

THE
SINGLETONS
IN PERIL
(An Excerpt)

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Despite being sleep deprived and on edge, Julie marveled at the number of books in the Chicago shop. Mom was *not* happy that they took the wrong highway.

Julie was glad for the diversion. Some of the bookcases stretched from the street level up to the roof of the third floor. Books lined every wall and were piled high on every flat surface. Rolling ladders and spiral staircases led to the upper levels. She saw an entire room for rare books. She peeked side-to-side and, saw no one nearby. Biting her lip, she tried the crystal knob. Locked, of course.

She gazed through the window on the door, longing to check out the huge books. She sighed and stepped back, her pale white skin looking even more pale in the wan reflection. She moved on.

Their mother had dragged them out of bed in the middle of the night and made them get in the van. Julie rolled her eyes at the memory, while glancing at a book on fashion from the sixties. Mom could sure be a bit erratic, but this was extreme even for her. *I hope I don't end up as crazy as she is*, Julie thought. *Maybe crazy will skip a generation.*

She moved past the second floor, and went up to the third floor instead, to see the view. She saw someone out of the corner of her eye, or thought she did, but when she turned, the person was gone. Strange. It must have been her imagination.

It gave her a touch of vertigo, gazing down from the cast iron railing to the marble floor far below. She wandered aimlessly through the precarious aisles when a table blocked her path. She started to turn to the side, when an old yellow and orange box with a psychedelic swirl spilling over the side caught her eye.

It was one of those old séance boards in a pile of games under a table. Yellowed, cracked tape held the old-and-water-stained cardboard box together. It looked like it belonged at a garage sale. Wide, looping letters read, “Great Family Fun!” and “Discover the Secrets of Life!” Along the bottom, it said, “Nain Rouge Games,” followed by surprisingly somber black letters that read:

YAHM-BUTAI BOARD

She caught another teaser-slogan, which brought a flush to her face, “Find TRUE LOVE!”

“Yeah, right,” she muttered. She didn’t believe in that séancey stuff—her best friend, Nina, had had a board at her last sleepover, and the girls had moved the wooden planchette around with their freshly painted fingernails to point at letters, pretending to hear messages from The Great Beyond. Marci Cramer had almost peed herself, she was laughing so hard.

Still, Julie felt drawn to the box, and she wanted to see what it held inside. She went to pick it up, and as her fingertips touched it, a static spark zapped her fingers, making her jump. “Ouch!” She sucked at her finger, scowling at the box until the sting went away.

When she lifted the cover, a mild mix of sweet scents drifted up to her nose. At first, she couldn’t sort them out, but musty old attic and old cardboard were the first of them. Then the smell of roses came to mind. Some kind of flower, anyway. There was also a hint of something like cinnamon French toast. How odd! It reminded her of the large breakfasts Aunt Dodie used to make them at the family farm.

Inside the box, a rectangular, reddish brown wooden board sat in a bright red velvet tray. Already, it held an allure that Nina’s had lacked—hers had only been cardboard, with a fancy sticker on top, the letters of the alphabet and the numbers 0 to 9.

The one she examined now had a whole lot more going on.

On the top of the rectangular board, the letters of the alphabet were still there, and the numbers 0 through 9 were on the bottom, but bracketed by the question words she knew from English class:

Who? How? Why? What? Where? When?

More common words ran around the center in the shape of a spade from a deck of cards: the, be, of, in and a bunch of others. Around the edge, in the shape of a rectangle, were lots of cryptic words: Death, Life, Hope, Danger, Hate, and the like.

The words, “Unknown” and “Maybe” hovered cryptically in the upper corners. The strange mix of fonts and capitalization gave it a strange, disjointed appearance. Carvings adorned the entire board; intertwined harpies, gargoyles and demons with wings, tails and fangs, all appeared to be trying to eat each other or gnawing on bones. It was incredibly macabre. Something right out of Edgar Allan Poe.

The planchette—the pointer—she’d used at Nina’s had been a simple wooden triangle. This one was also wood, but shaped like an arrowhead, with a glass circle in the middle. Letters or symbols for some language she didn’t recognize, worn and faded, adorned the outside edge.

At the very center of the board, though, was a heart, and in the center of the heart was a rose. Something about the heart and the rose drew her in. There was nothing particularly fancy about the simple drawings, but they spoke to her.

They sang of mystery and romance and loves lost and won.

