

ARCANUM 101



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Arcanum 101

Welcome New Students

Rosemary Edghill and Mercedes Lackey

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DEDICATION

For (Sara) Elizabeth Barnett, without whose eleventh-hour copyedit this book wouldn't be here now.

Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

CHAPTER ONE

New York might as well have been on an entirely different planet from El Paso, and as bad as life there had been there at the end, after three months here, Tomas Torres wished he was still back there.

Mamacita had moved them all up from El Paso when her cousin promised good jobs up north. They sure as hell hadn't been making it in El Paso; it had been a steady downhill drop since Papi walked out on them three years ago. Not that he'd been all that much help once he'd started drinking hard, acting out with craziness that had terrified Mamacita and infuriated Tomas, and losing the good job at the garage that he'd had since before Tomas had been born. But at least while he'd still been with them, there'd usually been a paycheck. Bills got paid. Food got put on the table. With him gone—

Mamacita had tried to get a job, any job, but in El Paso, with the Border so close, why pay benefits and decent money when you could hire *los pollitos* with no green card and no papers for a few dollars an hour?

Then Mama's cousin Carmelita came through with three bus tickets to New York and the promise of work. But somehow even that hadn't turned out right. There were jobs, but it was expensive to live in New York, even in El Barrio. And even though Mamacita had a degree in Education from the University of Mexico, it didn't matter. The only job she could get was as a maid, cleaning up other peoples' dirt. Being *solamente una criada* didn't pay well, either; she had to work two jobs just to pay the rent on their tiny, noisy, stinking, one-bedroom apartment. He didn't even have his own bedroom any more. He slept on a couch in the living room. And to make everything worse, he hadn't been sleeping well lately at all.

He hated the way Mamacita looked, tired all the time now. Hated that she was never home, or that when she was, she never had time for either him or Rosalita any more. All she did was work or pray. He could hear her *Rosalitario* beads softly clicking in the early morning hours in-between shifts, "*Lo ruego hago algo de se*"—*I pray he makes something of himself*. He hated when she prayed for him, too. If God had been going to help them, He should have done it a long time ago.

It was the end of April, and the weather should have been nice for weeks to come—the three of them had gotten here in January, and that had been horrible; no warm clothes, and no money to buy any. But instead of spring weather, which still would have been too cold for Tomas, since summer couldn't come soon enough for him, they'd gotten an early heat wave. It suited him just fine, but everybody around here was bitching about it. The one thing he'd learned for certain about *El Norte* and *El Manzana Grande* was that nobody was ever satisfied with anything here. Only his little sister Rosalita was happy, and that was because she had the same friends she'd had back home. Of course those

friends were invisible, and nobody could hear them but her, but at least his little *hermana* was happy. ‘Lita was five years younger than Tomas was—ten to his fifteen—she’d only been seven when Papi had finally left three years ago, and really hadn’t seemed to notice the drinking and the fights at all. The one thing Tomas was determined on was that ‘Lita would always only see good things around her. At least she enjoyed school here, and all her teachers loved her.

That was why, though Tomas had never bothered to attend school himself once they arrived in *El Norte*, he walked Rosalita to her school every morning and picked her up every afternoon.

They’d stopped at the corner bodega, partly to cool off after the long hot walk back from ‘Lita’s school—the little corner grocery store a long block from their apartment was air-conditioned—and partly so that ‘Lita could pick out a treat. He knew he shouldn’t waste their food money on things like that—wasn’t Mamacita working two jobs just to keep food on the table?—But he couldn’t resist spoiling ‘Lita every chance he got, and it was only a dollar or two. He was more than willing to skip lunch a few days a week just to see her smile.

Besides, there were other good reasons for stopping at this particular bodega.

He browsed the bakery rack as an excuse to check out the hot *cholas* at the magazine rack while ‘Lita hung over the freezer at the front of the store. She always took forever, even though she always ended up choosing the same thing: a cherry Ice Rocket. The *cholas* were wearing gang colors, so he certainly wasn’t stupid enough to even look at them directly, but they were certainly easy on the eyes. There were three of them, giggling over each other’s shoulders and talking trash about the *chicas* in *El Fuego* magazine. One was *asi*, one was nice and one... oh, too bad she was *chola*, because Tomas had every intention of living to see sixteen. He’d gotten along fine with the *clicas* back home, but he’d never been crazy enough to run with any of them, and he wasn’t going to make that mistake here, either. In El Paso he’d been someone to respect; he’d managed to stay out of the gangs by virtue of having a skill they all valued, because he could fix cars. The kids from the *clicas* would toss him a couple of Benjamins for dropping stolen superchargers in their rides, or hooking up mad wattage stereo systems in their trunks. He hooked up the *veteranos* and the *vatos* from *Nuestra Familia* for free, ‘cause that’s how you got respect *Norteno*-style, but that didn’t mean he wanted to join a gang—or become an ex-con—himself. For what he could do he was respected like the other *vatos* in the barrio, kept his clothes and his do-rags brown or gray, and nobody messed with him. But here—he didn’t have jack. He was still new to the hood, just a *caló* speaking *pachuco* in most people’s eyes. Before he got anywhere he’d have to get more juice. All over again.

It would help if there was money. That was another thing that had been supposed to be easy and hadn’t been. He’d dropped out of school when they got here—well, not exactly “dropped out”; Mamacita had registered Rosalita, but she’d assumed he’d register himself, and he hadn’t turned in the paperwork after she signed it. It was that simple; in the eyes of the New York State Department of Education he didn’t exist. He’d meant to

pick up an odd job or two to help out. He could tune cars because he'd been helping Papi at the garage from the time he could walk; the one thing his father had done for him that he valued was teach him to fix cars.

But no one seemed to turn their own wrenches around here, and there weren't that many cars to begin with, maybe because there was next to no place to park. He'd quickly found out that no one but the drug-dealers were hiring, and no way was he going to work for a dealer, selling *primo* or *chiva* to some whacked out base-head. He had his suspicions that part or all of his father's craziness had been due to drugs, and he wanted no part of that.

Tomas was trying to walk a wary line here; being respected by the gangs without having to be one of them—he'd managed it in Texas, but he'd been in that barrio forever, and he was the wrench. Get into a gang and the next thing you knew, there'd be shootings, and drive-bys, and maybe Rosalita caught in the crossfire—or maybe she'd end up as one of their pets; hiding their guns and drugs, and in a few years being pressured to—

No. No way. Rosalita was gonna make it in the gringo world, and that meant Tomas had to find some slick, smart way to make a lot of money. Enough so Mamacita could stop working. Enough for Rosalita to go to college. Enough for Tomas to get his own wheels. He'd chop the top, kick up both turbos' boost, rebuild the cylinders so he could drop a hundred shot of NOS in it. He'd put in a hydraulics kit, and drop it so low-profile that it would smoke any lo-rider, a dancer, yeah. He'd build her himself, with his own two hands. He could do that.

Suddenly he was wrenched out of the happy day-dream he'd taken refuge in so often lately. The *cholas* were reacting to something he couldn't see; they began inching, crouched over, towards the door.

His gut screamed an alert. Where was Rosalita?

He looked around wildly and spotted her. She'd left the ice cream case and was standing by the counter, her frozen treat forgotten in her hand. There was a man standing next to her—too close.

And he had a gun.

“Hand over da cash, man!”

The harsh words made Tomas freeze, and sent the three girls scuttling out the door to freedom.

“No worries. Keep cool, man.” Mr. de la Yedra was in no mood to argue with a man holding a loaded .45. Especially not one that looked as *loco* as this one.

Neither was Tomas—except—except that Rosalita was there, right there, next to him. Tomas wanted to run right up to him and snatch her to safety. Wanted to jump this fool, slam the guy to the ground for even being near his little *hermana* with a loaded gun in his

hand. Rosalita seemed to be frozen there, like a scared rabbit. He felt rage, rage like he'd never felt before, boiling up inside him as the dude waved the piece in the air. His fear and anger felt like lava, burning in him, not with pain, but with power—

“That’s all?” The gunman screamed as Mr. de la Yedra literally emptied the register drawer out onto the counter for him “You get me more, you hear me? You open the safe—”

Rosalita, move! Tomas thought furiously. *Stop standing there like you think he won’t see you!*

But Rosalita didn’t move, not one inch. The invisible friends she was always talking to weren’t giving her any good advice today.

“I don’t have a safe, Mister,” Carlos de la Yedra whispered. He was a old man, and he’d never been kind, not even to ‘Lita, but Tomas felt sorry for him now. “I can’t afford a safe. My wife picked up the money and took it to the bank an hour ago, that’s all I have, take it—”

“Then you get that money from the bank!” the gunman shrieked at the top of his lungs. “You call that bitch wife of yours and you tell her to get that money back outta the bank right now, or—or—”

And then the unthinkable happened. The gunman reached out and snatched Rosalita by the arm. She dropped the Ice Rocket to the floor and let out a shrill scream that twisted in Tomas’s gut like a knife. The man shouted something unintelligible and jammed the barrel of his gun against the side of her head, and ‘Lita went instantly silent.

“You get that money or I’ll—”

The rage in Tomas boiled over and something exploded deep inside. His vision washed red, and heat erupted from him like he was standing in a fire, except the fire was inside him, not outside him. There was no thinking now, only *furia*. He straightened out of his crouch and stepped out into the aisle.

“LET. HER. GO!” he roared.

And in an instinctive gesture, without any thought at all, he pulled back his arm as if he was pitching a rock at the gunman. He threw as hard as he could, as the startled gunman turned in Tomas’s direction.

There had been nothing in his hand when he threw.

But something had left it.

A ball of fire.

The fire struck the gunman square in the face, splattering over his skin as if it were liquid and pelting the counter-top with tiny droplets of flame.

The gunman screamed like a girl and clawed at his face with both hands, hitting himself

in the nose with the gun. It might have been funny under other circumstances, but Tomas was in no mood to laugh. He was already hitting him with another fireball, this time to the chest. This one clung, and the gunman's shirt began to burn.

Tomas couldn't understand it. Where was this coming from? It felt almost as if it was being pulled from inside him, from his anger, but how could that be?

Rosalita scrambled out of the way, beginning to scream again, and Mr. de la Yedra ducked under the counter. Rosalita ran toward the only safety she could see—Tomas—skidding to a halt as he threw a third fireball toward the gunman. As the third missile left his hand, Tomas felt something pulling inside his chest until the fireball separated from him and sped towards the thug. He ran forward and grabbed Rosalita in the split-second before she ran for the door by herself. For an instant, Tomas hesitated. By now the gunman was afire, and he was stumbling around the front of the store, screaming in pain and crashing into the displays of chips and candy bars. Mr. de la Yedra was still hiding behind the counter.

He's gonna catch the store on fire—

Dragging Rosalita by the arm, Tomas shoved the gunman out the door. The still-burning man stumbled across the threshold and into the street, where even the normally unflappable denizens of Spanish Harlem began shouting and screaming at the sight. Tomas didn't care. The doorway was clear, and he was the next one through it. Rosalita was screaming and fighting now, as if she was more afraid of him than she'd been of the *ladron* who'd held a gun to her head, but after a few steps she went as limp as an old dishrag, and he was able to pick her up and sling her over his shoulder, and run.

All the way up the hill to their apartment he could hear the horns in the street behind him—he knew, from the one glance back he'd risked, that the guy was still trying to run away. By the time Tomas reached the top of the hill, he could hear sirens as well.

He wrenched open the broken door to the foyer, dashed past the mailboxes and pelted up the stairs. Rosalita was getting heavier every second, but he wasn't going to stop or even slow down. He reached the fourth floor and ran down the hall, fumbling out the keys. When he got to the door he slid Rosalita down off his shoulder, then fought with his own shaking hands to get the keys into the locks and the door open. Rosalita stood beside him staring up at him with a strange, scared look on her face as he worked his way down the deadbolts to the door lock.

Finally he got the last lock open, wrenched the door itself open and dragged Rosalita inside. As he locked up again, she seemed to shake off her shock. She looked at him for a moment as if she didn't recognize him. And then she went crazy on him again. She started sobbing, and backed away down the hall, shaking her head.

It hurt. He was her *hermano*, wasn't he? He'd rescued her, hadn't he? Just because he was throwing fireballs at a guy didn't make him a monster, did it?

Did it?

Doubt made him angry, and he lunged for her, grabbing her shoulders and shaking instead of comforting her like he might have before this all happened. Like he always had in the past whenever something went wrong.

“Dammit, Rosalita, stop that! Stop that right now!” Her sobs turned to outright wailing and he shook her harder. “You listen to me! *¡Oye!* You didn’t see nothin’, you hear? *¡No vea nada!* We got to the bodega, the guy was already in there rippin’ the place off, and we ran! You hear? You understand? You can’t tell nobody about this, never, no way!”

“Mama—” she whimpered, looking up at him. He hated to see the fear in her eyes, but he was frightened too.

“*¡Especialmente no madre!*” He didn’t even want to think about what Mamacita would do if she heard about this. She was funny about stuff like that. Anything with even a hint of *brujeria*. and she just went off. Maybe it was because of the way Papi had gotten before he disappeared. Even ‘Lita didn’t talk to her invisible friends around Mama. Not any more.

Tomas couldn’t really remember when ‘Lita had first come up with them. It wasn’t cool for boys to pay attention to what girls did, especially baby sisters. He’d always thought that ‘Lita was talking to her dolls. Back when there’d been money—back in the good times—her room had been filled with them. There’d been one of them, a bride doll, almost as big as she’d been. She’d only been four then.

And one day—he’d been ten, and ‘Lita had been five, and Papi had just started drinking, and Tomas had still been young enough, and stupid enough, to think things were going to get better and they’d all go back to being the way they were—he’d come home from school to find ‘Lita sobbing in her room and the whole house and yard filled with the stench of burning plastic. Mamacita had taken all her dolls—every one, even the bride doll—and burned them in the incinerator in the back yard. She’d slapped Tomas when he’d asked why, and Mamacita never hit him.

After that, there’d been very little money to spend on luxuries like toys.

“Nothin’ to Mamacita or anyone else. *Aye nada.*”

Rosalita choked down her sobs and nodded silently, face tear-streaked.

“Now go clean up. I fix us some cereal or rice or something.” There wasn’t a lot left in the kitchen, but it was going to have to do until Mamacita came home with another check. At least they’d gotten home safely.

He turned Rosalita around and gave her a little shove towards the bathroom.

“Get cleaned up, *mija*. I fix something to eat.”

Food would take her mind off what had happened. For that matter, food would take his mind off what had happened. Whatever it was, it had to have been some fluke, some

freaky thing, and it would never happen again....

But what about tomorrow? Tomorrow he'd have to walk past that corner again, and right down that street. What if someone recognized him?

The fear was fading, and Tomas smirked. Mr. de la Yedra had never wanted to know him before, when Tomas had suggested he could work at his store as a way to earn some extra money. He wouldn't want to know him now. And he'd been hiding behind the counter the whole time. What was he going to say? "This *gato fresco* showed up in my store and saved me from a *malandrín* by throwing fireballs'?"

If Tomas couldn't believe it—and he'd done it—why would someone else? He'd come up with another explanation—a cigarette lighter or something. Peoples' memories were funny that way. They tended to forget things they didn't want to know about.

It was two days later.

Tomas sat on the fire escape outside the living room window. Even now, the neighborhood was noisy; cars, music, people on the street. Nobody looked up, though, so he had his privacy, and behind him, the apartment was dark and quiet. It was nearly midnight. Mamacita had gotten home about half an hour ago; in six hours she'd have to get up to catch the bus for work. This was no way to live.

At least nobody had noticed what he'd done. Just as he'd thought. There hadn't even been a story about it in *El Diario*.

He made himself as comfortable as he could on the rusting metal and made the little flame move from one fingertip to the next and back again, like someone flipping a coin across the backs of his fingers. It was like the flame of a cigarette lighter—pale orange and steady—except it came from his skin, and it didn't burn.

He stared at it, fascinated. Each night he waited until Mamacita and Rosalita were in bed before trying anything. Each night he promised himself that tonight would be the last time, but it never was. The fire was too much fun to play with. Too... seductive. It just felt... right, somehow.

What had happened to him in the bodega hadn't been a fluke, nor a freak thing. A few minutes later when he'd gone to turn on the stove to make some rice, the pilot light had blown out, and instead of reaching for the box of matches as he usually did, he had unthinkingly pointed his finger at the burner. It had lit with a tiny whoosh. Thank God Rosalita hadn't seen it.

So now... here he was. Playing with fire.

It was ridiculously easy, actually. All he had to do was get mad. Annoyed for little stuff like lighting the burner. Hard, raging angry for the fireballs. He'd fire-balled some rats down in the basement yesterday just to prove to himself he could do it again.

Now he made the little flame dance over the tips of his fingers and wondered what had happened to him to turn him into a *fenómeno*—a freak—like this. And what the hell he was supposed to do with it?

It wasn't like he wanted to be a superhero. That was for comic books and movies. And he couldn't see just telling people he could do this. Either they wouldn't believe him—and lock him up for being crazy—or they would believe him, and then he'd probably be arrested or dissected or something. And then what would happen to his family?

This power was his. So couldn't there be some way for him to use it to help Mamacita and Rosalita? Only he couldn't figure out what it was. Being able to set things on fire just didn't seem very useful.

New movement in the street below caught his attention, and *what* was moving down there did more than catch it.

A man was staring up at the fire escape, watching him.

It was a dark man, in a dark, perfectly tailored suit. And even from where Tomas sat, he could feel the chill coming off the man, the sense that he would pop a cap in your head with one hand while eating lunch with the other if that was what he'd been ordered to do.

This was so not good.

The man crooked a finger at him, and pointed to his own feet. *You. Down here.*

Trying not to think about what this meant, Tomas nodded, and waved, and ducked back in through the window. Moving as silently as he could—though he knew that nothing would disturb either his sister or his mother—he slipped through the rooms and made his way down to the street.

The man was even bigger close up, and he hadn't looked small from the fire escape. Still without saying a word, he pointed to a car parked on the other side of the street. A black Lincoln Town Car. Boring, but very expensive.

This was definitely not good.

He made his way to the car, and as he approached, the rear window rolled silently down.

He couldn't see inside. The interior was entirely in shadow and the passenger a mere silhouette.

A soft voice drifted out of the interior. "Tomas Torres."

His mouth felt very dry. "Si," he replied, then added, "*Señor.*"

"Little incident at the store down the street two days ago," the voice persisted. "Thief routed. *Muy Bueno.* I would hate for the gentleman who owns the place to fall behind on his payments."

Ah. Now Tomas knew who he was talking to. Tiburon Prestamo, the *padrone*. Everyone had heard of him. If you had a problem, Señor Prestamo could solve it for you. But his help came at a price.

A high price.

“So I understand you have a way with fire.” A pause. “What interests me is that the *policia* couldn’t find a trace of what actually caused the fire. Very interesting, that. You know what that means?”

The shadowy figure leaned forward; Tomas caught a whiff of expensive cologne, saw a gleam of silver hair in the street lights. He shook his head.

“Come on, you look like a bright boy. Without having a cause for a fire, they can’t say it was arson, can they?”

Tomas shook his head again.

“Now, I could use someone like you,” the *padrone* said, settling back in his seat. “Sometimes people are reluctant to pay what they owe. Now normally, I would ask someone like Jorge over there to pay them a visit and reason with them.”

Tomas glanced aside at “Jorge” and repressed a shudder.

“But it would please me to be able to handle such matters with more finesse. And a man can’t pay his debt with two broken arms.”

“No, *Señor*,” Tomas managed.

“So I would like to employ your services, so that Jorge’s time can be more profitably spent elsewhere—unless, of course, a more vigorous reminder turns out to be required. But those occasions hurt my heart. I consider them a failure of trust, a matter that I hope will never arise between us. And to show you how much I value your participation in my little enterprise, shall we say... a thousand a week?”

A thousand a week!

Tomas did his best not to stare slack jawed. That was more money than both Mama’s jobs put together. Rosalita could stay in school and have the pretty dresses she craved—and even new dolls to replace the ones she’d lost. Mamacita could quit one of her jobs. Not both of them—Tomas wasn’t going to be crazy enough to tell her how much he was really making and who his boss was, but he could tell her he’d found a job and bring her enough money that she’d be happy to quit one of her jobs so that she could spend more time at home. It would be easy to sneak more cash into the house without her noticing, and the rest he could save for tools, for his own car...

“A smart young man such as yourself you knows a good deal when he hears it, does he not?” the *padrone* said.

You don’t want to be a runner but you’ll take his money?

Tomas's conscience reared up and he crushed it down ruthlessly. Anyone stupid enough to take a *favore*—especially a loan—from the *padrone* and then not make whatever payment was owed deserved what he had coming to him.

“*Si, señor,*” he said, respectfully. “I will do this thing for you.”

“Excellent.” The *padrone* leaned back into the shadows of the back seat. “Jorge, give him the cell.”

The muscle-man fished a tiny cell-phone out of his breast pocket and handed it to Tomas, who could not help noticing the scars across the backs of the knuckles, as if Jorge was accustomed to hitting things often and hard.

“Do not give that number out to anyone. Your orders will come when someone calls you on that phone, so I don't want it busy. Ever.”

Tomas nodded. “As you say.” He suppressed another reminder from his conscience about how this was just like the way the dealers operated.

“I see we understand each other. This is good. After you do your first job for me, Jorge will bring you your first week's pay. And I do not want to discover that you are working for anyone else. I would be gravely disappointed.”

Tomas shook his head.

The *padrone* nodded, satisfied. “But I do not want you to feel as if you are being taken advantage of,” he added. He motioned again to Jorge, who again reached into his breast pocket once more and pulled out a roll of bills, peeling off five twenties. “Go take that little sister of yours for pizza. I'm sure she likes pizza.”

Tomas took the money and stuffed it into the pocket of his jeans. “She does, *Señor*. Thank you—”

But the *padrone* was finished with him. The window rolled up, Jorge got into the sedan's front seat on the passenger side, the driver started the car, and the car rolled slowly away.

And only after he had gone back upstairs to the apartment did Tomas realize something. Nothing about these last few minutes—even the “gift” of money—had been an act of kindness. The money—and Señor Prestamo's final words to him—had been a warning. *We know you have a sister and we know where you all live. It would be a very bad idea to change your mind.*

He told himself he wasn't scared.

It had been three days since Señor Prestamo had given him the cellphone. Long enough for him to imagine that it might never ring, to pretend to himself that the whole night had never happened. Then this afternoon, while he'd been waiting outside Rosalita's school to

pick her up—the money meant they could take the bus to and from school, and there was pizza and ice cream after school—the cellphone he carried with him everywhere now had rung.

He hadn't recognized the voice at the other end. It had given him a time and an address. And instructions.

And here he was. Out in the *extremo del extreme* of Queens—a place he'd never wanted to be—hanging around outside some old dusty warehouse in the middle of the night.

Everything here was dark—not many lights—and despite the heat of the night, Tomas shivered. It would be just his luck to get mugged. He was getting better control over his fire, but it was still far from perfect. And until he actually used it, nobody knew he had it. It wasn't much of a threat. Not like a gun.

There didn't seem to be anyone at the front—all closed up tight—but he wasn't going in the front door anyway. He walked around to the back of the building, where the loading docks were. There was a door marked "Service." When he got there, it opened, and an old guy in a Rent-a-Cop uniform opened it. He looked around, as if he was just checking out the view. Tomas was standing right in front of him, but it was like the guy didn't see him at all. He set a brick in the door, chocking it open, and walked down the steps and away.

Tomas hurried inside, grabbing the brick and closing the door.

Once there, he wiped his hands several times on the thighs of his jeans, looking around. One lone light-bulb burned, far above him. There were stacks of cartons and big shipping crates all around him—the warehouse was filled with stuff—and he thought for a moment of liberating a souvenir or two, but it would take too much time, and Señor Prestamo hadn't said anything about that. Besides, he had no idea what was in any of them. He wasn't here to find out, either. He was supposed to set this place on fire. He just hoped that whatever was in them would burn. It'd be just his crappy luck if they were all filled with truck parts or something.

If this place went up, it would be the biggest thing he'd burned yet. He stared down at his open hand, imagining it filled with fire. Come on, come on...

But all he felt was nervous. He couldn't imagine how he was going to set this place ablaze. He'd never felt less like a *arrancador del fuego* in his life. Maybe the power was gone. Maybe it had only been temporary, like a cold.

What would he do then? People like Señor Prestamo didn't take "sorry" for an answer. Failure would be the same as refusal. And he wouldn't be the first one to suffer. It would be Rosa. And Mama.

Fear grew in him then, and anger. He hadn't asked for this power. He hadn't asked for his whole life to be turned *al revés*—upside down—overnight. He hadn't asked for Papi to go loco and to lose everything he had. Everything all of them had had.

Suddenly he felt the heat growing in his chest again—just like in the bodega, and in the basement. At first his relief damped it down, but he concentrated on his anger, and it soon returned, and this time he made it grow. He fed it with every scrap of anger and fear he had buried inside him.

And suddenly the fire was there.

With a whoop of glee Tomas flung a fireball at the nearest stack of cartons. He didn't know what was inside, but the outside—wood and cardboard—caught quickly, and was soon burning with a bright golden light. Soon he was tossing fireballs everywhere, laughing in relief as they struck the crates and cartons around him, sticking and spattering and catching.

Burning.

It was only when he was coughing so hard he could barely breathe—and the warehouse was filled with smoke—that Tomas realized that he might be able to start fires, but that didn't mean he was invulnerable to an entire burning warehouse coming down around him. He stumbled unsteadily through the smoke, back to the door he'd entered through, and staggered out down the stairs to the loading dock.

He was smart enough to know not to run, even though the fire was now plainly visible through the windows. Running attracted attention. Run—anywhere—and people always wanted to know why. He forced himself to walk the two long blocks and stand quietly on the subway platform—it was elevated here, not underground—waiting for the train. Just an ordinary innocent *ciudadano* going about his business. He was still standing on the platform when he heard the first fire sirens.

After that, it was easy.

Over the next two weeks, he got a few more calls. Once to torch an empty tenement. That was fun; it went up instantly—nothing but dry wood inside—and he didn't make the mistake he'd made in the warehouse and stick around once the fire was started. Once he was told to start a fire in an empty lot. That was simple; all he had to do was toss one fireball and all the grass and trash went up like a pile of autumn leaves. A couple of times, all he had to do was set fire to a dumpster in an alley. Those could be hard—you never knew what might be in them—but two or three of his fireballs would start pretty much anything burning, and by now it was no trouble at all to call them up. Once he set fire to a car parked on the street. Each Friday afternoon Jorge came and found him outside Rosalita's school—Tomas knew that was no coincidence—and handed him a thick envelope full of cash. Two weeks. Two thousand dollars.

But having money was more difficult than he'd thought it would be, and it didn't seem to solve any problems. He'd thought he could buy Rosalita toys and clothes, but Mamacita would see them, and what would she say? He'd thought he could tell her he'd gotten a job, and explain the money that way—at least some of it—but what? And

where? She'd want names, details, and he wouldn't be able to provide them. He'd been sure he could sneak money into the housekeeping account, but the one time he'd tried it, Mamacita had been so suspicious, he hadn't dared try it again. She counted every penny.

He was stuck.

I'll think of something, he told himself desperately. *Maybe Señor Prestamo will help.* He hated to think of going to the *padrone* for a favor, but Prestamo owed him now, didn't he? Tomas was taking care of all his dirty little jobs for him.

Like tonight.

He had no idea why he was going to Brooklyn; that was one of the questions he didn't ask in his new line of work. Brooklyn was a long way away from Spanish Harlem—all the way off the bottom of Manhattan, and then some—but that was the address Tomas had been given for tonight's job. He hoped he could find the place easily, and do the job quickly, because from the looks of things, he'd have to hurry to get back before *Mamacita* was up and about. No chance he could just take a cab back, either, even though he had money to burn, because no *taxista* would stop for somebody who looked like a banger in the middle of the night. He'd have to take the trains back as well as out, and hope they were running—fast—when he was done.

It was after two when he reached the address he'd been given. Tomas looked around in confusion. He checked the scrap of paper in his pocket. Yes, this was the right place.

But it was all wrong.

The tenement he'd burned had been empty, with a junkyard on one side and an empty lot on the other. Here, both sides of the block were lined with two-story red brick buildings. His destination was the bridal shop in the middle of the right-hand side of the block, and there were businesses on both sides. All of them were gated and dark at this time of night, of course, but above all the shops, there were apartments.

There's no way the whole block can be empty.

Tomas was confused. He knew he was supposed to come here and burn the place. That was what he did. And if he did it, there was no way nobody was going to get hurt or killed, because the bridal shop was right in the middle of the block, and the fire was going to spread.

He'd never hurt anyone. He'd never been asked to hurt anyone. Just burn things. Cars. Buildings. Garbage.

Maybe Señor Prestamo just wants me to burn up the stock?

He thought he might have enough control of his powers by now to do that. And everything in a bridal salon was white, anyway; if he just set a small fire, one that would

go out by itself, smoke damage should ruin just about everything there. That had to be it.
I'll just go in and look around...

The building had the old-fashioned kind of security gates—iron latticework gates, not a solid shutter—with separate ones for the window and the door. As he'd been promised, the security gate for the door was unlocked, and so was the door itself. He slid the big steel door gate back cautiously—it was well-oiled, and didn't make much noise—and then opened the door.

He'd barely taken half-a-dozen steps inside before he was grabbed from behind.

"Freeze, you little skel! You're under arrest!"

CHAPTER TWO

Six hours later, and Tomas was in a room in a big building on Lafayette Street. Family Court.

First he'd been taken back into Manhattan and booked, and that had been bad enough, because they'd called Mamacita in the middle of the night—she was missing a day of work because of him—and he'd had to sit there, chained to a table like a dog, as *el policía* explained to her he was being booked for felony arson. Mamacita had looked not only tired, but old, and he hadn't had the nerve to ask her where Rosalita was.

They asked him why he'd done it, and who he'd done it for, but even then, scared and ashamed, he hadn't been stupid enough to give up any names. He might be going to prison, but he knew what happened to *tontos* who said the *padrone's* name where they shouldn't. He could still keep his family safe.

He'd thought being arrested, seeing Mamacita's face, was the worst thing, but the worst thing had been when *el policía* had driven him back downtown again. There, he'd sat in a room with a kind-faced woman, Ms. Lyons—the Family Court judge—for his arraignment. It wasn't like it was on television, with the judge sitting behind a big bench and everything. They all sat around the table together, him and Mamacita and the judge, and some *blanco* Public Defender who looked even more nervous than Tomas felt, and a hard-edged *oscurito chinga* who said she was from the DA's office and looked rich and some old woman he didn't know. And they all started talking, and the *chinga* called his guy "Marty" and Marty stammered a lot and called the *chinga* "Linda" and Tomas tried not to listen to any of it.

"Give it up, Marty. Mrs. Rodriguez has already picked him out of the line-up and made her statement. She's here now as a courtesy to you."

Tomas looked up and met the woman's eyes.

She was one of his victims.

It had never occurred to him, not really, that anybody was actually getting hurt by what he did. A warehouse, an empty lot—who was getting hurt by that? They were just warnings—and besides, all those businesses had insurance, didn't they?

"This is—" Marty said.

"Standing ten feet away when he torched the car, Marty. Got his picture on her daughter's cell-phone. People's Exhibit A."

He listened—he couldn't help it—as Mrs. Dominquez spoke urgently to the *chinga* in Spanish. The woman shook her head sadly. No, even if Tomas went to jail, there would be

no money.

Sure, the insurance had paid off, but it wasn't enough to replace the car. She was someone just like his mother, working as a cleaning lady, and without her car, she couldn't get to her jobs.

"I saw you do it," she said, looking at him. The worst part was, she didn't even seem angry. Just sad. "Why did you do it?"

Tomas stared down at the table in front of him.

Ms. Lyons—Judge Lyons, he guessed—beckoned to the woman sitting beside Mrs. Rodriquez. They talked together for a moment in voices too low for him to hear, then the woman went over to Mrs. Rodriquez and walked her out of the room. When she came back, the judge stood up.

"I'll be in my chambers for the next fifteen minutes, Linda." She got up and walked away.

The woman nodded, and sat down again, this time right across the table from Tomas. She stared at him until he looked up.

"Tomas, my name is Linda Kenyon. I'm from the DA's office. I've talked to Mrs. Rodriquez, and I've talked to Detective Martinez, and I've talked to your mother, and now I'm going to talk to you, and if Mr. Mitchell is wise, he'll keep his mouth shut while you hear what I have to say. You're fifteen years old, but our office is pushing to have you tried as an adult, and frankly, if this goes to trial we're probably going to get a conviction. You're looking at—at the very least—two to five, and I guarantee you that you do not want to do one minute of that time. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

Tomas nodded. He wasn't stupid, and he wasn't born yesterday. Back in El Paso, the *vatos* from *Nuestra Familia* had talked freely about life in *el jugado*, and that was a place Tomas had long ago decided he never wanted to go.

Ms. Kenyon looked satisfied. "All right. Now. This case doesn't have to go to trial, and you don't have to go to prison. We're willing to cut you a deal. This is a one-time offer, and it's only on the table while Judge Lyons is out of the room. Here it is. You agree to attend St. Rhiannon's School in Upstate New York for the next three years—on parole—and you come out with a high school diploma and a clean slate, records sealed, or you can go to trial and go to prison. Your choice."

"Well I think—" Martin Mitchell said.

"He'll take the school," Mamacita said quickly.

"I have to hear it from him," Ms. Kenyon said. "Tomas?"

It felt like a reprieve, but he wasn't quite sure he trusted this fancy-looking dark woman. Still, what could it hurt? Especially since he hadn't told anyone anything. If this

estúpido school didn't look like a good thing—and he didn't see how it possibly could—he could just run away from it, come back to the city and Señor Prestamo, and take up again where he'd left off. Only he'd be smarter this time. He'd make sure nobody got hurt—except for people who really deserved it. And he'd figure out some way to make sure Mamacita got the money for what he was doing this time.

"I'll go to the school," he said reluctantly.

"Good." Ms. Kenyon smiled. "I'll call them and make the arrangements, and I'll give your mother a list of things she can send with you. It won't be much. St. Rhiannon's is very strict. But I think you'll like it."

He didn't think he would. But that didn't matter. Tomas didn't expect to be there very long.

That had been at nine o'clock yesterday morning. By noon of the following day Tomas Torres was beginning to think agreeing to go off to some school in "Upstate New York" had been a very bad idea.

Last night he'd thought it was a great idea, because he'd spent last night in Juvenile Hall, and if prison was anything like that, it was definitely some place he didn't want to be.

Yesterday afternoon, when he'd met with his probation officer for the first time—and found out he wouldn't have to see him at all while he was up at St. Rhiannon's—he'd also thought going off to this place would be great. Mr. Blaylock had treated him like something he'd scraped off his shoe, like he was sure Tomas was not only guilty—and he hadn't even had a trial—but like he was never going to be able to make something of himself ever. If this was the way they treated guys who came out of prison, no wonder so many of them went right back in.

Blaylock had given him a long list of things he couldn't do while he was on probation—drink, carry a gun, use drugs, get a credit card, vote, buy a car without permission, hang out with criminals, commit another crime—half of which Tomas couldn't do anyway because he was fifteen and the other half of which he didn't really want to do in the first place.

This morning he hadn't thought much about the school at all when Blaylock came down to his nice cozy little cell to get him and turn him over to the driver of the dark maroon van with "St. Rhiannon's School for Gifted and Exceptional Students" painted on the side in a funny sort of script. He hadn't slept very well. The bed had been hard—and it stank—the lights had been on all night, and the place had never really gotten quiet.

He'd said his goodbyes to Mamacita and Rosalita already; they'd come to say *adios* yesterday, during official visiting hours, since Mamacita had already lost the day at work because of him. Saying goodbye had been hard. He could tell Mamacita was about ready

to cry, and angry at the same time. She'd wanted to give him a lecture about doing good at this school, but she'd probably figured out a lecture was the last thing he wanted to hear. Rosalita had just stared at him with big sad eyes, and in a way that was worse, because he had the feeling she knew exactly what he'd done and how bad it was, and he knew that somehow he had failed her. And that wasn't fair, nothing about this was fair, he'd done all of this for her.

Hadn't he?

But who was going to take care of her now that he was gone? Who was going to walk her to and from school, and make sure she ate, and make sure nobody laughed at her when she talked to the friends that nobody but her could see?

He wanted to tell Mamacita about the money tucked into the back of the kitchen cupboard, but somehow he didn't dare. Maybe it would still be there when he got back. Maybe she'd find it and forgive him.

He didn't know any more.

