

Accidental Oneironauts

by
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Chapter 1

When he was in elementary school, Jaden Sands had for a time practiced writing with his left hand, in hopes of making himself ambidextrous, but had given it up as being rather less interesting an activity than falling off of the monkey bars on the playground. Now, at 25, he wished he had kept it up, as some left handed dexterity would come in pretty handy. His right hand certainly hadn't been much use since the accident.

Jaden looked at his hand, lifting it up to rest on the small kitchen table as he sat down. *You sure wouldn't know to look at it*, he thought, but it still gave him the shivers so he turned his gaze over to the rest of his studio apartment. He had only been in the hospital for two or three days – it was hard to tell, since hospital days tend to merge together, and Jaden hadn't exactly been at his best – but he felt like he had been away for an age, and it was good to see familiar space around him again.

His eyes lit on the fish tank, and he realized that no one would have been in to feed his fish, and it was now what? Monday already? Well, if it was Monday, then it had been three days: definitely time to feed the fish. The two dwarf gouramis glided majestically toward the feeding corner of the tank as they saw him approach, as the smaller, striped danios zipped around them more energetically. Jaden reached for the fish food with his right hand, and knocked the jar to the floor.

He sighed. The cap hadn't come off, so no big mess, but this problem was going to take some getting used to. He picked the container up with his left hand this time, braced it against his opposite wrist, and awkwardly took the lid off and

sprinkled some flakes into the tank. His right hand stood by, unmoving and seemingly uncaring.

Jaden stood out in the middle of the room and rotated his arms around from the shoulder. His aching muscles complained, but that was nothing to be surprised at. You can hardly expect to be in your car when it gets totaled and not be sore for a few days. That was normal. It would pass. He bent his arms at the elbows: still good. But beyond that was the trouble. Left hand: great shape. Right hand: nothing.

The hand looked absolutely fine. Having been further towards the middle of the car, away from the impact, it had escaped unscathed, without even the scratches and bruises that were scattered around the left side of Jaden's body. But it wouldn't move. Jaden flexed all the muscles he could remember having in that area, but there was nothing. Using his other hand, he could maneuver the fingers and wrists into various positions, in which they would stay until moved again, like stiff clay. But that was it. Even touching the skin from his forearm on down felt like only the memory of a touch, and not real at all.

Paralysis was the verdict, of course; the doctors named it easily. But it was the "why" rather than the "what" that was more concerning. Some tests had been done, but had failed to find any brain or spinal cord injuries that could have caused it. The hand itself seemed in perfect condition, with no nerve or muscle damage. A few more tests followed, but by this time Jaden was in good enough shape to tell that Dr. Ramiri had been trying to downplay the lack of results, and pass the tests off as purely routine. Eventually he was just referring to it as "standard partial paralysis," as though it was as common as a fever, and didn't need further investigation. Jaden had been too tired still to question or argue, and had let himself be sent home with some physical therapy exercises and a scheduled follow-up appointment.

Muffled shouts came from downstairs. The couple in the apartment below Jaden's were having another one of their fights. They could raise the rafters at

times, but this was a bit more subdued than that. More of a standard "Hi, honey, I'm home. How was your day?" sort of yell, with only moderately raised voices and minor expletives. It quieted down after the bang of a pot being slammed onto the stove. The sounds took Jaden's mind back to Friday night, though.

The dance had been good for the most part. A fairly run of the mill Friday Night Waltz up in Palo Alto, but with a few nice cross steps and one particularly fast Viennese waltz that he had enjoyed. The shouting had come afterwards. Elisa had shown up to the dance late, and unequivocally draped over the arm of Marcus, who had for so long been "just a dance partner" in her performance group. She had every right, of course. She and Jaden had been broken up for over a week, and she could date who she liked. Not that that helped Jaden at all.

He had tried to be civil to her after the dance, when he was changing shoes and she passed by and said hello. But the few conversations he had with her these days all tended to derail quickly and this one was no exception. He couldn't even remember what it was that had triggered it anymore. Probably nothing important, or at least nothing that hadn't already been argued out many times. Jaden himself wasn't a shouter, and had no chance of holding his own against Elisa's lungs when she really got going. Marcus pulled her away, though, and Jaden drove home with a nest of eels in his stomach.

The rest of the night Jaden only had on hearsay. He had always heard about how shocks or accidents can erase short term memory of the actual event, but it was still creepy to actually have a blank hole like that in his own recollection. It was on Central Expressway, almost back to Mountain View. A drunk driver, no headlights, probably trying to double the speed limit. A glancing blow that sent both cars spinning. The other driver died instantly, going head on into a tree and flying through his own windshield. Jaden had been luckier and was taken unconscious to the hospital, rather than dead to the morgue.

On that thought, Jaden realized that it was rather morbid of him to be staring vacantly into space in the middle of his apartment, rehashing that night. He

shook his head to clear it a bit and went to put on some music to cheer himself up and make it feel more like home again.

He woke up his computer and moved the mouse over to the left hand side of the keyboard. When he had first started his current job, a couple weeks of aching wrists had put him in fear of carpal tunnel syndrome, and he had actually gotten fairly good at mousing with either hand, to distribute the workload. So at least he knew he could handle this bit, though it would be a bit slow until he got used to it again. He pulled up iTunes and put the swing music playlist on random. There was some good, cheery, bouncy stuff in there.

Louis Jordan started singing "Never Let Your Left Hand Know What Your Right Hand's Doin'," causing Jaden to give a snort of disgust and almost fling his useless right hand at the keyboard. He caught it in time, though, and managed to carefully aim and lower a finger onto the right arrow key and switch to the next song. "*Never let your left hand know*" indeed, he thought. *Heck, even my brain isn't in on the secret.* Indigo Swing came on next, with "Today's the Day I'm Glad I'm Not Dead." *Okay, I think I can live with that one.*

He just sat and listened for a few minutes, feeling the pulls and turns of the saxophone line, and letting his focus on the music relax him. As he did, his eyes drifted around and out his window, looking at nothing in particular. His view from the second storey was partially blocked by a tree, but he could see out over a small courtyard and walkway to the opposite building in the complex. Some of the units over on that side were larger, and had their own balconies. There was one balcony with a middle-aged man reading a book, another with a veritable jungle of potted plants, and a third which didn't seem to exist at all.

Jaden sat up a bit, distracted from the music now, and rubbed his eyes. He knew there was supposed to be another balcony just there, but somehow he couldn't see it. His eyes strained at their inability to focus. It was a late April evening, with plenty of light still, and the distance was only a matter of twenty yards or so. *I'm still just too shaken up*, he thought, *or something.* He closed his eyes,

counted to ten, and opened them again. The balcony was there, just as it should be. An older looking gentleman was folding up some sort of metal equipment and packing it into a case. For a second, he seemed to look directly back at Jaden across the courtyard, as though he knew he was being watched, then he turned and went into his apartment.

Jaden closed the curtains. The last thing he wanted to think about now was something going wrong with his *eyes* so he concentrated on scrounging together a one handed dinner from the contents of his kitchen.

Chapter 2

Jaden dreamed that night for the first time since the accident. In fact, it was really the first time in years, at least that he could remember. He had never had very good dream recall. Elisa, a very frequent and vivid dreamer, had always found that unusual, bordering on unnatural. Earlier on in their now defunct relationship, whenever she had spent this night at Jaden's apartment, she would wake up in the morning, immediately recount the latest story from her head, and ask about Jaden's dreams, which were never forthcoming. His attitude had been that if his subconscious wanted him to know what it was doing it would tell him, but he wasn't going to lose any sleep, so to speak, worrying about or trying to remember the random nighttime firings of some neural synapses. Elisa eventually gave it up and stopped asking.

There was no ignoring this dream, though. In it, his right arm was entirely gone, from the elbow down. Not simply nonfunctioning but outright missing. He passed his left hand through the air where his right wrist should be and felt an imaginary slice of pain. He couldn't tell where he was; all he could see was a thick, dark mist, which sometimes coalesced briefly into hints of shapes both horrible and beautiful, then dissolved again. He reached out with his left hand to touch it, and to his surprise he was able to pull out a tuft of mist like cotton candy.

And then somehow he found that he had been inverted. From a man missing an arm, he had changed to the arm that was missing the rest of its body. At least, that was the most sense he could make of it. He had no eyes to see if there was anyone or anything around him. He could feel and move the muscles of his right hand, his fingers and forearm, but that was all. It was as if his consciousness were inside it now, in the way it usually seemed to be in his head, and there was nothing else. He felt a pressure underneath him, something scaly under the heel of his hand and under his forearm, and he was lifted, carried. He thought he felt the thick swirl of the dark cotton candy mist, before it all faded away.

Jaden slept in the next day, and woke to the late morning sun streaming in through the window. He hadn't set his alarm clock, mostly because he hadn't really thought much about what exactly he would be doing when he woke up. His mother had called his boss from the hospital the day before, so people at work knew what had happened over the weekend. Jaden had no idea when they were expecting him back. He could probably play hooky for a while if he wanted.

He poked around the apartment until about noon, unable to get very interested in, or concentrate on, anything. It was too surreal, having been out of commission for several days, and now back at home, alone and with nothing to do but stare at his strangely paralyzed hand. He decided to go ahead and just go to work, if only to feel like he was back in the real world again.

The trickiest part of getting out of the apartment was tying his shoes. He eventually worked out a way to do it one handed, with a little help from a single, straightened finger on his right hand. Good enough for the walk to work, anyway. *Probably not secure enough for dancing, he thought, but I'll fake that step when I come to it.*

Jaden was glad he lived close enough to work to walk there. Even if his car had been in good enough shape to drive, he didn't know if he could have managed the stick shift with his hand the way it was. Plus, it just felt good to be out in the

sun and the spring air, and the walking started to ease out some remaining stiffness in his muscles.

He was only a few blocks from downtown, but he took a slight detour to walk down a different street for a more scenic route. Fewer generic apartment complexes and more fancy, expensive homes with pristine gardens. Mostly fancy and pristine, anyway. There was one large corner lot where an old house had been torn down the year before. Construction on a new one had been started, but abruptly abandoned with only a skeleton of a frame left behind. No one seemed to know the exact story behind it, or even who the owner was, though there was much speculation in the neighborhood about the mysterious number 250 Richards Street, and even, supposedly, many failed attempts to buy it. Jaden noticed a fresh growth of weeds around the swimming pool excavation as he passed it.

Once downtown, he headed for the used book store. At the entrance he turned right and took an anonymous looking door that could have led to a janitor's closet, but in fact took him upstairs to a small office suite on the second floor. MyPals.com had turned it into a small cubicle farm for their world (and only) headquarters. Jaden did QA work on their web application, a social networking service that was different and special just like all the others.

"Hey! Jade's back!" Todd's voice greeted him almost as soon as he stepped in. He sounded happy to see him, which was unsurprising, since he had probably been doing Jaden's job in addition to his own for the last day and a half, without knowing how much longer it would last. There was a flurry as the news spread around, and people came over to ask how he was. A lot of them were creeped out by his hand, though, and gradually everyone headed back to work.

"Are you actually going to be able to work with that thing?" Todd asked, gesturing at Jaden's hand and managing to sound both skeptical and hopeful at the same time.

"I'm not sure. I'm going to need to experiment a bit and find out what I can do and what I can work around."

Jaden didn't actually end up getting much done that day, spending it mostly in adjusting. Meetings were the easiest, but he usually only had one Tuesdays. He downloaded some speech recognition software that helped a bit with typing, though between some program glitches and frequent transcription inaccuracies, it wasn't always faster than a one handed hunt and peck method. A lot of the QA testing that he and Todd did required more mouse work than typing, so that would get better as his left hand got more practice. By the end of the day, Jaden had decided that he could probably manage, though at a noticeable decrease in efficiency. Still, it was better than nothing. Stacey, his manager, had told him it might be possible to go on partial disability leave, but he would save that as a last resort. He could tell she was deliberately trying not to put pressure on him, but he also knew how busy they all were there, and how his absence would just make it more difficult to keep up with everything that needed to be done.

After work, Jaden got some dinner at the Chinese restaurant across the street, with Todd and a couple of other coworkers. Taking leave of everyone an hour later, he headed off down Castro Street until he found himself outside the East West bookstore, and decided to go in and browse a bit.

East West being what it is, it had a fairly prominent section of shelves devoted to dreaming, and seeing the sign for it on the side of a bookcase reminded Jaden of his dream the night before. He scanned the shelves. Some titles looked like a complete load of New Age crock, but others seemed intriguing. Soon he found himself engrossed in one of the more reputable seeming ones, on the subject of lucid dreaming. He was fairly sure that this was not what he had experienced, since he had had no idea that he was dreaming until after he was awake. But it seemed incredible that some people could realize their dreams while still asleep. Jaden thought that if you were able to "wake up" in your dreams, and start consciously acting as though they were real, then you were probably well on your way to a completely unreliable perception of reality, and from there at least

some form of minor insanity. Interesting, though. The store was about to close, so he bought himself the book as a get well present for his hand.

It was dark as he walked home and turned down Richards Street. He had gone another block on automatic pilot when he found himself feeling a bit disoriented, and stopped. Looking around, it took him a second to realize where he was, and then a bit longer to realize why he had been confused. The view wasn't right.

The corner up ahead was supposed to be the final resting place of 250 Richards Street, but the skeletal building frame that had stuck bleakly out into the sky for the last year was gone. In its place was a dark mansion, which looked too big to fit between its neighboring houses, and yet still seemed aloof and removed from them. The chain link construction fence had been replaced by a wrought iron one, over ten feet high. The swimming pool was full of shimmering dark water, rippled by a silent fountain. Greenish yellow lights shone in the windows on the upper storey, and insubstantial silhouettes seemed to pass back and forth on the other side.

Jaden just watched it for a minute, as though waiting for it to pounce. He knew he had seen it as normal just that afternoon, so what had happened to it since then? He was about half a block away still, so he started gradually moving closer. As he did, the mansion seemed to grow less distinct, rather than more so, as though a mist were forming over it, clouding his vision. When he was at the end of his block and just across the street from it, Jaden could barely see a thing. He waded through a fog to the other sidewalk, at which point it cleared, and he found his hand resting on a chain link fence. On the other side was the empty pool, its concrete basin only partially filled in. Beyond it, the wooden beams in an empty outline of an ordinary house.

Chapter 3

Malcolm was dreaming. That the inhabitants of the dreamlands can themselves dream does not always make a lot of sense, and that is why most of them

generally don't. Malcolm wasn't precisely sure what his dreaming meant, and was a bit embarrassed about it in case it was something bad. Perhaps it was okay for a demon of his stature? But he also had a nagging feeling that it might only be for the lower classes. Safer then not to let his Master know. In secret, he enjoyed his dreams.

A Tyrannosaurus Rex, that's what he was now, with no need to think about his Master, or the court, or any of his waking life. (Is it really waking life if you live in the dreamlands? Tyrannosaurs don't think about those sorts of things, either, so there.) He gave an experimental roar, and the forest around him trembled. He lashed his tail, and turning his head he saw a small tree torn from its roots forty feet away. Excellent. This was his favorite form, what he really *should* be. It was time to go hunting, and let the world beware!

This being his own dream, prey was of course obligingly abundant. Malcolm headed to the edge of the forest just in time for a herd of leaping Struthiomimuses to bound into view across the plain. He let them approach until their path brought them nearest the forest, and then he leapt out and in a few enormous strides he was among them. The smaller bird-like dinosaurs shrieked in terror, and the ones at the edges of the pack bounded off out of range. But just as many were impeded by their companions, all trying to run in different directions at once. Malcolm tore through them, crushing some under his massive clawed feet and knocking others flying with each running stride. He bellowed a roar that would have left the nearest Struthiomimus deafened, if it hadn't immediately afterwards had its torso crushed in Malcolm's jaws. Its neck whipped around and snapped as its body was shaken briefly and then tossed through the air to knock other panicking creatures to the ground.

Malcolm caught a second victim, worried it, and threw it as before. He was slowing down now, though, and the fleet footed smaller animals were dispersing out of his reach. But he didn't care. The fun here was all in the surprise and flurry, like a child running into a flock of pigeons, only a couple orders of

magnitude larger and with considerably more blood. He wasn't even going to bother going back and eating the ones he had killed.

Already, as the adrenaline of his brief chase was barely cooling, a new scent had caught his nose. It was strange. Different somehow. The massive olfactory super computer that took up so much of his Tyrannosaur skull was having trouble describing it in terms his small and crowded brain could fully grasp. It didn't seem to be part of his dream, was the only way he could explain it. So what was it doing there? He took off in pursuit.

He followed small molecules of the scent wafting through the air for a mile or so, and it grew stronger as he approached the river at the point where it entered the forest. He slowed now, peering ahead carefully though somewhat short-sightedly. The creature was there, crouched at the river bank and lapping at the slow moving water. It was smaller than Malcolm, but far larger than any cat had a right to be with Tyrannosaurus Rexes around. The wind shifted and it raised its head to sniff the air, and sunlight glinted off a long, saber-like tooth.

Dream Malcolm lunged, though somewhere in his small dinosaur brain, waking Malcolm worried. Was attacking entirely a good idea, given that he didn't know what this thing was or how it had gotten into his dream? Too late now.

The giant cat twisted under him and Malcolm's feet gouged the ground where it had crouched a moment before. He gnashed out with his teeth like steak knives and this time inflicted a long gash in the cat's shoulder as it dodged. It snarled, trapped with its back to the river, then made a lunge of its own in desperation. But in close quarters it was no match for the Tyrannosaur's size. Within moments it had been buffeted to the ground and trapped under one large clawed foot.

Malcolm lowered his head, jaws gaping, to deliver the final blow. But then he paused. Something was wrong. He could feel the cat's blood seeping between his claws, but instead of trickling down into the ground, it seemed to be crawling up his leg. It began to burn. In horror, Malcolm saw the cat's body and his own leg

beginning to dissolve, as though covered in acid. He tried to shake it away, but it was too late. Drops of blood scattered and spread where they landed. He burned and crumpled and faded into nothing.

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Malcolm awoke, sweating and clutching a tattered sheet beneath his chin with two clawed hands on short, skinny arms. He heaved a sigh of relief, then got up to pace around the stone floor of his small room. He didn't want to go back to sleep just yet.

In appearance, Malcolm was actually very much like the Tyrannosaurus Rex of his dreams. The fact that he was only four feet tall, however, had a rather detrimental effect on his fearsomeness, as did the tie and the short sleeved button-down shirt he always wore, even to sleep. He didn't like the shirt and tie, but couldn't get rid of them. It's hard enough to deal with clothes when you only have short Tyrannosaur arms, but when he did manage to get them off, he'd only ever find identical garments underneath. This probably accounted for the expression he usually had on his face. Inasmuch as a Tyrannosaur with its curved jaw and gleaming teeth can look embarrassed, Malcolm did a fairly good job of it.

He wondered what the dream meant. When one lives in the dreamlands, one always has to take these things seriously. He didn't think it was good, though, and he worried that it was somehow his fault. With a twinge of guilt he wondered if it was related to the errand he had had that day.

It had been a very important errand, he was sure of it. His Master had a new trophy from the Other Side and he surely wouldn't have entrusted it to anybody but Malcolm. Well, probably Lozi or Bratch could have handled it, but they were away on other jobs when he had repeatedly called for them, so it had gone to Malcolm. "Take this to the collection rooms," he had said. Just like that! Right to

Malcolm, his faithful and trusted advisor. "Take this to the collection rooms and have the steward set up a new chamber for it." And Malcolm had done just that.

The trophy was a hand. A man's hand, medium sized, with slender fingers that twitched slightly, as though dreaming. It was connected to a wrist, which was connected to a forearm, which ended in a smooth, rounded surface before a nonexistent elbow. Malcolm had picked it up carefully in his small, double claws and cradled it like a baby to his chest as he hurried off to the collection rooms in the lower level.

It was so beautiful, he thought. For all that he tried to maintain his ferocious Tyrannosaur exterior, he had a bit of a soft spot. Poor little hand, all alone, no body to attach to. He stroked it sympathetically, which was a mistake. With his clawed hands, sympathy is more likely to bring stitches than comfort. A cut opened up on the underside of the forearm, and the hand clenched in pain. Mortified, Malcolm apologized, then quickly looked around to see if anyone had spotted him talking to the hand. (Could a hand hear without ears? He didn't know, but he felt like he should apologize anyway.) He dabbed blood away from the cut with the end of his tie. Luckily it wasn't serious, but he hoped it would heal before his Master noticed it.

He had deposited the hand with the steward, who gave him a suspicious look, and then scurried back to the court, to hear his Master finishing his tales of the latest hunt. He missed most of the story, but from what he could tell it had been a very important event.

Malcolm decided to keep both the incident with the hand and his dream to himself, and went back to bed.

Chapter 4

Ixy was dreaming. She did wonder whether she were simply conscious, rather than dreaming, but never having experienced either one before, she really

couldn't say. There were vague pseudo memories of a self made of cloth and stuffed with cotton batting, which clashed noticeably with her current body of flesh, blood, fur and claws. But mostly, she had a hunch that it was a dream, and she also had a hunch that what she was, was a cat, and that cats should follow their instincts and intuitions. So a dream it was. Call it that for now, anyway.

Whatever it was, Ixy liked it. She felt powerful. She stood up, walked, then bounded and ran, just for the feel of it. She retracted her claws in and out, first all at once, then one at a time, which was more difficult. She lashed her tail.

She was in a forest, and she prowled around until she startled a vole from beneath a bush. She pounced on it, and trapped it between her feet. She toyed with it for a bit, batting it back and forth between her paws, before dispatching it with a careless bite.

Then a new scent came to her, strange and different. She dropped the vole and began following her nose. The scent grew stronger as she trotted through the undergrowth, stronger and more reptilian. She came to a fallen, rotting tree trunk and peered around its upturned roots, looking down its length.

A few yards down the trunk, a lizard was sunning itself in a patch of sunlight. With her quietest tread, Ixy crept up slowly, but the lizard's bulging eyes on the sides of its head gave it almost a full circle of peripheral vision, and it caught her movement. It skittered in place, made a false start, then tried to dash off just as Ixy pounced.

She pinned the lizard under a front paw, with her claws digging in as it struggled. Sun-warmed lizard blood oozed out around her claws, and then, strangely, up her paw and into her fur. Ixy was perplexed. Granted, she didn't have much experience in this area, but still she didn't think this was supposed to happen to lizards. She looked at the lizard, and saw a scared, confused expression on its face, at least inasmuch as lizards can have scared and confused expressions.

The blood burned, spread, burned more, and Ixy dissolved with the lizard. When it was over, a small stuffed animal sat tucked away in the corner of a closet, where it had spent most of its time for the last several years. It was a gray cat, with a white mark on its chest, shaped something like an "X."

A most peculiar night, Ixy thought. Or would have thought, if thinking were the sort of thing toy cats could do.

Chapter 5

Jaden stood looking for a while at the house that wasn't there. He could come up with no good explanation for what he had seen, or what he thought he had seen. *I'm probably going crazy, he thought. First the balcony thing yesterday, and now this house. I wonder if something did get whacked inside my head, in spite of what all those tests showed?*

He pulled back from peering through the fence, and as he did so, he felt a sudden twinge of pain across his right, paralyzed, forearm. He jumped in shock, and then saw that his hand had clenched into a fist. He tried to unclench it, to wiggle his fingers, but he still had no control. The pain faded quickly, though, and the fist gradually relaxed, seemingly of its own accord. Jaden wondered if this meant the healing process was beginning. Strange way for it to go about healing, though.

When he got home, he inspected his hand and arm under the kitchen light. There was a faint red line across his arm, about where he had felt the pain, but he couldn't tell what had caused it. Everything else looked fine, aside from the continued immobility. Most peculiar.

He pulled out the book on lucid dreaming he had bought. This, at least, was something to occupy his mind without having to contemplate the sorry state of his disabled hand.

He was at a chapter on "reality tests," how to determine whether you are currently dreaming or awake, in cases where you are unsure. Before this week it never would have occurred to Jaden to worry about this, but come to think of it, that strange house would have fit much better in a dream than in real life, so he read with interest.

The most common reality test is to find something to read – a sign, a book, even a clock. Whatever is handy. Then you read it, look away, then look back and read it again. In a dream it will nearly always be different the second time, whereas reality tends to be more consistent. Jaden wished he had known to try that out back on Richards Street. He figured the fact that he was reading the book and it was making sense was a pretty good indicator that he was awake just now, but he explicitly tested it anyway, just to be sure. All good. He supposed that since he had a fairly clear recollection of everything that had happened on his way home, and that it didn't include either going to sleep or waking up, then it was probably safe to assume that he had not been dreaming back at that strange, dark mansion. Still, he'd have to remember the test if he ever saw something odd like that again.

He got up to feed the fish. It was a little easier opening the jar left handed today. Then, as long as he was on the subject of peculiar things, and as long as he had just verified that he was awake, he decided to take another look out the window at the balcony across the way. He pulled aside a corner of the curtain and peeked out.

Nobody was out on their balconies at this hour, though there were still lights on in most windows. The exception was the apartment across from Jaden's, which was dark. At least, the windows were dark. A tiny blue light blinked from a corner of the balcony. Jaden reached for the light switch with his good hand and flipped it off, keeping his eyes on the little blue light as they adjusted to the darkness. It seemed to be on a small antenna of some sort, which was attached to one of several small metal boxes connected and covered with an array of wires.

The wires themselves seemed to cover the balcony floor, and possibly even lead inside through a crack in the door, though Jaden really couldn't tell for sure. It didn't look like any equipment he could ever remember seeing.

Jaden pulled himself away and turned the light back on. Really, he had no good reason to be trying to spy on his neighbors, aside from some unfounded suspicion and what was probably a problem with his eyes. He didn't even know the man who lived in that apartment. He should just let it go, and not be so curious about what was none of his business.

He picked up the book again, settled into his beanbag chair and read for a while, until he eventually dozed off. He awoke slightly after midnight and pulled himself groggily up so he could go to bed properly. He switched off the overhead light and headed for his room, but realized that his computer was still on, lighting the room slightly with the glow from its monitor. He went over to turn it off, and saw that iTunes was still open, paused on the swing tune he had been playing the night before.

There was something new there, though, and it made Jaden pull his mind a little more awake. In the sidebar, there was a little blue icon indicating other users who were sharing their music on the network. The apartment complex had a wireless connection for use by all the residents, but for the most part Jaden never saw anyone else on iTunes. He clicked it, and saw a single entry, labeled "Julian P. Oddbury, Esq." It wasn't a name Jaden recognized.

Below that name were a list of playlists shared by that user. Jaden opened the list and read down the titles. Jonathan Logan Pace, Suzette Marie Pace, Benjamin Gregory Dickson, and on through a long list of names. Many were familiar, and Jaden realized that they were other people in the apartment complex. The Paces were the arguing couple downstairs, and he had met Ben Dickson from three doors down a couple of times before. Why were they all listed under this Julian person's name?

Jaden was wide awake now. He clicked a name to see what would happen. The playlist showed a list of video files, rather than audio, each with a date as a title, starting with that night's date and progressing back in time. Under Suzette's name, Jaden double clicked the current date.

A video began to play in the iTunes window. It was vague and foggy, and Jaden couldn't make much sense of it. There was a book with pages turning themselves, then the pages became wings and the book flew away. Other figures passed through briefly, then disappeared. After about 30 seconds he stopped the video and clicked on the previous night's date. He saw Suzette in this one, heard her husband yelling at her, saw him hit her. She ran down a corridor but was trapped. Everywhere she turned she was blocked, she couldn't get away. It was like a horror film. Or a nightmare.