Julie reached her hand out and touched that smooth center point. It was smooth and warm. A flare of light glinted behind her and to the left, drew her attention. She turned and saw a person in a black trench coat and dark leather fedora hat. Their eyes met long enough for Julie to see it was a woman, before the stranger turned away.

“Are you finding everything you need, Julie?” a voice asked from behind her.

Julie squeaked and jumped a foot in the air. It took a moment for it to register that the person who had spoken to her was a dwarf. The man stood a good foot shorter than she did.

His dark brown eyes, with thick, bristly gray eyebrows, bore into her. Julie, flustered at being scared half to death, especially by a dwarf, stumbled over her words. She’d never met a dwarf before.

“Yes, no. I mean, uh.” She quirked her body in an unconscious, sideways twist—her knees touched, and one shoulder slumped down as she tried to fold in on herself. Uncle Saul always teased her when he saw her do that. He’d say, “There she goes again: turning herself into a melting candle. I don’t know how teenage girls do that.”

Julie covered her mouth in embarrassment and said to the dwarf. "I'm, um, not looking for anything, really."

"No? Hmm. Seems like most people are looking for something..."

"I'm just here with my mom and my brother and my sister."

"...Or something's looking for them," the dwarf continued as if he hadn't heard her.

He cantered sideways to get around her in the narrow lane between the book-laden tables and squeezed through awkwardly to a nearby room with a glass door labeled in gold letters, "Special Collection."

Julie stared at her pale reflection in the glass, while he unlocked the door. Her chestnut brown hair was disheveled and definitely needed a brushing. Her blue eyes seemed a ghostly silvery-blue in the glass.

He started speaking rapid-fire, excited about his topic. "Perhaps you'd like this section on the Strange Midwest. Here's a particular favorite of mine. *The Nain Rouge: Scourge of Detroit*. It means Red Dwarf. Not the TV show, though. Although I do like that show."

How odd, Julie thought. *Nain Rouge is the same name as the game manufacturer on the box!*

"The book is about a little person" the dwarf paused and eyed her with a sideways glance, "who was insulted and then cursed Detroit. A bit Rumpelstiltskin for my taste. Stereotypes and all. Most of us little people are simply that. Little people. The Nain Rouge, though? He really is bad news. You should definitely avoid him. His real name is Mallik Ragnvaldr. Mallik." He tapped the book for emphasis. "You should take this book. Might come in handy."

Julie bit back a laugh but smiled in spite of herself. "We live in Rockford. I don't think I need a book on some dwarf in another city." She paused and then second-guessed herself. "Um, is dwarf okay? I mean, like, it's not offensive, is it?" She bit her lower lip.

"Most prefer the term Little People. The 'M' word used to be acceptable, and not that long ago, really, but no longer." He shrugged. "Times change. Midget is now highly offensive." He held up his pointer finger for emphasis. "Never use the 'M' word. Bad as the 'N' word for us. The worm turns, as they say. Remember, never offend a little person. Mallik Ragnvaldr is a prime example. I'd be careful about offending gypsies and giants, too. Bad mojo."

"Oh, I'm—I'm very sorry, sir."

"Oh, no harm done. Dwarf actually *is* acceptable. I actually prefer dwarf, myself. Dwarf sounds more heroic and epic, don't you think? Thanks to Tolkien and all that. At least since the last century. Little, though. I dunno. Seems derogatory to me. A little bite.

Who wants a little bite of cake? Give me a *big* bite of cake any time!" He held his arms out wide and smiled. He had a very nice smile, full of enthusiasm.

"And it's about time some of our better, uh, stories, were told, I say.

"Anyway, my pardon. I digress." He held up a finger again. "Mind what I said regarding the Nain Rouge. Most of my people are good, stolid folk, but not him."

"I'm sure they are. Really." She looked around for some avenue of escape. Her hands were sweaty. She wiped them on her jean shorts.

She couldn't understand why this crazy dwarf, little person, whatever—kept going on about this Nain Rouge guy in Detroit. He was really creeping her out.

As if reading her mind, he said, "You never really know which reality you might end up in."

"I'm sorry," Julie said. "Who are you?"

