Prologue:

Following a turbulent storm, the sailors of the royal navy were shocked to sight land days before expected. As the clouds cleared they were even more surprised by the fact that the sky was purple.

These surprises culminated in the fact that the shapes on the shore were not humans but instead monsters. After all of that it was an afterthought that the captain took tea with a dragonet.

Though the sailors didn’t know it, they had discovered a world of monsters.

When they returned home through the newly found portal, they encountered mild disbelief.

While skeptical the crown was never one to shy away from foreign lands. After all the sun never set on the greater kingdom, how much better if this was true in two worlds instead of one?

Decades later:

# The academy of monsters:

# Or the importance of being polite in the world of monsters

# By Aaaac

It was a fine early autumn day in the world of monsters, the yellow sun shined in the purple sky, the weather was warm with just a hint of the cold to come. It would have been a wondrous day for the boy, had it been in the world of humans.

The boy lay on the grass and looked up at the foreign purple sky, he wished that it was blue. He picked up the wooden sword and held it above him, examining it carefully. Finally, he stood sighing.

The boy was young, male and human. His light brown hair had the messiness that suggested that combs were objects of terror. He wore a new looking, striking blue private school uniform, that was already dirty. The boy slouched into himself, as if trying to hide behind himself. Despite or perhaps because of this, a confident smile was plastered to his face.

The boy surveyed the landscape, wooden sword held before him. The sun peaked into the through the thick canopy of trees into a grassy clearing. He fixed an enemy before him and then swung with all his might. The swing made a whistling noise.

He swung too hard and the sword tumbled from his hands. Swearing an old soldier’s curse he picked it up. As he turned around, he came face to face with an ant-girl who had been standing behind silently.

Like most of the civilized monsters the ant-girl had humanish features, with a few extras. She was about the boy’s height and had dark mud brown hair. She wore a similar school uniform to the boy. All four sleeves of her shirt were rolled up exposing slender chitin covered arms. The only decoration she wore was two large black hair ornaments that seemed to stick up through her hair. Her body language suggested a polite inquisitiveness.

Despite being completely startled the boy managed to say. "Hello."

The ant-girl smiled and said "Hello”. She looked at the sword with curiosity “What are you doing?"

The boy smiled and took a step back to display the wooden sword. "Practicing my sword fighting. My brother gave me this sword, so I need to practice."

The ant-girl admired the sword. "It’s a funny design."

"Yeah, my brother said that it was so you could repair the thing. All the pieces are replaceable or something." The boy turned the sword over, admiring it. "The instruction manual was a small novel." The sword was unimpressive; smooth, and almost featureless. Longer than a toy sword, it more resembled a cane. The only distinguishing feature was a series of lightly engraved lines.

"So are you going to the school?" The ant-girl asked this curiously, she seemed to be a similar age as him and was in fact a little taller.

"Yep, I’m starting tomorrow. What grade are you in?" He tried to seem positive.

"The first year of high school." The ant-girl seemed to take pride in saying this. "What grade are you in?"

"I'm starting high school too. But wait, aren’t classes still be running?" The boy had a confused expression.

Gaining an expression of perfect surprise, the ant-girl nodded. Then gathering confidence, she said “I’m skipping, don’t tell anyone.”

The boy rolled his eyes and answered as if it was a matter of honor "Of course I won’t. Say do you want to sword fight with me? All we need is some sticks."

The ant-girl smiled, things were getting interesting "Sure."

Neither of them knew the art of fencing in the slightest, they did know how to smash sticks together though. They traded on using the sword. The ant-girl nodded blankly when the boy clarified that aiming for the body was prohibited.

After an hour the two had exhausted themselves. The boy picked himself up off the ground. "I have to get to the principal's office."

The ant-girl sat panting "Why do you have to see the principal?"

"She wants to meet me. Whew, that was intense. You aren’t half bad." The boy dropped his stick and put back on his backpack.

"You are not that bad for having only two arms." She absentmindedly used both pairs of arms to message the other.

"Four hands might be unfair, but it certainly make things more fun." The boy checked a wrinkled letter. "Would you like to meet again, maybe during lunch?"

The ant-girl nodded "Sure. Where?"

The boy shrugged "I don't know. How about here? Then we can keep going at it without anyone telling us to stop."

The ant-girl smiled and said "See you tomorrow." The boy looked at his watch and was off at a sprint. As the boy took off at full speed the ant-girl shouted something that the boy couldn’t hear.

The school was situated in the mountains overlooking a valley. It had a series of beautifully landscaped lawns and gardens interspersed with forested and vibrant wild areas.

This was of only passing interest to the boy as he ran. He knew roughly where the principal's office was and went the most direct route. He leapt off hills and barreled through wooded areas, shielding his face as he ran. Unintentionally, he disturbed up the lawns in a few places.

Ten minutes later the boy was standing outside of the principal's office, dilligently scraping the mud out of his boots with a pencil. The fact that his pants were covered in mud and that he tracked a good deal of mud over a clean hallway did not seem to bother him.

The principal's secretary was a middle aged elf at thirty and had a fairly good attitude all things considered. She looked professional enough but seemed inherently uncomfortable, as if she couldn’t justify her presence to herself.

Her attitude however was sorely tested when a young human came into the principal’s office covered in mud up to his knees. The student noticed her staring and responded in an amused voice "Oh! My backpack is heavier than I thought so I got a little bit muddy." The secretary blinked in disbelief as he paused to rummage in his pocket and produced a very crumpled letter. "I have an appointment to see the principal." He consulted his watch "Soon."

The secretary snapped back to her job, she was more comfortable with that. A careful check of the letter showed that, it was indeed a letter arranging the appointment. She checked the principal's schedule for the day, but strangely it was not there. She decided to be certain. "Yes, one second while I tell her you are here." As the student moved towards the lobby furniture she hoped that he was not going to sit down.

The human began to scrape his pants clean with a waxed playing card while humming to himself. The mousey secretary knocked and then quietly let herself into the principal's office. As the secretary closed the door, the humming grew slightly softer.

The secretary started to speak uncertainly "A human of all things is here to see you, says he has an appointment." She continued distressed. “But it’s not scheduled.”

The principal looked up from her desk to the mousey secretary and said "Ah, he's a bit early. Let him in and ask Miss Sialia to come to the office after classes finish." The humble secretary nodded and quickly retreated, wondering what led a human student to have private business with the principal.

The secretary came back into the lounge and found the young human having neatly “Cleaned” his pants; was now sitting on a couch fiddling with something inside his backpack. He was still humming when the secretary said in a clear voice "The principal will see you now." The human nodded, quickly shouldered his backpack and headed into the principal's office.

The office was an impressive, a large and richly decorated space with a good deal of antique furniture. There was a huge outward-curving window, and on the window sill were 5 meticulously trimmed black flowering plants. There were two maps on the wall, and rather proudly a large pipe hung next to them. Perhaps no piece of furniture commanded more attention than the large ornate desk which was richly carved and so tall that the boy could barely look over it.

The human however did not comprehend any of this due to the very large spider woman sitting behind it. She was fairly attractive but had a stern face, and was obviously older. Her dark purple hair was gathered behind her head in a tight bun. This made for an intimidating appearance. The fact that she was about eight feet tall at her full height didn’t hurt either.

She took a moment to study the human, he seemed small as humans went. He constantly searched his suroundings and shrunk into himself. All in all an average human specimin.

For the benefit of the reader the way each message was interpreted in the following conversation will follow each bit of spoken text.

The boy looked directly at the spider-woman and said "Hello, I am James of the lines of Dante’s. I like your desk." -You are easily the third most fearsome thing I have ever seen-

All four pairs of the spider-woman’s eyes focused on James for a second until her expression softened and said "James, it is good to see you. I am Ms. Araneae. I did not expect you to be early." -You don't need to be afraid-

"I always prefer to be early when possible." -I didn't want to be near any students until I had accompaniment.-

"You understand of course that it is highly irregular for a student to join the school a month into the semester" -what did you do that made it necessary for you to come here?-

James smiled “Of course, however it was deemed necessary by my family. After thinking on it long and hard we decided there was no better school for me to transfer to." -Bad stuff, so bad I had to flee my world to get away.-

Ms. Araneae looked at James carefully and appraisingly. “Did you have a chance to learn much about the world of monsters?” –How sudden was it?-

Running his hand through his hair James replied. “I only had a chance to learn the most basic things. Most humans dislike monsters you see. –Immediately-

Ms. Araneae, took a moment to scratch her leg and then got up from her desk. "If you need any special accommodations, to help you move and settle into the school, please feel free to ask." -Tell me what it is and I will make things easier for you.-

James, keeping his smile tried to not show fear in how high he had to look up to keep eye contact with Ms. Araneae. "Oh, I should be quite alright, thank you." -I’m not talking-

Ms. Araneae, paced to the window which overlooked the school grounds. James hoped she could not see the places where he had disturbed the meticulous groundskeeping. "A lot of the most prominent families in the world of monsters send their children here. They come here to learn cooperation and tolerance. Tell me are you afraid of monsters?" -I have my own reasons in letting you, a human come here. Can you handle yourself?-

Shrugging James said “All men are afraid of things they do not understand. That is why the quest for understanding should never stop." -Of course I'm afraid, but I can handle myself-

"A noble statement, which everyone should strive to live up to. Is there anything you would like to ask me?" -You can talk pretty good, but let's see how your game does over time.-

"I have just two questions really. Firstly, humans are rare in the world of monsters, will my presence be much of a shock?" -You are asking if a human can stand monsters in a school full of them. I'm asking if monsters can stand a human in a school of monsters.-

"These are the children of some of the most prominent monsters in the world, naturally they are all held to a high standard of behavior. That said, part of the reason we allow humans in this school is to try and bring the worlds closer together." -I can offer some protection, but I expect you to make an effort.-

"Ah, of course. Secondly, I understand it's not uncommon for students to spend the winter break at the school. I love my family, but they have always stressed that academics are important; is there anything similar over summer break?" -It's going to be a problem. My position is desperate and I am safest here. Is there anything you can do to help me?-

Ms. Araneae paused for a second and then strode over to her desk and retrieved a pamphlet. "While we allow students to stay over winter break, we do not allow them to stay during the summer. But, this fine academy“ She took relish in saying that “Produces a large number of excellent graduates. As a result, we have many scholarships running. I think you would be interested in this one.” She tossed him the pamphlet. -You want a life line there, that's the lifeline.-

James quickly skimmed the pamphlet “Diplomat scholarship, interesting. What does 4 years of excellence required mean?" -Not my specialty but it could work-

"It's up to interpretation but it means you must be well known and respected for four years, with impeccable grades and support among the student body. If you put your mind to it I'm sure you could manage." -life or death, which are you going to choose?-

"How often we rely on the mind to do all the work, sometimes habit can be made to accomplish just as much. Thank you for seeing me, it has done much to make me more comfortable." -It's impossible, but i'll just have to do it.-

Ms. Araneae looked at the rather ornate grandfather clock. "From the looks of it, classes are over. I have arranged for your homeroom teacher to give you a tour of campus." -This is your chance to make a good first impression.-

James slightly bowed "I hope everything goes well and we do not have to meet again during the semester" -things are likely going to go wrong quickly-

As he turned to leave Ms. Araneae called out. "I thought that the humming trick was pretty neat.” She winked maybe half her eyes. “Also, don't forget to ask for help if you need it." -you may be slick but know your place. Last chance to spill the beans.-

James merely smiled and left. -Better men have tried, and they failed-

Leaving the principal's impressive office, James saw a bird woman resting, eyes closed on the couch. Pondering what to do, James decided on thanking the secretary. "Thank you for letting Ms. Araneae let me know I was here." he paused for a second “And I apologize about the mud." He looked at the elf perhaps a moment to long, trying to process how skin could look that flawless. It seemed unnatural, as if she had been freshly varnished.

The mousey secretary looked up and then pulled out a form. Mindful of the bird-woman, she asked quietly “To be sure, you are James of the line of Dantes?”

James hoped she hadn’t caught him staring, then nodded and added without thinking “Here by the grace of his majesty the king.”

The mousey secretary nodded and handed him a pen “If you could sign here.” James looked at her questioningly “It’s saying that you agree to follow all instructions of your embassy and we have the authority to throw you out if you don’t.” Nodding, James dipped the pen into the ink well carefully and with an exaggerated amount of care gave his signature.

Looking it over carefully and blowing a little bit, James appeared sheepish and said “I prefer pencils.” The secretary merely nodded, already resuming her work.

James looked back at the bird woman, who was still dozing on the couch. She had youthful looks, and was obviously a junior teacher. Her arms were bird wings and covered in light blue feathers. These mostly went well with her blue hair. She also had bird feet and legs, something James thought to be unfortunate as it precluded her from wearing shoes.

James did not want to be rude and was not looking forward to seeing the campus. He sat down and began to message his arms and legs. Eventually he decided he would feel better not wearing his backpack and put it on the floor.

This sound was loud enough to wake the bird woman and she sat up with a start. "I'm awake.” She looked around wide eyed.

James was used this sort of thing, mainly because it was often him who was doing it. He calmly said “Hello."

The bird woman was surprised to see a human sitting across from her, and made little effort to hide it. "Hello, is your name James?"

"Yes, I apologize for waking you up." Despite her enthusiastic expression she seemed very tired.

"Oh, no problem. I shouldn't have been sleeping anyway.” She rubbed her face with her wing. "I have to show you around. Oh! I'm Ms. Sialia.” She extended her wing for James to shake, which he did gingerly, not sure of how much force to use. She smiled at him. “You are quite brave to come here.” James mused about how that was a positive way to look at it. "Did you have to travel long?"

James nodded his head "For about a week."

Ms. Sialia put a light blue wing to her mouth in thought. "It takes two days by train to get here. So I'm guessing you live in the greater empire."

James nodded and Ms. Sialia beamed triumphantly "Yes, I'm not at all fond sleeping on trains. Still to guess that, you must know something about the world of humans."

After giving a slight almost guilty nod, Ms. Sialia tried her best to look official. "Err, which isle are your from?”

With the pride that goes with such a proclamation James confidently responded “England”

Ms. Sialia looked pleasantly surprised and said “Ahh, I have always wanted to meet an Englishman. Now, let's get started."

She patted her pockets and produced a series of notecards. James briefly wondered how she could hold them in her wings and decided not to worry about it. His list of impossible things at this point was so long that he could publish it. "Is this your first time doing this?"

Ms. Sialia blushed "Yes, well, it’s my first year teaching as well."

James decided to take the path of least resistance "Well then why don't you practice with me. I don't mind if you mess up."

