thing and be done with it. Another part looked on warily, reluctantly waiting to see what was going to happen next.

"This is Frederick, my servant." Nicholas announced to Paul triumphantly.

"Amelia, now that Nicholas has opened the doorway, would you like to work on it for a while?" Mr. Gilbert asked seriously.

Rather than answer, she sprang into action, reading an incantation aloud from a book.

"What's she going to do?" Paul asked curiously.

"For the past week or so, Amelia has been trying to determine *exactly* what realm Frederick comes from. Being able to trace an open doorway to its source can be a valuable skill." Mr. Gilbert explained.

"Can't you just decypher the spell and find out that way?"

"In many cases you can, but the spell that Nicholas uses is written in such a way that it doesn't give specific coordinates or any real clue as to where it's being directed. Besides, since you aren't always present to witness a doorway being opened, this is a good skill to develop." Mr. Gilbert said as he watched her work.

"Yeah. I noticed that when Nicholas was opening the passage, that he said things like 'Realm of Dark Desire' and 'Cavern of Fetid Fear'. If you don't already know where he's talking about, it doesn't really tell you much."

"I'd like to get you tested for your language comprehension. So far you've demonstrated an understanding of Sumerian and Gaelic."

"Is there some use for that?" Paul asked curiously.

"Actually, that's not a subject that I'm well versed in. I imagine that there are probably some lucrative job possibilities. I'll do some investigation and get back with you on that."

"Thank you. All of this is so new to me, it's all I can do to deal with what's in front of me. I haven't even thought about what I'm going to do *years* from now."

"In just a few minutes you've demonstrated a great aptitude for spellcasting and an understanding of ancient and dead languages. I believe that the future will be what you decide to make of it." Mr. Gilbert said honestly.

"Well, maybe. But I'm going to need help to get caught up to everyone else. A lot of the people that I've talked to have known about witches all their lives. I don't even know the basics."

"With the talents that you've already demonstrated, I feel confident in saying that you'll be able to catch up faster than you might imagine possible."

Paul glanced at Amelia, sitting cross-legged in front of Nicholas' spell diagram, and did a classic double-take. The rather average looking girl that had entered the room with them was now bright yellow in color and seemed to have grown a few extra arms.

"Does everyone transform when they use their magic?" Paul asked in wonder as he stared at her.

"Most, yes. Although, with some practice, you can usually resist the change. In Amelia's case, I think that it's more a matter of her not wanting to be distracted by resisting the transformation so that she can completely focus on her scrying."

Paul looked carefully at Amelia, something niggling at the back of his mind. While it was true that she had six arms and her skin was now buttercup yellow, none of that seemed to bother him.

It took a moment for him to realize what else was out of place.

"Her clothes changed." Paul finally said in realization.

"Yes. It's a basic spell that causes clothing to adapt to your magical form." Mr. Gilbert said simply.

"Can you teach it to me?" Paul asked hopefully, then explained, "Everytime I change I have to undress to keep from ruining my clothes."

"Yes. Of course. Give me a minute and I'll find a written version of the spell for you." Mr. Gilbert said as he stepped away.

Paul looked toward Nicholas and saw him talking to his little demonic imp.

Amelia seemed to be deep in concentration, totally focused on the misty vortex in the center of the spell diagram.

* * * * *

When Mr. Gilbert returned, he took a moment to turn to the proper page, then handed a book to Paul.

"This describes the spell gestures and gives you the incantation. Most witches can use this spell, but if for some reason you aren't able to, it's also possible to make a charm that you can wear to achieve the same result." Mr. Gilbert said seriously.

"Thanks." Paul said as he began to read the spell.

"Have you tried to use any basic magic yet?" Mr. Gilbert asked curiously.

"No. I haven't *intentionally* used any magic at all, so far. The most I've done is change into my magical form when someone asked me to." Paul said absently as he continued to read.

"Most people want to try things out as soon as they discover that magic is real." Mr. Gilbert said frankly.

"This time yesterday I was on a plane, crossing the Atlantic ocean. I just haven't had the chance." Paul said honestly.

"Well, if you want, you can try this spell out now to see if you have an aptitude for it." Mr. Gilbert said slowly.

"Yeah. I really want to learn this one." Paul said decisively, then looked to Mr. Gilbert and slowly asked, "But can you read the words of the spell aloud for me? I think that if I can hear it that I'll be able to remember it a lot better than if I read it."

"Yes. Of course. Just let me know when you're ready." Mr. Gilbert said quietly.

"Let me try the gesture first." Paul said as he returned the book.

Mr. Gilbert watched as Paul performed the gesture.

"That should work." Mr. Gilbert said with a nod.

"Okay. Then can you tell me the words?"

Mr. Gilbert carefully recited the spell, making sure to enunciate every word precisely.

Paul slowly nodded, then made the gesture as he recited the English translation of the ancient spell in his mind.

After a moment, Paul looked down at himself, then quietly asked, "Did it work?"

"The only way to know for sure is if you change."

"But if it doesn't work, then my clothes will be torn up." Paul said anxiously.

"I know a few spells that can deal with that. Go ahead and change. If your clothes are damaged in the process, just change back to your human form and I'll do my best to restore them." Mr. Gilbert assured him.

"Okay." Paul said reluctantly, then gave the internal push to begin to change himself.

"Good. It seems to be working." Mr. Gilbert quietly encouraged.

Paul could feel himself growing taller and his different physical attributes forcing their way into being.

"What are you doing?" Nicholas gasped from across the room.

"This is my magical form." Paul answered as he felt his transformation concluding. As expected, his voice was octaves lower than his 'normal' voice.

"Come back here!" Nicholas barked as Frederick broke away from him and scrambled in Paul's direction.

When the little imp finally reached Paul, it climbed up one of his hooves and hugged his ankle.

"Don't worry, he's not hurting anything." Paul said as he reached down with one of his clawed hands and plucked the demonic imp from his leg.

"He's MINE! Give him back!" Nicholas demanded.

"Take it easy on him. He's probably just scared being around people who are so different from him." Paul said as he held the tiny imp to his chest and petted it gently.

"If you want a demon, summon your own! This one's mine!" Nicholas snarled as he tried to snatch the demon imp from Paul's arms.

"Back off!" Paul bellowed in his booming voice as vortices erupted in flame around the room.

"Paul! You need to stop! You're opening doorways!" Mr. Gilbert shouted.

"Back. Off." Paul said in a lower voice as he looked directly at Nicholas.

After an indecisive moment, Nicholas finally took a step back.

Paul looked around the room and all the flaming vortices immediately vanished.

He looked down at the demon imp in his arms and quietly said, "I'm here if you need me. But for now, you have to return to the one who summoned you. Those are the rules."

The imp gave an agonized little whine in response.

"I know. I know." Paul chuckled, then took the imp from his chest and held it out to Nicholas.

After a long distrusting moment, Nicholas accepted it from him.

"Is everything alright now, or do we still have a problem?" Paul asked Nicholas seriously.

"No problem." Nicholas responded warily.

Paul looked down at himself, then at Mr. Gilbert and said, "It looks like the spell worked, except that I think that Frederick peed on me."

Mr. Gilbert seemed to be dazed, but finally responded, "Change back and I'll see what I can do about it."

Without betraying the slightest effort, Paul changed from his demon form back to looking fully human.

"What are you?" Mr. Gilbert asked suspiciously.

"Can't you guess?" Paul asked in return.

After a long silent moment, Mr. Gilbert irritably said, "They should have told me that I'd be teaching a cambion."

"Is it a problem?" Paul asked curiously.

"No. Of course not. I just might have approached things differently if I had known in advance."

"Can we do something about this demon pee? It really stinks." Paul asked hopefully.

"Yes. It will take me a moment to find the proper spell. I think it was his way of marking you, so there is likely a mystical component at play. It might take a bit more than soap and water to be completely rid of it." Mr. Gilbert said before hurrying away.

* * * * *

"You're a cambion?" Amelia asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But if you have any questions about that, I probably can't answer them. I only found out a few days ago." Paul said honestly.

"From what I've read, demons don't use spell books. They have an instinctive knowledge of magic." Nicholas said in a leading tone.

"I have no idea about that." Paul said honestly.

"But if you have that, I mean, inside you, then maybe there's a way to use that to find out how to navigate the portals and pull up demons from different realms." Nicholas urged him to understand.

"Again, I have no idea." Paul repeated.

"But would you be willing to try something like that?" Nicholas asked hopefully.

"Maybe. It depends on what you're asking me to do." Paul said cautiously.

"Frederick is the only demon that I've been able to summon. With your help, we might be able to tap into a realm that hasn't been touched before."

"Nicholas, before I say 'yes', would you do me a little favor?" Paul asked hopefully.

"What?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

"Would you try treating Frederick like your teammate instead of like your slave?"

"What's the difference?"

Paul looked to Amelia for her support.

"Trust me. He *doesn't* know." She confirmed.

Paul looked back to Nicholas and said, "Try looking at it this way. Asking is just polite demanding. You can still control your demon without looking like a complete dick while you're doing it."

"Are you ready?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously as he returned.

"Yeah. This really stinks."

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When Mr. Gilbert finished casting his spell, Paul wasn't sure if it had worked or not. Although there was no sign of a stain on his shirt, Paul continued to be plagued by the aroma.

"Nicholas, you've repeatedly demonstrated your ability to summon and control Frederick but for the remainder of our class time, I'd like for you to work on summoning *another* demon. Something just a little bit bigger."

"I've summoned a demon and sent it back. Isn't that enough to get me a passing grade?" Nicholas asked angrily.

"Actually, no. It isn't." Mr. Gilbert said frankly, then continued, "In this class, you're graded on your *improvement* more than your achievement."

"That's not fair!" Nicholas whined.

"Sometimes life isn't. But if you think about it, this makes sense. Rather than graduating groups of students who've managed to achieve the minimum requirement,

we graduate students who have been encouraged to do their best and challenge their limits, over and over again." Mr. Gilbert said reasonably.

"Do you mean that Paul is going to get a better grade than me even though he can't summon anything?"

"If the grades were being finalized today, he might very well surpass you. He may not have cast many spells, but so far, all of the ones that he *has* attempted, have been performed flawlessly and each has been of increasing difficulty." Mr. Gilbert said calmly.

"This sucks!" Nicholas declared.

"Perhaps, but it is still a requirement of the class." Mr. Gilbert said frankly.

Nicholas gave one last, rather impressive, sneer before stomping away like a petulant child.

"What now?" Paul asked cautiously.

Mr. Gilbert opened the spellbook that he was still holding, then leafed through to a particular page.

"This is a basic spell that falls both into the 'basic' and 'fire' magical categories, so it should be within your ability. It's a standard spell for wizard light. I'd like for you to read this through and then attempt the spell on your own. Modify the spell if you wish and come to me when you've reached a place where you're happy with the result that you've been able to achieve." Mr. Gilbert said seriously.

"I thought you were going to jump on me about opening doorways or acting threatening toward Nicholas or something." Paul said honestly.

"Demons follow the rule of dominance or submission. It's all they understand. Those who are learning the craft must also understand this. Today, within the first hours of meeting your classmates, you have established your dominance over them. I believe that it was a necessary development that will allow us to proceed productively."

"So you're not mad?" Paul asked to be sure.

"No." Mr. Gilbert said simply, then added, "Although I wouldn't have planned for things to develop in this way, it may end up being beneficial for all involved."

Paul looked at him inquisitively, silently prompting for more of an explanation.

"Study your light spell. If you're not finished with it before the end of class, make sure to show me what progress you've been able to make with it. I believe that I will be spending the majority of my time trying to guide Nicholas in a more productive direction."

Paul couldn't restrain a smile as he quietly said, "Good luck with that."

Mr. Gilbert gave an almost imperceptible nod before crossing the room.

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Paul carefully read through the spell and sounded out the incantation before attempting to cast it for real.

The manifestation of the spell was to create a little floating dot of light, which could be adjusted to be barely visible or bright enough to light one's path at night.

After successfully manifesting the Wizard's Light, Paul began to leaf through the book that Mr. Gilbert had given him, in an effort to find a way to modify the spell to make it his own.

Near the back of the book he came across a spell that caught his interest.

'Am I just a glutton for punishment?'

'When will I ever learn my lesson?'

'When I really try and do my best work, it always comes back to bite me on the ass.'

'As the saying goes, 'No good deed goes unpunished.'

'If I were smart at all, I'd just magic up a little wizard light and get the passing grade.'

'I'm new here. No one's expecting anything more from me.'

'And if I hold myself back, they never will.'

'They'll never expect anything from me but the bare minimum.'

'I can live with that...'

'...can't I?'

'...'

'I'm such an idiot dumbass loser.'

'I guess that I'm just incapable of learning from my mistakes.'

'I wonder if Nicholas and Amelia are secretly a jock and a cheerleader.'

'It wouldn't surprise me. My life is littered with such ironies.'

'Well, I guess if I'm going to do this, despite knowing better, that I'm going to pull out all the stops!'

With renewed dedication, Paul enthusiastically began trying different things to see if his plans were even possible.

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After trying a few different methods of altering the initial spell, Paul was convinced that his idea could work. The only problem was that he didn't have the knowledge that he needed to perform the entire spell on his own.

He would need help.

Mr. Gilbert spent a great deal of time working with Nicholas, apparently trying to inspire him to attempt more advanced projects.

Paul busied himself and was nearly ready to abandon his plan when Mr. Gilbert finally finished 'encouraging' Nicholas and left the room.

"Nicholas, I need your help." Paul said as he rushed to where Nicholas and Frederick were.

"Why should I do *anything* to help you?" Nicholas sneered.

"Hear me out. If this works, it might help you too."

"I don't like you." Nicholas said bluntly.

"I don't care." Paul said simply, then added, "But if we can pull this off, it will end up being a good thing."

"What do you want from me?" Nicholas asked warily.

Paul held out the spell book, opened to the proper page.

After a moment of reading, Nicholas said, "I can't do this diagram. It's 'next level' stuff using symbols that I've never studied." Nicholas said frankly.

"What about the incantation? Can you handle that part?"

"I'd have to go through it a few times to be sure, but I think I could probably manage it." Nicholas said slowly as he read through the details of the spell.

"So, what do you think? If I can make the diagram and you can do the incantation, do you think that we could summon a demon?" Paul asked hopefully.

"There's also a big blank in the summoning equation. Nothing's going to happen if we try to cast the spell without a locus. We're going to need that filled in if we're going to have any chance of this working."

"I think I've got that covered." Paul assured him.

There was a long silent moment as Nicholas considered his options.

"If this works, it'll make you look good and might even get Mr. Gilbert off your back for a while. If it goes wrong, it's all on me. You really can't lose." Paul explained.

Finally Nicholas grudgingly said, "Yeah. I guess we can try it."

"Good. You can keep the book and study your part. I need to double check a few things so that I'll be able to pull it all together when I need to." Paul said determinedly.

"I still don't like you."

"I still don't care." Paul responded with a smile before hurrying away.

* * * * *

Paul was careful to hide his progress from Mr. Gilbert. He manifested a few wizard lights when he had to, just to confirm that they would do what he was expecting, but for the most part, he did most of his work internally.

Much to Paul's surprise, about twenty minutes before the final bell was to sound, Professor Ortega walked into the room.

After walking around and looking at what Amelia and Nicholas were doing, he stopped beside Paul and said, "Mr. Gilbert has mentioned that he's impressed with the progress that you've made on your first day. Would you, perhaps, like to avail yourself of the opportunity to demonstrate what you've been able to accomplish thus far?"

"Yes sir. But to show you I'm going to need Nicholas' help." Paul said uncomfortably.

In a louder voice, to be heard across the room, Professor Ortega asked, "Mr. Spencer, would you be willing to assist Mr. Darroch with his demonstration?"

"Yes sir." Nicholas said as he stood, then perched Frederick on his shoulder.

"Why would you need help to demonstrate wizard lights?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

"Hold on for a minute and you'll see." Paul assured him, then waited for Nicholas to cross the room.

"You said that you were going to do the diagram." Nicholas said as he approached.

"Yeah. I am. Stand back a little. I'm going to do it right here." Paul said as he pointed at the floor in front of him.

Once everyone was out of the way, Paul began an intense internal chant. The original spell was a simple one, but the way that he modified it made it more complex by an order of magnitude.

As small specks of light started forming on the floor, Paul extended his arms and began to make the gestures of the fire spell with both hands.

In unison, seven balls of fire came into being at the seven points of the diagram that was taking form on the floor.

"What are you..." Mr. Gilbert began to ask when Professor Ortega shushed him.

Paul looked over his fully formed diagram glowing on the floor one last time, making a conscious effort to seal any breaches in the binding circle that surrounded it.

"Nicholas, it's your turn." Paul said with effort, betraying the amount of concentration that he was using to maintain the diagram.

Although Paul was completely focused on his magic, he was still able to notice that Nicholas was reciting his incantation without reading it from the book. Once again, Nicholas appeared to be turning blue, but since Paul had determined that that was Nicholas' magical form, he wasn't concerned by it.

Paul listened carefully, hoping beyond hope that Nicholas wouldn't mispronounce or otherwise butcher the spell.

By this time, Amelia had joined them and was looking on in wonder at the glowing spell diagram. Paul wasn't sure if she were using her own power to try and divine what they were doing, but he didn't sense her presence making any difference in the balance of forces at work.

After long minutes of calling out the incantation in a long dead language, Nicholas switched to English and said, "In the land held by Circe, where the disgraced have been exiled, I call upon the Yan-gant-y-tan to bring one forth to do my bidding. Come without odor and be bound by my word. I hereby summon! I hereby command! Come forth!"

There was a long moment of silence in the room as everyone watched and waited for something to happen. Although nothing appeared visually before them at first, Paul could sense the boiling and swirling powers at work. He didn't know if the others could sense it or not, but everyone remained still and silent.

Finally, a gray blur appeared just above the spell diagram.

Paul watched intently as a mostly humanoid demonic being took shape. It had the classic horns and pointy ears that one might expect. Its furry body seemed to be somewhat misshapen, with the limbs appearing to be spindly in comparison to the barrel shaped torso. Also notable was the fact that the demon's hands and feet seemed to be disproportionately large.

In actuality, the demon was only three feet tall, at most. But the fierce look it wore made Paul feel that it was plenty big enough.

"What is your name?" Nicholas asked firmly.

The demon made a gargling sound of defiance.

"Your master commands it! Tell me your name!" Nicholas demanded.

"Xaphan." The demon grudgingly hissed with disgust then held up his oversized hands. Before Paul could determine if the gesture were one of surrender or attack, the fingertips of each hand burst into flame.

"As I release you to return to your realm, know that I am still your master and you are subject to my command. When I call upon you, when I call your name, you are commanded to return." Nicholas nearly shouted and Paul noticed that Nicholas had rivulets of sweat running down his blue skinned face.

After a long tense moment, Xaphan finally said, "I come."

"I return you to your plane, to your realm, to continue as you will." Nicholas ground out in a hoarse voice.

After hearing those words, the demon dissolved back into a gray blur before disappearing completely.

"What has been opened, I now close. What has been closed, I now seal." Nicholas said as he held out his open palms to the glowing spell diagram.

Paul could sense that what Nicholas had said was actually invoked. The passage that had been created between realms was now bound by new magic.

Once he was sure that Nicholas wasn't going to do anything more, Paul withdrew his power from the flames and wizard lights, causing the spell diagram to fade into nothingness.

"That was..." Mr. Gilbert began to say, but didn't seem to be able to find the words to express what he was feeling.

"You have both done very well." Professor Ortega said simply.

Paul was surprised that such a simple, innocuous comment sounded like the highest praise ringing in his ears.

"I would like for both of you to submit reports to me detailing what you've accomplished here today. Remember to include the spells used, modifications made and cite any reference materials you might have accessed." Professor Ortega said calmly.

"Do you mean that after we were able to get a spell as hard as that one to work you're going to punish us by making us write reports?" Nicholas whined.

"You misunderstand, Mr. Spencer. What I am saying is that your achievement is of such merit that I would like to see that it is properly documented, so that others who are less talented might be able to look upon your work and be inspired by it." Professor Ortega said to Nicholas, then turned to Paul and continued, "And so that new students might know what may be achieved with the most basic spells combined with a little ingenuity."

"Yes sir." Paul said as he tried to restrain his smile of pride.

"Good afternoon." Professor Ortega said calmly to the group, then withdrew from the room.

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"How were you able to create a spell diagram using only wizard lights?" Mr. Gilbert asked slowly.

"I just did what you said and modified the spell that you gave me to work with."

"Yes. But the amount of detail that you incorporated was astounding."

"I just copied the diagram from the back of the book. The hard part was getting the wizard lights to stretch and warp the way that I wanted them to."

"But if you were able to do all of that, why did you need Nicholas to help you?" Amelia asked timidly.

"Because he knows what he's doing. I don't have any experience summoning. Drawing the diagram was the easy part. Any non-magical person could do that with a piece of chalk, but what Nicholas did took skill. If I tried to do it all myself, the *best* that I could hope for would be that the spell would totally fail. I can't even imagine the worst." Paul said honestly.

"So, am I off the hook now?" Nicholas asked Mr. Gilbert seriously.

"How's that?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

"You've been hounding me about trying bigger and better spells. Now that I've done one, will you back off?"

"Although an argument could be made that you didn't achieve this entirely on your own, I'm willing to accept your successful summoning as evidence of your academic progress. In other words, I'll back off for a week or two, but if you don't take steps to best today's performance within that time, I may be inclined to remind you that you are expected to *progress* in your training."

"Well, it's not as good as getting a free pass, but I'll take what I can get." Nicholas grumbled.

"Paul, your spell diagram was really amazing. Can you show me how you did it?" Amelia asked hopefully.

"It would probably take a lot to explain that. Since I'm going to have to write a report about it anyway, how about I email you a copy when I'm finished? That way you can just ask about whatever I didn't explain well enough."

"Yeah. That sounds good. From the way your spell diagram worked, I think that I'd like to have a written copy to refer back to."

"Amelia, were you able to make any progress on your scrying today?" Mr. Gilbert asked curiously.

"Yes. I didn't trace the portal all the way back to Frederick's realm of origin, but I was able to map another venule before my scrying spell got dislodged. One minute I'm following the portal, the next I'm looking at Camden, New Jersey."

"That often happens when scrying for locations in the bowels of hell. I'm not quite sure why that is." Mr. Gilbert finished absently.

"Anyway, I made good progress today, so I'm ready to try again tomorrow if you want me to keep going." Amelia said eagerly.

"Yes. I believe that this project of yours is well worth the time."

"Is it okay for me to close the portal now?" Nicholas asked uncertainly.

"Yes. I've done all that I can for one day." Amelia confirmed.

Nicholas walked to the spell diagram drawn on the floor, then took Frederick down off his shoulder.

"Frederick, return to your realm. I command it." Nicholas said firmly.

The little demon paused to look at Paul for a moment, then continued on to the center of the heptagram. There seemed to be the slightest blur surrounding Frederick, then the spell diagram was empty, looking mundane and harmless on the floor.

"What has been opened, I now close." Nicholas said as he made a simple gesture.

"The final bell will be ringing soon. Make sure to clear your diagram so that other students won't be tempted to try and reopen your portal." Mr. Gilbert said seriously.

Nicholas and Amelia sprang into action, stowing the candles and other pieces of gear in the cabinets along the wall.

As they did so, Mr. Gilbert approached Paul and asked, "I'm curious to know, how were you able to remain in your human form throughout your rather impressive spellcasting?"

"I don't know. I guess it's because I didn't really use all that much magic. I made a few wizard lights and tiny little fireballs. The biggest thing I did was figure out how to make the spell diagram turn out right." Paul said honestly.

"So you used your organizational skills coupled with intense visualization to achieve a result that is likely beyond the ability of most of your peers." Mr. Gilbert said speculatively.

"I just did what you told me to." Paul said frankly.

"I might be more worried about that if you hadn't exhibited such good judgement in requesting Nicholas' help. Sometimes the greater feat isn't knowing *how* to use magic, but *when*."

"Shouldn't I be helping them to clean up?" Paul asked uncomfortably as he watched his classmates, hard at work.

"They have established something of a routine. Although I'm sure that they would appreciate the offer, it's most likely that you would end up being in their way, making their clean-up effort take that much longer."

Paul nodded his understanding and acceptance of the assessment of the situation.

"I'm sure that in a short time that you will have your own equipment to store when class is coming to a close." Mr. Gilbert assured him.

Paul glanced at the third cabinet in a row and realized that when he had his own equipment, that it would be his.

"I'm not sure if anyone has told you, but on Fridays we typically set aside a portion of our class time to allow the students to demonstrate what they've been able to accomplish in the course of a week; a chance to 'show off', for lack of a better term." Mr. Gilbert said frankly.

"No. No one's mentioned it." Paul said slowly.

"It's completely voluntary, and to be honest, quite entertaining. The students in this class are specialized in a variety of disciplines which makes for an interesting production. You should consider demonstrating the unique variation of Wizard Lights that you've come up with. I'm sure that everyone else would be interested to see it." Mr. Gilbert said enthusiastically.

Before he agreed to anything, Paul thought to ask, "Do Nicholas and Amelia usually do anything on Fridays?"

"Amelia's skills don't lend themselves well to demonstration. Nicholas... well... he's kind of..."

"Yeah. I noticed." Paul assured him.

"While Nicholas is only too happy to show off Frederick at the meeting, he adamantly refuses to do an actual summoning in front of others." Mr. Gilbert explained, then hurriedly added, "But your method of creating a spell diagram doesn't depend on Nicholas using it. It's an achievement in its own right."

"I'll think about it. Okay?" Paul cautiously asked.

"That's all I'm asking." Mr. Gilbert said with satisfaction.

* * * * *

After their talk, Mr. Gilbert stepped out of the room while Paul watched Amelia and Nicholas store the last few stray items.

When they were done, Paul noticed that Nicholas was looking at him speculatively.

"So, do you like me yet?" Paul asked with an irritating grin.

"No!" Nicholas immediately responded, sounding offended by the suggestion.

"Good. Otherwise things might get weird between us."

"I still don't like you but... thanks for what you said about me having, like, experience and skills and stuff. I mean, thanks for saying it to Mr. Gilbert. He doesn't seem to understand that summoning and controlling a demon isn't easy, it's not *fun*. Him pushing me and riding me to work harder and do more doesn't do anything but make me want to give up and stop doing it at all. No matter what I do, he just wants more and more. He keeps moving the goalpost. It's never enough." Nicholas finished irritably.

Paul was astonished by the admission. What Nicholas said struck a chord within him. He had experienced the same feeling several times in his life, in relation to a variety of different subjects.

After a moment to consider, Paul hesitantly said, "It may not be *enough*, but what you did today seemed to be *enough for now*. You summoned a 'Yan-gant-y-tan'. That's a big deal, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I guess so." Nicholas grudgingly admitted, then continued, "As far as I know, no one else in our year has been able to summon anything that big... or summon the same thing twice."

"So you're a rock star." Paul said with a grin.

"Yeah." Nicholas said quietly, then added, "And you know what usually happens to rock stars, don't you? How they end up?"

The smile fell away as Paul realized what Nicholas was saying.

"I think I can understand why." Nicholas said simply before turning away and walking toward the table at the other side of the room.

When he glanced in Amelia's direction, he could see that she had been listening.

She gave a slight dismissive shrug before walking to join Nicholas at the table.

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"So how was it?" Nazzy asked as Paul walked into the main classroom.

"Okay, I guess." Paul said distractedly.

"Oh? That doesn't sound good."

"It wasn't bad. I'll be fine."

"No. Tell me what's bothering you. Maybe I can help."

"It's nothing. I guess that I'm just going to have to come to terms with the idea of working with amoral monsters."

"You're a demon summoner. I think that's part of the job description."

Paul looked at him curiously for a moment, then realized Nazy's mistake, "I'm talking about my classmates."

"You got stuck with Nicholas, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I haven't had to be around him much, but he always struck me as being a real douchebag."

"He is, but that's not the problem."

"Thanks for waiting!" Vinda said as she emerged from another of the side rooms.

Nazy's eyes lighted with delight when he saw her.

Paul looked on as they shared a quick kiss and thought about how 'right' that seemed.

"Paul was just saying that he was having a problem with Nicholas." Nazy said as he put an arm around Vinda's shoulders.

"No. It's not like it sounds." Paul hurried to assure them.

"What is it, then?" Nazy asked as he indicated for Paul to walk with them toward the door.

"You know how Nicholas is kind of mean and... self-centered?" Paul asked slowly.

"Yeah." Nazy easily agreed.

"The thing that's bothering me is that I can sort of see why he's that way. I mean, not all of it, but when I look at Nicholas, I can sort of get where he's coming from and that bothers me." Paul said thoughtfully.

After a moment of walking, Vinda turned to Nazy and asked, "Translation?"

"Paul's freaking out because he can see some of himself in someone who's a total asshole." Nazy said simply.

Vinda considered for a moment, then seemed to accept Nazy's assessment.

"I've never had to face something like this before. Do you have any ideas about how I can deal with it?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Just spend some time with G. That should sort you out." Nazy said with a smile.

"How will that help?" Paul asked slowly.

"Because what you're seeing is just a mind-fuck. I have no doubt that when you look at yourself reflected in G's eyes that you won't see anything remotely resembling Nicholas." Vinda said so confidently that Paul couldn't help but believe her.

"Besides that, was your class alright? Did you get to do anything?" Nazy asked as they walked.

"Wizard lights, fireballs and I learned a spell to make my clothes adapt to my body when I change form." Paul said simply.

"Were you able to do all the spells? I mean, did they work for you?" Nazy asked curiously.

"Yeah. I got the feeling that the teacher was surprised at how well I did." Paul said honestly.

"Then I think we can count this as a *good* day." Nazy declared.

"How did it go? Are you alright?" G asked as he rushed down the hall.

"Yeah. I'm fine." Paul immediately assured him.

Before Paul knew what was happening, G scooped him into a hug and gave him a quick, firm kiss.

Paul's first instinct was to worry about who might see, but that only lasted an instant as he enjoyed the feeling of being adored.

