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**The Dawnvel Druids**

**Episode One**

**Threads of Fate**

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## Chapter One- Human Problems

Simone Singh threw herself off the bridge and onto the train tracks below, cursing the goblins verbally whilst preparing to do it literally.

The squat little beasts hurried ahead of her in the dark, but she swept her wand high, roaring the spell, “*Unertan!*”

Green light flashed from her wand, shooting over the goblin’s heads in a stream before forming a solid wall which both goblins crashed into. The enchanted wall melted away as the goblins slid to the ground, dazed.

Simone sprinted toward them before they could recover, seizing the cloth sacks they’d been carrying, finding piles of jewellery inside them both.

“You’ve been breaking into houses to steal all this haven’t you?” Simone said.

One of the goblins sneered at her as he pulled himself into a sitting position.

“Duh. If a nun craps in the woods, does it make a sound?”

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“What th...that isn’t even remotely the saying.”

Her suspicion had been right. She’d spotted the goblins leaving a manor house minutes ago, wearing amulets enchanted with a glamour charm to hide their true appearance from the humans. But Simone could see through their illusion and the hairless, lime-skinned creatures they really were.

“Scando, you idiot,” the other goblin snarled, his yellow bug-eyes bulging further. “You aren’t supposed to admit it. No, missus, that treasure belongs to us, honest.”

“Your friend just told me you stole it, dumbass.”

Scando giggled at his companion. “She’s got you there, Yibli.”

“Whatever, you’ve been caught, and you’ll both be charged by the Guild.”

Simone flourished her wand, preparing to stun them before they could run again.

“Oh please most beautiful miss,” Yibli cried. “Let us off with a warning, yeah? We promise we won’t do it again. We’ll go straight back to the sewers where we belong. How about you keep the treasure for yourself as a-”

Simone whirled a second too late. Whilst Yibli distracted her, Scando had gotten to his feet. She’d taken his eyes off him for one second, but that was enough for him to lunge and bat the wand from her hand.

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Both goblins hooted with glee as they moved to attack, ripping curved black daggers from their belts.

Simone careened back as they both tried to disembowel her, before dropping into a fighting stance as they flanked either side.

“C’mon Scando, let’s hack her pretty little head off.”

Yibli charged her, but she ran to meet him, driving her boot into his stomach before slamming her elbow into his long, pointed nose with a nauseating crunch. Even as Yibli reeled, grey gore spraying from his face, Simone was already hitting a spinning back kick to Scando’s knee, forcing him to all fours.

She ran to scoop up her wand but as she turned back, she froze. The tracks beneath her feet were vibrating.

“*Tilin*,” she roared, swiftly stunning both goblins into unconsciousness, something she should’ve done right from the start. Damn it, still acting like a rookie, Lana would never let her live it down if she found out.

The oncoming train let out an ear-splitting screech and the tracks trembled violently beneath her now. A light bloomed in the dark beyond. In moments, all three of them would be nothing but smears.

She hurried to the goblins and hauled their stunned bodies off the tracks, flinging herself against the far wall a second before the train hurtled by. The

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metal leviathan smashed past in a blur, only inches from her face as its scream caused her whole body to vibrate.

The train's screech faded to leave an eerie quiet, her heavy rasps the only sound. Simone sagged against the wall, trying to catch her breath as it spiralled around her in the cold night air.

Once she'd regained some of her composure, Simone used another spell to tie the goblin's together, back to back. She kept them leaning against the wall and off the train tracks, safe from a splattering.

Finally, she lifted her wand and cast a beacon spell into the sky. One of the London clans could deal with the goblins now. It was time for her to finish what she'd come here for in the first place.

\*

Most seventeen-year-olds would be with their friends on a Friday night, or hanging out with their boyfriends or girlfriends, but Simone was stuck scoring drugs for her magically cursed father. Plus, she had no boyfriend to speak of anymore, although she still had feelings for the idiot.

She loitered in one of London's dark alleyways, feeling like the low-rent criminal she technically was right now. She'd been on her way here when she'd spotted the two goblins.

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The city's pollution hung thick in the air, mingling with the damp from the recent rain, and the sounds of traffic were a constant drone. She pulled her jacket tighter around her, thinking about leaving. Her contact was late.

Simone tried not to think about normal teenagers, no matter how much she wanted it, that kind of life would never be hers. She probably wouldn't even make it to her twenties, the odds weren't good when you regularly battled beings from Otherworld.

She was beginning to regret going elsewhere to get the Orachun powder. She thought dealing with regular people would be the safer option. Surely anything was better than making deals with orcish gangs again, but at least she knew how

to deal with those brutes.

She'd teleported to London early, so she could check for signs of a trap, but chasing down the goblins had cost her time.

No one else knew she was here.

Simone froze as the unmistakable click of a trigger sounded behind her.

Someone chuckled as the gun grazed the back of her head.

*Oh, for Camelot's sake.* Tonight was supposed to have been a quiet ordeal, not a series of mishaps that could've seen her gutted by goblins, mowed down under a train and now getting a bullet in her skull.

Blood roared in her ears and a wave of nausea hit her. In her line of work, she encountered swords, fangs and claws, not the human weapon of choice.

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"Don't move!" The stranger's voice was abrasive, but curiously calm. "I don't want to blow your pretty head off for a few hundred quid. Hand it over, and I'll let you go."

Her legs trembled as she struggled to stand still. The urge to run was overpowering. What if he panicked and shot her?

Simone was stronger, faster and more durable than any regular human, plus there was the whole magic thing, but not even that could save her from being shot in the head.

*Stupid, silly girl.*

The money wasn't the problem. Her dad needed the Orachun to cope. Simone didn't know what he'd do without it. She couldn't risk losing him, not after Mum.

But if this dealer was robbing her, did he even have it? *What did he say his name was in the texts?* Jason, that was it.

“Listen, Jason,” she said frantically. “I really need that Orachun. Don’t do this.”

Jason laughed once more. “I’m the one in charge here. I hadn’t heard of this new gear till recently, but from what I gather it’s right rare. I think I’ll keep hold of it until a richer buyer comes along.”

Whilst he talked, Simone slowly delved two fingers up her sleeve, seizing her wand handle.

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“Now,” Jason snarled, “give me the money and I’ll only knock you out. Keep on talking and I’ll blow your brains out.”

She ripped the wand free from her pocket and flung it up even as she threw herself to the ground and squeezed her eyes shut.

“*Arvundyn.*”

Blue light pulsed from her wand, blinding Jason. He fired the gun in a panic, but she’d already dropped to the floor. The gun exploded above her, the sound piercing her ears and the bullet bouncing off the walls.

Simone leaped to her feet, lashing out with a kick to Jason’s chest. The thug fell back, throwing a punch which she blocked easily before lunging forward to deliver a sickening headbutt. She felt his nose crunch as her skull smacked into him and he crumpled to the ground.

“*Caringa,*” Simone hissed, waving her wand once again, causing a cloud of blue vapour to seep out. The vapour swept over Jason’s face and once it took hold he would be enchanted to do whatever she commanded. The vapour evaporated however, another spell blocking it. Jason was already under a hex.

Someone else had forced him to kill her? She noted his glazed over eyes, a sure sign that he’d been enchanted.

Simone looked up sharply, scanning the end of the alley and the buildings above in case the enchanter had come to watch her die. The spell could only have been performed by another druid. *But who would want me dead?*



She pressed her hand flat on the ground, drawing on the earth for extra strength as she removed the enchantment. If she didn't Jason would keep trying to kill her, until Simone killed the moron first.

"*Erumt.*" She cast the truth spell before demanding, "Who hexed you? What did they command you to do?"

"I don't know who they were. They wore a hoodie and a hat." Jason rasped robotically. "They just told me one thing...kill you."

Simone had to stop herself from kicking the wall in anger. Instead she enchanted him once more. Jason looked up at her with a vacant, dreamy expression as soon as the blue vapour melted into his skin.

"Forget any of this happened," she ordered. "Now, go to the nearest police station and tell them you're a drug dealer who also carries a gun."

She picked up the gun and placed it back into his hand. As Jason got to his feet, she frantically rifled through his pockets.

"Thank Boudica," she gasped, pulling out the packet and checking the purple powder was inside. There was enough there for Dad to mix in his drinks for a month. She had no idea how Jason had come to possess the supernatural narcotic, and she didn't care. All that mattered was that Dad would be okay.

The remnants of her spell faded and Jason got to his feet, ignoring the blood streaming from his nose. He walked away mechanically, on route to hand himself in.

He'd only been a few years older than her. Such a waste. Although, she wasn't one to talk when it came to breaking the law. The elders would excommunicate her and Dad if they knew about his problem. Simone just hoped none of her clan had noticed her sneak out.

She stuffed the packet in her jacket, before retrieving the rune stone from another pocket and preparing to teleport back to Dawnvel, where hopefully she

could find out who was trying to kill her.

## Chapter Two- The Perfects

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There was something terribly wrong with Dawnvel. Bobby only arrived at the academy yesterday, yet he'd already heard a dozen horror stories from the other students.

He stood tentatively by his bedroom window, gazing at the sky as the sun died slowly. He hadn't been able to relax since he arrived.

The dormitory block was at the far left of campus, so he had a great view of the whole college. Dawnvel's grand castle stood on the biggest hill he'd ever seen, leering over the town beyond. It was a brooding brown fortress, the rock weathered and crawling with ivy. The castle looked older than Dawnvel's medieval town itself, like it should've crumbled into dust long ago and was chock-full of vengeful ghosts. Bobby didn't know if it was ghosts bumping off the students, but he wasn't writing anything off, not after what he'd seen on his train journey here.

He pulled out his old, battered phone the orphanage janitor had been kind enough to give him a year ago and reread the article for the umpteenth time.

He'd looked up Dawnvel academy as soon as he'd been offered a place. It was the only bad review of Dawnvel he could find, but he suspected the others had been deleted, some sort of government conspiracy perhaps.

He'd kept telling himself the article simply couldn't be true. The writer claimed that last year two students had died and even a teacher had been found with his throat slit. Apparently, a number of strange instances had occurred, which the faculty always had excuses for, like gas leaks and even random acts

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of lightning. Bobby swiped his finger down the screen, rereading the last paragraph of the article:

**I know there's something going on at Dawnvel. Maybe it's a crime syndicate**

**that uses the school, maybe it's the government. All I can say is do not go there! I cannot promise you'll make it out alive.**

Dread twisted his guts with one hand and pushed a lump into his throat with the other. At first, Bobby had assumed the ex-student was being dramatic, but now he was realising how right the pupil was. On his first day, he'd seen one girl crying on the phone to her mother, insisting her dormitory was haunted by a poltergeist, and another boy swear to his friends he'd seen a monster in the nearby forest. But that paled to what he'd woken up to today. The staff said a student had decided to drop out, but rumour around campus was that his dorm room had been filled with blood.

And of course, there was the mysterious gang of students everyone had dubbed, the Perfects. Bobby didn't know much about them, but he'd heard whispers from his classmates' conversations about how dangerous they were.

*Stop thinking about it, you'll give yourself a panic attack.* Bobby lay back on his bed and used his phone to distract himself instead. He went back to looking at internet memes and scrolling through his favourite tumblr sites. At least this place had free Wifi, despite how old it looked. Since he'd never had any friends, (every time he got close he'd end up leaving the area due to a foster family

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breakdown,) the internet had always been his main source of entertainment.

Without it, the soul-crushing boredom would've been a hundred times worse.

He enjoyed the fansites and forums on his favourite TV shows. He'd always been drawn to the fantasy and horror shows. Terror at Timbley High was his most beloved show. He sometimes wished his life was solving grisly murders by mythical monsters like the Byron brothers in Timbley, before he realised he was terrified of spiders and mice, let alone stuff like werewolves and mummies.

His stomach rumbled once more and Bobby knew he could ignore it no longer. He had to leave the sanctuary of his room to grab some dinner. It was too early to go to bed and hope everything would magically be better in the morning.

He looked to the empty bed opposite. His roommate might well be a missing student too. Bobby had arrived a week late to the new term. Apparently, his

room had been occupied in that first week, but there was no sign of him now.

He'd checked every inch of the room and its ensuite bathroom for anything mysterious, but all that turned up was a dead plant on the windowsill.

He considered taking his bag with him as he made to leave his room. The small bag was the only luggage he had for the boarding school, yet it held all of his life belongings. Three sets of clothes, half a bottle of shower gel and a toothbrush. Lucky him. He decided against it and pulled open the ancient wooden door before descending the stairs.

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Curfew wouldn't be long now, so he had to head to the cafeteria quick. He would've been fast anyway, his anxiety overtaking him over what he'd seen on the train.

He passed by the academy's newer buildings, shiny, silver blocks full of classrooms for every education subject and spaced out around acres of land, complete with both a rugby and football pitch, as well as tennis courts and swimming pools.

Bobby knew he had some brains, but he wasn't elite-level smart. Only students who could afford the huge tuition fees went here, or else ultra-talented people given scholarships, which made it all the weirder he'd been awarded a place. He was due a bit of luck though, after having a whole life full of the bad.

He walked a neat path surrounded by patches of wild flowers as he read the building's titles around him. Maths Block or History Block was printed in black lettering above their doors. The campus was huge, but he was starting to find his way around.

He looked for shapes in the early evening shadows, seriously on edge. What he'd witnessed was burned into his brain. He saw the spectral shadow whenever he closed his eyes. It had been a shimmering scarlet haze that vaguely resembled a man, gliding through the air, directly toward his train window. But then the thing disappeared in a blur as his train sped on. None of the other

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passengers had heard or seen anything, just looked at Bobby like he was a lunatic when he asked them. Maybe he was.

His heart screamed at him that he'd seen something real and supernatural, whilst his mind assured him he was seeing things.

He'd seen those ghost hunter shows on TV, but he'd dismissed them as fake.

Bobby hadn't believed ghosts were real, but he couldn't deny what he'd seen with his own eyes.

If Bobby hadn't have needed to be here so badly, he would've stayed on the train when it pulled into Dawnvel station and until it was on the other side of the country. He had no time for ghostbusting. But Dawnvel was his last chance. It was a new future he'd never expected to get a chance at. He couldn't let his wild imagination and too much watching Scooby Doo scare him off. He sure as hell didn't have a home to return to anyway.

Bobby shook his head as he walked, as if that would stop his mind working overtime like always. He was being stupid, on the off chance he had seen something supernatural, it didn't mean it would follow him here.

He'd never heard of Dawnvel before he'd applied. The large town was nestled away in the heart of the British countryside between Oxford and London. Bobby had lived all over in his sixteen years, bouncing around as foster family after foster family decided they didn't want him after all, like finding out the new package they'd ordered was broken.

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Dozens of students milled around the courtyard outside the cafeteria. Most were laughing and chatting, but Bobby noticed they gave a wide berth to a group in the centre. It was three of the Perfects. He thought there might be six or seven of them in total.

He didn't even notice the boy leaning against the wall behind him until he spoke.

"You alright bro?"

Bobby looked around, making sure it was him being spoken too. The other boy

smiled at him warmly. He was African-American, with amber eyes and finely shaped eyebrows.

Before Bobby could formulate a response, the boy stuck out his hand. "My name's Maurice Michael Jr. But my friends call me Mo," he spoke with a general American accent.

"I'm Maurice. I mean, hi. I'm Bobby," he said in a rush.

"Call me Mo." He took a swig from the can of energy drink he held.

Despite the student's pleasant demeanour, Bobby still felt awkward.

"You're one of the new kids, right? Where you from then?"

"I don't know really. Somerset, I guess." Bobby replied. "Although I lived in Devon before that, and the New Forest before that."

"So you moved around a lot then, your parents in the army or sumin?"

"No, they're dead." Bobby winced at his accidental bluntness. "Or they abandoned me shortly after I was born. I don't know which."

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"Ah, sorry to hear that dude." Mo's face fell. "That's horrible."

Bobby shrugged. "It's okay. I never even met them."

He looked around the courtyard in the silence that followed. His eyes fell upon the Perfects once again. The trio were seemingly discussing something important.

One of them caught Bobby's eye especially. Her skin was a dark gold and fringe-cut black hair framed a flawless face, set with bright grey eyes. A single golden stud glistened in her nose, and small gold hoops hung from her ears.

"Watch out for that lot," said Mo.

"Yeah, I overheard the other new students talking about them. Are the Perfects a sort of gang or something?"

“Na, Perfects is what everyone nicknamed them since not only are they top of their class-smart and ridiculously good looking, they’re filthy rich,” Mo said.

“They even have their own house on campus instead of dorms like everyone else.”

Mo pointed toward the tall blond boy in the trio. “That’s Zander Murphy, captain of the football team. Zander’s the ringleader of the Perfects.”

Mo motioned to the other boy, who had long dark hair and was twice as broad as the average man, his shirt straining with all the muscle. “That’s Warren Macleod. He’s the rugby captain and the one even bullies are scared of. You see why they’re called the Perfects now?”

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“Yeah, but why stay away from them?” There were popular kids at every school he’d been too, but people usually flocked to them, not the reverse.

“Well, they’re all a bit weird. More than a bit, actually.” Mo leaned closer to him to speak quieter. “Some of the stories about them are positively bonkers.

Loads of people think they’re in some sort of cult who do dark rituals or something. Or maybe the reason they’re rich is because their parents are all crime lords,” Mo snickered. “Either way, most people prefer to stay out of it.

The Perfects aren’t exactly friendly to outsiders. And they can be dangerous too.”

“Dangerous.” Bobby scoffed. “Because they’re parents are rich and they look like supermodels?”

“Well, Warren’s kicked the crap out of about seven other pupils last year, four of them at once the last time. And Simone Singh broke a guy’s arm last term.”

“And Simone is?”

“The one you were ogling at a second ago.” Mo grinned at him.

Bobby had to admit that after he’d gotten over how beautiful she was, Simone



also looked pretty tough, but breaking arms was quite a leap.

What about that one?” Bobby pointed to the smaller boy who sat nearby the trio, ignoring them. He appeared to be doodling on a piece of paper, whilst also smoking. “I get what you mean about them getting away with everything. None of the staff have mentioned his cigarette.”

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“That’s Dreg,” said Mo. “He’s...different, to everybody, even the Perfects.”

Different was an understatement. Dreg was scrawny where the other Perfects were tall and athletic. Instead of resembling a fashion model, Dreg had an untidy nest of ginger dreadlocks.

“His name’s Dreg?” Bobby frowned.

“Nickname. No one knows his real name.”

“Why haven’t they been expelled if they’re so violent?”

Mo shrugged. “That’s what I’m saying. Same reason they get other benefits.

Maybe they’ve got dirt on the people who own the place. They could probably get away with murder. In fact, some believe they have.”

“Oh yeah?” he said sarcastically. Mo was messing with him now. “Is this some sort of prank the new guy thing?”

“Nope. Halfway through last year a teacher was found dead in his classroom and he was last seen in detention with Simone, alone. Since she also had a black eye the next day at school, everyone thinks she killed Mr Burke.”

Bobby shook his head. Mo had certainly put a lot of effort into this prank.

“Sure, she killed a teacher, but is still allowed to attend school like nothing ever happened.”

“Exactly, weird right?”

“Impossible is another word I’d use.”

“Fine, don’t believe me.” Mo held his hands up. “You’ll see how strange they are soon enough.”

Bobby was about to reply when he went cold, remembering the testimony he’d read on his phone. It had said a teacher had died last year. It had to be the same one Mo mentioned.

Bobby looked back at the girl he’d been enamoured with moments ago. *Was she really a killer?* No, it had to be a coincidence she was the last person seen with the teacher. There would’ve been a police investigation and she would’ve been thrown in jail if she was guilty. *What about the other deaths and disappearances?*

Bobby decided to ask what had been on his mind ever since he’d learned Dawnvel wasn’t all it seemed.

“Have any of the students here died too?”

Mo’s eyes widened. “How did you know that?”

“I saw it on the web.”

“Hmm.” Mo looked perturbed. “We’re not supposed to tell people about that.”

*That’s not creepy at all.* And it did nothing to soothe Bobby’s nerves. He was starting to think these Perfects might actually be a murderous cult who regularly sacrificed the school’s staff. Or maybe his imagination was getting ahead of him like usual.

“So how many Perfects are there?” Bobby had seen the blond, Zander, hanging out with three entirely different students this morning. “Six?”

“Seven actually.”

“Oh, who’s the other one?”

“That’d be me.” Mo smiled, slinging his bag across his back.

“You--you’re one of the Perfects?” Bobby whirled to stare at him.

“Well, I just live with them.” Mo chuckled. “Like I said, they own this place, so it’s best to stay away from them. Just thought I’d give you a friendly heads up.” Mo headed over to the Perfects before shouting back, “nice meeting you.”

Bobby stood there in silence, reeling. *What the hell kind of college is this?*

He headed across the courtyard and into the cafeteria himself, wracking through all that Mo had told him. He thought he might’ve found his first friend here. But if Mo was a Perfect, did that mean he had to stay away from him too?

The cafeteria was a cavernous hall, filled with ten long tables, seating twenty pupils apiece. Bobby was starving as he lined up behind a throng of excitable students. He got his food portions from the lunch ladies and began looking for a spot to eat his dinner alone. As he carried his tray of beans and jacket potato, navigating through the crowd, he bumped into a solid wall of muscle.

“Watch yourself!” The boy snarled. It was one of the Perfects, Warren.

“You bumped into me,” Bobby said, before realising a simple sorry would’ve been the better option for his health.

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“What did you say?” Warren stepped toward him. He really was huge. His eyes were an electric blue and the nostrils of his wide nose flared. He resembled a Viking warrior from long ago, complete with noticeable scars, and his expression was just as fierce.

“Uh...I meant...”

Warren moved closer, causing Bobby to press himself up against the wall.

“Leave him alone, Warren,” said a new voice.

Bobby peeked over one massive shoulder to locate his saviour. It was Zander.

He was less menacing than Warren, but still looked like he could handle himself. Zander resembled a hero from a fairy-tale, and Warren the villain.

“He’s giving me lip,” Warren replied, his eyes still boring into Bobby’s.

“Let’s go,” Zander ordered.

“You don’t tell me what to do,” Warren growled, his Irish brogue coming out thick.

Bobby was getting sick of this. He hadn’t done anything wrong, Warren was just being an immature bully, and he’d faced enough of those. Bobby didn’t mind getting into brawls, even if he was usually on the losing end. It was better than being a victim.

“Excuse me.” He tried to sidestep the bigger guy, but Warren moved to block his path.

Bobby tried to shove Warren out of the way, to no effect.

“Dude, I-” he was cut off as the punch connected with the side of his head.

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A white flash filled his vision as he sagged against the wall before sliding down it.

“Warren!” he heard Zander shout and faintly sensed him pulling Warren away. Next, he heard the cries and jeers from the other students watching.

“Back to the house, now,” Zander said firmly.

Bobby looked up as Warren stormed off, fortunately following Zander’s orders this time.

Zander helped him to his feet. “I’m so sorry, mate. Warren’s got a few anger problems.”

“Yeah, you could say that,” Bobby replied, too dizzy to stand straight.

“Listen, I’ll make sure this never happens again. You have my word.”

Bobby's earlier question was answered, that was why people stayed away from the Perfects. From what Mo said, he guessed Warren wouldn't face any punishment for assaulting him either.

"Hey, it might not feel like it," said Zander, "but that was actually a light punch for Warren. You should be okay."

"Right," Bobby grimaced. It certainly hadn't felt light. "Thanks for calling him off anyway."

"Sorry again." Zander nodded apologetically as he too departed.

Bobby tried to shake away the cobwebs, and the dozens of eyes looking at him. He picked up his fallen tray. He just wanted to finally eat some dinner.

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After eating alone, where luckily the Perfects weren't anywhere in sight. He headed back to his room, relishing being away from prying stares at last. The punch had given him a splitting headache to go with a swollen lump on his forehead.

He lay down on his bed, fully dressed. Most people might've burst into tears right about now. But Bobby had no home to miss, and he'd already endured rougher schools. He'd had a rather rotten time at Dawnvel so far. The teachers had seemed helpful, and some of the other pupils might be nice once he got to know them. But he felt very alone, and very afraid. He couldn't ignore what he'd read before coming here, and now what Mo had revealed to him. Out of all the schools he'd been too, none had been as weird as Dawnvel. Maybe it would get better as he got to know people. As long as he didn't get to know any of the Perfects better.

He sat up to watch the red-stained clouds outside his window as the sun sank on the horizon. That's when the horrifying shape returned.

He heard the ear-shattering screech first. It sounded just like the one on the train. And then he saw it once more. The translucent mass of red appeared suddenly, gliding across the fields. He couldn't believe it, it was the same ghostly *thing*. He hadn't imagined it before. Was it an actual ghost? Or had he gone completely mad?