So this morning he'd gotten into the van with the little bag Mamacita had packed for him, and tried not to think about anything at all. Reform School had to be better than prison, and certainly easier to escape from. As the van sped through the steel canyons of the city, he stared out the window broodingly, frankly expecting at any moment it would pull into a security gate, and he could start the process of figuring out how to get himself out while he pretended to go along with the program.

But it didn't.

In fact, the van kept going. An hour passed, then two, and by then Tomas was really worried. They were out of the city, out of the 'burbs—all he could see was trees and Interstate. Were they going to Canada? If he did manage to get over the wall—he was sure by now this place, wherever it was, had a wall—where was he going to go? By the time the van actually pulled off the Interstate, he had no idea at all where they were, but they drove for another half hour along back roads before they finally got to where they were going.

It did have gates after all, although they wouldn't keep anybody out—or in. They were just sort of standing there, open, at the foot of a long drive at the bottom of a hill. There were more trees than he'd ever seen in his life.

There was no way he could escape from this place. None.

Then they got to the top of the hill and he saw the place itself.

It was a freaky dump.

The van pulled up in front of this ancient old house like out of some kind of a horror movie, and surrounding it were a bunch of sad old two-story buildings that practically screamed "low rent housing project." Cracked old sidewalks connected them.

And there were bars on the windows. What the hell had he gotten himself into?

There were two people standing on the steps of the Horror Movie House. One of them looked like he really belonged there: he was a tall—really tall—skinny, long-faced pale guy with the whitest hair and the greenest eyes Tomas had ever seen, wearing a black, really formal kind of suit with a vest. Looking at him gave Tomas a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach. It wasn't fear, exactly—not what he'd felt looking at Señor Prestamo—but it was like that. Like you'd better pay very close attention whenever this *vato* was around, because if you didn't, it could cost you. Why this guy, who didn't look like he could crush a paper cup, would make Tomas's hackles go up, he could not imagine.

But the other...

Oh, she didn't look like she belonged here at all.

She was tiny, blonde, and Anglo; as perky as a cheerleader in a commercial, wearing a cute little t-shirt and a nice denim skirt that showed off a pair of legs that almost made Tomas forget about the scary old guy for a minute. She had long hair—he liked his *mujeres* with long hair—pulled back in a nice bouncy ponytail, and when she saw him looking at her, her chin came up and her pretty blue eyes flashed. Oh yeah. This one had a temper. And she didn't look like one of the dumb blondes, either. Brains and beauty, both.

Maybe this place wasn't going to be so bad, if it had *chicas* like her in it...

"We're here, Mr. Torres. You can get out of the van now," the driver said. There was a popping sound as the doors unlocked.

That was when Tomas realized he'd just been staring out the window at both of them like an idiot. He grabbed his duffel off the seat beside him—he was sitting in the back—and dragged open the sliding side door of the van. He slammed the door behind him, swinging his bag up over his shoulder, and before the echoes had died away, the van was driving off.

"Welcome to St. Rhiannon's School, Mr. Torres," the scary tall dude said.

The classroom was depressing.

It would have been almost impossible for it not to be. Four plain, stucco-over-concrete walls painted in Institutional Green held a dozen students who sat at scarred and battered wooden desks that had been old before their parents had met. The floor was covered with equally-ancient linoleum, in a gray speckled pattern that looked dirty even when it was clean. The lighting was overhead fluorescent tubes of a style that hadn't been manufactured in decades, harsh and unforgiving, the sort of thing that made everyone look like a pale, washed out Goth. The fact that half the students in this class were pale, washed-out Goths didn't help—the lights made them look as if they'd been dead for a

week.

The view through the single window in the room was pleasant—woods and grass and sky—but the window, like most of the windows here, had bars on it, and that really spoiled the view. But then, when your school was in a decommissioned nuthouse, you tended to get things like bars on the windows.

Despite the surroundings, the class itself was anything but depressing. In fact, even the Goths were leaning forward in their seats with interest.

Mind, it didn't hurt that Eric Banyon, the teacher of this class, was by all feminine standards, "hawt." The fact he was also well and truly taken did not prevent virtually every red-blooded female student in the school from eying him with that peculiar moony daydreaming expression usually seen on the faces of preteens ogling a photo of Justin Bieber. Pretty much everyone agreed he looked enough like Johnny Depp to be the movie star's double, with that kind of competent-yet-vulnerable air that was just as irresistible as an Elven glamourie.

The class was music—with a difference. Eric was dissecting a series of folk-ballads. Now for most high school students, this would be yawn-making in the extreme. Not so for the M-track kids of St. Rhiannon's School for Gifted and Exceptional Students. The ballads Eric was teaching them about just might mean the difference between nailing a friend or possible ally by accident and being blindsided by someone you didn't recognize as a foe. That was because St. Rhia's was a school for people with "powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men." And the M-track students were budding magicians.

Or, in the case of Valeria Victrix Langenfeld, Mages in full bloom. She'd been a practicing magician since she was nine, and training in combat magic since she was twelve. By now she was a specialist, a techno-shaman, someone who used the common artifacts of everyday modern life—rather than arcane instruments and ingredients of the past—to make her spells work.

She didn't need this class, but she listened intently anyway. For starters, Eric was a Bard, and that was a discipline she knew very little about, so it was likely he'd have a slightly different approach to this than any of her other teachers, past and present. For another, this was filling part of her Art and Lit requirement. For a third—if she was ever made a Knight-Mage Underhill—one of her ambitions—she'd have to have mastered three of the Arts as well as combat-magic and swordsmanship. And for a fourth, well—Eric Banyon was hawt.

So it was with annoyance that she sensed one of the headmaster's runners just outside the door, waiting for Banyon to pause before making an entrance. "Sensed," rather than saw, because of course the door was closed and quite solid, but VeeVee had been able to see magical auras since she was six, and the runners were all magical constructs. They looked like students, but that was part of the whole ruse of making St. Rhia's look like an ordinary boarding school—even to some of the other students.

Eric could, without a doubt, sense the runner too. He gave no sign he had, but the fact

that he wrapped up the discussion of “The Wife of Usher’s Well” pretty quickly after the runner first appeared was pretty much a giveaway.

A couple of the other students sensed the runner as well; VeeVee could tell by the way they shifted in their chairs and looked quizzically at the door. None of them were nearly as far along in their studies of the Arts Arcane as VeeVee was, but then, most of them had been born into Mundane households and had found their way here by just about every means possible other than the straightforward one.

But when your mother was a Finnish Witch who could whistle up storms, and your father was a hereditary German vampire hunter descended from the Van Helsings, you tended to get your Gifts and Talents ID’d pretty early in life.

And when both of them were Guardians to boot, when someone started up a school specifically created to train the Gifted and Talented safely away from the prying eyes of the Mundanes, you could bet you’d probably find yourself enrolled faster than you could say “athame.”

The runner tapped once on the door as soon as Eric stopped speaking and opened it. There were two “models” of runner; this one was the cute-and-sassy schoolgirl in a plaid skirt, knee socks and white shirt. The other was the bespectacled-and-studious, but darkly handsome, boy in dark pants and a blazer. Both of them looked pretty familiar if you were into anime—and VeeVee suspected St. Rhia’s headmaster, Inigo Moonlight, watched a lot more Cartoon Channel than he was willing to admit.

The runner whispered in Eric’s ear and departed. Eric looked at her, and crooked a finger. Obediently she rose and came up to the front of the class.

“School Counselor wants to see you,” he said, and one elegant auburn eyebrow rose. “No, I wasn’t told why. Except to say don’t worry, there’s nothing wrong at home.”

Well that did quell the moment of panic. VeeVee hadn’t seen Sarah Clifford except at her intake interview—the school counselor saved her time for people with real problems, and VeeVee was one of the few, the lucky, who came from a stable home with understanding parents, even if they were freaking old-fashioned about some things. In fact, the more she saw of other peoples’ parents, the more VeeVee appreciated her own.

“Get your things, and report in, VeeVee,” Eric continued. “The rest of the class is going to be on ‘Tam Lin’ anyway, and I doubt there’s anything about that ballad you don’t already know.”

She nodded, and went back to her seat to get her backpack and stow her books. Eric was right. “Tam Lin” was a staple teaching element with all the teachers she’d had. She must have mined it for information a dozen times all told.

The Counselor’s office was in the Main Building. The Main Building was the only one that didn’t have bars on the windows—well, except for the little cottages where the

resident doctors had once lived with their families. The teachers lived in those now. But the school offices—and one or two of the classrooms—were all in what had been the old Administration Building, built in 1913, and designed to look pretty much like a scaled-down, red brick version of Mad Ludwig's Castle.

Outwardly, the school looked like a train-wreck because that was what people expected an “alternative” school to look like, and if it was sleek and posh, or all comfy-English-manor, outsiders would begin to wonder. But the fact was that VeeVee, and most of the other Advanced kids here, could have practically any teacher, on practically any subject, just for the asking. That was the sort of thing that happened when your school's founder and benefactor was a multi-billionaire—and a half-Elven Mage to boot.

And that made St. Rhia's the best school VeeVee'd ever been at in her entire life. She had friends here. She never had to lie about anything—and lies could be fatal to a magician, because words were Power, and when spoken by a Mage could twist and turn and bite you in the butt if you were lying.

With both of her parents being Guardians, there'd been a pretty good chance she'd turn out to have some sort of magical ability. She wasn't a Guardian herself, of course. Even though they'd been in existence for thousands of years, even the Guardians didn't know where their special abilities came from, or just what would confer them—or when.

The Guardians were a loose—very loose—anarchisticly loose—organization of the extraordinarily Talented and Gifted who stood between the Mundanes and the kind of things you usually found only in horror movies and books with black covers. Their purpose for existing was to protect the Mundane World from the Supernatural World in such a fashion that the Mundanes were able to go on believing that “things that went bump in the night” only existed in fiction, and the greatest restriction on their power was that they could never give help unless they were asked to do so by the person who was actually in peril.

Guardians were, in many ways, the elite of Mages. By virtue of what they did, and some undefined connection to Powers outside themselves, they were granted more strength than they would have had alone, more magical abilities, and had the benefit of being able to call on one another for help. But like the Knight-Mages of the Elfhames, they walked a path strictly hemmed in by what they could and could not do with their power. It was never to be used selfishly, for instance. Never punitively. Guardians were not judge and jury; they were protectors and defenders. And no matter what your heritage, you could not win your way to the position, nor volunteer for it. It was offered to you—or not.

VeeVee hoped one day it would be offered to her.

The trouble was, the Other Side didn't have to play by the same rules the Guardians did, and a lot of nasty stuff in the Guardians' world tended to take the offensive and come after them and those around them. Which was why a lot of Guardians tended to lead solitary lives—and the few who did marry didn't tend to start families. The idea of

producing “Daddy’s little hostage,” just did not appeal.

VeeVee’s parents, however, took the position that the last thing a Hideous Death Monster was going to expect was that the tiny blond-haired, blue-eyed child it had just snatched was going to turn around, pull out a Soul-Blade with the Six Runes of Righteous Destruction written on it, and stab it in the gut with it. So the second her Gifts had manifested, her parents began training her in them. It had been a real pain in the rear to have to attend both regular schools and arcane lessons, pull off good grades in both, and keep the latter secret from the former.

Mind, she’d never regretted it. Especially not after Shadow-Warriors in the pay of the Rudeski family of vampyri invaded the house one afternoon while Mom and Dad were still at work (because being a Guardian didn’t pay the bills, and so both of them had day jobs) with the intent to take her prisoner—or worse. She’d pinned the hand of the first Shadow-Warrior to the table with a handy fork (silver-plated steel, of course), pulled out the aforementioned Soul-Blade and stabbed the second in the gut with it, and then made a run for the bathroom. Once there, using only what was in the bathroom, she’d built a Nine-fold Sphere of Protection that had held until her parents got home and finished the invaders off.

Try explaining something like that to your school counselor when she wanted to know why you showed up at school the next day looking like you’d fallen down a flight of stairs. Backwards. It was only because the folks had had the smarts to file a breaking-entering-and-assault report with the cops that she’d kept them from getting hauled in as child-abusers. She was just glad she wasn’t the one who’d had to come up with the story for the cops.

But at St. Rhia’s, not only did VeeVee not have to come up with a convincing explanation for mysterious bumps and bruises that wouldn’t involve anyone thinking her parents were abusing her, she was safe. Because the entire school was Warded in every possible way—psionically, magically—with shields that, well, if something could actually get through them, they all had problems that were a lot bigger than just whether something had decided to show up to eat her.

She went up the steps of the main building and into the foyer. An enormous staircase led up to the second floor, and on the right, massive oak doors led into a large parlor where a lot of the interviews with new students and their parents were held. A long hallway led to the back of the building, where more staff offices were. The regular-sized door at the left was Ms. Clifford’s office. VeeVee went over to it and knocked, although the door was already ajar.

“Come,” Ms. Clifford said.

Now, given how the rest of the school was tricked out, it would be reasonable to expect that the Counselor’s office would be done up like something out of a 50s health-and-hygiene movie, with white walls with charts and rah-rah posters on them, a big wooden desk, and uncompromising chairs.

Reasonable, but wrong.

VeeVee had seen less-welcoming living rooms. It was exactly the kind of room to encourage a kid to just flop down, relax and talk. It had walls of a color between brown and gold, with funky art on them, mostly folk-art alternating with framed rock posters from the 60s. There were three sofas and three chairs, all of the kind of cushy-casual style that encouraged hanging your legs over the arm and staring up at the ceiling—which was painted with the night sky around Beltane. VeeVee knew it was that time of year—though Ms Clifford referred to it as “May Day”—because she thought she had recognized the star patterns and asked the last time she’d been here. Ms Clifford was a big fan of the Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries, and May First at Oxford was apparently something of an occasion.

For the rest, there were lots of bookcases, lots of books, a good stereo that was always playing something interesting—VeeVee had only been in here once before, but Ms. Clifford’s door was usually open, and VeeVee often stopped outside to listen. There was a fish-tank made up as a kind of water-scape in miniature, a waterfall with plants growing around it and little fish in the shallow water at the bottom of the tank, and a tiny green lizard that lived on the “cliff” part, which fascinated VeeVee.

Ms. Clifford was on the phone. She waved vaguely in the direction of the chairs, and VeeVee flopped down into the one nearest the fish-tank to watch the lizard. So, this wasn’t anything about her. Nor was it about any emergency at home. But now VeeVee was curious: just what was this all about? Ms. Clifford really was a psychiatric pro, specializing in the traumas of the Gifted and Talented. A conservative estimate was that about half of the kids showed up here with Issues and the other half showed up with Traumas, and all of them needed help. Real help—not the fake kind most of them had been getting for years in the outside world.

“Yes, I think we can handle this,” Ms. Clifford was saying. “Yes, the fax came through just fine. What time can we expect him? Good. We’ll look forward to it.”

She thumbed off the phone and turned to VeeVee. VeeVee regarded her with interest. Ms. Clifford interested her because in a school full of people all of whom tended to be outstanding and different in some way or other, Ms. Clifford was utterly nondescript. If you were to try to describe her, you’d find yourself talking about brown hair and eyes, someone who was neither tall nor short, neither fat nor slim, with what Kenny Chandler, the telekinetic, called “a face-shaped face.” And since all of the teachers and staff here had some sort of Gift or Talent, VeeVee really wondered if Ms. Clifford’s was to blend in and be utterly forgettable. If so, the ability had to be psionic, not magical, because VeeVee didn’t pick up any magical vibes from her.

“Well, VeeVee,” Ms. Clifford said, setting the phone back in the charger. “I believe I have a challenge here for you. We’re getting a new student here tomorrow—”

“Ah, and you want me to mentor him!” That much was easy to deduce; all new students got a student mentor assigned to them from among the pool of the more

experienced members of St. Rhia's student body. VeeVee hadn't done a mentoring stint yet, so she had more-or-less been waiting for her number to come up.

Ms. Clifford nodded, smiling. "This is no ordinary student, though, and he'll take some careful handling. I just got off the phone with our special contact in the DA's office; our new student will be coming to us instead of going to prison. He's on probation for felony arson—that's the only thing they could actually charge him with, but the things they know and can't prove are apparently pretty disturbing; he managed to get himself in with a very rough crowd in an extremely short time, and Linda's just glad they managed to get their hands on him before he actually hurt anyone. He's a pyrokinetic—so he'll be Mr. Bishop's problem as a last resort—and from what I've been told, he has attitude enough for any four people." Ms Clifford's smile never wavered. "His name is Tomas Torres. Since he'll be our first student with an actual police record, I thought I'd give you the chance to decide whether or not you felt this was something you felt you wanted to be involved with."

She reached across the top of her desk to hand a small stack of paper to VeeVee. There was a picture on top—it was an actual mug-shot—of a defiant-looking kid in a do-rag. "Where is he from?" VeeVee asked, studying the picture further. Even in the washed-out mug shot she could see he was cute. Antonio Banderas-league cute.

"The family is from El Paso. His mother was born in Mexico, but Tomas was born here. They moved to New York City about three months ago. Broken home. The father did a runner a few years ago and the mother got work up here through a cousin." Ms Clifford shook her head. "Mother works two jobs. There's a little sister."

"Hmm. Lots of opportunity to get into trouble." VeeVee turned her attention to the rap-sheet. "Fifteen?" She looked at Ms. Clifford speculatively. "So what do they know at the DA's office that they can't prove?"

"That he was acting as an enforcer for the local padrone," Ms. Clifford said with a sigh. "That was why he was setting those fires. He's a powerful pyrokinetic now, and he's only going to get stronger as he practices. He needs to be trained—or shut down."

VeeVee nodded. Harsh as that sounded, if you couldn't instill or awaken a good set of morals and ethics in someone with powerful abilities, then you had to take those abilities away. Otherwise, well, you ended up with another case for the Guardians to deal with.

"But Linda thinks he's salvageable," Ms Clifford went on. "She's one of ours, or rather, one of your parents' peers, another Guardian. I hope you feel up to the challenge, because I'd like to have someone mentoring Tomas who knows how to look for trouble, for something wrong that can't be corrected."

VeeVee wound a strand of her long blonde hair around a finger uneasily. She wasn't altogether sure that she'd know the signs of someone going bad. All her training so far had been in dealing with things that were already bad. And trying to kill her. Not much room for confusion there. Then again, he was cute, and he didn't look like the type to be overawed by her magical ability. That cocky attitude... hmm. A challenge. She studied

the picture. She hadn't always been living in the 'burbs. Her folks had been very mobile, what with both of them working as a team for the CDC. They tended to go where disease problems were, which meant a lot of places not on the recommended tourist lists. Only in the last couple years had they actually lived in a house rather than an apartment.

"So, what do you think, VeeVee?" Ms Clifford's voice brought her back to reality, and she set the photo back on the desk. Why try and scry something when you were going to meet the original in the flesh, anyway? One of the unwritten Laws of Magic was: "Never do anything Magically you can do as easily Mundanely. Save the energy for when you need it."

"I think I'll look forward to being Mr. Torres' mentor, Ms. Clifford," she replied cheerfully. She handed back the file on Tomas Torres.

"Don't you want to keep this?" Ms Clifford asked in surprise.

She shook her head. "No. I don't want to give the impression I've been studying him. I want this to be like any other mentor gig. I'll learn about him as we go." Then she grinned. "From all that free-range attitude, I don't imagine he's the kind to keep anything secret for very long anyway!"

Ms. Clifford smiled. "You know, I was pretty sure that was what you were going to say." She glanced at her watch. "In that case, why don't you run along down to the Headmaster's office? I think it's probably too late to catch up with your Music class anyway, and Mr. Moonlight has a few things he'd like to say to you."

VeeVee walked down the long hallway that led to the Headmaster's Study, thinking ruefully that if she'd known agreeing to mentor Tomas Torres would involve an interview with Mr. Moonlight, she might not have been quite so eager to take on the job.

It wasn't that Inigo Moonlight was cruel or nasty or engaged in any of the kinds of power games that adults—or those in positions of authority—often tried on children and underlings. From Mr. Moonlight's perspective, after all, VeeVee and Ms. Clifford were probably pretty much the same age, and he had no interest in human power games. Inigo Moonlight was a *Seleighe Sidhe*—an Elf of the Bright Court—and he was at least a thousand years old.

He was also a Magus Major—which meant he was one of the most powerful magicians the Elves could produce—and the combination of magical power, plus literally centuries of practice and discipline, meant St. Rhia's could have no better Headmaster. No one—not even Ria Llewellyn, not even Eric Banyon—knew what he'd done Underhill, or what his name had been there, but for the last several centuries Inigo Moonlight had lived on Earth pretty much in retirement, as a kind of occult private detective, until Ms. Llewellyn had talked him into taking over as Headmaster here. Of course he didn't exactly run the place—his human assistants, Grace Fairchild and Tucker Bell, did all the actual administrative work. Mr. Moonlight just sort of... oversaw things. And grew roses.

And sometimes hosted tea parties.

And was just a little... spooky. Not because he was Sidhe; VeeVee had actually encountered Elves before. She just didn't think that—even Underhill—there were very many Elves like Inigo Moonlight.

She reached the end of the hall and tapped quietly on the door.

"Enter."

She pushed open the door and walked in.

If Ms. Clifford's office was designed to be welcoming, Mr. Moonlight's, well, wasn't. It wasn't *designed* to be intimidating, either. It just *was*.

Although she knew it had to have been new when the school was started three years ago, it actually looked older than the building itself, like something out of the Victorian period (or maybe the Middle Ages.) There wasn't a single modern piece of office equipment in sight, not even a phone—the Headmaster left things like making telephone calls to his assistants. The walls were paneled in dark oak and lined with glass-fronted "barrister" bookcases; the large window had a stained glass panel at the top—and if that wasn't enough, gold-fringed green velvet curtains—and there was an enormous Oriental rug on the floor. The walls held, not only a number of lovely oil paintings in elaborate old-fashioned gilt frames, but other objects in deep shadow-boxes as well. A collection of sea-shells. Some carefully-framed—and very old—postcards. A number of coins or medallions. Nearly every horizontal surface contained some object as well: vases, bowls filled with Mr. Moonlight's beloved roses, pieces of sculpture even older than he was.

The center of the room was dominated by an enormous mahogany desk. The top was a single solid slab of malachite. VeeVee had seen one like it in photographs of the Russian Imperial Palace. Its top contained a bronze inkstand—Mr. Moonlight handwrote everything—some art-glass paperweights, a large wooden stationery box, several seals, and a very large leather blotter. Piled neatly in the center of the blotter were two stacks of paper. One was school paperwork and the other was gardening catalogues.

In front of the desk were two comfortable leather chairs. Behind the desk was a third high-backed leather chair, and in the chair sat Mr. Moonlight.

Even though he wore the *glamourie* that made him look human, VeeVee suspected he'd look pretty much the same way with or without it—very tall, very pale, and very old. His hair was absolutely white, swept straight back and worn collar-length, and the way he dressed reminded her just a little of Doc Holiday in the old Western movies her Mom liked to watch—a little old-fashioned, and very formal.

"Sit down, Miss Langenfeld. How does the world find you today?"

"Very well, thank you, sir." Formality was a plus in dealing with any of the Sidhe, and that went double for dealing with St. Rhia's Headmaster. She sat down and folded her hands demurely in her lap.

“I presume our Miss Clifford has spoken to you about our newest student already—and that you feel yourself capable of accepting the challenge he presents?”

“I think so,” VeeVee said. “And I know that if I’m not, I won’t be foolish enough not to say so as quickly as possible.”

Mr. Moonlight smiled. “An excellent answer. We can never, after all, be entirely certain of what the future will bring until it arrives. Even the Gift of Foreseeing is not entirely reliable in that regard. You’ve shown excellent judgment in the past, however, and I believe that, with your assistance, we may be able to preserve his Talent and harness it to the service of good works. I am also certain that this will be no simple task. The Children of Earth—especially the very young—are often remarkably set in their ways. You must impress him in whatever fashion you feel is best, Miss Langenfeld. I believe we will need to throw him off-balance at once so that he gives the other students—and especially the teachers—the respect they deserve.”

VeeVee blinked in surprise. Students were generally strongly discouraged from flaunting their Gifts and Talents outside the labs and classrooms. Had Mr. Moonlight just given her carte blanche to do anything she liked anywhere on campus?

He inclined his head, and she knew she’d guessed right.

“At the moment he believes he is an enormously special individual. I am relying upon you to impress upon our young man that he is perhaps not as unique as he believes.”

VeeVee couldn’t quite hold back a smile of her own. So Mr. Moonlight wanted her to take Tomas Torres down a peg or two, did he? Well, she could do that.

“Yes, sir,” she said. “I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will, Miss Langenfeld. And if you should sense any... extraordinary... difficulties in the weeks to come, please feel free to share them with me. My door is always open.”

“Yes, sir. Of course sir.”

She got to her feet. The interview was at an end.

The next day, at noon, the van from the city arrived. She and Mr. Moonlight were on the steps to meet it.

Tomas was much handsomer in person than in his mug-shot. Still wearing that do-rag, and now with a pair of cheap sunglasses, too. He was having a hard time deciding which of them to stare at harder—she was used to getting appreciative looks from boys, but he was obviously smart enough to know—or to sense—that Mr. Moonlight was somebody he’d better not blow off. He kept his attention on Mr. Moonlight as the van drove off behind him.

“Welcome to St. Rhiannon’s School for Gifted and Exceptional Students, Mr. Torres. I am Inigo Moonlight, the Headmaster of this facility. Did you have a pleasant journey?”

“Uh... yeah,” Tomas said. He looked wary and baffled, but he still hadn’t quite lost his swagger.

“Very good. I trust you will enjoy your time with us, and learn everything the staff has to teach you. You will be seeing Ms. Clifford later to discuss your academic placement, and anything else, Miss Langenfeld can tell you. Again, welcome to St Rhiannon’s,” Mr. Moonlight finished gravely. He gave a curt nod and turned, leaving the two of them standing alone on the sidewalk.

“I’m Valeria Victrix Langenfeld, but most people call me VeeVee,” she said, without offering her hand. “I’ve been assigned as your mentor.”

Tomas looked faintly affronted. “Mentor? Mentor for what, *rubia*? I don’t need no mentor for nothin’, *chinga*. Not from you... Why, what you got?”

One corner of her mouth lifted in a sardonic smirk. Tomas Torres definitely had attitude to spare. But he’d paid careful attention to the rather brief welcome Inigo Moonlight gave him, so maybe his instincts were as powerful as his attitude. She hoped so, for both their sakes.

“What I got,” she said carefully, “Is this—”

With a gesture and a twist of her mind that summoned raw power from one of the ley-lines beneath the school, she set herself on fire. Not illusory fire. Real fire. Fire more than hot enough for Tomas to be scorched by the flames that were her favored element. He was a pyrokinetic. That ought to impress him.

It did. He leapt back, yelping, “*Que onda oye!*”

She had no trouble translating that. “Whoa!”

She doused the flames with another gesture.

“That, Hot Stuff,” she said, “Is why you are here. That is what St Rhia’s is all about.” Now she grinned. “It’s not a reform school, *chico*. It’s a school where a guy that can toss fireballs at cars is less scary than midterms.”

CHAPTER THREE

“All right, *chico*,” she said after giving him a moment to recover. “Grab your bag. First stop on the nickel tour is the dorm.”

Man, this guy wore every feeling he had smack on his face. She said “dorm” and his face fell about a million miles. She rolled her eyes as he heaved up the dropped gym-bag; from the look of it, there wasn’t a lot in there.

She took off at a brisk pace—because she was so short, she’d had to run most of her life just to keep up with people—and he ambled along with his shoulders slumped. “We’re in Gotham County, New York,” she said, heading for the dorm building. “We’re in the middle of about a hundred acres of woods, and this place used to be the county mental health hospital. Back in the ‘seventies they decided sick people needed to be what they called ‘mainstreamed’ so they could close places like this down. Which is why you have street-people wearing dead cats on their heads and talking to themselves now—that’s what happens to people who need to be in hospitals when they get ‘mainstreamed’ cause they sure can’t make it in the outside world.”

He snorted. “So?”

“So nobody wanted an old ‘looney bin.’ Place is a bitch to heat, it never did have central air, and it was falling apart. Besides having the rep of being haunted. Which it isn’t. Here’s your dorm.” She ran up the cracked cement stairs, and opened the door for him.

Since everybody was in classes, the place was quiet for a change. Their footsteps echoed down the hall, a grim looking corridor lined with heavy metal doors with teeny windows in them.

“So anyway, there weren’t a lot of potential buyers, and the county wanted a fair chunk of change for the place. And this is your room.”

The metal frame that used to hold a patient’s medical records now had a card slid in it. It said “Tomas Torres” in plain lettering off the office laser-printer. None of the doors locked since the renovation; half the student body had abilities that would allow them to get around most locks, and the other half had problems—of one sort or another—that meant the staff might need to get into their rooms quickly. So the whole school was on the honor system—you might be able to walk into somebody else’s room any time you wanted, but you’d damned well better respect their privacy. And their ownership rights.

VeeVee pulled open the door to Tomas’s new room and waved him through. She knew it probably looked like a jail cell to him. There was a metal bed bolted to the green linoleum floor right under the window—relic of St. Rhia’s asylum days. A desk, dresser,

nightstand, all dull brown-painted wood, part of the original furnishings for the “minimum security” patients, stood against the beige plaster walls. A built-in closet. That was it. There were communal bathrooms—and showers—at the end of the hall.

“Yeah, this is what you get,” she said, ‘cause you didn’t need to be an empath to read the hunching of his shoulders, the tension in his muscles. “But we’re allowed to do whatever we want with the rooms—look, don’t take my word for it, drop your bag and get out here.”

Right next door was Chris Shakleford’s room. VeeVee opened the door and stepped inside. Chris wouldn’t mind—heck, considering Chris’s Talent, he’d probably known last week she was going to do this: Chris was a precog, and while his visions of the future weren’t really predictable, they were fairly accurate when they did happen.

Chris was one of the Goths, and his room was a goth-kid’s haven. Floor, walls, ceiling, all black. Fake-leather drapes at the windows, also black, of course. He’d tricked out the bed to look like a sarcophagus. The furniture—black—had little steel skulls for knobs. On the wall were death-metal band posters and black and white photos of graveyards. In fact, the only color anywhere in the room came from the screensaver on the computer monitor.

“Oh,” she said, offhandedly. “You’ll be getting a computer as part of your official school equipment. We have a LAN and full ‘net access. Just if anyone outside of the school asks, you got it from your mother.”

Tomas stared at her as if she had been speaking Urdu. Maybe she had been, to him.

“Anyway, you can see, you can do whatever you want with your room except set it on fire.”

“Using what for money, *chica*? Or is all that going to be part of the school equipment, too?” Tomas sneered.

VeeVee winced inwardly. Her parents gave her an allowance. Chris played the stock market—under supervision, of course—because he was one of the school’s many runaways. Some of the students had families who provided for them. Tomas, obviously, was not going to be in that category.

And while of course Ria Llewellyn was rich enough to be able to give every student there a thousand dollars a week spending money out of LlewellynCo petty cash and not miss it, that just wouldn’t be a good idea. For one thing, some of the kids wouldn’t be able to resist talking about it to their families. For another, they were here to learn, not shop.

“Well, you can at least repaint everything in better colors—you can pick out anything you like from Stores. And if there’s anything you like in Storage you can bring that up. Lamps and bookcases and rugs and things. It won’t belong to you, but you can use it.” She shrugged. She knew better than to offer him charity.

“So I can paint,” Tomas said grudgingly, as the two of them walked out of Chris’s room back into the hall. The hall looked pretty much the way it must have looked, well...

forever: yucky green two-tone walls (light above, dark below) and yucky green floor. If you hadn't been a few fries short of a Happy Meal before you got here, you probably would have been after you'd stared at that color scheme for a while.

He went back to the doorway of his new room and looked around. "An' maybe take the, eh, bars off the windows?" he said pointedly.

She snorted. "Maybe the bars used to be there to keep the loonies in, but let me tell you, *chico*, they've been left on to keep other things out." At his look of disbelief, she shrugged. "Come on, I need to show you the rest of the campus. Don't worry about your stuff. Nobody's going to take it, and if they do, not only will you get it back—or better—but they'll be sorry they did. This building is the guys' dorm—there's about twenty kids here and on the floor above—next door is the girls'—there are four dorm buildings, but there's nobody in the last two yet—and across the way is the infirmary, where Doctor Carter and Nurse Irene live." She gave him a sardonic look. "And don't even think about it. They never sleep. You'd be better off trying to sneak past a pit bull on crack as to try to get into our dorm after lights-out." She paused meditatively. "They caught Johnny Devlin trying to get from the boys' dorm to the girls' dorm after lights-out a month ago. He won't say what they did, but now he won't even ask them for an aspirin."

She led the way out of the dorm, and on a long circular tour of the grounds, pointing out the classroom buildings, the dining hall, the admin building—which Tomas had already seen upon his arrival—and the vacant buildings, then taking him on a brisk hike around the teachers' cottages, all the while giving a running account of what was where and who did what. She could tell it was more information than he could really take in—well, as long as he saw Ms. Clifford tomorrow morning at nine for his Intake Interview and Academic Placement, and then saw Mr. Bishop after that for his first Psionics lesson, he really didn't have to remember anything else. And today was more about overawing him than about telling him things, really.

Finally—just as she'd expected he would—Tomas interrupted her. "All right, *chica*, you been tellin' me everything 'cept what you did to get stuck here. So what was it? You run away? Steal stuff? Drugs?"

She'd been expecting this, too. She turned around and laughed. "You don't get it. You watched me set myself on fire—and not get burned—and you still don't get it! Everybody here is special—"

"You mean *muy loco*," he muttered, sneering.

"If it's crazy to Call Fire like I did, and like you can—" she shrugged. "The rest of us are here 'cause we want to be. Annabel calls storms. Sarita Heals, and Chris sees the future. Lalage's a Witch, like me—"

"Whoa, whoa—a Witch? Like—" he clearly fumbled for a comparison. "Like on Charmed or something? Or you mean *brujeria*—"

“Brujeria” was Black Magic, and something much closer to Shamanism than to anything either VeeVee or Lalage called Witchcraft. VeeVee decided to explain, not that the explanation would do him much good at this point.

“I’m a techno-shaman and a Fire Witch; I do combat magic. Nothing like on TV or movies.” She shook her head at him. “It’s complicated, but I’ve been doing this since I was nine, and this is the safest place for me ‘cause my parents travel a lot.”

“You mean they dumped you here.” His look was a mixture of pity and contempt and again she had to laugh.

“OK, I was saving the best part for last, but I guess I’ll show you now. You come have a look at the Student Union and tell me I was dumped here.” Once again, she set off at a brisk pace and was pleased to see that he actually had to stretch his long legs a good bit to keep up. She was heading for the building that held the dining hall, and he was about to get the surprise of his life.

They stopped in at the dining hall first. Their tour of the grounds had occupied most of the lunch hour, and the place was empty again—nothing to see but long rows of refectory-style tables and benches. If Tomas was hungry, they could probably go around to the back and cadge a snack before dinner; nobody went hungry at St. Rhia’s.

Lunch was always sandwiches, though you could have them toasted if you wanted. The setup was a lot like a good Subway Shop except there were lots of veggie choices. It beat the heck out of the “mystery meat” and bland mac-and-cheese in most high school cafeterias.

Dinner was another affair altogether.

VeeVee had seen St. Rhia’s austere little brochure. “Students will be encouraged to sample the cuisines of many countries at dinner-time,” it said primly. At best, this was misleading. At worst, you could say that the brochure was lying through its teeth. The “encouragement” consisted of the following: you could eat what was on the line, or you could have yesterday’s leftovers heated in a microwave—if there were any leftovers—or you could build yourself another sandwich. When confronted with their first sight of, say, stuffed Portobello mushrooms or calamari, it was surprising how many of the kids opted for bologna and cheese on white.

To be fair, the chef—because the guy in charge of St. Rhia’s kitchen was a chef, a chef with Talent as almost all the staff were, though no one knew exactly what his Talent was—didn’t spring really weird stuff on the kids very often. And there were some things you could count on: Friday night was always pizza night, for instance. VeeVee had gotten an international palate over the years, so she regarded the forays into the unexpected with anticipation. But the faces of some of the kids—half of them the ones from the inner city, which made sense, but a lot of them runaways from white-bread suburbs—when confronted with something they didn’t recognize was entertainment in and of itself.

Lalage, for instance... you would have thought that with a name like that, she'd be as used to exotica as VeeVee was. But no. The first time she had been presented with sushi, you'd have thought she'd been handed a bowl of monkey brains.

Come to think of it, VeeVee was kind of looking forward to seeing Tomas's reaction to sushi.

They went back outside.

VeeVee folded her arms over her chest and grinned. Tomas's jaw was somewhere on the floor.

