

# Johnathan Pearce 1

## Contents

Prologue - 11 November 2023 .....	4
Part 1 – The Mysterious Lion Bird .....	6
Chapter - 21 June 2010, thirteen years earlier.....	6
Chapter - 22 June 2010.....	10
Chapter - 23 June 2010.....	10
Chapter.....	11
Chapter - 24 June 2010.....	19
Chapter.....	20
Chapter.....	22
Chapter - 25 June 2010.....	23
Chapter.....	24
Chapter.....	26
Chapter.....	30
Chapter.....	32
Chapter.....	33
Part 2 – The Terrifying Flaming Horse.....	34
Chapter - 26 June 2010.....	34
Chapter.....	38
Chapter.....	40
Chapter - 27 June 2010.....	42
Chapter.....	46
Chapter.....	49
Chapter - 28 June 2010.....	50

Chapter.....	54
Chapter.....	55
Chapter - 7 July 2010.....	56
Chapter - 9 July 2010.....	58
Chapter.....	60
Chapter.....	61
Chapter - 28 July 2010.....	64
Chapter - 28 August 2010.....	70
Chapter.....	75
Chapter.....	77
Part 3 – Golden Monster Boar .....	80
Chapter.....	80
Chapter.....	82
Chapter.....	83
Chapter - 3 September 2010 .....	85
Chapter - 18 September 2010 .....	90
Chapter.....	95
Chapter.....	96
Chapter - 6 October 2010.....	98
Chapter - 10 October 2010.....	103
Chapter.....	106
Chapter - 5 November 2010.....	108
Chapter.....	111
Chapter.....	112
Part 4 – Cannibal Lizards .....	116
Chapter.....	116
Chapter.....	118
Chapter - 18 November.....	120

Chapter.....	122
Chapter - 15 December 2010 .....	123
Chapter.....	125
Chapter.....	126
Chapter.....	127
Chapter - 3 January 2011 .....	129
Chapter.....	130
Chapter.....	130
Chapter.....	131
Chapter.....	131
Chapter.....	134
Chapter.....	135
Chapter.....	138
Chapter.....	138
Chapter.....	141
Chapter.....	142
Chapter.....	143
Chapter.....	145
Part 5 – Monster Zombies.....	147
Chapter - 30 January 2011 .....	147
Chapter.....	150
Chapter.....	151
Chapter - 1 February 2011 .....	152
Chapter.....	154
Chapter.....	158
Chapter.....	159
Chapter.....	162
Chapter - 2 February 2011 .....	163

Chapter.....	164
Chapter.....	165
Chapter.....	165
Chapter.....	169
Chapter.....	170
Chapter.....	172
Chapter.....	173
Chapter - 6 February 2011 .....	173
Chapter.....	175
Chapter - 22 February 2011 .....	177

## Intro

### Prologue - 11 November 2023

“Gifted Enterprise has waited a long time for this opportunity,” Biggs said into the microphone. “I have just a few questions for you, and your treatment thereafter entirely depends on your cooperation.”

Biggs stared first at the heavy steel shutters, then up at the monitor above them. A silhouette of a man was shackled down inside.

A tired voice rattled through loudspeakers. “Where am I?”

“Let’s start with your name. Your real name.” Biggs was ready with his electronic tablet and stylus; the transcription department always took their sweet time.

“You can’t do this to a US citizen. I have rights!”

“Your name!”

A moment passed, and then another one. “The Hammer.”

“We are already aware of what you call yourself. Now, your birth name, please,” he stressed,

Another couple of moments passed in silence. Biggs turned to one of the cameras and rolled his hand. With a groan, the steel shutters split apart just a sliver. A ray of light crept through several layers of transparent plastic and hit the prisoner in the face. Instantly the loudspeakers filled the room with a piercing scream. Only when Biggs made the motion in reverse and the shutters joined again did the loudspeakers fall silent, except for a bit of gasping.

“You see, we know your weaknesses, so we can do this the hard way or the easy way.”

“Why are you doing this?”

Biggs drew his eyes up to the monitor. The prisoner had withdrawn to a corner.

“Let’s leave it at that. I know that true identities can be a touchy subject, and we can always extract it later. Would you prefer to tell me more about your powers?”

Silence.

“Feigning ignorance isn’t going to work. There were witnesses to your little fight downtown, and most of them swear to have seen light coming from your hands.”

“I would like my sunglasses back.”

Biggs slammed his fist on the table. “How this works is that you cooperate; then you may make requests.” He smoothed his hair back and took a deep breath. “Fine, your sunglasses then, let’s talk about them. Do they help you with your light sensitivity? How do you even see through them? Or do you just use them to hide your scars?”

Again, silence.

“You know, we wouldn’t have to be enemies if you would just cooperate. It would certainly make things more pleasant for you in the days to come.” Biggs sighed and got up. He was about to halt the interview when a thought struck him. “Before I go, would you indulge a personal question? You seem reasonably strong; I mean, I read the damage report, so why haven’t you escaped yet? Is it only because of the restraints and security measures, or do your powers really take that much out of you?”

More silence.

Biggs got up and approached the barrier. “Tell me something, do you think yourself special? That I have never seen anything like you before, so you deserve the royal treatment?” Biggs’s face contorted into a sneer. “Let me tell you, you piece of shit, I’ve been doing this for twenty years and I’ve seen all manners of freaks. One guy could consume people and take their shape, another was the avatar of a god. Tell me, how do you compare?”

“What happened to them?”

Biggs brushed his hand against the cold steel. “That depended entirely on how well they cooperated.”

Chains dragged across the floor. Did the prisoner somehow know that Biggs was close and had decided to meet by the divide? Impossible. The barrier was solid, and their conversation happened through microphones and speakers.

“You know, I think you make a good point. I *should* try to escape.”

Biggs felt the blood freeze in his veins and checked the monitor. The prisoner had to be right in front of him.

“Should we terminate the interview here?” a voice asked over his earpiece.

“No, no, let him try. After all, a demonstration would go a long way to improve our relationship,” Biggs said. “Besides, it’s not like anyone has succeeded in escaping yet.”

A small light appeared in the prison cell. It was hard to tell from the angle of the camera, but it appeared to originate from the prisoner’s hand. Biggs forgot to breathe. Impossible. The prisoner had nothing on him that could produce this light, not torches or matches or anything like that.

He held it up so that there could be no mistake: the light wasn’t in his hand; the prisoner’s hand itself was glowing!

The entire cell filled with the light so that Biggs could see nothing on the monitor. It took a split second and the feed cut out, an error message dancing across the screen.

Biggs stared confused for only a moment.

The room shook and sirens began blaring, but the shutters seemed intact.

“Open it up. Open the goddamn shutters,” Biggs screamed. “I want to see what happened.”

The steel barrier split apart and revealed the plastic divide again. It was several layers thick and could withstand even high-calibre rifle fire and hand grenades, but... a spiderweb of cracks reached almost from corner to corner!

Biggs could not stop shaking. “Please tell me we caught that!” he said as gas filled the prisoner’s cell.

## **Part 1 – The Mysterious Lion Bird**

### **Chapter - 21 June 2010, thirteen years earlier**

At the end of long rows of neat suburban homes, right up against the woods, stood a curious house. The ground floor was small with long, square windows, the first floor was big with small, round windows, and the whole thing was supported by pillars. It was here that Johnathan Pearce lived with his parents, though he preferred to go by John.

John sluggishly moved into the kitchen where his mother was munching on toast. Marilyn Pearce was scraggly looking despite nursing a bulge on her stomach.

“Good morning,” she said as John dragged himself up to the table.

John mumbled something and fumbled around the table with his hand. Marilyn nudged a carton of juice and a glass towards him.

“What’s the matter, honey? Don’t tell me you’re getting bored of summer break already.”

“Of course not. It’s just that Ragan’s busy preparing for his father’s business trip, and Phil’s having family over, so it’s just me here.” He cautiously grabbed the juice and started pouring.

“We promised you we’d go somewhere as a family... we just need to get the little one out first.” Marilyn drummed her fingers on her belly.

He buttered a piece of toast for himself, stealing a few glances at his mother’s belly. “Mom, I’m almost eleven, why am I getting a little brother now?”

Marilyn smiled and finished her toast. “Well, it’s not like we planned Ronald, but things happen sometimes. What about your homework then, have you started it?”

“Break’s just begun, I have plenty of time,” John said and stuffed his toast into mouth.

“You say that now, but things are bound to get hectic soon. You better get started soon or you’ll end up regretting it.” His mother slathered a piece of toast with first chocolate and then jam.

“What was the subject again?”

“My future career. Not like I know what I want to be, anyway.”

“Well, you’re not going to become a lawyer like your dad or a doctor like me with your grades.”

John made a noncommittal noise.

Marilyn sighed. “It’s not that you’re not smart, Johnathan, you just need to apply yourself more.”

“I know, I know,” he said and left the table before she could begin on a tirade again.

Back in his room, he sat down at his desk and put his pen to the paper. Whatever he had in mind was always better than what he drew.

“Well, you won’t ever get any better if you don’t keep at it,” a friend had once told him, so that’s what John did. The only problem was inspiration. At first, he had drawn animals, but had slowly drifted to mechanical models. When his dad saw his drawings of weapons, he bought him an air gun which was now displayed on the shelf above his desk. If he got the time in the holidays, he would show John how to use it.

John sighed and flipped open his library book about cars. The Chevy Impala 1967 had drawn his interest several times, but he had never dared actually depicting it. What if it didn’t turn out all right? He had to hand in the book soon, though, so he threw himself into the task.

After a while, he had a mildly decent copy on his paper. He sighed deeply and sank back in his chair. He had a PlayStation 3, but he had already burnt through his library. He drummed his fingers on the armrest and got up.

John went out the kitchen entrance to the warm summer day and the backyard. The neighbourhood rules didn't permit big trees, so his dad had bought a big parasol to shelter the terrace. He looked around for inspiration and his eyes fell on the house. John sat down on a bench by his mom's rose garden and put the pad in his lap.

The pen reluctantly traced the contours of his home. With its simple geometric shapes, he only had to worry about perspective.

"You sure anybody lives here?" a quiet voice asked.

"I told you, this is where the freaks live. Now hurry up," a loud voice replied.

John looked up. With pad in hand, he raced around the front and peeked around the hedge and saw two kids on the footpath outside his home.

"Why do you call them freaks?"

"Because," the second kid said and grabbed a stone from the arms of the first one, "anyone who'd want to live in that freakish house must be a freak themselves."

"That's it?" the first kid asked. "The house isn't that bad."

"Anyone who has lived in Ferman long enough knows this house. I hear the original architect hanged himself in the bedroom and you can still see his ghost wandering around. They were going to tear it down twenty years ago when these people moved in," the second kid continued. "And, besides, they never come to any parties and they never do anything in town. It's like they're not real; like they're trying to hide something."

"This is just silly."

"Okay, how about this. Their oldest kid was removed from the home. If that isn't freaky, I don't know—"

"What are you doing?" John asked nervously.

The two kids shared a glance. "Nothing. We were just leaving," the first one said.

"Yeah, once we've done this." The other one threw a stone and John shielded himself, but it flew over his head and hit the wall next to a window. "What are you going to do about that?" he asked and hurled another one. "You and your freak family don't belong here."

John felt his cheeks heat. "I'm not a freak." He clenched his fists and the other boy pushed him to the ground.

"Come on, that's enough," the first kid said.

The second one grabbed John by his shirt and lifted him.

"You don't want to be here, and no one wants you to stay either," he whispered.

Suddenly the other kid was sprawled on the ground. John looked up and a shopping trolley had taken his place. An old lady stood behind it.



“What the Hell is your problem?” the boy asked as he got up.

The old lady glanced his way, but her eyes were far away. “I was born to murder the world,” she whispered.

“Whoa, what’s with her?” the first boy asked.

All the fighting energy, and the arsenal of pebbles, had left the second boy. “Never mind her, that’s just Old Lady Taker. Another freak.”

“Should we help her?”

The other boy shook his head. “Why bother? She doesn’t belong anywhere. Come on.”

He started to leave while the other boy looked at her a moment longer. Only once they were completely gone did John approach her.

“Hey, um... thanks, I guess,” John said and smiled. “I mean, you probably didn’t do that on purpose or anything, but I still appreciate it.”

“Kill...” Old Lady Taker said. “Kilburne. Willesden Green. West Hampstead.”

John shook his head. “Do you need any help getting home?”

Her head slumped down, her chin resting on her chest.

“Hey, you all right?”

He reached out and touched her shoulder. Her hand jerked out and grabbed his neck in a vice-like grip. The white in her eyes turned black, like someone was injecting ink directly into her sclera. *“Not everyone is born into their powers, Johnathan Pearce. Even those who are, seldom knows.”* A deep, echoing voice not belonging to a woman or a human at all gurgled from her throat.

“W-w-what?”

He tried to break free, but her bony hand had the strength of ten men and the icy cold of the grave.

*“The time will come, and it will come soon. When you awaken to your powers, I trust you will use them with due consideration.”*

The old lady became limp, and her hand dropped.

John backed away and froze in fear. He was nailed to the spot as the old lady, mumbling to herself, shambled off with her shopping trolley. Once she was gone completely from sight, John realised he had forgotten to breathe and took a deep gulp of air and collapsed on his behind in his driveway.

“What was that?” he asked, trying to will his hammering heart into submission.

He stretched his legs, and pebbles clattered away. He stared at them for a second and remembered why he had come out front. He kicked the rest of the small stones away before picking up his notepad. He put the pen back on the paper, but his blood was boiling and his hands shaking.

Rather than finishing his house, he furiously slashed the paper and finally tore out the page. An elderly couple walked by and whispered to each other, but John ignored them. The pencil tapped the blank, dented canvas on his knees.

“What I want to be when I grow up,” he mumbled. “Not a doctor or a lawyer like my parents, that’s for sure.”

“Sweetie, are you outside?” his mother called to him from the house. John’s ears perked at the alarm in her voice. “Come inside and put some clothes on, we need to go to the hospital now. It’s time.”

## Chapter - 22 June 2010

“Son? Son?”

John blinked awake and looked around the waiting room. His father was looking at him. Henry was quite a bit shorter than his wife and a lot portlier, with a moustache and greying hair.

“What? What is it?” John asked and rubbed his eyes.

“You’re a big brother now,” Henry said and chuckled.

“You mean..?”

“That’s right. You want to see your little brother?”

John nodded. “Sure.”

His father turned towards one of the doors and held it open.

His mother was propped up in bed, her hair a sweaty mess, holding in her arms a blue blanket with toy trains. The bundle shifted, and John saw his little brother for the first time.

“You can come a little closer,” Marilyn said.

John approached the bed. All he could see was the face. It split apart in a toothless yawn.

“Well, what do you think?” Henry asked, beaming with pride.

“Can I... can I hold him?” John asked.

“Of course.”

Marilyn carefully shifted the bundle and John grabbed it slowly. His father adjusted his grip and John stared down into the eyes of Ronald, his baby brother.

“Still upset about getting a brother?” Henry asked.

John furrowed his brow. “I will protect him,” he said solemnly. “Ronald, as your big brother, I swear nothing bad will happen.”

## Chapter - 23 June 2010

Ragan paced around his room. It was a large one, for sure, but there weren't many more things here than in a normal boy's bedroom. Round and round he went, biting his thumb all the while. Finally, he paused by a glass cabinet opposite his door. His reflection stared back at him from the many trophies. Science fairs, speech competition, a few sports trophies.

"They won't be home today, right?" he asked. "The deal is that no one gets hurt."

*"Relax, would you?"* a voice boomed as his reflection grew hazy. *"I've told you a million times that John won't be hurt."*

"Good. Good." He lifted his hand, then lowered it again and looked back at the cabinet. "All right, listen, John means a lot to me. He's a bit of a goofball, but he's also my best friend, and the deal is over if he's hurt in any way. You hear me?"

*"Enough already, you have my fucking word. Now do you want to do this or not?"*

Ragan breathed deeply and raised his hand again. "Anzu! Anzu, heed my call and come to me!" he yelled and pointed at his window.

A line began to shimmer outside, sparkling in all the colours of the rainbow. The line split down the middle and widened, further and further, until a pair of paws grabbed the sides. A mighty roar shook the windows. Ragan barely caught a glimpse of the beast before it spread its wings and was off.

"Stay on it," he said and glanced over his shoulder at the cabinet. He could once more see himself in the shine of his trophies.

## Chapter

"Come on, son. We're home."

The door opened, and John looked up from his Nintendo DS. To celebrate the birth of his little brother, his dad had given him a new game. It was a good distraction, but he was almost through this one as well.

"I'm telling you, we were not home again this soon last time." His father's moustache quivered as he went around the car. "Or the one before that," he mumbled.

John swung out and planted his feet in the gravel driveway, nose buried in his handheld. His mother put an arm around him.

"Getting discharged early just means we're home sooner," she said and hugged him. "And you have a brother to play with now."

John nodded.

His father came from the other side with a baby seat in hand. "And we've had that room empty for a few years now. It's good to..." He stopped midsentence from the wilting glare of his wife. "It's good to be back."

"I could use a shower," John's mother said. "And my own bed."

"Don't worry, sweetie." His father fished out his keys from his pocket and put a hand on John's shoulder. He briefly glanced up from his game. "Johnathan and I can take care of Ronald."

"Thank you." His mother reached over and pecked his father on the lips. "It's good to know I can rely on my two boys."

A shadow fell on the house. They turned to the sky as a shape passed across the sun.

"Is that a plane?" his father asked. "I swear, ever since..."

A gust of wind assailed them, spraying pebbles everywhere.

"*Donnerwetter!*" Henry pushed down his hat, and Marilyn shielded John. "If it's going to storm, we better hurry inside."

As John's father grabbed the handle of the baby seat, John's mother put her hand over his. "It's just a little wind. Why don't you go for a little drive while I freshen up?"

Henry opened his mouth, but his wife looked at him sternly. He nodded and put a hand behind John.

"Really? Come on, I just want to go home," John said.

"No complaining." His mother kissed the top of his head.

"Yeah, there's a really neat place I've been wanting to show you. We'll be back in an hour, what do you say?" his father asked him.

"I guess."

John dragged himself inside and slowly put on the seatbelt. Henry lingered with Marilyn.

"You don't think it's..." he said in a low voice, but Marilyn turned him around.

"Go. I'll handle it."

With the baby seat next to John again, his father grabbed the wheel and backed them out. He fiddled with the radio and a few notes faded into a hardware store commercial.

"Is everything all right, dad?" John asked

"Everything is fine. Why do you ask?"

"It's just... what was that thing in the sky?"

"Eh, probably just a new plane from the Local Home Defense. Remember how the LHD took over the old military base last year?"

John raised an eyebrow. "But, dad, I think that thing had wings."

"Planes tend to have those, son."

“No, like—”

Another burst of wind howled around them and John yelled. People fell into hedges or to the pavement. Grocery bags flew off and their contents spilled. Dogs escaped their owners’ grasp. Rather than enjoying their freedom, they barked.

“Dad, can’t you show me that place some other time? I don’t think we should be outside right now.”

John pressed his face against the glass, trying to find the shape in the sky again.

“Nonsense, it’ll be fine as long as we’re in the car. Hey, how’s your brother doing?”

Ronald was fidgeting, but still sleeping in his blue blanket, adorned with little toy trains.

“Fine.”

His dad chuckled. “Good, good. Ronald is going to need his big brother for a long time, until he gets strong enough on his own.”

“Hey, dad... is everything all right?”

“Of course it is, why wouldn’t it be?”

His father’s laughter sounded a little hollow, and John couldn’t shake a feeling churning in the pit of his stomach.

The winds came in jerks, pushing people around and ripping things out of their hands. Dark clouds gathered in the sky, making finding the odd shape difficult. They passed a park eerily devoid of people. The fountains sprayed their water horizontally, and the trees swayed back and forth like they wanted to escape the ground. Cars were abandoned across the road, forcing John’s father to weave slowly between them.

A garbage can banged into the bonnet and his father slammed the brakes.

“Dad, can we please go back?” John pleaded and grabbed the seat in front of him.

His father took a few deep breaths and started the car again.

“Could you... could you play with your brother or something?”

John glanced sideways and found Ronald squirming in his seat.

“Stop ignoring me, please! What’s going on?”

“I know a place where we can be safe. From the storm, I mean.”

They left the park behind them as the sky turned a livid shade of blue.

“A storm warning has been issued through the greater Ferman area.” A voice interrupted the song that John hadn’t even noticed had come on. “All citizens are advised to stay indoors or seek shelter immediately.”

His father quickly turned it off.

“Are we being invaded? This isn’t like all the fighting in Europe, is it?”

“Don’t be silly, son, those civil wars would never happen here. Not again, I mean.”

“But the news is always talking about nationalist groups who want to hurt us. Maybe that shape from before is a fighter plane—”

“I’m sorry, Johnathan, but could you just go along with me and not ask any questions?”

John glared at his father but was interrupted by the babbling of his brother. Ronald fidgeted, so John grabbed a toy and dangled it above him. “It’s so easy for you, isn’t it?” John said, making no effort to lower his voice. “You don’t care when no one tells you anything. Like why we have to live in a big ugly house, where my big brother went, why we’re going out into this stupid storm.”

“That’s enough,” Henry said.

John fell back into his seat and crossed his arms.

Outside the windows, the hospital came and went, quickly replaced by both a high school and a mall before factories popped into view. All the while, the winds buffeted them so that John had to grab on to something several times. The time passed in silence before the car came to a halt.

“All right, gang, here we are.”

John jumped out and shielded himself from the wind and the dust in it. “Where are we?” he asked and looked around the industrial area.

His father came around from the other side with Ronald in his baby seat. “You wouldn’t think it now, but your mother and I used to come here all the times. I’ve wanted to show you for quite a while.”

His father clapped his back, and John started walking, looking behind him for the shape but the sky had become totally dark. It could be flying around up there, and he would not even notice.

“Sure, but why now? Why in the middle of a storm?”

They dodged discarded fridges and shopping carts. Beer bottles and cans clanged away from their feet. They trampled through someone’s small garden as they aimed for an abandoned warehouse at the other end.

“Well, we’ve been cooped up in that hospital for a few days, and you were complaining about not having anything to do,” his father replied.

A faded sign indicated the warehouse had once been turned into a roller derby before being abandoned again. The doors had been closed, but age and vandalism had pried open a small hole. John was pressed through the opening before his father ducked in after.

“Well, what do you think?” Henry asked.

“Dad, really, what’s going on?”

Henry’s smile twitched. “Can’t I show my sons a cool place without ulterior motives?”

They went around the rink and came to a small shopping area.

Everything not nailed down had long since been plundered, but John could still see gum and stains from sodas and beers littering the floor.

“Ah, I remember when we first moved here, this place had just opened up.” Henry chuckled and went around the area. “Your mother would take us here all the time and I hated every moment of it. I’d always fall on my ass, the food was cheap and disgusting, and the music kept playing the same outdated pop songs.”

“Then why’d you go?” John asked.

“Because your mother loved it. It was worth all those things just to see her smile and hear her laugh. That’s why I was genuinely sad when they closed the place. I knew how much it meant to her. Now she has Zumba, of course, but this was something we’d do together.”

“Can’t you just do something else together?”

His father passed his hand across one of the tables. “Eh, I was never any good at rhythm or balance, and that’s all your mom wants to do in her spare time. We tried line dancing, once... man, what a disaster.” Henry leant his head back and laughed. “Listen, Johnathan, do you mind if we stayed here for a bit?”

John looked at his little brother, oblivious to everything around him. “I wish I could have seen this place before it closed.”

His father chuckled. “I don’t know, John, I think you take a little too much after me. But they also had these things called arcade machines. Used to take all my quarters.”

“I know what an arcade is,” John said and hit his father in the shoulder.

“You would definitely have liked their nachos. Just like your mom makes them.” Henry stuck out his tongue.

A blast of wind assaulted the warehouse and rattled the few remaining panes of glass. The roof creaked. A wire snapped and a lamp crashed down.

“Nothing to worry about,” his father said, directed at the crying Ronald.

John couldn’t help but feel cold in here. Also, he had left his handheld gaming console in the car, so all he could do was try to imagine his parents here. Out on the tracks wearing skates or eating nachos on one of the benches.

“Dad, how much lo...”

Something passed by one of the windows. His father was there instantly and held him tight.

“No matter what happens, don’t be scared and do exactly as I tell you.”

“What do you mean?”

A chunk of the roof smashed into the track. A gigantic paw poked through the hole and grabbed the edge of the hole. With no seeming effort, it peeled back the roof like a can of tomatoes.

It all came crashing down in a cloud of dust. John screamed then coughed, trying to see through his stinging eyes. There was a snarl and a clacking as something heavy advanced across the vinyl floor.

His father put a finger across his lips as he ducked everyone behind an old counter. Ronald cried so he grabbed him from his seat and rocked him against his shoulder. John peeked over the top.

A lion's head poked through the dust. Wings spread almost from one side of the warehouse to the other. They flapped, and the air cleared. Arms with clawed paws carried it forward. Its plumage was deep purple and black. Intelligent eyes scanned the area.

"Dad, w... what is that?" John whispered and jerked back down.

"I don't know, son."

His father dragged him into a hug.

The beast kept stalking the warehouse. It roared and flapped its wings and things tore off with loud groans and loudly crashed around them. Bits of railing lodged into the wall above them and plaster drizzled down on John. He felt like crying, like Ronald, but his older brother wouldn't have approved if he had been here.

"Everything's going to be all right, just as soon as your mother gets here." His father closed his eyes and hugged them tighter.

The beast finally noticed the noises and advanced upon the hideout. Its paw hovered dangerously above them.

The clouds parted and light filled the warehouse. John blinked several times, just barely able to make out a glowing orb descending through the roof. A beam flew from the light and seared into the paw. The beast reeled and turned towards the source.

"What took you so long?" Henry sighed and pulled John up. "This is where we leave."

As John was frozen in fear, his father had to yank at him. The beast turned towards them again, but another beam raked across its back. Its howls shook the warehouse.

"What's going on?" John pleaded.

"I'll explain later, just run!" Henry yelled; his hair matted with sweat.

Beams flew like machinegun fire from the sphere. The beast jumped from side to side and banged into the walls. Steel girders snapped like twigs and smashed into the ground. Lamps crashed down. The roof collapsed entirely, and the walls cracked. John screamed, his father yelled, and his brother wailed. They squeezed through the opening again just as debris fell behind them and blocked the hole.

"Dammit, this place was supposed to be safe," Henry wheezed, his face beet red. "I was supposed to wait here if anything ever happened while you took care of things."



He paused halfway through the empty lot, out of breath.

"You're hurting me," John said and pounded at his arm.

"I never imagined it would come to this." His father released him and used the hand to wipe his own face. "Now listen to me, son, we don't have much time and there's something I must tell you."

"What?" John rubbed his arm and looked up at his father.

His father shifted Ronald to the other arm, the baby seat lost, and turned back towards the warehouse. Light flashed out of all the holes as if a rave party was going on inside.

"Where do I even begin? Okay, so, you remember when your older brother..." His father fell quiet. He cleared his throat before continuing. "You remember when Lawrence broke his arm?"

John nodded. His brother had always gotten into trouble. "Mom got so angry when she found out you had taken him to the hospital."

"Yeah, I freaked out a little bit, but the hospital seemed like the best option at the time," his father said, bouncing Ronald up and down. "Your brother's arm was fine the next day, Johnathan."

"Huh? But you made him wear the cast for three weeks."

"That's because breaking your arm is not like scraping your knee." His father sighed and kicked a discarded can. "You and Lawrence and Ronnie too, you are... well, you guys are special. And I don't mean like how I tell you every day that you're special; I mean that you have powers."

"I'm... special?" John looked at his hands. "But I don't want to be special. Everyone already picks on me."

"I know, son, I know." His father heaved a sigh. "Listen, you don't even have to worry about it. Your mom is going to take care of business, so we just have to let her do her thing."

"I don't understand."

"That light you saw, that was your mother." Henry smiled and looked at John. "I don't know what that bird monster is, but your mother's strong. This is nothing she can't handle."

"Does this mean I can do that too?" John stared at the warehouse. It shook, threatening to collapse any moment.

"I don't know, son. You'll have to ask your mom when she's done."

The light faded and the noises died down. His father moved back towards the warehouse when a paw reached out through the hole in the roof.

"Back to the car. Now!"

John once again found himself dragged along, this time across the empty lot. Their car, however, was now upside down. A loud crash made him turn around. The monster, a few oozing streaks across its plumage, had crashed through the wall.

“Dad... mom...” John cried.

“No, son, it’ll be all right. Everything’s going to be fine. We just need to... to hide somewhere while your mother catches her breath.”

“Where?”

His father looked around as the massive beast strolled closer. One eye was closed, and blood dripped down its feathers.

“The recycling plant,” his father said.

They raced across the street. The monstrous bird but flapped of its wings. John was lifted off his feet. His father hugged a lamppost with one arm and grabbed his hand with the other, but they were both too sweaty. John glided out of his father’s grasp and flew through the open gates and into the recycling plant.

“Johnathan!”

The car scraped along the ground with an ear-piercing noise and slammed into the gates, blocking the way. John rolled down the road between containers. He got up slowly, his body aching. All he could do was watch the beast bearing down on his father.

“Find a place to hide; I’ll try and loop around to you.” His father disappeared from sight and the beast went with him.

John scrambled between the nearest row of containers and squatted down. He couldn’t stop himself from shivering and snivelling. He tried to think of his big brother, but he was too scared. It didn’t work. He hurt all over, and he could see his own blood. He closed his eyes and put his hands over his head.

*“Johnathan, calm down.”*

John peeked out and looked for the source of the voice.

The sphere of light hovered above the ruins of the warehouse. It flickered weakly and he could now see a woman within it. “Mom!” John shouted.

*“Whatever happens, you must keep calm.”*

The voice echoed in his mind as his mother mustered a weak beam. The beast growled and swatted her out of the sky.

John could see the beast over the top of the walls: it was making its way towards his mother. Rage bubbled up inside him. John clenched his fists and stepped out of his hiding place.

“Stop hurting my family!” he shrieked.

The beast paused. It leapt and in a single bound landed inside the recycling plant. John yipped and stepped back again. It propped its lion head close to him, observing him. John tightened his hands into fists and backed away. His rage was making him dizzy.

“What do you want from us?” John cried, snot bubbling out of his nose. He felt hot, like his blood was boiling. His skin was itchy, and he could not stop scratching.

*“No! You have to stay calm, do you hear me?”*

The beast lifted a paw. John ran back behind the container. The paw smacked down, and the container burst open, spraying plastic bottles everywhere. The ground shook. John stumbled and fell on his face.

*“Get... get away from me!”* He felt sick. His head burned, and his blood was fire.

The beast swept the containers out of the way like toy blocks. John fell to the ground. Cans, TVs, bicycles, and toilets rained down around him, some shattering into pieces.

He looked up as the bird crept closer. The fire felt like it was dripping from his eyes and mouth. His arm was living flame. Everything was fire and pain. Through the scarlet he noticed that his arm glowed. Distantly, he heard himself scream. He could only see the light. The bird roared and squawked at the same time.

Then things went dark.

## **Chapter - 24 June 2010**

“What do you think happened here?” Phil asked, leaning across the police tape.

Ragan stared at the crater. “Hmm.”

“Do you think John was here?”

“You mean right in the middle of the explosion?” Ragan shook his head. “Don’t be ridiculous, he must have been at the hospital.”

“Right, because of his mom.”

The two stared at the former recycling plant. It was like God himself had reached down and scooped it out of the ground.

“You don’t think he was at home when his house was flattened in that storm yesterday?” Phil asked.

“Like I said, he had to have been at the hospital. Why would they have gone home early?”

“But we can’t reach him or his parents.” Phil sighed. “I wish someone would tell us how John is.”

“No news is good news,” Ragan said.

Phil nodded and withdrew from the crater. “Your dad must be able to figure something out. Can’t he talk with the police or something?”

“I’ll ask him.” Ragan bit into his thumb.

Their thoughts were interrupted by a rhythmic clacking. They turned around and saw a woman squeezing past the barricades. The thuds came from a walking stick taller than herself, with a birdhouse on top. She wore fishnet stockings, the right one tied together where she was missing her foot, and a studded leather jacket. Her gaunt face was full of piercings, and her hair was dyed deep red.

“Jesus, what the fuck could have done this?” she whispered and pushed her way past the boys. They made a hasty retreat as the lady closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

## Chapter

“Still no deaths have been confirmed following yesterday’s explosion at the recycling plant, though several were injured. While the cause remains unidentified, the Local Home Defense have gone on record that they are not involved. Numerous protesters have flooded inner Ferman demanding answers and the LHD has responded by deploying soldiers on the streets. No link has been established to yesterday’s storm that demolished a house in the suburbs.”

Rose turned off the radio. She was short and brawny, with her blonde hair tied back to reveal a time-worn face. Her small pawnshop was crowded with customers and had been that way almost constantly since morning. That’s not what drew a sigh from her, however. “I guess it really must be a nationalist attack,” she said.

“Of course they would deny any involvement,” answered an old man. He tapped the glass of the counter. “How much for that gun?”

“You got a permit?”

The old man grumbled and fished out his wallet. “It just ain’t natural. The LHD is supposed to replace the world’s armies? What exactly makes the Local Home Defense any different to an army, just because you call it a peace-keeping force?”

“Old man, your permit expired in the seventies,” Rose said and held up his card. “I can’t legally sell you any firearms unless you get this renewed.”

The old man yanked back his licence. “It’s the end of the world and you won’t let me defend myself? What if that explosion was a nationalist attack? What if European cells have infiltrated America to retaliate against us?”

“I doubt anyone is coming for you specifically,” Rose said. “You’re more than welcome to purchase anything else in here, though.”

The next one in line put a sack on the counter and started dragging out jewellery like a magician with a never-ending handkerchief.

The bell above the door jingled. A woman in a dark suit and dark sunglasses entered, stuffing a dark hat under her arm. Even her hair was black.

The customers looked up from the many display cases and remembered they had other places to be. The man at the counter stuffed his sack again and followed everyone else out.

The woman approached the counter, and all the sounds died. Perhaps it was just the door outside closing, but the clocks seemed to have stopped ticking, the TV in the backroom muted, and even Rose's own breath ceased.

"بيترسن—؟ روز أنت" the woman asked.

Rose stared at her confused, again remembering to breathe. "Pardon?"

The newcomer pulled out a notepad, her eyes slowly gliding down. "Vous êtes Rose Petersen?"

"Now listen here, if you're just going to make fun of me, then this is a bad day for it," Rose yelled. "I'm very busy..."

The other woman held up a finger and studied her notepad again. "You are Rose Petersen?" she tried, her inflections all over the place.

Rose crossed her arms and nodded.

"I am Detective Ebadicael of the FBI." She put away the notepad and produced instead a badge, and Rose held out a hand.

"Everything in here is above board, detective, so I really don't know how I may be of help to you. We follow the law in here." Rose scrutinised the badge and pushed it back.

The detective stared at Rose. Though Ebadicael had a charming face, Rose couldn't help but feel a chill running down her spine.

"Uh, so, what can I do for you?"

"Would you and your husband be interested in taking in a ward of the state?" the detective asked and picked up her badge.

Rose blinked a few times, letting the sentence sink in. "I'm sorry, for a moment there I thought you asked me..."

"If you would take in a ward, yes. I am afraid I cannot divulge any details during this preliminary meeting, but I will still need to hear if you are at least interested."

"Wait, hold on," Rose said and waved her arms around. "Why would you want us to do it; there must be hundreds of people wanting a kid in this area. Did... did my husband enter us into the system? Because this is the first I've heard of it."

"A social worker will come to your home later today and explain the situation further."

“Look, I haven’t said yes yet,” Rose said and slammed her hand into the counter. “And you still haven’t told me why you chose my husband and me.”

“My apologies, but time is of the essence here. Law necessitates that the ward be in the presence of legal guardians during all interviews and we would like to conclude the formalities ere he wakes up.”

“Ere?”

The detective flushed and consulted her notepad again. “Before. Before he wakes up. Now, what say you?”

Rose shrugged, still unable to wrap her head around the absurdity of the situation. “Fine, send the social worker around. Not like she’s going to allow a former prostitute and her con artist husband to have anything to do with a kid.”

“I am aware of your history.” Detective Ebadicael picked her up hat again and strode towards the door. “I will await the positive reply once you have talked with the social worker.”

“Wait, this wouldn’t have anything to do with that explosion at the recycling plant?”

Rose sprinted out after the detective, but the streets outside were empty. No cars were leaving, either. Rose scratched the back of her head.

## Chapter

The hospital in Ferman was designed by the same architect that built John’s home. In fact, the hospital resembled nothing so much as a larger version of his house with several more stories. In the observation wing, John was coming around. He stared blankly up at the ceiling.

“Mom?” he called out and turned his head. Wires connected his arm and chest to machines. He could see his heartbeat as a squiggly line getting squigglier as the fog cleared from his mind.

“Dad?”

He was in a room full of beds and people. Some had curtains drawn. John could hear voices from behind them. The other patients were children, too. They had casts on their arms or legs, or a bandage across their foreheads, or their parents shielding them from view.

“Calm down, it’s all right, you’re in the hospital,” one of the nurses cooed from the foot of his bed.

“W-what happened?” John asked and coughed. “I-I was just at the recycling plant. W-what am I doing here? I need to find my mom and dad and tell them that I’m okay.”

The nurse came around to his bedside table and poured him a cup of water from a pitcher. “You’ve been unconscious for three days,” she explained gently. “I’m the one who’s been taking care of you.”

“But why?” John tossed his head around. “Why am I here?”

“You were in an accident.” The nurse held out the cup, but John jerked his hand away. The plastic cup clattered to the floor and splashed the water up against the wall. Everyone looked up, but John ignored them and tugged at his IV.

“Easy, easy, you’re going to hurt yourself.” She tried restraining him, but this only made John thrash more wildly.

“I want my mom! I want my dad!” he screamed.

“I’m sorry.” Displaying more strength, the nurse held him tighter.

“Mommy! Daddy! Lawrence!”

Two older nurses burst in and pushed the younger one away.

“Remember your training,” the first of them hissed.

The young nurse nodded and drew the curtains while one of them put a needle to his IV. Slowly John calmed down and fell asleep.

“Go tell that detective she can interview the boy tomorrow morning,” one of the older nurses said to the younger one. “Goodness knows she’s been calling here enough times asking about it.”

## Chapter - 25 June 2010

The woman with the birdhouse cane hobbled through the middleclass suburbs in the east part of town, pausing a hundred metres from a ruin near the forest’s edge. “This is its nest,” she proclaimed. “Looks like it got destroyed in the fighting.” Only the foundation was left. The walls and even the surrounding trees had been pulled up by their roots and tossed aside. Isolated as it was, the damage was limited.

“*Look,*” a voice replied in her head.

A large truck was parked on the road in front of the lot. Workers sat by a folding table on its gravel driveway. Soldiers walked around in blue uniforms. The red letters ‘LHD’ was printed inside a large circle on their back and stitched on their chest.

Her shuttered eyes took them in one by one. “It’s not any of them.”

A uniformed young man approached her. “Excuse me, ma’am, this is a restricted area. Please turn away now.”

“Who lived in that house?”

“Ma’am, this place is not open to the public. Leave, now.”

Salvage had begun on the ruin. The truck was loaded with broken debris, but there were many boxes on the ground, some open where she could spot personal effects. The letterbox still stood by the road; the black box was only mildly crooked.

"The Pearces, what happened to them?" the lady asked.

"Are you deaf?" The soldier took a step towards her.

"Are they dead?"

"I'm warning you; this is your last chance!"

She turned on her heel and began walking away. "A family ... what the Hell is going on here?" She grabbed her head between her hands.

*"One of them survived. You must kill it,"* the voice said.

"Yeah, thanks, I'm aware," she muttered.

An older soldier approached the first one and whispered something to him. He nodded and rushed after the woman.

"Wait, hold on, ma'am. What's your interest in this?" he asked and grabbed her arm.

She swept her cane under his feet and continued on.

The older soldier helped up his colleague and they both aimed their rifles. Staring ahead confused for a moment, they lowered them again.

"I'm sorry, what were we doing again?" the older soldier asked.

"I-I'm not sure. I feel like I was talking to someone just now..."

"Whatever. Get back to your post, now."

The two soldiers went back to the ruins as the woman hobbled away, back towards town.

*"What's the plan?"* the voice asked.

"The family angle could potentially mean more targets, but I got a good whiff of their scent. They won't be able to hide from me."

*"And when the time comes, will you be able to do it?"*

The woman instinctively looked up despite knowing the voice was inside her head. "I'll do what needs to be done."

## Chapter

The world was dark and quiet. John tried to recall how he had gotten here, but he drew a blank.

His attention was caught by a window hovering in the air. He reached up to the sill and pulled himself up. John peered into a kitchen where a group of people sat around a table, one of them cradling a baby wrapped in a blue blanket adorned with toy trains.



He slipped down and looked behind the window. The kitchen wasn't there, only more darkness and windows everywhere. They led to places he did not recognise, and many just showed bathrooms or stared right up at the sky or were completely dark.

"Do you like it?" A figure swaggered out of the darkness; his arms spread out. "Welcome to the mirror realm, my own personal domain."

John started back and bumped into a window. He gasped, expecting to plunge backwards into a ballroom, but the surface was solid. "Who are you?"

"I'm Azer, and you... you must be Johnathan Pearce. Such a pleasure to finally meet you." The man was tall with a head full of dark hair. His shirt was open to reveal a scar running diagonally down his chest.

"H-how do you know my name?" John said and withdrew behind the window.

Azer checked himself. "I beg your forgiveness. I have not had anyone to talk with for so, so very long," he said and cleared his throat. "From this prison I can see almost the entire world. Well, I say see, but it's more like I felt you."

"Prison? What do you mean, prison?"

Azer pulled his head back and roared with laughter. "Don't worry, kiddo, this is just *my* prison. You are a guest. Kind of like in Monopoly."

John pinched himself and winced. "This isn't a dream?"

"Hey, could be, who knows? How do I know I'm not just dreaming you up right now?" Azer laughed again.

"So, what am I doing here?" John asked, peeking out from behind the window. The man remained motionless.

"I just summoned you for a little chat, you know, while you're dreaming anyway. I figured we could breach the topic of, 'I really frigging don't like being trapped here.'" Azer turned around with his hands in the air. "I mean, sure, it's fun to have portals linked to every mirror on Earth, but it gets stale after a few dozen millennia. Just trapped in here, nothing to do but watch and no way to interact."

"That's terrible and all, but I don't see what I can do."

"It certainly is terrible!" Azer sighed dramatically and put a hand to his forehead. "But you, you have some power. With your help, I could get out of here."