Ms. Sialia smiled at James "Why thank you. Alright now let me see where I should start."

James wondered if he should recite a speech in his head to pass the time, but he knew nothing about the school and resolved to just mentally watch serials.

"Welcome.” She paused for a second, glanced at James then back to the card “Student. To Sophia academy, one of the primer private schools in the world.” “World of Monsters” James mentally corrected her. "Founded several years ago, it is our mission to give monsters an understanding of the world of humans through a full immersion environment. This school is modeled on private schools in the world of humans and strives to give the most complete education possible." James had by this point switched to newspaper serials but kept nodding regardless. "I am Ms. Sialia and I will be your guide on a tour of the school."

That was enough to bring James back to attention. He asked with urgency "Are there still students in classes?"

Ms. Sialia gave James a curious look. "Why do you ask?"

James paused, while Ms. Sialia was fine with a human attending the school, the student body might not feel similarly. "Ms. Araneae suggested that the student body would be a bit uneasy with a human at the school.”

Ms. Sialia gave a good natured laugh, "I’m sure they won't be a problem. All the students are very open minded." James mentally swore.

Seeing little choice James said "If you say so but, let's hit the less crowded parts of school first."

Ms. Sialia smiled, "Are you sure it's not just that you are shy?"

James didn't look at her and said "Let's go."

Ms. Sialia showed James the campus, only occasionally stumbling over her lines. It was, a huge school, with everything from a track field to an expansive garden. Grander by far than James’ old high school. They even had a heated pool.

As they crossed the paved plaza infront of the school, James marveled at the main school building. The high school building rose out of the foundations of a late medieval castle. There was a small clock tower at the front of the school but in the back two of the ancient towers still stood.

James asked Ms. Sialia to explain "Oh, yes. The school is built on the grounds of a dragon’s castle. The high school occupies much of the same area."

James thought through his question carefully "Is the dragon still in residence?"

Ms. Sialia smiled "Oh, it is no longer in residence and a family of dragonets bought the land to build the school"

James asked himself what exactly no longer being in residence would entail and decided not to pry further.

They went into the main hall of the school/castle. It was impressively massive, the room seemed design to overawe anyone who entered. James noted that it would not be out of place in the palace. At the far end there was a large raised platform, big enough to fit a carriage or two. James interrupted Ms. Sialia’s spiel, “Is that were the dragon sat?” Ms. Sialia nodded. All James could think was how massive they must be.

Eventually they came to a stop. "And with that the tour is concluded. Any questions?" Ms. Sialia looked at James with polite anticipation.

James unconsciously raised his hand. Ms. Sialia called on James.

"Where are the male and female dormitories?" James was getting a little bit tired of carrying around his backpack.

"Wait I didn't say that?" Miss Sialia seemed genuinely shocked

James shrugged "If you did I didn't hear it."

Ms. Sialia went back through her notecards quickly. Two of them had been stuck together. "Oops. I missed a part."

James thought for a second and then said "Well, you should show me the places we missed. It will help you practice.” Ms. Sialia showed James the girl's and boy’s dormitory. Ms. Sialia explained that these were two very modern dormitories with all the amenities and that they had been put as far apart as possible. When James asked why, she merely said something about teenagers and kept moving.

As they stopped infront of the boy’s dormitory, Ms. Sialia announced in an official voice. "Now, any questions?"

The boy’s dormitory was an imposing structure James thought. It was at least three floors high, and it seemed to have been designed to make the building look as monster-like as possible. As a result, it was all sorts of colors and covered in exotic murals, it also had actual spikes, and a few gargoyles (some of which looked like they moved.)

James was taken a back "A strange building."

Ms. Sialia looked behind and her and exclaimed "Oh! I missed the part explaining why the dormitories look the way they do. The art club gets a chance every year to decorate the buildings as part of their club activities. They were enthusiastic."

James looked up at the building again. "Interesting. Will you accompany me to my room? I haven't the faintest of where it is."

Ms. Sialia hesitated. "I'm not supposed to go into student's rooms."

James put on his best friendly smile. "What’s the harm? Besides didn't Ms. Araneae ask you to show me around?".

Ms. Sialia reluctantly agreed and lead James through the dormitories to a small room on the third floor. James distantly noted that there were many facilities on the first floor of the dormitory, but was preoccupied with dodging any students.

The room was very small, with barely enough room for a bed, a dresser and a desk. It had a window which was a small comfort, but in the spirit of the day it faced onto the bed's pillows. The bed was raised to provide space underneath, and barely fit one person, the sheets were faded and dusty. The school’s opulence did not extend to James’ room. "Are rooms normally for one person?"

Ms. Sialia seemed surprised by the question "Oh no, normally students bunk together to promote community."

James put down his backpack with a sigh of relief. "I have some questions about the study material." James attempted to see how far behind he was in the curriculum.

When this line was exhausted James switched to personal questions. Having his homeroom teacher on his side would help. "So why did you decide to be a teacher?"

"Oh, I wanted to help people I think. Also, I have always been very curious about the world of humans, so I thought teaching here would help me get an idea of what it's like."

"Why don't you just visit the world of humans? Wouldn't that be easier?" Becoming a teacher to get a better idea of humans seemed a bit indirect.

"Oh I would love to, but it's expensive and I hear visitors to the world of humans are treated badly." James nodded, this was by and large true.

"Was it very hard to start teaching here?"

Ms. Sialia gave a triumphant grin. "Oh yes, I had to work my wings off to get hired here. Getting this job was one of the happiest days of my life."

James tried to mirror her enthusiasm. "So have you been teaching for very long?"

"No, this is my first year teaching here. I’m very excited."

"Has it lived up to your expectations?"

"Yep, it's hard but rewarding." Ms. Sialia nodded to herself as she said this, as if confirming it to herself.

James’s was suddenly excited. "Wait I have a question! Can you fly?"

Ms. Sialia seemed confused by this question. She drew herself up and presented her wings for James’ inspection. “Of course I can fly. I could even lift you through the air." She saw how James’ eyes lit up at the prospect "I’m not allowed. Liability thing."

As James went through the comedic motions of defeat, the school clock chimed.

Ms. Sialia seemed startled again. "Oh, what time is it?"

James told her the time. "Oh sh-, dear I have to get going." She went over James’ class details once again and turned for the door.

Excitedly James said "Wait, can you fly out my window? I want to see what it looks like."

Ms. Sialia smiled. "Well, if you came all the way to the World of Monsters, it’s the least I can do." James opened the window for her. Ms. Sialia took a deep breath and jumped through the window, she could hear James saying "Wow!" As she took off like a blue bird.

With Ms. Sialia gone, James was left to his thoughts and unpacking. As he unpacked he recognzied that it was good that he had little worth packing, there wasn't much space.

At the very bottom of his luggage though, there was his most prized possession; two twelve packs of coke. He had been told that for many reasons, there was no Coca-Cola in the world of monsters. Two twelve packs had to last until he returned home. Already he was dreading running out. He considered cracking one open right now, as a reward for a hard day. He quickly came to his senses though, he would have to sleep at some point.

With the most valuable treasures secured, James sorted his school supplies and then carefully peeked his head out of the door. After making sure the hallway was clear he sprinted silently to the bathroom. After a couple of minutes, he sprinted back to his room.

However, there was a surprise waiting for him. A pale white figure was floating over his bed. James froze startled and then leaned forward trying see what a ghost looked like. The ghost looked like a humanoid white cloud. All James could tell was that it seemed somewhat feminine, anything beyond that and it was like looking at an out of focus picture.

As he pondered just how to react, the figure said in a friendly voice "Hello."

James figured that was as good a place to start. "Hello. I don't wish to be rude but are you a ghost?"

"Why yes, and I don't wish to be rude but are you a human?" James could imagine a smile on its lips.

"Yes I am, one gets the feeling they are a bit of a rarity around here."

"Oh they are,” the ghost responded conversationally, “There is only one other in the school." the ghost noted James’ interest. "His name is Andrew Blake. He is a junior, but he is an unpleasant fellow so I would avoid him"

James sat down on his bed. "Are you the only ghost here?" The figure replied in the affirmative. James did not know proper manners for ghosts. "If you don't mind me asking have you been a ghost for very long?"

The figure floated down towards James and seemed to come more into focus. "A whole lot longer than you could imagine."

James shrugged, he could not imagine very long. "May I ask why you have decided to pay me a visit? Do you just wish to say hello?"

The ghost had a teasing tone. "I can't just pay visits to whomever I please?"

"Oh, I don't mind the chat and I can’t stop you. It just seems a bit unusual, do you visit all the transfer students?"

"You are a bit unusual to be honest."

James nodded "Well that's certainly true."

"I’m paying a visit to see what you think of the principal's offer." Her tone was probing.

James played it cool. "How do you know about that?"

The ghost was definitely smiling now. "I see all."

James’ eyes widened and then he continued it for her "I hear all."

The ghost finished it by saying "I know all."

James automatically went for a high five and the ghost returned the motion. Passing through the ghost was very cold, and there was only a little bit of resistance. "Yeah, Dangerman rocked. Regarding the offer, it's impossible. No way I’ll be able to do it."

The ghost gave a feminine giggle, and James could imagine a mischievous grin. The ghost asked “So do you refuse?"

James laid back on the bed looking up at the ceiling. "Oh it's impossible, but I’m still going to try. There is nothing else to do."

The ghost responded in a challenging tone. "Why do you say that?"

James had an excuse prepared this situation and he relished a chance to use it. "The Art of War says if you know yourself and you know your enemy, in a thousand battles you will be undefeated. I know myself."

The ghost floated over James’ face. That’s a rather defeatist attitude."

James turned his head away. "I think the word you are looking for is realist. Anyway how does a ghost know about dangerman?"

"I watch over many shoulders. What’s your favorite one?"

"The galloping knight." A great episode of an already amazing serial series.

"Same here. I love at how at the end he salvages it. It’s all about knowing the right thing to say at the right time." The ghost was more in focus and James could see a faint outline. The outline was raising her eyebrows.

"It’s getting a bit late miss; oh wait, I don't know your name." James sat up on realizing this, he didn’t wish to be rude.

The ghost extended her hand to James. "I’m the school phantom." She sounded proud.

James did his best to shake hands despite her being intangible. "That’s a bit of a mouthful. I’m James of the line of Dantes. But everyone calls me James." He put his hand in his armpit to help the chill.

"That’s a bit of a mouthful as well. Call me Fen.” She floated back, examining James. "May I ask what made you come here?"

James smiled "You may ask certainly; I may not answer. Alright now miss Fen I must ask that you let me go to sleep. I have class tomorrow, and it promises to be eventful."

Fen took on a knowing smile "Are you afraid of going to class?"

James face darkened. "Oh very. I’m trying to do something that's impossible. Any advice on what to do when it comes crashing down?"

Fen’s tone was reproachful, “Such a defeatist.”

James shook his head “Realist, please do you have any advice?”

Fen took a scolding tone. "Why of course not; any problems are the result of your actions. I would certainly not tell you to use the fact that the principal likes you, or the fact that no one would ever admit to you besting them."

James smiled a wry smile and bid one last farewell. Fen returned it and then floated through the ceiling. He had a frightful time getting to sleep, tossing and turning. Worst of all he kept waking up. It was like a bad joke. The idea that staying awake would somehow delay his class kept intruding into James’ mind.

James woke up a minute before his alarm clock went off. He considered closing his eyes and waiting for the alarm to sound. Experience had taught him that didn't work so he leapt out of bed. The room was warmer than he expected.

Hiding in his room, James missed breakfast. He had a coke instead, he figured that would destroy his nerves and they would reset. He feared geting to class early, so he delayed.

The thing about delaying is that eventually you can delay no longer. Finally, he shouldered his backpack and set off for class.

Quicky, he began to garner stares from all manner of monsters. He heard whispers about the rumors of a new human being true. The classes of monsters were incredibly varied. Some had animal features, some were insectoid, some came from the ocean. James saw a bee girl and wasp gentleman together both in matching colors, a mermaid being carted around in a wheel chair (he could see the fin), and a centaur.

Even within a species there were all manner of differences. Ms. Sialia was a harpy with blue wings but other harpies could have red feathers or mixed plumage. Jame’s curious glances were matched by disbelieving, hostile stares.

Eventually the eyes started to beat down on James. Fixing his eyes straight ahead, he started a death march to his class. Ms. Sialia was outside the door. "Good morning James. We have assigned seats. When everyone arrives, you will introduce yourself."

James desperately racked his brain for something to say, his brain disappointed him yet again. In a state of panic, James faced the class. As his panic started to surface, he recalled advice from middle school. “If you can’t meet the eyes of the audience, look at the back wall.”

The class was a menagerie of monsters. He noted a blond dragonet, a minotaur, a female Scylla propelled by nothing but tentacles. He took a deep breath, told himself he was excited, focused his eyes on the far wall, and tried to desperately pretend that the class was not in front of him. "Hello, I’m James Dantes. I am very excited to be here." He said this mechanically, James was sweating far too much to notice.

There was an awkward silence and Ms. Sialia directed James to his seat. To his horror he realized that it was in the middle of the room. He was surrounded. Thankfully Ms. Sialia taught a subject he liked. The curriculum was different but James managed.

His classmates all seemed to ignore him, this continued until lunch. At lunch James recalled his lunch date and was packing up when a large minotaur approached with a scowl.

The narrator would like to clarify that when we say “Large minotaur” please understand that we mean relative to human standards. He was actually small for his age by minotaur standards.

As James kept packing up, the minotaur loomed over James menacingly. James noted this with disinterest, an older brother prepared him for this. The minotaur said loudly "Hey."

James turned to the minotaur and said "Hello." In a serene voice. He smiled sweetly.

The minotaur drew himself up and easily looked down at James. “So you are a human?” There was derision in his voice.

Keeping the smile James said “Yes. Are you a minotaur?”

The minotaur simply kept staring. “This is the world of monsters; humans don’t belong here. This school is for monsters and you are no monster.”

James stood up never letting his smile drop for a second and responded in a bored tone. “I’m sorry?” The minotaur was quite large, and his two horns hugged his skull quite closely. At this point the bit of James that came from his father moved him to speak. “Why should I care if I’m supposed to be here or not?

The minotaur pushed James, and then added “You aren’t strong enough to be here and you are all alone.”

James regained control of himself and then said “I don’t want there to be any violence.” This was broadly true, violence in general was bad. He was less clear on specific violence.