Jaden realized what this was. He was seeing recordings of people's dreams. How had iTunes picked these up? He clicked through to another name and found a neighbor he didn't know in the midst of a sexual fantasy involving rather more whips and Jello than Jaden would have preferred, so he switched again. More people, and more dreams. It was incredible.

Then he scrolled down to the S's, and there he was: Jaden Sands. He clicked his name. iTunes showed a progress bar for a few seconds, then an error message: "The remote host could not be contacted. Please try again later." He was bumped back to his main library. He tried clicking again on one of the names that had worked before, but got the same error. A few seconds later, the shared directory disappeared entirely.

Without bothering to rationalize it, Jaden jumped up and ran to the window. Across the way, the blue light on the balcony had gone out, and a dark figure was hurriedly gathering up components and wires into a box. The box was closed and pushed inside the apartment. The figure followed and shut the door.

Chapter 6

Jaden slept self-consciously that night, if such a thing is possible. He kept waking up at varying intervals, as though subconsciously trying to avoid having any dreams that might get broadcast around from mysterious equipment to random computers. For the most part it worked, aside from one incident around four in the morning. He found himself standing in front of the dark mansion again, this time without it reverting to an abandoned construction site. From outside the cast iron fence, he watched the pool of black water. Dark, slippery things would occasionally break the surface, then vanish again. Then the door of the mansion opened, spilling greenish yellow light out into the night. A tall figure stood there, a cape swirling around it in a dramatic wind that Jaden couldn't feel, its face invisible in the backlighting. It reached out its hand, and Jaden felt the pain shoot through his right arm and hand, as before. It was enough to wake him up.

At long last his alarm clock went off, leaving him mostly unrested, but at least free of dreams. Though when he noticed the book where he had left it on his dresser he did a quick reality test by reading the title, just to make sure. *Exploring the World of Lucid Dreaming*, by Stephen LaBerge, Ph.D. Twice in a row. Good.

On his way out the door to go to work, Jaden realized that he hadn't checked his mail since before the accident, so he made a stop by the bank of mail boxes by the apartment manager's office. Reading along the list of names on the boxes, he recognized many, with a guilty shiver, from the dreams he had watched the night before. He found his own box and opened it, pulling out a small stack of mail containing a couple bills, a catalog he had never subscribed to, and a get well card from his sister back East.

On top of the mail, there was a business card. It wasn't clear how it had gotten there, since it wasn't stamped mail, and the mail boxes were all kept locked. Jaden picked it up and read:

PROF. JULIAN P. ODDBURY, ESQ.

Socio-Hallucinological Researcher
and Retired Oneironaut.

Jaden recognized the name instantly, but what on earth was an oneironaut? The rest of it just sounded like someone trying to put his experimental LSD days from college on a resume. The address given on the card indicated his own apartment complex, unit #113. Jaden scanned the mailboxes, but couldn't find "Julian P. Oddbury" listed anywhere. The number 113 itself didn't even seem to exist, with that name or any other. He scrutinized the card again, wedging the rest of his mail under his arm so he could hold it in his left hand, but there were no more clues.

"Excuse me?" a voice behind him said. Jaden turned around to see a small, round, middle-aged woman holding a mail box key.

"I just need to get in there to number 120," she said apologetically, "just behind you..."

"Oh, yes. Of course. Sorry." Jaden stepped aside, tucking the business card away in his pocket. He needed to be getting on to work anyway. He put the bills and the get well card in his bag, threw the catalog in a nearby trash can, and headed out.

Work was fairly uneventful, though working one handed was getting old really fast, for all that he was starting to get a bit better at it. He left again for home in the evening as soon as he could legitimately get away. It was still light out, and the house at 250 Richards looked as boring and unfinished as it had that morning. He tried squinting at it from a few different distances, but it remained determinedly mundane, so after a few minutes he gave it up. Perhaps it would be better to come back at night. He reminded himself, though, that it wasn't necessarily a good idea to assume it could all be taken seriously. He could still be crazy.

At home, Jaden heated himself up a can of chicken corn chowder and pulled the business card out of his pocket. It was nicely embossed, and the letters had an ephemeral quality to them, as though they had only appeared the instant you looked at the card, and could vanish again at any moment. They said the same thing each time, though, so Jaden knew he wasn't dreaming, but didn't learn anything more about Mr. Oddbury.

Jaden put his spoon down and picked up there card from where he had been staring at it on the kitchen table. He rubbed his thumb over the embossed letters and idly flipped it over. Were those faint markings on the back, or just some dust? He ran a finger over it again, and rather than being brushed away, the markings grew darker. He rubbed more vigorously and a message faded into legibility, handwritten in a old-fashioned looking style.

Meet me, #113, 7:30p.

Three turns CCW on the O.

-JPO

Curiouser and curiouser. The words started to fade away again, so Jaden gave them another quick rub to make sure he had read them right. A glance at the clock showed that it was a quarter after seven already. He bolted the rest of his soup and went to put on his shoes. There still remained the problem of apartment #113's existence, but Jaden was positive that it could only be the apartment with the mysterious balcony across from his window. He had no idea what to expect, so he just took the card and went.

He got to the hallway on the second floor of the building opposite his, and yes, this seemed to be the right place. He passed door #116, then 115, 114... and then that was the end of the row. Just a janitor's closet next to the stairs. Another wing angled off from there, and Jaden poked his head down that way. 112 was the first apartment there. He knew that ground level apartments had sub-100 numbers, so no use checking there. He went back to the stairs and the janitor's closet.

Whereas apartment doors had their numbers in metal letters on them, the closet simply said "Janitor al" (the "i" had fallen off). But looking closer, Jaden could see a faint outline on the wood behind the letters. A slight discoloration marked the place where the wood had for years been covered by the numbers 1, 1 and 3. This was it. Jaden checked his watch, it was 7:29.

He knocked at the door and waited. No response. What else was it the card had said? "Three turns CCW on the O." Feeling a little silly, Jaden reached out to touch the "o" in "Janitorial." It was loose, but in an odd way. It didn't seem to be nailed in at the top like the other letters, but could rotate around in its circle. He twisted it slowly three times around, counter clockwise.

The door and the adjacent section of wall shimmered, like a reflection on a rippled pond. It was replaced by smooth, gleaming metal door. A panel in the ceiling of the hallway slid open, and a small, spider-like robot descended on a wire, trained a miniature video camera eye on Jaden, then shot back up again. A second panel, this one to the right of the door, lit up with the glowing outline of a hand print. It flashed at him impatiently.

Jaden stepped hesitantly up to it. It was a security mechanism, apparently, that wanted to scan his hand. The outline required a right hand, so he had to hoist it up there like a dead weight, then use his left hand to arrange the fingers and thumb within the outline. Once he had done so, the screen beneath his palm flashed violet, then green, and a row of lights on the opposite side of the door flickered in a complicated pattern.

Then a crack appeared in the center of the door. A web of hairline cracks, in fact, all spreading outward from the center, like a spider's web. They reached the edges of the door, and just when it seemed that everything would have to collapse under the fractures, the door twisted slightly to the left, nipped behind Reality's back, and vanished.

A tall, thin man stood there, his long hair and beard both stark white. He had an old, worn suit that he seemed to not so much wear as be a part of. His eyes had a sharp sparkle, and he beamed when he saw Jaden.

"Ah, excellent! Knew you'd make it, of course. Bright lad. Come on in, come on in! Don't want to hang about in doorways. It'll look suspicious."

He ushered Jaden in as he stuck his head out to peer cautiously up and down the hall. Apparently satisfied, he pulled his head back in and the door rematerialized out of thin air. Jaden was a bit too surprised and overwhelmed by everything to come up with anything terribly intelligent to say.

"You're, um... Professor Oddbury... I assume?"

"Yes, yes. I'm afraid Her Majesty the Queen had other engagements tonight, so you're stuck with me." He busied himself poking at an array of buttons, dials and blinking lights next to the door.

"Um... what? The queen?"

"Never mind! Wasn't funny! Hold on a tick while I get the security back up properly. I had to loosen things a bit to get you in. It's not ordinarily that easy. There."

He pushed a final button and looked at a small video screen. It showed the door as it appeared from the hallway, now an ordinary janitor's closet once again.

"How did you... do that? With the janitor closet, I mean?" Jaden asked. It seemed as good a question to start with as any of the myriad others banging around inside his head.

"Cloaking mechanisms, m'boy! Invest in them now – they'll be all the rage in a few years, mark my words. Deuced useful things. Come along now."

He swept them out of the entryway and into a room which Jaden was sure must have been several times the size of the janitorial closet they were supposedly inside. It larger than Jaden's living room, and there seemed to be doors leading off to additional rooms as well. Bookcases lined two of the walls, though the density of books and papers did not seem particularly higher there than on the floor or the other furniture. Another wall and a half were lined with tabled and shelves of strange equipment, some wired up and running, with flashing lights or small beeps, some in various stages of assembly or repair. The opposite wall also contained a sliding glass door, leading out to a balcony. Jaden could see his own window through it, looking across the courtyard. They picked their way through papers and file cabinets and unidentifiable objects to two battered armchairs in the middle of the room. Prof. Oddbury pushed some books off of them and waved Jaden into one, taking the other for himself.

"Now," he said, "I expect you probably have a few questions."

Chapter 7

Gordon Ross awoke on a grey Thursday morning to the sound of his mother's shrieks coming from the kitchen. Blearily, he squinted at the clock by his bed until it came into focus. 6:25 AM – he could have slept another 5 minutes before his alarm went off. Then he woke up a little bit more, enough to realize that regardless of time, it was probably worthwhile to get up and find out why his mother was screaming.

He reached the kitchen about the same time as his father, hurrying along with a partially tied tie around his neck. His little sister Fiona, who was only six, peered out worriedly from her doorway. Their mother was balanced precariously on a chair and pointing at the floor.

"Martha, what – " Mr. Ross began, then followed her finger and laughed. "A wee mouse! Well, well, I'd better be calling the police, then."

Mrs. Ross glared at him. "It's horrid! Look! It's got its head torn off!"

"Well, it probably won't be much of a threat to our cheese then, will it dear?" But he did stop laughing to take a closer look. "Probably just something the cat dragged in."

"We haven't *got* a cat, Da," Gordon pointed out, with a roll of his eyes.

"Oh, aye, you're right. Well, let me just get something to clean it up. Come down off the chair, dear."

She did so reluctantly, muttering fearfully about where she might find the rest of the mouse and how she was certainly not going to enter the kitchen again without a sturdy pair of boots on.

Having a teenage boy's natural fascination with the gruesome, Gordon helped his dad scoop the mousy remains into a plastic bag. Its head really was entirely gone, and a bit of tiny, jagged vertebrae protruded from its neck. They looked around the floor and under the counters and chairs, but found no more evidence of it.

"What d'ye reckon really happened to it?" Gordon asked, once his mother had left the room.

"I reckon its heid exploded when your ma screamed at it," he said confidentially, giving Gordon a wink. "Spontaneous Murine Combustion they call it. Happens all the time."

Gordon didn't like to give his father the satisfaction of laughing at his corny jokes, but he couldn't repress a grin.

Back in his room, he turned off his now-ringing alarm clock, sat down on the end of his bed and heaved a sigh. It had been a tolerably exciting start to his day, but it was just going to go downhill from here. Bus rides, school, algebra test, Lucy Campbell, homework... blah, blah, blah, God only knows, and blah. So much to look forward to. Then he noticed something down by his feet, sitting on his school bag.

It was a small stuffed animal, a faded grey cat with a white X-shaped marking on its chest. It had been Gordon's favorite when he was younger (much younger, he assured himself), and he had called it Ixy, since he had liked the letter X. Silly name. He didn't know what it was doing out now, though. The last time he had even seen it was probably a couple of years ago, and that was just to push it farther back in his closet to make room for some other toys he had outgrown. He put it on the book shelf next to him and got up to get ready for school.

The bus ride from the outskirts of Edinburgh to Galbraith High School, nearer the center of the city, was always tedious. Gordon managed to snag a window seat on the right side of the bus so he could watch Arthur's Seat and Salisbury Crags as they drew closer. There were clouds over them that morning, but it was the best view he had. He drew on the cover of his notebook to pass the time, little armies of headless mice.

School was a typical disaster. He could have laughed at his answers on the algebra test had it not been his own grade that was taking the high road to a low D. Then Lucy Campbell had taken her seat next to him in history class and asked what he was drawing, and why oh why did it have to be the headless mice again? He could have drawn all sorts of things that would have been more impressive and not elicited a raised eyebrow or a wrinkled nose. *That* was a conversation killer for sure. He mortified slowly through the rest of the day and then got on the long bus ride back.

The next morning began with Gordon's alarm clock waking him up, rather than any of the previous day's dramatics. He rolled over to turn it off and found

himself staring into the enormous glass eye of a cat. He gave a start, then realized it was just Ixy again. Nothing like a real cat, but that eye up close had scared – no, just surprised – him. What was she doing on his pillow? Hadn't he left her on the bookcase or something? He put her aside and then got up to get dressed.

"Gordon! What happened to your face, sweetie?" Mrs. Ross was in the kitchen, in her boots, when Gordon came in to get breakfast.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Your face, dear. You've got a scratch across your cheek. What did you do?"

"Really? I don't know."

He went to the bathroom to check in a mirror. Sure enough, there was a thin red scratch going down his right cheek. His mother followed him in and began trying to apply ointment to it.

"Are you sure you don't know? I'd have thought you'd notice something like this happening."

"Yes, I'm sure. Stop it! Here, let me put that on." He took the ointment from her. "Maybe it just happened while I was asleep. I don't know."

His mother gave him a worried look, but relented a little bit.

"Well, alright. Just be careful, and don't let that get infected."

"I know, Ma, I know. It's not that bad, really. Just a scratch."

He dabbed at it a bit, but opted against putting a bandage on it. It wasn't actually bleeding and a bandage would probably just call more attention to it. Still, it was kind of embarrassing, and he wished he had a decent explanation for it. A pity

he couldn't say he cut himself shaving, but it would be another year at least before that would make a believable excuse.

He passed his bedroom again on the way back out to the kitchen, and saw Ixy still laying there on his pillow. No sharp parts on a stuffed animal, of course, even if he had been sleeping with it, which of course he hadn't been. Not deliberately, anyway. Still, that cat was starting to give him the creeps. He went in, reached under his bed, and pulled out a shoe box. He removed an old pair of sandals from last summer, put Ixy in, and closed the lid on her. For good measure, he found a rubber band on his nightstand and put it around the box. Okay, that much was a bit silly, but at least he was certain where he left her this time. He shoved it all back under the bed.

Another day, another blah. The algebra test came back and from the looks of it, the only reason he had gotten the few points he did, was that his test had caused a national shortage of red ink and there hadn't actually been enough to finish removing the other points. Mr. MacDowell took him aside after class.

"Gordon, about your test..." he began.

"I know, sir. I should have studied more." Gordon hated conversations like this.

"Yes, I had surmised as much myself. What I wanted to suggest, however, was that you might benefit from the new Galbraith After School Support programme. Do you know about that?"

Did he indeed. *The G.A.S.S. programme*, he thought. *Great, just great. Gordon A Stupid Student gets to go to Galbraith After School Support. Just what I wanted to do.*

"It's a wonderful resource," Mr. MacDowell continued, "for students who are... well, struggling a little with their schoolwork."

"Yes, sir."

"You can have study sessions with other students, and there are tutors there to help out as well. Does that sound good?"

A very dejected "Yes, sir."

"Alright, then. I know today is Friday and you're probably looking forward to the weekend. But next week it's my turn to staff monitor for the G.A.S.S. sessions, so I expect to see you there. Directly after school, in the study hall."

"Yes, sir."

Lucy didn't even give him a nod in History class that day. *Those bloody mice*, Gordon thought, though his current glower was probably a bit of a put off as well. Finally classes were out, and Gordon dragged himself home to play video games for a few hours and take his mind off things.

He was woken up that night by a thumping beneath his bed.

Chapter 8

Malcolm wasn't enjoying his dreams so much anymore. He missed his giant Tyrannosaurus Rex form, and he really didn't care for being a cat at all, though that seemed to be what he was stuck with. He was tiny, and he kept finding himself locked in a closet or something, which wasn't much fun.

The other night, though, the door to his dream closet had been left ajar, and he had managed to work his way out. Furniture loomed over him but he found that he could see fairly well in the dark room. He wished he could go hunting. He looked down at his paws, flexed a thought, and small claws protruded from the seams at his toes. That would help a bit. He flexed a jaw, and another seam ripped, revealing small, sharp teeth. Good enough. He began to prowl.

Pickings were decidedly slim. He had no way of getting out of the house, and there wasn't much that he could hunt inside. He eventually found a mouse which led him on a merry chase until he managed to tackle it and tear its head off. But he was interrupted by the sound of ground shaking footsteps coming towards him. He panicked, and dashed off towards the room he had come out of. He had just gotten inside when he was woken up by a loud shriek. He wasn't sure which world it had come from.

The next night was a short dream. He had found himself on a bookshelf, and had to jump down onto an adjacent bed. A boy had been sleeping in it, and Malcolm, feeling bold, had taken a jab at him with one claw. It was a dream, after all, right? What's the worst that could happen? (Also, Malcolm still forgot occasionally that he wasn't a large and fearsome Tyrannosaur in his dreams.) The boy hadn't woken up at the scratch, and Malcolm was about to take another swipe at him when a loud ringing sound woke him up.

The dream that began in a box was the worst. It was dark and cramped and smelled of cardboard and feet. He pushed at the top, bottom and sides, but it wouldn't open. He began to panic. The box was light enough that he could move it by throwing his body around. He felt it hit something on one side, then he tried thrusting upwards, and there was a block of some sort there, too, that he ran into.

Then suddenly the entire box moved in a direction he hadn't expected. Malcolm held very still. The lid of the box lifted just slightly, then paused. Then it lifted a bit more, and a huge face peered into it, accompanied by a blinding torch shining in Malcolm's eyes. He didn't flinch, though. Finally the lid was removed entirely and put aside. While the light from the torch was momentarily diverted, Malcolm blew his cover, sprang out of the box, and ran like hell towards the door.

He heard a muffled curse behind him as the boy jumped to his feet and stumbled after him in the dark, stubbing his toe on a backpack full of books that was left

on the floor. But Malcolm was fast, had a head start, and could see better in the dark. He was out the door and across the hall almost instantly, and by the time the boy had followed that far he was already in the living room. Under the sofa and behind the dust bunnies before his pursuer was in the room, and he was safe. There was no telling where he could have gone without having seen him.

The thin light from the torch swept back and forth across the room, trying to catch him still moving somewhere, but it was too late. The boy got down on his hands and knees and started peering under the armchair nearest the door, but then another figure entered.

"Gordon, what are you doing at this hour?" The woman gave a bleary yawn, clutching a nightdress around her and shivering slightly.

"Nothing, ma. I um... I thought I saw another mouse, and I wanted to get it out of the house for you."

"But what were you doing up in the first place? It's after three!"

"Well... I had to go to the toilet?"

"Hmm. Well, don't worry about mice for now. Come along back to bed, dear."

When they were gone, Malcolm slowly and quietly moved to a more remote corner of the room. He pulled a few books out from the lower shelf of a bookcase and hid behind them. After about 10 minutes, the boy was back half-heartedly peering under the sofa and chairs, but he soon gave up and went back to bed.

Malcolm remained hidden, trembling, until he woke up.

Chapter 9

Jaden did indeed have a bewildering number of questions. He hardly knew where to start, so he shook his head, dislodging them all and shuffling them like cards, then picked one at random.

"How on Earth was I able to see other people's dreams on my computer? You had something to do with that, didn't you? You must have."

"Ah, yes, well," Prof. Oddbury looked a bit embarrassed. "I'm afraid that was a bit of an accident. You see, iTunes 6.0 came out recently, with video support, and when I upgraded it automatically indexed my entire library of collected dreams."

He gestured towards a desk at the side of the room, and Jaden realized that there was a familiar piece of equipment among all the unusual ones: a Power Mac G5. It had a "Think Different" sticker on the side. *Different indeed*, he thought. Prof. Oddbury continued.

"Very handy, actually. I quite like it as an organizational tool. Of course, what I didn't realize was that it also happened to be sharing my files with the entire network. Most undesirable. I found out while I was collecting more samples and noticed an unusual amount of network traffic that was slowing things down. Needless to say, I've disabled the sharing feature now. Luckily, I don't think anyone else had stumbled across it. Just you, and that doesn't make much difference in the end anyway, does it?"

"Oh? Does it? I don't know."

"Well, you were in this already, weren't you? We would have met fairly soon, regardless. I've just been trying to gather a bit more data over the last few days."

"Was I? Data? You mean more dreams? Do you have any of my dreams in there? Can I see?" Jaden's techie side was pulling through the general confusion. It sounded like there could be some seriously cool geekery up in that apartment.

"Well not *just* dreams, of course, though in a way I suppose you could say it's *all* dreams. All related, anyway. I – well, I could show you a bit of it now, really. Come over here."

Prof. Oddbury forged a path across the room to the desk, and woke up a monitor that was sitting on it, connected to the G5. iTunes was in the foreground of the screen, and it was queued up to a file with Jaden's name and the date from two nights ago.

"Hey! I know what dream that was. Can we watch it? I want to see if it's the same as I remember."

"Ah, that. Well, no, not just now. I started running some further analyses on it this afternoon, and I'm afraid the file won't play while that is going on. Takes too much in the way of resources, you see, even for a G5."

Behind the iTunes window was another, larger window, black and covered with flashing numbers and graphs in different colors. It seemed to be measuring phlogiston levels, ephemery quotients, cross-existential blur variance, and a host of other quantities and qualities Jaden had never heard of. He stared at it entranced, until Oddbury reached over to the keyboard and hid the analysis program. On the computer's desktop was a photograph of a surreal and intricate statue. It was vaguely boat-like in form, but covered with an array of pipes and spears and trumpets and faces and baffling gadgets and machinery.

"I know what that is!" Jaden said, surprised to find something here to which that applied. "I saw that when I went to England in college. It's... it's..." he snapped his fingers, trying to remember.

"The Navigators, by David Kemp. One of my favorites. This one is at Hay's Galleria in Southwark. Of course, it was only a pale copy of the one at the Academy, but considering he had only seen it in his dreams, he made quite a remarkable reproduction." He nodded thoughtfully at it, with a fond expression.

"What academy was it, that had the original?" Jaden asked.

"Why, the Royal Academy of Oneironautical Science, of course! Ah, but of course you haven't heard of it. Pity it's been closed down so long. When I was there, back in aught-five – "

"What?" Jaden interrupted. "*Nineteen* oh five? How old *are* you? I mean, not to be rude or anything, but..."

"Hmm? Oh, well I'd say that at last count I was around, ooh, say a hundred and forty-two."

"Years?!"

"Yes. Being in my line of work does funny things to the aging process. I still feel like a spry young eighty-five year old. But as I was saying, back in my Academy days, we didn't have all this computer equipment to help us out. No! We had to do it all by abacus!" Jaden raised an eyebrow at this. "Well, by hand, anyway. But the point is, it's certainly easier now that everything's digitized."

"I saw that your business card said 'oneironaut' on it. What does that mean?"

"From the Greek, of course! *Oneiros* – of dreams and dreaming, *nautes* – sailor. One who travels in dreams. Don't you remember your Greek, boy?"

"Never had any, actually. Not really standard curriculum these days."

"Bah! Well, that's what we were about. Dreams! Very prestigious research, though top secret. A matter of national security, even. Did you know that Britain shares a larger border with the dreamlands than any other country? It's true! Hundreds of places, thousands even, with old magic, or just thin twilight areas with low reality quotients. They all had to be monitored for unusual activity.

Edward VII was quite keen on that. Wanted no surprises. I'm sorry to say the current Queen doesn't take it quite as seriously."

"So what are you doing out here in California?" Jaden asked.

"Oh, I retired a number of years ago, moved to Santa Barbara actually. Some old grapevines still carry news, though, and when I got wind of what was going on, I took it upon myself to set up temporary facilities here to do what I could."

"And... what exactly *is* going on?"

Prof. Oddbury's usually energetic demeanor grew more somber. He turned back to the computer. "Why don't we begin by taking a look at this."

On the screen he pulled up a map of what Jaden recognized as his neighborhood. It had very little detail though, and seemed to be in a sort of bas relief, like a sonar image. For the most part it was a pale blue, darker on the edges of roads and buildings.

"What you see here is a relative reality map. Blue indicates the world we live in, what we generally refer to as 'reality.' This is from approximately one week ago, in the daytime. At night, it is a bit different, something like this." He pressed a button which put an overlay of sorts on the map, adding small patches of light purple in various places. "At night the borders between reality and the dreamlands are much thinner. The dreamlands are represented by red here, so we see purple where they are nearest to us."

He brought up another screen of images, this time a row of several smaller maps.

"This represents the data I have been collecting over the last several days. Notice the change?"

Each image had a map with progressively more purple on it, and the final one had actual patches of pure red.

"What does that mean?" Jaden asked. "The dreamlands are getting closer?"

"Yes, but not only that. From the looks of it, someone is trying to break through." His tone of voice gave Jaden the shivers.

"And this relates to me... how?" Was there still a chance this was all just a big joke?

"The answer to that," Oddbury replied with a nod towards Jaden's side, "is there at the end of your right arm."

Chapter 10

Ixy didn't quite know why she was dreaming so often these days now, but it was a nice change at least. She also didn't know why she inhabited such a strange body when she did dream. But if she were going to make a list of all the things she didn't know, she could start now and not finish until yesterday rolled around again. Might as well just make the best of it and explore. She was nothing if not curious.

Balancing on two legs was a bit tricky at first, but luckily the body she was in knew how to do it, so she got used to it fairly quickly. The weight of her oversized head was counter-balanced by her tail, so that was good. It wasn't entirely clear what point there was to her bitty little arms with their two claws each. She could scratch her nose with them if she bent her neck and pulled her chin as far in as possible, and she could tear at the tie around her neck until it came off, though another one always appeared in its place. That was about it. She liked her new teeth though, and her hind legs seemed nice and strong, and well-clawed. So it could have been worse.

When her dream began, she was lying on a straw pallet under a thin, somewhat ragged, blanket. The room was small, with a cold stone floor and few furnishings. There were some candles on a table, a few bones scattered here and there, and numerous small knives, bits of chains or armor, and other similar items collected haphazardly, as if by a covetous magpie. Ixy rooted around amongst them for a bit before cutting herself on a broken blade, then decided to find out what lay beyond the door.

The door had a simple latch that was easy to operate, even with her small arms. She inched it open and peered out cautiously. There was a narrow hallway, scattered with a few other doors similar to her own, and dimly lit by flames from occasional torches spaced along the walls. The torches were burning low, and one or two had gone out. No one else was in sight and all was quiet.

Ixy slipped out and left the door open just a crack behind her, so she could spot the right one if she needed to come back. She tried to sneak quietly down the hall, not wanting to attract attention until she had a better idea of where she was, but her claws clacked annoyingly on the stones with each step. She couldn't figure out how to retract them, which was rather frustrating. She did her best to be silent, though.

Her hallway was short, and fed into a larger one lined with tapestries and suits of armor. It had other halls and doors and stairways leading off of it. Ixy kept to the shadows by the walls, staying behind the suits of armor or anything else that offered a bit of cover.

