

# Camp Little Eagle:

## Brothers in Spirit

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### Chapter 1 - The Lost and the Found

"What just happened?" Ronny asked in a voice that sounded hollow to his own ears. The darkness that was spread out before him sparked a fear that he might be suddenly entirely alone.

"I think that when Obie opened the door, the wind must have blown that big mirror over the fireplace off the wall." Donny said uncertainly, blinking to clear his vision or, in fact, retrieve any vision at all.

"That would explain the crashing sound, but why did the lights go out too?" Jason K asked tremulously.

"It's not just the lights. It looks like the power is out to the entire camp." Arlo stated reasonably.

"I don't know about any of that, but I get the feeling that Teddy was expecting whatever just happened." Dylan said frankly.

"*Do* you know what's going on, Teddy?" Jason K cautiously asked into the darkness.

"Not really. I mean I had a dream... well, except for I wasn't asleep. I saw something end. I can't really remember what it was, but I know that it was awful. It's going away. I can't remember it anymore." Teddy rambled.

"Did you dream about what's happening to us right now?" Jason K asked curiously.

"No. I don't think so. I think what I dreamed was kinda like the opposite. I dreamed about what the world would be like if none of us was here when we was supposed to be... what happened later because of it was really bad." Teddy fought to explain, then thought to add, "But since we're here, none of that happened. The dream is about something that never was... and now it never will be."

"Is anyone near Ryvan? Do you know if he's okay?" Another voice timidly asked.

"Kole? Is that you?" A voice quietly responded.

"Yeah. I'm right here. Don't worry, buddy. I know that you can take care of yourself. I just wanted to make sure that you're alright." Kole hurried to explain.

"Kole... I can hear you." Ryvan tentatively whispered.

"Good... Wait. What? You can hear me? How?"

"I don't know, but I think it happened at the same time that everything else did. All of a sudden I could hear... which is great... except that now I can't see."

"Yeah, well, neither can I. Hang in there, Bud. We'll figure it out." Kole quietly assured him.

"Does anyone know where they keep the flashlights or candles or anything? I thought the lights would have come back on by now, but it looks like they're not going to." Ronny asked nervously.

"Something's really wrong here." Obie said slowly.

"You mean, something besides the wind, the crashing sounds, and the blackout?" Donny asked exasperatedly.

"Yeah. Besides that." Obie muttered absently, then continued on to explain, "There are emergency lights that are supposed to come on in the main room when the power goes out. I've seen it happen before, a bunch of times. They should have come on as soon as we lost power."

"They just finished building this cabin today. Maybe they haven't got that part working yet." Dylan said reasonably.

"Maybe not, but from what I've seen of this place so far, I don't think that they'd let us move in if they knew that anything wasn't completely working. They seem really responsible like that." Paul said seriously.

"Yeah. And if the power's out, why hasn't anyone called us or stopped by to check on us? They've got a team of people working here whose only job is to make sure that we're okay." Obie seamlessly added.

"Maybe they don't know that anyone's living in this cabin yet." Arlo suggested reasonably.

"Yeah. But another weird thing is that not one *speck* of light is coming in from outside. I can't even see where the windows are." Kole added anxiously.

"I'm not from here, so I really don't know how light it usually is or isn't around here at night. But what I *can* tell you is that I was standing beside the fireplace when everything went dark. I've been feeling around and I can't find it." Dylan said seriously.

"It sounded like that big mirror broke when everything went dark. If you're not careful feeling around blindly like that, you could cut yourself really bad." Ronny hesitantly warned.

"I think it's okay. I haven't found any broken glass yet. Actually, I haven't found anything at all." Dylan finished uneasily.

"Is the new guy still here? The one we opened the door for?" Donny asked curiously.

"I'm right here." An unfamiliar child's voice timidly responded.

"Who are you?" Donny asked cautiously.

"Everyone calls me Jinx."

"What are you doing here?" Obie asked curiously.

"The guy in cabin one said you had some empty bedrooms and that since I just got here, that maybe I could move in here with you." Jinx answered uncertainly.

"Someone sent you over here all on your own? That doesn't sound right." Ronny said slowly.

"Yeah, well, they were really busy trying to do something with some honey or molasses or something like that. A couple gallons of it, it looked like. It was kind of a mess." Jinx said awkwardly.

"Why would they have gallons of molasses or honey in cabin one?" Donny asked slowly.

"I think I get it." Ronny said in prelude, then asked more gently, "Jinx? Did you cause the power to go out?"

"I don't think so. At least, it wasn't on purpose, if I did. Sometimes things just... *go wrong* around me." The younger boy reluctantly admitted.

"Is that how you got the name Jinx?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"The nurses at the county hospital came up with that the day when they stuck me with a needle and all the fire extinguishers in the building went off, all at once." Jinx said uncomfortably, then added more quietly, "They ended up having to evacuate everyone

out of the whole hospital and find other places to put them until they could get it all cleaned up."

"So, do you think that you might have somehow blown the power out for the whole camp?" Donny hesitantly asked.

"I don't see how I could. I knocked on the door. It opened and I said, 'Hi' and then all of a sudden there was blowing and breaking and then everything was black and quiet. It all happened at once. I don't know what caused any of it." Jinx quietly explained.

"Does anyone have any ideas of where to find a light? Because I'm really tired of standing here in the dark." Ronny asked irritably.

"I'm trying, but I can't find anything. I've been looking for the furniture to try and get my bearings that way but I haven't come across anything yet."

"Guys, just so you know, I can't find the door, either. I answered it when Jinx knocked and I was standing right in front of it when everything went dark, but now it's not there." Obie said in a slightly trembling voice.

"All of you sound like you're right in front of me, just a step away, but when I reach out, there's no one there." Ronny said in bewilderment.

"I would not wish to alarm anyone, but I feel that I should submit for your consideration the premise that we may no longer be in your waking world, most commonly thought of as the realm of the living."

"Randolph? Is that you? Are you alright? You sound funny." Donny asked with concern for his friend.

"My apologies, I tend to speak a bit more formally when I am particularly vexed or dismayed." Randolph said repentantly.

"It might also have to do with him using his own voice to talk to you."

"Randolph? You sound like two different people, but both of them sound like you... but not like each other. How do you even do that?" Donny asked in puzzlement.

"That is a rather long and convoluted tale that may be difficult to explain..." Randolph reluctantly began to say.

"Randolph's a ghost." Arlo interrupted.

"Arlo is correct. Since we met, I have existed, housed within his flesh, using his voice when I speak to you. But now, for whatever reason, I am once again a separate person. I appear to be myself again." Randolph said uncertainly.

"A ghost?" Donny asked slowly to confirm that one point before moving on.

"My apologies for not telling you the whole truth about me sooner. You're my first friend here and I didn't want to take the chance of chasing you away with mysticism and supernatural hokum." Randolph said repentantly.

"Don't worry about that. I totally get not being able to tell someone you just met every detail about your past." Donny hurried to assure him, then quietly added, "Besides, I don't think anyone has ever worried about what I thought about them before. It's kinda cool."

"Guys? Do you think you can maybe worry about that later, once we can see each other again?" Ronny asked hopefully.

"If we are, indeed, in the realm beyond, the realm of spirits, then perhaps we should seek out a source of fire. Flame is said to be able to penetrate the veil between the realm of the living and the spirit realm." Randolph carefully explained.

"Can we start a fire in the fireplace?" Paul asked anxiously.

"We can't even 'find' the fireplace." Donny said frustratedly.

"I don't know how everything works, but Arlo or I might possibly be able to make some light for you." Randolph cautiously offered.

"Me? What can *I* do?" Arlo asked dubiously.

"The light of your spirit is unusually bright in my experience and, if I may say, quite alluring. It is what drew me to you, like a beacon in the night. Your spiritual light has been quelled since I've been keeping company with you, but now that we've separated, you should be able to emit your light fully again." Randolph slowly explained.

"Aren't ghosts supposed to be able to glow too?" Paul cautiously asked.

"Although I'm not able to glow to the degree of Arlo, I will, of course, endeavor to do my best." Randolph easily offered.

"If you tell us what to do, maybe the rest of us can help somehow." Jason K timidly suggested.

"I will do what I can, but please be aware that I have had little desire to draw attention to myself, therefore I have had no occasion to develop the ability. The little I know, I have stumbled across accidentally over a long period of time." Randolph said regretfully.

"This sounds like something that Jerico would know about. Is there any way we can get to a phone and call him for help?" Paul hesitantly asked.

"If you think about it, we can't even find cabin seven, and by all the logic in the world, we're standing right in the middle of it." Dylan said irritably.

After a long moment, Randolph quietly said, "I'm ready to try."

"Go ahead. Just let us know if there's anything we can do to help you." Donny said supportively.

"You may rest assured that I will." Randolph promised, then went silent as he concentrated.

"I can almost see you, Randolph. Keep going... Just like that." Donny said encouragingly as he began to detect the slightest outline in the darkness.

"Actually, I'm Arlo. Randolph is beside me." Arlo struggled to say while maintaining his concentration.

Two figures slowly became more and more visible in the darkness. The first was pale, just a shimmer of a form, known to most present as Arlo. The second was more bluish in color and was barely visible at Arlo's side. The boy appeared to be a bit frail and notably more timid than his companion.

"It's working. Keep going. I can see the fireplace." Ronny said suddenly as the faintest outline of the fireplace materialized before them in the darkness.

"Can someone get the fire started? I don't know how long these guys can keep the light going." Dylan asked anxiously as he strained to see anything in the minimal light.

"We had one of these in my old cabin, but I never messed with it. I don't know how it works or where anything is." Ronny reluctantly admitted.

"If it's the same as the one in cabin three, I can do it." Ryvan said confidently as he quickly stepped forward.

"Hurry up! It's fading away!" Kole suddenly exclaimed.

Before anyone could react, the fireplace was gone. Arlo was no less illuminated than he had been a moment before and right beside him, Randolph was now casting his own distinct light.

"Where did it go?" Kole asked in bewilderment.

"I've got a better one for you. Since when is there a tree growing in the middle of your common room?" Ryvan asked in puzzlement as he strained to see anything in Arlo and Randolph's combined light.

"The floor changed too, it's leaves and dirt now." Obie said suddenly.

"Can you hear that? It sounds like we're outside." Donny said softly.

"Um, there goes the tree. It faded out and disappeared just like the fireplace did." Ryvan said slowly.

"I can hear the rain hitting the tall grass all around us." Donny carefully added.

"I can't tell for sure, but I think I can see drops of rain hitting the grass by Arlo. The funny thing is, I can't *feel* any rain hitting me." Paul said slowly.

"I don't care about the rain. How do we get back to the cabin?" Dylan asked seriously.

"Do you have any thoughts, Jinx?" Ronny asked cautiously.

"I promise, I don't know anything but what I told you."

"Don't forget that Teddy was working his little butt off trying to get all of us here to have a sleepover." Dylan added.

"What do you say, Teddy? Do you have any idea of why we're here... or where here is, for that matter?" Donny asked seriously.

"I don't *know* much. I have a *feeling* that something's coming that's too big and too bad for us to get through the way we are now. If we're not ready, some of us might die... or worse." Teddy said ominously, then continued, "The Clan is about to face a lot of messed up things and we need to be ready."

"They're all amazing and important and stuff. What can *we* do to help them?" Ronny asked incredulously.

"Not much." Teddy admitted.

"The cabin one guys know about this, anyway. They're already planning to be the Clan's support and recovery division." Arlo quietly interjected.

"That's right. What do you expect us to do?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"In one dream, against one enemy, I remember that we don't do anything and it turns out fine. But in another, we have a different enemy who plays head games and tries to divide us, knowing that with each of us working alone, we won't be strong enough to fight back." Teddy said seriously.

"Divide us? I may be new here, but as near as I can tell, all of us are from different cabins and friend groups. We're already about as divided as it's possible to get." Donny stated reasonably.

"Maybe that's what's special about us. If we can come together, maybe we can show them the way." Obie cautiously suggested.

After a long moment, Arlo finally reasoned, "But you're saying that if we can become a team, then maybe *we* can help to unite everyone else."

"Right. If we can get ourselves together we can help the non fighters to defend themselves and stand united and protect the ones who are too small to fight. While we're handling all of that, the Clan will be free to focus on more important things." Paul said seriously.

"You know what? I've heard enough. Count me in. I'm on board with helping cabin one support the Clan. I'm with you on being united and becoming a team. But for right now, I'd really appreciate it if someone would tell me what we're supposed to do next, because *that* I don't get at all." Ronny said irritably.

"There's not just one answer to that. The future hasn't happened, it isn't completely written yet. There's just a few unfinished versions floating around that I can get a peek at and maybe warn you about things that *could* happen. In the meantime, we have to make ourselves ready to fight." Teddy said in a trance-like voice.

"You're not the same Teddy I met in the office, are you?"

"I'm still me, but since the Frisbee thing, I know more things than I used to. It feels like maybe I knew some of this stuff a long time ago and just all of a sudden remembered it again." Teddy said with difficulty.

"Does any of that tell us what we need to do next? Because standing around here in the dark isn't doing anyone any good." Ronny asked irritably.

"Ryvan's able to hear. That's a good thing." Kole hurried to remind everyone.



"Can Ryvan really hear? Or does it have something to do with the place that we're in?" Arlo asked speculatively.

"It's a... means to an end." Teddy said distantly, as though he was speaking words that he didn't fully comprehend.

"Yeah... That means that it's the place causing everything and Ryvan's going to go deaf again when we leave here." Paul said uncomfortably.

"And Randolph won't have his own body anymore, either." Donny regretfully added.

"Perhaps we may find a way that I might continue to exist as myself." Randolph said encouragingly, obviously not holding much hope.

"Yeah, well, until that happens, maybe you should just plan on staying with me, where you know you won't have to worry about getting banished or exorcized or whatever other horrible things Jerico wants to do to you." Arlo said darkly.

"Arlo, can you come over here and crank your light for a few seconds? I'd like to try something." Paul anxiously asked.

"Sure. What have you got?" Arlo asked cautiously as his soft white glow increased by a notable amount.

"It's weird. When I was feeling around in the dark, I didn't feel anything, but then I could see that something was there when you lit it up. So I'm hoping that if I try to touch something *while* it's being lit up, that I'll actually be able to touch it."

"That *could* work." Dylan said with surprise.

"It's worth a try." Ronny added supportively.

"Get ready to grab." Arlo alerted them, then began to glow in earnest.

As everyone watched, the fireplace began to fade into view.

"Randolph, would you dim your light for a few seconds?" Donny cautiously asked.