Once the kiss had finally ended, G kept one arm around Paul as he asked, "Did you have any problems? Is the work too hard? Do you think that you're going to need a tutor?"

Paul chuckled at the barrage of questions and finally answered, "No. No. And not yet."

G had to pause for a moment to associate each answer with the questions he had asked.

"I really only had one class today. Before lunch I had the lecture class that was related to the practical class that I had after lunch. I didn't understand everything, but I think I got a lot out of it. I won't know about the math and science classes until I've started them." Paul said honestly.

"Since you've just changed status, they might put you in pre-numerology. But it's early enough in the year that if they put you in regular numerology, you'll probably be able to catch up to the class. They usually don't start into the difficult stuff until after the Solstice break." Vinda said thoughtfully as they began walking again.

"You might need some help catching up in Alchemy, since each lesson kind of builds on the one before it, but I can help you with that if you need it. None of it's hard, but there's kind of a lot to remember." Nazzy added.

"You mean that I don't have to take math and science?" Paul asked slowly.

"No. You take classes that show you how to magically manipulate math and science. That stuff makes a whole lot more sense when you take a step back and look at the meta-view." Vinda cheerfully explained.

"Real world." Nazzy chirped.

"What's that?" Paul asked curiously.

"We're crossing into the main part of the school. No magic talk from here on out." Nazy said seriously.

"Oh. Okay." Paul said as he understood what Nazy was warning him about.

As they walked, Paul thought to ask, "Is this okay? I mean, us hugging and kissing. Is anyone going to freak out on that?"

"This is fine. They don't want us making out in the halls and stuff like that. But no one has a problem with us holding hands or greeting each other with a kiss. As long as you don't go overboard, no one has a problem with it." Vinda explained.

"We had to be really careful about that when it was the three of us. I think that people were looking for things to find wrong with what we were doing." G added seriously.

"They got through it. We got through it. Hopefully, we made it easier for the next threesome." Nazy said comfortably.

"Are you guys going to catch a van?" Curtis asked as he hurried up to the group.

"Yes. Nazy and Vinda's is probably waiting for them. Paul's and mine should be here in a few minutes." G answered for the group.

"Mine will be here in a couple minutes too. Do you mind if I wait with you?" Curtis asked hopefully.

"No problem." G said with an easygoing smile.

"So how was your day, Paul? Are you doing better in the easier classes?" Curtis asked as he walked with the group.

"I think it's too early to tell for sure. But I haven't had any problems so far." Paul said honestly.

"That's good. I'm glad that they were willing to move you into an easier class. A lot of schools don't care and just keep hammering at you to 'get it' even if you just can't." Curtis said frankly.

"I've been in schools like that." Paul agreed, then added, "From what I've seen here so far, they want to make sure that you understand, but after that, they want to be sure that you keep building and growing and learning more. I haven't seen much of that in the other schools that I've been to."

"From what I've heard, I think public schools have different priorities, many of which don't really contribute to education." G said thoughtfully.

"I don't know much about that side of things, I just know that a lot of them were more concerned with the grade you received than if you learned anything." Paul said as they walked out the front doors of the school.

"There's our van, we've got to go." Vinda immediately announced.

"Call us if you want to go out and do anything later." G called after her.

"All I want to do is sleep off my jet lag." Vinda chuckled before hurrying away.

At Curtis' puzzled look, Paul explained, "The four of us were on our way back from Scotland yesterday. We're really tired from all the traveling."

"You were in Scotland... yesterday?" Curtis slowly asked.

"Yeah. I know how amazing it sounds, but it's not like we do something like that every weekend. We went to Scotland for our parents' wedding. It was a really big deal." Paul said as they walked out to the curb where several busses and vans were waiting.

"Our family is from there." G interjected.

"It sounds incredible." Curtis said simply.

"It really was." Paul admitted.

"Well, if something comes up like that again, maybe you can go with us. My dad was okay with inviting Nazy and Vinda along. He even paid for their airfare." G said happily.

"Really?" Curtis asked with surprise.

"We'll just have to wait and see what happens. If it's strictly a family thing, then we won't be able to invite you. But if it's something just for fun... why not?" G said easily.

"I hope your family decides to do something really soon." Curtis said with a grin.

"I think we're going to need a few days to rest up from this last trip before we start planning any more." G said frankly.

Paul nodded his agreement.

"There's my van. I've got to go." Curtis said abruptly.

"We'll see you tomorrow." Paul called after him as he hurried away.

'I don't know how D and Mom would feel about it.'

'But considering how things were before the wedding, I get the feeling that they wouldn't be too bothered by it.'

'As long as everyone knows what's going on in advance, having Curtis along with us might be nice.'

'I could remember what it feels like to be normal again.'

'Or, at least what I grew up thinking of as normal.'

'What is normal?'

'Am I still me?'

* * * * *

"That one's ours, isn't it?" Paul asked when he spotted their van.

"Yeah, but hold on for a minute." G said as he took out his cellphone.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I don't know that driver. Tony might be out sick or something, but we need to be sure of what's going on before we get into the van."

"Why?" Paul asked cautiously as he waited at G's side.

"Because Dad's rich. There's always the chance that some nutjob's going to try to kidnap us." G said as he held the phone to his ear.

"If something like that happened, don't you think that we could do *something* to get out of it?"

"Maybe. But maybe not. I know that this is all still new to you, but you've got to understand that we can still be threatened, hurt, knocked out or killed. Besides, if we were to do *something* we'd run the risk of exposing ourselves. And if we were exposed, none of the witnesses would be allowed to survive. That includes other hostages, good samaritans and innocent bystanders."

Before Paul could respond, G turned his attention to his phone. "This is Gwayne Darroch. The driver of our school van isn't familiar to me. I was just calling to see if there's been a change of drivers logged."

Paul waited anxiously, unnerved by the fact that G was taking the situation so seriously.

"Yeah. I'll wait." G said, then said to Paul in a quieter voice, "Try to act casual and look around and see if anyone looks out of place."

'Yeah. Act casual.'

'While my heart's beating like a drum and I can feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins.'

'Just, 'Act casual'.'

'No prob.'

Regardless of how freaked out Paul was, he did his best to scan the crowd of students to see if anyone appeared to not belong there.

"Got it. Thanks." G said into the phone before turning it off.

"Is everything okay?" Paul asked nervously.

"Yeah. The driver is named Joseph Willis and according to the security company he's had a full background check. Mrs. Bright told me to be sure to ask to see his ID, but beyond that, everything should be business as usual."

"How often do things like this come up, where you have to be worried about being kidnapped?" Paul asked anxiously.

"Not too often. I mean, it's not like we live like we're prisoners or anything. Just the other day we walked home. But there are certain times and certain situations where we have to be extra careful." G said as he motioned for Paul to walk with him to the van.

"Are there any other downsides of being a rich kid that I should know about?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I can't think of any right now. It's usually pretty great." G said with a grin, then as he approached the van, he made a rolling gesture to the driver, signalling him to roll down his window.

"I'm sorry to ask, but can I see your ID?" G asked, seeming to be careful to stand at least a foot away from the open window.

"I didn't believe it when they told me, but they said that you'd ask." The man said as he unclipped his security company identification card from his shirt pocket and handed it to G.

"License, too." G said as he accepted the security company ID badge.

"Seriously?" The man asked, however his disbelief didn't prevent him from taking out his wallet.

"I could print up a security ID like this one in about four minutes on my computer... in fact, I think I'd have to downgrade some of my software to match this quality." G said as he examined the ID in detail.

"I guess I can see your point." The driver relented as he waited for G to finish his examination.

"What happened to Tony?" G asked as he handed the ID and license back.

"Dunno. Boss just told me to run this route, didn't say why." The driver said frankly.

G motioned to Paul to get into the van.

"Most days I work on the armored car. The funny thing is, I don't think that any of the businesses that I've visited have checked me out as thoroughly as you just did."

"Maybe if it was their lives at stake instead of their money, they'd be a little more motivated." G said as he followed Paul into the back of the van.

"You might be right about that." The driver chuckled.

"Thanks for waiting! I thought I was going to miss you." A Chinese girl said as she rushed to get into the van. Of course Paul had seen her in the van before, but much like on any public transportation, they didn't introduce themselves.

"I keep telling you, you don't have to hurry. They'll wait for you." A boy's voice said from outside.

Paul watched as the ginger boy took his own sweet time climbing into the van, taking the seat in front of G.

"Before we leave, I need your names." The driver said into the back.

"Wait. You're not our regular driver!" The girl said accusingly.

'Observant, aren't we?'

"My name is Joseph Willis, you can call me Joe if you like. Would you please tell me your names so that I can be sure that I've got the right people?"

"My name is Sandy and this is Dex. You'll have to ask the others who they are, we don't associate with them." Sandy said primly.

"I'm G and this is Paul. He's my brother... and my lover." G said before leaning in to give Paul a very deep and passionate kiss.

"Ewww! Make them stop!" Sandy shrieked.

"Does anyone know if someone named Catherine Cook is going to be joining us?" Joe asked professionally.

"Cathy's in my class. She wasn't in school today." G said simply.

"Thank you, Mr. Darroch." Joe said respectfully, then said to the group, "If no one has anything else, we'll be leaving now."

"Aren't you going to do something about them making out, right here in front of everybody?!" Sandy demanded.

"Of course." Joe told her, then looked further back into the van and said, "If you get anything on the seats, there's going to be an extra charge."

"It'll be *totally* worth it." G said with a grin back at him.

Joe nodded once, then started the van.

* * * * *

Although Paul was slightly embarrassed by the makeout session in the back seat, listening to Sandy's overly dramatic cries of disgust made the whole thing worth it.

When the van pulled up to their house, G and Paul got out, then waved at Sandy as the van pulled away.

"Sorry about that. I know that what we do together isn't for everyone else to see, but I just couldn't help myself." G said repentantly.

"I probably wouldn't have done that, but I've got no problem." Paul said honestly.

"Good. I just didn't want you to be worried that we'd be putting on a show like that for everyone we meet. It's just that Sandy's so..." G trailed off, looking for the right word.

"Is she a witch?" Paul asked curiously as they walked around the front of the house.

"You missed it by one letter." G said with a grin.

"Okay. That's good. I wouldn't want to have to watch out for her magical retribution on us." Paul said frankly.

"Actually, I wouldn't relax just yet. Dex is a witch." G said frankly.

"Sandy was making such a stink about us, I didn't really notice how Dex was reacting." Paul said slowly.

"I think Dex is a 'live and let live' kind of a guy most of the time. But if he were forced to pick sides, he'd probably side with Sandy. I don't think he's irredeemably evil, but he seems to be hungry for acceptance so he hangs on the fringes of a group of really nasty 'fluffy bunnies'." G said as he unlocked the front door of his little house.

"I've met the type." Paul said with a nod.

"I don't think he'll do anything unless the hive mind makes him think that he'll get some crumbs of their attention if he does something horrible to us." G said frankly.

"I kind of figured that 'witch school' would be different from regular school somehow." Paul said honestly.

"Nope. We've got the same freaks and geeks, assholes and losers as any other school." G said simply.

Paul let out a long sigh, then looked at G curiously before asking, "Are you hungry?"

G shrugged.

"I'm hungry. Let's raid the fridge before we get started on homework." Paul said decisively.

"Okay." G said easily as he set his backpack beside the couch.

* * * * *

Walking into the kitchen, Paul was surprised to find a platter of nachos made on wedges of pita bread, sitting on the counter, hot and waiting for them.

"Is this for us?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"Who else would it be for?"

"Wait. I've been wondering about this since we moved here. Who's been cooking all the food? I know it's not my mom because she never cooked anything like this." Paul asked before taking a bite of one of the nachos.

"Do you want the truth?"

"No. Lie to me. I like it."

The reply caught G off guard and he nearly choked on his nacho.

"Come on, who's been cooking the food?" Paul asked with a smile.

"Grandma... sort of."

"Not Grandma Gruit?"

"No. Grandma B."

Paul went to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of apple juice, then walked to the cabinet and took down a juice glass. He looked at G with question and received a nod in response.

After filling glasses for them both, Paul asked, "So how is your grandmother cooking our food all the way from Scotland?"

"*Our* grandmother came to visit right after this house was built and enchanted most of the kitchen and dining room. To be honest, I don't know how it all works. Grandma's specialty is basic magic, sometimes called *household* magic. Don't be fooled by her, she's scary powerful."

"So the kitchen kind of just *knows* when we want something and makes it for us?"

"Yeah. I don't know how it does it, but it even knows that Vinda doesn't like meat very much, so it makes vegetarian dishes for her when she stops by." G said casually between bites of nachos.

"Well, I guess it beats having to cook for yourself all the time."

"Yeah. And if I had to count on Dad to cook for me when I was growing up, I probably wouldn't even know what a vegetable looks like. It would've been steaks on the grill every night."

"If your dad likes to cook steaks on the grill, I think I'd really like to try that. I mean, it wasn't my mom's fault, she was always really busy. But I've always heard about dads cooking steaks on the grill and I felt like I missed out on something."

"Believe it or not, Dad actually has a job that he has to do. I doubt that he'll have time to cook out on the grill during the week, but I bet if we asked him, he'd do a cookout for us next weekend."

"No. It's just a silly daydream of mine. I wouldn't want to put him to a lot of trouble."

"Trust me, he'll love doing it."

Paul nodded, since his mouth was full of nachos.

"Do you have a lot of homework?"

"I have to write a report."

"On your first day? That's kind of harsh!"

"Not really. It's actually kind of a compliment."

"How's that?"

"Today in class, I did this spell and I'm not sure, because I haven't been around magic that much, but I guess it was really good or special or something because Professor Ortega asked me to write a report telling how I did it."

"Professor Ortega? The Senior Professor of Wizardry personally asked you to write a report about one of your spells?"

"Yeah."

"What kind of spell was it?"

"Stand back and I'll show you."

"You aren't going to be summoning any demons in here are you? Because I don't want the sulfur smell getting into the food."

"No. I'm not summoning anything. Just take a step back and look."

G took a single step back, then watched as Paul held his hands out in front of him.

A glowing diagram began to appear, along with symbols in a language that G didn't recognize.

A movement drew G's attention and he watched as Paul made the same gesture with both hands, then looked down when seven little balls of fire appeared, one on each of the points of the heptagram.

"I created this, then Nicholas used my spell diagram to summon a demon, a Yan-gant-y-tan." Paul said carefully, maintaining his concentration.

"The detail is amazing!" G said as he knelt down to look at the diagram more closely.

"Well, it's not like I came up with the diagram on my own or anything. I just copied it from the back of the book."

"What are you...?" A voice began to ask, then silenced.

Paul glanced toward the door and saw his mother frozen in place.

"Hi Mom. I was just showing G what I did at school today." Paul said as he turned the majority of his attention back to maintaining his spell diagram.

"I haven't seen a diagram like that in years." Beth said as she walked slowly to her son's side.

"I still can't do anything with it, but the Professor seemed to be really impressed that I was able to make it."

"Paul, I've never seen *anyone* create a spell diagram like that. I've heard stories about the most elite demon summoners being able to cast a circle at will, but I've never personally witnessed it."

"Do you think that when you have some time that you might be able to show me some demon summoning things? I'm way behind everyone else in my class and it'd probably help."

"Yes. But we're going to have to do it quickly. Sometime within the next month, I'll probably lose all access to my summoning abilities. The baby will need to infuse all my magic until it can sustain its own."

"You don't have to show me a bunch of magic, I can see that at school. What I need is to know how things work; the do's and don'ts, the stuff that all the other demon summoners already know by the time that they're my age."

"That sounds like a good idea. And you're right, I won't need to give you a magical demonstration to illustrate what I'm talking about, but there *is* one thing that I will need to demonstrate before I lose my ability to do so."

"What's that?"

"We are descended from a long line of demon summoners. Even though the rest of our family have turned their backs on us, this knowledge is your rightful legacy. This distinct method of summoning isn't possible for witches not of our bloodline. It's only right that I pass it on to you."

"The Senior Professor of Wizardry at our school asked Paul to write a report on how he was able to make that spell diagram." G said proudly.

"I can understand why. Not only is that seen to be a high-level technique, but it serves one of the most basic functions in summoning." Beth said simply.

"Okay. It's special. It's great." Paul said flatly, then looked G in the eyes and asked, "But couldn't you do *exactly* the same thing with one of your illusions?"

"No. Not even close." G said honestly.

Paul looked at him dubiously.

G rolled his eyes, then made a grand gesture with both hands toward the floor beside Paul's diagram. Another septagram appeared, perhaps not *quite* as bright or sharp as the original. The fireballs at the points looked nice, but the symbols written throughout the diagram were sloppy gibberish at best.

"If I knew what the symbols meant or how to read that language, I *might* be able to do it, but the level of detail is just waytoo much for me to recreate at this point."

"You'll run into that quite a bit with summoning diagrams. They're very detailed and one little mistake can cause them to fail to summon, or even worse, fail to contain what *has been* summoned."

"I noticed that our teacher is really careful to check over the diagram before he lets Nicholas summon anything." Paul said thoughtfully.

"So you created this diagram so that *someone else* could use it?" Beth asked to confirm.

"Yeah. It was my first day. This is as much as I could do."

"If you want to help other witches with their summoning, that's fine. As long as it's of your own free will, I have no problem with it. But if you're creating spell diagrams for other witches because you *can't* summon a demon for yourself... that is *notokay*."

"Whats wrong?"

"The strong dominate the weak."

"Yeah. Dominance and submission. The rule of the demon world."

"I'm talking about the rule of the summoner's world. If you aren't one of the more powerful summoners, then you end up working for one of them, doing their dirty work, doing the things that are 'beneath them'."

"What if I don't want to be a summoner at all?"

"I could accept that as long as it's your honest choice and not a lack of training that makes you face that decision."

"Okay. If you want to teach me stuff, I've got no problem with that. Just as long as you're not disappointed if I don't want to become the biggest best demon summoner that ever was."

"It may take me a few days to get everything together that I'll need. But before I lose my witchcraft, I'll make sure that you've been given the Hiller family legacy."

"Want some nachos?" G asked as he pointed to the last few pita chips on the platter.

"No... you boys are going to spoil your... grrr... okay. The baby wants one." Beth finally grudgingly said before taking one of the pita nachos.

Chapter 3

After enjoying the last of the nachos, Paul and G went back to G's room to begin their homework.

"I've got some sorcery to work on, so I won't need the computer for a little bit." G said as they walked into the living room.

"Where's your computer?" Paul asked cautiously.

"In my study."

"Where's your study?"

"Through the double doors in the bedroom." G said as he motioned for Paul to follow him.

"Oh, I thought that was more closet space."

"Nope. Dad made sure to set me up with a 'dedicated workspace' so that when it was time to study, I'd have a place without too many distractions." G said as he opened the louvered doors to reveal a small neat desk and bookcase.

"Are you sure that you aren't going to need the computer?"

"Yeah. I've got to work on my focus and visualizations right now. I don't have any homework from my other classes, so you can use it as much as you want."

"Okay, but let me know if you need me to move or anything."

G walked over to a small panel by the door and pressed a button before asking, "Dad? Do you have a minute?"

"*One minute.*" D's voice responded.

"Do you have a spare laptop or anything that Paul can use? He has some school work to do and he's worried that I'm going to need the computer at the same time he does."

"Yes. If you'll come to my study, I have a couple that you can choose from. Later this week, I'll see to it that Paul gets his own dedicated workspace."

"You don't have to do anything extra for me. I was just worried that G might not be able to do all his work because I was hogging his computer." Paul said quickly.

"Paul, as your father, it's my responsibility to provide the tools for your success. As my son, it's your responsibility to put those tools to good use. Don't argue. That's just the way it is. Now come to the study and pick up a laptop to get you by until I can make arrangements for you to have your own workspace."

"Okay." Paul said quietly, then quickly added, "Thanks."

After turning off the intercom, G smiled and said, "Come on, I'll show you where it is."

"I don't want for anyone to go to any trouble for me." Paul muttered as he followed.

"Too bad." G said as he put an arm around Paul and gave him a quick firm hug.

* * * * *

Paul was surprised when G led him to D's study. Although he had been there once before, the 'museum' was such a labyrinthine maze of rooms and hallways that he couldn't get a sense of where anything was located.

Truth be told, Paul hadn't had much of an opportunity to see more than the kitchen and dining room. He spent most of his time in G's room.

G led the way as Paul followed along silently.

"If you'll check those messenger bags by the door, you should be able to find a laptop that will get you by for a while." D said without looking up from his work.

"Do you need to clear anything off of them before we start messing with these?" G asked cautiously.

"No. I've gotten into the habit of wiping them once I've gotten all the files transferred over. Those should all be fully loaded with all the software that you'll be needing, completely up-to-date and fully charged." D said as he finally turned to face the boys.

"Did the tech guys give you a little extra something to make that happen?" G asked curiously.

"Yes. I'll show that to you when I have more time, but I have quite a bit of work to catch up on right now." D said regretfully.

"Got it." G said to his father, then turned to Paul and said, "Grab one and let's go."

"Are they all the same?" Paul asked uncertainly.

Before G could answer, D said, "Each laptop is optimized for a specific task, whether it be high RAM, superior video processing or excessive storage capacity. When I need a laptop, I'll choose the one best suited to the job. But for your purposes, I'm sure that any of them will do."

Paul pushed past his indecision and picked up the first messenger bag.

"Will you be able to eat dinner with us tonight?" G asked hopefully.

"Unless something creeps up that I'm not expecting, I should be able to take a break around then."

"We'll see you then." G said before ushering Paul out the door.

* * * * *

"He looks tired." Paul said quietly as they walked.

"Yeah. He's responsible for a lot of different things. Usually he can touch on each one to get updated and let the momentum carry them forward, but after taking time off, he has to dig deep into each thing before getting each project moving again." G said thoughtfully.

"What does he do?"

"Lots of stuff."

"That doesn't tell me anything."

"It's as much as I know. He doesn't do just one thing. Lots of people do lots of things and Dad kind of coordinates it all. If he's not in charge, things can keep on working for a while, but eventually they fall out of synch and different things start working against each other."

"I still don't know what he does."

"I think he does a lot of things, but one of the most important ones is that he makes sure that everyone reaches their goals without interfering with each other while they do it."

"So if anyone asks what my dad does for a living, I should just tell them 'Traffic Cop?'"

"If they don't already know who he is, you might as well tell them that because they probably aren't anyone who matters, anyway."

"You sound like a stuck-up rich kid." Paul chuckled.

"I'm proud of my dad." G said simply.

Paul thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I'm proud of him too."

* * * * *

When they got back to G's room, Paul cleared a space for himself on G's desk and opened the laptop.

He turned it on, then asked, "Do you know the password?"

"Open that drawer under my computer." G said absently as he kept his focus on his own work.

Paul did so, then asked, "What am I looking for?"

"Do you see a dried out chicken foot?"

"Yeah."

"Take that and wave it over the keyboard and it should let you in."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. It's a charm that one of the tech guys made for us. It beats having to remember a bunch of passwords."

Paul cautiously picked up the chicken foot, then hesitantly waved it over the keyboard.

As G had said, the password screen cleared and the desktop revealed itself.

"Does this work on any computer, or just this one?"

"It will work on any computer that belongs to us and we have permission to use."

"The chicken foot knows if we have permission?" Paul asked dubiously.

"Don't get hung up on the chicken foot. It's kind of a joke. They just needed something to enchant and thought that a chicken foot would be funny. I think Dad's password charm is a USB thumb drive."

"Okay..." Paul said uncertainly as he returned the chicken foot to its place in the drawer.

* * * * *

After over half an hour of typing on the computer, Paul quietly asked, "Do you know how to use this drawing program? I've never used it before."

"Just a minute." G said distantly.

"What are you working on?" Paul asked curiously as he approached.

"Sorcery." G said as he quickly turn to face Paul.

Paul could tell that G didn't want to talk about it, so he asked, "Do you know how to use this drawing program? I need to draw the spell diagram for the next part of my

report so that someone who's reading it will be able to follow along and know what I'm talking about."

"Can't you just scan it in from the book?"

"The book's at school."

"Do you think that you can remember all the details of the diagram."

Rather than answer verbally, Paul glanced toward the floor as the diagram appeared.

"You can create the spell diagram without using any words or gestures?"

"I just do them internally. Mr. Gilbert said that I could do that if I wanted to."

"Paul, I don't know if you understand that what you're doing is a really high-level technique."

"Or I'm using the lowest of the low level techniques in a way that looks flashy and impressive."

"It's impressive enough for Professor Ortega to ask you to write a report about it."

"Yeah. But he only wants me to do that to show how a simple spell can be used differently."

"Okay... have we argued enough?"

"Enough for what?"

"So that we can kiss and make up?"

"Yeah. I think so." Paul said with a smile.

G moved in and gave Paul a truly memorable kiss.

When the kiss finally ended, Paul gently asked, "Can you show me how to use the drawing program?"

"That program is part of an office suite. It's good for some officey type things but I've got some professional art programs on my computer that will probably be easier for you to understand and better suited to what you're trying to do."

"Do you draw or paint?"

"Sometimes. But just to design my illusions. I don't draw for fun. I've never understood people who did that."

"With as beautiful as your illusions are, there's no way that you could be described as anything less than an artist."

"We already had our fight for tonight, so I'm not going to disagree with you about it, but either way, I don't draw or paint for fun. I do it as a stepping stone on my way to making my illusions look more real than a 1990's video game."

"Like how?" Paul asked curiously.

"In the really old games, they would have one picture of one brick and they'd use it to make all the walls in the entire game. When I first started, my illusions would sometimes be like that, just the same thing over and over. If I made a forest, it'd be two or three hundred of exactly the same tree."

"All I know is that the illusion you did after the wedding was *perfect*. Not only was everyone impressed by it, but it made the wedding seem that much more special for my mom and your dad."

"Yeah. That really did turn out well, didn't it?" G asked with a smile.

"Everybody loved it." Paul confirmed.

"Let me show you my art program before we get sidetracked any more." G said seriously.

"Before you do that, I just thought of something that I need to ask your advice about."

"Sure. What?"

"When I read the original spell in the book that Mr. Gilbert gave me, the spell diagram was missing a part. I was able to fill it in, but now I realize why it was left blank."

"Why is that?"

"Because if *any* demon summoner had access to the completed diagram with the locus intact, they would have everything they needed to summon a demon, whether they really meant to or not."

"Do you mean that you can *accidentally* summon a demon?"

"Well, a non-witch can't, of course. But if a witch with a summoning ability has the diagram... like my illustration, and has the words, which will be included in my report, then they could read the spell, aloud or silently, and actually summon a demon right then and there without really meaning to."

"Somehow I didn't think it was that easy to summon a demon."

"Actually, it isn't. There's a lot of stuff about your force of will and balancing power dynamics and other stuff that I don't really understand. But it's still possible that someone like me could read the spell and that everything would line up so that I'd have an actual demon appear right in front of me out of nowhere."

"I can see how that would be a surprise."

"Yeah. And if they're not skilled, they might not be able to contain it, control it or send it back." Paul carefully explained.

"Okay..."

"I guess I just answered my own question. I'm going to leave the locus out of the spell diagram so that no one can accidentally use it in its printed form."

"Yeah. Letting demons loose... not a good idea."

"Oh, yeah. I wanted to show you the other thing that I learned today." Paul said happily.

Before G could ask what it was, Paul began to grow in height and mass as horns and hooves came into being.

"You're getting better at that!"

"Look at my clothes, they're not all torn up. I learned how to make them change when I change." Paul said in his much lower voice.

"Where did your shoes go?" G asked as he looked at Paul's hooves.

"I don't know. The same place my feet went, I guess. But the cool thing is that now I don't have to worry about tearing up your uniforms if something happens and I need to change all of a sudden." Paul said happily.

"I never needed to learn that one. When I let my magic go full-out, all that happens is that my skin and hair color change."

"And you look awesome."

"Look who's talking."

"Will you show me your art program?"

"Yeah. But you need to change back first or I might not be able to focus on showing you how to use the program."

"Do you have some demon fantasies that I should know about?"

"Just change back. We have work to do."

'I'll take that as a yes.'

* * * * *

"Boys! Dinner will be ready in just a few minutes!" Beth's voice called over the intercom.

"How does she know that, if the house is doing all the cooking?" Paul asked as he saved his work.

"Her saying it lets the house know that we'll be going to the dining room soon. That sort of triggers it to get everything ready." G said simply.

"Did you get a lot of work done?" Paul asked curiously as he backed away from G's computer.

"Yeah. At least, I've almost finished the base. I don't have to have the project done until Friday." G said as he stretched.

"Can you tell me what you're doing?"

"Ask me again after dinner and I'll show you. You'll just have to keep in mind that it's not in its final form."

"Okay." Paul said as he walked to the laptop and made sure to save his work there too.

"What about you? How's your stuff going?"

"You were right about the art programs. I still have quite a bit to do, but I'm happy with the way it's going."

"Do you think that you'll be able to finish it tonight?"

"Yeah. The report's mostly written. I just need to go through it and make sure it all matches up to the illustration."

"I'm glad you're not having any problem writing the report. I know a lot of people struggle with that." G said as he led the way out into the hallway that led to the main house.

"About two or three schools ago, I was stuck in this one that made us do tons of reports. I kinda got used to the process."

"From the way you talked, I got the feeling that most of the schools you attended were sub-par, but report writing is a valuable skill."

"We had to write reports on articles from the Reader's Digest from the past fifty or sixty years, one after another, day after day. It was miserable."

"Sounds like it."

"But I guess it helped me to look up references and do research and that kind of stuff. As much as it sucked, I think I learned a lot more at that school than most of the others."

"Well, you're here now. I think you'll like this school."

"Yeah. I'm liking it so far."

* * * * *

"Did Dad say if he was going to be joining us?" G asked as he led the way into the dining room.

"Yes. I talked to him just a minute ago and he said that he had to finalize a few things and that he'd be right in." Beth said pleasantly.

"That sounds like about ten minutes to me." G said as he took his seat.

Paul smiled affectionately at G as he took the seat across from him, noticing that all the food in the middle of the table was covered with silver domed lids.

"How is your studying going? Are you getting a lot of work done?" Beth asked curiously.

Paul looked to G to see if he wanted to answer first but found the same expression mirrored back at him.