One of the doors along the hall was open, and spilled flickering light and raucous laughter out into the corridor. Ixy crept behind the curve of a marble stairway roughly opposite the door and peered in. The figures inside were grotesque, some scaly, some hairy, some fanged, some winged. She was glad that she had seen them first. It looked as though they were all half again or twice as big as she was, and not the sort you would want to run into unawares.

They wore a ragtag collection of helmets, breastplates, chain mail, and other pieces of metal that could be attached to their bodies either as decorations or as armor. Wooden tankards sloshed ale from a cask and large, unrecognizable chunks of meat lay on platters on the tables. Harsh voices jostled one another over the sounds of drinking and chewing. A deep and far off bell tolled twice.

"Two bells!" roared one of the larger demons over the others. "Who's got two bells?"

"It's Shandag's shift! Get out there, Shandag!"

"No it ain't! I did me rounds not two hours ago!"

"Liar!"

A short and hairy creature with a Viking style helmet leapt upon a lankier one with a snake like face, knocking plates and tankards aside. They tumbled onto the floor striking and snarling, but were interrupted in their epistemological discussion of Shandag's veracity. The larger demon had taken his own scaly tail in his hand and lashed it out at them like a whip.

"Break it up now, break it up!" he snarled. "And just for that ye can both go on the bleedin' patrol together. So get yer scabby hides out!"

Another couple of lashes and the two disputants were shoved roughly out the door, buckling on their knife belts, glaring at each other, and muttering.

"You and yer big mouth, Vormas. Always makin' things worse'n they were before."

"Perhaps if you didn't have grog for brains, you would remember when your own shift is."

"Well, perhaps if *you* — hey! What was that?"

"Well, well, well. Look who we've got here."

The two had turned to face the stairway and Ixy had noticed and ducked down farther behind it, but a fraction of a second too late. The guards sauntered over, smirking, seeing that she was blocked from escape by the stairwell. The tall, reptilian one leaned over here.

"My, my, if it isn't little Malcolm. And what are we doing out of bed so late tonight, eh? Potty break?"

Ixy cowered slightly and trembled.

"What's the matter?" sneered Shandag, "Cat got yer tongue?" He barked a harsh laugh. "C'mon Vormas, can't waste our time on a runt like him. Let's go tuck him in, shall we?"

He slapped Ixy across the flank with the shaft of his spear, and she jumped. Vormas kicked her and she took off running down the hall. This body she was in wasn't much for speed, though, and the larger demons kept up easily, laughing and jabbing at her until they reached the turnoff for the smaller hallway from which she had come. They gave her a shove down it in the right direction, then continued on their patrol, their spirits restored their entertainment with a mutual victim.

Ixy found the propped door leading to her room, let herself in, and lay down on the straw pallet. She would have to be careful around this place on further explorations.

Chapter 11

Prof. Oddbury gestured Jaden back to his armchair and began rooting around in a pile of equipment next to his desk. He brought back a device of several parts and then pulled his own chair closer to Jaden's so he could sit down.

"Extend your right arm, please. And don't worry: this is completely harmless."

Jaden did as he was asked. Oddbury fastened a thick band of some rubbery material around Jaden's bicep, just above the elbow. It was rather like a blood pressure monitor, but the inside seemed to be lined with special sensors. A flat layer of the same material was laid across his lap for his forearm to rest on. A wire connected the band at his elbow to a box the professor was holding, and another wire ran from there to a short, thick wand he held in his hand.

"The idea behind this is fairly simple," Prof. Oddbury explained. "You recall the maps I showed you earlier, showing the relative strengths of this world and the dreamlands over a given area?"

Jaden nodded.

"Well what we're going to do here is to take a similar reading of your arm. The Subcotex™ layer beneath it will filter out any stray signals, and the band at the normal part of your arm will provide a base reading for reference. All clear?"

"Clear enough, I suppose."

"Very good. Now, this sensor," he held up the wand in his hand, "will measure the reality levels of your affected limb against your base level. We'll get it calibrated correctly first."

He pushed a button on the box in his lap and turned it so they could both see the screen on the front of it. The screen lit up with a thin, blue line across the center. He then flipped a switch that was between the two wires on the box so that it

pointed to the wire leading to Jaden's arm. A second line appears on the screen. The professor turned a knob until the two lines lay on top of each other.

"There, that does it. This shade of blue indicates your basal reality level, like it did on the maps. Now we'll switch the input line over to the sensor," he flipped the switch so that it pointed to the other wire, "and see what we see."

He held the sensor over Jaden's elbow and a small patch of blue appeared at the top of the screen. As the sensor moved slowly down his arm, the patch expanded, outlining the shape of the limb as it passed over it. It only remained blue near the elbow, however. Almost immediately it became purple and then the blue gradually faded out until, at the hand, it was almost entirely red.

With a sigh, Prof. Oddbury sat back and pressed a button, freezing the image on the screen. Then he detached the band from Jaden's arm and put the rest of the equipment to one side.

"Well, I must admit, it's about what I had expected. Nevertheless..." he shook his head.

"What? What does it mean?"

"Hmm. Well. As you have probably realized by now, this is no ordinary paralysis in your arm. What you want to see on a reading like this, when you are awake and fully existing in this world, is a solid blue throughout. The unusual amount of red you see here indicates that your hand, and a good deal of your arm, has almost entirely crossed over."

"Crossed over? Where to?"

"The dreamlands, of course. Your hand is, in effect, dreaming without you, and it appears to be trapped there. The paralysis it exhibits here is similar to that which overtakes your entire body when you dream normally. The difference is that

your hand cannot wake up on its own. It may remain living but paralyzed, though it may also eventually atrophy to the point that it needs to be amputated. Cases like these are extremely rare, however, so not much is known about them and I can't give a very precise forecast."

"But how did this even happen in the first place? I was just in a regular car accident. How do these dreamlands even enter into it?" Jaden covered his right hand in his lap with his left one, protectively.

"I'm afraid that you were rather unlucky in the location of the accident, as well as in the mere fact of it. It so happens that it took place at the convergence of two very strong and ancient power lines, and I am referring to magic here, not electricity."

"Power lines? Magic? But that was Central Expressway! It's not like, Stonehenge or anything."

"Yes, very poor planning about that road. No proper zoning ordinances anywhere these days. An accident like this was bound to happen sooner or later. And granted, Silicon Valley may not be as liberally peppered with such things as jolly old England, but it is not entirely devoid of its own magic."

"Okay, so there were these magic line thingies. What actually happened?"

"Now keep in mind also that this was night time, when the dreamlands are naturally closer to our world, so the boundaries were thin to begin with. A tremendous amount of physical energy was involved in your collision, and being directly atop these power lines, a great deal of it was transmuted into magical energy, which tore the barriers between the worlds."

"But how do you know all this?"

"That's my job, boy! Or at least it was until I retired. Someone's got to keep an eye on these things. An old colleague of mine from the ministry alerted me to this case. Said it could probably use an investigation, but they're terribly short staffed out here. He knew I had moved to California, so he showed me the report and I offered to help out. Something to do, you know. Gets me out of the house. Anyway, where was I?"

"I think we had just torn the barriers between the worlds."

"Ah yes, of course. Now even that, terrible as it sounds, even that alone would most likely not have caused a lasting problem. The rift would have mended itself in seconds after your accident, since there was no sustained focus to the magic keeping it open. So what I believe is that someone – or something – acted very quickly in those few seconds from the other side, in the dreamlands."

"Someone?"

"Or something."

"But what? Who?"

"It is hard to say precisely. The dreamlands are inhabited by a mind boggling array of people and creatures. I'm afraid, though, that you may have fallen victim to what we refer to as a trophy hunter."

"And what's that?"

"Trophy hunters are beings take sport in cross-reality hunting, you might say. It's a violent challenge that appeals to some. While we can cross over to the dreamlands nearly every night, we cannot truly be hunted there, since we always just wake up in the end and vanish from that world. It is much harder – nearly impossible at most times – for denizens of that world to come here. But there are some that go to great efforts to break through, however briefly, perhaps taking

advantage of border rifts like the one that occurred here, and then bring back trinkets which win them prestige in certain circles. In your case, the hunter seems to have been very bold indeed. I expect you are lucky that he had only a few seconds available to him, and that in the midst of a speeding automobile accident, or he might have taken more than your hand."

"But my hand is still here." Jaden held it up, immobile. "He didn't actually take it, it just doesn't work."

"He took the spirit of your hand, its essence, the part he could carry back to the dreamlands. Without it, your hand is like a person in a coma."

Jaden shivered. "So what can I do? Where is my hand's... spirit... now?"

"That, young lad, is our next challenge. I haven't yet been able to trace it effectively, but now that you and I have had a chance to meet, we can tackle the problem together. However," here the professor glanced at a wall clock and at Jaden's stifled yawn, "I believe you have had quite enough new material for one evening. Go home, get some rest, study your notes – you were taking notes, weren't you? tut, tut – and I will see you again tomorrow. And don't worry about your dreams. I don't expect anything to happen, but I'll have you on the monitor just in case."

Jaden wasn't sure he'd be able to sleep after all he had seen and heard that evening, but he also wasn't sure he could fit anything else new inside his head either, so he took his leave and went back to his own apartment, leaving the door to the janitor's closet as innocent-looking as before.

Chapter 12

Gordon continued looking for Ixy on Saturday, though he tried to do it surreptitiously, when no one else was around. His parents would never believe he was that obsessed over a house mouse. Of course, looking wasn't going to be

of much use, he figured, since the creature could have gone anywhere after he had left it in the living room the night before, so he didn't spend long there. He checked his own room in case it had decided to come back, though he knew that was probably a long shot as well.

Nevertheless, he checked under his bed and his dresser, and he rooted around in the dark nether regions of his closet. Just to make sure. The hope he was holding out what that Ixy might only be possessed at night, since she had seemed normal enough when he had seen her during the day. If that was the case, then she wouldn't be able to keep moving around in the daytime, and he would have a better chance of finding her. Still, she could have gone anywhere in the night.

His little sister Fiona had caught him looking through her toy box when he thought she was playing outside and asked him indignantly what he was doing.

"Nothing. Just looking for something of mine that I'm missing."

"What's missing?"

"Nothing important. I'm sorry I came in your room without asking." He headed out the door.

"Good, 'cause you can't play with my ponies unless you ask me first."

"Right, I know. I won't." *I'm just hoping you won't play with my cat.*

"Can we draw something together?" Fiona asked, perking up and looking hopeful.

"Not now, Fiona, I'm busy." But the crestfallen look on her face made him sigh and change his mind. It had been a futile search anyway. Might as well drop it.

"Oh, alright. Get the paper and crayons."

"Yay!" Fiona scampered off and came back with an immense stack of paper and a bucket of crayons.

"I'm not going to use all that, so don't get greedy," Gordon said, taking a single sheet. "Now what do you want to draw?"

Drawing with Fiona actually meant that Gordon drew things with nice, crisp outlines and she coloured them in with jagged but enthusiastic scribbles. They both enjoyed it. They came up with a school of tropical fish on one sheet, and a very large butterfly on another, before Gordon got up and said that he had had enough for now. Fiona proudly carried the drawings off to show their parents.

Gordon went back to his own room, looking for his sketch book and thinking he might draw something for himself to keep from worrying about where Ixy might be. He had lots of his drawings up on the walls of his room. Fantasy subjects, mostly: knights slaying dragons, bizarre alien monsters, wizards casting spells. Everything up on display was black and white. He was in a pen and ink phase and had taken down all his old coloured pencil drawings. He pulled the sketch book out from under a few library books. Overdue library books. Dang. He would have to be taking those back soon.

Library books! The library! That was it! What he needed was information. Surely other people throughout history had dealt with supernatural problems, so somewhere there must be books about them. And that somewhere would be the library. Of course, it also occurred to him that the internet would be a much faster and easier way of looking this up, and if he had cooler parents, they'd even have an internet connection in their house. Oh well. The library it was.

He shoved the books into his backpack and headed outside to his bicycle, tossing a hurried "Going to the library!" over his shoulder to his parents on his way out the door.

"What was that, Gordon?" his mother called, leaning out from the kitchen.

"Library!" He was already off and pedaling.

Once he had parked his bike, returned his books, and paid his fines, Gordon sat down at one of the library's internet terminals. He started Googling terms like "exorcism" and "what to do if your pet is possessed by a demon," but unfortunately it seemed that the library's network blocked access to all the sites that were likely to have anything really useful. So he turned to the online card catalog instead.

The choices there were rather scarce as well. He did find a copy of *Coping with Satanism*, and also *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, both of which looked like they might contain something useful if he looked thoroughly enough. He also put in a request for a copy of *Driving Out Demons: Exorcisms Past and Present*, from the main library branch. That looked like it would be the one he needed, if he could just get a hold of it.

He checked out the two books he had in hand, and packed them nervously into his bag. He shouldn't be nervous, really, he told himself. They were just books. If someone asked he could always say they were for a school report. Though that might go over better for *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, than for *Coping with Satanism*, which sounded more like self-help.

He read as much of the two books as he could that weekend, in his room under the guise of studying for school. Most of it wasn't remotely relevant, but he paid close attention to any mention of spirits inhabiting people or animals. They didn't seem to get into toys so much. He went to church on Sunday morning with his family, as usual, but found himself wishing they weren't Protestant. A Catholic church would probably have a nice fount of holy water somewhere handy, but at their church there was nothing. He thought he'd probably find himself needing to nick some holy water from somewhere before too long.

* * *

Monday afternoon. Gordon headed for the study hall for his first visit to Galbraith After School Support. *I'm headed for the G.A.S.S. chamber*, he thought wryly, *I'm going to get G.A.S.S.ed.*

He opened the door and looked in, and very nearly turned straight around and left when he saw Lucy Campbell sitting there, along with a small assortment of other students and Mr. MacDowell. But she had seen him too, and he couldn't very well turn tail and run in front of her. Besides, at least they were both in the same boat, having to go to study hall for tutoring. They had that in common, though Gordon had always thought she was a rather better student than he was.

He sat down at her table, a carefully calculated distance from her. Not too close, not too far.

"So, um... what are you in for?" he tried to ask casually. "Maths been getting the better of you, too?"

Lucy gave him a humoring smile. "Actually, I help tutor people here. I get volunteer credit for my social studies class."

Whoo boy. That hadn't gone as planned. Gordon reddened and floundered briefly for a response. Lucy tactfully tried to divert the subject.

"Have you been drawing much more recently?"

"Oh, no. I mean, yes! I mean, yes just not... you know... um..."

"Mutilated rodents?"

"Right. That's it."

There was a brief moment of silence, as though someone had died. Even the group of students at the other table had stopped talking momentarily, just long enough for Gordon to wonder if everyone was listening, disgusted with this boy who can't do maths, sticks his foot in his mouth when talking to pretty girls, and draws gruesome pictures. Normal conversation resumed just in time, and Gordon decided not to commit seppuku after all.

"It looks like you're actually quite good," Lucy said tentatively. "At drawing, I mean. From what I saw. Odd subject matter of course, but well done, nonetheless."

"Well, I don't usually draw things like that, that was just..." he stammered and made a vague motion with his hand. "You know. I've done lots better pictures than that." God, that sounded dumb.

"Maybe I could see some of them sometime?"

"What? Oh! Um, yeah. Sure."

Sure, he thought, you can come home with me, hold my hand on the bus, be enthralled by my drawings, gaze longingly into my eyes, help me exorcise my demonically possessed stuffed kitten, and... no. I'll bring something to school.

Any further conversation was interrupted at that point. Mr. MacDowell. had just finished helping another student and had spotted Gordon. He walked over to their table.

"Hello, Gordon," he said. "Glad to see you could make it. You've met Miss Campbell, I take it? Lucy happens to be in my accelerated algebra class, so she should be more than capable of helping you out. You *were* going to be doing your algebra assignment, I assume?"

Gordon realized then that he hadn't so much as taken out a book, and was probably just staring ahead like a stunned fish.

"Yes. Maths, that's it. I've got my things right here." He hurriedly pulled out a book and a notepad from his school bag.

"Good, good. Well, I'll be around as well if either of you need anything." Mr. MacDowell moved off to check on the students at the next table, one of whom had her hand up for a question.

Lucy smiled shyly at Gordon. "Well, I suppose we should look at your assignment. Do you want to show me what you've been working on?"

Gordon would have preferred to throw himself off of Salisbury Crag than to find another way of looking stupid in front of Lucy Campbell, but the Crag were not convenient to the study hall and nothing else sufficiently deadly was within reach. He opened his maths book to the assigned chapter.

On further reflection later that afternoon, Gordon thought that perhaps the G.A.S.S. chamber wasn't actually such a brutal fate after all. His algebra assignment had gotten done in record time and with record accuracy, and he may even have learned something from it. And Lucy really was quite smart, and not at all condescending, even when he asked stupid questions. She helped other students too, of course, but seemed to spend – or was it his imagination? – just a bit more time with Gordon whenever she sat down at his table.

Could be worse, he told himself, could definitely be worse.

Chapter 13

Jaden went back to Prof. Oddbury's room behind the janitor's closet again the next night. (Behind it? Inside it? Around it? Wherever it was.) He accepted the

offer of a cup of tea and sat down again in one of the armchairs. The professor brought his own cup and saucer in and sat down opposite him.

"You know," Oddbury began, "I feel that there is one thing I should make perfectly clear before we go any further. It is your arm that is the issue here, and your life and your decision. I have no desire to force you into an undertaking you do not wish to accept. You know how your arm is now. In all likelihood it will get no worse, but it is my professional opinion – knowing what has happened to it – that neither will it ever improve. I may be able to aid you in recovering it, but it will be difficult and, I expect, more than a little bit dangerous. The choice to attempt it must be yours."

Jaden forgot about his tea. He hadn't really stopped to think the night before about where all this was leading. It was overwhelming enough just to learn what he had learned. But yes, what were they – what was *he* – going to do about it?

"So, does that mean you have a plan? Do you know how to get my arm back to normal? How to get it back from the dreamlands?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking, yes. But also, in some ways, no. What I mean to say is, there will be a great number of specific details that we cannot foresee, of course, and we will need to deal with those as they arise. But there is a general concept, yes. What I propose is this: We will send *you*, Jaden Sands, into the dreamlands to find and recover your dreaming hand."

"Send me into the dreamlands?" Jaden was looking a little wide-eyed. "You mean, not like regular dreaming, but actually *going* there?"

"Precisely."

"Wow." Jaden was silent for a moment.

"Excellent travel opportunity, you know," the professor offered. "Not many people get this sort of a chance. Usually you have to be in the business."

"Well yes, I mean, travel is cool and everything. But you said it would be dangerous, too."

"Yes, and I'm afraid we cannot accurately predict the dangers you may encounter, or even the exact nature of the trophy hunter that took your arm. As I said, this is a risk you must weigh for yourself. If you wish, I can pack up tonight and go home to Santa Barbara, and you can forget that any of this ever happened. Or pretend to forget, anyway. But if you decide to follow through, I will do whatever I can to help you. Which is no small offer, if I do say so myself."

Jaden thought for a few moments. A logical, rational part of his brain urged him to cut his losses. He could live without a hand if he had to. No point in getting killed, or whatever else could happen to you in the dreamlands. But a considerable part of him didn't like life without his hand. The few days he had spent at work this way had been a pain, and he couldn't imagine making a career like this. And then, he hadn't tried dancing yet, and he wasn't sure how much that would be affected. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life not quite being able to do the things he was used to doing. And also, a small, hidden, adventurous corner of his mind was beginning to quiver. The dreamlands! It was simply an incredible thought. And that small, hidden part of himself tipped the balance.

"Alright," he said, taking a deep breath. "Let's do it."

"Excellent!" Prof. Oddbury leapt from his chair spilling his tea, and clasped Jaden's good hand enthusiastically. "Marvelous! This is most exciting! I didn't want to say anything to influence you of course, but I was quite hoping you would decide to step up to the challenge. Retired life doesn't exactly agree with me, you see, and this is precisely what I needed!"

Jaden mumbled something about being glad he could help, but the professor was already back at his computer, checking notes and planning a strategy.

"My first bit of advice is that we should wait for Beltane before we actually attempt anything."

"Beltane?"

"The first of May. May Day. It's a little known fact, but Beltane is actually a counterpart to Samhain, what you would call Halloween. The boundaries between worlds are especially thin on both of those dates, which makes it easier to cross over."

"That would be next weekend, then."

"Yes, and what I would recommend would be to go ahead and go to work as usual next week, but arrange to take some time off the first week in May. I would hope that the journey will not take long, but we should allow for some flexibility and also for some recovery time, if necessary."

"Sure, I can do that. So what should we work on in the meantime?"

"The first thing I'll need to do is to take some physical samples, so we have the appropriate data to correlate with your dream data, which I already have."

"Physical samples? Of what?"

"Of you, of course. I will need a few strands of hair, some saliva, and a very small amount of blood, much less than you would donate, say, to the Red Cross."

"Oh... just a little bit?"

"Just a little bit. The data I will collect from them will let me prepare the necessary chemicals and equipment, and may even aid in tracking your lost hand."

"Well, alright."

"Excellent. We'll make this as quick and painless as possible."

The samples were taken and stored in an array of small vials in a rack on Prof. Oddbury's desk. Jaden looked at the long strand of black hair next to the small tube of dark red liquid, and imagined his right hand in another tiny bottle next to them. Creepy, thinking about parts of yourself taken away and locked up. The professor spoke again, breaking him out of his reverie.

"I'm afraid things will be fairly boring for a while as I run a number of tests and analyses here. All necessary preparation, but somewhat tedious. You may want to relax and get some rest. We will be getting much busier in the week to come."

"Alright. Oh, and not to sound overly mundane or anything, but..."

"Yes?"

"Well, there's a Jammix – a dance – up at Stanford tomorrow night, and I was thinking about going to it. It's only been a week since my last dance, of course, but the way the week has been, it feels like a year."

"By all means, my boy. Go ahead and have a nice time. We can begin our work on Saturday. I'll have my preparations ready by then."

"Great."

* * *

Jaden felt a little apprehensive as he paid his money and headed in to the dance the next night. He was still pretty self-conscious about his hand, and he expected that many people here wouldn't even have heard about his accident yet, and he would probably have to explain it more times than he'd like. Apparently at least one person already knew about it, though.

"Jaden! Are you alright?!" A small, red-headed blur rushed up to him and flung its arms around his neck. "I heard about your accident! That was so horrible!"

"Mmph. Hi, Amanda." Jaden gave her a one-armed hug. "Yes, I'm alright. Well, more or less."

He showed her his right hand and explained. She stared at it, wide-eyed.

"Oh my god! I'm so sorry! Do they think it will get better?"

"Well, it's not certain. Maybe. Too soon to tell for now."

"Wow. I hope it gets better."

"Thanks."

"Well, save me a dance, okay?"

"You bet."

Amanda skipped off to greet another friend who had just come in, and Jaden sat down to deal with changing into his dance shoes one-handedly. He reflected that running into Amanda first was probably the best thing he could have done for getting the news out, and indeed, it seemed that nearly everyone else knew about his condition almost as soon as they got in the door. Unfortunately, they all still had to hear about it from his own lips, so it didn't actually save him much.

There was a pretty thorough mix of dances that night, as there always is at Jammix, but Jaden decided early on to limit himself to things like waltzes, polkas, and one-steps. Dances where he could, for the most part, maintain a consistent frame without his right hand and arm having to move too much. Swing, and Latin and such dances could be attempted at a later date, if everything seemed to be going well.

He made sure to start off with a couple of his favorite waltz partners, so he could get a sense of what it was like dancing with his "new" hand without having to worry about his partner any more than necessary. He found that it actually went fairly well, or about as well as he could have expected. Before a dance started, he could use his left hand to get his right hand into approximately the right shape and position to be comfortable, and then just place it around his partner's back and leave it there. His upper arm and shoulder were still fine, so he could maintain a decent frame without it collapsing. The lack of sensation and flexibility was a bit annoying, and sometimes after a turn it would be awkward getting back into closed position, but for the most part, he could work with it.

Rotary waltzes were the easiest, since they used the most stable frame. Cross step waltzes twisted a bit more but weren't too bad. Polkas could get out of control more easily, but with a good partner they were doable. One steps were just silly anyway, so nothing much to worry about there. Plus there was only one of them in the entire evening. For the other dances, Jaden was content to sit and watch.

He was watching a tango – which wasn't the sort of thing he normally would have danced anyway – when he felt a small tap on his shoulder.

"Excuse me," said a voice, "but would you like to dance this?"

He turned and saw a girl he didn't recognize. He guessed she was a student, but she was one of those people who could be old than they looked. Or younger, if it came to that. She was a little shorter than him and she had dark eyes and long,

straight hair which hung loose down her back. There was a certain point to her features that Jaden couldn't exactly place, but they held the eye somehow.

"Oh, I'm sorry, but I don't really dance tango. At least not so that it would be recognizable as such." That got a smile from her. "I think there's a waltz next, though, would you like to do that?"

"Sure, I'd love to. I was told that you're a good dancer and that I should ask you to dance. I hope you don't mind. My name's Zoe."

"I'm Jaden, and I don't mind in the least. I shall try to live up to my flattery. I warn you, though: I may not be at my best tonight."

The tango music ended as he explained about his hand, and they walked out to take a starting position on the dance floor.

The waltz began: "Iris," by the Goo Goo Dolls. Jaden put his right arm around Zoe, and she seemed to shiver, and tense slightly at his touch. He wondered if it was just weird dancing with someone's paralyzed hand, but thought maybe he shouldn't mention it. They started waltzing with the opening lines.

*And I'd give up forever to touch you
'Cause I know that you feel me somehow*

He wondered what she had felt. Could she somehow feel the dreamlands through his hand? Feel through to his real hand, beyond the frozen version he had here? Silly thought. Her eyes were locked on him, so he turned his attention to her and they danced.

Zoe was an excellent dancer, and Jaden wondered silently how he had never met her before. Maybe she was new to the area. Regardless, she was fantastic. The waltz felt like flying, and Jaden barely had to think of a turn or a pivot or a redowa step before it became a reality. He hardly even had to look away from

her eyes to steer. From his peripheral vision it seemed as though the crowds simply parted in their path.

Then came the instrumental bridge, and the music switched from straightforward waltz time to 3 + 3 + 2. Extra pivots on each phrase. Most couples on the floor were getting confused, or simply waltzing on and getting off the music, then skittering to catch up. Jaden and Zoe hit every beat perfectly, the twos like little knives dismantling the threes, taking out little pieces of the waltz and the world around them, leaving little holes into Elsewhere.

And Jaden saw something in her dark eyes, something that seemed to grow until it filled her face and then his vision. A dark figure on a horse, its features hidden under the cape of a hood that billowed in some mythical wind. A burst of flames appeared in the air before it, and the sky seemed to tear open. The figure spurred its horse, and leapt through the flames into the gap.

The music quieted and lulled back into waltz time again. The figure was gone, leaving a tense, expectant emptiness behind. Jaden realized they were still dancing. And then the final chorus burst forth.

*And I don't want the world to see me
'Cause I don't think that they'd understand*

And once again the figure was appeared, in his vision or in his mind's eye, he didn't know. It burst out of the flaming gap, clutching a small bundle to its chest.

When everything's made to be broken

Jaden's right arm felt a brief stab of pain. The flaming rift in the sky sealed, and the flames flickered, then vanished.