"You can stay if you admit that that you are inferior, that you aren’t cut out for the world of monsters.” A smirk crept into the minotaur’s smile. “And you are my servant." James returned the smirk and kept quiet. "Kneel and tell me that monsters are greater than humans. That will settle things." James stayed silent and then the minotaur pushed him.

James calmly and reasonably said “Stop.”

The minotaur pushed him again and with the same damn smirk said, “Stop me.”

Again, the part of James that was his father's flared up in him. James responded by bringing a big bit of mucus up into his mouth, he spat hitting the minotaur square in his chest. He nodded and said "I apologize I can't stay any longer, but I have a lunch appointment." Then he checked his watch and left.

James made a mad dash to the ant girl, dodging the monsters in the hallways, not stopping or slowing except when necessary. He arrived in record time and out of breath.

The ant-girl was there to greet him. She was covered in dirt but not out of breath. James was panting, so he could only wave hello. The ant-girl waited for him to recover and then extended her two arms in a handshake motion. "Hello, what’s your name?”

James rolled with it and shook both of her hands "Sorry, I’m James. Whew, it's a bit of distance from here to school. How about you?"

The ant-girl looked surprised and gaped for a second, “Oh right,” she seemed uncertain “I am Forma.”

She looked him over "You don't have to run; lunch is pretty long." Her two lower arms took this as an opportunity to dust some of the dirt off her uniform.

"I had so much fun yesterday I couldn't wait to come back." James smiled warmly. "Up for another round?"

As they fought they traded questions during lulls. James’ stick splintered to almost nothing. "So which class are you in?"

"I’m in professor Irving’s class. He's a bit eccentric, keeps talking about why the school should let him discipline students." Forma said this as they ambled through the woods.

"I see, is he frightening?" James smashed his stick against a tree and threw away the shattered remains.

"A little bit, but I think the hitting thing comes from him being a minotaur to be honest." Forma handed James a stick to test.

James hefted the stick, it felt like a good one, nice and solid. "That's a bit of a mean thing to say." Forma shrugged. "So why did you come to this school?"

Forma responded proudly "I was chosen to be an engineer. There is a project planned and the colony needed an engineer who knew how to work with other species."

This puzzled James "Why is working with other species difficult?"

Forma shrugged with all four of her shoulder. "Other species use verbal communication. It's strange to us."

James took a few test swings with the stick, it was a good one. "Yeah, and most of us aren't very good at speaking as it is. What do you guys use instead?"

Forma spoke as they faced off "We use non-verbal communication; smells and body language. Why do you say you aren't good at speaking? You seem as good as any ant."

James considered starting with a low sweep. "Well, I get nervous. If you were infront of a lot of ants would you be able to communicate correctly?"

Forma considered this as she quickly switched her stick from her upper arms to her lower arms. "Well of course, I’m used to being around a lot of ants. The colony is very large."

James noted the change and started with a downward slash. "If you put me in front of a lot of people I would mess up. I would stutter and have a hard time with pronunciation."

After a lot of fighting James glanced at his watch. Lunch was mostly over. He signaled for a stop and produced his lunch, wrapped in the traditional cloth bag.

Forma sat down next to him smiling at him. Seeing his companion empty handed, James asked "Do you not have a lunch?"

"Why do you have a lunch instead of stuff from the cafeteria?"

James looked sheepish. "I made it on the train." James didn’t trust rail service sandwiches. He tore his peanut butter and jelly sandwich in half and gave one piece to Forma. "Here, have some. I make it with peanut butter on both slices of bread." He whispered this like it was a secret cooking technique.

Forma took a cautious bite and then devoured the rest. With a dazed look she asked "What was that?"

James was surprised at her speed. "Peanut butter and jelly. Jelly is pretty sugary so maybe that's why you liked it."

Forma who was licking her fingers, nodded in agreement. After that they both, stuffed their faces. James made his own lunchs through middle school. His lunches were designed so he could eat twice. Once when he was hungry, and then when he got hungry again.

The two sat together peacefully. James surveyed the large clearing, there was a gap in the in the tree and he could see a nearby hill. The forest around them was thick, to an untrained eye it was menacing. However, the effect was softened by the occasional tree flowering in orange and fruiting in pink. There were only a few thorns and enough space to pass between the trees. This made it homey for James.

As lunch ended, James timed leaving so that he would arrive when class was about to start. He hoped less exposure cut down on the harassment. He noted with faint surprise that in large letters “Kill yourself" had been written on his desk.

This harassment continued into the next week. Many members of the class took pleasure in insulting him, harassing him, and at times throwing things. Some looked on with an expression of pity, while others were oblivious to the whole thing. These attacks were always lead by the minotaur.

James took a special effort not to learn his name.

His tormenters were not stupid, and never did anything infront of the teacher. But it was all the constant little things, to reinforce that James wasn’t good enough. James lost count of the number of times they harassed him, they dropped papers to the floor, ignored him on purpose and the like.

James withdrew into himself. He spent his out of class time in his room either working on school work or reading. With no serials or activities to occupy him, he spent most of the week extremely bored. He read the books he brought from home, and made up the extra time in sleep. He lived for lunch.

Sleeping too much made James tired. When James was tired he tended to do foolish things, he blamed that for his actions on Friday. If you had asked James his reason he would have quoted the art of war on why to avoid sieges, and how the prolonged effort tends to blunt the blade. However, the narrator would like to note the art of war also speaks of why it is important to not destroy what you conquer.

On Friday morning before class he went up to the minotaur and simply said "Tomorrow morning before school, here.". With that errand accomplished he turned his attention to the various insults that had been written and carved into his desk. Most of them were pretty creative, perhaps a side effect of going to a private school.

During lunch, in one of the lulls, he tried to stop panting and tell Forma that he would miss hanging out during lunch on saturday. She kept interrupting him by attacking though.

He did not sleep well. He awoke disoriented and for a second thought he was home, free to relax. The realization that he was far from home was painful. James would have told anyone who asked that having school on a Saturday, even a half day was complete and utter bullshit. Back home he spent weekends unwinding and staying up late listening to his parents read. No such luck here.

James entered the classroom a half an hour early. For once his desk was clean. He pretended to sleep, it helped to his anxiety. When the minotaur arrived, he was flanked by many curious students.

James steeled himself and then stood face to face with the minotaur, looking him in the eyes. He kept a placid face and asked "Shall we?"

The minotaur looked confused "Are you here to kneel?"

James gave a sarcastic laugh. "I kneel to no one, I’m here to fight. So let's get to it before class starts."

The minotaur laughed, looked around, and then back to James who had the same serious expression. James stood a few paces away from the minotaur. "Look can we start? I don't want the teacher to interrupt us."

The minotaur looked at James incredulously. "You realize you can’t win?"

James was honestly confused. "Are you afraid? Let’s do this and get it over with."

The minotaur signaled to the crowd that he was going to humor James. James smiled in response and kicked him in the shin.

The Minotaur looked pained for a second and then threw a show punch at James. James had been feverishly studying self-defense for the past week, and was pleased that he could see it coming. He avoided the punch and hit the minotaur’s arm with a chair, causing a satisfying cracking sound in response.

After that James’ luck predictably ran dry and the minotaur landed a solid punch to the stomach. James dropped to the floor and took a minute to recover. The minotaur was busy playing to the crowd. Amateur.

At this point James would admit that things went red. His defense was that the pain pushed him into the red mist. Moving away from the minotaur James began to insult him, starting with fawn bastard and worked his way down to him from his kind, with plenty of jabs at his family thrown in for good measure. The minotaur took these personally and roared with anger at James, then he charged head first. Thanks to so much time spent with Forma, James sidesteped this at the last minute leaving the minotaur to plow headfirst into a desk. This demolished the desk and left the minotaur on the ground.

James quickly exploited this by kneeling on the Minotaur’s back and taking him by the horns. James then smashed his head into the ground, with superhuman self-restraint he did this only once. Then he got up and began kicking the minotaur in the stomach. This he did many times. The rage had begun to fade when Miss Sialia entered the room, and James would always remember her look of shock and horror at seeing him kicking the minotaur.

The waiting room outside the principal's office was calm. James took the time to admire the scenery as he waited for the principal to return. She had left with nary a word to him, only a scornful glance. While James had been agrily led by Miss Sialia to the principal's office, he saw the minotaur was being taken to the infirmary.

This situation was not unfamiliar to James and he spent the time trying to formulate what he was going to say. He remembered little of what had happened while he was angry, just a feeling that his hands had held horns.

The principal looked furious, and being fearsome already, easily cowed James into following her into her office. James simply stood while she glared at him behind the desk.

All of her eyes studied James "I did not expect to see you in this office so soon.” -You fucked up- James had a creeping feeling that she was viewing him as a hunter views her prey.

James kept as placid and not guilty smile as he could and responded "I did not expect to be in your office so soon" -I fucked up big-

“I want to hear your version of what happened” -Confess-

"Me and the other fellow had a disagreement, we seemed unable to find recourse through anything but violence." -I goaded him and tricked him into fighting me. Then I punished him for it.-

"I talked to Philip and Miss Sialia. Miss Sialia says she entered the room and you were kicking Philip. Philip says he simply fell. This involved destroying a desk and chair with all the other students outside the room. I asked Miss Sialia and she said she didn’t know what could have caused this incident. She was shocked, she thought you had been very charming before." -Why didn't you use Miss Sialia as cover, after all that's why I introduced you-

"Our disagreement was primarily over whether humans could be in the world of monsters. Philip insisted that monsters were superior, and I thought monsters and humans were equal. I felt it necessary to prove my point definitively. Miss Sialia would have only made us debate outside of the classroom." -He asked me to kneel. They were bullying me and I decided that the best solution was to solve the problem once and for all-

"I am disappointed in you. It looks very bad if one of the few humans in a school for monsters starts a fight within the first week of coming here. Did you know that Philip’s father is a rather influential minotaur?" -You chose wrong. There are going to be repercussions over this. - The principal had a steely look in all of her eyes.

"I very much regret my actions, I have had a problem with anger since childhood and I’m still working to manage it. How do you think the father will react to the news?" -I was wrong. How much shit am I in?-

"I think that if I told him the story that you told me, he will demand your immediate removal as punishment. He is influential enough that I would have to seriously consider it." -Hung out to dry.-

He gave a sad smile “Some things never change” Sighing he continued "It seems altogether unlikely that a human could beat a minotaur in single combat, it seems far more likely that he was trying some damn fool thing involving jumping from a desk and messed up. Perhaps he slipped on a piece of paper." -So don't tell that story-

"I’m not sure that Philip’s father would believe that story, Philip’s arm was broken." -Are you suggesting?"

"Oh I think it's believable, The minotaur will corroborate my story and Miss Sialia in her inexperience merely misinterpreted me moving to help him. If the principal says it, I doubt anyone would look into it." -That's right you don't need to be male to have the biggest balls in the room. The minotaur will never admit that I beat him and Miss Sialia will do as you say.-

"An interesting idea. But you have admitted to me that you decided not to avoid escalating the situation, and Philip was hurt. You are confined to your room for today, and I will decide on further punishment later." -It'll work. But I need to make a show of punishing you. Stay in your room to avoid reprisals and do not doubt that you will be punished.-

James hesitated. "Of course, is it possible that I could speak to him? I would like very much to apologize for my actions." -It’s never too early to start making amends.-

The principal eyed James curiously. "I will allow it, but do please try not to be there when Miss Sialia is there. She may misunderstand what is happening." -An interesting thing to do. Avoid Miss Sialia until I can tell her the most recent version of the truth.-

James was dismissed. As he turned the principal called out. "James, if this happens again I will be forced to ask you to leave." -Fuck up again and I nail your balls to the wall.- James merely nodded and left.

James took a lot of stares as he walked to the infirmary. Some whispered as he walked by, old hat by now. The infirmary was staffed by doctor Galen, a Scylla. His multiple pink tentacles clashed sharply with his white coat and each seemed to work independently with no difficulty. As James entered the room, the doctor moved to block him, James said quite calmly that he was here with permission of the principal. The doctor grumbled and moved back warning that he would be watching.

James approached the Minotaur with a purpose. The Minotaur’s nose had been broken, his left arm was in a sling and he winced whenever he turned his torso. He looked at James with a mixture of disbelief and wariness. James stood directly in front of the Minotaur, looked him the eyes and then bowed. "I apologize for what happened."

The Minotaur had anger in his eyes but drew back when James moved forward to whisper "This wasn't personal, it was a means to stop the bullying. I didn't intend to hurt you that badly." James messaged his own bruised stomach.

As James stood back the Minotaur had an enraged look on his face and seemed ready to swear revenge when James put a finger to his lips and pointed to the doctor. He was reading a magazine without flipping pages. "Let’s keep this between us?" A student who worked as Dr. Galen’s assistant came into the room.

James paused for a second and then asked, "Your name is Philip correct?"

Philip had an icy tone "All this and you didn't even know my name?"

James gave a faint smile "You didn't exactly sign your works Picasso." Then leaning forward James added "You were an enemy. Nothing more." He then leaned back and said loudly "Well I hope you get better soon Philip, and I would invest in classes or something. Was a damn fool thing to jump off that desk." With that he left.

Things would have gone perfectly, however Miss Sialia was waiting outside. James spun around and saw Doctor Galen talking to his assistant and looking smug.

Miss Sialia was furious. "I should like to speak to you James."

James silently cursed fate and called on his remaining supplies of audacity. "I apologize but the principal asked me to go directly to my room after I apologized to Philip." He nodded and tried his best to get away.

"Then meet me in my office tomorrow James. Ten in the morning please." James could not meet Ms. Sialia’s eyes as he passed her.

When he arrived back at his room, James shouted and punched the wall. Once his anger at himself had subsided he was left with a hurt hand and nothing to do.

As previously mentioned James did not cope with boredom well; he hadn’t brought cards or other diversions because they distracted him from doing schoolwork. He didn't feel like reading the books on self-defense he had brought from home, so he was left with nothing to occupy him. This was a punishment. He examined the impressive bruises on his stomach for a while but this got boring too.

So with all other options exhausted he laid down and tried to dream of a better world where he was with his family, he did not have rage issues and he was not bullied.

He had a palpable sense of dread when he awoke James woke Sunday morning. He considered skipping breakfast to limit his exposure, but felt hunger pains and remembered he had not eaten dinner. Previously James had been too preoccupied to observe the cafeteria. With a slightly clearer mind, he recognized that calling it the cafeteria was a discredit. It was a very stylish place more like a high-class restaurant than a lunch room. The carpet was a crisp red, the large drapes were fringed with gold, the ceilings high and vaulted. It was unusual however that directly next to all this decoration were the student kitchens.