A young woman jumped into frame of John's window, making him leap back. She was just dancing in and out of view, though.

"Did it really happen?" John asked.

"Did what really happen?" Azer didn't even blink at the events of the mirror.

"I mean..." John frowned, unsure how to word it. "I remember the light. I made it, and it blew up. Was that real?"

"What do you think?"

"I-I don't... I don't know." John stared down at his feet. "I guess I've always felt there was something off about my family. I just didn't..."

"Hey, no need to go into overdrive for my sake; you're still recovering, after all."

John looked up and followed Azer's finger to the window showing a small hospital room. There was a single bed in there, and John was resting in it.

"Listen, I shouldn't have disturbed your dreams by bringing you here. My apologies," Azer said. "You go back to your dreams, and I'll contact you later through a mirror, all right?"

"S-sure, but, how do I get back?"

As he said it, the world faded away around him. Azer waved. "And keep this between us. No one would believe you anyway."

John waved back until he was floating in the vacuum of space again. He was not drifting aimlessly. Something pulled at him.

## Chapter

"Where am I now?" John asked, rubbing his eyes.

"You're in a private room, at my behest." A dark-clad woman sat on a stool next to his bed. John nearly fell out of his bed. "Do you recognise me?" Ebadicael asked.

John stared at her, willing his heart to calm down. "You're the FBI agent who took my brother away," he said meekly. "Are you here to take me away as well?"

"No, Johnathan, I'm here to ask you about what happened three days ago. Do you remember?"

"Not really," he said. "My dad and I were going for a drive and then—"

"Doesn't matter," the detective said, twirling a pen between her fingers. "Your social worker will join us soon with your foster family so we can begin the formal interview. Before that, you must promise me that you will not tell the truth of what you saw."

"What?" he asked, sitting up straight.

"I know what you saw and what you did and what you are, and I'm telling you right now, you must never reveal it to anyone else. Do you understand me?"

"Not... really, I don't remember what happened."

"That is irrelevant," she said and tapped her notepad. "When the interview starts, your explanation is that you saw a blimp, and that's all you saw."

“Please, if you know what happened, tell me!” John shouted. “Are my parents still alive?”

Ebadicael grunted. “Very well,” she said and put the notepad away. “Your parents are missing but presumed alive. Thus, we are doing everything in our power to track them down and get their side of the story.”

John felt the world spin around him. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

“I have arranged for a new family for you in the meantime,” the detective continued. “You will live a normal life with them, you will not discuss the truth with them, and they must not know what you can do.”

“But I don’t want a new family,” John croaked and continued a little louder. “I want my mom and dad and my little brother!”

“We are working on that. Believe me, we wish to get a hold of them just as much as you do, but until then, it is paramount that you cooperate with us. For your own sake.”

John thrashed around in his bed but Ebadicael pinned him down with one arm. Her eyes glowed bright yellow and her voice echoed. “Listen to me, Johnathan Pierce,” she said, and he did, all at once forgetting everything else. Her hand displayed unusual strength for her size, and there was a warmth to her.

“What... what are you? What am I?” John asked and wept.

“That is irrelevant right now. You will forget everything concerning your powers, and you will never call on them again. I entreat you, live a normal life, or it will be my duty to remove you.”

“R-remove?” John gulped deep.

Footsteps stopped outside the door. John could hear them speaking muffled. The detective was still fixed on him, however.

“Do I have your word?” Ebadicael pressed.

With cold sweat beading on his brow, John nodded, and she let him go. The door opened and the glow was gone from her eyes.

A dark-skinned lady with hair cropped short entered.

“Hello, Johnathan, my name is Idowu. It’s been a few years, but do you still remember me?” she asked, parroting Ebadicael from earlier.

John nodded. “You’re the social worker who handled my brother’s case.”

“I did. Are you still angry with me that he was removed?”

“I miss him sometimes,” John said.

“I... see,” Idowu said, sounding a little disappointed. “You know why—”

Ebadicael cleared her throat. “Excuse me, but where are the foster parents? Did I not instruct you to let them pass?”

Idowu hugged an electronic tablet close to her. "You did, and I did. The Petersens seem like good people and I agree that John's best interests will be served well with them. For that reason, I do not hold past mistakes against them. However, I merely wished to check up on my client first."

"That will not be necessary, Johnathan Pearce is fine."

"You'll have to forgive me if I wish to make sure of that myself," Idowu said and looked back at John. "Has anyone explained the situation to you?" she asked him.

"You can't find my parents. Right?" John said, a little hopeful that maybe she would contradict Ebadicael, but...

"That's right," she said, her face and tone of voice softening. "A few days ago, you were involved in an explosion at the recycling plant here in town. You seem to have escaped unscathed, but your parents and your little brother are all missing."

"As I said, I've been over this." Ebadicael grabbed her notepad and crossed her legs. "Now, I really wish to start the interview, and I can't do that without legal guardians present."

"Just a moment," Idowu said calmly. "As we can't find your parents, and you don't have any other family, you are being placed with a foster family."

It felt like a gut punch. That the agent had explained it before didn't do much to soften the blow. All of it started to spin around his head and a veil of drowsiness was falling over him. Sluggishly, he nodded.

Idowu smiled. "You could have it much worse as a ward of the state. A lot of the kids that I've dealt with had to go through the system for years or ended up in crowded foster homes. I don't know what kind of magic the FBI used, but they managed to find a family that was willing to take you in. I've talked with them, and the Petersens are a wonderful couple with a lovely home."

"Done?" Ebadicael asked.

"Do you really need John to receive foster parents to interview him?" Idowu furrowed her brow and turned from the bed towards the FBI agent. "I don't recall this being the procedure."

"Those are my orders," Ebadicael stated firmly.

The two women stared at each other until Idowu returned her attention to John.

"Well then, John, do you feel up for meeting the people who'll be taking care of you?"

He felt more like plopping back on to his pillow, yet somehow managed another nod.

Idowu went back to the door and Ebadicael leant in towards John. "Remember what we talked about. Stick to the script."

Following behind Idowu was a short and brawny woman and a well-built Asian-looking man. The woman put her stetson and handbag on a chair in the corner and clacked across the floor in her high-heeled boots.

“Well, you’re not looking too terrible after what I heard you have been through. A little pale, maybe.” She planted a big hand on John’s forehead, and he snapped back.

“I’ve always been pale,” he said.

She stared down at him and withdrew her hand. “My name’s Rose. Rose Petersen, and this is my husband, Minik.”

She threw out her hand and Minik, in a loose shirt and sandals, drew a little closer. “Hey,” he said and scratched his arm.

“I know you’ve just woken up and everything, but I just thought you should know that there isn’t an orphanage or anything waiting for you. Until they find your parents, Minik and I have agreed to take you in.”

“S-so I’ve heard,” John said. “But it’s temporary, right? Just until they find my parents, right?”

“Right,” Minik said. “I’m sure they’re out there somewhere.”

“Until then, I hope you won’t mind staying with us,” Rose interjected and smiled.

Ebadicael clapped her hands. “All right, everyone, I know that nothing has been made formal yet, but I’d appreciate it if we could get on with it.”

“Right you are,” Rose said and stood back.

“Starting the interview,” Ebadicael said, “tell me what happened three days ago.”

John looked up at Rose and Minik. “I don’t know. I saw a blimp, and that’s all I remember.”

“Good, good, and what were you doing out in the industrial sector in the first place?”

“We were just going for a walk while my mom was preparing the house.”

Ebadicael jotted all of his answers down on her notepad as she asked the questions. After a while, she finished, picked up her hat from John’s bedside table, nodded to him, and left.

“Johnathan hasn’t been cleared for release yet, so he will have to stay here for now,” Idowu said and got up as well. “I figure it will just be for observation overnight.”

“Sure, but, just one last thing?” Rose asked.

“Rose, please, I thought we agreed he wouldn’t be interested in something like that,” Minik said and put his hand on her arm.

“This is important,” she replied and glared at him. Minik backed off with a shrug. “Listen there, Johnathan, I don’t know if you’re a spiritual kind of fellow, but I want you to have this.” She yanked out a crucifix from her pocket and put it down on the table next to John. “I know things must seem kind of overwhelming right now, but that’s why it’s good to have faith in the big man in the sky.”

“T-thanks,” John said from the safety of his covers.

“And he has manners too,” Rose said and laughed. She bent over and kissed his forehead and he felt her warmth. It was familiar and not at all unwelcome. “I hope you won’t mind coming back with us?”

“Is this really necessary?” John asked, barely able to keep his eyes open anymore. “I’m sure my parents are going to come for me soon.”

“It won’t have to be long, but I spent all day clearing a room for you,” Minik said. “Might as well spend a day or two.”

John opened his mouth to protest more, but he had finally reached his limit and plopped back on his pillow.

## Chapter

There was only light. John was floating in a vacuum of warm, bright nothingness. All he had to do was give himself completely and all the pain and weariness and troubles would melt away. Getting a little brother, not getting to go on vacation, being bullied, it all seemed so insignificant.

*“Johnathan... Johnathan...”*

A quiet voice echoed behind him. He tried to turn towards it, but his will drained out of him as the light began to absorb him. What did it all matter now anyway?

*“Come back... Don’t do it...”*

John drifted upwards, carried by the light. No longer could he even remember what it was that bothered him. Something about school? Or family? What were those things anyway? Who was he? He sighed calmly as the light swallowed him.

Something yanked at his arm.

The peaceful light shattered and cold, painful darkness surrounded him. He was tumbling backwards into a deep pit. He tried to scream but his voice was muted. He flailed his arms and finally hit the bottom.

John opened his eyes and found himself on the floor of his hospital room. A clock high up on the wall proclaimed it was four in the morning in glowing numbers. He grabbed hold of his head with both hands.

“I remember now,” he said, and the tears came easy to him. “I... I exploded.”

He ran into the bathroom and hiked up the sleeves of his gown to examine his arms and even checked his stomach and legs too. Not a bruise, not a wound, not a single scratch anywhere.

He looked at his palm, trying to feel the power he felt back then. A flash went through his mind. He saw the destruction again, felt the fire boil his blood and burn his organs. He stumbled

back and banged against the wall, cold sweat covering his body. Just like the detective said, he must never call on that power, ever again. He had been lucky last time.

The hospital room was still quiet when he returned. The moon peeked out from behind clouds and cast a ghostly sheen through the windows. John looked at his bed, but he felt rested, for the first time in days. His mind raced around even more than before, making it hard to focus on any one thing. He grabbed his head and screwed up his face, willing his mind to calm down. And then a thought occurred to him: he needed to see the crater. That was where this had all culminated, and it would put things into perspective.

The corridor outside the room was empty and dark. John slinked along like he had seen people do on the television. He made it as far as the receptionist's desk where a security guard sat.

"Who's there?" the guard asked.

John froze. He retreated while heavy feet pounded on the tiled floor. A cone of light wandered up the reception area, closer and closer, stopping just short of where John was rooted to the ground. He could hear static and a clicking.

"Yeah, what is it?" the guard asked into the darkness. "What? Aw, hell, I'll be right over."

John pressed himself against the wall, but the cone of light retreated. He held his chest for a few seconds, trying to still his hammering heart as the footsteps moved away.

*"How do you like that?"*

John clasped a hand over his mouth as he was about to cry out. In the pale light of the moon, he could see his reflection in the glass door he had just come through. Behind him stood a bare-chested figure.

"Azer?" John asked and peeked behind him. No, he was alone in real life.

*"Ding-ding-ding, we have a winner," Azer said and laughed. "Being locked in here does afford me some comforts. For one, I can manipulate coincidences."*

John dared closer, his gaze skirting around.

*"It's all right, kid, I got your back. Didn't mean to make you jump out of your slippers, but I couldn't help noticing you were planning a little excursion. You, uh... you're taking a walk in your hospital gown?"*

John looked down at himself. "Yeah. Thank you," he said and ran.

Guards finished their patrols just seconds before John arrived. Electronic locks were being replaced. The backdoor had not been shut properly. The unmown lawn diffused the noise he made. There was a small hole in the garden fence.

John looked up at the moon and couldn't help but laugh. Then he remembered why he had run. With a nod of conviction to himself, he hurried ahead.

The hospital was just on the edge of the industrial part of the city. Somewhere ahead was a crater he had made, only he didn't know the way. He almost stopped when he thought of Azer. With his help, it would be a cinch to find. John rushed ahead and turned a corner.

## Chapter

"Here it comes." The woman with the birdhouse cane lifted her head to the wind, her nostrils flaring. "I told you it would come here."

She threw a tarpaulin over herself and lay down on her back in the rubble heap. Her cane went on her stomach. It turned into a halberd, the birdhouse becoming a blade sinking into the rubble between her feet. She closed her eyes. Her hands danced across the shaft, and it filled with light.

It was close now, she could feel it, disguised as a boy; as a human child. As it neared, so did her feel for it. Every aspect of it was available to her. It stopped by the edge of the crater. She could hear it sniffle... mourn?

"It's so warm." Her breathing became laboured as she clutched her chest. "Hoffman, it burns."

*"What was the first thing I ever taught you?"*

*"That evil has many disguises."*

*"And it has many forms. So, kill it."*

"But what if it isn't evil? Hoffman, I don't think it's a demon." She moaned and writhed. "It doesn't look like a child; *It is a child,*" she gasped and wept.

*"It's not human, you fool, it's an aberration. Kill it!"*

"I can't, Hoffman. Please, I'm begging you, don't make me kill him!"

*"Kill it!"* the voice in her head screamed.

The halberd soaked up her light as fast as she could produce it. Already it was filled to the brim. Now the trouble was containing it. She had to release it. But the boy, he was just a child, not a demon or a monster. She bit her lip to keep herself from screaming. The other end of the halberd glowed faintly. Soon it would fire on its own.

*"Kill it!"*

She couldn't hold back anymore and released. It didn't feel good this time. Rather than vibrating as the energy exploded, it fizzled out. She stared. The halberd was a birdhouse again. She threw away the tarpaulin and a dark shape towered over her.

"Master?" she gasped.

*"Unorthodox,"* the voice chided.



## Chapter

The hole was bigger than he had imagined. Not just the recycling plant, but a chunk of the road and the land around it was just gone. Weirder, the crater formed a perfect semicircle. John sat down at the edge.

He thought he had no more tears. He had been wrong. He held up his arm, rubbing them away. Lawrence always scolded him for being too girlish. One time he had caught John playing with their mother's makeup. John could sometimes still feel the sting of Lawrence's fists. John tried not to cry but he never could help himself. Then Lawrence would just beat him more and call him names. There was no one here to stop him now.

The clacking of a cane made him jump up and turn around. He had been alone; he was sure of it. From the ruins of the old roller derby came a thin, short woman leaning up against an oversized pole... with a birdhouse on top? John rubbed his eyes. The figure had only one shoe; the right leg had no foot to put one on.

There was only the crater behind John, and he had no intention of falling down there.

"I know what you are," the woman said.

"D-Azer?" John whispered hoarsely.

She held on to her walking cane with her right hand and seized his shoulder with her left. It had surprising strength despite its bony appearance. "But I don't understand how a human could... no... one of your parents perhaps? But such a thing..."

John wriggled and struggled but she effortlessly held him in place. "Let go of me!"

Her shuttered eyes gave her a sleepy expression, but John could feel an intense fire within the scraggy woman.

"You must learn how to control your powers."

"W-what?" John was so surprised that he forgot to fight back.

"My job is usually to exterminate your kind, but my master has made an exception for you. I will teach you."

"W-what do you mean? Who are you?" John remained on guard. This was the type of person his mother had always warned him about.

"I am someone you do not want to mess with."

"But..."

"There's a whole 'nother world out there with its own rules. What if this happens again, huh?" She pointed to the crater without taking her eyes off John. "You're an irregularity, a mistake, but you have been given a chance."

"I don't understand." John clenched his eyes and turned away. "I don't know what I did, but I never want to do it again!"

"It's too goddamn late for that right now." She released him with a push so that he sat on the ground. "Tomorrow, we'll meet back here. If I'm not here, you wait. If you don't show up, I will hunt you down. Don't think I won't. I have your scent now."

The woman turned on her one heel and clacked off.

Once she was sufficiently far away, John retreated back the way he had come. Though growing short of breath, he could not stop running. All he could think of was getting back to his hospital room. The crucifix hopped out of his gown and dangled from his neck. He fingered the metal, warm from his bare skin. It reminded him of the Petersens. Nothing made sense anymore. Perhaps he would wake up in a different world tomorrow.

## **Part 2 - The Terrifying Flaming Horse**

### **Chapter - 26 June 2010**

"Well, I can't see anything wrong with you." The doctor sat down on the stool by John's bed. He consulted the chart on his tablet. "Blood tests are back, and everything looks good," he said and smiled. "You wouldn't think you had been through anything bad with these results."

John's eyes were focused the wall clock. He had not slept a wink all night, but he was not tired in the least. It was a little weird, but far from the weirdest thing that had happened lately, so he did not give it much thought.

"Then, I can leave now?" he asked, dangling his feet over the edge of his bed.

"I should think so. You've gotten plenty of rest, and it's unlikely we'll see any retarded effects."

John looked up puzzled at the guy. "I'm not a retard."

The doctor chuckled. "No, it means delayed, as in, after-effects. You're a perfectly healthy young man," he said and got up from the stool. "I'll go call your social worker."

John watched the doctor leave while drumming his hands on the bed. Waiting for another few moments after he had been left alone, John jumped down and rushed to the door as well. The corridor was filled with people. John found the doctor walked one way, so he hurried through the throng in the other. The nurses were too preoccupied with their jobs, and the patients were only interested in themselves. In his civilian clothes, John passed for a visitor and no one stopped him.

He had not, in fact, woken up in a yet another different world. It was the same one where he had blown a hole in a recycling plant and lost his parents. That also meant he still had an agreement with a frightening lady who, upon reflection, he did not know the name of. Further reflection also revealed that this lady might have some answers.

The world outside the hospital was brightly bathed in sunlight and bustling with activity. It was also a wide-open place, quite dissimilar to the world he had snuck out into yesterday. John stared at the parking lot, unsure where to go. Once he reached the street, however, he found some familiar-looking trees. Picking up speed, he also passed some familiar high rises. Grassy fields and urban development took turns. When he reached the technical school, he paused. This wasn't the way to the crater, or the industrial sector for matter. There was another destination in his heart. He was heading home.

Conflicted, he was rooted to the ground. When it had been the choice between the weird lady and his new family, his desire had seemed so clear. Now, with a third option, he didn't know what to do at all.

A car banged up on the sidewalk behind him, and John nearly toppled down the incline next to him. Several cars honked as they narrowly swerved out of the way. John backed away, considering taking the topple anyway. This seemed very much like a stranger danger situation he had been warned about once. Granted, it wasn't a van, but the car was a rusty, mismatched wreck that surely couldn't belong to anyone good. John almost ran when Minik jumped out.

"Wasn't as hard to find you as I feared," he said calmly, and he casually strolled around his old junker towards John. "You were on your way home, right?"

"Y-yeah," John replied, relaxing.

"Sorry to scare you like that, but everyone kind of panicked when you were gone." Minik nodded to his car. "Come on, jump in."

"Um... Minik, I'm sorry, but..." John started, dragging his feet.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Let me just send Rose a text, then I can take you home."

"R-really?"

"I mean, it's still a long way away, isn't it?"

John nodded vigorously and flung himself into the back, clearing away a mountain of trash to find the seat and the buckle.

"Listen, I know it sucks," Minik said, entering the traffic to another choir of honking. "The only person I've ever had close to me was Rose. When it comes to making friends, I keep making the wrong ones." The technical school came and went on the right. Some other buildings appeared on

the left. "Rose is the only good thing that has happened to me, and if she were ever to get hurt... I don't know what I would do."

Minik turned on the radio. A rock channel, blasting out some indecipherable lyrics.

John grabbed his knees. "Sorry I ran away."

"I understand, John, just talk to one of us first; it's not like we wouldn't let you. Tell me, what are you hoping to find there?"

"I-I don't know. Some answers, maybe."

"I hope you will, with what's left."

"What do you mean?"

"You mean you don't know?" Minik adjusted the mirror and looked back at John who stared back at him with big eyes. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but there was a storm the day of the explosion. Seems your house was damaged. You're damn lucky not to have been at home at the time."

John squeezed his eyes shut. Again, he could see the bird, gales sweeping from its wings.

"Listen, I hope you'll come to like staying with us," Minik said, his voice soft. "You know, Rose and I almost had a kid of our own. Could have been eleven this year."

"I'll be eleven next month."

Minik laughed. "Really? Damn, what are the odds of that."

"What happened to him?"

"Ah, well, I'll tell you that story another time."

Neat rows of houses leapt into existence on both sides, so John grabbed the seat in front and pulled himself up. Soon his home would pop into existence, looking over all the others. Yet no matter how close they got, all he could see were large trucks. Soldiers standing guard. Workers in orange vests milling about. And lastly, heaps of debris. There was a familiar letterbox half-buried right by the footpath. It was dinged and covered in dirt. He could just make out his own name.

"When I said your house was damaged, I meant more like... flattened. Hey!"

John had unbuckled himself and was out of the door even before the car had come to a complete stop. Minik skidded to a halt and jumped out after him.

A soldier approached them. "Excuse me, sir, this place is off-limits."

"Can't you make an exception for the kid who lived here?" Minik asked and grabbed John.

The soldier grabbed a folder dangling from his hip and leafed through it. "Sure, but just a moment. This is no place for a child."

John clenched his eyes and let the tears flow again. "Why does this keep happening to me?"

Before John could get an answer, he heard the rapping of a cane.

“It’s not all bad. They managed to salvage a few things.” John looked up at the sound of the familiar voice. Of all the people to show up here, the weird lady from yesterday was the one he had least expected. Still clinging to her birdhouse cane, she seemed to guard three cardboard boxes.

“Your wardrobe was surprisingly sturdy. Most of what’s in here came from that.”

“And you are?” Minik was suddenly in front of John, coming between the two.

“His aunt,” she replied without batting an eye. “I came as soon as I heard what happened to my sister. What’s your business with my nephew?”

“That’s funny, no one mentioned anything about an aunt when I was appointed his guardian.” Minik slowly blew up and John realised how muscular he was as his loose shirt began to frame his broad shoulders.

She glanced past him and gave a slight jerk of the head at John.

“A-auntie. Long time, no see,” John said and rushed up to hug her. As she bent down to reciprocate, he whispered: “What are you doing here?”

“My orders,” she whispered back. “As much as I would love to take the path of least resistance, my master insists I actually make an effort, so here we are.”

Minik looked her up and down and raised an eyebrow, perhaps at her piercings or her hair dyed a deep red. He let out air, however, and returned to normal size again. “I’m Minik,” he said and extended a hand.

The woman cast a quick glance to the cardboard boxes, one of them filled with magazines. “Jazlynn,” she said and straightened up before shaking his hand, though her short stature did little to improve her height. Her sleepy appearance and scraggy frame didn’t help either.

Minik raised an eyebrow. “J-Jazlynn?”

“Is there a problem?” she asked, not giving an inch.

“No, no, it’s just a name I would normally associate with... look, are you here to take away John?”

Jazlynn shook her head. “I only came to check up on my nephew. Looks like I needn’t have worried.”

“Well, uh, since you’re here, why don’t you come back with us?”

“I would love to. Been a while since I had a proper meal.”

Minik grabbed one of the boxes, looked to see if any of the soldiers were stopping him, then started back towards the car.

John sat down by his old letterbox and took in the wreckage. The last thing from his past... gone. All that was left was a few boxes of clothes. He didn’t feel sad or angry, just empty and adrift. Distantly he heard people talking. Someone grabbed his arm and nudged him away. His eyes fell on a

piece of paper caught in the hedge. A London metro rail map. He grabbed it instinctively as he was led to the car. He had a vague notion of Jazlynn being with him as he stared out into nothing.

## Chapter

“You’re his aunt?”

John had been listless, probably still tired from his ordeal, so Minik had dragged him upstairs. Idowu and Rose were then left to greet Jazlynn and take her to the living room. Idowu in particular sounded sceptical as she frantically swiped at her tablet.

“My records do not show any extra family, not even grandparents.”

Still clinging to her cane, Jazlynn followed them down the corridor. “I wouldn’t be surprised, our parents disowned me a long time ago. I’ve been living on the streets ever since.”

“Are you making a claim on John?” Rose asked, walking with her.

“How? I don’t have an address, or the mobility I used to. I’m more than happy to let him stay here.”

Idowu scratched her nearly bald head. “I’m going to have to make some enquiries about this. This is highly irregular.”

“Yes, but John recognised me, so I don’t see what the problem is.”

“True. And having a familiar element in his life could have a stabilising effect on him,” Idowu said.

Before she could continue, however, Jazlynn had already slung herself down into the couch. “I plan on sticking around for a bit. Is that all right?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Minik said, coming through the doorway.

“Now hold on a minute,” Rose said and clapped him on the shoulder. “If you really are John’s aunt, I would love to hear more about him.”

“Both of you, back off! No one’s agreeing to anything yet,” Idowu said and sat down in the chair in front of Jazlynn. “Johnathan has already confirmed your identity, but that does not mean you should get to see him. How well are you even acquainted with him?”

Jazlynn shrugged. “I didn’t see much of my sister or her family after I was kicked out.”

“And why were you kicked out?”

Jazlynn shifted uncomfortably in the couch and avoided Idowu’s stare. “I don’t like to talk about that.”

“That’s not an option,” Idowu said, keeping her gaze trained on Jazlynn. “Unless you answer my questions, I’ll have you removed from the premises.”

“Fine. I was kicked out because I was an underachiever, all right?” Jazlynn made a dismissive noise and finally met Idowu’s stare. “Mom always liked my sister the best. She was always the one with the good grades, and I was the one constantly in trouble. So when I flunked, I was kicked out.”

“What did you do after that?”

Jazlynn tapped her fingers against her cane. “I started a band.”

“And?”

“We did all right. Until we got caught in a bar fight and I lost my foot and all my band members.”

Rose whistled. “Hot damn.”

Jazlynn relaxed her shoulders and looked away again. “So there, that’s what I’ve been doing.”

“Then what have you been doing since?” Idowu continued, seemingly not fazed by Jazlynn’s story.

“Drifting, mostly. My sister was good to me, but she was married and had her first kid, so I was just a burden to them.”

“Drifting? On one foot?” Minik asked.

Idowu glared at him before continuing. “What he said.”

“Mostly thumbing my way around, taking jobs wherever I could.”

Idowu started noting it all down. “Any problems with alcohol or drugs?”

“My only problem is with authority. And stairs.”

“Did any of your jobs involve solicitation?”

“Was I a hooker? No, never,” Jazlynn emphasised.

“What kind of company do you keep?”

“Myself, mostly. People tend to call me an ugly bitch,” Jazlynn said. “Like, I apply for a waitress job, and they stick me in the kitchen where customers can’t see me.”

Idowu scribbled furiously on her tablet. “Are you planning on staying long in town?”

Jazlynn nodded. “I came to see how my nephew is doing. I haven’t done a lot of that yet.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Yeah I am, is that going to be a problem?”

Idowu looked to Rose and Minik who had been reduced to stage props. “I hope not.” She put her tablet and pen down on the table. “I don’t see a reason to prevent you from seeing your nephew, but I will be making regular check-ups.”

“One thing,” Minik said. “Can’t you easily check if this person really is Johnathan’s aunt? I mean, there must be records somewhere.”

“Of course, but those files are sealed by the FBI. When I headed their other son’s case two years ago, it was the same tug of war. All I know of Johnathan’s family is his parents and siblings.”

“Lands and stars,” Rose exclaimed and scratched her head. “Not to act like you’re not here, Jazlynn, but what do you suggest, Idowu?”

“Until I verify with the FBI that Johnathan has an aunt, I would limit their time together.” Idowu sighed and picked up her tablet and pen and rose to her feet. “At the same time, Johnathan himself has confirmed her identity. Spending time with a familiar face could be conducive to his recovery.”

“Don’t worry,” Rose said and flexed her hand. “If there’s any trouble with Jazlynn, I will take care of it myself.”

“That’s only fair,” Jazlynn said and got up as well. “I think John has had enough excitement for one day, so would it be all right if I came back tomorrow?”

Rose smiled. “Only if you tell me more about him then.”

“I don’t know how helpful I can be, I mean, I barely—” Jazlynn jerked her head towards the first storey. “You know, I think I want to say goodbye to my nephew before I leave. Do you mind?”

## Chapter

John opened his eyes sluggishly and stared at his surroundings with bland indifference. He was too tired to care that he had never been here before. There were boxes with his name on it, so he could guess this was to be his room, and he had a desk and a bed and a wardrobe. He closed his eyes again, inhaling the smells of detergent and wind from his linens.

*“Swanky place you got here. I think you’ll feel right at home.”*

John craned his neck and stared at the wardrobe. The voice sounded familiar, but too many weird things had happened. He jumped down, crossed his room and opened the door. The wardrobe was empty. John stuck his head in, making the coat hangers above him rattle.

*“Over here, kid.”*

A mirror was set into the door. Rather than reflecting John, he saw Azer smiling back at him.

*“Yo!”* Azer said and saluted John. *“If you’re just going to stand there like a guppy, listen. Be careful of Jazlynn.”*

John blinked several times. “Right, yeah, I know.”

*“No, John, you don’t know. We’ve met only once before, but that was yesterday. Don’t tell me you’ve already forgotten what I can do even though you’re staring at it right now.”* Azer laughed and John smiled back. *“She’s not kidding when she says she’ll kill you. She’s already come close once.”*



“So what do I do?” John opened the closet further so he could see the mirror from his bed.

Azer jabbed a thumb at his chest. *“I told you already, didn’t I? I’m watching over you. If she tries any funny business at all, I’ll stop her.”*

“How? You also told me you’re locked in there.”

*“I’m the effing god of coincidences. She can just try me!”* Azer threw up his arms. A gust of wind rustled through a window and its curtains, and the wardrobe door closed just as the room door opened.

Jazlynn hobbled inside and threw around her head.

“W-what’s wrong?” John asked, watching her inspect every corner of his room.

“I had a feeling,” she replied and lifted an empty waste basket by the desk. “A bad one. My skin was crawling and everything.” She replaced it and bolted to the wardrobe and flung open the doors. “You’re not negotiating with demons, are you?”

“Uh, no.”

“Consorting with ghosts?” she pressed and slammed the wardrobe shut. “Summoning monsters? Dealing with angels?”

“Also no.”

“Ever since the incident, perhaps before, have you seen anything unnatural? Heard voices?” Jazlynn jumped up on the bed and peeked at a shelf above it, taking down books at random.

“No!” John said and slammed the closet door shut. “What’s this about?”

“Hmm. Perhaps nothing. Might just be residual energy,” she mumbled and sat down in the chair by the desk, her birdhouse pole clanging against the wall. “You seem to be feeling better, so I want you to tell me what happened on that night.”

For a brief moment, John considered telling her of Azer. For some reason he couldn’t explain, he stopped himself, and recounted his story. The real one this time.

“I see. That explains the energy surge I felt here. Too bad I was so far away at the time.” She folded her hands and rested her head in them. “But why would that bird monster appear in this podunk town? And why would it attack you? Was it summoned? Then by who?”

John shook his head. “I-I don’t know.”

Jazlynn slammed her fist against the desk. A cylinder toppled and spilled its contents of pencils. “Then tell me what you do know! What are you? What is your mother?”

Not knowing what to answer, John opened and closed his mouth several times before hanging his head.

“Forget it. We’re starting totally from scratch here, I can tell.” Jazlynn sighed deeply and put a hand through her hair. “I haven’t trained anyone before, so we’ll approach this slowly. Wouldn’t want to kill you, after all,” she said and grabbed her pole and heaved herself up.

She hobbled towards the door, her right leg dangling just above ground. “I’ll drop by as often as I can, you got that? You already know the only alternative to my training.”

When the door shut behind her, John felt even more tired than before. He flopped back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. This was his new reality. About a week ago, he had worried how being a big brother would change his life. Now those worries seemed so miniscule.

## Chapter - 27 June 2010

Sunlight filtered through curtains to land in his face. John blinked and for one moment it seemed like everything was back to normal. The sound of feet on the steps was his mom coming up to wake him. But the bare walls of the room came into focus before the door opened.

“Johnathan? Are you all right?”

John swung his legs to the floor and for a moment he sat there. “Yeah,” he said and looked up at Rose. “Actually, I do. I feel really good.” His hands felt more powerful. His skin tingled and the tiredness from the last few days was gone.

“I’m glad to hear that. You were asleep all morning.” Rose wore an apron stained with batter and her sleeves were slightly singed. “Now come on down. I tried making some food, but I don’t think it went all that well.”

John got up on his feet. His whole body was so light it felt like he would fly off if he jumped. He made sure to grip the railing tightly as he got his first proper look at the house. It was narrow, probably half the size of his old home, if not more. Everything sparkled but was also frayed and worn, from the steps to the rugs and the tapestry. John couldn’t help but wonder if the house had been unkempt until a hasty clean-up for his arrival.

A corridor squeezed itself past the bottom of the stairs. The first door on the right had the washroom, the next one the kitchen, and the one at the end led to the living room. On the left side Minik sat watching TV, the right side had a large table where Jazlynn sat with a cup of coffee. The breadbasket was still mostly full, and she was enjoying a bowl of cereal.

“Good morning,” she acknowledged as John took a seat opposite her. “We barely got a chance to talk yesterday, so I came here early. I wouldn’t have bothered if I had known you were going to sleep in.”

“I was hoping she could tell me more about you, but it really doesn’t sound like you’ve spent much time together,” Rose said and took the seat at the end and flung her apron off. It landed

across an armchair next to Minik. "Listen, I don't mind at all, but if you don't want her hanging around, you just tell us."

Jazlynn raised her gaze for a moment. "No, it's no problem," John replied.

Rose scratched her neck and looked away. "I'll be straight with you, Johnathan, I'm on the wrong side of thirty and I've never done this before. When that FBI agent approached me about this, I was scared. I'm still scared."

"You can just call me John," he replied and pulled the breadbasket closer. Most of the content was burned beyond redemption. The box of cereal and milk caught his eye instead.

"Right. John." Rose moved her mouth as if she was tasting the word. She made an approving noise and sat down by the table. "Since your aunt couldn't be any help, I need to hear it all from you. What foods do you like? What's your favourite colour? Do you have a girlfriend?"

John eyed the breadbasket again. For a moment he thought of all the food he would never taste again. His mother's mac 'n' cheese. Her pasta and meat sauce. Her chocolate cakes. "No. I don't really get along with anyone at school."

"Now that can't be right." Rose laughed and clapped John on the shoulder. "You already look so different from when I first visited you. A little more grown up, I should think."

John nodded and took a sip of his cereal. The milk was warm.

"Yes, you seem very confident," Jazlynn chipped in and looked up from her newspaper. "Feel any different?"

Coming from her specifically, it sounded like a medical question posed by a doctor. John swallowed his cereal and took a deep breath. "Yeah, it's weird. It's like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders."

"I see," she said with a pensive look. "John, I think we should train in the backyard when you're done."

"Train?" Rose exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

Jazlynn spent a quiet moment slurping the last of her coffee. "To protect himself."

"If you mean martial arts, then I can do that." Rose flexed her arm, revealing the muscles she kept hidden under her sweatshirt. "I've attended self-defence classes, I'll have you know. I'm also one of those few people who use their gym membership often."

"That's very impressive and all," Jazlynn said and poured herself more coffee, "but I'm not talking about the Krav Maga offered by the local youth centre." She looked over the edge of the newspaper and John once more became acutely aware of being spoken to directly. "We're starting off with some visualisation exercises. Things could get intense."

John felt like questioning that statement but concentrated on his cereal instead.

“Well, all right.” Rose drummed her fingers on the table. “Maybe I could learn something too?”

“You can go to the shop, if you want,” Minik said. “I’ll keep an eye on things here.”

“What shop?” Jazlynn asked.

“I run a pawnshop out in the industrial quarter,” Rose explained proudly. “I’m usually open every day, but I’m making an exception now that we have John.”

Minik looked up from the TV. “I told you, I got this. I had a few ideas for John’s room anyway.”

“But...” she started protesting but Minik got up and pecked her on the cheek. “Oh, what the heck, I’m only open for a few more hours anyway.”

When they finally heard the door slam, Minik turned to Jazlynn. “She loves that place. Never been able to figure out why.”

“I see,” Jazlynn replied.

“Another thing,” Minik continued. “I don’t mind having you over, but I don’t want you alone in this house. If both of us need to leave, one of us will take John with us. I hope you can respect that.”

Jazlynn nodded. “Not a problem. You’re worried that I’m a kidnapper.”

Minik groaned. “I wouldn’t go that far. John did vouch for you, I just don’t think he knows you that well either.”

“True,” Jazlynn said and Minik went back to the TV. “Nice people,” she said as she leant in over the table.

“I suppose.” John grabbed a slice of bread from the basket now that the maker was gone. How anyone had managed to slice them in the first place was a mystery; the crust was black and hard. John quickly put it back.

“No, I’m sure they are,” Jazlynn said and put her head in her hand.

“Is this all right, though?” John asked and poured himself some more cereal. “They’re going to quickly figure out that my mother never had a sister.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about.” Jazlynn swirled the last of her coffee around in her cup and swigged it down. “Now, I wasn’t lying when I said we were going to do visualisation exercises,” she said and got up.

“Can’t it wait one second? I’m really hungry for some reason,” John said.

“Naturally. You have just awakened to your power; everything you’re feeling right now is from that.”

John scarfed down the last of the cereal and joined Jazlynn on the floor. "But haven't I always had this power?"

"Of course, but it has been dormant for all this time. Likely you would have eased into the awareness, rather than jumping the gun like this." Jazlynn went for the garden entrance. "I'm still not sure what creature your mother was, even after our talk yesterday."

"Is!" John corrected and followed her.

"Yes, yes, now come on."

It was another hot day with little wind. John rustled his shirt and wished for the shade inside.

"I'm going to expand on what we discussed yesterday." Jazlynn rested in a white plastic chair while John sought shelter under a pear tree reaching into the neighbouring garden. "Basically, you transform your life energy into a physical force that you can eject as a weapon. Being a human in a mortal body presents a problem, though."

"Problem?" John asked and sat down in the grass. It smelled freshly mowed.

"You've already experienced it. Um, let's see if I can explain it," Jazlynn said and scratched her cheek. "Supernatural beings like your mother can tap into the energy of the world beyond ours to feed their powers. Something like that. Your problem is that you can't. Instead your power boils your blood and burns your organs for fuel."

John suddenly felt cold, his sweaty back freezing. "How... how did I survive that?"

"As long as you don't kill yourself, you can regenerate," she dismissed with a shake of her hand.

"And how does that work?"

"Think of your power as a core of energy inside your body. You can take that energy and use it as a weapon, and as long as you leave just a fraction of it within you, it can regenerate itself and heal you. Anyway," Jazlynn said and clapped her thighs, "your problem last time was a lack of restriction. Just letting loose like that nearly consumed you entirely."

John looked at the lawn. He grabbed some of the loose straws and played them through his fingers. "Why didn't it, then? How am I still alive?"

Jazlynn shrugged. "All I can think of is that your mother must have intervened somehow."

"Then... I killed her?"

"Maybe, but don't flatter yourself; your power is bound to be nothing compared to hers."

"Mm." John closed his eyes, trying to process it all. "All right, I think I'm with you so far. How do I control it then?"

“Visualisation, how many times do I need to repeat myself?” Jazlynn said, fanning herself with her hand. “Your power is like an iceberg. Most of it is still hidden deep inside you, and even what you can see is still too immense to grasp.”

John thought about that and saw himself adrift in a rowboat on the Arctic sea.

“Forget about commanding that entire thing,” Jazlynn continued. “Chip off just a tiny bit. That will be plenty.”

Now he saw himself armed with a comically small pickaxe, stretching out of the boat to scrape off flakes. “I can see the connection, but how does this help me?” he asked.

“Don’t just see it, visualise it. That iceberg *is* your power,” Jazlynn said.

“But I don’t know how to do that.”

“Find your power inside. Make the abstract tangible. And whatever you do, don’t throw yourself at it. I have no way of stopping you if you hit critical mass... short of killing you.”

“Okay, here goes.” John took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Somewhere inside himself his power hid.

## Chapter

It was dark. With no place to stand, John floated, though he could also have been falling. He looked around with a dull glare, wondering where he was now. What was it that he needed to do? He couldn’t seem to remember, for some reason. But wait, how had he gotten here? What was the reason?

John dispelled the apathy miring his mind but could not get rid of the clouds filling his head. Why was it that he couldn’t go home? Right, the explosion. Now he thought of his parents, and the world started taking form. His feet touched solid ground. Walls grew around him. A table sprang into life. Two people were seated around it.

“Mom. Dad,” John said and walked through his living room, like he had on so many other days. They ignored him. “C-come on, why aren’t you...” John reached out a hand that passed through them.

His heart sank as he took his usual seat between them. Yet something about the scene soothed him. It was breakfast. A regular breakfast. His mother wasn’t pregnant, and neither of his parents were missing. They were here where they should be. John smiled and just enjoyed their presence.

“Are you sure that this is what you should be doing?” His mother turned towards him, making John yelp and fall out of his chair. “There was something else you were supposed to do.”

John nodded. “I think so, but... I couldn’t help thinking of you.”

His mother smiled and stroked his cheek. "My sweet, dear Johnathan, I am truly sorry for everything that has happened. If I could do anything over again to keep us together, I would. But we can't be together anymore."

"Why not?" John asked and firmly grabbed the hand on his cheek. "Why can't we?"

"Because I'm not supposed to be in this world. People will attack you because of me like they did the other day, so this is for your own safety. It's a miracle that we even got all these years together in the first place."

John lowered his gaze.

"What're you doing?" His father voice echoed through the room.

"Our son is dreaming about us. Do you want to see him?"

"Of course! How does this work?"

Marilyn grabbed Henry's hand, and the dream version of him snapped into life.

"Johnathan," his father said, beaming. "I'm so sorry for never telling you anything. Well, until right before everything happened. We thought we could keep the façade going forever, so there was always more time. We were wrong."

"It's all right; I have someone to teach me now," John said. "Where did you go?"

"Far away," his mother said and took a deep breath. "You will never see us again, but that doesn't mean we've stopped loving you, or that we ever will. This is just how things need to be."

The tears came unbidden and rolled down John's cheek. "It's not fair."

"No, it's not," his father said, "but we're all right. And you will be too. You're a big boy now."

John nodded. "Can we meet again like this?"

"Probably not, sweetie. I shouldn't even have done this, but I couldn't leave things as they were. I had to say goodbye properly. If you ever, ever need us though, you can always call for me here, but it has to be serious. The enemies we fear can use this place to track us both, after all."