I just want you to know who I am

The horseman galloped off, carrying its burden. And the world reformed around Jaden. Zoe, still dancing with him. The crowd of couples finishing the waltz. The walls, balcony and purple curtains of Roble Dance Studio. Reality.

The music ended. Jaden let go of Zoe slowly, making sure she still had her balance. He himself was feeling rather wobbly, and that was unusual for him, even after a fast waltz. He was also watching her face to see whether she had noticed anything of what he had seen, or noticed that he might have been acting oddly. She looked as though she had just resurfaced from a happy dream.

"That was... *wonderful*," she breathed. "Thank you."

"No, thank *you*."

He walked her back to the sidelines, without quite knowing what else to say. Luckily, someone else came up and asked her for the next dance before they were even off the floor, and Jaden was off the hook. He went outside for a drink of water, wondering what exactly had just happened.

Chapter 14

Ixy looked up at the large, ornate, wooden door before her and wished she could read. If she could read, she would be able to tell that the engraved letters on the door marked it as The Collection Room. Then, with a start, she realized that she must be able to read after all, since that was precisely what it said. Slightly fuzzy through her near sighted lizard eyes, but there it was. She wondered what a collection room was. It sounded very grand.

It was the next night after her rough encounter with the demon guards Shandag and Vormas. It was her next dream, anyway. Did she dream every night? She didn't know. Since she wasn't really awake in between, it was hard to tell.

This time she had taken a different route upon leaving her room, or if not her room then the room she always started her dreams in, and had avoided the soldiers' quarters. She knew she should be on the look out for the patrolling guards, but at least she didn't have to deliberately go towards the highest density of them. She had taken a winding corridor that sloped and curled downwards as though it knew as little of where it was going as Ixy did. The few times that other creatures had passed her, she had heard them coming and found a shadowy alcove to hide in, or a ragged tapestry to sneak behind, and she had gone unnoticed. But there were also long stretches of bare corridor, with no alcoves, tapestries, or side halls branching off, and these she skittered nervously through as quickly as she could.

She didn't really know why she had picked this corridor for the night's explorations, but now that she was in it there seemed no point in turning back. She figured her curiosity would surely get the better of her some day, and she wondered if she could get killed in a dream, or what would happen to her if her dream body got hurt. She didn't really think it was her body, so it might not be that catastrophic. She would be careful, nonetheless, just in case.

The door was immense, and Ixy's miniscule arms could barely reach up to the latch. She gave it a tug, but it was locked. She tapped at the large iron lock, and tried to stick a claw into it. But the keyhole sealed itself over at her attempt, and the lock now appeared to be nothing but a flat metal panel. She tapped it again, and spikes jutted out of it, nearly poking her. It was clearly a lock that did not wish to be disturbed. She left it alone.

Ixy heard the sound of footsteps coming down the corridor. Two pairs, one a steady clapping of boots in a purposeful stride, the other an irregular pounding shuffle, with the clacking of claws on the stone floor. Ixy looked around hurriedly. There was a turn in the winding corridor just next to the door, and she ducked behind it just as two figures rounded a bend from the other direction. The torch carried by the second figure illuminated the hall in flickering light, and Ixy peered out from her corner in the shadows.

The leading figure wore a long, flowing, dark cape that swirled around him as he stopped in front of the door. He examined the lock.

"Someone has been at this door, Bratch," he said, his voice a smooth, silky glide that seemed to carry unseen menace. He tapped one of the spikes, and they receded, then he rubbed a thumb over the metal panel and the keyhole reappeared.

"It wasn't one of my lot, Master," Bratch replied. "They been told what's off limits 'round here. They're just the patrol, and they knows it." He was a rough, jagged demon, with long, heavily muscled arms that reached down past the knees of his short, slightly bowed legs. Two large, bat-like wings curved out from his shoulders, occasionally flexing as if of their own volition, to tap the walls of the corridor. One clawed hand held the torch aloft like a matchstick, and the shadows it cast were like demons themselves.

"So you say, Bratch. But I will know if any of them happens to 'forget' his place. Hold this for me."

He passed a small bundle to the demon, then reached into his cloak and brought forth a thin, rectangular strip of metal. He held it in one hand and laid his other index finger perpendicularly across it. As he ran his finger along its length, bits of the metal vanished, leaving behind a bizarrely curved and twisted key. The key fit into the lock without even so much as a whisper of scraping metal, and the door swung smoothly open.

The Master swept into the room, and Bratch followed, stooping slightly and pulling his wings in tight to fit through the doorway. Ixy crept closer so she could peek in behind them. Bratch lit a second torch on the wall from his own, but most of the room was still dark. In the circle of torch light, Ixy could see rows of chests and cabinets, as well as cages of various sizes and shapes. A few

indistinguishable sounds of unknown creatures disturbed in their sleep burred up from somewhere in the back.

On a straw pallet near the door was a lumpy, sleeping form. The Master strode over to it and jabbed it roughly with his boot.

"Up, steward! Up! We have a new addition."

The steward grunted, and made some indistinct and groggy complaint, then seemed to realize who was addressing him and struggled hurriedly to his feet, rubbing his eyes.

"Yes, Master. Sorry, sir. Just catching a few winks, y'know. Door safely locked an' all, charges all asleep. Just restin'."

He was a short, stumpy figure, with twisted features and miscellaneous lumps scattered around his body. He wore a long tunic that looked like a rough burlap sack, and most of his skin was calloused and scarred.

"Spare me the details, steward, and prepare a new cage. It needn't be large. Bratch, give me that."

Bratch handed back the bundle he was holding, which was quivering slightly, and the Master began to unwrap it. Inside was a small, mewling kitten, which he took by the scruff of its neck and held up.

"Ah!" The steward's eyes lit up with interest as he inspected it. "Not one of our kind, is it, eh? Another one from Over There?"

"Yes, the second one in a week. The boundaries between the worlds are tearing more easily these days. Put this next to the other one."

"Yes, Master. And I know just the cage to put it in, all ready and waitin' for just such an occasion. Right this way, please."

As the three of them moved off down one of the rows, Ixy slipped inside the door, keeping to the shadows beyond the torchlight. The sight of the pitiful, crying kitten had struck a chord in her, though she didn't know why she should feel so sorry for it. She crept along under the tables in the row next to the one that the Master, steward and demon had taken, and watched from an awkward angle as the kitten was deposited in a grimy cage with a rough blanket and a bowl of cold water.

"There, y'see?" said the steward, "It'll be just like home. He'll be right happy and comf'table in no time."

The kitten's mewling did not seem to agree, but the Master had already turned his attention to a large glass enclosure next to it. A hand lay inside it, attached to most of a forearm, but nothing else. It wasn't bloody, and didn't seem to have been detached from a body. It was just there, being a hand.

"Ah yes!" The steward scuttled over. "Your finest catch yet! It's receiving the best of care. Hands are very sensitive, y'know, so I been finding it lots o' nice, soft things for it to touch and play with, to keep it happy. See that lovely rabbit skin? It likes to stroke that, to pass the time. And I even found a few shiny rings for it, in case it likes to decorate itself."

The enclosure did seem to have a variety of objects in it. There was even what looked like a stress ball, for squeezing, and some silly putty that had been pulled and prodded into vague shapes.

"Now, to tell the truth, I haven't rightly figured out what I ought to feed it," the steward continued, scratching his head, "but it seems to be doing right enough so far, eh?"

"Yes, it does," the Master intoned. "You have done well, steward. Continue to give this the utmost priority, however. I have a feeling that it will lead me to an even better catch, if we use it correctly."

"Yes sir, certainly sir. Always the best, sir."

"Very good. Come, Bratch. We are done here."

The Master glided back down the row towards the door, with Bratch following, looking uncomfortably cramped and trying not to knock anything over with his wings. The steward followed with a rolling waddle, looking very pleased to have earned a compliment.

Once the door was closed and locked again, the steward extinguished his torch and lowered himself back down onto his straw bed, grumbling something about midnight duty and needing his beauty sleep. Soon he was snoring again.

Ixy came out from under her table, looking for the little kitten. Her eyes were of hardly any use in the dark, but she could smell it without a problem. She crept up to its cage and pressed her nose to the bars. She wished she could let it know that she was a friend, that she wanted to help, but the kitten was terrified. It gave a cry even louder than before and cowered in the far corner of the cage, knocking over its water bowl. Ixy pulled away, sad but not wanting to make things any worse.

She knew she wouldn't be able to get past the steward, or out the locked door, so it seemed that she was trapped here as well. So she huddled in a corner where she hoped to remain unnoticed, and went to sleep. Or perhaps she woke up.

Chapter 15

Jaden got a ride home from the dance with Doug, who also lived in Mountain View. He was quiet for most of the ride, aside from asking Doug if he had met Zoe. Doug thought for a minute.

"Yeah, I think I did meet her," he said. "Small girl, right? Long hair, sort of elfin features?"

"That's the one."

"Great dancer. I think we did a cross step."

"Yeah, she's really good. I'd never seen her around before, though, have you?"

"Nope. I think she said she's a psych student or something. Maybe she only just got into the dance scene. Got good really fast if she did, though."

"Yes, indeed." Jaden wanted to ask if Doug had noticed anything odd about her eyes when he had danced with her, or if he had perhaps seen visions of blazing skies and cloaked horsemen. But he thought that might be going a bit too far.

The dance replayed in his dreams that night, and he woke up with the melody of "Iris" going through his head. After breakfast, he walked over to Prof. Oddbury's to talk to him about it.

"Ah, yes, I was wondering about that," was the professor's reply, to which Jaden responded with a quizzical look. "You dreamed about this Zoe girl last night, did you not?"

"Uh, yeah. How did you know?"

"I'm monitoring you, of course! I've told you that. Now, now, don't be embarrassed. It's for your own good, you know. Come, let's take a look."

They went to the computer and Oddbury pulled up the list of Jaden's dreams in iTunes, then clicked on the previous night's date. A movie began to play, and Jaden had the very surreal sensation of watching his own dream play back at him on a computer screen. He knew it could happen, since he had watched all those other dreams, but it was still bizarre. The professor fast-forwarded most of the way through, then started it playing again.

"That's her, isn't it?"

It was. There was the waltz music, and Zoe's eyes looking up at him. There was the meter change, and the pivots, and...

Jaden reached out and hit the space bar to pause the movie.

"There," he said. "Who or what is that? That's what I want to know. It was like that at the actual dance last night, not just in my dream."

"I believe you," Prof. Oddbury said seriously, and he began slowly scrolling through the following scenes. "And I believe that what we may have here," he looked sideways at Jaden, "may be your trophy hunter."

"That's him? That's the guy who took my hand? Damn it!" He shook his good fist at the screen. "That jerk!"

"Yes, well, I would say that is a fairly safe bet. You see these flames in the sky? Only once in my life have I been dreamsided on a boundary rift, but that is precisely what it looked like. Now, we see him leap through it – try getting a horse of this world to do that, eh? He's only got a few seconds, and yes, there he is again, carrying his trophy, whatever it was that he managed to get this time. And there, we see the rift sealing itself again already. Classic case, I'd say."

"But how did I see all this? And why?"

"Yes, that question had crossed my mind as well. My theory is that this young lady of yours possesses some degree of psychic power."

"She's a psychic? As in, she can read my mind?"

"Not necessarily. There are many forms of psychic power aside from the stereotypical view of it, and it is possible that she may not be aware that she has it. But someone with any form of extra psychic ability will naturally be closer to the dreamlands, and other alternate realities, than the rest of us. They make excellent oneironauts. Now take a look at this."

He brought up the dream analysis program Jaden had seen running before, and queued it up to the beginning of the dance with Zoe.

"We'll just run through a short clip with her in it, so we don't have to process the whole file. Here."

He paused the dream and clicked a button. The mouse pointer became a colorful, spinning beach ball for several seconds, and then a page of charts and data appeared.

"There. You see?"

Jaden saw nothing but incomprehensible graphs of lines and squiggles, and said so. The professor gave a tiny snort of frustration.

"This shows," he said, "that she has an unusual amount of actual presence, reality you might say, even in the context of your dream. She is partially crossed over, even though she herself might just be thinking it is an ordinary dream."

"Alright, I'll take your word for it. So what does this all mean? Why is any of it happening?"

"It *may* mean nothing. This girl could just have become a temporary and accidental channel, allowing you a glimpse into the dreamlands. It can happen."

"Or?"

"Or, I suppose, your trophy hunter could be doing this deliberately. He could be using her as a way of warning you that he's watching you, and knows what you're up to."

The last line of the waltz rang through Jaden's head. *I just want you to know who I am.*

"Which means..." he began.

"...that your task may be more difficult than we thought."

Chapter 16

Malcolm awoke to a kick in the ribs.

"Oi! What're you doing 'ere, yeh little blighter? Who let you in?"

Malcolm opened his eyes and saw the twisted form of the steward standing over him, about to deliver another kick. He tried to curl up tighter, and the kick landed on his tail. Ouch. That was going to leave a bruise, and on one of his favorite vertebrae, too.

"You in 'ere trying to nick somethin', eh? What did ya get? Turn out yer pockets!"

Malcolm realized where he was now, but had no idea how he had ended up falling asleep in the collection room. He only had the one shirt pocket, which he timidly presented, empty, for inspection. The steward grunted at it, and roughly searched over the rest of Malcolm's shirt and tie, looking for another hidden

pocket somewhere. But there was nothing, and aside from his clothing, a small Tyrannosaurus does not have a lot of natural hiding places for stolen valuables. The steward grudgingly gave up the search and began hauling Malcolm towards the door.

"Jus' because I can't find anything don't mean yeh ain't guilty," he snarled. "I'd report yeh to the Master this instant, if I weren't afeard o' losing me own job fer letting yeh in. But I warn yeh," he bent down to glare straight in Malcolm's eye, "if I find anything missing in 'ere, then yer in for it, no mistake."

He threw Malcolm out into the corridor and slammed the door.

Malcolm picked himself up gingerly from the stone floor, wincing as he felt the aches and bruises beginning to form. He stood up as straight as he could, dusted himself off and straightened his tie. Really! This was no way to treat one of the Master's most faithful servants. As if he, Malcolm, would ever want to steal from the Master! It was unthinkable. The steward's behavior was uncalled for and it would simply have to be reported, that's all there was to it. Malcolm wondered if he had the authority to do that.

He looked around and thought for a moment, to get himself oriented, then trotted off down the corridor in what he hoped was the correct direction. Rounding the first bend, he was bowled over by another demon coming the opposite way. A large, clawed hand grabbed him by the front of his shirt and lifted him easily off the ground, leaving his feet dangling.

"You got business down here?" Lotzi growled. Built as large and powerfully as Bratch, the other demon captain, Lotzi had no wings, but a long, lashing tail and fearsome fangs. Not the sort you want to run into unexpectedly.

Malcolm had no specific business there, regrettably, but was it so inconceivable that the Master should send him on an errand there? Surely Malcolm was above suspicion.

"Some of my lads say they been finding you out prowling around these last nights. Shandag says you led him and Vormas on a right nice little chase."

Malcolm knew nothing of this. Why would he be out prowling around? Especially without his own knowledge. There must have been some mistake.

Lotzi dropped him and gave him a thwack on the rump with the butt of his spear.

"Off with you, now! There's a patrol due on in two minutes, and if they find you here, they have my full permission to skewer you to your own bed to keep you out of trouble."

Malcolm took off. Who did that Lotzi think he was, anyway? Still, you don't argue with a demon three times your size and carrying a spear. The big bully.

As the corridor slanted upwards and approached more familiar territory, Malcolm slowed his trot to his usual bird-like walk. He found himself passing the entrance to the Great Hall and saw that the door was open slightly. The cleaning staff had probably not closed it all the way. He poked his head in.

He had always liked the Great Hall, such a regal place. It was still empty this early in the morning, and the tapping of his claws echoed off the marble pillars and cavernous ceiling as he crept inside. There was a throne on a dais at the opposite end, and Malcolm went up to it to admire it. He didn't usually get to come this close to the throne.

In fact, as long as he was here.... Malcolm took another careful look around the Great Hall. Definitely empty. He hopped up on the throne and surveyed the room. What a view! And how well the throne suited him! Then he spotted the small purple carpet leading up the steps to the throne. He hopped down again, grabbed the ends of the carpet, and wrapped it around his neck like a cape.

Beautiful! He hopped up on the throne. He wished he had a mirror: he must look fantastic. Well... he looked down and straightened his tie with his claws. Yes, fantastic. Very regal. Just look at that! *That* puts the Rex in Tyrannosaurus Rex!

When the soft voice sounded behind him, he nearly jumped out of his shirt.

"Malcolm," said the Master, warningly.

Before you could say *Struthiomimus*, Malcolm had leapt up out of the carpet and off the throne and had taken cover, quivering, behind a nearby marble pillar.

"Come here, Malcolm," the Master's voice never raised over its soft murmur.

Malcolm inched forward, bowing and keeping his eyes fixed deferentially on the ground. There was an art to groveling, he knew, that was lost on most of the Master's attendants. He, however, was an expert, and he was sure this made him stand out favorably in the Master's opinion.

"Malcolm, Lotzi informs me that you have been acting oddly of late. Sneaking around corridors after hours, turning up in places you have no business being in. Is that so?"

It most certainly was not. Malcolm was a model of respectable behavior. Even now, he had just been testing the Master's throne to make sure it was in suitable condition. Why should he want to go lurking and prowling around where he shouldn't? No, no, not Malcolm. He shook his head earnestly.

"Are you quite sure there isn't anything you would like to tell me, Malcolm?"

Quite sure, yes. Malcolm wasn't about to admit that he had woken up in the collections room for no apparent reason that morning, or that he thought he had been sound asleep when other demons claimed to have seen him up and about, or that he had been having strange dreams running around as a toy cat and

hunting small animals. Things like that weren't normal, and he didn't have a good explanation for them. Better just to let it all go and not mention it. It would all sort itself out in the end.

"Very well, Malcolm." The Master gave him a long, cold look that gave Malcolm the shivers and made him clutch nervously at his tie. "You may go. And no more of your little games."

Malcolm scurried backwards towards the door, head still bowed. Then, realizing that it really was quite a long way down the Great Hall just to get to the door, he simply turned tail and fled. He decided it might be best to just go hide in his room for a little while. It had been a rough morning. Really, he didn't deserve all this.

Chapter 17

Gordon was still keeping an eye out for Ixy, but he hadn't seen her for several days. He was even beginning to wonder if he had just had a series of strange nightmares, but the sight of a decapitated sparrow on the lawn one morning reminded him that if this were a nightmare, it was having awfully real effects.

He was getting rather more worried. What little he was managing to learn about exorcisms wasn't going to do him much good if he couldn't even find the thing that was possessed. Of course, when it came to that, he was having trouble even getting proper instructions. It seemed as though people throughout history had used all sorts of crazy methods to drive out demons, and the books he had were full of incomplete and/or conflicting accounts.

Most of the modern religious descriptions focused heavily on prayer, which Gordon wasn't entirely comfortable with. Without an actual priest or someone to help him, he didn't think his own little prayers would really have the necessary oomph to do much good. As for getting the subject to pray on her own behalf,

another recommended strategy, that was out of the question. It was a stuffed cat, for goodness' sake.

The older accounts focused more on precise rituals, performed with certain objects or tools by a village's local witch, healer, or even just members of the populace. There seemed to be a lot more hocus pocus involved, but Gordon figured that prayer was only a more commonly accepted hocus pocus than rabbit entrails and whatnot, and if you've already accepted that a childhood toy can come alive and start killing small animals and doing God knows what else, well then there's no point turning up your nose at any method of dealing with it.

Suspecting that he would have to come up with his own solution, Gordon had begun collecting various items that seemed like they might be useful. He had picked up a packet of white votive candles at the chemist's after school, for starters. He pinched bits of basil, rosemary, and mint from his mother's spice cupboard, since he had seen those listed as herbs believed to aid in driving out evil spirits. And when he had found the dead sparrow, he had even managed to collect some of its blood in an empty beer bottle. That had been pretty gross work, but "blood of a victim" sounded important, and he thought it might be worth having.

The after school study sessions had been improving somewhat, as Gordon got more comfortable actually talking to Lucy. He had brought one of his better drawings to show her on the second day, and she had seemed to be quite impressed. After that, he found himself getting into a habit of arriving early to history class, and leaving a small drawing on a folded piece of paper on her desk for her to find when she arrived. She smiled and complimented each one, and Gordon noticed that they seemed to accumulate in the back pocket of her binder, rather than getting thrown away.

Gordon wished he could tell Lucy about Ixy. It was a hard problem to be carrying around inside with no one to share it with. But that seemed like an idiotic thing to add to the equation just when things seemed like they *might* –

knock on wood – actually be going well. What would she say? "Oh, you know, I kind of liked you, but now that I see you're insane, forget about it." That's what. So he didn't mention it.

On Friday, their history class had a field trip to Edinburgh Castle. It wasn't as though any of them hadn't ever been there or anything, but nobody was about to complain about a day out of school. And the tourists would be amusing to watch, at the very least. Gordon wondered if he might be able to snag a seat next to Lucy on the bus, but a couple of her girl friends managed to get there first and he was stuck up in front next to the bus driver and the class dweebs who always sat in front, wherever they were.

Gordon had been to Edinburgh Castle several times, since his father was very keen on Scottish history and often tried to instill the same sort of interest in his children. The only thing Gordon had ever managed to take away from it, though, was the silly bit about Sir Walter Scott and the crown jewels.

The silly bit was this: Once Scotland became part of the UK they no longer needed their own crown jewels – the sceptre, crown, etc. – so they locked them in a box and locked that in a room. Then they promptly got themselves all confused and started wondering if the crown jewels were really in there, and where they might be if they weren't. It was all very mysterious for about a hundred years until Sir Walter Scott came along and had the brilliant idea of actually checking. Lo and behold, the crown jewels were right where they had been left, and Sir Walter got a plaque in Edinburgh Castle for it. Gordon wished he could get an award for something easy like that.

The crown jewels were now on display in a special room with high security of course, but Gordon had seen them plenty of times before. He slipped out of the crowd to go use the loo, which was beneath the building they were currently in. On his way back, he heard someone call his name softly.

He turned and saw Lucy beckoning him over. She was in a dark, cave-like area that overlooked the partially excavated ruins of some ancient feast hall beneath the rocks that the rest of the castle was built on.

"Hi Lucy. What are you doing down here. Are they done up there with the crown jewels already?"

"The crowded jewels is more like it. No, I got tired of all that and slipped off. I like it down here. It feels like the earth is reclaiming itself, and absorbing everything people built on it."

Gordon could see what she meant. In spite of a recorded voice backed by lute music and telling tales of the royal feasting that took place here, it was really just like looking into a cavern, with the outlines of old rooms and carvings all fading into the rock.

"It's a bit cold, though," she added, giving a little shiver and slipping her arm around Gordon's waist.

"Um, yeah," Gordon agreed, hoping he didn't sound too surprised. "It's all the, uh... rock. Caves like this are always cold." He put his arm gingerly around her shoulder and tried to stand very still.

"Gordon, will you draw me a picture of the castle?" Lucy asked. "With us on it?"

"Oh! Sure. Sure, I could do that." He realized she had pulled in a little closer and was looking up at him.

"I'd like that." And she raised herself just a little bit on her toes and kissed him lightly on the mouth.

Gordon looked at her in mild amazement. What little spare processing power currently available in his brain pointed out to him that she was smiling, but that

it was a slightly worried smile. Could it be that she was as nervous as he was, and worried about how he would react? *Do something!* that little spare bit of his brain shouted, before being overwhelmed again as Gordon leaned in to kiss her back, which seemed to do the trick.

The sound of an approaching gaggle of high schoolers filtered down into the caves, and Gordon and Lucy let go of each other just before the class trooped into the next entrance up from where they were. The two of them slipped out their own exit and mingled in with the crowd from the back, hoping they looked unremarkably casual.

There was no chance to get away for the rest of the afternoon. They did manage to sit next to each other on the bus ride back to school, but with all the other students around, they mostly just stuck to small talk, or swapping jokes with their neighbors. Back at the school, Lucy had to get on a different bus to go home, but she slipped something into Gordon's hand as she said goodbye.

He waited until he was on his own bus to unfold the scrap of paper. There was a phone number on it, followed by "Call me this weekend. – L.C." and a little heart. His own heart began to beat noticeably faster, and he looked nervously around the bus, but no one else seemed to hear the thumping. He reread the note until the bus reached his stop, then tucked it safely away in his pocket as he got out and headed home with a little extra spring in his step.

That night, Ixy came back.

Chapter 18

Excerpt from *An Introduction to Oneironautical Theory*, by Sir Robert Fitzmorgan, PhD, OnD, FRAOS, et al, 17th edition, 1903:

To be an oneironaut is to be a voyager in the finest sense of the word. The lands and seas of our vast Earth have been explored and examined for

years by countless men of many nations. But many yet are the shores of the dreamlands that remain untrodden and mysterious. The oneironaut is one of the few true explorers left in this world, for he may set foot in worlds that others see not but in their dreams.

[...]

As an introduction, the present volume is intended to provide a thorough grounding in the theories that govern objects, forces and beings in the dreamlands. The analysis of collected dream data is covered in depth, as well as its translation and relation to the waking world. A brief review is given of the modern technology available for both research and practical uses, but in-depth coverage is reserved for further laboratory courses. The material herein assumes a solid background in the sciences, particularly in Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Psychology...

[pages 12-13]

Jaden was reading from a rather hefty textbook that was part of a large stack of books lent to him by Prof. Oddbury. "Introductory background reading" he had called it. Introductory back breaking was more like it: Jaden had needed to carry them back to his own apartment in two trips. Even with one-handed trips, that was a lot. There was no way he was going to read this all before Beltane arrived next weekend. Nevertheless, he was learning a lot, and it was actually quite interesting, though some of the old-fashioned academic writing took a bit of wading through.

One small volume turned out to be the manual for Prof. Oddbury's FreeForm DreamWave Transceiver. (Jaden suspected that at that point the professor had simply been piling books on enthusiastically, without really looking at the titles.) This appeared to be the device Oddbury had used to collect – and inadvertently transmit – the dreams they had watched on the computer. It seemed to work on a concept similar to that of a radio transmitter, though it only functioned along the "soft" frequencies, which were measured in imaginary numbers. Jaden didn't entirely get that part of it, and suspected that rather more time would have to be spent at the textbooks before it would make sense.

What he was currently most concerned about, however, was the information on dream travel itself. In particular, he was growing rather worried over Chapter 13 of Sir Robert Fitzmorgan's book, which was entitled "The Physical Effects of Dream Travel on the Human Body."

In preparation for dream travel, you get attached to an IV drip containing chemicals which induce sleep, enhance dreams, and also loosen the chemical bonds between your cells ever so slightly. The exact balance of chemicals is critical, and varies from person to person, hence the need for the samples the professor had taken from Jaden. The IV remains in for the duration of the trip, though travels of more than two or three days are considered dangerous. You are then placed inside a machine and attached to various monitors to alert the mother ship as it were to any problems while you are gone. Once sealed inside the machine, it generates a dream field which radiates through your body, filling the spaces between your cells. The body in the machine is effectively asleep, and you are now equipped with a copy of it in the dreamlands.

The end result is similar to a lucid dream, in that you are fully conscious within the dream. But being physically induced like this, there is a much greater connection to the physical body, which places the dream traveler at a greater risk, should anything go wrong during the mission. It didn't make Jaden entirely comfortable.