"Oh, right, right!" His eyes widened in surprise. "I never introduced myself, did I?! It didn't even occur to me, since I—" He stopped, appearing rather flustered. "Well, I—um. Well, never mind all that nonsense." He chuckled nervously and adjusted his glasses. "Oh!" He fumbled around the pockets of his brown corduroy jacket, pulling out a pipe, a tobacco pouch, a yo-yo, a short plastic ruler with no numbers on it, a set of odd-looking keys, a small flashlight, and other items that Julie got to see before he quickly stuffed them back in. He scratched his mostly brown beard, a puzzled expression on his face and then stared at the ceiling humming.

"Ah, yes!" He reached into his gold brocade vest and a large grin lit up his face as he pulled something out of yet another pocket. "Here they are. Yes, yes! Here's my business card. Just in case. You can't be too careful, you know." He handed her a thick, textured card that felt like a page from a high-quality book.

No one had ever given her a business card before—and he was such an odd little fellow—that she felt a nervous giggle try to sneak out of her. As she held the card, though, a warm glow flowed through her, as if she had just taken that first swallow of hot chocolate after sledding on a super cold winter's day, except without the burnt tongue bit. The sensation was so strange, so out of context, that a wave of dizziness hit her, and she stumbled and almost dropped it. When her head cleared, she caught up with the dwarf's words.

"—and if you ever need a rare book or advice regarding dwarves, call me." He gestured at the card with his small hands. "That's a troll free number. Get it? Troll Free. Yes, if you ever run into any trolls, definitely give us a call." He winked at her and

chuckled. "You can call it from anywhere. Remember what I've told you, miss."

Totally confused now, she simply nodded and said, "Yes, sir. Uh..." She tried to think of a polite way to excuse herself before someone found her body in a dumpster, but before she could, the dwarf glanced at a watch on a hairy wrist, and his facial expression shifted so suddenly that Julie stepped back in alarm.

"Oh my. Your brother should be arriving about now. Look after him. Enjoy your time in Michigan." The dwarf glanced over at the stairwell and his incredibly thick eyebrows went up. Julie turned her head, expecting to see her brother, but no one was there.

She shrugged and turned back and the dwarf was gone. "Where did you go?" she muttered.

"Go? What d'ya mean, sis?" a voice said from behind her.

Julie squeaked and twitched, the nerves in her body all jumping every which-way at once.

"Geez. Jumpy much?" Tyler said.

"For Pete's sake. Where did you come from?" She glared at him, annoyed at being scared for nothing.

Her brother frowned at her like she'd lost her marbles. Speaking slowly, he said, "Over...there." He pointed to the opposite side of the third floor. Elizabeth was over a few rows, playing with toys. Scout lay by her side, panting. She made a mental note to get him some water.

Elizabeth saw her and waved, her blue eyes dancing merrily. Brown hair a shade lighter than Julie's framed her face. Elizabeth had the same blue eyes they all shared, but her little sister's eyes seemed a deeper blue and more intense at times. Older, somehow, than her age. Scout sniffed at a red wagon and sneezed. Julie smiled and turned back to Tyler.

"Did you, um, by any chance see a dwarf?" she asked.

"Yup." Tyler said.

"You did?" she asked excitedly.

"Yup. And a giant. Couple of elves, too."

She punched him in the arm and he snorted, laughing. "Very funny. I'm serious."

Still chuckling, Tyler said, "No, no dwarf."

Julie tried telling him about the dwarf, but he interrupted her. "Hey, what's this?" He picked up the same old séance board she had been looking at just a short while ago.

He stared at the cover as if it was a girl he had a crush on. "Check this out! This is so

retro!"

"Tyler, I'm talking to you."

Ignoring her, he ran his fingers over a phrase in orange letters. "Fame, Riches, and *Power!*" She blew out a disgusted sigh and bounced her body in a sulk. "Oh! You can be so annoying."

She punched his arm again and he just said, "Unh-huh." Julie rolled her eyes.

Tyler lifted the board out of the box and grinned like he'd just found a twenty-dollar bill. She saw his face and sighed. "Really? It's disgusting!"

"Are you crazy?" he ran a hand through his messy blond hair. "This is awesome! Look at these ghost faces. The guys will love it."

"No thanks."

Tyler went to pick it up and pulled his hand back with a yelp as soon as he touched it.

Julie pointed at him and laughed. "Ha, serves you right."

He growled and his blue eyes squinted at her with annoyance. He shook his hand and sucked on his finger for a second. "Got some kind of shock. C'mon, I'm going to buy this." He headed off to the cash register. She shook her head and followed him down the metal spiral staircase to the first floor. Their mom was across the street getting gas, and she was probably done by now anyways.