John wiped his eyes with his arm. "But... I don't understand anything. What's going on? What am I?"

"I wish there had been time to tell you everything. I wish you hadn't awakened your powers. And most of all, I wish we could meet again." Both of his parents embraced him. "Listen to me carefully, Johnathan: learn how to use your powers so that they don't kill you, but only use them if you absolutely must."

"We still love you," his father said.

"Now go, find what you came here for."

The world faded back into darkness, and he could no longer feel the warmth of his parents. Wind howled in his ears. The ground below him rocked rhythmically. He looked up and saw the blue

sky stretching forever. He was adrift in a dinghy without oars or sail. John shuddered, huddled in the bottom, trying desperately to get warm. If only he could find land somewhere, anything to make the waves stop thrashing him around.

A shadow fell over him. He lifted his head and saw an iceberg. The immensity of it filled his entire vision, and no matter how he turned his head it was still there. It was more like a landmass, a continent made entirely of ice. The sides of it were steep and slanting up to mountains like spearheads piercing heaven. Yet at its bottom was a flat plateau. His boat was drawn towards it.

The prow screeched along the ice. A wave from behind pushed him further in. He jumped out. The ice was secure and it... hummed, pulsating like it was alive. Dark clouds gathered across the sky and a chill wind howled through his marrow. He would find no shelter here, but another wave had already claimed his boat. He could only watch as it floated further and further away.

Shivering, John turned to the wall of ice. As with the boat before, it now called to him, and he obeyed. He reached out, feeling the rough, cold shape beneath his palm.

The iceberg shook. John staggered back, teetering at the water's edge. The mountain of ice tipped, as if wanting to push him into the drink.

"No!"

He thought for a moment it was himself that had said it; it's what he was thinking and there were no one else with him. But just as he soaked his heels a powerful force yanked at him.

The arctic world faded and for a moment he stared only at black. Then he felt the warmth of summer and the clamminess of his shirt. Jazlynn knelt in front of him, her small hands surprisingly strong in their grip around his shoulder.

"For fuck's sake, you idiot, I told you not to throw yourself at it," she screamed at him. A man passing by the hedge paused. Jazlynn sighed and continued in a lower voice. "Well, at least the visualisation part of it went well. You saw the representation of your power."

John realised he was out of breath and his heart was running wild. He took a moment to calm himself before replying. "Yeah, I saw it all right," he said and swallowed hard. "Jazlynn, it was huge. Just how much power do I have?"

"You're not going to blow up the planet anytime soon, but the crater you left at the recycling plant is probably not even half of what you can do." Jazlynn fell away from John and sat down. "Your approach was too feeble. If you're not going to take this seriously, then your power will consume you. Literally."

"I don't doubt that," John said and nodded. "I want to try again."

"No," Jazlynn replied quickly. "No, not right now. I don't think you understand how long you were gone."



He looked up at the sky. The Sun had moved, and his shadow had turned away from him.  
“How long was I gone?”

“Hours, but I’m guessing it didn’t feel that way.” Jazlynn scooted over to the table and helped herself up. “Trying to find your power, especially the first time, is a long journey through the darkest depths of your mind where time and space are irrelevant. I’m surprised you managed to find it on your first try.”

“I almost didn’t. I really was lost, but then I saw my parents.”

Jazlynn tensed up. “You... you saw your parents? You mean like a dream?”

John shook his head. “No, I really talked with them. I thought I was dreaming at first, but my mom turned to me and spoke to me directly. My dad came too. They were saying...” John swallowed the lump in his throat. “They were saying goodbye.”

“Holy shit,” Jazlynn said and grabbed her head. “If you inherited even a fraction of her power, then you’ll still be able to do some insane things.”

“Yeah, but my first attempt was too feeble.” He thought back to the iceberg. What could he possibly do different?

“You can worry about that later. It’s almost dinnertime, and I’d prefer to do the cooking before Rose can,” Jazlynn said, hobbling along on her birdhouse cane.

John sighed and got up as well. God, he felt stiff. Everything cracked as he unfurled himself. “So many things have happened, but it’s really only been about a week. I think... I think I’m going to be all right.”

“That would be another side effect,” Jazlynn replied. “Now that you’ve awakened to your powers, you’re going to experience a higher threshold than usual, as long as you don’t overextend yourself.”

“What’s that supposed to be mean?” John said, shuffling after her.

“Keeping your core healthy is going to keep you healthy of mind and body. You’ll see what I mean eventually.”

## Chapter

Minik waited for them by the dining table, a plastic bag on the chair next to him. “Had fun with your aunt? You guys were quiet for a long time. Apart from that screaming just now, what was that about?”

“Just visualisation exercises,” Jazlynn said and took a seat opposite him.

“That something you learnt from playing in a band?”

“No, you just meet a lot of interesting people on the streets. What’s in the bag?”

Minik hoisted the bag up on the table and looked at John. "Idowu told me you were good at drawing, and I thought it might be good for you with an unplugged hobby." He showed a notepad and pencils before stuffing them back inside. "I was scrounging for stuff we had around the house and it made me realise, you're missing a lot of things, aren't you? Like, do you even have a phone anymore?"

John shook his head. "It was in my jacket, but that's gone too."

"We should get you one. And some more stuff for your room. You're off school, right?"

"Yeah," John said. "We had last class this week."

"Any homework to be done over the summer?"

"Sure, but I think I have plenty to write about now."

"What about friends?" Minik asked, folding his hands. "Do they know you're all right?"

"I... I'm not sure."

Minik shook his head. "You do have friends, right?"

John nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Any of them play soccer? I coach Mondays and Wednesdays after school, maybe I'll know them."

"I doubt it," John said. He smiled. "Would it be all right to have them over?"

"Of course," Minik said and put an arm around John. "We're a family now. It might feel awkward for you, but it's the same for me and Rose too. If there's ever something you're not satisfied with or if there's something you want, don't hesitate to tell us. The worst that can happen is that we say no."

John fidgeted with his hands.

"I bet you play video games," Minik said. "I can't get your old savefiles back, but we have some consoles. Rose keeps kicking my butt in Wii Sports."

"Got any Tekken?" John asked hopefully.

Minik carefully scrutinised John for a long moment. "Fighting games, huh? All right. I'll see what I can do."

A chair scraped across the floor from Jazlynn getting up. "How about you guys keep talking and I make some dinner?"

## Chapter - 28 June 2010

When the doorbell rang, John was down the stairs and flung the door open before anyone else.

“Hi, am I the first one?” Phil asked and stepped inside. Despite being only a few years older than John, he was taller by almost two heads. He was muscular and well-tanned with deep, green eyes.

“Yeah, I talked with Ragan too, but it seems he couldn’t make it,” John said and stepped aside.

Phil threw his jacket on a hook. “Really? When I spoke with him, he was even more worried about you than I was. You couldn’t have picked up a phone or something?”

“No, I’ve kind of... lost everything,” John mumbled.

“Right, shit,” Phil said and lifted him up in a bear hug. “I’m really sorry, it’s just... we had no idea where you went or what happened to you. Then we learnt you were in the hospital, but we couldn’t see you because they would only allow family in.” Phil’s voice broke off into sobs. John patted him gently on the back.

“Glad to see one of John’s friends could make it.” Rose peeked out of the kitchen, a packet of store-bought cookies in hand. “You... look a little old.”

“Fifteen, ma’am, as of a few months ago!” Phil released John and marched over with heavy steps that made the house shake.

“Well, pleased to meet you, Phil.” Rose wiped her hand on her trousers before shaking his.

“Wow, firm grip you have there, Myth!” Phil said, pushing back.

Rose held his grip and starred at him. “Where did you learn that name?”

“That’s what my pops calls you,” he said, looking at her suddenly nervously but unable to wrench himself free. “I-is that wrong?”

“No, I just didn’t think there’d still be people remembering that name.” Rose sighed and released him. “Well, you can tell him my name is Rose. And only Rose.”

“Uh, sure, ah, Ms Rose,” Phil said, his face completely red.

John grabbed Phil’s arm and dragged him towards the stairs. “Come on, Phil, let me show you my room.”

“Sure, sure.” He turned around to Rose before following. “Bye, bye, Ms Rose.”

“I have something to tell you,” John said as they rushed upstairs. “But you’re probably not going to believe me.”

“What is it?”

He took a seat on the bed while John sat down in the worn office chair. “You know that explosion at the recycling plant? I think I did it.”

“What? Get out of here!” Phil said and laughed.

“No, I’m serious,” John said and drew closer, so he could lower his voice even further. He told the whole story with an excited voice. Phil nodded from time to time. When John was done, he leant back against the wall.

“John, sometimes I like to imagine things too,” Phil said. “When my parents start yelling, I just pretend to be somewhere else. I’m a knight and I fight dragons!”

John shook his head. “No, I’m serious. My mom was glowing. And so was I. I took out that monster bird.” He went over to his wardrobe and pulled open the door. The mirror was empty. Instead of getting into Azer as well, he closed the door and sat down again. “I’ve spent every day after the incident asleep. Only yesterday I woke up feeling refreshed. Last night I could not fall asleep. I was just sitting here watching old reruns till four in the morning. Yet when Rose woke me up four hours later, so we could go to church, I wasn’t tired.”

“Maybe you dreamt you couldn’t fall asleep?” Phil suggested. “Boy, if you think your fantasy is weird, you should see my dreams.” He chuckled but then cleared his throat. “Well, actually, maybe it’s a good idea you can’t.”

“I don’t know, I’ve just been so full of energy,” John said and collapsed into his chair. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Dude, you should come lift weights with me.” Phil bounced on the bed. John observed nervously, wondering if it would break.

An image of Lawrence floated into John’s mind. “Thank you, but like every time you ask, no,” he said. “So, how was Ragan?” he asked, hoping to banish his older brother again.

Phil made a noise like a deflating volleyball. “Man, that dude’s acting all kinds of squirrely,” he said. “I called him to see if he wanted to go to the crater with me, right, and he gets super defensive for some reason. We finally agree to go, and he barely says two words before taking off.”

“I mean, it’s not unusual for him to be busy, but you’d think he’d be more concerned about me,” John mumbled.

“In a way, I think that goober is. You should have heard him on the phone,” Phil said and grinned.

John nodded. Before he could say anything, his door opened, and Rose entered backwards. She was carrying a tray with cookies and orange juice.

“Hey boys, I didn’t know what you liked, but I hope this will be good enough.” She put it down on the desk and was halfway out again when she paused. “You know, it feels weird to be John’s mother when his best friend has known him for longer than me.”

“Aw, dude, Ms Rose, I have the best stories about John!” Phil said and grabbed a handful of the cookies from their bowl.

“Phil, no, please, she doesn’t want to hear about any of those,” John protested.

“Nonsense, I would love to hear more.” She sat down on the bed and smiled despite John’s blushing. “It all still feels so unreal to me. Not a week ago, it was just me and my husband here.”

“What do you want to know?” Phil asked.

“How did you guys meet?”

Phil’s grin became almost bigger than his face. “John’s never really been the social type,” he explained. “For some reason though, he would talk to me, even though I’m a few classes ahead of him and Ragan.

“I-I just know what it’s like when no one wants to talk with you,” John said and grinned sheepishly.

“Well now I have to know,” Rose said, looking at John. “What’s up with that?”

John shrugged.

“People think I’m too loud,” Phil said.

Rose smiled. “Kids can be cruel. And what about that other guy, uh, Ragan? What’s he like?”

John and Phil looked at each other before bursting into laughter. “Ragan, he’s, well... he’s Ragan,” John explained. “Always thinks he knows the answer, always goes really quiet if he’s wrong.”

“Yeah, I used to think he was just a prick,” Phil said, clapping his thighs. “Turns out he’s not so bad after all.”

“And yet he’s not here,” Rose pointed out. “Maybe you should go visit him.”

“Hey, that’s a great idea!” Phil said. “Come to think of it, I don’t think we ever have.”

John shook his head. “No, and I’ve known him for a few years longer,” he said, then looked at Rose. “Ragan lives both here and in Los Angeles, but even when he’s here, it’s a pain getting him to meet with us after school.”

“He likes to be alone,” Phil added.

“All the more reason. We should pay him a surprise visit,” Rose teased.

“Oh man, Ragan does not like surprises!” Phil said and snorted a laugh. “Dude has to have everything calculated and planned months in advance.”

“Once, our photo day was moved up a few days,” John mused. “Ragan looked like they had cancelled Tuesdays.”

“That’s what makes it perfect,” Rose said. “We just have to make sure he’s home.”

“Might be tricky.” John scratched his chin and tried to recall every bit of info he had accumulated over the years. “I think his dad runs some kind of construction company. He’s always using dinner parties and opening ceremonies to skip out on meeting us.”

“Shit!” Rose said, snapping John out of his thoughts. Adults rarely swore near him. “Now I recognise the name. He’s Ragan Cloubough, isn’t he?” she eagerly asked. “You guys are friends with the family who built half this town!”

“Damn, I never thought of it like that!” Phil said. “I wonder if I can get him to buy me a new computer.”

“Why do you think he’s never reminded us? Or invited us home? He doesn’t want us to treat him any differently,” John said.

Phil grinned sheepishly. “O-oh yeah, of course. I was just joking,” he said, though his chuckled began to sound rueful.

“Well, I’ll talk with his mother about arranging a date. That way it can still be a surprise to him.” Rose hurried out of the room while rubbing her hands.

“I do wonder why he didn’t come today,” Phil said. “He has been really worried about you.”

“We’ll find out soon enough. He’s probably just busy.”

## Chapter

*“You about ready for the next mission?”* his trophy asked. The man inside the reflection lounged on the bottom, picking his nose.

Ragan looked up from his bed where he was huddled up with a large pillow. “I don’t feel like it today.”

*“That was your excuse yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that. Summer vacation is going to end at this rate with nothing to show for it. The Pearce residence was only the first of our many planned targets.”*

“The plan’s cancelled.”

The man jolted up on his feet. *“What? I knock down your friend’s house without killing him, and this is how you repay me?”*

“You said they weren’t going to be there!” Ragan yelled. “I looked you in the eyes and asked you, and you told me you would make sure of it. Why the Hell didn’t you demolish their house the instant they left?”

*“Because, you idiot, they would have just gone back and tried to rebuild. This way the house stays knocked down and your father can get the property. That was what you wanted, right?”*

“Yes, but... dammit, not like this.” Ragan screwed his eyes shut. This didn’t keep the tears from squeezing out. “For fuck’s sake, making him homeless was a big enough pill for me to swallow. If you had told me you’d make him an orphan too—”

*"If I had told you, then you would never have agreed to it, and your father wouldn't have been able to buy up the property for cheap."*

Ragan threw down his pillow and leapt to his feet. "But we could have offered to rehouse them and bought the property from them directly. There was no need for this!"

*"And what would the chance have been of them agreeing to it? Certainly not a hundred percent, like my plan. I am the one getting things done, me. Not you. You have things you want to do but no idea how to carry them out. That's why you came to me."*

Ragan pounded his fist into the wall. "Yeah, I know, and I'm seriously starting to regret it too."

The man inside the trophy smirked. *"Hm-hm, well, too late to back out now. We have an agreement, after all."*

*"Right."*

*"So, the next mission, come on."*

"Won't be for a while anyway," Ragan said.

*"Oh? And, pray tell, why is that?"*

Ragan looked up from the wall. "Because I don't have any other orders right now. And besides, we'll be gone for a while."

*"Back to Los Angeles?"*

Ragan shook his head. "Overseas."

The man sat down again. *"I getcha, preparing for the next stage,"* he said and chuckled. *"Better be quick about it; I'm starting to feel restless."*

The fog faded from the trophy until Ragan again could see his own reflection in it. He fell back on the bed and buried his head in his hands. "Dammit. Dammit, dammit, dammit!"

## Chapter

*"Why such a heavy sigh?"*

John glanced up from his bed and saw the wardrobe door creaking open. "It's always exhausting having Phil over. He has a million ideas of what we could do, and most of them are terrible. I spent a good hour shooting down suggestions for punishments we should do to Ragan. Oh, sorry, I guess you don't know who either of those are."

*"Well, I'm guessing they're your friends,"* Azer said. *"I do keep an eye on you from time to time."*

"You can see anything, anywhere, huh?" John asked, thinking back to all the mirrors he had seen inside Azer's realm. "Can you see my parents? Do you know where they are?"

Azer brushed his hand through his messy black hair. *"Listen, John, I can see out of every single reflection on this planet. This means that, yes, I can see pretty much 'anything, anywhere,' but it also means I have like... a bazillion windows in here,"* he said. *"I'm sorry. I wouldn't know where to even start."*

*"But will you try?"*

*"Of course. Not like I got anything else to do in here."*

*"What are you doing in there?"*

Azer chuckled. *"Oh, it's a long, boring story about family and betrayal that happened thousands of years ago. I wouldn't bore you with the detail, John, but tell me, do you trust me?"*

*"Well..."*

*"You really shouldn't, you know; what do you actually know about me? I could be a bad guy."*

John raised an eyebrow. *"Are you?"*

*"What do you think?"*

*"You helped me out, and I can't really think of a reason why you would, so that makes you okay in my book."*

*"You're entering a whole new side of the world,"* Azer said. *"It is only natural you should find some guidance."*

*"I also have Jazlynn."*

Azer smiled. *"And what is she doing, besides training you? I'm here if there's anything else you need."*

*"Thanks,"* John said and sprawled out on the bed again. *"You know, I still don't get you. How exactly can I help you?"*

*"You already are. By growing stronger, you'll be help to help me one day. It's my goal to prove myself to you by that point."*

*"That's easier said than done, you know. I can't even do the visualisation tests properly."* John looked up to see if the man inside his mirror was still there. *"If anything happens, would you tell me? Like if you can find my parents?"*

*"Of course."*

## **Chapter - 7 July 2010**

John fell into the grass and stared up at the sky.

*"You're still doing it wrong,"* Jazlynn said, sipping her glass of cold orange juice.

*"How am I supposed to do it differently?"* John huffed and got up on his feet. He felt sticky and clammy in the afternoon heat. *"Every time I get near that iceberg, the same thing happens."*



"If the iceberg doesn't change, then your approach should."

John craned his neck. "My approach?"

"Yes," Jazlynn said, relaxing. "You're making decent progress. It's only been little over a week and you can already bring yourself back."

"Right."

He closed his eyes and felt himself falling. Instead of giving himself to the darkness, he struggled. He could see the Arctic Ocean below him. The rowboat rocked in the waves, with another him huddled in the bottom. He would join that other John in a moment, but first he needed to make some adjustments. Change his approach, was it?

The rowboat shimmered. He tried re-imagining it, but his mind was conflicted between Jaws and a drug smuggling boat he had seen on the news. The light faded, and the result was something like an elongated, sleek fishing boat armed with twin harpoon launchers on the side.

The John floating above popped out of existence and the John on the boat awakened. He jumped away from the helm and looked out of the cabin and smiled. This would do. He pushed the speeder and the boat slowly gained speed, chugging through the waves. Smaller ice floes tried to stop him, but they didn't even register anymore. His boat smashed through them, headed directly for the mother of them all straight ahead.

He pushed a button on the instrument panel and one harpoon launched, trailing a rope behind it. The barbed end sank into the ice. The rope pulled it back and the harpoon tore out a chunk of the frozen mountain. Ice sprayed over the boat and the water. Lumps hailed down and thudded down on the deck below his cabin.

John raced down the stairs and knelt by a piece. He cupped it with his hands. It was warm and pulsed. Without being pulled, John blinked and found himself back in his parents' backyard. Rather than ice, his hands were engulfing a small orb of light. For the first time in a week, John cried. It was so familiar, so nostalgic. He closed his eyes and he could smell laundry hanging from a rack, he could see faraway trips from many years ago, and the house was there. But most of all, it felt like mother's warmth.

"Well, congrats, kid, you did it," Jazlynn said and clapped her hands. John started, and the light snuffed out. "Maybe I really won't have to kill you after all."

His hands ached, like holding on to stuffed grocery bags for too long. "What happens now?"

"Now? Now you have to be able to do that with eyes open." Jazlynn sipped her drink loudly. "You're no good in a fight if you have to disappear into yourself for a few hours."

"Right. So, what do I do?" John flexed his fingers, but the light would not return.

"Keep the iceberg in mind but don't close your eyes."

John stared down at his hands.

"You'll be disappointed if you think you can be rid of me that easily," Jazlynn said. "Once you can call your energy, what do you want to do with it? Tell me, how are you going to use it?"

"I-I don't know. I'm still not really sure what this energy is."

"I told you, it's life energy, it's... well, it explodes on contact." Jazlynn scooted a little closer to him. "Anyway, you can worry about that for when you can actually produce a stable result."

John frowned and concentrated on his hands. Again he conjured forth the image of the iceberg. He saw himself in his new boat going out to pluck a piece from it.

A sharp pain over his head brought him back to reality. Jazlynn was removing her hand when John opened his eyes. "I told you, eyes open. Your enemy won't give you time for that."

"What enemy?" John exclaimed. "That bird is gone, isn't it?"

"Yes, the bird is." Jazlynn's relaxed face tightened just enough to appear serious. "Listen to me, John, you're going to be living a long life. It's improbable that you won't meet another demon at some point, and you need to be ready for it."

John nodded. "Sure. Right, I can see that... wait, how long am I going to live?"

"Produce a stable result for me, then I'll tell you more. Otherwise the information would just be wasted on you."

## Chapter - 9 July 2010

The two FBI officers came in a single file through the corridor and sat around the table in Rose's living room. One was Ebadicael, the other had a rough, uninviting face and short, platinum blonde hair.

"This is my partner, Detective Gagesham," Ebadicael said. Both of them put their hats down in front of them. "There has been a development in the case, and we had some more questions."

"What development?" Minik asked, leaning an arm across the table.

Ebadicael opened her suitcase and produced a photograph. "We have located the car belonging to Johnathan's parents." Underneath weird doodles, the image displayed a familiar car.

"Then my parents really are alive?" John asked, too afraid to raise his own hopes were they to be dashed again.

"The car was found at the JFK. Technicians are combing through security footage as we speak, but our theory is that they have fled the country under assumed names."

"Ronnie. What about my brother?" John asked.

Gagesham focused on him and John felt a chill down his spine. "Ronald Pearce has not been located," she said.

“Right. No babies have been found matching Ronald’s hospital record.” Ebadicael put the photo back and tapped her pen against her notepad. “You can understand how these actions arouse our suspicions.”

“So, they are suspects,” Minik said.

“To be honest, I have my doubts they even survived the explosion,” Ebadicael said and made a few scribbles. “We are more worried that the car was stolen by the culprits.”

“Johnathan Pearce is secure here. Johnathan Pearce is a witness. Johnathan Pearce will not leave Ferman.”

“The reason we came here is to find out if Johnathan has remembered anything else from that night,” Ebadicael said. “Do you have any amends or new details for us?”

John shook his head. “N-no, sorry.”

Ebadicael nodded. “And you are certain? It is imperative that we get into contact with your parents ASAP. Do you remember seeing them after the explosion, or have you ever heard them talking about a safehouse?”

“I really don’t know.”

“Contact us immediately if you remember something, or if you find out anything,” Ebadicael said and produced a business card from her suit. She got up from the table and Minik did the same.

“Wait,” he said.

“Hmm?”

“What about Jazlynn? Do you have any confirmation on her?”

“Right, the aunt,” Ebadicael said. “Yes, she checks out. Furthermore, her criminal record has been clean for as long as yours have.”

Rose sighed and put a hand on her chest. “Well, that’s a relief.”

“Have a good evening,” Ebadicael said and grabbed her hat and tablet.

Gagesham lingered by her seat a moment and stared at John. “Johnathan did not see a monster bird. Johnathan will not tell anyone he saw a monster bird.”

“I’m sorry?” Rose asked.

“Come along,” Ebadicael said, an edge to her voice as she yanked at the arm of her partner.

“The Hell was that about?” Minik asked, scratching his neck.

Rose remained sitting and rubbed her arms. “I know, that other detective gave me the creeps.”

“And what’s with their names? They don’t look foreign.”

John got up as well and wandered out of the living room.

“You all right, bud?” Minik asked but Rose put a hand over his.

“Let him have some space,” she whispered. “I think he needs it.”

John went back to his room and threw himself at his bed. He held up his hand before him and concentrated. “I knew that wasn’t a dream. You really are alive,” he said as light gathered in his palm. He winced but endured it, and the light became brighter. “If I become stronger, maybe we can be together again. No matter how much it hurts, I’ll do it. I’ll be able to protect myself and you can come back.”

## Chapter

The two detectives emerged into the darkness outside of the Petersens’ home. Ebadicael glanced around her and held up a hand to pause her colleague. “Just the person we were looking for,” she said. “Your interference is unwelcome, Knight. Whatever your business is here, we ask that you suspend it immediately.”

Jazlynn crossed the street and stepped into the light of a lamppost. “What’s your interest in John?”

“The Nephilim has grown stronger,” Detective Gagesham said. “Why?”

“That would be because I’ve been training him.”

The detective’s face flushed beet red, but Ebadicael put a hand on her shoulder. “The Nephilim is no concern of yours.”

“Isn’t he?” Jazlynn challenged, not taking her eyes off the Petersens’ residence. “Last I checked, my concern involves intrusions. That was the deal our agencies struck, right?”

“Then why have you not killed him?” Ebadicael asked calmly.

“Official orders from my master.”

“Humans cannot know about the other world!” Gagesham blustered, a vein almost bursting on her brow. “The Nephilim must not become stronger!”

“And then what? The cat’s out of the bag here, and you can’t stuff it back inside no matter hard you try. Whether you like it or not, John has awoken to his heritage, and that cannot be ignored, not by him, not by you, and certainly not by Order,” Jazlynn said. “You’re already treading a thin line here. What the Hell was his mother doing here in the first place? With a human mate, no less?”

Ebadicael looked away. “Marilyn Pearce was a special case.”

“You mean she was out of your control.”

Gagesham advanced but Detective Ebadicael dug her hand into her wrist. “We are willing to fight you over the issue of the Nephilim, so just. Back. Off.”

“Why does he mean so much to you people anyway?” Jazlynn asked unperturbed, looking from one to the other. “Marilyn was a rogue agent, right, so why shield her? From what I heard, her eldest spawn nearly killed someone, and this one destroyed a recycling plant. If anyone should have killed them, it should have been you.”

“They’re still one of us.”

Jazlynn approached them. “You’re hopeless and, more to the point, arrogant. We Knights have bad apples too, and you know what we do with them? We hunt them down.”

“We need everyone we can get,” Ebadicael said and snapped her fingers. The two detectives began fading away. “Tell your master that he’s overstepping his bounds, and that this will have consequences.” They were gone, but Ebadicael’s voice lingered. “Oh, and we confirmed your identity for now.”

Jazlynn snorted. “There’s even fewer of us,” Jazlynn grumbled and approached the door. “Bloody Watchers. Maybe if they’d spent a day down here in the real world, they’d see how things are.”

## Chapter

“Jazlynn?” Minik asked when he opened the door. “What are you doing here at this hour?”

“An FBI agent just told me that my identity had been confirmed, so I wanted to see if you had heard. Am I interrupting anything?”

Whatever Minik had been about to say, Rose joined them and dragged Jazlynn inside by her hand.

“I’m real sorry for doubting you,” Rose said and put an arm around Jazlynn.

“I mean, that’s only to be expected,” Jazlynn said.

“It is not,” Rose said. “You’re probably used to people distrusting you, but that doesn’t make it right. It was the same for us as well. Now come on inside, you can’t just stand out there.”

By the time Jazlynn flopped into the couch, Rose had already told her all about the evening.

“I just can’t believe it, you know?” Rose said and joined her. “If John’s parents really are alive, what have they have been they doing this whole time? What’s up with your sister?”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions here, they may not have been the ones to drive that car,” Jazlynn said.

“But what if they did?”

“All right, let’s assume that the explosion was indeed an attack by European nationalists; I know my sister’s husband is from Germany. Maybe he got spooked.”

“Why would European nationalists attack a waste recycling station?” Minik asked from the armchair closest to the TV. “More to the point, why would they target our town?”

“We do have a lot of European immigrants living here,” Rose countered and smiled to her husband. “Not to mention how close we are to an LHD base.”

Minik raised his eyebrows. “Okay, but then what about John’s house? It seems a bit of a stretch that it would get flattened in a storm on the same day as the attack.”

“You’re right.” Rose gasped. “They can just try and come here to finish the job.”

“Easy there, Rambo, I think if anyone wanted to do anything, they’d have done so by now,” Jazlynn said.

Rose sighed and melted into the couch. “Ah, things seemed so much simpler a few days ago when we agreed to this. I thought we would be taking in an orphaned kid, but we got mysterious parents and missing brothers, and I don’t know how to cook or what being a parent is about at all.”

“You love him, don’t you?” Jazlynn asked. Rose nodded weakly. “That’s all he needs right now. Someone to take care of him and love him and give him a stable life.”

“Where’d you get this smart? No offence, but you always run around with a vacant stare,” she said and elbowed Jazlynn in the side.

Her cane slid down and clattered to the floor.

“You know, I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Minik said. “I can see why you would need a cane, but what’s with the birdhouse?”

Jazlynn bent down and picked it up. “It’s a stage prop, from my band days. This hole is where a mic would be sitting,” she said and pointed to where birds would enter from on normal bird houses. “Never could get rid of it.”

“You never considered getting a prosthesis?” Rose asked and helped balance the cane up against the wall.

“Not really something you can do in my situation, being homeless and living hand-to-mouth.”

Rose stared at Jazlynn’s stump. “You remind me a lot of myself.”

“How do you figure?” Jazlynn asked and raised an eyebrow.

“We’ve both lived hard lives and have the scars to prove it.”

Jazlynn snorted. “You can’t honestly sit there and expect me to believe that?”

“It may be hard to imagine now, with a nice husband and a nice home,” Rose said, Minik grunting something nearby, “but when I was a teenager, I was like you. Adrift. Somehow, I washed up here, hooking for this pimp called Gold Rock.”

“That’s how I found her,” Minik said. “I had come to Ferman to play a soccer match and I was looking for something to take the edge off before the big night.”

“More like his teammates wanted me to take his cherry.” Rose laughed and clapped her thigh.

Minik coughed. “Yes, well, I ended up falling head over heels for her. I knew she was the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.”

“He kept coming back to me and I couldn’t help but find his naïveté charming. Kept talking about making an honest woman out of me once he made it to the big leagues. I don’t know, I guess I started believing him, because eventually I found out I was pregnant.”

“I knew it was mine,” Minik said. “I could feel it. So I asked her to marry me.”

“And that’s where the scars come in.”

Rose hiked up her shirt. Jazlynn only saw a blue wolf tattooed on her abdomen, like something out of a coat of arms. Slowly, though, she saw beneath it, finding several scars almost hidden by the ink.

“Holy shit,” Jazlynn said and sat up straight. “What the fuck happened?”

“When I told my pimp that I was pregnant and quitting the life, he took it pretty calmly. I guess that should have been my warning bell, but I was blind with love. The next day, one of his goons broke into my apartment with a knife.”

“What happened to him?”

“He was busted on unrelated charges,” Minik said and stared at his hands. “I... I couldn’t do a thing. I was too much of a coward to go after him. I thought when he was arrested anyway it would be all right, but he was charged with racketeering and pimping and other things. Not one word of Rose’s assault.”

“You were there for me,” Rose said and smiled. “When I was healing, you were there, and you couldn’t have been if you had wasted your fool life going after him.”

“That’s what I told myself as well, but it’s simply not true.”

“Minik Petersen, I will not have you sit there and demean yourself, I simply will not,” Rose stated and walked over. “You are the sweetest and kindest man I have ever met, and not even you yourself are allowed to talk badly about you.”

She put him in a chokehold and Minik clapped her arms in defence. “All right, sweetie, I give, I give.”

Rose stared at him for a moment and slowly sat down. “All right.”

Minik coughed and adjusted his shirt. “When I heard that Rose had been hurt, I rushed out of a pretty important game to be with her and got a suspension. Then came the scandal with me

being involved with a prostitute, and I could see where my career was headed, and I decided to call it quits.”

“I always told him it was nonsense, but you can see how he gets,” Rose said and sighed. Minik grunted and looked away.

“I’m happy coaching soccer to kids. Took me a while to get there, but I did.”

“There’s just one thing I need to know,” Jazlynn said. “Why the hell was your pimp called Gold Rock?”

Rose laughed. “Because he had only one nut left, the other was a fake made of gold.”

Jazlynn chortled. “Very well, Rose, I apologise.”

“You what now?”

“You remind me a lot of myself too. I can’t say I was ever a hooker but, while I was in my band, I made enough bad decisions that I might as well have been.” She sighed and stroked the cane next to her. “And I apologise for dragging up the past. You’ve told me things you would never ordinarily tell a stranger.”

“Come on, Jazlynn, we’re family now, aren’t we?” Rose said and clapped Jazlynn’s shoulder. “Honestly, I’ve always wanted a sister, but the only family we have left is Minik’s brother.”

Minik rolled his eyes.

Jazlynn hoisted herself up. “I should get going. It’s late.”

“Do you have arrangements? You can stay over, if you like,” Rose said and got up as well.

“It’s not like we need the couch at the night,” Minik chimed in and shrugged.

“It’s fine, I don’t like imposing.” Jazlynn clacked out of the living room with the Petersens following her. “I’ll come over soon to be with my nephew, anyway.”

She hopped out of the front door and let the darkness swallow her. After a while, she had to stop to catch her breath.

*“Establishing a base closer to the Nephilim is not a bad idea.”*

“I can’t, Hoffman. One thing is deceiving those people, another is taking advantage of them. They really... oh god, they really believe I’m his aunt!” she cried out and fell against a wall.

*“Is that all there is to it?”*

Jazlynn shook her head. “I like it better when you’re quiet.”

“Your first undercover mission is going smoothly so far,” Hoffman said as Jazlynn picked herself up and staggered on. “Besides, they’ll forget all about you once you leave.”

“But I will remember. I will know.”

## Chapter - 28 July 2010



“What did you say your friend’s dad did again?” Minik said as they turned the corner.

They had made their way out of the city into a forested area where a white wall now barred their way.

“He’s a Cloubough,” Phil said from the backseat.

Minik swallowed, his hands growing clammy. “Oh. Right. Cloubough, as in, the richest family in town and one of the richest in the States.” He looked down at himself and instantly wished himself anywhere but here in his coaching uniform.

They pulled up to a pair of wrought iron gates, and a security guard stepped out from his booth. “Yeah?” he asked, gazing at the party lazily.

“We’re here to see Ragan,” John said and pushed himself towards the window Minik was opening.

“What do you want with the young master?” the security guard asked, slapping a truncheon against his leg.

“We’re expected,” Minik said in a cowed voice. “The Petersens?”

The security guard held up an electronic tablet in his other hand. “Right, you have a ten o’clock, I see. Come on in.” He stepped back to his booth, and the gates swung inside.

“Are they as eccentric as I hear?” Minik whispered to his passengers as he drove inside. He did not know where to rest his gaze. There were the massive grounds filled with a huge garden and a hedge maze and a tennis court, and the mansion itself which would put minor royalty to shame.

Spending several moments enraptured by the architecture and statues and fountains, John finally regained enough control of himself to reply. “What do you mean?”

“I just hear that they are big on alternative solutions and the environment and such.” Saying it out loud, Minik eyed the solar panels on the roof, the vegetable patches off to the side, and the garage with a charger for electric cars.

“I did notice Ragan bringing an awful lot of kale in his lunchboxes,” Phil said, his face glued to the window, trying to take in everything at once.

“You guys have never visited your friend at his home, right?” Minik asked.

John shook his head. “He likes hanging out with us, but he always has an excuse if we want to go to his place. I’m actually surprised he agreed to this.”

Minik chuckled. “Well, he didn’t, technically. His mother did.”

“You mean he doesn’t even know we’re coming?” John asked, this finally wresting him free from the view.

“Nope. All arranged by Rose.”

They finally reached the front side of the mansion where a courtyard allowed them to park comfortably. The double doors swung open and an Asian woman burst out, accompanied by a butler and a handful of maids.

“You came!” the woman exclaimed. She was stout with a chubby face, jewellery dangling from her ears and neck.

“As promised.” Minik chuckled nervously out the window as his passengers escaped the car.

“Come in, come in. I’m Ragan’s mother, Kizashi,” she said, waving everyone close. “You too!”

Minik pointed at himself. “Me? Oh no, I have to get to work.”

“Nonsense, you can have a single drink, right?”

Minik tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “Well, I’m not actually coaching today, just swinging by the office... sure, but just the one.”

Kizashi bubbled with mirth as she directed everyone inside and Minik nearly lost his jaw to the floor. Two grand staircases led up to the first-floor balcony while doors and paintings covered the wood panel and yellow tapestry walls. Tables held vases and busts, and there were couches and chairs in the corners too.

“Holy, uh... smokes,” Minik said and scratched his neck. “I think you could fit our entire house just in the lobby.”

Kizashi laughed. “We get that a lot. Now please, sit down,” she said and guided everyone to one corner. “I already texted my son, he’ll be down soon enough.”

Everyone took a seat and immediately sank into the couches and chairs. Staff appeared with trays with refreshments, a bottle of amber liquid, glasses, and a bowl with sweets. The butler grabbed the bottle and held it up to Minik for his perusal.

“A glass of gin, sir?” he asked. “Brewed from environmentally friendly stock and tapped on recycled glass.”

Minik sweated and swallowed hard. “Uh, no, a soda will be fine.”

“As you wish, sir.” The butler went to the other side of the table and poured a glass for his mistress while the maids arranged the other drinks.

“I’m telling you, my little Ragan is so busy all the time,” Kizashi said and flicked her wrist. “When he doesn’t accompany his father back to the main office in Los Angeles, we’re on business trips around the world, and then there are piano recitals and school and extra tutoring too.”

Minik nodded and sipped his soda. “Oh, well, we keep busy too; my team sometimes play friendly matches all over the country. What exactly is it you’re doing?” he asked and added in a lower voice: “Whatever it is, I want to try it too.”

“Oh, we oversee the interests of Gifted Enterprises here in town.” Kizashi knocked back her thimble of gin and made a wry face. “Phew, that’s the good stuff.”

“You build things, right?” Phil asked, his entire hand digging through the bowl of sweets.

“No, darling, we mediate. Gifted finds promising companies, and then my husband and I arrange with the town to have them set up branches here,” she explained proudly. “This town would be in such a worse shape if we hadn’t softened the blow from all those heavy industries packing up and leaving.” She laughed shrilly and waved her hand, and the butler poured her another thimbleful.

Minik scratched his neck. “I... guess that makes sense. And this pays well?”

Kizashi nodded. “Of course, but only because my husband is so good at what he does. Otherwise Gifted wouldn’t pay so well for him to do what he does best.”

“But...” Minik continued, “what exactly does Gifted want with that sort of business? What do they get out of it? Aren’t they a tech company?”

“Oh, you mustn’t ask me such heavy questions,” Kizashi said and giggled. “I just help arrange the deals. Everything to do with Gifted is between them and my husband.”

Minik wrinkled his brow, trying to wrap his mind around it, when John cried out. Looking up, the resident son was hurrying down the stairs. He had a slimmer version of his mother’s face, but his skin was dark brown, his hair was long, curly, and brown, and he wore small, square glasses. He reached the ground floor and made his way over to John.

“Well, uh...” Ragan said. “H-how are you doing then?”

John smiled. “I’m good. You’re just really hard to get a hold of.”

“Sorry. Been busy,” Ragan mumbled back.

“Too busy for John’s b-day?” Phil said, his voice, as usual, loud. He got up as well and put a hand on Ragan’s shoulder, nearly making his knees buckle.

“Again, sorry, I know. It was a few days ago, right?” He looked over at Minik. “You must be John’s stepfather, yes?”

“That’s right. You can just call me Minik,” he replied and got up to shake Ragan’s hand.

“Thank you for taking care of my friend. I don’t know what I would do without him.”

Minik chuckled. “Well, it’s also good to see John’s friends. Imagine my surprise when I realised one of them was a Cloudbough.”

“Yes, that’s the power of public education. It brings people together.”

“I told him so many times we could easily afford private tutors,” Kizashi said and laughed. “He kept insisting he wanted to go to school and make friends. And it’s not like it hurt his father either.”

“How about we take this somewhere more private?” Ragan suggested, eyeing both the staff and his mother.

“Oh, that’s a wonderful idea,” Kizashi said. “Time to catch up with your friends after all this time.”

Ragan nodded. “I hope we get the chance to talk more sometime,” he said to Minik. “I would also like to meet your wife.”

“You can always come over for dinner sometime,” Minik said.

Ragan smiled. “I would like that very much.”

He began walking, and John and Phil followed after him. They swallowed the elaborate corridors whole, swivelling their heads to take everything in.

“I’m sorry for not inviting you over before; I didn’t want you to think I was some rich kid,” Ragan said. “Truth be told, my family suffered just as much as everyone else with the industries leaving. All of this is on loan from Gifted.”

“But your dad earns a lot, doesn’t he?” Phil asked.

Ragan blushed. “All our expenses are taken care of, but... but that’s not what you came here for.”

He opened the doors to a room headed by a large TV and a shelf full of consoles hooked up to it on one wall, and the rest of the room dedicated to a pool table, a dart board, several pinball tables, and multiple other gaming possibilities.

John picked his mouth up from the floor. “What in the world?”

Maids came out of a side door and arranged the table with refreshments here as well. The butler strode past the maids and presented a tray to Ragan. “Don’t forget this, young master,” he said, and Ragan took a wrapped gift from the tray.

“Thank you.”

With that, the butler bowed out, and the maids followed him, as quickly as they had come.

As Phil jumped into the couch, Ragan turned to John and handed over the gift. “It’s not like I forgot, I actually got something for you in Bangkok,” he said and blushed furiously. “H-happy birthday, John.”

Ragan took one of the chairs while John also sat down in the couch.

“Ragan’s gifts are always special, you never know what he brings,” Phil said and laughed.

“Hey, where’s mine?”

“Your birthday isn’t until October. And it’s nothing special, really,” Ragan said, tapping the armrest of his chair nervously.

John commenced ravaging the wrapping and a blue shirt emerged from within. John held it up and looked it over. Ragan leant closer, the palms of his hand getting sweaty. "It's proper Thai silk," he explained, keeping his face calm. "I know dark blue is your favourite colour."

"I like it," John said. His smile appeared genuine. Ragan breathed a little easier and blushed.

"W-well, we weren't exactly on vacation, so we didn't have a lot of time at each destination. We started in Dubai before going to India and across Asia and ending in Japan before we flew home."