"Yes. As you like." Randolph said as he went from full illumination to a faint glow.

As Randolph's luminance subsided, the fireplace of cabin seven became more and more pronounced.

"That's what I thought. Randolph's light shines on a different time and place from Arlo's." Donny said speculatively.

"Let's see if this works the same as the fireplace in cabin 3." Kole said as he hurried to the barely revealed fireplace.

"I won't be able to keep glowing this brightly for very long." Arlo cautioned him.

"I just have to hold down the safety, twist the knob, and hit the starter. It'll take about two seconds" Kole said simply as he confidently moved into position.

After a long moment, Dylan finally asked, "Is there a problem?"

"I can feel something there, but my hand is passing through the controls. I can't move them." Kole said quietly.

"Perhaps you could try projecting your own light whilst attempting to activate the controls. From what little I know of it, that is how disembodied spirits of the dead are sometimes able to move things in the world of the living." Randolph cautiously suggested.

"How do I do that?" Kole asked irritably.

"From the stuff I read about it, your light, your spirit, is inside you, it's like your ghost. You don't have to make it shine more, you can't. But it's more like you bring it up within you and push it forward. You adjust the brightness by how much you expose to the world." Paul said instructively.

"Yeah. That's just what it feels like." Arlo quietly confirmed, then added, "It can be a little scary, but don't let that stop you. Once you've done it, it feels kinda nice."

A sphere of golden light started to grow from within Kole, just barely peeking out, changing the illumination of everything around him.

While Kole was working on manifesting his own light, others were doing likewise with varying degrees of success.

"Hurry and turn on the fireplace before you lose the light." Paul said urgently.

"I'm on it." Kole said past gritted teeth.

As everyone watched and held their collective breath, the gas fireplace began to glow with an eerie blue/gray flame.

"Good! For a minute I thought you weren't going to be able to get it started." Donny said with relief.

"But what good does it do? We're still lost in the dark." Ronny asked reasonably.

"Not completely, we're not in total darkness. At least now we can see each other in the light from the fire. We're better off than we were two minutes ago." Dylan explained.

"Dylan? Your face isn't bandaged anymore." Teddy said hesitantly.

After a tentative touch to his cheek, Dylan quietly asked, "How does it look?"

"It looks fine! Like you were never hurt at all." Teddy rushed to assure him.

"I haven't seen you without a bandage before. You look... completely normal to me, like you were never hurt." Ronny said frankly.

"I was shot in the face. I don't know what you're seeing, but I don't think it's real." Dylan said seriously.

"Is this all a dream?" Jason K asked uncertainly.

"It seems like it could be." Arlo confessed.

"Whose dream?" Donny asked seriously.

"Hang on. Let me check something." Ronny said, then pulled the neck of his shirt out so that he could take a peek inside.

A hint of greenish-yellow spiritual light shone inside his shirt for a long moment before Ronny finally said, "Yeah. It's me."

"What's you?" Donny cautiously asked.

"This is my dream." Ronny explained.

"How do you know that?" Donny asked suspiciously.

"Because, in my dreams, I have a guy's body." Ronny said simply.

"I can't see any difference." Obie said honestly.

In response, Ronny lifted the front of his shirt for all to see.

Even though the greenish yellow light he was casting was meager, that combined with the blue gray flames was adequate to display the smooth expanse of a perfectly nice and wholly unremarkable teenage male chest and belly.

"I'm guessing that it doesn't usually look like that." Kole ventured to say.

"I wouldn't know." Donny said honestly.

"No. It doesn't." Ronny assured them.

"If you've got your dream body, why don't the rest of us have our wishes granted too?" Obie asked seriously.

"Ryvan can hear, Dylan got his face back, and Randolph has his own body." Kole slowly responded.

"Why didn't *I* get *my* wishes granted?" Obie asked sternly.

"You got your dead brother back, didn't you? Did you have another wish that you wanted more than that?" Donny asked simply.

"No. You're right. I got my wish. Amos is alive. I don't want nothin else." Obie said with an air of finality.

"If we've been given gifts, what do you think they're going to expect in return?" Kole cautiously asked.

"If it goes the way things like this usually do, we'll probably be faced with an easy path and a hard one, and of course we'll already know that the hard path is the right one but we'll have to agonize over the choice before we finally just go ahead and do it anyway." Paul said unenthusiastically.

"If we're here for a reason then what are we supposed to be doing now?" Jason K quietly asked into the silence that followed.

"I don't know everybody's. I think we each have to figure that stuff out for ourselves. Mine is that I have to learn how to tell apart what will be, what can be, and what should never be." Teddy finished darkly.

"If you can dream the future and stuff, I can see why you're here, but why am I being included in any of this? I don't have special gifts or powers or anything like that." Donny said frankly.

"When you're with a lot of people, how often do you end up being in charge of them?" Ronny asked curiously.

"I'm not around groups all that often but if no one else is doing it, I can take charge if I need to." Donny reluctantly admitted.

"I thought so. You're cute. You're kinda charming. People automatically like you and want to trust you. That sounds to me like something that you could use to help the Clan and cabin one when they need it." Ronny said frankly, then added with a smile, "It might not be laser beams, but it could still be useful."

"What about you? Any idea of what special ability you might have to be included in all of this?" Donny asked in a feeble attempt to shift the focus away from himself.

"I guess when you cast your net wide and try to get everyone to follow you and do the things they need to do, there might be a few people who feel like they don't belong. If there's anything special about me, it might be that I could show them that they don't have to be *exactly* like everyone else around them to be included; that being an individual isn't bad or wrong." Ronny said speculatively.

"I could see you being *ideal* for that." Donny said with a smile at his roommate.

"Hold on, guys. All we've got is a five year old's daydream to explain what's happening to us." Dylan said in a tone of warning.

"I'm almost eight." Teddy grumbled.

"I'm sorry, Teddy. That's a big difference. I didn't mean to put you down." Dylan said repentantly, then turned to the group and continued, "I just don't automatically turn to magic and psychic visions to try and explain it when the power goes out."

"I do not know if it is truly magic or some natural science of which I am woefully ignorant, but I assure you that I *am* a ghost and that, for whatever reason, we have found ourselves in, what appears to be, a spiritual realm." Randolph said seriously.

"I'm hard wired for things like this. I can't help but believe in it." Arlo confirmed from Randolph's side.

"What do you see, Arlo?" Teddy cautiously asked.

"Be careful asking that. I've learned to see what I'm expected to see." Arlo warned.

"What does that even mean?" Dylan asked impatiently.

"Growing up, when I'd tell people about what I could see, they would call me a fool or a liar. As I got older, they started calling me insane. Eventually I learned how to focus on one reality and block out any others. I'm used to ignoring what's right in front of me if I know that the people around me can't see it. I've been conditioned to do it without thinking." Arlo anxiously explained.

"Can you make yourself see the other reality now?" Teddy cautiously asked.

"I'm used to seeing reality on top and this place underneath. Being inside here, I can't make myself see out of it. I don't know if I can." Arlo said anxiously.

"Actually, what he sees or doesn't see isn't the problem. What we *need* is some way to be able to prove to the rest of us that there *is* another reality." Donny interjected.

"I don't know if we'll be able to do that. It may come down to it that the people who believe will have to make the decisions that are best for them while the unbelievers will hopefully do their best to keep enough of an open mind not to stop us in our tracks."

"Guys, before we start picking sides, I should tell you that I lived on the streets of Chicago for a long time. I've seen enough Obia and Lukumi to know that magic *does* exist." Dylan said in his defense.

"Then what's the problem?" Donny asked curiously.

"It's not the magic, not really. I just feel like we're being handed a set of easy answers that don't really *answer* anything." Dylan said honestly.

"Like you're being asked to believe in something unbelievable?" Paul asked reasonably.

"More like I'm being asked to pledge my oath of loyalty to something that I don't even begin to understand, much less believe in." Dylan fought to explain.

"I don't know of any way that I can prove what's real and what isn't. To be honest, I'm not sure about everything myself." Donny said seriously.

"But we don't have to believe everything... we don't have to believe anything. We can prepare and improve ourselves just because it's the right thing to do. That way, when bad things come, we'll be ready to face them at our best." Ryvan said encouragingly.

"But how can you be so sure that bad things are coming?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"Bad things are always coming." Kole said before Ryvan could.

Ryvan earnestly nodded his agreement.

"How are you going to do when we get things put back to normal and you're deaf again?" Dylan asked Ryvan seriously.

"Dude! Way to ease into the subject. Harsh!" Donny said in offense on behalf of one of his newest friends.

"No. It's a fair question. None of us knows how long this is going to last so it's important for us to be prepared... 'us' mostly being me and Randolph, from the sound of it." Ryvan said honestly.

"So, what are you going to do?" Dylan asked again.

"It seems to me that it's because we're in this spirit place that I'm able to hear at all. I think I'm going to work on building and controlling my spiritual energy as much as I can. I want to see if I can make it manifest in different ways and learn how to control it. With any luck, I might be able to use some of those spiritual skills in the 'real' world." Ryvan said seriously.

"Can I help you? I mean, since I don't really have a plan... like, at all." Kole asked hopefully.

"It's probably going to take a lot of hard work and concentration and may end up not doing anything useful. But doing it together should be better than each of us doing things by ourselves."

"Yeah."

"Guys? There's something wrong with the fire." Paul said tentatively.

After a long moment of inspection, Donny cautiously said, "It looks fine to me."

"It's like a picture of a fire. It's putting out light but not heat, and the flames aren't moving." Paul slowly explained.

"Has anyone else noticed that even though you can see the fire, you can't see anything else in the room from the light of it?" Kole asked curiously.

"Except that we can see each other." Obie immediately countered.

"Yes. But shouldn't we be able to see the rest of the room in the firelight? What about the fireplace?" Kole asked reasonably.

"Randolph? This sounds like your area more than anyone else's." Donny said frankly.

"Although I have existed as a ghost for well over a century, most of that time I was drifting without thought or purpose. Only in joining with Arlo was I able to recover my awareness. Of course I will be willing to help however I can, but I'm afraid that I have very few answers to share with you regarding spiritual matters." Randolph explained with evident regret.

"Understood. What can you tell us about the fire?" Dylan asked curiously.

"From what I have witnessed, flame seems to permeate both worlds. I have heard that it is sometimes possible to see from one world to another through the flames."

"Really?"

"I have never done so. I always harbored the fear that should I try, I might become lost in the spectacle of the flame and simply stop existing."

"I guess if you were all spirit, that could happen." Paul said uncertainly.

"In addition to scrying through the flames, creatures of great power are said to be able to create portals within the flames to travel to other realms."

"Then why don't we ever see them?" Obie asked skeptically.

"That's a good point. If that's all there is to it, there'd be demons all over the place."

Dylan agreed.

"If I am reminded of other stories detailing the attributes of flame, I will be sure to tell you, but that is all I can recall at the moment."

"Thank you for sharing with us." Donny said sincerely.

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"Whatever this is, I'd say that it isn't natural or accidental." Paul said into the silence that had fallen over the group.

"How do you mean?" Ronny asked curiously.

"I've always been interested in the spooky stuff and because of Uncle Aubrey and Jerico, I've been paying extra attention to it lately."

"What are you thinking?" Donny asked curiously.

"Some of it is the stories that parents tell their children to help try and explain why the world works the way it does."

"Is it like the spooky stories where someone is following a path and finding out that one day that it leads somewhere that it never did before?" Jason K asked curiously.

"Be careful of your goodies on the way to Grandma's house." Donny said with a smile.

"Yeah, but no. Like that, but also with something about it that's so big that it goes against the laws of nature." Paul said seriously.

"Some cultures have stories about villages lost in time, where everyone fell asleep for a hundred years. Could it be something like that?" Arlo cautiously asked.

"There are other stories where everyone in a town disappeared, all at the same time, and were never seen or heard from again." Dylan quickly added.



"Those could be the same story except in one the people found their way back and in the other one they didn't." Obie said seriously.

"Because of the frozen flames, that might mean that time froze all around us and that when we get back to normal that it'll still be the same hour, minute and second that we left. No matter if we're in here for days or weeks or even months." Jason K said with increasing excitement.

"I do not find the prospect to be quite as joyous as you apparently do. Existing without existing in a realm without day or night to mark the passage of time is maddening. The only sounds are shrieks and howls in the distance. Everything becomes odorless and tasteless. You can see flames, the inner light of certain special individuals, like Arlo, and sometimes, under the right conditions, you can see into the waking world through shadows and reflections." Randolph carefully shared with them.

"How did you get through it?" Donny asked with concern.

"While I would like to claim some great virtue or intestinal fortitude, the honest truth of the matter is that I continue to exist because I haven't disappeared yet. I don't have any monumental insights into the matter, only the good fortune to have found you before I gave up my last hope and ceased to be."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ryvan, can I ask you a kinda personal question?" Paul asked distractedly.

"Yeah. I guess so." Ryvan answered hesitantly.

"Do you know why you're deaf? I mean, do you know the medical cause of it?"

"Yeah. I guess my mom drank and did drugs and stuff when she was pregnant with me and because of that, I had a few birth defects. At first, they thought that I was going to be really messed up mentally, but I just ended up being deaf."

"Did they say what was wrong that caused you to be deaf?" Paul persisted.

"They said that the parts of my ears associated with hearing never developed in me. They couldn't do corrective surgery because there wasn't anything there to correct. I was born *without* auditory nerves and the related organs." Ryvan carefully explained.

"Do you know if they ever thought about transplants or anything like that?" Donny asked curiously.

"They talked about that. They said that even if they found everything I was missing somehow, which they didn't expect would happen, there wouldn't be anything to connect them to. I guess I've got to face it. I'm not wired for sound." Ryvan finished regretfully.

"But now that you're here you can hear us?" Paul asked to confirm.

"Yeah. I guess so." Ryvan cautiously agreed, then explained, "I've never been able to hear before, so I can't be sure that what I hear is the same thing that you hear. But I understand what you're saying when you speak, so I'm willing to call it good and leave it be."

"If you've never heard before, then it seems like you'd have to 'learn' what the different sounds are before you could understand what we're saying." Arlo said speculatively.

"What are you getting at, Paul?" Dylan slowly asked.

"I'm just trying to make sure that I'm understanding everything. Like, maybe if we understand all of what's happening to us, it'll help us figure out where we are and how we got here."

"Have you come up with anything?"

"Nothing that you'll want to hear about."

"So you've come up with something? What is it?"

"Have any of you thought about... what if we're dead?" Paul asked disjointedly.

"No. Why would you think that?" Dylan asked seriously.