After Tyler had paid, the woman running the register—a large-bodied woman with her hair piled up high stared at Julie over her thick glasses and asked with a raspy voice, "You going to buy that?"

"Excuse me?" The woman shifted her gaze down to Julie's hand. She still had the book the dwarf had given her. "Oh," she shook her head, "no. The guy working upstairs handed it to me."

The clerk scrunched up her face. "Honey, there ain't no men working here. Nobody at all but me."

"Yeah—yes. The guy upstairs. A, uh, little person." She felt her face turn hot. She leaned in and repeated in a whisper, "A little person. You know, a dwarf."

The woman just rolled her tongue, giving her gum a tour around the inside of her mouth. "Nope. Just me, honey."

Julie examined the book. The thin volume was bound in tooled leather with gold lettering. The pages felt good in her hand. The price inside, written lightly in pencil, read only \$2. *Why not?* She thought and pulled a couple of wrinkled bills out of her pocket.

Her transaction complete, she looked around and realized her little sister was missing. Panic seized her. "Tyler! Where's Elizabeth and Scout?"

2

"Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain...or that kid behind the pickup," Milton murmured to himself as he slid the key-blank into the door of the black Ford F-150. He focused his thoughts and channeled energy into the key and turned it. Nothing happened. He played it cool and casually looked around. He was technically at the back of the row of brownstone apartments, but people went in and out the back as much as the front. A couple of kids were hanging out about half a block away. Too far away to see anything. No one nearby.

He wiped a sweaty palm on his shirt, took a deep breath and tried again. Carm had asked him before they split up, "Are you sure you're up for this? You've never had a solo assignment before."

Milton had scoffed. "Of course, I am. You know I'm good." He'd given her his most winning smile and she'd laughed. "Oh, yeah, I got this. No problemo. I've got the easy part, especially with the mage-tech." He'd rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

"Okay, but don't get overconfident. If anything goes wrong, pull back. We can handle it when I come out."

He'd nodded, but there was no way he was going to screw this up. He was finally getting a chance to show off his stuff.

There were different ways to do spells, of course. He worked his magic best by picturing a school hallway lined with glowing formulas and equations. He walked down the halls and gathered magical energy as he went. Today, the mana was more elusive than trying to capture specks of dust with tweezers on a breezy day. He gritted his teeth. Milton closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tried again. He pulled the mana in and held it in his mind. When he felt the power thrumming behind his eyes and inside his bones, he slid the key in again.

It wouldn't budge.

Milton said an impolite word. Carm, his mentor superior officer, and unofficial foster mom, had told him more than once not to say that particular word, but she wasn't here at the moment.

"C'mon, c'mon," he said. "This should work!" Sweat prickled his brow. He could feel the mojo he had gathered. The magical energy he held should be more than enough. And, he didn't need mithrium as a catalyst for this, because the key had been pre-spelled.

Carm could be calling at any time, and he needed to be ready. He didn't want to blow this. He looked at the brass key. The Old Norse rune for 'open' lay etched in the surface. It seemed right to him. It had no teeth, but it didn't need any. The key *should* become magically attuned to the truck and start the vehicle.

He blew out his breath in a huff. Both in irritation and trying to calm himself. "Must be all this steel messin' me up," he muttered. He ran a hand up and through his dark, curly hair.

Once again, he took a deep breath and, when he was ready, gently and insistently *pushed*.

The car alarm started blaring and Milton launched about three feet in the air. He looked around in a panic. Now people *were* starting to turn and look.

Milton shoved the key quickly back into the lock. He focused his thoughts, fighting against the alarm cutting through his skull. He pictured his magical energy working its way through the barrier comprised of the steel of the truck.

The lock finally popped, and the ear-splitting noise stopped. He looked around, eyes wide. Nobody seemed to be paying attention now, except the two kids down the street. He waved and they looked away. No one around here wants to pay attention to a potential theft in progress. Milton let out a big sigh. *Whew!* He tossed his camouflaged backpack inside the truck and clambered up. He grabbed the handle and heaved the door closed with a squeak of protest. He blew a curl out of his face and tried to look like a bored teenager waiting for his mom or dad. After a few minutes, he cast a few sideways glances around. Nobody appeared to be watching him or the pickup. Good stuff.

