



BETWEEN THE WORLDS

Olive Tree Academy

Book Two

SAMPLE

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Prologue

Cotton Mather.

That hateful preacher had been the reason for half the recent trouble over in Salem, even while he'd kept himself here in Boston most of the time. And now, he was coming for her.

She knew most of the accused were innocent. Guilty of the crimes of being too poor, or too smart, or too lucky or unlucky. But not of witchcraft. Most of these idiots wouldn't know real magick from a recipe for pork stew.

She, though. She was different. Silence Matthews had learned all manner of magick, and had worked it, too. She didn't think they'd ever catch on, so distracted were they by fantasies of witches flying off on poles to meet the devil in the woods. So obsessed with every luck charm, protective sign, and healing salve. Nobody was watching for signs of real magick. Nobody was going to notice a true witch.

But they didn't need to notice she was a true witch, did they? No, all they needed to believe were the same jealous accusations and hateful rumors that had doomed so many others. Lies people had told on her before, and she was always able to push them

away. Had always been able to deny, even turn the suspicion around onto her accuser.

But this time was different, she knew. This time it was Cotton Mather, and he believed her guilt. He knew something more than some silly girl saying she made an evil sign with her fingers to sour somebody's milk. He knew, and he was on his way.

Silence darted around her small house, unable to decide between looking for a place to hide, or for something to use as a weapon. Her hands snarled her dark, curly hair in panic.

<Calm ye now, girlie>

"Toady?" she asked, stopping her frenzied pacing. The voice was a familiar one. She touched the necklace she always wore, a large, green stone with several smaller black ones in a silver setting.

<Aye, girlie>

"Toady, what can I do?" she asked, the anxiety rising again. "They've questioned me before, but they mean to hang me this time, I'm sure of it. There's no place to go!"

<Ye be a witch, lovely. Remember what ye know.>

"But I know nothing powerful enough to save me. I can't fight them, I can't escape. They'll put me in Boston Gaol, and that be a terrible place. Sarah Osborne from Salem Village died there in May. And so many more was hanged this summer." Silence felt a phantom rope tighten around her throat, even as she spoke the words.

<Aye, lovey. But they be not witches. Not like ye. Ye have power they know not. And ye have me.>

This was true. The imp had been her mentor and her familiar, right from the start. Toady Spiderlegs had led her to the spellbook hidden in a hidey-hole under the floor. Toady had guided her through every page, nurtured her thirst for knowledge, for power.

She clasped the pendant in her hand. The necklace had once belonged to her late husband's mother and grandmother. The necklace, unlike the book, had been given to her openly, though her husband had been ignorant of its power, of the imp trapped within. "What do I do, Toady? I know nothing to save me from this. What can you do to help?"

<Ye'll be makin' a door>

"A door?"

<Aye. A magick door, what'll port you far away>

There were references to such things in the book, but no instructions beyond a strange symbol and the words: *for opening the magickal doorway*. "I don't know how to make a door," Silence argued.

<Aye, girle. But I do. Do as I say...>

Silence unclipped the sewing scissors from her belt. These were her primary witch's tool, hidden in plain sight. The judges and preachers looked for charms, books, and dollies, but none of them ever questioned scissors, kitchen knives, wooden spoons.

She followed Toady's guidance. She had to start over several times, her panic making her clumsy and causing her to lose concentration. She gestured with the point of the scissors, altering the fabric of the world around her. After a time, she could indeed see a ripple in the air before her, the beginning of the door Toady promised. "It's working!" she exclaimed.

<O'course it is. Ye be a powerful witch, what deserves a good imp.>

A noise outside interrupted Silence's work. She whipped her head around to see shadows against the curtain.

<Pay attention, girlie!>

She turned back to her half-completed door. The ripple in the air was gone. She'd failed.

<Finish what ye started!>

She lifted the scissors again. She made the gestures Toady described, repeated the words he said. Soon, the ripple was back, and growing.

And none too soon; they were gathering outside, readying to come in. "Silence Matthews!" a man shouted, pounding his fist against her door.

<Ignore him. Ye'll be gone 'fore he comes through that door if ye pay attention!>

Silence bent down, placing the point of her scissors where the edge of the ripple in the air met the floorboards.

The men outside banged on the door, demanding entrance.

Silence drew the scissors up, standing as she moved. She raised the point over her head, then across, then back down, describing the outline of an imaginary door.

If this worked, it wouldn't be imaginary for long.

<Good. Good, girle. Now draw the shape from the book at the middle. The one what looks like a two-ended hook.>

Silence used the tip of her scissors to draw the symbol, hoping she was remembering it correctly, like the first letter of her name but with one curve smaller than the other. She drew an X in the larger curve and a circle inside the smaller one. She was about to draw the long, straight line down the middle when her front door landed on the floor with a BANG.

<Finish!>

Silence tried to continue, but the tip of the scissors shook. The line she made was jagged and off-center. Her heart beat so loudly in her ears she could no longer hear

Toady's voice over the pounding. She lowered the arm holding the scissors, accepting defeat.

But then, the doorway opened.

Right in the middle of her house stood a rough-edged doorway leading into a dark forest. It was so amazing she forgot, momentarily, about the men standing behind her.

"Dear God in Heaven!" one of those men exclaimed. "Witches!"

And indeed, witches it was. For on the other side of the doorway Silence had created stood five figures, clearly witches all. Three women and two men, wearing black robes. The one in front, a tall woman about Silence's age, with long, dark blond hair, wore a star inside a circle around her neck. Silence knew that sign from the book.

The people on the other side of the door looked at Silence, looked at the men behind her.

Silence spared a glance over her shoulder, to see the men frozen in place. These men had spoken long and loud against witches, had insisted on the reality of magick and the Devil, had preached for years about the very real, very present, threat of evil amongst men. But faced with this clear evidence of the invisible world, they were all struck still and dumb.

As was Silence herself, until Toady shouted in her mind, urging her to act.

<Move, girlie! This be your chance!>

She had no idea who these robed figures on the other side of the doorway were, no idea whether they were friend or foe. But she knew, without a doubt, the threat posed by the men behind her. The choice was an easy one.

She ran forward, through the doorway and into the unknown forest beyond.



Chapter One

DAVIE

Fuck.

My.

Life.

I raised my hand, but Professor Markston walked away. I looked at the sticky note again, the name of my project partner written in Markston's jagged handwriting. No motherfucking way was I going to be paired with Isaiah J. Bullshit Lewis on a class project. No. Goddamned. Way. "Professor Markston?"