James gave the décor a few glances, he was busy looking around at the students. There were many students milling around, it was obvious that he was no longer worthy of stares. He had been deemed a crazy human and was therefore not worthy of further notice. They no longer harassed him, they simply pretended he didn’t exist.

James decided not to push his luck and ate a small breakfast. It took him a while to find Miss Sialia’s office. He sat with a book in hand. She arrived surprised to find him there early. "Why are you here so early?"

James shrugged "I don't have anything to do, and I don't know anyone here. Besides it's best to finish unpleasant business early."

Miss Sialia was offended by this remark. "Why makes think this is going to be unpleasant?"

James shrugged again. "Being reminded of one's mistakes is rarely a pleasant business."

Miss Sialia unlocked her door and let James inside. The office was extremely cramped, a desk took up half the space, a couch the other half, and against all odds or physics a filing cabinet was wedged in there. James remained standing until Miss Sialia bid him to sit down.

Miss Sialia was in less formal clothes than her normal teaching outfit but still used her wings to straighten them as she faced James. "So tell me why you fought yesterday."

"There’s a multitude of reasons, would you like the most complete one?" James’ thoughts were hard to order and this was no different. Saying this let him play for time.

Miss Sialia had a stern face. "Tell me every reason."

James nodded solemnly "For the past week or so I had been the target of bullying led by Philip. I figured that fighting Philip would end the bullying."

Miss Sialia was shocked by this "Why didn't you tell me? I could have helped you."

James shrugged "I figured that asking you for help would only end it in the classroom at best. Fighting Philip ended it everywhere. I also fought because of who Philip was."

Miss Sialia was confused "What difference did Philip make?"

James gave a short lived smile. "I know Philip’s type. The bully who thinks his size and influence make him invincible. As a result, he doesn't really know how to fight and is soft. I knew that if I fought him I would win."

"This was all very calculated for you wasn't it?" Miss Sialia had a look of distain.

James kept a placid face. "The bullying was nearly constant, so I had opportunity to think of little else. I was stoic but it was getting to me. Experience has taught me that if you let them know it bothers you they push harder, and I reached my limit. So I weighed my options and did what I thought best."

Miss Sialia seemed to soften a little. "You still should have told me."

James nodded "The final and most important reason is a simple one. We fought because of who I am. Philip insisted that monsters were superior to humans. I disagreed and would not compromise. Maybe if I had compromised or tried to be more personable we would not have fought.” James sighed and said in a distant sad tone “In the end it's my fault, and I’m sorry I did it."

Miss Sialia leaned forward. "I dealt with some bullying in my time as well. I was never the biggest bird in the nest, and I was often teased for my interest in humans. But it seems different for you. What’s the real reason you came to this school James?"

James looked at his hands trying to think of what to say. "I" he paused "This school is my last option. I had to leave my family behind, my parents and my brothers all to come here. I came to world of monsters because it was not safe for me in the world of humans."

Miss Sialia seemed to pity James and asked "Why is not safe for you?"

James smiled bitterly "I apologize but I cannot tell you that. At least I can't tell you without putting other people in danger."

Miss Sialia’s wings drooped. "I’m sorry to bring it up."

James simply said "Forget about it.” He brightened up slightly and did his best to keep a smile on his face “Now, is it alright if I go over some of the material with you? The test is on Wednesday and I want to make sure I’m solid on this stuff." Miss Sialia smiled as James produced a binder from his backpack.

With that done James had the rest of his Sunday free. With no way to contact Forma and nothing else to distract himself with, he ambled over to the library. It was a majestic library. A proper and grand thing, it had multiple floors and many spare rooms coming off the library proper. The shelves were stuffed with books and arranged such that they made many quiet nooks and crannies to read in.

James carefully considered his situation and where he was, then decided he really wanted the sequel to the three musketeers so he tracked it down in the fiction section. Once he had the book in hand, it took a second, then James realized his previous thinking suggested that he understood the various types of monsters he was dealing with.

After multiple failed searches and a disastrous attempt to use the card catalog. James realized a change in approach was necessary and steeled himself to talk to the librarian. The librarian was a fairly young lamia with green hair to match her very large green tail. She was completely engrossed in her book and was sitting on her coiled up tail.

James decided a deferential approach would be best. He quietly approached the librarian’s desk and politely said "Excuse me."

The lamia was completely distracted by the book. She jumped a bit when James coughed, having not noticed him snapping his fingers, tapping the book he was carrying or walking as loudly as possible. She pushed her glasses up a bit and then took a good look at James. "How can I help you?"

James smiled and said "Well, I’m new to this school and I don't know much about monsters. Could you point me in the direction of some books on the subject?"

The lamia pointed at the book in James’s hands "What's that?"

James smiled a bit sheepishly. "Twenty years after by Dumas."

The lamia smiled and leaned forward over the Liberian’s desk supported by her tail. "Oh a Dumas fan?"

James responded in a happy tone. "Yes, I finished the Three Musketeers at the end of middle school and I wanted to see what happened next." He let out a small laugh. “I used to think it would be fun to go on an adventure.”

"It's a bit unusual to see someone read Dumas, what do you like about him?"

James glanced around cautiously "He is a verbose man; in three pages he accomplishes what most authors do in one. Also he is the very beginning of swashbuckling so he is making up the conventions as he goes." The lamia smiled upon hearing this.

The two of them talked books for a little while until James quietly coughed and asked again about books on the world of monsters. The lamia put her hand to her mouth in surprise. "Oh sorry. You want to go up the stairs and look in the bookshelves near the back."

James kept a polite face, "Could you show me? I’m bad at looking for things."

The lamia smiled, "That would be faster wouldn't it?" She slithered around the desk and James followed in tow. James was careful to keep his distance as he figured getting your tail stepped on would hurt, especially if it was your main method of conveyance.

They quickly found the bookshelf. The books were quite high up. The lamia looked at James and then looked at books. She then lifted herself up on her tail, and pass the books down to James.

James carried them to a nearby table with great difficulty. The lamia followed and asked "Is there any species you are researching in particular?"

James thought and then replied. "No, I’m just going to read until I get tired. I have nothing else happening today."

The lamia nodded and said "I’m Maria by the way, technically you are supposed to call me Ms. Maria but I don't mind. It’s nice to meet such an avid reader."

James looked bashful. "The most amazing details and images are found right here." He gestured to his head. James tactfully neglected to mention that he preferred to read in his room. The lamia smiled and headed back to the Liberian’s desk.

James spent the rest of the day reading. He decided to start with books written by humans. From these he learned many interesting facts, like that centaur's tend to have unusually long arms compared to human women their size, this coupled with flexibility helped the clean their selves. He confirmed that insect morphs mostly used pheromones. He learned that dragonets could in fact turn into dragons but that this usually killed them in the process.

In a margin of a wonderfully illustrated copy of “Species in the world of monsters”, there was scrawled “Wasps may be parasitic.” James had no idea what the hell that meant, did they attach to things like leeches?

He went to sleep with tired eyes and a sore neck. At class the next day he saw that his censure was complete and unrelenting. The other students treated him as if he did not exist. James had never been conversational but the level of censure surprised even him. He noted that Philip was unable to meet his gaze. After a quiet day he was notified by Miss Sialia to go to the principal's office.

Outside of the principal's office the modestly dressed secretary greeted him "The principal orders you to report to the groundskeeper's office. She has heard that your running everywhere is hurting the lawns around the school." The mousy secretary had a surprisingly a stern tone, in a reversal compared to her usual behavior.

The next morning James went uncertainly to the groundskeeper's shed. In a school of monsters, he wondered what the groundskeeper would look like. He guessed plant person.

To his non-surprise it was a plant person. James introduced himself. The groundskeeper eyed him suspiciously "Are you the fellow who keeps deturfing the lawns?" The groundskeeper was humanoid, although James noted he didn’t wear shoes

James shook his head, "I don't think I can run that hard." James of course would have liked to be able to run that hard but it would be dishonest to say he could.

The groundskeeper nodded his green head and put out his hand "Alright, I believe you for now. I’m Darius." James eyed the hand, it was covered in thorns.

James paused as he thought of his older brother. Then took Darius's hand warmly, the thorns receded back into his hand as he put pressure on. Darius smiled warmly at James "Not many people give that firm a handshake. I do believe you are not lying about the lawns."

James smiled back. "I went to the royal menagerie once with my brother. There was acreature there called a hedgehog, which was covered in spines. It always spiked up when I tried to pet it. My brother told me that it was suspicious because I was soft, that's what something that was trying to eat it would do. My brother always petted firmly and it responded to him." James shrugged. "It's a neat trick."

"Now let's get to work. By the end of this you are going to be an expert at returfing lawns." Darius said this happily while James made an expression of despair.

James said in a helpful tone "I have never had to returf a lawn before."

Darius shrugged “It's not hard, you lay down the turf, and then I can help it grow."

James gave a pleasantly confused look and asked "How do you do that?"

Darius smiled and patted his legs "I can spread my roots down and help the grass root into the soil." He noted James’ interested expression and then said "Now help me wheel this turf to where the damage is."

James helped push a wheelbarrow full of turf, it was heavier than it looked and James was panting when they reached the damage. Surveying the damage done, James could only be impressed. The turf was completely upside down in some places.

James expressed dismay. Darius rolled his eyes. "Don't give up, we will have this fixed in no time." He overturned the wheel barrow of turf. "Now the first thing to do is measure out the damaged area." with that they got to work.

As James was on his hands and knees helping to tuck in some turf, Darius suddenly asked "So why are you here?"

James looked up at Darius as he spread his roots underneath the laid turf. James looked confused "What here turfing the lawn?" He did not want to get into that again.

Darius grunted slightly "At the school."

James turned back to the turf "Why does everyone want to know why I am here so badly? Perhaps I wanted a broad education."

Darius gave a snort and a stern look to James. "If it's something that will bring trouble to the school, I need to know."

James stood up to examine his handiwork. "Everyone assumes that I’m fleeing some trouble. Did the principal ask you to ask me?"

Darius started to unroll the next bit of turf. "Few humans come here unless they have to. Me and the principal are old friends, she just can’t leave something like this alone."

James produced the measuring tape. "It's not something that will bring trouble to the school so you don't need to worry." Darius looked at James thoughtfully.

James spent his mornings that week helping the groundskeeper repair the damage that had been done. Despite the amount of work involved James had to admit that there was a degree of satisfaction in the work.

One day he examined the wide track of turf that had been cut through the dirt more closely. The steps were smaller than his, and he didn't drag his feet. He ended up following the track, which lead directly to where he met Forma.

During lunch, he laid down panting. "Hey Forma, how do you keep getting here first?"

Forma had only been forced to sit down "I run, why do you ask?"

James propped himself up "I run and you always get here first, what's your secret?"

Forma shrugged. "I run on all six legs, I laid a pheromone trail so I don't have to slow down to look."

James sat up suddenly. "Wait you have six legs?"

Forma patted her arms and legs. "Yes, don’t you have four?” James looked at her blankly. “If I lie down I can use them all at once." She mimed lying down, and pointed at the two multicolored broaches she kept in her hair. "What did you think my complex eyes were for?"

James had assumed that they were simply hair decorations. They were a deep black and tended to blend into Forma’s hair. "I hadn't noticed them. That explains why you are so muddy all the time." Forma nodded as if he was saying the sky was purple. "Anyway can you change your route? Every time you cut through the lawn I have to returf it in the morning." Forma nodded, and refrained from asking why he was returfing lawns.

On Tuesday James realized that all of his classes had tests on Wednesday. This was cause for little concern. In middle school he had never payed attention to when tests were. His memory coupled with an ability to pay attention in class meant he had never studied.

He looked at the material from class, most of it was familiar and he did some problems as practice. He felt good so he went to sleep happy. James liked the things he was good at, especially classes.

The next day passed quietly, James drank a coke in the middle of the day to help keep his energy up. The tests drew from the material he knew and he was able to guess confidently at the things he didn't.

He asked Forma about how her tests were going and she seemed confident. Forma seemed pretty sharp, although James would have had a hard time definitively testifying to anything but her reflexes. He knew these to be very sharp.

James went to sleep that night happily confident. On Friday morning when the results were published he overflowed with happiness; he had made at least fifth in all of his classes. In miss Sialia’s class; he was second. He celebrated in the traditional fashion. He allowed himself a small self-satisfied smile and then spaced out again.

His classmates did notice, but this was limited to a few glances. He was still a persona non grata. By Friday the damage done to the lawns had been repaired. Darius shook his hand as James left saying "You are easily the hardest working human I have ever met."

James smiled back at Darius. “These gardens are some of the finest I have ever seen. They would not be out of place at the palace.” This was a supreme compliment to Darius.

With his punishment finished, James was left with time to think. There were few things that troubled James more. The calm allowed him to reflect on his situation. On a hunch he dug up the scholarship pamphlet again and reviewed it. James’s heart sunk when it said “Support among the student body." Without a miracle he was almost certainly screwed.

Understandably James awoke in bad mood on Saturday. He went to class sullenly. What was the point of learning things to never use them? When class ended at the half day mark, the students were lined up and lead to the gym.

It was full of club booths. Miss Sialia spoke to the class. "Alright, students. This is the annual club fair, where every club puts up a booth to attract new members. It is recommended that you join a club and distinguish yourselves so that your college applications look better. Many of you have already decided on a career. We almost certainly have a club for you. I myself joined a club.” At this point miss Sialia went on a tangent about her days in a club and for some reasons the wonders of human cuisine.

James put up his hand. "Is there any limit to the clubs we join?"

Miss Sialia was pulled back to reality. "Oh right, no. But try not to overburden yourselves. Remember your studies are important.” She went on a tangent again. At this point most of the students wandered off. The booths were tempting, but James was too polite to leave.

When miss Sialia finished her tangent she produced a list of the various clubs. James wondered for a second why the club fair was so late in the semester. Then he scanned the list. He quickly noted the diplomat club, and that there was a club for the understanding of insect-morphs. Thinking of the scholarship James made a bee-line for the diplomat club booth.

At the back of the gym he saw a table with a menagerie of monsters at it. A male harpy wearing a large pair of glasses was standing at the table apparently having just thrown some dice. The harpy peered down at the dice and smiled. His brown and green tail went up happily. “I rolled a seven, did my assault succeed?” James shook his head and kept walking.

The diplomat booth was decorated in light blue with white accents. The decorations were all handmade. This clashed with the deeply purple dragonet that stood infront of it imploring people to join. He was obviously a senior and was best described as self-assured.

He was not the least surprised when James strode up to him and offered his hand saying "Hello, I’m James. I’m going to join, what do we do?"