"Well, we're here with a ghost and Ryvan can hear, even though he's physically not able to. According to what Randolph was saying, the light we see is spiritual..." Paul trailed off, not knowing what more to say to defend his supposition.

"I don't know what to tell you. I believe that I'm alive, but I don't have any way of proving it." Dylan reluctantly admitted.

"Randolph? Can you think of any way we could prove it to ourselves one way or another?" Arlo asked curiously.

"Like Dylan, I have no proof to offer that couldn't be dismissed as being part of our shared fantasy. I *believe* that you are all alive, but I have nothing else to offer in evidence." Randolph finished regretfully.

"Does it matter?" Kole asked simply.

"If we're dead? Yeah!" Dylan said somewhat frantically.

"What are we going to do if we *are* dead?" Before anyone could answer, Kole continued, "What are we going to do if we're *not*?"

"If we're dead, anything we could do probably wouldn't matter." Ryvan timidly ventured.

"We turned on the fireplace, that might mean that we can move and change things in the real world. If we can change things, we matter." Kole said firmly.

"I guess that's true." Ryvan said uncertainly.

"Does anyone have another plan?" Kole asked simply.

"*Another* plan? Do you mean that you have a plan to begin with?" Jason K cautiously asked.

"Yeah. Getting stronger with our gifts and becoming a team so that we can help the camp and the Clan." Dylan said seriously.

"Randolph? Would you mind if I touched you?" Donny asked cautiously.

"Why? If I may ask." Randolph warily responded.

"I'm just trying to understand the rules of this place. If I can touch the others, it doesn't really prove anything but if I can touch you..."

After a moment, Randolph cautiously asked, "What will it prove?"

Donny timidly smiled, then quietly said, "Just that I can touch you, I suppose. Nothing else."

Randolph adopted Donny's timid expression, then moved to be within reach.

As Donny reached up to gently cup Randolph's cheek, Randolph reached out his hand to mirror Donny's position.

Their eyes locked, daring each other to stop... or to continue, perhaps both at the same time. Finally, in the same moment, Donny and Randolph touched each other.

A strange look crossed Donny's face as he gently caressed Randolph's cheek with his thumb.

"Is something wrong?" Dylan quietly asked.

"No. I just thought that Randolph's cheek would be soft, it looks soft... It's actually kinda prickly." Donny finished with a tender grin.

"Is that acceptable to you?" Randolph cautiously asked.

"Yeah. I like it." Donny shyly admitted.

"But you can feel each other?" Dylan asked to confirm.

After a moment to consider what he was feeling, Donny finally said, "Yeah. He feels completely real to me."

"I'm not sure if that means that you're both spirits or if you somehow have real bodies in this place." Paul said frankly.

"Randolph, you said that as a ghost that you couldn't smell or taste anything, is that right?" Dylan asked slowly.

"Yes. It's not that I missed it, since it was mostly like being lost in a dream, but I noticed because it was something outside myself that could have helped to prove or disprove my existence." Randolph cautiously explained.

"So I guess that means that one of us needs to try and taste something." Dylan said as he looked around at the others in the faint firelight.

"That's easy." Obie said confidently, then walked to Dylan and gave him a firm kiss.

The mildly interested looks of the group slowly transformed to various expressions of surprise.

"Um, yeah. Easy." Paul muttered absently as he continued to watch.

When Obie finally backed away, Donny quietly asked, "Were you able to taste anything?"

"Yeah." Dylan confirmed, then added, "I'm not actually into guys all that much, but... it was sweet... in a lot of ways."

"So what does that mean? I mean, as far as us being real or not?" Paul asked seriously.

"The only thing it proves is that we're not dead like Randolph was. He couldn't smell or taste anything. We can." Dylan said reasonably.

"Would you mind?" Donny asked Randolph quietly.

"Would I mind what?" Randolph asked in puzzlement.

"If I kissed you so that we can see if we can taste each other, since you're the one who couldn't taste before." Donny carefully explained.

"Please try to understand that such things weren't done in my time." Randolph said regretfully.

"Not where anyone could see it, anyway." Dylan responded cynically.

After a moment to consider the words, Randolph cautiously ventured, "Who's to say who did what behind closed doors?"

"So does that mean that you'll let me?" Donny asked hopefully.

"Is the only reason to determine how alive I am?" Randolph asked tentatively.

"No. That's not the only reason. It's also because I want to and with everything that's going on, I may never get another chance." Donny said seriously, then continued by softly asking, "Would you mind?"

"That being said, I think, perhaps, that I would not mind at all." Randolph said with a quiver in his voice that betrayed his nervousness.

Those who had been able to witness both kisses couldn't help but notice that Donny had virtually duplicated Obie's kissing technique, mimicking his firm, self-assured style.

"You know, when I used to dream about being 'one of the guys' this isn't exactly what I imagined it being like." Ronny said to the others as the kiss continued.

Finally, Donny pulled out of the kiss enough to quietly ask, "Was that okay?"

After a long moment, Randolph was finally able to say, "Never, at any time, in my previous life, did I *ever* experience anything like that."

"So you liked it?" Donny asked hopefully.

"If one were to believe in such a thing as destiny, then it is conceivable that this exact moment may be why I have continued to exist." Randolph said somewhat breathlessly.

"I'll take that as a 'yes!'" Donny said warmly.

## Chapter 2 - Plans Awry

"What should we do now?" Donny asked into the silence that had fallen over the room.

"I think that we need to be on the lookout for a quest giver." Paul said seriously as he looked to Obie for confirmation.

As Paul watched, an expression of realization dawned in Obie's eyes.

No such expression visited Dylan and he finally cautiously asked, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I've seen a lot of movies and TV shows about things like this happening to people... usually kids." Paul said frankly.

"This isn't a movie." Dylan slowly informed him.

Before Paul could respond, Obie quickly interjected, "We know that! But stuff like this isn't supposed to happen to regular people in real life. There's nothing in real life that tells you what to do when something like this *does* happen. The movies and stuff may be pretend, but at least they already thought it through and can give us a clue of *something* that we can do."

"Besides, we're here in this other world or dimension or dream or whatever it is, and it looks like *someone* brought us here for a reason." Paul said seriously.

"Yeah. It was Teddy." Dylan confirmed.

"Teddy might have pushed *you* to be here, but other things pushed me and I'm sure that if you ask around, you'll find out that all of us were pushed in the same direction by different things that don't seem to be related to each other at all." Paul said seriously.

"I don't know where you came up with that, but from what little I know of it, that sounds about right." Dylan relented.

"Either way, it doesn't matter. Whoever brought us here got what they wanted. We're here. Now we need to know 'why'. The way things like this seem to work is that the only way we'll ever get out of here is if we do what we were brought here to do." Paul said reasonably.

"And what happens to us if we don't?" Ronny asked curiously.

"I don't know. They don't tell stories about quests that never started or make movies about people who refused to step up and take action when they were needed." Paul said regretfully.

"I don't think that the camp people would let us go off on our own for anything that could be called a quest." Donny said frankly.

"From what I've heard about the Clan, they actually might. They understand how important things like this can be. But I doubt that they'll be in a position to do anything about our situation either way. They might not know about it. In fact, they might not *ever* know." Paul offered frankly, then added more quietly, "At least, that's how things like this *usually* work out.

"Won't people notice that we're missing?" Arlo asked anxiously.

"Mayhap so. However, before we devote undue attention to that, there are unanswered questions that need be addressed." Randolph added quite reasonably.

"Like how you all of a sudden have a body of your own?" Arlo helpfully suggested.

"Yes. Our chances of success in coming endeavors will likely improve to a notable degree if we understand the governing mechanisms of this place that we have found ourselves in." Randolph admitted.

"Yeah. We need to do that for sure, but remember that quests usually have a time limit." Obie hurried to explain.

"And stakes." Paul added, then clarified, "Most of the time you're in danger of losing someone or something important to you. I mean, otherwise, why would you bother with it?"

"This doesn't sound like something that's fun." Jason K said honestly.

"Not everything is." Kole told him simply.

"You're still going to quest with us even if it isn't fun, aren't you?" Ryvan hurried to ask.

"Yeah. Just, at first, it sounded like we were going on an adventure, like when you go out and play. But the more you talk about it, the more it sounds like something dangerous, that's going to be a lot of hard work." Jason K said unenthusiastically.

"Probably, yeah." Kole confirmed.

"So, Paul, where should we go to find this 'quest giver' of yours?" Dylan asked curiously.

After a moment to consider, Paul finally said, "The 'quest giver' is probably waiting for something. Maybe it's for us to begin to understand or accept our situation. Either way, I'm pretty sure that we'll be thankful for whatever we're able to get done on our own ahead of time. Once we're given our quest, we probably won't be able to do much more than focus on that."

"So, what do you think we should do next?" Ronny asked reasonably.

"Food, shelter, and security. There's not much we can do about food with the way things are right now. We may come back to that. Shelter... if we can keep the cabin from fading out around us, we've got a roof over our heads."

"Do we? I can't see anything like a roof or anything else." Kole said frankly.

"But even if it *does* rain, we can't feel it anyway. We don't even get wet." Ryvan helpfully added.

"Which leaves us with security." Paul said seriously.

"If we can't touch anything, doesn't that mean that nothing can touch us either?" Kole cautiously reasoned.

"That *might* be true, but we can't count on it. Even something like a pointy stick would be better than having no weapons at all." Paul explained to the group.

"But if we had a weapon, wouldn't it fade as soon as we lost concentration and stop lighting it?" Kole asked curiously.

"I'm still not clear on how all that works. The flames are here but the fireplace isn't. We can see each other, but not the room that we're in. The rules of our reality don't seem to apply here... at least not consistently."

"One such inconsistency that *may* prove to be relevant is that the mirror seems to be missing." Randolph said slowly.

"Maybe the mirror is in the same reality as the fireplace. You'll probably have to look at it with your spirit light to be able to see it." Donny said with a smile at his friend.

"Except that Randolph's light looks at a different time and place than ours does." Arlo said reasonably.

"We still can't be sure about that, but that *is* how it seems to work." Ronny said cautiously.



"A different time, maybe, but probably not a different place. It makes more sense that Randolph's light shows into the past, into 'his' time." Donny said speculatively.

"What about any of this makes sense?" Ryvan asked irritably.

"The more we understand the rules of the world, the more tools we'll have to reach our goals." Donny said seriously.

"Once the 'quest giver' tells us what they are." Dylan quietly added.

"If that's how it works, then I'm going to try and find the mirror. If it isn't here with us, maybe I can find it with my light." Kole announced.

"That's a good idea. If anyone else wants to work on something like that, now's the time, go ahead." Donny said quickly.

"And if you can find anything that we can use as a weapon, be sure to grab it." Ronny helpfully added.

"Just because we can see something doesn't mean that we can touch it." Arlo warned.

"I couldn't touch something that I could see by *your* light but I could touch something that I could see with my own." Kole said reasonably.

"We'll just have to wait and see if it works for everyone like that, but at least it's a place to start." Ryvan said in support of his friend.

"I'm going to look for the door." Jason K announced, then asked more gently, "Do you want to help me Teddy?"

"You're not mad at me?" Teddy asked cautiously.

"For what?" Jason K asked confusedly.

"For causing all this." Teddy said anxiously.

"You trying to get us all together like this seemed a little weird, but I don't feel like you were trying to trap us or lie to us or anything like that. So no, I don't blame you." Jason K said seriously.

"I don't blame you either." Dylan hurried to assure the boy, then explained, "You just seemed to know about things that were going to happen before they did. That left me with questions... it still does." Dylan said honestly.

"All I remember is that I dreamed some stuff. Everything was all wrong and scary and sad. But I don't remember *what* I dreamed anymore." Teddy timidly admitted.

"Do you have any dreams like that about what's going to happen to us next?" Dylan asked curiously.

"Yeah. A couple, I think. I just can't remember them." Teddy said helplessly.

"Jinx? Are you still here with us?" Obie asked cautiously.

There was no answer as Obie searched the faces barely revealed in the frozen firelight.

"Jinx?" Donny called more loudly as his spiritual light began to gently shine.

"I'm here." A small voice responded from the darkness.

"What are you doing over here all by yourself? Did you find something?" Donny asked as he moved toward the sound.

"Someone will get hurt." Jinx said regretfully.

Donny's spiritual light increased as he searched for the source of the voice.

"There you are." Donny said warmly, then tentatively asked, "What are you afraid of?"

"I bring bad luck. I don't want anyone to get hurt because of me." Jinx timidly admitted in the faint glow of Donny's spirit-light.

"The way things are going tonight, it might not make much of a difference. Why don't you come over with the rest of the group while we try to figure things out?" Donny asked encouragingly.

"But what if bad things happen to you because I'm there?" Jinx asked cautiously.

"If bad things happen, we'll find a way to deal with them." Donny said reasonably.

"You won't leave me behind?" Jinx asked in almost a whisper.

"I wish I could promise you that I won't leave you, but there's too much we don't know about going on right now. I can promise to try and keep you with us. How's that?" Donny finished weakly.

After a moment to consider, Jinx finally said, "I guess that's more of a promise than I've got from anyone else."

"Is it enough?" Donny asked hopefully.

"It's a start." Jinx cautiously responded.

"Then let's get back to the group before they get worried about us." Donny said encouragingly.

After a moment of hesitation, Jinx moved to Donny's side and walked with him to join the others around the fire.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you okay?" Ronny asked hesitantly.

Donny looked down to Jinx, prompting him to answer.

"Yeah. I'm just used to staying away from people so that they don't get hurt." Jinx said timidly.

"Have you always had bad luck or did something happen to you?" Jason K asked curiously.

"I guess I always had it..." Jinx said slowly, then quietly explained, "My parents had it before I did. One of the times when lightning struck our house, I heard the firemen talking about how they didn't want to even go inside because they were afraid that they'd get the bad luck on them. Anyone who'd ever lived there was cursed, even after they moved away."

"Why did your family move into a place like that?" Jason K asked curiously.

"I think because it was cheap." Jinx said honestly.

"Really? That sounds kinda dumb." Teddy said simply.

"They never really told me, but from what I heard them say when they were screaming at each other, my mom blamed my dad for moving them in there. When I was born, they thought their luck had changed." Jinx said distantly, then quietly added, "They were wrong."

"Is that why they left you at Camp Little Eagle?" Jason K asked curiously.

"Maybe he doesn't want to talk about it. Remember what it's like to be new here." Arlo quickly suggested, giving Jinx a graceful way out.