She sighed, but turned, pushing her curly, dark hair out of her face. "Yes, Davie?"

"Can you double check my partner?"

"No, Davie," she said. "I don't need to check it." She adjusted her gauzy shawl before

dropping little squares of pink paper in front of Luna Garcia and Madeline Murphy. The two looked at each other and smiled; at least someone was happy with their assignment.

Without taking my eyes off Markston, I pulled my tarot cards from my bag. I shuffled, still not looking. This was where you were supposed to ask a question, but the only words my mind provided were *what the fuck?* They seemed appropriate enough, so I went with it.

The card I pulled depicted a sneaky-looking little guy, running off with a handful of swords he'd obviously stolen. The Seven of Swords: lies, trickery, deceit.

As she handed one last slip of paper to Zach Foster, I looked at my own sticky note again, then across the room. Isaiah sat near the window, his black hair pulled up into a knot at the top of his head, like he thought he was cute.

He turned toward me, the sun reflecting in his light brown eyes. I faced forward, showing him I was the better student. I was paying attention to the lecture, not to his stupid ass.

"You each have the name of the partner you'll be working with for this unit," Markston said. "We're working on circle theory for the next three weeks, and your project will be casting a circle with your partner."

She paused for the expected murmurs. "Yes," she said, smiling. "I know you've all cast plenty of circles before." We were seven weeks into the semester, and even though the class was called *Beginning Witchcraft*, it wasn't an introductory level course. Actual Witchcraft class had several prerequisites, including at least one basic magick class. Not to mention most of us in the witchcraft track had been recruited because we were already practicing Wicca or some other form of witchcraft before being recruited by Olive Tree Academy for showing unusual talent.

"But," Markston continued. "What we're going to be covering in this unit will go deeper than most of you have gone before in the casting or laying of circles. We're going to break out of our comfort zones, and look at circles from multiple traditions and disciplines. For example, Logan."

Logan Day sat up straight in his seat, alarmed to have been called out. "Can you tell the class the term used in American Traditional Witchcraft instead of *circle*?"

Logan relaxed again. He was a trad witch; she wasn't asking difficult questions yet. "The compass round," he said.

Markston nodded. "Different terminology, different method, same basic purpose and result. Yes, Sylvan?"

I turned to see Sylvan Jeffries putting her hand back down. "*All* the same purpose? I thought Ceremonial Magick circles were more of a protective barrier than other types?"

Markston considered her answer for a moment. “Certain types of magick sometimes involve potentially dangerous entities and, in those cases, the circle can act as a protective barrier. However, the most benign, even benevolent, workings, such as a Wiccan religious ritual, can attract such entities. It’s true a Wiccan-style circle is designed more to contain energy than to be a barrier, but it’s a blurry line. There are protective elements in a Wiccan circle, and there are containment elements to a Ceremonial circle. Examining similarities, differences, and distinctions like this are precisely the focus of this unit. Excellent question.”

Markston continued, describing the basic elements of a general magick circle. I’d read the chapter multiple times already, so there wasn’t any new information in this initial lecture. That would change next class, though; Markston always had insight beyond what the textbook provided. She was by far my favorite professor at OTA.

“You all have your partners for the unit project,” Markston said, shifting to her wrap-up tone. Now it’s time for the project itself. I’m going to come around and give each pair a set of instructions for a very specific circle or compass. For simplicity’s sake, we’ll be calling them all ‘circles’ in general discussion. Each circle is different, and I’ve tried to make sure each is from a tradition or style different than the pair’s most familiar method. I’m going to ask you not to discuss the project outside your partner pairs. We have a wide range of backgrounds in this class, and I don’t want you drawing on one another’s experience. Figure out your instructions, do whatever research you need to do, and then practice, practice, practice. At the end of the unit, I’ll be getting together with each pair individually and watching as you create your circle. This project will be fifteen percent of your final grade.

“Next class, we’ll be talking about some of the ways you can boost your circle’s strength and efficacy. If you haven’t already, be sure you’ve read the section on circle enhancement starting on page eighty-four. Before we go today, here are your project assignments.”

The many rings and bracelets she wore sparkled in the sunlight from the classroom’s one window as she opened a file folder on her desk. She picked up a thick stack of stapled packets of paper, each about ten pages.

She handed a single set of pages to Madeline and Luna. She handed a set to Logan, but walked past Sylvan. I’d seen Logan and Sylvan look at each other when the sticky notes went around, and assumed they’d been partnered; she was only giving each pair one set of instructions. It wouldn’t stop us from making copies later, but it meant we’d have to talk before we’d had any time to go over the pages.

Or one of us would, anyway. If she was only going to give the instructions to one person, I needed it to be me. “Professor Markston?” I called out, raising my hand. I had no clue what I was going to ask; I just wanted to get her by my desk before Isaiah’s.

“Yes, Davie?”

“I have a question about the circle enhancement chapter. I read it last week.”

Always good to start right out reminding her why I'm top of the class.

"Sure," she said. "What's your question?"

"I kind of need to show you," I said, improvising. "It's about an illustration."

She smiled and headed my way. I scanned through the pages, hoping one of the pictures would lend itself to a question.

"The crystal in this photo," I said, pointing to a small image of a cloudy white crystal with black flecks. "Is this tourmalinated quartz?"

I relaxed when Markston smiled. "Yes," she said, looking at the picture with me. "Tourmalinated quartz can be a great booster to a circle's strength. The quartz increases the energy raised, while the tourmaline inclusions help to ground the working, lending solidity to the whole. Good catch, Davie."

"Thanks," I said. I started to lift my arm, hoping to be handed a set of instructions. Instead, I found myself working to keep the irritation off my face as she headed toward Zach Foster instead. Zach sat next to Isaiah; if our instructions were next, she'd give them to him for sure.

Which she did, goddammit.

I held my tongue and refused to even look in Isaiah's direction. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of seeing me watch him go through the instructions before me. As soon as Markston dismissed the class, I headed for her lectern.

"Professor Markston," I said.

"Yes, Davie?" She smiled, looking up from a notebook and laying down her pen.

I took a breath. I hated to sound whiny, and this was going to sound whiny, but I had to try. "Are you sure about the project pairings?"

She gave me a small smile. "I knew you wouldn't be happy," she said. "But yes, I'm sure. The pairings aren't random. Where I could, I've matched people with similar experience and backgrounds. You and Isaiah may not see eye to eye on much but, I hate to tell you, you have a lot in common. And, I admit, I had ulterior motives in your case."

I felt my eyebrow go up of its own volition. "Ulterior motives?"