The dragonet smiled down at James "I’m Eric the president. This club trains students to be diplomats. Dancing, debating, dining and the like. That’s Sally the vice president." He motioned to a light blue slime, she was entranced in trying to drink something through a straw. "It’s good to have you onboard James." He handed James a flier.

The club looked keen, it had diplomacy lessons, international relations stuff and they debated frequently. It met a couple times a week and James felt he could manage it with classwork.

With the biggest problem solved, James wandered through the booths. There were many interesting clubs, a masquerade ball club, a crafting club, a hunting club. James felt motivated to keep things at a manageable level.

James continued wandering until he stumbled into the insect morph relations club. It was staffed by a spider-girl, a wasp-gentleman, and a trio of identical ant-morphs. The ant-morphs were all nearly identical copies of Forma, which caught James’ eye. Deciding to test his luck he walked up to the booth. It was extensively covered in lacy spider silk decorations. The spider girl was apparently bored after covering every available surface and resorted to twirling her hands around one another at high speed.

James bowed slightly and asked the trio of ant-girls "Do any of you know Forma?"

The ant-girls had been communicating among themselves but they all looked at James with a confused expression, heads cocked in unison. The leading one asked "I’m sorry?"

James repeated himself. "Do any of you know Forma?"

The ant-girls paused until one of them shifted slightly. As she shifted James thought he could catch a whiff of something. The trio nodded and leading member said "I’m sorry, you are saying our name wrong. We are all Formica."

James smiled, nodded and quickly changed the subject "I apologize, I must have misheard. What does your club do?"

The wasp-gentleman was staring into space and spoke without looking. "Insect-morphs are intrinsically different from many species." A closer look showed that the wasp was so androgynous that the title of gentleman was a guess.

The spider girl joined in "We seek to dispel various rumors surrounding our people."

The trio spoke in unison. "And work to enable cooperation through understanding."

James was fairly impressed by this display and the asked. "I’m pretty new here, is there anything I should know? I don't wish to spread misinformation."

The spider girl started this time 'It is malicious and false to say...”

The wasp continued "That we are unthinking and unfeeling drones..."

The trio finished "When we are individuals with our own thoughts and feelings."

The trio speaking in perfect unity prompted James to say "That is impressive."

The group looked at him together and responded with "Thank you." In perfect unison. The spider girl continued "Yeah, we have to practice to pull that off actually."

James smiled, even insects could have a sense of humor apparently. "I get the feeling that club isn't much fun."

The wasp shrugged "Why do you say that?"

James looked around. "You all look bored out of your minds." James thought he could smell something again but subtlety different.

The trio started. "Well, the insect societies are very different from other species, and usually insular."

The spider girl continued "So there is not much interest in building bridges between our peoples."

The wasp finished "Also a lot of people just find us, well creepy."

James shrugged "Do mantis people exist?" There was a round of head shaking. "Then the insect peoples are cool in my book. Back home insects did some of the most amazing things ever seen."

The group shifted, and the spider girl went around the table to inspect James. James smiled his toothiest simile in response. After looking him over head to toe a few times, she shifted and the group said "Are you interested in joining?"

James bowed and then said "Thank you, but I have committed to the diplomat's club." He showed the paper. He turned to the spider girl. "Are you sizing me up for a meal?"

The spider-girl laughed and backed off. The leader of the trio of ant-girls addressed James "It's a shame, you are the most interested person we have met all day."

James shrugged in response "Comes from being human I guess."

The wasp spoke up, after seeming to size up James in the same manner as the spider girl. "The other human was not interested."

This piqued James’s interest "You saw the other human?"

The spider girl said "Oh, yes. He was quite rude." She pointed “He went that way.”

James backed away saying "Oh, well I must go introduce myself. If you will excuse me." he didn't wait for a response and was off in a dead sprint. He searched frantically, scanning the crowds as he pushed his legs and lungs to their limits.

James saw him the first human he had seen in over a month. The familiar outline, that charmingly human shape. Heck he was even a boy. Hope blossomed in James’ heart. James was undeterred by how he was standing nervously in a corner. He was taller than James and seemed a unkempt. He was startled when James strode up to him hand extended.

He rushed forward, moving into James’ personal space "Another human, amazing!"

James quickly lowered his hand. "Hello, I’m James. Who are you?"

The other human looked around "I’m Andrew, we have to get away from all these sub-humans, I know they are watching me. Follow me” James was more than a little concerned about his habit to push people out of the way and tendency to trip people walking past him.

As they exited the gym, Andrew ducked into a secluded corner and crouched down. He motioned for James to join him. "Here we should be safe from the sub-human monster conspiracy. They aren't smart but they are vicious. I can help protect you from them."

James hesitated as the flower wilted and then extended his hand again. Shaking Andrew’s hand warmly he said "Andrew it has been a pleasure to meet you.” And then James left, leaving Andrew bewildered.

James checked his watch and saw that lunch was almost over. He ran as fast as possible to meet Forma. He arrived as he would normally have left, Forma was lying down and admiring the sky.

"Sorry, I had to go to the club thing."

Forma smiled "Same, I left at the start though."

"Not interested in clubs?" This seemed a bit silly to James. Of course he knew no one and spent most of his time alone. Maybe it was different for Forma.

Forma shrugged with all four arms "No architecture club and no engineering club."

James looked at his watch. "Hmmm. Would you like to hang out tomorrow morning?"

Looking up at him, Forma tilted her head "What will we do?"

James smiled "Look at architecture and engineering books in the library of course. If there is no club then we make our own." He pointed his finger upwards while saying this of course.

Forma nodded enthusiastically “I will meet you in the library tomorrow morning then." With that James gave her a hand up and she excused herself.

Sunday morning could not come fast enough. James slept with a smile on his face for once.

He considered setting off in his school uniform, but the flyer for diplomat club had said to dress casual. James settled on a much abused pair of jeans and a plain white shirt.

He got there early and made idle chit-chat with Ms. Maria. She was a new teacher and was doing her best to get a handle on a library that big. Forma showed up in her school uniform; which was clean for once.

"So now what do we do?" Forma asked looking around impressed and maybe a little awed. This seemed to be her first time in the library.

"Miss Maria, please point us to books on architecture and engineering. My friend wants to be an engineer." Miss Maria smiled and led the way.

Back home James’s father had religiously watched a serial on historical engineering; he had often brought James and his brothers along. James knew about various monuments and structures. They flipped through books on human engineering with James providing commentary. They also opened some books on engineering in the world of monsters with Forma providing commentary.

Forma was saying quite confidently “And that's why the main drainage canal is the greatest water carrying feat of engineering."

James smiled and thought for a second. "I admit it's impressive, but the aqueduct carries water over land, which makes it far more useful." James’s watch chimed. "Oh, dear. I have to go."

Forma asked curiously "Where do you have to go?

James quickly shouldered on his backpack. "Diplomat club, the first meeting is today. What are you going to do?"

Forma shrugged "Go back to the insect dorms I guess.” She paused for a second and carefully asked “I heard a human was asking around at the insect club booth. Was that you?"

James nodded and moved for the door. "Yep, I wanted to see if you were in. But it was just some girls called Formica instead." James said good bye to Forma and went full speed out of the library, making sure to wave goodbye to Maria.

James made it with a few minutes to spare and spent these minutes trying to control his breathing. He then carefully went into the club room and tried to sit near the back. This was hampered by there being not enough students to hide behind.

Surveying the room James saw that there were club members one side and the prospective members on the other. There were few dragonets, a lone centaur, a seriously out of place looking dryad, a lamia or two. They all looked awkward and the seating arrangement did not create a warm and inviting atmosphere.

As the meeting started everyone quieted down and the dragonet that James recognized as Eric stepped into the center of the room. He was genuinely excited to be up there. Eric launched into an enthusiastic speech about how much fun diplomat club could be and the various things they did. James zoned out and scaned the room. He realized that one of the prospective club members was a blond dragonet from his class. He didn’t know her name, and as far as he was concerned that was okay.

James plan for the club was to sit in the back, be on time, be polite and dress reasonably. According to his brother this made people think well of you. As a result James sat up when Eric mentioned that speech making and debate was an integral part of the club.

James raised his hand and asked in a timid voice "What like in front of people?"

Eric smile was naturally toothy. "Well of course. For some, talking infront of other people is difficult and this club is a good way to beat that." James reflected to himself that his version of beating the fear of public speaking consisted of not doing it.

Next was ice breakers where each student introduced themselves. James dreaded this and kept it brief "I’m James of the line of Dantes, I’m a freshman and I hope to get along."

James stopped patting himself on the back when Eric called out "Why did you join?"

Hesitating for a second James then said "I figured that all varieties of monster should be represented in diplomat club." James did his best to make this a joke.

The classroom laughed and then practice debates started, James did his level best to avoid being called on and succeeded. Finally, the club let out and James made for the door at best possible speed. He was intercepted by Eric. James tried to smile as Eric called out for him to stop. "Yes?"

Eric strode up to him confidently, James noticed that the blond dragonet trailed behind him. "It must be rather difficult to be a human in a class of monsters."

James shrugged "Oh not so much, you find friends here and there. Besides most of the class ignores me, which makes it easier I think." James gaze subconsciously went to the blond dragonet.

Eric quieted a bit and then said in a reassuring tone "You seem nice enough, no one will give you trouble in diplomat club." He glanced back at the blond dragonet. "This is my sister Sheena; she is in your class I think." Sheena was pretty in a nonconventional way, nonconventional in the fact that most of her body was covered in deep red scales. The two rather hesitantly shook hands, Sheena had a ladylike handshake despite having a hand with talons and scales.

They both avoided eye contact and Eric sensing the awkwardness that was happening left the room with Sheena in tow. James returned to his small room. To his delight he discovered a letter addressed to him.

The mail had finally arrived and it contained a letter from James’s father. The letter was rather mundane. There was one passage that James payed special attention to. "I understand that you have a hard time helping yourself but if you are determined to have fights I recommend winning them. Also I very much hope you recall my advice concerning fitness." James smiled to himself because he had forgotten his father's advice concerning fitness. James also read the postscript. "Son, I expect to be receiving a letter from you a week after you receive this message. James swore, he had forgotten to write letters to his family.

He got to work drafting a quick letter. James did his best to avoid mentioning what had gone wrong. He discarded his first draft when he realized it was too positive for him and would be quickly seen for what it was. That and it had barely any substance.

So he replaced his complete fabrication with a part fabrication. He glossed over the difficulties, focused on how he had made a friend and was learning a lot. He included a single reference to slight trouble. He realized that his father could probably read between the lines but there wasn't a choice. He finished the letter with a flourish and then jumped up from the desk. He did not enjoy writing, letter writing even less because it meant he had to keep his handwriting passable throughout. He fixed the letter from home to the wall with a smile.

With that finished he adjourned to dinner, the dinners were always pretty good and there was meat to James' immense satisfaction. After that he spent his time studying and reading 20 years after.

James woke up earlier than he wanted to. The fact that him a reasonable time to wake up was noon notwithstanding. He jumped out of bed and wondered why the hell he had done so. It was only after he had stumbled around the room in a daze for a few minutes that he remembered. He had promised his father he would get more exercise, he slowly got dressed and made his way to exercise field.

The exercise field was very large and had all varieties of equipment, more so than any human school. James surveyed the field as he gingerly started to stretch. He didn't mind the amount of stretching he did during sword fighting, but that was for fun.

As he stretched he noticed a female centaur run very hard, until even she was out of breath. James carefully joged around the track, he was born to sprint and it was hard not to.

James began jogging but tired quickly. The centaur girl ambled up. "It's unusual to see a human around here."

James looked up at the centaur girl, she was a good deal taller than him. Admiring her red hair James responded in a sardonic voice, "You would be surprised at the number of times I have heard a similar sentiment."

The centaur shrugged "I meant running on the track.” She paused for a second "I’m Cecilia, what's your name?"

"Hello Cecilia, I’m James. Do you come here often?" He started to feel the cold morning air and began to rub himself for warmth.

"Oh yes, I’m practicing for the track team." Cecilia smiled broadly. James smiled in response, he wondered exactly how fast a track team full of centaurs would go. Perhaps they had different times for different species?

"Is it very competitive?" James hoped this would be a safe area of conversation.

Cecilia paused for a second and considered the question. "I would say it's a bit competitive, but this is not a sports school to be honest. Are you trying out for something?"

James was surprised by the direction of questioning. "Oh, no. Nothing like that. I’m just trying to stay fit." James tried to keep his voice calm as he said this. "I’m a freshman, what grade are you?" He relaxed as he realized she likely meant a sport.

Cecilia smiled proudly, "I’m a sophomore. That means you are my underclassman."

James shrugged "Is that a tradition?"

Cecilia shrugged. "I don't know, but it still means that I’m older than you."

James was feeling the cold and started to jump up and down to keep warm. "Don't start, I get enough of that from my older brother as it is. Can we walk to keep warm?"

Cecilia started to walk and her long strides forced James to jog to keep up. "So you are the baby brother?" Cecilia had an easy-going manner.

James shook his head, "I have a younger brother, he's the baby. How about you, any brothers or sisters?"

Cecilia shook her head. It took her a few minutes to sprint around the track. "So why go here?"

James shrugged. "I could run up and down the halls in the dorm but this seems like a nicer place to go running." He looked up at Cecilia innocently.

She huffed in response. "What are you doing at this school?"

James nodded. "I joined the diplomat club thank you for asking. Do classes get any easier in sophomore year?"

Cecilia rolled her eyes and said "A little but only because I’m better studying now.”

Cecilia sprinted off again and James did his best to catch up. He kept up for about a second and then Cecilia had pulled past him.

As she pulled up to him again James said "You are fast."

Cecilia shrugged, "I’m only average for a centaur, you must be slow."

James smiled, patting his legs "Well I only have the two legs. But I’m pretty slow by human standards because I bicycle more than I run."

Cecilia leaned forward. "What is a bicycle?"

James laughed "It's a two wheeled device to help humans go faster." Cecilia gave a blank look. "I don’t it would help centaurs much.”

Cecilia shrugged. "Well, why aren’t you bicycling?"

James responded in a tone that suggested it was the most obvious thing in the world. "It's unlikely that I’m going to have to bicycle from danger. Makes more sense that I should practice running." He paused and then added “Also I don’t have a bicycle.” Eager to change the subject he said, "Speaking of running when are tryouts for track?"

Cecilia’s long ears moved forward perking up. "Next week. That's right I’m should be training. If you keep running, let's talk." James nodded and Cecilia took off at a gallop.