John hugged the shirt close. "Thank you, Ragan."

"Yeah, it's so soft!" Phil said, rubbing his big sausage fingers all over the sleeve.

Ragan dragged the pitcher close and poured himself some cranberry juice. "Again, I'm deeply sorry for being so busy this last month. With school out, I've been helping my father with his business instead. He expects me to take over someday."

John nodded and folded the wrapping around the shirt again. "It's okay, I understand."

"But enough about me," Ragan said, relaxing in his chair. "I want to know everything that has happened with you since last, you're the one who has actually experienced something. And, yes, Phil, you may begin playing if you want."

Phil grinned sheepishly and stepped away from the TV. "No, no, I was just checking out your library, man."

John's story was woefully mundane and contained no mention of the lion bird monster. Ragan listened quietly and simply nodded in places, trying to suss out the truth. Obviously, John had been hurt in some way because of him, but he was talking about storms and blimps instead of the explosion. Ragan sighed to himself. As far as John knew, he had no reason to suspect a different truth, so Ragan kept quiet.

"They're really nice," John said and moved on to his foster family.

"Just seems weird that the FBI would help you find a family," Phil said and scratched his neck.

"Seems like they just wanted a safe place for their witness," Ragan said. "I'm glad you're all right, John. I was really worried when I heard you were hospitalised after the attack. What exactly happened with you, though, you just said you were attacked."

John giggled nervously. "Ah, well, I don't exactly remember. Some witness I am, huh?"

"I see," Ragan said and got up from the chair. No, no bites. "The important thing is you're all right, though, so don't worry too much about it. You guys want to play a fighting game or a party game? Or just take turns in a different game?"

"This is in honour of John's birthday, right?" Phil said. "Why don't you pick, John?"

“All right, a fighting game, then. But then Ragan gets to pick which one.”

Ragan shrugged and went to the shelves. There was no particular order to the games, so Ragan traced a path across the spines with his finger, glancing at the titles. Most were still in their plastic, though a few brought back fun memories. His finger paused by one that he fondly remembered playing with his father, over and over again.

“You’re probably familiar with this one already, but I quite like it,” he said, slipping the case out and putting it on the table.

John nodded. “Me too.”

Phil picked up the case and scratched his neck. “Not exactly a shooter. Uh, can you play three people on this?”

“We can just take turns against each other,” Ragan said and sat down in the couch, between John and Phil.

“Yeah, let’s make a tournament of it,” John said. “I’ll go first against Phil.”

Ragan closed his eyes and let the familiar sounds of fighting wash over him, all the hit noises and character screams, and used it as his anchor. He knew how many rounds the game had been set to, so he knew exactly when the game would be over. Until then, he just enjoyed the moment as a normal boy.

*“In the end, you’re doing it for him too, right? So that the city can improve, be a better place to live.”*

Ragan opened his eyes. The sun was shining through the curtains, and he could see his reflection in the TV. Except the image distorted and grew dark.

“Can you promise me this time that John won’t get involved?”

*“Of course.”*

Phil made a dramatic sigh and lobbed the controller on the table.

“How can you beat me with a little girl? My guy was big and muscular,” he said.

“You just need to know how to play the game,” John said and chuckled.

Ragan twitched his fingers and picked up the controller. “All right, let’s play a game we can all enjoy. After I beat John, of course.” Adding under his breath, he said. “I have a target. It goes down in exactly one month.”

*“One month? Why not do it now?”*

“The timing and placement have to be just right. Surely you can wait that long.”

## **Chapter - 28 August 2010**

The doorbell rang. Minik opened the door and found Jazlynn outside. "You're just in time for lunch," he said and walked back.

"You told me over a month ago that you would not leave John unsupervised with me," Jazlynn said and followed him into the hallway. "I was wondering if you have changed your mind."

"Why?"

"I would like to go for a ride with him. To go train in the park for a bit."

"You're out in the backyard every other day training him, what do you need to go to the park for?"

"Those are just exercises. I was thinking of seeing what he is capable of, and for that, I need more space."

Minik put a hand on her shoulder and they came to a dead stop. "To be honest, there's still a lot about you that we don't know, and somewhere in the back of my mind, there's still some niggling doubt." He sighed and stepped back. "I guess what I'm trying to say is, don't betray the trust we put in you."

Jazlynn observed him coolly. "Does that mean..?"

"Have him back in a few hours."

"Right, you're going to the movies. Don't worry, I'll have him back in time for dinner."

"Good," Minik said. "Good. I'd offer to drive you, but Rose is at the shop right now, and we only have the one car."

"John can drive us on his bike. I'm light."

She rushed into the living room and stood by the dinner table.

"Hey Jazlynn," John said and slurped his soup. "I'm almost done."

"Things will be a little different today, John. This will be the real deal."

"Cool. I can't wait to show you how much I've improved."

"I would have a few things to say if you did not." She glanced over at Minik. "But we should get going."

John put the spoon down and got up. "Right," he said. "I'll be back in time for dinner."

"Don't forget we're eating early," Minik said.

John nodded and waved at him as he hurried after Jazlynn, grabbing his bike from the hallway. "So, what's the haps?" John asked, getting on top of his bike.

"I'll tell you when we get there, if you promise me to never use that expression again," Jazlynn said, climbing on behind him. "I swear, those late-night reruns are ruining you."

"Sorry," John said and grinned. "Where are we going?"

“The park, eventually, but first we’re going back to where all this started; I want to see how good you have become at materialising.”

“Materialising’s the easy part.” They rushed down the busy city streets, people enjoying their Saturday outside the cafes and restaurants. “Holding back I can do too. It’s the releasing it that’s difficult. If I release too much, then I can’t hold back at all, and if I hold back too much it just fizzles out.”

“You’ve had over a month. I trust you have a good grasp of it by now,” Jazlynn said.

“Course. It still smarts, though.”

“Yes, it’s always going to do that, I’m afraid. Though...” Jazlynn fell quiet as they escaped the inner city and forest became more abundant. “I think if you had some sort of medium you could lessen the strain on yourself.”

“Really?” John asked and looked over his shoulder. Jazlynn nodded. “What do you mean by medium, though?”

“One thing at a time.” Jazlynn tapped her fingers against her cane. “Are you settling down well enough? Keeping yourself mentally fit is vital.”

“It’s... starting to feel normal,” John said, as if it was a concession. “They’re just taking care of me for the moment, after all.”

“John...”

“I know, I know, I’ll probably never see my real parents again, but they’re alive out there, somewhere.”

“Forget I said anything.”

Reconstruction had begun on the old recycling plant. The crater had been filled out and machinery stood at the ready along with several mobile homes and portable generators. The old police tape had been replaced with a tall fence. While people waited for a new plant to be constructed, the ruined roller derby had been cleared and containers set up with a small staff running around.

“Hmm, I was hoping to find somewhere isolated for you to show off.” Jazlynn peered from the temporary plant to the old one. “Doesn’t look like anyone’s inside the construction site right now, though.”

They put the bike up against the fence and went to the gate. No actual work had been started yet. “Sweet,” Jazlynn said. “They’ve probably been so busy filling this thing that they haven’t had time to start construction.”

“Or maybe they can’t agree on a design,” John suggested.



“Either way, this is perfect. Just be ready to leg it if anyone realises we’re here.” She tested the meshed wire door, and it swung open. She hobbled inside as fast as she could with her birdhouse cane.

“Now, John, it’s time we take the next step in your training.” She planted herself in the middle of the empty lot, a good distance away from any equipment. “Now that you can produce the energy, it’s time for you to release it.”

John thought back to what had caused the crater in the first place. Had it really been two months at this point? “Won’t we be discovered if I do?”

“That’s why I’ll be absorbing it.” The birdhouse cane flickered. John blinked, and Jazlynn was instead leaning up against a halberd. The shaft was orange, and the blade pure white with a yellow band on each side.

“W-w-what?” John exclaimed and took a step back with each syllable he uttered.

“I am a Knight protecting the border between this world and the next,” Jazlynn proclaimed. “My job is to eradicate whatever crosses over and decides to disturb the peace. This is my weapon.”

“I... I see.” John came closer again, looking the halberd up and down.

“Now summon your energy attack. The only way I can be sure you’re ready is to see what you can do.”

John nodded and held up his hands. By now, it required almost no effort to call on the light. Sure, it still stung, but he barely registered it anymore.

“Good. Now shape it to an orb.”

“Um...” John wrinkled his brow. “I’ve never done that before.”

“Well you need to give it a shape. Won’t do you any good all intangible like that. Chop-chop,” Jazlynn commanded and rapped her halberd against the stamped earth.

He took a deep breath. If there was one thing he was good at by now, it was visualisation. He stared intently at the light and imagined it as a ball. The light fluctuated. A jab of pain went through his hand. He cried out and went down on his knees, and the light extinguished.

Jazlynn smiled. “So far, so good.”

“How... how was that good?” John groaned, clutching his wrist, trying to strangle the throbbing.

“So far it’s been easy; all you’ve had to do is call on your power. Now your job is to refine that power into something tangible.”

“It hurts,” he said and got up again.

“That’s why you must not hold it too long,” Jazlynn said. “Measure how much power you need, summon it, refine it, and throw it, all in one fluid motion. Now come on, we don’t have all the time in the world.”

He called the light again. It was like having a gash in the middle of his hand and accidentally brushing it against something. He took several deep breaths and then shaped it. He felt the pain and tossed the light.

The ball whizzed through the air faster than a bullet. Still Jazlynn blocked it with her weapon. No explosion, no noise, no light. The halberd rippled, and Jazlynn jumped back once, then twice.

“Good. That was really good,” she said and nodded. “You’re a fast learner.”

John held his hands under his armpits, trying to stop them from pounding with such intense pain. “Is it always going hurt like this?” he asked, blinking tears away from the corners of his eyes.

She nodded. “You’ll get used to it. Besides, we might be able to find you a medium.”

Slowly he held his hands out. His palms were covered in a thin layer of blood. “So what’s the deal with this test?”

“A monster is coming,” Jazlynn said and sat down on the ground. “Like I told you, I guard the border. Emphasis on border.” She put her halberd now a cane again down next to her. “When a monster crosses into this plane of existence, it sends ripples back and forth through time. We Knights can detect those ripples. Given the warning time of a few hours, this monster shouldn’t be too terribly difficult.”

John nodded. “All right,” he said slowly.

“We still have a little time, so let’s go over the strategy.” She gestured to the ground in front of her. John sat down, trying to tangle his legs into a comfortable position. “Because of my disability, I have had to adapt my fighting style accordingly. I can’t get up close and personal, so I take out my enemies from afar. I know it must sound dirty and not very noble, but you try swinging a halberd your own size on only one foot.”

“I’m not saying anything,” John said and smiled. “I’m more impressed that you still fight.”

“I almost didn’t. Fortunately, our weapons are flexible, and I was able to transform my halberd into a rifle. At any rate, you will have to go in alone, but that also means we can’t communicate directly. This brings me to my next point. I would like you to meet my partner, Hoffman.”

John looked around the abandoned construction site. When his gaze passed Jazlynn for the second time, an old lady stood by her side. John jumped backwards.

“W-what the Hell?” he asked.

“This is my partner, Hoffman,” Jazlynn said. Hoffman was tall and built like a tank, age serving more to grey and wrinkle her than diminish her in any way. Her jacket was unevenly buttoned, and her long wisps of hair were dishevelled. A large birthmark blemished the left side of her face. “She’ll be by your side and give you all the guidance you’ll need. Only you will be able to see her, and no one will be able to hear you speak to her.”

“What does that mean, your partner? Where did she come from? What is she?”

Jazlynn opened her mouth, but Hoffman put a hand on her shoulder and shook her head. “We need to get downtown.”

“Not until you tell me...”

Jazlynn got up and gimped towards the entrance as fast as she could. Hoffman simply blinked out of existence.

“Wait, hold up.”

## Chapter

“There. Right over there,” Jazlynn said and tapped John on the shoulder.

The park came up on their left. A month ago, his father had taken him here, trying to escape a monstrous bird. He pushed that thought aside.

“S-sure are a lot of people here,” he said, flushing at his voice breaking.

A big crowd had gathered around a stage, but that was all he could see from here.

Jazlynn jumped off the bike and took in the greenery. “I need to find someplace to set up shop; somewhere that will be easy to escape from. After all, we have no idea what we’re dealing with,” she said and clapped John’s back. “You go mingle. We still have a little bit of time.”

John leapt off as well and dragged his bike into the park. Getting closer, he now noticed a banner proclaiming the mayor to be speaking at two. John checked his watch. Two o’clock.

He leant the bike up against a tree and sat down on a bench. He clapped his hands against his thighs, looking around. What kind of monster would appear? He couldn’t spot anything out of the ordinary.

Hoffman sat next to him. John jerked out of his vigilance.

“It’s coming,” she said.

A young man in a snappy blazer appeared on stage and the crowd pressed itself even closer.

“Him?” John whispered.

Hoffman shook her head.

“Beloved residents of Ferman,” the mayor said and grabbed the podium. “We of course have a lot to thank the Cloubough family for. Many of its sons and daughters have become architects,

entrepreneurs, managers, and builders. We owe them over half our city. That is why it saddens me so much that they themselves want to clear away our oldest districts to make way for new. Surely they of all people should appreciate the legacy that they helped create.”

John bit his lip.

“Is it really okay for me to be here?” he asked and glanced over at Hoffman. “I don’t really have any control over my powers yet.”

She tossed her head towards the right side of the park. A horse was making its way up the path.

“It’s a brown horse,” he said. “With white spots.”

“What’s it doing here?”

“Let’s not forget Ferman’s history. Many of you here today, or your family, helped shape our city, along with our large immigrant population from inside and outside the country.” The mayor paced around on the stage, the people below him clamouring in agreement. “You know, when the Russians helped America win the World War in 1953, this place was nothing but marsh. When the veterans came home from the front, they needed a place to live, somewhere to work. With the economy booming, they founded cities like Ferman all over the country, all of them dedicated to industry and technology. Their hard work...”

John looked once more. There was a glow about it. No, behind it. It came closer, and John noticed it was pulling a cart. With a sphere inside it. Made of fire.

“What the...” he exclaimed and jumped on his feet.

“Their apartments should be made a museum! I promise you I will...”

The mayor paused at the crackling of flames. Everyone turned towards the horse pulling a small fireball towards them.

“Run!” John yelled but people stared transfixed.

Fire burst from the sphere. John could feel the heat even from a hundred metres away. People backed off. The horse ignored them and clip-clopped towards the stage. Two security guards rushed up and grabbed the mayor. The sphere spewed some of its mass, consuming the wood of the stage.

“Kill it,” Hoffman said. “Kill it now.” It was bizarre, hearing such an old voice speak with such malice and intent.

John summoned his light, manifested it, and threw it. The burst rammed into the cart and was swallowed by the sphere.

“Don’t hit the cart. Hit the horse,” Hoffman admonished.

“But...”

The horse looked normal. Of course, a normal horse would probably not be able to pull a small sun behind it. John threw another ball of light, hitting the horse in the side. It snorted and another mass burst from its sphere. John threw himself to the ground. It passed right over him, but he could feel the back of his clothes burn away and singe his back. He bit back the pain and got up again.

The mayor ran for his life, the horse galloping right after him. John threw another ball of light. His palm erupted in pain and blood dripped between his fingers. The horse staggered as the attack hit its flank. It flicked its head between the mayor and John.

“More,” Hoffman said. “More power.”

The horse went for the mayor but the ground underneath it exploded. The horse reared up and the sun behind it burst, setting the trees and bushes and benches ablaze.

Hoffman grabbed his shoulder. “More power,” she demanded and pointed at the horse.

John took a deep breath as the flames roared up around him. The old John would have been terrified. He would have huddled up and cried. But he had survived, and now he fought against his hammering heart and pushed through the flames. He ignored the heat and called on his light, allowing the pain to guide him. This last attack needed to be powerful, but too much and it would grow out of control. John eased himself past his previous threshold.

His hand felt like it had been transformed into fire, his blood like filled with red-hot needles. Not enough, it was still too weak. Branches broke off and spewed embers all around him. The horse was the fire, galloping around and igniting everything. The skin of his arm felt like it was being ripped off and cured in salt. As his consciousness slipped away to escape the agony, something pushed him from behind. The light slipped from his hand and whined through the air. The horse was engulfed in the light. His ears filled with the loudest bang he could ever recall hearing.

## Chapter

He must have blacked out for a moment, because now he was on his back. Jazlynn was off to his side, faintly arguing with Hoffman. He couldn't hear them clearly, his ears ringing, but he had never seen Jazlynn so animated before. She looked livid but her face softened noticing John coming around.

“Hey, sorry about that,” she said, rushing over and kneeling next to him. “I should have mentioned that Hoffman can get a little intense. How are you feeling?”

John stared at his arm. It was still there, the skin fine, though several long gashes were still in the process of healing. “I'm good,” he said and sat up.

She stared at him as if not convinced, gliding her gaze over his wounds and looking for more. "You spent a lot of energy today, so you're going to feel exhausted for a few days." She smiled. John tried to remember the last time he had seen her do that and failed. "But hey, you did it; you blew that thing away. Just be careful next time, all right?"

"There's going to be a next time?"

She nodded. "There's always going to be a next time. Don't worry, though, and don't overdo it. If there is a monster you can't take, just remember I'm there too."

"You mean you're going to stick around?" he asked and smiled back at her.

"The chance of two monsters naturally appearing in the same area within such a short time frame is astronomically low." She reached down and helped him get up. "Someone is orchestrating this, and I'm not leaving until we have dealt with whoever's behind this."

The noise of sirens blared through the air and John noticed he was on the road outside of the park. Fire engines and fire fighters were busy combatting the flames.

"What about the mayor?" John asked.

"He's fine, his security staff got him out. Incredibly, not a single person was hurt." She dusted him off and adjusted his jacket. "But we better get home. Your dad's going to be worried sick about you."

"My dad," John mumbled.

"Oh. Sorry, I just meant..."

John shook his head and got up. "It's all right, it just feels a little weird still."

"A moment of your time."

Both turned their head to find a woman in a black suit right behind them. Detective Ebadicael's partner appeared behind them, an intense glare in her eyes.

Jazlynn clapped John's shoulder. "I'll just be a minute," she whispered.

"What's going on?"

Ebadicael glared down her nose at John. "This does not concern you."

"You're not here to arrest Jazlynn, are you?" John protested.

"It's all right. Just stay right here," Jazlynn said and went with the two detectives a few paces away. No further was needed with the blaring of sirens and shouting.

"Are you out of your mind?" Ebadicael hissed as a group of firefighters rushed past them. "I would never have left the Nephilim in your care if I knew you would train him to fight."

Gagesham remained behind Jazlynn, her eyes glaring.

"What did you think I was going to do?" Jazlynn retorted calmly. "Train him not to fight?"

“Yes! No. Forget it. We’re done here. I’m having you extricated from the Nephilim’s care immediately, and we will fight you if you try to stop us.”

Jazlynn tightened her grip around her cane, though her voice was undaunted. “That would be a mistake. Whether you like it not, Johnathan is a part of this. He needs to finish his training.”

Ebadicael exchanged a quick glance with Gagesham. “Why didn’t you handle today’s case on your own? The Nephilim only became involved when you arranged it. Frankly, I’m starting to seriously regret allowing you to stay with him.”

“Allow, nothing. Johnathan is my issue, his parents should be yours. Have you Watchers made any headway in finding your rogue agent and her mate?”

Ebadicael looked as if she had been slapped and flushed bright red. “You watch your tone, Knight, or we will destroy you regardless. Now you go back to him and you tell him that you have to leave.”

“His training is imperfect. Leaving him as he is now would be foolish,” Jazlynn said. “He knows how to call his power, but he still needs a mentor to teach him control.”

Gagesham grabbed her sunglasses, light glowing from behind, but Ebadicael waved her hand. “You’re treading a fine line here, Knight, but you do make a point,” she said. “Just be quick about it. Your presence in this town is disturbing the balance.”

“You think I’m to blame for today?”

“No, of course not, not directly, but I do not like the number of cases concentrated on this small town. Finish your business here and then take your fights elsewhere.” Ebadicael turned away and snapped her fingers, and the two detectives began fading.

“Someone’s arranging these incidents. Someone in town. My job here is to find out who.”

“Leave the Nephilim out of this.”

A paramedic was looking John over, especially interested in the burn on his back. Jazlynn observed, not wanting to interfere and risk getting bothered as well. John had no particular wounds, though, so the paramedic shuffled off to more concerning patients.

“Can you ride back?”

“Yeah, I should be fine. Not too far anyway.” He looked back up the road, but the two detectives were gone. “Those FBI agents give me the chills.”

“Don’t worry about them,” Jazlynn said. “They answer to a different authority.”

“What did they want?”

“They were just in the area and wanted to know if we had anything to do with it. Now come on, your dad’s bound to be worrying about you.”

## Part 3 – Golden Monster Boar

### Chapter

“I was so worried about you,” Rose said and fell on her knees so she could examine the burn closer.

“W-what are you doing back already?” John asked.

“Minik called and said you had gone to the park, and then I hear it caught on fire.” She touched a hand to John’s exposed skin on his back.

“I’m all right,” John said, peering over his shoulder.

Rose fell back on her haunches and sighed. “I just hope your social worker doesn’t show up for a surprise visit now.”

John looked down at his feet. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Sometimes it feels like you two have your own little thing going.” Her arms came from behind and she rested her head against his. “I know it’s only to be expected, Jazlynn being your last real family and all, but maybe we could do something too? I haven’t taken a break from the pawnshop in ages.”

“S-sure,” John said and closed his eyes. She smelt different than the mother he had lost, but she felt the same way. Both glowed with a certain warmth.

“Well, I guess I found someone to stand in on your birthday, but I could do it more often. I don’t have to go there every day of the week. We make enough to hire an assistant or something.” She shook her head and released him. “You go upstairs and take a shower. I’ll have to do something about your clothes.”

John nodded and hurried up to the first floor.

Rose got up and looked squarely at Jazlynn. “I don’t mind having you here, you’re John last family and all, but please don’t go putting my son in danger.”

Jazlynn shrugged. “I had no idea that fire was going to be there, but don’t worry,” she said, “I got him out of there fast. You won’t find a hurt spot on him, I assure you.”

“What is the world coming to?” Rose sighed and went for the living room. “They said on the radio that someone set fire to a horse and let it loose in the park. I mean, who does something like that?”

“Can’t be human,” Jazlynn replied. She paused and turned to the door. “I should get going. I know you have plans tonight.”



“Where do you live?” Rose said. Jazlynn began walking but Rose grabbed her arm. “Now hold on. I’m mighty sorry if I’m being intrusive, but I couldn’t help but wonder. You’re homeless, aren’t you?”

“So what if I am? I’ve been living on the street most of my life.”

“You obviously know how to take care of yourself, so this is not at all a criticism, but I’ve been thinking about your story.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Jazlynn said and faced Rose. “I’ll probably be gone soon anyway.”

“I know all the tricks. You’ve probably got money squirreled away, and you have a gym membership for the showers and changing room, but I also know how hard it is. I’m just saying it doesn’t have to be that way. Why don’t you crash on our couch?”

Jazlynn grimaced. “Sorry, I’m not the kind to sit still and depend on others.”

“For John then? You’ve been hanging around this whole time because you want to keep an eye on him, right?”

“Why would you do that for a stranger?” Jazlynn said and shook her head.

“We’re family, aren’t we?”

“We’re not...” Jazlynn began but Rose stomped her foot.

“I’m serious about finding an assistant for the shop, and I could also use a hand around the house. Being mother to an eleven-year-old kid is a lot of work, almost more than being a business owner.”

Jazlynn shook her head. “You want me to work at your pawnshop? I don’t know anything about that.”

“You’ve worked with customers before, right? For all the technical details, I’ll train you.”

“You’re not going to let this go, are you?” Jazlynn asked and took a deep breath. “Fine then. I’ll stay, but just until I’m confident that John can fend for himself.”

Rose clapped her shoulder. “There you go, that’s the spirit! But now that school is starting up again soon, you won’t be able to keep an eye on him all the time anyway.”

“I suppose that’s true. But if I’m going to help you out at the shop, then I don’t want you to pay me. Consider that money my rent.”

“Right, that’s another thing, someone came in with a prosthetic foot today. I don’t normally accept things like that, but I couldn’t help but think of you so I bought it outright.”

“Wow, really? Someone actually sold their own foot?”

Rose shook her head. “No, no, it was someone clearing out their grandmother’s estate. I’d at least like to think Ferman isn’t so far gone yet that people would resort to selling their limbs,” she said and shivered.

## Chapter

"How was the movie?" Jazlynn asked and sat down on the chair by John's desk.

"It was awesome! All these old action stars were in it and it was just... it was awesome!"

"That's not what we're here for."

Hoffman blinked into existence and John almost fell out of his bed.

"I was easing into it," Jazlynn said, annoyed.

"And I'm cutting to the chase," Hoffman said, hands buried deep into her trouser pockets.

Jazlynn sighed deeply. "Right. I made a promise that I would explain a few things, and you have more than earned it. There's really one thing you need to know, the rest is a bonus from me. I protect this world from outside interference."

John nodded, drawing his legs up under him. "Forget that, I want to know who or what Hoffman is," John said, unable to take his eyes off her.

Hoffman lifted one side of her lip in an awkward smile. "I'm the spirit of a long-dead person housed within a vessel known as Neon. Us spirits are offered to potential Knights to aid them with our powers and guide them in the fights against intruders."

John nodded slowly, absorbing the information and digesting it. "You're offered? By whom?"

"Someone trying to keep order. We call him the Guardian," Jazlynn said. "He scouted me when I was kid and sent Hoffman to train me. I lived a pretty normal life with barely any fighting, just training and getting used to my powers. One day I was touring with my band and I got tangled up in a fight."

"That's when you lost your foot, I remember."

"No, John," she said sombrely and shook her head. "I died."

John blinked several times. "I'm sorry?"

"I didn't just lose my foot that day, I lost my life as well."

John opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"You can't serve the Guardian in life; a human body just isn't designed to wield the kind of power offered by Neon. If the Guardian likes the bond between the Squire and the Spirit, however, he resurrects you to serve him. You can refuse, of course, but obviously, I didn't."

"You with us so far, kid?" Hoffman asked.

John closed his mouth and nodded.

"Good, I mean, can you believe I actually wanted to be a teacher once?" Jazlynn mumbled and brushed back her hair. "Anyway, as I said, I protect this world from outside interference. This is a broad concept, but in essence, it concerns what we call demons."

"I know what demons are," John said.

"It's not that simple," Hoffman countered.

"Right, demon is an umbrella term. When a person dies, one of two things happen. One, they let go of their earthly desires and find peace in death," Jazlynn said. "People who cannot, will become demons. Some demons degenerate until they become like mindless monsters, while others can rein themselves in. They are the most dangerous of all. They look human, but they are anything but."

John knit his brow. "The horse I fought. That weird bird. They were all humans once?"

Jazlynn nodded. "Exactly. The form they take as demons reflect the image that they hold of themselves in their heart. All emotions can be warped, too. Some are more resilient than others, but even love can turn into something ugly. What's the saying, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions?" Jazlynn smiled, as if remembering something.

"She's talking about angels," Hoffman said.

"Angels? Are angels... bad?"

"They're demons, no exception," Jazlynn said. "But at least they're content to sit on their cloud and watch things, most of the time."

"That sounds strange," John said and scratched his head.

"Well, don't worry about it." Jazlynn pushed on her cane and hoisted herself up on her feet. "You get a feeling for these things over time. At least, we Knights do. But that was my lesson for now. If you keep impressing me, I will teach you some more."

## Chapter

"Delivery guy came by earlier with this," Minik grunted as he dragged a large box into the living room. "Almost forgot about it with everything else that has happened."

"What have you got there?" Rose asked and grabbed the other end.

"All of the stuff from John's old house. The intact things, anyway, according to the delivery guy."

With the box in the middle of the room, Minik straightened up and cracked his back.

Rose tugged at the flaps. "Let's see what's inside. No point in him going through his mother's old bras."

Minik cut the tape and Rose removed some of the bubble wrap.

A trophy for best mum, a toy gun, roller blades, a bag of crisps, a pair of shoes, and then a few articles of clothing. Rose pulled up a large black dress.

“Lands and stars, his mom must have looked like she was poured into this thing. I’d never fit my knockers in this.” She folded it neatly and dropped it to the floor to pick up a men’s red blazer. “I guess look through what we can use, the rest might as well benefit some other soul.”

A book fell out and flopped to the floor. Minik and Rose gathered around it.

“Memories and treasures,” Rose read from the cover and picked it up.

“A photo album?” Minik asked and was proven right when Rose flipped it open. “Think this contains any clues about John’s parents?”

“The authorities released it, so probably not,” Rose said. “Oh, this must be his mother.” She pointed to a lady with long, brown hair standing in front of what could only be their old house. Except it was run down and overgrown with weeds. “I forgot how beautiful she was, holy shit. That guy was lucky.”

John’s father was in the next picture sporting a scraggly sign of his later prominent moustache. “Looks a little thinner there,” Minik said and massaged his chin. “I’ll take any of his old clothes.”

Rose clutched her chest as she went through the book and she couldn’t stop tears from forming in the corners of her eye. “Dammit, I can’t stop thinking about all the photos we’ve missed out on.”

“It’s okay,” Minik said.

He put her head on his shoulder as she caressed a page filled with early baby photos. ‘Our little Lawrence’ was written in one corner of the book. She turned the pages, and John’s older brother went from sitting in a highchair covered in cake to being a boy John’s age standing by a bicycle before John first appeared.

“They sure waited a long time between them.” Rose grabbed the pages and peeked at the first baby photos before going back. “1995 for Lawrence, 1999 for John.”

“And 2010 for the latest one, what was his name?” Minik asked.

“Ronald. Just a day old.” Rose sighed and flipped on, seeing the same progression with John from baby, while Lawrence sprouted into the air, his shoulders widening. “It’s weird how he never talks about Lawrence. Ronald, I guess I can understand, but his older brother?”

“Sounded like there were some issues,” Minik said. “Look at the guy, arms like telephone poles, and then that scowl.”

Lawrence would be missing for several pages before he showed up again in the background, looking either bored or broody. He had to be almost two metres tall with muscles like a football player. In fact, several of the earlier pictures showed him in physical contact clubs like football and wrestling. Then after John turned nine Lawrence was missing completely and did not show up again.

The last pictures chronicled Marilyn's third pregnancy with baby names scribbled on every page until the last one where the name Ronald was highlighted with a circle.

"May I?" Minik asked and shifted the album over to himself before Rose could reply. He flicked irreverently through the pages as if looking for something.

"Something wrong?"

"Probably nothing, but something just feels off. I can't put my finger on it."

"Well you better be careful with that thing. I don't want you breaking it."

Feet came down the stairs.

## Chapter - 3 September 2010

The iron rod glowed vibrantly in John's hands. "Look, it's working!" he said. "I don't feel any pain either."

With the construction site properly closed for outsiders, it had been difficult for John and Jazlynn to find a place to practise. Fortunately, Jazlynn had known about an old ferry terminal by a dried-out lake. A few boats were scattered on the lakebed, joined by several letters from the "Ferman Ferry Terminal" sign above. John had found some old pipes by the berths, while Jazlynn had found a bench.

She looked out over the former lake, wondering whether man or nature had done this, when a small explosion snapped her attention back to John. John was sitting on the concrete pier, the rod gone.

"Ow," he said and shook his bloodied hand.

"What happened?" Jazlynn asked nonchalantly and crossed her legs.

"It blew up." John frowned and looked at his hands. "Dammit."

He picked up another rod. It glowed and once again exploded, again knocking him on his behind.

"Metal's probably too sturdy," Jazlynn said. "It can soak up your energy, but it has no way of releasing it."

John kicked the remaining pipes. They clattered over the edge. "Then what?"

"Try a different material," Jazlynn said and tossed him a stick.

"What am I, a wizard?" he asked and waved it around as it began to glow. "Uh, Wingardium Leviosa," he chanted. The stick disintegrated and the energy dispersed.

"Hmm, opposite problem," Jazlynn commented.

"Thanks, I noticed," John mumbled. "At least it didn't explode."

He spent the next hour picking up other stuff, but all had similar results, either disintegrating or exploding. Then again, all the things he could find were made of metal or stone or wood. Everything else had been stripped and plundered long ago.

"I wish I could give you a Neon Weapon of your own," Jazlynn said, her cane transforming into the halberd. "I don't know what they're made of, though."

"Where are they even from?"

"I don't know that either."

Jazlynn stroked the halberd and stared at it transfixed. John's trousers began ringing and the halberd turned back to a birdhouse.

"It's mom," he said after checking his cell phone. "Seems like Idowu's come by to check on things."

Jazlynn heaved herself up to a standing position. "Must be because we're getting close to your first day of school. Next week, isn't it?"

"Yup, first Monday of September."

"You'll need to focus on that, so you don't end up homeless and uneducated like me," Jazlynn said and tried resting on her prosthetic foot. "Well, in the spirit of homework, it will be your job to find a usable material. Or at least try out as many as you can. I'm not guaranteeing it's going to work, but it will be worth the effort."

"Hey, how come you don't have a cell phone of your own?" John asked a little later as he was riding them back towards town. "Then mom wouldn't have to call me every time she wants something from you as well."

"Same reason I don't have a permanent address; I'm legally dead. Granted, my body was never found, so maybe..." Jazlynn made a pondering noise before continuing. "No, it's been thirty years, I must have been declared dead by now."

"Does your family know?"

"Where did that come from?" Jazlynn asked surprised and shook her head. "No, they don't care about me. I tried going back once when I was still alive, and that was one time too many. Now concentrate on the road." Jazlynn knuckled John lightly over the head.

"How have you gotten by for all these years?" John said and massaged his scalp.

"Well, being a Knight has its advantages."

"You steal?"

"No, I don't steal!" she decried. "All I meant was... well... I might tell you when I have to leave."

John peeked over his shoulder at her. "You're going to leave?"

“At some point. How many Knights do you think there are in North America? No, don’t even answer that,” she quickly inserted. “Let me tell you right now, there’s maybe one or two others.”

“How many are you? Like, worldwide?”

“I don’t know, twenty, maybe; at least that I know of.” Ferman was quiet with most people at work. The inner city was still a bustle of activity. A large van zoomed past at too high a speed, making John’s bike wobble. “That’s not counting the odd loose Neons out there.”

“What do you mean?”

“The only thing we really know about Neon is that it came to this world a long time ago. In the early days, it was used by anyone who picked it up. Part of our duty is to locate any rogue pieces and hand them over to our master.”

John thought back to Jazlynn’s halberd rifle and imagined what it would be like in the wrong hands. A chill went through him. “Are there many of those? Rogue pieces, that is.”

“Could be, I mean, we don’t know how many there’s supposed to be in the first place,” Jazlynn said. “Probably not, though. Humans have been everywhere on this planet. If there are any loose ones out there, they are either deep inside mountains or at the bottom of some ocean.”

“Ah, that’s good to hear,” John said and felt a little happier.

He almost forgot the reason they cut their training session short. That is, until he saw the car by the curb, livery on the side declaring it to be from the authorities.

“I’ll handle the bike. You go ahead,” Jazlynn said.

She headed around the back with bike under the her, while John rushed for the main door.

“Hello, Johnathan.” Idowu was waiting for him on the other side, standing vigilant in the hallway. “I hope I’m not disturbing?”

“Uh, no, of course not,” John said and unclasped his helmet.

“Your new parents showed me around the house, but I wanted to wait until you got back to see your room. Would you mind?”

John put the helmet on the hook and shook off his shoes before leading her up to the first floor. Idowu calmly followed into his room. She paced around and made little notes on her notepad before waving a hand at his office chair.

“May I?” she asked and sat down as John nodded. “I can imagine this house and your own room are not as big as you were used to.”

“Sure, but it’s not so bad, honestly,” John said and plopped down on his bed.

“That’s good to hear. Now, I would like to know more about your life, in your own words. Your new parents can’t hear you here so you’re free to say anything on your mind. It’s just going to be between the two of us, so feel free to say anything on your mind.” She crossed her legs to rest

her pad on. "I might ask you questions that are deeply personal to you. Even if you feel uncomfortable, I want you to answer me as honestly as you can."

"A-all right," John said, clutching his knees.

"How are you feeling?"

"Good," he squeaked.

"Do you miss your real parents?"

John nodded. "Every day, but everyone here treats me so nice. Minik and Rose is always doing their best, but I can tell it's not easy on them. I don't think either of them has seriously cooked before, but the fridge is always full, and Minik can at least heat things without setting them on fire."

Again, the stylus danced across the pad as Idowu made notes. "I see no signs of malnutrition, and you appear to be in a good shape, physically and mentally," she said. "What do you do with your time?"

John scratched his neck. "Well, my aunt is helping me train."

"Physical exercise," Idowu mumbled. "I was hoping to have a talk with her too; ties to your old life are conducive to your recovery. What about mentally? Do you still draw?"

"Yeah, how did you know?" John asked.

"I remember from last time. Can I see?"

John pointed to the shelf above the desk. Idowu grabbed a binder between several pictures of John's family, new and old, and put it on the desk. "These are good," she said after a minute of leafing through the pictures. "Vibrant colours, innocent motifs. Very different to the ones from your case file a few years ago. Mind if I snap a pic?"

He shook his head and she held out the tablet. There were ones of his old house and family, and of his current house and family. "You have a good sense of lines and proportion. Has anyone taught you?"

"No, I just doodle now and then. Sometimes I colour them in. You really think they're good?" John asked with rising eagerness.

"Yes, and you're only going to get better if you keep at it." She picked one out and put it on the bed. "Why don't you want to be a lawyer or a doctor?"

John rotated it so he could see the paper properly. "Oh. This is just something I drew right before... you know. We were supposed to write about our future." Her sharply drawn features seemed to soften, and John smiled. "My parents are... were... a doctor and a lawyer. But I'm not really good at school stuff. I just like to draw."

Idowu put the pictures back and put them back. "What's your favourite course in school?"



“Physics, definitely. We made some experiments with magnets and electricity before summer.”

“School starts next week,” Idowu said and made more notes. “Excited?”

John shrugged. “It’s okay.”

“Have you made any friends?”

“A couple. There this older kid I talk to called Phil, and another one from my class called Ragan.” John was quiet for a moment and Idowu said nothing either, just scribbling on her pad.

They continued to talk for a while, Idowu broaching subjects high and low. At last, she settled her tablet down and rested her stylus.

“You’ve made some really good progress, John, I am very impressed with your improvements. I have just one last question: are you seeing a therapist?”

“What? No, why? There’s nothing wrong with me.”

“I didn’t say there was, but you’ve been through a lot. You’re taking all of this in much better stride than when your older brother was removed a few years ago. Do you remember?”

John nodded slowly and looked down.

“I’m just worried you might be bottling up your feelings. You know, it’s good to get things off your chest.”

“I’m not,” John mumbled.

“Still, it might be good to have someone to talk to.”

“I have my aunt.”

“Yes, but a therapist is someone who knows how to deal with problems and won’t tell anyone. I have to make reports and such about your progress, and you might worry about how your family is going to react, but a therapist is bound by law to keep your secrets.”

John shrugged.

Idowu picked up her stylus again and scratched a few notes on her tablet. “Well, I’ll leave it to your new parents to decide. Ultimately, I can’t or won’t force you,” she said and got up from the chair. “It’s been a pleasure talking with you again, John. You’ve been through a lot, but I also think you’ve been lucky. I doubt I could have re-established a normal life for you this quickly, and right in this town too. You take care now, John. Be sure to notify me if ever anything happens.”

On her way out, Idowu made sure to greet Rose and Minik again and reassure them that everything seemed fine. She had just stepped outside when Jazlynn approached her.

“Ah, I meant to have a talk with you as well, but I ended up spending way too much time with John,” Idowu said and acknowledged Jazlynn with a nod. “I admit, I was sceptical about you at first, but you have proven to be a good influence on him.”

Jazlynn was quiet, her eyes wandering all over Idowu, as if searching for something.

"I see you've gotten yourself a prosthesis too. Do you still need that cane then?" Idowu continued but Jazlynn still said nothing. "You know, I always wondered, why a birdhouse?"

"You're not... with the FBI agents, are you?" Jazlynn said.

"Pardon?" Idowu said.

Jazlynn sighed. "Never mind."

"It's funny you should mention them, you know. I saw that detective, Ebadicael, two years ago as well, back when John's older brother was removed from the home."

"I believe you."

"Well, goodbye for now, Ms Pearce."

## Chapter - 18 September 2010

The recycling plant blown up. That fire in the park. A lot of crazy stuff had happened in Ferman lately, too many to be a coincidence. Phil lay on his bed in his small bedroom, staring at his walls filled with posters of metal bands up to the ceiling and back again. He had spent all morning trying to find out more, but no official sources had anything definitive to say. The conspiracy sites were just full of theories. European nationalists retaliating against US support. The LHD developing military hardware and covering up their test failures. Gifted being involved in hideous experiments. Not a shred of proof besides blurry images and shaky testimonies.

Phil glanced over to the alarm clock on his desk. There was still time before he was supposed to meet the others. He jumped out of bed and grabbed the weights off the floor. The strangest thing was still John's house. Why had that collapsed as well? It was a good distance to the recycling plant, and no other houses had collapsed nearby.

"Argh, I just don't get it!" he groaned, lifting the weights up and down.

"Phil!" his mother yelled. "You're going to be late!"

"I know, mom!"

He glanced over to the clock. Right, no one was picking them up this time. Phil lowered the weights back to the floor and threw a new shirt on and rushed into the hallway. He quickly navigated between the discarded toys, toddler Lucas playing on the floor, and the five-year-old Hank standing, clueless, with a finger in his mouth.

His stout mother Molly was in the kitchen, rubbing his younger sister Francesca on the cheek. "M-mom," she protested.

"Now where did you even pick up a stain like that?" Molly asked.

"See you all later," Phil said in passing.

“Yeah, yeah, try and get some friends your own age, why don’t you?”

Phil grinned as he went to the garage on the side of the house, passing his father Bob playing house with the twin sisters on the front lawn.

“Where are you going, big brother?” Kate asked.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Liz asked.

“Nope, sorry, I’m going to do some homework with my friends,” he replied and grabbed his bike.

His father Bob had gotten his usually filthy mane of hair tied up with several scrunchies.

“Don’t you think you’re a little old to be playing with them?”

“We’ve been over this, pops,” Phil said and slowly pedalled to the curb. “See you tonight.”

The breeze was fresh against his skin, rustling his t-shirt and blowing through his hair. It was good to get out of the house before he was asked to do more chores. Or at least, asked to do the ones he was supposed to be doing. Like watching his younger siblings. Stop seeing his best friends? This was the highlight of his week! It didn’t even matter that he had gotten out a little late, he was so full of energy that he made up for it in the end.