"You're the alpha." Paul said with a grin.

G smiled, then said, "We got assigned a new project today, so I've been doing the groundwork on that. Since it's only the first day, I'm in a good place."

Paul smiled at the answer, then said, "I've been working on that report I was telling you about. I'm making an illustration of the spell diagram, so that's taking some time, but once that's done, I should be able to pull it all together. I've probably got another hour of work left."

"I hope this isn't an indication of how things are going to be around here. I'd like it if we could have the opportunity to do things as a family."

"Mom, we've just spent most of the past week traveling to Europe and back and we've been together most of that time. Once everyone gets their stuff caught up, I'm sure that we'll have time to do things together." Paul said frankly, then continued, "And if you're worried about us 'bonding' and coming together as a family, I love you, I love G and I love D. What more do you want?"

After a moment, Beth quietly said, "I guess that when I dreamed about what it would be like to have a family of my own... it doesn't matter... it's silly."

"Mom. We'll have special moments like that. I promise. But we're not going to have them all the time. In fact, we'll probably end up having them when you least expect it." Paul said frankly.

"Unless something really big and super important comes up, Dad takes the weekends off. So if you're wanting to do any big 'family' things, that's probably the best time to do them." G finished with a smile at Beth.

"That sounds like a good idea. And that gives me all week to plan something that we'll all enjoy doing." Beth said happily.

"I was telling Paul just a little bit ago about how good Dad's steaks are. Maybe we could have a cookout?" G suggested hopefully.

"Yes. We'll have to wait and see what the weather's going to be like, but I can imagine that it might be an enjoyable way to spend an afternoon."

"Yeah. And if you've got all week to plan it, we could even go somewhere for the day, maybe rent a boat or go to a park or something." G said excitedly.

"Rent' a boat? Somehow I thought your dad would already own one." Paul said with a grin at G.

"He does, but we'd have to fly to get there." G responded casually.

Paul had been joking and was left speechless.

* * * * *

"I'm willing to wait for D to join us, but the baby isn't." Beth said as she stood.

Before she could remove the dome from the first dish in the middle of the table, D hurried into the room.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long." D said quickly.

"You're right on time. The baby just decided that it's hungry." Beth said to him with a smile.

"How is baby doing today?" D asked warmly.

"So far it's just been hungry." Beth said as she reached forward again and revealed the main course.

"Oh good. I've been hungry for ribs!" D said happily.

Beth got a curious look for a moment, then said, "I get the feeling that the baby has been too."

"So I'm guessing that you haven't found out if it's a boy or a girl yet." G said as he lifted two other silver domes, revealing a kale salad and some steamed broccoli with cheese sauce.

"No. We've decided that we'd like to wait and find out the old fashioned way." Beth said, then smiled at her husband adoringly.

"But doesn't that mean that you're going to have to wait till the last minute to fix up the baby's room and buy clothes and stuff?" G asked curiously.

"Not really. The nursery may have some pink or blue things in it, but it will have lots of other colors too." Beth said simply.

"Beth has volunteered to design the nursery so that everything can be done to her specifications." D said as he served himself some of the vegetables.

"Since I left my job, I'll have the time to do some research and plan what I'm doing in advance." Beth said frankly.

"Are you upset about leaving your job?" G asked curiously.

"I miss the social aspect of it a little. But the drive to work from here would be impractical, and with the baby coming, it would only get more and more difficult." Beth said honestly, then added, "As for the job itself, good riddance."

D laughed at the statement, then said, "If everything goes well, the business that I was conducting in town will be concluded soon, so there won't be any reason for me to have to go into town as often."

"Except when we drive in to have lunch at 'our' lunch counter." Beth said with a tender smile at him.

"We'll make a point of doing that often." D assured her.

"If you're missing the people that you work with, maybe you could have a baby shower or something and invite them out here. Not only would it give you a chance to visit with your friends, but that way they'll know where you're living now so that they can come and visit you sometime." G thoughtfully suggested.

"It would feel kind of strange to throw a party for myself." Beth said honestly.

"Well, call it a house warming party or a reception for your wedding or something like that. It doesn't matter what you call it, it's just an excuse to stick some food and drinks in them and visit for a while." G said seriously.

"You know, that actually sounds like a good idea. I know that you haven't had much of a chance to meet new people since you've been here. I can see how you might start to feel isolated." D said with concern.

"If you're worried about that, then maybe you could set something up to invite some people from around here over. I bet that Nazy and Vinda's parents would come over if you invited them. And you know enough people from your work and stuff that you could have a really massive party if you wanted to." G said to his father.

"I don't know if any of us but you are temperamentally suited to a 'massive party', but I agree that it might be nice to plan a get-together or two with some of my acquaintances to introduce Beth and Paul to them." D said slowly.

"Yeah. And they're always inviting us to the theater and other snooty things. Maybe you could start doing stuff like that too, if you wanted." G suggested.

"There's no need for us to make any decisions about this tonight. You've made some good suggestions and given us some things to discuss." D said thoughtfully.

Paul noticed that G seemed to be pleased that his father had taken his suggestions so seriously.

* * * * *

There were a few minutes of silence as everyone turned their attention to their meals, but something occurred to Paul and he finally asked, "Have you been thinking of names for the baby yet?"

"K." Beth said with a tender smile at her husband.

"K? What does it stand for?" Paul asked cautiously.

"If it's a boy, it will be spelled, K-a-e. It doesn't stand for anything, that will be his name." Beth said simply.

"And if it's a girl?" Paul prompted.

"Then it will be spelled K-a-y."

"That's it? You're not even going to think about other names?" Paul asked dubiously.

"Who's to say that we won't consider other names between now and the time the baby's born? But at this point in time, I'm considering it settled." Beth finished with a smile.

"What if it's twins?" G asked cautiously.

"Let's cross that bridge when we come to it." D told his son firmly.

* * * * *

"I think that this is the best bar-b-que I've ever tasted in my life." Paul said abruptly.

"The thing is, you'll probably say the same thing the next time we have bar-b-que. Every time we have it, it tastes like it's the absolute best." G said happily.

"I can't wait to find out!" Paul said with a grin before diving in to eat more of the impossibly delicious ribs.

"The baby likes the ribs too." Beth said between bites.

"Obviously. As my child the baby will, of course, have excellent taste." D said with a grin.

"Does that apply to me too?" G asked his father curiously.

"Absolutely." D said without hesitation.

"Okay. I can accept that." G said easily.

* * * * *

"So, Paul, I was meaning to ask how the laptop was working out for you. Do you have everything you need?" D asked curiously.

"Well, when I got to the part of my report when I had to make an illustration, G let me use his computer because it has a lot better art programs. But as far as doing the report itself, the laptop has had everything that I've needed."

"You might think about making a list of what programs G has that you'd like to have on your own computer, as well as any other programs that you might like to have. If you get it to me in time, I can give it to the tech guys and they can see that everything is loaded properly and optimized for the best performance."

"They could just clone what I've got on my computer, if that would be easier... well, except for the porn. Paul would probably want to get his own." G added as an aside.

Everyone, even D, fell silent as they looked at G in shock.

"What?" G asked when he noticed.

"Certain subjects aren't appropriate at the dinner table." D told his son slowly and condescendingly.

"I used to be able to say whatever I wanted when it was just the two of us. Are Beth and Paul our family or not?" G asked challengingly.

"That's not the point. Certain things aren't discussed in polite conversation." D reiterated.

"I get that it's not right to talk about gross-out stuff when people are eating, but are you saying that I have to behave like I do when I'm at school, even when I'm at home in my own house with my own family?" G asked seriously.

"There's a time and a place..." D began to say, but was interrupted.

"When?" G challenged. "When are we all together in a time and place where it is appropriate to say what we're honestly thinking and feeling? Because besides mealtime, I can't think of a time when we're even in the same room."

"D?" Beth asked quietly.

After a moment more of glaring at G, D glanced at Beth inquiringly.

"I'd much rather the boys know that they can discuss what's on their minds with us when we're together as a family. If you want to spend time with the boys when they're on their best behavior, then maybe you could take them someplace that demands their 'best behavior'. I think home should be where they can be themselves." Beth said gently.

"Okay. I understand what you're saying." D finally relented, then added, "But I still don't think that it's right to discuss my son's porn stash at the dinner table."

"I wasn't going to give you details or anything. I was just saying that my computer has all the programs that I need for school. Instead of trying to make a list of all the programs that Paul *might possibly* need, the tech guys could just clone my computer and have it all done in one easy step."

"I can see that being a reasonable way of doing it." D conceded, then turned to Paul and asked, "Can you think of any programs that you'd like to have besides the ones on G's computer?"

"No. Not really." Paul said honestly, then added, "But I wouldn't mind getting a copy of that porn stash. I don't really have one of my own."

Although Paul was a bit worried about D's reaction, he felt that it was important to show G his support within the family structure.

"I don't know. A guy's porn stash is kind of a private thing. How about I help you set up your own? When I see what you like, I may have a few things to contribute to it." G said thoughtfully.

"You know..." Beth said, gaining everyone's attention, "...pregnancy can cause a woman's libido to shoot right through the roof..."

"I'm out!" Paul said immediately.

"Yeah. I see what you mean, Dad." G said quickly, then added, "Look at the time! We've got to get back to work."

As the boys rushed out of the dining room, D looked adoringly at his wife and quietly said, "Thank you."

Beth responded with a beaming smile.

* * * * *

"Before you go back to your report, do you want to see what I've been working on?" G asked as they crossed the bridge into G's room.

"Yeah. With as hard as you've been working on it, I'm sure it's going to be great." Paul said enthusiastically.

As soon as they were in the living room, G quietly said, "Well, here it goes."

Paul watched as G's features changed, becoming more and more clown-like.

G made the 'lifting' gesture that Paul had come to associate with G putting forth a great effort.

Suddenly, in the space between them, a vaguely humanoid shape began to form.

Paul's eyes went wide with surprise. He didn't know what he had been expecting, but that wasn't it.

"Hold on... hold on..." G said as he struggled to complete his vision.

Facial features began to appear on the illusory construct, but they somehow seemed wrong. The eyes and mouth seemed to be too big for the face, but the nose was bigger still; it was enormous.

Paul was stunned into speechlessness for a moment, but was finally able to say, "That's amazing! That's got to be the creepiest looking gargoyle that I've ever seen."

"It's supposed to be a self-portrait." G hesitantly admitted.

"Oh." Paul cringed, then quickly added, "Well, it *does* have a nice ass."

G stared at Paul for a moment, then broke into an unwilling smile.

Paul stepped around the illusion and pulled G into a hug as he quietly said, "I know that it'll be great when you've got it finished."

"I hope so. This is the first really difficult assignment that we've gotten this year. I don't want to start off behind." G said anxiously.

"Just think it through and make it happen. I know that you'll blow everyone away with it." Paul said warmly.

G chuckled, then said, "I guess since you impressed the senior professor of your department, you'd know what it takes."

Paul lightly kissed G on the ear, then whispered, "Count on it."

"We'd better get to work. We both still have things to do."

"Right." Paul reluctantly conceded as he let go of G.

"Will it bother you if I leave my illusion up while you're working?" G asked cautiously.

"No. It won't bother me at all."

"Just let me know if it starts to bug you. I can do it in my head if I need to." G said as he sat on the floor with his legs crossed.

"It's fine, but do you mind if I give it a name? I feel funny calling it... it."

"Go ahead. I never thought about naming one of my illusions before."

Paul looked at the poor misshapen thing for a moment, then slowly said, "How about if we call him 'Lex?'"

"Like Lex Luthor?" G asked dubiously.

"No. Like Lexington, a gargoyle from the cartoon show."

"I don't think I've ever seen that."

"I didn't think so, it didn't have any big-boobed schoolgirls or mech-warriors."

"We've gotten off track again. We *really* need to get to work."

"Yeah, but I wonder if maybe I should get you to show me how you do it. I know that visualization's not part of wizardry but maybe with your help I could do something more with my wizard lights."

"Considering what you've already been able to accomplish, maybe *I* should be getting *your* help with visualization."

"We'll help each other... after we get some work done." Paul said decisively.

"Right."

* * * * *

G's work consisted mostly of meditation with an occasional glance up at 'Lex' for reference.

Paul was working quietly on the drawing program on G's computer, trying to perfect his diagram.

"I think I got it." Paul finally said, snapping G out of his concentration.

"You've finished your report?" G asked curiously.

"No. But I finished the diagram. Do you want to see?" Paul asked as he backed away from G's computer.

"Sure." G said as he slowly got up from the floor, only just realizing how long he'd been sitting there in the same position.

"I think that's as good as I can get it."

"The amount of detail you put into it is amazing. I'm going to get you to help me the next time I have to do anything complicated like that."

"I'll always be happy to help if I can." Paul said warmly, then quickly thought to ask, "How's yours coming?"

"I think I'm ready to try it out." G said as he turned his attention to the illusion standing frozen in front of him.

Paul watched as G's coloring changed and became clown-like. He was surprised to realize that the 'clown' makeup wasn't *exactly* the same as it had been before. The painted on smirk that G had worn before was now replaced by a scowl.

Before Paul could say anything about it, G slowly raised his arms and concentrated on his objective.

Paul watched as 'Lex' began to change. Overall, his proportions in relation to each other seemed to become more realistic.

"I didn't notice before, but the clothes look really good." Paul said as he paid more attention to the detail work on the red tee shirt and blue jeans.

"Yeah. We've been working on that for a few weeks now. They do their best to make one lesson build on another so it doesn't feel like we're always learning a bunch of unrelated things." G said as he carefully looked over his handiwork.

"Do you need to visualize and plan each thing that you're doing before you make your illusion?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yeah. I do all the planning on, like, this internal canvas in my mind's eye, or something like that. Once I've made all the changes there, I can focus my power to make that image come to life in the real world. The funny thing is that sometimes what you start with isn't exactly what you end up with." G finished as he looked regretfully at his creation.

"Your other illusions looked perfect. Did you have to go through all of this with them too?" Paul asked curiously.

"Not as much. Sometimes I need to make adjustments, but they mostly come out like I envision them. For some reason, when it comes to 'alive' things, it's more tricky. Not just people, but animals too. They tend to look really 'fake' unless I go back and do a lot of detail work on them."

"What kind of animals can you do?"

"Right now, I can only do a hedgehog and an otter."

"Those seem kind of random."

"Yeah. I just didn't want to do the same 'dogs and cats' as everyone else. Those are the only animals that I've taken the time to try and perfect so far.

"Can I see?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Okay, hold out your hand."

Paul did so, and a moment later he saw a small, pointy-nosed little animal resting in his palm looking up at him with tiny beady black eyes.

"This is amazing! He looks completely real!"

"Yeah. I got an A+ on that one." G said with a smile, then added more grimly, "But people are a whole lot harder than animals. I can't believe how drastically different the final product was from my original vision. This is going to take a lot of work."

"I'll let you get back to it. I still need to put the finishing touches on my report. I'd like to get it finished so that I can have some time to do something else before bedtime."

"Let me know when you're done for the night and I'll finish up too."

"What do you want me to do with this?" Paul asked as he held up the hedgehog.

G smiled, then the hedgehog vanished.

On impulse, Paul leaned in and gave G a quick kiss before returning to the computer.

* * * * *

"That's it. I think I'm done." Paul announced triumphantly.

"Good. Let me see how this turned out, then I should be done too." G said as he slowly made his way to standing.

"Wouldn't it be better to sit in a chair?"

"No. I'm not sure why, but I'm able to visualize better sitting on the floor."

"When you're done, would you read my report and see if I missed anything?"

"Sure. Just let me do this first."

Paul watched as G focused on 'Lex' and made the alterations.

The illusion didn't look entirely 'human' but Paul had to admit that it did look better.

In its new state, Paul could now at least recognize what G was *trying* to do.

"I've got a long way to go, but it's not bad for a start." G slowly said as he examined his handiwork.

"It's looking a lot less gargoyley." Paul said weakly.

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Do you have a minute to look over my report? I want to be sure that it's good enough for this school." Paul said anxiously.

"Sure." G said with a smile at him, then turned back to his illusion and said, "See ya tomorrow, Lex."

As Paul watched, G made a lowering gesture with his arms and the illusory person, Lex, evaporated into nothingness.

"Where do you want me to start?"

"Right here. I've got the report in one document and the illustration attached." Paul hurried to explain.

"That's good. Do you know how to submit it?" G asked as he sat in front of the laptop and started reading.

"No. I hadn't thought about that. Should I print it out or email it to someone?" Paul asked slowly.

"Actually, each teacher has their own way of doing things, so it'd be best if you print it out *and* make sure that you have access to an online copy... maybe email it to yourself so that you can easily forward it."

"My email doesn't allow large attachments and the image file is pretty big." Paul said uncertainly.

"That's alright, we need to get you a secure account anyway. If you're going to be sending spells and summoning diagrams through email, you don't want it where regular people can snoop into it."

"Oh, yeah. I guess I need to do that."

"Let me finish reading this, then we'll see what we need to do to get you set up."

Paul nodded as he watched and waited for G's reaction.

"Wow. The next time I have to write a report, I'm going to get you to help me." G said as he turned to look at Paul.

"It's alright?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah, except for one thing..."

"What'd I miss?"

"You don't have any references. How do you know about all this stuff?"

"I got most of it from the book Mr. Gilbert gave me. The rest I just figured out on my own."

"So you read through it once and you remembered all this?"

"Not word for word, but it made sense when I read it, so I just wrote it down the way I understood it."

"Since it's your first day, I doubt that anyone will have a problem with it. But I know that *my* teachers are always after me to cite my references to back up whatever I'm saying."

"Is there some secret online magic library that I can use?" Paul asked anxiously.

"I know where to find Sorcery information, but I wouldn't know where to start with summoning. Maybe Nazyzy or Vinda would know of an online resource."

"Would it be alright to call them? I'd really like for my report to be as good as it can possibly be. You know, first impressions and all that."

"Let me see if they're online." G said, then scooted the chair over to his desktop computer.

Paul watched over his shoulder as G typed in a text message.

"This way, if they're online, they'll be able to share links with you." G explained as he waited for a response.

"So this magic stuff is online where anyone could access it?"

"Not exactly. Any library that contains anything *real* is encrypted and your IP has to be approved before you can access it. I'm pretty sure there's also some magical thing that the tech guys do as another level of security, but I don't know anything about that. All I know is that I have access when I need it."

"I'd really like to understand..." Paul began to say, but stopped when he saw a response to G's text message.

"Nazzy's on. Give me a second to tell him what we need." G said as he started typing.

Paul watched and waited for Nazzy's response.

When it finally came through, it was in the form of a link.

"Nazzy's busy with something else right now, but he said that this site should have what you're looking for." G said as he clicked the link.

G signed into the site, then moved out of the chair so that Paul could take his place.

"If the textbook is listed in here, should I just use that or should I go through some of these others for backup verification?" Paul asked as he searched through a series of thumbnails of cover art.

"If it were me, I'd look at the textbook and see if they cite *their* references, then go and check those out if they're available. That way it doesn't look like you're just copying from the book. But I wouldn't go any deeper than that unless it was for something like a term paper."

"Okay. Here's the book that Mr. Gilbert gave me, so I'd better get to work."

"While you're doing that, I'm going to look through my videos to find us something to watch so that we can relax for a while. I don't know about you, but I feel like I could really use some downtime."

"Sounds good." Paul said as he searched through the book's index for the section that he wanted to reference.

* * * * *

Once Paul had finished with all his citations, he printed off his report.

Soon thereafter he was cuddled up beside G on the couch, watching another bewildering example of anime.

Although it wasn't really that late, the previous day's travel combined with all the excitement of their day at school had taken its toll and the two were soon fast asleep.

* * * * *

Waking up the next morning felt right to Paul. He felt like he was establishing a routine and this particular morning, he felt like he was 'in the groove'.

Eating breakfast, showering and getting ready for school all proceeded at an unhurried pace.

The ride in the school van was enjoyable not only for the fact of grossing out Sandy with an impromptu makeout session, but also for the makeout session itself. Paul appreciated the show of affection and thought that it was an excellent way to start his day.

"What's your first class?"

"Numerology."

"Really? Me too! Who's your teacher?"

"Ms. Ipsum."

"That's so cool! You're in my class!" G said happily, then asked, "Do you need to stop by your locker before we go to class?"

"I don't have one."

"Do you have your schedule with you?"

"Yeah. Here it is."

"Your locker number is up here in the corner. Number 1402."

"Do you know where that is?"

"Yeah. It's not too far from here. Let's go."

* * * * *

"Do you know the combination?"

"No."

"Then how are we supposed to open it?"

G muttered a magical phrase as he made a gesture in front of the locker door.

"Does that tell you the combination?"

"No. It just pops the lock."

"Then can you teach it to me?"

"I can, but I don't think we have enough time right now. I guess that you can either carry your stuff with you or you can put your stuff in your locker and I can do a locking spell. But if I do that it would mean that I'd have to be with you to unlock it when you needed to get to your stuff."

"I'll just carry it with me. It's not that much."

"Once you've been to all your classes, you'll probably have more. Remind me at lunch and I'll teach it to you."

"Yeah. By then I'll probably need to know it."

Paul was somewhat reassured by having G at his side as he walked into Numerology class.

He couldn't help but smile at a paper banner at the front of the room with the numbers 07734 printed on it.

"Ms. Ipsum, this is my brother Paul. He's going to be starting your class today."

"It's nice to meet you Paul. Or would you prefer to be addressed in some other way?" Ms Ipsum asked seriously.

"Paul's fine."

"I received notice that you would be joining my class along with a brief summary of your magical aptitude scores. Based on that, I think that the best way to start you off is with a more advanced student to guide you through the basics. Of course, I'll be available to answer any questions that you may have. And don't be concerned if you notice that you're behind the other students. Everyone is learning at their own pace and things have a way of seeking equilibrium."

Paul hesitantly nodded his acknowledgement of her statement.

"G, since you've advanced beyond the majority of the class, I'd like for you to oversee Paul's introduction to Numerology. Not only will this give Paul the chance to learn from someone that he knows, but you'll also be familiar with what he's working on and be able to help him outside of school hours if necessary."

"I know the basic stuff, but I don't know if I'll know how to teach it. I wouldn't want to screw Paul up on the basics." G said nervously.

"Don't worry about that. I'll be supervising from a distance." Ms Ipsum assured him, then continued, "Besides, you'll have the basic workbooks to give you a structure to follow. Just go through the lessons at whatever pace you're comfortable with, then advance to the next workbook. If you have any doubts or would like recommendations on how to convey a particular concept, just come to me and I'll help you. This might end up being a valuable experience for you."

"Ouch! That's usually how people describe something that's going to suck." G said with a wince.

Ms. Ipsum laughed, then said, "Go to one of the tables at the back of the room and start on the arithmetic primer. Once I've gotten everyone else started on their projects, I'll check in with you."

"I already know arithmetic." Paul quickly interjected.

"Not like this, you don't." G chuckled as he led Paul away.

* * * * *

G went to a shelf of books and took one down.

When he returned to the work table where Paul was sitting, he opened it to the first page and said, "We have seven apples and three oranges. How much fruit do we have?"

"Ten." Paul said slowly, not believing that G was going to start him at such a rudimentary level.

"Right. How did you know that?" G asked slowly.

"Seven plus three is ten... I don't know how else to explain it. It just *is*." Paul said with frustration.

"Yes! Perfect! 'It just *is*.' Remember that. Because *magically* the answer can be a bunch of things all at the same time. Let's say that the apples break down into three different types. There's Red Delicious which weigh on average 100 grams each. The Granny Smith apples each weigh approximately 150 grams. We'll say that the Fuji apples are 125 grams each. Oranges range from eighty to one hundred ninety grams, so for convenience we'll say that our oranges weigh 130 grams each. Later on, we'll calculate the weight after removing peels, cores and seeds, but for now we'll keep it simple. Three Red Delicious, two Granny Smiths, two Fugis and three oranges. How much fruit do we have?"

"We still have ten pieces. But if you want to know the amount of fruit we have by weight I'll need a piece of paper and a minute to figure it out." Paul said honestly.

"Look at this." G said as he touched the tip of his pencil to the large open space on the page of the notebook.

Paul watched and his eyes went wide when he realized what was happening.

"The spell embedded in this page of the workbook allows us to do this." G said as figures started bleeding into being on the page."

"So it's like having a calculator built into the paper?" Paul asked slowly.

"Not exactly. The spell takes the known information and processes it for you. In some ways, it actually makes the math harder than the mundane way of doing it because you have to *understand* what the question is asking and choose the correct spell to solve it. In essence, it makes all your math into word problems. After a while you kinda just start thinking that way."

"What did you end up with on the fruit question?"

"Ten pieces of fruit totalling 1,240 grams, 930 grams of usable fruit product, 690 grams of water weight, three potential magical configurations using the pieces of fruit as spell components and one recipe for a summer fruit salad."

"So rather than do the 'nuts and bolts' calculations, you let the magic do that and focus on selecting the proper magic to produce the information that you're looking for." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Yep. Now you try it. Look around this room and figure out how many people are in here."

"And the spell is already on the workbook and I don't have to do anything to activate it?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I can't pull anything over on you." G said tenderly, then explained, "If it worked that way, then a mundane person could use the spell. Of course, that's not the case. Once you have all the parameters of the spell assigned then you need to activate the spell that you know is present and lend it your power."

"And I can do all of that mentally. I don't have to say the spell aloud?" Paul asked to verify.

"Not unless you want to annoy every person in this classroom. When we were in elementary school doing this, the whole class would be reading their spells aloud at the same time and feeding them the variables. It amazes me that the teachers didn't go stark raving mad having to listen to that all day long." G said with a grin.

Paul looked around the room, taking note of all the people present, then he looked at the workbook curiously and became conscious of his magical energy interacting with the spell that was dormant, waiting for him to use it.

"As soon as you're ready, touch the pencil to the paper to set the spell in motion." G said quietly, so as not to distract Paul from his concentration.

Paul picked up the pencil from the table and very deliberately let the point touch inside the blank area on the page.

Just as with when G had done it, words and numbers began to bleed through the paper.

When the page settled into its final form, G cautiously asked, "What'd you get?"

"Thirteen, including us." Paul said as he looked over the worksheet.

"What else?"

"Six guys, six girls and one woman, Ms Ipsum. Five caucasians, three blacks, two hispanics, two asians and one who the spellbook says is mixed race." Paul said slowly, then looked around to see who the book might be talking about.

"What else?"

"It also breaks us down by our heights, birth dates and BMIs. How does it know all of that?"

"It's magic." G said with a grin.

"So, when I want to calculate how many people are in a room, I'm always going to end up getting a bunch of useless information along with it?"

"At this stage, yes. The basic spells on these workbooks are very general, so they will provide you way more information than you'll be needing. Later on your spells will be more and more specialized so that you can get more specific results and whatever level of precision that you want."

"I get what you're saying, but all of this addition is too basic for me to really see what it's doing. Can you show me something more complex? I understand what you're

saying, but I'd like to see a spell that's useful and actually gives you the results that you're expecting."

"Sure." G said, then took the workbook and turned to one of the back pages.

"Are you going to be internally activating the spell on the workbook?"

"Yeah, I guess. The thing is, I've been doing this for so long that it's automatic. I don't even think about what I'm doing or how it works anymore."

"So spellcasting can become a reflex?"

"Yeah." G said then tapped his pencil on the page of the workbook.

Letters, numbers and symbols began to appear, so small that they were almost impossible for Paul to see.

"What does all this mean?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean that you don't know."

G turned and asked more loudly, "Ms. Ipsum? Could you come over here?"

"Is there a problem?"

"Let me pull up a written version of the spell I was using so Ms. Ipsum can see where I went wrong. This should have worked." G said as he placed his pencil back on the worksheet.

Paul watched as a paragraph of text appeared above the absurdly small printing of the result.

"Is there a problem?" Ms Ipsum asked as she approached.

"Yeah. I was just going to show Paul an example of a more advanced spell with a specific result and something went wrong." G said slowly.

"Schrodinger's Cat isn't really a good example to use for someone at a beginner's level." Ms Ipsum said warily.

"I know. But all I was trying to do was to calculate Paul's age in minutes." G said frankly.

"Oh. Yes. I can see what you were trying to do there... That should have worked." Ms. Ipsum said as she carefully read through the spell.

"So what did I do wrong?" G asked as he read through the spell again.

"I'd have to backtrack and verify all the magically retrieved datum to find out where the problem is. For now, try doing the same spell on yourself and see if you can get an answer more in line with what you're expecting."

G tapped his pencil in the work area and Paul noticed the change to one little phrase in the spell.

The results that followed on the page reformed themselves to accommodate the new input.

What, a moment before, had been an incomprehensible formula was now a relatively simple math problem, albeit with an insanely long final answer.

"That's better." Ms Ipsum said with a smile.

"But why did it go wrong before?"

"I'm not sure." Ms Ipsum said simply, then continued, "But I have a feeling that discovering the answer could take quite a bit of time and effort. Once we've been able to get Paul grounded in the basics, we may revisit this question and see where the answers lead us."

"Why does that sound like something really *really* not fun?" G asked cautiously.

Ms Ipsum smiled, then said, "*Discovery* is fun. It's an adventure. If there's one thing that I want you to learn in my class, that's it."

"Yeah. I'm all about discovery except when it means hours of work to find out that an 'ie' should have been an 'ei'." G said frankly.

"We don't have much time left in this class period, why don't you take a few minutes to introduce Paul to the wonder of pi."

"Yeah. I can do that." G said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Pi? Like 3.14159?" Paul asked slowly.

"Yes. Looking at it from one point of view, pi is an irrational and transcendental number that can never be explicitly stated. Looking at it magically, pi is a concept that can easily be used and manipulated."

"Hang on. So if I'm getting what you're saying, by using magic, pi is just another number. Since you don't have to 'calculate' anything with it, you can use it the same way you use the number 2 and not have to worry about decimal places that trail off into infinity."

"Right. Most people have problems with the concept of irrational numbers, but to us they're just the same as any other numbers. When you get into algebra, it still works the same way. 'X' is a number, the same as 2. You don't worry about what it represents, you just accept that it *is*. In fact, you can use exactly the same process with a formula, manipulating it the same as a number."