Her smile became a smirk. "Yes. While the two of you are the best students in my class, the one thing you both struggle with is teamwork. You always need to be the best and sometimes, in magick, cooperation is more important than outdoing everyone else."

"But if we're working together, then I can't beat him for—" I stopped as soon as I heard it.

She smiled, but didn't rub it in any further. "How about this," she said. "If you can't

bring yourselves to work together without competing, maybe make it a competition to see who can be the most cooperative.”

I let the look on my face tell her what I thought of that idea.

“See you on Tuesday, Davie.” She said it sweetly, but I was good and dismissed.

Just... fuck.

ISAIAH

I stood in the kitchenette of the Earth House common room, sipping a hard lemonade, hoping to make it last for the next few hours. My roommate, Cabot, had been released from the Infirmary the day before, and this was his *welcome back* party. I didn't know everything that had happened but, the way I understood it, one of the professors, Gideon West, had snapped and gone full supervillain. He'd been trying to steal something from the Library, and had caused all sorts of destruction in the process. In the end, he'd shapeshifted into a griffin, something I hadn't even known was possible, let alone known West could do. Before he flew away, he'd slashed Cabot with his talons, nearly killing him.

Whatever they'd done in the Infirmary, Cabot had healed fast. I wasn't the only one who thought he was up and about early; his girlfriend, Sofia, sat beside him on the dark orange sofa like his personal bodyguard. Her best friend, Daniel, sat on her other side looking around like he expected to be attacked at any minute.

There were four dorms for the Magickal Arts-Psychic Arts department, or MAPA, one named for each of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. The four buildings were arranged in a cluster around a square patio in the middle. Next door, a second set of four dorms, the buildings taller but otherwise the same, housed students from the Academic department.

The common room in each dorm took up about half of the first floor of the building, divided into several smaller areas of grouped furniture. Our common room had six such groups of varying size, the sofas and chairs of each a different color. It also had a kitchenette, an area for board games and the like, and a bookshelf. Since we were Earth House, the furniture colors were all shades of green, brown, or gold. The furniture in Fire House was shades of red, orange, and yellow. Water house had shades of blue and green, while the furniture in Air House was a mix of white and pastels.

Sofia had said the party would be just Cabot's closest friends, most of us second year students and residents of Earth House. The plan had been to stay confined to the orange furniture cluster, which included two sofas, an ottoman, a coffee table, and a television.

It seemed word had spread, though; the party had spilled out across the light brown and leaf green areas as well. Jackson Flowers, a surly, arrogant third year, sat drinking a beer in the leaf green section with Cabot's best friend, Gillian Foster. I saw Eddie Strathmann from my Spiritual Studies class come in for a while, and even Kendra Newton from Fire House breezed in and out at one point.

"Did you bring the instructions?" a voice asked from behind me.

I took a deep breath and let it back out before turning to deal with Davie. "No, Davie, I did not bring homework to a party."

She rolled her eyes. "It's not fair you've seen them and I haven't."

True enough, but no way was I admitting it. "They're in my room. You can see them later. We need to talk about how we're approaching the project anyway."

"I talked to Markston about giving us different partners," Davie blurted out. Leave it to her to go straight to the teacher and ask for special treatment.

"Did it work?" It was a ridiculous thing to even ask, but I still found myself hoping.

"If it had, would I be talking to you at a party?"

That might have stung, had I cared one iota for what Davie Melon thought of me. Instead, I rolled my eyes and took another sip of lemonade. "Okay, well, I don't have the instructions with me, and no, I won't go get them for you right now." I figured I'd get that out of the way before the spoiled diva asked. "According to you, we're stuck with each other, so we can get together tomorrow to talk about it. What do you have after Meditation class tomorrow morning?"

Friday was one of the days where I was blessedly free from Davie for the most part. I had Spiritual Studies first thing, followed by Meditation, then I was done for the day. Tuesdays and Thursdays were my class-heavy days, and Davie was in every single class with me. Now I was having to spend extra time around her on a Friday. Thanks, Professor Markston.

"Nothing until Magickal Healing at five," she said. "And I do want to see those instructions. But we should ask again about new partners. If we go together, she might see the sense in reassigning us."

"Davie, she's not going to give us new partners. If I agree with you on anything, it's this, but you could tell from the way she talked about the pairings she put us together on purpose. We're not going to convince her otherwise. What did she say when you asked?"

"She suggested since we like to compete with each other, we should compete for who can be the most cooperative." She rolled her eyes.

I was tempted to roll mine, too. Markston was a good teacher, and by all evidence a powerful witch, but she could be way too nice. "And you don't think, maybe, she'd see us going to her as a united front as a sign we were learning to work together?"

“I— oh. Well, fuck.”

I couldn't have said it better myself.

“Then I want to see the instructions right now,” she said.

“Davie, we're at a party. We're supposed to be welcoming Cabot back from the Infirmary, not doing homework.”

“You're his roommate. He's been back since yesterday. You don't need to welcome him back now.”

I didn't know where Davie had learned her social interactions. Maybe she'd been raised by wolves. Or a less social animal. Snakes, maybe. I didn't say anything, I just walked away from her.

She followed. She continued to insist on seeing the project instructions, and she did sound like a snake, hissing along behind me. After I moved position three times, including an attempt to go over and talk to Cabot, I gave up. “If I show you the instructions, will you leave me alone?” I asked at last.

“Are you going to?”

I sighed. “Come on.”

We got to my room, where the sheaf of stapled pages was lying on my desk. “They're not in a folder,” she said.

“And?”

“You put them in a folder when we left class. You've had them out, looking at them. Without me.”

Damn right, I had.

“This is what I mean. You're going to be ahead of me. You've already had them all day. I should get them tonight.”

“Oh, hell no. I had them with me, but I was in class, then at dinner, then the party. If I let you take them now, I'll never see them again.” I picked up the pages and headed out the door, trusting she'd stick to me like a cat following the scent of tuna.

“Where are you going?” she demanded.

“We're going to the Library to make you a copy of your own.”

And with that, I'd found the magick words to shut Davie up. For a while, anyway.



Chapter Two

DAVIE

I had six and a half hours on Friday between when Meditation class ended at ten-thirty and Magickal Healing began at five o'clock. I spent most of that time with my copy of the circle instructions. Markston hadn't been exaggerating about these circles being unusual.

I wasn't admitting to Isaiah I didn't know what this circle was, or how to cast it. I'd spent four hours in the Library, only stopping to grab a quick lunch in the Dining Hall. I was now sitting on a bench in the Agora.