It was still a good thirty minutes on bike from the outskirts of town to another sort of outskirts. He soon left the clutter of flat houses behind, took a shortcut through the woods, and there was Ragan’s big mansion. Phil checked the time. Only twenty-five minutes today. The winds had been in his favour. He saluted the security guard and breezed through the opening front gates.

One of the maids greeted him at the door and took his bike. Phil watched her a little confused, but decided it was just the way things were done here.

Kizashi waved him over to the recreation corner and got up from the couch. “Looks like you’re first,” she said.

“Oh, am I early, Ms Kiz?” Phil asked and checked his watch again.

“No, no, Johnathan is just a little late.” She giggled and waved her hand. “It’s so nice that you boys want to keep my little Ragan company. I always worry that he’s not making any friends, and then why did we put him in public school instead of home tutoring him, am I right?”

“Uh, sure.” Phil chuckled along half-heartedly.

“So, what makes you think I can help you with schoolwork?”

Ragan came down the stairs, neatly dressed and cleaned-up as usual. Phil was painfully conscious of his own worn attire and lack of expensive perfume, even though no one ever said anything.

“John always tells me that you’re the smartest one at his school. Who better to help me out, eh?” Phil ended with a boisterous laugh that made Ragan wince.

“That’s right, that’s absolutely right,” Kizashi said with a laugh. “All right, I’ll leave you to it, sweetie, mommy has work to do it.”

Her arms jingled from multiple rings and wristlets as she wrapped them around her son and kissed his cheeks. Ragan groaned but endured it. He waited until she had swayed out of the lobby and sat down in one of the couches.

“So, what do you have problems with?”

“I need to write an essay and I can’t decide on a topic,” Phil said and sat down on the other side of the table.

Ragan groaned and massaged his brow. “I don’t know, weightlifting? Body building?”

“I have to write about a modern author.”

“How about whoever wrote those Harry Potter books. They seem mildly popular.”

“Good call,” Phil said and dragged a candy bowl closer. “I don’t think I’ve ever read one, though.”

“Then you should probably ask John, they seem right up his alley.” Ragan clapped the back of the couch, glancing between the door and his watch. “Speaking of, what is he doing? He’s been so busy lately, but I can’t figure out with what.”

“Yeah, I sometimes wait for him outside the school, and just he blasts right past me,” Phil said and stuffed his mouth. “I have to yell to get his attention.”

“Isn’t that just your default setting?”

Phil nodded. Of course, he realised that he and Ragan weren’t friends. They knew each other through John, otherwise a kid from the wrong side of the tracks wouldn’t be sitting here in this fancy mansion. Phil chewed his mouthful to avoid having to say anything.

“Why *do* you hang out with us?” Ragan asked. Phil nearly choked and gasped. “I mean, you’re fifteen. Don’t you have any friends your own age?”

Phil pounded his chest and heaved a deep sigh. “Sure, I mean, I used to,” he said and poured himself a drink.

Ragan raised an eyebrow. “Are you going to make me ask you for a clarification?”

Phil’s smile waned. He sipped his drink and licked his lips. “There were two other boys living in my cul-de-sac, Dave and Darryl.” Phil chuckled. “Man, we were always raising hell, the three of us. Nicking stuff, setting things on fire... one time we climbed the fence to a kindergarten and pissed in their outdoor playhouse.”

“Lovely,” Ragan said.

Phil looked at his feet. "We would hide out in the woods. If felt safe, like no one would chase us in there. We thought we knew every inch of it, so when we found a shack we hadn't seen before, we had to get closer. All of a sudden, a guy bursts out and starts firing at us."

Ragan paused for a second. "I'm sorry, what? What happened?"

"We hauled ass out of there as fast as we could. By the time we could no longer hear the shots, we realised Dave wasn't with us."

Phil was quiet long enough that Ragan almost spoke up.

"It was a meth lab," Phil said pensively. "The police raided it the next day, but Dave was already... he was gone. I had a family to fall back on. I swore I would get stronger and never let something like that happen again. That's why I want to be a policeman. But Darryl..." Phil bit his lip. "He was the one who found the shack. He was the one who egged us to investigate it. He kept blaming himself. His dad was already gone, and his mom wasn't all there either. He cut his wrists not long after. Those two were my only friends."

"Good god, Phil, I'm sorry," Ragan said and clasped a hand over his mouth.

"Eh, you know, I didn't tell you all that to get pity or anything," Phil said and scratched his neck. "Look, just keep it between us, all right? John was my first friend in years, and he doesn't need to know."

Ragan snorted a laugh. "Let me guess, you were just sitting by yourself, looking all lost and lonely when he came up next you and started talking to you?"

Phil smiled. "Yeah. He's special."

Ragan shifted nervously in his seat. "All right, I'll tell you something as well that's going to stay just between the two of us then," he said and locked eyes with Phil. "John is also very special to me. In fact, you might say he... that is to say, I... kind of... really like him... as, you know..." Ragan flushed completely red and withdrew.

Before he could finish, however, the front doors opened, and John entered.

"Sorry guys, I completely forgot," he said and grabbed his knees, gasping for air.

"Sheesh, John, what are you so busy with all the time?" Phil asked and chuckled. "Don't tell me you're writing a book?"

John raised his head in surprise. "No, why would I be writing a book?"

"I just remember you telling me a superhero story during summer break."

Ragan got up from the chair to greet John. "What are we talking about?"

"Oh, he didn't tell it to you?" Phil said and got up as well. "It was a little farfetched but overall pretty good."

“No, I... I’m just training with my aunt, that’s all. She’s been teaching me a few moves.” John disappeared under the table and threw some books from his bag on the table.

Phil gave John a closer look. Still tall and scrawny. “Oh, hey, if you need some tips, just ask me.”

Ragan cleared his throat. “Now that we’re all here, perhaps we should get the study session going?” he said.

Before he could even nod, Phil found himself swept along to a different part of the mansion. Ragan opened the doors into a library bigger than any room in his own house. Almost bigger than the whole house, too. Phil felt very small and cramped himself together involuntarily.

The gang took seats around a central table, taking books and laptops from their backpacks and spread them out before them. Phil hung back and stared at the blank page on his computer. Modern authors... who even reads anymore? Now, those mysterious happenings, those were worth exploring. Someone should do something, and the town couldn’t wait for a superhero to appear.

“Hey son, heard you had friends over.”

The library doors swung open and a beefy guy entered with the jacket part of his business suit slung over his left arm. Ragan’s father looked shorter than in press photos, and his skin was even darker than his son’s.

“How did your business meeting go?” Ragan asked.

Aleksandro’s face soured. “I was stuck in that meeting for hours thanks to the mayor’s stubbornness; I thought I would never get to hit the pavement today.”

“What’s the problem with him?” John asked.

Aleksandro waved his hand dismissively. “He’s just using people’s nostalgia for votes. Once they see the businesses passing over Ferman and the economy tanking, then we’ll hear a different tune,” he said with a laugh. “You boys have fun now, I got to jet. I need to find some way to develop around an old diner out in Sacrisyard.”

“So, as I was saying,” Ragan continued and turned back to John, “knowing when to conjugate a verb and how to do it is important...”

“Listen, I think we got a little off-topic,” John said and chuckled nervously. “I wanted to ask you something.”

“Hm?”

“I’m looking for something between wood and metal.”

Ragan raised an eyebrow. “How do you mean? Like, a progression?”

“No, like...” John pushed the English book away and turned to face Ragan. “Um, like, wood is too brittle and metal too solid. I’m looking for a material that’s, well, between those two.”

“Wood can be pretty solid as well.”

“I know, I know, but...”

Phil watched the two of them talk. Sometimes it felt like they understood each other on a basic level. Rather than questioning John’s bizarre requests, Ragan just played along. It was always about something he knew nothing about and he always felt left out, but this one time a light blinked on in his mind.

“Plastic?” he suggested. The two of them stopped their discussion dead and looked at him. Phil leant his elbows on the table and put his head in his hands. “Plastic’s pretty tough, you know, but you can also bend it.”

“I would just like to point out that there are several types of plastic. There are several types of wood and metal, too,” Ragan said and turned back to John. “What’s this for?”

John grinned and scratched his neck. “Oh, well, I was just wondering. But do you think plastic could do it?”

“What, if you need something less solid than metal but not as brittle as wood, I suppose, yeah, plastic could do. Again, what is this for?” Ragan asked and leant in over the table.

“Not telling,” he said mysteriously and pulled his English book closer. “Now what error had I been making?”

Phil pulled back again and tapped his fingers against the table. Now he could only think about what John wanted with that information, any ideas of modern authors gone.

## Chapter

In the evening after John and Phil had left, Ragan retired to his room and approached the trophies on his shelf.

“We need to have a talk.”

Nothing. Ragan flushed, as he was effectively just talking to himself now. If anyone saw...

“Please, I know you have nothing better to do, so stop ignoring me.”

The reflection in the silver whirled and darkened, and a man in a tuxedo appeared.

“*Sorry, I wasn’t expecting a call. Is this about our next target? I would really appreciate you taking the initiative here for once.*” He laughed, sending chills down Ragan’s back.

“Yes. I mean, no. This is about John. There’s something I need to know,” Ragan said firmly.

His smile faded. “*Always with that kid. What do you want from me, a pinkie swear I won’t touch him?*”

“I need to know if he’s one of the Gifted, like me. The age doesn’t align perfectly, I know, but—”

"No."

Ragan lifted an eyebrow. "And you're not lying to me?"

*"What would even make you think that John would be a Gifted?"*

"Just something Phil mentioned. Might be nothing, but someone's been fighting the monsters we've released, and if he was a Gifted..."

The man behind the mirror shook his head. *"If he was a Gifted, I'd know about it."*

"But he could still be behind it, right? He could still be the one defeating the monsters?"

*"Sure, but I don't see how."*

"Right. Right, I know," Ragan said and bit his thumb. "The only alternative is that John should have gotten powers elsewhere, and where would that be? Maybe in a hundred years, people will be born with magic, but that's an absurd thought this early in."

The fog on the reflection cleared up, and Ragan could see only his own face, warped by the curvature of his trophy.

## Chapter

The closet door creaked open and John lowered his sketchbook. Azer waved back at him from the mirror inside the door. *"Yo. Still up late, I see."*

"Azer!" John said and instantly clasped his mouth. He listened intently but heard no indication he had given himself away. "What are you doing here?"

*"Well, I was just getting tired of peeping into someone's bathroom and decided it had been a while since I had checked in with you."* Azer grinned. *"Nah, what am I saying, I'll never get tired of that. One word of warning, though; it isn't always pretty what happens in there. So, how are you?"*

John scooted closer to the wardrobe. "A little worried. I don't really eat or sleep anymore, unless I really push my powers."

*"That just means you're special, kiddo; you're better than others. While others waste time eating and sleeping, you're free to do whatever you want."*

"Well, I used to catch late re-runs, but I ran out of excuses to Rose and Minik, so, I mostly just draw," John said and held up his sketchbook. "It's easier to explain why the lights are on than why the TV is."

Azer scratched his chin. *"What is this?"*

"You like it? I want to make a comic series based on my life, but all I've got so far is the character design."

*"No one became a master overnight, kiddo; you just have to keep at it. What about your training?"*



"Oh, I do a bit of that too. Watch this." John put the sketchbook away and held up his left palm. Light gathered and grew into a small ball.

*"Is that all you can do so far?"*

"Yeah, it still hurts when I call on the energy, so this is about all I can do." John winced, and the ball of light fizzled out. "I can control it much better now, though."

Azer walked around inside his world. Given the small width of John's mirror, it meant that Azer paced in and out of view. *"Good, good. Remember that I still keep an eye on you, even if you can't see me. Good work with the fire horse."*

"You saw that?" John whispered.

*"Of course. I feel it too when monsters appear, so I got worried about you,"* Azer said. *"You're doing great, but you also have a lot of potential left in you. Always train. I seriously cannot stress that enough; you're only going to get stronger from here on in."*

John dragged his feet up under him. "I will. It's only a matter of time before another monster shows up."

*"That's the spirit."* Azer smiled as he sat down in mid-air, as if there was an invisible chair under him. *"So how are you feeling otherwise, kiddo? Dealing with all this crazy all right?"*

"Sure. I can talk with Jazlynn fine enough, but I wish I could tell someone else too. My social worker suggested a therapist, but I couldn't tell someone like that about my powers. Then they'd really think I was crazy."

*"Yeah, it's not like anyone would believe you. I mean, you tried with your friend Phil. Unless,"* Azer said and scratched his chin, *"you had some way to convince them."*

"That's it!" John said as loudly as he dared. "If I showed them my energy attack, they'd have to believe me!" His enthusiastic smile waned. "But Jazlynn warned me not to show anyone."

*"And why should she have to determine what you can and can't do?"*

*"Well, she told me to follow some rules if she were to train me or she would... she would..."*

Azer leant in closer. *"Or she would kill you. Am I right? What a great person she is."*

John bit his lip and nodded. "But that was months ago. She hasn't talked about killing me in a long time."

*"She doesn't have to, with the way you behave."* Azer smirked. *"It's not like she would have to know, either. I mean, your friends can keep a secret, right?"*

"I don't know about Phil, but Ragan for sure," John said and sighed. "I tried telling all this to Phil, and it didn't take him long to pass it on to Ragan, like I'm making up stories."

*"Well, it's just a thought, John, but if you do decide to let anyone in on my secret, make sure that you do not mention me." Azer waggled his finger and smiled playfully. "I won't kill you, John, but I will be cross with you."*

*"Sure."*

*"All right, you've been up drawing long enough, you better hop to bed. Or even you will feel it tomorrow."*

The image blinked out of existence and Azer with it. John threw himself back and wormed his way up to the desk to turn off the lamp.

## **Chapter - 6 October 2010**

Today he would do it for sure. Azer encouraging him was one thing, but then actually defying Jazlynn and divulging his powers to someone else was a lot more nerve-racking than he had anticipated. Plus, the plastic clue had been buzzing in the back of his head. He would need something sturdier than Rose's Tupperware, but everything seemed to be made out of aluminium or wood or some other metal.

"So what do you think it is?"

John paused and glanced over the door to the school toilets. Two girls stood inside and admired a puddle on the floor.

"Maybe it's pee. But why would it be all the way over here?" one of them said, pointing first to the row of stalls and then back to the puddle by the sinks.

"Could just be water," the other one said.

"Hmm. No, definitely pee," John said and took his finger out of his mouth.

The first girl gasped at the boy now crouched between them. The second sighed and rubbed her head. "Gross, John. Why are you always like this?"

"But I just..." John blushed as he realised what he had been doing.

No, today didn't feel right either and John rushed out of school to grab his bike. Maybe he could train a little with Jazlynn again. Once home, however, he only found Rose. She was hunched over a familiar cardboard box in the living room and waved him over as he shuffled in.

"I know you've been avoiding this, but we got to get through this thing," she said and sat down. "I had Jazlynn take over the shop so we could do this together. Me and Minik've already sorted through your parents' stuff, but you got to look through your own too." She pushed the box towards him as John sat down opposite her.

"I already told you, you can just donate it all," John mumbled. He could already see several shirts and a few toys. "Not like my DS or PlayStation survived anyway."

“Maybe not, but someday you’ll regret it if you didn’t keep at least one or two things,” Rose chided. She smiled, and her voice softened. “Come on. I’ll treat you to waffles afterwards.”

John pulled the box closer and half-heartedly grabbed the top item. The authorities might have returned what was salvageable, but they didn’t clean it. The shirt, like most of the other stuff, was dirty despite Rose’s best attempt to dust them off. “You trust her with the pawn shop?”

“Oh sure, she knows the ropes by know,” Rose said and pulled out a few things.

John could feel hear earnest desire, so he accepted them. All they did was give him a stabbing feeling inside that made him think of his real parents. He haphazardly threw the shirt into a big pile already on the floor.

“Oh, what about these? Do you mind if I keep these for Minik?” Rose said and held up his dad’s toolbox. She burst out giggling. “Nah, what am I saying, I’d like these for myself.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Rose eagerly pried the box apart and held up a drill. “Sweet Jiminy, this is some high-end gear. Was your dad a pro?”

“No, he was... he was just kind of into fixing the house,” John said and peeked into the cardboard box himself.

A harmonica had also survived along with several toys. John remembered them being relegated to the basement years ago as he outgrew them. Now that he thought about it, his dad had had a toolbox in the basement as well. The clothes were probably hand-me-downs from a big plastic bag down there as well. Nothing topside seemed to have survived.

“It’s just junk from the basement,” John said and pushed the box aside.

“You haven’t even looked at everything yet,” Rose protested and dug into the box. “Are you really sure you want to give all of this away?”

John nodded, trying to think of something to say but stayed silent as he failed.

“You got some great Halloween choices down here. Though I guess they wouldn’t fit anymore.” She picked up a hat and a vest with a sheriff’s star attached. It had been a long time since he had dressed up as a cowboy. But there was something else too, some other part of the costume.

John crouched down and shoved his old toy cars and dinosaurs aside. His dad kept buying them for him even though he had no interests in them. Even the costume was just something they shoved over his head. One thing he had liked about it was the guns, though. Perhaps because it was the only manly thing John had shown genuine interest in, his dad had gotten him a very real-looking six-shooter. Had it survived too?

“Found something?” Rose asked and smirked.

No matter how much stuff he pushed aside, no matter which corner he searched, it wasn't there. John slumped down on his butt. That gun would have been perfect. Besides being made of plastic, it was sturdy. But that was the problem, wasn't it? He would not have thrown it down into the basement, not a great thing like that, even if he couldn't remember playing with it in a while.

"I was just thinking maybe my toy gun was in here too."

Rose scratched her arms. "What's it look like?"

"Pretty much like a real one. Except it has a red thing at the end, I guess so people won't think it's real." John got back up on his feet.

"What would you want with it?"

"I don't know, I guess it's just kind of cool." No way he would reveal his powers to Rose. "Why?" he inquired and glanced back at her.

"Well, I may have found it when I was looking through the stuff earlier," Rose said and got up as well. "I just don't think it's an appropriate toy."

"But it's my gun!" John said and stomped the floor.

"You haven't been missing it until now. What do you plan to do with it?"

Fire burned inside his hand. He tried holding it back, but it was like trying to hold water. "It was a gift from my dad," he said and hung his head. "That's all."

Rose went over to a dresser and pulled out the top drawer. "I don't want you to play with this at school," she said and held up the gun. Just like he remembered, with an adjustable drum and a movable hammer. "Or outside for that matter. In fact, this thing stays in the house, all right?"

John nodded quietly and took the gun, noticing a faint glow inside his hand.

"And the rest?" Rose asked and waved at the box.

John shrugged as put the gun into the back of his trousers.

"Then I'll donate it all to charity. Are you sure you're fine with that?"

Again, John nodded.

"Very well, charity it is." Rose knelt down and lifted the box up. "Hmm, I should probably wash the clothes first. And clean some of these toys. Tell you what, I'll give you another week to consider it."

"C-cool. Um, I-I think I'll go see how Jazlynn is."

Rose cocked her head at him. "Are you all right? You're white as a sheet, and you're shaking."

John grabbed his arm. "No, I'm fine," he said and made for the door.

"Hey! What did I tell you about that gun?"

John rushed outside, grabbing his bike on the way, and headed back towards the city. Faintly, he could hear Rose yelling, but there was no time for that. He had to find Jazlynn as quickly as possible. It's not like Rose took him to work often, but he still knew where to go. If only the pounding in his hands would go away. And why were they still glowing?

"Come on," John whispered.

Someone honked at him. John blinked away sweat dripping into his eyes. He felt hot. His anger refused to go away. It was just like that time all the way back, the one that had started this whole thing. His blood felt like liquid fire.

"Please."

Driving the bike was hard, and it was starting to glow as well. John avoided most of the traffic and finally the pawn shop was coming up. In his relief, he fully lost control of the bike, and it wobbled into the wall. John rolled along the sidewalk. He got up, still trying to hold back as he pushed himself to the door. *Rose's Pawn-o-Shop*. He slipped but fell into the door, opening it.

"Hey," Jazlynn said followed by the clacking of her cane. "What's up with you?"

"I can't... I can't hold it back," John whispered. "Why won't it go away?"

It took Jazlynn less than a moment to grab his arm and rush him around out the back to an open yard. "Release," she said and held up his hand towards the sky. "Release!"

The glow trickled out of his fingers like it was filled with razor blades. A small sphere formed above them.

"Don't hold back," she yelled. "Push it out."

John released the energy at once. A beam shot from his hand and raced up into the air. A few seconds later he heard a dull thud.

"Why? Why?" he sobbed, nursing his bloodied hand. "I thought I had learnt to control it."

Jazlynn heaved a long sigh and fell back against the wall. "Tell me what happened."

John explained as his blood dripped from his palm, slower and slower. "I just wanted the gun, but when Rose didn't want to give it to me, it was like I couldn't stop myself. Jazlynn, what... what's happening with me?" he cried.

"You've awakened to your powers at a bad time," she explained, slowly and coolly. "Had you been younger, you could have eased naturally into them, and had you been older, you would have better control over yourself. Right now, you're just filled with hormones driving you crazy."

"So, it's going to be like this until I'm twenty?"

"I never said it would be easy, now did I?" Jazlynn sighed and gave him a weak smile. "You remember our talk about demons? That they were once people and such."

"I think so, yeah."

“Death is a scary thing, trust me, and some people can’t let go of their worldly attachments. But the dead are without form. Things like greed, pride, love, hatred, anger... you know, all those emotions we humans have, they shape us instead. Those that can let go are allowed to move on, while those that cannot will be forced to roam the afterworld as monsters and demons.”

“Love? What’s wrong with love?” John asked and lowered his hand.

“All emotions can become twisted, John, even love. Courage, too, and joy and charity... We don’t usually think of them as bad, but imagine that you give away everything that you have. Or that you become obsessed with something to the point that you can see nothing else. Or that you charge into battle with no consideration.” Jazlynn stuck out her tongue, revealing it to be pierced. “Listen to me, no emotion is inherently bad, neither love nor hate.”

John finally felt normal again, no longer like he was burning up, nor did his hand bleed. “N-no?”

“No. Liking or disliking something is what humans do and the absolute worst you can do is deny it. For you especially, though, it’s paramount, that means very important, that you do not let your emotions control you. Do you understand?”

“So, but, does that mean all emotions?”

“All of them.”

“Even happiness?”

Jazlynn pushed herself off the wall and crouched. “Just keep a balance. Enjoy things, don’t love them. Dislike things, don’t hate them.”

John furrowed his brow. “I don’t think I understand.”

“You will, in time. If it ever happens again and I’m not around, just let it go and don’t let it consume you. All right?”

John nodded. “Do you have the same problem too?”

“Not exactly, but our situations are also different,” Jazlynn said and got up. “To put it simple, John, you’re a bit of both worlds while I am neither.”

John tried to wrap his mind around that one, but his thoughts were disturbed by a loud noise. He flung out his phone from his trousers and grimaced. “Right. I kind of left in a hurry.”

“Rose is worried about you.”

John nodded and accepted the call.

“I can’t believe you, I just told you not to leave the house with that thing. Was I not clear enough?”

John patted himself down and found it jammed down into the back of his trousers. "Oh. Right, sorry, I was just going to go tell Jazlynn about the waffles and I completely forgot about the gun."

"You better come home with it right now, or there won't be any for you. Is that clear enough?"

"Of course, I'm really sorry, I promise it's not going to happen again."

John put the phone back into his pocket with a sigh.

"What was that about a gun?" Jazlynn asked.

John retrieved it and Jazlynn weighed it in her hands.

"Not bad. Made of plastic but not the flimsy kind. Shape seems to be conducive as well, mentally if nothing else. But are you sure you want to use this?"

"What do you mean?"

"You can see and feel what your power does to your hand. This gun will be able to take some of the strain but eventually, it too will disintegrate, and it's a precious memento to you, right?" she asked and handed it back.

"R-right, I hadn't thought of that," he said and quickly stuffed it back inside. "I've always really liked guns, and this a hard-plastic replica of the Colt Python. A collector's piece, not a toy, like my dad used to tell me."

"Well, it's not a bad idea. I'll see about finding one for you before our next training session; as my reward for your hard work."

John beamed and hugged her. "Thank you."

Jazlynn gave him a tired smile. "All right, all right, that's enough now. We'd better get back to Rose, too."

## Chapter - 10 October 2010

When the two FBI agents once more stood outside their door, an instinct to fight or flight welled up inside Rose. What these two represented was a potential end to her family, of having a son and even a sister. Ebadicael, however, simply handed over a nondescript envelope.

"I apologise for the lateness. This came a while ago, but we have been analysing this until now."

Rose turned it over and over. "What... what is this?"

"Letter," Gagesham muttered, staring transfixed at the lamp glowing over Rose's door.

"From?" The envelope was fit for A4 paper but contained no writing on either side.

"Marilyn and Henry Pearce," Ebadicael said and yanked the ear of her partner.

“J-John’s parents?” Ice filled her stomach. “Then they really are alive. Tell me, are they contesting my parentage at all? Do they want John to join them?”

Ebadicael shook her head. “Read for yourself.”

“Any developments in their disappearance then?” Minik asked, coming up from behind as Rose kept examining the envelope.

“None,” Gagesham grunted.

“The Pearces are not considered suspects in the bombings, but they are material witnesses and their sudden disappearance are not good signs either,” Ebadicael supplemented. “For that matter, we have no reason to believe that they should have any involvement in other recent events.”

Minik nodded. “What about John, then?”

“What about your foster son?”

“Well, are you still investigating him?”

Ebadicael closed her eyes for a moment. “Naturally, should we ever get a trial on its feet, he would have to testify about what he saw. Aside from that, we see no reason to doubt his testimony.”

Minik cocked his head. “If I didn’t know better, I’d almost say you were looking for an excuse not to investigate John.”

“Minik!” Rose chided and slapped his shoulder. “If you hear anything about John’s real parents, please...” Rose took a deep breath. “Please contact us immediately.”

Gagesham grunted and Ebadicael bowed slightly before they turned around. Minik and Rose returned to the living room where Minik dropped down at the table and grabbed an opened beer. A momentary flash threw long shadows from the direction of the backyard.

“Are they goofing around in the backyard again?” Rose asked.

Minik took a sip of his drink. “Seems like they’ve been having fun with a model gun she got somewhere.”

“Yeah, it better be a model,” Rose mumbled and rushed into the backyard.

“Rose,” Jazlynn said from her favourite perch in a deck chair. It almost had to be raining to get her inside. And yet she remained as pale as ever. “We’re not disturbing anyone, are we?”

Rose glanced at John. Sure enough, he had a handgun not unlike her own Beretta. His had a bright red plastic cap on the nozzle.

“No, no, we just got mail.” Rose held up the envelope and looked over at John. “From your parents, no less.”

The gun dropped from John’s hands. “What?” he exclaimed and rushed over. “R-really?”



“Yeah, those two weird FBI agents were here just now,” Minik called out from inside. “Weird how the lead investigators would do it. I mean, it’s not even like they had any more questions for us.”

“You should probably just see it as their version of an apology,” Jazlynn said and clacked her way inside. Apparently mysterious envelopes could also get her out of her chair.

“Hmm. Still. Well, let’s get it inside and open her up.”

They gathered all four around the dining table. Rose put the envelope down and tore into it.

“Didn’t those detectives say they had already looked through it?” Minik asked.

“Oh, they probably just replaced the envelope,” Rose said. “I mean, do you see any address or anything on it?”

“Just seems like a lot of unnecessary work.”

“Why are you being so sceptical all of a sudden?”

“All of a sudden? You’re the one who told me those detectives gave you the willies last time they were here.”

“Come on, what’s inside?” John pleaded and tugged at the envelope.

“All right, all right, keep your shirt on,” Rose said and poured out the contents on the table. A bundle of A4 papers flopped out. Rose picked up the first page and squinted at the fine writing.

“I... I can’t read this. This is nothing but circles and lines to me.”

“May I? My grandma also had a pretty neat hand,” Minik said and Rose passed the letter on. First, he stretched his arms out, then he pressed the paper against his face. “Okay, hold on.” Slowly, haltingly, Minik read aloud:

*You no doubt have many questions. You want to know why the attack happened. You want to know why we left. For various reasons, we can’t tell you, but we want you to know it’s for your own good. We beg you not to pursue us or the case any further. We hear you have been taken in by a new family. Please just live a normal life with them and no harm will come to you.*

“Then it also talks about how they gave Ronald up for adoption before fleeing the country,” Minik said and leafed through the pages. “Sheesh, were they spies or something? I’d almost laugh if I didn’t think this was for real.”

“What else does it say?” John pleaded.

Minik squinted. “Uh, give me a moment,” he said. “Something about wishing you well and hoping that you will be all right in the future and not to forget your studies.” Minik put the papers

down and rubbed his temple. "Your mum's writing is enough to put my grandma's to shame, but I think one of these pages officially sanctions... our adoption?"

"R-really?" Rose blurted out. "They *want* us to adopt their son?"

"But can you read it?" John pressed.

"Tell you what, give me some time and I'll read these as bedtime stories for you."

He went through the pages and sighed. Only a few sheets, but it would take him a while to interpret all this. Coming to the last page, a few squares of paper fluttered down.

"Photos?" Rose asked and picked one up. It was Marilyn and Henry, like they had looked in the photo album.

"I think your father wrote this," Minik said and cleared his throat. "*We weren't sure if you had any pictures, so we printed a few off our phones. Your mother and I are both fine. No matter how far apart we are, we will always keep an eye on you. Stay good and don't cause your new family any trouble.*"

"How do they know about us?" Rose commented and scratched her chest. "Maybe they are spies? Like, ones with connections in every part of the world."

"No way," John said and shook his head. "My parents never did anything interesting."

"Well, maybe when Minik can decipher your mother's runes we can know a little more."

Rose picked up one of the photos. A vacation to some place with a lot of greenery and sun. "Until then, how about I put these in with the others in the album? That way you can look at them whenever you want."

John didn't reply, being too absorbed in a photo from a hospital. He was wearing a confused expression as he held a little bundle in his arms, his mother in a bed and his father sitting next to her.

"Let's leave him to it," Rose whispered to Minik.

## Chapter

"It feels like you could have done more," Jazlynn whispered and scooted closer, picking up one of the photos.

"Maybe if I had been stronger, I could have defeated the monster faster. Then mom and dad wouldn't have gone away, and we could have stayed together," John said.

Jazlynn sighed. "My family's gone too; you know."

John looked up.

"Right after I became a Knight, I did actually try and go back one time. Just to see if they were mourning me."

"Were they?"

"Some things are better left unknown," she said wistfully. "They were all dead. Burglary gone bad."

"I'm sorry," John said and hung his head.

"Don't be. You can go on blaming yourself and grieving, but life goes on. I found other people to protect along the way."

"But what if Ronald's new parents don't love him?" he asked.

"What if your new parents hadn't loved you?" Jazlynn stroked John's cheek as small tears rolled down. "Listen, what-ifs never help do anything but bind you to the past and tell you what you could do differently. Learn from them instead and concentrate on what you can do better now and in the future. You get me?" John nodded. "When you get older, you can try and find your little brother. For now, I hope you remember what I told you when we first met."

"Uh..."

"My job is to rid this world of interferences." Jazlynn snatched up the letter and placed the first page before John. "I know it's hard for you to hear, but you cannot stop our training, no matter how much you want to listen to your real mum."

*Or she would kill you. Am I right?*

Azer's words echoed inside John. He put the photos down and got up from the table. "Yeah, I get it. Don't worry."

She watched him leave, feeling a pang in her chest.

*"It'll be easier this way,"* an old voice told her.

Hoffman materialised by the end of the table, hands in her lap, a tired smile on her face.

"Shut up," Jazlynn said and wiped her eyes. "You told me we would be fighting monsters, not little kids; that I would be a knight, not a cripple."

Hoffman shrugged. "I'm only your helper. I can't control what situations arise."

"There are a lot of things you don't seem able to control."

"He'll listen to you," the old lady said. "He wants to control his powers just as much as you want him to."

Jazlynn crossed her arms and looked away. "I hope you're right. I don't think I could kill him anymore."

"Oh, is he done already?" Minik asked, entering with a couple of beers between his fingers. "I'd have thought he wanted to look at the pics a little longer. Maybe try to read the letters, too."

"For that matter, how much longer do I have here?" Jazlynn asked the spectre then looked up at Minik. "I think he just needed a little time alone."

*“As long as this terrible feeling persists.”*

Minik slung himself into a chair and put the beers down on the table. “You think he’s going to be all right?”

“John?” Jazlynn asked and grabbed a beer.

“His grades are improving, and I can’t feel anything wrong with him... you wouldn’t think he had gone through all that he had.” Minik unbuttoned one of the beers and put it to his lips. “And what’s up with his parents? They must be criminals of some kind.”

“John’s tough; he has the potential to get over anything. I’ll stick with him until I think he’s all the way better.”

Minik nodded. “I hate to say this, but I think he’s better off with us than getting mixed up in... whatever it is his parents are doing.”

Jazlynn put the bottle back on the table. “I don’t know what’s up with my sister, either; I never really knew her too well. Even if I had known, there probably wouldn’t have been much I could do about John either.”

“They had an older boy too, right? Uh, what was his name, Leslie?”

“Lawrence.”

“Yeah, what happened to him? Didn’t he end up in juvie or something? No wonder,” Minik said and sipped his beer. “I’ve been trying to dig more into their past, but I only have their photo album to go by. Are you sure you can’t tell me anything?”

“If my sister is a spy, it’s something she picked up after we parted ways,” Jazlynn said.

Minik tapped his fingers on the letter. “All right, well, I’ll try to get this thing deciphered. Maybe there’ll be some clues in there.”

*“Don’t stick your nose too deep into this,”* Hoffman’s voice echoed. Minik made no sign of hearing it as he headed out of the living room.

“Is he anywhere near the truth?” Jazlynn asked, watching him over the top of her beer.

*“I can confirm he still thinks they are spies. Neither of them doubts your cover story either.”*

“Good. I’d have a hard time controlling the situation if he got wise to anything.”

## **Chapter - 5 November 2010**

The abandoned ferry terminal glistened from the light drizzle only minutes in the past, the cold concrete smelling of newly fallen rain. John huddled down the riverbank and crawled up on the wharf extending into the dried-out lake. He looked around before finding his query in the darkness of the free-standing roof. He shook the rain from his coat and approached them.

"I didn't even know you could enter the old ferry terminal through the backdoor," Phil said, rubbing his arms. "Is this your cool, secret training spot?"

John slinked into the darkness, looking around him. It was imperative that Jazlynn did not find out about this. "I have something to show you guys," John said, looking back as well. "It's not that I've been meaning to keep a secret from you, but I didn't know how to properly convince you."

"Learnt any tricks?" Ragan asked, looking around the decrepit place nervously.

John held out his hand and light gathered in his palm. He had gotten a good enough grip to do at least this much without hurting himself. It was just light, no substance.

Phil looked like his eyes were about to pop out of their sockets. "H-how are you doing that?" He grabbed John's hand, twisting it.

"I've been able to do this since summer break started," John said.

The glow morphed into a ball rolling around in his hand. Ragan observed coolly, his face pale and glistening in the light.

"Let me see if I can..." John said, and the ball started to shake before popping, leaving the old terminal darker than before. "Well, I had hoped I could make an animal by the time you got back, Ragan. So, uh... what do you guys think?" John asked.

"You've had this power since summer," Ragan reiterated from somewhere close by. "As in, since the explosion?"

"Yup." John looked at his hands. The left one itched now. "That's when I first got my powers, but I couldn't control them back then. It almost killed me."

"You can make explosions?" Phil asked from next to John.

John summoned a small pearl on the tip of his finger and flicked it into the dried-up lake. The ground spewed up a plume of dust. "My mentor's telling me I have plenty more tricks in me; I just need to practise."

Phil craned his neck to catch the height of the dirt pillar and back down again. "Who? Your aunt? Does she have powers too?"

"Yeah, my aunt. Seems it runs in the family." There were still a few things he dared not tell anyone about. One was Azer, the other was the truth about Jazlynn.

"If you have superpowers, what are you using them on?" Ragan asked. "I've certainly never heard of a real supervillain before."

"There is one," John said and sucked his finger, tasting iron. "I've been fighting all these monsters with my aunt, but she's saying there must be someone behind them. Someone summoning them."

"And what would you do if you found that someone?" Ragan asked.

John frowned. "Whoever it is, he sent a monster after me that nearly killed me. It's because of him that I can't see my parents anymore. He was also the one who set fire to the park. A lot of people got hurt there. I don't think I could forgive him."

Ragan nodded. "Yeah, of course. Even if he had a good reason, he still hurt people and got a lot of others in danger."

"What's your superhero name?" Phil asked.

"My what?"

John summoned light into his palm. Phil looked very much like an excitable child, unable to wait for Christmas morning to arrive.

"You know, like, the Superman to your Clark Kent, or your Spider-Man to your Peter Parker."

"I-I-I hadn't thought of that," John said.

"Hmph. Well obviously, it needs to be something on point," Ragan said, still looking a little ashen. "The Avenger?"

"Idiot, that name's already taken," Phil said and shook his fist. "How about the Exploder?"

"So what if it's already taken, if it's just by a fictional hero? At least it's better than the Exploder." Ragan closed his eyes. "When I said on point, I didn't mean it to be blatantly obvious."

"Fine. Captain Exploder."

"Bane," Ragan said but Phil scoffed. "Fine, Blast Bane. Is that one taken?"

Phil sucked in air but quickly let it out again. "I actually like that one."

"Looks, guys, I don't need a superhero name," John said, laughing. "Because, well, I'm not a superhero. Or a regular hero. I don't do any crime solving, I just take care of monsters now and then."

"Monster Hunter!" Phil blurted out. "No, wait..."

"Kilburne," John suggested. "No, listen to me guys, I don't want..."

"But if you've had these powers since early summer," Ragan said, "why tell us now? You've been keeping it a secret, after all."

"Y-yeah, but, you guys are my only friends. No secrets, right?" John grinned sheepishly.

"Listen, I promised my aunt not to tell anyone. Phil, that means you guys can't tell anyone."

Phil raised his hands in defence. "Why are you singling me out?"

"Because he knows you have trouble keeping a secret," Ragan sighed. "John places a lot of trust on us revealing this to us. That means we have to honour that trust by showing him he can believe in us."

"Oh! Yeah, man, no problem." Phil laughed boisterously, making Ragan shrink away from the hollow echoes cascading back to them from the terminal.

“How did you get superpowers, then?” Ragan asked, tentatively removing his hands from his ears.

“I don’t know, from my mum, I think. She had something similar,” John said. “She could fly too, and she shot these really powerful beams like it was nothing. Pew, pew,” he imitated with his finger.

Ragan massaged his brow. “This is all just... well, promise me that you will use your powers responsibly.” He lowered his hand, his eyes wide. “Wait, have you already used your powers?”

John nodded. “You’re not going to believe this, but there was a horse pulling a cart full of fire, and that’s what burnt down the park.”

“No way!” Phil burst out and laughed but John made his most serious face. “Shit, for real? Where did it come from?”

“No idea, but that’s the kind of things I fight.” John smiled as an idea crossed his mind. “Do you guys want to see me in action?”

“Yeah, man, ‘course!” Phil looked ready to burst from excitement.

“Great. We know a monster is going to attack today, don’t ask me how, just roll with it. It’s going to get dangerous, just so you know.”

Phil puffed himself up so that he looked even bigger. “What do you take me for, John, a chicken?”

“Where exactly do you think this monster will attack?” Ragan asked.

“Somewhere around Sacrisyard,” John said. “That’s about as close as we can narrow it down.”

“You don’t think it might be too dangerous for you?”

John grinned. “Nah, I’ll be okay, I’ve survived everything else thrown at me.” He threw out his arm and looked at his watch. “I promised I’d meet my aunt in Sacrisyard once I had gotten some training in. I think now’s a good time to leave. If you want to come look, you better find a good seat.”

## Chapter

“Come on!” Phil said and jumped up the embankment after John.

“Try and think for a second,” Ragan said, coming up after him. “John told us this was supposed to be a secret.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, if his aunt doesn’t want him to tell others and we show up on his tail, then..?”

Phil stopped at the top. John was on his bike and waving them off, Ragan casually waving back.

"I see it. Then what do we do?" Phil asked and sat down on the grassy hill.

Ragan shrugged and sat down next to him. "Give him a head start."

Phil leant back and stared up into the cloudy sky. "How do you think someone gets their hand on superpowers?"

"Presumably they're born with them." Ragan drew his knees up under his chin. "Or they have some sort of accident. Maybe even both."

"Hmm. Some heroes don't even need special powers. Unless money is a superpower. Not that it matters since I don't have either." Phil clenched his fist and lifted it up before his face. "Man, I wish I had powers too."

"It might be possible in the future," Ragan said.

"Really?"

Ragan looked at Phil with wide eyes. "Well I mean, you never know," Ragan said and got up again. "A-anyway, you don't need superpowers. You want to be a police officer."

Phil smiled. "You remembered," he said and threw an arm around Ragan. "But I get the feeling that there's something you're not telling me."

"I think John has a big enough lead." Ragan tried getting up, but Phil had him in too tight a grip.

"What was it that John said, no secrets between friends?" Phil asked.

Ragan sighed. "I'm saying this for your own safety, forget about it. I was speaking hypothetically."

"Come on, I revealed something personal about myself last time; the least you can do is pay me back."

The grass was still moist, and Ragan could feel it through his jeans, a clammy, cold feeling. Similar to the one he felt down his back. "I have nothing else to say on that. Now, do you want to get going, or do you want to miss out on John's performance?"

"You're right." Phil clicked his tongue and got up on his feet. "Guess you're off the hook this time."

## Chapter

A dog whined somewhere. The alleys stank of stale urine and trash. The buildings were tattooed with graffiti, the people with ink. Even with his gun under his shirt, John did not feel secure here. It was a relatively small area but one that he usually kept far away from. Though largely



abandoned, that was a fact in paper only; many people made the houses and apartments their unofficial home. The only place still in operating condition was a corner diner at the edge of Sacrisyard. Jazlynn stood outside, enjoying a beer. Her raggedy clothing made her fit in so well John almost missed her, though the birdhouse on a pole rectified that quickly.

“I was about to call you,” she said. “The energy is getting pretty intense. I’d say that’s what got my skin crawling, but with this place, I’m not really sure.”

A homeless man pushed a shopping cart past them, focusing intently on not staring at them. That didn’t prevent John from following him with his own eyes.