As well it should be. Behind a forbidding cellar door was Ria Llewellyn's most expensive concession to the fact she had forty-odd kids locked away from malls, fast-food joints, and skating parks.

The Student Union was in the cellar of the Dining Hall. It had been an ordinary storage cellar before the renovation, but now the food storage had been moved upstairs and the basement had been put to a much better use. Now top-of-the-line commercial-quality Arcade machines lined one wall. Six game-consoles took up the next, with a seventh solely dedicated to Dance Dance Revolution. The biggest plasma-screen TV VeeVee had ever seen occupied the third wall, hooked up to a DVD and VCR that read both PAL and NTSB format video. There was full satellite too, and a cable package that got just about every station there was. The one thing you couldn't have in your room was a television, because there was no reception and no way to get cable or satellite into all those individual rooms—of course, with full Internet who needed one? And for a lot of shows, it was a lot more fun to watch together on a 120" screen. The "furniture" was all the expensive kind of beanbag chairs, easy to clear off the floor for whatever reason. A microwave, a restaurant-sized fridge, and a drink machine rounded out the fourth wall. Right now, with everyone in class, the place was silent except for the pings and sound effects of the arcade and pinball machines.

"'Dumped?'" VeeVee prodded.

"I bet everybody doesn't get to use this stuff," Tomas said snarkily.

"Actually, we do," VeeVee said, tossing her head. "You can use any of the machines—or anything else down here—once you've done your coursework, whatever it is. Of course, you do have to access both the pinball machines and the arcade games with your ID card, which keeps track of the amount of time you spend on the machines. So you can't goof off."

Tomas was staring at her as if she'd grown an extra head.

"Oh, yeah, *pachuco*," VeeVee said. "There is serious money involved here. And even more scary: serious brains." She shrugged and smiled. "Upstairs in the Dining Hall is where we have concerts and dances. And 'lights-out' in the dorms doesn't mean

“curfew’, it just means if you’re gonna do something noisy, take it here so everyone else can sleep. There’s a skater park I didn’t show you yet—you don’t skate, do you?”

He shook his head, looking as if she’d just hit him with something large and heavy. He probably hadn’t looked this stunned when he’d been arrested, VeeVee thought. Considering that had been less than 48 hours ago, Tomas Torres had received a large number of big shocks in a short time.

“Then you won’t care,” she decided. “What do you do?”

His mouth opened and shut a couple of times. Finally a strangled “—cars—” came out.

She facepalmed. “OK, then I got one more thing to show you. It’s a long walk, though.” She grinned, maybe a little cruelly. A barrio boy might not have a good idea of just how long a long walk was. “You better be up for it.”

Tomas just glared at her. She knew perfectly well he’d never admit weakness to someone like her. She’d known enough Hispanic boys to know the mindset, and Tomas seemed to be about as “old school” as they came. And so she was determined to make him stretch his legs and maybe get a little out of breath.

“See,” she said, as he puffed a little, determined to keep up and not let her know it was an effort. “Thing is, there’s money here, like I said, but this isn’t like some fancy-schmancy prep school either. I mean, not everybody’s going to college. So you learn how to use your powers, and you learn you aren’t alone, and then if you aren’t going to college, you learn how to make a living. And I mean a living, not starving in a fast-food or mega-mart job.”

She didn’t say why. If he thought about it, the answer would be obvious. People with powers like his—and hers—faced temptations all the time. And being stuck in a burger-joint, or behind a cash-register—well, when you were trying to figure out how to pay the bills and eat, it made the road Tomas had started down look real attractive.

Ms. Llewellyn was nothing if not pragmatic. Anyone who left here, if they weren’t college-bound, would be able to buy one of those big screen TVs he’d seen in the Student Union for themselves out of what they could make honestly. And not every kid here at St. Rhia’s was college material. Ria Llewellyn knew this. The point was to train young mages and psi-talents in how to safely master their abilities, not prepare them for a life of crime. And so there was what even VeeVee callously referred to as the “Bonehead Track”—the vocational courses. But, as with everything else here, they were vocational courses with a difference.

They might call it wood-shop class in the catalog, but it was a full apprenticeship with a professional cabinetmaker. There was an accredited course in home heating and air-conditioning repair and installation—which included, according to Mr. Fred, a section on removing the Portal to Hell from your furnace (VeeVee still wasn’t sure whether this

part was tongue-in-cheek or not). There was another in TV and appliance repair, and one on computer repair—and the sections on exorcising the baneful spirits from all three, VeeVee knew from personal experience, were not tongue-in-cheek.

And there was “Auto Shop.”

This course was taught by a tiny blonde woman named Dottie Davies, who had been recruited from a place called “Fairgrove Industries.” Fairgrove made race cars, and not just turnkey check-book racers either. Real race cars, of the sort that ran at La Mans and Petite La Mans, and Dottie had been one of the chief mechanics there. Dottie didn’t just teach people how to repair vehicles, she taught them how to rebuild them.

That was obviously where Tomas was going to end up, because even on only a couple of hours’ acquaintance, Tomas didn’t strike VeeVee as the college-bound type.

The route Tomas would probably be taking every day was a well-traveled dirt road that wound down through the grounds towards County 6, and St. Rhia’s next-door neighbor.

A junkyard.

A very, very special junkyard.

The “Auto Shop” class took junkers and turned them into working cars, then sold them. Every student in the class had their hours logged, and the proceeds from the sales of the cars were distributed in the form of credit on the basis of hours logged. The credit went towards “buying” your own junker, and the parts, so you could build yourself a set of wheels of your very own.

VeeVee led Tomas up to the high chain-link fence that surrounded the yard. They walked along it until they came to the gate—unlocked and open at this time of day—and then walked through. She’d watched his eyes when he saw the big new industrial garage and the old, the very old, junkyard with its 1920s Art Deco garage and former gas station, and she grabbed him by the elbow before he could start wandering off down the seemingly endless rows of lovingly parked junkers. He barely noticed.

Towing him mercilessly in her wake, VeeVee hauled him in through the side door of the industrial garage. As she expected at this hour, class was in session, and the place was awash with sound—tools on metal, banging, the roar of a welding-torch, and over it all, the blare of rap music.

Five sets of eyes turned in their direction.

The owner of one of those sets of eyes turned off her torch and slapped the mute button for the shop-wide stereo system.

“Folks, this is a new student, Tomas Torres, and he’s a Firestarter.” As Tomas goggled at VeeVee’s bald statement, she turned back to him. “Tomas, this is auto-shop class. And that—” she pointed to the person peeling off her welding helmet, a graying blonde no taller than VeeVee was, “—is the instructor. Dottie Davies.”

“She’s a girl?” Tomas blurted.

“You could say that, if you didn’t want to get to be much older than you are now,” Dottie said. “Know anything about cars, homeboy?”

“Uh—” Tomas goggled at Dottie, who briskly shoved him towards a bench with a gloved hand.

“There. Carburetor rebuild, ‘57 Chevy, should be a piece of cake. Show me what you can do.”

Tomas still had that cartoon-stunned look on his face, but it didn’t affect his abilities. His hands moved surely among the parts and the tools in a way that looked as arcane as anything VeeVee could do. Dottie watched silently over his shoulder, saying nothing, eyes thoughtful. After a moment, Aaron Clark and Brian Walker—the latter a drawling tow-headed backwoods kid from Appalachia, the former a square-built black boy from Atlanta—sidled over to watch too.

After about fifteen minutes, Dottie put a hand on Tomas’s shoulder, making him jump. “That’ll do, homie. You’re in.” She grinned, and slapped his back hard enough to make him stagger a little. “Tell Ms Clifford. For the next three years or so, your ass is mine. Now, you finish that rebuild while these two knuckleheads watch.” She gave the other two a sidelong, amused look. “On the whole, boys, you’ll discover knowing what you’re doing rather than trying to intuit stuff from the way the parts are shaped tends to work better.”

“Well, what do you think?” VeeVee said.

Auto Shop class was over—she didn’t think she could have pried Tomas out of the garage with heavy machinery, and so she hadn’t tried—and the students were cleaning up, putting away their tools and getting ready for dinner. “Think you’re going to like it here?”

He’d been smiling and easy with the other bolt-heads, but now she saw him hesitate, and visibly remind himself he wasn’t supposed to want to be here.

“It’s still a prison, *rubia*,” he said.

“Fine,” she said. “Come on and have dinner, then.”

The next morning, Tomas went to see Ms. Clifford.

He wasn’t looking forward to it at all. *Que linda rubia* had told him Sarah Clifford was the school Guidance Councilor, who would set up his class schedule. What he knew for sure was that he wanted to spend every minute down at the garage and no time anywhere

else. Dottie Davies might be a crazy smack-talking old lady, but Tomas liked her already, and she spoke his language. Cars.

Ms. Clifford was another matter. He'd met her kind before, back in El Paso. Social Workers who didn't have a clue, who figured any problems you had were all your own fault. She take one look at him and probably tell him he'd have to jump through all kinds of hoops to get what he wanted, because that was what her kind always did.

But that wasn't what happened at all.

He'd been supposed to go to her office right after breakfast. He'd deliberately made sure to arrive fifteen minutes late.

She hadn't been angry. She'd been reading a book when he came in, and she just waved toward a chair. "Tomas. It's good to see you. My name is Sarah Clifford."

"Yeah," he said rudely, flopping into a chair and putting his feet up on the cushions. "I know."

At that point he'd expected a lecture on manners—and to be told to put his feet on the floor—but Ms. Sarah Clifford just smiled. "Good. Now. You're going to be with us for the next three years—as you already know. I've got your transcripts from El Paso, so I've got a pretty good idea of where you need to go academically."

Tomas slouched even further down in his seat. "I don't need to go to school."

Ms. Clifford actually looked sympathetic, which he was sure was a complete act.

"I'm afraid you're going to at least need a High School Diploma, or a GED—that's a General Equivalency Diploma, which means you've passed a test that means you know everything you would have learned in High School. You'll need one or the other in order to get your mechanic's license, which involves passing the mechanic's course we offer here and getting both a regular drivers' license and your Class III driver's license as well. And it's a condition of your probation, so we can't really skate on that."

Tomas sneered. This was going about the way he'd expected. They were going to promise him that if he behaved he'd be let to go back down to the garage someday.

But Ms. Clifford's next words took the wind right out of his sails.

"Now, Dottie's already talked to me about putting you in Auto Shop, so we'll be scheduling your other classes around that. And VeeVee's explained to you that we train Gifts and Talents here, so you'll also be working with Daniel Bishop. Mr. Bishop trains our psionic students."

Tomas blinked. "I can start at the garage now?" he said suspiciously.

"Tomorrow afternoon," Ms. Clifford said, smiling. "Auto Shop meets from one-thirty to four down at the junkyard during the week, and you can work out additional time with Señora Davies, but that's up to the two of you."

“Why?” he said bluntly.

“Because that’s what you want to do,” Ms. Clifford said. “And Dottie says you’re good with cars.”

Tomas shook his head, baffled. “Why do you care what I want?” he blurted.

Ms. Clifford leaned forward. “It’s easier that way,” she said confidentially. “I know you don’t want to be here, Tomas, but the reason you’re here is because you can do something few people can. And with an ability like that, it just makes sense we should try to work with you and not against you.”

“So because I can start fires, I get what I want?” Tomas said belligerently.

“No,” Ms. Clifford said firmly. “The purpose of this school is to teach you about your Talent and prepare you to live with it for the rest of your life. So why shouldn’t you spend your life doing something you like?”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Tomas said stubbornly.

“It will,” Ms. Clifford promised. “Okay. In addition to the academic courses and the vocational courses, you’ll be taking P-track courses. ‘P’ stands for “Psionic.” Your instructor will be Daniel Bishop. Mr. Bishop also teaches History, so you’ll be seeing a lot of him. When we’re done here, you need to go down to the P-lab and see him.”

“He start fires, too?”

Ms. Clifford shook her head, smiling. “You’re our first Firestarter.”

Tomas frowned. “No, I saw that—VeeVee, she set herself on fire yesterday.”

“Yes, she did,” Ms. Clifford said calmly. “But VeeVee is a Witch, not a pyrokinetic. Her powers come from magic. You were born with yours.”

“Is everybody here crazy?” Tomas asked desperately. “Witches, and—there ain’t no such things as Witches, *mujer!*”

“St. Rhiannon’s is a school for young people with abilities that others don’t have. Sometimes those abilities come from magic. Sometimes they come from the powers of the mind: psionics. Often they look very much alike, but they need to be trained differently.”

“I still think you’re all crazy,” Tomas muttered.

“Well, I can’t help that,” Ms. Clifford said calmly. She didn’t seem to be particularly upset about it, or even offended. “I know this is a lot to take in all at once. Most people live out their entire lives without ever finding out about these other kinds of people—much less discovering they’re one of these people themselves.”

Tomas thought about it. He’d like to be mad at Ms. Clifford, but somehow she wasn’t giving him anything to be mad at. Okay, going to classes sucked, but he was going to get to spend hours every day down at the garage. And—

“What’s this Bishop *culo* going to do with me?”

“Well, today he wants to find out about your abilities, and what you can already do with them. Then he’s going to teach you how to do what you do... better.”

Better, huh? That sounded interesting, Tomas thought warily. “Okay. I guess we’re done here,” he said.

“All right then. If you have any problems that need fixing, you can tell VeeVee, or you can tell me. We can probably work something out.”

“You think so, eh?” Tomas said, getting to his feet.

“My job is to solve problems, Tomas. Usually I can,” Ms. Clifford said. “Here’s your class schedule. If you don’t know where all the rooms are, just ask anyone. Chris Shackelford is your Residential Assistant—you’ve already met him, right?”

“Yeah.”

He’d met Shackelford last night—a freaky Goth kid; he even wore makeup—but he’d been helpful without being pushy, getting Tomas’s new computer set up and running without any fuss.

“You can ask him about anything you need to get your room set up, and he or VeeVee can show you where the storage rooms are. You can probably get it painted over the weekend.”

“Yeah. Thanks,” Tomas said reluctantly. He took the sheet of paper, folded it over several times, and stuffed it into the pocket of his jeans without looking at it.

“It was nice to meet you,” Ms. Clifford said.

Tomas had the weird feeling she actually meant it.

When he walked out of the building, VeeVee was waiting for him.

“What are you doing here?” Tomas snapped. He felt a little irritated, as if she was checking up on him. And partly, he’d been all set to get into some kind of fight with Ms. Clifford, and it just hadn’t happened, and he still wasn’t sure why.

VeeVee had been smiling until he spoke. Now she frowned, her eyes flashing dangerously, and Tomas kicked himself mentally. If there was one person in this whole place he wanted to get on his side—well, besides Dottie Davies—it was VeeVee. And now he’d gotten her mad at him.

“Oh, waiting for you, of course! Because you can’t be let out alone without a keeper!” she huffed right back. “Excuse me for thinking you might not be able to find the P-lab by yourself on your first real day here!” She turned away, blonde ponytail swinging.

“Aw, *chica*, don’t be like that,” Tomas said. “I was just... Hey, I know what. After I get done with this psychic guy, maybe you’d like to help me pick out some colors for my room, hey?”

““Psionic,” not “psychic,”” VeeVee said. “And I’ll be in class this afternoon—and you’ll probably be down at the garage—but after dinner, sure.”

“So it’s a date?” Tomas said eagerly.

“No,” VeeVee said. “But I’ll help you choose paint colors.”

“Here you go,” VeeVee said, stopping at the door of yet another of the red brick bunker buildings. “Good luck,” she added mysteriously.

Tomas regarded the building as VeeVee walked off. It looked just like all of the dorm buildings, with one exception: all of the ground-floor windows had been bricked up, and the regular metal door with the glass pane had been replaced with a new solid metal door. *Oh*, he thought to himself, *this don’t look good*.

But he wasn’t a coward. He opened the door and went inside.

Extensive renovations had been done inside the building as well. It was now one giant room—there was no second floor any more—with very thick walls. The second-floor windows were barred inside as well as out, and Tomas could see that the walls were at least three feet thick. The walls were unpainted cinderblock, and the floor was a solid slab of new concrete.

“Nothing in here to burn at all, so we’re perfectly safe,” a cheerful voice said. “Come on in. Oh, and bolt the door behind you, please.”

In the center of the room—several yards away—stood a large grey metal table, and behind the table was—Tomas guessed—Mr. Bishop.

He didn’t look like a scary guy. Young, Anglo, wearing a polo shirt and sneakers and jeans. He looked like all of the stupid smug rich white guys Tomas had seen by the dozens on the infrequent occasions that he’d ventured downtown back in New York, except that they’d always looked at him as if they were either scared of him or mad at him—like his dark skin and do-rag meant he wasn’t entitled to breathe the same air as them. This Bishop guy looked at Tomas as if the two of them were just the same, and Tomas wasn’t quite sure what to make of that.

The door swung shut behind Tomas with a bank-vault clang. He looked around and found the bolt Mr. Bishop was talking about—an actual metal bar, designed to drop into brackets in the door and the frame. When it was in place, nobody would be able to open the door from the outside, though all anyone would have to do to get out would be to lift the bolt free. That reassured him a little. He dropped it into its brackets and walked over to the table.

On top of the table was a large shallow metal box filled with sand, and sitting in the middle of the sand was a fat white pillar candle.

“Welcome to St. Rhia’s, Tomas,” the man across the table said. “My name is Daniel Bishop.” He held out his hand.

Tomas took the hand and shook it. Mr. Bishop blinked slowly, then smiled. “Today we’re going to establish the parameters of your pyrokinetic abilities.” His smile got wider. “You’re going to show me what you’ve got.”

“Yeah, the lady in the other building said you was going to teach me things. I don’t need to learn nothing. I can already burn things up. That’s why I’m here, you know?”

Mr. Bishop looked amused, as if he’d expected Tomas to say that. “In fact, there’s a great deal you need to learn. You just started Calling Fire—what? A few weeks ago?”

“About that, yeah.”

“And you’re fifteen. Your powers are only going to get stronger as you get older. You only think they’re under your control now. They’re not. Soon they’re going to be completely out of control, and somebody is going to get hurt. If you practice now, you’ll have the control you need—later, when it matters.”

Mr. Bishop sounded serious—more than that, deadly serious. His brown eyes were fixed on Tomas’s face, and the smile was gone. Tomas got the feeling that whatever he said next, it had better not be a lie.

He thought about the way he’d felt in the bodega when he’d set that gunman on fire. Not at the time—then he’d only been thinking about keeping Rosalita safe. But afterward, when he’d thought about the fact that he’d set someone on fire.

He thought about the bridal shop. Would he have burned it? What if he’d hurt someone? If he hadn’t burned it, Señor Prestamo would have hurt Mamacita and Rosalita. He wouldn’t have had a choice.

But—so far—the fire only came when he called it.

What if—some day—it came whether he called it or not? What if he hurt someone, or even—*el dios prohíbe*—killed someone by accident?

“I suppose it don’t hurt nothin’ to see what you got,” he said.

“Good,” Mr. Bishop said. He sounded relieved, and Tomas had the odd feeling that he’d just passed some kind of test. “Light that,” Mr. Bishop added, nodding toward the candle in the middle of the shallow box of sand.

This is too easy, Tomas thought to himself. He called up his Fire—

—and a moment later the candle was a puddle of burning wax in the middle of the box of sand.

That isn't fair! Tomas thought in alarm. Three weeks ago he'd lit the kitchen stove without any problems.

But did you ever try lighting it again after the first day you had your powers? a little voice inside him asked. *No. You spent your time burning bigger and bigger things. Getting stronger. Good thing you never tried to light it again after that...*

"I said light it, not blow it to bits," Mr. Bishop said mildly. The wax soaked sand was burning merrily. "Let's try again. First, can you put out the fire?"

"I don't know," Tomas said, still staring at the flames in shock. "I never tried."

"Well, everyone can't do everything." There was a large bag under the table; he pulled out a small fire extinguisher and doused the flames, then set up another candle.

"Try again."

At the end of two hours, Tomas had managed—barely—to keep from completely melting one candle. He'd thought, when he'd come in here, that it was going to be about how big a fire he could light, not how small a one. Now he was just as glad it hadn't been.

"That's a good start," Mr. Bishop said encouragingly. "I'll see you again tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Tomas said, horrified. Right now he was as exhausted as he'd ever been in his entire life, and all he'd done was stand in front of a table for two hours and try to make very small fires.

Small controlled fires.

"Not for as long," Mr. Bishop said soothingly. "But I think we really need to work on control. And hey, wait until we get to flash-paper. And ice. That's really going to be fun." He pulled a garbage bag out of the satchel at his feet and began dumping melted wax and clotted sand into it. When he was done, he handed the bag to Tomas. "Toss this into one of the garbage cans on the way out, will you? And better hurry. You don't want to be late for lunch."

Thursday morning was Tomas's first day in class, and if not for everything that had happened to him in the last two days—and the fact VeeVee had oh-so-casually mentioned the school held dances in the dining hall every Friday night—he'd be thinking about getting back to the city right now even if he had to walk.

There were little kids in the same class as him.

He'd figured school would be just like regular High School back in El Paso; he could sit in the back of the room, blow off the teacher, and skate by. But it wasn't like that at all.

For one thing, the class was small. Not thirty or forty kids. Twelve. And they weren't all his age, either. There were a couple of boys older than he was, a few kids around his own age, but some of them couldn't be more than ten or eleven—one of the boys looked like he was Rosa's age. He'd figured he was in the wrong class, until one of the girls his age, Jamilla, told him you got put in classes at St. Rhia's not because of how old you were, but because of what you knew. That shut him up pretty fast, because no freakin' way was he as dumb as some ten-year-old. Only the first class of the morning was English—reading and writing—and that had never been his favorite thing. The teacher, Mr. Balinsky, didn't let him get away with anything, either. Sure, he could sit in the back of the room. But it didn't help.

Mr. Balinsky didn't make any of the assumptions Tomas's other teachers had, either—like that English was his second language, just to begin with. And he didn't make fun of him. Every time Tomas started to get confused—or just let his attention wander—Mr. Balinsky was right there pushing him back on track and straightening him out, until Tomas almost started to think it would be easier to actually learn something.

There was homework—and Tomas already knew from Dottie that getting in extra hours down at the Garage depended on keeping up with his classroom assignments. The only good thing—so far—was that all the school supplies were free, as much as you wanted.

Algebra class was next. Tomas was relieved to find most of the kids were about his own age there. Well, you couldn't fix a car without knowing math.

After that was History and Geography. According to his schedule, it was two mornings a week one week, three mornings a week the other week, alternating with Biology and Chemistry. So today he got a double dose of Mr. Bishop.

It wasn't as bad as it could have been, though Tomas saw even less point to History than he did to English. Why learn about a bunch of dead people and some places he was never going to go? But Mr. Bishop talked about them like they were all personal friends of his, so even though Tomas still didn't like History at the end of the hour—and there was more homework—it didn't suck as much as it could have.

After that came another private lesson.

"How come this place is like this?" Tomas asked, looking around the big echoing room. He was still working with candles—tapers this time. He suspected he was going to get really tired of candles before Mr. Bishop was done with him.

"You don't think we built this just for you, do you?" Mr. Bishop said. "All the P-track kids start out here, and believe me, you really want thick walls and a high ceiling when you're practicing telekinesis or levitation. The soundproofing comes in handy, too, especially when the M-track kids get going, because they use this lab too. And, of course, the fact you can just hose the place down is a real plus."

“There’s stuff you’re not tellin’ me,” Tomas accused.

“There’s a lot I’m not telling you,” Mr. Bishop corrected. “But you haven’t even been here a week yet. You’ll pick up everything you need to know soon enough. Now, are you ready to go again? Just light the center candle, not all three of them.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know,” Tomas muttered.

He was really glad to get away at the end of half an hour.

CHAPTER FOUR

Friday night was the School Dance.

Dances were held once a week in the Dining Hall, with a combination of live music—provided by the students themselves; there were a couple of different bands here—and dance music from a club-worthy sound system. Nobody had to attend—at first Tomas had thought that this was one of those kind of things where the teachers all stood around and made everybody “socialize”, until Chris set him straight—and nobody was punished by being kept away from it either. You could go or not, and dance or not, just as you liked.

Tomas was looking forward to it. He was a good dancer and he liked to dance. He figured he had a really good shot at impressing VeeVee with his moves.

“One thing you gotta remember, Torres,” Chris said to him as they were heading out. “The rules are kind of relaxed on Fridays in the dining hall. So don’t freak.”

Tomas looked at him, frowning. The two of them were standing in the hallway outside their rooms, getting ready to head over to the dining hall.

“You know: the rules about not showing off what you’ve got outside the labs,” Chris said. “Well, at the dances, it’s okay to flaunt it a little, so long as everything’s completely under control and nobody’s going to get hurt.”

“So I’m gonna see what you got tonight?” Tomas asked. Everybody kept telling him everyone here could do freaky things, but so far he hadn’t seen anybody do anything except VeeVee.

Chris smiled. “Not me. Couldn’t show it to you if I tried. That’s why my folks locked me up in a place like this—only it really was a nuthouse.”

Tomas stared at him. “They put you away?”

“Sure they did. They thought I was crazy because I was telling them I could see the future. Well, that got old really fast, so I booked. This place is a lot better. Come on.”

He turned and walked off down the hall. Tomas hesitated for a moment and then followed him.

“So... what do they think about you being here?” he asked curiously.

“They don’t think anything,” Chris said neutrally. “They never knew. They died in a car-crash last year. It was what I was trying to warn them about, but they wouldn’t believe me.”

The dining hall looked completely different set up for the dance. All the dining tables and benches were stored away, except for the tables along one side of the room that held ice and soft drinks and bottled water, and the row of benches along the other wall to give people a place to sit. The back of the hall had been set up as a performance stage, and the band was already set up and getting into its first set.

By now Tomas had a nodding acquaintance with half-a-dozen of the guys around his own age in his dorm, but he didn't really know anybody here. He hadn't quite made up his mind whether he wanted to or not. Last Sunday night he'd been pretending to sleep on the couch in Mamacita's living room, waiting until he could sneak out of the house and go off to set a fire for Señor Prestamo. Now it was Friday night, and he was here. And everybody kept acting like being able to make things burst into flames because you pointed at them was normal.

He glanced around the room, looking for VeeVee, and didn't spot her. He felt a brief flare of irritation. How was he supposed to impress her if she wasn't here? He supposed he could get a soda while he was waiting for her to show up, and check out some of the other girls, just to keep in practice. As he skirted the edges of the dance floor—it was already starting to fill up; the band was pretty good—his eye was caught by a flash of *pelo rojo*—red hair—out on the dance floor. He stopped to look.

The girl had long red hair, and she wore it loose—the way Tomas liked. Her big gold hoop earrings caught the light as she moved, and from where he was standing, there was absolutely nothing wrong with any part of her. Her tight little T-shirt fit her like it was sprayed-on, and so did her jeans.

She caught him looking at her, and she smiled at him. Oh yeah, that was definitely one to save for later.

He made his way over to the drinks. Several of the other boys were gathered around one of the ice-filled buckets. Tomas recognized Johnny Devlin and Kurt Richards.

Devlin was small and wiry. He read like a banger to Tomas—or at least a wannabe banger; somebody who was used to making trouble. Tomas didn't think he'd have any trouble taking him if he had too, though. Richards was a different matter. The guy was as big as a house—football-player big—and even his muscles had muscles. They didn't have any of the same classes, though, so Tomas didn't know very much about him.

“Hey, Torres, you want a can a' pop?” Devlin asked, raising his voice to be heard over the music. Without waiting for an answer, he opened his hand, and suddenly there was a can of soda in it where none had been before. He offered it to Tomas, who took a wary step back.

Devlin laughed, and Richards plucked the can out of his hand and opened it with a sigh. “Stop playing around, Johnny,” he said mildly. “Tomas hasn't even been here a week.”

“Better get used to the place then.” Devlin opened his hand again, and another can

appeared in it. He opened this one himself and took a long swallow.

“Where’d you get that?” Tomas asked. He did his best to keep it *frío* this time, because guys like Devlin, if they knew they’d rattled you, they never let up.

“Over there.” Devlin pointed to the far end of the table, several feet away.

“It’s called “apportation,”“ Richards said, sounding long-suffering. “Teleportation of outside objects.”

“Yeah, well, why bother when there’s soda right behind you?” Tomas said, pushing past Devlin and grabbing himself a Coke from the bucket on the table right behind him. Richards snickered and Devlin pretended he hadn’t heard.

“Yeah,” a new voice said. “It’s not like you’re all that special, Johnnyboy.”

Tomas turned around. A boy who looked maybe a year or so younger than he was stood behind him. He was plump, with long blond hair, and looked like he’d gotten dressed by picking through the Dumpster in back of a Goodwill Store—a plaid flannel shirt open over a stained and faded t-shirt, cargo pants, and work boots. Still, Tomas had already seen that everyone here wore pretty much what they liked, and considering some of the outfits he’d seen in the last two days, he wasn’t going to hold somebody’s clothes against them. Automatically, he moved to make room by the table.

“Don’t bother,” the new kid said. He reached out his hand, much the way Devlin had, but instead of a can just appearing in it, there was a rustle of ice, and a can floated up out of the bucket, over everybody’s heads, and down into his hand.

“Kenny Chandler,” he said, popping the top. “Telekinesis. And you’re Tomas Torres, pyrokinetic. That must be really cool.”

“Yeah,” Tomas said, a little surprised. “It is.”

It was, he decided. At first he’d just been scared. And then—he realized—he’d been trying not to think about it, just taking one day at a time. But maybe Mr. Bishop was right. Maybe someday he’d be able to stop his fires as well as start them. And at least—as Mr. Bishop also said—they’d be his fires, and not the other way around. “I’d show you, but—”

“Yeah,” Kenny said, shrugging. “Not here. Maybe someday I can watch you practice, though. Man, you should’a seen me when I started out—Mr. Bishop and me, we were both in full goalie gear—like for hockey, you know?—and we still both got a collection of prime bruises.” Kenny grinned.

“How long’d it take you to figure things out?” Tomas asked.

Kenny winced. “Man. Months.”

Tomas turned his attention back to the dance floor. The hot-looking redhead was still out there, and the floor was starting to fill up now. If he hadn’t been braced for it by

Kenny and Devlin, some of the things he saw would have made him think somebody'd found a way to spike the cans of Coke.

A couple of the dancers were surrounded by of colored lights, like something out of the movies. One or two of the others didn't quite seem to be touching the floor. And Tomas nearly choked on his Coke when he saw a couple of kids dance up to another pair of dancers... and through them.

"Half the people out there are illusions," Kenny said—as quietly as possible under the circumstances. "The M-track kids can tell which ones they are. I can't."

"Why not?" Tomas asked. He knew Mr. Bishop—or Ms. Clifford—or VeeVee, even, would answer questions like these, but for some reason he didn't want to ask them.

"I'm psionic but not psychic," Kenny said. "Telekinesis isn't like having mental powers. If I was, oh, a telepath like Gordy, or a Sensitive like Aimee, I'd probably have a pretty good idea they weren't real without touching them. But all the M-track kids can tell."

"What's the difference?"

"Between—"

Just then the music stopped again and everybody applauded and whistled. Tomas looked out over the dancers, trying to decide which ones were real, and which ones were the illusions Kenny said they were. He had a sudden horrified thought. What if the redhead wasn't real?

"That girl out there—" he said urgently.

"Oh, that narrows it down," Kenny said.

"The redhead, she real?"

Kenny looked where Tomas was pointing. "That's Lalage Chisolm. She's M-Track. Her parents think this is one of those behavior modification schools for troubled teens."

"You know a lot about her."

Kenny shrugged. "Everybody knows her. I'm not dumb enough to think I've got a chance, you know?"

"Maybe I do," Tomas said casually. He was a lot more interested in VeeVee than he was in Lalage, but it was nice to have choices, and maybe he could use Lalage to make VeeVee jealous...

There was a crunching sound behind him, audible even over the sound of the music, and when Tomas turned around, he saw Kurt Richards setting his crushed soda can carefully down on the table.

Then he saw VeeVee walk out onto the dance floor and he forgot all about the incident.

VeeVee usually wore her favorite baby-tee and low-rider jeans to the dances—no real reason to dress up, since she intimidated the crap out of most of the guys and generally ended up dancing alone—but tonight she stood in front of her closet, frowning at the contents.

Ah, there were the fruits of her secret vice. Sewing.

When you moved a lot, you needed hobbies that were portable. She'd started out on dolls, rescuing them from thrift stores and making fantastic costumes for them. Then she'd found some great adult clothes in the same thrift shops and started cutting things down and tailoring them for herself.

By day, she's an ordinary student; by night, she becomes a Gothic Lolita...

VeeVee loved the whole New Romantic gig. The lace, the satin, the velvet, the floaty chiffon, the leather waist-cinchers, the brocade corsets... She had an entire closet full. Most of what was in there she'd made for herself, cutting down thrift-shop wedding gowns and prom-dresses, making skirts and tops and bustiers. The only things she hadn't made were the corsets and leather cinchers and boots.

And she hardly wore any of it. There didn't really seem to be a point. When she'd first arrived here, she used to wear her creations, but after a while it was just easier to throw on something quick. Dressing for herself seemed kind of narcissistic, and as for dressing for the guys, well... who was there? Devlin was a pain, Chris was intimidated by her, and so were Tyler and Ethan. Aaron and Brian did nothing for her, and they had this habit of switching girlfriends every couple weeks anyway. Gordie wasn't exactly intimidated, but he was always giving her the hairy eyeball, maybe because he couldn't get even surface thoughts through her magical shielding. Kenny was a slob, Gareth was OCD, and anyway, he and Lauren had a thing going. That left Kurt, and anyone with two functioning braincells could tell Kurt had a major crush on Lalage.

Well maybe dressing to please herself wasn't all that narcissistic after all. Otherwise the stuff just wasn't going to get worn, and what was the use of that?

She groaned, looking at her stash. How to not look like she was dressing up just to impress Tomas? Everyone knew she didn't dress up for the dances...

And I'm not dressing up to impress Tomas. I just want to wear some of this stuff for a change. I never get to wear it.

Finally VeeVee arrived at what she thought was a reasonable compromise. A flirty, multi-layered chiffon skirt—short in front, long in back, in bright red. The red-and-black second-hand haori she'd gotten on eBay. And the black leather waist cincher with the red hot-rod style flames on it. She'd worn the haori and belt with jeans to the dances before, though not with the skirt. And in case she got too hot, the little black brocade bustier under the haori coat. Black Ceili—Irish folk dance—shoes. And then she looked at

herself. And sighed.

She looked all dressed up. There was only one person here who was new, and only one person here who she was mentoring.

She was not trying to impress him!

With a growl, VeeVee examined herself in the mirror again. All right. She lost the haori and the waist cincher. That left her with the skirt and bustier. Still too dressy.

Tee with a touch of lace that she wore to class and the skirt? Or bustier and jeans?

Bustier and jeans, she decided, and, with a sigh of regret, hung the skirt back up. Then, instead of jeans, she changed her mind at the last minute and grabbed the denim miniskirt instead.

She thought about having her hair loose, then decided to put it up with a few loose, curly tendrils.

Finally she was ready, and, with a last look at the mirror, she sauntered out of the now-empty dorm.

By now it was dark, so she conjured a ball of Mage-fire to light her way, sending it to follow a little behind her and above her head.

She paused at the entrance to the dining hall, listening to the band. The guys were getting really good... then again, they all had some capacity for Bardic abilities, and Eric and Hosea were teaching them. A quick glance through the door didn't show her Tomas and she felt a pang of disappointment and almost went back to her room.

But then VeeVee squared her shoulders. After all, what was the use of being a mage if you couldn't supply yourself with a dance partner?

And the music was really good.

She stepped aside into the corner, cast a quick summoning circle, and issued an invitation.

Something immediately shimmered into being; red-haired, green-eyed, with a wicked grin and a bow and a flourish. And sharply pointed ears.

She raised an eyebrow. This was not only an Elf, it was one she knew. But before she could say anything, Nierin ap Bedwyr grinned and bowed with a flourish. "Ah, my sweet Valeria!" he said, in mock-mourning. "I hear an invitation to dance, I come in answer, and lo! It is you! Is this the only way I can see you? You never call, you never write—"

"Would you answer me if I had?" she asked pointedly. "Besides, the last time I saw you, I was thirteen and you were describing me to Mom and Dad as 'your grubby little virago—'"

"And so you were." Nierin wagged his eyebrows at her. "You seem to be finishing out

rather nicely, though. Cleaner, certainly.”

She rolled her eyes. She’d been dazzled by Nierin when they first met, of course. Fortunately she’d had her parents around to keep her from making a complete fool of herself. “Come on,” she said shortly. “Let’s dance.”