All he could hear was his own frantic breathing and the blood pounding in his ears. He felt paralysed by his fear. The *thing* flew slowly his way, closer and closer.

The field was devoid of any students, but suddenly someone tore across the field, running straight for the spectral shape. Bobby gasped as he realised it was Zander. Why the hell would he run toward that nightmarish thing?

Zander threw out his arm as he reached the abomination, holding what looked like a wand of all things. White light shot from the wand and smashed into the wraith. As the light hit, it spread out into a swirling vortex, carrying the wraith high into the air and away on a violent gust of wind.

Bobby ducked out of view as Zander looked around to see if anyone had seen what he'd done, squinting towards the dorm buildings. Bobby kept his face inches above his duvet for a handful of minutes. When he crept back to the window Zander was gone, only trees and grass swaying in the wind remained.

Had that *thing* been the same one he'd seen on the train? Would it come back, or was it dead?

His door was locked, and he knew the school had campus security. Besides, surely someone would see the creature if it got inside the dorm building. Even so, Bobby was terrified.

For hours, he kept sitting up and twitching back the curtain, to check if Zander was out there again, and more importantly whether any spectral

monsters were there too. The first six times he saw nothing, but around midnight he spotted a lone hooded figure heading into the forest.

It was one of the Perfect's, Dreg, he looked behind him once more, checking no one else was around, before running into the trees and out of sight.

Bobby wanted nothing more than to leave this whole place behind.

Tomorrow he would run away. He just had to survive the night.

## Chapter Three- Murder most Foul

He must've eventually drifted off to sleep, as Bobby awoke to flashing blue lights directly outside his window. He fought frantically with his duvet, ripping it aside and pressing his face to the glass. He half expected blue ghostly monsters had returned instead of red, but it was three police cars instead.

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They'd parked halfway up the field outside, and a crowd of teachers and students surrounded them. An ambulance stood on the other side of the cars, whilst men loaded a stretcher into the back of it.

He wondered what the hell was going on now. It looked like a body they'd loaded into the ambulance.

The student's faces went from eager and curious, to pale and panicked as a ripple of gossip went through them. A few burst into tears and many more pulled out their phones. One boy got scolded for trying to snap a picture of the ambulance before its doors slammed shut.

His bedroom door burst open and Bobby jumped out of his skin, yelling in surprise.

"Bit jumpy, aren't you?" The newcomer looked at him in distaste, holding a key to the room.

Bobby rubbed his bleary eyes as the boy unpacked his luggage on the other side of the room.

"Wha...who are you?"

"I could ask you the same," the boy replied pompously.

He was tall and thin, but with a plump face and watery blue eyes. He was dressed immaculately, in tan trousers and light blue shirt that looked hideously expensive. He even wore a knitted cap, like he was desperate to play a round of golf or polo.



“I’m Bobby.” He blinked stupidly as it dawned on him. “Oh, are you my roommate?”

“Looks that way, although I was here first. So *technically*, you’re my roommate.” The boy spoke in such a posh accent it was almost ludicrous. He made the other toffs at Dawnvel sound normal. He looked at Bobby in disapproval, as if he’d found a deeply unpleasant insect in his bedroom.

“I think I’d have noticed if you’d been here all this time. Unless you got here on the first week of term and then left?”

“That’s exactly what happened,” his newfound roommate replied, carefully laying a pair of thoroughly ironed socks on his bed. “The family and I had a skiing trip we couldn’t possibly cancel. But quite frankly after moving to this new school I needed the vacay.”

“After a week?”

“And what a terrible week it was.” He sighed, as if recalling a terrible tragedy.

“Won’t you get in trouble for missing school?” Bobby asked.

“Heaven’s no. My parents have become large sponsors of the academy. I’m as impervious as those wretched Perfect hoodlums. I’m Freddy Poppington by the way. I’ve no doubt you’ve heard the Poppington name before. Daddy’s practically a celebrity. They’ve done documentaries on the Poppington family dating back generations, don’t you know? We even got offered a reality show.

The castle I live in is far superior to the abomination here. I’m only here for the supreme theatre programme Dawnvel offers. And because Cambridge...”

Bobby didn’t listen to the rest of Freddy’s monologue, distracted once more by the commotion outside. More police had turned up now, as well as a white tent to obscure whatever the crowd was surrounding.

Freddy sniffed imperiously and Bobby turned to see his roommate observing

him. “You could be worse, I suppose. I’m not sure how, unless... you don’t have a disease do you?”

“What? No.”

“What about lice?” He peered at Bobby’s hair.

“Of course not. Why?”

“Well I assumed your tragic haircut had been done in a rush after you found it crawling with creatures.”

Bobby glanced dubiously at Freddy’s own ginger curls, which matched the mass quantity of freckles surrounding his button nose and slightly too-large mouth.

“Well, make sure you never snore, leave the toilet seat up, or take longer than ten minutes in the shower and we might be okay,” Freddy continued. “I demanded daddy pay the school a little more so I could have a room to myself, but the imbeciles wouldn’t accept the bribe.”

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Freddy looked back at Bobby, face wrinkling in disgust once more. “Judging by the atrocious state of your clothes I’m thinking *your* family didn’t pay.

Another wretched scholarship student. You lot are like rats.”

Anger boiled in Bobby’s gut. “I reckon daddy might have to pay more money soon.”

“Oh, why’s that?”

“You’ll need plastic surgery after I rearrange your face.”

He sprang out of bed and smiled as Freddy scurried back, tripping on his own feet and colliding with the wall.

“Lay a finger on me and I’ll sue you so bad you’ll lose everything you have.”

“I don’t have anything.” Bobby grinned. “So sue away. Your daddy won’t get a penny, and the damage would’ve already been done.”

In truth, Bobby only wanted to scare him. He didn't want to risk fighting again and getting thrown out like he had his last school.

"Ah, so you're a thug as well as a lout, point taken," Freddy eyed Bobby warily. "But I don't wish to take a beating. I'll try to refrain from insulting you.

They just kept coming to me, you see."

Bobby shook his head. "Whatever mate. If you leave me alone, I'll leave you." He jerked his head toward the window. "What's happening down there?"

"A student died mate." Freddy grinned, the absolute opposite reaction any sane person would have.

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"No way. Who?"

"One of those Perfects. Guess they weren't so Perfect after all, eh?"

He went cold all over. "Which one?" His mind immediately went to Simone, even though he barely knew her.

"Zander Murphy."

Bobby dropped the phone in his hand, nausea creeping up his throat. *It can't be.*

*The creature from last night.* He hadn't considered telling a soul what he'd seen. Who could he tell that wouldn't assume he was a raving lunatic? And now Zander, the guy he'd seen get rid of the thing, was dead. If Bobby told the police what he'd witnessed they'd assume he was playing a sick joke.

Had Zander really been murdered? Maybe the creature had returned in the few minutes Bobby hid beneath his window?

He still had to run away. This place was like the twilight zone. If Bobby stayed here another night it would probably be his last.

"Does anyone know how, or why?"

"Nope." Freddy finished unpacking his bags and slid a much smaller rucksack

under his bed, looking a little guilty, before moving swiftly on. “Just that a couple of girls who’d got up early this morning found his body lying there, right in the middle of the field. Now, I’m hungry. I probably shan’t see

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you until tonight. You and I don’t need to be chummy just because we share a room. Bye then.” And with that, Freddy left.

Bobby didn’t have time to wonder about how rude, and rather strange his roommate was, his anxiety overrode everything. He’d be freaked out if any student died, but it was very likely Zander had been murdered, and by something supernatural.

He considered telling Mo what he’d seen. He was a Perfect after all, he’d been friends with Zander. But would even Mo believe him? He’d likely think the same as anyone else, that Bobby was attempting a cruel prank.

After half an hour of sitting in shock, Bobby jumped again as a voice exploded out of the tannoy around campus.

“All students please gather in Dawnvel’s Greater Hall, at once.”

Bobby reminded himself along the way that the castle had two great halls, and the greater hall must be the bigger one as he fell into step behind the crowds of frantic students. Talk was of nothing but Zander as everyone climbed the hill and clustered into the medieval castle.

Headmistress Harkin and a handful of teachers were waiting to address them once everyone arrived. Bobby looked around for the Perfects, wanting to see Simone in particular, but there was no sign of them.

“The rumours Zander Murphy has been murdered are at this time, just rumours,” Headmistress Harkin began. The story she peddled was that Zander must’ve climbed the tree above where he’d been found and slipped, thus

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breaking his neck. Some of the students believed it, but most didn’t. Bobby didn’t blame them.

Harkin also told them classes were called off that day and left them with a stern warning about spreading rumours, not that it did much. Bobby hurried back through the castle and headed into town to buy a train ticket out of here, but the station had been shut down for unexpected maintenance. He was stuck.

Later that evening, news broke from the townspeople that the police had declared Zander's death as suspicious, even getting ready to announce it as a murder investigation.

During dinner, everyone around Bobby were still speculating.

"I heard one of the other Perfects did Zander in and they've all been arrested," said one student whose face was ninety percent nose.

"No way," his friend argued. "They're holed up in their house, mourning."

"I heard it was a drug deal gone wrong," said another girl. "We all know the Perfects are practically crime lords."

"Or junior spies," said another. "MI6 trains people to be secret agents as young as eleven now."

"Both those suggestions are ridiculous," a different pupil shouted.

Bobby was terrified to go to sleep that night. His fears grew worse as there was no sign of Freddy either. He jumped for the third time that day as Freddy suddenly strode through the door, two hours after curfew.

"Where've you been?"

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Freddy merely observed him like he was a mildly curious piece of mould.

"What I do is my business, not yours."

He didn't speak again and was soon fast asleep, snoring loudly. Bobby irritably pulled his own covers tight, afraid to fall asleep in case something else occurred. He repeatedly looked out of his window for signs of ghosts or Perfects, but saw neither.

Lessons resumed the next day, but the Perfects were still absent.

Bobby still planned to leave as soon as the trains were up and running again.

The orphanage would check up on him if they hadn't contacted the school already. But Bobby couldn't go back there, it had been a horrible place. He was sixteen now, and he'd always looked after himself anyway. Maybe it was time to leave education altogether. Away from shadowy monsters and weird students with weirder wands, or whatever that item was. What he would do from there, he had no idea.

Although they were absent, Bobby discovered many of the Perfects were in his classes when the teachers called their names in the register. He also passed their house, the students walking in front of him on the way to P.E cluing him in.

"Do you reckon they're inside?" one girl asked her friend. "Or are they still down at the police station?"

The house was partially hidden behind a line of trees, practically inside the forest on the edge of campus itself. It resembled a home straight out of a gothic

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romance novel, like it would be owned by some rich Victorian noble, not a group of teenagers. It was three storeys' high, with a pub-style wooden sign above the door which read, St. Elran's.

Dreg was on the roof of the large house. He was actually *sitting* cross-legged on the tiles, idly smoking from a strange looking pipe, which emitted green smoke.

Bobby wondered if Dawnvel was really a renowned school for especially talented teenagers, or an actual nut house. That would certainly explain why he'd been given a place.

On the third day, the Perfects returned to class, acting like nothing had happened. No one dared ask them either.

Bobby had English Lit, his first lesson inside Dawnvel castle. Climbing the sandstone steps that snaked their way up the hill was a chore in itself.

Inside, the castle proved to be as old as its exterior. Cobwebs furnished every ceiling's corner, but those ceilings were so high up the webs and mould weren't immediately apparent. Thick carpets ran down the centre of many of the wooden corridors, like miniature Hollywood red carpets. Other passageways were bare wooden floorboards, causing every footfall to echo and bounce off the high walls. The walls were covered by oil paintings of long dead wealthy British people, all of them with inescapable gazes.

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The English classroom was like a mini library, its walls lined with leather-bound books. Bobby chose a seat at the back of the room, like he'd done for most of his classes, so less people would be looking at him.

Mr Witt wasn't what Bobby expected. Most of the staff at Dawnvel were middle aged and older, many nearing retirement age. Mr Witt however, was a well-built man barely in his thirties, with curly hair and dressed in plain clothes as opposed to the stuffy suits other teachers wore. As the lesson commenced, Bobby learned Mr Witt's teaching was also different. Instead of lecturing the class and having them take notes, Witt asked them about their favourite works of literature. Blissfully, Bobby wasn't one of the students asked anything.

After the lesson, Bobby passed by the Perfect's house once again. He realised the house wasn't actually on the way to his dorm, but his feet had taken him there instinctively. He knew he shouldn't be here, but he also believed the weird stuff going on at Dawnvel was linked with the Perfects. He even considered knocking on the door and telling them he'd seen Zander fighting that insane ghost creature. Maybe it would help them understand what had happened to Zander. Or maybe they already knew?

He walked closer and closer to the old house, his heart thumping in his chest.

He didn't know what he was doing, but his curiosity was irrepressible. Fear spiked through him as he heard voices inside, but instead of running away like any normal person would've done, Bobby crept down on his hands and knees and crawled beneath the double windows. One window was open a crack.

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He fought against the urge to leave, but he needed to know more. Maybe once

he'd heard the Perfects talking he'd understand it all better. Bobby couldn't deny a part of him yearned to investigate the mystery of it all, just like the Byron brothers from Timbley High. *But this isn't a TV show, mate. This is real.* His conscience almost made him change his mind and run, but then he overheard Simone. "No Maurice. I took care of it. I killed him a few days ago."

*Killed!* She admitted it. Surely Simone was confessing to killing Zander? He went cold all over. If it wasn't Zander, she'd still admitted to being a murderer.

"Niamh still hasn't left her room. She's inconsolable," Mo said miserably.

"And Warren went out hunting last night and hasn't come back since."

"I told him to give it a rest for one night, but Warren says he knows Cairnath are behind this. I reckon he just wanted to let his anger out on them," said a new voice. Bobby couldn't be sure, but he thought it was Dreg. He didn't dare stand up and peek through the window though.

"But there were clear signs of dark magic." Simone insisted. "We both saw the... body, after those girls first found him. I only wish we could've examined Zander further to see exactly what-"

"*Examined* him?" Mo interrupted. "Don't treat Zander like just another one of our jobs. He was one of us."

"I know, I didn't mean too." Simone replied. "He was the best of us, and we'll stop at nothing to find and bring his killer to justice."

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He stayed where he crouched, breathing raggedly. So, Simone hadn't killed Zander, but she planned on killing whoever did. He could barely comprehend that a sixteen-year-old girl was a stone-cold killer.

*Dark magic, are they having a laugh?* But what if magic was real?

What Zander had done to the ghost creature had been some sort of magic, for sure.

They were mad, all of them. They had to be. Or it was him who was insane?



Or maybe, just maybe, magic and monsters were real.

Bobby needed to tell the police what he'd heard. But then it was his word against hers and if the Perfects were as connected as people said he might even get silenced. He needed proof. Just as he got his phone out to record the conversation, he heard footsteps heading to the door and knew he had only a few seconds to leg it. He almost tripped over his own feet as he sprinted away, hoping the line of trees obscured him from view.

He ran for several minutes, all the way out of campus, before stopping to clutch a stitch in his side. He looked over his shoulder, but he hadn't been followed.

His sports lesson would've started ages ago now, so he decided to skip it and have an early lunch. Bobby didn't fancy eating lunch in the cafeteria alone once again, so he made his way to the bakery in town, his mind whirling with all he'd overheard, trying to piece it all together.

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Along the way to the bakery, he checked if the trains were up and running again, but no such luck. He was still stuck in this creepy town.

He was reminded of a horror film as he headed back after lunch. The countryside town seemed perfectly lovely. The people were friendly, and the scenery was nice and pleasant. Yet lurking just out of sight he could feel a strange sense of fear amongst the townsfolk. Did they know something unnatural had happened in Dawnvel too? Or were unnatural things always happening in Dawnvel?

Bobby tried to push the paranoia to the back of his mind as he returned to campus for his last class of the day, double science.

After dinner Bobby didn't want to stay shackled up in his room again, especially not with Freddy. He walked around campus as late-afternoon turned to dusk. There were still several areas he hadn't explored. Bobby made sure to check he was always within sight of other students though. He wanted witnesses in case anything weird happened again.

The campus had an eight o' clock curfew. Students could still hang out in the common rooms afterward, but they had to be inside the buildings themselves.

The syllabus had even said students would be punished harshly if they were found outside once the sun had fallen. He supposed a curfew was ordinary for a boarding school come college, but bizarrely the townsfolk abided by the same curfew too.

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Bobby reckoned he had half an hour before curfew. After traipsing near the woods and lapping the tennis courts, he headed to the vast school lake, where several vacant canoes bobbed alongside an army of ducks.

On his way, he passed a group of people on the opposing path, a line of plants separating them. Bobby only caught a glimpse of them, whilst they couldn't see him at all. They looked a little odd for students and seemed to be arguing. The three men in the group had an unnatural grey pallor to their skin and long black fingernails. Otherwise, they looked relatively normal, but the girl leading them didn't. Her hair was an acidic green and the tips of her ears appeared to be pointed, like the elves from stories. *They had to be fake, right?*

"We shouldn't be here Tarin," one man said in hushed tones. "They've got a whole load of the Earth-suckers here."

"I know Derek," Tarin snapped back, "that's why we need to find Tiberius. I told the fool not to feed here, but he couldn't resist."

Bobby quickened his step, his instincts urging him to run. He couldn't be sure, but he got the feeling things would go bad for him if they noticed him.

*Feed? What the hell is she on about?*

The strange group disappeared from view as Bobby turned off the path and started down another. He told himself he was being silly and paranoid. They were probably just a couple of locals from the town come to check out the esteemed college.

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Bobby checked his phone, seeing it was ten minutes until curfew and time to head back to his room. As he passed by the Science block, however, he heard a thunderous crash from inside. Bobby stopped dead in his tracks, looking around

wildly. He couldn't see another student on campus. Usually, he'd be curious rather than terrified of hearing a crash. He would've thought a teacher had knocked something over in one of the labs or something. But due to previous events, his mind went straight to the ghostly monster.

He heard a muffled bang and then a girl's voice swearing in anger. It didn't do much to allay his fears, but Bobby knew he couldn't just run away. It sounded like someone had hurt themselves. Maybe a girl had knocked over some equipment and got cut by glass. Or maybe something was attacking her?

Despite his fear, he ran into the building. He'd never forgive himself if someone in danger and all he did was run.

He headed down the corridor, looking to the classrooms to his left and right.

They were empty, all that remained was the stairs at the end of the corridor leading to the basement.

All was silent now, except the sound of heavy breathing, it took a moment for Bobby to realise it was his. He wanted to call out, 'hello' or something, but his mind told him that would be a bad idea. If it was something malicious, he didn't want them knowing he was there.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he scurried down the steps and into the basement. The room was colossal, running the whole length of the building

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most likely. It was lit by only one lightbulb at the other end of the room, so Bobby couldn't see much of anything in the gloom. He looked around frantically, but there was no one here.

Then he saw her in the far corner of the room. Simone leaned against the wall, her white shirt covered in grey paint. It was only when something moved by her feet and she kicked it back down did Bobby realise she was assaulting someone. She slashed down with the knife in her hand and another splatter splashed across her shirt. It wasn't paint, it was blood.

Bobby heard a muffled gurgle from the man struggling against her, and then silence as Simone stabbed down one final time, shoving her dagger into the

man's chest.

Bobby turned to race back up the stairs, but smashed the tip of his shoe into the first step. He clamped his mouth down to stop himself yelping in pain and hopped behind the steps before Simone saw him.

Bobby held his breath in terror, knowing that if she found him, he'd be killed next.

## Chapter Four- Lady Killer

It didn't feel real. How could a teenage girl be a stone-cold killer? And yet Bobby had just seen her stab some poor man in the heart, causing an explosion of grey gore.

*Wait, how can blood be grey?*

Addled by fear, Bobby kept completely still.

"They just get dumber," Simone said.

He heard a strange noise, what sounded like multiple stones falling to the ground. Bobby tried to get his breathing under control and not think about how easily Simone could kill him. He was all skin and bone whilst she was as tall as him and far more athletic, plus she had a knife.

He tried to be utterly silent, yet he thought his heart might give him away. It was louder than a drum, smashing against his chest in a bid to escape. Bobby wanted nothing more than to turn and sprint up the stairs and away, but then Simone would see him. Even if he outran her, she and the rest of the Perfects might then come after him.

Panic was threatening to overwhelm him, but Bobby distracted himself by noting the murderer's appearance. He'd need to tell the police everything about her when he reported this. If he managed to get out alive that was.

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Her hair was coiled and marker-pen black, her face an unblemished dark gold mask. A far cry from his Bobby's face full of freckles, reminiscent of a cookie.

She was both athletic and curvy, with cheekbones sharper than broken glass.

Simone looked like she should be on the cover of magazines, not savagely slaughtering people.

*What're you doing?* His mind screamed at him. *It's pretty weird to think a murderer's hot, mate.*

Cold sweat dripped from his forehead to sting his eyes and he didn't even dare wipe his brow in case it made a noise. If only he could reach the campus outside he'd be safe. She couldn't kill him in front of witnesses, could she?

He'd been so stupid to come down here. He should've just ignored what he'd heard and returned to his dorm, he'd needed the toilet anyway. But no, he had to check no one had accidentally hurt themselves. Now it had probably cost him his life. But since the murder, his bladder seemed to have emptied. Quickly Bobby checked to see he hadn't wet himself. *Phew*. He guessed witnessing a homicide was a good cure for needing to pee.

He stayed in place for what felt like hours, yet he knew it could've only been minutes. His best chance was to wait until Simone was long gone before running to his dorm and calling the police.

The rumours had been right all along. Simone was a serial killer. She'd already murdered that teacher, and now another dude had snuffed it.

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She must've left by now. He had to look. He really didn't want to, but Bobby knew the longer he waited, the more chance Simone could kill again. She may be on a murder spree. He'd heard about this stuff, but couldn't believe he'd ever be caught up in it.

Bobby just grit his teeth and did it. He meant to look out slowly but instead he darted out of his hiding place.

The basement was empty.

*Thank god*. Wait, why is it empty? What happened to the body?

Did he imagine it all? No, he'd stumbled upon something massive here, some sort of supernatural conspiracy he needed to unravel. Part of him wanted to run for the hills for sure, but another part of him needed to find out what was going on.

He moved to the corner of the room to examine further, but only saw shards of rock where the body should've been. *The hell?*

That still wasn't evidence, but he'd have to just tell the police what he could.

Whilst Simone was out there, she was a threat to everyone. She needed to be caught.

He turned to leave and saw Simone standing a metre behind him.

The dagger was gone from her hand, but in its place was a wand. She opened her mouth to speak, but he was already running around her, sprinting for the staircase.

"Damn it," she growled.

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He made a noise halfway between a moan and a scream as Simone reached the stairs before him, moving faster than he would've thought possible.

Her hand snaked around his collar and held him in place, her strength inhuman.

Bobby made to scream, it probably would've been a very high girlish scream that would be embarrassing under different circumstances, but she clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Time to forget what you saw, little boy," she drawled.

She raised the wand and held it up to his face, its tip glowing blue. Bobby acted desperately, biting her hand before swinging wildly and connecting with her jaw. She barely flinched at his punch, however, and his hand really hurt, as if he's smacked a brick wall.

He felt bad about hitting a girl, until he remembered she was a crazed serial killer. He tried to run again, but she seized his t-shirt and pinned him against the wall, his frantic struggles having no effect on her. It was like she was the damn terminator.

"You're a murderer. And now you've killed another student," he rasped.

Her face blanched at his accusation, as if his words hurt her more than his punch.

“That was no student, believe me.”

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“I saw it happen.” He tried to buy himself time, maybe someone else would come down here and she’d be caught. “Get that wand away from me too. I saw Zander use it against that red...creature, and then-”

“Wait, what did you say?” she interrupted, looking at him as if seeing him for the first time. “You saw the Shade?”

“If that’s the name of that ghost thing, then yeah. I saw it twice. I saw Zander shoot white light at it too, with the same wand you’ve got now. Did you steal it from him?”

“Shut up,” she snarled. “This is mine. Zander’s wand is missing. But if you were able to see the Shade, that means...” her words trailed off as something dawned on her. “The demon said it would happen, but I didn’t think it would be so quick. You’re the one, the replacement.”

Bobby grabbed her arms with both hands and tried to break her grip, but it was futile. She had she-hulk strength.

“How long have you been a druid?” she asked, to his utter bewilderment.

“Who are your parents? What’s your family name?”

“I don’t understand a thing you’re saying,” he whimpered. “Just don’t kill me.”

“Who are you?” she roared.

“Bobby,” he roared back. “I’m Bobby Biscuit, bitch.” He had no idea what he was saying, adrenalin flooding through him.

“What kind of last name is that?”