James ran a bit more but eventually he could do nothing but spit up mucus. He cut through the gymnasiums. There were multiple practices happenning. The spiders were playing a complicated game with multiple baskets, the dragonets were fencing and there seemed to be multiple racket and ball game for the Scylla. James shrugged, and wondered what humans would play? He guessed cricket or perhaps football.

The next two days were peaceful. James was glad for it; he did not want a life of adventure. The diplomat club met frequently though and James did his best to avoid notice.

Wednesday had something notable happen. James got up and went running as normal. Cecilia exchanged a few pleasantries and then took off practicing. Class with Miss Sialia was moderately engaging, although James had read the book ahead of time and daydreamed through class. The interesting thing happened as he left to go to lunch.

James put his backpack on with a grunt. As he was plotting out his route he saw Eric in the hallway. He waved hello and proceeded to try and get away as quickly as possible.

He stopped as Eric greeted him "Hello, James. Would you like to join us for lunch?"

James looked up, sighed and then turned around. He answered as politely as possible. "I apologize Eric, but I am meeting a friend for lunch."

Eric simply tilted his head "Oh, where are you meeting them?"

James kept a placid face. "Out on the fields."

Eric seemed puzzled. "Is it going to be a picnic?"

James shrugged. "I always pack my lunch so it's always a picnic for me."

Eric smiled a rather unusual smile. "Then it's a picnic, come on Sheena. James follow us while we get our lunches and then we will have a picnic." James rolled his eyes as he waited for the dragon siblings to get their lunches.

James softly knocked his head into the wall as the siblings debated what to get between the two of them. Sheena favored the smoked lizards while Eric preferred the eyeball soup. They debated rather than the older sibling simply deciding as James expected.

When the siblings finally decided and started walking a half an hour had passed. James he led Sheena and Eric on the fastest way to meet Forma. This was the most direct and muddiest route. Both Sheena and Eric tried to pick the cleanest way through the mud.

Sheena had rather fashionable school shoes on but Eric was just wearing simple shoes. Glancing at his watch James said "Eric it's just mud it's not going to hurt you."

Eric, had been trying to leap from log to log. He peered out from under his horns. "You do this every day?"

James nodded. "Usually I sprint, Eric."

Sheena glanced down at James's mud covered shoes. They were boots that James had pressed into school service. "But why don’t you track mud everywhere?"

James was surprised to hear Sheena speak and replied frankly. "I know where all the spigots are around campus. On the way back I hose off my shoes. I doubt you have ever looked, but when I come back from lunch my shoes are wet." James snapped his fingers, "Oh, why don't you guys do the same? Your scales are waterproof are right?"

Both brother and sister and nodded dumbly. "Look guys, the clearing is just up this hill, so let's hurry."

Forma must have heard them and sat up as they approached. She must also have thought it strange to see James going up the muddy hill on just about all fours, with the two dragonets following uncertainly behind him. James panting slightly called out, "Sorry I’m late Forma, these two insisted on coming. They wanted to make it a picnic. Do you have all the sticks picked out?"

Forma looked at James with an uncertain expression. For a second James thought that he saw Forma look angry. She furrowed her brow and then nodded slowly. Smiling in response James dropped to one knee, and retrieved his sword from his backpack.

Eric did not have much more time to blink before the human and the unique ant girl were hitting sticks against one another. This strange display continued long enough to enable Eric and Sheena start their lunch.

After what seemed to be a round of the game the two played, James panting rather heavily came up to Eric. "Fancy a match either of you?"

Sheena gave a blank stare. Eric puzzled asked "What sort of game are you playing?"

"A sword fighting game, you try to hit the other stick. Simplest game in the world, although Forma has some difficulties with the rules. If you play it might be repayment for the picnic?" James tried to say this in a friendly manner but the panting hurt his delivery.

Forma had a confused smile as she watched James lead Eric in stick-fighting motions, she approached him about to say something. He handed her his lunch and said "I’m sorry, just one quick round with him.” She had an exasperated look but sat down next to Sheena.

James and Eric went at it, they seemed matched despite Eric being stronger, taller, and a dragonet. James had little obvious strategy beyond swing and hope for the best. Often when James to his personal elation would force Eric back it was soon obvious that he had kept his balance using his tail. Despite his lack of technique, James was relentless, no matter how many times Eric outmaneuvered him or overpowered him he kept trying.

During a lull in the fighting when even Eric kneeled to catch his breath. James called out. "I have your gentleman's oath you won't tell anyone about this will you? I don't think students are supposed to stick fight” His tone became more serious “Also I wouldn't want to get my friend in trouble."

Eric nodded saying “Of course, I understand the importance of discretion." He looked over at his sister who was trying to quietly keep to herself and politely ignore the ant girl who was going whole hog on James’ lunch next to her. "Same for you right Sheena? You won't tell anyone will you?" She nodded yes and went back to daintily nibbling on her sandwich.

James smiled. "Thank you Eric, that's a big load off. I don't know what's going on but I get the feeling it would be bad if people knew that I am hanging out with Forma."

Eric nodded and then asked, "Just out of curiosity have you studied human fencing?"

James smiled and felt the heft of his sword. "No, why do you ask?"

Eric looked off towards the nearby trees. "You are good for an amateur."

James shrugged. "I swung sticks as a kid and practiced against Forma since I got here. You are good for someone who started today, I think you were doing forms or something. Have you been trained to defend yourself?"

Eric looked at James in his eyes, his purple lizard eyes finding an unwavering answer in the polite blue eyes of James. "I just picked a few things here and there. Lots of dragonets fence. Fighting someone with four arms must be different"

James got a wide smile. "Man you cannot imagine, she switches hands constantly so I have to outthink." He looked over at Forma. "Here, wait you should try." He eagerly beckoned Forma, and passed her the sword. “Your turn!”

The ant girl faced off against the much larger dragonet with a fiercely determined look on her face. James sit down rather heavily on the edge of the picnic blanket that Sheena was reclining on. To his surprise his lunch had been eaten.

He watched the match in the distance, said in a distracted tone "I do have your word as well, miss?"

Sheena wassurprised by James’ speaking to her, and hesitated in responding. James took this opportunity to shout advice to Forma, who was faring better than Eric expected. Instead of one stick she had become a whirling dervish of sticks.

Sheena spoke uncertainly. "I won't tell anyone about the ant." Sheena considered the back of the human's head carefully. The human was dangerous and unpredictable, she had been close when the fight between the human and Philip had started.

James watched the fight carefully trying to learn as much as he could from it. He was surprised when Sheena spoke up again. "How did you meet the ant-girl?"

James did not turn, Eric was doing a complicated maneuver that involved jumping and wing flapping. "Her name is Forma. We met in one of the fields where I was practicing my swordsmanship."

Sheena sensed that the human was not interested in talking to her and went back to daintily eating her roasted lizard. She sighed and looked around, the school grounds were perpetually covered in mud and here was no exception. It was a pretty clearing, large and with wildflowers at the boundary the trees began again. She could however see where tracks had been worn into the grass by the fencing.

Her brother was managing magnificently though, he was better than both of them put together. The ant-girl was fearless, baiting Eric only to dance away at the last possible second. Eric had great fun until the school clock chimed and the human stood up looking panicked.

James shouted. "Hey, you two. Lunch is almost over, we have to pack up and get back." Eric was surprised and hurried back to clean up his lunch.

Forma was out breath and handed the sword back to James reluctantly. James leaned in and said "I got the both to promise to not tell anyone. It should be fine." Forma nodded slowly. James looked around, the dragon siblings were cleaning up, and leaned in " you are quiet today."

She looked at James in his blue eyes and whispered "I’m upset with you. I don’t want them to ruin things."

James nodded in response and solemnly replied "They won't." He bid farewell to Forma and lead the dragon siblings through the forest.

On the way back they go down the hill covered in slippery mud. Eric eventually gave up, and removed his shoes bounding down the hill the same way James had. Sheena took the far slower approach of trying to save her shoes.

At the bottom Eric asked James "May we join you for lunch again James?"

James nodded. "I’m there most of the time, I can only meet with Forma during lunch so I don't stop at the eating hall to save time." He glanced over at Sheena still trying to carefully get down the hill. Eric rolled his eyes and went to help, James looked up for a second, asking for divine guidance, and then reluctantly went to help.

A while later Eric walked Sheena to her class. They walked close together and spoke in low familiar tones.

Sheena looked at where James had been. "Why do you think he runs everywhere? Even in class he all but sprints everywhere."

Eric looked around taking in the scenery from his still wet feet including the school building and the surrounding wilds. "Some people are in a hurry. I get the feeling he doesn’t care what others think of him. Perhaps he is an honest soul."

Sheena adopted a skeptical look. "You may think he is a fine fellow but you did not see him beating Philip. He is a fearsome for a human."

Eric nodded "For a human to be sure, he fought unexpectedly well. Perhaps it was something about his sword, it would not break no matter how hard I struck."

Sheena sharply asked "Do you think they are assassins?"

Eric smiled and laughed "No, impossible. You wouldn’t see it but their swordsmanship is completely amateur. I kept leaving openings and they kept not exploiting them."

Sheena seemed put out by this news. "He seems to dislike me."

Eric shrugged “You should know how to handle the ones who will hate you.”

Sheena kept silent as she pondered James. She trusted her brother, but he had not seen James and Philip fight. There was something off putting about how James fought. Even when surprised it hadn’t seemed unexpected to him. But he was only a human.

James was timid when he went to fence with Forma the next day. He understood that for some reason Forma was hid hanging out with him. Perhaps it was because he was so reviled. He was uncertain what Forma upset though. He had gotten promises from both of them that they wouldn’t tell anyone.

As he entered the glade, Forma was there as always. However, this time she was staring at him with a stern expression. James expected that sort of look on Formica. As a result, he was concerned. He approached her slowly holding out his lunch as a peace offering.

Her face softened slightly. “You have to tell me if someone else is coming.”

James nodded, he didn’t know the specifics, but by god if one of his only friends wanted something then he was not going to disagree. “Of course.”

Forma seemed to be searching for the right word, and her antenna twitched multiple times. “Guarantee” she seemed to stumble on the word, “That you will tell me.”

If James was confused by her behavior, he didn’t show it “I promise” he saw Forma soften and asked cautiously “Is it okay if they come again?”

Forma smiled at him sheepishly and then nodded. “The tall one is good.” James smiled and passed her his lunch.

For James the rest of the week passed peacefully. He met Cecilia every morning and wished her luck when the time came for try outs. Eric came again, accompanied by Sheena. He seemed to be in good spirits and enjoyed the fencing. It was when the diplomat club met that weekend that the peace was disturbed.

They had just received a long and boring lecture on how common double-speaking was in diplomatic conversation. To illustrate the point, they read a poem that designed and written to confuse. By chance or at least James hoped it was chance, he and Eric were paired.

As the poem began, James listened earnestly and as the poem continued Eric looked confused. It was about a competition among trees that was eventually solved by the axes of lumberjacks. Once it was over James laughed to himself and couldn’t help but explain it to Eric. The lecturer was a self-important dragonet. When no one could explain it he puffed out his chest in frustration. Finally, Eric raised his hand and explained the poem.

This recieved a round of applause from everyone. Eric tried to credit James for understanding the poem but few listened. As they moved to the next activity, Eric shook James' hand and asked "How did you get the poem so quickly?"

James shrugged “The only worthwhile thing I got from middle school was the ability to pay attention to all of a lecture." James hoped this would be the end of it but was cruelly disappointed when Eric volunteered them for a mock debate. James tried to hide his dismay.

James got up in front of the club. He thought he could see them staring at him especially hard. This caused him to avert his gaze and his palms began to sweat and his leg to tremor. He thought it had to be obvious to anyone that he was panicking.

Eric however loved the spotlight. He strode confidently to the front of the class saying hello to people occasionally. He stood up straight and tall while looking at people in the eye.

The first bone James was thrown was that topic they were to discuss was not one that either of them cared about. It was something about whether harpies should be able to wear a ceremonial baton in public.

As Eric began his speech in a dry tone, speaking against the idea, a crazy idea began to form in James head. Normally it was his policy to let the other person win. The only exemption to this was fencing. James thought that just this one time he would try to win. He looked over at Eric as he spoke, looking bored. It wouldn't be that difficult James thought, although it would be almost cheating to try when Eric wasn't.

As Eric made his closing remarks, James swallowed hard. James then launched into a passionate plea. He tried to identify the idea with members of the crowd. He hoped they would not notice how much his hands were shaking or how much it looked like he was going to pee himself. He stuttered and misspoke as usual but tried to remain passionate nonetheless.

Once he finished enthusiastically James looked over at Eric who was surprised. James nodded and smiled blandly. Eric smiled a sinister smile, he was suddenly interested and launched into a furious rebuttal. James was hard pressed to respond and his tendency to mis-speak in front of groups of people got the better of him, he however tried to remain passionate and engaged.

Once they had both finished, the class took a vote on who had given the better speech. By a narrow margin James won. He smiled, blushed and tried to withdraw into himself. What had he been thinking?

As club ended Eric approached James and shook his hand. "There really is more to you than meets the eye, James."

James looked puzzled "What do you mean by that?"

Eric waved his hand and said in conciliatory tone "Would you like to hang out with me and my friends during lunch on Saturday?"

James tried to subtly back away. "I apologize Eric, but normally I meet my friend on Saturday." He gave the fastest wink he could give.

Eric continued smiled and talking as if nothing had been said to the contrary. "It's just this once James. Besides it's good to meet more people." James tried to fade into the background and escape the conversation. "Look, just come this once, there will be snacks and cakes." James finally recognized that there was no polite way to refuse and slowly nodded. Eric smiled triumphantly. "Excellent, lunch on Saturday."

Sighing James asked "Is there a dress code?" Eric shook his head. "Fine, but just this once. It's very rude for me to suddenly cancel an engagement with a friend."

Eric nodded and gave a disbelieving look "An honorable objection."

With that James was left to go back to his room and do more homework. He found that 20 years after was going rather quickly, even though the time scale seemed weird.

The next day he went to class with a heavy heart and it seemed to drag by. When the lunch bell finally rang, James went at full speed to meet Forma. He hoped that she would be accepting of the fact that she was not invited.

Forma was saddened as James explained desperately that he did not want to go and felt bad about going. They fenced with a passion that day, with Forma relentlessly attacking, something that James was unprepared for. Still he gave a good account of himself. As they finished, James turned to leave and felt a hand on his shoulder.

Forma looked at him with her all black eyes and James squirmed under the pressure, after a moment she said "You are my friend" and sent him off with faint smile.