Naturally Nierin was an excellent dancer. What was most amusing to VeeVee was that the other dancers—even those who should have known better—took him for an illusion. It amused him too, and when Tomas finally swaggered across the dance floor to her, ignoring Nierin, the Sidhe grinned at her and faded into invisibility as if he really had been an illusion.

“Yo, VeeVee,” Tomas said. “Wanna dance?”

“I was dancing,” she retorted sharply.

He smirked, saying nothing. Just at that moment the band started another song, with just enough of a Latin rhythm she decided it was about time to lay down a challenge.

The shine footwork—and hipwork—she did was salsa... but the challenge in her eyes and her steps were pure flamenco.

Bring it.

Tomas’s eyes widened, then narrowed. His “reply” was half salsa, half hip-hop. VeeVee followed, shadowing what Tomas did one beat behind him and adding some flourishes of her own for good measure.

Anything you can do, I can do better.

She evaded his hands, and noticed out of the corner of her eye that the dance floor was clearing around them. The band had picked up on that too, and instead of breaking for the next song, they bridged right into it.

Tomas was sweating. So was she, and her hair had come undone; she made use of that by tossing her head to punctuate her movements. By this point, their dancing was part-sparring and part-flirting; Tomas had a grin on his face and kept trying to capture her hands, while VeeVee knew her eyes were dangerously alight and there was no way he was going to touch her unless she let him.

The band gave out first. VeeVee sensed they were going to end with the third song rather than bridge to a fourth, and she spun out of reach and hit a challenge-pose on the last note.

Then, as some of the kids broke into whistles and applause, she ducked out and headed for the drink-table, searching for the magical signature that was Nierin. Tomas stayed on the dance floor, wearing that smirk, acknowledging the applause.

Nierin was gone of course. She sighed, and shook her head. *Elves.*

She downed a water, then ducked into the girls’ washroom to put her hair back up.

When she came back out again, the sound system had taken over while the band took a break, and Brian and Megan were in the center of the floor, engaged in a playful version of a Magician's Duel. Their avatars were mostly illusion, and it was pretty much the magical version of a video game. In fact, the glowing figures between them, battling it out, bore suspicious resemblance to certain Immortal Konflikt toons...

VeeVee tucked herself up to the side of the room and invoked Shadow to give herself a little time to breathe. She didn't want Tomas to come looking for her just yet. This wasn't quite the spell that would make people's eyes slide right past you; this was more as if you were sitting in a very deeply shadowed corner of the sort so beloved of fantasy writers. People would register someone was there, but not really know who you were unless you spoke.

"...dunno, he doesn't do anything for me." Lalage Chisolm and Jamilla Adams drifted within hearing range, fresh sodas in their hands. Jamilla was the one talking, and it was pretty clear from her next words who it was she was talking about. "That whole Latino macho attitude makes me want to slap him into next week. I dunno how VeeVee puts up with it, but I guess she has to since she's his mentor."

"Well I think he is hawt, girlfriend," Lalage replied, tossing her mane of red hair. "I can't believe VeeVee isn't jumping him. I would."

"I wouldn't." Jamilla wrinkled her nose. "Boy needs some of the barrio polished off him first. Maybe he can get away with treating a girl like an accessory back home, but he's not back home."

Lalage giggled. "I bet I can think of a few ways to change that attitude."

"Yeah, like giving him a good whack in the—hey, Tomas." Jamilla abruptly changed the tone of her voice as Tomas eeled past a couple of the other kids.

"*Hola, chicas.*" Tomas smirked and preened, basking in Lalage's obvious admiration. "Either of you wanna dance?"

Lalage tossed her hair and smiled winsomely, obviously about to accept. But she was just a second too late. VeeVee dismissed the Shadow and stood up.

"I do," she replied, as Tomas registered her presence with a start. "That is, if you think you're ready for round two."

He grinned, and made a mocking bow towards the dance floor.

"Bring it on, *rubia*."

"Oh, I will, *cholo*," she replied, settling herself and getting her balance. "Just try and keep up."

"Fairy Tales, suitably fractured," said Eric Banyon, sitting on the edge of his desk at the

front of the classroom. VeeVee leaned forward in her chair. She had a suspicion she knew where this was going, and if she was right, Music Arts class was about to get a whole lot more interesting.

“We’ve been covering all the traditional beasties and boggarts of ballad and folklore since this class started, but magic, and Underhill, are not frozen in time, and these things get changed. Sometimes accidentally, sometimes on purpose, but they do get changed.”

VeeVee nodded; alone among the students at St. Rhia’s, she had seen that first hand. There were places Underhill that were direct copies of the work of illustrators from John R. Neill to Todd Lockwood; of movie sets and real-world buildings; of places like Graceland: of basically anything the human imagination could cook up...

It was June now, but while other private schools took a break over the summer months, St. Rhia’s didn’t. Most of its student body had no place else to go, and St. Rhia’s had too much to teach them. When you were cramming scholastic and vocational courses into the school week alongside practical training in either magic or psionics, there were never enough hours in the day.

And when you added field trips...

No one else among the students at St. Rhia’s had been Underhill to see the things Eric was describing. But VeeVee had been helping her parents since she was twelve, and some of those jobs had been Underhill. VeeVee’s Gifts were geared towards combat, and her parents’ were not, so when they couldn’t get a combat-mage in an emergency, well, they used what they had. Which had often been their own daughter...

Eric, the class, all faded for a moment as VeeVee’s thoughts turned shadowed. She was very, very different from anyone else here. Tomas Torres thought he was the odd man out at St. Rhia’s. He had no idea.

VeeVee often had to deal with things no other student here had ever had to face, but her relationship to her parents was probably the most complicated. She was not just a daughter: she was a warrior in a long, long battle against the Darkness, and her parents not only accepted that, they embraced it. How could she explain to someone else that, although she knew her parents loved her unstintingly, she also knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that if her parents ever had to choose between saving their daughter and saving, if not the world, then certainly a great many people, they would without a moment of hesitation sacrifice their daughter.

Just as they would sacrifice themselves.

Kids were thrown to the wolves all the time by abusers, but this wasn’t the same thing at all. Sure, her parents would throw her to the wolves. But they’d throw themselves to the same wolves. In VeeVee’s family, everyone would go down fighting off the wolves. If there were any survivors, they’d certainly mourn, but that didn’t mean the survivors would make any move to stop someone from flinging themselves into the battle if the same thing happened again.

They'd even shove them into it.

The stakes were too high.

But the Langenfelds were hardly the usual sort of family. There had been Guardians on both sides of the family for as far back as there were records. No one was ever forced or even pressured to become a Guardian—when the Power was offered, there was always the chance to refuse—and the perils of Guardianhood were many—yet out of every generation on both sides of VeeVee's family for as far back as they had records, there had always been at least one who had accepted the task.

Would the power be offered to VeeVee? She didn't know yet. Would she take it if it was?

Yes.

She dragged her attention back to Eric.

"Here's the thing," Eric was saying. "We—humans—our will and imagination, have enormous impact on the world of *mythagos*—creatures who are created by and live because of magic. As a result, these days you're just as likely to encounter something like the *bean-sidhe* that's become a rock singer and now uses its voice to mesmerize, as you are to run into the classical version. Human dreams and nightmares call and feed these creatures, and human dreams and nightmares change them. That's what our field trips are about. When one of these creatures is found in this area, once the—ah—'agent' in question knows it's something our classes and teachers can handle, it's referred to us to deal with."

So there was going to be one of the special field trips? VeeVee felt a spark of excitement. And if Eric was talking about it to the Music Arts class, it looked like it was going to be opened up to more than the Advanced classes this time.

Up until now, only the Advanced students had gone on these "hunting trips," and although VeeVee was certainly an Advanced student, the teachers here hadn't wanted to include her on one of the trips until they'd seen her in action. Now that they knew just what she could do, VeeVee would have gone along on the last one, except for the fact her parents had pulled her for a job of their own. It had been great experience, but she missed the whole idea of going on a class trip with kids closer to her own age.

"We have people from both the M—and P-tracks along on these things since it's good for both sides of the school to see these things, and because you never know what's going to be the most effective means of dealing with a problem until you get there," Eric said.

Lalage raised her hand. "Why don't we know?" she asked. "I mean, if an agent has already seen whatever it is—"

"Because the agent probably hasn't seen it," Eric answered. "What the agent is doing is almost always identifying an anomalous power-signature remotely, and then verifying how strong it is, also remotely. Kind of like spotting something on radar and getting a feel

for what it is.”

He didn’t mention something that VeeVee was pretty sure most of the kids here didn’t know: that the agents in question mostly worked for LlewellynCo. Ever since Ria Llewellyn had decided she’d had enough of being called into situations long after they’d become emergencies, there’d been a sea-change in the way those mages allied with the Elfhames Underhill and some of the Guardians started to operate. Thanks to what Eric and Ria and a small group of Guardians in New York City had started, there was an uneasy, but real, alliance among the three groups, with LlewellynCo Mage-tech watching for problems, LlewellynCo agents monitoring the tech, and a LlewellynCo “Coordinator” deciding who or what needed to deal with said problems. No more vague “disturbances in the Force.” No more vague feelings of impending trouble. No more tea-leaves or crystal balls or card-reading...

Well, that wasn’t entirely true. Stuff could still crop up out of nowhere almost overnight. And there were Guardians and other Mages who refused to work with a corporation, with Ria, or both. But for most hot-spots, at least in North America, LlewellynCo now provided the early warning system for magical trouble. The “Defense Against The Dark Arts” had finally moved into the 21st century.

VeeVee’s parents loved this, but there were plenty of Guardians who thought they were crazy for trusting an outsider. VeeVee was going to stay out of the argument; not only was she a non-Guardian and a teenager, no matter what she said, the fact she was attending a school also sponsored by LlewellynCo would be held against her.

“Now, much as I would like to haul all of you along on this, the limit this time is going to be those with combat-oriented talents,” Eric concluded. “VeeVee, Lalage, Ethan and Brian. The P-track teachers will be picking the Psis, but one I can promise will be going will be Kurt. Never, never, never go on a Hunt without a medic.”

Well. Combat-oriented, hmm? There was one P-track candidate VeeVee could think of that fit that description. The question was, did he have his power under enough control?

Well, that would be for the teachers to decide, and if they had decided he was ready, he’d probably been told. Annoyingly, she was not going to have a free time-slot or a class with him in it until after lunch. So talking to Tomas was going to have to wait until lunch, and he might not show up for lunch. He spent an awful lot of time on that car of his, and yet it always seemed to look exactly the same whenever she went down to the garage: still stripped down, no paint, no interior, no—well maybe the engine looked different. She couldn’t really tell.

There had been a time a couple of weeks back when she’d thought the reason Tomas spent every free minute down at the garage was because he intended to use the car to make a run for it. She’d thought about warning him the techno-mages here had ways of making sure anything built on the grounds didn’t leave the grounds without their

permission, but then she'd figured he wouldn't believe her. He still really didn't believe in magic. He thought it was all psionics—and it had been hard enough to get him to believe in that. Well, if he did go on this hunting trip, maybe what he saw then would convince him.

VeeVee's next two classes weren't much different from the ones any ordinary high school student would take: World History and Biology. History she enjoyed, Bio was a pain. There was a lot of memorizing involved and none of it was intuitive. She could not imagine how anyone with three brain-cells could look at the biology of the world and see the hand of intelligence there. "Intelligent Design" indeed! If the world had been designed by the Powers, then the Powers sure as heck were a bunch of slackers. Take human spines, for instance... she could have come up with a better design in half a day.

VeeVee bolted from the classroom like a shot when the bell rang and made straight for the dining hall, then slowed down as she reached the door and tried to glance nonchalantly at Tomas's usual table.

The effort was wasted. Tomas wasn't there. Grumbling to herself, she got into line.

She ate her lunch quickly, trying not to seem as if she was hurrying through it. She casually took her tray back up to the front and dumped her garbage, then sauntered out as if she had no particular place to go. Only when she was out of sight of the windows did she run down to the garage, and once she was within sight of the garage she slowed down to a walk again.

Most kids in Auto Shop took months to earn themselves just one of the basic hulks from the junkyard. Tomas had gotten his car within his first two weeks here. But then, Dottie described him as a "natural wrench"—someone with an instinctive understanding of automotive mechanics. But now that he had his wheels, Tomas didn't seem to be in any great hurry to make them functional. And yet, he spent most of his free time down here. There was something in this equation VeeVee was missing.

Well she'd have to ask him about it. But not today.

She heard him grinding away on something at the back of the otherwise deserted shop. He was the only one allowed to work here unsupervised, another indication of how capable—and even trustworthy—Dottie deemed him to be.

He finished just as she approached his section of the garage, and caught sight of her as he turned. He pushed up his protective visor and grinned.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey yourself." She looked at the piece of metal in his hands and could not identify it. "You need to eat."

He shrugged. "I ate," he said. She looked at him with skepticism. "Dottie keeps

sandwich stuff here,” he elaborated.

“Okay, I guess,” she responded, feeling awkward in his presence. A little off-balance. A little fluttery inside. Maybe even a little shy. “But I’m your mentor, I’m supposed to keep track of you.”

He smirked. “Chica, I don’t need no babysitter.”

Stung, she frowned. “Fine, then. Don’t come whining to me if you miss a meal.” She turned on her heel and made one step towards the door.

“Hey, don’t be like that.”

“Don’t be like what?” she snapped, without turning.

“Like that.” She turned slowly and he shrugged. “Look I want to ask you somethin’. This monster-hunting trip—”

So he had been tapped to go!

“This’s all just phony, right? I mean, this is like Blair Witch. There ain’t nothin’ out there—”

She sighed with exasperation. Was he never going to learn? “No, it’s not phony. There’s something dangerous in this area we need to take down. You should be pleased they’re letting you go along—”

He snorted. “*Chica*, this’s what you call a “snipe hunt.” Teachers are tryin’ t’ scare you. Ain’t nothin’ out there but trees.”

She shook her head in exasperation. He’d go right on believing that until the moment whatever it was attacked. And maybe that was why the teachers wanted him along.

Not because he was ready.

Because he wasn’t.

And it would be her job to keep him safe.

On the one hand, she could hardly wait to see his face when he was rescued by a girl. On the other...that girl was going to be her, which was not going to do a lot for his ego or their relationship. Such as it was.

Great. Just great.

But on the third hand—could you have a third hand?—maybe he’d finally start believing.

He still hadn’t decided one hundred percent that he was going to stay at this crazy school, even though he’d been here a month now and had not only gotten his room fixed up

pretty nice, but Señora Davies had helped him pick out a sweet little junker—the body was crap, but the frame was tight—that was going to be a thing of beauty some day. The schoolwork was still pretty annoying, and the homework really sucked, because there was absolutely no way he could skate on it without getting his extra time privileges at the Garage revoked, but even that he could deal with.

But the thing that really bugged him was that every time he thought he had this place figured out, they threw something else loco at him. Like this “hunting trip.”

They were supposed to be out here looking for monsters, like they were in some kind of TV movie. He’d tried to get VeeVee to admit it was all some kind of joke the teachers were playing on them, but she wouldn’t, and that really annoyed him. A lot.

And then he’d found out it was some kind of stupid camping trip, too. They’d all gotten backpacks and camping gear—he’d gotten a pair of hiking boots a couple of days before; Chris said they counted as school supplies and if he didn’t break them in he was going to regret it—and climbed into the back of one of the old pickups late in the afternoon on Saturday, and Mr. Bishop and Mr. Songmaker had gotten into the cab, and they’d driven down the road for a few miles and then way back up into the hills along something that didn’t even look like a road to Tomas. And then after that they’d hiked for miles. That was bad enough, but along the way they’d gotten a history lecture from Mr. Bishop about how the Hudson Valley had been a hotbed of what people had called ghosts and hauntings since before European settlement, and how European settlement dated back to the 1600s when the Dutch arrived to start fur-trapping in the Upper Hudson region. And then Mr. Songmaker had explained about how they didn’t know exactly what was out here, but they did know something was, so their task was going to be to find it, identify it, and neutralize it—or decide whether it was too strong for them to deal with, in which case they should gather as much information as they could and call for help. It all sounded like hocus-pocus to Tomas, and it was really irritating that all of the other kids were taking everything Mr. Songmaker said completely seriously.

Besides him and VeeVee, there were six other kids along on this so-called “hunting trip,” and he only knew a couple of them even to speak to. There was Kurt and Lalage—and then there were Brian Walker and Ethan Harris.

Both of them were M-track, which meant they were supposed to be magicians. He’d never seen either of them doing anything—not even at the Friday Night Dance—but he didn’t really know them well enough to bust their chops about it. They looked really ordinary. But Aaron Clark down in Auto Shop was a skinny little Black guy with an accent so thick that Tomas couldn’t understand him half the time—and one day when a jack had slipped on one of the cars, Aaron had just reached out and held the whole thing up until they could get the jack seated properly again. Aaron hadn’t even popped a sweat. Señora Davies hadn’t batted an eyelash, either, just given them hell for not taking proper precautions.

Tomas was pretty sure Ethan and Brian couldn’t be magicians, though, even if they could Do Stuff, because there wasn’t really any such thing as magic. They had to be

something else.

The two girls he didn't know at all. He hadn't even known their names until they'd all been introduced to each other today. Aimee King wasn't his type at all—pale and washed out, and freckled besides. Worse, she'd looked at him as if she'd known exactly what he was thinking, and made a scrunched-up face that did nothing for her looks. She spent a lot of time after that whispering to VeeVee and Lalage—and to the other girl, Annabelle Young—and all four of them had done a lot of giggling. By the time Tomas had started to wonder if they were just going to hike into the next county, they finally stopped.

"This looks like a pretty good place," Hosea Songmaker said, looking around at the open field. He slipped off his pack and dropped it to the grass. "We'll set up camp here, have a bite to eat, and wait for dark."

Annabelle raised her hand. "Excuse me, but why are we waiting? There's a couple of hours of light left. We could start looking now."

Mr. Songmaker smiled at her. He was a really big guy—bigger than Kurt—and had a Southern accent thicker than Señora Davies'. Tomas didn't have any classes with him, so he really didn't know anything about him at all—except he got the same kind of "don't mess with this guy" vibe off him he'd gotten off a few of the teachers here. It was a funny thing—another funny thing—because Tomas had never seen anybody here—at least none of the teachers—go out of their way to impress anybody with how tough they were. Oh, sure, some of the other kids tried the "*malo hombre*" thing on, but Tomas hadn't seen anybody take them seriously. He kind of got the impression that real all-out bad attitude wouldn't go down well with anyone at St. Rhia's.

"Well now, you wouldn't want to have to hike up here in the dark, but the kind o' critters you're usually going to be looking for are just naturally easier to see at night; less background noise and distraction," Mr. Songmaker said. "And some of them just don't come out in the day at all. Ah cain't rightly say what you're looking for this time, since Ah don't know, so you'd best go hunting when you've got the most chance of catching it."

"There's a full moon tonight, too. That's another important point," Mr. Bishop added. "Whether a disturbance is magical or not, all kinds of instability peaks around a full moon. So you'll wait until moonrise before starting your search. The light will be better then, anyway."

Terrific, Tomas thought grumpily. He could see how this was going to go now. They'd all be sitting here in the dark, and then one of the two teachers—probably Mr. Bishop, since he didn't think someone Mr. Songmaker's size could sneak anywhere—would creep off into the dark to play the "monster," giving everybody a good scare.

Well, he didn't intend to be scared.

Even though he knew what was coming later, he had to admit the rest of it was kind of fun. Mr. Songmaker had them all go gather firewood and stones for a firepit while he dug out a nice clear space to build it. They'd come back and put up their tents—fortunately none of this stuff was too heavy, since they'd had to carry it all in—and then Mr. Bishop asked Tomas if he wanted to light the fire.

Tomas had actually felt a little bit shy about that, but he knew he had enough control of his power by now for that, so he'd pointed his finger at the firepit, concentrating—he just wanted to start the fire, not burn the pile of logs to ash—and there was a whoosh and a crackle of flames and everybody had applauded. Even VeeVee.

After that it was time for dinner. Hot dogs roasted over the campfire, and Mr. Bishop said no camping trip was complete without S'Mores. And there was soda, too, and it was ice-cold, although Tomas didn't see any ice anywhere.

"Magic," Mr. Songmaker said, and winked at him.

After they'd all eaten—and cleaned up, too, burning the paper garbage in the campfire and packing up the plastic and metal trash to take out with them later—Mr. Songmaker took out his banjo and played them a couple of songs. They were about ghosts, of course, about what Tomas had expected. Then Mr. Bishop told them a couple of stories. He said they were local legends, but of course they were ghost stories again.

And by then the moon was coming up.

CHAPTER FIVE

“We’re at the edge of the area where the disturbance was reported,” Mr. Songmaker said. He reached into his pack and began removing objects. “Ah’m giving each of you a radio. Ah want you to stay in touch with us and with each other. If’n you see—or Sense—something, let us know. We’re going to pair up Mages and Psionics, because a lot of the time, one of you will notice something the other doesn’t. So... Tomas and VeeVee, Lalage and Kurt, Aimee and Ethan, Brian and Annabelle. If you haven’t found anything by midnight, come back.”

Okay, things were definitely looking up, if he was going to spend several hours alone in the dark with VeeVee, Tomas decided.

“Aw, c’mon, *chica*. Why don’t you just admit there’s nothing out here to find? We’ve been walking around in circles for hours.”

VeeVee sighed, coming to a stop. She had a flashlight clipped to her belt, but there was enough moonlight she didn’t want to risk using it and ruining her night-sight. Although right now, the idea of using it to beat some sense into Tomas was seeming more attractive by the minute...

“We still have two hours before we have to check back in. And there is something out here to find. We just haven’t found it yet.”

Even with her back to him, she heard Tomas sigh.

“Oh, come on. You’re not going to tell me that—”

Suddenly their walkie-talkies both crackled to life.

“Help! Help!”

“Aimee? Where are you?” VeeVee demanded. Each of them had been given a search area to cover, but they were fairly large, and even with a GPS to guide them there was no guarantee any of them would stick to their own search areas if they found a hot trail.

There was no reply.

Suddenly the sky—which had been clear a moment ago—boiled over with clouds. *Oh, this isn’t good.* That had to be Annabelle. But Annabelle was supposed to be with Brian. Brian was a Water Witch—their Gifts would compliment each other on a Hunt. Because Aimee was a Sensitive, she’d been paired up with Ethan—Ethan was an Astral Warrior, who should be able to protect her no matter what they ran into.

“Come on!” VeeVee shouted over the wail of the rising wind. She pulled out her flashlight—by now it was pitch dark—and ran. She might not have been able to find what they were hunting for, but she could certainly locate her classmates.

To Tomas’s credit, he didn’t waste any time arguing. He followed VeeVee at a dead run, grabbing his own flashlight as he did—and a good thing too, because a moment later there was a crack of thunder and the rain started—hard, driving, ice-cold rain, and neither of them was dressed for it. A month ago Tomas wouldn’t have been able to keep up with her, but now they charged through the darkness side by side, their flashlights bobbing, illuminating sheets of rain and the uneven ground ahead of them.

Where is she—where are they—where is it—?

Suddenly there was a blur of white faces. Aimee was lying on the ground with Annabelle crouched over her, sobbing hysterically.

“Annabelle!” VeeVee shouted.

Lightning sheeted across the sky, followed by a crack of thunder. Annabelle stared up at her, wild-eyed. “She screamed, and then she—We traded—”

VeeVee gritted her teeth over the harsh words she desperately wanted to say. They wouldn’t do anybody any good right now. It was obvious what had happened. Aimee and Annabelle had traded partners, so Ethan and Brian were out here somewhere together, Powers help them. Then Aimee had Sensed whatever it was, and Annabelle had panicked.

“Annabelle, you’ve got to calm down—” she shouted desperately.

“No!” Annabelle said, shaking and sobbing as she clutched her friend tighter. “You didn’t see it!”

Well, so much for that. And the storm was only going to get worse until Annabelle calmed down enough to dispel it. VeeVee pulled her athame from its sheath in the waistband of her jeans.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Tomas demanded.

“Drawing a circle of protection around the four of us,” VeeVee snapped. “You heard Annabelle. That thing is around here somewhere close.”

“So let’s go looking for it!” Tomas said eagerly, taking a step away from her.

VeeVee grabbed him with her free hand. “Didn’t you ever watch any horror movies?” she demanded, raising her voice to be heard over the howl of the storm. “We stay together!”

Just then—even over the roar of the storm—they both heard the sound of a full-throated scream. *Lalage!* VeeVee thought in horror. *Lalage* was a Green Witch, with

strong powers, but her partner for tonight—Kurt—had no combat abilities at all. Kurt was their Healer.

There was the sudden blue-violet flash of a spell-shield in the distance.

“No we don’t!” Tomas said. He went running off in the direction of the flash, breaking through her half-formed Circle.

VeeVee stepped outside the perimeter of her Circle and sketched it closed with a quick gesture. “Don’t move,” she told Annabelle firmly.

She ran after Tomas.

As she ran, she tried her walkie-talkie once—just for luck—but as she’d expected, Annabelle’s storm had pretty much fried their communications. It didn’t really matter. The moment that storm had hit, Mr. Songmaker and Mr. Bishop would have started out looking for them. The trouble was, VeeVee couldn’t afford to wait for them.

He was freezing and he hated rain, and he didn’t know where he’d dropped his flashlight. It was a good thing it didn’t matter. The sky was lighting up like a Fourth of July gone really wrong, and straight ahead there was a purple light flashing on and off like some kind of mad neon sign.

Lalage hadn’t screamed again, and Tomas knew that was a bad sign. If you screamed, you were alive.

When he got there, the first thing he saw was Kurt on his hands and knees puking his guts out and covered in mud.

The second thing he saw was Lalage. Even though she was soaked to the skin, her hair was flying around her like she was bone-dry. And she was glowing.

The third thing he saw was what she was pointing at.

It was maybe fifteen feet tall, and for one long moment Tomas was perfectly calm, because it didn’t seem to be real at all; maybe one of those wacky sculptures like the Art Students liked to make. It was shaped sort of like a person, and he could see pieces of twisted metal, and a couple of sets of antlers, a lot of sticks, and a bunch of leaves and vines-

Then it moved, reaching out toward Lalage, and he saw there were some kind of body parts hanging down from the inside; that it was shaped kind of like a man; that the vines were writhing all over it, alive-

When it tried to hit Lalage, there was the same purple flash he’d seen from a distance, and she made a sound like the thing had hit her, instead of something about five feet away from her. And Tomas knew if it ever got past that thing he couldn’t see, it was going to rip her to pieces.

And he knew he'd been wrong. The monster was real.

Burn it! You've got to burn it!

But he was freezing and soaked to the skin and he didn't think anybody on Earth could start a fire in the middle of a freakin' monsoon.

He had to try.

"It's all about control, Tomas. You control the fire. The fire does not control you."

Tomas took a deep breath. He shut out the look on Lalage's face and the sight of the monster she was facing. He shut out the way he felt and all his doubts. He concentrated on the fire. His fire. His Gift.

Burn!

A thin tendril of smoke coiled up from the body of the nightmare.

This was the point at which Tomas had always stopped before, since everything he'd ever tried to burn in the past had been dry and flammable, and as soon as he'd kindled it he hadn't needed to do anything else. But this time he couldn't stop, because the moment he did, the rain would quench his fire. He kept pushing with his power, pouring whatever it was he did that Called Fire into the monster, willing it to burst into flame. Whatever he was doing, the thing seemed to notice, because it stopped trying to get at Lalage and turned toward Tomas.

Lalage sank to her knees with a gasp as it stopped attacking her. Tomas didn't dare stop to look at her to see if she was all right. He kept pouring everything he had into that thing. Now he was sweating like a pig and starting to shake. He didn't know how long he could keep this up—everything he'd practiced so far had been about control, not about force, but right now that was what was needed. And when the monster's patchwork body finally went up in a rush of fire Tomas still couldn't stop. As the flames licked over its body it reared back, slapping clumsily at itself, just as if it were alive. But to Tomas's horror, it didn't burn up. It just changed shape as parts of it burned away, getting smaller, reforming....

"Stop! Tomas, stop!" VeeVee ran past him, her dagger in her hand. "You can't kill it! I can!"

Black spots were dancing before his eyes now, and he felt like he was about to pass out. Tomas didn't know if he stopped because she told him to, or because he couldn't keep pouring Fire into the monster another second. By now it was only about the size of a man, but it was all black and charcoally, and the metal parts of its body had melted and fused under the heat of Tomas's flame to make a weird sort of armor over half its body.

He sank to his knees in front of Lalage, gasping for breath. He didn't even have enough air left to yell at VeeVee to stop before she got herself killed. All he could do was watch as she ran right up to the monster, body covered with a kind of pale blue flame, and plunged her dagger into its chest.

Everything about the monster suddenly seemed to... blur... for just a moment, and then it was crumbling. The wind and the rain whipped pieces of it away. Heavier pieces—metal, bones, antlers—fell to the ground.

All of a sudden it stopped raining.

“Are you all right?” VeeVee demanded.

Tomas just stared at her.

“Gaia and Bhride!” Lalage groaned, shaking her head. Her red hair was plastered to her skin. “What was that?”

“Some kind of hybrid spirit, I think,” VeeVee said. Tomas watched as she wiped the dagger on her jeans and tucked it away again. “Kurt? You okay?”

“I am now,” Kurt said, sitting up with a groan. “Sorry. I... When it showed up, it was just like a punch in the gut.”

Tomas saw VeeVee nod, as if what Kurt was saying made sense to her.

“You saw that metal?” Lalage asked VeeVee. “It looked like part of an ultralight—you know, one of those little one-person sport planes?” She got carefully to her feet and put out a hand to help Kurt up.

“If the pilot managed to crash in the wrong place—and died—his death energy might have woken up something in one of the old hidden burial mounds around here,” VeeVee said. “The result has probably been wandering around for weeks, feeding on animals and getting stronger.”

“Working its way up the food chain,” Lalage said, shuddering.

“What are you talking about?” Tomas demanded. He scrambled to his feet. His head hurt, but aside from that—and being wet and cold—he didn’t feel too bad.

Except, of course, for having been wrong about the monster.

“They’re talking about magic,” Kurt said. He took a deep breath, and groaned, shaking his head.

“Hey! Are you guys all right?”

Brian and Ethan came running toward them, slipping and sliding through the wet grass, their flashlight beams bobbing everywhere. Oddly, Brian’s clothes and hair were completely dry.

“Better than you’re going to be when Mr. Songmaker and Mr. Bishop find out what you did,” VeeVee snapped, turning on them in a fury. “Did it ever occur to either of you idiots you could have gotten Aimee and Annabelle killed?”

Both boys stopped where they were, their looks of worry changing to expressions of guilt. Kurt flinched, and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Well, uh, Aimee wanted to switch, and, um, Ethan and I figured, well, she and Annabelle...” Brian said slowly.

VeeVee opened her mouth again, and Tomas had the idea that whatever was going to come out of it just couldn’t be good. “Hey, *chica*, come on. Maybe we ought to be getting back and see how the others are? Besides, it’s cold out here,” he said.

VeeVee shut her mouth with a snap, but he could tell she was still furious. He couldn’t really figure out why. They’d killed the thing, hadn’t they?

“So what have we all learned tonight?” Mr. Songmaker asked.

An hour later everyone was back at the campsite, changed into dry clothes and gathered around the campfire again, this time with mugs of hot cider.

“That magic sucks,” Tomas said feelingly.

Lalage and VeeVee glared at him.

“Well,” Mr. Songmaker said, “there’s good magic and there’s bad magic. Ah guess you got a sample of both tonight. VeeVee was pretty much right, it looks like—there was a flying accident up here about six weeks ago, and some fella managed to get hisself killed—probably on top of an old burial ground, as far as Jeanette an’ Ah could tell. The energy released with his death grabbed ahold of something that would otherwise have stayed safely asleep—like pouring gasoline on a fire that isn’t quite out. It made something that wasn’t quite one thing or the other, but what that it was, was hungry. It was able to feed itself on plant, insect, and animal life—which is why your Green Witch powers weren’t having much effect on it, Lalage; they were just feeding its energy. And once it took a human victim...”

“Its power and ability would not only have increased tenfold, but its intelligence would have, too,” VeeVee said grimly.

Mr. Songmaker nodded. “Just as well we caught it in time. If it fed on a human, that would be bad enough. If’n it got its hands on someone with Talent...”

“Then there’s yelling, and running, and screaming,” Ethan said. The words were humorous, but his expression wasn’t. He looked thoroughly shaken by his narrow escape tonight.

“And Kurt, might be you want to work a bit harder on your shielding,” Mr. Songmaker added.

Kurt nodded. “I wasn’t expecting... that,” he said, sheepishly.

“I wasn’t either,” Aimee said loyally. “It was... hungry.”

“It wanted,” Kurt said. “And it hurt. But it wasn’t anything I could fix.”

“And if’n you’d tried, you would of found yourself in a power o’ trouble,” Hosea said. “And as for you, Aimee, if’n you’d stayed with Brian, it could be you might not have been taken quite so much by surprise.”

Aimee hung her head and fiddled with the ends of her long hair in shame.

“It was my fault, too,” Brian said. “If I hadn’t—”

“Next time, you’ll know,” Mr. Bishop said simply.

“You knew what was out there!” Tomas said angrily. “And you let us walk right into it!”

“That was what you were out here to do,” Mr. Bishop pointed out reasonably. “And we were right behind you to step in if things got completely out of hand. Talent draws Talent: in your future lives, whether you choose lives of Service or not, it’s more than likely you’ll find yourselves facing problems like this again. You’ll need to know how to respond.”

Tomas looked around the campfire.

Kurt still looked like he’d been hit over the head with something, and Aimee and Annabelle looked as if anybody even said “boo” to either of them, they’d run screaming. Ethan looked angry, and Brian looked guilty. Lalage looked pretty excited, like she’d like another monster to come along so she could take another swing at it. VeeVee looked mad enough to be spitting fire herself.

Every single one of them looked like they believed every single word Mr. Bishop had just said.

And Tomas?

He didn’t know what to believe. This morning he’d been sure he knew exactly how the world worked—and there was no place in it for either monsters or magic. Now? He’d seen both. He had to believe.

But he didn’t have to like it.

VeeVee was so angry she couldn’t speak, which was just as well, since what would have come out of her mouth would not have made anyone feel better. Hosea Songmaker could probably tell just how angry she was, and if he couldn’t, his possessed banjo Jeanette surely could. She wasn’t at all surprised when Hosea gave her a look and nodded towards his tent. She didn’t even wait to make sure the other kids were back in their own sleeping bags so they didn’t get the wrong idea. She unzipped the flap, crawled inside, and dropped down on the canvas floor, seething.

Hosea was right behind her, closing the door-flap against the bugs.

“All right, young’un,” he said, reaching up to turn on a lightweight LED lantern hanging from the criss-crossed supports at the top of the dome. “Let’s hear it.”

“You explained it to them!” she burst out. “You told them, one M, one P, so they could protect each other and cover the holes in each other’s defenses. The only one who thought this was a snipe-hunt was Tomas! And the first thing they do is trade partners! What did they think this was, some sort of game? Somebody could have gotten hurt or even killed out there, and why?” She punched the floor. “Because they’re idiots!”

“Because they’re young’uns,” Hosea said mildly.

“They’re Talents!” she fumed. “That’s no excuse—”

“Whoa, whoa, now hear me out,” Hosea interrupted. “Y’all’ve been a workin’ Talent for how long now?”

“Since I was nine, and even then I wasn’t that stupid!” she exclaimed.

“And y’all’ve been out there, doin’ adult work, Guardian work, fer a couple years.” Hosea shook his head. “VeeVee, none of them others have been workin’ Talents fer half as long as you, ‘cept mebbe Lalage, and ah guarantee you, none o’them is going to up to yore standards fer a couple o’years yet—”

“It was amateur!” she retorted. “It was childish!”

Hosea shrugged. “‘Pears to me that’s about normal.”

“But we can’t afford to pretend be normal,” she said flatly, getting a startled glance from him. “You ought to know that. We’re extraordinary. Extraordinary things happen around us, usually bad. And we have to be ready for them. Always.” She looked down at her hands, hands that had done things few here would have guessed. “Acting like other people is a luxury, and we don’t have that option anymore once our Powers start to manifest.”

Hosea ran his hand through his hair, a baffled expression on his face. “Sugah, ah know y’all are a pro, but th’ rest o’ the kids—”

VeeVee looked up at Hosea, her anger as hot as any fire she could conjure. “We might be kids, but we had damn well better act like pros in the field. Because if we don’t... someone is going to die. And if we don’t do everything we can to make sure they act like pros, that’s going to be on our heads.” She leveled a peer-to-peer, challenging gaze at him. “You want that? ‘Cause I don’t.”