The OTA campus was laid out in a series of concentric circles. The inner circle, called the Agora, was basically a big park, with trees, gardens, walkways, an outdoor stage, and a couple of ponds. The Cardinal Buildings sat around the

outside of the Agora like the points on a compass: the Library, the Student Building, the Administrative Building, and the Infirmary. Behind those were a ring of classroom buildings, then the student housing. Beyond that was staff and faculty housing, and the farms that supplied much of our food. The outer areas were mainly forest, mountains, and sea.

And did I mention the whole thing was in another dimension? OTA existed in its own pocket dimension that we, its inhabitants, referred to as “the Bubble.” It was tethered to the Earth plane in the American Midwest, near a suburb of Barrow City called Greenvale.

At the center of the Agora sat a round building called the Portal House, named for the thing it contained: the main portal in and out of the Bubble. We had pretty much everything we needed inside the Bubble, but it was nice to get out sometimes.

Right now, the only thing I needed wasn’t available inside *or* outside the Bubble, and that was an explanation for this weird-ass circle. It wasn’t anything like the circles I was used to casting. Markston had said she was giving each pair something outside our usual wheelhouse, and I was pretty sure Isaiah was Wiccan, like me. This wasn’t a basic compass round from Traditional Witchcraft, either. I thought it might be something from Ceremonial Magick, but my knowledge there was too thin to be able to jump straight to the relevant information in those books and make much sense of it.

I was still reading when I noticed a shift in the light. I pulled out my phone to discover it was a quarter to five. “Shit sandwich with a side of fries!” I was going to be late for Healing class.

I took off running, stuffing the circle instructions into my messenger bag as I went. Being a top student, I could get by with being late occasionally, but I didn’t *become* a top student by missing chunks of classes.

I might have managed not to be overly late, had the heel of my boot not caught in a crack in the sidewalk. I wiped out, books and profanity flying. When I sat up, the heel was still stuck in the crack, no longer attached to my boot. I’d have probably sprained, if not broken, my ankle had it not given way, but that would have healed. My six-hundred-dollar boots, by contrast, were pretty much done for.

As was my dignity. I fumbled around on the ground, gathering up my books, papers, and tarot deck and stuffing them back into my bag. I was extra careful to be sure my circle instructions were there; I had no trouble imagining Isaiah refusing to make me another copy if I lost the first. I made a mental note to make myself a backup.

Once I had everything gathered up, I pried my heel out of the sidewalk and shoved it in the bag, too. I walked as fast as I could on one heel the rest of the way to class, hoping the blood from my scraped knee didn't get on my skirt and ruin that, too.

I hobbled into Healing class a good fifteen minutes late. Dr. Lang looked up to acknowledge my arrival but, as expected, she didn't bitch about it. I slid into a chair in the back and dug through the chaos in my bag for my digital recorder.

Lang's lecture was already well underway. "This spell is one of the most important for a healer to have in their toolbox. It isn't much use for major wounds, but it's excellent for stopping bleeding in small to moderate cuts and scrapes."

I found the recorder, a notebook, and a pen at last, and looked toward the front of the room, hoping Lang had written the name of the spell she was talking about on the board.

"Davie," she said, catching my eye. She was smiling, but there was something smug in it, too. "Come up here, please."

I almost fell again when I stood up, having forgotten momentarily I was missing a heel. I held up a finger, signaling *give me a second*, then pried the boots off. I walked, sock-footed but stable now, to the front of the room.

"Looks like you had a difficult trip to class," she said.

I wasn't sure whether the pun was intended or not, but I decided not to acknowledge it. "Kinda," I said, understating the matter.

"Want that scrape fixed?"

I looked down to see my knee was still bleeding.

She had me sit on a tall stool, with my foot on another, so the knee was elevated for the class to see. Lang placed her palms together for a moment, then pulled them apart. She used her index finger to trace a symbol onto the palm of each hand, then aimed both palms toward the broken skin on my knee and held them there, about an inch shy of touching me. She repeated a short incantation at whisper volume, over and over.

My knee felt warm, then itchy, then like nothing. When she pulled her hands away again, there was still a smear of blood on my skin, but the scrape was gone.

She used a warm, damp towel from her podium to wipe the blood away, leaving my knee looking like nothing had ever happened. "How's that feel?"

"Good," I said. "Can you fix my boot, too?"

That got a laugh out of her, and a smattering of appreciation from the class. “I’m afraid the spell only works on living flesh,” she said. “You can go back to your seat now.”

I returned to my seat with my newly healed knee, and resumed taking notes for the rest of the lecture. The spell was called *Lipson’s Knitting*, named for the healer who invented it. Like a lot of healing spells, it was based on a foundation of Reiki energy healing, with an extra layer of more deliberate magick added in.

“This is one of the easiest spells you’ll learn in this class,” Lang said. But there’s a catch.”

She paused, waiting for someone to ask her what the catch was. I was a good student, but I didn’t tend to be the person who responded to cues like that. It seemed sycophantic somehow, buying into the performance of it. Or maybe I was just a bitch. Probably the latter, all things considered.

“What’s the catch?” asked Sylvan.

“You have to care.” She paused, giving the class a moment to consider this. “You’ll all see what I mean, because it’s time to practice. Everyone pair up.”

Lang’s classroom was set up like a science lab in a normal school, with two-seater high-top lab tables. I looked for Farrah Ming, who I usually partnered with, but she was already sitting with Roger Schilling. I looked around the room, until I made accidental eye contact with Ravi Gera, who was sitting alone as well. Seeing I was on my own, he gestured to the stool next to him, inviting me over.

I could not wait for this shit salad of a day to end. Baffling project from Markston, broken boot, humiliating wipe out in the Agora, late to class, and now I had to be partners with Ravi? Fuck this whole week.

I nodded to Ravi, but made him come to me, unwilling to parade around the room in my footie socks again. “Bet you already know this spell, huh?” Ravi asked as he settled in, used to my usual, high-level class performance.

I shrugged noncommittally, not willing to admit I’d never even heard of the spell beyond one short paragraph in the textbook. Lang appeared at our desk, set down two small boxes, then moved on.

“I’ve given each table a box of lancets and a box of alcohol wipes,” she said, once she’d returned to the front of the room. “You’re going to take turns pricking your finger with a lancet and healing each other with the spell. I know some of you are going to be squeamish about the lancets; prick each other instead of yourselves if it’s easier.” She reminded us to use each lancet only once then to drop it into the biohazard bin built into each lab table.