"No. That's okay." Jinx told Arlo quietly, then continued, "Besides, my parents left me a long time ago... when they died. My dad caught fire and burned to death in the produce section of the Piggly Wiggly."

"He just... caught fire?" Obie slowly asked, certain that he must have missed something in the telling of the story.

"Yeah, next to the cucumbers." Jinx confirmed.

"What about your mom?" Dylan gently asked.

"She fell out a window and broke her neck." Jinx reluctantly answered.

"I guess that happens." Dylan half-heartedly supplied.

"Do you know? Was it an accident?" Donny cautiously asked.

"Yeah. She didn't jump or anything like that. She fell. She was hanging out the window, sneaking a cigarette and her boss walked up, she lost her balance and... think they said that she fell a total of about two and a half feet. She was on the ground floor. She fell out the window, landed on her head and broke her neck." Jinx explained.

"So then you were sent here?" Paul guessed.

"Then I was sent to foster homes and group homes and stuff but when they figured out about my bad luck, they'd pass me on to the next place. The last people who had me, the Catholics, decided to give me to Camp Little Eagle when they did some stupid little prayers, you know how they do, just to make us kids miserable. Anyway, this time when they started forcing us all to pray, they woke up the bad luck real hard. Have you ever seen nuns with chiggers? Nasty. At least they didn't try to 'pray it away'. As soon as they made the connection and figured out that it had something to do with me, they brought me to the camp." Jinx timidly finished.

"Does anyone here know of anything that we can do to undo curses?" Donny asked seriously.

"Jerico might know something about it, but I never really studied anything like that myself. I was more focused on the theory side of Shamanism than the practice." Paul awkwardly admitted.

"I've seen some things, but not enough to be able to do anything myself." Dylan said frankly.

"Mikey? Are you there?" Arlo asked as he looked upward.

"What are you doing?" Jason K asked curiously.

"Calling for help." Arlo said simply, then looked upward again and asked, "Mikey?"

After a moment, Paul cautiously asked, "Are you sure he can hear you?"

"He said that he might be out of contact with us for a while. I just thought it was worth a try."

"Is he a telepath?" Ronny asked curiously.

"I don't know. He could be. But he's also an angel... well, a saint, actually." Arlo timidly admitted.

Dylan nodded his confirmation that he knew who Arlo was talking about.

"You're friends with a saint?" Kole asked dubiously.

"Well, I don't hang out with him or anything, but he was nice to me and helped me when I needed it, so I kinda count him as a friend because of that." Arlo explained.

"But he's not getting your message now?" Ryvan cautiously asked.

"I don't think so. The last time I saw him he said that we might not be able to reach him for a while and that we needed to prepare to deal with things for ourselves." Arlo said frankly.

"So maybe he saw this coming?" Kole asked speculatively.

"From the way he talked, it was like he could see several things moving in a particular direction. I think he was trying to prepare us to face whatever the danger turned out to be. I don't think he had this specific outcome in mind." Arlo explained.

"So that helps us exactly not at all." Dylan said slowly.

"Yeah. That was kinda my point, but It would've been stupid to not call him and then find out later that he was waiting around listening for someone to need his help with something." Arlo countered.

"Yeah. I guess so." Dylan unenthusiastically relented.

"So, what do we do now?" Ryvan asked curiously.

"Let's go over what we know..." Donny began to suggest, but was gently interrupted.

"We don't *know* anything. But it wouldn't hurt to go over what we think we know." Dylan said simply.

"That's what I meant." Donny said with an exaggerated eye roll for emphasis.

"They're just like Matt and Tai." Paul said with a grin at Obie, eliciting a giggle from the younger boy.

"What's that?" Dylan asked suspiciously.

"It's just something from a show that Obie and I watch. You and Donny get along like the main characters of that show." Paul explained.

"How do we get along?" Donny asked hesitantly.

Obie shook his head at Paul, letting it be known that he wasn't going to be the one to say it.

Past a barely restrained grin, Paul timidly answered, "Like an old married couple."

"I don't do that!" Donny and Dylan barked simultaneously.

The boys around the frozen flames laughed good naturedly at their identical reactions.

"What do we know or *think* that we know?" Paul asked with a grin.

After a moment to see if anyone else was going to speak, Randolph quietly said, "From my limited and admittedly out-dated point-of-view, it appears to me that we are inside an otherworldly, dream version of your cabin seven. Does that sound like a reasonable assessment of our situation?"

"I don't know about that. Normally, whether the light's turned on or off the room hasn't changed, only your perception of it has. I get the feeling that when the lights went out this time, everything changed." Arlo said thoughtfully.

"That sounds about right, except that it doesn't explain why I can't find any pieces of the mirror." Kole said in frustration.

"Maybe you're looking in the wrong place." Ryvan told him seriously.

"Have you found something?" Kole asked with surprise.

"Bring your light to the wall above the fireplace. I think maybe the mirror's still there, it hasn't been broken." Ryvan said frankly.

"If it didn't break, then what was that sound?" Kole asked curiously as he made his way to standing.

"I wouldn't know. Identifying sounds isn't a talent that I've had much of a chance to develop." Ryvan said wryly.

"Was it *reality* breaking, maybe?" Ronny cautiously suggested before Kole could respond.

After a moment, Dylan reluctantly said, "I don't know if you're joking or not, but either way, it's not nearly as ridiculous as it sounds on the surface."

"Ryvan was right. Here it is." Kole said anxiously.

"Can you see anything in the mirror?" Jason K asked curiously.

"I don't have enough light to see more than the glass itself." Ryvan reluctantly admitted.

"Get Arlo over there. If you need a strong light, he's the best we've got." Donny said seriously.

"What do you want me to do?" Arlo asked anxiously.

"Just focus your light on the mirror so that maybe we can get some answers." Dylan said as he lined up with the other boys to try and see something... anything in the mirror.

"What was that?" Kole asked suddenly.

"I can't see anything. What did you see?" Dylan asked anxiously.

"I saw something move. I couldn't see what it was. It's too dark." Kole said as he strained to make out any details.

"That's Dylan!" Teddy said as he pointed.

"Where?" Dylan asked as he searched to see anything where Teddy was pointing.

"Over there, by the door. I can't really see you, but for a second I could see the bandage on your face." Teddy hurriedly explained.

"There I am." Ryvan said in a tone of wonder and disbelief.

"I see it. I'm signing to you!" Kole said excitedly.

"Can you see what you're saying?" Donny asked curiously.

"Something about... dog nipples? I don't know. I really can't make it out from here. It's too dark and too far away." Kole said in slow confusion.

"Can you tell if it's something that you said before we heard the mirror break?" Ronny asked reasonably.

"No. It's not a replay of something we already did. I can tell you that much for sure. We never had a conversation anything like that." Kole said with conviction.

"So the world's moved on without us." Arlo said speculatively.

"Do you think if I looked through the mirror with my own light I might be able to see my time instead of yours?" Randolph asked curiously.

"That's a good question." Dylan said, then continued by asking, "Arlo, would you step back and go dim so that Randolph can look with his own light?"

"Yeah. I don't like looking in there anyway. It makes me lose hope." Arlo said as his light faded.

"I'm not as strong as Arlo. I can only do this for a minute, but I am hopeful that we will be able to see *something*." Randolph said seriously.

"Do it." Donny said encouragingly as he moved to Randolph's side to support him regardless of what he saw.

The rest of the boys lined up as they watched and waited.

"It's the same thing that Arlo showed us." Kole said slowly.

"No. It's moving slower... and in reverse, I think." Ryvan said as he fought to make sense of the dim foggy images moving before them.

"See if maybe making it brighter will make it go faster." Dylan slowly suggested.

Randolph gave a push and his light became slightly brighter.

As the boys watched, the scene before them seemed to increase in speed, nearing normal, except, of course, for the fact that everything was moving backward.

"I can't hold this much longer." Randolph warned them.

"You don't need to. Let it go." Ronny said wearily.

"But if you keep it going, maybe we'll be able to see something that'll tell us what's going on." Dylan quickly argued.

"Or we could get fixated on a world that's not ours anymore and maybe lose the chance to prepare for whatever's next." Donny implored him to understand.

"I think we've seen enough for now. We're them. They're not us. What else do we need to see?" Ronny explained.

"If that's true, we *were* them. But now we're us." Dylan reasonably countered.

"Am I the only one who doesn't know what they're talking about?" Ryvan cautiously asked.

"Good. I thought for a minute that it was just me." Jason K nervously chuckled.

"Teddy, does any of this seem familiar to you? Like something from your dreams?" Dylan asked curiously.

"Them in the mirror does. Us here don't." Teddy answered honestly.

"Randolph, didn't you say something about ghosts being able to see through flames, reflections, and shadows?" Arlo asked uncertainly.



"Yes. Although I have always believed that such things were to be avoided due to their allure. Had I found a mirror, I might easily have become bound to it, forever watching the passage of a reality that I had no part in." Randolph said seriously.

"So we're back to the theory that we're ghosts." Donny said frankly.

"Regardless of what we're called, we appear to have flesh and we feel alive, at least to ourselves. We have to make decisions based on that. If we start buying into being ghosts, we'll never get anything accomplished." Dylan said seriously.

"What can we do when we're like this?" Jason K asked reasonably.

"We're still working on that. But what I just saw Randolph do looked like something that could end up being really useful." Donny said encouragingly.

"How's that?" Ronny asked curiously.

"When something bad happens, how often would you like to go back and get a do-over?" Donny asked with a smile.

"So you're saying that you think that Randolph has the ability to rewind time?" Ronny asked dubiously.

"I'm saying that it's not the most ridiculous thing I've heard in the past few hours. If we work to discover what other abilities we have, we might be able to do some incredible things... real superhero stuff." Donny said frankly.

"I'd expect that kind of an idea from Obie or Paul, but not from you." Dylan said with concern.

"What they're saying is beginning to make sense to me. We *were* brought here, this exact group of people. I have to believe that there *is* a reason. The sooner we get an idea of our situation and decide to band together, the sooner the 'quest giver' will show up to tell us what's expected of us." Donny explained earnestly.

"Yeah. And remember that something like this usually takes a lot of power to make happen, which is why they don't do stuff like this all the time. That means that whatever we're here to do must be something really important to someone very high up in things." Paul explained.

"How can you be so sure that we're not dead?" Kole asked seriously.

"Randolph. You've been dead before. Is this what it's like?" Arlo cautiously asked.

"No. I mean, the world is, yes. But the way I feel now is completely different. When I was dead before, I felt like I was dissolving, I was becoming more and more a part of the world around me and less myself. The light wouldn't take me and the dark didn't want me, so I was slowly becoming part of everything that was left."

"But you don't feel that way now." Donny gently prompted.

"No. Now I'm solid. I'm awake. I have hopes and dreams and I can plan for the future... In fact, I think that may be it. When I was dead, I had no future. All that was left for me was to wallow in the past."

"But you believe the place we're in *is* the realm of the dead?" Ryvan cautiously asked.

"It seems that way to me. But keep in mind that while I was here, all of this was like a dream to me. I wasn't thinking rationally. I didn't investigate my surroundings or test my boundaries. I was feeling fear and regret for my lost life and missed opportunities."

"I don't feel that. I mean, I feel like myself... well, except that now I have a guy's body." Ronny said frankly, then tugged at his crotch as he absently asked, "How do you guys ever get anything done? This thing is a constant distraction."

Donny nodded his confirmation to Ronny's words as Dylan said, "That's another thing to keep in mind about all this. My face is healed, Randolph has a body, Ronny's a guy now, and Ryvan can hear. These are miracles, by anyone's definition. I had a miracle before. Questioning it doesn't help anything. Accept it and move forward with gratitude and try to be a better person. Prove that whoever did this was right to invest their trust in you... in us."

"Whether we call it a miracle or not, does it make any difference in what we do next?" Kole asked seriously.

"Yeah, actually I think it does." Paul said confidently, then explained, "You've got to learn the rules of the world to get anything done in it. Science and physics and all that stuff that we're used to, may not work the same here. The magic you heard about in fairy tales as a kid and always thought was pretend might actually be more useful to us here and now."

"Depending on whether your world has witchcraft or science might make a difference in how you respond to a potential threat or solve certain problems." Arlo said supportively.

"Like Jinx's curse." Donny said simply.

"Let's hold off on tackling that one until we have a little more of an understanding of our abilities and of the world that we've found ourselves in. His 'curse' could very well be the reason he was included in this adventure." Dylan explained.

"We might have easily overlooked Randolph's time reversing ability and dismissed it as being useless if we hadn't dared to speculate on the utility of it." Arlo said seriously.

"We're still not sure if it's going to be of any use. We're just guessing." Kole reminded the group.

"That doesn't matter. The idea is sound. We need to not only take stock of what talents we have at our disposal, but also stretch our imaginations to come up with as many ways to use them as possible." Arlo said as he looked around the group to gauge their acceptance of his words.

"But we won't know what abilities we *need* to have until the 'quest giver' shows up." Ryvan countered.

"If we know what abilities we have to work with, then we'll have a whole lot better idea of what we'll be able to do when we start our quest." Obie said speculatively.

"So we *are* doing a quest?" Kole asked cautiously.

"The way things like this go, we'll probably be given a choice. If we decide not to do the quest, we'll be allowed to go back to our regular lives and maybe not even remember about any of this. But at the same time, deep inside you'll know that because we didn't go on the quest, lots of people are probably going to suffer or maybe even die." Obie said seriously.

"Lots?" Ronny asked hesitantly.

"Even if it's only a few people, wouldn't you still want to do it?" Paul asked reasonably.

After a moment to consider, Ronny finally answered, "Depends on the people, I guess."

"He's right. While it sounds nice to say that you'd endanger yourself for someone else, regardless of who they are, the truth is that you might as well just give up if you're willing to risk yourself needlessly. Be smart. Only take a risk when it's important." Donny said seriously.

"But before we even start the quest, we'll probably get tested, to show that we can stick with it and get the job done." Obie hurried to add.

"Yeah. And then after we're tested as a group, we might still get tested individually before we're trusted with anything really dangerous or important." Paul added seriously.

"So what, in your opinion, should we be doing right now?" Ronny asked reasonably.

"I don't know. We don't seem to be able to do much of anything about food, shelter, or weapons. Maybe if we take a few minutes to tell about ourselves that'll trigger the 'Quest Giver' into showing up." Paul reluctantly suggested.

"Then why don't you tell us something about you?" Ronny asked simply.

"Uh, yeah. There's really not much to say. My Uncle Aubrey is a shaman and a lot of people really depend on him." Paul said with difficulty.

"Is he teaching you about that stuff or anything that might help us?" Ronny asked cautiously.