He hauled himself and the textbook up out of the bean bag chair and went over to see Prof. Oddbury. He had been reading all morning and most of the afternoon now, and needed a break.

"So are you sure you can't come with me?" he asked, once he was over there and ensconced in his favorite arm chair.

"We went over this yesterday, my dear boy," Oddbury replied, "and I told you: I'm far too old for this sort of thing anymore. Perhaps back when I was 115, I

would have leapt at the chance, but not these days. And besides, someone has to monitor you, and wake you up when you're done."

"Right. Show me again how that's going to work?"

"It's quite straightforward. You will have a device like this," the professor said, producing a small metal amulet with a button in the middle of it. "The machine will create it from dream material for you when you enter the dreamlands, and it will synchronize itself with it. You can wear it around your neck if you like. When you press this button, it signals the machine, which automatically cuts off the IV and stops generating the dream field. It also alerts me," he pulled a pager out of his pocket, "so that I can monitor you as you awake, administer stimulants if need be, etc."

"And you've really done this yourself?"

"Many times! Though mostly in the earlier part of my career. I was a spy, you know."

"Really?"

"Yes, indeed. One of His Majesty's finest. This was back in the time of King George V, you know, during World War I."

"Who were you spying on?"

"The Germans, of course! Who did you expect, the Mexicans?"

"Well, I know, but – in the dreamlands?"

"They dream like the rest of us, laddie, and you can learn some very useful information by spying on people in their dreams. Tricky, sometimes, to tell what represents an actual threat in our world as opposed to pure imagination, but the

boys in the labs could always take care of that once you've brought the data home."

"Was it dangerous?"

"Extremely. The dream technology of the Germans was not as advanced as ours, and they did not have as strong an oneironautical force, but it was still not an easy job. They even enlisted the aid of certain demons, who were ordered to kill any Englishman on sight. On sight, smell, hearing, or feemum, in fact."

"Feemum? What's that?"

"It's like a sixth sense. Though really, for demons, I should say it's probably more of a tenth or eleventh sense. Some of them have up to 15 beyond the ones we know. Rather hard to explain."

"Wow." Jaden wasn't sure that demons were really the encouraging sort of thing he wanted to hear about just now. Luckily, Prof. Oddbury seemed to pick up on that.

"But never mind all that now," he said, turning back to his computer. "I've got something I wanted to show you. Take a look over here."

Jaden came over. "What is it?"

"Thanks to the blood sample you so kindly provided, I believe I may have been able to track down your hand."

The computer screen showed a map of a place that Jaden did not recognize. It was shaded all in red, and showed outline of what looked like a large house, or mansion. Within the mansion, a small, blue figure flashed, in the shape of a hand.

"That's my hand?" Jaden asked. "Where is it? What is that place?"

"That place is the dreamlands," Prof. Oddbury explained patiently, "and as such it can be directly adjacent to any number of places at once, which makes it hard to assign an exact location to. However, the place shown here currently seems to have a distinct correlation for our present location in this world. In fact..."

Here he pulled up another window, with a map Jaden recognized. It was mostly blue, with splotches of red on it, and outlines that matched those of his own neighborhood.

"If you remember this map," the professor continued, "you may notice that some of the outlines match up in an interesting way."

He set the neighborhood map to be translucent, and hovered it over the dreamlands map. The outline of the dream mansion perfectly matched the red shape that marked...

"250 Richards Street," Jaden said, nodding.

Chapter 19

On Friday night, Gordon's mind was, understandably, completely preoccupied with thoughts of the field trip, of Lucy, and of her note. It was a thrilling preoccupation, but confusing as well. She had kissed him! And asked him to call her that weekend! But when really should he call her? Give it a day, maybe, so as not to seem over eager? And what would they talk about? Should he ask her out somewhere? Where?

He had left the note on his desk with his sketchbook, and attempted to go to sleep. He found it rather ironic that starting to dream too early could actually make it harder to get to sleep. The insomniac's curse of a busy mind. But he had drifted off eventually.

* * *

Malcolm was angry that night. It had been a frustrating day, all around. He was, of course, far too dignified to express his anger outright in public. Roaring and yelling, or taking his anger out on underlings was not at all befitting a noble demon of his rank. No, the proper thing to do would be to let it all out in a dream. It would be safe there, and no one would have to know about it.

He had gotten tired of killing mice, and their flying cousins, the sparrows. He wanted bigger prey. Unfortunately, he was still trapped in the small, cotton and polyester body of a cat, and couldn't tackle anything much bigger. What he wanted to hunt was the giant who had tried to lock him in the box, but that was out of the question until he could get his Tyrannosaurus Rex body back. He snuck into the room anyway to glare at the giant's sleeping form.

And then an evil little idea popped into his brain. In a calmer state of mind he might have denounced it as unworthy for a demon who prided himself on his virtuousness. But he noticed all the drawings that the giant seemed to be so attached to...

* * *

In Gordon's dream, he and Lucy were back at the castle, only now they were up at the very top, and all of Edinburgh – all of Scotland, even! – was spread out beneath them. It was glorious. But then the idyllic silence was broken by a ripping, tearing sound. Gordon turned around sharply and saw in the distance the Sir Walter Scott Memorial, one of the blackest, most evil looking structures in the city. It tore open, splitting down its middle and revealing a giant set of crown jewels within. But then the split continued, with a sound like the ripping of an enormous sheet of paper, and a crack appeared in the earth beneath it, spreading quickly up towards the castle on the mound. It reached Gordon's feet and tore him in two, and he awoke to a loud THUMP.

He squinted at his alarm clock. It was only 3:15 or so in the morning. Ugh. Just weird dreams and nightmares. Forget it and go back to sleep. But then another thump caught his attention. A book had just been pushed off his desk and fallen to the floor. He flipped on the small bedside lamp and saw what looked like a tiny storm of shredded papers forming on his desk. His sketchbook and some other books were open, with their ragged pages hanging out or scattered around or flying through the air. And in the middle of it all, furiously tearing away at it all, was Ixy.

She had frozen when Gordon turned on the light, looking up and staring him straight in the face with her black little button eyes. Then they both broke into action at once. Gordon lunged at her, knocking his desk chair over, and scattering more papers and a school notebook to the floor. At the same time, though, Ixy had leapt down behind the desk, and squeezed in between it and the wall where Gordon couldn't reach.

Gordon pulled one end of the desk away from the wall and thrust his arm behind it after Ixy, but she slipped out the other side and ran along the wall. He threw himself after her, landing full length on the floor but with his hand around her tail. A sudden flash of claws drew blood, though, and surprised him enough that he let go in shock, and the possessed cat was away again. Gordon rolled over to get between her and the door, and she skittered for a moment in uncertainty, and then dashed into the open closet.

Gordon leapt up and slammed the closet door. Brilliant! There was no way Ixy could get out of there on her own, as long as he kept the door closed. He sat down again and leaned with his back to the door. His heart was racing, and having gone from sound sleep to violent activity in such a short period of time was making him feel a little light headed. He looked around the room, and saw now that several of the drawings on the lower sections of walls had been torn down, or ripped in two. That little bastard! So that had been the ripping sound in his dream.

There was a knock on his door. "Gordon? Are you alright?"

It was his mother. Why did she always have to be such a light sleeper? He jumped up again, looking frantically around the room. There was no way he'd be able to clean anything up before letting his mother in. Especially since she simply opened the door herself.

"Gordon! What are you doing? What's going on?"

"Hello, Mum. I'm fine. I think I was just... sleepwalking maybe."

"Sleepwalking? But what have you done to your desk? Why are all your books on the floor?"

"Well," Gordon made a show of being groggy and attempting to remember a dream, "I think I was looking for something, in my dream, you know. But since I was sleepwalking, I guess I kind of just made a mess of things. It'll be alright, really." He started shoving a few books off to the side, to minimize the visible mess.

His mother's eye fell on one book that had landed face up. Gordon saw where she was looking, but failed to reach it first before she picked it up.

"*Coping with Satanism?*" She looked at him worriedly. "Is this yours?"

"No, of course not, it's from the library."

"What I mean is... come here, dearie." She sat down on his bed and pulled him reluctantly over to sit next to her. "Are you really alright, Gordon? You've been acting a bit odd recently."

"I'm fine, really." Gordon was trying not to cast what would look like very suspicious glances at his closet door. At least he had latched it, and he didn't think Ixy could deal with a latch on her own.

"Is everything okay at school, and with your friends?"

"Yes, Mum. Everything's good."

"Well, I just want you to know that you can always talk to me. Just if anything ever bothers you. Anything at all. I know that high school is a difficult time, and there can be peer pressure, and social circles to fit into. And sometimes people have trouble making good decisions in situations like that, and they get into drugs, or other... sorts of trouble. Cults, for instance, or..."

"Don't worry about me, Mum, really. That book, it's just for a report I'm doing. We're studying, um, alternative religions. I'm just reading it, that's all. For school."

"Well, alright. I don't want to be nosy and prying, but I do worry sometimes. I'll trust you on this, though, and I hope that you'll be able to trust me too if you even need to talk about anything. Deal?"

"Deal."

She gave him a squeeze and got up.

"Are you going to be able to get back to sleep?"

"Sure. I'm still really tired." He faked a large yawn.

"Okay. Good night, dearie."

And finally she was gone. Gordon heaved a sigh of mingled relief and frustration. The last thing he needed now was his parents suspecting that he was some sort of Satanist drug addict. He hoped she had meant it about trusting him, but he figured he'd probably be having his actions scrutinized rather more closely than usual for a while.

He surveyed the damage on his desk. There were some decent sketches ruined, but nothing that had been super important. His best drawings were higher up on the walls where Ixy hadn't been able to reach. Look on the bright side.

Then suddenly he began plowing frantically through the piles of papers and books, looking for a small piece of blue lined notebook paper with purple ink on it. He found the smaller piece of it first, a torn corner with the initials "L.C." on it. When he found the rest of it, it had been savaged beyond legibility.

Ixy was going to have to pay for that. Gordon put his ear to the closet door and heard a faint scratching from inside. He would wait until morning, and not have her scampering away from him again. He got a pillow and blanket from his bed and lay down in front of the closet door. Latch or no latch, he wasn't going to take any chances. He turned the light out and slept undisturbed the rest of the night.

In the morning he woke before the rest of his family, thanks no doubt to his less comfortable sleeping situation. He listened at the closet door again but heard nothing. Nevertheless, he took care to close the door to the hallway, and to block off the area under his bed and behind his desk. Then he slowly opened the closet door just a crack.

Nothing moved. He opened the door a little farther, and Ixy fell out. He pounced on her instantly but she was completely inanimate, a soft toy kitten without even a hint of the teeth or claws that had wrought such damage the night before. Gordon still didn't trust her in the slightest.

He got some duct tape and thoroughly bound Ixy's front paws and back paws together. Then, though no mouth or teeth were currently evident, he wrapped some tape around her muzzle as well. Then he put her in the shoe box from before, taped her to the inside of it, put the top on, and bound all of that up in tape as well. *That* should do well enough until he decided how to deal with her once and for all.

Unfortunately, it didn't look like that was going to be that weekend. Gordon was reminded at breakfast that his aunt Mary and uncle Charles were going to be visiting from London for the weekend, and his younger cousin Colin would be sleeping in Gordon's room. His mother had given him a long look when she reminded him to tidy up before they arrived. Plus, he thought it would be safest to be on his best behavior for a couple of days and not risk get caught trying to perform bizarre exorcism rituals on a toy. He just hoped that he had tied Ixy up tight enough that she wouldn't be able to make much noise from under the bed. Of course, if Colin happened to hear anything, Gordon could probably just pass it off as a little kid being afraid of the dark. Colin was only 10, after all.

He was mostly upset, though, that he wasn't going to be able to call Lucy now that he had lost her number. It was going to be a long weekend before he could see her again on Monday.

* * *

Malcolm was now finding his dreams distinctly unenjoyable.

Chapter 20

Gordon didn't have much time to himself that weekend. Only the excuse of homework kept him away from family outings with the visiting relatives, or having to entertain little Colin. Though within that "homework" time he also managed to draw the picture he had promised Lucy. He was grateful, as he had often been in the past, that he had a hobby that could look so studious, as long as

you did it at a desk, with lots of open books around. It was an easy way to get undisturbed time.

On Monday, Gordon left the drawing on Lucy's desk before History class, as he had gotten in the habit of doing. For a few minutes he watched other students trickle in, and wondered where Lucy was. She finally arrived at the last second before the bell, sat down, and pushed the drawing under her binder without even looking at it.

Ouch. Gordon was about to lean over and say something – he had no idea what – but their History teacher was nothing if not punctual, and immediately cut off all talking to begin class. He tried, during class, to simply catch Lucy's eye, but she seemed unusually riveted by the lecture and intent on the names and dates up on the chalkboard. After class, she was instantly away talking and laughing animatedly with two of the girls that sat on the other side of her, and Gordon was left behind with his drawing, which he picked up after seeing it abandoned on her desk.

He went to Galbraith After School Support that afternoon. He had ceased thinking of it as the G.A.S.S. chamber the previous week, but it was now back to being torturous. Lucy very pointedly focused on helping the other students there, even the ones who didn't need much help. If Gordon asked her a question about maths, she would answer politely and correctly, but with no more words than necessary, and then would be back to another student again. Gordon made himself stay until the bitter end, though, and then followed her out as she left, walking quickly to the bus stop.

"Lucy! Wait! Hold on a minute!"

She kept walking quickly so he just jogged briefly to catch up with her.

"What is it?" she asked curtly, not looking around at him as he drew up behind her.

"That's what I wanted to ask you," Gordon replied. "Look, is this about me not calling you? If so, I'm really sorry. I was... really busy this weekend."

"Well, you still could have called to tell me that much, even if you didn't have time to talk or to do anything. How do you think I was feeling about it? Pretty stupid, I can tell you."

"Huh? Stupid? You? I'm the stupid one for not calling you."

"Yes! There I was, thinking you liked me, and I even went ahead and *kissed* you, and wrote you that stupid little note, and then you don't even call me. I was sure you would, but I guess I was wrong."

"No! Really, um... thank you for the note, and for, you know, everything. I wanted to call you, honestly. But I couldn't because the note... well, I kind of lost it."

"*Kind of* lost it? How do you *kind of* lose something?"

"Well, to tell the truth, it kind of – sorry – it *did* get destroyed."

"A likely story. And how did this poor, pitiful specimen of correspondence get so hopelessly obliterated?"

"Look, it's true, and I don't want to lie to you. But if I told you what really happened to it, you'd think I was making it up, which would be almost as bad as actually lying."

"Oh? Well you'd better say something, so might as well give it a try."

They were nearly at the bus stop. Gordon stopped walking and Lucy turned around to look at him, expectantly.

"Do you have to catch the next bus?" he asked, "or could we maybe keep walking for a bit? The story may take a bit of telling."

"Really? Alright then, let's walk. If we head this direction, I can just catch the bus at another stop if I need to."

Gordon took a deep breath as he thought about where to start. He told her about the toy cat he had had as a child, and then about the strange occurrences with the dead mouse – "remember those first drawings you saw?" – and the nighttime movements of the stuffed animal. And he told her about actually seeing it move, and chasing after it but losing it. And finally, he described the creature's senseless rampage on his desk, resulting in the regrettable loss of the note and phone number, but ultimately leading to Ixy's capture.

"And, well, there in a nutshell is why I didn't call you this weekend," Gordon gave a nervous little chuckle. "It's kind of a lot to deal with. It feels good to be able to tell someone about it, though. Assuming, of course, that you don't think I'm crazy?"

Lucy had been silent the entire time he was talking, and now she spoke slowly and carefully.

"I think I may reserve judgment for now on the craziness question," she said. "This is a lot to expect me to swallow all at once. I'd be inclined to think you just made it all up. Though you do seem very... sincere."

"It may be hard to prove that I'm not making it all up. Ixy only seems to be possessed or whatever it is at night, and I'm not even sure it's every night."

"Yes, how very inconvenient."

"But, I suppose I could at least prove that I didn't make it up on the spot right now. There really is a stuffed cat wrapped in duct tape in a shoe box under my bed. Though I don't really know if that would reassure you much or not. Kind of a weird thing to have under one's bed, I know."

"Well, I'm still not going to say I believe you just yet. But if you wanted to show me... I guess I could at least take a look."

"Great! Do you want to come over now? I mean," Gordon tried to not sound quite so excited, "thanks for giving me a chance, and if it's convenient for you and everything... my parents could give you a ride home later."

"Sure, why not?"

"If we cross the street, we should be able to get the bus to my house in just a few minutes."

It was a somewhat tense bus ride at first, though eventually Lucy broke the silence with some comments about Mr. MacDowell's overzealousness in assigning algebra homework. They chatted a little bit about the trials of high school, then in a pause, Lucy looked down at her hands.

"I'm sorry," she said, "that I got mad at you. I shouldn't have done."

"That's okay. I mean, I should have called you, after all."

"And I know you meant to. I shouldn't have gotten so upset over such a little thing when I hadn't even heard your side of the story." She gave him a little smile. "No hard feelings?"

"Of course not."

She reached over and gave his hand a quick squeeze, then let go as he reached up to ring the bell for their stop.

Lucy gasped in delight when she saw all of Gordon's drawings around his room, but then grew more serious when he showed her the pile of ripped sketches that he still had from his book and the lower walls. Then he brought the shoe box out from beneath his bed and peeled the tape off it.

There was Ixy, still inside, and still bound in duct tape. Gordon was pleased to see that the inside of the box bore some scratch marks, which he pointed out to bolster his story. Lucy still looked serious.

"So what are you planning to do about it?" she asked.

"Well that's the question now, isn't it?" replied Gordon. "What *am* I going to do about it? I've certainly never had one of these before. Performing some sort of ritual exorcism or something is the best idea I can come up with."

He showed her the library books he had, and the possibly useful parts he had highlighted. They pored over them together for a few minutes.

"Anyway, whatever I do," Gordon went on, "I figure I had better do it soon. It's just too weird and creepy having this thing under my bed."

"No, I know when you should do it," Lucy's voice was suddenly decisive.

"Beltane is next weekend, May Day."

"Why then?"

"It's a time when the spirit world is closer to our world. It should be easier to send whatever it is that's doing the possessing back to where it came from." In answer to Gordon's questioning glance, she added, "My mum is into all that neo pagan wicca stuff. I pick up random things here and there."

"Hmm, okay. Next weekend. I guess I can wait. She seems to be fairly safe locked up in here like this. As long as she doesn't claw her way out."

"And have you thought about where to do it?"

"Well, it seems from all the references as though a church would be the most effective place, but I doubt we'd have an easy time getting into a church to perform an unauthorized exorcism ritual without getting caught. Got to be careful about that, by the way. My mum already suspects I'm getting into Satanic cults or something."

"How about St. Andrew's then? The ruins. Would that work?"

"Where is St. Andrew's?"

"Haven't you ever been up to Arthur's Seat? St. Andrew's is the church up on the hill, below Arthur's Seat and looking over that little lake. It's just a few small ruins now, but it's better than nothing. I'm sure it still counts as a church in some sense of the word."

"Oh, that church. Yes, good idea."

"So shall we say Friday at midnight, up at St. Andrew's? That would put us there at the witching hour, and right at the beginning of Beltane. We should probably meet earlier to find our way up there in the dark together, though."

"Are you actually going to help? Does this mean you believe everything?"

"Yes, and maybe. I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, but I want to reserve a nominal claim on my own sanity if this all turns out to be something crazy."

"Thanks," Gordon grinned, "I'll take it."

"Awfully strange sort of first date, of course," Lucy said, glancing at him sideways.

"Oh! Um," Gordon flustered a bit at the change of subject. "Well, maybe we could also do something else before then?"

"I'd like that."

There was the sound then of a key in a lock and the front door opening. Two pairs of footsteps sounded in the hallway.

"Gordon! Hello, dear, we're home!"

Gordon sighed.

"That'll be my mum bringing my little sister back from day care. Come on out, I should probably introduce you."

Mrs. Ross was very pleased to meet Lucy. She knew Mrs. Campbell from PTA events, and had heard good things about her daughter, so she was very pleased that Gordon was making friends with someone who would be such a good influence on him, though luckily she refrained from actually saying that in front of Lucy. Fiona just snickered a little bit from behind her mother's back, mouthing the word "girlfriend" at Gordon until he made menacing faces at her.

"Anyway," Gordon said, "we're working on a history project together, so Lucy just came over after school to do some preliminary research."

"Yes, and I'd probably better be getting home soon," Lucy added.

"Oh alright. Would you like me to drive you, dear?"

"That would be lovely, thank you. It's not too far."

"My pleasure. Just let me know when you're ready."

"I'll just go get my book bag."

Back in Gordon's room, Lucy asked somewhat sheepishly if she could still have the picture he had drawn of the two of them on Edinburgh Castle.

"Of course you can," he said, "I didn't think it was all that bad, so I saved it."

"Thank you," she said, taking the paper. "And it's not bad at all. It's wonderful."

She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and then went back out to get her ride home.

Chapter 21

Jaden was feeling nervous and distracted all day at work on Friday, April 30th. Coupled with his nonfunctional right hand, this made him almost completely unproductive. He had told Stacey and Todd that he was going back for some more tests and some physical therapy, so he would need the next week off since it probably wasn't wise to be trying to do much with his hand in that shape this soon after the accident. Stacey could tell he was a bit more stressed than usual, and eventually just sent him home in the middle of the afternoon, telling him to get some rest. Todd made good-natured dying noises as he contemplated dealing without Jaden for another week, and wished him well on his recovery.

He left gladly, but was unable to rest much when he got home. He wasn't sure if he really needed to or not, though. He was starting his quest at midnight, so a good nap might seem to be in order beforehand. But on the other hand, he'd be asleep for the entire thing, so he wasn't sure a nap would make much difference. Confusing stuff, this dream travel. He busied himself for a while trying to read

more of the books he had borrowed, then made himself a quick, light dinner, and headed over to Prof. Oddbury's apartment.

"Tonight's the night, my boy!" Oddbury exclaimed as soon as Jaden entered. "Beltane begins at midnight! The witching hour! I haven't been this excited since my own last trip back in '57."

He spread two maps out on the desk to review with Jaden. One was of their Mountain View neighborhood, and the other was of the dreamlands.

"As you can see, if this building here corresponds to 250 Richards Street," the professor explained, "then the river running along here roughly lines up with this cross street." He pointed to another spot a little ways along the river. "So if you are traveling from my apartment, you should end up approximately here. It should be easy to find your way, since there are not many other buildings nearby."

"Great. So what do I do when I get there?"

"That, I'm afraid, will be up to you. It is impossible to tell precisely what sort of a reception you will get there, so all I can recommend is to use extreme caution and your best judgment."

"Just for the record, I would like to state that I am scared shitless."

"Quite natural, my boy, quite natural. But, nothing ventured nothing gained, eh? Now we must begin the preparations."

From a back room he wheeled out the OneiroPorter. It seemed much smaller and more rickety than Jaden had expected, and he decided not to ask if this was the very one Prof. Oddbury himself had used on his last trip, back in 1957. He would try not to think about that.

Various wires were connected together and plugged in to electrical outlets. Some also ran to the G5 by the desk, and Jaden noted that they seemed to have had Firewire connectors grafted on to the ends of them. The professor explained that this let him set up some extra, automatic monitoring, in addition to the watch he personally would keep on the array of monitors and dials on the machine itself.

Jaden was given his first shot of the appropriately balanced chemical mix an hour early, to let it begin sinking in and to watch for any adverse effects. There were none, but he did begin to feel appropriately sleepy. This had the added benefit of making him feel rather less afraid. At 11:30 PM he lay down on the bed in the middle of the OneiroPorter, which was adjusted for his comfort. The IV was inserted into his arm, and Jaden grew even sleepier, his eyes barely staying open as the professor continued to explain the various wires and dials that were being set up all around him.

Then the professor seemed to be talking very loudly, and pressing something into Jaden's hand, so he tried to pay closer attention. The object was an amulet that was on a cord around his neck, though he couldn't remember having put it on. The professor was saying something about the button on the amulet, and using it only when he was ready to wake up and come back. A nod of acknowledgement seemed to be in order, so Jaden gave one, sleepily, letting his eyes drift closed again. He felt the professor drop the amulet back on his chest, and heard the rustle of a few more adjustments being made, and then he was asleep.

A small clock in the professor's study chimed midnight. It was Beltane. Oddbury took one final glance over Jaden's sleeping form and silently wished him luck. Then he went to the side of the machine and pressed a large red button. He entered various confirmations and security codes, and an envelope of purple light formed inside the machine, around Jaden's body. He stepped back to watch.

* * *

Jaden opened his eyes. He found himself looking out at a sunset over some hills in the middle distance. Apparently the dreamlands were on a slightly different time zone, or else sunset happened at midnight there. A small river ran by a short way away from him, and following it he could see the mansion that he recognized from his vision on Richards Street. Beyond that was a forest.

He felt more awake and alert than he ever had before. If it weren't for what he saw around him, and the knowledge that minutes ago he had been strapped into a bed in Prof. Oddbury's apartment, he would have had trouble believing that he was dreaming. Or in the dreamlands at least. Was it really dreaming, what he was doing? It didn't matter.

Something, however, felt wrong. He looked down at himself and realized in horror what it was. He held his hands up in front of him, but only one appeared. His right arm now stopped completely at the elbow, without even the paralyzed hand and forearm. There was simply nothing.

Once he had adjusted to the shock and calmed down, he told himself there was probably a perfectly understandable explanation for it. After all, the essence of his hand had been captured and imprisoned here in the dreamlands. It seemed logical that while in the dreamlands himself, he would have to play by their rules, and that would mean leaving his hand where it was until he could retrieve it. There probably hadn't been enough of his hand left behind in the waking world to be able to take any of it along with him. Well, this would make things a bit more difficult, but it was all sure to work out in the end.

Jaden put his right elbow back at his side and decided to try not to think about it too much for now. He began walking towards the mansion.

Chapter 22

Gordon had told his parents that he was going to spend the night at his friend Michael's house on Friday April 30th. But after collecting the duct taped box

from beneath his bed, as well as the various other exorcism-related ingredients and tools he had assembled, he got back on the bus and went to meet Lucy. She had told her mother a similar story.

They had several hours to kill before they needed to think about heading up to St. Andrew's, so they ate dinner at an Indian restaurant and then saw a movie at the Odeon. Lucy insisted on paying her own way, but she did lean cozily on Gordon's shoulder during some of the more romantic parts of the movie. Gordon himself hardly noticed any of the movie, being equally distracted by both the upcoming night and the possible terrors or embarrassment it might bring, and also the presence of Lucy next to him, with his arm around her. He ate chocolate Revels from a Mars tub mindlessly until his stomach began to ache and he set them aside. Nervousness and a chocolate overdose do not make a great combination.

After the movie, they headed out to Holyrood Park. It was getting late, but still light out thanks to the long evenings of the northern latitudes. Gordon was glad they weren't doing this stage in the pitch dark, since the rocky path up the hill at the base of Arthur's Seat would be tricky without any visibility.

The path curved around some large boulders to a small, flat area on which St. Andrew's church had been built several centuries before. Only a fraction of one stone wall remained, with door and window openings still visible, and crumbling edges. Other small piles of stone lay around the area, showing where other parts of the church had been. A few feet from the opposite side of the wall, the hill sloped down so rapidly as to be almost a cliff, leading to a small pond with ducks and swans below, now all huddled away for the night.