"But if you use magic to solve problems pretty much the same way that you use a calculator, what's the difference? Why use magic at all?" Paul asked curiously.

"It's all about complexity. When you get used to using magical methods to manipulate numbers and solve problems, you end up being able to find answers that can't be gotten with mundane math."

"That is, if you know which spells to use."

"Yes. Look at this. Using this very basic spell, the magical expression of pi is plotted to create a circle." G said as he touched the paper with his pencil.

As expected, Paul saw a circle form, along with a mathematical formula quantifying its construction.

"Would that plotting spell work on something besides the paper?"

"Well, *this* spell is on the paper, but if you wanted to I guess you could use a copy of it on something else."

"So in a way, it's kind of like the wizard's light? There's a standard form that almost anyone can use, but you can alter it in a lot of different ways to suit your needs."

"Yeah. I suppose so. I never really had a reason to use it anywhere but on my schoolwork."

"Let me see if I've got this." Paul said slowly, then a glowing circle appeared on the desk in front of him.

"Did you just plug the pi formula into your wizard's light spell?"

"Yeah. It's like a total shortcut compared to what I was doing before."

"But is the math spell going to work along with the other stuff that you were doing?"

"I'm just drawing pictures. I don't think it matters." Paul said honestly, then added, "But I can try it out easily enough."

Before G could even think about objecting, Paul created a complete spell diagram on the floor beside the table.

"You really shouldn't do that in here." G said as he looked around nervously.

"Why not? We're in the 'witch' part of the school, aren't we?"

"Yeah. But it's kind of a rule that we don't practice our specialties outside of our practical application classes."

"What are you doing there?" Ms Ipsum asked as she approached.

"I'm sorry. When G was showing me the spell to plot pi, I thought it might work well in a spell diagram that I've been working on. I didn't realize that I wasn't supposed to do spell diagrams outside of Wizardry class." Paul answered repentantly.

"While it's true that I don't want my students working on projects from other classes during our class time, this relates directly to what you're learning. Why don't you explain what it is that you've done here?"

"Yesterday, I made this diagram for my Wizardry class using wizard's lights. When G showed me the spell to plot pi, I thought I'd incorporate it into my spell diagram to see if the two spells would work together."

"Although people alter Numerology spells to suit their own needs all the time, as far as I know you're the first student to attempt to do so, much less succeed at it, on their first try."

"Yes Ma'am. But it *feels* wrong doing it this way. The *math* doesn't feel right."

"How so?"

"In the spell, 'r' is looked upon as a constant. It feels to me like 'r' should be a sliding scale variable so that it can be easily manipulated. The way I've got it now, I made the circle with a fixed number for 'r', then had to scale everything else to fit inside the circle. That feels like just the opposite of how it should be."

Ms. Ipsum walked over to the table where Paul and G had been working and wrote down a very simple magical phrase before saying, "If you can incorporate this into your plotting spell, it should allow 'r' to be defined as an array of sequential values. The class is nearly over, but I'd be interested to see how it works when you've got it done."

"I think I can do it now." Paul said simply.

Before Ms Ipsum could respond to that, Paul created another diagram on the floor, this one being about half again as big as the previous one. Once the diagram was established, Paul created a circle surrounding it.

"Yeah. That works a lot better." Paul said happily.

"You didn't have to rewrite your spell to incorporate the new statement?" Ms Ipsum asked cautiously.

"I rewrote it in my head." Paul said simply.

"For future reference, I would very much like to be told about what other numerological spells you are able to find useful in your other classwork. I think it would benefit my students to know that there might actually be a use for what I'm attempting to teach them."

"Yes ma'am. I'll do that." Paul said with a smile.

"You'd better gather your things and get ready for your next class. The bell's about to ring." Ms Ipsum said before walking away.

"What's your next class?" G asked curiously.

"Um... Alchemy." Paul said as he looked at his schedule.

"Oh, I have Astrology next. But if I remember right, Vinda's got Alchemy second period. Maybe you'll be in her class."

"What do we study in Alchemy?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Changing one thing into another." G said simply then looked up when the bell rang.

Chapter 4

G walked Paul to his next class and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before hurrying away.

Paul was wearing a smile as he walked into the classroom and was happy to see that G had been right and Vinda was already there.

"How's it going? Are you starting to get used to things yet?" Vinda asked when she saw him.

"So far everything's been fine. At least, I don't feel as lost as I did going to regular classes." Paul said honestly.

"Well, Alchemy is one of those classes that sounds a lot more interesting than it really is. You probably won't learn how to turn your enemies into frogs, but there's a chance that you'll learn how to defend yourself from a magical attack."

"Is that something that you really have to worry about?"

"It's not like someone attacks you every day. But it's one of those things that's good to know just in case."

"Well said, Ms Sodhi."

Vinda jumped and turned suddenly.

"I take it that you're the new student I was told about, Mr. Darroch, is it?"

"Yes sir. But you can call me Paul, if you like."

"I prefer to use the proper address in regard to my students. However, I will address you by your first name if you would rather."

"No. That's fine. I just didn't want you to think that I was flaunting who my father is to make it seem like I'm someone important."

"No need to concern yourself about that. I assure you that any judgements made about you will be based solely on your own performance."

"Thank you, sir."

"Forgive me for not saying so sooner, it's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Darroch. My name is Larthur Hind. I will be your Alchemy teacher."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hind."

'Respect.'

'What a concept.'

"Since it's your first day with us, I believe that the most productive way to proceed would be to give you an absurd amount of reading to do and let you work at your own pace. Ms. Sodhi and I will be available to answer questions, should you have need of us."

Paul hesitantly nodded.

"Give it a try. If it turns out to be too burdensome, simply tell me and we'll try something else to get you caught up with the rest of the class."

"Yes sir. Thank you. I will."

"Take any available seat and I'll bring you a book so that you can get started."

"Yes sir." Paul said, then started to walk away. Vinda motioned to get his attention, then indicated for him to take the seat next to hers.

"That wasn't too bad, was it?" Vinda asked with a smile.

"He seems nice." Paul said honestly.

"Yeah. If his class had anything to do with my magical specialty, I wouldn't mind taking it as much. But since it doesn't, it feels like a waste of my time." Vinda said frankly.

"I guess that I'm still too excited about learning that magic is real. I want to learn everything about everything right now."

"That's very good to hear, Mr. Darroch." Mr. Hind said from just over Paul's shoulder, causing him to startle.

"This isn't the book that the rest of the class is using. I feel that this one is better at explaining the foundational magics involved in Alchemy. Once you've gotten a grasp of those concepts, we can ease you into the more advanced studies." Mr. Hind said as he handed the book to Paul.

"Thank you sir." Paul said sincerely as he accepted the book.

"I'll leave you to it, then." Mr. Hind said with a smile before withdrawing.

"Let me know if you need for me to explain anything... well, except for how to stay awake. This stuff is *really* boring." Vinda said frankly.

"I'm actually kind of interested in how everything works." Paul assured her as he opened the book to the first page.

* * * * *

Paul found the book to be well written and engaging. Each new concept was introduced, defined and demonstrated by way of detailed descriptions and sometimes photographic evidence, allowing Paul to incorporate them into his limited view of magic.

Unlike with previous classes, he didn't find anything that he was tempted to try on his own. The spells were of such complexity, yielding such intangible results, that they didn't seem to be worth his time. He was perfectly happy to accept that the reactions and results would be just as the book described them.

When the bell rang, Paul was surprised. He had become consumed by his reading and lost any concept of the passage of time.

"You seemed to really get into it." Vinda said as she got up from her desk.

"Yeah. I just got to the part about changing the states of matter. Using magic to alter something on the molecular level seems like something so incredibly small, and at the same time so unbelievably big that it's hard to wrap my mind around it."

"Yeah. I guess so. You'll probably never look at an ice cube the same way again." Vinda said as she led the way to the door, then thought to ask, "What's your next class?"

"It just says 'Spelling'. I'm guessing that doesn't mean what it does in regular school." Paul said cautiously as he followed along.

"Not really." Vinda chuckled, then happily added, "Nazzy and G are in that class too."

"What will we be doing?"

"Spellcasting. The spells that you use in class don't matter as much as *how* you use them. It's all about your method, style and technique. Sometimes, even if the spell works, you still don't get credit for it because you didn't use the exact right method."

"So everyone in the class is going to be doing magic at the same time?" Paul asked cautiously.

"We usually work together in small groups and take turns. The spells aren't difficult, but you have to do everything just right or you're docked points for it."

"It doesn't sound too bad. At least we'll be doing magic." Paul said honestly.

"G and Nazzy are waiting for us." Vinda said as she gestured at the pair, standing side by side in the hallway ahead of them.

Paul couldn't help but smile when he saw G.

"How's it going?" G asked as he approached.

"So far everything's been great!" Paul answered happily.

"Good. I was afraid that you were going to be overwhelmed like you were before." G said as he pulled Paul into a firm hug.

"Nope. So far I haven't had any problems. Everything's made perfect sense. In fact, it feels like instead of learning new things, I'm getting the answers to questions that I've had for a really long time." Paul said as he was released from the hug and moved to walk at G's side.

"So what's your next class?" G asked curiously.

"Spelling."

"Us too! That's great! I was hoping that we'd all have a class together."

"Do you think we'll be allowed to work together as a group?" Vinda asked as she and Nazy moved in a little closer to be heard.

"As long as we get our work done and aren't too distracting, Mrs Herdez probably won't care." G said frankly.

"Yeah. If we go in acting like we're already a group, she'll probably just go with it." Nazy agreed.

"Is there anything I need to know going in?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. We'll tell you everything you need to know. Just follow the instructions exactly and you shouldn't have any problems." G promised.

Before Paul could ask anything more, they walked as a group into the classroom.

* * * * *

"Hi Nicholas. Do you know G, Nazy and Vinda?" Paul asked the somber boy as they entered the room.

"Did I say or do something to give you the idea that you should talk to me?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

Paul noticed that G immediately bristled at Nicholas' negativity.

"No. But you're my teammate in Wizardry, so I'm not going to pretend like I don't know you when I see you outside of class." Paul explained simply.

"I'd rather you did." Nicholas said firmly.

"Too bad." Paul said with a smile, then continued, "It's not like we're going to hang out, watch movies together or wash each others' hair or something. But if I see you in the hall, I'm going to say 'hi'."

"So there's nothing I can do to make you stop?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

"Nope." Paul said with a smile, then conspiratorially added, "But if you said something like, 'hi' in return, I'd probably just leave it at that."

"Hi." Nicholas said immediately.

Paul grinned at the response, then said, "I'll see you in class."

Nicholas watched warily as Paul rejoined Nazy, Vinda and G.

* * * * *

"What the *hell* was that all about?" G asked as soon as they were away from Nicholas.

"He's on my team in Wizardry." Paul said simply.

"I got that. But he obviously doesn't want to have anything to do with you... or us. What are you trying to do by forcing him to talk to you?"

"I'm just being nice. I sort of get how he feels. Sometimes just knowing that someone cares enough to even make the effort is enough."

"I'll have to take your word for it. I don't get someone like that at all." G said honestly.

'I believe you.'

'You can't even imagine what it's like to feel unloved or insecure.'

'That's one reason why you're my Alpha.'

The class bell rang and G guided Paul to take a seat next to him.

"Those of you who have completed your previous spells, be looking for what you're going to attempt next, so that I can approve it. The rest of you, continue on and let me know when you're ready to demonstrate your completed spells for me." The teacher announced from the front of the room.

G raised his hand and waited for a moment for the teacher to notice.

"Mr. Darroch, do you already have an assignment ready for me to approve?" Mrs. Herdez asked pleasantly.

"No ma'am. But this is my new brother, Paul. He's starting your class today." G quickly explained.

"Oh yes. I had noticed that I'd be getting a new student, but then got distracted. Paul, is it? Tell me, do you have any previous magical training?"

"No ma'am. I just learned that magic was real last week." Paul said uncomfortably.

"Have you had the opportunity to attempt any spells since then?" Mrs. Herdez asked cautiously.

"Just a few little ones." Paul shyly admitted.

"Are they something that you can safely demonstrate here in the classroom?"

"Sure. If you could just step back a little, I could do it right here on the floor." Paul said simply.

Mrs. Herdez took a step back, then said, "Go ahead."

Within a few seconds, Paul's Wizard's Light spell diagram appeared, sharp and clean in every detail.

Mrs. Herdez looked at the diagram, then at Paul skeptically for a moment before asking, "Did you do the wording and gestures in an internal fashion?"

"Yes ma'am. They told me I could do it that way in Wizardry class." Paul quickly explained.

"That may be true in Wizardry, but in *this* class we focus on refining your technique. For that to happen, I need to see the technique that you're using in every detail as well as hear the spoken words." Mrs. Herdez said firmly.

"I should be able to do that. Do you want for me to do it now?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yes. I'm interested to see the spelling you used to get this result."

Paul first dispelled his diagram from the floor, then after a moment to internally calm himself, he held his arms out before him and began making the arcane hand signs while speaking the words of the spell.

Mrs. Herdez listened carefully to his spoken words as she looked curiously from one hand to the other.

Nazy, Vinda and G all stood silently and watched as Paul continued on and on, speaking every detail of his spell. He verbally described every stretch and skew of the wizard's lights to achieve the desired effect.

With his left hand, Paul was weaving the basic wizard's light spell, creating one little dot of light after another so that he could manipulate them. With his right hand, he was enacting his variation of the pi display, creating the circle that surrounded the entire diagram.

When the diagram was mostly complete, Paul found that his right hand was free, having completed his circle, so he took the opportunity to create seven little balls of flame, to serve as candles surrounding his spell diagram. He was able to work in the spoken invocation of the fire spell as though it had been there all along.

"I didn't realize how much faster that was in my head." Paul admitted as he finally lowered his arms.

"I detected variants of three distinct spells, as well as quite a bit of adaptation. Did you learn to create this diagram somewhere or did you craft it yourself?" Mrs. Herdez asked slowly.

"I learned the wizard's light spell yesterday afternoon and I've been adding things to it ever since. I added the pi formula this morning so that I wouldn't have to draw the

circles the hard way." Paul said simply, then noticed that Nicholas, along with most of the rest of the class, had moved in to see his spell diagram.

"Based on what I've just seen here, I believe that I have much to teach you. You seem to have an exceptional aptitude for spellcasting. If we can just refine your technique, you should be able to achieve great things." Mrs. Herdez said seriously.

"Okay." Paul said slowly, then asked, "But what should I be doing right now?"

Mrs. Herdez smiled at the question, then said, "Find out from your group what spell they'll be working on. If you don't understand it, get them to explain it to you. The spells they're using are more advanced than what you've done so far, but there's a chance that you'll be able to manage it. If not, you'll probably learn quite a bit by trying. Take this opportunity to stretch yourself a bit."

"Yes ma'am." Paul said as he waved his hand over the spell diagram at his feet and watched as it vanished.

"Everyone else, back to work! I need some completed spells to evaluate before I can give you any grades." Mrs. Herdez said as she walked back toward the front of the room.

* * * * *

Before Paul could ask about what spell they were working on, a voice from behind him said, "Paul."

He turned and saw Nicholas looking at him nervously.

"Yeah?" Paul asked cautiously.

"What you just did there, was that it? Was that all of how you did the spell diagram?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

"Yeah. *That* one, anyway. If you wanted a spell diagram for another realm or locus, you'd be better off starting from scratch. What you just saw me do was the *answer*, it doesn't include how I got the answer." Paul said carefully.

"So you didn't just copy the spell diagram from the book?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

"I got the basic form from the book, but the formulae inside the diagram needs to be worked for the time and place that you're in just like it is for the place you're trying to reach. When I started evaluating the formulae I noticed that the locus was left out. It was easy enough to put it back in, but if you were just copying and pasting, you wouldn't know if what you were trying to do would even work." Paul said thoughtfully.

"But some of those diagrams are written in dead languages. How do you do something like that?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

"Well, to be honest, I can understand *some* of the obscure languages. I don't know how. But from what I saw in Numerology today, there are spells that can manipulate numbers, variables and expressions interchangeably. If there are spells that can do that, then there have to be spells that can help you translate ancient languages. This is all new to me, so you'd probably know more about that than I do." Paul said honestly.

"I guess I just thought that I could use the written diagram, kind of like a shortcut, and not have to *understand* what it was doing." Nicholas quietly admitted.

"That could work." Paul easily admitted, then added, "But it's also the perfect way to fall into someone else's trap."

"Nicholas, would you like to join our group and work with us?" Vinda asked as she approached Paul's side.

"No." Nicholas immediately barked, then once he'd realized what he'd just done, he said more quietly, "No, thank you."

"We can talk more about it in Wizardry class if you want to." Paul said assuringly.

Nicholas looked uncertain about what he was agreeing to, but finally nodded.

* * * * *

"So, what are we doing?" Paul asked curiously.

"Actually, we were all three able to complete our spell in our last class, so today we're picking the next one we're going to try to do." G said simply.

"No more stink bombs." Vinda said firmly.

"It wasn't a stink bomb, it was an aura manipulation." Nazy said informatively.

"Yeah. You manipulated my aura into a stink bomb." Vinda countered.

"Here's a nice levitation spell." G said as he leafed through a book.

"Can any of us use it?" Nazy asked, obviously already knowing the answer.

"No. You have to be proficient in Thaumaturgy and none of us are." G said as he continued to flip pages.

"How about shapeshifting? We all have magical forms, so that might be enough of a magical connection to allow us to be able to do... something." Vinda said as she looked at a different book.

"What did you have in mind?" G asked curiously.

"The one I'm looking at is a mermaid spell." Vinda said slowly as she read through it.

"No." G said firmly.

Vinda looked up from her book curiously.

"There are certain parts of my lower body that I don't want to have replaced by a fish. Thank you very much."

"You want to protect your guppy. Got it." Vinda said with a grin as she turned the page.

"So, we can just pick any spell from any discipline to work on in here?" Paul asked Nazy curiously.

"Yeah, pretty much. We can *pick* anything we want. But Mrs. Herdez has to approve our choice before we're allowed to work on it." Nazy said as he leaned forward to read over Vinda's shoulder.

"There was this spell in my numerology book that looked interesting, it was kind of a 3D graphing thing. Could I do something like that?" Paul asked curiously.

"We can take a look at it, but one thing to keep in mind is that if the spell isn't very complicated, Mrs. Herdez probably won't allow it. She wants for every spell to be cast perfectly AND for each spell to be a challenge for us." Nazy said honestly.

Paul opened his backpack and took out his numerology workbook.

After flipping through a few pages, he found the page that he was looking for. It was an exercise that did a simple 3D plot. As Paul looked at the details of the spell, he realized the potential to manipulate the plotting parameters.

"Is it okay if I try something, I mean, like magic, or do I need to have permission before I do anything like that?" Paul asked cautiously.

"What did you have in mind?" Nazy asked as he turned his full attention to Paul.

"I was just thinking that if I combine the 3D plotting from this numerology worksheet with my wizard's light that I could probably come up with something interesting. But I can't be sure that it's going to work until I try combining them." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Sometimes it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission." Nazy said with a grin.

"What?"

"Just do it. The worst that will happen is Mrs. Herdez will ask you not to do it again." Nazy assured him.

"Oh. Okay." Paul said, then concentrated while internally weaving the hand signs for all the spells simultaneously.

Right in front of Paul, a pillar of stone emerged from the floor, stopping at about belly height. On the 'tabletop', a complex landscape appeared, complete with a lake, forest and a castle.

Admittedly, the landscape appeared to be somewhat 'pixelated', due to it being made entirely out of little cubes, but the overall structure was definitely recognizable.

"Okay. How did you do that?" Vinda asked as she walked up to the pillar.

"With a spell."

"Which spell?"

"Um, wizard's light, the 3D plotter spell from numerology, and then I threw in some of the 'states of matter' manipulations that I read about in Alchemy." Paul said as he looked over his handiwork.

"It blows me away how much detail you're able to create." G said as he cautiously reached forward to touch the top of one of the little trees.

"I think that I do it in a completely different way from you. Making something that seems 'unreal' would probably be more of a challenge for me." Paul said frankly.

"It's solid!" G said with astonishment.

"Yeah." Paul said slowly.

"I thought you made an illusion, but you actually *created* this thing?!" G asked in wonder.

"No. Not really." Paul admitted, then explained, "It's only *real* for as long as I keep the spell going. Once I dispel it, the air that I turned solid will go back to being a gas."

"From all the detail on this thing, it would probably take more than one class period for you to cast it... I mean, out loud with all the gestures and diagrams and everything." Vinda said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. But I thought that, if we're allowed to do it, each of us could take one part and we could all cast it together... isn't that what you do in here?" Paul finished uncertainly.

"We usually all work on casting the same spell separately." Vinda responded.

"Oh. I misunderstood what you were talking about." Paul said as he raised his hand toward his construct.

"No. Wait! Don't get rid of it yet!" G urged him.

Paul lowered his hand and looked at G curiously.

"Go through this with us, one piece at a time. Maybe there's a way that the four of us can cast this spell together." G said seriously.

"Remember, I've only been here one day. None of these spells are hard at all. I've just been mixing and matching them so that they can work together to do new things." Paul said as he looked from person to person.

G had most of his attention on the little landscape and he couldn't seem to get over the fact that it was solid. He experimentally touched the water, then quickly withdrew his hand as he said, "It's wet!"

"It's water." Paul said flatly, then added, "Well, *technically* it's air, but I overrode its natural properties to make it think that it's water while I'm using it."

"Paul, I don't think this is as simple a thing as you think it is." Nazy said frankly.

"Before we do anything else, we need to ask Mrs. Herdez if we can even attempt to do this spell together. If she says 'no', then we're going to have to come up with something else." Vinda interjected.

"I'll go get her." G said decisively before there could be any further discussion of the matter.

* * * * *

"Well, what do we have here?" Mrs. Herdez asked as she approached.

"Paul came up with this... construct and he was thinking that if we do all the different spells that make it, we could do it as a group." G explained.

"Is this sorcery?" Mrs. Herdez asked slowly.

"No. It's completely real. The water is even wet." G said with a smile.

Mrs. Herdez cautiously touched the water of the lake, then let her fingers drag across the tops of a few of the trees before asking, "So you were able to create a solid object from nothing?"

"No ma'am. I created the images using wizard's lights combined with the plotting spell from numerology, then I gave them substance by using the same coordinates with an alchemy spell to cause air to temporarily take another form." Paul said slowly.

"And you're proposing that each of you take a different component of the spell to recreate this, using the long form spoken spell, hand manipulations and written diagrams?" Mrs. Herdez asked cautiously.

"Yes. And I could probably even do a little sorcery overlay to even out the look of it, if you'd allow it." G interjected.

"Do you think that you'll be able to do the completed spell within one class period?" Mrs. Herdez asked thoughtfully.

"We should be able to. From the way that Paul explained it, none of the spells are that hard to do on their own. The trick is going to be to coordinate all our different magics to work together at the same time." Vinda said seriously.

"I'm interested to see what you come up with. I'll allow it. But I'm going to want every single detail of what all four of you are doing written down. If you can get this to work, I'll submit your completed report to the department head for his evaluation." Mrs. Herdez said seriously.

"This might take us a couple days. Is that okay?" Vinda asked cautiously.

"If you can manage it, I'd like to see your completed project during our class on Friday. Do you think that will be enough time?" Mrs. Herdez asked hopefully.

"I think so." Vinda said uncertainly, then looked to G and Nazy as she said, "We're probably going to have to work on this outside of class."

"No problem for me." Nazy said easily.

"We can do it at my house." G said simply.

"Well then, I suppose that you'd better get to it. You've taken on quite a project." Mrs. Herdez said before walking away.

'When will I ever learn to keep my big mouth shut?'

'Oh well, if we can pull this off it's going to be amazing.'

"Paul, I'm going to need for you to write down *everything* before you forget it." Vinda said firmly.

"Do you have some paper?" Paul asked simply as he opened his backpack.

"Yes. Here." Vinda said as she handed him a spiral bound notebook.

Paul sat down at a desk, then opened the notebook to the first blank page. He thought for a moment, then touched the pencil to the paper.

Words immediately began filling the page, giving the spoken words of the Wizard's Light spell. He turned the page and touched the paper with his pencil. The hand-signs and gestures were both illustrated and described in great detail in writing almost too small to read.

When he went to the next page, he filled it with the manipulations of the Wizard's Light spell to create the desired color and texture effects.

Nazzy, Vinda and G watched with surprise as Paul continued to fill page after page with detailed text and diagrams.

"When did you learn how to do that?" Nazzy finally asked.

"Do what?" Paul asked as he continued.

"How do you write like that?"

"I learned it this morning, in Numerology class. It's how the workbook lets you fill in the answers." Paul said absently as he filled page after page with details about the Numerology plotting spell. Once that was done, he started on the specific coordinates for the 'construct'.

"You learned this in *one* class?" Nazzy asked disbelievingly.

"Yeah. I just wanted to know how the writing spell worked, so I deconstructed it. It took, like, a minute." Paul said absently, then turned the page again.

"What's that?" Vinda asked curiously.

"Alchemy. It's how I make the whole thing solid... or liquid, depending on what it's supposed to be." Paul said frankly.

"I always thought of Alchemy being mostly theoretical. I mean, we'd do magical manipulations of things, just to show that it *could* be done, but I never really had any reason to use it for anything." Nazy said honestly.

"I don't know how useful *this* is, but it seemed like it would be a good thing to include in this project." Paul said as he closed the notebook and handed it to Vinda.

"It's all in here?" Vinda asked as she opened the notebook to see for herself.

"Yeah. Well, except for whatever G comes up with for an overlay illusion. I don't know how his magic works, but he can probably use the same coordinates that I did to create the original construct. The three of us can create the 'bones' of the construct and G can give it a 'skin'." Paul said with a smile at him.

"Paul, what part do you want to focus on? To do this right, we're each going to be working on different things so we'll be dividing the work four ways." Vinda asked as she skimmed over what he had written.

"Well, G's going to have to work on the skin, I'm assuming that he's the only one who can do that. So we'll actually be dividing it three ways." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Right. One of us will do the Numerology plot, another will do the Wizard's Light effects and the last will do the Alchemy." Vinda said slowly.

"Well, even though the spells themselves aren't too hard, it sounds to me like neither of you are too comfortable with the matter manipulation, so I can do that if you want... I mean, since I've already done it." Paul said cautiously.

"I think any of us could do it using this spell, but since you seem to have the best grasp of *how* to manipulate the matter, it's probably best if you do it. Nazy and I will split the rest between us. Both of us are better than average at Wizardry and Basic magic." Vinda said decisively.

"This class is almost over, when do you want for us to get together to work on it?" G asked curiously.

"I think that all of us are going to need to study our spells on our own before we're ready to try them together. How about tomorrow night? That way, if we run into any problems or have to do any fine tuning, we can do that on Thursday before we have to present it on Friday." Vinda asked cautiously, looking to see if anyone had a problem with the plan.

"Sounds good to me." Paul said simply.

"Yeah. That'll give me enough time to tweak the illusion." G said thoughtfully.

"Remember that every tweak you make will have to be documented. We want it to be nice, but we're going to have to present this in front of Mrs. Herdez. Don't make it so complicated that we can't do it in the allotted time." Vinda warned him.

"Paul, you might want to put that away." Nazzy said as he gestured toward the pillar that they were standing around.

The 'construct' suddenly vanished, leaving nothing in its wake. Paul hadn't used so much as a word or gesture to dispel it. He simply withdrew the power that was fueling the spell and it collapsed in on itself.

"Do you need for me to make copies of this for everyone?" Vinda asked as she held up the notebook.

"We're probably going to be making changes before this is in its final form. Why don't you keep it so we won't have lots of out-of-date copies floating around?" G asked seriously.

"Yeah. If you need anything from the master copy, just let me know."

"Sounds good. And if you need to make any changes to the master copy, just keep notes about it and we'll incorporate them when we get together." G agreed.

The bell ringing caused them all to look up.

"What's your next class, Paul?" G quickly asked as he gathered his things.

"My schedule just says 'Basic'."

"Basic magic. You should enjoy that one. You'll learn lots of spells that are useful in everyday life." Vinda said with a smile at him.

"Are any of you in that class with me?"

"I'm in my 'related' Sorcery class next." G said regretfully.

"I've got Astrology." Vinda said sourly.

"Potions." Nazy said unenthusiastically.

G put an arm around Paul and gave him a firm hug as he said, "Have fun. We'll see you at lunch."

Paul was about to respond, but was too slow. G moved in and gave Paul a quick, firm kiss before dashing away.

It took a moment for Paul to get his bearings, but he finally found his class schedule and set off in search of his next classroom.

* * * * *

Paul walked into the classroom and looked around.

Unlike most of the other rooms that he had visited, this one seemed to be unusually 'cluttered'. There were benches and shelves around the room and all of them seemed to be filled to overflowing with little knick-knacks and random junk.

The teacher was sitting at her desk at the front of the room, engrossed in her reading.

Paul timidly approached and waited for her to acknowledge him.

The other students were entering the room, remaining mostly quiet as they made their way to their desks.

Finally, the woman looked up at Paul and when she saw him, she smiled before saying, "You must be Paul Darroch."

The only word that Paul could think of to describe the woman was 'grandmotherly'.

"Yes ma'am." Paul quietly responded.

"Well, let's see... I'm Mrs. Cualla. This is Basic Magic. In this class you'll be learning about charms, hexes, personal spells, wards and household magics."

"I just learned about magic being real last week. So everything's new to me."

"Then this is a good class for you. Unlike most other classes, there isn't a 'learning curve' in this one. One lesson typically doesn't build on the previous one. Those who prove to be adept at Basic Magic may advance to the point where they can create their own charms, but many won't. Instead, they'll acquire the charms that prove to be useful to them in their daily lives. Along the way you'll also be introduced to spells that every witch should know, to make your daily lives easier."

Paul remembered G's 'chicken foot' charm at home and nodded that he understood.

"Tell me, before you came to your new understanding about magic, what did you think charms were?" Mrs. Cualla asked curiously.