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“I-uh- it’s not. I don’t have a proper last name okay. I liked biscuits as a toddler so the orphanage gave me that name, that’s all.”



Her eyebrows furrowed. “Your parents died?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. Someone dumped me outside a hospital when I was like a week old. That’s all I know. Happy now?”

“No, of course not,” Simone stammered, her fierce grey eyes softening as she looked upon him. “Sorry, I needed to know if you belonged to one of the druid families in our records. You must’ve been sent here in Zander’s place. Damn, they don’t waste time, do they?”

“Madman!” He found himself yelling, even though she was a woman.

“You’re mad. Let me go.”

“What do you mean?” Simone seemed to realise for the first time that he truly had no idea what she was saying. “You are a druid, aren’t you?”

“No I’m not a bloody druid, you psycho.”

“Terrific,” she sighed. “I’ve heard this can happen. You have no idea what you are. Look, you’re not in any danger, not from me anyway. Just try to calm down.”

“Shut up you loon. Let me go.”

“Listen, come with me quietly and I’ll explain everything.”

“Kill me before anyone hears me shouting more like,” he cried.

“Right,” Simone said through gritted teeth. “If you don’t stop struggling, I’m gonna to have to knock you out.”

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“Okay, I’m sorry. I’ll come quietly.”

“Good.” Simone let go of him. “Now--”

Bobby seized the opportunity the second he was no longer pinned against the wall, darting away from her and launching himself up the stairs.

Impossibly, she was already in front of him again. He ducked under her outstretched hand and ran down the corridor. He was almost at the doors when she caught him by the collar and yanked him back. He seized a fire extinguisher hanging by the wall and swung it behind him.

He hadn't meant to hurt her, even if she was a murderer, but the extinguisher smashed straight into her face. She fell to the floor with a thunk.

Bobby didn't wait to see if he knocked her out, flinging himself through the doors and outside. It was practically pitch-black now.

Knowing how fast she was, Bobby took a gamble and dived behind the dumpster nearby.

Seconds later, he heard her come through the doors after him.

"Bloody idiot," she cursed.

He heard her run past him, heading towards the lake. Bobby waited for several minutes, and then ran in the opposite direction.

He yanked his phone from his pocket, intending to dial 999. *No!* His phone was out of battery and his charger was in his room.

Curfew was in full effect now, so the campus was deserted. Bobby considered tracking down a security guard and telling them there was a

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murderer running around, but they'd assume he was crazy. It would be safer to call the police, explain it all to them. Even if the man's body had mysteriously disappeared.

He ran as fast as he could across campus and to the dormitory block. There, he raced up the seven flights of steps to his room. He was wheezing by the time he got to his door. He fished out his keys and opened it hurriedly.

He'd already whipped his phone back out of his pocket, preparing to plug the charger in when he saw Simone sitting on his bed, waiting for him.

## Chapter Five- Gargoyles and Gateways

“Urrrrrrrrrgh,” was the bizarre sound Bobby screamed. He made to dash back out of his room, but Simone got there first, thrusting her foot against his door so he couldn’t open it.

She hurled him onto his bed, but he rolled right off and leaped for his window. It was already half open, she must’ve used it to break in.

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He hopped onto the window ledge as he saw the wand glowing in her hand once more. She was going to use magic on him, probably to kill him horribly!

He knew the drop was too high for him to jump, but it might be a better fate than whatever Simone was planning.

“Bobby, stop!” She seized his shirt, but he’d already jumped.

He hung suspended in the air for a moment, before plunging down at terrific speed. The green grass rushed up to meet him. There was a strange flash of blue light, then all he knew was darkness.

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He was dead, or he was blind. Either way there was only dark.

Bobby tried not to scream. *What use would screaming be if I’m dead?* Wait, he had to be alive, he could feel himself practically hyperventilating. He forced himself to calm down. He tried to remember.

*Murder! Simone! Me!*

The three thoughts crashed through his brain in quick succession. *Please, let this be just one horrible nightmare, it’s only dark because I haven’t opened my eyes yet.*

He blinked rapidly. The darkness remained. I mean, he didn’t feel dead. It felt like wood underneath him. The serial killer must’ve thrown him in a darkened

room. Imprisoning him until she was ready to kill again.

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His left arm throbbed, while his right leg was far too heavy. It felt like he'd been in a terrible accident months back and only traces of pain remained. He'd fallen, well jumped, out of a high window. His injuries should've been far worse, even life threatening.

Slowly, Bobby stretched out his arms. He was lying down somewhere. Both of his hands brushed against something, wood again. He pushed his hands up above him, finding more wood inches from his face. *Jesus Christ, I'm in a coffin. She's gonna bury me alive! What if she already has?*

Panic ripped through his body like spreading fire. He was about to start clawing his way out of the casket when he heard voices.

"Hey, it's not my fault. It was an accident," came Simone's muffled voice.

She'd come to finish him off. "I would've just wiped his memory and been on my way," she continued, "but the kid said he'd seen a Shade."

"No way," replied a familiar voice, Mo. Surely Mo wouldn't let Simone bury him alive? But if she'd told Mo about him, they must be in on this together.

"He didn't have a druid family name, but the impact from jumping out of his window should've killed him."

"Okay," Mo said. "but I assumed you healed him?"

"I did," said Simone. "But a normal human would've died as soon as their head hit the ground. I saw him fall, and his body flashed blue the moment he landed. It was like he cast a spell to protect himself. He's one of us."

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Bobby remembered the flash of blue light too. But what did Simone mean by a spell?

"Alright, let's pretend he isn't your average human. Why have you put him in a

bloody coffin?”

“He saw me kill a gargoyle and royally freaked out,” said Simone. “He even slapped me with a fire extinguisher.”

Mo burst into laughter. “Sorry, but I’d love to see that. I don’t think any of us have used an extinguisher as a weapon before.”

“That’s why I stuffed him inside there. He has breathing holes though, I think.”

“I thought you’d be used to boys running away from you by now,” Mo replied. “Where’d you get a damn coffin from anyway? Don’t tell me, Dreg?”

“Yep, in case a vamp ever wanted to sleep over he said.” Simone’s voice came closer and Bobby tensed. “If he makes a run for it, you know what to do.”

Bobby held his breath for several unbearable moments whilst Simone unlocked the lid. The moment she opened it he threw himself out of there.

He caught a glimpse of Mo, wand in hand, before he was running away from them both. Mo slashed his hand through the air just as Bobby jumped the low table in the middle of the room, shouting, “*Freylan!*”

There was a flash of purple light and Bobby froze, suspended in mid-air. He tried to keep running but his legs wouldn’t move, his whole body was paralysed. He couldn’t even scream.

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“So, he really has no idea what he is?” Mo asked, apparently forgetting about Bobby for the time being.

“Looks that way. I don’t think he had any family to tell him.” Simone replied.

Bobby’s mind searched in vain for some logical explanation for why he was paralysed.

“And you think he’s a Lost One because he saw a Shade?” asked Mo. “Sure, humans can’t see them, but anyone supernatural can. This dude could be a goblin or werewolf in disguise, maybe even a Baynir.”

“I would agree, but when I healed him after he jumped through his window, my spells worked perfectly. It would’ve taken longer and much more of my magic to heal an average human with such injuries,” Simone replied.

“So you think you were stronger because your magic was reacting to his own?”

“Definitely.”

Mo stopped pacing and stood in front of him. Bobby could see him from the corner of his eye, unable to move his neck an inch.

“His name’s...Bobby, I think it was. He was one of the dozen scholarship kids this year?”

“You’ve met?”

“Briefly. I gave him one of my, ‘stay away from the Prefects’ introductions.”

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Simone came into view on Bobby’s other side, shaking her head. “You really need to stop doing that. We should be flying under the radar.”

“No chance of that.” Mo chuckled. “And everyone else would’ve told him the stories about us anyway. I find it fun to do it myself. Besides, we’ll never be under the radar again after you killed that teacher.”

*So it was true?* Bobby already suspected, but to hear it confirmed made it worse.

“Alright Bobster, as I’m sure you’re aware,” Mo began kindly, “you’re currently experiencing the effects of a spell. So you can see, quite clearly, magic is real. As are supernatural beings, which you’ll find out soon. Now, I’d like for us to talk normally. So, if I release you from my spell will you sit calmly on the sofa and have a conversation with the darling Simone and I?”

“Uhh, he can’t answer you dude,” Simone said.

“He can blink. Blink twice for yes, once for no.”

Bobby hadn’t realised the one thing he could move was his eyelids. He blinked

twice, there was nothing else he could do. He just wanted this bizarre spell off of him. He'd run again if he saw them pull out a knife or something.

But for now, he'd give them one minute to somehow explain how they weren't deranged murderers.

"Perfect." Mo smiled, swishing his wand through the air.

Bobby landed atop the table, staring at them both wildly. If they meant him harm, surely they would've taken advantage when he was paralysed?

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Mo gestured to the leather sofa beside the table. "Take a seat."

Bobby slowly complied, taking in the room as he did so. These guys claimed to be druids, so he'd expect their house to be the gothic creepshow it looked like from the outside. This room, however, was not only very modern, but just what you'd expect from a group of college students. Takeaway boxes, magazines and an assortment of sweet wrappers littered the square room, whilst both an Xbox One and a Playstation 4 lay beneath the wide screen TV in the corner and a snooker table sat across the room. The white walls were surprisingly clean, except for the red stain by the door Bobby seriously hoped was ketchup. Night sky showed through the windows outside. He must've been unconscious for at least a couple of hours.

Bobby sat on the very edge of the sagging sofa, seeking an escape. The windows were the closest way out. The living room door was shut, and Mo took a seat in the armchair beside it.

Simone remained standing, studying Bobby, as if she was the one who should be bewildered. "We're sorry, you know."

"Which bit are you sorry for?" Bobby replied. "The fact I caught you red handed, or for chasing me around campus until I almost killed myself to get away from you."

He looked down at himself then, wondering why he didn't have a few broken bones. His white t-shirt was heavily ripped, as was his jeans, and both had grisly bloodstains on them. But his actual flesh was cut-free.

“Neither,” she said. “I’m sorry that all of this happened to you this way. The majority of druids learn about their potential destinies when they’re still children, with years to prepare.”

He looked from her to Mo. “Is druids your gang name or something, or do you guys consider yourself more of a pop group?”

“It’s what we are,” Simone said. “What we’ve been since birth. What you are too.”

*She’s saying I’m one of them. Oh I see, she’s hoping that if I join the gang I won’t turn her into the police, as I’ll be implicated too.*

“Sure I am.” He gestured to his clothes. “Why am I covered in blood but have no injuries? What did you do to me?”

“Saved your life, I reckon.” Simone crossed her arms. “Your stupidity cost you a broken arm and a shattered kneecap, not to mention some of those glass shards came dangerously close to severing an artery. Although you saved yourself from the initial impact.”

“Judging by the flash of blue light and the fact he had no head wounds,” said Mo, “I reckon he used the *Trardn* spell to cover himself in a shield.”

Simone nodded. “But I think his body did it automatically, and obviously without a wand. He must be pretty powerful.”

“So you used...spells on me?” Bobby looked at her accusingly. He extended his left arm, feeling the dull ache in his elbow, whilst his right knee felt like it had pins and needles.

“Ah, so you’re coming round to the idea of magic then?” said Mo.

He didn’t know how to answer, so instead turned back to Simone. “I heard you admit it.”



“Admit what?” she arched an eyebrow, amused.

“That you killed that teacher. And I saw with my own eyes what you did to that man in the basement. You’re a murderer.”

It didn’t matter what they told him, she was still a killer, and nothing would change that.

Simone’s plump lips spread into a smirk. “Technically, I guess. Though not of humans. The teacher a few months back was a demon in disguise, whilst the man you saw me destroy was a gargoyle.”

“What the heck are you saying?”

“That we kill monsters, basically,” Mo answered. “Usually with these things.” He gestured to the stone wand still in his hand, before twirling it to his left and muttering a word Bobby had never heard of. A cupboard at the end of the room burst open and a can of coke shot out of it and into Mo’s waiting hand.

“Want one?” he asked.

“No way.” Bobby looked from Mo to the cupboard, almost expecting to see string or some other magician’s trick. “Okay let’s just pretend I believe you, that magic is real. There’s still no proof monsters are.”

“You’ve already seen one,” Simone replied. “A Shade.”

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Bobby couldn’t deny that. The image of the otherworldly creature was imprinted on his mind.

“But...you guys are rich right? Maybe those wands are like brand new technology that can do funky stuff?”

“They’re just carved out of simple rock actually,” said Mo, holding out his wand for Bobby to examine. “Set with a crystal at the base, of course.”

Bobby didn’t want to get close to touching the strange instrument, but he leaned in to look. The wand was long but skinny, the stone dark and warped, with a blue

crystal at its base.

“My stone is a sapphire, but Simone’s is a diamond,” said Mo. “Each wand is set with one of eight precious jewels. Well, technically there’s a ninth stone, but no one gets that one, and it would be terrible if they did.”

“Sssh, Mo. Don’t scare him. We seven...six now,” Simone faltered. “We ‘Perfects’ are the druids that protect this place.”

“Aren’t druids priests from like, medieval times?” he asked. “You’re kind of in the wrong time zone, guys.”

“We’re the clan of Dawnvel,” said Mo. “But every clan who protects a gateway to Otherworld must have seven. The threads of fate have led you to us.

Now that...that Zander has passed.”

Bobby wasn’t even going to pretend he’d understood the words Mo said. He opened his mouth to disagree, but Simone was already speaking.

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“When one of us falls, a new druid comes into his powers to join the clan.

You are Zander’s replacement, Bobby. The clan must be whole. We grow stronger together.”

“Do you realise how much of a cult you guys sound like right now?”

“You’re a Lost One...we think,” said Mo. “You see, all the ancient druid families are well-known and recorded. Magic is passed down through the generations and your family must have druid blood.”

“So my parents were druids?”

“No,” Simone said. “Magic always skips a generation. One of your grandparents would’ve been one.”

“But your birth wasn’t recorded,” said Mo. “Or else the guild would’ve known about you before now. Your grandparents must’ve hidden from us, a rare feat.”

“We’ll have to inform the guild about him,” Simone said. “See if we can find his relatives.”

Bobby was speechless. He’d given up on ever finding family. After assuming his parents were dead, he’d thought any other relatives he’d had would’ve tracked him down. He used to dream about it growing up. How a fancy car would one day pull up at the children’s home and come to take him away. A wealthy uncle, or a kind aunt perhaps.

Bobby was about to ask more when the door swung open and a third person sauntered into the room. It was Lana, the small, blonde Perfect he’d only seen

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from afar. She wore a matching pink skirt, blazer and too much makeup, whilst her hair looked like it took hours of care, but she would’ve looked beautiful without either. She looked to be half Asian, with skin like cream and eyes of lightest green.

Unlike Simone however, Lana didn’t look remotely intimidating, more like a grotesquely rich creature from Hollywood who starred on her own reality show.

Lana’s eyes narrowed when she saw him, her cherry pink lips curdling into a sneer. “*What* is this urchin doing in my house?” She bit out the words in an extravagantly patronising voice.

“I don’t want to be, believe me. And who’re you calling urchin?”

“Well, just look at you,” Lana replied, as if grossed out he’d even addressed her.

“At least I don’t look like a flamingo threw up on me.” He glared back at her.

Simone burst into laughter. “I think I’m gonna like you Bobby.”

Lana’s delicately featured face hardened, but she ignored Bobby’s insult.

“Normals aren’t allowed in the house, Simone. I know you like breaking the rules, but this will get you disciplined by the guild.”

“Don’t mind Lana,” Mo turned to him. “She lives to look down on others.”

The Princess of Petty.”

“At least I’m not malignantly mediocre, darling,” Lana shot back.

“She likes to exaggerate her words too,” said Mo. “She’s like all those awful theatre brats rolled into one.”

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Despite the sniping, Bobby got the impression the two of them actually liked one another. Lana and Simone however, did not. They got that across without exchanging a single word.

“Well, why isn’t he leaving?” Lana insisted. “Did you have to treat him for a werewolf bite? Did he get a demonic disease or been inflicted by a spell gone wrong?” She retrieved a bottle of anti-bacterial gel from her handbag and began rubbing it liberally in her hands. “He better not have a disease, or I’m never sitting on that sofa again. Whatever’s wrong with him, fix it, wipe his memory and chuck him out. Non-druids aren’t allowed.”

“Good thing Bobby’s a druid then,” said Mo.

“I...what?” Lana faltered, looking back at Bobby in disbelief. “This *thing* can’t be one of us.”

“That I agree with.” Bobby got to his feet. “I’m not sure why your friends are convinced I’m the same as you guys, but I don’t fancy joining a cult. Sorry.”

“Wait, he doesn’t even know he’s a druid?” Lana turned to her other cult members, ignoring him entirely.

Simone sighed. “Yes, he’s having a hard time coming to terms with it, but it all adds up. The demon did say one of our number would perish, only to be replaced by a new member.”

Lana’s aloof expression flashed with anguish for a second, before slipping back into its icy mask. “What? Zander, who looked like a golden god, who was the best at everything, even compared to us, who led us countless times, is

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going to be replaced by this random loser? And you two are happy to go along with it. It's like Zander never existed, like you're not even bothered he's gone."

"Don't say that," Simone snapped. "We cared about Zan just as much as you.

But we all know the risks. Zander is far from the first druid to die before his time, and he won't be the last."

"Wow, you guys are really convincing me to want to join you," he muttered.

But the cult members continued to ignore him.

"We could never forget about Zan," Mo said. "I told you I had the biggest crush on him for like a year after I got here. I got over it before he got together with Niamh though," he added quickly.

Lana nodded slowly. "Fine."

Bobby's fascination of these people had dulled his fear over the past few minutes, but he was still very aware that he needed to escape.

"Look guys, I only met Zander once, but he was kind to me, and I'm sorry he's gone, but I'm not the one to replace him in your, uh, gang. So, if you don't mind, I'd better be going."

"Don't worry," Lana said acidly. "I suspect Simone's got it wrong. We do need to add another druid to our group, but I highly doubt it will be some cretin who wouldn't know a spell from a sock."

"You're really good at meeting people, you know that," he replied, beginning to wonder who was worse out of Lana and Warren. "And I thought the girl with the weird ears was the weirdest person I'd see tonight."

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"What did you say?" Simone asked sharply. "You saw someone on campus with pointed ears? Did they have unnatural hair too?"

"Uh." Bobby had no idea why she'd ask such a random question. "Well she was like a punk chick with pink hair and weird contacts lenses-"

“Damn it,” Simone interrupted him. “A Cairnath was here.”

“Cairnath?” He’d wanted to believe it was some sort of self-mutilation the punk had done, but he knew deep down it was something more.

“More proof you’re one of us,” said Mo. “Humans can’t see past the glamours Cairnath wear to make their appearance seem normal.”

“They might’ve learned I killed one of their gargoyles,” said Simone. “They could retaliate at any time.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Lana said. “Cairnath wouldn’t be so foolish to attack our home.”

“This new coven might,” said Mo. “We don’t know what they’re like.”

“Well, this is all terribly...bizarre,” Bobby said brightly. “But I think I’ll leave you all to it. It was nice chatting to you.” He walked toward the door but Mo moved to stand in his way.

“Hold on, Bobby. I promise you can go in a moment, we just need to test you.”

“You haven’t even tested him yet,” Lana exclaimed. “Gods, I hope he fails.”

“Test me?” His nerves were already frayed, he thought they might snap any second.

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“To see if you have magic,” said Simone, “to confirm our suspicions. If you fail, I can wipe your memory of this entire night and you’ll never have to speak to any of us again.”

“That sounds good, other than the you messing with my mind thing. And if I don’t fail?”

“Then you will partake in the joining ceremony, choose your wand, and become the seventh and final member of our clan.”

*A wand? That seems pretty cool. No, Bobby, stop it.*

“But first, shouldn’t we get all of us together?” Mo asked. “Or at least inform them we might have a new member?”

“We should,” said Simone, “but I don’t think Niamh would cope well with it right now. She’s barely even left her room to eat. God knows where Dreg is, and Warren is still out hunting Cairnath.”

“You said that word again, what do you mean, Cairnath?” Bobby asked.

“You’ve heard of vampires,” Simone said. “And you’ve heard of faeries.

Well, put them together. That’s what Cairnath are. They kind of look like the evil faeries from the stories, but they feed on human blood, as do the gargoyles who serve them.”

“There’s gargoyles now?” Bobby asked, aware how high-pitched his voice went. “I thought you said that because the guy you killed was ugly or sumin. I didn’t take it literally.”

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“Yep,” said Mo. “Gargoyles are the Cairnath servants. You can tell you’re facing a Cairnath by their unnatural hair, eyes and ears, but the gargs look entirely human, save for their skin has a grey tinge and their eyes are bloodshot.

They’re undead though, with none of their humanity left. They’re supernaturally strong, just not as strong as Cairnath. Oh, and the gargs don’t have wings like in the myths, so that’s a plus. But they do turn to stone during the day, so we only have to worry about them attacking at night.”

“Ah, that’s much better.” Bobby couldn’t help the sarcasm leaking out.

“Oh and there’s more gargoyles and Cairnath in Dawnvel than almost everywhere in Britain,” Simone added.

“What, why?”

“Because of the gateway to Otherworld in Dawnvel castle’s catacombs,” said Lana, as if it was obvious.

Bobby just blinked.

“That’s why there can’t be only six of us druids for long,” said Mo. “There must be a clan of seven to protect a gateway.”

That didn’t really answer Bobby’s question, but he was hesitant to ask more.

Everything they said just gave him a dozen other things to ask.

“Okay, okay,” he said slowly, looking at all three of them. “Let’s say, hypothetically, that I believe magic and druids exist, do you honestly expect me to believe monsters are rea-”

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He was interrupted by an ear-splitting crash as the windows exploded inwards. Showers of glass flew across the ground, followed swiftly by four shapes hurtling violently inside the living room.



## Chapter Six- Cairnath Chaos

Warren couldn't handle the guilt. It was all his fault. If he hadn't been with Simone, instead of going out to take over Zander's guard duty he might still be alive.

*Or you'd be dead instead.*

*Good, it should've been me.* He wouldn't be missed like Zander was. Zander deserved to live much more than he did.

He'd stalked through the woods at the end of town for hours now, tracking Cairnath. The last of autumn's leaves crunched beneath his trainers as he stomped through the undergrowth.

Before daylight came, the gargoyles would retreat beneath the earth, back into their dens, lest the sun's light turn them to stone.

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Warren had hoped to find one of their dens before nightfall, to catch them unawares and slay them all even as they awoke.

He longed to take out his rage on them, ripping them apart with his magic. He had to release all the pent-up rage inside of him. He wished he wasn't wired this way, but he couldn't help it. It was either be angry at the world and everything in it or lose himself to sorrow.

But it wasn't manly to show such emotions like pain or sadness. The time his dad caught him crying as a boy had been the last time he'd done so.

He'd managed to hold it all in since the morning Zander had been found. He had to be strong for the others. He and Simone had been amongst the first to find him, to see his body.

Niamh had already seemed to know something was wrong when he went to her room to tell her. Warren knew her best, aside from Zander, he thought it only right that the words come from him. She'd sat on her bed, staring at him blankly

for an age. She'd refused to believe it at first, accusing him of playing a sick prank on her. She'd even called out Zander's name, as if he was hiding somewhere in the house. Warren didn't think Niamh had truly believed until the police came and she'd insisted they take her to see the body herself.

The rest of the clan were still in shock. Simone had cried silently on that first morning, but not since. Mo had broken down the day after whilst he was on the Xbox, playing the game he and Zan always used to play together. Lana and

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Dreg hadn't shown much grief at all though, and Warren suspected it seemed to the others that he hadn't either.

He'd been focused on revenge. He couldn't get his head around it. Who, or what, could've killed Zander? And right in the middle of campus too. Had Zander not been able to call to any of them for help? And what could've killed him so quickly?

Zander had been his first real friend. The only person he'd been able to trust since his father had shattered Warren's faith in anyone.

Warren almost wished it had been Cairnath, then at least he had someone to blame. Someone he could slaughter to give Zander justice. Yet he'd seen the body. The markings were clearly dark magic, not Cairnath bites or claw wounds.

"*Esgando*," he muttered, holding his wand aloft and moving it from side to side like a metal detector. The tip glowed a dull yellow, but would flash gold if it detected life beneath the earth. It had glowed a few times already, but Warren had only disturbed a badger and a mole so far, not the monsters he wanted.

Fighting soothed him. He knew it was barbaric to admit, but he couldn't deny it. Destroying evil things gave him a respite from all the dark thoughts that plagued him. From the memories of his childhood, the memories of what he'd caused.