Jazlynn guzzled down the last beer and stuffed the bottle into her vest. “I’m starting to see a trend with these attacks,” she said. “That’s why I think this dinner is next. The mayor has been campaigning on not tearing it down because it’s still run by an eighty-five-year-old World War veteran and his family.”

Through the large windows John could see a timeless interior. Whatever movie or TV series he watched, all the diners looked like this: upholstered booths with a table, a counter, waitresses in skirts serving coffee and plates with bacon and eggs... this establishment did not skip a beat. As for an eighty-five-year-old man, John could spot none.

“You know, I feel like I’ve heard about this place recently,” John said and wrinkled his brow.

“No doubt, it’s the only reason this entire area hasn’t just been demolished yet. One half of this town wants to preserve it for the historical significance, the other to tear it down for a new, modern city centre.” Jazlynn clacked closer to John. “If someone were to let a monster loose here and let it do the tearing, there’d be no choice.”

John nodded. “Whoever stands to profit from this is likely to be our culprit,” he said and looked up into Jazlynn’s shuttered eyes. “I can see targeting the mayor, but why me?”

“They were probably after your house. Joke’s on them, though, since the investigation has halted any new development on the property.”

“Still, I feel like we’re missing something.” John scratched his head furiously.

“You can worry about that later.” Jazlynn clenched tighter around her cane and lifted herself straight. “The energy is peaking. We’ll have contact in seconds.”

She clacked away with good speed. John, afraid to leave his bike anywhere here, jumped off and pulled it alongside him. Jazlynn led him back the way he had come. John scouted around for his friends. Seeing the neighbourhood up close, he started regretting telling them to come. But Azer had been right; he could no longer keep it to himself. He worried about the safety of his friends but also hoped they were watching from somewhere.

“It’s here,” Jazlynn whispered and peered down an alley.

An old lady sat mumbling to herself, her possessions in a plastic bag. John looked away but Jazlynn wasn't moving. "First rule: protect innocents," Jazlynn said and pointed to the old lady. "You're faster, go get her out of there."

The tone left no room to argue and John sped down the alley.

It was slick from the earlier downpour which thankfully drowned the stench of garbage a little. "C-come on, it's not safe here," he said but the old lady kept staring vacantly ahead.

A shiver went through John and he looked to the other end of the alley. He could feel the presence of something. He swallowed hard and tried to ignore it. The houses cast long shadows, but he could see something glisten.

"Hurry up!" Jazlynn yelled.

John seized the old lady by her arm. Her not resisting made it easy for him, despite his age, to get her up on her feet. It also helped that she was small and practically skin and bones.

A loud squeal reverberated between the walls. John got busy tugging at the old lady, hurrying back out into the street.

"Same deal as the last one," Jazlynn said. "I'll leave Hoffman with you while I find a vantage point. You play with that thing until then and then you lead it to me."

Jazlynn took control of the old lady and led her down the street. John took a few steps back into the road.

A golden boar melted out of the shadows, taking up the entirety of the alley, its bristles quivering. John pulled out his gun and levelled it at the beast. Power flowed through him and the gun glowed in fierce competition with the boar. The beast charged and John fired. It was too soon, and the energy pellet bounced off and continued off into the sky where it exploded harmlessly. John just got out of the way. The boar charged past and slammed into the apartment block behind him. People screamed and scrambled out.

"It's not really interested in you," an old voice said. John jumped as Hoffman now stood next to him. "Use that to your advantage, boy."

"But if it isn't interested in me, how will I lead it to Jazlynn?"

Hoffman smiled wearily and flicked her grey hair out of her face. "Why don't you stick with the boar?"

People had stopped coming out from the apartments. John took that as his cue to venture closer.

"Oh, and your friends are here."

John froze and looked back at the old lady. Hoffman shrugged and vanished again. Fearing the chewing out he likely had in store once this was over, John rushed inside.

The hallway stank like the rest of the neighbourhood. Somewhere he heard the boar grunt. John kept his gun tightly in his hand as he looked inside the first door on the right, just before the stairs. It was filled with sleeping bags and mattresses and garbage and buckets. John ducked out again before he could retch.

Crash.

He hurried into the next room where a wall was missing. The boar was running wild, charging and kicking and knocking things down. The apartments shook and groaned under the punishment.

John clutched his gun tightly and charged his energy into it. It was a Remington revolver duplicate, never used in his training before. He had some idea by now of how much punishment these things could take. If he had to keep the gun charged for too long, it would melt into a useless lump. On the other hand, this monster required a strong dose.

People screamed outside. The thuds grew distant. The more energy he filled into the gun, the warmer and brighter it grew... and tranquil. The apartments were collapsing. The room in front of him filled with dust as the ceiling caved. John flexed his fingers.

"You have been defeated by Kilburne," John said.

The energy pellet roared out of the barrel. All the filth, all the debris, vanished in a flash of light. The apartments roared with pain and trembled. John lowered his gun, the warmth ebbing out of him. Yelping, he ran outside, covering his head.

The apartments collapsed like a domino effect. Three buildings down, a yellow bubble grew out of the walls and roof before popping. All was quiet for a moment in dazzling radiance. A great gust enveloped him. Only then did he hear it. He screamed but there was no sound, just the roar of the explosion.

"Kilburne?" Hoffman asked in her gruff voice. She put a hand on his shoulder. At some point, he had fallen to his knees. He looked up and found her crouched down behind him.

"My new superhero name," John stated between gasps.

"Keep workshopping it."

John looked down at the gun in his hand. A useless lump. "Did I do it?"

"Well, monsters of that calibre are a little sturdier than that, but you've definitely improved." Hoffman said. "You managed to get your shot off by yourself, and that's what matters."

John nodded and got up on his feet.

The boar staggered out of the ruins, grunting weakly. A hole in its golden hide revealed it was hollow inside and made of metal. John threw away the gun and gathered energy directly into his

palm. His arm and hand stung. There was barely any power yet, and it already hurt so badly. Blood trickled down his pale skin.

He heard a pop and looked up just in time to see the boar splinter into pieces.

*"You've done well, more than could reasonably be expected of you,"* Hoffman said. *"It won't be long before you can deal the finishing blow yourself."*

John lowered his hand and the energy dispersed. He panted, only now noticing his heartbeat and how tired he was. He had never been in a marathon, but he felt certain that's how it must feel to run one. Now he also noticed how quiet things had gotten. Before, there were dogs barking or people talking or coughing or cars driving.

"We need to talk."

Jazlynn stood before him with Ragan and Phil.

## Part 4 – Cannibal Lizards

### Chapter

Jazlynn silently herded the children in front of her, snubbing out dialogue before John could utter more than a few syllables. First, they checked on the condition of the diner. It was deserted and missing all glass from its windows, but it was still there. Satisfied, Jazlynn directed them away from Sacrisyard and into a nicer neighbourhood, not stopping until they found a café and ducked inside. Everyone made their orders and still Jazlynn was quiet. Their food and drinks arrived, the waiter doing a double take on the birdhouse. Jazlynn took a sip of her coffee before putting down the cup with a clink.

"I thought I told you to keep this a secret," she said, folding her hands on the table.

"They're my friends," John replied, looking at them. Phil was looking more subdued than John had ever seen him before. Ragan was more casual though he did not speak either. "I didn't want to keep any secrets from them."

Jazlynn sighed. "I gave you a very explicit order, and I am disappointed that you went against it. This is far as it goes. If you tell anyone else, our deal is over. With everything that entails." She did not need the harsh tone for John to recall what that meant.

"Please don't be angry at John because of us," Ragan said softly. "We can keep this a secret."

"See to it that you do." Jazlynn's gaze lingered at Ragan. She frowned before continuing.

"My job is to keep things like this a secret. Do you understand why?"

"Yes, ma'am, I read comics," Phil said.

"You saw what I can do. That's also a secret," Jazlynn said.

"Are you really John's aunt? If I may be so bold," Ragan asked.

Jazlynn lifted her cup and took a slurp of coffee. "So, you think it's weird that John has an aunt that he has never mentioned before, and one who has never come for a visit?"

"Yeah, huh? That is weird," Phil said and dug into his strawberry cake.

"Rest assured that I'm only here to guide John."

"But what are you?" Ragan pressed. "You fired that huge rifle, and you knew where that monster would be and when."

Jazlynn lifted a hand. "Sorry, that's all I have to say." She grabbed her cup again but checked herself. "Oh yes, one other thing. Never again follow after John or me when we're working. Is that understood?"

They both nodded.

"As for you," she said while looking at John, "do you have anything to say?"

"I'm sorry," John said and hung his head.

"If you are sorry, then you will never do something like this again. Ever."

John nodded.

"Good. Now drink, before it gets cold."

They stayed until their orders had been consumed, the conversation turning to mundane things like video games and homework. Jazlynn kept to her coffee and ordered another one before everyone was ready to go.

They were not far out of the café before a woman attacked, seizing a hold of John's arm. He yelped until he noticed it was just the old lady he had rescued from the alley. She was dishevelled and gaunt and carried two plastic bags with her, rattling off her bony arms.

"Can I help you?" John asked, fighting back the initial fear and the growing revulsion.

Her lips moved but only a slight wheeze escaped her.

"C-come again?"

"Thank you." She let him go and fished out a book from her bags. "Thank you. Thank you." She kept repeating herself until John accepted the book. She tottered off down the street, people giving her a wide berth.

"John's got a girlfriend!" Phil piped up.

"Don't be vulgar," Ragan chided and knuckled him. "What did she give you?"

"A book. Um..." John frowned at the cover. It and the rest of the book was well-thumbed and smudged, the title in particular.

"Beyond Good and Evil," Ragan said, peeking past John. "By Nietzsche."

“Um, okay.”

“Oh, oh! New English translation,” Phil chipped in and pointed to the bottom.

“Yes, yes, good work, all of you,” Jazlynn said, “but you need to return that.”

“Because it could be filthy?” John asked and flipped it open. It was full of marks and spots.

“No, because that old lady obviously treasures that thing,” she replied. “She must have been really grateful to part with it, but she’ll appreciate it if you give it back to her.”

John stretched his neck. “She’s gone, though.”

“No problem,” Phil said and blew himself up. “I know who she is.”

“It’s old lady Taker,” Ragan butted in. “Everybody knows who she is.”

“Hey, I wanted to say that.”

“Is she dangerous?” Jazlynn asked.

Ragan shook his head. “Just off her rocker.”

“She always rides the bus and tells stories,” Phil chipped in. “I sometimes see at her at the station too. I had no idea she was homeless.”

“Good. And you better stash that thing somewhere,” Jazlynn said and glanced at the book. “I don’t want Rose to know that homeless people are giving you gifts, or why. And you two better find your way home as well.”

## Chapter

Ragan rushed home, past his mother who said something he didn’t quite catch, shut the door behind him to his room, and flung himself into his chair and turned on the TV. An announcer appeared in a studio.

“It is still unclear what caused the destruction in Sacrisyard just a few hours ago, but a preliminary investigation points towards the ancient gas line system running underneath that whole part of the city.”

Footage appeared of Sacrisyard. Several blocks had been demolished, medics were treating the wounded, bereaved mourned the corpses... it looked like a battle zone from Europe. His stomach churned, and he looked away.

“We are just informed that the mayor has shown up at the scene.”

Ragan glanced back at the screen. A big, black limo was parked across the street, and there the mayor was, holding out his arms. The camera shook as it followed a reporter running towards him. The mayor was silent until they were closer.

“Everyone, may I have your attention please,” he said. “This is what I have been talking about the last four years. This beautiful piece of our city’s history has been neglected for far too long, and this was bound to happen.”

A crowd gathered in front of the mayor. A mumbling, grumbling crowd.

“It’s not too late. Sacrisyard isn’t completely gone yet. We still have the Veteran’s Café. We still have Memorial Park and the old ferry terminal left. We can still preserve Sacrisyard. Let’s...”

A bottle flew overhead and dented his limo.

“P-please, let me finish,” the mayor said, but the crowd advanced on him with angry retorts and more projectiles. Two bodyguards went in front of him and dragged him inside the limo.

A chilling laughter filled the room and Ragan jumped out of his seat until he noticed his trophy cabinet. A man in a business suit stared back at him from inside one of trophies.

*“Seems things went better than expected. Not only did we begin the demolition, we also turned the public tide against the mayor.”* The figure pulled his head back and laughed once more. *“What’s the matter, kiddo, you’re looking a little green.”*

“I asked you if John was involved in this,” Ragan said and turned the TV off. The remote shook in his hands. “You told me no.”

*“What I said was...”*

“Not only is he involved. Not only does he have powers. HE’S THE ONE WHO HAS BEEN STOPPING OUR PLANS THIS WHOLE TIME,” Ragan screamed and hurled the remote at his cabinet. The glass shattered, and the trophies spilled out.

*“There was no way for me to know any of that,”* the voice replied with unshakable calm. *“He’s not a Gifted, after all.”*

“You said yourself there’s no other way. How else could he be firing energy projectiles?”

*“The only other way.”*

“Yes?”

*“He inherited it from a parent.”*

Ragan frowned. “That makes even less sense, how could one of his parents be a Gifted?”

*“They wouldn’t be, of course.”*

Ragan scoffed. “If you’re not a Gifted, the only other way to obtain magical powers is... is...” Ragan’s face grew pale, and he swallowed hard.

*“Yes. A demon. One that came here before Gifted Enterprises opened the gate.”*

“We thought that could be true, but even with your testimony, it was hard to believe,” Ragan said and sat down on his bed. “Goddamn. They really have been here this whole time.”

*“Now that we know, do you think your friend can be persuaded to join us?”*

“No, not with that aunt of his, or whatever she is. And besides, I have no intention of revealing you to him. I have no idea how I would ever face him. Are you laughing again?”

The voice was quiet for a moment. *“Have you considered the next target?”*

“As you said, things are starting to go our way. For the next phase, we should just let my father do his thing. Your involvement will only be required should we run into any more hitches.”

*“May I just say, choosing mascots for your monsters was truly inspired. It sends a message.”*

Ragan shook his head. “No, doing that was a stupid mistake; it draws too much attention.”

*“I’ll deal with any, uh... hitches, as you put it. If anyone starts snooping around, we’ll know instantly.”*

“Right, but we have been too loud. We need to tread carefully from here on in.”

*“As you see fit. However, I’ll advise you to strongly consider who knows, and how much they know. If the operation is compromised now, it could cost us everything.”*

Ragan glared at his trophies, but the presence had left them.

## Chapter - 18 November

The more he pushed off returning the ratty book, the more he worried about Rose finding out, and the more Jazlynn nagged him to do it. So, on this Thursday, John pedalled off from school. It was cloudy and grey and cold, and Ferman was a dull, lifeless city despite all the people outside.

His first impulse had been going back to Sacrisyard and look for old lady Taker, but Jazlynn had warned him that the place had been condemned and warded off. The large homeless population had drifted elsewhere, unobserved, but a large shelter had also been repurposed from an old warehouse. His instruction was to look there. If he couldn’t find her, she would most likely have left and that would be it.

There was plenty of space in the industrial section and was a comfortable arm’s length from the city proper. On the way, he passed the construction site taking up the old recycling plant and the decaying roller derby rink. It made him even more uncomfortable. John sped up, wanting this to be done with quickly.

He looked around, his nose starting to drip, when he noticed a sign by a warehouse. “All homeless welcome – food and beds and medical attention provided.” John pulled up through the parking lot and slipped through an open door. The interior had been stripped, and the homeless lived in tents or out of shopping trolleys or cardboard boxes. A few facilities had been erected here and there.

“Looking for family?”



John had been so busy gawking that he had missed a truck on the right side of the entrance. A young woman in a white coat addressed him from the side door.

“Uh, no, I, uh...” John settled his bag on the ground and took out the book. “Well the thing is, I was passing by Sacrisyard a few weeks ago and I helped out this old lady. She gave me this, but I don’t think I can keep it.”

The woman smiled. “You can leave the bike with me while you look around, but do take care, all right?” She stepped down and leant towards John. “Some of these people are not all here, and some of them are a little upset, but mostly they just want to be left alone.”

A police officer marched up between the rows of homeless people. “Everything all right here?” he asked, looking first at John and then at the lady.

“I want to return this,” John said and held up the book. “To an old lady called Taker.”

“Ah. Right, yes, Taker. Harmless enough,” he said and pointed to the left side of the warehouse. “Want me to come with?”

“No, I’m all right.” John hiked the book under his arm and began marching.

“All right, sonny, but there are plenty of us walking around. If there are any problems, just yell as loud as you can.”

John nodded and went into the gathering. Some sat among their possessions, ignoring John or watching him with wary eyes. Others were gathered in small groups, talking, playing cards or dice, or cooking food on small stoves.

Taker sat a few rows from the wall with her two bags beside her. Without a demonic boar on his tail, John had time to see that her belongings consisted of a spare pair of knickers, more books, and assorted junk.

“Um, excuse me,” John said and held out the book. “I’m sorry, but I can’t keep this.”

“You saved me. Thank you,” she said and pushed the book back.

“No, really, I appreciate it, but... but I think you’ll be happier with it.”

Taker stared deeply at the book. She reached out a pair of bony hands, but only grabbed the book and didn’t take it back. “He who fights monsters.”

“P-pardon?”

She stared at him. The white in her eyes darkened. John’s mouth fell open, a shudder going through him. “He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster,” Taker said. John let go of the book and backed away, but her arms seized his wrists. “You. You fight monsters. You have powers. You’re staring into the abyss, but the abyss is staring back.”

“I...”

The old lady closed her eyes, and her body went limp. "My name is Mari-ersetim. I was born 5,543 years ago." The voice coming from her lips was now a man's, and her grip around John grew solid. "I lived in a small village along the Euphrates river. I had a wife and two daughters. When I was twenty-seven, bandits came to my farm. They killed everyone. Including me. But I was to be the first, the first to guard the void."

"What are you talking about?" John said.

The police officer from before wrested Taker off him. For a moment, it seemed her eyes swirled before turning back. "All right, that's enough. Sorry, I just remembered she can be kind of grabby. Hence the name, I guess," he said and chuckled. "Uh, you all right?"

John looked at his wrists. "Yeah. No problem."

"Well, it's probably best you be on your way, sonny. We don't really allow people in here unless they have a purpose..."

With Taker slumping back, caressing her returned book, John nodded and went back to his bike. Helmet properly secured, he raced back out into the cold, grey weather. Once more, he passed the construction site. This time he paused. A new recycling plant was being planned, and security was being provided by a company he remembered hearing about somewhere. What caught his eyes was their logo. It looked like a bird, except it had hands too. Just like the one that had attacked him so long ago...

## Chapter

"Did you find the old lady again?" Jazlynn asked from the couch.

"Yeah," John wheezed as he dragged himself inside.

"Good. Why do you look so haggard?"

"Where is everyone?"

"Rose is at the shop, and Minik is out with friends." Jazlynn stretched her neck and looked around the living room.

"Do you have time to talk?"

She nodded and turned off the TV.

"What's up?"

"There have been three monster attacks by now. A bird with the body of a lion, a horse drawing a flaming carriage, and a golden boar," John said and fished out his phone. "I knew I had seen them before. Look."

He had saved a collage of the images and flicked through them back and forth. "Here, a security company, Commandited Security." The logo was the silhouette of a perched bird with the

arms and head of a lion, framed by a padlock. "Tighe's Market, a convenience store chain." This logo was a galloping horse dragging a flaming chariot across the company name. "A shoe store called Nordic Leather." The last was a golden boar with the caption, "We use real leather."

Jazlynn picked up his phone and stared intently at the images. "Not bad, but also not much of a revelation. I'm sure you could find dozens of companies with variations on these logos."

"But that's just it, these are companies with a stake in this town," John said and accepted his phone back. "Ragan talks about his dad's work sometimes. He said that these companies could revitalise the stagnating industrial section if they could be allowed to branch out here."

"I'm not questioning your logic here," Jazlynn said and raised an eyebrow, "but those are some pretty big words. Bigger than what I usually hear you use."

John blushed and giggled. "Hehe, well, I was just repeating what Ragan told me. He really has some interesting stories."

"These companies, then, are there more like them?"

"Oh yeah, loads. Ragan's told me about dozens of companies with interest in Ferman, but I don't know how many are seriously considering it."

Jazlynn nodded. "Mm, yeah. If any serious deals are made, it would be beneficial to clear land for them. And when I say beneficial, I mean of course that there is one central figure who would benefit from this."

"Yeah," John said quietly. "Ragan's dad, right?"

"All right, look, we still don't know how the monsters are summoned." She leant back into the couch, her shuttered eyes fixed on John. "And I'd think someone as smart as Aleksandro wouldn't use such obvious monsters that would point to him."

"So, it's not him?" John asked confused.

Jazlynn was quiet for a moment. "Regardless, it's a valuable clue, and you did well to spot it. But now that we have a pattern, we may be able to predict future events. How many more companies are interested in Ferman?"

John flicked through the photos on his phone. "As I said, dozens more. According to Ragan, the land around here is cheap and it's close to New York City."

"Then your job will be to single out some likely candidates," Jazlynn said. John nodded.

## **Chapter - 15 December 2010**

Below the stairs is where Minik had a small room for himself. It used to be their broom closet, but with John needing a bedroom, Minik had to move his man cave. Whenever he needed

time alone to surf the net or write reports or generally unwind, he would come here. It was cramped, but he could fit his desk, a computer, a chair, and a pair of shelves with his old trophies.

“And that’s all I need,” Minik said as he sat down.

The computer turned on and Minik went into his reports folder. Two of them were named simply Lawrence and Ronald and contained his search for John’s brothers. Minik glared at the screen, not feeling like opening the web browser to waste more time. He had been going at it for months, with nothing to show for it. It was like they had simply dropped off the surface of the earth.

Instead, Minik pulled out an old photo album and several loose photographs. John’s father, Henry, wore a beard growing thicker as time progressed, giving an order to the photos. They started with John’s parents moving in in 1990 and ended with their disappearance about half a year ago. Thanks to the beard, Henry seemed to grow older, but Marilyn... she nagged Minik the most. Over twenty years, her haircuts had been long, and they been short, and they had been long again. It was the face, though.

Minik pulled the photos close. She must have been around twenty on the earliest one, and a good forty something in the latest.

“No wrinkles,” he muttered and tapped his finger against the desk. He glanced at his computer screen for a second.

Neither of their names had gone anywhere, and he had tried all the variations and combinations of Marilyn and Henry and Pearce.

He took a sip of his beer, mulling over his choices. There was a revelation waiting for him, something he was still missing, just within his grasp. He grabbed the picture he thought to be the oldest. Marilyn and Henry Pearce stood with a baby in their arms, in the hospital parking lot. Minik scratched his chin, reminding himself to shave one of these days. He threw the photo back on to his desk and got up. He had looked through that damn album a dozen times, but maybe just one more peek...

He snuck down the hallway, careful not to wake anyone up, and went into the living room. He eased the album out of the cabinet and turned through its pages. Once more reaching the end with no satisfying conclusion, he sighed and collapsed into the armchair. Minik caressed the leather of the last page with his thumb.

He almost had a family like this, once. Would have been a boy, too. And only a few months older than John. He still wasn’t sure if fate was cruel or merciful.

“Oh shit.”

Minik snapped his hand back. He had been so lost in thought that he had just continued to rub the last page, and now the leather was peeling off. He almost clapped the book together when

he noticed something underneath. Minik glanced around the room, his ears throbbing to pick up any sound. Comfortable that he was alone, Minik tugged at the corner of the leather. It resisted, initially, so he tugged a littler harder. It came off in a single, fluid motion, and a scrap of paper fluttered to the ground.

It was a photograph. Minik stared at it. It was a tent of some kind, full of beds and injured people. There was a nurse crouched down next to a soldier, both of them smiling broadly. Minik raised an eyebrow and turned it over. *“Together at last, ‘51.’ Year of D-Day,”* Minik read with his own commentary spliced in. The next paragraph made his jaw drop. *“Heinrich and Marilyn, love forever.’* What the Hell?”

Minik turned the old photograph around and put it down next to the later ones.

“No. No way. If they had been alive in ‘51, they’d both be eighty today, at the very least.”

A cold shiver went down his back, freezing his sweat. His eyes darted from the old photograph to the newer ones. The man had no beard, and the woman had a different hairstyle, but they looked similar. Too similar.

## Chapter

The alleyway behind the Petersen home was illuminated only by pools of light coming out of the houses. Jazlynn waited in the darkness between them.

“Stop,” she said and pushed herself off the wall.

The two FBI agents paused at the edge of the light spilling out from the Petersen home.

“You know why we’re here,” Ebadicael said.

“Right, but the man inside is under my watch, and I guarantee that he will not harm anyone with what he knows.”

Gagesham advanced with a growl but Ebadicael held out an arm and stopped her. “That is really not for you to decide, Knight.”

Jazlynn clacked closer so she could stare down into the sunglasses of the Detective. “They’re the foster parents of Johnathan Pearce, who, I might add, you elected to take care of him. Did you honestly think they would not realise something eventually?”

“This is an unusual situation,” Ebadicael said. “We’re dealing with it the best way we know.”

“Then tell me, what does Minik really know? Are you willing to risk a big exposure on this?”

“Only if you make it so.”

The two glared at each other.

“You’re getting too close to the Nephilim,” Gagesham said from the sideline. “You’re getting too close to his family.”

Ebadicael glanced at her and nodded. "She's right. We're both concerned that you are losing focus here. Step aside and let us do our job," she said but Jazlynn remained in their way. "None of this is showing any signs of slowing down. The Nephilim almost had another breakdown, and now his foster father found a photograph that you should by all rights have destroyed."

"Hidden in the photo album that you released to them," Jazlynn said with a freezing voice. "I'm doing the best I can here too, so, what's it going to be?"

"You truly wish to fight us over this?"

Jazlynn nodded.

Ebadicael glanced both ways down the streets. "There will come a time when a fight will far outweigh the risks of exposure. By then, it will be too late, and we might have to purge this entire city."

"You're not seeing the bigger picture here. Someone here is summoning monsters."

"Then perhaps you should concentrate on that case instead."

The two FBI agents slinked back into the darkness.

"I will have to explain this situation to both of the parents. My job is still to contain the situation, but this will help in the long run."

The darkness did not speak back.

## Chapter

Minik jumped when Jazlynn came through the backyard entrance. "Oh. It's just you."

"I'm not John's aunt."

He blinked at her a few times. "Excuse me, for a moment I thought you said..."

Jazlynn sat down in the armchair opposite him. "You've just realised the truth about John's parents. Surely, this isn't too much of a stretch?"

"No. No, I suppose not. I'm sorry, I'm still trying to wrap my mind around this. John's parents were alive during the World War?"

Jazlynn nodded. "I don't know the specifics, I'm afraid, but I was sent here to... to train John. You were not supposed to know, but it was ridiculous to expect you not to catch on."

"S-so what is John?"

"He's your son."

"My son..." Minik snorted a laugh and smiled. "You know, Jens was one of the names we considered for our son. In Danish, that means John. It's like we lost him eleven years ago and got reunited with him again this summer."

"Life's funny sometimes."

“Will you tell me more about... about John?”

“I can’t. I’m sorry, I don’t know anything, but I’m trusting you to not tell anyone but Rose about this, so I hope you will trust me enough to not ask me any more questions. I can only give him training, but you can give him love. I can make him a demon, but you can make him a human. Is this too much for you?”

Minik closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Shit, we need to tell Rose.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Sure, but what do we tell her? That I just discovered John’s parents are immortal? I mean, what does that mean for him?”

“I don’t know, but I hope you’ll never get the chance to see what he’s capable of. I want you to give him as normal a life as possible.”

“You know, it almost feels like our life was put on hold when we lost our baby,” Minik said and opened his eyes. “I don’t need to know more about what John is. Just, please tell me we can keep him?”

“Of course. That’s what I’ve been working so hard on. Will you... still let me live here with you?”

Minik scratched his neck. “We should really ask Rose about that; we kind of have to let her in on it too. If that’s all right?”

Jazlynn sighed. “I suppose we should. Is she still awake?”

## Chapter

Rose sat in bed, reading a hardware manual, when her husband and Jazlynn entered. She took off her reading glasses and put the magazine aside. “Yes?” she asked.

Minik handed her a photograph, an old, worn one, depicting a tent and several beds.

“What?” she asked and looked up at the two again. “All right, what’s going on? Is this supposed to be a game?”

“Look closer,” Minik said.

Two people were in focus, a guy in bed and a nurse standing by his side. Rose almost put the photograph down again but quickly pulled it closer. “Is that John’s parents? Where did you get this?”

She flipped the photo over and read the text too.

“51? That can’t be right, that would mean they would be...” She looked up at the two people in her bedroom. “What the Hell is this?”

Jazlynn sat down on the edge of the bed. “You see, Rose, John’s mother is not of this world. I don’t know what she is, but she shared her immortality with a mortal man and started a family with

him. I don't know why, I don't know how, I've never seen anyone actually do it, but that's the theory as I understand it."

Rose opened her mouth. Every time she tried to form an argument against, she looked down at the photograph and found the same faces in the fifties as in the nineties.

"John is what we refer to as a Nephilim. A being who walks both worlds. And, one more thing... I am not his aunt," Jazlynn said, her shuttered eyes scrutinising Rose's face for the slightest hint of a reaction.

Rose put the photograph away and swung out of bed. "What are you then?"

"A guardian. And a mentor."

"And you came from the other world to do this as well?"

"I will explain things in more details later, but, yes, something like that."

Rose sat in silence for a while, staring at the floor. Minik sat down next to her and put his hand on her shoulder.

"I don't entirely get what's going on either, but I think we should let her stay. She only deceived us to help out John."

"Prove it. Can you prove to me that this is not just a hoax conjured up by you and my husband?"

Jazlynn stood up from the bed, still leaning against her cane. Except it was now a halberd. Neither Rose nor Minik could say when it had changed. Perhaps it never had. Perhaps it had always been a weapon and only now did she permit them to see the real deal.

"I am a Knight of Order, one of a few entrusted with Neon, and my mission is to guard the border between worlds. You have been granted a rare permission," she said.

Minik's mouth fell open.

"Holy shit," Rose said.

"Is this adequate?" Jazlynn asked. "Do you believe me now?"

"Yeah," she said, entranced by the sight and colours of the weapons.

And then it was a birdhouse cane again.

"I don't wish for anything to change between us," Jazlynn said softly. "And I really hope you can keep this a secret. I'm in enough trouble as is."

Rose pinched the bridge of her nose. "Jazlynn, why did you not tell us earlier? We would have realised at some point that John is special."

"My job is to keep information about the other world away from the residents of this plane of existence," she said in a professional tone. "I was hoping that John would never have to use his powers. The many attacks we have suffered, though, made it harder and harder."



"All right, well, sure. You may stay." Rose clapped her thighs and swung back into bed. "I think this is all I can deal with today, so I'll be headed to bed now."

"Yeah. That sounds like a good idea," Minik said, shaking his head. "I'll just put the photograph back where I found it first."

"I apologise if this is too much to take in," Jazlynn said.

"I can definitely see why you don't want this to be common knowledge. I'm trying to wrap my mind around it, but it just refuses to," Rose said. "Hopefully things will make more sense in the morning."

### Chapter - 3 January 2011

"You have a good time at your friend's," Jazlynn said from the couch.

"What are you doing, you're invited too," John said.

Jazlynn's usually laidback face grew rapidly attentive. "Say what?"

"Yeah, for Ragan's New Year's party, you're invited too."

"Oh boy... and you *want* me to come?" she asked.

"Of course," he replied and smiled.

Jazlynn dragged herself up on her feet. "I don't have anything to wear. How long do I have?"

"About an hour."

"Oh... I thought you were leaving now."

"No, Rose just insisted I got dressed early."

Jazlynn clacked out of the living room, and John fell back into the couch. With his foster parents now knowing about him, he could practise in the living room. First was the light in his palm, then transforming it. He could make things other than spheres, he just knew it, but getting it to obey was difficult. He couldn't materialise it too much or it would hurt, but without substance, it was like shaping water.

The doorbell chimed and his palm bubble burst.

"I'll get it," Minik called from upstairs.

John called on the light again, but his mind was too distracted. He could hear Minik talking by the door, but no one was being invited inside. John closed his hand and went for a look.

A man very much like Minik, looking a little less worn and a few years younger, stood in the doorway. Their conversation ceased as soon as John entered viewing range.

"Ah. I guess you were telling the truth, for once," the man said and pushed up his glasses. He wore what looked to be an expensive suit.

“Yes, this is my son, Johnathan,” Minik said and dragged John closer. He felt oddly tense in his grip.

“How do you do, young man? I’m your uncle, Alros.” He had a cold, detached demeanour as he looked at John.

“Minik never told me he had a brother.”

“I’m not surprised. None of my friends know I have a brother either.” Alros made a pained expression and sighed before heaving a flat present out from inside his jacket. “Here. To my brother, my only family.”

“I told you to stop coming around if you just want to deliver token presents. I don’t have anything for you,” Minik said.

The hand hovered in the air, still clutching the present. “That’s not why I...”

“If you’ll excuse us, we have an appointment tonight.”

Alros fidgeted with his tie and cleared his throat. “Well. It was nice seeing you again.”

He handed the gift to John instead and left. Once Minik had closed the door, he snatched the gift from John and headed for the living room.

“Who was that?” John asked and followed.

“My brother,” Minik grumbled. He opened the bottom drawer and shoved the gift in there. John just caught a glimpse of a dozen others before Minik kicked it shut again. “Now go get changed.”

“I already am.”

Minik looked him up and down. “Right, it’s me who isn’t done yet,” he said and ripped his tie off.

## Chapter

Down in the boiler room, they awoke. They knew their time was about to come. They also knew they had to be patient. They grabbed the weapons and armour that had been provided for them and they waited.

## Chapter

Aleksandro and Kizashi waited for them in the lobby, him wearing a green and white sweater with a pine tree motif, her a pair of fluffy antlers.

“Welcome,” Aleksandro said, throwing his arms around John and his three companions.

“We celebrating something?” Rose asked and handed over a bottle of wine. “The invitation wasn’t quite clear on the occasion.”

“It’s been a hectic year,” Kizashi said. “If anything, we’ll celebrate to a new year that can only be... better.” Her voice trailed off as Jazlynn came up from behind. She looked downright normal in a dress and with a bit of make-up, but she was still clutching her birdhouse cane.

“I’ll drink to that,” Jazlynn said.

“I see we’re last,” Rose said, looking at the corner where a small group of people was huddled. “That must be Phil and his family.”

John nodded.

“Now that we’re all gathered,” Aleksandro said, “I suggest we move to the dining room.”

“Follow along, or you’ll get lost,” Kizashi added and giggled.

## Chapter

They climbed the stairs and peeked out of the door. The coast was clear. They had no leader, no one to tell them what to do; they simply did as they had been born to do. They broke into two groups and slinked down the hallway in opposite directions.

## Chapter

The dining room for the occasion was the largest of the rooms that John had seen so far, with paintings and vases all along the walls. The table was perfectly cut for their exact number of people with plenty of elbow room. Even so, it did nothing to diminish the room. Phil and his family sat on one side of the table, his father a short, rotund man and his mother the exact opposite. It made Phil look like an exact mix of the two. His many siblings fell somewhere on the scale between extremes.

“Our house is often filled with guests,” Aleksandro said and clapped his hands together as the new arrivals seated themselves, “but rarely is it filled with family. I always wished to be blessed with more children, at least three of them, but that is not how it was supposed to go.”

He swung around the table end and held up a glass. Everyone else followed suit. “To the family we have, not all the what-ifs and could-have-beens.”

“And to those we have lost and those we have gained,” Kizashi said and held out her glass. “May the new year be better than the last. Kampai!”

John tasted juice in his glass. He wasn't sure which fruit, but then, he never knew what he ate or drank in this house. Ragan or his parents would usually explain it, but he could never put an image to the names.

Once the food had been eaten and conversations dried up, Aleksandro rose once more and raised his hands, silence falling on the gathering. "Friends and family, I... I cannot thank you enough for blessing our home like this. I hope we can make this a permanent deal, and a more frequent one at that. It has always been business that drew us away from Ferman, deals to be made and hands to be shaken, but things are looking good locally. Aside from vacations, we will likely be staying here more."

Phil's family grumbled something but cheered with the rest when Rose raised her glass.

Jazlynn used the disturbance to lean towards John. "Doesn't look like a man with a guilty conscience."

"No, he doesn't, I was thinking the same thing," John said and sipped his juice. "Did we get it wrong?"

"Maybe he just doesn't have a consciousness. He is a businessman, after all."

John felt full and zoned out of the table talk. It still felt a little weird that his foster parents knew about his powers. For the first couple of days, they had been acting differently. Probably still would, if they also knew the truth about the explosion at the recycling plant. For now, just having not to lie around the house was immense relief. After a while, Rose and Minik had also accepted the new aspect about their foster son. With no new events, they hadn't had to confront it, either.

A weird clanging came to his ears. He sat up straight and focused on it. It was moving around.

"What is that?"

Jazlynn looked around over the top of her glass. "I'd have felt it if there was anything wrong."

A shriek pierced the air.

Aleksandro hadn't sat down yet, his head jerking towards the sound. "Excuse me, everyone, I better see what that's about."

The doors burst open before he could go three steps. A lizard scampered in on two feet, its scales sandy brown with darker splotches. It raised a club over its head and smacked Aleksandro round the side of his face. He fell to the ground with a sickening splat.

"D-dear!"

Kizashi screamed and jumped out of her seat but froze in place when two more lizardmen streamed in. These held javelins instead. All three were dressed in crude leather gear and hissed at the party guests. These responded with screams and drew back.

“D-didn’t you feel anything?” John whispered to Jazlynn.

“No, but these grunts are likely too weak for me to pick up,” she responded, watching the lizardmen hobble inside.

“What do we do? I didn’t bring a gun!”

“Keep calm.” Jazlynn reached into a purse that Rose had provided for her and passed a plastic gun to John.

The lizardmen looked from guest to guest, their moves hesitant. John finally found out where that clanging came from: the lizardmen rapping their weapons against metal bucklers secured to their hips.

“I hope you’re ready for a solo mission,” Jazlynn said. “One of us will have to secure the mansion, the other stay with the guests.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Phil’s father blew himself up like a balloon, pushing his chest out. “How dare you miscreants just barge in here, dressed like that?” His entire family easily hid behind him though they all protruded above him. Kizashi clung to Rose, and Minik stared disbelieving at the scene.

One of the lizards waddled towards Phil’s father, its javelin swaying back and forth in its hands. It hissed, sticking out its tongue and revealing rows of razorblade teeth. Phil’s father paled as he realised it probably wasn’t a costume.

Jazlynn rose from her seat and kicked off the ground before her birdhouse cane could transform. The lizards all swung their heads towards her too late. Her halberd cut through the nearest one, separating its left arm and shoulder and a good chunk of the chest from its body. It screeched and flopped to the floor.

The second lizardman flailed its javelin around and stomped its feet and hissed and screeched. Jazlynn lowered the halberd and fired a clean hole through its chest. It fell backwards and did not get up again.

The third lizard banged its club against the floor twice before rushing her. Jazlynn swung the halberd towards it, but it exploded before she could take aim. John lowered his gun.

Silence fell on the gathering as they tried to comprehend anything of what had happened. Kizashi was the first to rouse from her stupor, sprinting to her husband.

“Dear!” she screamed, planting her bejewelled sausage fingers on his chest. The club had gotten him square in the side of his head. An angry bruise was forming on his cheek and around his eye.

“Well, uh, I think we should call the police,” Phil’s father said, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. His children were already busy with their phones.

“Are there any more of them?” John asked, looking up at Jazlynn.

Jazlynn closed her eyes and wrinkled her brow. “I’m sorry, I just can’t feel them. Dammit, why the Hell can’t I feel them?”

“How are you holding up?” Rose asked and wrapped her arms around John from behind.

“I-I’m good.”

“Man, I just can’t believe this.” She rested her chin on top of his head. “I lost my parents too when I was young, you know. It was just me all alone until I met Minik.”

“That’s right,” Minik said and dragged chairs over. “Life’s funny in a way. I was the older one, but it was my younger brother who did best in school and got all the praise from the teachers. I tried to find my own way for the longest time, and I thought I had found it in soccer until I met Rose. I thought she was just another bad decision, but if anything, she’s the only good one I ever made.”

“You guys...” John felt something tickling in the corner of his eyes. He wiped his face on the sleeve of his shirt. “Why tell me this now?”

Rose released him and sat down in the chair Minik had procured. “We don’t want to lose you. We know about loneliness.”

“Enough to never want it again or wish it on anyone we know.” Minik sighed. “You have to take care of this, right?”

John nodded. “I do.”

“What about you?” Rose asked and looked at Jazlynn.

She shook her head. “Someone has to stay behind and protect you guys.”

“Couldn’t he do that?”

“I won’t always be here for him. He needs to show me what he has learnt.” She smiled at John.

“Don’t worry... mum... dad.” John hugged both of his foster parents.

“Be careful, son,” Minik said.

John nodded. When Rose finally released him, John hurried out of the dining room.

## Chapter

Ragan stared down at his father, sorrow and rage competing for his face. He clenched his fists and tears streamed down his cheeks. His mother sobbed, both wanting to hold her husband but also afraid she'd worsen his condition.

"What the Hell is the meaning of this?" Ragan said. His mother didn't hear him, nor his father or anyone else in the room.

Blood had formed a small pool next to Aleksandro's face. The reflection of the ceiling swirled and a voice echoed out of it. *"I took the liberty of advancing the plan a little; after all, the conversion's been completed for a few days now."*

"This wasn't the plan. You... you had no right. NO FUCKING RIGHT!" Ragan yelled.

*"Oh, so it's only cool with you when it doesn't hurt people you don't know? Like an old war veteran or a few dozen homeless people?"*

"No, that's not..." Ragan wiped the tears and snot from his face and took a deep breath. "You're supposed to be on my side. MINE."

*"And what do you think I'm doing? No one's going to believe you were behind any of the attacks if one happened to you personally."*

"And my dad?"

*"Hey, I'm the god of coincidence, am I not?"*

Ragan stared intently at his father's resting form. True enough, he spotted a shallow breathing. "And just coincidentally, my father was struck non-fatally."

Hollow laughter echoed in his ears. Ragan knelt by his father, ignoring it.

"It's going to be all right, mom. Dad's going to make it."

## Chapter

Hoffman waited for him outside the door, flicking a short salute at him.

"What good are you going to be if you can't detect the lizards?" John asked.

"The lizard-kin."

"Pardon?"

"That's what I call them, the lizard-kin," she said and stuffed her hands into her trouser pockets. "And you can always do with an extra set of eyes."

"I suppose. Where do we go from here?"

Hoffman shrugged. "The police will be here soon. Just take care of as many as you can before then."