Tomas’s plans for the evening had pretty much gone out the window now. When he’d thought—and *Dios!* It seemed a lifetime ago!—that this was going to be all a way to scare everybody, he’d planned on giving VeeVee a hard time for believing in it, then making it up to her by being nice, not rubbing it in too much, maybe getting her off alone for a little

before the chaperones hauled them all back to their tents.

Now though—she was mad, and even if he hadn't been seriously shaken by what had happened, the last place he wanted to be was anywhere near her. He'd never seen her like this before. Annoyed, *si*. Even a flash of anger now and again. But not mad like this. He only hoped Mr. Songmaker could cool her out because... oh man this was the kind of mad that could bust out in bad ways.

The other three guys crawled into the tent right after him, Kurt, who shared it with him, looking seriously shook, the other two, puzzled. "I don't get it—" Ethan said. "I mean, Jeezus, you'd think me and Brian had done something—man, VeeVee is wound way too tight—"

Tomas saw Ethan still didn't get it. OK, yeah, VeeVee was wound tight, but she had a good reason to get a mad on. Listening to Mr. Songmaker and he still didn't get it. "Look, *cholo*, you messed up."

The tiny lantern showed Ethan's face pretty clearly. He looked as surprised as if Tomas had just starting reciting Shakespeare or something. "But all we did was—"

"You unbalanced the tires, man!" Tomas shook his head. "You 'member what happened when Señora Davies showed us unbalanced tires an' how they can wreck things? Mr. Songmaker balanced the tires with us when he paired us up, so's we could cover blind spots. You went an' unbalanced the tires, an' the car just about rattled itself to pieces." He shook his head. "Man, that—That could'a been bad. Anyway, I bet that's why she's mad."

"But the teachers—"

"An' what if that thing had got them before it got to us, huh? What if it had friends? You can't count on nobody if you can't see 'em, and sometimes even if you can." He thought about all the people that might have turned on him and given him to the cops. Okay, these kids weren't like that. But—things happened. "Somethin' like this, *muy loco* stuff, you don't know, so you gotta stick to the plan so at least everybody knows where everybody's supposed to be."

Now how VeeVee knew that, and how she'd guessed what that thing was and how to bring it down... well, maybe it was luck and maybe it was something else he didn't want to think about right now. But he knew it was true.

Ethan, at least, was nodding and now looking as guilty as Brian. Tomas punched him lightly on the bicep. "Get some sleep," he said. "It's a long hike back in the morning, no? I'm beat."

Ethan nodded, paused, then wordlessly crawled out of the tent with Brian behind him. Tomas took over his own sleeping bag with a sigh. "This magic stuff—" he said to Kurt, as he wedged himself into his bag. "It's *muy loco*. I mean, I thought you were all—" He fumbled for words. "It don't seem right."

“You get used to it.” Kurt said wearily. “How is it weirder than psi? They both use stuff you can’t see to do things you can.” He turned off the lantern and crawled into his own bag. “In fact,” he continued, somberly, “I wish what I did was magic.”

OK, that was just crazy talk. “*Que?* What kinda sense is that?” Tomas asked. “I mean, what we do, that’s science, you know? Like there are laws, it isn’t wave your hands around an’ spooky stuff happens—”

Kurt snorted. “If you haven’t figured out by now, havin’ VeeVee as your mentor, that it ain’t just waving your hands around... Magic has more laws than psi and—ah hell. Ask her. Thing is, you don’t have to do magic. Fact, it’s easier not to. Easy to control doing it or not doing it, easy to shut it off. This—I can’t shut it off. And neither can you, or you wouldn’t be here.”

Tomas was stunned into silence by that. Kurt was right.

“When this first started... this healing, this feeling what’s wrong with people, with things... I thought I was gonna die. It all came on all of a sudden, and pretty much full power.” Kurt turned over in his sleeping bag. “My folks... they didn’t get it. First they thought I was makin’ it up and sent me to counselors. Then the counselors told ‘em I was psycho, an’ they tried every kind of drug there was on me. I was sick all the time from the drugs and sick all the time from feelin’ other people being sick and sick from tryin’ t’help ‘em. Finally they were gonna lock me up—” He made a sound that wasn’t a laugh. “That would’ve been just great, lock me up with nothin’ but sick people. So I just—ran. Stole their ATM cards, cleaned out their wallets, got as much cash as I could and ran. Went to a 24-hour superstore, got camping stuff, got a bus ticket—Allegany State Park, I just wanted to go somewhere there weren’t people. Or at least where I could get away from people. I snuck in through the woods, figured out where people were camping, camped far enough away I couldn’t feel them but close enough I could sneak down, use the showers, get water, steal food.” Kurt laughed a little for real now. “Funny how smart you get when you’re around crazy people. Turned out I didn’t have to steal much food. People always bring too much, or stuff they thought they’d want to eat and don’t, and that’s usually good stuff like fruit, beef jerky, bread. They bring healthy stuff, then eat junk, same as always. End of the weekend, they pitch what they didn’t eat. Pitch a lot of things. I figured I was doin’ OK. Didn’t think that where someone like me was, there might be somethin’ around that’d think I was mighty tasty.”

That came out of nowhere. Tomas felt his eyes fly open. “*Que?*”

“Psions, like me. Empaths, healers. There’s other things, some people, they can feed off us or use us, or both. There I was wide open, an’ there was someone lookin’ for something just like me.” Kurt sighed. “Almost got me too, except there was someone on his track, and I was lucky; he showed up just like on TV, just in time to keep me from bein’—well, I dunno. It felt like this guy was pullin’ my brain out through my ears, when this other guy all in cammo kind of appeared outa nowhere, cold-cocked him. Some dude from LlewellynCo, only I didn’t know that then. He grabbed me, grabbed the guy, called in a chopper, dumped me here, flew off with the guy in restraints.” Kurt laughed again.

“Real Men In Black stuff, except it happened.”

“What about your ‘rents?” Tomas wondered.

“Ms. Llewellyn fixed it with ‘em. I don’t know how.” A sigh. “Hell, I was never what they wanted anyway. They wanted a football player. First time I told ‘em I wanted to be a nurse, Dad just about had a coronary over that, and that was before all the healing an’ empathy stuff started. Aaron—that’s my little bro—he’s everything they ever wanted. Nothin’ but football, an’ that’s all he wants. So I guess they’re happy. I get cards and presents, but they never come here.”

Tomas didn’t have to be an empath to feel the pain on the other side of the tent. He thought about saying something, but what? Nothing he could, really. What would Mamacita say if she knew what he was doing? Would she still love him? Or would she write him off, or worse, be afraid of him? The silence deepened, and finally, turned into sleep.

Monday morning.

The banging of doors in the hallway woke him a little after six, just as it always did. Tomas muttered and grumbled and rolled over, pulling his pillow over his head. His alarm was set for seven, but it was a rare school morning where he got to sleep that late. There were twenty-two boys in his building, and the bathrooms were on the first floor—where he was—so there was a lot of traffic in the mornings.

The dining hall opened at six—if you were a really early riser—and stayed open until 8:30—if you just wanted to grab something on your way to class, which was usually what Tomas did. Classes ran from nine to noon, there was a ninety-minute break for lunch, and then half the poor slobes were back in the classrooms till four, while lucky guys like Tomas were off doing cool things like working in the garage until Señora Davies threw him out for the evening. Then he’d come up, maybe hit the end of the dinner serving (though usually he just made do with sandwiches down at the Garage, except for Friday nights), hit the books for a couple of hours—because weekends and time after four at the Garage depended on good grades and getting his course assignments in on time—and then maybe cruise on over to the Student Union to hang out. Aaron was almost always there—he said the noise helped him study—and Kenny shot a mean game of pool. He didn’t use his powers—it actually hadn’t occurred to Tomas that he would—but one Friday night Kenny had taken him downstairs and showed him what he could be doing. He’d sunk every ball on the table with one shot, time after time.

“You could make money at this,” Tomas had said, frowning faintly.

Kenny shrugged. “It’d be cheating. Like if Gordy used his power and you played poker with him.”

Gordon Riley, Tomas knew by now, could read minds.

“So...” Tomas said. “Would you?”

Kenny looked at him oddly. “I’d have to have a really good reason. Can’t think of one offhand.”

And actually, Tomas couldn’t think of one, either.

He didn’t know when he’d stopped thinking of his special abilities as something he’d be able to use to get one over on everyone who didn’t have them. Certainly nobody here spent all their time preaching about how he was going to have to Use His Great Powers For Good. Not even Mr. Bishop, who was the one who spent the most time talking to Tomas about his powers. But what Mr. Bishop talked to Tomas about was living with them and controlling them, as if the ability to start fires with his mind was some kind of large dog Tomas had accidentally adopted and was now going to have to learn to take care of properly, like it or not.

He wasn’t really sure when he’d stopped thinking he was just going to stay here for a little while, either. It wasn’t the day VeeVee and Chris and a bunch of the other kids had come and helped him repaint his room and all his furniture. That had been the first week he was here, and he’d still been thinking about leaving. It hadn’t been when VeeVee had gone down to the Storage Room with him to help him pick out some more furniture for his room, or when Brian had burned him some really cool mixes to play on his computer. Or when his wardrobe had gotten mysteriously filled out one day when he was in class. (Not too much, and none of it had been new, and nothing he wouldn’t have worn. But he’d been pissed-off enough about the invasion of his personal space to mention it to Chris. Chris had shrugged, and taken him back to the Storage Room. Next door to the furniture was another room with racks and racks of clothes. “Some kids show up with nothing,” Chris had said. “Some kids don’t take all their stuff when they go. Some of the teachers hit garage sales every weekend, and what doesn’t get sold on ebay ends up here. You don’t like what you got, change it out here.” Tomas had kept the clothes. He’d suspected VeeVee was behind it, but he’d never asked her.)

It wasn’t the day of the first Friday Night Dance, or the second. Or the first time he’d fired up the engine in his junker, just to try her.

It wasn’t standing out in the rain on a windy hill, pouring everything he had into something that shouldn’t be able to exist, hoping and praying it would be enough.

But somewhere, between there and here, St. Rhia’s had become, well, not home exactly, but not a place he was planning to escape from as soon as he could, either. There was too much to do here. Things to learn—things he wanted to learn. And, Tomas realized with a faint hint of surprise, things he trusted people to teach him, from Mr. Balinsky in his English class to Mr. Bishop in his, well, Psionics class.

And then there was VeeVee.

She wasn’t like any girl he’d ever met.

And he was pretty sure she liked him. A lot.

Oh, she tried to play it cool. But they were spending a lot of time together with this whole “Mentor” gig, and, well, a guy could tell. Besides, the other guys had ragged him about her enough by now that he had a pretty good idea she was a lot more interested in him than she’d ever been in any of the other guys here at St. Rhia’s.

The funny thing was, they all talked about her like they were afraid of her or something, and that was just loco. It wasn’t that she didn’t have a temper that could peel paint right off the wall—he’d seen plenty of signs of that by now—but she was pretty, and she was smart. And it couldn’t be that they were afraid she was going to beat them up or something, because even if she could—he didn’t know whether she could or not, because while what you could do wasn’t exactly a secret, not everybody was a showoff like Johnny Devlin—Tomas did know she wouldn’t. Not unless they deserved it, and maybe not even then.

So what was the problem?

He didn’t know, but he didn’t exactly mind. It meant she’d been unattached when he got here.

The noise in the hallway had reached riot proportions, just as it did just about this time every morning. Tomas sighed and rolled out of bed. No point in trying to sleep in this madhouse.

Madhouse.

Funny, funny joke.

As he walked over to the closet, he glanced at the calendar displayed on his computer monitor, and realized he’d been here just a few days over two months.

The last class of the morning was Biology and Chemistry, so they were over in the Science Lab today. Tomas actually liked Bio & Chem, especially when the teacher, Ms. Bosworth, was doing cool science experiments like mixing sugar and sulfuric acid to create foaming black columns of snaky stuff that boiled up out of the Pyrex beaker as if it were alive. She called it “kitchen science,” and pointed out that knowing the weird things that basic chemistry was capable of producing—or that you might encounter in the realm of regular old Biology—could help you determine whether you were facing something Arcane or Mundane.

The bell rang for the end of the class—not a lot of action today, though they’d spent a few minutes on the fluorescing properties of common foods, like Wintergreen Lifesavers and Mountain Dew—and Tomas was stuffing his books into his backpack, not thinking of much except spending the afternoon down at the Garage, when Ms. Bosworth’s voice interrupted his pleasant train of thought.

“Tomas, would you come up here for a moment?”

Puzzled, he got to his feet and walked up to the front of the room. There was a kid standing next to Ms. Bosworth—a dark-haired boy in glasses and a blazer. Tomas had seen him around a couple of times, but he wasn't in his dorm. As Tomas reached the front of the room, the boy turned around and walked out, smiling at Tomas as he went.

"You need to go over to Admin for just a moment and talk to Kayla Smith. Do you know where her office is?"

"Uh..." He wasn't quite sure. It wasn't like he'd exactly gotten a tour of the Main Building, and, in fact, he hadn't been back inside it since the first day.

Ms. Bosworth smiled. "Well, never mind. I'll walk you over. You aren't in trouble or anything, so don't worry about that."

Tomas nodded, still puzzled. Kayla Smith was one of the teachers here, he knew that much. She taught the advanced Computer Science courses—Chris had her—and she was a Healer, so she was teaching Kurt the way Mr. Bishop taught him—because if there was somebody who actually had what you could do and knew how to use it, it was a whole lot easier to learn from them than anyone else. Or so Tomas guessed.

He followed Ms. Bosworth out of the classroom. When they stepped outside, she paused and looked up at the sky appreciatively. "Wonderful weather. I'm glad we're going to have good weather for the picnic."

"Yeah, well, I guess some people are taking care of that. So I hear," Tomas said.

It was almost the end of June, and the school was planning a big party to celebrate July Fourth. A school-wide picnic—and a barbeque—with music, and dancing, and—of course—fireworks. Not only the traditional kind, so Tomas had been hearing, but a lot of M-track specials as well. Everybody was looking forward to it.

He was looking forward to it for reasons of his own.

He was hoping to persuade VeeVee to actually, sort of... date him.

It was true that the off-campus day-trip was coming up—this weekend, in fact—and to Tomas's surprise, he was apparently getting to go along. And as far as Tomas could see, half the rest of St. Rhia's student body was hooking up, and used the day off-campus as a good way to get out from under the watchful eyes of the faculty and the student advisors. But he wasn't completely sure what she'd do if he asked her to go along with him on something that... definite. All Tomas was sure of was that he wanted VeeVee to be his *hyna*—his girlfriend. And that meant going out on a date—and not a study-date, either. But stuck out here on a campus in the middle of nowhere, he didn't have a lot of ways to do it casual.

"Well, what's the use of magic if you can't use it—sometimes—to make your life a little easier?" Ms. Bosworth said cheerfully, breaking into his thoughts. "A little weather-working—if you're careful, and know what you're doing—never hurt anybody."

Tomas nodded, not really paying attention. Bus trip? Picnic? If she said "no" to the bus

trip, he could still try to sweet-talk her around at the picnic...

When they reached the Main Building, Ms. Bosworth pointed him down the long hall on the right. "Second door," she said. "Just knock. She's expecting you."

Tomas went gingerly down the hall. Fortunately the door had a name-plate on it. He knocked.

"Come i-i-in," a voice sang out.

He pushed the door open and walked in.

Kayla Smith was sitting behind her desk, her feet propped up on it. She waved him to a chair. "Come in, sit down, take a load off. Relax."

Tomas did as he was told, taking the opportunity to take a quick look around since he'd never been in here before. Kayla Smith didn't seem to be much older than some of the students here, but Tomas wasn't about to say so. She dressed more like her day job was being a VJ on Fuse or VH1 instead of a teacher—or maybe being in a band. Plenty of color and glitter and high-heeled boots, and lots of silver jewelry. He wasn't really sure what to make of her.

Her office was pretty neat, though. The walls had a wallpaper design on them that was giant pages of old newspapers, photos and all, and hung on them were a couple of the largest flatscreen TVs Tomas had ever seen—almost as big as the one in the Student Union, but these looked bigger because the room was smaller. One was set up to pretend it was an aquarium, all full of tropical fish and everything, and the other was showing some kind of snow-covered mountains from above, with the camera soaring over them so the effect was like you were flying. There were a couple of electric guitars hung on the walls, too.

The desk was completely transparent. Maybe it was glass?

"I guess you wonder what I want?" Ms. Smith asked. "'Course you do," she said, answering herself. She swung her feet off the desk and sat up. "There's gonna be another field trip in a couple of days, and you're going to be going along, so I'm going to tell you a little about it."

Tomas couldn't quite repress a flinch. "Like the last one?" he asked, to cover his unease.

Ms. Smith snorted in a very un-teacher-like fashion. "Nothing like the last one, homeboy. No, this is going to be a simple meet'n'greet. You, and me, and Eric, and Mr. Moonlight, and about five other kids—we haven't picked all of them yet—are going to go Underhill to visit some friends of ours. It should be fun. But since you aren't enrolled in Music Arts, we figured you sort of needed a crash course in Underhill 101."

Tomas raised an eyebrow at her. "So... you mean stuff like 'where's Underhill?'"

Ms. Smith grinned at him. "Underhill's where the Elves live. You gonna tell me you

don't believe in Elves?"

"That depends," Tomas said cautiously.

"Good answer," Ms. Smith said. "Now. What you need to know is—"

Fifteen minutes later Tomas walked out of Ms. Smith's office feeling as if somebody'd slipped him a dose of giggle juice while he wasn't looking. Psionic powers he could deal with. Magic, he was just starting to get a grip on. Now they were asking him to believe in magic doors that lead into other worlds where Elves, fairies, and just about everything he'd ever heard of, imagined, or disbelieved in lived.

And that he was going to go there on a field trip.

Life had seemed so simple this morning.

He got to the dining hall, but VeeVee wasn't at their usual table. All the others were: Kurt, Lalage, Kenny, Annabelle. But no VeeVee.

"If you're looking for VeeVee, she's still in the library," Lalage said. "But if there's anything I can help you with...?"

Tomas favored her with a slow smile. It was nice to have a girl actively interested in him—and Lalage was, he could tell—but she wasn't the girl he was interested in.

"Thanks, *chica*. But not right now. See you around. I gotta run."

He headed for the library.

CHAPTER SIX

Like the Psionics Lab, the Library had originally been one of the dorm buildings, and—like the Psionics Lab—though it still looked just the same on the outside, on the inside it had been completely gutted and rebuilt.

It was still two stories, and the first floor was a popular gathering place for students to do research in the usual study groups, with large oak tables to spread out on, wireless LAN access for anyone who wanted to bring in their computer—some of the kids had laptops or notebooks—and not only a wide variety of reference materials, but current newspapers from all across the country, magazines, and (to Tomas’s surprise when he’d found out) plenty of popular reading and up-to-date manga that and the latest graphic novels and comics as well. The Second Floor was a different matter.

Tomas walked into the library and glanced around quickly. He didn’t see VeeVee at any of the tables, so he walked up to the desk.

“Yo, Mari,” he said.

The pretty young Latina woman behind the desk looked up from the book she was reading and smiled at him. Her last name was “Morales”, but she refused to let anyone—even the youngest students—call her “Ms. Morales”, insisting that everyone call her “Mari.” Tomas had tried talking *la lingua* to her when he’d first met her, and been stunned to discover that Mari didn’t know a word of Spanish: she’d laughed and told him that her family had been in the States for three generations, and only her grandmother was fluent.

“What can I do for you today?” she asked.

“I’m looking for VeeVee. Lalage said she was in the library, but...”

“Oh, she’s upstairs in the Special Collection. Don’t worry. It doesn’t bite.” She pointed at a door behind her desk. “Go on up.”

Normally VeeVee did all her reading and research in her room, but there were some books that hadn’t made it onto the ‘net... understandably. Books that weren’t quite the Necronomicon, but nevertheless dangerous. Not to mention weighty.

Not to mention that they were the sorts of things that for their rarity alone would not be allowed out of the library. The Special Collection was possibly the safest set of rooms on the campus—excepting maybe the Headmaster’s office. The kinds of people who would be interested in these books—and shouldn’t have them—wouldn’t even be able to get

through the door downstairs. And to ensure they couldn't use an unwitting tool to remove the books, there were very potent protections in place, both magical and high-tech, to ensure the books didn't leave the second floor of the library.

All of which meant that doing the research was a royal pain.

This was an advanced-level paper that VeeVee was working on, too; it would probably take her two or three years to write, and it was almost the equivalent of a thesis. That was a lot of work, and it was going to take a lot of dedication and giving up things; like, for instance, a completely free summer. Usually, for the summer term at St. Rhia's, the Advanced students got to switch to an elective course—all fun subjects—and last year VeeVee had just gone home to spend quality time with her folks. Not this year. But it was the only way she was going to get admitted to Ambrosius College at Oxford once she had graduated here.

The cool thing was that Ambrosius College wasn't actually in Oxford; there was a Nexus Gate there, but the College itself was Underhill. Ria Llewellyn was negotiating to put another Nexus Gate here—well, actually, to move the Everforest Gate here, since with one thing and another, it couldn't be left where it was—and she was confident that by the time the first lot of M-track students graduated here, the Gate and the “exchange program” would be in place, so VeeVee could continue to live at St. Rhia's and still attend the College, which her folks thought was the best of all possible worlds. VeeVee had to admit she was pretty attached to the idea. Not that she didn't like the UK, but Oxford was a long way from home: all right to visit, but to live there for four years, or even more? No. There were just too many things she would miss. American food, for one. While there were things in the UK that were to die for, you just couldn't get a chili-dog—or pizza that tasted right—there.

The book she was currently taking notes on was huge, and just a bit over four hundred years old, which put it just on the edge of decipherable by modern standards. It was printed, rather than handwritten, but it looked rather like a Shakespeare folio. It had no title, and no title page; it just launched straight into the first chapter without even a Foreword. VeeVee wasn't sure how many copies of this thing had ever been printed, but she was pretty sure there couldn't be more than two or three still in existence. It had been a dangerous book to print, back in the day, since it detailed the meddlings of the Sidhe Courts, both Seleighe and Unseleighe, in the politics of Scotland, England, and France. The challenge to reading it was that all this was couched in very coy language, a kind of “code” that required you to understand the history of both Underhill and the World Above to decipher it. A surprising number of agents of that period had served masters both Underhill and in the World Above...

A hand came down on her shoulder at the same time as a very-familiar voice said in her ear, “Yo, VeeVee.”

She jumped. The Special Collection librarian scowled, but did not—yet—scold. Probably she was mostly concerned about the precious book in the vicinity of the careless-looking street kid.

VeeVee's heart was pounding, and not just because she was startled. "Yo, yourself," she whispered, and pulled the chair next to her out with her foot, by way of invitation to sit. "I was working, what do you need? Don't touch the book."

Tomas had in fact been reaching for it out of curiosity. He pulled back, starting to frown. "What? I'm not good enough to look at—"

"It's about a zillion years old, it's rare, and you aren't wearing these—" she held up her hands in the white cotton gloves the librarian had supplied. "The ink and the paper are fragile. If you want to look at it, get some gloves."

"Naw, I don't wanna look at it that bad." Tomas lost the frown, and leaned back in the chair.

"So, I'm guessing you've heard about the field trip?" VeeVee asked. She'd known that he'd been tapped for it, and that Ms. Smith was going to be talking to him about it this morning.

"You going?" Tomas asked in return, trying not to sound too hopeful.

VeeVee shook her head, smiling. "Not really a lot of point. This trip is for kids who've never been."

It took Tomas a moment to process that. "You've been... there?" he asked.

VeeVee shrugged. "A couple of times."

"What's it like?" Tomas asked.

It was an honest question, and VeeVee smiled inside. Tomas might not see it himself, but he'd changed a lot over the last two months. The suspicious, defensive street kid was changing into somebody else. Someone she really liked.

"It's a little different every time, actually. The Elves like to change things around. Still, you'll have some pretty experienced guides with you, and it's just a day-trip. You'll be back in plenty of time to catch the bus to Poughkeepsie on Saturday."

Every other month the older students of St. Rhia's were given the opportunity to go "off campus" for the day, to shop, see a movie, or just hang out. Tomas had missed the last trip—and wouldn't have been let to go, anyway, as he'd only just arrived—but the next one was coming up this weekend, and she knew he had permission to go.

"This trip to Poughkeepsie—" Tomas made a face. "Can't believe there's really a town with that name—"

"What about it?" VeeVee asked indifferently. Frankly she wasn't that jazzed about the trip to the "big city." It wasn't as if it was all that big a deal for her. OK, the focal point of the trip was a mall, but two or three circuits of the place was about enough for her. There was a multiplex cinema, but there wasn't anything playing she was particularly jonesing to see. Maybe for the others this was their big chance to get off campus, and have dates

that let them get some time away from all the other students, but she'd skipped the last two trips and hadn't planned on making this one either—

“So they really take us to a city? On our own? Even me?” There was something poignant, or maybe pathetic, about the way he said that. Dammit, he still expected to be treated like a criminal. Okay, so he actually was a criminal, but still...

“Yeah, but if you miss the bus back, you might as well kiss your Student Union privileges goodbye for a month, even if you have a good excuse,” she said wryly. She thought about adding, *and don't even think about doing a runner*, but decided better of it. “They have to send out the van special, and it's a two hour drive. Each way. And you'd better have more than just a good excuse for why you missed the bus in the first place. You'd better have been saving three orphan kids from drowning or something.”

He heaved a huge sigh, and put his hands behind his neck. “VeeVee... this maybe sounds dumb, *que?* But I gotta see someplace that ain't here.” Then he did something so unexpected her heart turned over. He turned his head to look at her with an expression she'd never seen before on his face. “I heard some of the guys talkin'. Seems like some of 'em are goin' with someone, *comprende?*”

“Well, of course they are, they're going with the whole sch—” Then she did a second mental pass over the words. “Oh, you mean with someone. Like, a date—”

“Yeah, like a date.” Tomas brought his hands down and studied his fingernails. “So I was thinkin' you'd want to go with me.” He continued to study his fingernails. “‘Cause I wanna go with you.”

Her mouth went dry, and her heart did a kind of double back-beat before it settled again.

“Yeah,” she heard herself saying, and her voice was echoing back up at her as if from the bottom of a deep, deep well. “Yeah. I'd like that too.”

“Cool.” He stopped studying his nails and flashed her a grin.

She couldn't help grinning back at him, as he pushed the chair back and gave her a wink before sauntering out of the library again.

After that it was kind of hard to keep her mind on the books she was supposed to be reading.

Tomas spent the rest of the week in a kind of happy daze. Not over the upcoming trip to Underhill—though by now all the kids who were going had been tapped and they were all pretty excited about it—or about the upcoming picnic. No, he was thinking about the Mall trip. An actual date. With VeeVee.

It wasn't like he hadn't had dates before. More than dates. Back in the barrio in El

Paso, there'd been... But this one was special. She was special, in a way he really couldn't put into words. She made him want to be... well, he wasn't sure what.

But he knew this was going to be the best Saturday of his life.

That Friday morning they left on the field trip.

There didn't seem to be any particular rhyme nor reason to the people picked to go, as far as Tomas could tell. On the last field trip, VeeVee had said it would be kids with what she'd called "combat specialties" who'd be going. This time it was him, Kenny Chandler, Johnny Devlin, and Destiny Campbell, Chloe Howard, and Megan Bennett.

He knew Destiny really well, since she was in Auto Shop with him. She'd told him she was an Artificer, which was a kind of magician who could build things really, really well. She said that Merlin had been a Bard, an Artificer, and a Healer, but that most people these days only got one of the three Gifts, and that Bard and Healer were much more common. She was hoping to go to Fairegrove to work on race cars when she left St. Rhia's and she was trying to get Tomas interested in that, but Tomas just couldn't see it. Sure, speed was fine. But what was the point of just driving in circles on a track when you could build a street machine that would have eyes popping wherever you drove it?

Chloe and Megan he didn't know as well, though he knew they were both M-track; that Megan and Brian were dating (off and on); and that Chloe played keyboard in what Tomas considered the best of the school bands.

For this field trip, they'd all been encouraged to dress well, but not too fancy, and wear shoes that they'd be able to do a certain amount of walking in. Tomas had decided to go with the hiking boots—they weren't all that stylin', but he knew they could cover the ground in comfort. To make up for it, he'd worn one of his nicest shirts—dark green, with pearl snaps—and, after only a little hesitation, changed out his usual do-rag for a bright red bandanna. No need to worry about stepping on gang toes by showing the wrong colors around here, after all.

When he reached the van parked in front of the Main Building, several of the others were already there and he was relieved to see he wasn't the only one making a special effort. Kenny was wearing a crisp, brand new t-shirt for some band nobody had ever heard of, and Destiny was wearing a long denim skirt.

"Where's Johnny?" Destiny asked.

"Last, but certainly not least," a familiar voice said behind Tomas. He turned around.

"We're going Underhill, not to a disco," Kenny said, rolling his eyes.

"Satin? In this weather?" Megan said in disbelief.

Devlin was wearing a black satin shirt—half-unbuttoned over his skinny chest—and

black jeans with a studded belt that made him look like a cut-rate motorcycle outlaw. “Hey, I figure we’re gonna meet some cute girl Elves,” he said, grinning.

“All of whom are going to be older than your grandmother,” Chloe said, shaking her head in disgust. “Which part of “Elves live a thousand years” did you miss in the Orientation Lecture?”

Devlin just shrugged, and Tomas figured it would serve him right if he did meet some “cute girl Elves.” From what VeeVee had told him about the Elves this week, they’d probably run him around in circles.

Just then, Ms. Smith and Mr. Moonlight came walking down the front steps, so it was too late to tell Devlin to go back and change, even if Tomas had wanted to make the effort.

You couldn’t just click your heels together to get to Underhill. You had to go through things called “Gates”, and the nearest Gate to Underhill was several hours drive south of here, almost all the way to New Jersey.

“So... how come it’s so far away?” Tomas asked, once they were on the road. It was the first time he’d been down the drive and back out into what he was actually kind of starting to think of as the “real world” since he’d arrived, and it was kind of an odd feeling. Although he’d be going out again tomorrow, with VeeVee. On an actual date...

Megan giggled. “Everforest is the close one. Thundersmouth is about a day’s drive north of here, up near the Canadian border. Then there’s Fairegrove, down in Savannah. Not really a lot of Gates on the East Coast.”

Tomas wondered just why that was. He glanced around, and was relieved to see that Johnny, Kenny, and Destiny looked as puzzled as he was. At least everybody didn’t seem to know all about Elves.

“Soon the Everforest Nexus will have to be moved,” Inigo Moonlight said from the front seat of the van. Tomas had been sure he’d want to do the driving, but he’d left that to Ms. Smith, and simply stared out the window with a faintly disapproving expression. “The habitations of Men encroach too closely upon it, and that is a perilous thing.”

“It’s near where the Sterling Forest RennFair is now,” Megan said. “It’s on State land, but there’s a lot of traffic in that area. To move a Gate, you need a Bard and a Node Grove—to anchor it in its new location.”

“Points to you,” Ms. Smith said, not taking her eyes from the road. “Lucky for us, we’ve got Bards coming out of our... ears.”

Chloe smirked, but didn’t say anything.

The Interstate was really boring, but Tomas and Destiny played games on her GameBoy, Kenny zoned out with his iPod, and Chloe and Megan read. Only Johnny sat, fidgeting and bugging the others, until Ms. Smith threatened to do something (unspecified) to him that he wouldn't like. After that, he rummaged in his backpack (they'd all been told to bring them, in order to carry their lunches once they got there) and pulled out a DVD player. The ride went more quietly after that.

It was almost lunch time when they got close to where they were going. They'd turned off the highway onto a side road, then onto a one-lane road, which turned into a dirt road that the van bumped carefully along for a mile or so before Ms. Smith pulled off to the side and parked.

"We hoof it from here, boys and girls," she announced. "And the management strongly suggests leaving all electronic toys and wristwatches here. Underhill's just gonna fry 'em." Kenny sighed reluctantly—Tomas almost never saw him without his music, except in class or at the dances—but tucked the player under the car-seat. All of them took off their watches. Megan and Chloe looked smug, and stuffed their paperbacks into their backpacks to take with them. They all climbed out of the van, and Ms. Smith distributed large brown paper sacks from a box in the back—their lunches. All of them were labeled, since Megan didn't eat meat, Kenny was allergic to eggs, and Destiny hated everything but peanut butter sandwiches. Tomas pretty much figured that if it was food, he'd eat it, no matter how weird it looked. Some of that sushi stuff had been pretty good. Once they were all set, they started off, with Mr. Moonlight in the lead.

For the first time, Tomas wondered why the Headmaster was coming along on this field trip, especially since it was supposed to involve a certain amount of hiking. The guy had to be about a hundred and seven, and he looked pretty frail. Now that Tomas wasn't busy worrying about a bunch of other things the way he had been on his first day at St. Rhia's, he was taking a good look at the *vato*, and Inigo Moonlight looked like he was ready for the undertaker. He was, like, maybe six-four, and pale like somebody who'd done serious time in *El Jugado*, and he didn't look like he weighed more than a hundred pounds soaking wet. But he still set a pace—first up the rocky dirt road, and then off it, right across an open meadow—that had the rest of them struggling to keep up.

"Here we are," Mr. Moonlight said.

Tomas looked around. He didn't see anything. He was glad to see that the *chicas* looked as puzzled as he did.

Then Mr. Moonlight raised his hand, and suddenly, right in front of them, there was a shimmering space in the air. It was just hanging there, looking like a giant dark-blue scarf that was somehow just... there.

“Whoa,” Chloe said, and giggled. “Chevron Seven locked.”

“All you have to do is walk through it,” Ms. Smith said calmly. “You’ll feel a little weird, but that’s normal. Eric’s going to be waiting for you on the other side. Come on. Who wants to go first?”

“I’ll go,” Tomas said. He was a little surprised at himself, but hey. He already knew—and believed—that while the teachers at St. Rhia’s might be out to scare him sometimes—like on that last field trip—they weren’t going to hurt him. If Ms. Smith said this was safe, he believed her.

“Come on, then,” Ms. Smith said.

“I’ll go with him,” Destiny said.

Tomas and Destiny walked up to the shimmering Gate, with Ms. Smith right behind them, and stepped through.

It felt a little like going down in a really fast elevator, and Tomas staggered as he stepped out on the other side. To his surprise, it looked just like the place he’d left.

Well, no, actually. It looked better.

On the other side, there’d been a few clouds in the sky. Here the sky was a flawless blue. The grass underfoot was green—a brighter green than before—and lush, and perfect. Even the air smelled sweeter.

“Welcome to Underhill,” Eric Banyon said.

Tomas looked around.

The Music Arts teacher was sitting in the driver’s seat of something Tomas had never seen except in old movies. It was a wooden wagon—a little like a flatbed pickup truck, except without the cab and the engine—with bench seats in the back. It had yellow spoked wheels with red rims, and its sides were painted with a gaudy design of vines and fruits and flowers that reminded him of the curtains in the house of his girlfriend back in El Paso. Hitched to the front of it were a couple of cream-colored ponies with ribbons braided into their manes and tails, and all their reins and everything were yellow and red and green like the paint on the wagon.

“Oh, wow,” Destiny said. “A buckboard. Just like in one of those old Western movies.”

Chloe giggled. “Nah, it’s a Lord of the Rings prop from the first movie!”

“Yep,” Eric said. “It’s a little faster than walking—though not very. Still...”

“Aw, c’mon, Banyon. Couldn’t you have at least gotten those things to turn into something more interesting? Like ATVs?” Ms. Smith said. She walked over to one of the ponies—slinging her backpack into the buckboard as she passed—and began scratching it on the forehead.

“Oh, sure,” Eric said. “If I wanted to scare off everything between here and Elfhame Misthold. But the whole point of this field trip is to meet the locals.”

One of the ponies turned its head to look at Tomas, and he could have sworn it winked at him.

“Well, it’s a nice day for a joyride,” Ms. Smith said grudgingly.

“It’s always a nice day Underhill—except when it isn’t,” Eric answered confusingly. “Oh, good. We’re all here.”

Tomas turned around—and took a very deep breath.

There were Kenny, Johnny, Chloe, and Megan, looking just the way they had before they’d walked through the shiny patch of nothing.

And there was Mr. Moonlight. Who now had long—very long—very pointed ears. And instead of wearing that black undertaker suit that was all Tomas had ever seen him in, was wearing a tunic, and tights, and boots, and gloves, and had a cape, and a sword...

Tomas swallowed very hard, determined not to boggle, at least not out loud. VeeVee had described to him what Elves looked like. And Mr. Moonlight... was an Elf.

“Well, Bard Eric, where do you take us today?” Mr. Moonlight asked.