"I guess I thought that a rabbit's foot or a four leaf clover were supposed to bring you good luck. I didn't believe in it. But I hadn't thought about it much beyond that."

Mrs. Cualla smiled, then said, "Yes, those are some of the classics. The fact of the matter is, those things actually *do* exist. There are magically enchanted items that hold power."

Paul cautiously nodded that he was following what she was saying.

"Here. Let me give you this." Mrs. Cualla said as she picked up a small silver spider from her desk and handed it to him.

Paul accepted it and looked at it carefully.

"What do you think that does?" Mrs. Cualla asked curiously.

"It's a protection spell... you put it over a crib or give it to a little kid to wear on a necklace or as a charm for their charm bracelet and it keeps away sickness and evil spells." Paul said slowly.

Mrs. Cualla chuckled, then said, "It's a wonder that you didn't know about magic already if you can read it so clearly now, after only a week."

"I guess it's like the ward on the hallway to this part of the school, it was always there and I always could have seen it, but I just never looked before." Paul said honestly.

"Well, since you seem to have the ability to 'read' the spells on enchanted items, there's no point in you going through an endless list of enchanted items to learn their intended purposes. We have another student in this class who is much like you. He's only recently become aware of magic and he also has the ability to read the spells on enchanted items. I think that I'll put the two of you together so that you can work on enchanting some items of your own."

"Even though I can see the spell on this charm, I wouldn't know how to cast it. Will I be learning that?" Paul asked hesitantly.

"This one is a bit complex for a beginner, it might take some time before you're ready to take on a project of this scale."

"As long as I can cast it in the next six or seven months, it should be fine. I'd like to make a charm like this for my little brother or sister when they're born." Paul said honestly.

Mrs. Cualla smiled tenderly at Paul, then said, "I promise, if you haven't developed the skill by then, I'd be honored to enchant the item for you myself."

"Thank you, ma'am." Paul said gratefully.

"Come along then, let me introduce you to your class partner and get you two started on a project." Mrs. Cualla said as she slowly got up from her chair.

* * * * *

"Filipe, how are you doing today?" Mrs. Cualla asked as they approached.

"Not very well, Mrs. Cualla. The spell that I'm wanting to use is no problem, but I can't get it to bind to the charm." The younger looking hispanic boy said with frustration.

"Go ahead and show me what you're doing and I'll see if I can give you any advice." Mrs. Cualla said seriously.

Paul watched as Filipe placed a piece of paper on his desk with a spell diagram drawn on it. In the center of the diagram, he placed a small piece of plastic shaped to look like a 'corn on the cob'.

Felipe then touched the five points around the spell diagram as he said an incantation which Paul could tell was intended to enchant the little charm to hold a spell of prosperity for whomever holds it.

Mrs. Cualla slowly nodded at Filipe's casting of the spell, then turned to Paul and asked, "Can you see what he's doing?"

"Sort of. The prosperity spell is simple enough, but the binding seems to be off. It's like there's nothing balancing the equation. For what is given, something must also be taken. Without that, the spell won't stick." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Very well said." Mrs. Cualla said with a smile, then added, "This is probably the main reason that every witch alive doesn't have a dozen or so charms hanging off of them, automatically granting them every blessing under the sun."

"How can I get it to bind?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"Filipe, this is Paul. He just learned about magic last week and he can also read the spells bound within enchanted objects. I'd like for you two to work together. You'll have the entire magic library at your disposal to discover a way to make your binding complete."

Filipe and Paul shared a withering look at the monumental task before them.

"No blood sacrifices!" Mrs. Cualla said firmly before walking away to talk to another group.

* * * * *

"Hi. I'm Paul."

"Filipe."

"How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"I'm fifteen. Mrs. Cualla said that you just learned about magic too. How are you handling it?"

"Okay, I guess. My *abuela* used to tell me stories about witches and magic. I grew up thinking that they were like fairy tales, but I'm finding out that everything she told me was true."

"Was she a witch?"

"I think so. I don't remember her doing any magic, but people used to come to her for things and now that I look back on it, not everything they asked for was exactly *normal*."

"My mom never said a word to me about magic. I'm starting out from nothing."

"Well, then I guess there's only one way to go." Filipe said with an encouraging smile.

'Okay.'

'Kindred spirit.'

'Friendly guy.'

'Positive and Encouraging.'

'We have all the necessary components on hand to accomplish great things.'

"I guess so. Do you have any idea of where we should start looking for an answer on how to bind your spell to the charm?"

"Not really. I've only read through a few of the books in here, but they were mostly about how to use existing charms, not how to enchant new ones."

"Well, if these spells are anything like the others that I've been reading, they're probably hiding the most useful parts of them on purpose so that lazy people won't misuse them." Paul said as he walked to one of the bookcases surrounding the room to browse through the titles.

"So you think that they're making them difficult to understand on purpose?"

"Yeah. In my Wizardry class, they actually leave parts of the spells out so that someone who doesn't know what they're doing won't accidentally summon something that they can't control." Paul said frankly.

"You're in Wizardry?"

"Yeah. What's your specialty?"

"Thaumaturgy."

"What's that?"

"Basically, it's magic that binds two related things together so that when you act on one, there is a reaction in the other. I think voodoo dolls are the easiest example to understand... even though I can't do that... yet."

"I don't get it."

"If I have a little basket that will fit in the palm of my hand, and another basket big enough for a person to fit inside, I can raise the basket in my hand two inches and the basket holding the person will raise two feet."

"I bet that there's a lot more to it than that. Nothing's *that* simple and there's always a price to pay."

"True. The spells are really long and complicated and you have to do them just right every single time. Once you get the spell right, then you have to fuel the spell with something, sometimes that's your own personal magical energy."

"It sounds like even a simple little job could wipe you out."

"Yeah. And sometimes, if the spell gets broken in the middle of casting it, there's a backlash that can knock you out for days."

"That sounds nasty."

"It is. From what I hear, there isn't much of a use for Thaumaturgy in the world anymore. I still need to learn how to use my abilities the best that I can, but I can't depend on being able to get a job using it when I'm grown up. That's why I'm working so hard to try and learn the charms and stuff."

"I haven't really thought too much about what I'll do with my magic when I grow up. So far, I've just been reacting to what's been happening around me."

"When my parents realized that I had magical abilities, they checked with some of my *abuela's* old friends to find a place where I could learn how to use my witchcraft. I had to move here, on my own, all the way from New Mexico. I'm staying with a host family while I'm here."

"Oh wow! I never realized just how good I had it. Are your host family nice? Do they treat you alright?"

"Yes. They're fine. Their daughter, Stevie, is your age. She looks at me kind of like the little brother that she always wanted. Besides her treating me like I'm a little kid, everything's fine."

"If it starts not being fine for some reason, let me know. I'm still getting settled in with my new step-dad and step-brother, so I know how it feels to be overwhelmed by a lot of 'new' all at once."

"Thanks. It'll be good to know that there's someone I can talk to who understands."

"I can give you my email address, but don't send me anything to do with magic in it. I'm still working on getting a magically secure email account."

Filipe patted his pockets and took out a folded piece of paper from his left hip pocket.

Paul touched his fingertip to the paper and his email address appeared, written in his own handwriting.

"How'd you do that?" Filipe asked as he looked at the paper.

"I'll show you the spell once we've picked out some books."

Filipe nodded, then began to look through the book titles in earnest.

* * * * *

According to Paul's research, while creating the charm wasn't 'impossible', it was somewhat unlikely.

The prosperity spell required a lot of magic to fuel it, and it would need a continuous supply of magic to keep it functioning. Although such things were possible, the magic involved was uncomfortably high and decidedly dark.

Paul now understood why Mrs. Cualla had made a point of saying 'No Blood Sacrifices'.

A captured life force *'could'* fuel the spell, but even so, the duration of the charm would still leave a lot to be desired.

"I want to say that it's impossible, but I know that charms like that exist. There's got to be a way to make the enchantment stick, but I just can't see how it works." Filipe said with frustration.

"Maybe that's what we're missing." Paul said in realization.

"What's that?"

"Both of us can *read* enchantments. Maybe the answer's not in the books but in the enchanted items around us. Maybe there's a clue in there of how they made the magic bind to the item."

"I've tried that. I couldn't see anything."

"Have you tried it with your spell diagram? Maybe the diagram that you use to *bind* will also *unbind*."

"If you'll grab us an active charm, I'll get the diagram." Filipe said with renewed energy.

Paul walked to one of the shelves and looked at the collection of seemingly random and useless items.

He took down one that seemed to be of adequate power for them to be able to read, but also handle safely.

* * * * *

"I only have the one spell diagram." Filipe said apologetically as he placed it between them.

"No problem. Here, try this snowglobe." Paul said as he handed the object to Filipe.

"We won't be able to test it out. The spell on it only affects animals, like cats and dogs."

"We don't need to test it. The spell just looked so simple and straightforward that it seemed reasonable to assume that the binding would be too. Open your spell diagram and see if you can get a peek at what's holding the spell to the snowglobe."

Filipe placed the snowglobe in the center of the spell diagram, then touched each point of the diagram as he spoke the invocation.

Paul watched carefully for any sign of what was keeping the spell in place.

"Oh. Yeah. We're not doing that." Filipe said slowly as he backed away from the snowglobe.

Before Filipe had closed the spell, Paul was able to catch a glimpse of what Filipe had seen.

The snowglobe was indeed being fueled by a life force, or more precisely, three life forces, which were sacrificed and captured at the moment of death.

"That's just sick." Filipe said with disgust.

"Yeah." Paul said, then despite his revulsion, picked up the snowglobe and walked back across the room to put it back in its original place.

* * * * *

After the snowglobe, neither had any desire to 'peek' into the spell on another charmed item. Instead, they went back to their books with renewed dedication.

"Okay. Here's one that binds the magic with a candle's flame." Filipe said distantly as he continued to read.

"What's the spell that's being bound?"

"Positive energy."

"Okay. That sounds promising. What is the charm that it's being bound to?"

"White quartz."

"Yeah. I see how that could work. The quartz can act like a battery, storing the energy. As far as the positivity... can energy *be* positive? Isn't energy just energy?"

"I don't know. The spell says all kinds of stuff about purity and light, but I can't see where it actually *does* anything."

"So basically you can magically use the candle's flame to 'charge' the thing, but after that, the person holding it would have to believe that the magic is something positive to get it to do what they want it to."

"So it's all in their head?"

"No. There *is* energy stored. It's not hard to do that part. But the spell is a cheat because it makes someone think that they've got magic to make them happy or upbeat and all they've really got is a little psychic energy boost. If they're pissed off, they could tap into that same energy to fuel their rage. It wouldn't do anything to calm them."

"Yeah. And the little bit of energy that it could store wouldn't be enough to do much of anything anyway. You sure couldn't use it to power a prosperity spell."

"Maybe not, but you said that Thaumaturgy links one thing to another with an external source of power to fuel it, right?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

"How do you bind the power to your linked objects?"

"There's a couple spells that I've come across for that. But they draw on kinetic energy or flame to fuel the spell. As soon as the power source is withdrawn, the spell ends."

"Okay. I get that. But if you can take kinetic energy and convert it to magical energy to fuel a spell, couldn't you do the same with the energy stored in a battery... or a crystal?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure of how you would do it, but it sounds like it could work."

"If we could find a source of enduring energy like that and convert it to fuel the prosperity spell, then maybe we could get it to stick. I mean, it looks to me like what our problem has been is that the energy we've been using is too weak to maintain a binding."

"Does that mean that I'd have to carry a battery around with me?"

"No. You'd take the properties and potentials of the battery and transfer that along with the energy into your charm."

"I don't know how we'd do that."

"I don't know either. But it seems like it should be able to work. We're almost out of time for this class. Do you think that you'll be able to get some batteries before the next time we meet?"

"Yes. That shouldn't be a problem. Our next Basic class is on Thursday."

"Okay. Between now and then I'm going to dig into my Alchemy textbook and see what I can come up with to magically transfer inherent properties from one thing to another. If I can manage that, then we *might* be able to bind the spell, since we'll have a way of fueling it."

The bell ringing caused them both to look up.

"Do you have someone to sit with at lunch?"

"Yeah. I sit with Stevie and her friends. I know it sounds kind of lame, but I really don't mind. It's kind of nice that she wants to include me."

"Okay. Well, if she starts getting boring, you're welcome to come over and sit with us. Just watch out what you say if you do. We have a friend who sometimes sits with us who's not a witch."

"I'll remember." Filipe assured him, then said, "I'll see you Thursday."

"Yeah. See you then."

"Is everything still alright?" G asked as he put an arm around Paul.

"Yeah. It's all great." Paul said honestly.

"So it's not like it was before, where you didn't even understand the questions they were asking?"

"No. I'm understanding things just fine. Instead of memorizing a bunch of crap that I'll probably never need to know, I've been *discovering* things and... I guess, learning..." Paul trailed off in wonder, then muttered, "I never saw *that* coming."

G laughed, then used his free arm to wave at Nazy and Vinda who were approaching.

"How was Basic Magic? Did you get started learning about the endless selection of charms?" Vinda asked with a smile.

"No. Mrs. Cualla said that I could skip that. She wants me to work on 'making' charms for right now. From what she was saying, she's going to be teaching us some 'daily use' spells, too." Paul said honestly.

"Really? I've been doing this *forever* and I still haven't made a charm."

"Yeah. I guess that I can somehow 'read' the spell that's embedded in the charm, so she said that it would be kinda pointless for me to learn about what all the different charms can do when I can just tell by looking at them."

"But she's having you *make* charms?"

"I haven't made anything yet, but I get the feeling that that's what she's going to have me doing once I've figured out how it all works."

"New guy. First day in her class and she has him making charms... I'll never figure this place out." Vinda muttered with a shake of her head.

"Real world." Nazy said as they stepped out of one hallway into a much larger one.

"Thanks Naz." G said with a grin at him.

"Paul! I didn't know if you were here today. I didn't see you in any of the classes." Curtis said as he hurriedly approached.

"Yeah. I guess we didn't get scheduled to have any classes together." Paul said honestly.

"So how are you doing? Is the new class schedule working better for you?"

"Oh yeah. It's great. My only problem so far has been that I can't keep my big mouth shut and I'm always volunteering to take on more work." Paul said with a self-deprecating grin.

"I don't have to worry about that. I might as well be invisible." Curtis said frankly.

"I know how that is. I think I went through one whole school year without ever talking to anyone... of course, the year after that, I was in a school where everyone was getting up in my face all the time and wouldn't shut up. It's hard to find a good balance."

Curtis looked at the rest of their group, then quietly said, "Sorry for intruding. I was just worried that Paul might not be here today."

"It's fine. Remember, we invited you to join us yesterday." G assured him.

"Yeah. And before you caught up to us, we were interrogating Paul about his day. We were all worried about how he was going to handle taking all new classes." Nazzy explained.

Before Curtis could respond, they reached the cafeteria line and started taking trays.

* * * * *

Once they were all sitting, Paul noticed a concerned look on Curtis' face.

"What's wrong?"

"Those guys are staring at us." Curtis said anxiously.

Paul glanced where Curtis was looking and saw four boys about their same age looking back at him.

"What do you suppose that's all about?" Paul asked curiously.

"They don't think that I should be sitting with you." Curtis said honestly.

"What? Do they want you to sit with them?"

"No. They just think that a black guy should only sit with other black guys... even though I'm not friends with any of them."

"How 1950's of them." Nazy said with a smirk.

"What is this that we're eating?" Paul asked as he looked at the food on his plate.

"Mushroom risotto, I think." G said as he poked it with his fork.

"It's good. I don't think I've ever had it before." Paul said before taking another bite.

"Curtis, you may have noticed that I'm not exactly lily white." Vinda said seriously, then continued, "If you need any help dealing with people who can't see past your race, let me know."

"Thanks. I usually don't even think about it until something like this happens to remind me." Curtis admitted shyly.

"Yeah. I think we're all like that." Nazy said easily.

Paul nodded his agreement before taking another bite of his food.

"So are you guys all in the same classes?" Curtis asked curiously.

"We have one class together. We cross each other's' paths most of the rest of the day." G said easily.

"It's funny that I don't see any of you in any of my classes. What are the odds?" Curtis asked slowly.

"I think it probably has to do with you being relatively new to the school. Those of us who've been here since the beginning have been... trained... I guess, to be what they expect us to be, so they have classes that reinforce and build on what they've taught us all along. For someone like you or Paul, they have to make up for whatever you didn't get taught at your old schools, so you get put on a different course track." G said thoughtfully.

"Or maybe it's just because this is a big school with lots of little classes." Nazy interjected.

"It could be that, too." G easily accepted.

"Do you guys have anything going on after school?"

"Since we all take vans to get home, we can't really hang around or anything." Vinda said honestly.

"Yeah. And besides that, you remember that thing about me and my big mouth? I've volunteered for so much extra stuff that I'll be lucky to have enough time to eat and sleep before this weekend." Paul said unenthusiastically.

"Did you volunteer for extra credit or something?" Curtis asked curiously.

"No. It's nothing like that. I think the teachers just want to get a handle on what I do and don't already know, so they're having me do extra projects. I'm guessing that I'll get some kind of a grade or extra-credit or something out of it, but that's not why I'm doing it. Doing these things helps to show me what I need to focus on most." Paul said thoughtfully.

"I guess that's a smart way of doing it. I'm kind of used to just waiting around for someone to tell me what I need to do to get the grade, then doing it." Curtis said frankly.

"Whatever works best for you." G said to Curtis with a grin, then continued, "But I think Paul's proactive approach works best for the situation that he's in, starting while the school year's already in progress."

"Yeah. There's already a lesson plan in place for the rest of us, but Paul's trying to jump in, right in the middle of things. So he's going to have to sort a few things out on his own before he'll be able to fit into the groove with the rest of us." Nazy said consideringly.

"Speaking of which, it's almost that time." Vinda said as she gestured toward the clock.

"Ungh. English Lit." Curtis groaned.

"Sitting here complaining isn't going to make anything better." Vinda told him sympathetically.

"I know. But it's boring and it sucks. I feel like I should at least be able to whine about it." Curtis responded.

"That's true. Go ahead. We can wait for you to finish if you need us to." G said as he started gathering things onto his tray.

Curtis broke into an unwilling smile, then said, "It's okay. I don't need to anymore. But thanks."

"Have a good day Curtis. Maybe we'll see you out at the vans after school." Vinda said as she stood.

"Yeah. I'll see you then." Curtis said as he began to gather his dishes.

"Are you okay?" Paul asked as he waited for Curtis to be ready to go.

"Yeah. I guess I just feel like I'm doing something wrong by hanging out with you guys." Curtis said frankly.

"I don't know what to tell you except that Nazyzy was right. People who are hung up on race have their thinking stuck back in the 1950's. If me and my friends have to divide people into groups at all, we mostly look at who's on their way up and who's on their way down, then we decide who we want to be associated with. A loser is a loser, regardless of race." Paul said frankly.

"Does that mean that by accepting me, you guys are saying that you don't think that I'm a loser?" Curtis asked cautiously.

"Yeah. That's exactly what it means." Paul said simply.

"Thanks." Curtis said sincerely.

"It goes both ways." Paul added, "By hanging out with us you're saying to everyone that you think we're worth something."

"Nobody cares what I think."

"We do." Paul said as he led the way to the drop off window, then added, "And I think you care what we think too, or you wouldn't have accepted the invitation to sit with us."

"Yeah. I just wish that things didn't have to be so complicated." Curtis said regretfully.

"Welcome to high school." Paul said with a grin.

"The most *wonderful* time of your life." Curtis said with a reluctant smile, then added, "At least, according to my parents."

"Yeah. Depressing, isn't it? It's their way of telling you that things only get worse from here on out." Paul said as he set down his tray.

"It gets worse?" Curtis whimpered.

"Only if you let it." Paul assured him and waited for Curtis to be finished at the drop off window.

Chapter 5

Nazzy and Vinda were waiting for Paul just inside the 'magic' hallway. Paul was disappointed that G wasn't waiting there too, but understood that G needed to be on his way to his Sorcery class.

"Are you ready for Wizardry?" Nazzy asked as Paul approached.

"I'm as ready as I can be." Paul said honestly.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Vinda asked curiously.

"I've written all that I can on my Wizardry report, but I need to check with Nicholas to see if he's done his part."

"So it's not ready to submit?" Nazzy asked curiously.

"No. Besides that, I've got to make one little change since I found a better way to draw the circle."

"If you need to use a computer, you'd better jump on as soon as we get into the main classroom. They usually go quick." Nazzy said frankly.

"I have to talk to Nicholas first. If he's not ready with his part, then there's no need for me to rush on mine."

"That's the downside of team projects. If you've got one person who doesn't pull their weight, the whole team suffers because of it."

"Yeah. Tell me about it." Paul muttered and seemed to be lost in thought.

* * * * *

When they walked into the main classroom, Paul noticed that all the computers had already been claimed.

"We'll see you after class." Vinda said quietly before hurrying away to join the rest of her team.

Paul looked around and spotted Amelia and Nicholas standing next to the door of the study room that they had used the day before.

"Do we have to wait around out here, or can we go into our room?" Paul asked as he approached.

"Professor Ortega usually talks to us for a minute and tells us what we'll be focusing on before we separate into study groups." Amelia said informatively.

"Nicholas, were you able to get your part of the report finished?"

"Yeah. It's just the summoning spell. Amelia's got it. She said that she'd look it over before we turn it in. I suck at reports." Nicholas admitted.

"Amelia, if you're helping us, you should get credit for it. Your name should be on the report along with ours." Paul said frankly.

"But she didn't have anything to do with casting the spell." Nicholas whined.

"If she contributes to the report, then she deserves to have her name on it. Besides that, if she does any fact checking and actually finds a mistake, then she *will* be in some part responsible for whatever grade we end up getting." Paul said reasonably.

"If you want, I could include what I observed when you were doing the summoning. I already had my scrying spell thrown wide open, so I could see all of what you were doing." Amelia interjected.

"Since you already have the information, you might as well include it." Paul said thoughtfully.

"So does that mean that your part of the report is ready?" Amelia asked cautiously.

"For the most part. I have to make one little change. I found a better way to draw the casting circle."

"What did you..." Amelia began to ask, but stopped when Professor Ortega led a group of teachers into the room.

"Good afternoon! I hope that this day finds all of you well." Professor Ortega said formally.

"Today your teachers are going to be focusing on how you are balancing forces in regard to your individual spells. Although it may seem to some of you that you have a bottomless reserve of power to draw upon, as you progress in your magic, you'll discover the need to use it efficiently. Learning the proper techniques now will serve you well in the future."

Paul could see the importance of what Professor Ortega was proposing.

"Now, if you will proceed to your study rooms, we will begin this day's adventure."

* * * * *

"Do you want to make your changes to your report before we start?" Amelia asked as they walked into their room.

"Yeah. I'll need to use the computer for that." Paul said as he looked toward the computer at the side of the room.

"You can use the computers in the outer room whenever you want, but Mr. Gilbert has to sign you into this one." Amelia informed him.

Just as she said so, Mr. Gilbert walked into the room, looking professional and prepared for a productive work session.

"How are we doing today?" Mr. Gilbert asked as he placed his messenger bag on a table at the side of the room.

"I've got my report for Professor Ortega almost finished, but I need to make one little change. Can I use the computer for a few minutes?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Yes. And if you wouldn't mind, I'd very much like to have a look at your report as soon as you're done with it."

"Yes sir. I'd be interested to hear your opinion of it."

* * * * *

After signing in, Mr. Gilbert surrendered the chair to Paul, allowing him to work.

It took a minute for Paul to bring his report up, but he was soon working to replace the section where he described how he drew the circle with the much simpler pi plot from his numerology class.

Paul briefly scanned what he had written to be sure that the changes fit in with the rest of the report. Once he was done, he looked around to see if Amelia were ready to add her part.

He found Nicholas and Amelia watching him from across the room.

"How do you want to do this?" Paul asked as he walked to them.

"I thought that I'd compile what you've both done, then I'd add my own information." Amelia said frankly.

"That sounds good to me. But would you mind if I looked over the report when you're finished with it? I'd like to read the whole thing at once before we turn it in." Paul asked hopefully.

"Yes. I'd feel better about it if you did." Amelia said honestly.

"What should I be doing while you're working on the report?" Paul asked cautiously.

"If you don't have anything else assigned, get with Mr. Gilbert."

"I'll do that now."

* * * * *

"Mr. Gilbert, I've finished working on my part of the report, do you have something else for me to work on right now? I mean, I'm starting off behind everyone else, so there's probably something that I should be studying." Paul chattered nervously.

"There are many things that you *could* be studying, but the way this class is organized, every student is encouraged to compete with their own achievements thus far. What do you think should be the next step in your training?"

"Well, I made the summoning diagram and was able to come up with the missing locus. So I guess that the next step would probably be for me to actually summon something... except that I don't have a clue where to start."

"Yes. From what I witnessed yesterday, there is no doubt that you are fully capable of summoning. I believe that the most productive course we could take right now is to capitalize on what you've already mastered and take that next step. To do this properly, you might need the assistance of your classmates."

"Okay. What do I have to do?" Paul asked cautiously.

"You have a library of magical texts at your disposal. Rather than tell you specifically what you should conjure, I'll let you choose for yourself. There is no shortage of low-level summoning spells."

"Okay. So I just pick one and summon it?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Correct. But I will ask that whatever you choose have a physical form. Even if it's just a little speck of a demon, I would like for it to be fully manifested within this dimension. It's too easy for monstrous demons to hide their true natures by tricking new wizards into summoning them and only manifesting the smallest fraction of their true selves." Mr. Gilbert warned.

"Yeah. I noticed that limitation was built into Xaphan's summoning spell. I'll be sure that whatever spell I use has the limit built into it." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Also, whatever you summon, you must also be able to command. Again, from what I saw yesterday, I'm not concerned about that. You have more than enough strength of will to dominate whatever you are able to conjure."

"I'm not comfortable thinking of myself dominating anyone or anything, but when I know that what I'm doing is right, I can make myself do it."

"Good. The final part of your task will be to take that which you have summoned and return it to its place of origin. It shouldn't be much of a problem at this level. Later on, it can become more of a challenge due to the fact that what you have summoned may not want to leave."

"Put it back where I got it from. Got it." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Let me know when you've chosen which spell you're going to attempt. And, it goes without saying, do not attempt to summon *anything* without supervision." Mr. Gilbert said firmly.

"Yeah. Don't worry. I'm not ready to work without a net." Paul assured him.

Mr. Gilbert smiled at Paul, then walked across the room to where Amelia and Nicholas were working on the computer.

* * * * *

Paul was fully aware that magic was real.

He knew without a doubt that there were unseen forces at work that he didn't understand.

Yet he couldn't account for the 'need' that he was feeling to find one particular spell.

He bypassed hundreds of books without ever considering them, simply because he somehow knew that they weren't 'the one'.

When he finally did stop to look through a book, he'd leaf through, looking for the exact summoning spell that he wanted, without consciously knowing what it was that he was looking for.

All he knew is that he was feeling intense frustration at his inability to find exactly the right spell.

* * * * *

After going through approximately half the library, Paul happened upon a rather ordinary looking book that made his heart jump for some inexplicable reason.

He took the book down with shaking hands and flipped directly to a section toward the back, as if already knowing what the book contained.

While leafing page by page, he slowly walked toward one of the tables at the periphery of the room.

He was somehow able to ease himself down into a chair, despite having all of his attention focused on the text before him.

A sudden rush of relief washed over him as he found the spell that he wanted. The strange thing was, he didn't know *why* he wanted it. He couldn't think of any reason that he should know about the existence of the spell in advance.

Regardless, he looked through the spell and found that it contained everything that he would need to do a simple summoning. There wasn't a spell diagram drawn out for him, but he had everything that he would need to construct a diagram on his own.

As he read through the spell, he realized that it didn't give any clues about 'what' it would summon. However, the spell was incredibly limited in what it *could* summon. In fact, the number of limitations on the spell made it likely that it was specifically tailored to one or two types of demons, disallowing all others from that same realm.

Paul turned his attention toward the realm that the spell targeted. Being completely new to summoning, he felt that it would be wise for him to do some investigation before committing himself to casting the spell.

Glancing across the room, Paul saw that Amelia, Nicholas and Mr. Gilbert were all gathered around the computer, working on the report.

* * * * *

Although he didn't want to interrupt, he was on a mission and reluctantly made his way across the room to them.

"Could one of you help me with something?" Paul asked hopefully as he approached.

"Certainly. What can I do for you?" Mr. Gilbert asked as he turned to face Paul.

"I've found a spell that I'd like to do, but before I try it, I'd like to do some research on the realm that it taps into. It doesn't look like it's anything dangerous, but I get the feeling that sometimes spells are written like traps to look like they're something safe when actually they're opening a doorway into an absolute nightmare." Paul finished anxiously.

"There is always that possibility." Mr. Gilbert conceded, then continued, "Although most of the spells in our library have been vetted over the years, I think that

investigating the properties of the dimension you'll be accessing is an extremely good habit to develop early."

"Okay. But I don't know where to find information on different hell dimensions." Paul said honestly.

"Amelia would be your best resource for that type of information. It ties directly into her specialty." Mr. Gilbert said frankly.

"She looks like she's busy right now. Can you just point me in the right direction?" Paul asked hopefully.

To Paul's surprise, Mr. Gilbert literally pointed to the second bookcase inside the door they had entered through.

"Thank you." Paul said with a smile, then hurried away.

* * * * *

It only took a matter of fifteen minutes before Paul had found the information that he had been looking for.

The specific 'hell' dimension that he was planning to tap into had been well documented as being one of the more 'civilized' demonic planes. The Meayithan Realm had an authority structure in place, by all accounts something like a monarchy, although since demons typically aren't born, don't live in the classical sense of the word, and aren't known to significantly age or die of natural causes, the concept of heirs and succession wasn't present in their society.

The documented demon population was such that Paul couldn't really pinpoint exactly what he might summon if he used the spell that he had found. There were a variety of low level demons with several magical specialties that might possibly fall under the terms of his spell.

Although most of them wouldn't be particularly useful to Paul in his current situation, being able to summon any of them might be beneficial later on, if only as a source of information about what The Meayithan Realm was like.