“You want me to go first with the lancet?” Ravi asked. “They don’t bother me.”

“Sure,” I said, regretting the response immediately. Letting him go first with the lancet meant I had to go first with the spell. I always went last if I had any choice; that way, I had a bar to clear.

Like most people, Ravi seemed to take me letting him go first as a favor. Idiots. He cleaned his finger with an alcohol wipe, then unwrapped one of the little weapons and jabbed himself with zero hesitation. He squeezed his finger until a single drop of blood welled up on the tip.

I followed the steps Lang had demonstrated and written on the board. I placed my palms together in what people tend to refer to as *prayer position*, though it had nothing to do with praying. I focused for a few seconds on the space between my palms, centering myself, getting ready to invite the healing energies to flow through me.

Next, I used my index fingers to draw the spell’s symbol, an X inside a circle, onto the palms of both hands. My palms tingled, though I wasn’t sure whether that was the flow of healing energy or just because drawing the symbols tickled.

Hoping it was the former, I held my palms about an inch over Ravi’s bleeding finger and visualized the energy healing the tiny cut. I repeated the spell’s incantation, the word *enono*, at whisper volume, the way Lang had. The tingling sensation faded after a few repetitions of the incantation.

I stopped, hoping the short duration was because it was such a tiny wound. Ravi wiped the blood from his finger with an alcohol wipe, then squeezed again. Another drop of blood appeared. Smaller than the first one but there, nonetheless.

“Goddammit,” I said, shaking out my hands to clear the energy that apparently wasn’t flowing anyway.

“You want to try again, or want me to go?”

“You go,” I said. I needed to confirm he couldn’t do the spell either, then we could start over. I wiped off my finger, then unwrapped a lancet. The idea of using the lancet hadn’t been particularly disturbing, and Ravi had made it look even easier than I’d expected. But once the thing was in my hand, I felt slightly nauseated by the idea of using it. I’d had blood tests via lancet at doctor’s appointments before, and knew it wasn’t a big deal, but doing it myself was too much. I hesitated long enough for Ravi to notice, adding sprinkles to the crap cone that was my week.

“Want me to do it for you?” There was no judgment in his voice, but he sounded too confident for my liking. I was the superstar here; other students

were supposed to be intimidated by me, not offering help.

“Yeah,” I said, extending my finger. Motherfucking balls.

He pricked me with the efficiency of a nurse, giving the finger a squeeze like he’d given his own. “Sorry,” he said. “Habit. I don’t suppose this spell requires I squeeze the blood up.”

I tried to shrug, which was hard with him holding me by the finger. “Confirms the cut is there, I suppose.” Why was I trying to make him feel better?

I watched as he prepared to do the spell. Once the symbols had been traced onto his palms, he held them over my finger and closed his eyes. As he chanted the incantation my finger felt warm, then tingled, then the sensations faded. When I looked, the wound was gone.

He opened his eyes. He wiped off my finger and squeezed. No blood. He looked delighted; I felt nauseous again. I’d just been upstaged by Ravi Gera on a new spell.

I looked at the clock. There was time. “Let’s go again.”

We each took three more turns with the spell. By the third round, I at least had the tits to stab my own finger. I still couldn’t manage the spell, though, while Ravi did it every time. The second we were dismissed I was out the door, stomping up the hall, boots in hand.

When I got to the exit doors, I discovered it had rained while we were in class. Now I was going to get to walk back to the dorm in wet socks. The perfect end to a perfectly shitty week.

ISAIAH

Engrave ye a moste strait line, running from the Nor’easterly corner to the Southeast.

I forked a whole ravioli into my mouth without looking up from the page beside my plate. The circle instructions for Markston’s project were an indecipherable mess, written in a strange, archaic dialect, and appearing to have been typed on an antique, manual typewriter. The formatting was bad, the wording was dense and terrible, and the circle itself was the weirdest thing I’d

ever seen. I had to figure it out before Davie and I started working together; there was no way I was admitting I didn't understand the assignment.

"Room for two more?"

I looked up to see Cabot and Sofia, dinner trays in hand. "Sure," I said, my eyes going straight back to the baffling pages.

Commencing at the Southeast, engrave a similarly strait line ending at the Southwest. Make ye a line from the Southwest towards the Nor'west. Engave ye a very strait line from there to the Nor'east.

The instructions were saying to draw a square inside the circle. I thought. It was way too many words, written in way too strange a fashion to be sure. Stupid project.

Take ye the length o' one foote, from the Northernmost edge and towards the direction of the South, and engrave ye a strait line in parallel situationment with the firste.

I looked up, needing to see something besides the ridiculous pages for a while. "Cabot," I said, surprised to see him. "Hi, Sofia. When did you guys get here?"

Sofia raised an eyebrow.

"You talked to us when we sat down," Cabot said. "Like five minutes ago."

"Oh."

"What are you working on?" Sofia asked. "It must be pretty interesting."

I sighed. "Not sure 'interesting' is the word I'd use."

"Is that the project Markston paired you with Davie on?" Cabot asked. He sounded way too amused.

"How do you even know about that?" Another conversation I'd forgotten having?

"Davie told me," Sofia said. "Well, maybe not *told me* so much as slammed things around the room yelling and cursing, but I was able to glean the general idea."

“Sounds about right,” I said.

“What’s Markston got you two doing that’s causing Davie to throw tantrums?” Cabot asked.

“We’re supposed to be casting a circle together, but it’s the most bizarre thing I’ve ever seen. Markston said she gave us all circles outside our usual traditions and experience, but this is just...” I trailed off, suddenly remembering Sofia was Davie’s roommate. I wasn’t sure how well they got along, but they talked. I couldn’t have Sofia telling Davie I was having trouble figuring out the circle. “It’s weird.”

“Have you worked on it with Davie yet?” Cabot asked.

I shook my head. “Not yet. We only got the assignment yesterday. I’m trying to fig—” Again, I caught myself before admitting confusion in front of Sofia. “I’m trying to work as much out for myself as I can first. I’d prefer to spend as little time as possible working with Davie Melon.”

“You wanna try it with me?” Cabot suggested.

Cabot had recently discovered his primary talent was magickal arts, not psychic arts, but he hadn’t switched tracks yet. “But you don’t—”

“I haven’t taken any magick classes yet, no,” he said. “But maybe that’ll help.”

“How?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes the best way to learn is by teaching. Explaining to me will force you to break things down.”

It sounded to me like a good way to *slow* things down, but it wasn’t like I was making any progress anyway. Cabot and I had missed our usual Thursday night movie this week due to his party; I supposed we could use some roommate hang time if nothing else. I shrugged. “Okay. When do you want to do it?”