James went slowly towards where he was to meet Eric, he briefly considered ditching going but the honorable bits of him said he should go regardless. The honorable bits of him were also the bits of him that James considered the stupid bits most of the time.

He went to the club room and hesitantly knocked on the door. He waited for a second with no response. He considered fleeing and apologizing later. Just as he was about to run for it however the door was opened abruptly a tentacled beast.

Eric smiled warmly at James as he was ushered into the room by a taller Scylla who had several light yellow tentacles wavering around her head. James became the center of attention as he entered the room. He did scan the room though. It was a normal club room, made comfier by the addition of a few threadbare couches.

As he entered the room Eric stood next to him and loudly said "This is my friend James. He's a freshman I met the other day, smart as a whip. Say hello James."

James tried to back behind Eric said "Hello everyone. I know Eric from diplomacy club."

First was introductions, James already knew Eric, the Scylla next to Eric was named Lana, there was also a slender dignified looking elf named Steven, a light blue slime named Sally who James recognized from club, she seemed entranced in building a house of cards. Sheena was in a corner hunched over a book.

Lana seemed especially happy to greet James. She extended a tentacle for him to shake and giggled as he actually went for it. Then she extended one of her hands saying “Eric mentioned you have a talent for puzzles. We always appreciate that sort of thing around here.” James shook her hand puzzled.

With the introductions in order James surrended two cans of coke as a gift to the party. Eric had gone to some trouble to welcome James, and there were multiple sweets, ranging from little cakes to dollops of sweet cream.

Eric, Steven, and Lana asked James all kinds of questions about humans, what they eat, how they addressed one another and that sort of thing. The slime barely looked at James more concerned with building a house of cards. Her hands were however inherently bad for this as cards kept sticking to her hand.

James did not respond to the questions well and asked questions to distract attention from himself. His father had told James that people often preferred to talk about themselves. James wondered if that also held true for monsters. During the party he caught Eric and Lana exchanging happy glances at one another.

Eventually interest faded, and he tried to act natural. This by and large failed. However, the group were friends and did not mind an outsider in their midst. They talked about teachers they shared, about diplomat club and the sleep-inducing ability of the professor who lead it.

Steven talked at fast rate but his comedic timing was perfect. He often made jokes so funny they left James holding his sides. Sally bubbled freely incapable of stopping herself.

Sally for her part was an expert at imitations, often subtly changing shape just enough to invoke the character in question.

James listened politely and attentively. He might as well learn what he could.

Despite Eric goading her to join the conversation Sheena remained reading her book. She did however seem a bit more relaxed than in class.

Lana stayed close to Eric and James saw that they held hands, occasionally her tentacles played with his hair. Eric and Lana often whispered to one another. She was an active force in the conversation; often starting new topics and swaying opinion.

The most important part occurred after James had asked how they all managed their homework. Steven said in an exasperated tone "It's just incredible, I’m on the accelerated track and Eric still gets his homework done before me." Steven combination of dignified and cross, this seemed to be facilitated by his fancy clothes.

Eric looked smug and responded. “None of the stuff is that hard.”

Lana poked him with a tentacle and said in a teasing voice. “Not all of us have been tutored from childhood Eric.”

James was puzzled "Tutored from childhood?"

For the first time Sally spoke. Her voice was as clear as crystal which surprised James. "Eric is prophesized to be a great hero of the dragonets. He is supposed to stop the return of a terrible dragon from the dragonet's age of myth." James saw Eric and Lana hold hands. Sally continued, quietly smacking the table so that her house of cards fell. "So he has to be the best at everything. I am told it can be frustrating at times."

James looked over at Eric. Sure, he was a large for his age and had rather striking purple scales. But legendary hero? James thought for a second. James had had heard of charisma and studied it because he was certain he didn't have it. He admitted that Eric had charisma. People tended to look to Eric when they did not know what to do, when he suggested something people tended to do it.

James looked at Eric again. "Hey Eric, why did you decide to go to this school? It doesn't seem to be a place for a legendary hero."

Eric acted dismissive. "This is a reputable school. Even if I do end up being a hero, I will need everyday skills." He looked over at Sheena who was quietly reading her book. "Also it's a very safe place."

James nodded. "I agree on that much.” He took a noble tone “Well, Mr. Hero if you need help fulfilling your destiny or whatever I’m happy to help. It is the duty of a gentleman to promote good."

Eric smiled warmly. "Thank you James, hopefully I will never need to ask for your help." James smiled. "Let's try the drink you brought, except I don't think we have any cups."

Everyone looked around for cups, and James quickly produced a few cups from his backpack. Steven looked at his backpack intensely and said "Your backpack smells funny." James merely smiled, and very quietly and rapidly put the backpack behind his chair.

The coke had a mixed reception, Steven and Lana seemed to like it although it seemed to rev Steven up even more, the bubbles got up the noses of both Eric and Sheena. The strangest reaction was Sally, after the slime drank it small bubbles began to drift towards her skin and eventually emerged, this embarrassed her and she could do nothing to stop them.

The group talked of many things, most of which James tuned out. He wasn’t sure about Steven and Sally were juniors but Lana and Eric were both seniors, so they talked of the various senior things they would do. Some of this strayed onto what they would wear to the Halloween ball which was about two weeks away. They played a card game or two, which James did his best to lose. Eventually the party broke up and James went back to his room.

He wondered if his letter had reached his family yet and went to sleep looking forward to seeing Forma the next day.

The next Sunday passed peacefully, Forma decided to look at siege engineering, which fascinated both of them. They passed the hours until diplomat club started happily.

James avoided doing debate that day. Sheena however was less lucky and seemed to suffer for it, being extremely nervous as she spoke. James noted that Eric was beaming with familial pride.

The unusual thing was that another letter arrived. It was too soon for a response from home so James handled it gingerly. He let out a sigh of relief when he realized it was from his older brother. It was a short letter, wishing James luck and telling him to watch his manners. True to form his brother asked if he could bring a few souvenirs from the world of monsters. James smiled.

At the very end of the letter however his brother grew serious. “I imagine that our father has told you that if you start any fights you should win them. That is advice that worked for him but not necessarily us. We both know how dangerous the world of monsters is, and I don’t want you to get hurt. Back home there were few reprisals. Where you are I cannot be so confident. So let me give you a different advice, if you don’t bury conflict then eventually conflict is going to bury you. I’m not telling you to lick boots but try to be friendly. You can be hard to get along with at the best of times.” James gave a hollow chuckle, that would have been handy earlier.

Sitting on his bed and smiling sadly James lost himself in memories of his brother. Then he pulled himself up, his brother had written to him out concern and he should try to follow the advice. Glancing at the letter again, he noted that postscript repeated the request for souvenirs.

The next day brought a new surprise. During his lunch spar with Forma, Forma had just used her second right hand to pull James into her punching second left hand as they locked swords. As James stumbled back trying to catch his breath, he turned and saw Eric running into the clearing barefoot. James’ eyes widened as he saw the wooden sword in his hand.

Eric strode up to James and brandished his sword for James to examine. Smiling he asked "Do you like it?" James examined the sword, holding it up to the light, not as good as his personal sword but still he could tell that craftsmanship had gone into making the blade.

Passing his sword to Forma, James swung Eric’s sword experimentally. He used it to cut a few pieces of grass, the weight was off, the blade was a bit heavier than it looked. "It's a strange sword, why show it to me?"

Eric smiled at James. "It's an enchanted wooden sword, it's supposed to be all but unbreakable; you won’t need to find sticks now." James stayed puzzled. "I should like you to have it."

James immediately handed the sword back. "I apologize, but this is too grand a gift for me to take. I barely know you Eric and this is too expensive." To James the sword was a treasure beyond compare. He wouldn’t have to worry about the stick breaking.

Eric smiled even wider, and looked back to Sheena who was entering the clearing. "What did I tell you Sheena? A true gentleman." he turned back to James and said in compassionate voice. "It was cheap to order James, and I’m sure you will pay me back with something down the line."

James had another confused look "What do you mean by order?"

Eric was puzzled. "You know you can order stuff, right? You get credit with the school based on your grades." James had a look of surprise so complete, it would have shamed most deer. "You can order all kinds of stuff. Clothes, snacks almost anything really."

James responded with a surprised "Oh" he showed Forma the sword and told her smiling "No more messing around with sticks for us. From now on it’s sword on sword only." Forma jumped into the air happily.

Forma and James fenced for a while, and then James switched with Eric. Eric had a grin which James recognized as meaning Forma was about to have a hard time. He sat down on the picnic blanket his mind whiring. Sheena was also sitting on the blanket and watched as James seemed to use an abacus in mid-air.

Glancing at his watch James stood up suddenly and "Guys I need your help." He motioned for the both to come over.

They did so uncertainly and huddled up with James while standing. James confidently pointed at Forma "I would like to dance with you at the Halloween ball. If it is acceptable."

Forma’s surprise was complete and she hesitated, making a sort of chittering noise until blushing she nodded and said "It would be difficult."

James nodded "Do you know how to dance?" Forma shook her head. He turned to Eric "Eric could you help me teach Forma to dance this weekend?"

Eric seemed rather shocked by this turn of events "Can I bring my sister?" James shrugged. Eric kept a bemused smile "I didn't expect you to know how to dance."

James rolled his eyes "Eric I dance around with Forma everyday. Besides I practiced a good deal as a child."

Eric smiled to himself. "You really do keep being a surprise. Alright, it will be a unique experience if nothing else. When and where would you like to meet?"

James paused for a long second and then lit up with an idea. “Library, on Sunday morning before club. Does that work for you Eric?"

Eric nodded and then in a happy voice said “Shall we continue?"

Forma turned to James looking at him with a curious expression, “Switch with me. He was good before but with a sword it's a real challenge."

James smiled and placed the sword in ready position. “Alright man of destiny, I’ll have to start pulling out a few tricks to keep you on your toes."

James broke lunch early because Eric was merciless with sword in hand. Seeing as fair was fair and he already had a sword, he gave the new one to Forma, she seemed shocked by the gift and was left looking at it as James turned away

As he turned to help Eric and Sheena clean up their picnic Forma poked him on the shoulder presenting Eric’s gift sword. “You keep it."

James smiled and nodded, carefully cleaning it off on the grass and then put it into his backpack. With that James was off to class. Miss Sialia announced to the class that of course there would be a test on Halloween which merited groans. James simply shrugged, it was not like he had anything else to do after all.

The next morning as James was stretching around the track Cecilia came bounding up to him. She looked excited and James asked “What has you so excited?"

Cecilia was practically jumping in place. "I got on the track team."

James smiled and then darkened “So does that mean you will stop coming in the mornings?"

Cecilia playfully pushed James “Of course not.” She assumed a regal air "Now that I’m on the track team I will need to practice more than ever."

James smiled “So we can keep talking in the morning. I enjoy our chats; they help with the cold."

Cecilia smiled at James. “So are you going to go to the Halloween ball?"

James began jogging to keep feeling in his limbs. Cecilia kept up easily with long strides. “Of course I’m going. Not sure about my costume yet. How about you?"

Cecilia smiled. "I already figured out my costume and I want to go but it's hard to find partners to dance with. Non-centaurs have a hard time dancing with centaurs."

James shrugged “Why is that a problem? Can they not dance very well?"

Cecilia laughed, “I imagine they can dance as well as any centaur, it’s just hard to deal with the difference in feet. But dancing with other centaurs can be difficult.”

James nodded “If they are willing to try it what’s the problem?”

Cecilia sighed, “You probably haven't had to deal with this yet but guys sometimes will not understand that ladies are not interested in them.” She tried to look mature.

James expression darkened considerably. "I understand somewhat." He then suddenly said “What’s your costume?"

Cecilia was happily smug “You wouldn’t know it, and it’s hard to get if you can’t see it.”

After that the week passed mostly without incident for James. He discovered that doing so well in his classes had granted him a reasonable amount of credit with the school. He immediately checked if it was possible to order any coke. He discovered it was impossible because did coke not sell it's products in the world of monsters. After a generous period of cursing the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, how life was inherently unfair, how he was far from home and had nothing for comfort, James managed to collect himself. This left him to flip through the thick catalogs of things that could be ordered looking for pieces of his costume.

Eric was now certain of his dominance in sword fighting, fought less and instead spent more time with his sister. This left James to try and refine his skills against Forma.

James spent most of his time looking forward anxiously to the weekend when he might get his packages and his letter. Miss Sialia was a reasonably skilled teacher, but James could sense that his eagerness to participate in her class was met with hostility by the rest of the class. Miss Sialia seemed to like him and often smiled when he was the only person willing to raise their hand.

That Saturday James finally finished 20 years after. Once he had reached the end he smiled at D’artangan’s impetuousness, after all marshal of France did not sound so bad. He would consider himself lucky if he ever did anything as amazing as D’artagnan. He considered reading the sequel, his brother said it had a sad ending though. If there was one thing that James could not stand it was a pointlessly sad ending.

On a whim he flipped through the book. It struck him that something was wrong about it. Looking over the book he couldn’t figure out what it was. James shrugged to himself, it was unlikely to be important.

When Sunday finally arrived, James awoke earlier than normal. He hummed to himself happily as he put on his shoes and stretched to make sure he could still strike various poses.

He stole into the bathroom stealthily, once again making sure no one was there. He made sure to brush his hair and check that his clothes were clean. Once done he flashed a smile in the mirror smiled and went back to his room to wait. When the time came he almost skipped to the library. He had still arrived early, and it was obvious that Ms. Maria had arrived only shortly before him.

She was surprised to see him and her eyebrows showed it. “You are here rather early, some special occasion?" She seemed to imply something by that sentence.

James shrugged and came clean. “Me and some acquaintances are going to try and teach Forma how to dance. Do you have any books on the subject?"

Ms. Maria nodded and then paused for a second. “We have some books but that won't help much. What you need is some records, and a wide place to try and dance."

James shrugged again. “Do you have any of those?"

Ms. Maria smiled widely and clapped her hands together. “Yep, give me a couple minutes to set it up and I’ll show you."

James sat down in the front of the library. And rummaged in his backpack for a book. He had read only little bit by the time Forma had sat down next to him. She didn't say anything, just rested herself against the wall with her eyes closed. He had read a bit more and then he heard a greeting from down the corridor. Eric with no seeming respect for what time it was loudly greeting them with Sheena in tow.

James and Forma both responded weakly. This prompted a disappointed look from Eric. “Are we going to be dancing in the library?" Eric said this peering into the library.