Milton sat in the driver's seat and tapped on the steering wheel and worried about Carm. Red light from somewhere flared across his eyes. He glanced around, his hand reaching for the visor, looking for the offending window or brake light, but he didn't see anything.

His mind drifted to the magically sealed tube in his backpack. Carm had given it to

him with strict orders to keep it safe and *not* to open it. That was like telling him not to think about the various incarnations of Dr. Who. Once you mentioned it, how could someone not think about it? He could list his top three easily.

His backpack and the tube inside it drew his gaze. Not for the first time, he wondered what was in it. Curiosity nagged at him. Maybe if he just took a peek. He should, after all, know what Carm had given him to carry around, right? Milton rubbed at his temples. That darn light seemed to pulse, like a blinking traffic light, but brighter. He couldn't see where it came from, and it was giving him a headache. Annoying too.

He shrugged it off. Time to get back to work. Besides, if Carm found out that he'd opened the package against orders, she'd probably turn him into a goblin.

Opening his backpack with a quick *zip*, he ignored the cylinder-shaped package Carm had given him and pushed aside the Glock and ammo he had tucked in a foam cushion—safety on, of course. Hopefully, neither he nor Carm would need firearms today.

He found what he was looking for. He pulled out a folding sunshade he'd picked up at a thrift store for three bucks. He put it into the front windshield. Next, he took out a roll of pitch-black easy-on, easy-off window tint and spread it on the driver's side window with a plastic wedge. With a *snick*, he unfolded a knife from his multi-tool, and trimmed the plastic along the outside edge. He loved the brass blades and how they had a warm golden glow. He paused and looked at his handy work. He could see lots of little wrinkles and air bubbles. It looked terrible, but it was a temporary fix. "I can fix that," he said to himself. He quickly roughed out the passenger side window and the back windows of the pickup's cab as well.

Once he was hidden from view, he gathered more mojo. They had previously scouted out, and mapped, the cellular connections in the area. "*Metu hekson en la chelan reto*," he said with conviction, using the phrase they had crafted and tested together. At the last word, he crushed an infinitesimal grain of mithrium, effectively launching the spell like a rocket.

He felt the power whisk out of him, the air rippling for a fraction of a second. The weaving hit the cell tower, the telephone line, and the electric line—and then bounced around taking them all out. There would be no phone calls, emails, or any other technological use for the next hour or two. Not so much as a digital camera, TV, or microwave would function, unless he allowed it. It was a rather intoxicating feeling of power.

His phone and Carm's phone used traditional cell tech combined with magic, so they

were the only ones who could communicate in the area. Still, he kept his in a special aluminum lined pouch to protect it. He pulled it out now and checked it. No messages.

With a smile, he hit the AC and cranked it up. Then he punched on the radio and flicked through the preprogrammed channels. Country and rock. He put on an R&B station and looked around. Two bucket seats in the front. Bench seat in the back. Screwdriver, manual, receipts, Band-Aids in the glove box. Nothing exciting. Other than some grease stains and a little dirt on the floor, the place was clean for a work truck.

He sat there in the driver's seat and tapped his thigh. Now what? "Sit and wait," Carm would say. He bit his lip. He didn't like waiting.

He snapped his fingers and said, "Oh, crap! Almost forgot!" *Obscurement*. It was a tricky spell. More complicated than any spell he'd done before, but he knew he could do it. He hadn't told Carm—partly because he'd been afraid she'd say no, and partly because he wanted to impress her with his skill and initiative.

Milton had been studying it, and he knew all the parts. Excited with anticipation, he rifled through his backpack until he found a Sharpie pen. He popped the door open and went to the front of the Ford. He scrawled a glyph—an Old Norse rune, in this case—meaning 'hide' on the paint above the drivers' side headlight. "Good thing this is an old, rusty truck. A little marker won't hurt any. Besides, at least its black ink on black paint. You can't even see it. Mostly."

Quickly, he tagged the passenger side and then the rear passenger side door. As he was doing the drivers' side above the brake light an old man with dusty-brown skin and a gray goatee yelled at him in a voice like dragging metal trash cans, "Hey, whattaya doin' to that pickup?"

"Ah...nothin'. It's my uncle's."

"Sure. And I'm Ice-T. Get away from there. Punk."