He felt so guilty about his actions that night, the night Zander died. He'd just received bad news about his mother. He'd meant to keep it to himself, to bottle

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everything up like he always did, until he'd heard Simone crying in her room.

She'd just got off the phone with her dad and confided in him about her own problems. He found himself doing the same, and before he knew it, it was like he and Simone were together again. Like the good times. They'd kissed that night, for what seemed like hours. Zander could've been fighting for his life whilst they'd hooked up, oblivious to his peril.

Zander was on campus patrol for the first half of the night. Warren was supposed to take over from midnight till dawn. But he'd fallen asleep with Simone. By the time he'd awoken it was six in the morning. He and Simone had run outside after realising Zander had never returned home, and that's when they heard the students start screaming.

Warren still hadn't told Niamh that he was partly to blame. She'd never forgive him, or Simone. Part of him was furious with Simone too. He'd awoken by hearing her come back into her bedroom after taking a shower. She could've woken him sooner. Maybe an hour earlier was all he'd need to find Zander battling the Baynir and save him.

Warren had been sorely tempted to rage at Simone. To demand why she'd been awake so long without telling him, but he knew that would be awful of him to do. She felt an extreme amount of guilt too. He shouldn't make it worse.

He usually made things worse.

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He tripped on a tree root and made to swear, but instead a howl of fury escaped his lips. Before he could stop himself, Warren snarled out a spell and blasted the root into a thousand fragments.

He stood over the destruction, chest heaving as he panted.

"What a waste of magic," came a snide voice.

Warren whirled, seeing the Cairnath leaning on the tree behind him. He looked like a teenage boy, only with green hair and long, pointed ears.

Gargoyles seeped out from behind the trees around him, forming a wide circle.

Trapping him.

There was at least six, but there could be more of the monsters hiding in the branches above. He could almost feel their overpowering hunger for his blood, see it in their bottomless pits for eyes.

Despite being severely outnumbered, Warren grinned, pulling the dagger from his boot with relish and gripping his wand tighter. At last he had an outlet for his fury. He'd imagine every single one of them was Zander's killer and make them pay.

A voice at the back of his mind told him to run instead of fight. There was far too many of them, he'd die. But a stronger voice spurred him on. Kill them all, or die trying.

"Any last words, druid." The Cairnath spoke again, pushing himself off the tree and edging forward.

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"Yeah. *Fuerno!*" Warren replied with a spell, flinging a ball of flame from his wand. The fire struck the tree as the Cairnath ducked, causing an explosion of splinters. Warren leaped toward the fae before he could rise again, plunging his dagger into the monster's chest. He crumbled into stone as Warren swivelled to face the others, a new spell on his lips.

Not only were there gargoyles on either side of him, but more gargs dropped down from the forest canopy above, like angels of death.

His wand flared with a second fire spell as Warren grit his teeth and raised his dagger once more. If he was to die tonight, he'd make sure to take these bastards with him.

\*

"What the hell!" Bobby yelled, as the window exploded and four figures emerged. He jumped back, whilst the druids behind him snatched their wands free.

"Get behind me." Simone seized his arm and dragged him behind her as a

terrible, inhuman hissing filled the room.

Over Simone's shoulder, Bobby saw that the intruders were three men led by a woman, Tarin. The group he'd seen earlier.

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She was tall and lithe and her eyes had no iris, only diamond shaped pupils surrounded by whiteness. The men behind her almost looked human, were it not for the grey hue of their skin.

Bobby could almost imagine Tarin's abnormally white skin and that it was contacts that made her pupils like diamonds, but there was no way he could explain the forked tongue slithering out of her mouth, making that heinous rattling sound.

"Earth-suckers," Tarin spat the word, her voice disturbingly similar to a normal woman. "Which one of you slew my brother tonight?"

"How did they get in?" Lana demanded. "Why didn't our shield charm work?"

"Ah, jeez. My bad guys," Mo winced. "I forgot to do it after Dreg disabled the charm last night."

"Moron," Lana cursed, her arms shaking with rage as much as fear as she held her wand ready.

Tarin took another step forward, as the three gargoyles remained by the window. Their long black nails looked sharp as knives.

"Your brother was on our territory," Simone replied, "not only hunting humans but preparing to kill one. After catching him in the act, I killed him."

Tarin's eyes flashed with venom. "All creatures have to eat," she snarled.

"We don't complain about you druids draining the Earth dry for your spells."

"Cairnath can live off animals," Mo said, his wand pointed in their direction.

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“You humans don’t have to eat meat,” Tarin growled back. “Drinking from humans is a pleasure unparalleled. Animals can’t compare. My sire has claimed this land and proclaimed it a free feeding zone.” She grinned wide, showing a whole mouth full of twisted black fangs.

“Not whilst we’re here.” Simone stood firm.

“Then we’ll have to remove you.” Tarin turned to her gargoyles. “Kill them, but I get the one who slew my brother.”

Bobby wanted to scream in terror, but before he could do anything Tarin pounced on Simone, even as the three men leaped across the room.

Simone readied a spell but Tarin moved inhumanly fast, batting her wand away before trying to gouge Simone’s eyes out. Simone reeled back, before falling into a martial artist’s stance and swivel-kicking Tarin in the chest. The two women began countering one another’s vicious strikes as Bobby huddled behind the soda, praying Simone would win.

“*Destraya*,” Mo roared, throwing his hand out in a backhand swipe. Orange sparks flew from his wand, hitting a gargoyle in the chest and throwing him across the table.

Lana screamed out a second foreign word, this one causing a spout of flames to leave her wand and scorch the garg attacking her. The monster ducked Lana’s second fire spell, however, which hit the curtain beside the window instead.

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Bobby turned to see the fourth monster heading his way. Realising he needed to defend himself, he looked around desperately for a weapon, snatching an ash-tray from the coffee table.

“Where’s your wandie, friend?” The garg giggled as he advanced.

Bobby heard himself make a weird, panicked grunt as he threw the ash-tray at the monster’s head. The idiot didn’t even duck and the tray exploded across his forehead, opening up a grisly gash.

The abomination just giggled again as the gash closed itself once more.

“Holy crap.” Bobby gasped.

The thug ran at him, but before Bobby could try to dodge, a shape collided with the gargoyle and both figures smashed into the wall. As she hurried over, he realised Simone had thrown Tarin into the garg attacking him.

Tarin seized her gargoyle and threw him right back at Simone, causing them both to sprawl in a pile of limbs. This left him and Tarin alone on that side of the room. She swivelled to look at him, licking her lips. Worse, the curtain was aflame and quickly spreading. The whole house would burn down soon.

He continued to back away, until he met the wall. Simone was battling the other gargoyle as Tarin stalked toward him. He had nothing nearby he could make weapons out of either.

“Come here little boy,” Tarin cooed. “I won’t hurt you. Promise.”

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She lunged for him suddenly. Bobby dived to the side, but her long nails raked him across the shoulder. He felt no pain, but saw his blood splatter across the wall and then blossom on his shirt.

Tarin raised her bloody nails to her lips, licking drops of his blood off them pleausrably. “Hmm, you taste good, little druid.”

Tarin reached for him, but he ducked beneath her outstretched arms, trying to make for the door and escape. He’d taken no more than a couple of steps when her boot slammed into his back, driving him to the floor.

Before he could scramble to his feet, she’d flipped him over and sat on top of him, hand wrapping round his throat and pinning him down. Bobby struggled frantically, but she was far too strong.

She used one thumb then to tilt his head back, exposing his neck to her. Tarin opened her mouth wide, fangs salivating as she brought them down. Her teeth were an inch from tearing open his throat when a flash of bronze ripped Tarin’s throat open instead.

She spluttered and choked, her hands leaving his neck to go to her own as blood

spewed out. Tarin stood up hurriedly, but the bronze flashed again, plunging into her chest this time and piercing the heart.

Tarin gasped one last time, before her body crumbled into pieces of stone.

Bobby looked up to see Dreg above him, flicking Tarin's blood off the bronze sickle in his hand. In his other hand was a wand, which he raised as he strode to the partially-charred gargoyle pinning Lana to the table.

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"*Lavardun!*" Dreg roared. Abruptly, an invisible force seized the gargoyle, yanked him away from Lana and then, as Dreg brought his wand up sharply, the monster shot up into the ceiling only to slam back into the ground, unconscious.

"*Urolen,*" Dreg said next, using his wand in an overhand swipe. Vines crawled out of the wooden floorboards to wrap around the garg like ropes, binding him to the floor.

Finally, Dreg turned to the blazing inferno in the corner of the room. "*Iquill.*"

At his command, water fired from his wand until the fire was doused.

Bobby pulled himself to his feet as Simone finished off the last gargoyle, shouting something unintelligible. A thick, purple mist spewed out of her wand to consume the monster. In moments, the spell seeped into him, dissolving his body as it touched. The garg screamed in agony before crumbling into stone.

"Believe us now, mate?" Mo laughed weakly, picking up one of the rocks from the gargoyle he destroyed.

"We have a guest?" Was all Dreg said, his tone polite.

"Yeah," Simone panted, wearily raising her wand again. Her wand ignited and the shards of glass covering the floor rose into the air before swiftly flying back into place and joining together. In seconds, the front windows were as good as new.

"We just battled actual gargoyles," Bobby panted, looking at the piles of rubble that had been bloodthirsty monster's moments before. "And the girl was a



faerie?”

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“Yep, and Carinath are the worst kind,” said Simone.

“Only the worst kind of fae that exist in the mortal world actually,” Dreg added.

“Tarin might’ve got him,” Lana pointed at Bobby viciously, as if he’d done something wrong. Lana appeared more irritated at her clothes getting creased than almost getting killed herself.

Simone strode over to him, her eyes going to the blood on his shirt.

“It’s okay, a scratch won’t infect you, only a bite.” She placed a hand on his shoulder and pushed him down onto the sofa before leaning over him.

“*Infection?* What do you mean, Cairnath spread plague or something?”

“No, they can turn others into one of them.”

“What!” he exclaimed. “Anyone can turn into those monsters? Would have been nice to know before now.”

Simone grabbed his t-shirt by the collar and ripped it down the middle, exposing his chest and the scratch wounds.

“Whoa, steady on.” Bobby became incredibly self-conscious about his pasty and stick-like body as the beautiful girl leaned in close. He wasn’t used to being this close to anyone, let alone someone like Simone. He was filled with the scent of exotic flowers as her face was inches from his own. He avoided making eye-contact and his whole body tensed.

“What’re you doin...”

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He trailed off as Simone pressed her wand to his cuts and whispered,

“*Estorate.*”

Bobby sucked in a breath as it felt like a wasp stung his chest. He looked down in amazement to see the cuts stitch themselves together. His skin was red raw where the three wounds had been moments before, and now even the sting faded and he felt only a cold tingling sensation instead.

“So, I’m not going to become a Cairnath?” He needed to be sure.

“Nope,” said Mo, “you would’ve become a gargoyle first anyway.”

Bobby’s horrified expression must’ve been a comical sight as he looked between Mo and Simone.

“Sorry,” Simone said, “all of this is second nature to us, we keep forgetting how little you know. Basically, when Cairnath decide to infect humans they become undead. Only it takes a century for the victim to become a Cairnath.

Being the gargoyle is like a cocoon period, literally a stone cocoon for them at night. After a century of being a garg, they evolve into a true Cairnath.

Understand?”

Bobby slowly closed his mouth before nodding. “Jesus, it’d be easier if they were just vampires. You see them in movies all the time, but evil faeries and freaking gargoyles. It’s insane.”

“Sorry about your shirt.” Simone smiled at him. “I had to work quickly and make sure Tarin hadn’t dipped her nails in any poison. That would’ve complicated things.”

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“Bloody hell,” was all he could say in reply.

“So he’s to be our newest member.” Dreg’s dreadlocks fell to the side as he cocked his head at Bobby, studying him as if he was a curious insect.

“How did you know?” Mo asked.

Dreg shrugged. “You wouldn’t have brought him here otherwise. And we need a replacement for Zander.”

Bobby noticed there was a faraway look in Dreg's pale blue eyes, like he was lost in his own thoughts and barely paying attention to his surroundings.

"Don't use that word," Lana snapped. "Zander can't just be *replaced*."

"Yes he can," Dreg replied with no malice. "Everyone can be replaced. Our clan must have seven. That's all that matters."

Lana looked like she wanted to argue with him, but also that it was helpless to try. Dreg wasn't paying attention to her anyway, his gaze lingering on Bobby.

"Do you like animals?"

"Uh, sure. I always wanted a puppy," Bobby replied, frowning at the odd question.

"Do you love plants?"

"I like some flowers, sure," he said slowly. This was like the weirdest job interview ever.

"I bet you never had a flower die on you have you?" Dreg pressed.

Bobby thought back to the time he'd forgotten to water the plants in his room at the orphanage for weeks, yet they hadn't shown any signs of shrivelling.

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"And I'm guessing no dog has ever growled at you," Dreg continued. "No cat has ever hissed at you and no horse has ever thrown you off."

"Well, I've only ever ridden a horse once. Actually, it was technically a donkey ride at the beach when I was small," he mumbled. "But no, it didn't throw me off."

He cast his mind back, thinking if an animal had ever growled at him, but he couldn't think of one. Every dog he'd met had licked his hands and face like he'd covered them in peanut butter, and cats often tried to follow him home.

"So what you're saying is, everyone who likes gardening and owns a couple of

pets is secretly a spooky druid?”

Lana’s nose wrinkled in distaste. “This moron isn’t taking this seriously.

Let’s just assume he isn’t one of us and get rid of him. Even if he is destined to be a druid, another will come along to take his place once we’ve assured he’s out of Devery.”

“Is she talking about *killing* me?”

“No, darling,” Lana said acidly. “I’ll simply spell you with the desperate need to walk to Scotland, where you can stay for all I care.”

“Ignore Lana,” said Mo. “She’s just being nasty because she wanted a hot chick to be our next clan member.”

Lana rolled her eyes. “I’m pansexual, not a lesbian. Nor am I that shallow.”

“Pah, you are so shallow,” Mo shot back. “You stopped dating that one girl because she wore an offbrand dress.”

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“She got it *second-hand*,” Lana cried. “You can’t blame me for that.”

“Whatever picky-percy,” Mo laughed.

“Have you ever seen a ghost?” Dreg continued his bizarro questions.

“Uh...maybe.” Bobby had never told anyone about that before. He was sure that posh man in the Victorian suit he’d seen in London last year was part of some sort of street theatre. But his skin *had* been translucent, which he hadn’t been able to rationalize to himself.

“Excellent.” Dreg smiled faintly. “Well, I better get back to my potion. Try not to make so much noise, it’s harder to concentrate.”

With that, the small boy left the room, closing the door behind him quietly.

“Yeah, it was just loud noise, not like our lives were in danger or anything,”

said Mo. “And you thought we were odd,” he turned to Bobby, chuckling.

## Chapter Seven- White Tiger

“This is so nuts.’ Bobby paced around the room anxiously. “These Cairnath creatures are all around town, so everyone here is in terrible danger? How can

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that be allowed?” His mind was bursting with questions that he couldn’t ask all at once.

“Well, Cairnath are everywhere,” said Mo. “As are all Otherworld creatures.

As a ‘formerly normal’ person, you just didn’t know about them.”

“No way.” Bobby shook his head violently. “Every town has a pack of those rainbow haired monsters?”

“Not exactly,” Simone said. “Monsters exist all over the world, but Dawnvel is one of the few towns they are drawn to in particular.”

“So why aren’t all the townspeople dead?” Bobby asked desperately, looking for an answer to make sense of all this madness.

“We protect them,” said Mo. “Cairnath and gargoyles can’t attack during the day, which is why Dawnvel has a curfew. We’ve also placed ward spells so they can’t enter people’s houses.”

“My dorm building...that’s safe right? I’m not going to find a Cairnath in my bed or anything?”

“Not unless you invite one in.” Mo grinned. “And I can’t deny some of them are pretty sexy.”

“But why Dawnvel? It’s just a quaint countryside town, isn’t it? I mean, aside from the school and its old castle?” Bobby asked.

“Because of Dawnvel itself,” Lana drawled, as if she were loath to speak to him. “Deep underneath the castle is a gateway to Otherworld. It’s a sealed gateway, so nothing can get out, but where a gateway is the veil between worlds

is thinner, drawing supernatural beings to it like a beacon. It's why our clan is stationed here."

"Okay, I'm going to pretend I understood all of that," said Bobby. "I just need to..." he trailed off, edging for the door once again.

"You can't leave yet," Lana sneered. "Not until the perimeter has been secured. There could be more Cairnath watching the house. Although you're a pesky little urchin, I don't fancy seeing you ripped limb from limb."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Alright, I'm not gonna try and escape, but I really need to pee, okay?" he lied.

"No problem," said Simone. "You do that whilst Lana and I spell the house safe."

"Uh, do I have too?" Lana followed Simone from the room sluggishly, muttering something about needing to do her hair.

"Toilet's to the left of the front door." Mo collapsed onto the sofa and flicked on the TV, with his wand; not the remote. "But don't go wandering and come straight back here. Dreg keeps all kinds of magical creatures round the house, you probably don't wanna run in to them."

"Uh, right," Bobby nodded awkwardly, trying not to rush from the room.

He'd fully intended running back to his dorm the moment he got the chance, but with the threat of Cairnath out there he hesitated.

He walked down a long corridor, finding himself staring at the front door, frozen. Before Bobby could decide the door opened and Warren barged into the

house. He looked a mess, his hair covered in sweat and his face coated in blood.

It dripped from his nose, as well as the gash under his eye and more scratch marks on his neck. The heavily muscled Irishman took one look at him before

leaping forward and seizing Bobby round the collar.

Bobby tried to speak, but only a grunt came out as he was lifted high into the air and pinned against the wall.

“What the hell are you doing here you little creep?” Warren roared. “You a bloody Legionnaire?”

The blood around his eyes made Warren look even more deranged than normal. With his long black hair and electric blue eyes, Warren resembled some Norse warrior or a barbarian Viking. A broadsword would’ve fit better in his hand than a wand.

“N-no,” Bobby croaked.

Warren held him up in the air with only one hand now as he rooted through Bobby’s pockets with the other. “C’mon, where’s your sorcery extractor?”

“Warren, let him go,” Mo shouted, racing toward them. “He isn’t a druid hunter, he’s one of us...we think.”

“What the hell are you on about?” Warren said through gritted teeth.

“When one of the clan falls, another rises to take his place, you know the drill.”

Warren looked from Mo and back to Bobby in disbelief. “You’re telling me this little eejit is gonna be Zander’s replacement?”

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“You can let him go now,” Mo repeated.

Warren ignored him, glaring at Bobby like he’d peed in his cereal. Bobby had no idea what he’d done to offend him so.

“If he’s not a hunter, who’s to say he isn’t a dark druid. Maybe he’s the one who murdered Zander!”

“I didn’t even know druids existed until today,” Bobby shouted. “How could I be an evil one?”



“It’s a cover. You’re pretending to be hopelessly pathetic to wriggle your way into our ranks only to betray us.”

“I’m afraid being hopelessly pathetic isn’t an act,” Bobby replied.

“Leave him alone Warren,” said a new voice.

He turned to see a stranger standing on the stairs. It must be Niamh, the only Perfect he hadn’t met. Bobby wondered how long she’d been there. He prayed she hadn’t heard Mo call him Zander’s replacement.

Warren let him go at last, mumbling. “Sorry.”

The girl before him was physically intimidating. She looked like a pro athlete, taller and more muscled than the majority of guys, but etched on her face was a vulnerability that belied her size. Her blonde hair might’ve once been as perfect as Lana’s, but was now knotted and dirty. Old makeup was still smudged under her eyes where she’d been crying.

“Whoa, you’re finally out of your room. We started to worry you spelled your door locked.” Mo smiled weakly.

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“Warren’s shouts made my floorboards shake,” she replied with her own faint smile.

“Oh, *that* you hear? But not the group of Cairnath bursting through the windows?” Mo rolled his eyes.

“They were here?” Warren seethed. “On the same night this guy shows up?

How do you know he isn’t one of em, trying to fool us?”

“Oh course he...” Mo trailed off. “Actually, that could be a possibility...wait, with you being so close to him and with blood all over your face he would’ve exposed himself by trying to bite you or something. He isn’t one of them.”

“I assure you, I certainly won’t be exposing myself.” Bobby edged away from Warren before the brute could hoist him into the air again.

“What happened to you?” Niamh asked Warren softly, pulling him toward her. She’d been so quiet Bobby hadn’t even heard her come down the stairs.

“I was scouting the new coven in town,” Warren grunted, reluctantly limping away from Bobby. “It’s big. I got ambushed by a Cairnath and a gaggle of gargs. I killed several, but got outnumbered and had to escape. The maggots almost killed me. They must be led by an ancient Cairnath. They usually can’t co-exist in such large numbers unless a real powerful dude is influencing them.”

“You idiot,” Niamh pounded her fist against his chest. “You could’ve died tonight. What were you thinking hunting them alone? We don’t need another of our number to die, not so soon after...”

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Warren’s expression showed something other than anger for the first time since Bobby had met him.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean too. I thought there’d only be a half dozen of ‘em. Just wanted to get my anger out, you know.”

“And why didn’t you heal yourself?” Niamh asked, using her own wand to cure the litany of flesh wounds covering him.

“Ran out of magic keeping the monsters at bay,” Warren grumbled, holding up his wand which was smoking at the end, apparently useless for now.

*So, druids don’t have an endless supply of the stuff.*

Niamh pulled out a handkerchief and gently wiped Warren’s blood away after she’d healed his wounds. Bobby watched in fascination. This kind of thing was normal for these people. Hearing about the Cairnath attack had barely bothered Niamh and Warren.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when Lana and Simone suddenly re-appeared in the hallway.

“Are there more to kill?” Warren said eagerly.

“No sign of any others.” Simone shook her head. “And we put the protective

spell back on the house.”

“Good, now you can explain what *this*, ” Warren jabbed a finger at Bobby, “is doing here.”

“He’s going to be the newest druid in our clan.” Simone met Warren’s gaze, not backing down.

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“And you’re sure of this?” Niamh said, her tone intense.

Simone nodded sadly. “Yes. I know it’s hard, what with how soon it is. But like Dreg always says, ‘The Threads of Fate wait for no one’. We all knew we’d have to be seven again soon.”

Warren turned to glower at him, but held his insults at bay.

“Why was the protective spell down anyway?” said Niamh.

“Dreg disabled it.” Mo shrugged.

“He did what?” Warren growled.

“He brought back another creature from the forest,” Lana said. “I just hope he keeps whatever germ-ridden thing it is in his room.”

“So he often brings strange animals here?” Bobby asked.

“All the time.” Mo grinned. “Don’t worry though, they’re not Otherworld creatures, just your regular Snortails and Pixikins.”

Bobby decided to let the last two names go, unsure whether Mo was joking, and focused on the word he’d heard them use before. “Right, and what the hell is Otherworld?”

Lana sighed melodramatically, turning away from him. “Do we have to tell him everything? He’ll probably die soon anyway. It seems like a dreadful waste of time.”

“Lana! She’s joking Bobby,” Simone tried to reassure him. “But she’s right, in a

way. We can tell you everything once your powers have been awakened, but first you need to become one of us, you have to go through the Joining.”

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“Are you sure you guys aren’t a cult?” He chuckled weakly. “You do keep saying an awful lot of cultish things.”

Bobby kept smiling, even as he wracked his mind for ways he could leave.

Maybe these druids really were the good guys, but Bobby wasn’t one of them.

“No, the Joining is a ritual, I know that part does sound cultish.” Simone broke off with a grin. “But we’ll need all of us to take part and it needs to be at midnight. We can do it tomorrow.”

“Excellent. I’ll see you then,” Bobby said quickly, not caring what he was saying, but jumping on a way for him to leave.

“Are you sure it’s safe for him to walk back to his dorm?” Mo asked.

“We swept the area with a detector spell,” Lana yawned. “There’s nothing out there now.”

“Dandy,” said Bobby, immediately horrified by his use of the word. “Well okay then, see you tomorrow.” He hurried from the house before any of them could reply, hoping this was all some sort of fever dream. Maybe someone had spiked his drink at lunch and tonight’s events had been one long hallucination.

\*

Simone took a deep breath as she began climbing the stairs to his room. They still hadn’t talked, not properly, since Zander’s death.

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It had been one hell of a night. Just like she’d told Niamh, Simone hadn’t expected they’d be joined by a new druid, Zander’s replacement. No. She shouldn’t think of Bobby that way. He was his own person, and no one could replace Zander.

A tiny voice at the back of her mind whispered that maybe Bobby wouldn't be the newest member of their coven anyway. There was always a chance he could die when he went through the Joining. *No. Don't think that way either.*

Simone willed the bad thoughts away, something she felt she was doing more of lately, and walked down the hall, stopping outside Warren's room. The only noise on the corridor had been her own footsteps, but now she heard the clank of metal and the rough exhales of air.