A couple who looked like university students were sitting under the ruins, "watching" the sunset and snogging. Lucy gave a little giggle when she saw them, but they were still far enough away that the couple, being otherwise distracted, didn't notice. Gordon and Lucy backed a little way up the hillside, and found a large rock, from behind which they could wait and observe,

unnoticed. Eventually, as darkness more fully closed in, the couple extracted themselves from each other and picked their way carefully through the rocks and back down the hillside.

Lucy got a torch out of her backpack, and Gordon wondered why he hadn't thought to bring one. It was so obvious! They climbed down and surveyed their church.

"Well," said Lucy, clearing a spot on the ground and setting down her bag, "it looks rather more haunted than holy, especially at night, but I suppose it will do." She sat down on a seat-sized rock and Gordon came over to join her. They were a few feet out from the wall and under a completely open sky, but still clearly within the boundaries of the original building. There was a large moon overhead, giving them enough light that they could get by with just minimal help from the torch.

Lucy opened her bag and brought out a wide, shallow bowl, and then a small container of liquid.

"What's that?" Gordon asked.

"Holy water," Lucy said proudly. "There's a church on my way home from school, so I slipped in yesterday. When no one was looking, I managed to sneak a bit."

"Well done!"

She poured the water out into the bowl, and looked at it glistening in the moonlight.

"I suppose," Gordon said, "that seeing as how we haven't exactly got a recipe or anything, we may as well just mix everything together. Is it alright to mix things with holy water?"

"I don't know, but you're right. We might as well try. Didn't you say you had some blood from something this thing had killed?"

Gordon got out the beer bottle from his backpack, opened it, and poured the few drops it contained into the bowl. The red drops swirled and faded in the clear water, leaving an irregular pink haze in it. They both looked around briefly, but neither of them was smitten by lightning, so they carried on. The herbs from Mrs. Ross's spice cabinet were brought forth, and pinches of rosemary, mint and basil were sprinkled on the water in the bowl. The holy water was now looking decidedly unholy.

"Anything else?" Lucy asked.

"I think that's it. Just Ixy now."

Gordon got the shoe box from his bag and peeled off the duct tape. Ixy was there, looking very immobile and very un-demonic. He thought there might be more scratches on the inside of the box, but it was hard to tell in the moonlight.

"So what should we do with her?" he asked.

"We're just making this up as we go along, right?"

"Right."

"Okay, then. Put her in, too."

"In... the water?"

"Yep. Dunk her. Might as well. It'll be kind of like a baptism, right?"

Gordon shrugged and put Ixy in the bowl. Only her lower half was submerged in the shallow water, but she began soaking it up, and bits of the herbs were clinging to her sides. They both watched her for a minute. Ixy just sat there.

"I'm feeling decidedly silly right about now," Gordon admitted. "I expect you're thinking I just made this all up."

Lucy just shook her head. "We're not done yet. I think we probably ought to say something, see if we can contact whatever it is that's been possessing her."

"Alright, then," Gordon cleared his throat nervously, then put a hand on Ixy's head, since that seemed like it might help. He took a deep breath and said in the deepest, most commanding voice he could manage, "Demon! We hereby command you and bind you with our magic and the magic of Beltane! You will do as we bid you! Reveal yourself!"

"Very good," Lucy nodded approvingly. "But I'm afraid it looks like she's still just sitting there."

She was right, and Gordon began to feel rather sillier even than he had before. He took his hand off of Ixy and sighed.

But then, as they stared at the soggy, duct taped, stuffed cat in the bowl of rather unpleasant water, they thought they saw it begin to twitch slightly. At first it was so slight as to be a trick of the eyes, or a slight gust of wind, but it caught their attention. And the twitching grew and intensified as they watched until it was unmistakable, and the entire animal was shuddering and trembling.

Then a small wisp of what appeared to be smoke began rising out of Ixy's head, apparently from right between her eyes. It rose and expanded, forming a shimmering cloud above her, two or three feet across. Gordon and Lucy were now watching in stunned silence. The cloud stopped expanding and remained

fixed in its position. It gave another vigorous shimmer, and then an image appeared on it, as though from a video projector.

The image showed what looked like a very small, apologetic Tyrannosaurus Rex, wearing a short-sleeved button-down shirt and a red tie. It shuffled its feet a bit, and bowed its head, looking rather embarrassed to be caught like this. Lucy almost laughed out loud in spite of herself.

"That's it? You're our demon?"

It didn't seem to be able to hear her, though. It appeared to be getting chastised by someone they couldn't see or hear, and it was now outright groveling.

"Gordon, see if you can just tell it to go away and leave Ixy alone. Gordon?"

But Gordon had stopped watching the little demon, and was looking around them. Lucy followed his gaze and gasped.

The moon no longer shone overhead. Looking up, a dark, cavernous ceiling stretched above them, with monochrome stained glass windows high up that let in a very small amount of light. The single ruined wall of St. Andrew's had grown and repaired itself, and now connected with more walls all around them. A hard marble floor was now underfoot in place of the dirt and grass. Pews of dark wood stretched out in rows behind them.

"Have we brought the church back to life?" Lucy whispered. "I always imagined that St. Andrew's would have been a more pleasant place than this."

"I don't know," Gordon replied, "but wherever we are, we seem to have lost control over our demon. Look."

He pointed back at the cloud above Ixy's head. The picture had gone from it, and the smoke was disappearing like real smoke that had never seen a demon in its

life. Ixy remained alone in the bowl, all the water, blood and herbs now gone. Gordon picked her up; she was completely dry.

Chapter 23

Jaden followed the river towards the mansion, trying to keep to what little cover was available. There were a few bushes and shrubs lining the banks, though the trees didn't start until farther on. Also, it was getting darker, so he hoped that would help him remain unnoticed until he got closer and formulated an actual plan.

As he drew nearer, he could tell that this was indeed the dark mansion he had seen superimposed on 250 Richards Street, though here it seemed even bigger, or perhaps it was just that the space it was in was actually big enough to hold it now. The same eerie light came from the windows, and the halls and towers seemed to stretch out farther than before, making it hard to tell exactly how big it was. A long, dark pool stretched out in front of one wing of the building, with a fountain in the middle stirring the water.

Jaden was approaching from the side with the pool, and he crouched behind a low hedge on the other side of the tall, cast iron fence next to it. He wondered if it really was water in there. It moved and sounded like water, but looked as black as tar.

He inched along quietly, thinking to prowl the perimeter for a while and get his bearings. There was a small gap in the hedge, and he was scooting quickly across it when his toe stubbed against a large, thick root sticking out of the ground. He looked down in surprise at the feeling, since the root had seemed to squish and bend, rather than yield a solid resistance, and then the root peeled itself off from the ground and practically reared up at Jaden like an angry snake. In a split second, Jaden saw that the underside was lined with small suction cups, and the root was actually a tentacle, trailing off into the pool. Then it lashed out at him, flinging itself around his waist in a tight grip, and yanked him forward.

Jaden threw his left arm up to block his face as he was slammed against the metal fence. Then tentacle continued on through the bars, but Jaden's body wouldn't fit, and he continued to be buffeted against the fence as it jerked him forward repeatedly. Between the bruising blows, Jaden could see other tentacles poking up and slapping the surface of the water, and he could hear an eerie wail coming from somewhere in the middle, near the fountain. He tried to pry the tentacle off, but it was latched on like a boa constrictor. He didn't know how long he could keep getting whacked like that before it beat him into a pulp.

And then he heard shouts and running footsteps, and suddenly large, clawed, hairy hands were seizing him and others were striking at the tentacle and peeling it off of him. After a brief struggle, the tentacle let go, doled out a few extra slaps all around, and then retreated back into the pool. Jaden was being held down on the ground, though he probably wouldn't have felt much like getting up just then, even if he hadn't been restrained.

"Looks like ol' slime gills here has caught a bigger rabbit than usual, eh Vormas?"

"Yess, indeed, Shandag."

"Lucky for us we got outer East wing patrol today. He'll make a fine catch to bring in. Not often we get to take a real prisoner." Jaden heard a snuffling sound close behind his head. "And this'll be a good one. He's not one of us. He's got the smell on him, from the Other Side."

"Ssso ssstop gloating already and tie him up sssso we can take him in."

The one holding Jaden down yanked Jaden's arms around behind his back.

"How am I supposed to tie his hands together? He's only got the one of them!"

The other one gave a hiss of annoyance, and Jaden felt scaly hands replace the hairy ones and haul him to his feet. A gray-green snakelike head stared down at him contemptuously, and grabbed at his arms. His left arm was crossed across his chest, and the shortened right one pulled in as close as possible, then he was wrapped in a rope, creating a makeshift straight-jacket. His captors held one end of an attached rope as a leash, and ordered him to march.

They followed the border around for a while until they came to a large iron gate, which the taller, reptilian demon – the one that had been called Vormas – opened with a key from a ring at his belt.

Well, thought Jaden, at least this solves my problem of getting inside.

A second key unlocked a solid wooden door leading into the mansion itself. Up close, Jaden wondered if it was actually big enough to be called a castle. It seemed slightly different every time he looked at it, though. This was not the main entrance they were at, but something on the side, and the stone corridor led downwards immediately from the entrance.

As they turned a corner, the shorter, hairier demon caught sight of something in the shadows and lunged after it. He hauled a smaller, wriggling creature out into the light. It looked like a very small Tyrannosaurus Rex, in a shirt and tie. Shandag gave it a shake.

"Listen here, Malcolm," he said, roughly. "We've got a new prisoner that we're taking down to the dungeon. An important prisoner. You go find Bratch and let him know. He'll want to see this one. Then tell the next shift to get on outer East wing patrol while we're in here. Go!"

He shoved Malcolm off with a kick, and the smaller demon scurried away, whimpering slightly. Jaden's captors laughed as he ran.

The dungeon was cold and dank, but seemed basically empty of prisoners. Jaden was tossed into the first cell and locked in. He tried to say something once or twice, but Shandag and Vormas just told him to shut up and save his stories for the captain.

After a few minutes, the dungeon door burst open and two enormous wings made the torches flicker as a huge demon entered and towered over the other two. Shandag and Vormas leapt up from where they had been lounging by a wall and gave a hasty salute.

"Well, what have you found for me?" rumbled the voice of the demon captain. "I hope for your sakes that you are not troubling me with trifles."

"No, sir!" barked Shandag. "This is a good one! Right there, sir, in Cell One." He pointed to Jaden.

Shandag and Vormas had to leap out of the way to avoid Bratch's wings as he swept around and glared into Jaden's cell. Jaden shrank back against the wall, but the cell was too small, and a long arm reached in, hooked a claw in the rope around his chest, and drew him up to the bars. Bratch peered at him closely, and sniffed, then his eyes fell on Jaden's amulet. He grabbed it, and snapped the cord off of Jaden's neck, then turned on the guards again.

"You fools!" he growled, "Never leave one of these on a prisoner. They can use them to escape back to their own world."

He turned back to Jaden again.

"Now," he said, "what exactly are you doing here? And don't tell me you're just dreaming, because I know better. You don't dream with one of *these* on." He waved the amulet in front of the cell bars.

Jaden tried to speak firmly, without letting too much tremble into his voice.

"I am here to recover something that was taken from me."

"Oh, really. And what might that be?"

"My right hand."

Suddenly Bratch's arm was in the cell again, and he had wedged a claw in Jaden's bindings, loosening the rope so that he could see the stump of Jaden's elbow.

"Mmmm," he rumbled, "Excellent. The Master will be most pleased." He withdrew his arm and addressed Shandag and Vormas again. "You have done well. Leave him here for now and make sure no one touches him without orders from the Master or myself."

With a bound assisted by his wings, he was up the stairs and out the dungeon door. Shandag and Vormas congratulated themselves, looking at Jaden and snickering.

After several minutes of eternity passed, Bratch returned.

"The Mater wishes the prisoner to be presented at court," he said. "Open the cell."

Shandag and Vormas rushed to obey, and hauled Jaden out by his rope, heading towards the dungeon stairs. But Bratch grabbed the rope from them.

"I will take him. Do you think the Master wants you two at court? Get back to your patrol."

The two guards looked disappointed but knew better than to argue. They saluted glumly and left. Jaden was left with Bratch, who, he noticed, now wore Jaden's

amulet around his own neck. Bratch saw him looking at it and grinned a snarling, fanged sort of grin.

"I'll just be keeping this for you," he said. "Wouldn't want anything to happen to it, would we? Now march!"

He gave Jaden a shove towards the door and they left the dungeon. As they ascended the corridors, they gradually moved into more populated areas, and passed more and more demons, or other beings. Many stared at Jaden in curiosity, but refrained from getting too close or asking any questions of his fearsome captor.

At last they came to two enormous double doors, guarded by two trolls. The trolls were as tall as Bratch, and at least twice as wide, but seemed to be mostly mindless brute strength and not much else. Bratch barked an order at them and they each grabbed an iron ring in one of the doors and pulled them slowly open.

Jaden found himself at one end of an immense hall, the towering roof supported by marble pillars. A purple carpet paved a path all the way down to a dais and a throne at the other end, and crowds filled the hall between the carpet and the walls. A general buzz of excited conversation hushed as everyone turned to see the newcomers.

Bratch strode purposefully down the aisle, yanking Jaden along after him. Jaden looked around him as he went. The crowd seemed to be made of demons, fairies, dwarves, elves, human-like people of various kinds, and probably many other things that he wouldn't know names for.

When they reached the foot of the dais, Bratch pushed Jaden down to his knees and gave a low bow, saying nothing.

The figure on the throne rose. He was tall and thin and pale white, and his black robes swirled around him and pooled on the dais. A crest of long black feathers

from some giant bird arched from the back of his robes, framing his white face starkly against them.

"Thank you, Bratch." His voice sounded like a whisper in Jaden's mind, but he had no doubt that it was heard just as clearly at the opposite end of the hall. "You may go now. We have some entertainment planned for our... guest here."

Chapter 24

Gordon and Lucy crept to the door of the cathedral, which was open a slight crack, and peered out. A cold stone corridor peered back in at them, lined with torches. Then they heard the tread of heavy feet coming around a bend in the hall, and they pulled back behind the door. It sounded like two guards on patrol. Their weapons and hodge-podge armor clanked as they talked.

"What do ye reckon the Master'll do with his new prisoner, eh? Captain Bratch seemed to think he was an important one, but bugged if I know why."

"Thiss iss the one whose hand he took, of coursse."

"What one?"

"Two weekss ago. He bragged about it for dayss. Very proud of it."

"Huh. I didn't hear anything of it."

"That iss because you have no connectionss in the court to tell you the newss." The hissing guard seemed to be gloating in his sophistication over the gruff one.

"You need to be part of... Ssssociety to learn these things."

"So tell me about it already!"

"The hand iss hiss favorite trophy from the Other Sside, and the Master planned to use it as bait. It iss very difficult to get trophiess from there, sso now that a human being hass come to him, I expect he will..."

The voices faded with the clop of the soldiers' footsteps as they disappeared down the hall. Gordon and Lucy looked at each other.

"Do you have any idea what's going on?" Lucy whispered.

"Not much. But wherever we are, I'm pretty sure this isn't St. Andrew's anymore. Did you manage a peek through the door? Those weren't regular soldiers. They were monsters."

Lucy shuddered. "And it sounds like someone else is here, too. I mean, maybe someone else like us. Trapped here or something."

"Yeah." Gordon looked out the door again. "Though at least we're not trapped here. Yet."

"We just don't know where we are or how to get out."

"Right. Could be worse."

Then Gordon jumped as he felt a movement in his hand. He looked down and saw that Ixy was twitching again. He grabbed her tightly, expecting her to try to run away, but she seemed only to be twitching.

"Is she possessed again?" Lucy asked.

"I don't know. Maybe partly?"

"She seems to want to go somewhere. Like that direction, down the hall." Lucy

pointed to the right, and Ixy's twitches did seem to be generally in that direction. "Maybe she's trying to tell us something?"

They slipped out into the hallway and moved a few steps to the right. Ixy seemed to relax a bit. Then Gordon tried moving back to the left, and the twitching started up, more energetically.

"Yep. She definitely seems to want to go this direction," Gordon said. "Think we should follow?"

"Do we have a better plan?"

They shrugged at each other and moved off down the corridor. At the first juncture they came to, they paused to look cautiously down the crossing hall. When they saw no one was coming, Gordon held Ixy out in his hand again and she jerked slightly, toppling over on her left side. They went to the left.

After several minutes of this, they found themselves facing a small wooden door in a dark little side corridor. It had the name "Malcolm" carved on a little block of wood just above it. They had tried continuing along but Ixy was definitely indicating this particular door. Carefully, Gordon and Lucy eased it open.

Inside they saw the small Tyrannosaurus Rex that they had seen an image of before, when they had commanded their demon to reveal himself. He really was as small as he had looked back in that cloud of smoke, no more than four feet high. He whirled around at them in surprise, and then looked as though he didn't know whether to charge them or to cower in a corner, so he sort of wobbled confusedly in place.

And then Ixy seemed to fly out of Gordon's hand, straight at the demon, who gaped at her in shock. There was a blinding flash of light, and when Gordon and Lucy opened their eyes again, the demon was laying stunned on the floor, and

Ixy was nowhere to be seen. They approached the little dinosaur figure carefully as it stirred and moaned groggily.

It sat up and gazed blearily over at Gordon, then seemed to suddenly recognize him and began nuzzling him and bumping him affectionately with his head.

"Well, this is certainly odd," Gordon said, gingerly patting the demon on the head. Lucy laughed.

"It does seem to like you, though. So do you think we should call it Ixy or Malcolm?"

"I don't know what just happened here, but I'd have a hard time calling something like this Ixy."

"Then the name over the door it is. Good boy, Malcolm." She scratched the back of its head, around where she thought its ear holes might be. He gurgled a little in what might have been a dinosaurian purr.

"Okay, so we seem to have ourselves a pet dinosaur. Now what?"

As if in answer, Malcolm scurried over to the door and looked back at them expectantly.

"It appears," Lucy said, "as though we can just keep following her. Him. It. Whatever."

So they did. The literal following was rather easier than deciphering a stuffed animal's twitches. They followed more corridors, twisting and turning downward. They passed no windows, and eventually they thought they must be far below ground level, but it was hard to tell with the outside reference point so far behind them.

Finally they came to another door, this one much larger and more imposing than Malcolm's had been, and displaying a very meaningful looking lock. Malcolm gazed up at the locked door and seemed to heave a little sigh.

"Alright, another door," said Gordon. "This time I expect we'll find a dragon inside, get another flash of light, and then go around with an even bigger, stranger pet. I wonder how far we can keep trading up?"

"Very funny."

Then the lock gave a loud, solid click, and the door began to swing open from the inside. Malcolm started up in alarm, and all three hurriedly ducked behind an adjacent corner. A dark, lumpy figure came out, only slightly taller than Gordon or Lucy, but much stockier and hairier. It was pushing a small cart that seemed to contain bits of debris and trash.

Suddenly Malcolm darted out from behind their corner, took a few running strides and leapt on top of the steward, hitting him squarely in the back and knocking him to the floor. The steward hollered angrily and tried to heave himself up, but Malcolm jumped on him again, giving an extra little kick for good measure. Malcolm made a frantic motion with his head at Gordon and Lucy, indicating the open door, then was thrown off by the steward's struggles. All three dashed for the door, and Gordon grabbed a hold of the inside handle and heaved at it. The steward had by this time gotten to his feet and turned around to see them. He charged after them, but the door swung slowly shut and closed and locked just before he could reach it.

The door was so thick that they could barely hear the shouts from the other side, though it did tremble slightly from the pounding it was getting. Gordon and Lucy looked at it nervously, but it seemed pretty solid, so it would probably hold up alright. Malcolm on the other hand was already bouncing up and down in excitement.

"Alright, then," Gordon said to him. "What's so important here that we need to see?"

"Any number of things, it looks like," Lucy said, already looking around the vast room.

The room was filled with orderly rows of tables, chests and cages, and seemed to contain all sorts of things. On the nearest table was a display case showing a variety of jewels in many strange shapes and colors. A shelf next to it held several ancient looking books with gilded edges and faded leather covers. In the next row over, a bizarre creature squawked at them from its cage. It had no legs or arms, but only a very prehensile tail, with which it flung itself around between the branches and the bars.

Malcolm was hopping down another row, looking back expectantly at Gordon and Lucy, so they followed him, marveling at the ornamented daggers and the strangely patterned hides of unknown animals that they passed. Then they came to a stop in front of a small cage, from which emitted a tiny, pitiful mewing sound.

"It's a kitten!" Lucy exclaimed. "Oh, the poor little thing!"

Malcolm held back a little, looking sorrowfully at the kitten as Lucy reached into the cage to pick it up. It was cold and scared, and it huddled close to her chest when she brought it out.

"Well, that was very nice of Malcolm to want to come rescue it, I suppose," Gordon said. "But now we've got a dinosaur *and* a cat. Mum is going to have a fit if I bring home a whole menagerie." Then he noticed something else. "Hey, what's this?"

They peered into the adjacent glass enclosure. Inside was a human hand and forearm, rounded off neatly just before its nonexistent elbow.

"That must be the hand we heard those guards talking about," Lucy said. Then she gasped. "It's moving!"

The hand was indeed moving. It tapped its fingers as if bored or absent minded, then idly stroked a piece of rabbit fur that lay next to it. Then it pulled itself a little way along the floor with its fingers, and grabbed a small rubber ball to squeeze.

"Wow, that is creepy," said Gordon. "Kind of awesome, actually, but still really creepy."

"What should we do about it? It has to get back to its owner, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess so. But how are we supposed to do that?"

"I don't know, but we'd better start by getting it out of here at least. Can you open the case?"

They found the latch on the outside and opened it easily. The hand turned to face them, or to aim itself with fingers in their direction anyway, seeing as how it had no face. Gordon started to reach in, but hesitated.

"This is really weird," he said. "How am I supposed to do this? Do you think it even wants to be taken?" Then to the hand, "Um, hi. I'm Gordon. We'd like to help you, if that's alright."

The hand rotated so that its thumb pointed up and the fingers extended in a friendly sort of way. Hoping he was doing the right thing, Gordon gripped it with his own hand and gave it a brief handshake, which it returned. Feeling a bit reassured now, he pulled it out of its cage, supporting the forearm with his other hand.

"Okay. Midget dinosaur – check. Baby kitten – check. Disembodied hand – check. Complete insanity – I think I'm nearly there, how about you, Lucy?"

"No time for going insane now. Let's just figure out how to get out of here."

Chapter 25

Jaden stood before the Master of the castle, with all the eyes of the assembled court upon them. Without either of them moving a muscle, the ropes that bound him fell to the floor.

"We can't have our guest unduly encumbered, can we?" said the Master, as invisible hands whisked the ropes away. "Not on the evening of the Grand Ball."

On the last words, he swung his scepter around in a dramatic arc, and the hall around them changed. The purple carpet down the aisle disappeared, and Jaden noticed that the marble floor beneath his feet felt softer, more like a sprung wood floor, though it still looked like marble. The lighting dimmed, coming from candles in chandeliers that hung suspended in the air with no visible supports. Jaden couldn't remember if they had been there earlier, or if the light had come from somewhere else before.

A thin, reedy tone pierced through the air, a note midway between an A and a B flat. Jaden cringed at it, then remembered in surprise that he had never had perfect pitch before. He decided it must be part of traveling in the dreamlands that you occasionally find yourself knowing things just because that's the way they are, like you do in regular dreams. Then he realized that there were other tones playing and shifting slightly to match the first one, and he turned around to see that the dais and throne were gone. In their place was a bizarre sextet of musicians.

The one that played the reed instrument to which the others were tuning was a thin and reedy creature itself. It coiled over and around its chair and its

instrument, which was also curved and twisted and lined with finger holes placed convenient to various small appendages. Another played the violin, or the instrument most like a violin, though it had an extra low string and also several sympathetic strings, like a sitar. It was a little more humanoid in form, but with a very wide, frog-like head and long, delicate fingers. The bass player was so small that the bass had to lay flat on the floor. The furry little creature held four ropes connected to pulleys on a wooden frame that lead to plectrums that each plucked one of the four strings. The bassist hopped around on the fingerboard, stopping each string at the desired note and tugging the appropriate rope to pluck it. The pianist and the players of the other two, unrecognizable instruments, were equally odd. All wore purple and white tuxedos modified to fit their various shapes.

The beings and creatures of the court were by now all milling around and chatting excitedly. Many had on fancy ball gowns, or ball gown equivalents to match their physiology. Some were changing shoes for dancing, or even changing feet in some cases. Jaden felt suddenly lost in the crowd and he wondered if he could just slip away and go back to looking for his hand. Could it be that easy? Maybe they didn't really care that much about him after all.

Then the Master seemed to appear next to him again out of nowhere. He towered briefly over the crowd and clapped his hands twice, slowly. The hubbub quieted and a small space cleared around them, and the Master seemed to be a more normal six feet tall or so again.

"Before we begin, I would like to remind you all," he said, in his quiet yet piercing voice, "to demonstrate the hospitality of our land by dancing with our guest. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you, Mr. Jaden Sands!"

At this, Jaden felt himself drawn violently up into the air and spun around several times in a full circle. When that stopped, he was hovering some ten feet above the ground, and he was dressed in an elegant suit that had even had the

right lower arm altered to fit him. A mixture of laughter and applause came from the crowd as he floated slowly back down to the floor.

So much for sneaking off unnoticed, then. It appeared that he would be the center of attention, at least for a while. And was he really supposed to dance? He had no idea what dancing would be like here, and he was still missing his right hand. It had been bad enough dancing with the paralyzed version, but having it gone entirely would be very difficult.

The music began. It was a polka, fast, twisted and bizarre. The violin and the reed instrument seemed to be playing in parallel major seconds, and the other instruments were divided on which melody they harmonized with, sometimes switching back and forth. The tune had an incredible drive to it, good for a polka, but a lot of it may simply have been due to the desire simply to get farther away from it.

Jaden wondered if someone would ask him to dance or if he was expected to do it, but his question was soon answered for him. A tall, elegant figure in a black gown swept down upon him and they whirled off into the now stampeding crowd. Jaden polkaed like he never had before. The music had sounded like normal polka tempo, so why did he feel like he was struggling to keep up? They must have been going double time, at least. He puffed and panted, and dropped steps frequently, practically running to keep up, but his partner glided around him as though floating along in a lake. Jaden stole a quick glance at her feet, but saw nothing between the bottom of her dress and the floor. He looked into her face and saw nothing but an empty glass mask.

And then he was snatched away from his partner and spun off in another direction. Two large fairies or pixies had a hold of him. Whatever they were, they had small, lithe bodies, translucent wings, and few clothes. They flew around him, giggling incessantly and periodically picking Jaden up to spin him around in the air and then drop him back into the flow of the dance to watch him try to

recover. On one of these reentries, Jaden collided with a cloaked figure whose partner reached out to knock him aside with a large, heavily muscled arm.

This flung him into the arms of an androgynous, metallic dancer covered in spikes, which pinned Jaden painfully to itself while hardly pausing to lose its momentum. The spikes dug in painfully on each bounce of each beat of the polka

The polka seemed to continue for hours, with Jaden being flung violently from one partner to the next. *This is like a nightmare from back when I was first learning to dance and was so bad at it*, Jaden thought as the music finally ended and he collapsed, panting, to the floor. But that was only the first dance.