The other four—who’d been standing in front of him, staring at the wagon and the landscape—hadn’t noticed the change yet. When he spoke, and walked past them to the wagon, they noticed him for the first time. Johnny said “Holy sh—” before Kenny kicked him, Megan squeaked, and Chloe stared with wide eyes.

He’s enjoying freakin’ us out, Tomas realized.

“We go to visit my liege-lord at Elfhame Misthold, Lord Moonlight,” Eric said, with a small formal bow. “The way should be pleasant, simple, and fast.” Tomas remembered VeeVee saying that you had to be on your best manners with Elves, and he’d figured they were kind of like bangers—you had to show respect, or you’d just be in a world of hurt.

“Then let us begin,” Mr. Moonlight said, climbing up into the driver’s seat beside Eric.

“Everybody in,” Ms. Smith said briskly, pointing at the back of the buckboard.

Tomas scrambled up into the wagon—there were steps in the back to make it easier—and took his seat.

“Those of you who are magic-users will find that your powers are stronger here in Underhill,” Ms. Smith began, in the dry tones of a bored tour-guide. “This doesn’t mean you should try to take them out for a spin, you know? Destiny, you shouldn’t have any particular problems, or you, Chloe—although they really like Bards here, and all of you should remember that there are more than a few critters Underhill that just think of Talent

as a tasty snack—but Megan, there’s gonna be a lot more things for you to talk to here, so you better be ready to dial it back, okay?”

“Got it,” Megan said. She darted a glance at the driver’s seat, where Eric and Mr. Moonlight were sitting, calmly watching the passing landscape.

“What about us?” Devlin asked boldly.

“Psionics don’t have the same basic power source as Mages, hotshot, and if you don’t remember that, you probably need to go back to P-track kindergarten,” Ms. Smith said. “Underhill will pretty much leave your abilities alone—although I’m sure you can get into trouble if you try. Just remember—and this is the last time I’m gonna say this—that for a lot of things down here, they ain’t gonna care whether you’ve got a Gift or a Talent; you can still be lunch. And just because they’re pretty doesn’t mean they ain’t trouble.”

Kenny snickered, and for a moment Tomas wondered just why Johnny Devlin was here. He’d thought this trip might be a reward for good behavior, but now he was starting to think it just might be another test.

Eric had been right that the wagon was only a little faster than walking, but Tomas found he didn’t mind. Even though landscapes weren’t exactly his thing, there was so much to see! In the sky overhead were just about the biggest eagles he’d ever seen. In the distance, a herd of deer watched them, and one of them was pure white. Even up close, down by the wagon’s wheels, there were things to see. He’d thought at first the meadow was all grass, but now, looking closer, he could see that the grass was mixed with all kinds of tiny flowers as well, in dozens of colors....

“Hey there, *hombre*,” Ms. Smith said, grabbing his elbow. “You don’t want to take a header out of the bus.”

Tomas grinned, a little sheepishly. He hadn’t realized just how far he was leaning out. He shrugged, straightening up.

“The flowers mean we’re getting deeper into Underhill,” Ms. Smith explained. “Almost up to the next Gate.”

“I thought we were already in Underhill,” Kenny said.

“We are. But Underhill is made up of a bunch of different Domains—each of which is under the control of some Power or other—connected by Gates. All the Domains are carved out of something the Sidhe call the Chaos Lands, which are a place you really don’t want to go. The Chaos Lands are pure undifferentiated magic, which means they can be anything at any moment—including your worst nightmare.”

“So none of this is real?” Megan asked nervously, looking around.

Ms. Smith grinned at her. “Sure it is. But it’s only real because it’s anchored by Gates,

a Node Grove, and the will of the Sidhe whose Domain it is. Without those three things, it'd just dissolve back into Chaos. How fast it would dissolve depends, pretty much, on how long it'd been a Domain."

"Kind of like a memory plastic," Destiny said consideringly, looking around. "But what if the, um, Sidhe dies?"

"Then his—or her—heir takes over maintaining the Domain," Ms. Smith said patiently. "That's why Elves—at least—go in for royalty, so there's always somebody in charge of the Domain. Some of the other Domains can get kinda... wacky."

"I'd like to see one of those," Tomas said.

"Not this trip," Ms. Smith said. "Ria'd skin me alive if I didn't bring you all back in one piece. And this year, too—remind me to tell you about timeslip Underhill when we get back. But maybe sometime."

"Oh, look," Chloe said. "That. Is that a Gate?"

She pointed. Several hundred yards in the distance Tomas could see two trees. They looked odd, and after a moment he realized why. They were absolutely identical to each other.

"Yes. Yes it is," Megan said. She sounded absolutely certain.

When they went through the next Gate—all they did was drive up to the suspiciously-identical set of trees and drive between them, as far as Tomas could see—he received his next big shock.

On the other side, everything was completely different.

Moments before, he'd been in an open meadow that looked pretty much like the meadow he'd walked across when he'd left the van. Now, suddenly, the wagon was in the middle of a dense ancient forest where it was as dark as twilight, and when he whipped around in his seat, all he could see behind him was more forest.

"Steady," Ms. Smith said.

"But... how do we get back?" Tomas asked. He took a deep breath.

"Most of the Gates are connected," Eric said, from the front seat. "We can either retrace our path exactly, using the same Gates we took to get to the Everforest Gate, or use a different set. Whichever ones we use, the final one will be the Everforest Gate, so that we come out in the same place in the World Above."

"A-a-a-a-nd... you gotta have a Mage to work the Gates, or even find one," Ms. Smith added. "Which means Eric, or Mr. Moonlight—or in a pinch, Megan, Chloe, or Destiny."

"What about you?" Destiny asked. "You've got one of the Three Gifts, right, Ms. Smith?"

Ms. Smith shrugged. “I’d hate to try it. Not that it’s likely to come up. Of course, if I was stuck down here, I’ve got a lot of friends I could call.” She grinned at them. “Not that that’s gonna happen.”

“So Kenny and Tomas and me’d be screwed,” Devlin said.

“Which is why you tell anyone you meet—if you happen to get separated from our little tour group—that you’re a close personal friend of Sieur Eric, Bard of Elfhome Misthold, who is liegeman to Prince Arvin of Elfhome Misthold, and wait for the cavalry to show up. Think you can remember that?” Ms. Smith asked.

Devlin nodded, but to Tomas’s eye, he didn’t look as worried as he ought to. As for Tomas, he knew she wasn’t trying to scare them—at least not more than they needed to be scared. He was starting to get the idea that this Underhill place was kind of like a big city. It had safe spots, and rough spots, its upright citizens, bangers, and *malo hombres*. And you could be safe just about anywhere in it so long as you knew just what—and who—you were dealing with.

“Heya—Ms. Smith—these, um, these Underhill *vatos*...” He glanced toward the front of the wagon and decided to ask his question anyway. “They ever come out? You know—where we are? I mean—”

Eric laughed. “Go ahead, Kayla,” he said.

“A lot of them,” she said. “A lot of Elves like to live in our world, and most of them are no trouble at all—like the folks at Fairegrove. Or our boss up there,” she added, nodding toward Mr. Moonlight. “Some of them can be pretty bad news, though—the Unseleighe Court.”

“Un—Unseely?” Tomas asked, stumbling over the unfamiliar word.

“The Unseleighe Court is the Dark Court. Elves come in two flavors, Dark and Bright. The Bright ones are the Good Guys. You’ll be getting into all of this next year, really; there’s a whole course on Occult and Magical Races and Creatures. Most of the things in Underhill stay Underhill, though. Either they’re tied to a specific place—like the Low Court Sidhe, which can’t leave their Node Groves—or they’ve been sealed into a specific Domain—usually for a very good reason. Or they just like Underhill better.”

“Good,” Megan said firmly.

Tomas had to agree.

“Okay,” Eric said, pulling the wagon to a halt. “Time for lunch. It’s about an hour to the next Gate, after which we should have a straight shot through to Misthold, and this looks like a pretty nice place to stop.”

Tomas looked around. He’d been so intent on listening to Ms. Smith that he’d been a little distracted from his surroundings, but now he saw that the forest had opened out a bit. The wagon was drawn up at the edge of a small—but picture-perfect—meadow. Sunlight slanted down through the trees, dispelling the sense of gloom and doom he’d felt

while they were in the forest itself. Butterflies flitted among the trees, and he could hear water splashing in the distance.

“Oh my god. It’s gorgeous,” Destiny said, sounding awestruck.

“You can take some time to explore after lunch,” Eric said, swinging down from the driver’s seat and starting to unhitch the ponies. “Just don’t plan on going too far.”

There were a couple of large plaid blankets stowed in the back of the wagon—plenty of room for everyone—and they quickly spread them out. The ponies wandered off to a far corner of the meadow and began grazing unconcernedly.

Tomas thought it was just about as odd as anything else he’d seen today to see Mr. Moonlight—dressed the way Tomas guessed Elves dressed all the time—sitting cross-legged on a picnic blanket eating a sandwich and drinking bottled water, but he guessed he ought to be getting used to weird things by this time. Two months ago he’d still be freaking out over the whole idea that Elves could even exist at all. Now he wasn’t even—exactly—mad that VeeVee hadn’t told him in advance that their Headmaster was from way out of town. And he was even kind of looking forward to that class next year—the one that would be about all kinds of weird monsters and things.

There was so much food in their brown bags that none of them finished it all; in fact, the girls barely touched theirs before they were stuffing their brown bags back into their backpacks and heading out to explore. After a few minutes, Devlin got to his feet and wandered off too—being really ostentatious about not going in the same direction.

Kenny looked at Tomas, raising an eyebrow. He didn’t say anything because they were surrounded by teachers, but his expression was plain: *oh yeah, like he thinks he’s going to get over with any of them?*

Tomas had to agree. Devlin was so convinced he was *caca fuego*, that and if he’d just lose the attitude, he’d probably do a lot better with the ladies...

“I believe I shall take a short constitutional in order to settle my repast,” Mr. Moonlight said, getting to his feet. “Yourself, Bard?”

“I think I’ll stay with our ride,” Eric said. “I’m pretty sure nothing will happen to it here, but...”

“But Triple-A charges a wicked premium for those Underhill service calls,” Ms. Smith finished. She got to her feet as well. “Go on, guys. Check the place out. How often do you get a chance to visit Elfland?”

“True,” Kenny admitted. “C’mon, Tomas.”

“Try to be back at the wagon in about half an hour,” Eric said.

The two of them walked off under the trees. Tomas stared up into the leafy canopy. Only tiny chinks of daylight filtered down.

“Not much like home, is it?” Kenny asked.

“Yours or mine?” Tomas said, smirking.

“Well, anyone’s. But I was thinking, this is a lot more like Seattle than it is like Texas.”

“Yeah,” Tomas said. “I—Oh, wait. Is that a house?”

Both boys stared at something nestled in the roots of one of the enormous unfamiliar trees. It wasn’t a whole house, but it was the front of one—in miniature. A shingled roof and a door with a tiny brass knocker. The whole thing couldn’t be more than six inches high.

“Yes-s-s-s...” Kenny said cautiously.

Tomas stared up into the branches of the tree. He couldn’t see anything, but he had the strong feeling that something was watching them.

“Do you want to find out what comes out if we knock?” he asked.

“No,” Kenny said hastily. “Not really.”

As they moved on, Tomas could swear he heard high-pitched giggling behind him.

They didn’t—exactly—see anything else as they walked through the forest. Not if you didn’t count birds in more colors than a whole box of Crayolas, and all kinds of flowers. Some were twining up the trees in vines, some were growing on bushes, and some were just growing right out of the ground. They all looked... fancy.

By mutual consent, neither of them went very far into the forest. Tomas was hoping to find the water he’d heard earlier—it had sounded like a waterfall to him—but although he could hear it, it never seemed to get any closer.

“I think we’d better turn back,” he finally said.

Kenny was staring dreamily at a big yellow flower about the size of his head. It smelled a little like bananas and a little like grapefruit—which was better when you smelled it than it was to describe. He didn’t react.

Tomas poked him. Hard.

“Hey!” Kenny said. “What’d you do that for?”

“Because I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life out here watching you stare at *una flor, amigo*.”

“Um... yeah.” Kenny took a deep breath. “Let’s get back.”

When they got back out to the meadow—Tomas breathed an unconscious sigh of

relief—he could see that the three teachers were already waiting by the wagon.

“I don’t suppose you saw the others?” Eric asked, when Tomas reached him.

Tomas shook his head. “We were over there.” He pointed.

“And they are there,” Mr. Moonlight said, pointing in turn.

Eric sighed faintly. “Let’s go get ‘em. C’mon.”

The five of them crossed the meadow and walked into the trees for a short distance. The sound of the water that Tomas had heard before got louder.

Suddenly the trees opened out again. Not into a meadow this time; it was more of a clearing, an open space about the size of one of the classrooms back at St. Rhia’s. At one corner of it there was a rocky pool, and a backsplash down which water was bubbling and spilling just as if this were an ornamental fountain in somebody’s back yard.

The other four were here. And they weren’t alone.

Devlin was lying with his head in some girl’s lap. She had short pink hair, and her ears were even longer than Mr. Moonlight’s. They were also furry like a donkey’s, and when Tomas looked down at her feet, he saw that she didn’t have feet, she had hooves.

Megan was sitting with something that looked like a giant German Shepherd in her lap. She was scratching it behind the ears, and talking to it adoringly. Only dogs weren’t supposed to be bright blue. And they weren’t supposed to have hands and feet instead of paws.

Chloe was sitting with a harp in her lap while two pretty-normal looking girls in brushed and braided her hair. At least, they were normal-looking except for the fact that they both had enormous butterfly wings growing out of their backs.

And Destiny was sitting staring into a mirror that was being held up for her by what looked pretty much like a kid Tomas’s own age—although considering all the others, Tomas bet he wasn’t. All he was wearing was a bunch of vines and flowers and a loincloth like Tarzan. When he saw them, he turned his head and smiled at them over his shoulder. Tomas saw that his teeth were pointed like a cat’s, and his eyes were all green, no white at all.

“Well, this is going to be fun,” Ms. Smith said. She didn’t sound particularly upset.

“Okay,” Eric said, turning to Kenny and Tomas. “These are Low Court Sidhe, meaning they’re tied to this Node Grove. They’ve enamoured your friends in order to keep them with them. What are you going to do about it?”

What am I going to do about it? Tomas thought in exasperation. “Guys! Hey, guys! Time to go!”

The dark-haired boy holding the mirror laughed, and the butterfly-winged girls giggled. The whatever-it-was with the hooves just ignored him, and so did the pink-haired girl and the big blue dog.

And so did his classmates.

He walked into the clearing and grabbed Devlin by the ankles, dragging him out of Pink Hair's lap. Devlin didn't react, but when Tomas got him to the edge of the clearing, he struggled free—getting to his feet and elbowing Tomas painfully in the ribs in the process—and made his way back to his new girlfriend's side, cuddling up to her again. She looked up at Tomas and snickered, flicking her ears back and forth like an irritated cat.

"Well, now you know that won't work," Eric said calmly. "As long as they're enamoured, they'll just want to stay here."

"So... break the spell?" Tomas asked. Eric nodded.

And it was obvious that the teachers were going to leave it to him and Kenny to figure out how to do that. He looked at Kenny.

"We could, um, throw holy water on them?" Kenny suggested.

"Nice try," Ms. Smith said, "but they aren't vampires. And I don't think you've got any holy water, either."

"We could, um, burn down their grove," Tomas suggested tentatively.

"Well, yes," Eric said. "That would certainly work. But it might be a little extreme."

"It would kill them, wouldn't it?" Tomas said.

"It would," Mr. Moonlight said. "The Sidhe of the Low Courts are bound to their Groves. They have no other habitation."

Tomas thought about that for a few minutes. He thought about how much he was looking forward to going to the Mall tomorrow, and what it would be like not to ever be able to leave St. Rhia's, ever. And the Sidhe were supposed to live for a really really long time...

"So I guess they get really bored, right?" he said after a moment.

"Perhaps they do," Mr. Moonlight said, in tones that indicated he'd never thought about it before.

"Kenny," Tomas said. "Get the mirror."

Kenny looked puzzled—just for a moment—then smiled. He reached out his hand, and the mirror shivered in the dark boy's hand—and then rose up into the air.

The boy snatched at it, but Kenny swooped it out of reach. He made it fly all around the clearing, swooping and sailing, but after that first failed grab, the dark boy simply sat

back and watched it, a smile of delight on his face.

At last Kenny brought the mirror to himself.

“Do you want it back?” Tomas asked. He was hoping to trade the mirror for Destiny.

“I can get another,” the dark boy said, shrugging. “Make it fly again.”

“What’s he so excited about?” Kenny whispered. “He’s got magic. He can make dozens of mirrors fly.”

“He can’t make them fly without magic, though,” Eric said.

“Hey,” Tomas said, getting an idea. “Look. We want our friends back. We’ll make the mirror fly again in exchange for them. And other stuff, too.”

“You would bargain with us for your friends’ lives?” the dark haired boy asked. His eyes gleamed.

Kenny opened his mouth to say something. Tomas kicked him. If there was one thing Tomas knew something about, it was cutting a deal with bangers and not getting skinned. He’d done it for years back in El Paso, when he’d had a skill that everybody had wanted, and had used it to buy his safety and freedom and not get dragged into any of the gangs.

He shrugged, feigning disinterest. “I just want you to let them go. Got stuff to trade, you know?”

“What “stuff?”” The dark haired boy looked interested now.

“We’ll make your mirror fly again.”

“Not enough,” the boy said quickly.

“Did I say that was all?” Tomas held out his hand, palm up. He concentrated, and a jet of fire leaped up from his palm.

Whoa!

Ms. Smith had been right about everything being... stronger... here. He’d only meant to make a little flame. She’d said it wouldn’t affect psions, only mages, but he was more nervous than he wanted to let on. This was no time to lose control, though.

The flame collapsed and died.

“Do it again!” the boy cried. All five of the Sidhe were watching him now.

“If we’ve got a deal,” Tomas said.

“One of them,” the boy said, grinning.

What else have I got that they want?

He shrugged off his backpack and rummaged through it.

“No candy bars,” Ms. Smith said in a low voice. “The chocolate’ll kill ‘em.”

Tomas nodded. “I got genuine Earth sandwiches. I got potato chips. I got bottled water.”

Kenny had gotten the idea and was going through his pack as well. “Pretzels,” he said. “Jelly beans. Granola bars—no chocolate in those. Raisins. And, um, sunglasses.”

“I’ll go get the other packs,” Ms. Smith said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A few minutes later, everything they'd brought with them that contained neither chocolate nor caffeine that was spread out on one of the picnic blankets—including two paperback novels, a Frisbee, and a bright pink boonie hat. The Sidhe had abandoned their new playmates—who were still sitting, entranced, in the middle of the clearing—to inspect the goods. Tomas couldn't decide which of them was the weirdest—he was pretty sure it was a tie between the pink-haired girl with the hooves and the bright blue dog-thing.

He kept hoping that one of the teachers would step in and take over, but by now he'd realized that he and Kenny were pretty much on their own here. And that Kenny was expecting him to figure things out.

The dark haired boy reached for one of the books.

"Uh-uh," Tomas said firmly. "Not until we've got a deal." He glanced at Kenny and wiggled his fingers. Kenny got the idea. The book rose up off the blanket and hovered.

"You'll give us all this? You'll make fire again? You'll make the mirror fly again?" the boy asked guardedly.

"You give us back our friends—all of them—"

"Undo," Ms. Smith murmured in a low voice.

"—and undo what you did to 'em," Tomas added, "and yeah."

The boy still hesitated.

"Seriously," Kenny said. "This is cool stuff." He picked up the Frisbee—Tomas wondered who'd brought it, because it hadn't been in Kenny's backpack—and skimmed it across the clearing with an expert flick of the wrist. It arced upward, turning, and came back again. Kenny reached up and caught it—no telekinesis required.

"You'll have to practice with it," Kenny said, shrugging, "but it will work for anybody. No magic."

But they hadn't closed the deal yet, Tomas could tell. What else did he have to sweeten the pot with?

"And here, okay?" Tomas said, untying the red do-rag from around his head. "This, too." He held it out.

The boy took it, and tied it around his own head the way he'd seen Tomas wearing it. It looked weird with the flowers and the loincloth, but the boy didn't seem to care. "A

bargain, then, Child of Earth,” he said. “Now, make my mirror fly.” He held it out.

Tomas glanced back toward the three teachers, but from their expressions, he and Kenny were still doing okay. He nodded. “Done deal.”

For the next half hour, Kenny made the mirror swoop around the clearing like some kind of demented bird as Tomas juggled fireballs—small ones. It took every ounce of the control he’d learned in those weeks of tedious practice sessions with Mr. Bishop, and when he got tired, he switched to flashier—but easier—moves: lighting up his fingertips like candles, and then walking a single flame across the backs of his hands, the way a stage magician would manipulate a coin. His audience watched closely, and Tomas had the feeling they’d be willing to watch, well, forever.

“The bargain is fulfilled,” Mr. Moonlight said at last—to Tomas’s great relief. “Now you must fulfill your end of it.”

“Take them,” the boy said, sounding bored. And between one moment and the next, he and the other four Sidhe... weren’t there any more.

“Oh man,” Kenny said plaintively.

“Welcome to Underhill, hotshot,” Ms. Smith said, smirking. She walked over and began folding up the picnic blanket. It was empty now; its contents had vanished with the Sidhe.

“Hey!” Devlin had jumped to his feet. “Megs, I just saw a girl with wings! And—” Abruptly he realized that he was very far from alone. He stared at the others in confusion.

“So was this some kind of a test?” Tomas asked Eric. He hadn’t decided whether he was angry that he’d been tested, or pleased to have passed.

“Yes and no,” Eric answered, shrugging just a little. “No, because it isn’t anything we planned to have happen, but yes, because it’s the kind of thing that does happen Underhill, and you need to know what to do if something like this does.”

“So... what if we couldn’t get them out, you know? I mean—” Tomas said hesitantly.

“Well, in that case, Lord Moonlight or I would have stepped in and taken over. But you did a great job, Tomas. You kept your head, and you didn’t panic, and you came up with a good solution that kept everybody happy.”

“Yeah,” Ms. Smith said. “You rocked, kiddo.”

“Indeed, young Master Torres, you comported yourself with distinction here today,” Mr. Moonlight said.

By now the three girls were on their feet, and Kenny was explaining to them what had just—sort of—happened. According to Megan, they’d wandered into this clearing to look at the flowers—all of them knew better than to actually pick any—and that was the last thing they really remembered.

“Time to go,” Eric said firmly.

As they walked back to the buckboard, Destiny dropped back to walk beside Tomas. “Thanks for getting us out of there,” she said.

“It wasn’t really anything much,” he said, feeling awkward.

But Eric and Ms. Smith—and even Mr. Moonlight—seemed to think he’d done a good job, and he was a little embarrassed to realize how much he valued hearing their words of praise.

“Are we gonna be late?” Chloe asked, when they were moving down the road in the wagon again.

“Not really,” Eric said over his shoulder. “Time is pretty much a suggestion in Underhill, not an absolute. We’ll just skip a couple of stops on the tour, and reach Misthold pretty much when we said we would.”

“And be home on time?” Tomas asked. Underhill was great, but he’d trade everything he’d seen here for tomorrow—a real date with VeeVee.

“You got somewhere to be?” Devlin snarked.

“In time for dinner,” Eric said, ignoring the byplay. “Hey, it’s Friday. Wouldn’t want to miss Pizza Night.”

Destiny groaned, too low for anyone but Tomas to hear.

He’d never actually met anyone who hated pizza before.

About ten minutes later the buckboard reached a stone circle. They drove into it, but they never reached the other side. Chloe made a startled sort of hiccupping noise, and Tomas turned to look at her, and suddenly the light changed, as if somebody had turned up the sun.

And the buckboard was driving along a cliff road above a beach.

“Hey, cool,” Kenny said.

“I wish we’d stopped here for lunch,” Megan said wistfully, gazing out at the ocean.

Tomas found himself in agreement. From their viewpoint at the top of the cliff he could see the perfect white sand beach below—it looked like something out of a travel poster—and beyond it, the ocean was a glowing pale turquoise.

“You wouldn’t get along with the locals,” Eric said. “And none of you can breathe underwater. So....”

“You mean this place isn’t safe?” Johnny asked indignantly.

“Devlin, did you sleep through everything that happened in the last place we drove through?” Kenny asked.

“No place down here is safe,” Tomas said, reasoning it out. “But I guess... some places are safer than others?”

“We’re okay here as long as we don’t go down to the water—or into it,” Eric said. “And Lord Moonlight and I could probably keep the merfolk from luring the rest of you in. Probably.”

He sounded like this was all a great big joke, Tomas thought—and it probably was, if you were up here on the road, and safe, and knew you had magic to protect yourself besides. But he was just as glad when, a few minutes later, the road curved away from the cliff and they went through another Gate.

“Euw,” Chloe said immediately.

It was dark—not night-dark, but overcast. And foggy. And after a few seconds Tomas realized that he expected it to be damp and cold, too—because when it was dim and foggy like this, it was always damp and cold—but it wasn’t. It wasn’t much of anything.

At the edges of the road he could see—he was pretty sure—trees. It was hard to be certain. On the one hand, what else could they be? On the other hand, he couldn’t really see them clearly at all.

“Um... shouldn’t the weather be a little better?” he heard Ms. Smith say.

“Yes,” Eric answered. “I’m going back to the Gate. We’ll take a road through another Domain.”

He pulled the buckboard to a stop and clucked to the Elvenponies, and the wagon began to make a wide careful turn. Soon they were heading back the way they came.

Destiny poked Tomas. “Wrong turn?” she asked in a low voice.

“I guess so,” he said.

“The ways through Underhill are not always straight,” Mr. Moonlight said. “Nor do they remain the same from season to season. Yet I had thought this was Prince Panariel’s Domain, and Elfhame Silverleaf should be willing to grant us safe passage.”

“Yeah, well, how long since you’ve been here?” Ms. Smith asked.

“Long,” Mr. Moonlight answered shortly.

Shouldn’t we be there now? Tomas thought a few minutes later.

By now all six of the students were exchanging nervous glances, and even Ms. Smith was looking edgy. They'd been heading back up the road toward the Gate for longer—a lot longer—than they'd been coming down it, and they were still in the middle of the fog and the mist. In fact, it was getting thicker.

"I think I see something out there," Megan said uneasily.

"Oh, no," Ms. Smith said. "I've been in this movie."

Eric looked back at them over his shoulder. "We've got a little problem, and all of you need to help. This, ah, used to be an Elven Domain. Now it isn't. And that means it's returning to Chaos Lands again."

"Breaking down into the elemental stuff of magic," Chloe said.

"And that means it can be shaped by the thoughts of anyone who travels through it," Eric finished. "Now, Lord Moonlight and I can shield you from its effects while we make a run for the actual Gate—never mind the details now—but it will be a really good idea if you don't look at the mist, stay calm, and, above all, don't imagine things. Okay?"

Now how the hell are we supposed to do that? Tomas thought with a combination of irritation and panic. But he said "right" along with the others, because what else could you do?

He wasn't even sure what the Chaos Lands were, but it sounded really bad.

The Elvenponies moved from a walk into a trot.

"Why don't they, you know, just magic us out of here?" Johnny asked in a loud whisper.

"The Chaos Lands are made of magic," Ms. Smith said. "Any magic anybody uses is just going to feed the Chaos. And, of course, attract the attention of anything that happens to be around."

"And that would be bad?" Megan asked.

"It's the Chaos Lands, so yeah," Ms. Smith said.

Suddenly there was a howl from somewhere out in the mist.

It didn't sound like either dogs or coyotes—Tomas had heard both back home—and it didn't sound like the wolves he'd heard in the movies, either. It sounded like a monster.

The Elvenponies broke into a run. It was odd, Tomas thought—with the part of his mind that wasn't on its way to a full-scale panic—that the wagon didn't bounce, but it was as if whatever its wheels were rolling over was absolutely smooth. He could barely hear the hoofbeats of the 'ponies, either: he didn't know whether the mist was muffling them, or whether the whatever-it-was that they were running over was soft.

"Eric?" Ms. Smith said tensely.

“We might be in trouble,” Eric said.

Tomas heard the howling again, louder. It echoed weirdly, the sound bouncing off the mist, and he couldn’t tell whether it was one... thing... or... more than one.

“Guys! Look at me,” Ms. Smith demanded.

Everyone did. Chloe and Megan were holding hands, white-faced, and Destiny was hugging herself tightly. Kenny looked like he wanted to throw up, and Johnny looked like he wanted to cry. Tomas put his game face on and gritted his teeth.

“We will get out of this. Once we’re through the Gate, we’re safe, and we’re almost there. Chloe, Destiny, Megan, down on the floor. Now.”

“Because they’re girls?” Johnny demanded. His voice was high and shaky.

“Because they’re Mages, jackass,” Ms. Smith snapped, as the girls moved to obey. “If we have to fight, it’s up to you Talents to do it. Your psi-powers won’t feed the Chaos-energy.”

“Incoming!” Eric shouted.

“There!” Ms. Smith said. “Tomas! Hit it!”

All he saw in the direction where she pointed was a darker shape in the mist. He flung a fireball at it anyway, and something screamed. The mist swirled away from his fireball for a moment before his fire vanished and the mist closed again, but he still didn’t get a good look at what he’d hit.

The howling was a definite chorus now; dozens of voices, not just one. He tried not to think about what was out there—Eric had said that anything you thought of would appear—but he couldn’t help it. Dogs hunted in packs. So did coyotes and wolves.

He heard Ms. Smith talking to Kenny and Johnny, directing them at targets. *Pick them up, throw them, shove them, stop them—*

Tomas looked for shadows in the mist and launched Fire at every one he saw. He didn’t try for elegance or control—the fireballs he conjured would have torched entire cars back home—and when he had to hit something in the air ahead of them, the ponies ran through a rain of falling sparks.

He didn’t know how long he could keep this up. He hadn’t been practicing endurance, only control. And he was already tired from showing off for the Low Court Sidhe. What if he ran out of fire? Kenny was good, but all he could do was shove them; Johnny could throw things a long way, but Tomas didn’t know if he could throw really big things. Only Tomas’s power could really hurt them.

Suddenly the buckboard made a sharp right turn and he was nearly flung over the side. Ms. Smith grabbed him around the waist, yanking him backward. He sprawled on top of Kenny and Johnny, kicking and elbowing at them as he struggled to get to his knees,

because he couldn't fight what he couldn't see. He heard Eric swear, and now the ground beneath the buckboard's wheels was so bumpy that it spent more time in the air than on the ground, and each time it landed it came down with a crash that jarred Tomas so badly that he saw stars. Somebody was crying, and Johnny was saying something over and over—not even a swear-word—and Tomas realized that he'd bitten the inside of his mouth.

And behind them, the mist started to swirl, like water going down a drain, and turn pitch-black.

There was a bright flash of light. Tomas felt his ears pop and his stomach lurch, and the buckboard jounced slowly to a gentle stop.

"Warn a girl, will you, Banyon?" Ms. Smith snapped.

Eric laughed. He sounded relieved.

Johnny shut up.

"Oh yeah," Kenny said, over and over. "Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah..."

They were out of the Chaos Lands.

Tomas blinked, squinting against the light. Not sunlight, exactly, because he really hadn't seen any sunlight since he'd come through the first Gate, but the sky was so blue it made his eyes water, and the wagon was resting on grass as short and green as if they were on a golf course, and a gentle breeze that smelled like roses was playing over his face. He looked around wildly, but all there was to see was the edge of a forest that could have come out of a photograph. Tall trees, with bright yellow and blue butterflies flitting around the lower branches, and everything looking as peaceful as Church on Sunday.

"Everybody okay back there?" Eric asked.

"Fine," Ms. Smith said.

"There's no telling what those things were," Eric said a few minutes later. "Either they were created by the Chaos itself, or possibly they were creatures trapped there when the lands started to dissolve back to Chaos."

Eric had called another rest-break. Both he and Mr. Moonlight swore they were all perfectly safe now that they were on this side of the Gate, and they'd driven on for a few minutes until they found a single enormous tree standing by itself in the middle of the meadow. Chloe said it was an oak tree—a dancing oak, whatever that meant. They'd stopped there, and Eric and Mr. Moonlight had spread out the picnic blankets again. Most of their picnic supplies had gone to ransom Destiny, Megan, Johnny, and Chloe from the Low Court Sidhe, but there were Cokes and candy bars left, and Eric used his magic to ken them (which was kind of like Xeroxing them), so there were plenty to go around, and

Mr. Moonlight conjured crystal goblets and bowls full of water out of nothing, as far as Tomas could see. Everybody sat around and washed their faces and tried to pretend that they all hadn't been scared out of their minds just a few minutes ago—as far as Tomas could tell, the only one who hadn't actually been scared was Mr. Moonlight.

There were plenty of bumps and bruises to go around, too—the girls were banged up from rolling around on the floor of the wagon and Kenny had a sprained wrist and Johnny had a big bleeding gash over one eye—but Ms. Smith was a Healer, and once they'd all caught their breath, she fixed them all up. Kind of like the school nurse, if your school nurse was some kind of *bruja*.

Being Healed was weird. She touched his face—his lip was already starting to puff up where he'd bitten through it—and Tomas felt a weird tingling feeling run all the way through his face and jaw. And then all the pain and swelling was gone, and Ms. Smith was sitting back, rubbing her fingertips together and reaching for a Coke as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"But they're all gone now?" Megan asked nervously. She kept looking back over her shoulder, even though none of them could actually see the Gate they'd come through.

"Indeed they are not," Mr. Moonlight said. "They are precisely where they were before—in that which was once Prince Panariel's Domain before it unraveled. If they were but manifestations of the Chaos Lands, they were nothing more than the manifestations of our own thoughts."

"And whatever they were," Eric said firmly, "they can't get through the Gate. Only the Sidhe—or one of the other powerful inhabitants of Underhill—can use the Gates to travel between Domains. But I think we're gonna scrub the rest of this field-trip and head on home anyway. I think we've all had enough Underhill for one day."

Tomas looked around at the others. Nobody was actually crying—though a couple of them looked pretty close. It didn't matter how cool Eric and the other teachers were playing it, though. They could all have gotten killed just now, and all of them knew it, because they'd taken an accidental wrong turn into a neighborhood that was supposed to be safe, but wasn't.

It was nobody's fault—nothing anybody had done deliberately. It had just happened.

He could say he was never going to Underhill again, and he was pretty sure that if he put his foot down, nobody would drag him back here, but...

There'd been that thing on his last field-trip. And the fact that Eric had just, oh-so-casually, mentioned that there were a lot of things down here that could go walking through the Gates—walking out into his world—any time they felt like it. Mr. Moonlight had, after all, hadn't he?

So, really, no place was safe. No place had ever been safe, really; the only difference was that now he knew it. And—as all the teachers at St. Rhia's kept helpfully reminding him—kids with powers like his, Gifted and Talented alike, were pretty much a Salad Bar

for a lot of them. He wasn't sure whether he was better off knowing that or not, but what he did know was that he really wanted to get back to St. Rhia's and talk out the whole day with VeeVee. He was glad, now, that she hadn't been with them. He'd been scared in the Chaos Lands. He would have been terrified if she'd been along for the ride.

But unfortunately, by the time they got back to St. Rhia's, it was too late for that. The route they took back to the Everforest Gate—an extremely safe path through long-established Domains, Mr. Moonlight assured them—got them back to New York later than Eric had hoped. It was well after sunset by the time they stepped through the Gate, and they had to stumble back to the van in the dark.

Because of their late start back to the school, they ended up stopping for dinner along the way. He tried to enjoy it. Mr. Moonlight insisted on stopping at a real restaurant—not one of the Thruway fast-food places—and it was the fanciest place Tomas had been to in his entire life. Johnny tried to order a cocktail—not that he got very far—and Ms. Smith even loaned Tomas her cell phone so he could try calling VeeVee, but when he got bumped to voicemail Tomas hung up without leaving a message. He couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't sound really lame, anyway.

When they finally got back to St. Rhia's it was after midnight. The Friday Night Dance was breaking up. He looked around inside, and didn't see VeeVee anywhere. He did find Lalage, who told him that VeeVee had said she planned to spend the evening studying. But he knew that the Library closed at seven on Fridays; that meant she'd probably spent the evening in her room or maybe the Student Union. It was after ten—lights-out, which meant he couldn't go into the Girls' Dorm; he checked the Student Union and she wasn't there.

He sighed, acknowledging defeat. She was probably asleep by now anyway. And while he did want to talk to her, this wasn't exactly urgent. He'd be seeing her in a few hours. It was already—barely—Saturday morning. They'd have the whole day together. Their first date.

Whistling to himself, Tomas went off to bed.