She almost chickened out and turned straight back for her own bedroom, but forced herself to knock lightly and push the door open.

Warren didn't hear her enter. His earphones were in as he stood in the corner of his room, grunting as he lifted the dumbbells up before swinging them back down again.

He was topless, his muscles even bigger than normal as the blood rushed through them. He'd tied his dark hair back from his face, and it was already damp from sweat.

All of them were lucky to have large, spacious bedrooms in the house, yet they didn't always seem that way with how much clutter they'd all piled in.

Lana had nabbed the biggest room for herself, naturally, yet hers was also the

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most crowded with furniture and the numerous belongings she didn't really need. Due to this, Warren's room always seemed to be the biggest, with how minimalist it was.

Bare wooden floorboards ran the length of the room, since he hadn't bothered to have any carpet, whilst his bed lay in one corner, his workout bench and weights in the other. No TV, sofa or barely any personal belongings could be seen in the room.

Warren turned toward her suddenly, dropping the dumbbells in shock. The weights had been so large Simone was surprised they didn't crash straight through the floor.

“Simone,” he rasped, his blue eyes blazing with anxiety.

“Are you sure you should be working out after what you’ve been through tonight?”

“I’m fine,” he murmured, seizing his bottle of water and taking huge gulps.

“What are you doing here?”

She shrugged. “I...just wanted to see how you’re doing. After everything, I mean.”

“Me?” he slammed the water bottle back on his windowsill. “I’ve never been better. Why would anything be wrong? It’s not like my best friend is dead, or that I’m no longer with the girl I’m in love with, is it?”

*In love with?*

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“C’mon,” she said quietly, closing the door behind her and edging into the room. “Don’t be like that.”

She tried not to let his words stun her. They’d told each other they’d loved each other before, but that had been months ago, before it had all fallen apart.

But not he’d admitted that nothing had changed for him.

“Like what,” he replied, taking off his workout gloves and laying them on his weight bench.

“Don’t pretend nothing’s happened. I’m here if you want to talk about...about Zander. About anything.”

“Okay,” he stepped towards her, his pumped-up chest muscles very distracting. “How about we talk about the new kid. Some random stranger you brought in off the streets. Are you really in that much of a rush to replace Zander, to pretend he never existed?”

His words hurt her like a punch to the gut. “I can’t believe you just said that. I

can't believe you could even think it."

Warren had the good grace to look down at his feet, ashamed of himself. "I'm sorry. I know you're not consciously trying to replace Zander, but maybe in your grief, you're just latching on to someone."

"You know every coven needs seven!" she cried. "This isn't about replacing anyone I swear."

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"I just...it's too much of a coincidence," said Warren. "We all knew this day would come, but not this quickly. I don't trust this Bobby, not when we have no idea who killed Zander."

"You can't really think it was him."

"Because he looks so pathetic." The ghost of a smile flitted across his lips.

"No, the fact Bobby genuinely didn't know druids existed before today. But I know I can't convince you to trust him just like that. I didn't come here to talk about Bobby, anyway."

"Why did you?" He looked into her eyes, and his own eyes seemed to be swirling slowly, the brighter blue motes swimming in the darker navy.

"Because I'm worried about you. Grief affects everyone differently. I know you don't show your emotions, and I'm...I'm just worried about you okay."

"Worried I'll do something stupid." He took another step closer. There were only a few inches between them now. Simone took a deep, involuntary breath, her senses filling with Warren's sweat and the spicy, sandalwood smell from his cologne. She'd missed that smell.

"You've already started," she replied, though allowed herself to smile a little.

"You shouldn't have gone after so many gargoyles on your own. You're lucky you weren't seriously hurt."

"It helped me forget though." His eyes clouded over with pain. "When I was

fighting, everything else went away. It was better.”

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“Warren,” she murmured, leaning in to him and stretching her arms over his broad back. “It’s okay.”

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight. For the first time since she’d learned of Zander’s death Simone felt safe, here in his arms.

“It isn’t.” He chuckled humourlessly.

“I know, I just couldn’t think of what else to say.”

As she made to end their embrace, Warren looked down at her.

“Like I said, just don’t do anything stupid,” she muttered.

“Like this?”

His mouth pressed down on hers suddenly. Shock flooded through her for a heartbeat, before she eagerly returned the kiss. Her hand travelled up and clutched his long, damp hair. It felt like forever since they’d last kissed. He moaned softly, his lips vibrating against hers and Simone found herself opening her mouth, deepening the kiss. Her tongue wrestled against his as she held his head tight and arched her body into his own.

She wanted this, needed this, but she shouldn’t, she couldn’t. Simone broke it off.

“We can’t,” she panted, moving away reluctantly. “It...it isn’t a good idea right now. Neither of us are thinking straight.”

“I never do when it comes to you,” said Warren, gazing at her in wonder.

She could tell he wanted more, and so did she. She wanted nothing more than to reach up and kiss him again, to push him over to his bed and... *no!*

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She’d read about the things grief did. She’d broken up with Warren for a reason.



She had no idea if they would get back together, or ever could get back together, but she knew she risked losing him as a friend too if she led him on like this. What kind of person would she be if she broke up with him and then continued to hook up with him afterwards whenever either of them were feeling low?

“I- I’m sorry. I should go. I just wanted to let you know I’m here for you, if you ever need to talk about it all,” she said it all in a whispered rush, hastily backing toward the door.

She knew Warren wanted to argue, but instead he just watched her go, the agony back in his eyes.

\*

Simone hurried through the darkened streets, on the tail of the gargoyles looking for food tonight. She’d thought it would be a quiet patrol tonight, especially after already battling them today, but no such luck.

She’d offered to take tonight’s sweep of the town off of Dreg. She needed to get out of the house, to clear her mind from what had happened in Warren’s room barely an hour ago.

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Several minutes into her patrol she’d found a lone handbag on the pavement, its contents spilling out in a river of cosmetics. There’d been a purse too, still full, and the strap of the bag had been ripped.

Her first thought had been to hope this was a simple mugging, but what failure of a mugger would leave behind the very thing he attacked someone for?

Sure, the handbag could’ve belonged to some poor victim of a normal abduction, but this was Dawnvel. Chances were, the crime committed here wasn’t a matter for normal police.

Simone had cast a tracer spell on the red leather bag, and now held her wand at arm’s length, letting it lead her to the last person to touch the bag. Currently, the wand had led her away from the Dawnvel’s residential area and closer to the edge of town.

Even as she scoured Dawnvel town for signs of trouble, it hadn't taken her mind off Warren and their kiss, nor her paranoia about Bobby and the fact he might not make it to becoming a druid. The one silver lining of the gargoyle activity was that it allowed Simone to forget her problems, just for a little while.

Her wand vibrated and veered to the left, guiding her across the road and toward one of the three local supermarkets in Dawnvel. This one stood proudly at the front of the industrial estate behind it. The large, multi-purpose store teemed during the day, but now it was devoid of any life signs at all.

Her wand shook to the left, down the side of the supermarket, to the loading bay where their deliveries took place.

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A screamed rent the still air, swiftly cut off and muffled. Simone pressed herself against the wall of the supermarket before entering the bay as she heard gruff voices close by.

"Jack you moron. I thought you knocked her out."

"I did James," Jack snarled back. "The bitch woke up didn't she. What does it matter anyway, no one can see us now?"

"Someone might've heard us, dumbass."

"So what?" said a third voice. "If another person comes down here it just means more food for us."

"Here here," someone else cheered.

"Not if that someone is a damned druid," James shot back. "You know about them. We were all warned."

"Your paranoid mate," said Jack. "That's just stories our sire told us so we don't kill our food out in the open. Now stop being a baby and lets kill this one, her fidgeting is getting on my nerves."

Simone chanced a look around the wall and down the loading bay. A group of four hulking men stood at the very end. One of them, Jack, held a struggling girl

tight, his hand clamped over her mouth.

The four men were only a couple of years older than her, but by the unnatural grey tinge to their skin they were all gargoyles, recently turned too. The blonde woman Jack held captive looked to be in her early thirties, her face stained with mascara and tear tracks.

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*Crap.* Simone thought she could probably handle four gargoyles, but the risk was too great. She dove into her pocket and snatched out her phone, rapidly texting Mo her location and that she needed help. Her first instinct had been to contact Warren, but he'd been through too much today already. She certainly wasn't going to call Lana; she'd tease her mercilessly. Maurice would also be the only other coven member already awake, likely gaming as always.

There was no time for her to wait for Mo, however. They were about to kill the young woman any moment now.

Simone gripped her wand tight, grabbing the hilt of her dagger with her free hand she hurried down the bay.

"Let her go now!" she cried, willing a fireball to bloom on the end of her wand to serve a warning to what she was capable of.

The four gargoyles flinched in surprise, and James even put his hands up in surrender as she approached.

"What're you doing, mate?" Jack barked out a laugh. "It's just a little girl."

"She's one of them, a druid." James insisted.

Now she was up close, Simone vaguely recognised both Jack and James from Dawnvel Academy. They'd been a couple of years above her and she'd never interacted with them, but she remembered they'd both been on the school football team. It chilled her to know the old Jack and James had been murdered by a Cairnath, turned into the monsters they were now.

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Jack laughed once more, accompanied by the two other men Simone didn't recognise.

"It just looks like a girl holding a piece of rock to me, or a really big lighter."

"This thing," Simone held her wand higher. "Yeah it'll work as a lighter if you want, stoneboys like you go up like dry paper."

Jack kept the dumb grin on his face, but the mirth died in his eyes.

"Let the girl go," she repeated.

"Nah, we caught her fair and square." Jack snarled. "You don't scare me, witchy. You are hot though. Here, you can have this tart." Jack threw the sobbing victim at one of his friends, turning to Simone. "I reckon I'll be feeding from you tonight instead."

Jack licked his lips as he advanced, laughing once more. Simone supposed Jack thought he terrified her, but in truth his stupidity put her at ease. The vast majority of freshly turned gargoyles were like this, naive to the danger of druids and drunk on their newfound powers. Jack likely thought nothing could harm him now, he was a god amongst mortals.

He leaped for her, but Simone merely let loose her fireball. The fire struck Jack square in the face, setting his hair and flesh alight in seconds. The fool howled in surprised agony and ran back, flailing his arms and trying to bat out the flames in vain.

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His fellow gargoyles shouted out in shock, trying to help Jack but not wanting to get fire on themselves either. The fire spread to his body and Jack fell to his knees, his screams dying out as he keeled over, burned to a crisp.

That was the easy part however. Now the four remaining gargoyles knew what they were up against, they'd take her far more seriously.

One of them, who looked like he'd been a bodybuilder in his past life, threw the blond woman to the ground, hard enough to knock her out cold.

Bodybuilder then motioned to the others, who spread out to flank Simone's either side as they made to surround her.

She backed up, conjuring another fireball. She couldn't get them all at once though. She ripped her dagger free

Two of them went for her at once. She threw fire at the garg to her left, whilst pivoting to slash the thug on her right. The gargoyle on her left ducked the flames, and the one of the right tried to evade but she still caught his ear, lopping off the tip. The brute keened, clamping a hand to his ear and falling back. The other three gargoyles pressed against her, however, grabbing for her weapons.

Simone booted one guy in the stomach and elbowed Bodybuilder in the nose, causing a crunch, but James used the distraction to slug her in the face, so hard her vision blacked out for a second. She lost her balance and couldn't block the next attack in time as Bodybuilder wrapped a hand around her throat and

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launched her into the air. She flew backward, hitting the pavement with such force her entire body jarred.

Simone made to leap to her feet, but all the wind had been driven out of her.

She only realised then that her knife had been taken from her in the commotion.

"Ha," sneered James, the fear he previously had erased. "I guess this druid doesn't have any friends."

James stepped over her, lifting her own dagger high, ready to strike.

A colossal pale shape smashed into James with sickening force and a thunderous roar. Simone caught a glimpse of teeth and an arc of blood as James fell under the weight of the tiger mauling him.

Simone couldn't believe her eyes as the white tiger rose on its hind quarters and strode forward like a man. The majestic beast threw himself at the remaining three gargoyles, fearless.

With one swipe, he caved in one monster's face before whirling to backhand

another, his claws raking the man's chest to ribbons. Bodybuilder was the last to die, his skull breaking and letting loose a red mist as the white tiger clamped his jaws down on either side, wrestling him to the ground and shaking his great head from side to side until the gargoyle stirred no longer.

By the time Simone got to her feet, the white tiger was back on all fours. He was awe-inspiring to look upon. Snowy-white fur streaked with lines of black covered his heavily muscled body.

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She felt a primal fear as the tiger padded her way, his iron grey eyes piercing her own.

Simone raised a trembling hand, gripping her wand tight, ready to fight to the death. The white tiger paused as her wand lit up with a blue glow, and then his maw widened into something that vaguely resembled a parody of a smile.

Slowly, the white fur melted away, the huge teeth and claws retracted and the beasts very bones changed shape.

As the tiger dissolved, it revealed a tall, leanly muscled man in its place.

Simone tried not to let her shock show. She'd heard of weretigers before, and knew they were one of the rarest shifters, and the most deadly. They possessed an inhuman combination of strength and speed, just like the animal they could morph into at will.

Now in his human form, the weretiger looked to be only a few years older than her. His face was flawless, almost angelic, yet the illusion broken by his devilish smirk. He had silky white-blond hair, the strands dangling over his pale grey eyes, and his skin was pale gold, his torso and stomach impeccably defined. He was also completely naked.

"My name is Kazimir," the nude man drawled, his words laced with mirth.

"Pleased to meet you, druid."

Simone didn't lower her wand, even though Kazimir showed no signs of immediate attack. He could be lulling her into a false sense of security, but then

why had he bothered to help her fend off the gargoyles?

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“The Dawnvel coven are in charge of this town,” she said, keeping all fear from her tone and expression. She wouldn’t give this weretiger the satisfaction.

“So I’ve heard,” said Kazimir, still smirking at her, his cheekbones sharp enough to cut. “No one told me how beautiful the druids were however. Are the others as divine as you, or are you special?”

“Shut it,” she snapped. “Declare your intentions. Weretigers have been known to feed off of humans. If you’re here in search of new prey it won’t end well for you.”

“Oh?” Kazimir said softly. “Are you going to arrest me, girl. Wrestle me to the ground and bind me in shackles. I’d love to see you attempt it.”

Simone had no idea why he kept coming on to her. Maybe this was part of his ploy to ambush her. Maybe he was just in heat.

She fired a warning spell at the weretiger’s feet, causing a mini electrical explosion.

Kazimir took a step back, his smirk slipping.

“I’ve already called in the rest of my coven,” Simone said. “They’ll be here in moments. Do you need to arrest you? If you try to fight it could end in your death.”

“Relax pretty one.” Kazimir wrinkled his nose in distaste. “I’m not one of the rabid of my kind who feast on human flesh, nor do I seek quarrel with any of you druids.”

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Simone relaxed a little, although her wand stayed aloft. He could always be lying.

“So what are you doing he... and could you at least cover yourself,” she said,

purposely keeping her eyes focused on his own.

“Of course.” Kazimir bowed his head. “Try not to peek.”

Unfortunately, she couldn’t look away from him completely, in case he took the chance to attack, but she kept him in the corner of her eye as he pulled one of the dead men’s jackets off and wrapped it round his waist.

She turned back to face him fully, now trying not to stare at his bulging abs.

“Tell me your name girl.”

“Simone,” she said through ground teeth.

“That’s as pretty as you are,” he replied, unashamedly taking in her own body.

“Do you-”

“I’m asking the questions,” she cut across. “Now, tell me what you’re doing here?”

“Saving your fine behind it looks like.” He shrugged, his devilish smile returning.

“I didn’t need saving,” she spat.

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“What were you doing following me?”

“My, my. Awfully big headed, aren’t you? I was merely passing by when I heard the commotion. I know what gargs are like, wretched fiends. Druids

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however have been allies to me in the past. I was only happy to save your life.

Although I don’t appreciate the wand pointed in my face as a reward.”

“You expect me to believe that?” she said, but even so she lowered her wand.

Maybe he was telling the truth?



It wasn't that uncommon for other supernaturals to visit Dawnvel from time to time; supernaturals who had no intention of preying upon the residents. Since Simone had been here, a vampire couple, a troupe of elves and even a mermaid had stopped by.

"I assure you, I'm just passing through this town," Kazimir said. "Research the name Kazimir Kaine in your little druid database if you must. You'll find no record of me harming innocent humans."

"I will," she promised, relief flooding through her. Even if he was lying and her search proved he was a dangerous criminal, she wouldn't be able to take him down on her own. If he was foolish enough to hang around Dawnvel, she and the rest of the coven could capture him later.

"Thanks, I guess," she said. "For helping me fight the gargoyles, *not* rescuing me."

Kazimir bowed low. "It was a pleasure Simone, and an even greater pleasure meeting a woman as beautiful as you. I'm sure we'll meet again."

"Really, why?"

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"Oh, I may stay a while," was all Kazimir gave in reply. He suddenly looked up over her head, listening intently. "Ah, I can hear someone running this way. I best take my leave."

Before she could say anything to stop him, Kazimir cast the jacket at his waist aside and fell to his knees, morphing into the great white tiger once again.

The tiger ran past her at terrific speed, wheeling around the corner and disappearing from view. Simone stared in the space Kazimir had been seconds before, stunned.

A minute later, a breathless Mo rounded the corner into the loading bay, clutching a stitch in his side.

"Oh, thank Lucifer you're alright." Mo came to her side before hunching over to get his breath back. He spotted the gargoyle remains. "You handled them all on

your own?”

“Uh...yeah. Sorry, I thought I might need help, just as a precaution. But I got ‘em all. We better help that woman out. Make sure she’s not hurt too badly.”

“I’ll do it,” Mo panted. “You must be beat.”

As Mo drew his wand and tended to the gargoyle’s would be victim, who was starting to awake, Simone frowned in the dark.

She had no idea why she’d kept Kazimir to herself, as if he was something to hide.

## Chapter Eight- A Choice

Bobby didn't think things could get any stranger, until he woke up that morning to find a green man looming over him.

"Whatthafoo," he yelped, scrambling feverishly with his duvet as the green man drifted away from him, his curious expression unchanged. He was tall, with long dark hair, but what stuck out most was the suit of medieval armour he wore. Worse, what looked like a wooden stake poked out of his chest.

As Bobby sat bolt upright, he realised the stranger was not only translucent, but floating several inches above the ground. That, combined with the green tinge to his skin, made one word crash through his mind. Ghost!

His suspicions were confirmed as the armoured man moaned faintly before gliding out of Bobby's room by simply melting into the wall.

"Tell me that didn't just happen," he mumbled to himself, exhausted by all the madness he'd seen since setting foot in Dawnvel.

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He'd spent a couple of hours googling druids on his phone before he'd fallen into a restless sleep. He'd read some articles that described druids as a peaceful people in tune with nature and animals, but other articles depicting them as an evil cult who took part in human sacrifice.

Bobby hastily got dressed and unlocked his door, jumping once again as he found Mo leaning against the wall waiting for him, apparently filing down his nails to pass the time.

"Don't mind Vlad," said Mo.

"You what?"

"The ghost that just passed through here." Mo grinned widely.

"So he was a ghost?"

“He is now, yeah. Was a vamp before that. Old Vlad doesn’t know he’s dead.

Still tries to suck on people’s necks when they sleep. Most people just feel a slight breeze or nothing at all. If he annoys you, just fling some garlic at him.”

“And the ghosts can’t hurt us?”

“Not these kind,” Mo replied. “Lots of others, sure, but Vlad the Lad and Dawnvel’s other permanent ghosts aren’t gonna hurt or possess anyone.”

“Apart from the phantom neck biting?”

Mo shrugged. “The animal ghosts come in handy sometimes. We can communicate with them better.’

“There’s animal ghosts?”

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“Of course, why would humans be the only ones whose spirits remain?” Mo looked over to the empty bed across the room. “Hey, where’s your roommate?”

He shrugged. “No idea. He’s hardly ever here. Freddy usually rolls in hours after curfew.”

“Hmm, very interesting.” Mo twirled an imaginary goatee. “My spider senses are tingling. What you need to learn around here Bobby is that everyone’s potentially up to something. This Freddy could be a gorgon or even a mermaid in disguise for all you know.”

“Well, I didn’t see a tail, but I suppose he could be hiding one.” They shared a grin.

Mo assured Bobby as they got ready to leave that only one in a hundred poor sods became ghosts after death, and that was usually because they had unfinished business.

“And there’s vampire ghosts?”

“Just one at Dawnvel. All the others were mortal before.”

“Others?” Bobby asked, locking his door behind him, not that it would stop Vlad from gliding back in again.

“Course. This place is full of them.”

“How come I haven’t seen one in Dawnvel before now?”

“Your powers are burgeoning,” said Mo, continuing to casually file his fingernails. “I’m guessing it started when you first saw that Shade on your way here. Every day you’re getting stronger, until one day the sorcery makes you go

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off like a bomb, killing you and maybe innocent bystanders nearby. Unless you complete the Joining of course.”

“What! I might explode? You left that part out last night.”

“Did we? Oops,” Mo sniggered. “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine as long as we do the Joining.”

“You know this is like, emotional blackmail or something,” Bobby said as they walked through the building.

“Hey man, it’s just the unfortunate truth.”

“What were you doing outside my room anyway, stalker? Please tell me you weren’t there all night.”

“Naa, you’re not that important.” Mo chuckled. “I arrived about ten minutes ago. Simone ordered me to check you hadn’t skipped town. She’s deemed you a flight risk.”

Bobby couldn’t deny he’d thought about it. He’d spent half the night making plan after plan of how he could get out of all this.

“You like her, don’t you?”

“Wh-what do you mean?” Bobby spluttered.

“I saw the way you looked at her, completely enamoured.”

“I was not. I mean, she’s beautiful, everyone can see that. But so are Lana and Niamh, as well as a load of other girls here.”

“A fair few guys too,” Mo added. “Maybe it’s something in Dawnvel’s water, eh.”

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“What, like a spell?”

“No, I was joking.” Mo said. “I don’t think it’s possible to magic yourself pretty. Illusions are only temporary, otherwise I’d spell myself gorgeous daily.”

“So, I really don’t have a choice with this druid nonsense?” Bobby asked as they left the dormitories and set off through campus.

“Not with the Joining I’m afraid. You could willingly give up your magic though, if you’re dead-set on not being a druid.”

“Really, then I can do that, can’t I.”

Mo nodded grimly. “It’s possible, but not recommended.”

They passed by the Perfects house now, where Dreg was hanging out of the window, his arm flung out. Bobby’s mouth fell open as the raven swooped down from the clouds to land on Dreg’s arm before he disappeared back through the window.

“That’ll be the guild replying to us,” Mo explained. “Dreg sent them the raven last night.”

“What like with a scroll attached to the bird’s leg.”

“Yep.” Mo chuckled. “You’d think a phone would be easier, but the Elders are sticklers for tradition. So’s Dreg actually, the guy doesn’t own a phone or even a TV. I don’t think he’s ever been on the internet.”

“He’s a bit more...druidy than the rest of you, isn’t he?”

“Definitely,” Mo replied. “It’s probably because of who his family are. The rest

of us are relatively normal, promise.”

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“Wait, where are we going?” Bobby realised Mo was leading him to the cafeteria.

“You get to sit at the ‘Perfects’ table now.” Mo grinned. “Other than that, it’s a regular school day. Try to act like there’s nothing out of the ordinary going on.”

He opened his mouth wordlessly. How could Mo expect him to act like last night hadn’t happened? “You think I’ll be able to focus on mathematical equations this morning?”

“Well, the clan’s got to maintain secrecy, haven’t we?”

Before Bobby could reply, he got distracted by a rabbit hopping through a stone wall. He guessed Mo hadn’t been joking about animal ghosts. Bobby would have to double-check every animal he saw was opaque or not from now on.

They entered the cafeteria, greeted by the smells of cooked porridge and bacon as Mo led him to the Perfects table. Bobby received more than a few curious glances as people saw him hanging with the elite gang.

The rest of the clan, other than Dreg, huddled together at the end of one of the long tables. As usual, no other students were seated anywhere near them.

They’d all been talking in hushed tones, apart from Niamh, who spooned her porridge silently, without eating any.

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“I’m telling you, a Legionnaire is to blame,” Warren declared as he and Mo sat beside them. He cut off to glare at Bobby. “Why’s he here again? He isn’t even one of us yet.”

“He will be after the Joining,” said Simone.

“If he passes, which I find highly unlikely,” Lana added.