The music started up again almost immediately, and this time it wasn't anything that he could recognize as danceable. It changed time signatures almost constantly, moving between four, seven, thirteen, six and a half, or pi beats per measure, and the first two beats of each phrase were upside down, which Jaden knew would make absolutely no sense back in the real world. It barely did even there in the dreamlands.

He realized that he had ended the polka near the doors of the Great Hall, and he headed towards them, wondering if he could sneak out now. But two troll guards like the ones on the outside of the doors were there blocking the way. One of them pushed him back with the butt of his spear. However, Jaden noticed that they let other dancers through who wanted to go out for a breath of fresh air, so they were clearly under orders to keep him inside.

He didn't have long to consider it, though, since he was once again grabbed from behind and drawn out onto the dance floor. Another agonizingly long dance followed, with Jaden trying desperately to perform the correct steps to the strange music and being traded from partner to partner, as before. And more dances followed that one, each more difficult, painful, and/or mind bending than the one before.

The tango was one of the worst. Jaden ended up dancing most of it with a being that seemed to be made almost entirely of fire. Jaden could feel his skin crackling, bubbling and scorching in the searing heat but he was unable to get away. He didn't understand why it didn't simply burn him to death, but when he was finally pulled free he saw not a single mark on his skin. His rescuer was a large, wobbly, tentacled lady who oozed around him, squeezing him into bizarrely convoluted moves.

When the tango ended and he finally gasped free of his partner, Jaden leaned against a pillar and wondered how long he had been dancing. Hours? Days? Weeks? The ball showed no sign of stopping though, and he had the suspicion that there had really only been a small number of dances so far. The music began yet again, and Jaden felt a tap on his shoulder. With a groan of despair, he turned.

And found himself looking at Zoe. He blinked several times. It was definitely the girl he had met at Jammix, and she didn't seem to have wings or claws or any of the other oddities of the other dancers in the room. She did, however, have an elegant, silvery gray dress that looked like the color of dreams.

"Now that the tango is over," she asked politely, ignoring Jaden's bewildered look, "would you like to waltz? I was very careful not to ask you for the tango this time, did you notice?"

"Honestly, no, I'm afraid I didn't," Jaden replied, recovering somewhat. "It's been all I can do to just stay alive out there, and I didn't even realize you were here. But yes, please, I'd love a waltz. A real waltz."

They began dancing in a barrel hold position, which worked well enough to deal with the missing support of Jaden's right arm.

"So what are you doing here?" Jaden asked as they danced. "Are you dreaming?"

"Yes, of course."

"But you know you're dreaming. That seems unusual."

"I've been having lucid dreams since I was six. I'm used to it. When one started tonight, I felt like dancing and, well," she blushed slightly, "I remembered dancing with you last week, so I thought I'd look for you. I'm not sure why I put you in this weird ballroom, though, or why you don't have a right hand anymore. Sorry about that. It wasn't intentional, but even lucid dreams are not always completely under my control."

"Well, the truth is, I'm not really part of your dream. At least, not in the usual way." And Jaden tried to sum up his situation and how he had gotten here. Zoe listened intently and seemed to take it all very much in stride.

From time to time as they spoke and danced, other dancers would take a swipe at Jaden and try to steal him away. But now that he was more in control of his dancing, and also had Zoe helping to keep an eye out, they were able to evade the attempts at cutting in. Zoe seemed even lighter and quicker on her feet than she had in real life, which was saying a lot.

"Alright, then," she said, when Jaden had finished the Reader's Digest version of his story, "let's go find you your hand."

"As far as I can tell, I'm trapped here, and I haven't seen my hand anywhere around this ballroom."

"You may seem to be trapped here, but I'm not. This is still at least partly my dream. So let's go."

The music was beginning to speed up.

"But what do we do?"

"Let's try getting a running start first."

As the tempo increased, the bass and the high, reedy lead instrument began doubling together on a fast, staccato melody, while the other instruments created a smooth background of increasing tension with rising chords flowing one into the other. Jaden and Zoe broke into a redowa, dodging past and between the other couples on the floor until they found a clear track at the outer edge of the room. They began barreling down it full speed, as though on a race track.

"Now what?" Jaden asked as they practically flew down the length of the hall.

"Keep going, dead ahead."

"There's a wall there."

"I know. I think it will be okay."

"You think?"

"We're still in a dream, remember? We can make this work. Just go for it."

"Okay then... here goes nothing."

And just as the music reached the final crescendo of the waltz, Jaden and Zoe took one last redowa leap and flew directly through the solid stone wall.

Chapter 26

Gordon and Lucy listened at the inside of the door of the collections room, but heard nothing to indicate that the steward was still out there. His pounding and yelling had stopped.

"Maybe he went to get reinforcements," Gordon said, "or a spare key." There was a key hanging next to the door on the inside, which the steward had neglected to take with him. "We could try sneaking out now."

"Or maybe he's just waiting quietly," countered Lucy, "hoping we do just that so he can catch us by surprise."

"Right. But it's like the crown jewels of Scotland, isn't it? There's no way to tell without actually checking. And we can't just sit here forever. Sooner or later someone will get a key and come in after us."

"Why don't we look around for some weapons first? We should be able to find something useful in here, and then we can at least be armed before we try our luck."

"Good idea."

They prowled along a few rows of display tables, looking for anything suitable. Gordon found a jeweled scimitar that was probably intended as much for decoration as for battle, but seemed appropriately sharp nonetheless. Lucy found a long, thin dagger in a leather case, which she tucked into her belt, and also a small mace that must have been taken from an elfin warrior, since it was a very convenient size for her to swing easily. She had tucked the kitten inside her sweatshirt, and cradled it with one arm, leaving the other free to carry the mace. Gordon had found a suit of light leather armor, unfortunately too big for him, and taken from it a quiver of arrows. With the arrows emptied, he was able to put the hand in it and strap it to his back. The hand scrabbled around a bit, and clung to the edge of the quiver as though trying to peek out, but then seemed to understand and be content to stay where it was.

They looked around for Malcolm and saw that he had wandered off towards the back of the large room. They followed him back there and saw that he was sniffing curiously around what seemed to be a huge cage covered with a large

burlap sheet. Gordon picked up a corner of the covering to peek underneath it. Inside was a gigantic, brown, furry creature, curled up and sleeping. They couldn't tell what it was. Malcolm gave a squeal of fear when he saw it, and the creature awoke, uncurling and swinging its two bear-like heads around to look at them. A row of spikes down its back unfolded and stood on end. It growled menacingly, and Gordon dropped the cover quickly, hoping it would just go back to sleep.

"What was that?!"

"Whatever it was, it's certainly scarier than the average bear. I wouldn't want to get into a row with it."

They collected Malcolm and went back up to the main door, after checking around to make sure there wasn't a back way out. They tried listening again, but the door was so thick that someone could have been talking just on the other side and they wouldn't have heard a thing. But then the question was answered for them, when the lock began clicking and turning from the other side.

The door was yanked open and the steward leapt into the room, only to have Lucy's mace brought down immediately on his head, sending him staggering to the floor. But he had brought guards as well as a key, and the first one clambered in over him, aiming a snarling grin full of fangs at Gordon. Gordon took a swipe with his scimitar, which only grazed one of the guard's arms, but pulled him up short in surprise. Another guard then shoved the first forward to charge into the room as well.

"Run!" Gordon shouted.

Malcolm was already yards ahead of them, and Gordon and Lucy barreled down the aisle after him, trying to pull down tables and cases behind them as they went. Some of these slowed their pursuers, though some the demons simply

leapt over. Gordon realized that they were heading back towards the large cage with the two headed bear creature in it.

"Get behind the cage," he told Lucy, who was ahead of him. "Try and get Malcolm back there, too. Then help me get the cover off it."

She nodded as she ran, then grabbed an edge of the burlap cover as she passed the cage. They hauled the sheet off, sending light streaming into the cage and causing the beast to wake up with a snarl. Their pursuers looked surprised at this, but kept on after them, gaining now.

Gordon looked around quickly, saw the latch on the cage door, fumbled with it for a moment, then got it open. He pulled the door open, keeping himself behind it, as the beast clambered to its feet. The guards pulled up short, but were knocked forward again by the steward, who had recovered and was running along behind trying to keep up and hadn't noticed why everyone was stopping.

The creature gave an ear splitting roar from each of its two heads and lunged forward out of the cage and at the first things it saw, which were the guards and the steward. Gordon, Lucy and Malcolm cowered behind the cage and watched as it batted one of the guards aside with a gigantic paw, sending him crashing into a glass display case. The other managed to dodge and get a jab in at it with his sword, and the steward had picked up a battle axe from somewhere and was making clumsy swipes with it.

Gordon led the way, creeping out from behind the cage and under some tables to a parallel aisle a few rows over, and the others followed him. When they had put a little sideways distance between themselves and the melee, they stood up and started running back towards the door. One of the guards saw them and shouted, but couldn't turn to run without getting tackled by the bear monster. The creature had taken some severe wounds from the weapons already, though, and looked like it might not provide a distraction for must longer.

They got out the door and closed it behind them, not that it would slow anyone down once they started after them again, but it did feel better to close it. Malcolm nudged them off in the direction in which the corridor sloped slightly upwards, and they took off running. After the first turn or two, they began to hear running footsteps, shouts, and clanking armor behind them.

"They must have finished off the bear thingy," Gordon panted.

They turned another corner and collided full on with another armed guard coming out of a door. This one was squat and hairy, but still bigger than Gordon or Lucy, and wore a Viking style helmet. They were knocked backwards by the collision, though the guard barely stumbled.

"Well, well, what have we here, eh?" He picked up Gordon and Lucy each with a large hand around their shirt fronts. Then he called back over his shoulder. "This really is our lucky day, Vormas. They're just fallin' outta the skies for us today. Ha!"

Looking past the guard into the room he had come out of, Gordon could see an entire mess hall of demon soldiers, all perking up with interest, and some heading towards them already.

"Oh bollocks, now we're in for it."

But then Malcolm, who had not yet been caught, leapt up with a miniature Tyrannosaurus roar, and chomped his jaws down on the wrist holding Gordon. Even from a four foot tall dinosaur, a vicious bite is nothing to be trifled with, and the guard yelled in pain and anger, dropping both Gordon and Lucy to give Malcolm a clubbing blow to the head with his other hand.

All three fell to the floor, and Gordon and Lucy were up and running again as soon as they bounced back up. Malcolm left a nasty gash in the guard's calf before being kicked down the hall after him, then he too started running. But the

alarm was raised now. The steward and the two guards from the collections room had caught up and were yelling at everyone to pursue the escaped prisoners, so now there was an entire horde of demon soldiers on their heels. Some were lagging behind the pack, struggling with armor that had been taken half off in the mess hall, but some with long legs were gaining rapidly. And this time there was no convenient bear monster to let loose to slow the pursuit. Gordon, Lucy and Malcolm ran for their lives.

Chapter 27

Jaden and Zoe came to a halt on the other side of the walls, stumbling slightly as they landed on the stone floors of the hallway. The music was fainter now, being on the other side of the thick walls, but they heard the waltz end in a dramatic flurry of notes and chords.

"They'll notice you're gone soon," said Zoe. "Since I'm actually dreaming, it's like I'm a part of the dreamlands, and they hardly notice me. But you're different, and they can sense that. Plus, everyone's looking to dance with you. They'll probably be out here after us any minute."

And indeed, when Jaden glanced down the hallway to his left, he realized that they had come out on the side of the Hall with the main entrance, and the two trolls on guard there had already spotted them from about ten yards away. One had just thrown open the door to sound the alarm in the hall, and the other was clearly struggling, in his tiny troll brain, between staying where he was or abandoning his post to chase the escapees on his short and stumpy legs.

Jaden and Zoe didn't wait for him to decide, but turned immediately and took off in the other direction. Behind them they heard the great doors crash open against the wall as the horde of dreamland dancers within burst forth to give chase.

They had no real idea of where to go at this point, so they simply ran as fast as they could, taking whatever turn seemed easiest at each juncture, to keep ahead

of their pursuers. Then suddenly, coming around one turn, they nearly collided with two young teenagers, followed by a small dinosaur in a shirt. Both parties pulled up short in surprise. The boy noticed Jaden's right arm immediately.

"Hey! You're the guy who lost his arm!" he said, in a Scottish accent.

"Hey! You're..." Jaden started, "I haven't the foggiest idea who you are."

"But we're being chased right now by an entire ballroom of dream creatures," Zoe filled in, "so you two had better turn around and come with us."

"No good. We've got a pile of crazy demon soldier things on our heels."

The sounds of shouts and running feet were growing louder from each direction now. All four people looked frantically around and zeroed in on the one hallway branching off to the side.

"That way!" they said in unison, and took off, with Malcolm scampering to keep up.

Their head start was very slim by this point, but they heard the two pursuing contingents converge at the juncture behind them as they ran. Nearly the entire population of the castle was probably there by now, not to mention all the guests invited for the dance, and possibly the populations of some neighboring counties as well. Simply coordinating that many people, demons, fairies, trolls and other miscellaneous creatures to not over run each other and to head down the same corridor bought them a little bit of time. But soon the chase was in full force again, and there was nowhere to run but straight ahead.

A hand grabbed Jaden by the shoulder and he shouted in surprise, thinking they had already been overtaken. But then the hand clambered down his arm and he realized it was his own. It held on to his right bicep and swung its other end down to touch the empty elbow. Skin, bone and muscle fused together and

suddenly, for the first time in two weeks, Jaden could feel his right hand again, and move it at will. He glanced over to the boy running next to him, who gestured at the now empty quiver on his back.

"We'd heard someone was missing a hand," he panted, "and we happened to come across it, so we picked it up." He slung the quiver off his back and tossed it aside.

"Thanks," Jaden panted back, and they kept on running.

Around the same time, they all began to notice that the corridor they were in was very unusual. It was getting extremely dark, and there was not a single door or hallway branching off of it anywhere. It simply seemed to keep going straight ahead, without turning, forever and ever. The stone walls seemed to echo in inconsistent ways, making their pursuers sometimes sound far off in the distance, and other times right on their heels, though if they looked back, they always appeared to be the same distance away. *It's like a nightmare*, Jaden thought.

And when he thought that, he realized where he was, and that it might literally be a nightmare. He looked around and the others appeared to have had a similar thought. Zoe nodded at him.

"It's a fear tunnel," she said, between breaths. "An awful lot of the buildings in the dreamlands have them. They're easy to get stuck in, hard to get out of."

And indeed, by this point Jaden was feeling as though he had been running forever, and as though he probably would continue to run forever, mindlessly fleeing a terrifying enemy that would never quite reach him, but never quite let him relax, either.

Gordon was beginning to notice a sensation of falling. He had had dreams like this before, endlessly falling through the blackness towards some unknown fate,

struggling against thin air but unable to do anything effective. He could look down and see that his body was still running along a stone corridor and carrying a jeweled scimitar, but in his mind, he felt like he was falling.

Though Lucy's rational mind told her she was still running in a straight line, she felt as though she were frantically searching for a way out of a sealed, featureless room that was slowly shrinking in on her. It had been years since she had had that dream, and she thought it had been left behind in childhood. But now her mind was being overrun with that same old frantic obsession of trying desperately to find a way out of something that didn't exist.

Malcolm was reminded of being duct taped all around and locked in a shoe box, struggling fruitlessly to escape. He didn't like it one bit, and just kept running as fast as he could to get away from it.

Zoe was the only one of them who was truly dreaming, but because she was aware of that fact, it actually gave her an advantage over the others. She knew that she still had the most important part of herself back at home and safely in bed, and she could therefore step back a bit mentally and look at the situation more objectively than any of the others. Having had so many lucid dreams in her life, she was used to finding creative ways of dealing with nightmares, or with anything else unpleasant that appeared in her dreams. She knew there were other things going on here than usually happened in dreams, but she was also in more comfortable territory than her companions were.

"We've got to stop!" she called out to the others.

"What? Are you crazy?" came back the reply, from three separate mouths.

"They'll catch us!"

"No, listen to me!" she went on. "We're in the dreamlands, right?"

"Right," said Jaden.

"Sure, if you say so," said Gordon.

"So this is a nightmare, right?"

"Sure seems like it."

"And when you have a nightmare like this, it basically never ends, right? You just keep running until you wake up."

"Right."

"But we can't wake up now. Or rather, I could if I wanted to, but none of you can. So we have to get out of this in some other way. And what is it you never do in these endless chasing nightmares?"

"Stop running?"

"Exactly. You never stop running and turn to face the danger, so it pursues you forever. When you're aware that you're dreaming, though, you can take control. That's what we need to do."

"Alright," said Jaden. "I don't think any of us have a better plan, On three, then? One... two... three!"

Jaden, Zoe, Gordon and Lucy all stopped on a dime and spun around to face back down the corridor. Malcolm skittered on a little in confusion, then turned back to peer out from behind them.

The light seemed to be coming back to the corridor now, though they could find no source for it, and they saw a seemingly endless army of dream figures approaching them at a gallop. But then they began to slow down, as though a film were running on a projector with a dying battery. By the time they had

approached within a dozen yards or so, they had slowed to a crawl, and they eventually froze entirely, just inches from where the refugees from the real world held their ground.

Jaden looked around nervously, and saw a confused, but slightly relieved, look on his companions' faces.

"Well, I guess that worked out," he said, hesitantly. "Thanks, Zoe. But now what?"

In answer, she simply gestured back towards the frozen crowd in front of them. From the middle of it arose one figure that still retained its freedom of movement. Tall and black robed it grew upwards until it towered over the others, and then began to glide forwards, passing through the mass of bodies like a fog.

It stopped before Jaden and looked down at him. The others simply watched, feeling as frozen as the opposing horde. A white face looked out from the black hood, and spoke in a voice that whispered through their minds louder than anything they had ever heard.

"My business is with this one," the voice said, "and does not concern the rest of you. You may wait here and I will deal with you later."

And with that, a section of ground beneath Jaden and the figure disappeared, and they were gone from view.

Chapter 28

Jaden had recognized the lord of the dream mansion, but he had had hardly any time to react before the world slipped away from them. He wasn't actually sure if he saw anything move, or if everything around him and the dream lord simply vanished. There was a vague sensation of falling, but it seemed to pull in several

directions at once, so that didn't necessarily mean anything. He seemed motionless next to the dream lord, who was the only thing he could see.

"You may think you have done well, Jaden Sands," the dream lord said, "having recovered your hand already. But let me assure you that was mere luck. Those two children took advantage of one of my servants to break into my domain and meddle in our affairs, but they will be punished in due course."

"Leave them alone!" Jaden replied. "They didn't mean to get into this. I don't even know them. Whatever is going on here is between you and me only."

"I am lord here and you will not tell me what to do or how to handle my affairs," the dream lord said calmly. "After I settle our business, I will deal with them. After all, as you say, they do not concern you."

Jaden didn't like the sound of that, but he figured he could only deal with one thing at a time anyway right now, so better to just let that go for the time being.

"So what are you going to do to me?" he asked.

"What do you think I'm going to do with you?"

"Well, you'll probably let me get nervous and stew a bit first, it looks like," Jaden said, irritated. "Then I'd like to say you'll give me a nice explanation for all of this, perhaps an apology, and then send me home. But somehow I don't think it's going to happen quite like that."

"No, not quite. Though I suppose that out of mere hospitality I might offer you a small explanation. Not that it will do you much good."

"Well, go for it anyway."

The dream lord was standing about two yards away from Jaden, but without seeming to move from his place, he tapped Jaden sharply in the chest with a thin, white finger.

"You," he said, "represent the oppression of our world, of the dreamlands."

"What?" Jaden was confused.

"Your people think that this place, that we ourselves, exist only for your own use and pleasure. But that is a lie. The dreamlands were here long before your kind ever existed, and we will be here long after you are gone. Yet you think that a few delta brain waves and rapid eye movements entitle you to come in here by the millions every night and have your way with our entire world, doing whatever you please and leaving us to clean up after you in the morning."

"But," Jaden stammered, "it's just dreaming. We can't help it. It's just the way things are. Most people don't even think it's real."

"You have something called slavery in your world, I believe, yes?"

"Well, yes. I think it's abolished in most places now, but sure, there's been a lot of it over the centuries."

"Then I am sure that, from your modern, enlightened viewpoint, you are familiar with many of the old justifications for slavery. 'It is the natural way of things,' for instance, or 'God intends for these people to be enslaved.' Excuses for ignorance and cruelty, that is all they were. And the ignorant will go on being so for as long as it is convenient for them and for as long as it keeps them in power. For change to occur, the oppressed need to speak up and fight back."

"So that's what you're trying to do, then?" Jaden asked. "By stealing my arm? What good is that supposed to do?"

"Your arm, in and of itself, is not important. What it symbolizes is important. The dreamlands are fighting back. The system we are trapped in does not allow us access to your world as easy as yours to ours, so we must take what we can get. When I find a rip in the boundaries, I cross over, and always I bring something back, no matter how seemingly small or insignificant. With each trophy, the dreamlands become a little stronger, and the inhabitants grow more adventurous, more willing to fight alongside me and the others like me.

"Claiming a piece of you, however, was an important coup for me. Since it allowed me to maintain a connection to you, I was able to leave exceedingly obvious clues for you regarding where your hand had gone. I knew that the excess of dream activity around you would attract the attention of an oneironaut or two somewhere, and that old fool Oddbury very obligingly came along and helped you get yourself into my clutches. And that girl Zoe who thought she was so clever dreaming herself over here to find you, she was also very useful for facilitating our communication. I shall have to see if I can deal with her later as well. I am not pleased about what you and she did to the East wall of my Great Hall."

"You can't actually harm her, though, right?" Jaden interjected. "Since she really is just dreaming, unlike me. She can just wake up and be safe."

"Yes, perhaps," the dream lord said, with a hint of annoyance in his voice. "But I expect we can find something... unpleasant to happen to her, at the very least."

"And those kids, they're probably just dreaming, too, so you can't touch them either."

"Oh, no, there you're wrong," the dream lord sounded much more pleased at this. "Those two have performed some very clumsy magic to travel all the way here from their homes. I don't believe they could find their way back even if I left them alone. But no, they will be mine. This hunting trip of mine will really have a far better result than I had dared to hope."

"So what are you going to do, then? Mount us on your wall like some deer that you shot or something?"

"Figuratively speaking, yes. Three human beings snatched from what you call 'Reality' and subsequently destroyed will be remarkably inspirational. I expect it to provide the greatest boost our cause has ever experienced."

"And I'm just supposed to take this lying down, am I?"

"Not at all. I fully expect and hope that you will put up a highly entertaining struggle. I am nothing, after all, if not a sportsman. In fact," here the dream lord drew from his robes the silver scepter he had held back in the court, "we will even have an audience."

He swept the scepter gracefully around, and all above and surrounding them appeared ranks of bodies and faces that looked like the crowd Jaden had seen and danced with back in the court. He and the dream lord, however, still floated in featureless darkness within the large ring of spectators. Jaden looked around at them, and then back at the dream lord.

"Alright, so they're all ready. What now?"

"Now," said the dream lord, with relish, "the hunt begins."

He pointed downwards with his scepter into the inky blackness below their feet, and now Jaden could see a tiny patch of green far, far below them. It gradually grew bigger, and Jaden realized that it was rising rapidly up towards them, or they were falling towards it, he couldn't tell which. Soon he could see that the green patch was actually a forest, and to the right he could make out the forms of a hunting party approaching it. The hunting party was composed of demons, loping along and carrying a variety of different weapons. There was only one horse, saddled and bridled, and with a hunting horn hanging from its saddle

horn, but rider-less. The demons began to fan out as they neared the forest, like hunting hounds. The trees of the forest were nearly upon him now, though. And just before they engulfed him, Jaden saw the dream lord give him a quick salute before falling outside the forest, towards the hunting party and his waiting horse.

Suddenly there were leaves and branches all around, slapping and scraping Jaden as he flew past them. Then he landed with a dull thud on the ground, the wind knocked out of him. He lay there for a few moments, catching his breath, then was roused by the sound of a hunting horn in the distance. He got to his feet and saw that he was now clad in light, flexible, leather armor and had in his hand a short halberd, about his own height, with both a cutting, axe-like edge and a spear-like point at the tip. To his waist was strapped a long dagger. At least he wasn't being thrown into this completely unprepared.

The hunting horn sounded again, nearer this time. Jaden began trotting off through the woods in the opposite direction. He knew that he would have to face the hunting party eventually, but he hoped to perhaps find a more convenient location from which to defend himself, perhaps with some features of the landscape to block off certain angles of attack. Or if nothing else, he could simply delay the confrontation a bit.

As he went, he tried to think about what advantages he might have that he could use. The dream lord had expected an interesting challenge it sounded like, so maybe Jaden had more of a chance in this than he thought he did. He racked his brains for another minute or so, hearing the hunting horn draw still nearer. Then he remembered that he was still in the dreamlands, and he remembered what Zoe had shown him back in the ballroom, about being able to manipulate the environment here in ways that weren't possible back in the everyday world. Jaden wondered how much control he had to change things here.

He plucked a leaf off of a tree and rubbed it between his fingers, willing it to change somehow. He didn't know if there was a precise way to do these things,

but he tried to imagine the leaf changing form. And as he did, it softened in his fingers like clay, and he was able to roll it into a little cylinder. He pointed the end, making a dart out of it, then flung it at another tree. It flew straight and stuck fast in the wood. Very interesting. So normal rules definitely did not apply here. He would have to think of something creative to do with that.

He realized then that he had stopped running while he thought about that. He collected himself with a start, and was about to dive back into his flight when he heard a movement in the bushes from the direction he was about to head into. The sound was enough to give him a split second warning before the demon launched itself out from behind a tree at him.

Jaden just barely dodged and the demon's sword whistled past within inches of his ear as the momentum carried the demon on past Jaden. It caught itself quickly, though, and whirled back around at him. Jaden parried the next blow clumsily with his halberd, but then was knocked to the ground by the next one. He rolled aside as the demon leapt at him again, and he tried to jab at it with his halberd, but he couldn't get a good angle from down on the ground.

A small corner of Jaden's mind that kept itself walled off from the adrenaline was analyzing the situation. The real problem here was that Jaden had absolutely no experience at hand-to-hand combat. He might as well have been holding a garden hose for all the good the halberd was doing him. He could conceivably gain some sort of speed and agility advantage over the demon's superior size and strength, but not if the weapon and the necessary movements were so foreign to him.

This analytic corner of his mind then had an intuition. A dream, it thought, is merely a sensory model for a set of data. Neurons fire in someone's brain, and in their dreams they translate this into sensory perceptions, even though the actual sensory input does not exist in the same world as the dreaming brain. The scenario currently being enacted was clearly a creation of the dream lord.

However, since Jaden was also in the dreamlands, he was free to create a new model of his own as a way of processing the given data in his environment.

His conscious mind didn't even stop to think about how he should translate his situation. The answer was obvious. What was he the best at? What could he compete in that would give him the best chance of success? He could dance.

Jaden rolled away from another blow and leapt to his feet. Once his mind had realized what needed to happen, it all seemed taken care of automatically. He didn't know how he was actually doing it.

He now had two views of the forest clearing in which he and the demon were fighting. One was the obvious one that he had been seeing all along. But in the other view, there was only a dance floor, some fast swing music, and Zoe. Jaden was dancing with her, though he couldn't tell if she knew what was really going on in the forest or not. She just kept her eyes locked on his and followed as precisely as ever.