"No. But my cousin Jerico is going to be the camp's shaman and I'm going to be living with him and helping him out where I can." Paul hurriedly explained.

"But you haven't learned anything from him yet, right?" Ronny asked speculatively.

"Right." Paul reluctantly confirmed.

"So far you've told us about your uncle and cousin, but who are you when you're not acting as an extension of someone else? Who are *you*?" Ronny asked concernedly.

After a moment to consider, Paul finally responded, "If you're asking who I am when I'm alone in the dark, I don't know what to tell you. Being Native American kind of sets me apart in a way. Maybe that gives me a special something or another, but except for that, I'm the same as everyone else here."

"Obie, you and Paul seem to be on the same wavelength a lot of the time. Will you work with him on discovering things that make him unique?" Donny asked hopefully.

"Yeah. We speak the same language." Obie said with a grin in Paul's direction.

"Digimoji." Paul responded with a pained smile.

After a long moment, Dylan finally said, "I'll go next."

No one seemed to be inclined to disagree, so he continued, "Before hearing Paul's answer, mine would have been completely different. I would have told you about growing up on the streets and getting shot in the face, but you know what? That's not who I am, that's what was done to me. I think I'd like to join Paul on his path to discover

who he is. For me, every day so far has been about survival. I've never really had the time to stop and think about who I am or who I want to be."

"Let's take a shortcut here. Is there anyone who *doesn't* want to figure out who you are deep down in your gooey places?" Kole asked seriously.

"I think we all would. But I don't know if this is really the thing we should be focusing on right this minute." Ryvan countered, then explained, "It just feels like we could be doing something a little more productive."

"I'm open to suggestions." Dylan said honestly.

"Randolph was just saying something about investigating and looking for boundaries and stuff. That sounds like something useful to me." Arlo said cautiously.

"It looks like each of us has his own light, so we should have everything we need to be able to step away from the fire and explore a little." Dylan said uncertainly.

"We should go in groups and stay within hearing distance of each other. When we get as far as we can that way, one person can stop and act as a relay, so that the rest of their group can go further and explore things without having to worry about losing anyone." Donny said seriously.

"What are the chances that once we separate we'll each end up in our own little world, shaped by our dreams and hidden fantasies where we'll be lost forever?" Arlo asked cautiously.

"I'm not even going to argue that it couldn't happen, mostly because it would fit right in with the weirdness of this place. But what can we accomplish by sitting around the fire where it's safe?" Dylan asked frankly.

"It sounds to me like we can either do something or do nothing." Obie said simply.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm not good at doing nothing... never got a taste for it. I'm gonna go explore. Who wants to go with me?" Dylan asked with a smile.

"I will!" Teddy immediately volunteered.

"Anyone else?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"Come on Jason K. We can explore together." Teddy said encouragingly.

Donny smiled at the development, then turned and asked, "Jinx? Would you like to go exploring with me?"

"Really?" Jinx asked disbelievingly.

"Yeah. I think that if you're brave enough to go out into the dark on your own to protect the rest of us, that you'd be a good person to have on our team." Donny said seriously.

"Dylan, do you mind if I tag along with you?" Arlo cautiously asked.

"Sounds good. Glad to have you." Dylan said confidently.

"Randolph? Would you like to go with me and Jinx?" Donny asked hopefully.

"Yes. Thank you. I am honored by your invitation." Randolph said reverently.

"Ronny?" Donny asked with a curious look in his direction.

After a moment to consider, Ronny finally said, "Before I say 'yes', I'm wondering if you'd feel comfortable being on a team where 'I' was in charge?"

"Sure. In fact, you can be in charge of this one if you want. I'm just getting a team together." Donny said easily.

"No, maybe next time. I was just curious." Ronny said comfortably.

"I don't get off on being in charge, but I'll do it if no one else wants to. I don't mind." Donny explained.

Ronny nodded his easy acceptance of the statement.

"Is it going to be a problem for anyone if I don't go exploring and hang out here by the fire?" Ryvan cautiously asked.

"Actually, that sounds like a good idea to me. This is our home base. We can go out and explore, then come back here to share what we found." Donny said happily.

"Besides that, if someone brought us here and wants to talk to us, this is going to be the first place they're going to look." Obie added reasonably.

"While we're here, we can try and come up with other stuff from all the shows that we've seen." Paul said speculatively.

"Yeah. Weren't you saying something before about weapons..." Kole said in a half-teasing tone which didn't quite hide his genuine anxiety.

"If anyone finds any weapons, they need to bring them back here to home base right away. If we're going to have to defend our ground at some point, this is what we'll be defending." Dylan said seriously.

"Unless one of us runs into an even better place to call home." Donny added reasonably.

"Yeah. Like someplace with food, water... light, maybe." Ronny added with a grin.

"That'd be nice, wouldn't it?" Donny asked playfully.

"If you find someplace like that, come back here and let us know before you decide to move in." Dylan said in a mock-stern voice.

Donny flashed an amused glance at Ronny before responding, "We'll think about it."

"Are we going now?" Jason K asked anxiously.

"There's no time like the present." Dylan said eagerly as he gestured vaguely in the general direction of where the bedrooms had been in the Cabin Seven layout.

"Actually, considering everything, I'm not sure if 'time' and 'present' mean the same thing that they did when we woke up this morning... or anything at all, really." Arlo said hesitantly.

"Then let's get out there and see what we can find so that you can use that big brain of yours to put the pieces together and figure out what's going on here." Dylan said encouragingly.

Arlo smiled at the vote of confidence and stepped to Dylan's side.

His movement seemed to set things into motion.

A few seconds later, Paul, Obie, Kole, and Ryvan were standing by the frozen fire watching the others being absorbed into the surrounding darkness.

## Chapter 3 - Splinterland

"Guys, remember that you can make your own light if you need to. You don't have to wait for Arlo to do it for you." Dylan quietly told his fellow explorers.

"But it's hard to make light and walk at the same time." Jason K complained.

"I know, but don't let it slow you down. It'll get easier with practice." Arlo implored him to understand.

"It's okay Jason. You can go slower if you need to. We won't save any time by letting you run face first into something." Dylan said reassuringly.

"Speaking of that, shouldn't we have come to a wall by now?" Arlo cautiously asked.

"I only have a general sense of how big the main room is, but it does *feel* like we should be at the far side of it." Dylan reluctantly admitted.

"Listen." Teddy whispered.

After a long silent moment, Dylan cautiously asked, "What is it?"

"I thought I heard a voice." Teddy slowly answered.

"Maybe you heard someone from the other group." Dylan reluctantly suggested.

"I don't think so. It sounded like it came from in front of us... listen. *There it is again.*" Teddy finished in a whisper.

"I heard it too." Arlo quietly confirmed.

"Hello! Who's there?" Dylan asked forcefully as he fought to boost his spiritual light enough to see ahead of them.

A brighter light rose up from behind him. He glanced over his shoulder to see Arlo casting a soft white glow.

"Dylan? Is that really you?" A young voice asked hopefully from the surrounding darkness. Suddenly a small figure slammed into Dylan, engulfing him in a desperate hug.

"Johnny?" Dylan asked disbelievingly, then looked around to see if any of the others might have a clue of what was going on.



"I thought I lost you. I just about gave up, then I heard your voice. It sounded like you were talking about me. As soon as I heard that, I followed the sound until I caught up to you." Johnny said with accomplishment.

"But Johnny, I heard that you were... dead." Dylan said as gently as he could and even returned the hug he was being given to some small degree.

"Yeah. I got popped pretty bad. It took me a while to figure out what happened. You're dead too, ain't'cha? I mean, the living can't see me. I learned that first thing." Johnny said as he finally pulled back from Dylan's side enough to look up at him.

"I got shot, but I didn't die... it's kind of a long story. But now it seems like we're in a place between life and death where we can talk to each other. We still haven't figured out exactly what that's all about." Dylan said honestly.

"He's not like Randolph." Arlo said cautiously.

"Like how?" Dylan asked curiously.

"Look at him, he looks like a ghost. He's transparent." Arlo said frankly.

"Johnny, take a step back so I can get a good look at you." Dylan said gently.

"You're not going to make me go away, are you?" Johnny cautiously asked.

"No. It's nothing like that. We've just found ourselves in a weird place where we don't understand how things work. We need to step carefully and look closely at each new thing we discover." Dylan rationally explained.

Finally, after taking a moment to think it over, Johnny stepped away from Dylan and waited to be evaluated.

"He's see-through, there's no doubt about that." Dylan said frankly.

"I'm having less of a problem with that than I am with Randolph being solid. In our world or realm or whatever it is, Randolph can barely manifest at all. Now, here, he's as solid and substantial as any of us. Which is fine. Except that if Randolph is solid, then so should Johnny be, too. Right?" Arlo slowly reasoned.

"Do you think it'd be alright if I crashed with you guys for a while? I mean, all the other stuff I had going on kinda fell through when I died." Johnny said uncomfortably.

Dylan looked around their gathering and came to the conclusion that regardless of any feelings he might have on the matter, he *was* the leader.

"Honestly, we don't know enough to make too many plans. You can hang with us for now if you want, and we can see how things work out." Dylan said a bit regretfully.

"Don't worry. I get it. There's too much weirdness going on for either of us to promise much of anything right now." Johnny said frankly.

"Yes. That sounds just like us, doesn't it?" Dylan asked rhetorically,

"Always has been." Johnny reluctantly responded.

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"Ronny, are you okay?" Donny asked with concern.

"Yeah. Why?" Ronny cautiously responded.

"I don't know. You just seem like you're a little quiet... depressed, maybe."

"I'm not depressed. Not really. I think it has something to do with having all my dreams come true, all at once. Now that I have a few minutes to process, it's a little overwhelming."

"I'm guessing that you're talking about the guy thing and not about being stranded in the realm of the dead." Donny said speculatively.

"It's kind of hard to explain. I'm not sure if I even *know* what I'm feeling, but for as long as I can remember, I've always been a girl trying to live as a guy and become like one. As near as I can tell, now I'm exactly the same as if I had been born male... which is good. I'm not complaining. It's just that all of a sudden, I'm missing most of how I identify myself. I mean, who am I? *What* am I? Before, I had a lot of answers to that. I was an FTM trans guy. I was used to fighting to pass, fighting to be recognized, fighting to be heard. Now I'm a guy... just like any other guy... I'm straight, even. I don't know how to be like this."

"After winning your fight, don't you want to celebrate or something?" Jinx quietly asked.

"Yeah. Except that it doesn't feel like winning." Ronny said in a pained voice, then speculated, "Maybe that's the thing. I've been *given* everything that I asked for. Nothing I did caused anything to change, the fight just suddenly ended."

"I guess you could try dressing like a girl. I mean, even if you don't feel girly, it might help you get your trans thing back." Donny cautiously offered.

"No. That'd be like living a lie, like I'd be pretending to be trans just to be part of the movement." Ronny said in a conflicted voice.

"You can still fight for trans stuff as a guy. I mean, no one's going to try and stop you." Donny said honestly.

"Yeah. Of course I'll support them. But if I'm a guy, who identifies as a guy, then me fighting for the cause feels like I'm an outsider trying to horn in on their movement."

"Then what do you believe is your proper place in the grand scheme?" Randolph asked curiously.

"I don't know if there is one for me. Maybe it's as a member of the crowd, cheering from the sidelines."

Before Donny could respond, a low growl sounded from nearby.

*"Did you hear that?"* Ronny whispered.

As Donny opened his mouth to answer, he froze at the sight of inhuman red eyes glowing in the darkness before them.

"What?" Ronny began to ask when another pair of red eyes appeared, focused directly on him.

"Please don't hurt them. They're being nice to me. I don't want them to go away." Jinx implored in a small helpless voice.

Both pairs of eyes shifted to focus on Jinx.

"Do you know who or what they are?" Donny asked cautiously.

"They're demons. I dreamed them up when I was little." Jinx timidly explained.

"If you dreamed them, how are they here?" Ronny asked quietly.

Before Jinx could answer, Randolph asked, "How am I here?"

"Yeah, but you were real to begin with. If these guys are imaginary... I don't know. It makes a difference." Donny said anxiously.

"Jinx. How sure are you that these demons aren't real?" Ronny cautiously asked.

"I've always dreamed about them and sometimes I thought I saw them, when I was alone in the dark. They don't talk to me or anything like that, but I've always felt like they could understand me from the looks in their eyes. Sometimes I'd even talk to them, you

know, tell them what I was feeling when I didn't have anyone else." Jinx fought to explain.

"So they don't hurt you?" Randolph slowly asked.

"They don't bite me or anything like that. But they scare me and make a big mess that I get blamed for and sometimes they'll hurt the people around me. It's mostly because of them that I try not to be around people." Jinx said anxiously.

"Do they cause your bad luck?" Ronny asked curiously.

"I don't know. I guess they might." Jinx said honestly.

"From what you were telling us earlier, it sounds like these creatures became attached to you in your old house and have been following you since." Randolph said speculatively.

"Maybe. I guess." Jinx said uncertainly, then explained, "I never thought about them causing my bad luck. I always felt like I was already unlucky and having Ginger and Mary Ann following me around was just another part of it."

"Ginger and Mary Ann?" Donny asked with a smile.

"They couldn't tell me their names and I needed to call them something. We can give them better names if you want." Jinx hurriedly explained.

"No. The ones you picked are wonderful. As long as Ginger and Mary Ann aren't mad about it, I don't have any problem with it at all." Donny hurried to assure him.

"Do you think they could step closer so that we can see them?" Ronny asked curiously.

"I think they're already close enough." Randolph quietly offered.

"They probably won't anyway. They don't like light." Jinx said anxiously.

"Do you think that they're imaginary?" Ronny cautiously asked.

"Logically, they could be." Donny said consideringly, then continued, "But my instincts are telling me that Ginger and Mary Ann are actual demons who became attached to Jinx because he was born and raised in a haunted house. They may or may not be the source of Jinx's curse, but they are almost certainly a part of it. It would be too big of a coincidence to be random."

"Do you think that they have anything to do with where we are or how we got here?" Ronny cautiously asked.

After a moment to consider, Donny carefully said, "No. I really don't think so. They're here with Jinx. If they cared about us at all, I'm sure that they would have killed us by now. I mean, really, what could we do to stop them? We never even got our pointy stick. But I think that as long as we don't try to hurt Jinx, they'll probably leave us alone."

"So they protect him?" Ronny asked uncertainly.

"I don't know if I'd go that far." Donny said honestly.

*"What do you think we should do next?"* Randolph whispered.