He turned to Sofia.

“I’ve got plans with Daniel after dinner.”

Looking at me, he asked, “How’s now?”

DAVIE

I paused outside the door to Earth House to pull off my nasty, wet, muddy socks. I walked into the building barefoot, and headed straight for my room. I dumped the filthy socks into the hamper, and let my broken boots drop to the floor beside it. I'd get the heel fixed at some point, but right now it was too much to even contemplate.

I went into the bathroom and stared at myself in the mirror. I was Davie Melon. I was the star pupil, the trendsetter, the super witch. Why did I feel like the loser new kid with a bad haircut and weird clothes? I turned away from the mirror, not even wanting my own reflection to see me cry.

I indulged my frustration for maybe five minutes, sitting on the lid of the toilet and crying out my shitty week into a big wad of toilet paper. When I heard Sofia come into the room I stood up and wiped my face. I hadn't expected her back so early, dammit.

I looked in the mirror again, checking myself for obvious signs of distress. My eyes were bloodshot, and my whole face was puffy. I washed my face, hoping the lack of makeup would distract from the real reason I looked like a mess. Now that she'd learned to control her telepathy and stay the hell out of people's heads, I just needed to keep her from noticing my red, swollen eyes and I might be good. "I thought you were hanging out with Daniel?"

"I did. He just wanted help dying his hair. What's with you? You look miserable."

So much for my face-washing ruse. I wasn't interested in talking about my fee-fees, and I'd have probably burst into tears again if I'd tried to recount my shit-monster of a week in any detail. So instead, I deflected. "This week sucked. It's Friday. We need to go out."

"Out?" Out where?"

I could tell what she was thinking. We had pretty much everything we *needed* inside the Bubble: food, shelter, books. But there wasn't much in the way of entertainment, at least not the non-educational kind. There were parties, and public social events from time to time, like the guest lectures we had every Wednesday, and the Samhain Ball coming up in a little over a week but, for the most part, well, it was school. We needed to go *out-out*. I needed that more than I could explain. "We're going to Changeling."

"What's that?"

"It's a club, a little past Greenvale."

"Like the Bean?"

The Blessed Bean was a combination coffee shop and bar on the main strip in nearby Greenvale. “Oh, no. We’re going dancing.”

She made the exact face I’d expected. It was bad enough I’d been saddled with a roommate after a month of having a room to myself; did the Universe really have to give me an introvert on top of everything else? “N—”

“Yes, we are. You need an excuse to wear some of your new clothes anyway.”

“I’m wearing them now,” she argued, gesturing toward her jeans and lightweight orange sweater. It was nothing fancy, but better than the beige bullshit she’d come to school with. I’d dragged her out and forced a whole new wardrobe on her last week, and I was damned well going to call in that uninvited favor now by making her wear some of the nicer things.

I went to her closet and pulled out a short, red skirt and a long-sleeved cream top. A black camisole would have looked better than the cream top, but I knew I’d have to baby-step her into wearing things like that in public. I shoved the clothes at her, hangers and all. I dug out some sparkly tights and a pair of black heels I was sure were too tall for her. “Get dressed,” I said. “I’ll do your makeup after.”

A little over an hour later, we were on our way. She’d checked in with Cabot, probably hoping he’d give her an excuse to stay home, but he had plans with Isaiah and told her to have fun.

There was a line at the Portal House. I looked around at the walls as we waited. Alongside the mundane light fixtures and a couple of security cameras hung posters for the upcoming Samhain Ball, as well as the standard reminders to be careful with library books taken out into the world and the chart giving sunrise and sunset times for inside and outside the Bubble.

When it was our turn, we entered the main room at the center of the Portal House. Two columns and a connecting arch stood in the middle of the room, nearly as tall as the domed ceiling high above. Within the arch, the air appeared to ripple, blurring and obscuring the view, so the other side of the room wasn’t visible.

We stepped forward, walking under the arch. I felt Sofia tense a bit beside me as we went through; she hadn’t been at OTA long enough to be used to this. To be fair, it was a weird sensation, like the drop of going down an unexpected, steep hill while driving a bit too fast on a country road.

When we emerged on the other side we appeared to have merely crossed the room, but that wasn't the case. We were now in the *other* portal room, the one inside the Terrestrial Building, which sat at the center of the Terrestrial Campus.

We left the building, passing a security guard at a desk near the main doors and stepping out into air a good deal chillier than what we'd left behind. There were plenty of students present, but rather than milling around and socializing like they would on a real campus, everyone here was moving in one direction: out.

Sofia and I walked through the big, copper gate and continued along the narrow road. A few people drove by in cars. Not many students had cars, but every time I made the trek into the Vale I thought about it. It was only half a mile, but that was more than far enough with the kinds of shoes I tended to wear. I hadn't made the trip often in my first year at OTA, since things were still a bit dicey from the pandemic. This year, though, I expected to be going out more and more, and I preferred not do so on foot in high heels.

I wasn't the only one thinking along these lines, it seemed. "Are we walking all the way there?" Sofia asked, tripping over a crack in the sidewalk.

"Oh, hell no. Once we get to the Vale, we're taking the bus."

The bus stop was on the edge of the Blessed Bean parking lot. I considered stopping in for a latte for the trip, but I didn't want to waste the time. The bus only came out this far until a little after one o'clock and, in my experience, the few ride share drivers willing to come this far north that late at night weren't people you wanted to get into a car with. Unless we wanted to walk about three miles in high heels, we needed to get there early enough that leaving an hour before closing time wasn't a goddamn tragedy.

"So, what's this place like?" Sofia asked as the bus lurched into motion.

I smiled. "It's awesome. Huge dance floor, great atmosphere. I'm not sure the music is anything you're used to, but I think you'll like it. There's a theme to it all, you'll see."

She looked at my outfit. I wore a simple white dress, short and light, with a daisy chain belt and a long, flowered scarf. Another chain of silk flowers ringed my head, while still more were clipped here and there throughout the length of my long, straight, brown hair. I'd gone with bright colors in my eyeshadow, bright yellow spike heels, and a watch with a daisy for a face. "What's the theme?" she asked. "Come hither, hippie?"

I laughed. *Come hither, hippie* was a pretty good description of my everyday look, albeit with a designer leaning. "Not quite. Faerie."

From the look on her face, I knew what she was thinking.

“Not like that bitch, Tinkerbell. *Real* faerie. You’ll see.”