It wasn't the phone that woke her up around four A.M. Saturday morning. The phone just punctuated the rocket-transition from dream-state to wakefulness. And VeeVee knew before she put her hand on the phone who it was that was calling.

"What've we got?" she asked, her voice still foggy with sleep, but her brain alert enough.

"Nightflyers," her mother's voice said, in that flat, professional tone that told VeeVee this is not a drill. She shuddered; that word alone told her how serious it was. The Nightflyers came from—somewhere. No one quite knew where; fortunately there were

never many of them at a time, and doubly fortunate that when they did somehow manifest, it was rare. They looked most like enormous manta rays, but manta rays made of shadow and darkness, that shifted their shapes—not to anything recognizable, more to vague suggestions of something—a flapping cloth, a pool of darkness, the hint of something at the back of a dark alley.

And they killed. Oh, so very efficiently, they killed, sucking not just the life out of the body, but draining the personality and—it was hinted—the soul. Like something out of a horror movie, they swooped in out of nowhere and fed, and vanished.

It was, horribly, possible to summon them from wherever it was they came from. In the past, some fools had done so deliberately, thinking that they were like ordinary demonic creatures and could be constrained by the usual magical means. Those people pretty quickly found out this was not true, as the summoned creatures turned on the one that had brought them, floating across the bounds of magical circles as if the lines were mere children's chalk-scribbles.

“Where?” VeeVee asked, snapping the phone on “speaker”, and scrambling out of bed.

“Just outside of Lefever Falls. Some old recluse somehow managed to summon them. Three.”

VeeVee didn't bother to ask about the fate of the “old recluse.” He was unlikely to have survived his experiment. She thought about asking if there were any other victims, then thought better of it. She didn't really want to know. There was nothing she could do for them, and their fates would only prey on her mind. “ETA?”

“We're half an hour out. I thought I'd give you as much sleep as I could.” Her mother's voice turned warm and sympathetic. “We've already cleared it with Moonlight.”

Small wonder, the man didn't sleep. He also didn't answer the phone, but that wasn't how Moira Langenfeld would have contacted him. “Right. I'll meet you at the front gate. No point in making the kids curious to see a car drive up at godawful A.M.”

She had already gotten into the part of her closet that held something no one here at school had ever seen.

Her armor.

It looked medieval, and it was a combination of modern and ancient as only the Elven smiths of Fairegrove could create. Modern polymers and ancient hand-tooling, it was light as a coat and jeans, flexible as silk, bulletproof as well as resistant to fire, ice, acid, weapons and a host of inimical magics.

“Roger that.” There was a click as her mother disconnected the cell phone, even as VeeVee was peeling out of her pajamas and donning the armor, starting with the undertrews and shirt. She was lacing on the greaves when she suddenly remembered what day it was.

Saturday.

The day of the mall-trip. Of her date with Tomas.

Savagely she swore as she continued to lace on the bits of armor. She couldn't wake him up to tell him what was going on. She couldn't even leave a note. No one was supposed to know about these little absences, much less the reasons for them. It was the job of the Guardians to keep what they did secret...

So she was going to stand him up, and totally blamelessly, but he wasn't going to know that.

Dammit! It wasn't fair—

She could only hope that Mr. Moonlight or one of the other teachers would get to him and give him some sort of explanation before the bus left. Because right now, she had a ride of her own to catch.

As one of the Sidhe, Inigo Moonlight (oh, he had possessed another name, centuries ago, and many of those Underhill still knew it, but he had lived entirely in the World Above since England began her rise to power) did not sleep, nor did he occupy himself overmuch with the running of this school that he oversaw as a favor to Ria Llewellyn. It entertained him—and there were few things that did, at his age—and it was a great force for Good in the World Above (and it seemed that there were fewer of those with each swift turn of the seasons) but there were many calls upon his attentions.

Tonight, for example.

The Everforest Node would have to be moved soon. While this was obvious to most, it was not obvious to all, and placing it where it would seem to be under Ria Llewellyn's control was not a plan that met with universal consent. Many remembered her father, Prince Perenor, and that not kindly, for the Unseleighe Prince's plotting had nearly brought about the destruction of Elfhame Sun-Descending, and Elven memories were long.

To obtain agreement first, for the Node to be moved, and second, for the Node to be moved here required the thing that Inigo Moonlight detested most in both worlds: meetings.

One—and if fortune smiled, it would be the very last—was set for this very night, on the Underhill side of the Everforest Gate. He would be gone at most a day, perhaps two.

He walked down the steps of the Main Building. His Elvensteed was already waiting for him. His staff was used to his absences. There was no need to burden them with additional advice.

And then, perhaps, upon his return, he could devote himself entirely to his roses. They really were coming along well.

Saturday morning Tomas was up even before the alarm went off. He dressed quickly and with care—he'd dressed well for Underhill, but he'd saved his best clothes for today—a crisp white shirt and a new pair of jeans. He wore his good black boots, too, the ones he wore to the dances—there weren't going to be any long hikes through mud today. He was going to the city—or what passed for one around here, anyway.

The bus would be leaving early—it would stop for breakfast at one of the rest-stops on the Thruway, which was another perk of going—more junk food. He even had some spending money—not a lot, about thirty bucks, but Chris had slipped it to him a couple of days ago, saying it would be crazy and stupid for Tomas to be wandering around Poughkeepsie without even cab-fare or phone change in his pocket. “You can run a tab,” Chris told him. “In a year or so—maybe sooner—you can probably pick up some spare change working on the teachers' cars. Plus, once you've paid for your car and its parts, all the work you do down at the Garage comes to you as cash.”

“It does?” Tomas had asked, stunned.

“Sure,” Chris explained patiently. “What? You think when you leave they just turn you out with a hot car and the clothes on your back? You'll pay me back when you can. Don't make yourself crazy. I can wait.”

So Tomas didn't feel bad at all about taking the money, since it wasn't charity.

But when he got to the place where the bus would be leaving from, VeeVee wasn't there. Almost everyone else was there; there was already quite a crowd assembled on the steps of the Main Building, and Tomas recognized a lot of familiar faces.

Not everyone at St. Rhia's was going, of course—the trip was only for the older students, so that meant only about two-thirds of the student body was here—but even though that meant about thirty kids, VeeVee was easy to pick out of a crowd. And she should have been looking for him.

But she wasn't. Because she wasn't here.

Was she late? Maybe, if she'd been up studying late and overslept.

All around him everyone was laughing and talking, discussing their plans for the day. Everyone but Tomas had gone before and knew what to expect. The bus was going to take them to some place called The Galleria—some big-ass mall—and everybody was talking about movies they wanted to see, books and music and games and videos and clothes they wanted to buy (you couldn't order anything over the Internet here, even if you were one of the few students with a credit card; it was one of the school rules), or just seeing people who weren't them.

Where was VeeVee? Tomas looked around for someone who might know, and finally spotted a likely candidate. He ambled over.

“Hey, Des. You seen VeeVee this morning?” He did his best to sound casual. Like it was no big deal.

Destiny stopped and frowned, looking around. “Isn’t she already here? She wasn’t in her room when I got up this morning; I figured she might have gone over to the Library really early to get in a couple of hours before the trip.”

Or maybe she just decided that a day spent studying would be more fun for her than going at all, Tomas thought. Hadn’t she said she hadn’t been planning to go until Tomas asked her to go with him? *Well, maybe I won’t go either.*

Just then the bus came chugging slowly up the hill and everyone cheered. Five minutes ago Tomas would have joined them, but not now. The bus pulled to a stop and the doors hissed open; everybody began shuffling into an approximation of an orderly line to board.

Tomas began to walk away.

“Hey! Tomas! Where you going?” Lalage ran over to him and grabbed his arm.

“Nowhere, I guess.”

“But the bus is leaving! C’mon.” She looked at his face. “You’re waiting for VeeVee, aren’t you?”

Tomas didn’t answer.

“Well, she’s obviously not coming, but that’s no reason for your day to be ruined, too, is it?” Lalage said. “So you were going to go with her. So what? Come with me. It’s a beautiful day, we’re going to get to go off campus, come on. We can have some fun.”

She smiled at him, and Tomas hesitated. Lalage had been flirting with him practically from the day he’d gotten here. She’d never hidden the fact that she liked what she saw. And she was easy on the eyes herself—a gorgeous redhead with curves in all the right places. If not for VeeVee....

Well VeeVee wasn’t here. And from the look of things, she didn’t want to be here, either.

“Sure,” he said. “Let’s have some fun.”

They found seats next to each other near the back of the bus—fortunately they weren’t the last ones on board, and there were still some sets of seats together. A few minutes later, the doors closed and the bus pulled out. Tomas realized he’d been hoping—right up to the last moment—that VeeVee would show up. Maybe she was just late. Maybe she’d lost track of the time. But as the bus rolled down the drive and out the main gates of the school, he had to admit the truth.

She’d stood him up.

She hadn't even had the guts to say: *no, I don't want to go out on a date with you, barrio boy*. She'd said "yes" and then she'd blown him off. Left him to twist in the wind.

"So, I guess you guys had a pretty exciting time yesterday?" Lalage said. "Megan said she was going to tell me about it today, but hey. I'm sitting with you, right?"

Tomas turned to his seatmate and flashed her his most dazzling smile. "You have no idea," he said.

He told her about going to Underhill with Kenny and Megan and the others. Lalage said she'd been—a few months ago—but there hadn't been too much trouble when her group had gone. Their lunch had been stolen by pixies and Lauren had gone running off after a unicorn and gotten lost, but they'd actually reached Elfhome Misthold just the way they were supposed to.

"But I'm not sure what I would have done if what happened to you had happened to us," she said.

"Aw, c'mon," Tomas answered. He was pretty sure she couldn't be serious.

"No, really," Lalage protested. "I'm not, you know, trying to sweet-talk that you or anything. But you haven't been here at St. Rhia's that long, and haven't known about your powers, or, well, any of this stuff for very long, and besides, I was there when you took out that revenant a couple of weeks ago. You've got a cool head and you haven't freaked once. I think that's great, and, well, I just wish more people could see that about you, because it's got to suck to have people always looking at the outside, instead of seeing what's there on the inside."

"You sound like you know something about that, *chica*."

Lalage made a face. "More looking at the inside, but still not seeing what's there. The usual story. Pretty boring."

"Hey, I'm willing to listen. I mean, I guess you're not gonna say you got sent here for boosting cars."

"Nah. I got sent here because I sent my mom to prison."

Tomas stared at her, jaw dropping. Was she jerking his chain? Lalage smiled, a little bitterly. "Okay, it was six months in the Franklin County Jail back in Ohio. But we lost the farm and the shop—fines and legal fees—and Dad wasn't really thrilled about that, and—long story short—I ended up here."

Tomas studied her face for a moment, his own troubles forgotten. "There's gotta be more to it than that," he finally said.

"Well, okay. If you want to know. Most people don't. They figure someone who looks like me can't have any problems, and I guess—compared to a lot of people at St. Rhia's—I don't. I got my Gift early, and I always had a pretty good idea of what to do with it. Plants talked to me, I talked to plants—I could make them do a lot of things,

too—not as much as I can now, but every year I could to more. I learned really quickly to keep my mouth shut about it, too. Except to my parents.”

“They give you trouble?” Tomas asked.

“No!” Lalage laughed, a real laugh this time. “They were third-generation hippies, going back to the land within an easy commute of Columbus, Ohio. The problem I had with my folks wasn’t that they weren’t accepting, but that they were too accepting—Mom and Dad believed in everything—you name it, they believed in it, whether there was proof of it or not. It’s not exactly that they were gullible—I mean, you could never cheat Mom on a business deal, and Dad had a degree in Geology, but they had no reality-testing mechanisms at all. Everything in the world seemed just as reasonable to them as everything else: government conspiracies, the lost continent of Atlantis, fairies living at the bottom of the garden, magic. It didn’t help that Grandma Ruth had named Mom Titania, and Mom believed all her own publicity. Mom was sure she was a witch.”

Tomas raised his eyebrows. Lalage sighed.

“Not a—a real witch. The kind there are. And not a NeoPagan, either—those are people who call themselves witches, but usually they’re just being religious. No, Mom thought she had actual magic powers. And she didn’t.”

“Must have been tough for you, since you did,” Tomas said.

“Not at first. Not when I was little. She loved hearing everything I’d tell her about what the plants were thinking. She loved it when I’d make the flowers bloom, or change their colors, things like that. I don’t know whether she wasn’t as—as crazy then, or whether she convinced herself that she had something to do with it. And I was really a lot of help around the farm. She had an herb shop in town, and we grew most of the herbs she sold on the farm. Best in the state. It’s funny. She wanted magic powers, and all I ever wanted was a quiet normal life. I guess we all know none of us are going to have one now, don’t we, Tomas?”

It was something he was thinking about more and more these days, especially since his trip to Underhill. “I guess we aren’t,” he said quietly. “But you were getting along with your ‘rents. You knew enough to keep your mouth shut about what you could do, and... it’s not something dangerous. I mean—”

She nodded, agreeing with his unspoken thought. “No, you’re right, I could always control my powers. But when I got into High School, Mom stopped just selling herbs at the shop and started diagnosing people with crystals and prescribing herbal mixtures for them to cure their diseases. She was telling them that regular medicine couldn’t help them but her magical herbs could. I told her they couldn’t—she’d always believed me when I told her about herbs before—but now she wouldn’t listen to me. I told Dad, but he wouldn’t do anything to stop her—he thought she was a witch, too. By then my magic was strong enough that I could tell that the people she was “helping” were just getting sicker, and I knew if I didn’t do something—soon—somebody was going to die.” She was

silent for a long moment, staring out the window.

“It must have been tough on you,” Tomas said. “You were only a kid.”

“I told a friend of mine’s dad I didn’t know what else to do. He was the County Sheriff.”

“Ouch,” Tomas said, wincing.

“Yeah, it turned out that they aren’t too wild about you practicing medicine without a license in Franklin County, and that’s what she was doing, according to the law. I just thought he’d have a talk with her, maybe scare her a little. But she was arrested. She lost the shop, she went to jail, everything got really bad, and about the time I was seriously thinking about running away from home, this amazingly unlikely offer of a scholarship to a boarding school Back East turned up, and, well, Dad couldn’t get rid of me fast enough.” She sighed. “They moved in with Grandma Ruth out in California after Mom got out of jail. I hear from them sometimes.” that

Tomas winced. Mamacita loved him. He had no doubt about that, no matter how badly he’d shamed her. And he knew that parents abandoned their kids—hadn’t Papi run off and left all of them? But that wasn’t the same thing as dumping your kid in a pretty fancy boarding school and just bailing because you’d been stupid and your kid had done the right thing. That just sucked.

“But hey. Enough downer vibes. Let’s talk about something fun. What do you want to do in the big city?” Lalage asked.

“Um,” Tomas said. “I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“So, let’s think about it now. It’s going to be at least half an hour until we stop for breakfast.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Poughkeepsie wasn't a patch on New York, but after about two months stuck out back of beyond, it was pretty exciting to see stores and people and civilization again.

He and Lalage spent the whole day together. They window-shopped, checked out the book and music stores, had lunch, even went to a movie. It was all really nice.

It would have been even nicer, Tomas couldn't stop thinking, if he'd been doing it with VeeVee instead of Lalage.

What are you, vato, loco? You're here with un que linda hyna—someone who actually wants to be here with you—and you're thinking about somebody who doesn't? Your head is full of rocas, that's for sure!

He glanced over at Lalage, who was strolling along beside him. She smiled at him and reached out to take his hand. Feeling oddly guilty, Tomas closed his fingers around hers. *So what's wrong with being with somebody who actually wants to be with you for a change?*

Nothing. That's what. Nothing at all.

On Sunday the two of them sat next to each other at breakfast in the Dining Hall. Lalage chattered animatedly about the fun they'd had yesterday—and it had been fun; Tomas had to admit that—and about the picnic coming up this weekend.

"This is the last week of regular classes—um, I mean for the Advanced students," Lalage said.

"Not for me," Tomas answered with a grin. "Too much catching up to do." He was going to be spending the entire summer getting up to speed on English Comp and Reading—not to mention his psionic abilities—plus everything else he'd sluffed off back in El Paso. Two months ago that would have bothered him. Not now. "So what are you going to be doing until September?"

"Botany," Lalage said dreamily. "Botany, landscape design, and gardening. I know it's a real cliché, but I like plants, and if I'm a Green Witch, it makes sense to learn as much about them as I can."

"Okay," Tomas said. "But... landscape design?"

Lalage sighed and shrugged. "And I have to figure out what I want to do when I get out of here. It's okay for people like you, Tomas—you know exactly what you want from

your life. So does Chris. Kurt wants to go to nursing school. Jamilla wants to be a vet. VeeVee's already got college lined up. I've got no clue."

Tomas tried not to wince when VeeVee's name came up. She wasn't here for breakfast, and even though their usual table was crowded, it seemed empty.

"Yeah, well, speaking of my future, I haven't been down to the Garage in two days, you know? So I kinda think I'd better put in a couple of hours now."

Lalage tossed her head and flashed him a teasing grin. "Hey, boy, you think we're joined at the hip or something? Tell you what. You go play with your cars, and I'll come along in a few hours and bring you something nice to eat, okay?"

"Sure," Tomas said, grinning back. "You do that, *chica*."

It was nice—just for a change—to be with a girl who knew what the rules were. One who really wanted to be with him.

Sunday was a free day at St. Rhia's—since there were no classes, there were no Auto Shop classes either, but some of the students had permission from Señora Davies to come down to work on their own projects. Aaron and Destiny were already there—both of them had cars of their own that were much farther along in the restoration process than Tomas's; Aaron was restoring a classic 1958 Ford pickup truck that somebody had unfairly junked, while Destiny was working on the engine of a Pony Car that somebody had t-boned. The body was still in crap shape, and all the electronics made it an expensive restore, but it was going to be a fine ride when she was done. He could see Carlos and Alan at the back of the garage—they were still at the stage of taking their heaps apart and soaking the engine-pieces in gasoline to see what could be salvaged.

Tomas got out his tools and got to work.

About an hour later, Destiny came over to him. He was over at the Coke machine—it was exactly like one of the really old-time machines, the kind built like a big chest freezer, except you didn't need money—taking a break.

"So I talked to Ms. Clifford this morning before I came down here," she said, reaching in and pulling out a bottle of Orange Crush. She popped the top on the edge of the cooler, flicked the cap into the nearby bucket, and took a long swig of pop. "She told me VeeVee's going to be out of school for a few days. She said not to worry about it."

"Hey, *novia*, no skin off my *nariz* where she is, you know what I mean? She's probably off talking to some Elf somewhere," Tomas said quickly.

That was probably pretty close to the truth, actually, but by now Tomas didn't care. She could have left him a note. She could have phoned. Something.

“Sure,” Destiny said.

Tomas finished his soda quickly and went back to work.

“You know, I’ve heard about how nicely you got your room fixed up. You want to give me the tour?” Lalage asked.

It was Monday evening, just after dinner, and the two of them were walking back up to the front of the Dining Hall together, bringing their trays to the kitchen. Tonight’s offering hadn’t been too exotic—Philippine-style menudo—and there’d been chocolate cake for dessert.

Tomas smiled inside. He was pretty sure the gorgeous redhead who’d been throwing herself at him for the last two days wasn’t really interested in his furniture or the color he’d painted his walls. But you had a certain amount of privacy in the dorm rooms. A lot of privacy, actually, if you didn’t abuse it.

“Sure,” he said. “Come on.”

VeeVee had never been so happy to get back to St. Rhia’s in her life. It hadn’t turned out to be a long hunting-trip—not in comparison to some; it was only Monday night and she was already back—but it had been rough. Nightflyers always were. At least the three of them had managed to take them out before they’d spread too far—or killed too many people—or did whatever-the-hell-else it was that Nightflyers always tried to do whenever some idiot built them a bridge from their dimension into this one, because despite the fact that Guardians and Mages had been fighting Nightflyers for just about as long as the records went back, nobody was really sure. They ate people and reproduced, but probably there had to be more to it than that. She’d settle for ignorance if it meant she never had to see another one for as long as she lived.

But—home again, because St. Rhia’s was as much home to her as her parents’ house, really. And now she could find Tomas and explain to him just why she’d had to bail out on him Saturday morning, hopefully without having to say “I can’t tell you” too many times, because the work she did for the Guardians was a secret. She just hoped he trusted her enough to buy the “family emergency” story, because it had been a family emergency. Her family just wasn’t exactly like other families.

Her folks had dropped her in front of the Main Building and driven off immediately; they’d all said their goodbyes at the bottom of the drive. VeeVee took a moment to conjure up a quick “you don’t see me” glamour around herself—not quite invisibility, but it would keep anyone from actually noticing her. Much better that way, at least until she got back to her room and got her things put away. The sword and the armor would be a little hard to explain.

Once she'd gotten them tucked back behind the false back of her closet, though, she went looking for Tomas. Even though she suspected that at this time of day—just after dinner—he'd have gone back down to the Garage to put in a few more hours of work on his junker, she might as well try his room first.

To her surprise, he was there.

And he wasn't alone.

Tomas had spent the last three days flirting hot and heavy with Lalage, hoping that would take his mind off VeeVee. He was pretty sure by now that she wasn't coming back, and he hated the fact that he couldn't stop thinking about her. He was pretty sure Lalage knew he'd been attracted to VeeVee from the beginning and was still thinking about her, because she'd certainly been doing her best to make him forget about her—if using magic weren't strictly against the rules here at St. Rhia's, he'd even suspect her of casting a spell on him.

Not that she really needed one right now, because he'd been right about how much interest she had in seeing his room. About two minutes after they got there she turned around and just about threw herself into his arms. And what else could he do but what it was so obvious she wanted him to do?

But just about the time Tomas was really starting to get into the idea of kissing Lalage, he heard a choking sound from the doorway. He pulled away and looked up—just in time to see VeeVee running off.

Tomas didn't stop to think. He pushed Lalage away and ran after her.

He saw one of the outer doors swinging shut as he skidded out into the hall—the one closest to his room—and charged toward it. By the time he got outside, though, VeeVee was nowhere to be seen.

He looked for her for hours without finding her.

The “you don't see me” glamour was one of the first spells VeeVee's teachers had taught her—years ago—drilling her in it until she could cast it with barely a moment's thought. She whipped it around herself before she was out of the dorm. She didn't want anyone to see her now.

Tears trickled down her cheeks—shame, fury, grief. She hadn't even been gone three days. And this was what happened? She came back to find Tomas all snuggled up to Lalage? Kissing her? She'd thought he loved her. And she-

VeeVee knew exactly whose fault this was. Lalage had had her eye on Tomas from the moment he'd set foot on campus. And she hadn't wasted any time, either. Damn her! And VeeVee couldn't even think about how satisfying it would be to take revenge on Lalage—and on Tomas—for doing this to her, because for a Mage, thoughts and words were the same as the deeds themselves, and the Threefold Law that governed the actions of all Witches would come back to bite her on the ass for anything she did, hitting her in triplicate with any petty revenge she took.

There was nothing she could do.

Except one thing.

Ms. Clifford spent a lot of time in her office outside of class hours. If kids were going to come to her with problems of their own that needed solving, they were more likely to do it on their own time—which meant during lunch or after class was over for the day. VeeVee wasn't surprised to find her still here now, even though she'd spent about an hour just walking around the campus—unnoticeable—calming herself down before coming here.

"VeeVee. What can I do for you this evening?" Ms. Clifford asked when she walked in. "Everything all right at home? I know you just got back from visiting your parents."

Soothing Celtic music was playing on the sound system; Ms. Clifford turned the volume down when VeeVee walked in. She sat down in the chair across from Ms. Clifford's desk. The last time she'd sat in this chair, Ms. Clifford had asked her if she wanted to mentor a boy named Tomas Torres.

"As right as it ever gets," VeeVee answered. "Everything's fine there." Aside from the fact that someday Mom's going to call, or Dad—or maybe one of their friends—and tell me somebody's dead. But I've always known that. "Actually, I need to ask you to assign Lalage Chisolm as Tomas Torres' Student Mentor. He's made a great adjustment—as you know—and I don't think we have anything to worry about. And I can't work with him anymore. So if you'd make the change, that'd be great."

There was a long moment of silence.

"Is this about you, or about him?" Ms. Clifford finally asked.

VeeVee knew she was only doing her job, but it was still a hard question to answer. "It's me, Ms. Clifford," she said. "I'm the one who can't deal. I think Lalage will make a great Student Mentor for him."

Ms. Clifford nodded, accepting VeeVee's words at face value. "I'll talk to both of them about it in the morning, then. VeeVee... I know you're very strong—probably the strongest person I know—but nobody has to handle everything in their life alone, you know?"

“I know, Ms. Clifford,” VeeVee said quietly. She was already getting to her feet. “This isn’t something anybody can help me with, though.”

A few hours later she went back to her room. On the drive up here she’d been so happy, thinking that soon she’d be back at St. Rhia’s with the people who understood her (some of them) and who loved her (some of them, in different ways.) But she knew—because Mages had to be honest with themselves, first and foremost—that the person she’d most been looking forward to getting back to was Tomas. Who didn’t give a damn what she could do magically. Who didn’t even really believe in magic, despite what he’d seen in the last few weeks.

As she walked down the hall to her room, she saw that Lalage’s door was open. It didn’t matter how bruised VeeVee’s heart was right now. It didn’t matter that she’d just resigned as Tomas’s Student Mentor. She still owed him all her care, even if her heart was breaking right now. She stopped and pushed the door open.

Lalage was sitting on her bed, paging through a fashion magazine. *Just as if she doesn’t care what happened tonight*, VeeVee thought spitefully, and locked the thought down. Hard.

Lalage looked up when she saw the door open. She looked alarmed when she saw VeeVee, then wary. “What do you want?” she asked. “Come to ask for him back? He doesn’t want you.”

And I wonder whose idea that was, in just three days? Another thought she didn’t dare think. “No,” VeeVee said levelly. “I’ve just come to tell you something. If you break his heart, the first time you know I’ve found out about it will be when the fire alarm goes off in your room.”

Her oaths be damned.

Lalage’s jaw dropped in shock. She was still staring when VeeVee closed the door again and walked on to her room.

On Tuesday morning, Chris grabbed Tomas on his way out of the dorm to tell him that Ms. Clifford wanted to see him some time that day.

“No hurry. Anywhere between your classes is fine.”

“Um...?” Tomas said.

Chris shrugged. “I’m only the messenger.”

As one of the Dorm Proctors—and a known night-owl besides—Chris got copied on all the e-mails to the students living in the dorm. Nothing confidential, of course, but a lot of

the students didn't check their e-mail before breakfast, and it was part of Chris's job to check his. If your class schedule had been changed unexpectedly, or you had to see any of the school staff for any reason, Chris would catch you in the morning to tell you about it.

Tomas didn't see any reason to wait around, so he went over to the Main Building immediately to see if Ms. Clifford might already be there. But even though he could hear music coming from behind the door of her office, the door itself was firmly shut, meaning there was somebody already in there, and Tomas knew better than to interrupt.

He went on to the Dining Hall, hoping that VeeVee would be at their usual table, but this morning not even Lalage was there. He guessed he needed to apologize to Lalage as well; by the time he'd stopped running around the campus checking every place VeeVee could have been last night—nobody'd even known she was back—Lalage had left his room. He'd really blown things bigtime—dropping one girl to go chasing off after another.

Even if he didn't want the girl he'd dropped and did want the girl he'd chased. Oh yeah. One *poco se beso* had been enough to tell him that. The moment he'd kissed Lalage he'd known it was a mistake. And it was too late then. Lalage was *bastante*, and nice, and *muy caliente*, but she wasn't the girl for him.

His attention wandered all through his morning classes—Mr. Balinsky kept calling on him, but Tomas simply wasn't following the discussion; and in Algebra, a class he normally aced, he flubbed every question Ms. Mallozzi tossed at him. Fortunately, after the first few, she decided to ignore him completely for the rest of the hour. The only thing he had to be grateful for that morning was that third period this week was History instead of Chemistry—he'd probably have blown up the whole school. When it was over—last class before lunch—he went off to Ms. Clifford's office again, and this time she was free.

"Have a seat, Tomas. I've got some great news, and some news that could go either way. I'd like to know how you feel about it."

Tomas knew he looked suspicious, but people wanting to know how he felt about things had never been a good sign. "Could we start with the good news?" he asked.

Ms. Clifford smiled. "Okay. This weekend your mother and your sister will be coming up to visit during the picnic. Since you've been here for two months, and you've been doing such a good job of settling in with us, we thought it would be a nice idea if they could come up to see how you were doing."

"Without asking me?" Tomas demanded.

"This is one of the few times of the year St. Rhia's is open to visitors," Ms. Clifford said gently. "And your mother has been asking when she can see you. After she visits, you'll be allowed to write to her whenever you like. You do need to make a decision though. Before you see them, really."

“What?” Tomas demanded. He knew he sounded sulky and hostile, but he was still reeling with the shock of the thought of seeing Mamacita and his little Rosalita again. One of the school rules had been that he wasn’t even allowed to write home, and it hadn’t even occurred to him until now that someone might be writing home about him, telling Mamacita how he was and how he was doing.

“You need to decide just what you’re going to tell her about... who you are, and what you’re becoming. It’s not a decision we make for our students,” Ms. Clifford said. “All we’ve said in our weekly letters to her is that you were settling in well and doing well in your classes. And all of that’s true. But it’s not the whole truth. You need to decide just how much of that she can stand.”

“None of it,” Tomas said instantly. Mamacita didn’t even like Rosalita’s invisible friends, and they weren’t real. How much worse would it be for her to find out that some people’s invisible friends were? “She won’t—when she’s here—”

“No.” Ms. Clifford shook her head. “Any unusual aspects of our festivities won’t start until well after dark, and any visiting parents will be off the campus by then. A number of our students who are in contact with their families prefer not to involve them in this part of their lives just yet.”

Not ever, Tomas thought fervently.

“All right. That’s settled then. She should be arriving around eleven on Saturday, she’ll get the tour of the school, she and Rosalita can stay for lunch, and then someone from the staff will drive her back into Tammerlane to catch the bus back into the City.”

Tomas nodded. As he knew by now, Tammerlane was the nearest town to St. Rhia’s, a wide spot in the road about ten miles away. It had a Post Office and a bus station, but that was pretty much it. “Okay,” he said. “So... there were two things?”

Ms. Carmichael actually seemed to hesitate for a moment before she spoke. “VeeVee has decided that Lalage would do a better job as your Student Mentor. I asked Lalage this morning if she thought she was capable of doing the job, and she said yes. So from now on, if you need anything—”

“But I don’t want to change!”

“I’m sorry, Tomas. It isn’t up to you. Unless you don’t think you can work with Lalage.”

Tomas shook his head slowly. He didn’t want to tell Ms. Clifford that he couldn’t work with Lalage, because he didn’t want to tell Ms. Clifford why VeeVee had asked for the change. *But how do I get VeeVee back?* Oh, yeah, that was the real question. And he didn’t think Ms. Clifford could answer it.

“I don’t want to pry, Tomas, but is there anything about this you’d like to talk about?”

“No,” Tomas said, swallowing hard. “Nothing.”

That was Tuesday.

By Saturday morning Tomas was just about crazy. Oh, sure, VeeVee was here. Sometimes he even saw her at a distance—across the Dining Hall, on the other side of the campus, walking into the Girl's Dorm, or into the Library. But after the first time he'd gone running after her and she'd just disappeared before he got anywhere near her, he had too much pride to try that again. He couldn't get anywhere near her.

He couldn't make himself be happy with Lalage, either, even though once she would have been just what he wanted. It didn't help either that all-of-a-sudden that Kurt Richards was glaring at him every time he turned around, and while he and Kurt had never exactly been *buenos amigos*, they'd gotten along okay until now. The last thing he needed was to start getting into fights. He tried to look forward to the good things: seeing his mother and sister again, telling them that he would never steal, never cheat, never hurt anyone again.

Except he was going to be lying to both of them the whole time. Because Mamacita was going to ask him to swear not to tell lies—and he would—and ask him never to start another fire—and he'd promise her that, too. And the whole thing about not hurting people, well... were monsters people? What about Elves? What about all the things that lived in Underhill and might come out? Kurt and Sarita Healed people and Gordy could just hear what they were thinking and Chris could see the future (sort of) and Destiny built things, but when you came right down to it, when Tomas started tossing fireballs around, somebody was going to get hurt. And Mr. Bishop had said that there were all kinds of good and necessary ways to use his power, and Tomas was starting to believe that—especially after going to Underhill—but the fact remained that he was still going to be lying.

He hated that, but there didn't really seem to be any way around it. There was only one thing Mamacita would think if he told her the truth: that he was *una bruja*—a witch. And not the kind they had here, or even the kind on television, but the kind that dragged souls down to Hell.

There wasn't a dance this Friday because of the preparations for the picnic. It was just as well, because Tomas didn't think he could have stood it. Lalage was already giving him some pretty odd looks, and as for refusing to dance with her—he'd danced with her every Friday for the past two months. It would look a little odd if he stopped now. But he felt so guilty....

On Saturday the weather was bright and clear. Of course it was. The whole school was full of magicians, wasn't it? Even though it was Saturday, most of the kids were up at their usual weekday time, too—the tables had to be moved out of the Dining Hall onto the lawn, and that was being done right after breakfast. If you didn't want to eat breakfast

standing, you had to hurry.

When he headed past Chris's door, he saw that it was not only closed, but there was a black curtain down over the window. He remembered he hadn't seen Chris last night. Cautiously, he opened the door.

The whole room was shrouded in black—well that was normal; Chris was a Goth—and Chris was lying on his bed, an arm thrown over his eyes.

"Don't turn on the light," he said hoarsely.

Tomas stepped inside and closed the door. "Hey, *hombre*, you all right?" It occurred to him that Chris was the one who called the School Nurse when someone was sick, but who called Nurse Irene if Chris was sick?

"Fine," Chris gasped. "I'm having a vision. Or, I'm going to. This is just the lead-in. Probably later today."

"Is there—?" Tomas asked uncertainly.

Chris laughed shakily. "No. Nothing anybody can do. I used to pass out. Now I just wish I would. I'll be okay in a few hours. I just need to lie around for a while. But... thanks for checking."

"See you later, then," Tomas said.

As he closed the door behind him, it occurred to him that there were lots worse things to be than a guy who could start fires by thinking about it.

At about eleven o'clock, the maroon school van came slowly up the drive. Tomas was waiting anxiously out in front, flanked by Ms. Clifford and Mr. Bishop, and—to his secret horror, even Mr. Moonlight was there. Señora Davies was driving the van, and Tomas wondered nervously what she'd said to his mother.

The van pulled up, and Consuelo Torres stepped out, followed by Rosalita. Even though it had only been two months, Tomas was sure that Rosalita was much taller than she'd been the last time he'd seen her—and he was sure she was wearing a new dress. She looked around for only a moment before she rushed past her mother and flung herself into his arms, chattering excitedly: she'd missed him—was he coming home—they'd had frozen carrots for dinner three times last week—she stayed with the neighbor down the hall after school now and she was okay, and she had three dogs, but when was he coming home?

"Ah, not for a while yet, 'Lita," that Tomas said, hugging her tightly. "I've got lots to learn here. And when I do come home, I make a home for you and Mama, *ay*?"

"I am most pleased to make your acquaintance, Señora Torres," Mr. Moonlight said, stepping forward and extending his hand to Tomas's mother. "And to congratulate you

upon being the mother of a fine son. He is a great asset to St. Rhiannon's, and we are fortunate to have him enrolled here."

Mrs. Torres took the proffered hand, and shook it, but Tomas could tell she really wasn't buying it.

"Èl es un gamberro," she said softly, shaking her head.

Tomas winced. To hear Mamacita call him a criminal hurt.

Mr. Moonlight smiled. "While it is true that young Tomas did indeed have an unfortunate run-in with the law, may we not agree to look upon it as fortunate instead? For I am persuaded, even upon my short acquaintance with him, that such an adventure will never be repeated, and it has brought him here to us. May I present to you Ms. Clifford, our school counselor, and Mr. Bishop, one of Tomas's teachers? Both agree that he shows great promise."

Suddenly Tomas realized that both of them were staring at Rosalita—and had been for the last several seconds. Mr. Bishop had been standing right next to Tomas when the van pulled up, but he'd actually moved away, going over to stand next to Señora Clifford.

Both of them shook hands with Mrs. Torres, assuring her that yes, Tomas was a promising student and an asset to the school, and to Tomas's embarrassment, she began to cry.

"I'd wanted—I'd hoped—" she said.

"Mama?" Rosalita said, sounding worried.

"Why don't we go into my office for just a few minutes?" Señora Clifford said, taking her arm and walking her up the steps of the Main Building. "It must have been a very long bus ride from the city, and I'm sure you'd like a moment to rest."