"I think we should back away slowly and go back to the fireplace. Their presence is enough to prove that it isn't safe for us to be wandering around in the dark." Donny said slowly.

"I avoided such creatures in the past, believing that any encounter with them would lead to my certain death." Randolph said nervously.

"Weren't you already dead?" Ronny asked curiously.

"Granted. Even so, I still feared being mauled by a demon." Randolph said honestly.

"Yeah. Actually, that sounds like a valid fear to me." Ronny said easily.

"Let's head back to the others. Remember to take it slow. We don't want to spook the demons." Donny said quietly.

"I'm sure there's a joke in there somewhere, but let's just go." Ronny said anxiously.

The four boys looked at each other and it was Donny who finally asked, "Does anyone know which way is back?"

"I thought you were keeping an eye on the fireplace." Ronny said honestly.

"I am. I mean, I was. When you said that, my attention wavered for a second and it wasn't there anymore." Donny explained.

"Let's go back." Ronny said quietly, obviously unnerved by the new development.

"Yeah. But be careful. I have the feeling that my sense of direction is off." Donny reluctantly admitted.

"Yes. From the distance we walked, it feels to me as though we should be outside by now." Randolph said nervously.

"I think it's this way." Donny said, trying to sound confident, as he put an arm around Randolph to reassure him.

Ronny looked down at Jinx and smiled as he gave a slight eye roll at the budding romance.

Jinx giggled in response, then started walking with the group back in the direction that *seemed* to be where they had come from.

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"What happened back in the real world when Matt and Tai first went to the digital world?" Paul slowly asked.

"They were away at summer camp, weren't they? I don't remember anything important happening in the real world until the second season." Obie responded uncertainly.

"Oh yeah. That's right. I was mixing up Matt and Tai with Takuya and Koji." Paul said seriously.

"Didn't time slow down or stop for Takuya?" Obie asked cautiously.

"Yes. Time in the real world stopped while he was gone so that he ended up returning the same minute that he left. There was a birthday party or something that was starting at the beginning of the first episode and was still going on at the end of the last one." Paul said in slow concentration.

"Do you think we have something like that going on here?" Kole asked cautiously.

"I don't know about that, but from what we saw in the mirror, time isn't working the same there as it is here." Paul responded easily.

"The frozen flames have me wondering if it's us or them who's unstuck in time." Ryvan said honestly.

"How long do you think it will be before someone notices that we're gone?" Kole cautiously asked.

"If what we saw in the mirror is really real, I don't think there's any chance. We're not missing. We're still there." Paul said frankly.

"Yeah. It's weird. We're here, knowing about them and they're there, not knowing about us." Obie said anxiously.

"I'm going to look in the mirror to see if maybe I can spot something to explain what's going on." Kole said determinedly.

"While you're doing that, I think I'm going to see if I can find the front door." Ryvan said as he stood.

"If you find it, don't step through. There's no telling where it might take you." Kole said sternly.

"I'll be careful if you will. There's a good chance that that mirror is somehow tied to all of this, whether it's a tool used to bring us here or the cause of everything, I don't know. But either way, I'm betting it's dangerous." Ryvan said seriously.

"You guys are pretty good. You've figured a lot out with very few clues." An amused voice said from the darkness surrounding them.

"Who's there?" Paul asked in sudden panic.

"A friend." The voice responded in a delighted tone.

"You saying it doesn't make it so." Obie said challengingly.

"He's right. Who are you?" Paul asked again.

"You can call me Alistair." The voice responded.

"That doesn't tell us anything. Who are you and why are you here?" Kole demanded assertively.

"I somehow thought you'd be nicer when we finally met." Alistair said speculatively, then continued more seriously, "I guess you would probably call me your 'quest giver'."

As Alistair said the words, he stepped into the faint light being cast by the blue/gray fire. His brown hair and eyes were unremarkable, but the stranger still seemed unaccountably familiar to all of them.

"Do you have some answers about what's been happening to us?" Kole asked hopefully.

"Some. Not as many as you probably want." Alistair said frankly.

"Where are we? What is this place?" Ryvan asked seriously.

"Don't you want us to have this conversation with the whole group?" Alistair asked in a leading tone.

"Before you can run away or disappear, I want to know where we are and what's happening to us. Depending on your answers to that, my other questions may not matter." Kole said frankly.

"Fair enough." Alistair conceded, then cautiously asked, "What *exactly* did you want to know?"

"Where are we?"

"Even though it might sound like a joke, the most accurate answer I can give you is 'through the looking glass'." Alistair finished with an apologetic grin.

"That sort of confirms what I was thinking about the mirror, but it still doesn't tell us where we are." Ryvan said seriously.

Before Alistair could explain, Paul said, "It means that we're in a different dimension, or at least it confirms it. We pretty much figured that part out already."

"That much is true. And the rest, I'm afraid, is complicated and will take more time than we have to explain. You'll need to discover the unique attributes of this place for yourselves."

"What dimension are we in?" Kole asked cautiously.

"It doesn't really have a name... I suppose that you can name it if you want to. Very few beings in the multiverse are granted the honor." Alistair said consideringly.

"Yeah, great. Maybe later." Kole muttered unenthusiastically.

"Am I going to be deaf when I go back to our own dimension?" Ryvan asked bravely.

"There *is* a decision path that you could take that would have that result. But hopefully we'll be able to find something better for you before that can happen." Alistair carefully answered.

"Hopefully? You don't know?" Kole asked suspiciously.

"Let me be blunt with you. What's going on here isn't a plan, it's damage control. Most of this was made up on the fly."

"Made up by who?" Kole asked in a firm, serious voice.

"Whom." Ryvan quietly corrected.

"Bite me." Kole automatically responded.

Undeterred, Alistair continued by saying, "There are certain beings who can move between realities..."

"Is that what you are?"

"No. My talents are a little more... psychic in origin. The others let me handle things on-the-ground so that I can make split-second decisions using my ability to foresee. They keep watch and help me out by doing what I can't." Alistair said cautiously.

"Does that mean that you're doing what they can't." Paul guessed.



"I'm sure they could probably do it just fine without me, but since they don't like meeting new people, my gifts can make it easier for all involved. I like to think that it's a lot faster, cleaner and easier with me helping them." Alistair explained.

"Okay, '*quest giver*', tell us what we have to do."

"First step, gather the team."

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"The fireplace should be around here somewhere." Dylan said as he stopped in the darkness.

"I was careful to keep track of where we were going and you're right, this is where it should be." Arlo confirmed as he worked to increase his light.

"Most places don't stay where you leave them. It's easier to find people in the dark than it is places." Johnny quietly explained.

"How do you do it? Find people, I mean?" Dylan asked curiously.

"I'm not sure how it works, I mostly did it without thinking. But all I did was *want* to find someone and sooner or later I'd hear them... I think it only works if they're talking about you or maybe if they're thinking about you really hard." Johnny said uncomfortably.

"We can try that." Dylan said cautiously.

"I don't know anything about Paul, but I can picture Obie, Kole and Ryvan. Tell me who we're focusing on and I'll help." Arlo said seriously.

"I never talked to Kole or Ryvan that much, but I talk to Obie all the time." Jason K reluctantly volunteered.

"I don't know any of them, so just tell me who we're calling so that I can try to listen for them." Teddy said frankly.

"Everyone, be quiet for a minute and focus on trying to hear Obie." Dylan said firmly.

"If I knew who Obie was, I'd help you." Johnny quietly offered.

"That's okay. You gave us an idea of something we can try. That was a really big help. You've already done your part." Dylan said frankly.

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"I was afraid of this. When we walked away from the fire, everything behind us disappeared." Donny said anxiously.

"It's not your fault. Sometimes the world changes around you, even when you don't do anything to cause it. You just blink and suddenly everything's different." Randolph said regretfully.

"Do you know of any way to get back to where we were?" Donny asked cautiously.

"No. But stopping and waiting doesn't help, I've done that before. If I keep going and looking for it, sometimes I'll end up where I want to be." Randolph said carefully.

"But you just said that the world sometimes changes when you don't do anything." Jinx timidly pointed out.

"That's right. The world might change, but it doesn't revert to how it was before. Stopping is like giving up. If you keep moving, there's at least a chance that you'll get to where you want to go." Randolph carefully explained.

"I guess that settles it." Donny said resignedly, then turned to Jinx and asked, "Do you think Ginger and Mary Ann could help us find our way?"

"They *might* attack someone who tried to hurt us because they don't want anyone else taking their prey but that's about as much help as I think they'll be." Jinx responded anxiously.

"Comforting." Ronny said dryly.

"It looks like the closest thing to friends we've got here are enemies." Donny said frankly.

"At least we have each other." Randolph quietly offered.

"Yeah. That's important." Donny confirmed, then added more confidently, "We'll find a way to make it work."

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"We can make this place be anything you want. Where do you want to have your meeting?" Alistair asked pleasantly.

"You mean that you can take us anywhere in the whole world?" Obie asked in awe at the suggestion.

"Anywhere in the whole universe... anywhere in any universe, really." Alistair said happily.

"So, does that mean that we're not really in Cabin Seven anymore?" Kole asked cautiously.

"Not really, no. In fact, we've been actively suppressing the formation of the Cabin Seven manifestation until you had a chance to make the conscious decision."

"What decision is that?" Paul cautiously asked.

"What kind of home do you want to have?" Alistair responded simply.

"Since we ended up at Camp Little Eagle, we probably aren't the best ones to ask about good homes." Kole said frankly.

Ryvan nodded his wholehearted agreement.

"When you're asking us about a 'home', are you talking about something like a 'made for TV' Holiday Special type of home?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"I don't know. You'll need a place where you can have group meetings and activities, but you'll probably also want some private spaces where you can be alone and relax if you want to." Alistair slowly explained.

"If we can live anywhere, does that mean that we could have someplace like the Hall of Justice?" Obie asked with delight at the thought.

"I suppose that you *could*. But unless you've got actual superpowered beings on your team you might not want something that high-profile. Besides that, there's always the chance that your home base will need to be shifted to another dimensional incarnation. You might actually want to keep a low profile at first in a situation like that." Alistair said cautiously.

"It sounds to me like we need a lair." Paul said simply.

"Will we still be in Camp Little Eagle?" Obie slowly asked.

"The people you saw in the mirror will still be in Camp Little Eagle. The way things stand at this exact moment, it looks like you won't be able to access that planar node until after a significant dimensional incursion has concluded." Alistair said carefully.

"Could you try that again in English?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Some people who exist outside standard time and space noticed a significant anti-time disruption in the prime materia planum. As you might expect, the dimensional superstructure began to fracture as a result, so we took steps to shore it up to minimize the damage caused by the split."

"You're giving us waaaaay too much credit of how smart we are." Paul said frankly.

"I'm catching about every third word." Kole supportively added.

"Let him keep going. I think he's working toward something that he thinks makes sense." Ryvan countered.

"It doesn't matter anyway. The original plan fell through. The 'forces that be' pushed and pulled trying to get the impending split to happen cleanly and smoothly, so a mend might eventually be possible. But instead of a clean break, with two nearly symmetrical divergent timelines, we ended up with two slightly messy timelines... and then a little left over besides."

"And that 'little left over besides' is where we are?" Kole guessed.

"Yes." Alistair reluctantly admitted.

"Is that like an island between two continents?" Ryvan cautiously asked.

"Yeah. Sure. Why not?" Alistair said uncomfortably.

"So, from what you were saying before, the two new timelines each have their own Camp Little Eagle but our splinter doesn't?" Paul guessed.

"If we hadn't taken action, some version of Camp Little Eagle might have manifested here, but it wouldn't be sustainable. Initially, we were trying to isolate your group so that you could have the option to jump between the two dimensional incarnations and give help when needed, as you had already deduced."

"But something went wrong. The fragment or island wasn't supposed to be completely created." Paul automatically provided.

"That's right. We took the actions we thought would prepare us to be in the best position when everything settled into place, but our abrupt actions and rushed preparations triggered something in the supernatural that shunted off into the splinter universe."

"What does that mean for us?" Ryvan asked cautiously.

"We don't know yet. Nothing is for sure until it happens. We've done all that we can in the name of prevention. We can't really do too much else until the anti-time ripple impacts us. After that, we pick up the pieces."

"Due to the presence of higher beings in the main universes, an instance of Camp Little Eagle cannot exist in parallel within the splinter without their participation. They're integral for what Camp Little Eagle fundamentally *is* and how it functions."

"Okay. I don't really get all that except that things are happening and nothing's for sure. What do you need for us to do right now?" Kole asked firmly.

"First, we need to collect the others. To do that, we'll need a homebase. If you can describe a place where you feel that you'll be comfortable, we'll do our best to manifest it for you."

"Shouldn't the other guys be in on this?" Obie asked cautiously.

"I'm pretty sure that having more people here won't make it easier to decide. And in order to call them, we need a place to call them to. When things settle, we should be able to make changes if necessary."

"So, you need for us to describe the place where we want to live?" Ryvan asked cautiously.

"If you know of a place that already exists, you can just tell me and we can try to recreate it for you."

"So, do you mean that if I ask you to do Gilligan's..." Paul began to ask but was harshly interrupted.

"Stop!" Ryvan barked.

"I didn't mean..." Paul began to say when Ryvan interrupted again.

"Don't say another word. Don't even think it."

After a long silent moment, Paul finally nodded his compliance.

"I don't have anyplace special in mind where I'd like for us to live, so you guys can work that out. Just don't say anything that you don't mean. Assume that whatever you say next will be taken literally and made into reality." Ryvan said carefully.

After another long moment passed, Alistair quietly asked, "Does anyone have any ideas?"

"Camp Little Eagle is the nicest place that I've ever lived. I can't really think of anyplace better than that." Kole said honestly.

"While it would be easy enough to build the structures of Camp Little Eagle, it might cause problems in some of the possible futures. 'Like summons like' and all that sort of thing. With what we're planning, it just isn't a good idea for the long term." Alistair slowly explained.

"What are we going to be doing in this place? Eating? Sleeping? Meetings? Training?" Kole asked seriously.

"All of the above." Alistair responded.

"When you put it like that, it sounds like we need what Paul was saying, something like a villain's lair. Maybe not an island in the shape of a skull or anything like that, but someplace where people won't mess with us and where we can do the stuff that we need to do without being bothered." Obie said slowly, obviously thinking aloud.

"I guess that makes sense." Kole reluctantly admitted.

"So, what kind of place are you thinking of? A remote island? A giant cave? An extinct volcano, maybe?" Paul asked with building excitement.

"Hold on, I'm being told something." Alistair said slowly.