Several minutes later, the bus slowed and pulled into a parking lot. “That... doesn’t look like what you described.”

Ivy covered a good seventy percent of the slightly listing building. It looked kind of like the Blessed Bean, but smaller and older, made from rough-cut wood and grey stones. Behind it, a high stone wall extended out well past the building itself in both directions. “Trust me,” I said, smirking and standing up to exit the bus.

ISAIAH

“This is cool!” Cabot said, looking around.

“You’ve never seen the practice rooms before?” The empty room was about twelve feet square, with a narrow shelf running around the walls and a closet containing a few basic supplies. Each of the four walls had a single letter painted on it: N, S, E, and W.

“I haven’t, no. Do we get to draw on the floor?” The most useful feature of the practice rooms was the chalkboard floor, perfect for drawing circles, symbols, or whatever you needed for your working.

“Yep.” We dropped our bags in a corner, and I took a box of white chalk and a coil of thin rope from the supply closet.

Cabot watched as I knelt down in the middle of the room. The rope had a metal tip, like the end of a shoelace but about two inches long, which I inserted into a small hole at the center of the floor. I slipped a stick of chalk through a loop at the other end of the rope, creating the perfect compass for circle-drawing.

I uncoiled the rope to its full four-and-a-half foot length, then went to my backpack to retrieve the instructions.

Cabot looked at the pages over my shoulder. “Are circles always this complicated?”

“No,” I said. “If it’s part of a religious ceremony, like a Wiccan ritual, there can be a lot of scripting and theatre, but that’s not what this is. This is ten full pages of detailed instructions; I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“What’s different about it from a regular circle?”

I hesitated. “How much have you read about circles so far?”

“Not a lot,” he said. “I know they’re cast for working magick inside of, and I get the impression that’s for protective purposes, but nothing I’ve read yet has gone into much detail about them or has given any how-to.”

“Time for a quick one-oh-one then. You’re right, circles are cast for working magick, and one of their purposes is protection. Different traditions and disciplines use them for different things, though. I grew up in a Wiccan family, so my main experience with circles is in religious rituals. There’s a certain amount of protection there, but mostly the circle is cast to establish sacred space and to hold energy until it’s released.”

He didn’t interrupt, but I could see the questions on his face.

“In this context, sacred space is an area that’s been purified and dedicated, either temporarily or permanently, to sacred purpose. Christians build churches; Wiccans cast circles.”

“So where does protection come in?”

“A typical part of a Wiccan ritual is raising energy together, which the circle contains until it’s released at the end of the ceremony. Some people believe that energy can attract unwanted entities. I’m not sure how often that actually happens but, if and when it does, the circle can provide a protective barrier.

“Some magicians, though, deliberately call up some pretty scary stuff in their workings, and they need the protection. For them, the circle really is necessary as a protective barrier. The way I understand it, once a ceremonial magician starts a working, that circle barrier is the law to them.”

“It’s not to Wiccans?”

“Not especially. We try to keep it to a minimum but, for example, if you’re about to start the ritual and the High Priestess realizes she forgot the wine, she can use her athame—that’s a ceremonial knife—to cut a doorway shape in the circle and walk right through. When she comes back, she redraws it the other direction, and seals the circle right back up.”

“So, why even do the doorway? Is it too solid to walk through?”

“No, the circle is just energy. But if you walk through, it pops the bubble and the energy dissipates. Cats and little kids seem to be able to come and go, but adult practitioners break the circle if they walk through it.”

“Why can’t you just jump over the edge?”

I'd left out an important piece of circle basics. "Because the circle drawn on the ground isn't the actual thing. We call it a 'circle,' but it's really a bubble of energy, shaped sort of like an egg. When a circle is drawn on the floor, it's to help with visualization while casting, and to let people see where the edge is. People casting circles in their homes or dorm rooms, places where it isn't possible or practical to draw on the floor, don't even bother.

"More elaborate circles, like ceremonial magick ones, involve a bunch of symbols, writing, sometimes additional shapes, and those are all part of the casting. With those, the writing on the floor is necessary, but it still isn't the circle itself. They're all bubbles of energy that the witch or magician works inside of."

As I talked, Cabot flipped through the pages Markston had given us. "So, this one is a ceremonial circle of some sort?" he asked.

I shrugged and made a noncommittal noise.

"It says at the end if it's cast properly, it'll be visible. Is that normal?"

"No. Some people with a lot of psychic talent can see a circle, and a well-cast circle will sort of mute light and sound in both directions, but it isn't a solid thing. I've never heard of a circle being objectively visible the way these instructions suggest. You ready to try it and see what happens?"

He was.

I reached into my backpack and pulled out my athame, wand, a few sticks of incense, and a lighter. I placed them on the floor in the middle of where the circle would be.

There wasn't going to be much for Cabot to do, but I figured I'd try to find places where he could help. I used the chalk line to draw the outer circle, then set the rope on one of the shelves along the walls, pulling the chalk out of the loop and bringing it back with me.

I read over the first section of the directions again, which wasn't any different than a normal circle. I picked up the athame and stood at the edge of the chalk ring, facing the wall marked *E*. I visualized energy coming up from the Earth, through the floor, and into me. Pointing the tip of the blade toward the chalk circle, I sent the energy up, through my right arm, and out through the athame. I walked, clockwise, around the circle's edge, creating a ring of energy.

Once I reached the spot where I'd begun, I dropped the tip of the blade, cutting off the energy flow. "Can you see that?" I asked. The discovery that Cabot had magickal talent had involved the awakening of a natural ability for metamagick, which meant he could literally see magick.

“Yeah.”

“What’s it look like?”

“You can’t see it?”

“Nope. I’m visualizing, so I know where it is, and I can feel the energy shift in the room, but I can’t see magickal energy like you can.”

“It looks like... This is going to sound weird, and I’m sure there’s a better way to describe it, but it sort of looks like gel toothpaste.”

“Huh?”

“Like I said, there has to be a better analogy, but it’s sort of that color, shiny blue-green. Not as solid, and it’s bigger, about...” He held out his hands about a foot apart, indicating a round shape. Like you’ve squeezed out a ring of glowing gel toothpaste from a giant tube.”

Interesting. “Okay, then. Next step.” I set down the athame and picked up the wand. My wand was old school; a stick from a hazelnut tree, just under a foot long, and naturally twisted. I’d worked copper wire into the twist, wrapping it along the shaft, ending in a tight wrap that covered the connection with a simple quartz point at the end. That was it. Nothing fancy, but cool looking and quite functional. I’d never seen Davie’s wand, but I assumed it was some commercially-produced thing that looked like a movie prop.