A scream pierced the air following a lot of clattering. "I think I have an idea of where to go."

The hallway was beautifully adorned with a thick rug and what passed for modern art on tables. Going left, John came to the kitchen. It looked like something you'd find in a restaurant. One of the chefs was duelling a lizard-kin while a handful more chased the rest of kitchen staff around the various stations. Glass and plates and pots and pans flew into the air, either as defence by the staff or knocked over in the chase.

None of them had spotted John yet. He took a deep breath and launched his first barrage, catching most of the lizard-kin in the back. One went astray and sent a pot flying. It and the boiling water inside landed on top of the duelling lizard-kin and sent it sprawling.

Two remained. Their tongues lashed out and their eyelids squelched close and open again. Hissing, they charged at him, brandishing their clubs. John jumped back as he summoned more energy.

One club grazed him at the top of his head, knocking him down. The lizards towered over him, ready to pummel, but John fired a couple of projectiles. The lizard-kin staggered back with their new holes and plopped to the ground.

"Everyone all right?" John asked as he got up, massaging where the lizards barely hit him.

The kitchen staff nodded and looked perplexed either at the dead lizard-kin or at John.

"Thank you," the duelling chef said.

"Yeah, you saved us. Thank you so much," a cook said.

"Do you know if there are any more around?" John asked. They all shook their heads. "I have to look the mansion through, then."

"Wait!" One of the cooks took off her hat and tugged it under her arm to wipe her forehead. "I don't know if there are more around, but you should check out the boiler room."

"Don't bother him with that," the chef said. "It's just been acting up a little and making weird noises. Besides, the young master told us not to go in there."

"It's as good as any other place."

Ten minutes later, John had checked every room on the way, including the game room where they sometimes played, but had met little resistance. Mostly solitary lizard-kin stalking the corridors. He reached the boiler room and was met with long, winding stairs. John flicked the light switch, but nothing happened.

"*You know, there is a way to summon monsters without alerting anyone,*" Hoffman said, nothing more than a whisper in his ears. Before John could reply, she continued. "*All you'd have to do is summon something that's already here.*"

"You didn't have any trouble detecting me."



A dry chuckle echoed in his ears. *"You did also set off an explosion of energy. After that, it was just a matter of following the scent."*

John walked slowly in the darkness, gripping the railing tightly. His ears were perked for any noise. All he could hear was the creak of the stairs. "Fine, fine, but are you saying that the lizard-kin have always been here?"

*"Yes. And no."*

*"And what is that supposed to mean?"*

*"I believe that they are humans who have been transformed into lizards."*

"Is that... is that possible?" John asked, feeling a chill run down his spine. The room was hot, and the beads of sweat now felt like small pearls of ice.

*"Well..."* Hoffman replied in a sombre tone. *"Theoretically, it's the same process as summoning monsters. All you'd have to do is summon the idea of a lizard-kin unto a human recipient."*

*"But, wait, there haven't been any news about disappearances."*

*"Maybe not disappearances, but what about displacements?"* she asked. As John did not reply, she spelled it out for him. *"The homeless."*

*"But I saw them. In that warehouse. They're all right,"* John protested.

*"And how many more do you think there were in town? Or decided to spend just a night or two before moving on?"*

John could see it but did not like it. By now, he had reached the bottom and did not have time to worry. His heart hammered in his chest. A couple of lizards he could take out at a time. The furnace room felt large, and it was hot and humid, making him sweat. There could be dozens down here. John summoned energy into his hand and held it up, banishing the light from around him.

*"You're getting better."*

*"Just a little trick I came up with. All shine and no power."*

John gently threw the ball of light into the air, and it hovered around the room. He could only see the stone floor, some pipes, and finally the furnace itself. It was a big, white monstrosity humming along.

*"So, uh... do you also think Ragan's father could be behind it?"*

With no visible threat, John began walking around cautiously. Still all he could see were machines with heavy cases to protect them from the moisture and the heat.

*"He did take a good hit to the face. I doubt he'd do that to himself, under any circumstance."*

John smiled. "Yeah. I was afraid it'd be someone I knew."

*"Yes, I wonder."*

Something shifted through the light. John guided the sphere, but it fizzled away. Clang. Clang. Clang. John slowly turned around. Suddenly a wall had fallen behind him. A scaly, green wall. A glimmer announced a gust of wind whooshing past his cheek. He touched a hand and felt warm blood.

## Chapter

Phil's father hugged his twin daughters close to his chest. "Don't worry, everyone. The police will be here soon," he said, his moustache bristling.

Phil sat next to him, hands in his lap. Why was John the only one with power? He was off saving the day, while all Phil could do was comfort his mother. She sat stiffly in her chair, observing silently like a prairie dog. Her grip was tight around his hand. The rest of his brothers and sisters sat around and in-between them.

John's family was even more nervous, his mom and dad holding each other. The aunt stood guard by the door, leaning up against her ridiculous cane. Ragan and his mom sat around Mr Cloubough. He was getting around and mumbled a few words.

The door creaked open, and Jazlynn tensed like a cat ready to pounce. What came in were just the kitchen staff along with some of the maids and the butler. They all reported that they had been cornered until John showed up. There were a lot of people. If John had to help all of them, then he had to be getting tired by now.

The tension in the room eased, and Phil slipped away from his mother and over to Ragan. "You think John's all right?" he whispered.

"He better be," Ragan said, not taking eyes off his father.

"But what if he's running out of energy?"

"Then the police should be here soon. In fact..." Ragan glanced to the windows at the other side of the room. "I think that's them."

## Chapter

The darkness shattered with flashes of light. The lizards cut through them, some falling to the ground, but John was gone. He had used the confusion to slip away and now sat with his back against one of the many machines. His heart hammered, he was panting, but he smiled nonetheless. "I don't know why, but I feel amazing!" he gasped.

*"You wouldn't react like a normal human," Hoffman said into his ear. "Remember what we taught you: your power amplifies your emotions, and your emotions amplify your power. Right now, your power is giving you courage, and your courage is strengthening your power."*

"Yeah, it's great!"

He leapt from cover and fired his gun blindly. The basement lit up in short bursts, giving John a quick overview and several satisfactory screams. He zipped between javelins and clubs, sending more shots flying.

*"It's not great. This is a downwards spiral that ends where your powers began."*

"Come on, what's the problem? Don't you think I'm doing a great job here?" He laughed, pretending he was a cowboy.

Something heavy caught him in his back. He staggered forward and smacked into the wall. "P-point taken," he said and rubbed his head as he ran along. "What's the plan then?"

*"You get the Hell out of here, for one."*

John charged another shot. In the light, he saw another club swinging at him. He threw himself to the floor and fired the shot, the lizard-kin exploding. A dozen more were still left, coming from all sides. John bit his lip and summoned the energy again, but this time it was the gun blowing up.

"Dammit, not already," he whispered as the fragments drifted from his fingers.

He summoned the energy directly into his hands, feeling the familiar stabs of pain and the drops of blood trickling down his skin. He flicked the orbs away, seeing in momentary flashes the lizard horde advancing on him. He was surrounded.

Pop. Scream.

John looked behind him as a hole opened in the lizard ranks.

"Get to the stairs!" Jazlynn yelled.

John didn't wait to be told twice and bolted for the steps, summoning and throwing more energy as he went. The stench of blood and death assailed his nose, making him queasy. He held back his urge to throw up and grabbed the railing and pulled himself up the winding stairs. He wanted to summon more energy, but his hand had begun throbbing painfully.

The lizards screeched and followed him, clawing and banging at the wooden steps. Pops and flashes came from the top, and the pursuers vanished into crimson mist. One hand grabbed John's ankle. He yelped and felt his leg heat up. The lizard's squawking was cut short as it exploded.

And just like, he had reached the top, and silence fell on the basement. John breathed deeply and collapsed on his back.

“You still have a lot to learn, kid.” Jazlynn appeared above him, leaning against her cane.  
“For one, entering hostile territory without a plan is a bad idea.”

John sighed and clutched his arm, trying to suppress the pain. Crimson pearls welled up from the wounds and dripped like tears. He yanked his sleeve down. Rose would just get too worried.

“So, how did I do?” he asked.

“You managed to survive while also saving people. I can’t fault you for either of those.” She put her hand on his head and rubbed vigorously. “Controlling your emotions is half of what we practise, though. I need to see you able to muffle yourself better before I can let you off.”

“I know, but it’s not easy, all right?”

“No, it really isn’t, but it’s mostly a problem when you’re fighting. That’s when you need to be extra careful.”

John nodded and got up on his feet.

“Now let’s get back. The police are already here.”

“Is everyone going to remember this?” John asked. “I guess the cat’s out of the bag on this one.”

“Not necessarily.”

John looked at her puzzled, but she opened the basement door and John saw that the hallway outside was strewn with corpses. Human ones.

“What? I-I don’t understand.”

She pointed to the only lizard. Its scales were turning into a patched jacket, its head becoming round and soft, its claws retracting.

“People... I... I’ve been fighting people this whole time?” John almost screamed, feeling the colour drain from him.

Jazlynn grabbed his shoulder. “No! No, these are not people, not anymore. Once they were turned, there was no going back. Do you understand that?”

“You’re just saying that.” He pushed her away, but she grabbed him again.

“No, listen to me. As soon as these people were transformed, they died. They’re going back now because you dispelled the magic and gave them peace.”

An old man with a thick, grey beard lay where the lizard-kin had been.

“Come on.”

John wiped his eyes and followed her.

What do we do now? I mean, everyone here saw these people as lizards.”

“They’re not going to remember,” Jazlynn said. “That’s the life of a Knight; no one remembers us or what we did.”

“But...” John looked around. None of the corpses had any wounds, like they had just collapsed to the ground. Even the blood from the lizard was gone. “This isn’t right. Now everyone will think these homeless people did it.”

“That’s just how it is.”

“They had nothing to do with this!” he protested and looked up at Jazlynn. “They’re the real victims here, and you’re telling me they’ll have to take the blame?”

“Would you prefer everyone started to panic about monsters being real?”

“Of course not. It’s just... haven’t these people suffered enough? There’s a reason they were on the street in the first place, then their home in Sacrisyard was destroyed, and now this?”

“What do you propose we do instead, hmm?” Jazlynn asked and looked directly at him.

“Complaining won’t change anything, John. You either change what you can or learn to accept what you can’t. It’s that simple. Tell me, what would you do here?”

John opened his mouth, but nothing came to him.

“I get it more than anyone else, believe me.”

## Chapter

Policemen were waiting in the front hall of the mansion. Phil’s father was going on a long tirade while holding his children close. Ragan and his family were gone but there were plenty of staff being interviewed as well. Rose and Minik sat in a couch by the wall. When they saw John enter, Rose jumped up and fell around John’s neck. His cuts were still there but looking like nothing more than the scrapes or nicks a child would usually get playing. “I was so worried about you!”

“Yes, I thought you might be,” Jazlynn said coming from behind.

“You got to listen to this,” Rose said hushed, casting furtive glances. “When I said we were attacked by lizard people, everyone just stared at me funny. And the only bodies around here are of homeless people.”

Jazlynn nodded. “Just stick to whatever version everyone else is dishing out. It’ll be easier that way. Important thing is that you know what the truth is.”

“S-sure,” Rose said.

“You can’t tell anyone,” John said. “Not about me or the lizards either.”

“I guess it’ll be our secret then.” She squeezed around John tighter. “Listen, sweetie, I need to talk with the cops again, but I’ll be right back.”

“Any idea why we’re the only ones remembering the lizards?” Minik asked and scratched his neck.

“That would be my doing,” Jazlynn said and sank back into the opposite couch.

Minik opened his mouth, closed it again, and opened it once more. "I'm just going to accept that as one of those things you do," he said and looked over at John. "Will this be a regular thing for you? I mean, you're eleven. Seems a little young to be... patrolling the streets for muggers and bank robbers."

"The police can handle those things," Jazlynn said.

"So that's a negative on patrolling?" Minik smiled as Jazlynn nodded.

"I have this gift for a reason." John clenched his fist. "I'm only going to be using it to fight monsters, though."

Rose rejoined them shortly accompanied by a police officer. He interviewed the two newcomers, scratched a few things into an electronic tablet, and sauntered off.

"I told him the same story as everyone else did," she whispered. "So, I have to know, will you be going on patrols?"

## Chapter

"Are you feeling better?" Kizashi asked, clutching her husband's hand.

"Yes, dear, much better." Aleksandro smiled, despite lying in a hospital bed with half his face bandaged.

"The doctors said you were lucky," she continued. "No brain damage and only minor fractures. With some rest, you'll be good as new."

"Looks like Ragan will have to take over the business while I recuperate, eh, son?"

"I'll do my best," Ragan said.

The mirror behind him swirled and filled with shadows.

*"First half of the plan is done,"* a voice said.

"What plan? All of the lizards are dead."

The voice laughed, sending chills through Ragan's body. *"What died can live again, and what lives again can become even stronger."*

"I thought you were supposed to help me. What are you planning behind my back?"

*"You'll see."*

"No, I won't see!" He could raise his voice all he liked, his parents wouldn't hear him speaking to the entity, but what he really wanted was to get up and punch the mirror. "You're starting to act too independently. You almost killed my father, and I know you're scheming something in secret. If you don't start cooperating more with me, then our partnership is over. It's that simple."

The voice fell silent and Ragan turned back to his father. It hurt him like nothing ever had to see him like that. No, that wasn't true, one thing had before. Hurting John. The voice had assured him that they would have been in the hospital. Had that been a lie too? Even the people in the park and the homeless people started to hurt now.

*"Johnathan Pearce is in our way."* The voice had never sounded so cold. Ragan could see his breath form in the air, and even his parents started shivering and looking around. *"This next attack will be aimed at him directly, and it will kill him."*

Ragan glanced over at the mirror. Frost covered it yet he could still see the shadow. "No! Are you mad?"

*"You wanted to save this city and I answered your pleas. As long as this agreement is not fulfilled, our contract stands."*

The mirror shattered and the temperature snapped back to where it was previously. His parents yelled and covered themselves from the raining shards. Ragan was too numb to move, even when he felt something brush against his cheek and something warm dripped down his face.

## Chapter

Phil's father planted himself in his favourite recliner and sighed like a torn ball letting out all its air at once. The living room floor was cluttered with toys and books as the children played and did their last homework before school started again. Phil sat in the middle, pushing a toy truck over to his baby brother. The little guy clapped his hands and tried to do the same but didn't quite grasp he needed to let go of it to achieve similar results.

"It's not fair, why does John get to have cool powers?" he said. The baby yanked the truck back and forth faster and faster. "I wish I was a superhero. Then I could solve all those mysterious things going on in town. And after that, I could go to the big city. Probably full of crimes."

The baby threw the truck to the floor and crawled towards a ball instead. Without anyone noticing, Phil slipped out of the living room and drifted back to his own room. He plopped down on his bed and dragged a pair of headphones down over his ears and turned on his iPod. *Mercyful Fate* started playing, and he closed his eyes. He was finally alone again, until someone needed him. The only surprise then would be whether it was his siblings or his parents.

*"Feels like no one pays any attention to you, huh?"*

Phil opened an eye. That had not been part of the lyrics. Then again, it couldn't be someone in his room either or he would not have heard that voice as clearly.

"Um... hello?" he asked and slipped the headphones off.

*"And your two best friends have been so busy lately."* It sounded like a grown-up. Phil swung off his bed and looked around. *"I mean, Ragan's always been busy, always travelling, but now John too? Getting superpowers?"*

The view through his window faded into black. A man in ripped jeans and a dirty tank top looked back at him.

*"Who the Hell are you?"* Phil asked, sliding sideways to a baseball bat he kept in the corner.

*"I'm a demon, Philliden Tudrustuch, and I know what you want."*

Phil's hand hovered above the pommel of the bat. *"What?"*

*"I've been keeping an eye on you, and I have a once-in-a-lifetime deal for you. Money, power, glory, bitches; nothing would be outside of your range."* His hand turned with each proposition and a smoky representation of it wafted into the air.

*"What's the catch?"*

*"Nothing you need to worry about for a long, long time. So? What do you say? You won't get a deal this sweet anywhere else."*

Phil shook his head. *"A few months ago, I'd have thought I was going insane, but I've seen enough weird crap lately to accept that you're probably really here."*

*"Oh, I'm real, all right, and I care about you; I am only interested in those with powerful desires and ambitions, and yours are out of this world. You want people to notice you. You want riches and fame."*

*"Who doesn't?"*

The apparition walked around in his window. *"Here, you're ignored. Always someone wanting something of you. Your best friends are kids, and people your own age ignore you out of hand. You're never even given the time of day. Except me. I can make you a somebody."*

Phil's hand on the bat shook. *"You can do that?"*

*"And so much more! The world will lay at your feet."*

*"You will just give all of that to me? I would have to do nothing?"*

*"Not a thing!"*

Phil took a deep breath and grabbed the bat. *"Sorry, but I can't accept that."*

The man's smile faded. *"What do you mean?"*

*"It sounds good, it really does, but I won't really have earned it your way, would I?"* Phil continued and levelled his bat at the window. *"If I want to be at the top of the world, then I can't be in anyone's debt. Certainly not yours; I'd never be satisfied with a hollow victory like that."*

*"So, you think you can achieve anything on your own?"* The apparition laughed; a haunting, chilling laughter that made Phil's skin crawl. *"I am giving you the only chance you'll ever get to move*



*anywhere in this world. A police officer? How would a dumb shit like you ever pass that exam? And even if you did, what would that get you?"*

*"Get out," Phil said in a low, deadly tone.*

*"You're a worthless piece of shit, Philliden Tudrustuch. I'm your only lifeline out of the rut that you can't even see that you're trapped in. You think you're going to move up in life, but you're stuck in a track heading for mediocrity and misery. I can give you those things that you will never have but so desperately want."*

*"I said get out!"*

Phil swung the bat as hard as he could against the window. It had less of a dramatic effect than he hoped, merely creating a spiderweb-like crack. The man inside glared at him.

*"You'll be sorry," the man growled.*

*"I will get what I want on my own, all right?"*

The darkness faded from his window and Phil lowered the bat, huffing and puffing. He threw the bat on the floor and collapsed back on the bed.

*"Phil, what's that noise?" his mother yelled.*

Phil jolted up straight. *"Oh crap."*

## Chapter

Azer heaved a deep sigh and pulled away from the cracked portal. *"Never mind, I suppose."*

He lifted a hand, and the portals shifted until he found a dark one. Azer stared at it, his demeanour shifting. The portal grew lighter. John's bedroom swung into sight, with John at his desk, drawing. He noticed the creak and turned around and smiled at seeing Azer.

*"It's been a while, John. How are you holding up?"*

John got up and sat down on his bed instead. *"Did you see today?"*

*"You mean your fight with the lizards?"*

*"So, you did see it?"*

Azer nodded. *"Of course I did. I told you, I'm always keeping an eye on you, and I must say, I'm very impressed with your progress. You're getting really good."*

John beamed. *"I've been practising every day."*

*"I can see that."*

*"Listen, Azer, there's been something I've been meaning to ask you."*

Azer shifted nervously. *"Yeah?"*

*"Are you ready? I mean, to tell me what you're doing in that dimension?"*

*"Is that all?" he asked and laughed.*

*"What's so funny?"* John asked.

"No, it's just that I came here to ask that same question. What a funny... coincidence, I suppose." He put a finger to his chin.

*"Of course,"* John said. *"You told me you're looking for a way to get out of there, so recently I started wondering what you were doing there at all."*

Azer turned his back on the portal and looked up into the void. "Very well. It's my brother, Oudin, who imprisoned me here many thousand years ago. He wanted to take over the world, so I tried to stop him."

*"What happened?"*

"I am the god of coincidences, and he is the god of deception. He tricked the Knights of Order seal me in here."

*"Knights of... you mean people like Jazlynn, right?"* John asked.

"That's right," Azer replied and turned around to face him again.

*"So that's why you don't trust her."*

Azer shrugged. "I can't help it, but I don't blame them, really."

*"What happened with your brother?"*

"I was unable to stop him in time. To this day, he continues to manipulate the course of history and feeding on the very worst of human emotions."

John looked down between his legs. *"That's awful. Does that mean we have no free will?"*

"Of course you have a free will, you can always choose to ignore him, but that's the hard part; he always makes it sound like his ideas come from a higher place. And that's why it's so imperative, in other words important, that I get out of here."

John nodded. *"I swear, I will do anything to get you out of there, anything."*

Azer smiled. "Thank you, but the seal on me was made by twelve really strong Knights; to break the seal would require a similarly strong power."

*"Right, but maybe if I'll talk with Jazlynn--"*

"No," Azer yelled. "No, don't do that. The Knights are not keen to admit their mistakes, and you know what she would do if she found out you had been talking with me."

Azer studied John's face closely. The young man churned Azer's words through his head, while Azer held his breath.

*"You're probably right,"* John said, and Azer let out air again.

"Did you have any other questions? And no, I have not found your parents yet."

John rested his arms in his lap. *"By now I'm starting to wonder if religion is really worth it in the end. Seems to be nothing but trouble."*

“Hey, you know it’s all real, at least. Just got to be careful of where you put your trust.”

“*I like that,*” John said and smiled. “*My parents hated everything religious, and I can sort of see where they’re coming from now, but I still like to have something to believe in.*”

“As long as you don’t expect your problems to magically vanish.” Azer put on his best grin and stretched. “Well then, John, I am off now. You worked hard today, so you must be tired. No staying up late tonight.”

As if on cue, John yawned. “*Oh, right, yeah. Thanks.*”

Azer waved and the portal closed. “That was too close. I can’t fail now, not when I’m so close to getting out of here.” He rested his arm against the portal and put his head there. “Well, not like he’ll need me to tell him what to do. He’ll play his part.”

## **Part 5 – Monster Zombies**

### **Chapter - 30 January 2011**

“Where’s Phil?” John asked and looked around the parking lot. “Is he still grounded?”

“He did take a bat to his bedroom window.” Ragan shuffled up the side of the warehouse with hands buried deep in his pockets and a scarf wound several times around his neck and up his face. “Though I think by now it’s just the girlfriend he found.”

It had stopped snowing a few days ago. Now John wished the wind would have too. “He’s got a girlfriend? Since when?”

“He met her at that place he started working... why are you laughing?” Ragan asked and dragged his knit cap further down his head.

“Sorry, sorry, I just never figured I would be the one asking *you* questions about Phil,” John said, putting a mittened hand over his mouth. “You’ve just never really been all that sociable. Is this... is this because of what happened to your dad?”

Ragan shook his head. “No. Well, yes, but not for the reasons you’re thinking of. It’s just that, we’re here in town now, probably for good,” he said. “I’d like to hold on to the friends I have.” Ragan had not brought gloves and alternated between blowing on his hands and stuffing them back into his pockets. “Can we get inside already? It’s not getting any warmer out here.”

The warehouse kept attracting the homeless, and it was halfway full by now. A small camp had been erected by now with tents all over the place in addition to several facilities, like for cooking food and going to the toilet.

“Do your parents know you’re spending money on this?” John asked and shirked off some of his clothes. There was both heating and electricity now.

“How could they not?” Ragan countered and followed John’s example. “Besides, this place is full of recruits for my father’s construction projects. Look over there.”

Against the wall he pointed to, several stalls had been erected. Some of them advertised job opportunities, not just construction, but also offers of education with the intent of employment afterward.

“This place has become like a... a middle station to a better life,” John said and smiled.

The medic van was still parked by the entrance. The nurse, taking blood from a young man, waved at them. A police officer broke from his patrol and came up to them.

“Back again?” he asked with a playful smile. “Don’t you boys ever get tired of volunteering here?”

“It’s the least we can do,” John said.

The officer almost went back to his patrol when his gaze fell on Ragan. “You know, I’ve been thinking about this, but aren’t you the Cloudbough son?”

Ragan breathed deeply. “Yes, and before you ask, I am here because I sympathise with the plight of the homeless. I recognise that the ones who attacked my mansion were a fringe group, and I hope to show others not to fear the homeless by example.”

The officer scratched his neck. “Oh, I-I see. Carry on, then.”

“You totally rehearsed that,” John whispered as the officer went on his way.

“I’ve learnt to always be able to explain myself.” Ragan sighed. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

There were plenty of other volunteers, most picked from medical schools who needed experience as part of their education. They handled the caretaking aspect for the homeless with mental diseases and instabilities. Others sought to become counsellors of some sort and spoke with the men and women about education and re-education and finding jobs. John and Ragan were mostly tasked with supervised assistance or as errand boys.

Once more, John found himself face to face with Taker, again alone. The old lady had a blanket and a sleeping bag. Her large collection of books was kept in several shopping bags and seemed to be her only possessions.

“She’s quite taken with you,” a female volunteer said and smiled. John nervously smiled as well, not sure if that had been a joke.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked.

“Obviously, her name isn’t Taker, and finding any relatives or associations is impossible without a name,” she said. “DNA and fingerprints haven’t gotten us anywhere either, so look through her stuff. Maybe she wrote her name in one of her books.”

John glanced over at the old lady. She was slumped over in a picnic chair, asleep.

“She can get a little handsy,” the volunteer continued, “but she’s absolutely harmless. If you run into any trouble, though, just call for one of the guards walking around here.”

“Yeah, we’ve met,” John said.

The volunteer left, and John went to work. “Hey,” he called out to Taker. “Hey, is it all right if I take a look at your things?”

Taker snored lightly.

John spread out one bag of books on the blanket. He recognised one of them; the well-thumbed one she had gifted him a while back. Many of the others were worn too, ranging from philosophy to theoretical science. These were full of notes scrawled in a small hand and underlining. They were also over twenty years old. The most recent was from 1980, the oldest being the one that John had been gifted, dated to 1950. The handwriting in this one was clumsier and often just consisted of doodles.

In contrast, the other half of her collection had no apparent rhyme or reason. There was a historical text on Mesopotamia, one on beekeeping, a third on virtues and vices, and a fourth on 1800s sailing and sailors in Britain. These books also contained library stamps and their spines had library stickers on them. The last page revealed them to have last been lent out either in the nineties or noughties.

“What happened to you?” John mumbled and flicked through a book on lemurs.

He put the likely stolen library books aside. They could be a window into her madness, but he needed to figure out her identity for now. The best place to start was the oldest book. John dragged it into his lap and leafed through it more carefully.

Only a few pages in, his tactic rewarded him. What he had discarded as another doodle was, on closer inspection, a clumsy scrawl of letters. John sounded out the letters to try and decipher them. “Return to... Carla... Brown.”

“People used to call me Charlie Brown. Even my fiancée.”

John jerked to his feet, dropping the book. The old lady sat watching him, her eyes sharper than he had ever seen them.

“I-I’m really sorry for...”

The awareness faded again, and Taker's head drooped. A quiet snore soon followed. John grabbed his chest and sighed deeply. He packed up the books again and placed them back in the cart. *Carla Brown*, he repeated to himself, adamant to pass it on to the other volunteer.

"Crawling... like snakes."

John did an about take. A man had clearly spoken but only Taker sat in the chair. Her eyes were wide open but far, far away. "The summer was scorching hot again that year. Many villages along the delta were starving. People turned to banditry to survive. Some of them grew to like it."

"What are you talking about?" John said, feeling a chill at seeing her like that.

"We had been lucky. We had managed to scrape together a small stock. We didn't feast, but we didn't starve either. That's why they came for us, and they killed us all. My wife, my two daughters. But I saw them. I burnt their faces into my mind, and I swore revenge with my last breath."

Taker's head lolled back down, the voice replaced with her snoring.

"Seriously?" John asked.

"Are you done?" The female volunteer was back, tapping nervously on her pad. "Either way, it's probably best you go home for now. People have started gathering in front of the warehouse again."

John nodded and relayed the information he had found, neglecting Taker's last outburst.

"Carla Brown. Got it," the volunteer said, her finger dancing across her pad. "Hopefully we can find someone who knows her."

One of the security guards joined them, Ragan trailing along after him. "We better get you two out of here. Just in case that mob tries to get inside."

## Chapter

"Honestly, I can't believe our mayor isn't speaking out on the subject," Rose said and heaped a pile of rice on her plate.

"The man doesn't care about the homeless, plain and simple," Minik replied, already digging into his stew. "He wanted to preserve Sacrisyard so that they would be contained, and now he's hoping people are going to take action for him."

Rose prodded her pile of rice with her spoon. "And don't people have better things to do in this cold? Even the Clouboughs went public against retaliation. Right?"

Ragan nodded from the other end of the table. "Yeah. We donated a fair amount to the welfare of the homeless too." He swallowed his mouthful of stew before continuing. "And thank you very much for having me over for dinner."

“So well-mannered. John, you need to take notes here,” Rose said and laughed.

Jazlynn quietly ate, constantly stealing suspecting glances over at Ragan, as if anticipating him to suddenly declare himself the mastermind behind the string of incidents so far.

“Really, though, do you have to keep going?” Rose asked in a more sombre tone. “I mean, all that’s happened so far is a lot of shouting, but someday... who knows, maybe a firebomb or a gun or something.”

“Don’t you think you’re exaggerating a little?” Minik cautioned.

“I’m just saying, I’m not comfortable with this situation.”

“We’ve been over this before, the boy can take care of himself. Really.”

John smiled, knowing what they referred to. Neither of his foster parents knew that Ragan was in on the secret, and it always amused him to see them tiptoe around the subject.

“I’ll be okay, mom. It’s only once a week, anyway. I’m hoping Phil can join us next Sunday too.”

Minik tapped his spoon against the table. “You know, maybe I’ll join you guys next time. I’m not comfortable with you guys going alone.”

“Then how about we all go?” Rose suggested.

Jazlynn looked up, aware that focus was suddenly on her. “I don’t know how much help I could be, but sure, I’ll come too.”

“Great! We can even make it tomorrow,” Rose said.

Minik nearly swallowed his spoon. “T-tomorrow?”

“Yeah. I was wondering what we should do on Freedom Day, and this seems like the perfect idea.”

“Of course.”

“I can probably make it,” Ragan said.

“Mm, me too,” Jazlynn said.

“Then it’s settled! Now eat, eat up. Minik spent all day making this.” Rose doled out more portions despite no one being quite done yet.

## Chapter

John’s room. He was sleeping in John’s room, on a mattress next to John’s bed. Ragan closed his eyes and tried to still his heart. A sleep-over. He had always wanted to try it, but there had never been time. No, that wasn’t true, he had never made the time, never wanted to bother with it. Never had the friends.

Ragan turned over, to face away from John.

"John, I was wondering, what do you think of me?"

"What do you mean?"

*I'm wondering if you could forgive me everything I have done to you and for not telling you about any of it. "N-never mind."*

He fell quiet and Ragan closed his eyes.

"You're my best friend. I'm really not sure if I could go through everything that I have without you."

Ragan put a hand over his eyes and thanked the darkness for hiding him. He opened his mouth when the closet door creaked open. In the moonlight coming in from the window, he could just make out a mirror glued to the inside. A shape stirred in the depths.

*"I hope you're ready for tomorrow."*

Ragan drew the duvet over his head.

## **Chapter - 1 February 2011**

"Did you know that they celebrate Freedom Day a month earlier in Europe?" Minik asked from behind the wheel of his car.

"N-no, really?" John asked, squeezed to the side with Jazlynn between him and Ragan.

"While the World War officially ended on the first of January 1953, American soldiers were not sent home for a whole month to help keep the peace."

"Except for the injured," Rose continued.

"Not to mention that, while the first soldiers did start to come home after a month, many more had to stay on duty. It took almost a year before America pulled out entirely, and some were sent back once or twice," Ragan said from somewhere beyond Jazlynn. "Surely, you must have heard about that in class?"

John just chuckled nervously.

"As usual, your inattentiveness fails to surprise me," Ragan mumbled.

"Well, we learn so much at school. I'm bound to forget something."

They pulled in towards the warehouse and found the place cramped with people, most holding up signs and chanting.

"They're a menace!" someone shouted.

"No one's safe as long as these animals can walk amongst us!"

"Why aren't the police doing something?"

Minik idled around the edge of the parking lot, the warehouse a good distance away. "Oh boy," he said. "I think we need to reschedule."



“Nonsense. I can clear a path,” Jazlynn said, straightening her studded vest.

“Or I could try and have a talk with them,” Rose cut in. “Sweetie, just stop here. We’ll walk the rest of the way.”

“I just hope this isn’t a car-flipping protest.” Minik turned them in towards a corner where they noticed Phil. He quickly threw away a cigarette and smiled sheepishly.

“H-hey!” he called out and waved.

“Is that his girlfriend?” John asked and leant in across Jazlynn.

Ragan stretched to look out the window. “Yeah. I think he said her name was... Patty or something.”

She was only a little shorter than Phil with the darkest brown skin John had ever seen. Her belly hung out over her skirt. Unlike Phil, she did not put out her cigarette and continued to blow smoke away from the group, even after everyone had gotten out of the car.

“That’s a bad habit, son, and I know about bad habits,” Minik said and eyed Phil’s cigarette on the ground.

“I-I know, I’m not serious about it either,” Phil said, chuckling.

“Are you even old enough to buy them?”

Rose squeezed his hand and pulled Minik back. “Who’s your girlfriend?”

Phil nudged the woman. She frowned and quickly glanced at everyone. “I’m Paratify.”

“C-come again?” Rose asked.

“Patty’s an artist,” Phil said. “She comes all the time at the Mickey D’s I’m working at now. It was love at first sight.”

Patty snorted which turned into a hark and then a spit on the ground.

“Paratify. I like it,” Jazlynn said and crossed her arms.

“Yeah, whatever.” Patty threw the stub away and shoved her hands down her skirt. “Can we get inside already, I’m freezing my ass off out here.”

“Well, that’s the rub, isn’t it?” Minik said and scratched his neck. There were enough protesters to comfortably fill the parking lot, blocking any entrance to the warehouse a hundred metres further away. “You’d think they’d give it a rest on today of all days.”

“If anything, I think there are more than usual,” Ragan said.

“Hmm, well, sorry, boys, but I think today’s plans have to be cancelled.” Minik sounded at least halfway disappointed, if not more because his disappointment seemed to stem from irritation.

“No, no, wait,” Phil said. “I think something’s about to happen.”

The chants intensified, and the crowd started to thin. Curious, the group followed behind only to realise the mob had finally dared to go inside.

“No!” John cried but he could only watch as the roaring horde descended upon the warehouse. He ran after them, but Rose grabbed his shoulder.

“And where do you think you’re going, mister?” she asked.

“I have to help them. I can use my power.”

“On normal humans? Of flesh and blood?” Rose asked and shook him.

“W-well!”

Jazlynn squeezed tightly around her birdhouse. As if only noticing it now, Patty couldn’t but stare at it, her mouth opening slightly.

“Fact is you probably could help,” Jazlynn said, ignoring or unaware of the interest directed towards her. “If you could better control your powers, you could lower the intensity of your energy attacks and knock them out instead.”

“What are we talking about?” Patty asked, her eyes seemingly glowing.

“Uh-oh, look out everyone,” Phil said with a laugh. “She’s gone into artist mode now.”

Jazlynn erected herself and turned to John. “Can you blow a hole in that warehouse without destroying it? Be honest. The last thing I want you to do is kill everyone inside.”

John raised his hand palm up, light already humming between his fingers. “Yeah.”

Though his reply had been confident, John knew it was a monumental task to undertake. He had a good grasp of his powers by now, though, and quickly shaped a sphere the size of a golf ball, looking so fragile that it seemed the wind could scatter it. Despite this, it flew easily through the air, over the heads of the mob, and assaulted the wall further down from the door.

The boom was enough to stagger everyone. John feared he had still overdone it, but the warehouse remained integrally sound. And, the ones who hadn’t entered already were either floored or fleeing. Several people came out of the dust as the first sirens wailed in the distance.

“That worked better than I expected,” Jazlynn said and grinned. “Now allow me; I have this one.”

## Chapter

Jazlynn pushed her way through. The ones making their escape had just been taken by the stream; any sensible person would have been shaken out of the mob mentality by John’s explosion. The real troublemakers would have been at the front, however, and the first to break inside. She could deal with them.

*“The Watchers are taking exception to this,”* Hoffman’s gruff voice said into her ears.

“What else is new.”

*“There are a lot of witnesses here; they are talking about dealing with it.”*

“Put a pin in it, I’ll deal with it afterwards. Not like they’re going to step into action now.”

*“What are you even doing, meddling in human affairs? Wasn’t that the first thing I taught you? Not to get involved in mortal affairs.”*

“Quiet! There’s something about this air I don’t like. It tastes...” Jazlynn stuck out her tongue. “It tastes a bit like the mansion.”

The dust was settling inside, revealing security guards being overwhelmed by the protesters. All other personnel had fled and so had a lot of the residents. Not all were mobile or functioning, however.

“Enough!” Jazlynn cried out and slammed the butt of her cane into the ground. The echo rang loudly in the room, and the action stopped for a moment, everyone looking at her.

“What do you want?” a man asked, a baseball bat in his hand. “Stay out of this.”

Jazlynn clacked further into the warehouse. “I ask all of you to stand down. Do not make me subdue you,” she said, scanning the room. Actually, there seemed to be more homeless people left than she had at first realised. They were mostly catatonic, lying or sitting on the ground. A shiver went down her spine.

“Yeah right, what are you going to do?” This one was barely a man yet, but there was such intense hatred in his eyes. “I think you’re one of these dangerous bastards.”

The protesters outnumbered security personnel two to one. A few broke off from the fight with the guards and advanced on Jazlynn.

*“No weapon?”*

*“No weapon.”*

Jazlynn bent her knee and sprang into the midst of the protesters, knocking them aside with her birdhouse. The protesters forgot everything else and came at her. Her cane was long enough to keep them at bay. A couple of jabs and swings and she had everyone on the floor.

She could hear and smell more of them. Protesters rushed from all corners of the warehouse, new ones even pushing their way inside. She took her stance, looking around, surveying. The protesters stayed just out of her range, circling her.

One of the homeless on the ground twitched. An awful, unnatural stench wafted from him. Jazlynn recoiled, and a baseball bat caught her against the side of her head. She went down, her cane clattering out of her hand.

“We got her!” someone cheered.

“Should we do her?” someone else asked. “She’s not much to look at, though.”

“Forget her. We came here for the menaces.”

Jazlynn found her face forced into the concrete floor, her arms yanked behind her and two people sitting on her back. The security guards were also mostly knocked out. Outside she could hear cars and sirens coming closer.

“We need to get out of here,” someone said from above her.

The man that had first spoken to Jazlynn paced around. “Fuck that. I’m not leaving empty-handed.” He wandered over to a group of the homeless just sitting there staring stupidly ahead. “You’re not breaking into my fucking home, you hear me?” he yelled at them.

Tires screeched to a halt just outside. The sirens were at their loudest.

“Go. Run!” Jazlynn said.

It was the last push he needed. The man brought his bat down on a ragged teenager. His arm made a squelching sound and fell off.

It was like a switch got flipped. The homeless people got up from the floor, quivering. She had seen them before, back at the mansion. That one had lost his head... and now he lost it again. Others had large holes open up in them, where John had blown them up. One by one, they disintegrated until they were corpses. The protesters screamed and bolted.

“Hopefully this’ll get the Watchers off my back,” Jazlynn mumbled.

The weight lifted from her back and she got up again, looking for her cane.

The homeless blocked all the exits. The protesters tried pushing, but the standing corpses were as nailed to the floor, their movements more and more jerky, like a grotesque caricature of epilepsy. The protesters wailed as they pounded and beat the homeless.

Jazlynn sighed and picked up her cane.

“*Weapon on?*”

“Weapon on.”

The air shimmered around the birdhouse and then it was an orange-shafted halberd with a white blade.

“How do we do this?”

“*I could call for John.*”

“I think we might need to.”

The homeless stopped shaking. Their skin boiled and popped, their bones creaked and broke and regrew. Over and over again, they melted and hardened, expanding. Jazlynn could barely blink before they transformed again. Their shapes were lost, they were deformed, lumpy, still missing appendages. They roared, breaking everyone’s stupor. The protesters ran too late. The monsters tore into them.

Jazlynn fell to the ground and squeezed her halberd between her legs. Bullets not unlike John's shot out. The projectiles pelted the ogreish beasts, but bounced off again, doing little more than singeing them.

Shots were fired from behind them and the homeless turned to the police officers. Their bullets had about the same effect, and the officers backed away.

"Monsters!" they screamed.

A light roared over their heads. One of the monsters fell to the ground with a hole in its chest. More lights followed and more of the monsters fell.

"Looks like John has this side," Jazlynn said, though Hoffman did not respond.

She turned towards the inside. The camp had been upended like a tornado had raged through. Only a few destitute, real people, remained along with the security guards. They had only rubber truncheons and stun guns; even less effective than actual guns.

She focused on a group of the ogres charging through as the security guards did their best to wheel or drag their wards around. Her fingers danced around the shaft of her halberd gun. She needed her shots to be more powerful which meant slightly longer charge. Her heightened senses informed her of the best opportunity, and she let it rip.

The gun barely kicked as the charge left the barrel. The yellow sphere of energy consumed one of the beasts and exploded, taking out its entire pack. Blood evaporated in the air. Limbs were pushed in all directions. The innocents were knocked down but remained alive.

Jazlynn took a deep breath and scooted to the right. This flock of ogre zombies were even more hideous. Their faces were so screwed up by boils and sores that their eyes were either crushed or pushed out, their scalps were like rolling waves, and their bodies resembled rubber gloves pushed to the brink with grey meat.

Something that resembled a young lady, one breast dangling out from a torn dress like a tumour, had half a security guard shoved up a snaggle-toothed hole in her face. Her pack was feasting on protesters and guards and homeless alike.

Jazlynn charged up a little longer and hit the zombies in the middle. They disappeared along with their gore in a flash that made the warehouse ripple.

A few stragglers remained, some dragging their knuckles along the floor, others speeding around on relatively healthy legs. They were starting to understand the situation and tried to break out, banging on the walls or barrelling towards the entrances. John was still on point. Those that came near splattered all over the floor. Jazlynn concentrated on the ones still running wild inside. Pop. Pop. Pop. Done.

She got up, leaning against her cane now a birdhouse once more. The police officers looked around at the corpses questioningly. These homeless people had been humans once, transformed into lizards, died and turned into grotesque zombies. Hopefully their ordeal stopped here.

Something wet slapped against the floor behind her and a pool of red streamed between her feet. She glanced over her shoulder. No, she had missed one, and she must have looked tastier than the dismembered security guard now on the floor as the ogre zombie's gums overflowed with drool.