Satisfied that he wasn't about to do something monumentally stupid, Paul returned his reference materials to the bookcase, then walked back across the room to where Mr. Gilbert, Nicholas and Amelia were still gathered in front of the computer.

"I'm ready to try, whenever you have time." Paul quietly interrupted.

"Already?" Mr. Gilbert asked with surprise, then said more calmly, "Let me see what you're proposing."

Paul handed him the book, already opened to the first page of the spell.

"While I'm familiar with this realm, I'm not sure if I've ever seen anyone attempt to summon from it." Mr. Gilbert said absently as he read.

Paul waited with anticipation for Mr. Gilbert's decision.

"Yes. There seem to be sufficient safeguards in place to prevent you from summoning something too overpowering. However, I think that as an added precaution, I should ask Professor Ortega to join us. Not only will he be invaluable if something were to go wrong, but I also get the sense that he would be rather interested to see what you can achieve."

Before Paul could agree, object or even consider what was being proposed, Mr. Gilbert hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"You're going to summon a demon right now?" Nicholas asked as he approached, leaving Amelia to work on the computer alone.

"I'm going to try." Paul said timidly.

"It's only your second day here. Are you trying to prove something or are you just stupid?"

"I'm trying to do my *best*." Paul said coldly to Nicholas, then added, "And next time, I'll try to do even better."

"No matter what you do, it'll never be enough. They'll always expect more and more out of you until you can't give them what they're asking for. But if you do just enough to get the next grade, then you'll always have more that you *can* do. You can finish with strength instead of ending in defeat." Nicholas said informatively.

"Maybe. But I think that you're missing one important thing."

"What's that?"

"You're doing what you do for *them*. You let their minimum expectations dictate how hard you work and what you try to achieve. I'm doing what I do for *myself*."

"What's the difference?"

"One difference is that I don't care if you can do something better than I can. I don't feel threatened by you. You're my teammate in the group, so I'm just as happy to work with you and help you as not. Another difference is, doing it this way, I can feel *good* about myself. If I know that I'm trying my hardest and giving my best, then no matter how it ends up turning out, I'll be able to look in the mirror and be proud."

Nicholas snorted with laughter at the proclamation, then said, "Feel good about yourself all you want. In the end, it means nothing. When you crash and burn, I'll still be here, marking time until I can get out of this place and into a college where I can learn some 'real' magic."

"I have a feeling that you've already refused to learn what's most important."

"Yeah, whatever. We'll see who's right in the long run." Nicholas said knowingly.

"I guess we will." Paul agreed.

* * * * *

"Young Mr. Darroch, Mr. Gilbert has informed me that you are preparing to attempt a rather ambitious summoning." Professor Ortega said inquisitively.

"Yes sir. I'm going to try to summon an entity from The Meayithan Realm." Paul said quietly.

"While the summoning could have its hazards, it also has the potential to yield better than average results. I'm interested to see what you're able to summon."

"Yes sir." Paul said quietly, then asked, "Do you want for me to go ahead and do it now?"

"Make whatever preparations you need and proceed in your own time. I assure you that we won't rush you."

"I'm ready. I just wanted to be sure... never mind. I'll do it over here." Paul said as he walked to a more central location in the room.

As he was bracing himself for what he was about to do, he noticed Amelia getting up from the computer to join them.

"Amelia, do you want to do any of your scrying spells or anything before I start?" Paul thought to ask.

"Give me one minute." Amelia said as she ran to her cabinet.

Paul watched and waited as Amelia retrieved her supplies, then unrolled a mat, which had been embroidered with a spell diagram.

"I'm ready." Amelia said as she sat cross-legged before her mat.

Paul raised his arms and began performing the hand-sign gestures as he spoke aloud the long-form version of the spell to draw the spell diagram. He reasoned that since what he was doing was, in essence, putting on a show, that he might as well show them every detail of what magics were at work.

Professor Ortega, Mr. Gilbert and even Nicholas were carefully watching and listening to every detail of what Paul was doing.

A glowing pentagram appeared on the floor at Paul's feet and it was notable that the circle was nearly twice as big as the one Paul had created for Nicholas to summon Xaphan. Following the establishment of the circle, magical phrases began to appear in different areas, each explaining a different requirement of the spell being cast.

Five little balls of flame came into being, one at each point of the pentagram, which signalled more than Paul's words that the actual 'summoning' had begun.

At a certain point during the recitation of Paul's summoning spell, Professor Ortega and Mr. Gilbert turned to look at each other with surprise at one particular phrase that Paul had uttered.

Amelia watched intently as the vortex began to open, creating a filmy transparent interruption in reality.

Once the 'mechanics' of the spell had been completed, Paul realized that he had forgotten one small detail in his preparations.

He decided that since it wasn't part of the spell being presented, that it was alright for him to perform the spell to change his clothes internally, so it didn't disrupt the rest of his presentation.

As his personal magic began to flow out of him to fuel the summoning, Paul let go of his human form and allowed himself to flawlessly slip into his demon visage.

"The time has come."

"Follow my voice."

"Your master summons you."

"Come to me now."

Those in the room were enthralled by the change not only in Paul's appearance and his deeper voice, but also in his suddenly forceful demeanor.

In his demon form, Paul's presence became almost frighteningly powerful.

"Heed my command."

"Come forth."

"I demand it!"

Paul's entreaty seemed to come from a place of pure power. He was simply summoning his minions to do his bidding, as was his right.

Professor Ortega, Mr. Gilbert, Nicholas and Amelia watched breathlessly as something began to emerge from the gauzy orifice suspended above the glowing pentagram.

When the dark, misshapen salamander was finally able to make its way through, it dropped to the floor with a sickening ::splat::.

"Your master summons you!"

"Come forth!" Paul screamed toward the vortex.

Professor Ortega and Mr. Gilbert exchanged another concerned look, but their attention was drawn back to the summoning diagram as another grotesquely deformed amphibian dropped to the floor with a wet squelching sound.

"What I have opened, I now close. What I have closed, I now seal." Paul said as he made a grand gesture over his spell diagram.

"You should really leave the gate open so that you can return them." Mr. Gilbert warned.

"I'll open it again when I need to." Paul assured him, then realized that his much deeper voice might be construed as defiant or less than respectful.

"What the *hell* are those?" Nicholas asked with disgust.

"Yaggoral." Paul said simply, then looked down to the two disgusting slimy things and said, "While you're on this plane of existence, you need to take on the forms of native beings."

The two squirming little... things... didn't make any show of having heard his words. But both were looking up at him with slightly glowing red eyes.

"I command it." Paul said as a simple statement of fact.

Both the slimy creatures began to writhe. It wasn't clear if they were in pain, ecstasy or if they were just having some sort of seizures.

"What..." Amelia asked as she backed away.

First one, then the other began to reshape themselves. What had been slimy a moment before was now furry. The long thin bodies became more compact and took on a more conventional appearance.

When the transformation was complete, sitting in the middle of the glowing circle were a small white kitten and a small black puppy. The kitten had a black patch of fur surrounding one eye, just as the puppy had a white patch.

"How did you do *that*?" Nicholas asked in confusion.

"I didn't. Yaggoral have a natural shape-shifting ability. I just told them to change into something that belongs in this world." Paul said simply.

"Mr. Darroch. I have a feeling from your method of spellcasting that you intentionally summoned these *exact* demons." Professor Ortega said slowly.

"Yeah. I got that feeling too." Paul said uncomfortably.

"Would you care to explain?" Professor Ortega asked as more of a demand than a question.

"I don't know. That's the truth." Paul said simply, then explained, "I never met my dad, so I don't know if maybe he has some influence on me or something. I've also never met my grandparents, my mom's parents. I guess they're demon summoners too. So there could be magic at work on me from any or all of them. All I know is that I was sort of 'pushed' to summon my familiars, Mah Zah and Ginh Zah."

"Familiars? Are you sure?"

"Yes. We have a magical binding pact."

"Are you planning on keeping them with you?" Professor Ortega asked cautiously.

"No. I'll summon them when I need them." Paul said simply.

"Can you tell me more about this compulsion that led you to summon these creatures?"

"Not really. Every now and then I'll get this feeling like something is a *really* good idea, so I'll go ahead and do it. When I go back and think about it later, I'll realize that the idea kind of came out of nowhere... but it usually works out. I mean, I don't end up doing stupid things that get me in trouble."

"Do you think that you can recognize this compulsion when it comes over you?"

"Yeah. Most of the time when it happens, it's about things that really don't matter, I just have to make a choice about something and it pushes me one way or the other. You know, like deciding between pepperoni or supreme pizza or something like that."

"But just now it drew you to summon two familiars." Professor Ortega cautiously prompted.

"Yeah. But since I had to summon something anyway and I didn't have any reason to summon one thing over another, I just decided to go with it."

Professor Ortega looked to Mr. Gilbert to see if he had anything to add.

"I think he completed his first summoning without significant issue." Mr. Gilbert offered weakly.

"Yes. The method of casting was flawless. The presentation was appropriate for what he was attempting. The resulting summoning was successful, twice. Young Mr. Darroch had full control over those whom he had summoned. And although he has not as yet returned the summoned beings to their native plane of existence, I have no reason to doubt that he will do so in nothing less than an exemplary manner. This was a successful summoning by any measure, but being his first summoning in this class makes it that much moreso."

"Thank you sir." Paul said respectfully.

"You've set the bar rather high for yourself."

"Yes sir. I like it up there." Paul finished with a smile.

"A very good attitude to have, young man." Professor Ortega said pleasantly, then added more grimly, "But please *do* try and be aware of what you are being compelled to do. If you find it troubling, come discuss it with me and we'll look deeper into it."

"Yes sir." Paul immediately agreed, then added, "But like I told you before, it usually only happens with stuff that doesn't matter, you know, like choosing between Pepsi and Coke."

"Young man, I'll have you know that I'm a veteran of the cola wars." Professor Ortega said with a restrained smile.

"Yes sir." Paul said respectfully.

"Don't forget to send your new friends home before class ends." Professor Ortega said before turning to leave.

"Yes sir, I will." Paul called after him.

* * * * *

When Paul turned his attention back to the others, he noticed them all staring at him.

It took a moment for him to realize what they were looking at.

With a little internal push, Paul made his demon visage subside.

Paul then waved one hand in the general direction of the glowing spell diagram and it faded from existence.

"Come on, guys." Paul said as he sat cross legged on the floor beside where the diagram had been.

As soon as he was seated, the excited kitten and puppy both scrambled to climb onto his lap.

"Forming attachments to summoned beings is generally frowned upon." Mr. Gilbert said in a warning tone.

"I know. They're familiars, not pets." Paul said simply, but seemed to be determined to give the two creatures equal amounts of cuddles and scratches behind the ears as he said it.

"I don't understand the difference between the demons that Nicholas summons and Paul's familiars." Amelia said cautiously.

"Loyalty." Mr. Gilbert said simply.

When he didn't seem to be inclined to explain, Amelia cautiously asked, "How does that work?"

"Nicholas commands his demons to do his will. They obey because of his dominance over them. Paul's familiars serve him because they are loyal to him. Even if Paul were to become incapacitated for some reason and couldn't command them, they would remain at his side and defend him to the best of their abilities."

"But why are they loyal to Paul? Did I miss that part when it happened?" Amelia asked curiously.

"No. That is the result of something that must have happened elsewhere. The yaggoral have sworn their loyalty either to Paul or to another and are serving Paul at the other's bidding." Mr. Gilbert said slowly, then looked to Paul and asked, "Do you have any idea of how this happened?"

"Not really." Paul answered honestly, then said, "I guess it could have something to do with my dad... but maybe that's just my wishful thinking."

"And your father would be..." Mr. Gilbert said in a leading tone.

"A demon. That's all I know about him."

"And you suspect that he commanded the yaggoral to serve you?"

"Like I said, it's probably just wishful thinking. There's no reason for him to know that I even exist, much less to care about how I'm doing."

"This may be a stupid question, but since demons aren't alive or human or anything like that, how could someone... you know... have a kid that way?" Nicholas asked uncomfortably.

"Actually, if you'll look at Paul's lap, you'll see the answer." Mr. Gilbert said simply.

"Excuse me!" Paul said with immediate offense.

Realizing the way that sounded, Mr. Gilbert blushed as he explained to the group, "I was referring to the yaggoral in Paul's lap. They are demonic beings physically transformed into natural creatures. In this form they could enjoy sexuality with a member of the species that they appear to be and were they older, they might be capable of producing viable offspring."

"So you're saying that Paul's mom got it on with a demon who shapeshifted into human form?" Amelia asked cautiously.

"Perhaps. Just as with other types of magic, there are many levels of shape-shifting. An arch-demon might exist in a fully human form at all times, simply because it pleases him to do so. I've heard various accounts of that. However, most average

demons who have the ability to shapeshift only do so when there is a need. The shapeshifting spells simply require too much magic to maintain."

"I don't understand about familiars. To be honest, I kind of thought that they were just made up stories." Amelia said frankly.

"The concepts of duty, trust and loyalty seem to have fallen out of favor in recent years, so the demand for honorable companions has lessened. These days people tend to only believe in what they can absolutely control for themselves." Mr. Gilbert said frankly.

"But are familiars really a thing? I mean, what can they do that other demons can't?" Amelia asked curiously.

"Again, it simply comes down to trust. In most cases a summoned being absolutely loathes their master and they only follow his orders because they are compelled to do so by the conditions of the summoning spell. If they were given an opportunity, they would gleefully betray him and delight in his agonizing death." Mr. Gilbert said dispassionately.

"And a familiar would fight to defend their fallen master, even to their own death." Amelia quietly provided, completing Mr. Gilbert's thought.

Mr. Gilbert considered for a moment, then said, "Paul, good work. You may spend the remainder of the class 'motivating' your familiars, if you would like."

Paul easily nodded his acceptance to the arrangement as he continued cuddling and scratching the squirming little balls of fur.

"Since Nicholas was able to perform a successful summoning yesterday and Paul was able to do so today, I think you can guess what I'll be expecting tomorrow." Mr. Gilbert said as he looked askance at Amelia.

"Yeah. No pressure. Like my grandma says, 'It's like following Streisand.'." Amelia said sourly.

"What?" Paul asked in confusion.

"Not to worry. I promise that you'll be graded on your own merits and not compared to your classmates." Mr. Gilbert assured her.

Amelia glanced at him with undisguised irritation, then turned to Paul and said, "We've got the report compiled if you want to take a look at the final product before we print it out."

"Yeah. I'll do that now." Paul said as he gathered his yaggoral.

"Before you do that, could you make a summoning circle for me so that I can summon Frederick?" Nicholas grudgingly asked.

"Sure." Paul said easily, then glanced at the floor beside him.

Within a few seconds, Frederick's summoning septagram and seven fireballs appeared.

"Thanks." Nicholas reluctantly choked out, then started his summoning ritual.

* * * * *

Paul settled himself on the chair in front of the computer and ended up with a yaggoral perched on each shoulder.

"Did you study Nicholas' spell diagram?" Mr. Gilbert quietly asked as he approached.

"I wouldn't say that I 'studied' it, but I read through it enough to understand its construction. If you'll look at the primary transit locus and the bounce coordinates, you'll see that I cleaned it up a little." Paul said absently as he read.

"Do you know where Frederick's home dimension is?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously, not wanting to draw too much of Paul's attention from his reading.

"No. I think you're right. The only way to trace it all the way back is going to have to be Amelia's way. There's not enough information in the spell to tell me where it's drawing from."

"Yes. I just thought that since you seemed to have such an aptitude for summoning, that you might have some insights."

"Nope. Frederick comes from one of many demonic realms... or maybe New Jersey. That's all I've got."

"What do you think of the report?"

"I like it. I'm glad that Amelia added her observations. It makes it read a little more like an eyewitness account than an instruction manual." Paul said honestly.

"I agree. If you ever have to submit a report for publication, I suggest that you attempt to use this format. It's very readable."

"Yeah..." Paul began to say, but was interrupted by a tiny mewling cry from his left shoulder.

"What was that?" Paul asked.

The kitten purred, then gave one quiet little growl from deep in its throat.

"Ginh Zah noticed that I didn't put the locus in the spell diagram that I drew. I forgot to ask you if that was alright."

"Yes. If you had included it, I would have seen that it was removed before it was submitted for review by a larger audience." Mr. Gilbert assured him, then cautiously asked, "You can understand what the kitten says?"

"Yes and no." Paul said as he looked away from the computer to meet Mr. Gilbert's eyes. "Actually, Mah Zah and Ginh Zah can make themselves be understood by whoever they want. They learned the spells so that they could carry messages for me or gather intelligence."

"They told you this?"

"Yeah. They've been sort of introducing themselves to me while I've been petting them." Paul said as he turned his attention back to the report.

"This sounds to me like ancient wizardry from an age long past." Mr. Gilbert said thoughtfully.

"Things that go can come again, like a circle..." Paul began to say, but was interrupted by a yipping little bark.

"Excuse me. Like a *pendulum*." Paul said with a smile at the puppy on his right shoulder.

Mr. Gilbert watched as Paul went back to reviewing the report, with the puppy and kitten intently reading from his shoulders.

* * * * *

"Paul. Do you have a minute?" Amelia asked hopefully.

"Sure. What did you need?" Paul asked as he turned.

"You heard Mr. Gilbert. I have to do a summoning tomorrow. Do you think... I mean, is there any way that you know that I could summon a familiar like you did?" Amelia asked hopefully.

"I didn't really *plan* to summon these guys. Things just kind of worked out..." Paul was saying when the kitten on his shoulder meowed, rather loudly, into his ear.

"What?" Paul asked as he focused on the kitten.

The little mewling cry that the kitten emitted sounded to Amelia almost to be a form of speech.

"Okay. We could try that." Paul said simply, then turned to Amelia and said, "Ginh Zah said that she knows someone who might like to be your familiar. If you'll summon her tomorrow, you two can talk it over and decide what you both want to do."

"Really? That would be great! What do I have to do?" Amelia asked happily.

"I'll go ahead and give you everything that I had so that you'll be able to do the summoning. Do you want for me to make the diagram for you or would you rather do the whole thing yourself?" Paul asked curiously.

"I think it would be better if I did it on my own. That way I won't have to wonder if I'll be able to do it if you aren't around."

"Okay. I can respect that." Paul said simply, then carefully took the puppy off his right shoulder.

"I'm going to send Ginh Zah and Mah Zah back so that they can talk to their friend. When you do your summoning tomorrow, she'll be waiting to answer your summons." Paul said as he placed Ginh Zah and Mah Zah on the floor.

"What's her name?"

"Knowing her name gives you power over her, so you'll have to find that out for yourself." Paul said frankly.

"Did you have to find the names for *your* familiars?" Amelia asked curiously.

"I already knew them... I just don't know how." Paul said simply, then added, "They don't know either."

Amelia watched as Paul made a gesture. A pentagram and flames suddenly came into being.

"I'll probably summon you again tomorrow, after Amelia does her summoning. While you're there, remember to find out whatever you can about what we talked about." Paul said seriously.

Ginh Zah gave a single 'meow' just as Mah Zah barked.

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow." Paul said as the vortex opened in the middle of the spell diagram.

The kitten and puppy promptly passed through the gauzy gray twist in reality and vanished.

Paul made a subtle gesture and the portal dissipated, then he turned his attention to Amelia and asked, "Do you think that the report is ready to submit?"

"What? Oh, yeah. I think so."

"Will you show me how to submit it?"

"Yes."

* * * * *

"How was your day?" Nazyzy asked as Paul walked out of the study room into the main classroom.

"Pretty good." Paul said honestly.

"Did you volunteer for any more big projects?"

Paul had to think about that for a moment, but finally said, "No. Actually, I was able to submit my report, so I've got one less thing hanging over me."

"Good. It looked like you were overloading yourself."

"Where's Vinda?"

"She's talking with her friends about ghost stuff. Since she's one of the most successful ghost summoners in the class, they all go to her with their questions."

"What about you? Don't you get the same thing from the zombie summoners?"

"Actually, I'm the only one. The teachers put me in with the ghost summoners because our spells are so similar, but no one else in our class can pull up a physical manifestation... well, except your team, but that's something completely different."

"I guess that works out. This way your 'army of the undead' only has one general to lead them."

"So, are you planning on working on the big spelling project with G tonight?"

"Yeah. Whenever he's ready I'll pull up the 'construct' so that he can start working on his 'skin'."

"Vinda and I are going to work on our parts of the spell. After reading it over, she said that we can do our things without using your Alchemy elements, so even though what we do won't have any substance, we can still be sure that our parts will work."

"Good. That's what I thought too."

"What are you doing over here, being antisocial? Why don't you give the rest of us a chance to get to know the new guy?" A girl with a bit too much makeup asked as she approached. To Paul it looked like she had used the makeup to mask all her actual facial features then painted on the ones that she wanted.

"Paul, this is Carla, our own personal welcome wagon." Nazzy said with disdain dripping from his words.

"Hi." Paul said simply.

"So you're Mr. Darroch's new son? Isn't that wonderful? I can think of a dozen people that you absolutely *have to* meet." Carla said delightedly as she linked her arm through Paul's and attempted to guide him away.

"No thank you. If you'll excuse us, I was talking to Nazzy about a project that we're doing." Paul said as he planted his feet and refused to be moved.

"You know, there are advantages to being seen with the *right* people. You're new here. You should really think about that." Carla said persuasively.

"Actually, considering who my dad is, I'm pretty sure that I can hang around with whoever I want to. And just so there's no confusion, you are *not* included on that list. Now get off me." Paul finished firmly.

Carla looked shocked, but Paul was fairly certain that the emotional reaction was as false as everything else about her.

"You're going to regret that." Carla finally said in a low voice.

"No. I really don't think that I will." Paul said with reasonable certainty..

Carla stomped away in a huff as Paul and Nazzy watched her go.

'And people look down on demons.'

'They call them monsters.'

'I wonder how many of those same people have bothered to look in a mirror.'

"You keep surprising me, Paul. You're usually so quiet and willing to go along with anything, then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, you take a stand."

"I choose my battles." Paul said simply, then explained, "When it's something that matters, I do what I have to do. Besides that, if I let some makeup-based life form make me her bitch, how am I ever going to be able to command a demon?"

"I wonder what you'd find if you excavated down through all that makeup?" Nazzy asked with a smile.

"More makeup... all the way to the core."

* * * * *

"Paul! What did you do?" Vinda asked as she rushed to join him and Nazzy.

"About what?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Well, according to Carla, she came over here to introduce you around and make you feel welcome and you practically assaulted her!" Vinda said disbelievingly.

"Well, she came over here, that part's true." Paul said simply.

"We were talking when Carla interrupted and tried to drag Paul away to show her new pet off to her minions." Nazzy said simply, then added, "Paul said 'no'."

"So you didn't hit her?" Vinda quietly asked, sounding somewhat disappointed.

"I wouldn't dare. I'd be afraid of scraping my knuckles on the stucco." Paul finished with a grin.

"Paul thinks she's a makeup golem." Nazzy stage whispered.

"Considering her personality, or lack thereof, he might be right." Vinda reluctantly agreed.

"So, what do you think she'll do to get back at me?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I think the worst thing that she'll do is spread ugly rumors about you and try to poison your name around the school." Vinda said honestly.

"Do a lot of people listen to her?"

"Yeah. Mostly the snotty stuck-up types."

"So, basically, she's going to put a hit out on me. She'll let it be known through the grapevine that she would be pleased and look favorably upon anyone who caused me to be hurt or humiliated."

"Yeah. Sort of, I guess."

"I'm going to need you guys' help. I don't know how to defend myself against magical attacks."

"Actually, you don't have to worry too much about that. Anyone caught using magic against another student would get into *real* trouble." Nazy said seriously.

"What would they do to them?" Paul asked curiously.

"First, they'd be kicked out of the school. Then, depending on what they did, even worse things might happen to them in the outside world."

"Because someone who can't control themselves in school might be seen as a threat to the entire community." Paul slowly reasoned.

"Yeah. So with magical retribution off the table, that kind of puts all of us on the level of second graders on the playground." Vinda added.

"Maybe, but they still might be willing to try something if they think that they can get away with it. Remember that when you're privileged, the rules are for other people to follow. They don't apply to you."

"Actually, you may be right about that." Vinda reluctantly agreed.

"So, what can I do to defend myself?" Paul asked seriously.

"If you were trying to defend against ghosts, I might be able to come up with something that would help. But Carla could rally people from just about any discipline." Vinda said cautiously.

"Isn't there some... I don't know, 'protection from magic'... magic?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Yes. Of course! I hadn't thought about them in years, but there are quite a few protection spells and charms. We learned all about them in grade school. Most of them aren't too complicated." Vinda said with increasing enthusiasm.

"From the depths of hell, the darkest night, the deepest fear, from Him without mercy."

"I call forth the power to vanquish mine enemies."

"Let the damned be horrified by their fates."

"Show mercy not, for those who would cause me harm."

"Thrice-damned retribution, I call upon mine attackers."

"Allow them to survive to lament their choices."

"Give them not the peace of death."

"If you want, I can probably find a protection spell or two in some of my old spell books at home. I'm pretty sure I've still got them." Vinda quietly offered.

"No thanks. I think I've got it covered now." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Wait. Did you just come up with a protection spell, right here on the spot?" Nazzy asked cautiously.

"Yes. I don't think I really have to worry about being attacked, but if I am, you might want to worry for whoever attacks me. I'm pretty sure that the spell that I just cast isn't from this plane of existence." Paul finished timidly.

"Ouch! That sounds nasty." Nazzy said cautiously.

"Well, if they don't try to magically attack me, it won't matter." Paul said weakly.

"You're scaring me." Vinda said honestly.

Paul smiled at her, then said, "Yeah, well I'm a half-demon. I think it kinda comes with the territory. If you can't handle it, I understand."

"Nah. We'll be fine." Nazzy said with an easy grin. "If we can't handle being around someone a little dangerous, we might as well join the 'fluffy bunnies'."

At the sound of the final bell ringing, all of them gathered their things and proceeded to the door.

* * * * *

"How was your class?" G asked as he caught up to the group.

"Pretty good. I made some new enemies today. How was yours?" Paul asked casually.

"Fine." G responded uncertainly, then cautiously asked, "Is someone causing you trouble?"

"Carla." Vinda supplied, knowing that the one word answer would be enough for G to grasp the entire situation.

"I would have thought that she'd try to be your best friend. She's been sniffing around me since we were eight years old when she realized that my dad was someone important." G said frankly.

"Yeah. She tried that. It didn't work." Paul reluctantly responded.

"Paul called her on her bullshit and shut her down. You would've been proud of the way that he stood up for himself." Nazzy said with a big smile.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much. Carla only hears what she wants to hear. I think that in her delusional little world, everyone loves her." G said thoughtfully.

"What I'm more worried about is one of her vapid minions coming after Paul. Don't underestimate the power of the clique." Vinda said frankly.

"There's my locker. Do you want to show me the locking spell now?" Paul asked as he pointed ahead of them.

"Nazzy? Do you want to show him? This is more your thing than mine." G asked hopefully.

"Sure. Which one is it?"

"1402." Paul immediately responded.

"This is a basic spell, so you should be able to do it without a problem." Nazzy explained, then slowly and carefully spoke the words of the spell while performing a series of simple gestures.

"Wait. Can you do that again?" Paul asked as he watched carefully.

Nazzy dismissed the first casting of the spell, then went through it again.

"Okay. So physical forces are manifested to create a matter plug in just the right configuration to pop the lock." Paul said thoughtfully.

"I never thought about *how* it worked, it just did." Nazzy said honestly.

"Okay. I think I've got that." Paul said slowly, then continued, "G said something about using a locking spell, so that someone couldn't go behind me and pop the lock. That's something totally different, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's not actually a lock in the physical sense. It's a binding seal that prevents anyone else from being able to magically open it." Nazzy said instructively.

"I'm ready." Paul said as he watched carefully.

Nazzy went through the process of forming a spell not only on the locking mechanism, but also on the structure of the locker.

"So this prevents someone from making the locker door insubstantial and reaching through it." Paul said slowly.

"Yeah. But it also keeps them from manifesting a portal inside your locker or doing anything to the lock or hinges. As far as I know, it's pretty secure. I know that there's a 'next-level' spell that you can use, but I haven't learned it. I don't keep anything important in my locker anyway."

"Yeah. But if I have rabid 'fluffy bunnies' after me, they might try to set me up by planting something illegal in my locker." Paul said frankly.

"I can't tell if you're being paranoid or smart." Vinda said slowly.

"Maybe I'm being both. They *are* out to get me." Paul said seriously.

"Why don't you go ahead and try the locking spell? We need to get out to the vans." G suggested.

Paul nodded, then duplicated Nazy's casting of the locking spell.

"That didn't look right." Nazy said slowly.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked cautiously.

"That's a really easy spell. From the way you cast it, it seemed like it took a lot more power and effort than it should have." Nazy said seriously.

"Yeah. It felt that way too." Paul said slowly, then explained, "It's something like when I try to speak Spanish. I can see the words, but I'm not comfortable with the pronunciation. It's like my mouth hasn't been trained to form those sounds."

"And that's what it's like casting the locking spell?" G asked to confirm.

"Yeah. Most spells so far have felt like they're in my native language, but this one feels... foreign." Paul explained with difficulty.

"We've got to go before our vans leave. Keep track of any other *foreign* spells and we can try to see if they have anything in common." G said decisively.

Paul slowly nodded his agreement.

Nazy did a quick gesture toward the locker and nothing happened.

"I just wanted to make sure that your spell actually worked. From the casting of it, I wasn't completely sure."

Paul nodded at him, then followed along as the group walked toward the main part of the school.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Curtis?" Paul asked when he spotted him.

"I'm okay. I've been waiting for you. Is everything alright?"

"Yeah. Why?" Paul asked as they walked.

"I don't know. You seem to be a little down, that's all."

"Yeah. Well I guess every day can't be filled with unicorns and rainbows."

"I guess not. So you're okay? No problems?"

"None worth worrying about. How about you? How were your classes?"

"Boring as hell. I mean, sure, I guess I probably want to learn about American History, but seriously? Do they have to make it sooooo dull?"