“I’m just glad you didn’t try to run again.” Simone bestowed him with a brilliant smile, her grey eyes twinkling. Bobby felt his chest flutter.

He decided to ignore Warren and Lana’s jibes and asked. “Legionnaire? Isn’t that what you accused me of last night?”

“It’s the name of those who hunt druids.” Warren scowled. “Their order has been around since Roman times, and they still practice the tradition.”

“Oh yeah, because Legionnaire is what Roman soldiers were called,” he said.

“Well done, you know basic history.” Lana applauded sarcastically.

Simone shook her head. “Legionnaires aren’t to blame for Zander. I told you before, there were signs of dark magic.” She looked at Niamh guiltily. “But I won’t go into details.”

“It’s okay,” Niamh mumbled. “You don’t have to wrap me in cotton wool. I know none of us have been ready to question you yet, but please, you and Dreg were there just after those two girls found his bod...found Zander. What was it you saw?”

Simone took a deep breath, as if she didn’t want to talk about this at all.

Bobby didn’t blame her.

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“Zander’s flesh was grey and his veins had gone red, clear signs of dark magic. There’d also been a black line at his throat. Whatever dark spell was cast on him it...suffocated him to death.” She struggled through a sob. “I’m so sorry Niamh. I wanted you to believe he died peacefully.”

Bobby was shocked to see Niamh didn’t appear close to tears, but stared stonily into space instead. “It’s okay, Sim. There is no peaceful way to go once dark magic is involved. It’s not your fault.”

An uncomfortable silence followed, until Mo said. “At least we have a strong lead to go on, so we can catch whatever scum did this.”



“You...you’re going after Zander’s killer?” he whispered.

“Of course,” Warren snapped. “You think we’d let anyone get away with this? He was one of us. I’m gonna kill whoever did this myself and make it as painful as possible.” Warren’s massive arms trembled as he clutched his fists.

Bobby just nodded, scared to ask anything more.

“We know Legionnaires aren’t above using tools of dark sorcery to achieve their goals,” Lana insisted. “It’s still possible the hunters are behind it.”

“Listen,” said Simone. “I want justice for Zander as much as anyone. But we have a more imminent threat with this new coven in town.”

“Nothing’s more important than Zander,” Warren shot back.

Bobby couldn’t fail to notice the tension between the two of them, so many things left unspoken whenever their gazes met.

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“I didn’t say that,” said Simone, looking away from Warren. “But we can’t let them ambush us again. You said yourself it was a larger coven than normal, and probably led by someone powerful.”

“And you’re sure Cairnath didn’t kill Zander?” Bobby summoned up the courage to ask.

“Cairnath don’t have magic,” Lana replied acidly, “so how could they kill Zander with dark magic? Imbecile.”

“He was just asking,” said Simone.

“And I’m just telling.” Lana crossed her arms beneath her chest. “Stop defending him so much, the rest of us don’t care if you want to hook up with him or something. Keep it to yourselves.”

Bobby’s stomach clenched.

“What’re you talking about?” Simone frowned, evidently making her feelings

toward him clear. Of course, a girl as beautiful as Simone wouldn't be interested in him. He hadn't really expected anything less.

"Yeah, what are you talking about?" Warren demanded, looking at Bobby with renewed loathing.

"Absolute nonsense, as usual." Simone met Lana's frosty gaze.

"Calm down, hulk," said Lana. "The jealous ex-boyfriend is so cliché."

*Wait, what?* Now it made sense. Of course, the hottest girl on campus would've dated the rugby captain muscled like a Greek god.

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"Maybe you're the one who's jelly." Mo smiled around a slice of toast.

"Didn't you have a fling with Warren before he and Sim happened?"

The level of awkwardness permeating the table made Bobby want to physically cringe.

"As if," Lana laughed. "I just got out of a relationship with Athena."

"Oh, the less we hear about that witch the better." Mo rolled his eyes.

"Has Warren hooked up with you too, Mo? Trying to go for the whole set."

Bobby said light-heartedly, trying to break the tension.

"He wishes," Mo snorted.

"New guy's got jokes." Warren eyed him coolly.

The chatter of the students around them faded as two police officers entered the cafeteria and the constable made a bee-line straight for their table.

"Have you come to arrest the Perfects?" A boy called out, standing up at his table and grinning around at his mates. He was in Bobby's Maths class. Nate, Bobby recalled his name.

“I always knew the Perfects would eat their own,” Nate continued loudly.

“Let us know which one of ‘em killed Zander, will you?”

“You what, ya gobshite?” Warren leaped off his chair, but the police officers blocked his path.

“Settle down lad.” The chief officer gestured for Warren to return to his seat.

Constable Dennings, going by the name on his badge, had a square head and a moustache that looked like it had been squiggled on with a pencil.

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“You were the roommates and closest friends of Zander Murphy?” Dennings asked.

“Yes, officer,” Mo replied politely, looking the picture of innocence.

“I’m very sorry for your loss, but I’ll need you all to come down to the station and give statements,” said the Constable.

“Are we suspects?” Warren growled.

“I wouldn’t go that far.” Dennings laughed nervously. “At least, not yet. We just need to clarify a few things. There are two squad cars outside. Please, come this way.”

“How about you,” the female officer pointed at him. “Were you a roommate too? We only have these six on our records.”

“No, he’s new to Dawnvel,” Simone said. “He didn’t even know Zander.”

“Very well,” the officer nodded and Bobby sighed in relief, though his dread remained as he saw the six of them led away. What if the police found something they couldn’t explain? They’d never believe magic was real and might try to arrest one of them, maybe all of them.

*What if one of your new friends is the killer? A dark voice whispered inside his head. What if they all are? Some people believed druids performed human*

*sacrifice. What if they sacrificed Zander, and you're going to be next?*

\*

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Bobby tried to ignore his disturbing thoughts that his newfound 'friends'

were all lying to him. Luring him into a false sense of security so they could sacrifice him. Maybe that's what tonight's Joining was. But even if he truly thought that, how could he go about escaping?

He knew he was being paranoid. And he couldn't imagine Simone and Mo were secretly planning to murder him, or that any of them had harmed Zander.

They all seemed to care for him deeply, even to the point of near-worship.

Gossip around campus was already rife.

"I bet that Warren killed Zander," he heard one girl tell her friends, and another say, "that Dreg's always been the biggest weirdo, maybe he did it."

"I heard Zander cheated on her and Niamh did him in," another boy claimed.

"Maybe it was Mo. It's the nice guys you've got to watch," said another.

Bobby tried not to ignore the gossip, until some of the students turned their attention to him.

"Oi, you," said Nate as the students filed in for Maths class. "You were sitting with the Perfects this morning, what's that about?"

"Oh, nothing," he mumbled, hoping Nate would drop it.

"Come off it," Nate's replied. "You seemed well chummy with 'em, especially with Maurice."

"Not really," Bobby answered, frantically trying to come up with an excuse.

"Uh Maurice is my cousin, that's all."

“Your cousin,” Nate frowned. “But Mo’s black?”

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“Uhh, yeah. I’m adopted, Mo’s auntie is my foster mum.” He said quickly, which wasn’t a total lie. Technically, he’d been fostered before.

“So what happened to Zander?” Nate pressed. “We heard he overdosed on something. Dreg’s a drug dealer on the side, isn’t he? But now people are saying it wasn’t an overdose, but someone stabbed him to death.”

Bobby looked from side to side, aware practically the whole class was staring at him. *Damn, why did the teacher have to be late for his own lesson.*

“C’mon guys, leave him alone,” said another voice.

Bobby turned to see a strikingly pretty girl across the room. At first, he thought she was just pale, before realising she was actually an albino. Half her hair was white, whilst she’d dyed the left half a dark blue.

“Why’s that, Julia,” said Nate. “You got a crush on the new kid?”

“You’re just being insensitive. Besides, he’s not going to know anything.”

“You’re probably right,” Nate said. “We’ll have to ask one of the actual Prefects what happened.”

“Yeah, I’d love to see you question Warren,” Julia replied.

“I ain’t scared of him,” Nate proclaimed, looking around the class and daring anyone to say otherwise.

“Whatever you say.” Julia shook her head before returning to her Maths book.

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It struck Bobby as ironic, considering Julia looked like some sort of supernatural creature, or a mythical druid herself, that she was just a regular student, and unremarkable old him was supposed to be the magical one.

At last, Mr Rustin arrived and the class began. Lana and Dreg were supposed to

in his Math lesson too, but were absent due to the questioning. But by the time his science class came around, Mo and Simone had returned to campus.

They took the seats either side of him, gaining a dozen stares from pupils nearby. Until Simone asked the room at large what they were looking at and they all turned away.

“So, what happened,” he whispered as Mrs Aylen addressed the class. “Did the cops say if they know anything?”

“They mainly asked if Zander had any enemies we might know of, that kind of thing,” said Simone.

“And we can’t very well tell the police, ‘of course officer, there’s a load of monsters who probably have motive,” Mo said.

“They’re confused about how he died though,” Simone whispered. “Zander had a wound on his chest, but also showed signs of suffocation. Obviously, they couldn’t explain his unnatural skin or the fact his veins had turned red either.”

“They’ve quietly decided Zander’s death is a murder inquiry,” said Mo.

“They don’t want to announce it and spook the whole town. But I bet everyone will know by the end of the day. You can’t keep secrets in Dawnvel. Other than our clan, of course.”

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“So what happens next?”

“Our guild will sort it,” said Simone. “Us and the clans like us ensure that humans never encounter stuff like this. But in the rare times it happens at this level, our Elders make sure it doesn’t become a government incident and stuff like that.”

“Are you telling me the older druids control the government?”

“Hardly,” Mo snorted. “But they have influence.”

Mo was right about the whole school learning the police were actively

investigating a murderer on the loose. Bobby sat once again at the Perfects table, where he felt like was on stage with the number of students watching them, trying and failing to be subtle. He could barely eat, his stomach like writhing worms and before long he excused himself to his room.

“Just stop by our house at ten,” Simone called after him. “We’ll make our way into the forest from there.”

“The forest?”

Bobby saw the tip of Simone’s wand protrude from her sleeve as she waved her hand and suddenly her voice was directly in his ear, so no one else could overhear.

“It’s where our grove is hidden, where the ceremony must take place. Just avoid any of the school security as it will be after curfew, and you’ll be fine.”

“What if Cairnath are around again?” he muttered.

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“They shouldn’t be, but I’ll know if you’re in danger,” Simone’s voice was a nearby whisper.

He just nodded before leaving the cafeteria, wondering how she’d know if he got himself in trouble and if that was unsettling or not.

The dread that had lived in the pit of his stomach all day quickly turned to panic once he was enclosed in his small bedroom. He paced back and forth, trying to push it down. Before he knew it, curfew had passed and he found himself staring out into the night outside his window.

After pacing, he’d packed his bags once again, ready to leave. This was his last chance to run from Dawnvel. He had no doubt the Perfects would follow him, but there was a chance he could lose them. *And then what? Get killed by another Shade? Eaten by a Cairnath? Or just wait to explode from the inside out from magic?* There was danger in running, but would it be any less if he stayed?

Someone or something had already killed Zander and Bobby couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d be next.

Whatever he chose, there'd be no turning back after tonight. He still didn't know what he was going to do as he left his room, setting off into the night.

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## **Chapter Nine– Down to the Woods Today**

Simone was reaching her limit. Her breath spiralled around her in the cold night air, increasing as she huffed in annoyance.

Mo, Warren and Niamh stood outside the house with her, but Lana and Dreg were making them run late. The Joining had to take place at exactly midnight.

That might still be two hours away, but everything had to be prepared just right.

"I still don't know why we can't wait inside," said Mo after a long yawn. "I was halfway through Titanic."

"You've watched it like a hundred times," she sighed. "And you know why.

We have to be on the verge of leaving before Lana actually hurries up."

"Good point," Niamh agreed, allowing a faint smile, one of the first ones Simone had seen since Zander's passing.

"It's probably best I don't finish the movie anyway," Mo lamented. "It always sets me off. Poor Jack."

Warren remained silent, not even looking their way as he leaned against the wall, the smoke from his cigarette mixing with the steam from his breath. He always acted like he didn't want to be there when it was time for official druid business. Simone suspected the only thing Warren enjoyed about being a druid was killing things.

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"Boudica. What's taking Dreg so long again?" she asked.

"Feeding his wibbersnake," Mo replied.

"Uh, is that a euphemism?"



Mo chuckled. “No, he got some shaman from abroad to deliver him this creature. Didn’t anyone tell you about the giant birds that flew here carrying a crate?”

She shook her head. “I hope no one saw. Dreg will get in trouble with the guild again.”

Simone sighed once more. Lana was always the last to get ready, too busy perfecting her hair and makeup. It was needless like usual, it wasn’t like they were going to a fancy party.

She slid her wand out from her sleeve and used it to pick up a nearby pebble and guide it up to tap lightly on Lana’s window.

“Alright!” Lana yelled dramatically.

Simone felt a pang of dread as her phone beeped with a new text message. If it wasn’t one of her clan members, there was only one other person who’d be texting her this late. Her suspicions were confirmed as she read her dad’s message.

**Hi, darling. Need more meds again. Can you get some from the orcs by tomorrow? I’m desperate. I’ll make them last the whole month this time.**

**Thanks honey.**

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*Damn it Dad.* She’d have to sneak out after Bobby’s Joining and use the runestone to travel into London. The orcs would want some of their clan’s potions in exchange for the drugs too, but at least she didn’t need to worry about drug dealers pulling guns on her again.

“Who was that?” Mo grinned. “Has the Bobster given you his number already?”

“No, just my phone company trying to sell me stuff,” she grunted.

“But still,” Mo continued. “*Have* you given him your number?”

“Pipe down Maurice,” said Warren. “Stop acting like she’s remotely interested in the eejit?”

“Who says I’m not?” Simone said, to annoy Warren more than anything. In truth, she hadn’t thought about men in general since her and Warren’s messy breakup, but she couldn’t deny she enjoyed Bobby’s company. But maybe that was just because he was so... *normal* compared to the rest of them. She hadn’t known him long enough to decide either way, but he seemed kind and funny, despite being scared out of his mind a lot of the time.

Annoyingly, Kazimir kept popping into her mind ever since she’d first encountered the white tiger. And she couldn’t ignore her and Warren’s most recent kiss either. She didn’t have time for romance, damn it.

“Yeah right.” Warren snorted. “You’re way out of that guy’s league.”

“I don’t believe in leagues,” she shook her head. “We’re all equal.”

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This time Warren laughed loudly. “Keep telling yourself that. For one, we druids are already above the Normals. Magic makes us so.”

*Not this again.* They’d already argued about this. She didn’t care to go over it again.

“I still say this is a waste of time,” Warren said. “He’ll never be one of us.”

“You don’t get to decide that,” she replied. “No one does. Fate brought Bobby here and if he’s destined to be part of our clan, he will be.”

“Just don’t get your hopes up,” he muttered. “You’re probably gonna see your new friend die tonight.”

Simone clenched her fists, biting down an angry reply. She’d fought with Warren enough for two lifetimes, and it was pointless doing it anymore. She turned her gaze away, so she wouldn’t accidentally admire the way the shadows sculpted his muscles and made his azure eyes pop. She hated the attraction she still felt for him, and the memories she had before his personality had grown so ugly.

At first, she’d had sympathy for Warren, his mother’s health had gone downhill these past few months and of course his father’s actions would’ve affected anyone. But bad things had happened to all of them, and so many others around

the world, they couldn't always be blamed for you acting like a jackass.

"If Bobby does die," Warren continued, "he'll probably reveal himself as the Baynir before the ceremony can end. I wouldn't be surprised if he's been

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hanging around Dawnvel for days now, scouting us all out and preparing to go undercover. The rest of you might be fooled, but I-

"Bobby's not the..." she trailed off as Warren's words made her remember something. What if it had been the Baynir who enchanted that drug dealer to kill her?

"What is it?" Mo asked.

She was already keeping Kazimir from them, and still wasn't sure why; probably because Warren would insist he was a threat and get himself killed trying to slay the weretiger, so Simone decided to come clean about the drug dealer attack.

"Someone tried to kill me the night before Zander died," she admitted, wincing at her friends' extreme reactions.

"What the hell!" Warren roared. "Why didn't you say something before now?"

"Because I knew you'd all freak out."

"Where did it happen?" Niamh had gone pale as snow.

"You left Dawnvel for your dad again, didn't you?" Warren growled, yet concern had replaced the usual anger in his eyes.

Simone gave them the details, explaining how she hadn't realised it might be connected. "I didn't want to tell you I'd gone out on my own at first, then everything with Zander...it drove it out of my mind completely. I'm sorry."

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"You've got nothing to be sorry for." Niamh moved toward her and hugged her tight. "We're just glad you're okay."

“None of us can go anywhere alone from now on,” said Warren. “In case this Baynir is trying to pick us off one by one.”

At last, Lana sauntered out of the house, dressed to the nines and squirting liberal amounts of anti-bac into her hands after she closed the front door. Once her hands were clean, she slipped on a pair of white velvet gloves. “Happy now?” she smiled sarcastically at Simone.

“Yep, unless you need to take a quick bath before we go?”

Lana grimaced. “OCD can’t be helped darling. I don’t know why you’re in such a rush anyway. The little urchin isn’t even here yet.”

“He will be,” Simone said confidently, although her eyes met Niamh’s, whose expression showed doubt.

Lana was observing each of them in turn, judging their fashion choices like she always did.

“Looking particularly dashing tonight Warren,” she purred. “I love the way your arms look in that shirt. Nice to see you’re almost making an effort with your appearance again Niamh. You were looking a bit drab these past few days.”

*Well her freaking boyfriend had just died!* Simone held her tongue.

Then Lana spotted the cowboy boots Mo had decided to sport.

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“*Why* are you wearing those things?” Lana enunciated every word with disgust. “I told you to burn them and cast the ashes into the deepest ocean.”

“It might be muddy in the forest.” Mo shrugged. “Besides, they look good on me.”

“Sure, maybe you should get yourself a horse and a cowboy hat too, you walking disaster.”

“Well, we’re both wearing leather jackets so we make a perfect pair,” Mo grinned, trying to hug her playfully.

“Don’t, you’ll give me creases.”

Simone met Niamh’s gaze again as Lana and Mo started play-fighting.

“Where’s Bobby,” Niamh murmured.

“He’s done a runner, I reckon,” Warren said.

“Oh man, I should’ve kept an eye on him again,” said Mo.

“No need.” Dreg remarked, surprising them with how silently he’d arrived behind them. “I had one of my birds, Gerald, keep tabs on him. He left his room not long ago.”

Simone sighed in relief. It didn’t diminish the dread tightening her chest, but at least Bobby hadn’t made things harder. She felt responsible for him, in a way.

It had been her slaying a gargoyle that led Bobby to them after all.

Although she had no control over the fact Bobby was a potential druid, if he died before he could ascend, Simone didn’t know how she’d handle the guilt.

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Another of their pet ravens was perched on Dreg’s shoulder, a scroll attached to his leg. Dreg had named this one Richard. Dreg held his pipe in his other hand, which he’d carved out of bone, and the green smoke that drifted from the end was from some sort of tobacco he’d created. Slung over his shoulder was a leather bag full of potions they’d need for tonight.

Dreg whistled once and Richard left his shoulder, beating his wings rapidly as he flew toward the forest.

“Who are you messaging?” asked Niamh.

“Grandpa Merle,” said Dreg, pulling out a pair of hole-ridden mittens from his trench coat.

“Could you look more homeless?” Lana shook her head.

“Probably,” Dreg replied, not understanding Lana’s sarcasm. He never

understood any of their sarcasm, or a whole lot of their social interactions. She often thought Dreg was more in tune with animals than humans.

Simone looked out across the campus's empty fields, only a few pools of light from streetlamps pierced the sea of gloom. The light from the castle windows were barely discernible from this far away.

She saw him then, his pasty skin looking paler than usual as he walked slowly toward them. From here, he looked years younger, like a little lost boy.

She felt sorry for Bobby. He seemed like a nice, relatively normal guy. He didn't deserve a life devoted to battling dark creatures and dealing with druid politics. But he deserved an early death even less. This was the only way, and at

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least the magic was great, exhausting sometimes, but wonderful. Simone didn't know what she'd do without her magic, what any of them would do. It was as much a part of them as their eyes or hands.

"Glad you could make it." Niamh greeted Bobby warmly.

"Yeah, it would be a shame if I got all dressed up for nothing," said Lana.

"Uh, why did you? Was I supposed to wear a suit or something?" Bobby frowned.

Simone chuckled. "No, you're fine. Lana would get dressed up for a dog walk."

"At least I always look fantastic, unlike some."

"Come on then," she beckoned Bobby forward. "Now you're here we can go."

"Sorry," said Bobby as he fell into step beside her. "Were you guys waiting long?"

"Ages," Lana groaned.

"Ignore her." Simone smiled at him, happy to see him smile back at her, even if it didn't erase the overwhelming anxiety in his eyes. She prayed tonight went

well. Or she'd feel like she'd led a lamb to slaughter.

The seven of them strode toward Dawnvel's forest, clearing the few metres that separated St.Elrans with the line of trees. Their house had homed clans of druids for generations and had been built specifically to be partially hidden by the surrounding forest, so no curious pupils could peer inside its windows, or

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see the occasional magical creature that might go in and out. Despite that fact, Simone had given her fair share of memory spells on students who witnessed something they shouldn't.

A bird shrieked and the wind moaned around the great oak trees, causing them to creak as if in agony. They were plunged in near darkness as the forest enveloped them, but Mo and Warren wordlessly lit their wands and held them aloft.

"So, I take it this isn't a...normal forest?" Bobby asked, his eyes darting from tree to tree, looking for strange shadows beyond the magically lit path.

"It is actually," said Dreg. "There's a number of places in Britain with a higher number of ghosts and magical creatures."

"Wait, you're saying all the forests, like in the world, have magical creatures in them?"

"Of course," said Dreg dreamily, straying from their path and disappearing from view. Moments later he returned, but this time with a pixie on either shoulder.

Bobby gaped at the two flesh-coloured miniature men with giant bat-like ears who laughed and pointed at him. They spoke to each other in fast, chirping noises. Simone had no idea what they were saying, but Dreg had taken it upon himself to learn pixie language, as well as gnomish.

She could use the beast-tongue spell of course, so she didn't understand why Dreg had gone to all the effort, yet she didn't understand most things Dreg did.

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"Pixies live inside trees," Dreg told Bobby as one of the pixies took to swinging

on Dreg's dreadlocks like a rope. "And they're always happy to receive guests. Ballachinn and Borogoninn here say you look very amusing.

They can tell you've never seen their kind before."

"This is so mad," Bobby murmured as Dreg returned the pixies to their home.

Simone noticed Lana looping her arm around Warren's, pretending to be scared. When their eyes met Lana smiled at her, as if she didn't know what she was doing.

Warren barely seemed to notice. She could tell he was in one of his dark moods, holding in a fountain of rage. It added to her unease about tonight's ceremony. Warren was barely recognisable as the funny, adventurous guy who'd been her boyfriend. And Zander's death had made him worse.

They continued to traipse through the undergrowth, wending their way between the army of thick-trunked trees. Most of them walked in silence, but Dreg hummed an old Celtic ballad under his breath, whilst Mo and Lana chatted quietly.

"How's it going with that Wizard from London, he still ignoring your texts?"

"No," Mo said, a little too defensively. "I'm just keeping my options open, you know."

"Wait, wizards are real too?" Bobby asked.

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"Duh," Lana mocked him. "As are witches, warlocks, shamans et cetera.

They all protect the gateways to Otherworld like us. Just in their own countries.

We druids protect Great Britain and Western Europe."

"Don't forget those pesky wicca too." Mo grinned. "Who we know all too well, some of us more intimately than others."

"Do wizards use wands like you... I mean, us?" Bobby turned to Simone.



“Not all,” she said. “Shamans use these really cool staffs. I used to really want one myself, until I realised how much easier wands are, considering you can hide them under a shirt or jacket.”

“How are we different to the others.”

“Oh my god.” Lana rolled her eyes. “How are wolves different to dogs?

There’s loads of ways. But it’s mainly our ability to travel back in time sets us apart.

“You’re yanking my chain?” he exclaimed.

“Trust me, I would never yank your chain,” she sneered.

“It’s really rare. And the druid guild has to authorise a journey through time,”

Mo explained. “You need special stones to do it, and can only travel a certain few days of the year. It all has to match up. Nearest one for us is stonehenge.”

“None of us have done it,” said Simone. “Except Dreg went once with his great gramps, but that’s only because of who he is.”

“Wait, who?”

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“Merlin. I told you Dreg was a part of a really, really ancient family, didn’t I?”