I returned to the East wall, this time aiming the tip of the wand at the glowing ring of magickal toothpaste I couldn’t see. I made another circuit, using the wand to direct the energy into shape. As I walked, I visualized the energy spreading up and over, as well as down under us, on the other side of the floor, enclosing us in a bubble. Once my second pass was completed, I returned again to the center. “Now what’s it look like?”

“It’s all around us now, kind of smeared-looking. You ever go through one of those drive-through car washes?”

I had.

“You know how it looks when the foam is squirted on, so the windows are covered with it? It’s sort of like that. It’s all over, but not evenly distributed. And it’s still the same color, but lighter now that it’s spread out.”

That tracked with the step we were on. I picked up three incense sticks and the lighter. I lit the tips of all three at once. I stuck the lighter into my pocket while they burned for a few seconds. Once the tips were all glowing bright orange, I gave them a hard shake to extinguish the flames and again returned to the eastern edge. I made a final trip around the circle, this time visualizing the smoke

from the incense filling in the gaps, marrying the energy and solidifying the circle.

“Wow,” Cabot said without being asked.

“Yeah?”

“It’s smooth and flat now, all one color, and glowing. It’s amazing. You’re gonna ace your project.”

“Unfortunately,” I said, sticking the ends of the still-burning incense into the hole in the floor at the center of the circle. “This isn’t the whole project. This is just the outer circle, and there’s nothing special about it.”

He continued to look up and around in amazement. “This isn’t anything special?”

I shook my head. “This is the same type of basic circle I’ve been casting since I was thirteen.”

“So, what comes next?”

I picked the instructions back up. This was where things got weird. “I don’t understand the rest of it at all, and the instructions don’t explain it. Let’s see what happens, I guess.”

I picked up the chalk and walked to the spot halfway between the East and North.

Engrave ye a moste strait line, running from the Nor’easterly corner to the Southeast.

I drew the straightest line I could manage, from left to right. Then, continuing to follow the directions, I did the same along the South, then West, then North, squaring off the circle. I directed Cabot to stay inside the square part now, as I continued to follow the words on the page.

I added a second line to the eastern edge, about twelve inches inward from the first, creating a long, narrow rectangle. This was where it got tricky. Inside this foot-wide strip, I was supposed to draw a line of detailed symbols I’d never seen before.

I copied the unfamiliar symbols as faithfully as I could manage. The final symbol was to be drawn at the center of the narrow rectangle, an X with a vertical line through it. That vertical line was then to be extended to the center, ending in an O. I drew the little circle around the hole in the floor, pulling out and

pocketing the leftover stick ends from the incense, then stood up to take in my handiwork. “So, what did that look like?” I asked Cabot.

He shrugged. “Nothing.”

That was disappointing, but not a surprise. I hadn’t been doing anything deliberately magickal that time, just copying drawings from the pages. “Okay,” I said, scanning the next page. “Time to activate these symbols, which the instructions say takes two people. I know most of what you know is just theory, but let’s see what we can do. Stand at the end of this rectangle thing. Be careful not to step over the edge of the circle and pop it.”

He nodded, taking his spot by the opposite end of the narrow rectangle of symbols. I handed him my athame, keeping the wand for myself. I stood at the opposite end of the rectangle. “Okay, now, aim the point of the athame at the first symbol inside the rectangle.” I did the same at my end, using the wand. “Have you practiced raising and sending energy?”

“I’ve tried.” The uncertainty in his voice wasn’t encouraging. “My instinct is to use already-existing energy, since that’s how metamagick works. Raising energy of my own doesn’t come as naturally, but I’ve read the theory and practiced a bit.”

“Good enough,” I said, though it probably wasn’t. I really wanted to know what I was doing with this circle before practicing with Davie. “Try it now. Bring up some energy from the Earth, visualize it moving through the floor and into you. Imagine it moving through your body, through your chakras, and then down your arm and out the tip of the blade.” He’d know about chakras from his Psychic Arts classes and from Meditation class; I hoped switching to a magickal context didn’t throw him.

He nodded, seeming to understand.

“Send the energy into the first symbol. You might be able to see it glowing for real but, if not, visualize it. Do the same with the second, then the third, and so on. We’ll meet in the middle.”

He did as instructed. I went through the symbols on my side of the circle, sending energy into each, visualizing it glowing, then moving on to the next. When we reached the X in the middle, I said, “We’re both aiming for this final symbol together. Once it’s glowing, draw the tip of the blade along the line toward the center of the circle.”

“What’s supposed to happen then?”

“I have no idea.”

We did the final step, aiming the energy at the X, then moving along the line towards the O around the hole in the floor. “Is it glowing?” I’d avoided asking throughout the process, but I couldn’t resist this time.

“Sort of,” he said. “The symbols are flickering a bit, but it’s nothing like watching you cast the outside circle. Which... shit.”

All of a sudden, the temperature in the room dropped a few degrees, and the air felt lighter. I could hear the noise of people walking in the hall outside, the mechanical hum of the building’s ventilation system.

The circle was broken.

“I’m so sorry,” Cabot said. “I think that was me.” He looked behind him and, indeed, his foot was halfway across the chalk line.

“It’s okay,” I said, once I thought I could speak without barking at him. “It’s your first circle, and I distracted you by talking. This is what practice is for. You feel up to giving it another try?”

He did. I cast the outer circle again, careful not to smudge the inner symbols lest I have to re-draw them all. If I could avoid that, the second try would be a lot quicker.

I managed to get the circle cast without messing up the symbols, and we started activating them again. We’d only gotten halfway to the center symbol when the circle broke, this time with no apparent cause at all. The third time I stepped on the chalk symbols halfway through and smeared them, causing the whole thing to fail yet again.

“Okay, I’m calling it,” I said. “Thanks for helping, but I’ve had it.”

“Sorry,” Cabot said.

“No, no, it wasn’t you.” Not *just* him, anyway, but I knew how that would come out. “We got a lot of practice in. It was my first try with this weird-ass circle, and your first time with any circle. Let’s pack up and get out of here. We’ll watch a movie or something.”

“Sounds good.” Cabot said. I put all the tools and supplies I’d brought back into my bag and returned the rope and chalk to the closet. I grabbed a mop—really a big eraser on a long handle—and cleared away the circle and symbols from the floor. “How about—”

“You’re not picking the movie,” I said, cutting him off.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not in the mood for Star Wars.”

“I was gonna say—”

“—Or Lord of the Rings.”

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