"Do you think we're going to be superheroes?" Kole quietly asked Obie with concern.

"No. Probably not. But it wouldn't be bad living like we were." Obie said honestly.

"If we're supposed to have a place for meetings and training and living places too, then a lair like that sounds like it could be just what we're looking for." Kole said decisively.

"What's our other choice? To live like we're nobodies? To struggle each day to find the things that we need?" Ryvan asked simply.

"Okay, guys. I've got the inside scoop on your lair. It's beginning to look like we don't have a lot of time, so I'll let you discover the features of it for yourselves." Alistair said seriously, drawing all attention to himself.

The boys were waiting with anticipation for any hint of what was in store for them.

"Before we manifest the structure, we're going to have to make some decisions about the technology that's going to be included."

"Can't we just have the stuff that we're used to? If you'll leave us the owner's manuals we can probably figure out anything we don't already know." Kole asked cautiously.

"What you need to keep in mind is that not all the dimensional incarnations that you might encounter will have achieved your level of technology. We need to be cautious from the outset." Alistair said anxiously.

"Do you expect us to be time traveling or something?" Kole asked hesitantly.

"More like dimension hopping. Anything that you encounter that seems like *time* travel is more likely going to be a separate dimensional incarnation which is differently-developed compared to what you're familiar with." Alistair carefully explained.

"I think I see what you're saying, but what can we do about that?" Obie asked seriously. Alistair looked upward for a long moment, then said, "We can make adjustments later as needed, but I suppose for now, I need for you to promise not to expose any primitives to modern technology, or invite them into your 'lair' where they might be culturally contaminated."

"What? You mean like the prime directive? Sure. I think we'll all agree to that." Paul said confidently.

As Alistair looked around the group, illuminated by the fireplace, he saw each of them nod their agreement in turn.

"Any other requests or suggestions before we finalize things?" Alistair asked cautiously. After a long silent moment, Alistair finally said, "Good. It's done."

In an instant, their surroundings suddenly changed from night to day.

Curiously, the fireplace and mirror remained in exactly the same place that they had been before. Although, now the fireplace itself was visible, not just the flame.

Everything else around them sprang into being, fully formed, from pitch black to dazzling brilliance in an instant.

"What just happened?" Dylan asked suddenly from the next room which had several dining tables flanked by a professional food service steam table.

"I think Obie and Paul just wished us up a home base." Kole said weakly.

"What happened to the cabin?" Donny asked curiously as he stepped out of an expansive library into the well appointed lounge area.

"The cabin was never really there. The only thing you were able to fully manifest from it was the fireplace. Everything else was brought into being using the blueprint that Obie and Paul provided." Alistair explained.

"Who are you?" Ronny asked hesitantly.

"You can call me Alistair. I'm here to help you." Alistair said pleasantly.

"When can we go home?" Arlo asked suddenly.

"I don't know if you can." Alistair said regretfully.

"Why not?" Dylan asked with concern as he looked out the patio door at a deck surrounding a large pool.

"I've already explained some of this to the others, but basically, a certain number of unexpected things happened and we reacted the best that we could to what we knew at the time."

"That doesn't sound good." Jason K said frankly.

"Right this minute, we don't know exactly how bad 'bad' really is. We're just taking what seems to be the most reasonable steps to keep everyone comfortable through some potentially uncomfortable times." Alistair said regretfully.

"Where are we?" Ronny asked warily as he took a step nearer the patio window to look toward the sky. The sunlight seemed somehow wrong to him.

"Where we are doesn't really have a name yet. I suppose that you can name it whenever you're ready." Alistair explained uneasily.

Ronny was only mildly surprised to find that the light coming from above outside the building was coming from multiple industrial grade light fixtures.

"Are we still in Florida?" Kole asked boldly.

"I can't really answer that right this minute. In fact, this very well could be the only instance of what you might call reality in this entire dimension right now." Alistair explained with difficulty.

"Can't we go back to Camp Little Eagle?" Dylan asked uneasily.

"We can peek in at them through the mirror. This dimension is still synchronized with them, but there are currently no open venules to either of the primary Camp Little Eagle incarnations." Alistair carefully said.

"There's more than one?" Jason K asked anxiously.

"Actually, there are probably countless possibles, but of the stable dimensions expected to continue their existence, there are two parallel instances, either of which would be suitable for you to return to." Alistair said with difficulty.

"Except that we can't go there." Paul guessed.

"That's right. Except for that."



## Chapter 4 - The Realms of Supernature

"Hold on. I'm not getting what you're saying. Why is it that we can't just go back to the other dimension?" Dylan asked curiously.

"The splinter dimension that formed doesn't have the necessary travel mechanics built into it. I, personally, don't know too much about that. I've just been assured that it's something that's rather technical and will be dealt with in due time, once more things have settled into place. To send you back as things are would set a whole other series of events into motion... very bad things."

"If there's no travel stuff built in, then how did *you* get here?" Obie asked suspiciously.

"I was in the vicinity of cabin seven when the lights went out. Anyone present could have been pulled into the limbo layer of this dimension during its formation." Alistair quietly explained.

"But now that this 'splinter' has been completed, it's not possible for any of us to leave this place?" Arlo guessed as he looked out the window and noticed the umbrella covered tables outside the patio doors.

"It's not complete. Far from it. The way I understand it, this whole thing has something to do with anti-time and effect preceding cause, but again, I can't tell you too much about that. All I know is that a few more things have to be resolved before we can really do much of anything. Besides, there are the other versions of yourselves to consider. It would be *difficult* to settle you in a place where you already exist."

"Didn't you say that there are other dimensions? What about one of them?" Donny asked reasonably.

"There are two that we're focused on that are presumed to be stable and enduring. We wouldn't want to send you to a place that's about to disappear or be absorbed. The problem is that your group was assembled for a specific purpose and when the time came to fulfill that purpose, the universes appear to have had ideas of their own about what was supposed to happen next." Alistair said tiredly.

"So there's no place for us in either universe?" Teddy asked quietly.

"Not so far." Alistair admitted, then hurriedly amended, "We're working on it."

"Where's Johnny?" Jason K asked suddenly as he looked around.

"I don't know. He was with us before the lights came on." Dylan said as he, too, looked for his ghostly young friend.

"Who's Johnny?" Donny asked cautiously.

"We ran into his ghost while we were walking around in the dark. He's a friend of Dylan's from back in Chicago. I guess he followed Dylan's voice here or something." Jason K easily explained.

"Don't worry. He's still here with us." Arlo said calmly.

"He is?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"Yes. Johnny is standing beside you, just like he was before the lights came on. I can still see the spirit world that we were in before. This new reality was draped over top of it. I just have to light it up a little to see what's underneath." Arlo explained as he maintained his gaze on the spot beside Dylan.

"But the rest of us can't see him because the lights are on so we're seeing with our eyes instead of our spirits... or something like that. I don't know how it all works." Dylan reluctantly admitted.

"Does that mean that I can hear using my spiritual senses in place of my physical ones?" Ryvan asked cautiously.

"I honestly don't know, but since there are spirit mediums who claim to be able to *hear* spirits speak when no one else can, there's no reason that I can think of why it couldn't be so." Arlo said consideringly, then looked to Alistair for confirmation.

After a moment to consider, Alistair finally said, "Sure. I guess so. To be honest, I've never really thought about it."

"What about your 'friends'? Don't they know?" Kole pressed.

"They might." Alistair admitted, then added, "Of course, what they know and what they choose to tell *me* isn't always the same thing."

"Arlo, can you see if Ginger and Mary Ann are still with us?" Jinx asked timidly.

"Who's that? More ghosts?" Arlo asked curiously.

"Demons. They kinda watch out for me... or torture me... I'm not too sure which... Actually, kinda both." Jinx quietly admitted.

"To my eye, their appearance was that of diseased mad dogs rolled in filth, but of course I only caught a fleeting glimpse at them and it was quite dark." Randolph explained.

"No. I don't see any diseased dogs around here, but even my brightest spiritual light doesn't let me see all that far." Arlo admitted.

"Alistair, do you know if the bad stuff that I dreamed about before is going to happen now or not?" Teddy asked anxiously.

"Not." Alistair said confidently, then explained, "The future you envisioned is no longer possible. Your being here has negated that projected outcome."

"So does that mean that a better future took its place?" Ronny asked hesitantly, obviously not believing it to be so.

"Certainly different, but not necessarily *better*. Right this minute... let's just wait for things to settle down a little bit more. Recent events have sort of *muddied the waters*." Alistair said weakly.

"What's wrong? Is it something that we need to be worried about?" Dylan asked seriously.

After a long moment of consideration, Alistair finally said, "I foresee major upheaval ahead, no matter how things go. There are possibilities that *might* play out a certain way that would affect you here. But nothing is for certain until it happens."

"What about my brothers? Is any of this going to hurt them?" Obie asked seriously.

"My clairvoyance doesn't always let me pick and choose what visions I see, it's a little bit more broad than that. It *does* let me choose which visions I pass on, but that's another thing entirely. I can't see what happens to your brothers in any of the possible futures, but if it helps you to know, I don't see anything about them at all. That's probably a good thing. Most likely it means that they're fighting the good fight along with the other camp people. Nothing extraordinary has happened to them to draw my attention." Alistair said in his most encouraging voice.

"So this bad stuff that's coming, is there anything we should be doing to prepare for it?" Donny asked cautiously.

"Not really, no. Any meaningful action we could take would be just as likely to hurt us as help us at this stage of things." Alistair fought to explain.

"If we're not able to do anything, what is the point of our being here?" Ronny asked with a significant knowing glance at Alistair.

"Did someone say there was a point? I'm not saying there's not, but if there is, no one's told me about it." Alistair said as he looked around the group, noticing all their interested expressions.

After a moment to consider his next words, Alistair finally explained, "When we became aware of the imminent dimensional instability, our first instinct was to preserve a cross section of pivotal people across established groups in any upcoming endeavors. We dipped into the prime materia plenum just enough to gather those important people into a location without too much spiritual residue, where a parallel sub-plane could be established, shielded and otherwise protected from catastrophic changes. We weren't trying to seed a new dimensional incarnation with you or anything like that. Our thinking was that if something unfortunate were to happen during the proto-dimensional mitosis, we would have everything we needed to spawn a replacement on the fly."

"So we're, like... Clones or something?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"Not exactly. A clone is a copy. You're other instances of the same beings. In your case, you're the Paul who exists in the splinter dimension. Another instance of Paul exists in the prime dimension, others in other dimensions... That's the difference between you, which dimension you belong to. I'm sure that you exist in countless other dimensions, but there are just a few that we're interested in at the moment. If we had not interfered, then this dimensional fragment most likely would not have developed the capacity to support life and it would have been allowed to fall away naturally."

"So our memories are all fake?" Obie asked in bewilderment.

"No. They're as real as anyone's memories in any dimension. What happened to you this morning happened to 'you' this morning. What you are, here and now, is the Obie that belongs to this universe. The *yous* in the other dimensions are living their own lives, oblivious to your existence." Alistair tried to explain.

A moment of silence fell over the group, which was finally broken by Teddy quietly asking, "Are you my dad?"

"Whoa. Where did you come up with that?" Dylan asked as he gently hugged Teddy to his side.

"He looks a lot like what my dad looked like... at least, I think so. It's been a long time since I seen him so I'm not sure. But he's still got the same hair and eyes as me so it *could* be true." Teddy desperately reasoned.

"No. I'm not your dad, but you're right that I'm not too distantly related to you." Alistair said gently.

"Why didn't you say something about that before?" Donny asked suspiciously.

"Listen. The reason that some of you were assembled here is because Teddy got the warning that I sent him and worked to bring you together. Other people made other arrangements that I wasn't involved in, but as to my part in all of this, I showed Teddy the things that we were afraid could happen and what he might be able to do to prevent them." Alistair carefully explained.

"I don't like how you're saying stuff without really saying it." Jason K said warily.

"Try to understand that there's such a thing as 'too much' information. I'm trying not to say things, even if they're true, that won't help you with your situation." Alistair said frankly.

"So let me get this straight." Kole said in prelude, "You told Teddy what you thought he needed to be told to bring us here, and now that we're here, you're not sure if we need to be here or if there's even a place in this or any other dimension for us. Is that about right?"

"As things stand right this minute, yes." Alistair reluctantly agreed.

"And now you're telling us that you're related to Teddy but you won't tell us how because... what? It's not important? We have too much to deal with already? Because it'll distract us from more important things? We already have more questions than we have answers here. You telling us will give us one less unknown to worry about. And besides all that, it sounds to me like your judgment isn't all that great to begin with. Tell us and let *us* decide what's important to us and what we need to worry about." Kole said firmly.

"I'm not really supposed to say..." Alistair began to say when he was interrupted.

"Let me guess. Okay? Tell me how right I am. You're, like, a thirty-something year old *instance* of Teddy, aren't you?" Ryvan asked cautiously.

"I'm twenty-seven." Alistair absently corrected as his mind raced.

"Really?" Paul hesitantly asked.

"Is that what I'm going to look like when I'm twenty-seven?" Teddy asked anxiously.

"No. We'll be sure that you have plenty of moisturizer and sunscreen before that happens." Ronny assured him.

"Hey! I'm standing right here." Alistair said in offense.

Jinx, Arlo, Randolph, and Ryvan suddenly turned in unison, reacting to a sound that not everyone could hear.

A long moment later, Jinx quietly explained, "That was Mary Ann."

"I guess that answers *that*." Ronny said uneasily.

"This place is nice, but are we *really* here, or are we living in limbo with some kind of a 'playhouse' built overtop of it to make us feel like we're in the real world?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"Um, the second one, mostly." Alistair admitted, then conspiratorially added, "Actually, I think that sums it up fairly well. Not that other dimensions are really all that different, but most of the inhabitants of them have never looked behind the curtain to realize what their so-called reality is propped up on... I'm sure they would be horrified."

"I can still see into the world of limbo. It's just like it was when we left it, fireplace and all." Arlo quietly verified.

"Speaking of which, *that* was unexpected. We were counting on you to discover your inner spiritual light, especially with Arlo being included in your group. But we never considered that you might actually find a way to start a fire." Alistair said with a grin.

"What about the camp and the Clan? If you're not sure about what's going to be done with us, do they even need our help anymore?" Kole asked anxiously, obviously afraid of the answer.

"Honestly, I don't know. Of the futures that I can currently see, there isn't much that you can do that your counterparts can't take care of more easily for themselves. If something should happen to one of your counterparts, I suppose that we could swap you with them to take over and complete their mission, but that's about the only way I can see you being of use in their current situation." Alistair said regretfully.