“No freaking way. His grandpa Merle is Merlin. *The* Merlin?” Bobby looked over at Dreg, who continued to hum dreamily.

“Yeah,” said Mo, “and Dreg the lucky sod got to go with Merle to Camelot last year. He met King Arthur and everything. Dreg didn’t say it, but I’m betting Arthur was gorgeous. I’d join his round table any day. Unless Lancelot’s hotter.”

“Someone’s jealous of Guinevere.” Simone giggled.

She couldn’t help grinning from ear to ear at the look of wonder on Bobby’s face. He reminded her of a puppy, sometimes overexcited and other times scared, but trying to act brave. He looked like he was bursting with more questions, but

as he opened his mouth Warren cut in.

“Enough. You don’t have to worry about time travel, and I’m not saying that to be an ass. Very few druids are ever permitted too.”

“Oh,” Bobby said glumly, before jumping back with a yell as an object hurtled toward them.

Simone stepped back instinctively as well, although she knew there was no point.

The Victorian husband and wife greeted them joyously as their horse and carriage crashed through the trees and past them. The carriage’s wooden wheels

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should’ve caused a racket across the undergrowth, but the vehicle was utterly silent as the carriage barrelled past and disappeared through another thicket.

“More ghosts?” Bobby gasped, clutching his chest as if worried he’d have a heart attack.

“Yep.” She nudged him affectionately. “Relax, these aren’t the types of ghost that can hurt people.”

“Dreg wasn’t exactly right about this forest being normal,” Niamh told Bobby as they moved deeper into the woods. “Many forests do contain an ancient grove like Dawnvel’s, but not many are as large or powerful as ours.

Plus, the gateway being so near makes this forest a little more active for dark creatures.”

“Dark creatures?” he squeaked. “So you’re saying there could be some crazed beast roaming nearby?”

“Only Warren,” Mo piped up, ignoring Warren’s glower.

“Probably not,” Simone said. “We almost always contain those who arrive here, before they do much damage.”

*“Almost doesn’t really alleviate my fears.”*

“Stop being such a baby then,” Warren snapped. “If anything here is stupid enough to attack a full clan of druids, I’d rip em apart before they got to you.

Mind you, I shouldn’t say full clan. We need a seventh.”

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“And we will have our seventh, after tonight,” she said. “You should be wanting Bobby to join us. The sooner our clan is complete again, the sooner we can focus on Zander’s killer.”

Warren tensed at that. “I still don’t trust him. It’s not a coincidence Zander died just after this guy arrived.”

“If you really believed that you’d have tortured Bobby to get the truth out of him,” Mo said. “You know he doesn’t show any of the symptoms of dark magic. Plus, Simone would’ve sensed it in him when she healed him.”

Warren grimaced. “Maybe he’s not the dark druid himself, just in league with him. Sent here as a spy.”

“I didn’t have you down as the paranoid type,” Simone said frostily.

“Well excuse me for giving a damn after my best friend has died.”

“Are you saying I don’t? That none of us do apart from you?”

Warren wrenched his arm away from Lana, who’d been holding on to him like a raft at sea. “No, just that you and Mo seem all too happy to replace Zander with the first random guy you find. We don’t know anything about him.

He says he doesn’t even know anything about himself. No druid family name, no parents-”

“The guild is looking into it,” Dreg muttered absent-mindedly, his attention focused on an owl roosting above them.

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“That’s not good enough,” Warren shouted. “You might not be fawning all over the new boy like Sim and Mo, but you haven’t shown you care in the least that Zander’s gone.”

“I quite liked Zander Murphy,” Dreg replied, acting like he was talking to himself. “I’ve questioned the animals, but they saw nothing of his death.

There’re still some creatures left to to ask though. Maybe one of them saw something.”

Simone knew Dreg had started investigating the morning Zander was found.

Due to his advanced druidery, Dreg was far better at communicating with animals. He could also check the plants for the signs of damage they’d have if a Baynir passed near them.

“That wasn’t what I meant,” Warren growled.

“Hmm,” Dreg turned around, as if he’d already forgotten the conversation.

“Oh yes, Zander’s demise was tragic, but the threads of fate stop for no one.

Which is why they guided Bobby to us as Zander’s flame was extinguished.

Fate moves in mysterious, inexplicable ways like that. Oh, and as for what you mentioned earlier, I sensed the lingering effects of dark spells before Bobby came here.”

Warren lunged at him suddenly, lifting Dreg high into the air.

“You knew! You knew and you didn’t warn us. Zander might still be alive if it wasn’t for you.”

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“Warren no!” She leaped to grab hold of him, but he was an immovable wall of muscle.

“Put him down,” Mo cried, echoed by Lana.

“All of you stop it,” Niamh shouted suddenly.

Slowly, Warren dropped Dreg, whose calm expression never wavered.

“Explain yourself,” Niamh continued, gazing at Dreg in horror.

The small boy shrugged. “It’s as I said. I believe I sensed traces of dark spells a few days before Bobby came here. I couldn’t be sure, so I didn’t tell you. I wrote to Grandpa Merle though.”

“Screw Merle,” Warren roared. “You should’ve told us. We’re a clan. No secrets.”

“We all have secrets we keep.” Dreg shrugged.

“What did Merlin write back?” Simone asked.

“He hasn’t yet,” said Dreg. “Must be busy. I’ve kept an eye on all the new students and teachers from our first week of term though. One of them, Frederick I think his name was, left after the first week, or at least pretended too, he piqued my interest.”

“You should’ve told us,” said Mo. “We could all have investigated the new people on campus, see if any showed signs of being a dark druid.”

Dreg nodded. “Perhaps you’re right Maurice. I apologize for any inconvenience.”

“God, you’re weird,” Lana mumbled under her breath, turning away.

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“Okay, there’s nothing we can do about it now. We’ll talk when we get back to the house,” said Simone. “C’mon, we can’t be late for the Joining.”

“We should postpone it until after we’ve found and destroyed Zander’s killer,” Warren snapped.

“Bobby’s unlocked power might’ve killed him by then,” she said.

“So?” Warren looked at Bobby blankly, who still looked shocked at the argument he’d just witnessed.

“You don’t mean that,” she glared at Warren. “You might be a moody jackass, but you wouldn’t let an innocent die.”

“No, I wouldn’t. I just don’t think he’s innocent.” Warren replied, although he joined the rest of them as they continued through the forest.

“Don’t worry Bobby,” she moved beside him. “We’re nearly there.”

The trees around them now appeared to be bleeding, as if the trunks had been stabbed as pools of sap dribbled down. They walked the rest of the way in tense silence after Warren’s outburst. Simone knew he’d been keeping a lot bottled up, but she didn’t realise it had been so much.

Minutes later they reached the grove. It was a small patch of naked soil, free of even a single blade of grass. The trees around the barren area were clustered together tight, like a rugby team’s huddle.

“Who wants the honours?” asked Mo.

“Who cares,” Warren grunted.

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“I’ll do it,” Niamh sighed, stepping into the centre of the bare earth and placing the tip of her wand into the ground, muttering, “*Ovagale*.”

“Two druids are needed to gain passage,” Mo explained as Niamh and Dreg dragged their wands across the ground in two separate semi-circles. Once their semi-circles joined into one, the circle flashed with a blue gleam. Niamh and Dreg moved away as the dirt inside the circle dissolved, revealing the stone deep beneath the ground. Silently, the stone split into halves, sliding away from each other and revealing steps going down into a yawning abyss.

“We’re uh...going down there?” Bobby’s hand shook as he pointed.

Simone nodded. “It’s time for you to become one of us.”

## Chapter Ten- The Joining

Bobby watched the ground open up in disbelief. *And they expect me to go down there?*

“Uh, what’s the chances of us getting trapped beneath ground? What if there’s a cave-in or something?”

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“There won’t be,” said Dreg casually, stepping into the yawning cavern and disappearing from view.

“Besides,” said Lana as she walked toward the steps. “If we were to get stuck down here, you’d be the first to get eaten once we resort to cannibalism. You’ll suffer the least if you think about it.”

Warren and Niamh followed Lana into the ground next, but Bobby stood rooted to the spot.

Simone put her hand on his shoulder. “You’ll be okay. It’s your destiny to be one of us.”

“I don’t believe in destiny,” he replied, calculating the possibility of him vomiting from nerves.

“Ah, but destiny believes in you,” Mo proclaimed. “Sorry, I just made that up, and it was really cheesy. C’mon, before midnight strikes Cinderella.”

Tonight had proved so far that Warren was as dangerous as a Cairnath and Dreg more resembled one of the ghosts haunting Dawnvel than he did a real person. As for Lana, Bobby surmised he couldn’t trust her as far as he could throw her, and though she was small, Bobby wasn’t strong so it still wouldn’t be far.

Bobby took a deep breath and clenched his fists, pushing down the hysteria threatening to boil over. “Okay. Let’s go.”

He kept close to Simone and Mo, sandwiched between them as they descended the stone steps.

It had been dark on the walk here, but at least he'd been able to see his immediate surroundings. Now he was underground, he couldn't even see the hands in front of his face.

His one saving grace was the levitating ball of light floating on the tip of Mo's wand, although it looked like it was bobbing on a sea of blackness as Mo's wand wasn't even visible.

Within seconds, Bobby walked into a wall by accident. He felt something grab his hand and leaped in fright, before realising it was Simone.

"It's alright," she whispered soothingly. "We cast a spell on our eyes to give us night-vision, but it's best if I don't perform the spell on you yet."

"How come?" he asked, incredibly aware that they were still holding hands.

"Well, the spell has been known to severely damage the eyes of those who aren't druids, and as you aren't technically one yet, it's best not to risk it."

"Oh, makes sense," he muttered, seeing Simone's grey eyes glinting in the dark like a cats.

"Keep hold of me, before you crack your head open on a hanging stalactite or something."

He made a weird noise in the back of his throat as Simone led him through the underground tunnel. Her hand felt warm and soft, not clammy and sweaty like his probably was.

Bobby felt the rock all around him like an oppressive force. He couldn't stop thinking the roof would cave in and crush them. Before his worry turned into a

full-blown panic attack, the darkness suddenly diminished and their narrow tunnel opened into a vast cavern.

Several six-foot black candles ringed the cavern in a large circle, blue flames at



their peaks. Bobby wasn't sure whether Dreg lit the candles just before he arrived, or whether the candles were always lit magically. He'd wondered why it this place was called the grove when it was a cave, until he saw the trees embedded in the rock walls. They were different to regular trees, pale as bone, with leaves like blood.

Two naturally worn circles were etched into the cavern. A large outside ring, and then a smaller inner ring which was deeper, like a basin.

"So, do you guys come here often? That's an actual question, not a chat up line." He chuckled weakly.

"Only about once a month," Mo replied enigmatically.

Dreg pulled two bottles from the leather bag he'd been carrying, before walking over to the large, ancient-looking cauldron at the end of the cavern.

"What's he doing?" Bobby whispered.

"Making the potion you need to drink," said Simone. "One of the bottles is soil, the other sea water."

"Sounds...tasty."

"You don't even know the best ingredient yet." Lana smirked.

Dreg muttered something and a lick of flame leaped from his wand and into the cauldron. The liquid began to hiss and bubble as Dreg returned to his bag

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and pulled out a rock. He muttered once more and the rock turned to sand in his hand, which he then sprinkled into the potion.

"Uh, are rocks digestible?" said Bobby.

"C'mon, you know what to do," Warren ordered the others, ignoring Bobby.

He watched as the clan spread out, picking up various stones off the ground.

The druids set down seven rocks in total, in a circle around the outer-ring of the

cavern. Bobby realised each of the rocks were different, iron, tin, limestone and more.

He noted a narrow passageway led off into darkness on one side of the cavern, whilst a rock ledge was on the other, lined with hollowed-out skulls.

“My god,” he breathed, “are those human skulls?”

“Don’t worry. We didn’t kill anyone.” Mo grinned. “They were given freely by ancient druids.”

Dreg next added crushed up leaves and wood shavings to the potion before stirring it rhythmically, counter-clockwise.

“Uh, what will this weird drink actually do to me?”

“We call it druid drink, original name I know.” Simone smiled. “And it will help awaken your powers. The ritual we perform takes care of the rest.”

“I take it the rock powder was the horrible ingredient you mentioned,” he asked Lana.

“Oh no.” Her eyes flashed mischievously. “That’s blood my dear.”

“Are you serious?”

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“You can choose if you like,” said Warren, pretending to be nice as he strode over to the rock ledge. “Which cup would you like to drink from?” He picked up two of the hollowed skulls. “This giant oaf or this deformed head?”

“I thought you guys were druids, not flaming vampires?” Bobby’s voice rose, echoing around the cave.

“It’s only a trickle,” Niamh said kindly, as if drinking just a little bit of blood from some dead druid made it okay. “Once you’ve drank the skull dry, your powers will awaken or...”

“Or what?” he jumped on her hesitation.

“You’ll die,” said Warren, his cold eyes boring into Bobby’s. “The blood of a druid in a non-druid’s body will poison it. It’ll slow your heart until it beats no more.”

“Then no way am I drinking that. There must be some other reason I saw that Shade. I probably don’t have a shred of sorcery at all.”

“Shut it Warren,” Simone growled. “He’s exaggerating. If a human drank the potion they’d fall ill, yes, and likely die.”

“That doesn’t sound any different to what he said,” Bobby cried.

“Let me finish. I was going to say they’d likely die unless a druid used healing spells to cure them. We’ll make sure you don’t die. I promise.”

“You can’t really promise than, can you?” Warren said through a yawn, like didn’t have a care in the world. “There’s still a chance he’ll react really negatively to the potion and die before we can heal him.”

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Simone placed a hand on her wand. “Do you want to spend the rest of week as a bloody frog?”

“Try it,” Warren shot back.

“Sorry guys, if there’s even a chance I’d die, I’m not gonna drink that swill.”

Bobby edged backwards.

“You’ll die if you don’t,” Dreg muttered, barely audible as he bent over the cauldron.

“What did you say?”

“If a druid doesn’t perform a joining, binding himself to the Earth, his magic will consume him from the inside. Might not be today, might not be tomorrow, but soon, your sorcery will explode inside of you.”

“Well, maybe I’ll take that chance.”

“You could,” said Lana, “but we aren’t going to let you.”

“You’re forcing me?” He yelled, looking around him, suddenly realising he was surrounded by them, trapped.

“It’s not that,” Simone said, trying to be reassuring. “It’s just that if your magic was to explode, you might take innocent civilians with you in the process. We’re duty bound to ensure you go through with the Joining and thus protect others from harm.”

“Besides, we need you mate,” said Mo. “It looks like there’s a dark druid in town, maybe more than one, and our clan is vulnerable without the seventh. All of us will be stronger once you’re one of us.”

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Bobby took in a deep breath, hating the situation he was in, but knowing they were right. Although he didn’t have much of a life, he didn’t really fancy blowing up. Nor would he ever be able to live with himself if he hurt innocent people. *You wouldn’t live with yourself because you’d be dead, idiot.*

“Okay, I’ll do it,” he sighed. “It can’t be worse than the alternative.”

“Nice one, bro,” Mo clapped him on the back whilst Simone smiled at him in relief.

Simone checked her phone before stating, “Five minutes till midnight. It’s time.”

The clan gathered behind the stones they’d retrieved, Dreg being the last to take his place, holding a goblet.

“Please stand in the inner circle.” Simone pointed to the basin.

Bobby did as she asked, taking the hollowed-out skull Warren offered him as he went. He thought the skull would be full of blood, but was relieved to see it was just a trickle. The skull was like a mug, and the blood was so dark it was almost black. It must’ve been preserved somehow if Mo said it had come from an ancient druid.

He held the skull out warily as Dreg poured the contents of his goblet inside.

The liquid hissed and continued to bubble. The brown potion turned dark red as it mixed with the blood and Bobby was sure it glowed too.

Dreg stepped back behind his stone and then all six druids linked hands.

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“Do not drink the potion until after our spell is activated and the fire has been summoned,” Simone instructed.

“Fire? You didn’t say anything about fire?”

“Calm down, it won’t hurt you,” said Lana.

“Sorry Bobby,” said Simone. “I’d like to ease you in, but we’re running out of time. On my count, we begin the chant.”

Before he could ask anything else, the six of them began chanting identical words simultaneously.

**“Dùisg leanabh de talamh. Dùisg leanabh de draoidheachd.”**

He reckoned the language was Celtic of some kind, and as the chant ended fire leaped up around him, anchored by the stones.

Bobby could barely see the clan now through the flickering flames. He wanted to cry out for help, before realising Simone had said to drink the moment the flames appeared. Trying to ignore the nearby inferno, he brought the skull to his lips and started gulping down.

The potion tasted like acid and burned his throat. A choking sound of revulsion escaped his lips, before he forced himself to continue. The skull dropped from his shaking hands once he’d drained it and he struggled to stand as his vision swam. He could no longer tell where the flames started and he began. Judging by how his throat felt, he had swallowed a few flames too.

Bobby hunched over as his stomach spasmed. He heard Simone saying something, but her words were muffled to his ears. It felt like a giant spider with

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razor-tipped legs was scrambling around inside his stomach. He fell to his knees, his chest suddenly cold, as if his ribs had been encased in ice. He couldn't breathe. His flesh was burning hot, but his insides were achingly cold.

He was suffocating.

An explosion of adrenaline roared through him, whilst panic pierced his heart.

The potion hadn't worked. Warren had been right. Being a druid wasn't meant for him. The agony was too much. This was it. He was going to die.

## Chapter Eleven- The Ire of Iyffidin

Bobby was very faintly aware that Simone and Mo were shouting. Through his blurred vision, he saw the two of them leave their places behind the stones and try to reach him through the fire.

“Let him be!” Dreg warned them off.

“But he’s not gonna make it?” Simone yelled.

“We don’t know for sure. He definitely won’t if you break the circle.”

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His body was wracked with pain, too much for Bobby to handle. He wanted to die, just to be free of the suffering. He sagged to his side, his face hitting the ground as he took what he believed to be his final breath.

Ah his cheek touched the cold ground he felt the earth whispering. He could no longer see his surroundings, but his mind’s eye travelled deep beneath the stone instead. He could feel the insects below ground, and then went further, hurtling towards the earth’s core itself.

The agony melted away as his body was filled with a strange thrum of energy. His mind’s eye shot back up through the earth, back to him. Bobby saw his own body as if it was suffused in a golden glow, and then he was back, his vision normal.

The flames died out and the pain stopped. He lay, blinking stupidly and panting raggedly.

His body was heavy with exhaustion and drenched with sweat, but he laughed despite himself. The surge of power filling him made the pain a distant memory.

“He did it,” Simone laughed joyously, running to him at last and pulling Bobby to his feet to hug him tight.

Mo and Niamh cheered, and Bobby saw Dreg smile sagely. Even Lana looked mildly pleased. Warren’s expression was strangely unreadable, neither happy nor

enraged.

“I knew you’d make it,” Mo clapped him on the back.

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“No you didn’t,” Warren snorted. “You and Sim would’ve broke the circle and doomed him if Dreg didn’t know what he was doing.”

“Well, it looked a bit sketchy there for a sec,” said Mo sheepishly.

“Are you okay?” Simone asked, gazing into his eyes.

“I, yeah, I am now,” Bobby gasped in relief. “That was like a rollercoaster, but more painful, but I feel really good now. Like I can do anything.”

He felt something like the rush of adrenaline, but even stronger, pounding through his body. He reckoned he could leap ten feet into the air if he wanted, or punch a hole straight through one of the walls. He felt invincible.

“Can I... can I do magic now?”

“Yep,” said Mo. “Soon as you pull your wand from the wall. It’s just through here.”

Bobby followed him down a tunnel only wide enough for two. His lips still tingled from the potion and his heart seemed to beat just that little harder than before. The cave wasn’t so dark now and he could smell and hear things that he hadn’t noticed before. It was like all his senses had doubled in strength.

“What’s happened to me?” he rasped.

“Your inner-druid has been unleashed.” Mo turned back to him as they walked, smiling from ear to ear. “That feeling you have right now, like your whole is vibrating, is because you’re standing so close to the Earth, its magic is filling you.”

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Bobby somehow understood perfectly. It was like his feet were connected to the



cave floor. He didn't think he could stand the power if he was to walk barefoot across the stone.

"It's not usually like this, I'm afraid," said Lana, following close behind.

"Out in the real world we live in buildings above the Earth, further away from the magic source. But we're stronger whenever we stand on grass, water, or dirt, anything that isn't man-made."

Simone reached round her neck and pulled the leather cord, revealing a lone pebble dangling on the end. "When we're really far away, like if we had to use spells on a plane or in a skyscraper, we have these."

"You er, throw pebbles at your enemies?" he ventured.

"Not quite." Simone smiled brilliantly, making his heart thump a little extra.

"We can store magic inside the stone. Like a reserve, since our spells barely work if we're say, fifty feet above the ground."

"But that doesn't explain why I feel so...strong," said Bobby. "Or like I can run faster than I ever could before. Like my body is indestructible."

The natural high had whooshed over him. Bobby reckoned he could dive off a building and walk away without a scratch, like he could take on the whole world.

"Because you are," Dreg replied. "You're thrice as strong as the average human now, thrice as fast, and thrice as durable."

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"You're joking?" Bobby said, noting that Dreg's use of the word thrice was the least bizarre thing about his current situation.

"Oh, Dreg never jokes." Mo and Simone shared a grin.

"So, I'm like a superhero?" Bobby muttered, looking at his hands like they didn't belong to him.

"Nah, we can't fly or shoot lasers out of our eyes," said Mo, "actually, there's

probably spells for that.”

“Such a geek,” Warren snorted derisively at Bobby. “This isn’t a comic or a cartoon, eejit. We aren’t heroes who always save the day at the last moment.

We die just like everybody else, usually a lot more gruesomely.”

“He’s right,” said Niamh.

Simone had probably been about to tell Warren to stop, but closed her mouth as she looked at Niamh. It was a sobering thought, and Bobby’s high started to dwindle.

“C’mon,” Simone said instead. “We aren’t done yet.”

“Don’t tell me I have to glug another disgusting drink?”

“No, this is simple,” said Mo brightly.

The tunnel ended at a fork and they took the left path, but not before Bobby caught a glimpse of the right path. The walls were coated in black moss and at the very end of the tunnel was a red glow. Unease slid down his spine.

“What’s through there?”

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“The altar,” said Niamh grimly. “We don’t go there. This grove was used by the first druids, those who performed animal and even human sacrifice for their spells. But the altar hasn’t been used in centuries, and never will be again.”

She said it with such finality that Bobby knew not to question it further.

“What’s that?” Lana said suddenly, staring at a narrow passage to their left hallway down their tunnel.

“I heard it too.” Dreg held his wand ready.

Bobby strained his ears as the druids around him all pulled out their wands and he shrank behind them. Finally, he heard the eerie rustling, accompanied by a strange gasping sound. He had no idea what kind of animal could make that

noise, but it filled him with terror.

The rustling and ragged breathing contorted to an inhuman scream as the creature appeared. It looked like a woman draped in brown rags. A hood obscured her face, but Bobby could see a skeletal jaw hanging by a scrap of sinew. Her hands were skeletal and her whole body was suffused with an emerald glow as she limped toward them.

“Wraith,” Warren roared.

“I’ll trap it.” Simone was already tracing her wand across the ground.

Bobby jerked away from the wraith as she came near, backing up until the wall stopped him going further.

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Warren leaped to meet the monster, slashing his wand like a sword and yelling, “*Silren*.” Flecks of silver flicked from his wand to splash on the wraith, hissing as it burned her. The monster didn’t back down, however, slashing with her skeleton hands. Her bird screech melted into a howl that echoed off the stone as Warren evaded her blows, leading her forward.

By now, Simone had completed her spell, a purple brand the size and shape of a car tyre on the ground.

“Herd the old hag into the trap,” Lana cried, directing Niamh and Mo as they moved behind the wraith as Warren kept its attention. Niamh and Mo cried *Silren* too and more silver flecks burned the wraith, before fizzling away, only hurting her in the short-term.

Warren grunted in pain as he failed to evade the wraith’s next swipe and her fingers sliced right through his shirt, slicing his bicep deep. The wraith struck again rapidly, this time aiming to slash Warren’s throat. He reared back at the last second, before jumping over the trap spell.

The wraith’s howl cut off and she froze the moment she stepped onto the trap. Dreg moved to her, murmuring, “*Ultramor*.”

A beam of orange light spewed from his wand like a laser, straight into the

Wraith's heart. The spectre shuddered before literally melting into a pool of green slime.

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Silence pressed in on Bobby's eardrums, the only sound was everyone's heavy breathing.

"So, *that's* one of the nasty ghosts we have to deal with." Simone patted him on the shoulder, chuckling.

"You guys are more like ghost busters than wizards." He shook his head in wonder.