## Chapter

Ebadicael remembered getting her partner, how excited she had been. Someone that old had to be wise and experienced. But no, Gagesham was a troglodyte without any contact to the material world for two million years, barely capable of forming coherent sentences. Sometimes Ebadicael felt more like a babysitter to a monkey than a divine warrior. Gagesham did clean up nicely, though. To blend in, her body hair disappeared and her skin paled, her head hair shortened and grew blonde, and voila, she actually resembled a homo sapiens.

Ebadicael herself preferred to keep her bronze skin and long, dark hair. She looked very much like she had, five thousand years ago. "Let's do this," she said, and Gagesham nodded.

They appeared in a parking lot and the problem was immediately visible. Several towering humanoids ran around, chasing police officers and flipping their cars over, while the Nephilim tried shooting them. His shots were getting weaker though, and the ogres were barely flinching. His substitute mother was pulling him back, dabbing his lashed arm with a handkerchief.

"Yes, clearly, the Knight has everything in check," Ebadicael said.

"No, things look chaotic," Gagesham grouched.

Ebadicael rubbed her temple. "Never mind that. Where is the Knight now?"

The wall of the warehouse burst open again. One of the ogres was stampeding, one normalized arm clutching Jazlynn, the other big and swollen and swatting obstacles aside. Jazlynn transformed her cane into a halberd and whacked at the neck of the brute. She was more than halfway through the bulbous growth that was its head before it finally collapsed with a groan. Jazlynn was hurled away and landed by their feet.

"Need help?" Ebadicael asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I'd never need your help. This is under control," Jazlynn said and laboriously climbed up on her feet.

"How many are going to forget this?"

Jazlynn looked around. "I think most people saw me."

“In other words, there are some who didn’t,” Ebadicael said. “Meaning they won’t forget you, and subsequently won’t forgot about this.”

“Well... yes.”

Ebadicael took a deep breath. “This is what I warned you against. All of this? It ends here. Now.”

Jazlynn waved her hand dismissively. “A week. Give me a week, and I’ll have this swept under the rug.”

“No. It’s because of my leniency that your meddling has gone this far. You ignored protocol when you let the Nephilim live...”

“Hey, you wanted that too!”

“... you’ve let these incidents occur again and again, you keep letting people get away after they find out too much...”

“All right, look, I’m obviously not the one who conjured a flaming horse or these zombies or any of the other things,” Jazlynn yelled. “So, can we please forget about the pissing contest for one fucking second? Unless you really want to purge this town and then try and explain the goddamn smoking crater?”

Ebadicael had much more bile to let out, perhaps more than what was professional, but Gagesham interrupted. “Fine. A week. We will handle witnesses. You will take care of problem.” She had a chilling laughter to boot. Her speech, even her voice, was part of her disguise, but that laugh was all hers, all primal, all primate. Ebadicael shivered, imagining that smile on a chimp.

“You sure I shouldn’t handle the witnesses?” Jazlynn asked.

“No,” Ebadicael said. “If they haven’t seen you here and now, then it’s pointless.”

“True,” Jazlynn said and glanced over her shoulders. The last of the ogres was on the ground, police officers emptying their guns into its leathery hide. “I better go back and make my presence known.”

As she clacked back towards the action, Ebadicael turned towards her partner.

“A week? What the Hell were you thinking?” she hissed. “If the Knight fails...”

“She will.”

“P-pardon?”

“The Knight will fail. City will not return to normal. Watchers make it normal. I will make it normal.” Gagesham grinned, and Ebadicael started wondering how deeply rooted evil was in man’s nature.

## Chapter

"You all right?"

John looked up and found his fake aunt back with them. "I think I should start carrying a gun around," he said. His arm was a mess of cuts and lashes that Rose was dabbing with a handkerchief. "Things are not good, are they?"

Jazlynn scratched her neck. "No, they really are not. We had too many witnesses running off, and I don't know what we're going to do about the corpses, either."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem." Minik pointed to the ogre zombies spread across the upturned squad cars. They had shrunk again so that they were now dismembered homeless people in stretched or ripped clothes. "Well I mean, the question is still how bodies escaped the morgue."

"Maybe they'll think it was a prank?" John suggested, but Jazlynn was staring intently at the corpses. "Jazlynn?"

"Sorry, it's just... no, it's nothing. Right now, we need to stop any more incidents from happening again."

"That was really cool," Patty said, her pen dancing across her notepad. "I just have to ask, did all of this happen? I can't remember taking anything today."

Jazlynn snatched the notepad out of her hands. She grabbed the opened page and tugged at it but stopped again. She recognised the McDonald's logo on the page. The rest was just a jumble of shapes. Flipping back didn't reveal anything either.

"Isn't she great?" Phil asked with genuine heartfulness.

"They are quite... they're quite something." Jazlynn closed the sketchbook and handed it back to Patty. "But we have to go back now. Family matters."

"Whatever."

Patty wandered off and Phil started after her, but Jazlynn seized the scruff of his neck and threw him back.

"J-just a minute, babe!" he said. She made no reaction. "What's this about, Ms. J?"

"Keep an eye on her," Jazlynn said and released him. "Make sure she remembers nothing."

"No problem. Sometimes I don't think she even remembers me."

"I can't believe things like this can really happen, in our small town," Rose said.

"It's not supposed to. That's why I'm here, to prevent things exactly like this," Jazlynn said and gritted her teeth. "And it ends now. Everybody, into the car."

There was a presence to her now, one that out of the group only John had felt before, and one that chilled him to the bones. This was not his fake aunt Jazlynn, but the Knight Jazlynn.



On her say-so, everyone huddled back inside the car and it sputtered back out of the parking lot. Jazlynn sat very still, very quiet, with a serious expression in the middle of the backseat, her cane across all their laps. Once they had left the industrial section and passed the hospital, she spoke up again.

“The people in this car plus Phil are all the people who know John’s secret. All of you have glimpsed the world beyond, so I will be very direct here. There is an existence in this town that has been causing various disturbances, including the one we just witnessed. The time for subterfuge is over. Ragan, I have overwhelming reason to believe your father is behind all of the incidents.”

Ragan got a sudden coughing fit. “W-what?” he harked with tears in his eyes.

“I know it’s hard to believe and my suspicions are merely circumstantial, but he is the only one in town with motives.”

Everyone’s eyes turned to Ragan; even Minik looked at him through the rear-view mirror.

“I find that hard to believe,” Ragan stated sincerely. “My father is the most honest and kindest person around. What exactly do you suspect him of?”

“I suspect him very specifically of summoning the monster bird that destroyed the recycling plant, the fire horse in the park, the golden boar in Sacrisyard, and now these senseless attacks involving the homeless. Not only do these incidents benefit him, they also occurred while he was in town.”

Ragan shook his head. “But they attacked my home. For goodness’ sake, he nearly died last time.”

“He survived, didn’t he?” Jazlynn observed him closely, while John silently prayed neither Ragan nor his dad was involved. “I must admit, I am not 100% convinced, but that’s why I will want to pay him a visit.”

“This is... this is absolutely preposterous. I refuse to believe that my father could be involved with this.”

“Um, pardon me,” Minik said, “how exactly would anyone do all those things you accuse his father of?”

Jazlynn sighed. “I don’t know, but there are plenty of options. I guess we’ll see which one it is.”

“So what are you going to do Aleksandro if you’re right?” Rose asked.

“I have no beef with the guy, but I will do what I must.”

“You want to visit, right? Come by tomorrow and we’ll resolve this issue.”

“Sure. Tomorrow,” Jazlynn said equably. “Spend your time well, Ragan Cloudbough, and please don’t try to flee.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

The atmosphere turned tense in the silence, but they were almost back at the Petersens. Ragan grabbed his bike and headed for home.

## Chapter

A door creaked open and John half expected it was his closet door, but it was Jazlynn clacking inside. She sat down in his swivel chair and looked directly at him.

“I’m sorry that things are progressing the way they are. I know he’s your friend and I would have loved to gather more intel, but my hand was forced.”

“I get it, I mean, I’m the one who first noticed the pattern after all. I don’t want to think it could be Ragan’s father, but there really aren’t any other good candidates.”

Jazlynn nodded. “Not even a year ago, I would not even have hesitated like I have done so far. I would have moved the instant I got a whiff of something and just play it by ear. I’m getting soft.”

“Is that so bad?” John asked. “Sounds like you’re thinking things through more.”

“And that’s the problem. People suffered from my lack of action.”

“Who’s to say you could have done anything? It’s kind of presumptuous of you to assume you could have made any difference.”

“So you’re saying I’m worthless?”

John shook his head. “I’m saying there’s nothing you can do about things that have already happened. Maybe you could have changed them, maybe you couldn’t, but there’s nothing to do about it now. What’s important is what you’re doing do about things you can change. What exactly are you going to do about tomorrow?”

Jazlynn closed her eyes. “I’m still not sure. Again, the old me would have just killed Aleksandro. That would stop all the attacks from happening.”

“There you go,” John said and smiled. “You’re not softer, you’re wiser.”

“I’m still not comfortable with this situation. I can handle any old run-of-the-mill demon, but there are even worse things out there. Let me tell you about the trio.”

“The trio?”

Jazlynn nodded. “Yes, it’s our codename for these three ancient, powerful demons that have been around for as long as the modern human. I doubt we’ll run into them, but I want you to know about them so that if you ever run into them, you will know to run. We Knights certainly do.”

John swallowed a lump in his throat.

“No one knows their true names, so we just call them Creation, Destruction, and Chaos. Creation is content to watch over the world and hasn’t meddled in affairs down here before, we sealed Destruction away a long time ago, and the MO is too overt for Chaos. He’s more of a trickster, really, likes to make people think they’re doing the right thing.”

“What about your master? The one you called... the Guardian, was it?”

“Ah, yes,” Jazlynn said and smiled. “Well, he’s not as old as the trio, but still plenty old. He has some weird code he must follow so he rarely does anything himself, but that’s what we Knights are for. We try to maintain order.”

John got up and hugged Jazlynn.

“W-wha..?”

“I’m sure everything will be all right tomorrow. You have me too, after all,” he said and sat down on his bed again.

Jazlynn hoisted herself up on her feet. “Go to bed, John. Get some rest for tomorrow.”

## Chapter - 2 February 2011

*Great. More clowns,* Ebadicael thought to herself. The upstairs had decided to issue backup for this job, and the two new ones could not look more uncomfortable with their disguises if they tried. These were probably not even humans anymore underneath, having ascended into flaming wheels or some such nonsense. They waddled around stiffly, mutely, and something about their shape was... off. Too thin in places, too pale. *But does anyone dare correct them? No. Do they bother taking one look at me and then themselves? Of course not.*

“He comes,” Gagesham said.

Their objective was the young postal worker driving down between the blocks of apartment buildings. He stopped his van and Ebadicael approached him from one side, Gagesham the other.

“Lloyd Wrigley,” Ebadicael called out. “I need you to come with us.”

“What’s this ab...” He noticed the two agents in the background and dropped his letters. His mouth fell open, uttering only choked wheezes.

Ebadicael seized his arms and pushed him across the street to an abandoned clothing store. This was what all their planning had amounted to and, like predicted, no one was inside.

“We know you were at the riot yesterday,” she continued and threw him against the glass counter. A box of zippers on sale clattered to the floor. “What did you see?”

His mouth clearly worked, closing and opening again, but nothing came out.

“What did you see?” Gagesham asked and slammed her fist into the counter. He squeaked at the loud crunch and the cracks spreading in the glass.

“Nothing!” he screamed. “I-I-I saw nothing at all.”

“Good. And what did you see today? Right now?” Detective Ebadicael asked.

“Also nothing! Nothing happened today!”

The detectives backed off, and the postal worker tore out of the store like a bat out of Hell.

*Perhaps the backup had their uses after all.*

“Just a few more to go,” she sighed.

## Chapter

When Rose got up that morning, she found Jazlynn sitting on the couch, sleeping, clutching her cane between her legs. Soon the smell of coffee, or perhaps the loudness of the machine, roused her. When Rose entered with a plate of bacon and syrup and eggs and toast, the most complicated meal she could cook, Jazlynn looked positively awake. She accepted a plate and a portion of the breakfast along with a mug of steaming coffee.

“Do you hate me?” Jazlynn asked.

“What, did I burn the bacon?” Rose asked and sat down in the reclining chair on the opposite side of Jazlynn.

“Not what I meant. Do you resent me for forcing John to fight?”

“I have had to accept a lot of things since I welcomed John into my life. I mean, I was prepared to receive a child, but all this baggage completely overwhelmed me,” she said and heaped on to her own plate. “I, well, I accept that you are a necessary part of John’s life, and I wasn’t ready for the truth when we first met. I’m glad you felt confident enough to tell us in the end.”

Jazlynn held the coffee to her lips for several moments before finally putting it down. “I don’t think many people could say that. I have come to... hmm... value, let’s go with that, my time spent here, and I will miss it once I need to leave.”

“It won’t be soon, will it?”

“John isn’t my only responsibility. He’s getting a good handle on his powers, and I can only teach him the basics. Like keeping the fights separate from everything else.”

“And that’s why you sent him to school today?”

Jazlynn nodded as she dug into her food. “It’s what he’s working to protect. So that he can live a normal life with school, without having to worry about the next monster attack, or who’s going to be killed next.”

“But does he have to keep fighting?” Rose asked. “I mean, how often does something like yesterday happen?”

"It's not over yet, I'm afraid. Whoever is behind yesterday's incident is still at large, and until we find this person, bad things will keep happening. That's the truth."

"Lands and stars... is there anything I need to know? Anything I can do?"

"Hmm. Be understanding, I guess. Give him space," Jazlynn said, bits of egg flying out of her mouth. "You're already good parents. Just continue doing that and let John deal with everything else."

## Chapter

The backup made the biggest scene in the hotel, though Gagesham's constant fidgeting of lamps and pens and potted plants also drew attention. *Sometimes I feel like I run a circus*, Ebadicael thought to herself. *At least this was the last one.*

After scaring the living daylight out of people all morning, it was good to be finally free. She looked around the street, but the backup was long gone, and people were whispering. "Seriously!" Ebadicael said out loud, then continuing more quietly to her partner. "They show up barely looking human and then vanish into thin air on the open street?"

Gagesham glanced around at the onlookers. They were already starting to disperse, falling back into idle chatter. "Good to be done."

"My thoughts exactly. But we can't rest now." She wriggled her fingers. Her very own fingers, not part of any disguise. "Since we finished up early, we should go back up the Knight."

"No," Gagesham said.

"The Knight was right about one thing, Gagesham; do you know how much extra busywork levelling this city is going to be? Sure, you might enjoy it at first, but when you're done purging comes the clean-up. Somehow explaining it, getting to the people who might know the truth, and in the end, what did we actually accomplish?"

Gagesham shook with fury. Under her disguise, her bristles were probably completely erect.

"If we go now, we might beat the Knight to the punch," Ebadicael said. That at least got the troglodyte calmed down.

"I hope he puts up a fight."

"We're about to arrest a man for going too far in achieving his dream. I'm sure he will."

She could do without Gagesham's smile, though. Again, it sent a chill down her spine.

## Chapter

*"What the Hell happened yesterday?"*

Ragan jolted awake at the booming voice and instantly looked over to his glass shelf.

"What do you mean?"

*"The plan was perfect until you decided to summon those misshapen lumps instead of what we agreed on, and now John and that Knight survived."*

"I'm sorry," Ragan said and hung his head. "I couldn't stop thinking about John."

*"Well, I suppose it isn't all bad. They still don't suspect our involvement, and now they're targeting your father instead!"* One of the trophies rattled with laughter.

Ragan hugged his pillow. "I can't believe I didn't say anything. My own father is going down for something I did."

*"Don't worry, kiddo, even if your courage doesn't fail you, I'll clam you up for you."*

"Why? Why are you doing this?" Ragan rubbed his eyes as tears came unbidden.

*"Aw, what's the matter? Has the ickle little egghead finally found himself in a situation he can't think himself out of? Well, tough. You know the expression 'quit when you're ahead?' I can't afford that."*

"How does this benefit you at all? How does any of what we have done benefit you? Tell me!"

The trophy was quiet for a moment, a pair of cold eyes staring out at him. *"Ants are very organised beings. They always travel in set routes to and from their homes with military precision, keeping their eyes to the ground and mindlessly going about as the hive orders. One day, an ant looked up. It saw the stars and the mountains. It knew that being an ant was only a small part of the world, that the universe was so much bigger, that this one ant's life was pretty insignificant in the grand scheme of things. That ant is you. You can grasp my existence, Ragan, but you can never understand it or your place in my plans, nor will you ever be able to."*

Ragan shook his head. "Right, right, I get it. You're a cosmic entity and all of this is just beyond me."

*"You know, I was once like you, Ragan. Just a stupid human getting stupidly involved in things far beyond me. Difference between you and me is, I emerged on the other side victorious... Oh!"* The trophy laughed again. *"I see, I see. I thought it would just be your friend, but now the Detectives are moving as well."*

"Detectives?"

Ragan flung the pillow aside and sprinted out of his room, down the corridors, down the stairs. From the top of the balcony he saw them, those two women in black. Even inside, they wore their hats and sunglasses, their suits finely pressed and steamed and immaculate.

"We are here for Aleksandro Cloudbough," Ebadicael said.

His mother was there in the foyer, hand on her cheek. "My husband? What is this about, detectives?"

"We are not obligated to say," the detective continued. "Produce him or we shall tear this mansion apart."

"Oh my, no need for that. One moment." She flustered around in her clothes before finally fishing out a small cell phone from her trousers.

*"What are you going to do?"* A familiar figure appeared in the mirror behind him. *"Those two are not from the FBI, or any other earthly agency. Once they take your father, that's it. You'll never see him again."*

Ragan leant in over the balcony and opened his mouth but only a choked croak escaped him, not even enough to redirect the attention of the agents below him.

*"How admirable, you want to sacrifice yourself. I prefer to let my involvement go unnoticed for now, though. So, what's option number two? Better think fast."*

His father came from a side door, looking as visibly confused as his mother. "Honey, what's going on? Why is the FBI here?"

"They wouldn't say, dear. Did you do something?"

"N-no." He embraced his wife and looked at the agents.

"You idiot. Run," Ragan wheezed.

Gagesham, wearing a primal smile, grabbed Aleksandro. "You're coming with us. Please; resist."

"I-I-I'm sure this is a misunderstanding," Aleksandro said. "I'll be back in a few hours, sweetie."

Ragan pushed himself away from the balustrade. "Do something. Please, Azer, I'm begging you." He screwed up his eyes, as if to prevent the tears from leaking out. It didn't work.

*"Are you sure? You were quite adamant about not needing me anymore,"* the mirror replied archly.

"Don't let them take my dad!" Ragan bawled.

*"Very well." Azer's voice turned deadly serious. "I save your father, and you belong to me. No more resisting, you follow orders, that is the deal."*

Ragan nodded and wiped his eyes. "Sure. I'll do anything you want, just save my dad."

A chuckle only he could hear emanated from the mirror. *"That wasn't so hard, now was it? And don't try to go back on our agreement, either. You don't want to know what will happen."*

The front doors opened again. Ragan rushed back to the edge and just caught the two detectives shoving his father along. "Just hurry it up!"

*"Now, you don't want to summon anything from the otherworld, or everyone will have been on high alert. Instead, you should call on something already living here."*

*"Like we did with the lizard-kin?"*

*"No, that would require a body, but there are other ways. Do you know what a reaper is?"*

*"S-sure, they're..."*

*"They're ghosts, cannibalising on the souls of the dead. It's perfect for dealing with all manner of nuisances."*

*"And that will be able to save my father?"*

Azer nodded. *"You better hurry it up."*

"Reaper!" Ragan called and raised his hand to the ceiling. "Reaper! Come to me."

The detectives stopped just shy of the door. Ragan glared down at them, but it wasn't him they were reacting to. Smoke poured into the foyer from nowhere. The cloud of inky darkness swirled, and a shape materialised, hunched over yet still reaching from floor to ceiling. It was cloaked in black, a skeleton made of bluish smoke. In its hand it summoned a scythe to match its size.

"Finally!" Gagesham said. "I almost worry that we have wrong guy."

The rest of the people below screamed. Ragan's mother fled into one of the side doors. His father would have done the same had he not been restrained by Ebadicael.

"No, be careful, this is a reaper. And a bigger one that I've ever seen," she said, but Gagesham charged like a wild beast. The reaper snatched her out of the air, and she joined the screaming.

Ebadicael flung off her sunglasses, her eyes glowing like gold. A beam of pure light shot out from them and etched along the surface of the reaper. It growled and released the detective. She crumbled into an unconscious pile.

"Unsummon it!" Ebadicael screamed at Aleksandro, twisting his arm.

"M-me?" he spluttered. "W-what do you want me to do? What is that thing?"

She threw him to the side where he knocked over a table, toppling a large vase over himself.

"You're supposed to keep him safe," Ragan hissed, afraid to catch the attention of the giant reaper.

*"Oh, stop that, you know your father will be fine. Have you forgotten?"*

"Right. God of coincidences and all that," Ragan mumbled, feeling no less convinced about his father's safety. It wasn't long ago that he hit his head last.



Ebadicael fired another optical blast, keeping the beams locked on to the reaper. It writhed and opened a hole in itself, and the beam passed straight through. The detective stopped her attack, and the reaper slithered behind her, clutching her with a skeletal hand.

## Chapter

Azer stroked the inside of the mirror, revelling in what he was seeing. The Ragan kid finally put into his place, the detectives trounced, and a little destruction never hurt. Well, never hurt him, that is. Yes, all he had to do was keep tugging at the invisible strings, manipulate the right threads of causality, and keep Aleksandro alive, and soon he would be out of here.

The portal blanked. Azer blinked several times. "W-what?" he said and touched the empty surface. "No. No! Not now, goddammit!" He screamed and hammered at it.

He whirled around. The world was dark and decidedly portal-less. No more nightlamps or chandeliers or bright sunlight shining in from nigh infinite sources. He raised his hands and twitched his fingers. None of them opened at his command.

"You forget, dear brother, who it was that put you in here."

A mask appeared out of the darkness, a grotesque caricature of a human face writhing in pain.

"Don't do this to me! I am so close!"

"It seems I was mistaken to think you helpless." The cold voice rang out distorted, and Azer knelt down. "Then again, I did not think you so desperate. Like a prisoner gnawing off his own arms and legs to escape his shackles, you have torn your soul to pieces and smuggled them out. I am ashamed to admit I did not even catch you before now."

Azer fumbled around his world, now a vast room of nothing. Oh, he could feel the mirrors, but they were dead to his touch. "I'll get out of here somehow! And when I do, I'll kill you! I'll fucking kill you!"

The voice sighed deeply. "Tens of thousands of years later, and you're still only chasing my shadow, still unable to think more than two moves ahead. Where are they, Azer? Where are your soul carriers? Where are those lost little fates that you gave your soul shards to?"

"Somewhere you'll never find them, Oudin. You can spend the rest of eternity looking for them, but you'll never, ever find them."

"So not in this world? No, of course not, they would have their own realms where you could call them from whenever you needed them," the mask said as it floated around Azer. "They are not my concerns, either; you are, so let's get one thing straight: you'll never get out of here. The world of the living is mine."

Azer clenched his fist and held it up. "You can have the world. In fact, why haven't you conquered it yet? When I destroy it; I'll destroy you with it."

A deep chuckle rang through the darkness. "Who says I haven't? One of my many names is whispered in every prayer and yelled in every wars. No one can stop me, and certainly not you. Why don't you just get comfortable in here?" Oudin laughed, and Azer clenched his teeth.

"You think I'm the arrogant one, but you're the one who put me in this world. You could have banished me to the void or one of numerous hells or even destroyed me, but you put me here, with these portals."

"Yes, so you could see the world shaped into my image. I admit it was careless of me to not realise that you could communicate through the windows. Quite an amusing little oversight. But go ahead, you're just a few vessels short. I want you to try, just to see you fail."

Oudin faded into the darkness, and the portals reappeared.

Azer jerked back to the mirror hanging in the lobby of the Cloudsbough mansion. It was hanging on the first floor, and he could barely see over the railing. Azer put his hand to the portal's surface.

"Shit," he muttered.

## Chapter

"I haven't felt any intrusion from the otherworld, so this probably won't be too difficult," Jazlynn said as the mansion appeared in the distance. "You should also know that I am suspecting your friend as well, not just his father."

"Ragan? What, no! Why would he do any of this?" John said from her left.

"To help his father, of course. Either of them will do, really, but that's why I agreed to wait. To see how they'll react."

"Then, yesterday, you lied to his face. To all of us."

"I still think it could be his father as well, don't get me wrong," Jazlynn said. "I want to make sure that we put the kibosh on all these monsters, by any means necessary."

"Even kill?" John felt his chest tightening. "I can't kill a human."

"And whoever's summoning these monsters isn't one himself? Would you not kill one person to prevent him from killing more?"

"All right, that's enough," Rose said from the front. "John is right. Monsters are okay, but I draw the line at humans."

"Fine, I was going to do it myself anyway."

"No! No killings," John said, feeling the sting of tears now.

"It probably won't come to that anyway," Minik said from behind the wheel. "Wasn't that what you said, Jazlynn?"

"Right," Jazlynn said and looked at John. "If we had more time, I would teach you some nonlethal techniques. For now, leave any humans to me."

The car stopped at the curb in front of the gates and Jazlynn got out as the first. "The two of you should go; you won't be of much help to me and John from here."

"We can't do that!" Minik said but Rose squeezed his hand.

"You return him safe and sound," she said out of the window, "or there'll be Hell to pay from me."

The front wall of the manor tore open and a gigantic, floating skeleton in a robe pushed through. Jazlynn transformed her weapon, but Rose grabbed her arm.

"Promise me."

"I do, on my Knight's honour, now go!"

John circled around the car and grabbed the gun from his belt. It looked eerily like the right thing, even missing that red plastic tube fake guns usually had on their barrel. It also had some heft to it despite being made entirely of plastic.

"Come on," Jazlynn said.

The skeleton threw one of the FBI agents, Ebadicael, if John's memory were to be trusted, down on the ground. John raced through the gate and fired. The skeleton looked up. It reached out its hand, indifferent to John shooting it.

Jazlynn turned pale and backed away. Her form rippled. She twisted around, holding her head. The cane slipped from her hands and she fell to the ground, writhing and screaming as if tortured. Yet the skeleton was nowhere near close. John charged up his gun and fired, but the skeleton simply opened a hole in its chest, the beam flying through and into the blue yonder.

*"That's not going to work,"* an old, tired voice said. Hoffman materialised before him, flicking away her long mane of silvery hair.

"W-what's happening?" John asked. "What is that thing? What's it doing to Jazlynn?"

Hoffman held up a hand and John fell silent. "That is a reaper, a ghost that feeds on human souls. And that's basically all that Knights are."

Jazlynn slumped to the ground. Colour drained from her, and John could see the gravel driveway under her.

"What's the strategy then?"

"If none of your attacks are working, well," Hoffman said and rolled her hand, "come up with some new ones. The quicker the better."

“Wait, that’s it?” he asked, but she blinked out of existence. “Are you kidding me?”

Once more he lined up a shot, and once more the beam passed through. It did not even grab the reaper’s attention. It hovered over the detective and Jazlynn, cackling as they slowly faded. John closed his eyes.

*If the gun doesn’t work, discard it.* John stuffed the gun back in his trousers and closed his eyes. He could see the enemy, this reaper, and he could see himself fire his beams at it. Over and over again, slower and slower it happened. *I think I know what to do.*

Opening his eyes, the real enemy was still there, Jazlynn almost completely transparent.

On each of his fingers, he summoned an energy sphere and threw them together. The reaper opened five holes to let them through. Before it could close them, John had summoned another five and threw them too. Now with ten holes opened all over its body, the reaper tore itself apart. The pieces turned to a ghostly mist, swirling together and reuniting. The reaper roared as it became whole again. It grabbed its scythe with both hands and raised it high over its head.

This was what he had waited for. Grinning, John summoned all the energy he could muster into his left hand. The amount of energy required here would be too much for the gun. He shook with the effort. Never had he summoned so much energy so fast. It felt like his arm would explode. It burned, every vein like filled with molten steel. The sphere of energy in his palm ballooned in seconds until it was larger than his head. The sleeve of his jacket disintegrated almost up to his shoulder; deep, long cuts springing open in his flesh and spurting blood. The scythe was coming down fast, gunning for his head. His bit his lip hard and released his energy.

No part of this process was pleasant. Releasing felt like the final straw that would rip his arm to shreds. In the few seconds where there was only light in his vision, he thought it had. But when it faded, the reaper was gone, and his arm was still there, throbbing and burning, covered in blood.

“Don’t use your dominant hand next time,” Hoffman said, phasing back into reality. “If you ever lose control, you also lose your arm.”

John sank to his knees and poked his arm. It wouldn’t move, and prickled like numb, feeling inflamed. But Jazlynn was regaining colour, literally, as she became more and more solid. John looked up at the sky, smiling. Distantly, he heard Minik’s car pulling up and footsteps rushing for him.

## Chapter

“He’s going to be all right, isn’t he?” Ragan asked and leant as far over the balustrade as he dared. He couldn’t see his father anymore, but he had to be somewhere under the debris. “Azer? Hello?”

He turned around, but the mirror only reflected himself. Ice snaked its way down his spine. Slowly, he approached.

*"What happened?"* a familiar voice asked. The mirror darkened, and Azer appeared within.

*"What happened? I could ask you the same thing!"*

Azer was quiet for a moment. *"I experienced a little interference for a few minutes, but I'm back."*

*"I don't care. What about my dad?"*

The mirror was quiet for a moment. *"I'm sorry, kiddo. I can't feel him any longer."*

*"No. Are you for real?"* Ragan yelled at the mirror. *"I summoned that gigantic thing because you were supposed to control the situation. Interference, are you kidding me? That's not good enough!"*

The mirror groaned. *"These things happen, all right? I'm not exactly king of this realm I'm trapped in, so cut me some slack here, would you? You got your wish, after all."*

*"No, my wish was for my father to be safe, and he's currently trapped under the wreckage of our front wall."* Ragan grabbed his head and paced in a circle. *"You know what, the deal's off."*

The mirror laughed, a deep, unsettling stomach laugh that made the hairs rise on Ragan's neck. *"That's not how it works, I'm afraid. We made a deal, remember?"*

*"Right, and my condition was my father's safety. You didn't hold up your end, so I'm not holding up mine. Deal. Is. Off... goodbye!"*

Ragan flung himself down the stairs with Azer talking to his back. *"Hey... wait a minute. Stop! Stop, you little shitcake, you don't fuck with me! Do you hear me? I'll fucking end you!"*

The last he heard of the man was a bestial roar before the mirror shattered.

Ragan froze on the last step of the stairs. His mom had come out of hiding and was digging through the rubble. She wailed as she called for her husband. *"Aleksandro..."*

*"Hold on,"* Ragan said and joined her. He wiped the tears away, but they kept coming.

John and Jazlynn crawled over the debris with Rose and Minik right behind them. Even the detectives dug in.

## Chapter

When they returned home late that evening, John was surprised to find his closet mirror had shattered.

## Chapter - 6 February 2011

The funeral for the human Aleksandro Cloudbough occurred a bitterly cold, windy Sunday. Among friends and family were businessmen surreptitiously trying to ensure deals with each other or sneaking little comments to the son or the wife. Ebadicael tried to remember all these drives and desires and wants, all these little things pushing the living along. In her suit, she looked like just another attendee, perhaps an old business partner or some such. She also tried to behave the part though from the back or the corner, silently observing. Not like her partner. When the priest spoke inside the church, Gagesham jumped nearly a metre, trying to find out how his voice was booming down here.

The reason they had come? Well, she told herself it was orders again. Following up on a closed case. Making sure there were no loose ends. Something about the whole thing had nagged her, but it had been almost a week. No further incidents, no ominous presence. Truth be told, she had liked the kid for it more. Sure, a grown man could easily be lured into temptation, but a kid, even a smart one, would have a harder time grasping the consequences. But here came the coffin and the pallbearers, faces screwed up in masks of grief.

By the grave, the usual rituals proceeded. Ashes to ashes and all that. *Did people mourn for me like this?* Ebadicael wondered. In lieu of grief, she assumed a stony face out of respect. Gagesham looked mostly bored and shuffled around restlessly. She perked up when the priest rounded off and the guests started to disperse.

“It’s over,” Ebadicael said. “And this is where we say goodbye.”

Gagesham nodded. “Yes. I am sad that we did not find strong enemy to fight. That giant reaper was just cheating.” She punched her hands together, growling.

“Yes, well, it’s going to be good to get back to normal.” She cast a last look towards the grave and sighed. “At least we never ran into the trio.”

“Mm, too strong. Don’t want to meet them,” Gagesham said and avoided her partner’s gaze.

*So, there are some things she respects.* “Hey, you must have been an angel for a long time,” she said. “How come you’re still doing... this?”

Gagesham wrinkled her brow. “My ambition is too weak. I am fit only for this. It is what I love. And you? Will you ascend?”

Ebadicael laughed. “After seeing the higher-ups, I think I’m happy where I am.”

Gagesham grinned, the first time she had opened her mouth in a gesture that wasn’t angry or malicious. “We part here,” she said, “but I hope we shall meet again.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Ebadicael said.

The two detectives retreated to a quiet corner of the cemetery. Light surrounded Detective Gagesham, but rather than disappearing, her shape undulated, her disguise vanishing. Without it, she looked like a glorified ape from almost two million years ago. "Good luck."

Ebadicael did the same. It had been a long time that she had been the little girl who fell off a roof and broke her fool neck, five thousand years ago. What did they call the area these days? Iraq? Iran? "You too."

Gagesham really did vanish, like Ebadicael had wished for so long. Now, though, she felt an emptiness. It was back to the office, back to being the only angel, back to taking care of mundane cases.

## Chapter

Ragan stood with his mother by the edge of the cemetery, receiving condolences from the guests and thanking them in return for showing up. The businessmen were mostly interested in his mom, dropping their last hints, only offering Ragan the standard brownie points. When John showed up, Ragan broke off from his mother, and no one seemed any the wiser.

"It was a beautiful ceremony," Rose said from behind John. "I know we never knew him well, but we are truly sorry."

"Thank you. It was nice of you to show."

"I can't believe it was your dad that... that did all those things," John said. "He really didn't seem like that kind of guy."

*That's because he wasn't.* He couldn't feel Azer's grip anymore, no big yoke weighing down. He could tell the truth now. He could tell the whole world who had really done all those awful things. "Listen, John, there's something I've been meaning to tell you for a while. I've never really known how to tell you, but I'm leaving tomorrow anyway, so I might as well just come out with it."

"You're leaving?" John asked. "For how long this time?"

"For a long time, okay? A very long time. Years. My dad's bosses want me to take over his position, so they're sending me to a business school."

"Wasn't that always the plan?" Minik asked, prompting Rose elbow him in the ribs.

"No, it was my father who was supposed to teach me," Ragan said. "If you don't mind, I'd like a word with John now. Alone."

Rose grinned as she dragged the doubled-over Minik away.

"What's up?" John asked as they were now alone.

Kizashi was finally working her way through the throng. The businessmen had all made sure to be first. The rest of the attendees made no small talk aside from their condolences and greetings. He had only a few minutes before she was done shaking hands and she would be eager to leave.

“There’s no easy way to say this, so I’ll make this short,” Ragan said. “I’m gay.”

John opened his mouth, but no words were coming out.

Ragan glanced over at his mother. Still time, so he continued.

“I’ve never really had many friends, not just because I was never much in the same school, but also because I never allowed myself. Why bother, right? Not like I’d be able to meet with them a whole lot. So, everyone took me for a stuck-up brat and never bothered speaking with me. But not you. I don’t know why you started talking to me, but I began to look forward to school. Even going through the same subjects I had gone through elsewhere didn’t bother me, because I would be going through them with you, and I came to realise I was in love with you.”

“What are you..?” John asked. “Me? Why?”

Ragan shrugged. “You’re a good guy. A little quirky and a little awkward, but you’re also honest. I appreciate that. Everyone else are so afraid about sticking out that they completely ignore themselves. You try, John, you really do, but you’re just a little bit too weird.”

“Thanks, I guess?”

The queue over, Kizashi tapped her watch. Ragan nodded at her and held up two fingers.

“I’m only telling you all this because we’re going back to LA, and I couldn’t bear leaving without getting this off my shoulders. Don’t think I’m telling you all this because I want something out of it.” Ragan hugged John and squeezed him. He could just imagine his mother roll her eyes. Should he pretend to be ‘reformed’ just to please her or should he act out and rub it in her face? “Goodbye, John. Needless to say, you were my best friend. Now let’s see if a black Japanese gay boy can find another friend like you.”

There were clichés, of course, like stealing a kiss, but Ragan just lingered a moment before running towards his mother. Phil waited by the gate with his girlfriend. She looked even more distant than usual.

“Sorry, dude,” he said, and thrust a withered flower into Ragan’s hand. “If you see my dad, I wasn’t here.”

“Angry at us?” Ragan asked. He could hear his mother groan from the waiting car. He just needed another second.

“Mostly at your dad. He was very against any of us coming, but I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Ragan smiled. “Thank you, Phil. You’re not a bad guy either, you know that?”



Phil blushed and scratched his neck. "Sheesh, w-where did that come from?"

"Listen, I really have to go, but John will fill you in. Bye. And thanks for the memories."

Ragan jumped into the limo after his mother. The door closed, and it felt like it was shutting on this part of his life. Would he ever see John again? Or Ferman, for that matter. He relaxed into the upholstery, wanting to do nothing more than melting. Next to him, his mother quietly sobbed into a handkerchief. The car rumbled into life. For a split second, he saw John's face in the window, and then it was gone. Ragan stretched his neck and just barely saw the lot of them waving, even John's fake aunt.

"I had really hoped it would never come to this," Kizashi said and dabbed her eyes.

"No, it's my fault. I was too obvious in my summons," Ragan said. Outside, the cityscape of Ferman rolled by like a reel of his memories. "Did father ever catch on?"

"I doubt it. He's always been a smart one, but too naïve to ever suspect anything. I doubt Gifted would have allowed our marriage otherwise, anyway."

Ragan put his chin in his hand and stared out of the window. "What's going to happen to this place now, you think?"

Kizashi sniffed. "Well, without your father around, the mayor of this town is going to rescind a lot of his decisions. The homeless shelter has already been cancelled, for one."

"Or rather, there are no plans to relocate it, right? Not much of the old warehouse left."

"It will be a few years, son, but you'll be back. Ferman will belong to Gifted."

"I know, I know. I just worry what will become of it in the meantime."

## Chapter - 22 February 2011

There was no need for her to have stayed this much longer. It was weeks since the funeral, and there had been no threats, not a slight tickling of danger. In the end, she had had to realise she was only pushing off the inevitable. She was worried about John, in particular. There were his powers, of course, but there was also Ragan's confession. She had not meant to overhear, but all of her senses worked in overdrive. Even from the other end of the cemetery she had heard it. John had been quiet and contemplative at first, but she could not deny, he was getting back to his old self again. So, one Tuesday morning, Jazlynn threw her few belongings into her kitbag and had one last breakfast with the family.

"It's over," Jazlynn said, deciding against another helping of eggs and toast. "I cannot detect any more threats, so I have to conclude that Ferman has fallen quiet again."

"You mean you're leaving," John stated. "Do you really have to go?"

“I’ve taught you all I could by now. It was fun for me too, but this was always just about the case in the end.” She got up from the table and the rest followed. She knelt to embrace John and looked up at Rose and Minik. “Thanks for lending me the couch all this time.”

“It’ll always be there for you,” Rose said, holding a hand up to her mouth. Minik patted her shoulder.

“If you’re ever in the neighbourhood again, feel free to drop by any time.” He gave her a melancholic smile. “You know, you’ve been part of our lives as long as John have. You’ve become a part of the family too.”

Jazlynn blushed and looked away. “Well, if it’s any consolation, you’ll soon forget all about me.”

“How can you say that?” Rose said and hugged her. “We’ll never forget you.”

“You know what happens, Rose. You’ve seen it happening several times now.”

“Then all the more reason for you to stay,” Minik said, but Jazlynn shook her head.

“Sorry.” She picked up her bag and slung it over her shoulder. “There aren’t enough Knights that I could continue staying here any longer. John, would you follow me to the curb?”

“Sure.”

Once the front door was closed behind them again, Jazlynn put her bag on the ground and grabbed John’s shoulders. His body entered fight-or-flight mode until he saw the tears that streamed down Jazlynn’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for all the times I threatened to kill you,” she said, sinking to her knees and lowering her head. “You have no idea how hard it is to hold on to your humanity doing this. At some point I just decided it wasn’t worth trying. There was no point trying to see the grey middle when it’s so much easier to look at the world in black and white, as demon or human. When I met you, you weren’t a scared kid that had no idea what anything was about. You were a Nephilim, a target, end of story. But...”

She wiped her eyes and smiled.

“I think that’s why my boss asked me to mentor you. Demons and angels and Knights and Nephilim, we’re all human. It’s the choices we make and why we make them that we should be judged upon, not where we ended up. You didn’t choose to be a Nephilim, so I can’t judge you on that, only what you choose to make of it.”

John listened quietly but found he had nothing to say when Jazlynn finished. He opened his mouth, but no words came to him.

“Maybe you don’t understand now, but you’re a bright kid. You’ll get it someday even if you don’t remember me.” Jazlynn sniffed and wiped her eyes as she stood up again. “Even you will

forget me, John. You're special, but you're also human. Never forget that even when you forget me. If you don't need your powers, then don't use them. Go back to being a normal boy in a normal town. There are other people protecting your world. And if you do decide to use your powers, please, *please*, do not make me come back here for you."

She hugged him tightly. "I'll never forget you or Rose or Minik or anything of my time here, not in fifty or a hundred or two hundred years," she said and stood up. "Now, this really is goodbye. Goodbye, John."

"Goodbye, Jazlynn," he said, unable to hold back his own tears.

"Oh... that's right, I never told you my real name, did I?"

"Jazlynn isn't your real name?"

"Nope. It's Melissa, but everyone just called me Missy."

"Right. Goodbye... Missy," he sniffled.

She smiled despite her tears. "Take care."

Writing Johnathan Pearce was a special challenge to me, it's the furthest back I have ever gone in John's timeline. I have written stories and chapters and whole novels from future points, but they always felt like something was missing. Perhaps for me to truly write about John I have to truly know him. Making this novel has taught me so many things about a character that has been with me since I was a little kid. In fact, the story I set out to write was completely different. I thought I knew his past, his early years, but I was wrong. I see now why it was necessary to begin here. But no work is ever wasted. Everything else I have written will form the basis for future stories. If you enjoyed reading this volume of John's life, please let me know. You may not think it, but it's immensely helpful to me to know what you thought, what you would like to see in the future, what changes I can make, what parts you liked.