A woman yelled at the old guy from a screenless open window. "Harold, how many times I done told you, leave them bangers alone. Yer goin' ta'get *shot*. Git in here, you fool."

The man went inside, grumbling, but not before stabbing two fingers at his eyes and then pointing at Milton. *I'm watching you, punk*, the gesture said.

Milton scrambled back into the truck, grinning. Next, he reached into his vest and gathered the rest of the materials he needed for the spell. His used military vest was urban camo, with a ton of pockets on and in it. He loved it. Those pockets held any talismans and catalysts that he would need to weave and trigger his spells. A small string of

pouches held individual grains of mithrium—the element of magic, used to trigger a prepared spell—and far too dangerous to keep in one pouch as catalysts.

It amazed him how talismans, catalysts, words of power, magic circles, and the like—they all really boiled down to symbols that helped a wizard focus his power. They were like a magnifying glass that could focus the sun into a beam to create fire. There was more to it than that, but that was the crux of it.

What he still didn't get is why some symbols worked better for some spells than others. And why some combinations worked better for some people than others. Each wizard had to figure out what worked best for them.

For this spell, he grabbed a test tube filled with water from condensation collected during a foggy night, a black square of cloth, and a pair of glasses with a broken lens.

"Oh, almost forgot the marker." He sketched the same 'hide' rune on the center of the dashboard.

He flipped through his notebook. No e-pad. Couldn't risk electronics getting fried at a critical moment. After he found the right page and read the steps one more time, he hopped out of the pickup. He held up the test tube, and then began the ritual hand and body movements to focus his energy. He poured drops around the interior of the cab and around the outside of the truck, all the while chanting the prescribed words:

"Kashi min de miay malamikoy. Protektu min de la demonoy, kiu sidas en la nokto. Shirmi min de la leonoy promenadis, kay la sagoy de kontrauulo." Hide me from my enemies. Protect me from the demons lurking in the night. Shield me from the lions prowling, and the arrows of the Adversary.

He did three circles around the Ford, once with water, then the black cloth, and the last time around, holding the broken glasses.

Milton *had* been doing really well, until the old man yelled out his window, "Hey, what are you doin', boy?" Distracted, Milton stepped on an empty Vodka bottle someone left in the street, slipped, and then fell over the curb.

He heard a "Ha!" from the window.

Milton barely noticed. A wispy smell of burnt metal told him that mithrium had been consumed by the spell, and before he'd been finished. That was bad! Interrupting a spell is *not* a good thing. All sorts of badness can happen.

"Uh oh." He leaped to his feet, peering around. The pickup started buzzing. Everything on the floor inside rattled. The glove box popped open. Receipts, invoices, sandwich wrappers, and an old coffee cup whirled around inside the cab of the truck.

The sidewalk started vibrating. Milton's teeth chattered. A parking sign wavered back and forth.

"Oh, no. No, no. Not good!" dirt and other debris in the street and along the buildings shot around, faster and faster, like a tornado gathering speed. Milton put his arms up, covering his eyes. Then, just as suddenly, everything dropped back to the floor of the truck and the surrounding street.

"Well, that wasn't so—"

PHOOOOM!

An oval wave of sound blasted out from the Ford, and every glass window of every car and every building on the block exploded out onto the sidewalks and the street. Car alarms began blaring up and down the street. "I can fix that. Maybe. With a *lot* of time." He grunted and threw his head back. "I don't think that worked the way it was supposed to, Toto. Carm is *not* going to be happy."

Not far off, Milton could hear sirens blaring. He decided this would probably be a very good time to move the truck. Quickly, he took the sunscreen off the dash. Thankfully, none of the vehicle's windows had broken from the Wyldfire that had just ripped down the street. Why, he had no clue. He chalked it up to dumb luck. He buckled in, said a little prayer, and turned the key. The Ford wouldn't start.

"Seriously?!" Milton rubbed his face with his hands and tried to ignore the approaching sirens and the people coming out of their buildings. Sweat prickled his forehead.

He took a deep breath and let it out. He wasn't very good at meditating. He couldn't just sit and not think. Who does that? It made him feel even more hyper—like his brain was going to explode. Instead, he counted off mathematical patterns. Sometimes the numbers in Pi; sometimes the Fibonacci Series. Some worked better than others, depending on the spell.