"What the hell was a wraith doing down here?" said Lana.

"Our Otherworld gateway appears to be drawing more supernatural activity than normal," Dreg observed. "What with this and the Shade Zander banished."

"Yeah, just one evil spirit a month is normal," said Mo. "For us anyway."

"What was that thing you did?" Bobby stared where the trap spell had been.

The purple brand had gone, leaving behind only a scorch mark.

"Some ghosts can't be hurt by normal weapons," said Simone.

"Or fists," Mo added. "On my first ghost hunt I made the mistake of punching him. My fist went right through the ghostie and my hand was cold for like a week afterwards."

"It was not." Lana sighed. "You're so melodramatic. Either that or your pain threshold's appalling."

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"Yeah well, at least I don't try to get off with ghosts," said Mo. "Unlike some people."

Lana gasped in outrage. "Hey, that headless horseman came on to me, not the other way around."

“Anyway,” Simone turned to Bobby as Mo and Lana continued to bicker.

“The trap spell tethers whoever steps on it to Otherworld. Once we’ve got a spectre in a trap, it’s simple to banish it back there.”

“Yep, seems totally simple,” Bobby replied.

“Don’t worry, eejit.” Warren called over as Niamh performed a healing spell on his arm. “I’m sure you’ll get the hang of all our druidic ways in a month or two. Of course, you’ll be long dead by then, but let’s try to be optimistic, eh?”

“Shut up Warren,” Simone snapped. “You’re not helping. C’mon, we’re nearly there.” She started off back down the passage.

“Hey, maybe it was a wraith who stole the books from us,” Mo mused.

“Don’t be stupid.” Lana tossed her blonde hair back irritably.

“What happened?” Bobby asked.

“A while back this sketchy dude moved into town,” Simone explained. “We busted him trying to summon an incubus and in his house we found a chest of

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books about dark magic and how to use it. We were gonna give them to the guild, but someone broke in and stole the books before we could.”

“And you have no idea who it was?” Bobby asked.

“Nope.” Mo shrugged. “Well, aside from it had to be another druid to enter our grove. Well, two druids as you need two wands, unless the guy stole another druid’s wand actually. But it’s been so long now, it’s useless to worry about it.”

“I wouldn’t say that at all,” Niamh replied, “there’s just nothing we can do right now.”

They entered a second, smaller cave, bare of any furnishings, except the far wall wasn’t the same as the weathered grey stone around them. It was hewn out of rock black as oil and speckled with small spheres of light, like glowing orbs

trapped inside. The lights were every colour imaginable, green and purple to white and gold. There seemed to be at least three of each, but curiously only one red sphere.

“It’s time to connect with your wand,” Dreg intoned.

*Wands?* Bobby supposed he needed one now he thought about it, everyone else had one. He’d just assumed they kept bag full of them at the house or something. He squinted and saw that amidst each glowing light in the wall was the very tip of a wand poking out.

“It’s like pulling out Excalibur,” he mumbled.

“Not quite,” Dreg whispered back, smiling faintly.

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Simone moved to Bobby’s side, pushing him forward gently. “Hold out your hand and pass it over the wall, the wand meant for you will present itself.”

He felt a tingle where her hand grazed the middle of his back. “Really, how?”

“Boudica’s sake, just do it,” Lana sighed, pulling out soap to wash her hands yet again.

Bobby started to walk the length of the wall, keeping his hand raised. He felt ice-cold air emanating from the first wand entrenched in the rock and knew better than to touch it. It was the same for the next four wands he passed, until an inviting heat replaced the cold. The source came from a wand near the wall’s centre. This time, the wand trembled as his hand came close, urging him to take it.

Bobby wondered why Mo gasped and Warren swore. They must’ve seen this before, they’d got their own wands this way, why were they acting surprised?

The wand wriggled frantically inside the rock, trying to worm its way out and into Bobby’s outstretched hand. He grabbed the end and pulled the magical weapon the rest of the way. As he did so, the red light inside the wall went out, but materialised in the ruby stone at the wand’s base. He clutched it in wonder, feeling it vibrate across his skin.

“Seven hells this is bad,” Lana cried.

Bobby finally turned back to the others. Mo’s mouth still hung open and even Dreg had paled. They all looked at him like he’d done something terribly wrong.

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“What?” he said simply, the lone word echoing around the cavern.

“You...” Niamh hesitated. “You pulled forth a rubiate wand.”

“Eh?”

“It’s the wand most associated with dark magic.” Niamh shared nervous glances with Lana and Mo. “It’s also the rarest, there was only one left in our grove’s wall.”

“No one has used a rubiate wand since Lucian Dawnskar.” Mo blinked stupidly. “One of the most powerful and destructive Baynir for generations.”

Bobby almost asked if they were joking. He looked back at the wand in his hand, which had seemed so remarkable moments before. He felt like dropping it instantly, as if it was a venomous snake, but found he didn’t want to let it go either. It was his and his alone. *They’re just jealous. They want to steal it from me. But it’s mine. Mine!*

He shook his head hard. Where had those thoughts come from?

*Can I put this wand back and pull out another one? No! This wand was made for you. Who cares what they think?*

“We’ve made a terrible mistake,” Lana whispered. “We never should’ve performed the Joining. We’ve practically unleashed another dark druid onto the world.”

Her words made his mouth run dry as nausea bubbled in his belly.

Bobby had thought all his dreams had come true but now he had a wand used almost exclusively by dark druids.

He may have been coming around to the idea of being a druid, but what if his destiny was to be a Baynir? A murderous, evil dark druid.

END

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### **Episode Two**

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## Chapter 1- Imagined Worlds

*You should never have let her die.*

Evan Umbra tried to ignore his thoughts as he walked back from school.

Water bled from a bruised sky, soaking the streets as gusts of wind shoved him with cold hands. Cars groaned along the roads and a church bell pealed, but the heavy rainfall smothered most of the city sounds. It beat down mercilessly, turning his brown hair black as the strands stuck to his face like leeches.

Evan looked behind him on instinct. Paranoia had been a constant ghost at his shoulder since the first attack. He didn't see them, but they could be near. Evan tensed, ready to run at the first sign.

*You should never have let her die.*

*Stop it! You couldn't have done anything. It was always going to happen one day, but why so soon?*

Last night had been bad. He'd distracted himself all day with school, but now the nightmare wouldn't stop replaying in his head. Maggots had taken up residence in one of her eye sockets. The other eye stared at Evan in accusation.

In the dream he was back in the front room, staring at Gran in her beloved armchair. The cloying stench of death made him gag.

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"Why," his grandmother had croaked. "Why did you let me die, Evander?"

"Gran," he'd cried. "Gran, I'm so sorry."

The carcass cackled, its black tongue lolling. "You were never good enough, boy. I'm glad I'm free of you now. You're pathetic, worthless. Even your own parents didn't want you."

"Please Gran, I..."

She'd risen to her feet, stretching out one rotting hand.

Evan had screamed as talons clawed out chunks of his chest, and he woke up trembling.

He wished he could seize the recurring nightmares and rip them into pieces.

If he'd just been there, he could've called an ambulance. He could've...

She'd died five months ago and he still missed Gran terribly. She was the only person he'd ever loved and the only person who'd ever loved him.

Evan took a deep breath and composed himself as he crossed the road, leaving one grey street and entering another. He missed the countryside, but being dumped in some obscure part of London was the least of his problems.

His nightmares had gotten worse since the murder. *Death follows me like a hunter*, he mused, *picking off everyone around me until I'm the only one left*.

The children's home was still reeling from Pete's murder one week ago. No body had been found, but there'd been a huge amount of blood in Pete's bedroom. Pete's room was also right next to Evan's.

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The orphanage staff refused to tell the kids anything. They'd surmised that Pete was killed and his body deposited somewhere. Police were still looking for a missing person, but everyone said there'd been too much blood for someone to survive. No one was allowed in the room, of course. But two days ago, Evan glimpsed through a gap in the door what looked like claw marks on the wall.

He hadn't known Pete well, he didn't really know any of the kids he shared the orphanage with, but it was still horrific. It didn't feel real that someone could be murdered. Evan was terrified; he'd hardly slept since, fearing he'd be killed in his bed too. He didn't know who or why anyone would murder Pete, and paranoia made him think he'd be next.

Was one of the other kids the killer? One of the staff? Evan couldn't stop the horrible thoughts boiling in his head.

Stranger still was his dream that night. But he dismissed it for the hundredth time. *You're way too old to be dreaming of monsters, Evan.*

Cruel laughter cut through the air.

He recognised it straight away. His body went cold. He rounded the corner and saw them. Ollie and his mates had a small boy cornered. As Ollie shoved his victim against the wall, Evan saw it was Tommy.

Evan barely knew him, but Tommy was much smaller than him, and right now he was crying in fear.

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Ollie and his gang had beaten Evan up weekly since he'd moved here. He didn't know they had a more vulnerable target too. He couldn't stand here and watch them do it.

Ollie hadn't seen him yet. He could turn back round and run. Part of him wanted to. But Evan knew his conscience would never forgive him. He had to help, or at least try. Anger surged through him, burning out the fear. "Oi!"

Ollie and his two mates turned as Evan shouted. He needed to lure them away from Tommy, even if that meant getting his own ass kicked. "C'mon then Ollie, you fat pig, I'm right here."

No one had ever spoken to the bully like that before, but Ollie's surprise quickly turned to rage. "Get 'im," he roared.

As soon as he saw Tommy escape, Evan sprinted the other way, hounded by the laughter of his pursuers. He veered into the nearest alley, hoping to lose them. He soon realised his mistake.

Alone. Cornered. *Trapped.*

At the alley's end loomed a metal fence, blocking his escape. Evan knew his chance was slim, but he threw himself at the gate anyway. He scrambled up like a monkey. He was almost there. He was going to make i—

Hands seized him.

One moment Evan clung to the cold metal, the next he was yanked down, and thrown back against the unforgiving steel. *Just let it be over quick.* His body trembled, and he tasted bile in his throat. The thugs laughed in his face.

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“What’s the rush, Ev?” Ollie snarled.

Evan opened his mouth to speak. Ollie slapped it hard.

“What you gonna do, mate?”

Before Evan could reply, the wind rushed out of him as Ollie’s fist slammed into his stomach. He fell to his knees, gasping for air. They were double his size. Evan knew fighting back would make the beating worse. He just hoped that after him, they wouldn’t feel the need to hurt anyone else.

He closed his eyes and braced himself. It would be over quickly. Maybe the pain could distract him from thinking about Gran for a while.

His head snapped back as Ollie’s fist smashed into his jaw and he slumped to the ground.

All three bullies shouted incoherently. Evan was silent.

Ollie stamped on his hand, a sharp flash of pain. Another punch. Evan saw a faint trail of black smoke snake across the ground. The mist appeared to be coming from Evan’s fingertips. *This happened once before*, he thought. The punches in his last beating had made him see mist too.

He thought he saw the mist morph into a clawed hand that crawled across the ground, but just as it looked ready to seize Ollie’s ankle, the mist dissipated.

Finally Evan’s torture came to an end.

“Try that again and we’ll kill you. That’s a promise.”

Ollie punctuated his threat with a last kick to the stomach.

Evan covered his face, gritting his teeth and trying not to cry out at the pain.

Their laughter haunted him as they sauntered out of the alley, leaving him curled up in a ball against the cold metal fence.

\*

The sleet worsened, turning to hailstones that bounced off the ground like a gang of tiny white frogs. Evan stumbled home, hunched over, face pulled tight in a grimace. The downpour beat against his aching body and the wind crawled across his skin, cold as a corpse's caress.

He walked through the gates of Helken Place and up the winding path to the drab children's home, stomping up the stairs to his room. He wanted to cry as he closed the bedroom door, but it wouldn't help. Nothing would.

He stripped off his school clothes and slumped on to his bed. *Just one more year, one more year and I'll be done with school, free of Ollie. Free of everyone.* Evan had to tell himself that, to keep himself sane.

He looked in the mirror to check the bruises. As usual his pale face was marred by ugly abrasions. His left cheek had swollen to near double its usual size. He lifted up his shirt and winced at the discolouration there. Evan told the staff he just kept falling over. They asked questions, but he pushed them away.

It would only make things worse.

He would've liked to call himself tall, dark and handsome. Really, he wasn't much taller than average, his hair was a dull brown, and he wasn't handsome.

At least, no one had ever told him he was. Dark grey eyes, made darker by pale skin, stared back at him miserably. Oddly, tiny red scratches adorned each iris, like the grey was a stone that'd been cracked and was now bleeding. It was the only interesting thing about him.

Evan pulled up the chair by his desk and sat down to write. Writing was his favourite, well only, hobby.

Pages and pages of his scrawling littered the untidy desk, reflecting the rest of the room. He picked one at random and began reading.

This one was about his hero Alwar. Alwar was the exact opposite of himself.

Strong, courageous, amazing in every way, he was the stuff of legend. Evan loved writing about his many adventures.

With the warrior Alwar he could lose himself, forget Grandma's death and his miserable life. He could escape. Alwar conquered terrible opponents and the most ferocious of beasts. Evan couldn't even escape Ollie and his thugs.

He peered out of his small window. The hail had morphed into heavy clumps of snow that splattered onto the ground, lighting the garden with a ghostly sheen.

Evan forced everything else out of his head as he wrote long into the night, immersing himself in imagined worlds and allowing reality to slip away.

\*

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Winter descended upon London, its cold touch bathing the streets. Snow fell heavily, carpeting roads and walkways. Not a street lamp glowed as silence ruled the midnight hour.

In a dark alleyway, the shadowy veils of night shattered as light filtered through a gap in space and time. The beam of light flashed scarlet as it expanded into a swirling mass.

Out of the portal stepped a monstrosity not meant to touch this world.

Quickly, he distorted his features. The abomination transformed to what could pass for a man, providing no human looked closely.

He took in a deep breath, inhaling the air of Earth. Inhaling the air of men.

It appeared he'd come to the right place.

The demon's lips hooked up. He would take great delight in killing the boy,

regardless of his master's orders.

\*

Evan trudged through oceans of snow on his way to school. His body shivered and his hands grew numb as the frost bit deep.

His grandmother's face haunted his thoughts. He'd accidentally knocked her photo over this morning. The glass had shattered. She was smiling in that photo, her face kind and warm. Her face had been cold and slack when he'd found her.

*Her body was there, but she wasn't. She was gone, she...*

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Evan forced the memory away. He wouldn't think about that, he couldn't.

She wasn't his real grandmother; he'd been abandoned by whoever his parents were, just like he'd been abandoned in London now.

He rounded the corner and Elfort School came into view. It was a typical English school, a mass of brown buildings, usually cluttered with litter as much as it was pupils.

But Evan was late and there was no one else around.

Except one.

A large figure stood by the school gates. He was as wide as he was tall, but hidden by a long trench coat and low-hanging hat. As Evan drew closer the feeling of dread engulfed him. For some reason, he was horrified by whatever waited at the gates. He didn't know why. Everything just felt *wrong*.

He froze, not wanting to get any closer to the stranger.

With agonising slowness, the stranger's face, half obscured by a scarf and hat, turned to look at him. Evan gazed in horror at the repulsive figure. He wanted to run away as fast as he could, but he was rooted to the spot.

Terror clutched at Evan's mind, squeezing his stomach and constricting his chest.

He had the innate feeling this stranger meant him grievous harm.

A double-decker bus, filled with raucous students, abruptly turned into the street and glided towards the school.

The stranger turned away fast and walked in the opposite direction. Soon he'd disappeared from view, swathed by the screeching wind and swirling snow.

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The bus pulled up by the gates and the pupils filed out, complaining how the snow had made them late.

Evan breathed heavily, trying to stuff down the panic and bile crawling up his throat. He had no idea who the stranger was. He'd always had an active imagination, and right now his mind was telling him the eerie figure could've had something to do with Pete's death. *No, you're being stupid. It was probably just some homeless man.*

Trying to shake it from his thoughts, he headed to class.

Throughout the rest of the day, Evan couldn't stop thinking about the stranger and the sense of dread that'd overwhelmed him.

He was so distracted that he paid less attention in class than usual. He was terrified when it came to the end of the day, not of Ollie and his friends, but that the stranger might be back. That *thing* frightened Evan more than Ollie ever had.

He walked out of his English class with great trepidation, trying to fight the urge to run all the way to the orphanage. He was almost relieved to see only Ollie and his friends at the gates.

Evan attempted to walk past them unseen, trying to blend in with the other students, but as always Ollie spotted him. Since Evan had first arrived and answered one too many questions in his English lesson, the thug had made his life hell.

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The smoke of Ollie's cigarette lingered about his nostrils, furthering his



resemblance to an angry bull.

“Oi, Umbra!”

Ollie had four friends with him today and all five of them chased Evan as he broke into a sprint.

Adrenaline coursed through Evan’s veins as he darted between pedestrians and cars, cutting across the road in a desperate attempt to shake them.

The streets retreated and a park came into view. He was nearly at the orphanage.

He’d never made it home before they’d got him though.

Evan leaped over the park fence, only to fall face-first in the snow on the other side. Regaining his balance using the merry-go-round, he pushed off and continued to run. Vaulting the fence had cost him. Ollie and his thugs made the jump easily and Ollie managed to snatch the back of Evan’s coat and swing him round with ruthless force. Evan’s head whiplashed and he veered sideways, tripping over and crashing to the ground.

A cruel chorus of laughter broke out amongst Ollie’s friends, but the leader himself wasn’t smiling. Perhaps he felt especially vicious today.

Before Evan could stand, Ollie booted him back down.

“Why do you always run, eh?” he snarled.

Ollie aimed a kick, but Evan rolled to his feet.

“C’mon!” Ollie shoved him. “Do sumin’.”

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This time he landed a punch to the jaw. Evan crumpled under the blow.

“Get up!” Ollie bellowed.

Evan’s anger rose to a crescendo within him, but he lacked the courage to let it loose. Ollie seized his coat and hauled him to his feet.

“Look at you. You’re nothing,” he spat, his nose almost touching Evan’s.

The other boys screamed abuse, threatening to beat Evan to within an inch of his life.

*I don’t deserve this.* He felt tears at the back of his eyes.

“Aww, you gonna cry again, mate?”

Ollie’s gang shrieked their mirth.

“Don’t see him mouthing off today, do we, boys?” Ollie looked to his peers for encouragement.

“You really are pathetic, aren’t you, Evan? Tell me, is it true you’re not even an orphan; you just live in that place because your parents abandoned you? I can see why they would.”

Evan’s anger blazed to within an inch of the surface. It felt like the blood in his head was banging against his skull, trying to leak out of his ears.

“Do sumin, Evan, I dare ya.” Ollie’s fat lips spread into a wicked smile. “You know how they always say, if you stand up to bullies they’ll leave you alone?

Well, with me... it makes things much worse.” Ollie said the last two words slowly, savouring each one.

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“What should we do to ‘im, boys? Beat ‘im bloody, or rip all his clothes off and send him back to the orphanage naked? That’ll be a laugh. Maybe we should stub our cigarettes out on him. Or maybe we should bury him next to his dear dead granny.”

Evan snapped.

His fist smashed into Ollie’s mouth. The bully’s head jerked back as his laughter cut off. Evan launched a second blow to the jaw, then another at his throat. Choking, Ollie staggered backwards. Evan hurled himself at him, his vision distorted red. Again and again he wreaked his vengeance on the bully who’d

tortured him for months.

Abruptly hands clutched at his arms and hurled him to the ground. Evan landed a short way off. His head hit the ice hard. He tried to get up, but Ollie's gang bundled him to the ground. Evan's breath was crushed out of him as they kicked his stomach, back, and chest. Dizzy and disorientated, his vision no longer a vivid red but a dull blur, he was dragged back to his feet. Ollie struggled to stand in front of him, blood streaming down his face.

"You shouldn't have done that," he rasped through mashed lips.

Evan stared back at him in defiance, his fear of these savage bullies erased.

He wouldn't be their victim today. He had finally fought back, and he'd keep fighting back every time they came for him. Eventually they'd learn to leave him alone. *They had too.*

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Ollie's grin was feral as his hand slipped into his pocket. His cohorts egged him on. One word screamed through Evan's mind— *knife!*

He'd seen Ollie showing one to his mates last week, chortling as he slashed it through the air. Sure enough, he produced a flick-knife from his pocket.

"I'm gonna give you some scars to remember me by."

As Ollie advanced his eyes suddenly widened in fear as he saw something over Evan's shoulder.

Evan fell to the ground yet again as Ollie's friends let go of him with stricken shrieks and ran as fast as they could, terror hounding their steps.

Blood trickled from Evan's nose to stain the snow; blood so dark it was almost black.

A large shadow loomed over him.

Evan's shakes turned to violent trembles as he guessed what had horrified the others. Ollie's gang had vanished, leaving their leader to stare frozen at the thing

behind Evan.

Something long, black and sharp careened into Ollie's forehead with a squelch. Ollie's mouth gaped open for a second before the black spike arced up, taking Ollie's head with it. Blood vomited from Ollie's torso as it fell convulsing to the ground.

Evan turned and came face to face with a creature from a madman's nightmare.

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Terror ripped through Evan's mind, consuming all thought and setting his blood afire. Horror clenched his stomach and gripped his heart. It was the stranger he'd seen before, only now it'd ripped off its garments, revealing monstrosity in its true form.

The hideous contortion of mangled limbs crouched. Its yellow slavering fangs were inches from Evan's throat and the glare of its five green eyes was bloodcurdling.

The black spike-which had Ollie's head speared on the end like a grisly cocktail stick- was only one of eight legs. The monster was some amalgamation of giant spider and grotesque troll.

The creature pounced, one of its spikes inches from Evan's shoulder as it pinned his coat to the ground.

As Evan stared into those gigantic green eyes he saw only horror.

"You're weak, childling," the monstrosity hissed.

Evan didn't know how, he didn't know why. His mind should have collapsed in madness. He should've been paralysed with mind numbing fear, but somehow, something erupted within him.

He felt a force, a rising tidal wave of energy that burst out of him. Faced with such absolute evil and the threat of imminent death, his power awoke. Bright emerald flames shot forth from Evan's outstretched hands.

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The creature roared as the fire blasted into him, throwing him back to land in a sprawl of spidery limbs. The stench of roasting flesh filled Evan's nose as he staggered to his feet, staring at his unblemished hands in disbelief.

His hands had vibrated and pulsed when the flames shot out, but Evan hadn't felt any heat.

The fear was there, undeniably, but so was the power surging through him.

Evan didn't understand. Nothing like this had ever happened before, it was impossible.

Before Evan had time to work out exactly how he'd caused fire to burst from his fingertips, the monster charged.

All eight of its arms wrapped around him, thrusting Evan into its hairy, slime-ridden chest. The monster clutched tight, as if intending to crush Evan to pulp.

As Evan kicked wildly, he accidentally punted Ollie's disembodied head. It sailed off the monster's leg and landed on the park's slide.

He was spun round in its arms as the creature used one of its limbs to pull out an object that'd been sheathed inside its very skin. The object glowed scarlet, transforming into a portal that swirled and crackled like lightning.

None of this could be real; Ollie's death, a giant spider monster, flames bursting from his hands. Evan would've tried to pinch himself and awake from this nightmare if he wasn't so horrified by everything around him.

The monster stepped into the portal, taking Evan with it.

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The portal took hold and Evan was hurled into the whirling mass. The world disappeared in an instant, only to be replaced by another.

The great beast landed on solid ground, holding Evan in its two lower arms.

Screaming and thrashing, Evan tried to escape, but the creature had him locked in an iron embrace.

“I didn't realise how powerful you are,” his captor mused. “I was going to feast on you myself, but you have great sorcery. I will gift you to my queen instead. Yes,” he muttered rapidly. “Yes, yes, my lovely queen will surely forgive me if I present her with a gift meant for Lord Kurlan.”

They stood on a narrow cliff face that jutted out above a sea of lava. Beyond the narrow ridge stood volcanic mountains and a ruined red landscape swathed in a mist of ash. Many of the volcanoes were tinged green or blue. One volcano floated high above the sea of fire, as if by magic. The sky was strewn with stars of black fire and painted a vicious magma to rival the sea below.

This wasn't Earth. This wasn't anywhere that should be, or could be, real.

Evan continued to struggle feverishly against his captor, but the demon only laughed. Roaring in pain, fury and fear, Evan aimed a punch at the beast's head.

To his astonishment a green blaze lurched from his hand again.

The demon's laugh curdled to a yell of agony and Evan fell from his grasp to the ground.

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As the monster staggered, Evan crawled across the ruined red earth, making for the edge of the cliff. He'd rather throw himself into the volcanic sea than be eaten alive.

He scrambled to his feet, but before he could take another step the demon plunged a black spike into Evan's stomach.