"So, we're spare parts?" Obie asked weakly.

"No! Not at all." Alistair hurried to assure him, then explained, "I'm just saying that even though we don't have a plan for you at this exact moment that there still might be ways that you can make a valuable and unique contribution."

"If we can't go back to the camp because we're already there, can't we go to a space station or a colony somewhere?" Jason K asked reasonably.

"If you did that, you'd still exist twice in the same universe. While a few people have been able to make that work, it's not a preferred outcome. It has the potential to raise questions that we'd rather not have asked." Alistair carefully informed him.

"If I'm understanding this right, you and your friends could decide to ditch this entire splinter dimension and let us die with it. There's nothing stopping you from doing that except for wanting to give us a fighting chance." Dylan said seriously.

After a long moment, Donny finally asked, "Is that true?"

"From what I know of it, yeah. Pretty much." Alistair reluctantly confirmed.

"If this is just them being nice to us, is there anything we can do to help them out? Maybe improve our chances of survival?" Ronny asked anxiously.

"I overheard you talking about developing your spiritual abilities. I have a feeling that my associates might be interested to find out just how much you can accomplish with that. I can't guarantee you that it will help your situation, but I'm reasonably certain that it won't hurt it." Alistair said frankly.

"If you're twenty-seven, does that mean that you time traveled or that there's another universe where all of us are older?" Arlo asked curiously.

"I'm from, what you might call, a failed universe. Think of it as more of a mock-up than a universe in itself. I happened to be outside the time stream when my universe failed, so I've been doing odd jobs since then. Besides all that, time moves differently in nonsynchronous dimensions." Alistair said wearily.

"If your universe failed, do *you* have a place to go that you can call home when everything finally gets sorted out?" Dylan asked sympathetically.

"Not exactly. I'm hoping that while I'm doing odd jobs and helping people in all the different dimensions, that maybe I'll meet someone special and decide to settle down there." Alistair said with a pained smile.

"Since your dimension is gone, it doesn't really matter that much which one you choose, does it?" Donny asked gently.

"Not really. If there's anything that I've learned, it's that while every person is unique, one universe is pretty much like another." Alistair confirmed.

"So, the people you work for, are they like 'gods'?"

"Someone from the bronze age might think so, but you'd probably be most comfortable thinking of them as being more advanced or evolved than ourselves. Of course the people *they* work for... there's only so many ways that you can rationalize beings of seemingly infinite capabilities and power." Alistair finished quietly.

"Have you ever seen them? What are they like?" Jinx asked curiously.

"Actually, I'm not sure that they *can* be seen..." Alistair responded honestly, then a worried expression crossed his face, causing the others to go silent in anticipation of his next words.

Worried looks flew around the group, all of them sensing an increase in tension.

"Things are turning badly." Alistair said distantly.

"What's wrong?" Dylan asked anxiously.

Alistair blinked and seemed unsteady as he appeared to lose track of where he was and what he was doing for just a moment.

"What's going on, Alistair?" Donny pressed.

"The worst of the worst case scenarios just became much more likely." Alistair said gravely.

"Do you need for us to get back to the camp so we can do something to stop it?" Arlo asked reasonably.

"Without embedded venules, there's no way you could go back without triggering a response from just about every power, potentiality, and higher being within six dimensional manifestations." Alistair said frankly, then speculatively added, "And all of them would almost certainly see your arrival as being some kind of an invasion or attack."

"So what do we do?" Obie anxiously asked.

"It's too early to be sure but it's looking more and more likely that it might become necessary to 'dislodge' this splinter from the stable universes in order to protect it. If you agree to that arrangement, you will be able to continue training, getting stronger, and preparing for when your special gifts can be used to help people."

"And if we don't agree?"



"Then you can go back to the moment before the lights went out. As far as you'll ever know, the next minute naturally followed the last. This entire experience will be erased not only from your memory, but also from your very existence."

"I thought you said there wasn't such a thing as time travel." Jason K said suspiciously.

"There *is* such a thing, I was just making the point that many times when people assume that they're time traveling, they're actually crossing into a slightly different parallel dimension that's either out of temporal alignment or is altered in some small way by a particular event or decision being different from the prime materia. Those are commonly known as 'alternates'. True time travel carries the very real risk of creating a temporal paradox so it's avoided as much as possible." Alistair struggled to explain.

"If we decide to stay with the splinter, are we going to get to go back and see our families and friends and stuff?" Paul reluctantly asked, afraid of the answer.

"By all indications, it seems that one or more new 'god tier' beings are beginning to emerge in the prime materia, rising up and gathering power and allies to stand against each other. In a battle like that we wouldn't stand a chance of survival."

"So, what can we do?" Dylan asked with concern.

"Once we've separated from the stable timelines, the splinter will no longer be synchronized with them. Events in this universe could move drastically differently in relation to the prime universe. There's really no way of knowing how much differently at this point." Alistair cautiously explained.

"What does that mean about us visiting our families?" Paul slowly asked as he thought about the people who were closest to him.

"It means that while it *may* be possible to visit your family at some point later on, when you do, they may not be exactly how you expect them to be." Alistair carefully explained.

"So are you saying that by the time we get to see them they might all be old?" Teddy asked cautiously.

"That's possible." Alistair admitted.

"Or maybe in fifty or so years we might go back and find them just the way we left them?" Jason K quietly suggested.

"While I'm inclined to say that that is possible too, please keep in mind that I'm not an expert on these things. I don't know enough about temporal mechanics to make an

educated guess of which way things will end up going. That being said, it just seems reasonable to me that either outcome could be equally possible." Alistair reluctantly admitted.

"So, if we decide to go, it's pretty much a one-way trip." Arlo quietly explained to the silent group.

"Don't get too hung up on that. Life is a one-way trip. You may be able to revisit where you've been, but you can never really go back." Kole grimly stated.

"Did you get that one from Dr. Dan?" Ryvan asked curiously.

"Chief Tecumseh." Kole corrected.

Ryvan nodded his acceptance of the answer.

"But didn't you say that we can go back and forget that any of this ever happened? If time travel isn't really a thing, how does that work?" Obie asked curiously.

"Does it really matter how it works?" Arlo asked simply.

"No. I guess it's not important." Obie relented.

"Are you saying that we can't go back?" Donny asked cautiously.

"The people that we are right now never existed, as far as the people back home are concerned. If I'm understanding this right, no matter what we decide, it won't make any difference to them." Ronny said slowly as he fought to process the new information.

"I hadn't thought of it in those terms, but yes, leaving the question of time travel aside, that *is* the nature of the decision you're facing." Alistair confirmed, then quietly added, "Sometimes the universe dishes up a healthy portion of just what you deserve. But other times... you get what you get. It may not be fair, but that doesn't change that you have to deal with what's been served up to you."

"Is that how you decided to cope with things after your universe failed?" Obie asked curiously.

"It was a little different for me. Thanks to my clairvoyance I had some idea of what might possibly be ahead of me, but yeah. I suppose that I still had to make a choice." Alistair explained, then with an ironic chuckle he admitted, "It's easy to think of yourself as being strong and making reasonable decisions at a time like that but trust me, when you're in the moment, it's impossible to sort out what makes sense and what really matters."

"If you cut the splinter loose from the stable dimensions, where's it going to go?" Jason K cautiously asked.

"Well, I personally, won't be the one cutting it loose, I'm not *quite* that powerful. But to answer your question, the splinter will probably get secreted away someplace safe until the turmoil can settle down..." Alistair trailed off as a distracted expression fell across his face.

The others watched silently, not wanting to chance jarring Alistair out of his trance.

Finally, Alistair looked around the group before quietly saying, "I've just been told that you need to make your decision before the choice is taken from you."

"If we go, will you be going with us?" Teddy asked cautiously.

"No. Big things are coming and I have a job to do." Alistair said with a note of regret under his words.

"Will there be any way for us to call you if we need help?" Obie asked hopefully.

"No. But there's every likelihood that I'll cross paths with you again, sooner rather than later... After all, I *am* your 'quest giver'." Alistair finished with as much cheer as he could muster.

"So, our choices right now are to try or to give up, right?" Jason K cautiously asked.

"Yeah. Go forward or go back. That's pretty much it." Alistair regretfully admitted.

"Can you tell us anything about what our lives will be like in the splinter?" Ronny asked in an uncharacteristically timid voice.

"Your lives will be what you make of them. You'll have opportunities to do great things or commit horrendous atrocities. It will be up to you to exercise restraint and behave in a civilized manner. If you allow your worst impulses to rule you, then you may exterminate yourselves before you can use this opportunity to contribute something of value to the universe." Alistair warned.

"How do we do that? What do we do?" Paul quickly asked.

"Better yourselves. Seek excellence. Forgive inadequacies in others and in yourselves. In short, be decent people." Alistair said with concern evident in his expression.

"What will we do about food and stuff like that?" Dylan cautiously asked.

"The pantry is stocked, but when you need other supplies, you can go into town and buy them. The people there are what you might think of as non-playable characters in a

video game. You can interact with them, but they only have the capability of responding with the awareness embedded in them at the time of their creation." Alistair hurried to explain.

"So they're not real people?" Donny asked to confirm his understanding.

"No. They're mock-ups based on real people, but they don't learn or grow. In a hundred years they'll be exactly the same as they are today."

"What's the point of that?" Dylan cautiously asked.

"I don't know. I didn't come up with it." Alistair admitted, then speculatively added, "Maybe it'll make you feel less alone here."

"Or more." Dylan countered.

"It's the best we could do in a pinch." Alistair said frankly, then hurriedly announced, "Anyone who's not staying with the splinter needs to stand in front of the fireplace. I need to go while I still can. Take care of each other."

"Can't we go with you?" Obie asked hopefully.

"Not possible. You're attached to this universe, so you need to stay at least until we get the travel mechanics sorted out. Sorry." Alistair said regretfully.

"Do we have to decide right now?" Paul asked in panic.

"Yeah. What happens next is up to you. Good luck guys." Alistair said before stepping up to the fireplace and vanishing.

"It looks to me like someone's gone to an awful lot of trouble to give us this chance. I'm staying." Donny said decisively as he took a step away from the fireplace, toward the doorway to the library.

"Yeah. Me too." Ronny quietly confirmed, then explained, "I'd rather live an uncertain future as my new self than try to go back to who I was."

"You guys need me. I'm staying." Arlo said simply.

"But don't the camp guys need you too?" Obie asked cautiously.

"The way I understand it, they've already got me, at least a version of me. Remember, nothing we decide here affects them at all." Arlo carefully explained.

"Anybody who's not staying needs to go now." Dylan reminded them as he took a step back, away from the fireplace.

"Do you guys want me to stay here? I mean, if I leave, the demons will probably follow me. Things might be a lot easier for you if me and my bad luck aren't here." Jinx said anxiously, obviously afraid of the response.

"We want you to stay, Jinx." Donny said firmly, then clarified, "You *and* your demons. We'll face what happens next together."

"Yeah. You're not alone in this." Ronny assured him.

Various others around the group nodded their agreement to the sentiment.

"What about Johnny? Does he know what's going on? Is he going to get to choose where he ends up?" Jason K asked with concern.

"Dylan, Johnny's still right beside you. Do you want to ask him?" Arlo quietly asked.

"Can he hear what I'm saying?" Dylan asked cautiously.

After a moment of listening, Arlo quietly answered, "He says that sometimes he can hear you, but not always. Anyway, right now I'm casting my light on you both so he should be able to hear whatever you say to him and I can tell you his answer if you can't hear it for yourself."

"I don't know what it's going to be like in this new place but I'm going to be staying here. If you want to, you can stay too." Dylan said to the space where he imagined that Johnny was standing.

After a moment, Arlo quietly said, "If you'll promise not to send him away, he'd like to stay here with you."

"Before I agree to anything, do you think that he can give me some privacy when I ask him to? There's going to be some times when I'd like to know that he's *not* watching me." Dylan asked hopefully.

"Yes. He said that he can do that." Arlo confirmed.

"Then I promise not to send him away." Dylan said in the tone of a vow.

"So we're all staying?" Teddy asked as he looked around.

The others also looked and one by one, they noticed the internal battle that Obie was fighting.

When Obie noticed, he reluctantly explained, "I just got Amos back. I *should* be with my brothers."

"It's okay Obie. You can go if you want to. It's your family. We all understand that." Paul assured him.

"What are *you* going to do?" Obie asked in a conflicted tone.

"I'm staying here. These guys need someone like a shaman to tell them the lore, you know, things about quest givers and stuff like that." Paul said with a contented smile at his revealed purpose.

"A part of me wants to stay here with you and help you with that, but another part wants to be with my brothers." Obie said desperately.

"If you stop and think about it, another part of you *is* with your brothers... literally." Jason K reminded him as he moved a little farther away from the fireplace to stand with Dylan.

"Yeah. So I guess it's okay if this part of me goes off on his own for a while and has an adventure without them." Obie said in realization.

"Teddy, Is your future vision giving you any clues about what you should do next?" Dylan asked curiously.

"Even if it was, that's stuff that Alistair was sending to me. I need to make up my own mind." Teddy said confidently.

"That's right. I'm glad you realized that." Kole said seriously.

"What are you going to do?" Dylan asked hesitantly.

"If you and Jason K are going to stay here, then there's no reason for me to go back." Teddy said honestly.

"Remember, we're here and there, both. Go where you're going to be happy." Dylan said firmly.

"From what I saw of *that* future, I think we're all probably better off here." Teddy said anxiously.

"What can you see about this future?" Jason K asked curiously.

"Nothing yet." Teddy said honestly, then added, "But that's okay. I think I'll sleep better not knowing everything that could possibly go wrong."

"What about you, Randolph? Do you want to go back?" Arlo cautiously asked.

"To being a ghost? No. Thank you." Randolph immediately answered.

"As long as you're really sure." Arlo said seriously.

"Do you not want me to stay?" Randolph asked cautiously.

"I'd *love* for you to stay. But even more important than that, I want you to be happy. I don't want you to ever regret your decision." Arlo said reasonably.

Before Randolph could respond to that, the fireplace, as well as the large mirror that hung above it, were suddenly gone, evaporated into nothing.

After a long silent moment, Randolph finally said, "I've barely existed for an unfathomable number of years, constantly burdened by a sense of regret for things I never did, opportunities I never dared seize. Starting with this decision, in this new world, with this new life I've been given, I will endeavor not to repeat my previous mistakes. In the fullness of time, I may come to regret things that I have done, but no longer will I be encumbered with the burden of regret for the things that I did not have the courage to do."