This time, he latched onto the Fibonacci Series: "0+1=1; 1+1=2; 1+2=3; 2+3=5..." When he hit number 987, he paused, said the trigger words for his spell, and turned the key. The motor coughed, turned over and came to life with a roar.

He shifted into reverse and punched the gas. Before Milton could crank the wheel, there was an amazingly loud thump and a sound like a metal garbage can being crushed. Milton's stomach plummeted even before he hit the brakes. The Ford F-150 jolted to a halt. He looked in the rearview mirror, which he had forgotten to do, and saw a white car, much too close to the truck.

“Oh no,” he said.

People gathered on the sidewalks were now pointing at him and the pickup. He glanced over and saw the grumpy old man shaking his head at him.

He hadn’t had much cause to drive, living in the city, but Carm had given him a few lessons. Maybe he should have practiced a bit more, but he’d only had his license for a couple of months, and Carm didn’t own a car.

“I can fix that,” Milton muttered to himself as he put the vehicle in drive. The tires crunched on broken glass as he pulled out and drove off, feeling guilty about leaving the scene of an accident.

Judging from the broken windows he could see, the Wyldfire appeared to have gone mostly straight ahead and straight back. Milton took the first right turn he could find and headed to the rendezvous point and parked. He looked around. No police or fire trucks in sight. Milton blew out a large sigh.

The gas gauge only read one-quarter of a tank. That wasn’t great. A truck had a lot of steel, which could really disrupt or disperse magic. Now that the pickup was running, he wasn’t sure if he should shut it off. If he did, he might not be able to start it again. On the other hand, if the mojo in his magic key ran out, he had no idea if the engine would stop running, too. He hadn’t thought to ask. If they ran out of gas or the key stopped working—either way, they would be in big trouble.

He thought about all those broken windows and winced. Milton hoped no one had been hurt, but it hadn’t looked like it. He wondered how many windows got busted out.

As he sat there, thinking of all the destruction he’d caused, he remembered Carm’s words of admonition before she left. His face flushed with heat. “Stick to the plan, Milton. Don’t get carried away. Most importantly, don’t draw attention to yourself.”

“I won’t, Carm. I got this. Really.”

His face had flushed then, too, when she raised one eyebrow. He guessed she was thinking about the time he’d tried going after the Rock Girls Gang and almost gotten himself killed. Or maybe she was remembering that other time when—well, anyways, that was probably why she’d had that skeptical look on her face.

Milton knew he could do more than she was letting him, if she would just trust him a bit more, and teach him more magic. His lessons were going sooo slowly. He hadn’t realized how much repetition magic was going to be. Honestly, how can it be possible to make magic boring?! *It’s magic!*

He wanted to learn more, faster. He wanted to be in on the action, fighting the bad

guys. Making the universes safe for humankind.

“You sure I can’t come?” he’d asked her. “I can help. These guys are dangerous.”

“Yes, I’m sure. You just answered your own question. These guys are bad news.”

“I’ve helped you out in worse situations than this.”

She chucked him under the chin and gripped his shoulder with a smile. “Not this time. I need you to get the pickup ready. Follow orders. Do the job well.”

Milton rolled his eyes and groaned. “I know, I know.” She’d told him that a few hundred times, at least.

Carm’d been letting him crash with her for a while now, even before he saved her life or she saved his, and she was as close to family as he had now. Rugged and tough, yet graceful and pretty. She had curly hair like his, but the golden-olive skin of Italy instead of the golden-brown complexion he had, and her brown eyes had gold flecks while his were the pure dark brown.

“Remember,” she’d said, “Saul’s the priority. Saul, the kids, and the package I gave you. They need to get to HQ, even if I don’t make it back.”

“Carm, c’mon—”

“No, corporal. Those are your orders. Say it.” She rarely pulled rank on him.

“Yeah, okay. Right.” She stared at him with her don’t-mess-with-me look. He’d sighed, straightened, and said, “Yes, ma’am. Understood. Saul, the kids, the package. HQ.”

He glanced at his watch. He bit his lip and looked at the old apartment building they’d been casing for two weeks and that Carm had entered eighteen minutes ago. Had it only been eighteen minutes with all that had just happened?

He hoped she was okay. He could live on his own, but he definitely preferred a hot shower and cable TV. Besides, Milton liked her. Loved her, probably, but he didn’t like to think about that. It made him feel too many conflicting emotions. It also brought up memories of his own mom and dad, and he didn’t like to go there.

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