"Do you like hot wings?" Paul asked curiously as he stopped to look Curtis in the eyes.

"Um... yeah." Curtis stammered at the sudden non sequitur.

"What about plain chicken wings, without any seasoning?"

"I don't think I've had them that way, but they sound kinda gross."

"I think so too. The point I'm trying to make is that American History, or any history for that matter, is full of exciting stories of regular people achieving incredible things. But when they 'condense' the history to put it into a text book, they boil it down to the facts and take out all the flavor."

"Okay. I think I see what you're saying..."

"If you want to find an interesting story about history, you have to go looking for it. Read biographies and actual eyewitness accounts. Try to look at the same events from different perspectives. If the event was big enough to be included in your history book, there's a good chance that there's an incredible story behind it. You just have to find it."

"Or you could just regurgitate what it says in the textbook and get the grade." Nazzy added.

"Yeah. You could do that too." Paul said with a smile.

"Guys... Vans." Vinda urged.

"Right. Sorry Curtis, we'll talk to you again tomorrow." Paul said as they started walking again.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Joe?" G asked as he climbed into the van.

"I'm fine. Tony's going to be out for another couple of days, I found out that his wife just had a baby and he wants to spend a few days at home with them before going back to work." Joe said with a smile.

"Good. I was worried that he might be sick." G said as he got into the back seat.

As Paul climbed into the van, he noticed that everyone else was present. Sandy and Dex were sitting side by side, as was customary for them. And in the front seat beside the driver was Catherine, who Paul had yet to speak one word to.

G automatically put an arm around Paul as he settled into place.

Paul smiled at the gesture and snuggled in close to enjoy the sensation of being held.

"Would you two stop it!?" Sandy sneered at them.

"No." G and Paul answered simultaneously.

* * * * *

Paul was enjoying the incredibly comfortable ride when he noticed the red haired boy, Dex, glancing back at them.

"This is what makes it all worth it." Paul said quietly.

Dex looked away uncomfortably, but Paul got the sense that it wasn't with disgust.

Paul felt a little kiss on his ear lobe and smiled as he let all his worries drift away for a few blissful moments.

* * * * *

"We're supposed to go to the parlor. I think this must be your mom's handwriting." G said as he read the note that was posted on the outside door to G's room.

"I wonder what that's all about." Paul said as he followed G inside.

"I'm guessing that your mom's going to show you the 'family secret' summoning spells." G said frankly as he took off his backpack.

"Oh yeah. You're probably right. Do you want to go with me?"

"I'll go, but if it starts getting boring I might decide to duck out for a snack."

"Not without me you won't."

"Let's just see how things go before deciding anything." G said, then gestured toward the hallway that led into the house.

* * * * *

"Mom?" Paul asked cautiously as he led the way into the parlor. As he looked around the room, he remembered that it was the same room where he had first met G.

"I'm almost ready." Beth said from down on her knees at one side of the room.

"Do you need any help?" Paul immediately asked, rushing to her side.

"No. I'm just finishing this spell diagram." Beth said in concentration.

Paul looked over the diagram and was surprised at just how complicated it appeared to be.

After a moment, Beth quietly asked, "What do you see?"

"An eight pointed summoning diagram." Paul answered simply.

"Made of..."

"Two squares, turned at a forty-five degree angle to each other, a circle surrounding them, a circle within them, a star terminating at each of the eight points of the squares... there's another square, no two squares inside the inner circle and more triangles than I can even count."

"What's your first impression of the diagram?" Beth asked as she stood and brushed off her knees.

"It's more than a summoning diagram, it's like one diagram woven inside another."

"That's exactly what it is." Beth said with a smile.

Paul closed his eyes and shook his head slowly as he tried to sort through the permutations of having a summoning diagram inside a diagram.

"Your whole family does this?" G asked, drawing Paul's attention.

"It's the family legacy, but not every member of the family has access to it. It's only passed down to those who have shown that they have a talent for summoning and embraced it." Beth explained.

"How do you use it?" Paul asked slowly as he once again focused his attention on the spell diagram.

Beth began to chant in an ancient language that Paul couldn't identify.

Although he didn't know the word for word translation, he could still catch the gist of what she was doing.

"Can you do that?" G asked in a whisper.

"Not even close. This diagram is about twelve times more complicated than anything that I've tried to do." Paul whispered in return.

"In the time of Nedra, in the year of Thoth, under the light of Taurus with Sagittarius ascending in glory whilst Selene be in Scorpio. Now I do entreat that balance be achieved and maintained, it is by my will, should the universe consent."

Paul looked at his mother curiously at her strange invocation.

Before he could ask, a bright light began to form over the spell diagram.

Unlike Paul's gauzy little flaw in reality, Beth's manifestation was definitely able to be seen.

Paul and G watched in awe as the tear between dimensions grew bigger and bigger until it was taller than either of them.

"Our family has the capacity to do several high level spells at the same time. This diagram was developed by us to make use of this unique ability. No single witch can perform one of our spells. In fact, even a group of witches would be hard pressed to duplicate one of them because of their need to synchronize them *exactly*." Beth explained.

"If I'm understanding what I'm seeing, what you just did was manifest a summoning spell inside a reverse summoning spell." Paul said cautiously.

"Yes. In other words, I made a fully traversable portal." Beth confirmed.

"I'm still new to this, but aren't *all* portals traversable. I mean, if you summon something with a portal, you can send it back the same way." Paul asked slowly.

"That's only true for what you summon. The terms of a typical summoning include limits on what you will allow to traverse the passage. The primary reason being that otherwise you could potentially summon something beyond your ability to control. But along with that, there's also the amount of magic it takes to maintain a less limited

passage. A one-way passage is, by its very nature, unstable so it takes a formidable amount of magic to open and maintain it. A stable two-way passage can take almost nothing to maintain once it's been established."

"So I could walk through that?" Paul asked as he looked through the portal into an intense light.

"Probably not." Beth admitted, then explained, "You see, that portal doesn't lead to a *hell* dimension."

Paul looked at her with confusion for a moment, then suddenly realized what she was implying. "It's a heavenly realm?"

"To tell you the truth, the whole heaven and hell thing is kind of subjective. We tend to use the classic terminology as a matter of convenience, but in reality what we're looking at are two opposing forces. Humans and witches tend to be more or less neutral, able to access either sets of realms, but at the same time they are incapable of surviving in either for any significant length of time."

"Wait. Wait. Are you saying that you have access to both angelic and demonic realms of existence, and not only can you summon from either, but you can actually *visit* them?" Paul asked anxiously.

"Yes. That's true. And when you say *visit*, that's exactly what it is. You can't survive more than a few hours away from the prime materia plane. The energies present in both realms are toxic to us in the long term." Beth said seriously.

Paul strained to look through the vortex, but could only see the bright light.

"Is that true for the creatures from the other realms? Can they only exist here for a short time, too?" G asked curiously.

"Some of them." Beth responded, then turned her full attention to him and explained, "Different beings have different tolerances. Those who can shapeshift to adapt to their new environment have a distinct advantage. As a rule, most diabolic creatures have a fairly high threshold and can stay longer. The divine creatures tend to be less so."

"Did you open a doorway to a heavenly realm because you knew that I wouldn't be able to walk through it?" Paul asked suspiciously.

"It had occurred to me that your mixed heritage might come into play at this stage of things." Beth said carefully.

"So you opened the heavenly doorway to test Paul?" G asked curiously.

"I wanted to give him an opportunity to discover something about himself. There have been a lot of things that I wasn't able to give him along the way. I *can* give him this." Beth said sadly.

"What does it mean that I can't even *try* to walk through it?" Paul asked cautiously.

"It could be a self-defense mechanism that you were born with." Beth said simply.

"Or maybe you're just a pussy." G said with a teasing grin.

"Not helping." Paul growled at him.

"Seriously. Is it that you *can't* or *won't*?" G asked curiously.

"Okay. I'll try, but if I turn into a pillar of salt or something, I'm going to be very *very* pissed off." Paul said firmly.

"Got it." G said in what seemed to be a completely serious voice.

Paul glanced at G and then his mother before haltingly taking steps toward the vortex.

"You don't really have to do this." G barked suddenly.

"Yes. I do." Paul said as he slowly reached into the shiney bright vortex.

* * * * *

As soon as Paul's hand entered the realm of divinity, the blood in his veins began to boil.

He snatched his hand back and clutched it to his chest as he screamed out in pain.

"Get him away from the portal." Beth called to G as she did her best to use her own body to shield Paul from any influence that the portal might be projecting on him.

"Are you alright? What can I do?" G asked in panic as he did what he was told and helped Paul across the room, to one of the couches.

"I don't know. It hurts. I've never felt anything that hurt so bad." Paul said as he held his hand against his chest protectively.

"Let me see it." G said softly, doing his best to comfort Paul.

"It hurts." Paul whimpered.

"I know. Let me see." G said again as he guided Paul to ease his injured hand away from his body.

Paul consciously looked away as he asked, "How bad is it?"

"Um... Bad." G said honestly, then looked at Beth anxiously.

"Give me a minute." Beth said as she knelt on the floor and rushed to make changes to her spell diagram.

"Paul's hurt! Do you really have to worry about your magic *now*?" G asked angrily.

After quickly chanting a long magical phrase, Beth stopped her spellcasting and said over her shoulder, "I know what Paul needs to help him recover, but this is the only place to get it."

Before G could ask, Beth stepped through a purplish-black portal hanging in the air.

Paul chanced a look at his hand, then looked away in horror. It appeared as though much of the flesh had literally been burned away. There was little, if any blood visible, since it appeared to have burst from his veins and been incinerated. Glimpses of the bones of his hand could be seen between chunks of cremated flesh.

"I feel like I'm going to pass out." Paul said as his breaths started coming shallowly and more quickly.

"DAD!" G called out, not having any idea of where his father was in the house.

"Hold him still. This might hurt a little." Beth said as she rushed out of the portal.

"He's been hurt enough." G said as he felt tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Hold him!" Beth commanded, then gripped Paul's forearm and forced his entire hand into a bucket that she had carried through the portal with her.

"What's that? What are you doing to him?" G asked as he held Paul's face in his hands and tried to see any sign of consciousness in Paul's vacant half-lidded stare.

"Cursed water. It's supposed to have magical healing properties for infernal creatures who have been injured by divine magical forces." Beth said as she fought Paul's little bit of resistance and kept his hand in the bucket.

"So you had to go to *hell* to get cursed water to heal him?" G asked dubiously.

"Do you know how many churches there are in hell?" Beth asked as she finally seemed satisfied that Paul wasn't going to fight her anymore.

"I have no idea." G said honestly.

"Exactly one." Beth said simply, then added, "They've got more than their fair share of priests, but as far as churches, there's just the one. Fortunately, I was able to port in right next to the baptismal and get what I needed to help Paul."

"They have baptisms in hell?" G asked curiously.

"Yes. Well, no. Actually, it's the exact opposite... you know what? Why don't you ask me about that some other time. Right now, we need to see how Paul is doing." Beth said as she pulled his arm out of the bucket.

G was amazed to see that Paul's hand had been restored, almost as good as new. In fact it was *exactly* as good as new. The color of the skin of his hand didn't match the skin of his arm. There was a clear delineation where the flesh had been burned away and then later restored.

"What's going on in here? Is there a problem?" D asked as he rushed into the room.

"Yeah. About five minutes ago." G answered his father without looking away from Paul.

"What happened?" D asked as he took a seat on the couch beside Paul, the other side from Beth. G was kneeling on the floor in front of Paul, trying to gain his attention.

"I didn't think there would be any harm if I let Paul touch a divine dimension, just to see if he were going to be limited in that regard." Beth said softly as she watched carefully for any sign of consciousness in Paul.

"When he touched the heavenly plane his hand exploded." G said as fresh tears started to fall.

"I had heard before that injuries caused by divine magic could be healed by diabolic cursed water, so I went and got him some... and it seems to have worked." Beth explained.

"So what's wrong with Paul right now?" D asked cautiously.

"Shock, I think." Beth said simply.

"G. Will you walk ahead and open doors for me?" D asked as he stood.

"Um, sure." G answered uncertainly as he scrambled to his feet.

D scooped Paul up into his arms, then slowly started walking toward the door.

"What are you going to do?" G asked anxiously as he did as he had been asked and opened the door ahead of his father.

"I'm going to take him to his own bed and wait with him until he regains consciousness." D said simply.

"I'm sure he'll love that." G said with a smile, then thought to add, "Except that Paul doesn't really have a bed of his own. We kind of just fall asleep wherever we happen to be when we get sleepy."

"G, don't you think your brother deserves a space of his own?" D asked quietly as he walked.

"He's more than my brother, Dad. You know that." G said frankly, then added, "It feels right to share what I have with him."

"Regardless, he deserves a space of his own. Whether the two of you choose to share his space or yours is of no concern to me, but at the end of the day, I want for Paul to have the peace of mind to know that he has a place that he can call his own. I want him to have things that are *his*. I'm concerned that he may feel that he's an extension of you, or worse, that if something happens between the two of you, that he will feel that he doesn't have a place here with us."

"I guess I've just been thinking with my dick." G said regretfully.

"You've been a wonderful brother and an incredible friend. And honestly, I don't think that Paul has suffered for a moment because of it. I'm just saying that Paul is my son now. It's time to act like it." D said firmly.

"This is a nice start." Paul muttered from D's arms.

"How are you feeling? Does it hurt?" G asked anxiously.

"Door." D said firmly.

As much as he didn't want to, G hurried ahead of them and opened the door to the connecting hallway.

"I think I can walk." Paul said uncertainly.

"We're almost there. Let me do this for you." D said gently.

"So what were you talking about when I woke up?" Paul asked slowly.

"I was just telling G that I'd like to build you your own room, so that you'd have a place of your own."

"Cool. Just make sure that it has one of these glassed in hallway bridges. I love that." Paul said with a smile.

There was a long silent moment as D carried Paul into the bedroom and carefully placed him on the bed. Being that D was only slightly taller than Paul, it was a notable feat, but D seemed to have pulled it off rather well.

"So, a glassed in hallway... that's all you want?" D asked as he sat on the edge of the bed and looked at Paul curiously.

"I've lived in so many places that I can't even remember them all. I've had to adapt to every place that I've ever lived, so I never really got into the habit of wishing for things, I just kind of accepted them and adapted however I had to."

"I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm verrrrry rich." D finished with a smile.

"I might have picked up a clue here and there." Paul grinned.

"Just let me know if there's anything I can do to make you feel at home here." D said sincerely.

"You're doing it right now."

Chapter 6

"How are things going for you at school, Paul?" D asked gently.

"Really good. I can't believe all the things that I'm learning. All the teachers have been really great so far." Paul said happily.

"So, no problems?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

"You know how I've told you what a pain Carla can be? She went after Paul today." G told his father regretfully.

"Went after, as in, trying to get a ring on his finger?" D asked curiously.

"I wasn't there, but it wouldn't surprise me. Her entire existence seems to be based on the hope that she'll be able to find a man to take care of her so that she can eventually blame him for every little thing that's wrong in her life, real or imagined." G said frankly.

"Maybe she sees what her mother is going through and doesn't want to end up the same way, in her mid forties and desperate." D said thoughtfully.

"Actually, I think she wants to end up *exactly* the same way. That's why she's making all the same choices." G said simply.

"Either way, I think that Paul might need a little protection from magical manipulation." D said thoughtfully.

"I've already got a pretty hefty protection spell on me. If she tries anything, it'll rebound on her." Paul assured his new father.

"Alright then, I'll trust you to handle this yourself, but if I hear about you making wedding plans, I reserve the right to intervene." D said warmly.

"The only wedding plans are going to be happening in Carla's delusional little mind." Paul assured him.

As nice as it was to lay in bed and relax, Paul felt the weight of the obligations that he had taken on.

"G and I have a project that we have to work on tonight. We need to have our parts ready before Nazy and Vinda come over tomorrow." Paul said regretfully.

"Paul, you need to relax for a little while. You've just been through a major trauma." D said gently.

"My part of the spell is done and besides, I'm only using the most basic spells. It takes, like, no magic. All I really need to do is set it up so that G can work on his part." Paul slowly explained.

"I can work on my sorcery project right now if you're not up to it. We can do this later." G quietly offered.

"I have something else that I have to work on later. It would really be best if we got this done right now." Paul explained.

"Just don't overdo it." D said decisively.

Paul sat up in bed and looked at the floor a few feet away.

Out of nothing, a stone pillar rose up from the floor.

"Dad, come look at this. It's really amazing." G said excitedly as he hurried to examine Paul's creation.

D stared with wide eyes at what Paul had accomplished with seemingly no effort.

D slowly got to his feet and walked to stand beside G. When D was finally able to find his voice, he turned and quietly asked, "How were you able to make something like this in less than a week of using magic?"

"That's not the best part. Touch it. It's solid." G said with a smile of pride for Paul's accomplishment.

"Touch? Do you mean that he created something *real* out of nothing?" D asked as he experimentally let his fingers drag across the tiny landscape.

"It's just a really simple spell to temporarily change the properties of matter. It's basic alchemy. No biggie." Paul explained.

"There's got to be a lot more to it than that or everyone who ever took alchemy would be doing the same thing." D said reasonably.

"All I can figure is that they must not have thought about doing it because it's such a simple spell that anyone could probably cast it."

"Prove it."

"What?"

"If it's really that simple then prove it by showing me how to do the same thing that you've just done." D said calmly.

"Okay." Paul said with a smile, happily accepting D's challenge.

"What do I do first?" D asked as he looked at the 'construct' more closely.

"I don't really have a 'first', there's kind of a lot of things going on at once, but they're all little things; really basic spells." Paul tried to explain.

"Okay. Just get me started." D said determinedly.

"I guess the *first* thing would have to be the basic 3D plotter spell from the numerology workbook." Paul said thoughtfully.

"While I'm probably familiar with the spell you're talking about, I can't be sure that it's exactly the same one and I certainly haven't memorized it."

"No problem." Paul said as he looked around.

"What are you looking for?" G asked when he noticed.

"Paper to write down the spell."

"I'll go get you some."

"No. Don't bother. I've got it covered." Paul said and looked beside the bed just as a large dark stone wall emerged from the ground.

"Ookay." G said slowly.

Paul got off the bed, then reached out and placed one finger on the smooth sheet of stone. As he did, glowing words began to appear.

"Here it is, but I'm leaving enough room for some of the other spells that we'll be using." Paul said simply.

D skimmed over the spell before looking at Paul and asking, "Where did you say that you got this spell from?"

"My numerology workbook. It was enchanted into the page to plot the 3D display of one of the spells." Paul said simply.

"When you say 'enchanted', does that mean that the spell itself wasn't printed on the page?" D asked carefully.

"No. But it took, like, a second to see through the enchantment to the spell. I guess from what Mrs. Cualla said that not everyone can see through enchantments like that." Paul said honestly.

"Okay. I'm familiar enough with the plotting spell to be able to use it, but to make it work, you have to give it coordinates to plot. Where did you come up with that?" D asked curiously.

"I made them up." Paul said simply.

"How?"

"I just imagined what I wanted it to look like when I was done, then put in the coordinates that I imagined would make that happen." Paul said simply.

"I have a feeling that the entire landscape is going to be too much for me to create, so why don't you just give me the coordinates for the pillar. I want to see if I can recreate it." D said slowly.

"Yeah. Okay. But before you do that... well, I guess it's more like '*at the same time*' you do that, you need to weave the Wizard's Light spell into the display properties. If you don't do that, all you're going to end up with are smooth looking geometric shapes."

"But the pillar looks real, it doesn't look like it's lighted." D said slowly.

"Oh, that! All I did was switch the luminosity properties to their reciprocal values so that instead of producing light they reflect it."

"To get this result, I'm guessing that you must have modified the Wizard's Light spell quite a bit."

"Well, I did a lot of stretching and skewing for the spell diagrams, so I had to do some heavy duty modifications for that. But for this, I just dumped most of the basic spell into the output properties of the 3D plotter. Here, I'll show you." Paul said as he touched his finger to the stone wall again and another portion of the wall began to fill with text.

After a moment to read it over, D slowly said, "So you established the plotter and modified the display to be made of wizards lights. Is that it?"

"Well, after that... okay, *at the same time* as that I also added an alchemy component into the Wizard's Light spell so that whatever was created would have substance, or at least seem to, because the air where anything was plotted would become solid." Paul said carefully.

"And did you say that they taught you this in Alchemy class?" D asked slowly.

"Not exactly. The teacher gave me a book to read and it mentioned that Alchemy can be used to magically alter the states of matter. I don't think it had the exact spells to do it written down, but there was enough in the description that I was able to put things together and make it work." Paul said frankly.

"Show me that." D said as he looked back to the stone wall.

Paul touched a finger to the wall and yet another enormous patch of text came into being.

"And you say that you intuitively deduced this from reading the first pages of your alchemy textbook?" D asked curiously.

"No, it wasn't the standard textbook. Mr. Hind gave me a more basic book to start off with so that I'll be well grounded in the concepts that I need to know when I finally *am* ready to start using the textbook." Paul said thoughtfully.

"So you were able to come up with *this* from a basic beginners book?" D asked dubiously.

Paul rolled his eyes, then slowly said, "All I'm doing is magically turning the gas in a plotted area into a solid. Or, in the case of the blue areas of the construct, a liquid. It's gotta be, like, the easiest first step thing in Alchemy."

"G, can you turn air solid?" D asked his son.

"I don't know. I never tried. I could probably do it using this spell." G said as he looked at the written out text.

"Go ahead." D challenged.

"I can't do it right now. I'd have to go through it a few times to get the balances right and make it all work together." G said slowly.

"Is that all? You're simultaneously doing the plotting, Wizard's Light and alchemy spells. Is that everything?" D asked cautiously.

"For the pillar, yeah. When you get into the display on top, then you have to add in some more coordinates for the plot and figure in all the different colors." Paul said frankly.

"So all that's left is the coordinates for the pillar, right?"

"Yes." Paul said, then touched the stone wall and the coordinates appeared.

"So now I have everything I need to perform the spell."

"Yeah. I think that's it."

"If I'm understanding you right, the alchemy is embedded in the Wizard's Light, which is embedded in the 3D plotting spell. Is that right?"

"I guess. I kinda do them all at once, but if you were going to do them all in a row, that'd be the way to do it."

"Can you reorganize the spell that you have written down to show everything in its proper place?" D asked hopefully.

Paul nodded, then glanced at the large stone wall. Portions of the text vanished and reformed, embedding themselves in the proper places. D made note that Paul wasn't even touching the stone wall at this point, he was doing every bit of his text manipulation internally.

"I think that should work." Paul finally said.

"Okay. I'm going to try it." D said, then raised his hands and began to do the gestures that accompanied the spell.

As he did so, he started the invocation, giving the spell parameters.

Paul and G watched as D went on and on, gesturing and speaking in a tightly controlled voice.

Occasionally, G would look at the stone wall and follow along with what his father was doing.

Although D had never been one to shy away from performing magic in front of his son, he had also never gone out of his way to make a point of it.

G knew that his father was powerful, but it seemed strange to him to watch his father casting a difficult spell.

Paul slowly nodded as D finished with the alchemy elements of the spell which led into the Wizard's Light.

G turned his attention downward, where the spell was focused, but had yet to see any indication of anything taking shape.

D continued on and on, accustomed to keeping a particular pace when spellcasting.

G looked over at the other stone pillar that Paul had created and was just beginning to realize how much of an accomplishment that it really was.

A change in his father's tone of voice made G look back to what he was doing.

There was still nothing manifested, but he recognized that his father was beginning to add the positioning coordinates to the plotting spell, thereby nearing the end.

G watched and waited for what was going to happen.

In a sudden sucking ::whoosh:: of air, a stone pillar started to rise from the floor.

G noticed that it wasn't *exactly* the same as the stone pillar that Paul had created. The 'stone' was significantly less detailed, although made with the same general pattern and color.

When D was finally done with his spellcasting, G could tell that his father had put forth a genuine effort. D looked drained.

"Easy peasy, huh?" Paul said reluctantly, obviously knowing that D had proven his point.

"I'll agree with you that you're using the lowest of low level spells... except perhaps the alchemy. But the way that you're combining them is not only ingenious, but also increases their complexity to a measurable degree. Doing that simple stone pillar was challenging for me and it was nowhere near as complex as the manifestation you're doing for your project." D said seriously.

"Okay. It's complex, but it isn't because of magic. I mean, the spells being combined like they are take almost no magic at all. What makes them difficult is all the technical stuff." Paul explained.

"Yes. I'll agree with that." D conceded.

"I guess from the summoning that I saw my mom do, that I must have a talent for doing a lot of technical stuff, all at once. It's in my blood. So it seems to me like I should play to my strengths and even though I haven't figured out how to do any really challenging spells yet, I can still do these flashy things to get good grades."

"As long as you don't rest on your laurels and try to coast on the talent that you've inherited, I have no problem with that." D said slowly, then added, "But don't get the idea that because you can do multiple low-level spells simultaneously that you don't need to learn the more challenging spells. Your growth as a witch depends on it."

"I think I'm ready." G said, interrupting their conversation.

"For what?" Paul asked curiously.

"I've come up with a skin. Do you want to see it?" G asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I bet it's going to be great." Paul said with a smile.

D nodded at his son then turned his attention to Paul's original construct.

"Remember, I've still got to do a lot of detail work. This is just my first try." G warned.

"Go ahead. We don't expect it to be perfect." D assured him.

G nodded anxiously, then made a dramatic lifting gesture.

As he did, Paul's 'construct' transformed, ever so slightly. The little cubist landscape scene took on a feel of reality as colors blended and corners smoothed out.

"G! That's fantastic!" Paul enthused.

"Using your ability in concert with your brother's seems to be a perfect pairing." D said as he stepped closer to admire the tranquil scene of beauty.

"Well, this is really just kind of a 'sleeve' that uses the coordinates that Paul established. I haven't really done much of anything to it. Right now it's all smoothing and blending."

"Before you do anything else, remember that you're going to have to do all of this in its long form when we present it. The more complicated you make it, the longer it's going to take." Paul warned.

"To be honest, I wouldn't change a thing." D said frankly.

"I don't know. It just feels like a cheat to only do this much. It feels like I'm going to be riding on the coattails of the rest of the team." G said anxiously.

"If you can think of some improvements to make, by all means, make them. Just be sure that whatever detail you add doesn't detract from the overall image. I'm certain that what you've done here will be sufficient for you to get the grade." D said firmly.

"Okay. I have a few ideas of things that I might be able to do to improve the overall appearance, but if it's going to take too long or take away from everything else, I'll drop it." G said decisively.

"Can I come in?" Beth asked from the doorway.

"Sure. We're just showing Dad what we've been working on in school." G said happily as he gestured toward their project.

"That's beautiful!" Beth gasped as she approached.

"Paul and I did it." G said proudly, then quickly added, "It's not finished yet."

"It's like one perfect moment, frozen in time." Beth whispered.

G looked at her curiously, then slowly said, "Maybe that's what I can do to make it more 'real'."

"What do you mean?" Paul asked curiously.

"Give me a second." G said as he closed his eyes.

After a long silent moment, Beth turned to Paul and quietly said, "About before... I never intended for you to be hurt."

"I know." Paul assured her.

"I just thought that if I were to introduce you to a heavenly realm, then you could see if you had any negative reaction to it, so you'd know what you needed to watch out for in the future." Beth tried to explain.

"Yeah. I think we've got *that* answer." Paul said frankly.

"Do you think that Paul might also be susceptible to holy objects?" D asked curiously.

"No. At least, not the typical ones. I suppose that if someone had a physical artifact from the divine realm that it would probably harm Paul. Then again, such a thing would probably degrade to nothing within a matter of days. Divine matter can't exist in this world." Beth said thoughtfully.

"I'll have to take your word for it." D said frankly, then explained, "I've never had much cause to deal with the divine or the demonic, so I don't really know much about it."

"Yes. I've noticed that most people who don't have an ability that forces them to take notice would prefer to pretend that such things don't exist." Beth said thoughtfully.

"Okay, I think I'm ready." G said, causing the others in the room to look at him.

"With what?" D asked cautiously.

"Something that I can do to really *contribute* to the project. Smoothing it out is nice and everything, but... just watch." G finished determinedly, then made a grand lifting gesture toward the construct.

As everyone looked at the tiny landscape scene, they saw it shimmer slightly, but the change was so subtle that none of them could pinpoint exactly what it was.

Paul leaned in closer and once again appreciated the look of the construct, both his work and G's.

As he was watching, he saw the tiniest motion and his eyes tracked to the movement.

The thing was so small that it took a moment for Paul to be able to identify it, but finally he realized that what he was seeing was a single leaf falling off one of the trees.

Once he realized that, he backed away slightly to take in the entire spectacle at once.

He hadn't originally noticed the slightest little waves on the lake or the miniscule movement of imaginary wind in the trees.

"I see it." Beth whispered.

"G, remember what I said about not getting too detailed?" D asked seriously.

"Yeah." G said cautiously.

"Forget it. This is amazing. Don't just do enough to get the grade. Make it *right*." D said firmly.

"Okay Dad." G said happily.

"The baby has informed me that it's time for *us* to eat. The rest of you are invited." Beth said as she reluctantly turned her attention away from Paul and G's project.

"I think baby will enjoy his or her meal more if big brother is there to share it." G said decisively.

"Brothers." Paul corrected.

"Daddy should be there too." D said with a loving smile at his wife.

"Do you need to put all of this away before we leave?" Beth asked as she looked around.

Paul glanced at the project, then asked, "Do you want to undo your part first?"

"Yeah." G said as the beautiful scene before them suddenly became pixelated.

"I don't remember it looking this bad before." Paul said honestly.

"At least there's no doubt that G is actually contributing something of value to your group project." D said reasonably.

"Yeah. He made my 8-bit *masterpiece* into something that you might actually want to look at." Paul said frankly.

"Baby... Hungry... Remember?" Beth asked impatiently.

"Right." Paul said with a grin, then withdrew his magical flow to both the 'project' and the stone wall that he had been using as a chalkboard.

In the blink of an eye, they both evaporated into nothing.

Beth looked at the remaining pillar, then at Paul expectantly.