Señora Clifford and Mrs. Torres walked into the building, and Mr. Moonlight followed them, seeming to feel that his work here was done, though Tomas doubted very much that he intended to actually join them.

"She's all right, isn't she?" Rosalita asked anxiously. "Mamacita never cries. At least not where anyone can see her."

"She's just been very worried about your brother for a very long time," Mr. Bishop said encouragingly. "Hello. My name's Daniel. I'd like to be your friend." He held out his hand.

"I have a lot of friends," Rosalita said. She took his hand.

Tomas was watching for it carefully, and so he saw the blank look of shock cross Daniel Bishop's face, as if the man had grasped a live wire rather than a ten-year-old girl's hand. But Rosalita didn't seem to notice anything.

Tomas glared at Mr. Bishop anyway. Mr. Bishop shook his head slightly, meeting

Tomas's gaze, his lips forming soundless words. *Not now.*

Okay, Tomas could wait. For a while.

"Come on," Mr. Bishop said. "Let's take a look around. Ms. Clifford and your mom will catch up."

The quadrangle had been decorated for the picnic. The buildings might be shabby and the sidewalks cracked—as fit in with the school's "cover story" of being a down-at-heels dumping ground for kids nobody wanted—but today the buildings were hung with bunting and garlanded with balloons.

The tables were all set up in the central area, and behind them were more tables near the barbeque grills. Tomas's class had actually made the grills down at the Garage, since they were a couple of old fifty-gallon oil drums cut in half, with legs welded on. When you were cooking for fifty, you wanted to be able to cook a lot at a time. Tubs full of ice and drinks were already set out, and when he saw that, Tomas suggested that Rosalita go and help herself.

"Can I really?"

"You're coming to the picnic, right? Go ahead."

Rosalita giggled with delight and ran off in the direction of the tubs of ice.

"Now what the hell was that all about?" Tomas demanded, as soon as Rosalita was safely out of earshot. When he turned around, he saw Ms. Smith heading toward them from the Main Building at a dead run.

"Tomas—" Mr. Bishop began.

"Hi, guys, did I miss anything?" Ms. Smith said. The sunlight sparkled blindingly off her red-white-and-blue sequined t-shirt. She glanced in the direction of Rosa. "Whoa," she said.

"Exactly," Mr. Bishop said. He turned to Tomas. "Tomas, it seems that you aren't the only Talent in your family."

Tomas glanced back at Rosa. She was standing by the ice-tub, a can of Coke in her hand, talking to a couple of the other students, a boy and a girl close to her own age.

Not the only Talent?

"What?"

"Tomas, when Rosalita stepped out of the van, both Ms. Clifford and I could Read her. And Kayla can too, from all the way over here. Her Talent is very strong. So is mine—psychometry—and I touched her to find out more about hers. I'm fairly sure that Rosalita is a Medium."

“What? You mean she talks to dead people?” Tomas thought about all of Rosa’s invisible friends, but Mr. Bishop was already shaking his head.

“Not necessarily. Or... not exactly. A Medium is a Sensitive with the specific power to communicate with discarnate intelligences—living things that might not have bodies. They could be spirits of the dead, yes, or that might simply be their normal form. If she’s powerful enough—and I think she is—she also has the power to wake those that are sleeping. And if she’s really powerful, she can Call those beings to her across the Planes, becoming a tool for their manifestation—their arrival—here.”

Tomas stared at Mr. Bishop in sick horror, unable to believe what he was hearing. He shook his head slowly. No. Not his perfect little sister. He might have to lead a life like this, learning to fight and to hide. Not her.

“Tomas, we gotta get her into the school,” Ms. Smith said. “Now. I bet she’s already hearing voices, right? Has been for a while? That’s got to stop. It’s got to be stopped. She may not be hearing a lot of them yet, but there’s gonna be more all the time, and I’m telling you, if you think there are things out there that want to eat you, well, for a Medium it’s a million times worse. A lot of those things without bodies are gonna want hers.”

“I don’t believe you!” Tomas said desperately. “I won’t! Rosalita isn’t a freak!”

“Tomas—” Ms. Smith said.

“No!”

He ran over to where Rosalita was talking to Nina and Vanh. He forced himself to take a deep breath and smile. He wasn’t going to frighten her again, not the way he had the day he’d first discovered his fire. She was just starting to trust him, to believe in him, again, and he wouldn’t do anything to destroy that.

“Come on, Rosa. Let’s go find Mama.”

Mrs. Torres was just walking across the lawn with Señora Clifford when Tomas headed back in the other direction with Rosalita in tow. The two women were talking animatedly, and Mrs. Torres was smiling hopefully.

Tomas was trying to figure out how to explain to his mother—well, he wasn’t quite sure what—when Consuelo Torres enveloped him in a sudden fierce hug.

“You must be good, now, Tomas!” she said. “You’ve been given a second chance!”

“I will, Mamacita. I promise,” Tomas said.

“Well,” Ms. Smith said brightly, coming up to them. “Shall we take the tour?”

For the next forty minutes the six of them walked through the small campus, and Tomas couldn't find any way to get Mamacita alone and tell her that she had to take Rosalita away from here now. Señora Clifford talked about the many advantages of attending St. Rhia's—the small classes, the individual attention, the college and vocational courses. Mrs. Torres was very impressed with the library, as well as with the fact that each of the students was issued a computer for their personal use.

“We find that it's helpful in encouraging study skills,” Mr. Bishop said cheerfully.

“We hope that you'll consider letting your daughter come here as well,” Señora Clifford said. She darted an apologetic glance at Tomas. “You see, St. Rhia's is a very special school. It's for children who are gifted in the way that we understand your daughter is gifted. You see, your daughter has a very strong psychic gift—you'd probably know it as Mediumship. It's rare, but it's not completely uncommon, and I'm sure you've already seen some evidence of it. It's nothing at all to worry about. With the special training and help that she can receive here at St. Rhia's, Rosalita can go on to live a perfectly normal life—even use her ability if she wishes to. Of course—”

“No!” Mrs. Torres stared at Señora Clifford as if she'd suddenly grown horns. “What are you saying to me? Are you all *insano*? My daughter isn't *una bruja*! She's a good Catholic!”

“Mrs. Torres, this isn't witchcraft,” Señora Clifford said carefully. “Your daughter's Talent has nothing to do with magic. It's very real. And if she doesn't receive special training, things could become very difficult for her very quickly.”

“Yeah,” Tomas heard Ms. Smith mutter, “like when she starts to hear voices that nobody else does.”

“They will not! I will take care of *mi propia carne y sangre*! The moment I get home I will place her in a convent, and the Holy Sisters will pray all the darkness out of her—as they could not with her father!”

Oh, no. Suddenly, just as Tomas had realized there were much worse things than being a pyrokinetic, he realized that there were much worse things for Rosalita than coming to St. Rhia's. He still didn't want to believe she had a Talent, but... what if she did? He thought about Chris, who's parents had put him in a mental hospital, and other kids here, whose parents had tried to “retrain” them to be “normal” in other ways.

“Mama, there's nothing wrong with Rosa! She doesn't need anything prayed out of her. If you—If you let her come her—for maybe just a few months, you could see—”

“No! Rosalita, come here at once!” Rosalita started toward her mother, but before she could take more than a step or two, Mrs. Torres darted forward and grabbed her, clutching her to herself so hard that the ten-year-old squeaked in surprise. “We are leaving immediately! Tomas! I want you to come with us!”

Tomas shook his head slowly. “I can't do that, Mama. Please, you have to let Rosalita stay.”

“Mama, we’re not leaving? But—”

“Quiet! And you, Tomas, do they say you are a witch, too? Do they say that my only son has the Devil in him?”

“Mama, it’s not *El Diablo*, it’s not magic, it’s science—Rosalita has to stay here, to learn—”

“Oh, Mama, I want to stay here—everyone’s so nice, and they know about people like me—”

“Be quiet! From now on, you are not my son, and I will pray to the Blessed Virgin on my knees that it is not too late to save my daughter!” Mrs. Torres turned away and began dragging Rosalita with her. It took a moment for Rosalita to really realize what was happening, but once she did she began to cry, pleading with her mother to go back, to let her stay-

“I’m going after them,” Tomas said.

“No.”

Inigo Moonlight had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. He put a hand on Tomas’s shoulder and frowned warningly at Ms. Smith—from the look on her face, she felt about the way Tomas did.

“But—” Tomas protested.

“She is far too upset to listen to anyone right now. Give her half an hour to collect her thoughts. Tammerlane is ten miles from here. She cannot possibly reach it in that time. We will send Ms. Clifford after her in one of the automobiles, and perhaps, by then, she will be willing to listen to words of reason and counsel. If not, we must find another way to help your sister,” Mr. Moonlight said.

“If we can’t, we’ll be seeing her here in a few years anyway,” Mr. Bishop said sadly. “One way or another.”

Consuelo Torres was walking down the long hill that led to the main road. Her feet hurt, and her good shoes would be ruined by the time they reached the bus terminal, but she was too angry and frightened to care. These people—these people who had her Tomas—said her daughter was a witch, and in her heart Consuelo knew it was true, for hadn’t her little Rosa, the rose of her heart, been speaking to the spirits of the air for years? When she was only a baby, she’d said her dolls spoke to her, and at first Consuelo had dismissed it as the games all children played, especially lonely children, for Rosalita had never been one to make friends, but when Rosalita had begun to tell her some of the things her dolls said...

Consuelo had burned them all, every one, and prayed that the evil was gone from her

house.

But it wasn't. It was in Rosa, and she would do anything she had to do to root it out. And she would go home, go to the people at the *estación de la television*, and tell them all just what sort of school this was. They would help her.

She tightened her grip on Rosa's arm. Rosalita was usually so good, so quiet. And now she was screaming, crying, acting like a wild thing. More proof that the school was a bad place.

"Mama! You have to listen! I want to go to St. Rhia's! I want to stay here! Everything they said about me is true! I do hear voices! Mama, sometimes they frighten me! Mama, I am like the other children there—if they know about things like what I can do, maybe they can tell me about it—Mama, maybe they can make the bad voices stop—"

"No! You aren't a witch, you aren't cursed in the blood—you have the Devil in you! I tried to pray him out of you, but I wasn't strong enough! You'll go to the convent, and you'll say prayers all day long under the eye of the Virgin Herself, and if you have to pray until you're old and grey—" Both of them were shouting so loudly that they didn't hear it at first. Suddenly Consuelo did—a loud crashing in the woods. She put both hands on Rosalita and shook her violently enough to make her fall silent.

"We must run, *hija*." Her only thought was that those *gente traviesa* from that horrible school had sent people after her to kidnap her precious Rosalita and kill her to keep her from telling everyone what they were. But the sounds were much too loud.

She barely managed a few steps when something struck her, knocking her to the narrow road. She rolled onto her back in time to see a dark blurred shape—clutching Rosalita—vanish into the woods.

She screamed.

CHAPTER NINE

Tomas was still standing in the middle of the quadrangle, wondering how the day could have gone from “okay” to “complete disaster” in the space of a heartbeat, when he heard a crash. Kurt had collapsed, knocking over one of the tubs of drinks. A couple of the other kids were on their knees, too.

And Ms. Smith had gone white with pain. She pointed. In the direction Mamacita and Rosalita had gone. Tomas didn’t need any more information. He took off running.

He’d always been a fast runner—it was a survival skill in the barrio—and his time at St. Rhia’s—good food and plenty of exercise—had only made him faster. It took him less than five minutes to reach the place—only a few hundred yards down the drive—where his mother had stopped. Rosalita wasn’t there.

Consuelo Torres was sobbing hysterically—incapable of talking—but not so out of control that she couldn’t direct help toward her daughter. She pointed off into the woods, and Tomas ran in that direction without a single thought as to what he might be chasing.

The trail was easy to follow. This wasn’t an Elven Wildwood or a State Park; the underbrush was messy and tangled, and something—something big—had smashed and trampled it.

And suddenly—up ahead—he could see a flash of pink.

Rosa’s dress.

He’d slowed down a little when he got into the trees. Now he speeded up, running all-out again, because he could hear her crying, no, screaming, and she was his Rosalita, his *hermana*, and she should never make sounds like that, never.

He was close enough to see what had taken Rosalita now, and if he hadn’t been at St. Rhia’s for almost three months, if he hadn’t been on the school’s little “field trips”, he would have stopped dead and panicked. Lost his temper, lost his head, done something dangerous and stupid.

But he didn’t.

A thing was holding Rosa. It was big—she looked like a doll in its hands. It was dark in here under the trees, but the thing was even darker, hard to see, the way something you tried to look at outside in the middle of the night would be. It made his eyes hurt to look at it. Big, and hairy—or blurry, he wasn’t sure—and shaped like a comic book monster: tiny short legs and long arms that nearly brushed the ground. Colored lights swirled around its head. As they touched it, they vanished, and it cackled with glee, a deep grating sound that actually made Tomas sick to hear.

And it got bigger.

He wasn't imagining it. It sucked in the lights, and it grew.

It hadn't seen him yet. When it did, it might run, or it might attack. He had a split-second to decide what to do. He could use his fire against it. But it was holding Rosalita, flung half over one shoulder. Tomas had to decide—right now—did he have enough control over his fire to hit the monster and not hurt his sister? If he was wrong, he could kill her.

'You have to decide now, Tomas. Either you control your fire, or your fire controls you. There's no third choice.' Mr. Bishop had said that to him.

I control my fire.

He raised his hands and extended them, feeling the power wake up from wherever it slept when he wasn't using it. Heat swept through his veins, and tiny white-hot pellets of pure Fire shot from his fingertips: the pure essence of Fire, hotter and more intense than anything he had ever Called before in his life. They sprayed out over the monster, striking its legs, its torso, the arm that wasn't holding his sister-

They had no effect.

Except for one. The monster saw him. And for a moment Tomas thought—hoped—it would attack him, because then he could run, run back to the road, toward help, leading it after him.

But it didn't. It merely laughed louder, that grating nerve-rending cackling...

And vanished.

One moment it was there, in the clearing, surrounded by a web of dancing lights, sucking them in, growing.

The next it was gone.

Tomas ran forward, unable to believe it.

"Rosa!" he shouted. "Rosa!"

There was no answer. No sign of her. Only the trampled grass and broken bushes—the only indication at all that something had been here—and a few charred places where sparks from his fire-pellets had drifted to earth. He ground them out, barely conscious of what he was doing.

"Tomas?"

He swung around, hands up to defend himself.

It was VeeVee.

Panting, disheveled, she looked as if she'd been running farther and longer than he had.

He didn't care. He didn't care about the bad blood between them, or the past week, or anything. What he cared about now was that of all the people in the whole school, he was the one he trusted most to help, the one he knew could help. She had cut down one monster. She could find this one, and when she did—

"Something took my sister, VeeVee," he said brokenly.

"Yes," she said, struggling to catch her breath. "Let me work."

She dropped to one knee and pulled a knife out of her waistband. He wasn't surprised. VeeVee carried that knife with her everywhere. She closed her eyes, raising the blade above her head, and then holding it out over the ground. He could see her lips moving.

"Trollking," she said, getting to her feet and sheathing her athame again. "Did you see it?"

"I—yes."

"Did you see any colored lights? Any lights at all?"

"What does—VeeVee, we've got to go after it!"

"Yes. But it's not going to hurt her, Tomas. It needs her. The lights. Did you see any?"

Frightened as he was for Rosalita, Tomas had to believe that VeeVee knew what she was talking about. And that she wouldn't ask if it weren't important. "Yeah. A bunch. Around its head. They kept disappearing. And it... it seemed like it was getting bigger."

VeeVee smiled sourly. "It was. Those lights? Your sister was calling for help. They were spirits. Trollkings feed on spirit-energy. I don't know how it got here, but it's tricking Rosalita into feeding it, and the longer she does, the more powerful it's going to get. Come on." She turned, heading back toward the road.

"Why—wh-where are we going?"

"Back to the school. If we're going to hunt it down and get Rosalita back, we need to organize a proper hunting party."

By the time the two of them reached the road again, one of the school cars was there, and Señora Clifford and Ms. Smith were helping Mrs. Torres into the back.

"Tomas?" she gasped, when she saw him.

"Don't worry, Mamacita," he said. "Rosa's going to be all right."

The Trollking had come at the worst possible time—if any time could be said to be a good one. This was the day of the picnic, and some of St. Rhia's students actually had parents

who visited. By the time the school car passed through the gates again, the space in front of the Main Building had already collected a few visitors' cars. As soon as Ms. Clifford led Mrs. Torres inside, telling her firmly that Rosalita was all right and would be back soon, VeeVee told Ms. Smith everything she knew about what they were facing.

Ms. Smith groaned. "That's gotta be what Chris was having his vision about. I wish to hell precogs had more control. And I really wish we could drop everything and circle the wagons, but we can't."

Tomas looked panicked. "But it's got Rosa! *Mi hermana*—it's dangerous, and—"

"Yeah, kid, it is," Ms. Smith said with a sigh. "But so is letting everybody know what's going on here at St. Rhia's. So we need to keep the really big guns here, to make sure nobody sees anything they shouldn't, and to make sure it doesn't get onto the actual campus. Think you guys can handle it?"

VeeVee nodded. "Won't be tougher than what I've tackled before. I'll need some backup, though, you don't go after one of these things alone. I can't track it easily. A Healer. Lalage—she's the best balance for my Fire Magic. Mr. Bishop."

"Right. Let's go round up a posse," Ms. Smith said.

"Why Mr. Bishop?" Tomas asked in a low voice. He'd said his Talent was psychometry. That didn't seem as if it would be particularly useful today.

"Some people have two Talents. It's not common, but it happens," VeeVee said. "Mr. Bishop senses Talent. He can also turn them off—that's why he trains new Talents. When we find Rosa, we'll want him to dampen her power temporarily and sever the link between her and the Trollking."

Tomas thought about that for a moment. "He can turn off Talents? Can he do it, like, forever?"

VeeVee hesitated for a moment. "Yes. It's a last resort, though. Your Talent... it's part of what you are."

Ms. Smith moved quickly through the groups of students—nearly everyone was gathered outdoors by now—finding the people they needed. Aimee King and Gareth Moore were both Sensitives—Aimee was a Psionic, Gareth was a Mage, so they were covered both ways. Mr. Bishop arrived in the middle of Kayla's explanation to them about what was needed, and attached himself to the group without needing to be asked.

Last was Lalage. Tomas was a little surprised that VeeVee had asked for her, considering everything, but he already knew that VeeVee took her work very seriously.

Lalage was standing in the middle of a group of girls that Tomas knew slightly. She looked pleased to see him, puzzled and wary to see VeeVee with him, and then simply

confused. Ms. Smith beckoned her over.

The explanation was quickly made, and to her credit, Lalage didn't hesitate to agree to help.

"And I guess, if you need a Healer along, that's going to be me." Kurt Richards had been standing at the edge of the group of girls talking to Lalage, and had followed her over to Ms. Smith.

Lalage looked at him in surprise. He regarded her steadily. "VeeVee's said that the Trollking won't want to hurt Tomas's sister. So there really won't be anything for me to do, will there?"

Oh. Oh.

Everyone always thought that because she was beautiful—and knew it—Lalage was stupid, but in fact, if you were beautiful, you'd better be smart. And she was. She'd known from the moment VeeVee had walked in on her and Tomas in his room that the boy had it bad for the school's Ice Princess—who would have guessed that the Fire Mage would be the thing that sunk the Titanic?—and there was nothing on earth (or for that matter, anywhere else) that was going to change his mind.

And sure, she was jealous, but not really of VeeVee. And yeah, it would be nice if Tomas was in love with her—because he was not only drop-dead gorgeous, but smart and funny and sweet—but what she wanted more than Tomas was what Tomas and VeeVee had (because she had no doubt that VeeVee was just as much in love with Tomas as he was with her): that kind of whole-hearted love, the kind she'd always thought you only saw in movies and books, because no one had ever loved her that way.

She'd thought. Until just this moment. The way Kurt had looked at her, how he'd been around Tomas, how he'd been around her before all this... now all the little bits suddenly fell together into a picture and she stared at him without blinking while everyone talked.

She'd thought nobody cared about her. Not special.

But... Kurt did. He was volunteering to go off into the woods with them—instead of Ms. Smith—just because she was going. So she smiled at him, and said: "Don't worry, Ms. Smith. I'll keep an eye on him."

And Kurt smiled back.

"All right then. Let's go," VeeVee said.

They'd moved fast. It was less than ten minutes from the time VeeVee had joined Tomas in the clearing to the time the seven of them—Tomas, VeeVee, Kurt, Lalage, Aimee,

Gareth, and Mr. Bishop—were back there again. Aimee and Gareth began circling the clearing, trying to pick up the Trollking's trail.

Tomas was more worried than he'd ever been in his life. He could face danger to himself and not think about the worst that could happen until everything was over—but this? This was Rosalita in trouble, his baby sister, and he could feel himself drawing closer to panic with every minute that passed.

"You have to focus, Tomas," VeeVee said quietly. Her voice was pitched too low for anyone standing even a few feet away to hear, but even so it made Tomas jump. He felt a flash of anger, but quickly suppressed it. He knew she was right. But it was so hard!

He turned toward her, knowing he looked as miserable as he felt.

"The Trollking is a creature of magic," VeeVee continued softly. "Your Talent isn't going to be much use against it, but that's not why you're here. You're the only one Rosalita knows. She'll trust you. You have to be strong for her."

Tomas took a deep breath, holding on to VeeVee's words. But he still blamed himself. "But if she'd never come here at all, none of this would have happened, VeeVee."

VeeVee shrugged, just a little. "No," she said seriously. "Something much worse would have—and far from any possible help. Think about New York. You know how mean it is there. Figure just what else might live there, now that you know about things like magic and psi." She looked off in the distance for a moment, and shuddered. He guessed she was remembering something.

He decided he'd rather not know what it was.

"Got him!" Gareth said excitedly. He pointed, and they headed off in that direction.

"And I've got her," Aimee said a moment later. "She's scared—but she's alive!"

If the creature had been trying to hide—or, oddly, had been less powerful—the hunt would have taken them longer, but apparently it was doing nothing to conceal its presence. Gareth kept muttering and shaking his head, as if he smelled something bad, but he didn't waver at all in his pursuit.

On their way here, they'd come up with as much of a plan as they could manage in advance. Find the Trollking, and—somehow—get Rosalita away from it. Once they did that, Mr. Bishop would have to shut down her power, and VeeVee and Lalage could destroy it. Until the link was severed, they couldn't actually try to harm the creature—not only would it be able to draw power from Rosa, but it would be linked to her: if they harmed it, they'd hurt her as well.

There were a lot of points in this plan at which things could go horribly wrong.

"This isn't good," Mr. Bishop said after a few minutes.

“No,” VeeVee answered tightly.

“What?” Tomas demanded. He was doing his best to stay calm—VeeVee was right; he might not be able to hurt the Trollking, but the whole plan really did depend on him, because he was the only one here Rosalita knew, and right now she was terrified.

“There’s an old graveyard up this way. The dead there are at rest—but your sister’s strong enough to wake them up anyway,” VeeVee said. “If she’s scared enough.”

“We’ve got to hurry,” Tomas pleaded, though they were almost running now.

Up ahead, the trees were already thinning out, and now Tomas could hear his sister’s exhausted sobbing. Gareth stopped, clutching a tree and panting. Aimee went to his side, putting an arm around his shoulders. Tomas wanted to rush forward, but VeeVee put a hand on his arm.

“Wait. Tomas, if you trust me—we have to go slow.”

Tears of frustration burned in his eyes, but he did trust VeeVee. He’d given her no reason to trust him, lately, but he would always trust her. He forced himself to nod.

“Okay. Come on.”

They walked forward slowly. Lalage and Mr. Bishop followed.

The clearing held what had indeed once been a small burial ground. The wrought-iron fence that had once surrounded it was red with rust, canted crazily in places, and lying flat on the ground in others. It surrounded perhaps a dozen old marble tombstones.

Standing in the middle of the burial plot was the Trollking.

Despite everything he’d seen since he’d come to St. Rhia’s, it was hard to believe the evidence of his own eyes. Something like that didn’t belong here, in the middle of an ordinary meadow in Upstate New York on an afternoon in July. Monsters like this belonged in the movies or on television. They were supposed to be unreal—fantasies—not standing just a few yards away. But it was real. Terrifyingly real. He could even smell it, a smell like sulfur and wet stone.

It was hunched over, but if it stood upright it might be as much as twelve feet tall. Its skin was grayish black, and it had a flat face with a protruding jaw, almost like a bulldog’s, but there was nothing in the least comical or friendly about it. Even though it was standing in direct sunlight now, Tomas still couldn’t tell whether its skin was smooth or hairy; it seemed to shimmer and smoke, as if it were a cake of dry ice, so the creature’s outline was always blurry. He could see it breathing, hear the grunting noises it was making, and hear Rosa’s frightened sobbing, too. But still, he couldn’t—quite—see it. He clutched his hands into fists until they ached.

It was larger now than the first time Tomas had seen it; Rosalita looked like a child’s doll in its hands now. It was holding her in front of its face, shaking her and growling. It was obvious to the observers that it wanted her to do something. It was equally obvious

that Rosalita didn't have the faintest idea of what it was. She kicked and struggled feebly in its grasp, sobbing and whimpering, out of her mind with terror.

"We have to make it let go of her," VeeVee said in a low voice. "Until it does, there's no way Lalage and I can destroy it."

Suddenly the Trollking threw back its head and bellowed, exposing long yellow fangs. The sound was deafening, and Rosalita screamed in unison with it, a high cracking wail that came close to breaking Tomas's heart.

"Let's do it," he said grimly.

He lashed out at the Trollking with the same kind of Fire he'd used before—his attack might not have hurt it, but maybe he could annoy it, and at least his fire was controlled enough to definitely not hurt Rosa. At the same time, Lalage struck with her Green Magic: the grass around the creature's feet suddenly came alive, growing longer, whipping up around its stubby legs. An individual blade of grass might be easy to break, but there were hundreds of these, and soon they were joined by tree-roots. Every time the Trollking tore itself free of one web of clinging vegetation, more grew up instantly wherever it set its foot down.

VeeVee had her athame out and was sketching symbols in the air. Lights began to dance around the creature's head, but while it had welcomed the lights Tomas had seen before, it didn't like these. It roared and tried to bat them away. First it held Rosalita in one hand and used the other to swat at the lights, but then, after VeeVee hit it right in the face with something particularly unpleasant, it dropped her completely.

But the ground was already starting to shimmer with a glowing fog.

If Tomas hadn't had it explained to him—what this place was, and what Rosa's power was, and how it manifested—he wouldn't have known what he was seeing. But he had, and so he did know. The Trollking had terrified her enough that she was summoning the dead up out of their graves, and once the creature had eaten them, it would be even more powerful—hadn't somebody said once that the energy of dead humans was the most powerful spirit energy there was?

"Rosalita! *Mi hermana!* Here! Come here!"

She pushed herself to her hands and knees, but she was obviously too disoriented and terrified to be able to move. Tomas ran out into the clearing. When she saw him, she staggered forward a few steps. He lunged for her, snatching her up as the Trollking grabbed for her. An entire full-grown tree slammed up out of the ground between Tomas and the creature, keeping it from grabbing both of them, and Tomas ran for the edge of the woods with Rosalita clutched in his arms.

"We're good," he said, panting, as he crashed to his knees. "We're good, right?"

"Not yet," Mr. Bishop said grimly. "They're still linked, and while they are, she's feeding him power—and any harm to him is harm to her."

Tomas looked back over his shoulder toward the abandoned burial ground. The Trollking was wrapped in a cage of light now, and surrounded by a forest of trees, but it was systematically smashing its way through them, reducing them to splinters. And the glowing fog was rising up from the graves, moving toward the creature as if it were some kind of psychic vacuum cleaner.

“This won’t hurt,” Mr. Bishop said reaching for Rosa. “You have to trust me, Tomas.”

“I do,” Tomas said steadily. Trust had never come easily to him. So many people had failed him, all his life. Lied to him, betrayed him, even tricked him to get him to do what they wanted. But he trusted Mr. Bishop. He held Rosalita tightly, holding her face against his shoulder as Mr. Bishop placed a hand on her head. When he touched her, Rosalita gave a surprised squeak and then went completely limp.

“Go!” Mr. Bishop shouted to the two Witches.

VeeVee and Lalage stepped out into the clearing. Tomas clutched his sister tightly. It went against every instinct he had to just let the two of them walk into danger like that. But this was their kind of fight, not his.

Suddenly VeeVee was wreathed in flames, a shimmering pillar of fire. Beside her, Lalage glowed with a faint but visible emerald shimmer, and around her feet, the summer-dry grass turned deep green and bloomed with tiny flowers.

The moment Daniel Bishop had shut down Rosa’s link to the Trollking—and her power—the shimmering fog over the graves vanished as if it had never been. The Trollking howled in rage, lunging for the intruders who had deprived it of its meal. But suddenly it found itself trapped in a cage of interlocking magics—Fire Witchery and Green Witchery.

Again and again it broke through the cage of spells. Each time they were rewoven. And each time it broke through it was smaller. Weaker.

But each time it broke free, it gained a few feet of ground. And neither VeeVee nor Lalage was retreating. It was only about six feet tall now, but it was still bigger than the biggest football player ever born. That once more the cage of magics crumbled before its assault. It lunged forward.

And Kurt came rushing out of the woods toward it.

“Kurt!” Lalage screamed, but he didn’t slow, didn’t stop. Everyone always thought somebody Kurt’s size was slow and stupid. Tomas knew he wasn’t stupid, and now Kurt proved he wasn’t slow, either. He hit the Trollking with a tackle any football linebacker would have been proud of, stopping its rush and even making it stagger.

And it picked him up and threw him. Hard.

Once more the cage of magics surrounded the Trollking. But this time was different. There was a hum in the air that set Tomas’s teeth on edge, a high whine just at the edge of sound. No matter how hard the creature tore at the bars, they kept re-forming.

Tightening.

Now they were pressed against the Trollking's shadowy skin, and—Tomas blinked—it was shrinking away from the bars of the cage. But they kept closing in on it, in every direction at once, and now they were writhing, in a way that made his eyes hurt to look at them.

The spellcage shrank, and kept shrinking, and then it was the size of a basketball-

And then it was gone.

Lalage gasped, and dropped to her knees, and VeeVee staggered over to the nearest tree and leaned against it. Mr. Bishop got up and walked out to them, making sure they were all right.

And finally Tomas felt as if he could breathe again.

It was over.

The seven of them walked slowly back the way they'd come. Tomas carried Rosa. She was sound asleep; Mr. Bishop said she'd probably wake up in an hour or so, but he'd had to shut her Talent down quickly and thoroughly. Tomas didn't mind. Sleep was the best thing for her right now. And she was all right. Oh, her dress was ruined, and she had some minor bumps and bruises, but she was here, and she was safe. That was what mattered most.

Kurt walked along at the back of the group, with Lalage beside him, rubbing his head. He'd hit a tree when the Trollking had flung him off, and Lalage was still scolding him about trying to take on something so much bigger than he was, but considering everything—and considering what they'd been facing down—a few bumps and bruises—and a bad headache—was a small price to pay. And maybe somebody would eventually figure out how the creature had gotten here, but right now Tomas didn't care. It was gone now, and that was the important thing.

Just before they reached the road, they heard voices up ahead.

"Hey! You guys all right?"

Kayla Smith, Señora Davies, Mr. Songmaker, several of the other students, and a woman Tomas didn't know, walked toward them through the woods. The strange woman had blonde hair, green eyes, and every instinct Tomas had told him that this woman was money. She wore casual clothes that looked as if she had just stepped out of a fashion magazine, but not the kind in the news-stands in the barrio. Every single seam and stitch she wore was perfect in a way that was more unreal than all the magic he had seen so far. And that took money.

"Ms. Llewellyn," VeeVee said, sounding surprised.

The blonde woman smiled. “Hello, VeeVee, Daniel. And this must be Tomas Torres. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Señora,” Tomas said, feeling a little bewildered. Was this the famous Ria Llewellyn who was responsible for the school? She didn’t look anything like he’d imagined.

“I like to come up every once in a while to see how my money’s being spent. I seem to have picked a particularly interesting day to come,” Ms. Llewellyn said.

“So to speak,” Ms. Smith said.

“But I see everything’s turned out well,” Ms. Llewellyn added, indicating Rosa.

“We got rid of the Trollking,” VeeVee said. “And maybe we can figure out how it got here in the first place.”

“Oh, Mr. Moonlight has a few theories. But we can talk about them later,” Ms. Llewellyn said. She eyed them all again, and Tomas got the unnerving sensation that she was learning every detail of everything that had happened to them with that sweeping glance. But she reacted as if she had simply expected that they would handle everything, and was pleased, but not surprised. “Let’s get you back to the picnic before all the food is gone.”

It was the end of a very long day. One that—when he’d gotten up this morning—Tomas could never have imagined taking place. So much had happened. His mother had found out about his powers. He’d saved his sister from a monster. And... VeeVee wasn’t mad at him any more.

According to Mr. Moonlight, the monster they’d fought had been almost here ever since their fieldtrip to Underhill. His theory was that it was one of the creatures that had been left behind in the Chaos Domain they’d nearly been trapped in: it had gained power from the unformed essence-of-magic that had surrounded it, but it had wanted out. It had been able to follow them out of the Chaos Domain itself, but not back to the World Above. Rosa’s wildly out-of-control temper tantrum had provided it with the last link it needed to make its way into the World Above, since her Talent formed a bridge between worlds. Apparently they were lucky that nothing worse had come through. That was a chilling thought.

Now Tomas stood beside VeeVee on the steps of the Main Building watching one of the school cars head down the drive. His mother and Rosalita were in it. They were going back to New York, but in a few weeks, Rosalita would be returning to St. Rhia’s, this time as a student. Ms. Llewellyn had put something she called “shields” around Rosalita. She’d explained to Tomas and to Mrs. Torres that they were only a temporary measure, but they would hold until Rosalita could return to St. Rhia’s to begin to learn to live with—and use—her powers properly.

Mrs. Torres still wasn’t completely prepared to accept the idea of her children being...

not normal... but Rosa's brush with death had at least convinced her Rosalita would be safer at St. Rhia's than she would be in a convent. And Ms. Llewellyn had solemnly promised that Rosalita—and Tomas—would attend church every single Sunday that Rosalita remained at St. Rhia's, which had done much to convince Mrs. Torres that whatever else the school was, it wasn't a hotbed of *brujeria*.

"So *mi hermana* is going to be a student here, just like me," Tomas said musingly.

"Oh, I don't think there could ever be anyone just like you," VeeVee said lightly. "She'll be just like her. And she'll learn to control her Talent. That's the important thing."

"What if she doesn't want it?" Tomas asked. Now that he knew Rosalita's "invisible friends" had been real all along, he could barely imagine what the world she lived in was like. And she was only a baby. Her powers were going only to get stronger.

"Human Talents are given for a reason." Inigo Moonlight strolled out onto the steps behind them. Tomas jumped at the sound of his voice; the man—Sidhe, rather—moved absolutely silently. "It would be rude indeed to reject a gift without understanding the intentions of the giver." He spoke reprovingly, as if imparting a much-needed lesson.

"So I can set things on fire for a reason?" Tomas asked. He still wasn't really convinced about that.

"Sometimes," Mr. Moonlight answered, "it is more important not to set things on fire." Before Tomas could think of anything to say to that, the enigmatic headmaster of St. Rhia's had strolled away again, leaving the two teenagers alone.

"I guess he's put me in my place," Tomas said, turning to VeeVee.

"He does that to everybody. You'll get used to it," she answered with a smile.

"I guess I will," Tomas said. "I guess I've got a lot of things to get used to around here."

VeeVee's smile grew wider. "Here's one," she said. And suddenly she leaned forward and kissed him, right on the mouth.

Lalage and Kurt were walking back from the Infirmary. Although he'd protested that it wasn't a bad bump on the head, Dr. Carter had still insisted on taking X-Rays and then keeping him under observation for most of the afternoon. Lalage had stayed with him, and they'd gotten a lot of things said.

Things she'd always wanted to hear—from someone. And things Kurt had always wanted to say—to her.

"I feel a little bit bad about chasing Tomas around all these weeks," she said, as they came around the corner of the Main Building. "I know he's not in love with me, but you know, I think he still kind of has feelings for me. So how do I explain to him that I'm just,

well, dropping him?”

Kurt put a hand on her arm to stop her, and pointed. Up ahead they could see Tomas and VeeVee, and it was obvious that neither one of them was aware of anything else at all. Kurt turned to Lalage and smiled.

“I’m pretty sure you’re not going to have to figure out how to tell him much of anything,” Kurt said.