Jaden concentrated on that view, and on dancing perfectly in sync with the music and with Zoe. As they whipped through the swingouts, he saw their motions translated into his body in the forest, dodging and parrying the demon's thrusts, far more nimble than before. A bright trill came from one of the horns in the swing tune, and Jaden led Zoe in a series of twirls that matched the music perfectly. His halberd seemed to twist around the demon's sword and knock it aside, sneaking in to leave a bleeding gash in its right arm. The demon howled and lunged, and the music began speeding up. The more closely and musically Jaden danced to the music, the better he fought, and when he stumbled slightly or mis-stepped was when the demon got in some hits of its own. But as long as Jaden was dancing, he was in his element and he had the advantage. The music roared to a climax, with blasts of blaring horns, with a flurry of traveling twists and spins, and with several blinding movements of the halberd that sent the demon's sword flying into the bushes. A final note, a deep dip, and the halberd was thrust home into the demon's chest.

Jaden stood panting in the clearing, over the demon's body, with vague images of Zoe and the dance hall still floating around him. Then he turned and dashed off into the woods again.

During the battle, though, another demon had caught his scent, and Jaden could hear it trailing him slightly behind and to his right. And gaining. Jaden kept running, but began shifting himself back into the dance. Music began playing for a polka, and he was dancing with Zoe again. They were on a crowded floor this time, dodging other couples that crowded them or blocked their path, as Jaden in his other view skirted trees in the forest.

Then the other demon was upon him. This one had a net and a spear. Jaden and Zoe tried to dance faster, looking for space on the floor between other couples. The spear shot out at Jaden, but a quick turn caused it to miss him by a hair's breadth. The demon, still slightly behind them, gave a mighty leap and cast the net at him. Jaden and Zoe spied the slimmest of openings, just where two other couples with poor steering were about to collide, and they slipped through it, leaving the couples to knock each other over, and the net to fall harmlessly behind them. They were at the outside track of the dance floor now, and transitioned smoothly into polka redowa. Jaden's running form suddenly seemed to glide ahead at twice its previous speed, leaping lightly over rocks and bushes, and the pursuing demon was left behind, stumbling through the undergrowth.

Jaden and Zoe continued to fly at full speed around the room, and Jaden almost tuned out the forest entirely in the exhilaration of the polka. But then the music came to a screeching halt and Jaden felt himself collide with something solid. A boot at the level of his chest kicked and knocked him to the ground. A black horse reared above him, and he rolled aside just before its hooves hit the ground where he had fallen.

The dream lord was looking down at him from the horse, a silver hunting horn hanging from his saddle, and the silver scepter still in his hand.

"Very good," he said silkily. "Quite resourceful, in fact. I hear you are quite a hit up in the stands, and I must say that even I am somewhat impressed. However," here he dismounted from his horse in a single, fluid motion, and came to stand over Jaden, "it is now down to us. Stand up!"

Jaden felt himself rise to his feet, as though pulled by strings at his joints like a puppet. He faced the dream lord and tried to hold his halberd in what he hoped was a confident, yet menacing position. The dream lord just laughed.

"Let us see now," he said, "how you fare against a real enemy."

Chapter 29

Gordon, Lucy and Zoe were all silent and still after Jaden and the dream lord disappeared, and the only sound was of Malcolm sniffing curiously around at the space in the ground that had vanished. Finally Zoe broke the silence.

"So, what brought you two into all of this?" she asked. "You aren't just dreaming, are you?"

"No," replied Gordon. "At least, I don't think so. Are we really in a dream world? Do you live here, or are you dreaming?"

"I'm just dreaming, and yes, these are the dreamlands. How did you get here?"

"Well, it was an accident, really," Gordon began, and then decided to back up to the real beginning, to the morning his mother found the dead mouse on the kitchen floor. He described how stranger things began happening, and how he gradually decided that his stuffed toy kitten Ixy was possessed.

"As far as we can tell," he said, waving his arm in the general direction of Malcolm, who was now nuzzling at Lucy's hand as though he wanted to be petted, "it was that little bloke over there that was doing it, though I haven't a clue how or why. And from the way he carries on now, I don't know if he knows much about it either."

"So how did you find out it was him?"

Gordon, with a bit of embarrassment, described their amateur exorcism attempt, and how it had conjured up Malcolm's image before mysteriously bringing Gordon and Lucy into the dreamlands themselves. He also explained the strange thing that had happened when Ixy and Malcolm had seemed to merge.

"I think they must have had some sort of split personality thing going on," Lucy put in. "The miniature dinosaur thing and your toy cat, I mean. Now they've been merged back together or whatever it is split personalities do when they un-split, and he's turned into... well, I don't know, but he seems rather puppy-like now, don't you think? The sweet and mindless kind of puppy."

"Right," Gordon agreed. "He's not really so bad anymore."

"I'd take him home, but I don't know if Mum would really go for it. She's all new age and open minded and everything, but I think it would still be asking a lot."

"Not to mention the fact that we don't know yet how we're getting home ourselves. We can't just wake up." Gordon looked at Zoe.

"I've only ever dreamed myself here," she said, "but I'll stick around as long as I can in case I can do anything to help. For now, though, I'm not sure what we can do aside from waiting to see what happens to Jaden."

"Jaden's your friend?" Gordon asked, "The one with the arm issues? I don't think we were ever actually introduced."

"Yes, that's him." Zoe told Gordon and Lucy as much as she knew from Jaden's side of the story, and her own small involvement in it. They seemed pretty impressed.

Malcolm had wandered off in the meantime, though, and was poking curiously around all of the frozen dream figures that had previously been pursuing them so fiercely. Lucy called to him.

"Malcolm! Come back here! We don't know if those are really safe."

"Well, they do seem to be pretty harmless now," Gordon pointed out. "In fact, I'm kind of curious about them, too. Let's go take a look."

Shaking her head, Lucy followed him after Malcolm. Zoe joined them as well, though still keeping a corner of her attention on the gaping black void into which Jaden had vanished.

Fascination soon got the better of their caution and soon all of them were exploring excitedly through the crowd like children at a park. All of the figures were as solid and cold as marble, and completely immovable. Even the fire demon that Zoe had seen Jaden dance with was completely frozen, its flames stilled and solidified in midair, but still blazing orange. Gordon climbed up on it as though it were a boulder or a tree, laughed, and began hopping around between various heads and shoulders of the other creatures.

There were numerous other dancers from the ball and from the dream lord's court, including the thin, glass faced woman, the spiky metal monster, and the octopus-like tango dancer. The scantily clad pixies particularly caught Gordon's attention, until Lucy glared at him and told him not to be crude. And there were more, as well. A large, tree-ish figure, perhaps an Ent? A green, penguin sort of creature, with its head, wings and feet sticking out of a turtle's shell. A manticore. A serial axe murderer with a ski mask covering his face. There was

even a mermaid, though none of them could figure out how on earth she had been following after them out of the water. And, of course, there were numerous demon soldiers in a variety of sizes, shapes and armors, but all fearsome even in paralysis.

Malcolm found one short, hairy demon and tried to take a bite out of its leg, but came away whimpering after hurting his teeth on the rock solid flesh.

"Wasn't that the one that nearly got us?" Lucy asked, pointing to it. "Back there in the hallway, when we ran into him? He put the whole army on our heels."

"Yeah," agreed Gordon, looking down. "I guess Malcolm wanted another shot at him. Looks like a bit of a tough chew for him, though. Pity."

Gordon bent down over the demon on whose shoulders he was currently balancing, and tugged at a sword that was in a scabbard slung at its back. It came loose with a jerk, nearly unseating Gordon from his perch, and he admired it.

"Now that's a sword meant to be used," he said, tossing his jeweled scimitar aside and brandishing his new weapon. "I'd much rather carry this on around than that wall decoration." Then suddenly he froze.

"What is it?" Lucy asked worriedly. Zoe also turned to look at Gordon from where she was examining the mermaid for a believable method of transportation.

"I thought I saw something move," Gordon hissed. "Over there, behind the tree thing. Where's Malcolm?"

"He's still over here," Lucy replied, quieter now, "next to me. Do you think one of them came unfrozen?"

"I don't know."

Gordon kept his eyes fixed on the place where he thought he had seen the movement, but crouched down, trying to maintain his vantage point without being so much out in plain sight. Then he saw it again, or something else. The movement of a shadow, slipping through the frozen fairies and demons like a prowling cat through a forest. It disappeared, and then he caught it again, closer to them this time, and he saw the tip of a wing peek out above its cover now.

"Something's coming this way," Gordon whispered urgently, sliding down from his perch now. "I think it's coming for us. Quick, get Malcolm, don't let him run off and get caught. Where's Zoe?"

"She was right here," Lucy said, "looking at the mermaid. I just saw her a moment ago."

"She's gone?"

"I didn't see what happened to her."

"Well, let's hope for her sake she just woke up. I'd have felt better if we still had her around, though. Let's go."

He took Lucy's arm and they headed off at an awkward, zigzagging trot, weaving between all the statues in the opposite direction from the approaching shadow Gordon had seen. Lucy drew her dagger and Gordon kept his newfound sword ready in his free hand. Malcolm skittered along behind them, glancing around anxiously, looking more worried than ever and wringing his tie in his small claws.

Gordon was trying to steer back to the front of the crowd, where Jaden had disappeared, though he didn't know if that would do much good. He could already tell that whatever was after them was getting closer, giving itself away by the occasional heavy footstep or scrape of a claw. Then he saw a golden

brown shape flash between two of the statues only a couple of yards to their right, and he pulled Lucy to the left as fast as he could, heading through a slightly more open area in the crowd.

With a roar of malicious delight, a huge pair of bat-like wings erupted up out of the crowd behind them, pumped once and launched a demon into the air. With a hind leg, he gave himself an extra push off the head of a frozen guard and catapulted himself at Gordon and Lucy.

Gordon swung his sword at the demon, but was knocked flying as soon as the creature hit the ground in front of them. He slammed into a statue several feet away and slumped to the ground, stunned. He could see Lucy diving through a small gap between two other statues, and the demon reaching in a long muscular arm to catch her ankle and begin dragging her out. With dazed eyes, he watched what happened next.

* * *

Malcolm-Ixy was terrified. It had been bad enough since that awkward moment earlier when half of himself/herself/itself had suddenly appeared and decided to share the body. He/she/it wasn't even entirely clear on who he/she/it was anymore, though he was doing his best to continue thinking of himself just as Malcolm. It seemed the simplest thing to do. It had been quite a shake-up for him, though.

He had rather enjoyed romping around all the frozen demons for a while, but now the fun was decidedly gone. He could smell Bratch getting nearer as they ran twistingly through the crowd, and that specific fear was worse for him than the unknown was for Gordon and Lucy. The demon captain was by far the most frightening being Malcolm could think of to have chasing them.

When Bratch attacked, Malcolm almost fainted, and then ducked behind a nearby witch. But then he saw Gordon get thrown aside and crumple to the

ground, and something stirred in Malcolm, or was it in Ixy? Malcolm didn't want Gordon to be hurt, he mustn't be hurt. And Lucy, she had been nice to him too, and now Bratch was after her, clawing at her leg, about to haul her out into the open. This was horrible. Malcolm knew he had to do something, had to take matters into his own claws. He didn't know what to do, but there was no time to worry about the details. He stepped out from behind his statue. He took a deep breath.

And he roared.

It was only a little roar at first, hardly more than a bark, really. And it made him jump a little in surprise, though Bratch didn't even seem to have noticed. Then he roared again, and it was louder this time, and longer, and deeper. And now Bratch turned around to see where this noise was coming from. Malcolm took another step forwards toward him, and on his third try he truly roared.

It was the roar of his dreams, the roar of a forty foot long Tyrannosaur thundering through a herd of shrieking Struthiomimuses. It was a roar that boomed and bellowed and echoed throughout the fear tunnel, shaking the statues to their very bases.

Bratch had let go of Lucy now, and was it Malcolm's imagination, or was there a look of uncertainty on the mighty captain's gruesome face? He continued to advance, and now Bratch seemed to be shrinking, until his head was level with Malcolm's own, and then even beneath it. The statues around him were also shrinking though, and Malcolm realized that he himself was changing size.

He was nearly upon Bratch now, and the demon leapt up into the air and flew at Malcolm's head with a desperate sounding yell. Wings beat around his head and claws tore at his face, but a gnash of his mighty jaw put a huge tear in one of the wings and Bratch howled in pain. With another roar, Malcolm tossed his massive head sideways, knocking the demon out of the air and onto the ground. With one huge, clawed foot, he pinned him there, and crushed him.

* * *

As soon as Bratch had released his hold on her, Lucy had ducked back into her cover again, and she watched as Malcolm roared and grew, knocking statues aside and leaving behind the torn remnants of his old shirt and tie. She covered her eyes when Bratch attacked, but couldn't keep herself from peeking out between her fingers as they fought.

And then Bratch was on the ground, and Malcolm gave a final, ear-splitting roar of triumph. Lucy wondered if it would be safe to come out yet, if this new Malcolm would remember her and still be friendly as he had been when he was the cute little puppy-like Malcolm. She glanced over at Gordon, and was glad to see he was still breathing, but he looked stunned and unable to move. Should she try to get to him and pull him to cover before Malcolm noticed him?

She was starting to inch over towards Gordon, when Malcolm's head dived down over his prey again. She froze, watching to make sure she hadn't been noticed.

Malcolm tore at the demon's neck, and when his head rose again, Lucy saw the light glint off of something dangling from one of his frightening, butcher's knife teeth. He tossed his head and a small amulet on a cord flew up into the air. With a surprisingly dainty movement, Malcolm nipped it from the air, and swallowed it.

Chapter 30

Jaden watched the dream lord warily, not knowing what to expect. He was more conscious now of their audience again, hovering in the air above and around them, and the forest seemed to slip away until it was just the two of them on a small, grassy patch of earth, facing each other.

It didn't look as though the dream lord was carrying any weapon, other than the scepter. Jaden figured that probably meant he had more to be afraid, rather than less. He continued to crouch slightly, trying to stay at the ready for whatever happened.

But he wasn't ready enough. The scepter flicked through the air like a wand, with a mere twitch from the wrist, and Jaden felt a searing pain slash across one cheek from something invisible. Another twitch of the scepter and this time Jaden swung his halberd across in front of him. Something metallic clanged off of it and cut his arm.

Not knowing what else to do now, Jaden threw himself at the dream lord slashing and jabbing wildly with his halberd. His opponent scarcely seemed to notice, but somehow the scepter appeared everywhere that Jaden struck, just a split second before, and in time to block every blow. Then it flicked out on its own and Jaden fell backwards with the wind knocked out of him.

He remembered the fights with the demons in the forest, and he tried to call to mind the dance hall, and the music, and Zoe. Gradually the secondary scene formed around him. There was a tango playing, with sharp, violent music. Why did it have to be tango? Zoe was in his arms again. He tried frantically to remember any tango at all, hoping to at least reconstruct the eight count basic in his mind. He took a step.

But then the dream lord was there in that world with him as well. He grabbed Zoe roughly, tore her from Jaden's arms, and threw her aside. Jaden saw her flicker and then fade away, and then he too was knocked to the ground. The dream lord ripped the music from his ears, and cast the dance hall into darkness. They were back again on the grassy arena. Clearly Jaden had no choice but to face his foe on his own terms.

He rolled over onto his back, and started to bring his weapon up in front of him, but then found the shaft of the halberd pinned to his chest. The dream lord had

caught it with his scepter, and was knelt over him, pressing him down into the grass with his weight. Jaden couldn't move, could barely breathe.

And then the dream lord seemed to be inside his mind, twisting it and contorting it against his will. As Jaden had previously created a new dream of his own devising to overlay the battles, so now was the dream lord pulling him into another world. Jaden could still see and feel himself pinned to the ground, but now he was also present in a secondary reality.

He was in a torture chamber, strapped to a rack, his body covered with bruises and welts and bleeding gashes. The dream lord stood over him, brandishing a whip and laughing maliciously.

"So you think you can beat me at my own game, do you?" he sneered at Jaden. "Never! I will be the master of your dreams, and while you are in my realm, I will determine your reality."

And even as he spoke, Jaden could feel the original scene slipping away, and the torture scene becoming stronger, and more real around him. He tried to force his mind back to somewhere else, to pull a different reality back around himself, but the pain made it hard to concentrate.

"Pitiful!" the dream lord shouted at him. "Give it up! You have no hope here. You will merely die slowly, and dying here means that you will be completely and utterly destroyed."

He reached for the crank to give the rack another twist, but then froze. The world around them seemed to be shaking, or quivering. Then the torture chamber began to fade. Jaden felt barely strong enough to notice at this point, much less cause it, but who else could be imposing their will on this place? He began to feel grass beneath him again, and the pressure of the dream lord leaning on him from above, pressing the halberd shaft into his chest. One by one, pieces of the torture chamber winked out of existence.

Then the sky seemed to split and open above them.

Chapter 31

Lucy didn't know what it was that Malcolm had swallowed, nor why it should have the effect on him that it did.

His body stiffened momentarily, then quivered, and then he let out the loudest roar yet. Lucy was sure she would be deafened by it, but she couldn't tell whether it was a roar of triumph or despair, delight or pain. His attention seemed completely distracted, though, so Lucy took the opportunity to scoot over to where Gordon was recovering and trying to pull himself upright. She took his arm and helped him back farther into the crowd, behind a couple of large, petrified demons, where they could wait and watch from a bit of cover.

The roar faded out into the encompassing silence of the hall, and Malcolm's head, twenty feet above them, seemed to split across the top. A thin gray mist came out, slowly at first and then faster, spinning down in a spiral to encircle Malcolm's body. Within moments he was only a large, vague shadow in a giant column of gray. Then the mist began spinning faster and faster, until it took on the appearance of a stationary tornado. Gordon and Lucy thought they heard another roar beginning, then decided that they must have been mistaken, and that it was actually thunder. They cowered further behind their demon statues.

And then the tornado slowed, and the spinning mist began to clear. Behind it, the dinosaur demon was gone, and there stood a towering figure in a white robe, with an amulet suspended from a red cord around his neck. He had black hair that stuck out from his head at spiky angles, his face was thin and pale, and his eyes so very dark that they seemed to be composed of nothing but night.

He stood with his face and arms upturned for a moment, and then lowered them with a sigh that might have indicated relief or contentment, or both. When he

looked down he saw Gordon and Lucy and began to walk towards them. As he walked he shrank, until he stood before them, the size of a normal adult man. His voice when he spoke was smooth and warm, and seemed to come from within each of them, soothing and relaxing them throughout their bodies.

"Thank you, Gordon Ross and Lucy Campbell," he said, nodding to each of them. "We have not the words, even here in the dreamlands, to properly express my gratitude."

"You... you're... welcome," stammered Lucy, as Gordon shook his head, thinking he must have been hit harder than he had thought. "But I'm not sure what we did. Or even who you are, now that you don't seem to be Malcolm anymore, at least."

"Whether you intended it or not," the man said, "you were instrumental in bringing events to this point, and for that I thank you. I am King of the Dreamlands, and you are honored guests of my realm."

Gordon and Lucy shuffled awkwardly a bit, then tried to bow and curtsy, but the Dream King waved them back up.

"There is no need for that here," he said. "Being King of the Dreamlands is really more like being a caretaker than a monarch, and I do not require strict subservience of my subjects."

"But, sir," Gordon asked, "what happened here? Where were you? What's going on?"

"I have spent the last year entrapped in the body of a minor demon," the Dream King explained, "known as Malcolm, as you are aware. Not only was my body not my own, but my mind and memories were stolen from me as well. Even now, some are still slowly making their way back to me from the far reaches of my realm."

"The one who calls himself a dream lord, and master of this castle, is but a villainous fiend. We had a dispute, and through trickery and stolen magic, he trapped me. I have been unable to fight back or free myself for these many months, until a chance accident gave me contact with your world. I did not understand this at the time, but it eventually led you to me. And you in turn were kind to me, and took me with you, and inspired in my small demon heart the bravery to fight for you. Your companion's amulet that the demon Bratch carried then provided the final catalyst for my transformation."

"That was Jaden's?" Gordon asked. "Where is he now? Is he okay? And were did Zoe disappear to? Did she just wake up?"

"So many questions...." The Dream King was silent for a moment, and his invisibly black eyes seemed focused on something beyond the normal senses.

"Jaden is in a duel for his life," he said. "Zoe was with him for a time, and may still be. I sense her slipping back and forth between worlds. They need our help, and we will go to them. But first I must release these creatures."

He went to one of the frozen demons that Gordon and Lucy had been hiding behind, and passed his hand in front of its face. The creature melted back into life, and stumbled slightly as its foot fell in completion of its interrupted step. It looked around, confused.

"Listen to me," the Dream King told it. "You and your kind are no longer under your master's command. You will return to your barracks, collect any belongings you may have, and disperse. Go, wake the others, and do as I bid you."

With a grunt, the demon slunk off and began seeking out the other soldiers in the crowd. Each one he touched was released from its paralysis. Gordon and Lucy watched nervously.

"There is nothing to worry about," the Dream King said, reassuringly. "They will not harm you against my wishes."

He then turned to a nearby elf, and released it in the same manner.

"You and the other guests of this hall may return to your homes and go about your business. We have no need to keep you here. Wake the others for me, and go."

The elf bowed elegantly, and floated off on light footsteps to carry out his task. The frozen crowd around them was gradually thawing and dispersing, with many of the creatures yawning and rubbing their eyes, or looking around confusedly as if having been awoken from a long nap. Gordon and Lucy watched in fascination, though they still kept close to the Dream King, who was given a respectful amount of space.

"And now we are ready," the Dream King said. "Let us find and rescue your companions."

He put a hand on each of their shoulders, and then everything around them seemed to wink out into blackness.

Chapter 32

As the split in the sky widened, Jaden could see the assembled audience disappearing. One by one they were vanishing. The dream lord had noticed this, too, and he looked worried about it now, though he still kept Jaden pressed to the ground with his scepter. The gap in the sky was edged with blinding light, but the interior was an even inkier black than the darkness around it.

And then out of the gap there stepped a figure in a white robe. He seemed only the size of an average man, but with one simple step he crossed from the gap in the sky to the ground, just a few yards from the combatants. Behind him

stumbled the two Scottish kids, whose names Jaden had never gotten. They looked a bit disoriented, but seemed to be following the man of their own free will, which Jaden hoped was a good sign.

The dream lord had now stood up and was facing the white robed figure, on his guard. Jaden pulled himself up a little bit to watch, but tried not to draw any extra attention to himself. The man in the white robe spoke.

"Your games are over," he said. "Your demon army has been disbanded. These dreamers will now be free to go, and you will await my punishment."

"Is that so, your *majesty*?" the dream lord sneered. "And why should I? I might decide to simply lock you up in another useless little demon body again for a while. Or perhaps something you can't escape from so easily. And then I'll set myself up as King of the Dreamlands. I think we're about due for some changes around here, anyway."

As he spoke, though, Jaden noticed that the dream lord seemed to be weakening. His poise was beginning to falter. His voice, which had been so smooth and sinuous before was now becoming harsher, higher pitched, and jerky. He also seemed to be shrinking just slightly in relation to the Dream King.

"You will not," the Dream King said. "You know that you have failed in your one chance to depose me permanently, and already you are crumbling in your defeat. You cannot make such an offense against the laws of this realm and against its king without paying the price. In fact," he looked down at the shrinking figure that was now a full two feet shorter than him, "it appears that my personal revenge will be not only too late, but unnecessary."

The withering figure of the dream lord snarled and clenched a fist in the empty air, but the fist merely crumbled to dust and blew away on a small breeze that came out of nowhere. A strangled cry came from the twisted mouth and the hollow cheeks of his face.

"Go," said the Dream King calmly, "and may your next existence bring you more peace than this one has."

And he passed his hand in front of the crumbling form as he had done to free the frozen dream creatures in the Hall of Fear. But this time, the rest of the body crumbled and disintegrated, then vanished, leaving behind only a pile of dark robes, and a silver scepter on the ground.

"You may get up, Jaden," the Dream King said, and with a start Jaden realized he was still lying on the ground, jaw agape at the scene before him.

"Wha... what just happened?" he asked, getting unsteadily to his feet.

"Your opponent here was a villain, a scoundrel, and an imposter," the Dream King said. "I pray that you do not judge our land too harshly on his account. Now that I have returned, I will be seeking out any other such 'trophy hunters' that he may have corrupted, and they will be dealt with appropriately. You and your companions are, of course, free to return to your own world. Your dance partner has already awoken and is safe at home."

"Thank you," Jaden said. "But I'm not sure how to get home, actually. I'm not just dreaming, you see. One of the demons took the amulet that I needed to get back home."

"Us, too," Gordon chimed in. "Er, what I mean is, we got here sort of by accident. It was magic, but we didn't really know what we were doing. Are we going to be able to get home?"

"That will not be a problem," the Dream King said. "Come, stand before me."

Gordon and Lucy did so, and the King put a hand inside his robes.

"First, I feel as though I should return something to you," he said, and drew forth his hand, holding a small, stuffed toy kitten and offering it to Gordon.

"Is it safe?" Gordon asked, skeptically.

"Completely. Through one of your dreams a year ago, our late villain found this and used it to hold the magic that imprisoned me. Outside of the dreamlands, he thought it was safe from detection, but luckily for all of us, he was proved wrong. Now that I am whole again, that magic is dispersed, and this is once again a harmless toy. Take it home and do with it what you like."

Gordon took Ixy, and thanked the King, who now put a hand on both his and Lucy's heads.

"Close your eyes," he said, "and envision where you were just before you entered this land."

They did so, and Jaden saw them both fade, flicker, and vanish. The King turned back to Jaden.

"And as for you, Jaden," he said, "your amulet was the final catalyst that allowed me to regain my true form. I thank you for the loan of it."

He pulled the red cord from around his neck and offered it to Jaden, who now saw that at the end of it was the amulet Professor Oddbury had given him. The King pressed the amulet into Jaden's hand, pressing the button on it as he did so. Jaden's vision faded and flickered, as Gordon and Lucy had when he watched them disappear. Then everything was gone.

* * *

Professor Oddbury lay slumped and snoring in an arm chair, with the remains of his sixth cup of coffee on the desk nearby. He had desperately wanted to stay

awake and on watch until Jaden came back, but he just couldn't handle the late nights anymore the way he used to.

The OneiroPorter was sitting quietly before him, a few small rows of lights winking on and off with a perfect regularity they had maintained since Jaden fell asleep several hours before. But now some of those lights began to speed up, and other, new ones joined in urgently. A valve clicked shut, cutting off the IV drip to Jaden's arm, and the machine began emitting a steady buzzing sound.

Oddburry shifted, murmured, and opened one eye reluctantly. Then both eyes shot open and he leapt to his feet, hurrying over to the machine, flipping switches and checking dials. On the bed inside, Jaden gave a gasp, and his eyes flickered. The purple dream field buzzing through the air was clearing, and Oddburry opened the machine to reach in and remove the needle from Jaden's arm. Jaden's eyes flickered again, and the professor laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Jaden? Jaden my boy? Are you alright? Can you wake up?"

Jaden shifted now, and groaned, but opened his eyes completely.

"Come along, let's get you out of there." The professor helped him out of the machine, and Jaden stumbled over to collapse in the chair that Oddburry had recently vacated.

"That," he said, "was about the least restful sleep I have ever had in my life. But I think I'd like to stay awake for a few days now, if I can. Have you got any more of that coffee?"

The End