"I didn't make that one." Paul stated simply.

When Beth glanced at G, he shook his head.

"After all I went through to create it, I kind of hate to let it go." D said frankly.

"We can make another one together, whenever you want." Paul promised.

"I think I'd like that." D said with a smile.

"So would I." Paul said honestly.

After one last look at his accomplishment, D withdrew his power and let his magical construct release in a puff of air.

"Let's go feed baby." D said as he walked to Beth's side and gently put an arm around her.

Paul and G followed along, wearing matching smiles.

* * * * *

"Ham and eggs for dinner?" Paul asked with surprise.

"Would you rather have something else?" D asked as he settled into his place at the table.

"No! This is great! I just never thought that someone as rich as you would have breakfast for dinner." Paul rushed to explain.

"We probably wouldn't be having a meal like this if we were having company over. But part of being rich means that you can have the things you want when you want them." D finished with a smile.

"As long as you're not a brat about it when you have to eat something that you're not in the mood for." G added helpfully.

"That's right." D said with a loving smile at G. "We've had a few discussions about that over the years."

"When you're used to getting your own way, it can be hard to understand that you aren't automatically entitled to everything you want... at least, it was for me. I still have times when I assume that the world will bend to my will, no matter how childish it happens to be." G said regretfully.

"It's a rich kid thing. I think you've done pretty well at getting past it, especially in comparison to some of your peers." D said frankly.

"Yeah. Seeing how spoiled and snotty other people can be helped to wake me up and realize that I didn't want to be that way." G admitted.

"I haven't noticed a problem, so you must be doing alright." Paul interjected.

"So Paul, you mentioned earlier that you had another project that you needed to work on. Is it something big?" D asked curiously.

"I just have to do a little alchemy research for a project in Basic Magic. We're making a charm."

"Your teacher has you *making* a charm on your first week in class?" D asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Since I can see through the enchantments, Mrs. Cualla wants me to learn *how* the charms work... from the inside out, I guess."

"It sounds like quite a leap, but as long as you're comfortable with it, I suppose that I can trust that your instructor knows what she's doing." D said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I'm just glad that she's not forcing me to learn a bunch of stuff that I can know just by looking. I think the class is going to be interesting."

"It sounds like you had a pretty good day." Beth said with a smile at her son.

"That's not even the best! When I got to Wizardry class, I got to do a summoning!" Paul said happily.

"They had you do a summoning on your second day?" D asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Since I'd already shown that I could make a decent spell diagram, Mr. Gilbert said that it would be okay if I tried to do an actual summoning."

"And you were able to manage to do that today?" Beth asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I mean, it's not like it was a hard one. Everything was written down for me. All I had to do was follow along with the book." Paul said earnestly.

"Paul, there are Wizards who prepare for a summoning for *weeks* before attempting it." Beth slowly explained.

"Yeah. I understand that, but this was a really simple summoning spell. It was nothing compared to the spell that you used."

"Still, it *does* seem a bit fast." Beth said honestly.

"I tell you what, if you want, I can show you the spell after dinner. It's really super simple." Paul said reasonably.

"Yes. I'd be interested to see what you can do." Beth said slowly.

"So would I." D said honestly.

"Okay." Paul said, committing himself to the endeavor.

"This potato dish is great! We should have it more often. What's it called?" G asked, interrupting the conversation.

After a long moment of silence, Beth looked down at her plate, then up at G and finally responded, "Fried."

* * * * *

When the meal was finished, the family moved into the parlor, prepared to see Paul's demonstration.

"I have all my supplies in here if you need anything." Beth said gently.

"No. I've got it." Paul said simply as he waited for the others to be seated.

Once he was sure that everyone was settled, Paul decided that since he was at home with his family he didn't need to go through the motions of putting on a show.

The floor in front of Paul began to glow with a pentagram surrounded by a circle.

Text began to appear in the different sections of the diagram and five balls of fire sprang into being.

"Ginh Zah, Mah Zah. I summon you. Come forth." Paul said aloud in a clear firm voice.

Two furry little creatures with the sweetest tiny faces and the biggest most soulful eyes appeared in the middle of Paul's summoning circle.

"See? Simple." Paul said frankly.

The kitten and the puppy both started raising a ruckus with yipping, yapping, hissing and spitting.

"I didn't mean *you*. I meant the spell I used to summon you." Paul said with playful aggravation.

The puppy and kitten quieted at his words.

"Wait. I thought you summoned *demons*, not puppies and kitties." G said slowly.

"They *are* demons. I just asked them to shapeshift into these forms when they're on our plane of existence." Paul explained as he made a sweeping gesture and the spell diagram disappeared.

"You *asked* them to shapeshift?" Beth asked suspiciously.

"Yeah. They're my familiars." Paul said calmly.

Beth shook her head, then said, "Paul, summoning familiars requires a lot more than a summoning diagram. You have to earn trust and make a pact. There's absolutely no way you could have done that in the past twenty-four hours."

"Mom, if you had a familiar and wanted it to become mine and take care of me, the pact you made would transfer to me. That's what happened here. Ginh Zah and Mah Zah have sworn their loyalty to a demon, whose name they've told me but asked me not to repeat. That demon instructed them to be my familiars. We have a magical pact that binds us together from this point forward. Their former master can no longer command them."

"Paul. You can't possibly realize how dangerous this is." Beth warned him.

"Um, it's magic. From what I've seen so far, all of it's dangerous." Paul said frankly.

"For what is given, something is taken. That's how magic works. Look at what you've just been given." Beth said soberly.

"Or was it what was taken from me the past fifteen years?" Paul asked defensively.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Beth asked warily.

"I don't know. Okay? Maybe it's because of my dad. Maybe it's because of *your* dad. Maybe it's because of someone I don't even know about who wants to help me out and get me on the right track now that I know about the witch stuff. But what was *taken* was fifteen years of my life that I could have known about who and what I was."

"Paul, whatever you were given or denied is entirely my fault. No one else owes you anything. I am responsible; one hundred percent. This 'gift' may have some very nasty strings attached."

"Or it may not." Paul countered.

"I know that this is, like, none of my business, but if Paul didn't accept them, would they still be his familiars?" G asked cautiously.

"Yes. Under the terms of the pact, they would be, but Paul would be within his rights not to summon them." Beth said firmly.

"So, by your logic, if Paul didn't summon them, he'd still have the same 'gift' and the same obligation, right?"

"I suppose that's one way of looking at it." Beth grudgingly agreed.

"Is there another way?" G asked curiously.

"At some future time, Paul's gratitude for this 'gift' might cause him to assume motives that aren't real and open himself to being manipulated."

"Like that couldn't happen anyway. When the nice man in the van offers you some free candy, you've got to be smart enough to do what's right. With or without the familiars, Paul's going to face the same decisions." G said thoughtfully.

The puppy started yipping and barking, drawing all attention to him.

"Yes. This is G. He's my alpha." Paul responded to the puppy with a smile.

The puppy gave an excited little 'yip', then ran across the floor, ending up at G's foot.

"What's that all about?" G asked curiously.

"Mah Zah likes you. She's still my familiar, but she's decided that since you're my mate and you'll fight to defend me, that she would like to focus her attention on protecting you while Ginh Zah protects me." Paul said tenderly.

"What should I do?" G asked as he looked at the puppy trying to climb his leg.

"Try scratching her behind the ear." Paul said with a smile.

"Just remember what I've told you. This 'gift' could be used as leverage at some future time. Don't accept that this is what it appears to be on the surface." Beth warned.

"Got it, Mom." Paul said simply.

A tiny pitiful 'meow' sounded and Paul couldn't help but smile.

"Come on up here, Ginh Zah. Tell me about how things went with your friend." Paul said as he scooped up the little kitten and held her to his chest.

* * * * *

Paul sat with Gihn Zah and talked with her quietly while G enjoyed petting and cuddling Mah Zah.

Beth and D sat together enjoying a peaceful moment, watching the scene with matching contented smiles.

"Mom, I was wondering about something." Paul said quietly as he looked up from petting the kitten.

"What was that?"

"At the wedding, you were able to summon demon imps without a summoning diagram. How'd you do that?"

"That was sort of an emergency."

"I know. That's why I'm asking. Someday, I might have an emergency too."

"Listen, the technique that I used was something that I had prepared for years ago but never really intended to use. Now that I've used it, trust me when I tell you that this is one of those things that is a lot better in theory than in practice."

"But when things went wrong, you were able to use it when it really mattered. If you hadn't been able to summon demons at the wedding, things might have gone a whole lot worse."

"I don't have those spells anymore, so I can't give you any details anyway. But basically, many years ago I placed reverse summoning diagrams on each of the imps so that I could activate them and call upon them in an emergency."

"Like an enchantment?"

"More like a tattoo."

"But how would that even work? Doesn't the summoning diagram have to be big enough for the demons to pass through?"

"Yes and no. Having an adequate sized portal is the *humane* way of summoning." Beth said gravely.

"So you sucked the imps through a pinhole from their realm into ours?"

"More of a keyhole, but yes. The pain that it must have caused them had to have been beyond description." Beth said grimly.

"But when they got here, they fought for you." Paul said slowly.

"I'm a demon summoner, no matter how injured they were, they were still bound to follow my commands."

Gihn Zah looked up at Paul and meowed sternly.

Paul looked at her for a moment, then softly responded, "Yeah. If you were in danger, I'd want to be able to help you too."

"Leaving that aside, the magic needed to perform that type of summoning is... problematic. Basically, if I hadn't been afraid for all our lives, I wouldn't have been able to activate the reverse summoning spells."

"But I still don't understand how you could do that at all. I mean, how could you breach their realm to activate their reverse summoning spells without your own summoning diagram in this realm?"

"When I cast the 'tattoo' spell on the imps, I cast a similar spell on myself. I have a spell diagram embedded in my flesh. I can open enough of a doorway into their realm to call on them, activate their reverse summonings and draw them through to me."

"Can I see it?"

"It's magical. It isn't visible to the naked eye."

"I can see the spells embedded in my numerology book and the spells on charms. I can probably see your diagram too."

Beth held her left hand out to her son, so that he could examine the back of it.

Paul looked at her hand for a moment, then slowly asked, "Vrezixus?"

"You *can* see it?" Beth asked with surprise.

"Yeah. When you were done with your imps, did you send them back there?" Paul asked curiously, remembering that he had been otherwise occupied at that time.

"Later that night, I did. But, of course, I returned them with a full sized diagram."

Gihn Zah meowed, then continued with a long murmuring growl as Paul listened carefully.

Finally, Paul looked away from the kitten and asked, "What about 'lending' magic? Do you know anything about that?"

"That's a very dangerous technique. Not only does it have the capacity of being misused, but it also leaves you completely vulnerable, since your own magic is tied into the spell and completely out of your control."

Paul slowly nodded as he considered his mother's answer.

"As much as I would love to stay in here with all of you, the fact of the matter is that I still have quite a bit of work to do." D said regretfully.

"Thanks for coming to help me when you did. It really means a lot to me." Paul said quietly.

"I may not be around you every minute of the day, but I'll try to always be there when you need me." D said as he got up from the couch.

"If you ever need me, I'll be there for you too." Paul said earnestly.

"Don't forget, we've got our own stuff to do." G reluctantly whispered.

"Yeah. I have the feeling that if we let ourselves get behind, we'll never get caught up." Paul agreed.

"What do you want to do about..." G trailed off as he looked down at Mah Zah, curled into a ball in his open palms.

"We'll take them with us. I'll send them home before we go to bed."

"Paul, I can tell that you're thinking about the reverse summoning tattoo spell. There's no way that I'll be able to stop you if you're determined to do it. But before you take that step, keep in mind that if you decide to go through with it and ever have to use it, you'll hate yourself for it. I can promise you that."

"Okay Mom. I'm listening to you."

"Good." Beth said seriously, then gently added, "In case I don't see you again tonight, have a good sleep."

"You too, Mom." Paul said with a smile at her.

After the somewhat tense back-and-forth, it pleased him to know that they were still on good terms.

* * * * *

"What are you working on next?" G asked as they walked back to G's room.

"I've got to do some alchemy research to see if we can convert potential energy the same way we convert manifested energy, like fire. If I can find a way to make that work, then I have to dig into the basic magic book and see if I can get any clues on binding the energy and the spell to the charm."

"It sounds like you're not sure if you can do it."

"From the little bit I've learned about how things work, it seems like there should be a way, but I can't be sure that I'll find it." Paul said frankly.

"Remember that if you get stuck really bad, you can always ask our parents. Even if they don't know the answers, they might have some different ideas of where to look for them."

"I probably wouldn't have thought to ask them for help, but if I can't find what I'm looking for, it might come down to that." Paul said thoughtfully, then asked, "Are you going to be working on Lex tonight?"

"Yeah. I've only got until Friday and I've still got a long way to go before he's ready."

"I may need to get into the online library later. If you're going to be busy, maybe you could set me up now."

"Sure. Do you want it on my computer or the laptop?"

"The laptop. I don't think I'll be using it for anything else, so that leaves your computer free for whatever else either of us might need it for."

"What about these guys?" G asked as he indicated the puppy that he was still holding.

"You can keep holding her or put her down. Whatever works best for you."

"I think I'll try holding her. Maybe she'll inspire me."

Gihn Zah meowed and Paul immediately responded, "I'll tell you all about what I'm doing as soon as the computer's set up."

* * * * *

"Paul."

"Hmm?"

"You know how you were asking your mom those questions about her summoning."

"Yeah. Maybe I coulda been nicer to her."

"I think you were fine, but you asking those questions got me to thinking, how did *you* summon a demon at the wedding without a spell or a summoning circle?"

"I don't know." Paul answered honestly.

"But now that you're learning what a demon summoner does and how things work, can't you look back on that, at what you did, and see something more now?"

"Not really." Paul said slowly, then explained, "Doing the diagrams and weaving the spells is nothing like what I did at the wedding. The magic that I used... it felt like I magically *punched* a hole in reality and broke through to a hell dimension and I'm not talking about one of the nicer ones either, like where Gihn Zah and Mah Zah come from."

"So there are a lot of different hells. I kinda always thought that there was just the one."

"I learned a little bit about that while I was looking for Gihn Zah and Mah Zah's realm, but I don't know everything. From what I could make of it, there are a bunch of different layers of reality. Some are flooded with bright energy, some are flooded with dark and just a few are like this plane, with only slight occasional influences of either type of energy. The dark realms are collectively called hell and the bright realms are heaven."

"And when your mom opened that portal tonight, you found out that you can never go to heaven. How do you feel about that?" G asked cautiously.

"I think you're looking at it like 'good and evil'. They're just two different realms with competing and incompatible types of energy. My dad was a demon so I guess it's no surprise that I have demonic energy in me. When I tried to enter a celestial plane, my flesh and blood was incompatible with the energy of that realm and... you saw what happened. I guess the same thing would probably happen if someone from a heavenly realm tried to enter a hell dimension." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Are there any half-angels running around?" G asked curiously.

"They're called Nephilim, but I don't know if any exist today. I don't see any reason why there wouldn't be." Paul said honestly.

"How's your project going?"

"I'm not sure. I've come up with a few things, and they seem like they should work but I really don't have any way of trying them out. You don't happen to know any thaumaturgy binding spells, do you?"

"No. I don't have any talent for that, so I never learned any of their spells."

"Well, whether I have talent or not, I need to find a way to regulate the flow of magical energy to fuel the spell or this will burn out about two seconds after I cast it."

"That's not something I've ever had to worry about. Although from what I've heard there are some advanced sorcery spells that can be made permanent, so that the illusion stays even after you leave, I've never had to power any of my spells with anything but my own magic."

"Does that mean that you could make it so that Lex could hang around here while we're at school and stuff?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure what you have to do to make an illusion permanent. Something like that's a long way away from where I am right now."

"Yeah. Just about everything is like that for me." Paul said frankly, then asked, "Are you ready to give it a try?"

"Yeah." G said reluctantly, then took a long slow inhale to brace himself before adding, "Well, here it goes."

Paul watched as 'Lex' came into being.

This time, Lex looked quite a bit more human.

He wasn't an exact duplicate of G. In fact, no one with eyes would ever mistake one for the other. But much to G's credit, Lex looked quite a bit more *real* than he had the day before. If Paul were to run into Lex while walking down the street, he wouldn't give him a second look as being anything other than an ordinary person.

"There's still a long way to go." G said as he walked around Lex and looked at him critically.

"He looks good." Paul said gently.

"He looks generic." G countered.

Paul thought about that as he looked at Lex, then said, "Okay. Maybe he *does* look generic. But he looks like a *real live human being*. He doesn't look like he's a gargoyle or even a mannequin. Even though he's not completely finished, he's a lot better than he was yesterday."

"Okay. I'll agree with that." G slowly conceded, then asked, "Do you have anything to show from all the work you've been doing?"

"No. This is for a project in my Basic Magic class. It's something that I'm working on with a partner so I won't be able to try any of this out until we get together again on Thursday." Paul said frankly.

"What classes do you have tomorrow?"

"Let me see." Paul said as he took out his schedule. "Tech, Myth, Gym and Astro... After the classes I've had so far, I don't want to even guess at what they're actually going to be teaching." Paul said honestly.

"Are you scheduled for Tech 1 or Tech 2?"

"One."

"Then that probably means that you have little or no talent for technological magic. Tech 1 is to teach you how to use the high-tech magic tools that the techno-mages come up with."

"Oh. I really would have liked to have learned to combine magic with electronics and stuff. But I guess that I can't be good at everything."

"From what I hear, there aren't many people who make it to Tech 2. There probably aren't more than five in any given school year."

"I bet they must get paid all kinds of crazy money if they're that rare."

"I guess so. I know that Dad depends on the tech guys a lot and he bends over backward not to waste their time." G said frankly, then thought to add, "If you have Gym, you're going to need gym clothes."

"I thought that going to witch school would be different from the hell of regular school."

"I've never been to a regular school, so I don't know what your gym class there was like. But I can't imagine any way that it could be anything like *our* gym class." G said frankly.

"I guess I'll just have to wait and see." Paul relented, then asked, "Do you have some stuff I can borrow?"

"Yeah. Are you done studying for the night?"

"No, there's still another chapter that I need to go through in my basic magic book before I call it a night. So I'd better get back to it."

"Yeah. Remind me and I'll get you some gym clothes when we stop for the night. Right now, Lex looks like he still needs more attention."

"Has Mah Zah been any help?"

"Yeah. Actually, I think she was a good source of inspiration for me."

"Gihn Zah has been helping to keep me on task." Paul said seriously, then added in a conspiratorial whisper, "She's kind of a hard ass."

The kitten meowed in offense at his words.

Paul turned to her and said, "Well, you are."

* * * * *

Paul couldn't get over the sense of tranquility that he received from something as simple as having a morning routine to follow. Fortunately, G had remembered their conversation the night before and prepared a gym bag.

The ride in the school van cuddled beside G was just what Paul needed to give him a sense of security about the coming day. Knowing that he had G's support allowed Paul to face each new challenge confidently.

As they entered the magical hallway, they realized that their first classes were in opposite directions.

Paul walked to his locker, then performed the reverse of the lock spell to release the locker from its magical protection. Next he performed the '*foreign*' spell to pop the physical lock.

As he was stacking his excess books and gym bag in the locker, he thought about how he might be able to modify the locking spell to be more convenient.

As he was about to close the locker door, he changed his mind. He scooted everything away from the back wall, then he stopped for a moment to touch one finger to the back of the locker.

The text of a spell along with an eight pointed diagram appeared on the back of the locker. Paul didn't have time to linger. He closed the locker door, then enacted his newly modified version of the locking spell.

Confident that he had everything that he needed, he hurried away to his next new class.

* * * * *

"Hello. My name is Paul Darroch and I'm starting in this class today." Paul said to the youngish looking teacher at the front of the room.

"It's nice to meet you Paul. My name is Nedrick Plaven. Please feel free to call me Ned, but you can call me Mr. Plaven if you absolutely can't force yourself to see me as a person."

"It's nice to meet you, Ned." Paul said sincerely.

"Good." Mr. Plaven said with satisfaction, then turned to look at his computer.

Paul waited as Mr. Plaven seemed to be absorbed in whatever he was reading.

"So, can I assume from your recent change in status that you've just learned about magic?"

"Yes sir... Ned."

"According to the testing, it seems that you don't show any tell-tale signs of a technomage ability. Tell me, what is it that you hope to get out of this class?"

"A passing grade." Paul said weakly.

"Well, that's not encouraging, but I suppose that it's honest."

"I really don't know exactly what it is that you do in here, so I don't have any idea of what I should be working toward."

"Better." Mr. Plaven said with a smile, then continued, "Techno-mages work to combine the benefits of magic and technology. In this class, we try to familiarize students with the magical tools available to them in the twenty-first century."

"That sounds really great. I've been working on a report for the past couple days and it felt like, with magic, that there should be a lot easier way to do things."

"Really? Tell me about it."

"Well, since I can use magic to write as fast as I can think, it seemed like typing was the long, slow way."

"How so? Come around here and show me on my computer." Mr. Plaven said as he stood from his chair.

"Um, okay. But do you have a piece of paper I can use to show you the difference?"

Mr. Plaven took one step and pressed a button. The printer beside his desk immediately ejected a single sheet of paper.

After placing the paper on the desk, Paul slowly said, "Okay. Here's a simple alchemy spell."

He touched one finger to the edge of the paper and it filled with writing.

"If you really want me to, I can start typing that in on the computer, but it's probably going to take me at least five minutes. Do you see my problem?" Paul asked seriously.

"So you're using some sort of thought transference spell in lieu of writing?" Mr. Plaven asked cautiously.

"It's a standard spell from the numerology workbook. I just modified it a little so I could use it wherever I wanted to." Paul said honestly.

"Do you happen to have the spell where you can get to it? I'd like to see it."

Paul touched his finger to the piece of paper again. The page of writing cleared and an entirely different spell took its place.

"Like I said, it's just a really simple spell. But it's a whole lot easier to use than writing everything out longhand or typing it."

"Yes. I can see what you're saying."

"So, are there any techno-mage things like that for typing things into the computer? Or is it just my wishful thinking?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Paul, have you discussed this idea of yours with anyone else?"

"You mean using the spell from the numerology textbook? Yeah, I talked to a few people about it."

"Not that. I mean the idea of modifying this spell to work as an input method on a computer."

"No. I didn't think about it until I was talking to you."

"Give me just a moment..." Mr. Plaven said as he sat down at his computer and began typing.

Paul waited, not knowing what Mr. Plaven seemed to be so excited about.

He glanced over his shoulder at the classroom and found that everyone seemed to be engrossed in working on their own projects and didn't seem to take any notice of him at all.

"You probably don't know this, but one of the things that techno-mages do is create new magical technological tools to make people's lives easier. When one of us comes up with an original idea, we have a registry, something like the patent office, where we catalogue those ideas. If a new idea results in a new technology, then the person who came up with it will be compensated for it. Basically, that person holds the patent."

"Yeah." Paul said slowly, not seeing how that had anything to do with anything.

"I've just submitted your idea... under your name, of course. It may take a few days for the people at the bureau to determine if your idea is truly original, but if they determine that it is, then you'll reap the reward if your idea is ever developed."

"Okay. So I don't have to *do* anything?"

"Well, I suppose that since you've come up with such an interesting idea that you might decide to develop it yourself. If you can come up with a practical way to make it work, then that would make it that much more likely that you will see some financial reward from it."

"But you said that I don't have any techno-mage ability."

"You have a brain. Use it. If you need to incorporate magic into a mundane piece of technology, just ask and I'll be happy to help you with it. This is actually what this class is all about; learning to use magic and technology to its best advantage."

Paul slowly nodded.

"I'll let you in on a little secret, if you promise not to spread it around." Mr. Plaven said quietly as he leaned closer.

"What's that?"

"The people in the second tier of the techno-mage class may have magical talent for working with technology, but they couldn't come up with an original idea to save their lives."

"So they're not better than us?"

"No. They have a talent. You have a different talent. That's all."

"Okay. What do I need to do?"

"I assume that you're familiar with computers and their peripherals."

"I'm no guru or anything. I'm about average, I guess."

"That should be all you need for a while. Try a few things and see what you can make happen."

"But don't I get a textbook or something?" Paul asked cautiously.

"This isn't that kind of class. In here, if you come to me with an idea for a project and I judge it to be of merit, then I'll encourage you to work on it. Of course, if you come to me without any ideas, then I'll pick a project for you, like creating a sentient toaster or some other harmless thing."

"But what about grades and testing?"

"You're graded on the work you do. Every day is its own test." Mr. Plaven said seriously, then added, "Unless you have an even better idea, this is going to be your project for this class for the entire year. Whether or not you're able to bring it to fruition doesn't matter. What you're learning is how to take an idea and develop it."

"But the numerology spell is someone else's. I can't take credit for their work."

"Each of us stands on the shoulders of those who came before us. Credit will be given where credit is due, but don't let that hold you back from taking the magic and technology to the next level."

"Okay. I'll do it... except that I don't know what I'm supposed to do now."

"Do you see that workbench over there? Gather what you need from the supply room and start working on ways to make your magically altered input device. If you need my help, whether it be magical or just to brainstorm, all you have to do is ask."

"And I've got all year to work on this?"

"I've had one student complete eight projects in the course of a year. I've had others who haven't been able to finish one. You're here to learn how to develop your ideas. As long as you're doing that, you'll get the appropriate grade."

"Thank you, Ned. I understand."

* * * * *

When the class bell rang, Paul checked his schedule to see where his next class was located.

As luck would have it, the next class was practically across the hall.

He was one of the first to walk into the classroom and saw the teacher sitting behind his desk, reading.

"My name is Paul Darroch. I'm starting this class today." Paul said quietly, hesitant to interrupt.

The teacher slowly looked up from his book and asked, "Has anyone warned you about my class yet?"

"No sir. I haven't heard a thing about it." Paul said honestly.

The fiftyish pot-bellied man chuckled, then said, "I must be slipping."

Paul waited, not knowing what, if anything, he should say in response.

The man slowly stood, then offered his hand as he said, "It's nice to meet you Paul. I'm Franklin Cox. This class is called Mythology Studies, but it could just as well be called Ancient Religions or Historical Belief Systems. Whatever you call it, in this class we study what people have believed and speculate as to why that is."

"Do you just study this plane of existence or do you also cover the belief systems of other realms?" Paul asked curiously.

"What do you know about other realms?" Mr. Cox asked curiously.

"That they exist, mostly. I've heard that there's one of the hell dimensions that has a church... that's kind of a freaky concept." Paul said frankly.

"I tend to focus more on the historical belief systems of *this* realm. That alone is a topic so vast that it's hard to do it justice in a single school year."

"Yeah. It sounds really interesting. But I'd like to learn about the other realms too. Do you know of a website or a book or anything where I could find more information about that?"

"I think I can do you one better. Every six weeks I require a report to be submitted detailing the historical practices and belief structures of a different civilization." Mr. Cox said as he handed Paul a piece of paper.

Paul glanced at the paper and saw that it was a list of requirements for the report that Mr. Cox was talking about.

"If you would like, you may study the belief system of any civilization in any realm you choose and once you've decided on the realm, I will provide you references to appropriate resources."

"Thank you Mr. Cox. I'd really like that."

"Well, before you get too excited, there is also a lecture portion of the class. If you'll have a seat, I'm going to tell you a little story about the Aboriginal people and the development of their belief systems over time."

"Yes sir."

* * * * *

When the bell rang, Paul quickly looked at his schedule to confirm what he already knew. The location of his locker was exactly opposite the location of the gym, where his next class was being held.

Most of the other students had already left the room, and the last few still in the room were in the process of gathering their things to leave.

Paul flashed back on Nazy's advice, 'Sometimes it's better to ask forgiveness than permission.'

In the air before him, Paul manifested an eight-pointed summoning diagram, which contained a reverse summoning diagram inside it. He knew that there was no way he could use the diagram to reach another realm since the spell for that was insanely complicated. But he was confident that he could use it to reach a few hallways over, creating a fully traversable portal to his locker."

As soon as the blurry gray distortion appeared, Paul reached through and grabbed his gym bag and replaced it with his backpack.

He dispelled the portal, then noticed that Mr. Cox was watching him.

"Sorry." Paul muttered shyly before dashing out of the room.

* * * * *

Although Paul wasn't sure exactly what they were going to be doing, he had been to enough gym classes to know that things would go best if he simply suited up before even checking in with the teacher.

When Paul walked into the locker room, he found everyone in various states of dress, changing into their gym clothes. Paul followed suit and no one seemed to take notice of him.

As everyone finished changing, they left the locker room, mostly as a group, and walked onto the basketball court.

Paul spotted the teacher and hurried over to introduce himself.

"Excuse me, sir. My name is Paul Darroch and I'm starting this class today." Paul said as he approached.

"Have they warned you about it yet?" The man asked with an evil grin.

"No. No one's warned me about anything." Paul said cautiously.

"Okay. First of all, my name is Spencer Tran. You can call me Spence or Coach, but please don't call me Coach Tran. It just sounds weird to me. Anyway... warnings. Let's see. Are you sure that no one's told you anything?"

"Not a word."

"Since you're starting in the middle of the school year, I'm guessing that you just found out about the whole magical world thing."

"Yeah."

"Okay. Have you ever played dodgeball before?"

"Yeah. A few times. Until they outlawed it or something like that."

"Well, that's what we're playing today."

"Really? I kinda thought that witches... I don't know what I thought... I just didn't expect you to be playing dodgeball."

"The rules have been slightly modified and we *do* insist on common sense and good sportsmanship. You can't magically attack another player or destroy the ball. No spells that alter time or dimensions or warp reality outside the boundaries of the playing field are allowed. Besides that, have fun."

"So we can use our magic?" Paul asked in surprise.

"Yes. Use it to defend yourself, but also use it cleverly to overcome your opponents."
The coach said with a sly smile.

"And besides all that, it's just the regular dodgeball rules?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yes. Oh, and the boundaries of the playing field extend fifteen feet above ground and fifteen feet below... just in case that comes into play."

"Okay. I think I'm ready." Paul said as he looked around.

"Everyone! Take the court! We're about to begin."