James smiled “Yes the librarian, said she would help. Then she took off to parts unknown." He heard a soft shuffling sound from behind him, turning saw Ms. Maria emerging from one of the stacks.

James paused for a second trying to figure the polite thing to do and then strode forward saying. “This my friend Eric and his sister Sheena."

Ms. Maria smiled a professional smile. “Hello again, Sheena.” She slithered forward and shook Eric’s hand "I have heard a lot about you Eric." Eric merely nodded in response.

As Ms. Maria lead them through the many book stacks, Eric asked James “Do you get up this early every day?"

James shook his head, “No, but I have a hard time dancing so I figured we would need a lot of time." Eric gave a muffled laugh in response.

Eventually they came to a small side room normally used for storing supplies. Ms. Maria gestured towards a stack of dancing manuals, and then showed them how to safely operate the hi-fi. Everyone thanked Ms. Maria. As she turned to leave, James had a realization and asked “Ms. Maria would you like to join us? I know you have to mind the library but the more the merrier."

Ms. Maria smiled a warm smile and turned back towards James. "James I would love to but." She straightened up, looking official. "I have to watch the library." James nodded and his eyes lingered on her large tail, he briefly wondered if he could dance with her at all.

Eric had both James and Forma stand together. James noted again that Forma was a little bit taller than he was. “Do either of you have any dancing practice?"

Forma shook her head strongly. James nodded said "I practiced some, but that was when I was younger."

Eric clapped his hands “Alright, James you try to dance with Forma. If I see any areas for improvement I’ll say something. Let's try a slow waltz, that should be easy to follow." He looked at Sheena who had already opened her book. “Please help Sheena.” She nodded not looking up

James turned to face Forma. “Right now the first thing to know is the posture of the dance. Stand right in front of me." Forma did so. “Now put your posture kind of like this." James straightened up and Forma did the same. “Then put your arm around my shoulder, and hold my hand."

Forma took this opportunity to interrupt. “What should I do with my other two hands?"

James gave a puzzled look. "I guess you should just hold my waist kind of loosely." Forma did so and this left her with nothing to do but stare into James' eyes.

James returned the gaze for a long second and then looked away releasing Forma. “Right, now when we are dancing you do this kind of three step thing. There are other steps but we can get to those later." He mimed the motion with an imaginary partner.

Forma and James held each other again. “Hit it Eric." Eric put on the record and off they went. James was not an amazing dancer, but he could say with confidence Forma was terrible. All Forma could do was alternate between staring nervously with her black eyes down at James and watching their feet constantly. After a few rounds of getting kicked in the shins and having his feet stepped on. James said “Alright, Eric could you try? She isn't getting it." Forma apologized for the abuse James had taken.

It was kind of strange sight to see the tall form of Eric tower over the smaller and more fragile figure of Forma together. However even as they danced it quickly became apparent that Forma was just not getting it.

Eric eventually let go in defeat. He turned to James and said “Maybe if she saw an example it would help."

James responded by saying "I guess I could dance the woman's part, but I don’t know it very well and I’m not that good to start with."

Eric looked confused “No I meant you and Sheena." he gestured towards Sheena who had been watching with some amusement.

Adopting a carefully blank expression James said in the politest of tones. "I think it would work better if you danced with Sheena. You are both seem like much better dancers than I am."

Both Eric and Sheena squirmed at the suggestion. Sheena spoke up “It's frowned on among dragonets for siblings to dance.” She faltered

Eric tried to continue “It's thought to signal a..."

Sheena tried to finished admirably “A frowned upon relationship."

Shrugging James said "Huh, must only be dragonets. The brother and sister I learned dancing didn’t mind. Elizabeth and George both danced with each other, quite well I might add." This made both Eric and Sheena squirm again.

Eric turned to James again "So do you not want to dance with my sister?" James nodded which puzzled Eric. "Is it because she is my sister? I’m quite fine with the two of you dancing together."

James shook his head and still looking at Eric. "I apologize Eric but your sister has committed transgressions for which I have not forgiven her. As a result, I do not want to associate with her." He looked over at Forma who had been stoically watching. He sighed "I f it's absolutely necessary to teach Forma I will dance with her though."

Eric looked over at Sheena who shrugged in response. “What did she do?"

James diverted his gaze away from Eric. "Eric, that is between her and me. I apologize if this offends you, Eric. If she really wants to make nice she can fucking talk to me by herself, without you to shield her. I don't want to talk about it."

He turned to Sheena giving her a cold expression. He then walked to her, mechanically bowed and said "Shall we dance?"

Sheena was somewhat bewildered by this turn of events and simply accepted passively. They adopted waltz position and James gave a cold stare into Sheena’s red eyes. To her credit Sheena did not blink, but she hardly felt comfortable. This was of course until they started to dance. James was not a particularly good dancer but he could feel that Sheena was uncomfortable and was unable to not try to support and soothe her. Sheena appreciated the fact that he constantly made sure that he was never going too fast, that he would rather trip himself than step on her feet, and that whenever she felt unsteady James was always there to reassure her.

When they were finished Eric stood up and started clapping saying "Bravo. You guys need to practice but you definitely had the feeling of the dance."

James let go of Sheena and resumed his cold expression. "Let's see if helped that Forma learn." Forma had watched the dance very intently, keeping time by clapping her second pair of hands quietly.

It did not help. James' shins were hurting pretty badly when they stopped and he sat down heavily. Forma sensing that this was going nowhere stood up and announced to everyone “Thank you all for helping me learn how to dance. But I think it will be much more difficult for me to dance at the ball than you think."

James looked up from messaging his bruises and said "Why's that?"

“Because the ants only send a limited number of individuals to any given ball, we are expected to all be the same." Forma had a sad look as she said this.

Eric took this opportunity to speak up "Yeah, James meeting with a singular ant-girl is very rare."

James seemed to ignore Eric and spaced out "How many do they normally send?"

Forma was a bit puzzled "I have been told that normally 3 of us go. Why?"

James paused then asked "Eric, how do these dances normally go?"

Eric had a puzzled look "What do you mean?"

James made the come-on motion with his hands "How long, where they normally are, etc."

Eric had a look of realization "Oh, it goes most of the night and takes place in the main hall and the gardens usually."

James paused to think and then, he smiled "Forma, if you wanted to could you get on the dance squad?" Forma nodded. "Then it's simple. Forma get on the dance squad. Back during the club fair, the ant-girls there seemed enthused that a human was interested in cooperation with the insect peoples. I’m going to take advantage of that and ask if I could entertain one of the dance squad for the evening.”

Forma cut in “And then I’ll give a sign, and we take off. Any other insect species would inform on me though."

Eric stood up "I can use my friends to help shield you two."

Forma nodded slowly "Might work.

Getting a funny smile Eric said. "I can only imagine what the two of you would do alone and secluded in a dark room."

James responded earnestly. "I think if we start to sword fight Eric people will notice. Thank you though."

Eric rolled his eyes. James messaged his bruises and glanced at his watch, he stood up saying "You guys should get going to lunch, club is going to start soon."

Eric eyed James curiously "Why don't we go together?"

"Because me and Forma both packed lunches, we will stay behind and clean up." The room was not that messy, but James felt that Ms. Maria would want the books put back.

Eric nodded "Alright James see you in club. Do try to speak today." James simply shook his head.

Sheena stood up and said to James “Would you discuss your grievance with me?"

James shook his head. "I apologize Sheena, but I am not ready to forgive you yet."

Sheena took a step back and asked politely with only a touch of impatience “Will you at least tell me what I did wrong?"

James shook his head. “You should know."

Eric snorted in disbelief “You realize it's maddening to be told you did something wrong and not be told what it is right?"

James shrugged "I suppose it is."

As Eric and Sheena moved to leave the room. James turned to Forma "I’m going to get Ms. Maria. Take my lunch." he rooted around in his backpack and then passed his lunch to Forma who took it gratefully.

Once Eric and Sheena had left the library, James was left walking with Ms. Maria back to the room. As they walked James smiled as he was suddenly struck by a thought. "Ms. Maria, you know Sheena?"

Ms. Maria turned and nodded “Oh yes, she comes by the library fairly often. A bit more often than you in fact."

James raised his eyebrows “What kind of books does she read?"

Ms. Maria smiled "I’m not sure if I should tell you."

James replied in a teasing tone. “Oh, it's quite all right if you tell anyone else what I read."

Ms. Maria smiled and said “If you promise not to bother her with it, I’ll tell you.” James nodded “She reads mostly romance novels, the brave knight rescues the princess kind of things."

"Hmmmm." was James' simple reply.

As they cleaned the room and put the chairs back in order James called out "Do you want us to put these books back?" He motioned to the stack of books on dancing. "I think Forma would be pretty good at putting books in order." Forma raised all four hands.

Ms. Maria smiled and said “Please do not bother, we need them for the dancing classes."

Forma got a confused look on her face. "Dancing classes?"

Ms. Maria smiled “The school offers dancing classes in the courtyard during lunch the week before any dance. It's supposed to make the students more confident during the actual dance."

James nodded, and then asked mostly on a whim “Are you going to the dance?"

Ms. Maria nodded “Yeah, it's important to have faculty to chaperone the thing."

James smiled at Forma and then looked back at Ms. Maria “Are you going to wear a costume?"

Ms. Maria nodded and then said in a stage whisper “It's a secret.” She then paused and said in a normal voice “And before you ask it's not a medusa."

Forma got a confused look “A medusa?"

Ms. Maria got an exasperated expression and said “Even in a school full of lamias, it's just assumed that if a lamia has a secret costume that it's automatically going to be medusa. Don't ask me why."

Both Forma and James shrugged. Once the room had been cleaned, James and Forma traded good byes and then split. Just as he was about to leave James had a brainwave and checked out a book called “A guide for dragonets on dancing with non-dragonets."

The rest of the day passed quickly, James as usual tried to avoid standing out in club. The most exciting bit however was when James got back to his room that evening. There was a letter and a package waiting for him. The letter was from home and contained news about his family and all the other little things that remind one of home.

James penned a response on the spot. He talked about how he was making some friends things seemed to be going well. The letter was a little bit more positive and James made sure to ask what his little brother was going to wear as a Halloween costume.

The other package contained a black turtle neck and black pants. Excitedly James put them on and checked his reflection. They looked perfect and James put them away with a smile.

At lunch the next day it was just James and Forma. Forma was as usual winning, she tended to exploit the extra arms factor combined with having longer strides than James. James found this a bit exasperating, he when possible preferred to attack. But Forma had forced him to play defensively as usual.

After a fairly long bout where James was all but certain he was going to win for once, Forma in a stunning display feinted beautifully and knocked the sword from James hands.

James took this as an opportunity to sit back heavily and catch his breath. He motioned for Forma to join him and she sat down across from him.

She spoke first saying a pleasant tone “What's up? Would you like me to let you win?"

James rolled his eyes. “Thank you but no. I’m going to the dance lessons tomorrow and on Wednesday. I apologize." he passed her the lunch sack.

Forma nodded and said “Thank you. It's not a problem, so have a good time."

James gained a cunning smile. “Would you like to go with me?" maybe if Forma got to practice with different people she would get it.

Forma imitated James using her second set of arms to great effect.

Looking a bit morose she answered matter of factly said “If I did go I would have to act like we have never met."

James looked surprised and grew a little depressed “Oh, right. What will you do if we can't hang out?"

Forma smiled slightly “Eat lunch with everyone else for once. Ant-morphs are all supposed to eat together anyway."

Nodding James asked “Is that why you never bring your own lunch?"

In a reluctant tone Forma admitted “Yes, it would make me stand out in front of them."

James nodded and then asked “What do they think you are doing instead?"

Tersely Forma responded, “Sleeping or studying."

James smiled at the thought and stood back up “Well, it's time for you to school me again."

Forma smiled deeply. “If we can’t go to dancing practice then let’s practice dancing right now” James suppressed a groan and tried to be enthusiastic, okay he should have seen that coming.

James spent that night reviewing the book he had checked out from the library. Well that and messaging his bruises. Frustratingly the book had relatively little on dancing with insect species. He eventually went to sleep happily thinking about that Friday.

The dance lesson the next day was led by a male centaur that James strongly suspected was a math teacher. But still it was a fairly good time despite the mortal terror James felt whenever a centaur almost stepped on his feet.

The next day however passed a bit more eventfully because it was Ms. Sialia of all people leading the dancing lesson. Partially by chance, and partially because to most James was still a non-person, James ended up paired with Ms. Sialia.

Ms. Sialia said “Oh, hello James. Do you do a lot of dancing?"

James shook his head “Oh, no. Well not much.” Paused and then added “And definitely not with people like this though. I’m no good anyway though.”

Ms. Sialia smiled. “The trick is to not be nervous. If you are nervous the other person feels it and thinks it's their fault." Ms. Sialia was confident this was true because she was presently doing it.

James smiled back “Have you done a lot of dancing Ms. Sialia.?"

Ms. Sialia shook her head. “Not with humans no. Still it's part of the reason I came here.” She smiled at James and offered her wing.

James gingerly took her wing, trying to be gentle. This continued until he looked back at Ms. Sialia who mouthed confidence at him. He then gently but firmly took her wing and started to dance.

Neither of them were very good but they both seemed to enjoy it. Ms. Sialia because James was attentive and tried to do his best despite everything. James because it seemed to be going well.

Once the music was over both James and Ms. Sialia were slightly flush. Ms. Sialia was the first to speak and said “You are mistaken James. You are pretty good."

James nodded and responded “Thank you." he tried to move away only to find that Ms. Sialia was still holding him tightly “Umm, Ms. Sialia will you let go? We have to change partners." Ms. Sialia blushed and apologized.

James less than enthusiastic to go to his next class, and so stayed behind to help Ms. Sialia clean up. In the midst of organizing the dance books James asked “Are you going to wear a costume to the ball Ms. Sialia?"

Ms. Sialia turned smiling broadly. “Oh yes, I’m very excited about it too. Are you wearing one James?"

James nodded emphatically. “Yes but no one will get it. I look forward to seeing you at the dance."

Ms. Sialia smiled and looked at James fondly. "I look forward to it as well James."

The week leading up to Saturday passed mostly quietly, James did his level best to avoid Sheena and avoid hurting himself dancing with Forma.

On Saturday a few students wore their costumes to class, a fact which was politely ignored by the faculty. James for his part was much too consumed by the round of testing that had begun to pay any mind. However once that was over James went back to his room with a skip in his step. There was little to do he felt but wait for the dance to start.

He pulled out his costume again and put it on experimentally. He stared at the mirror giving it his most serious glare. It however felt off.

James decided that the problem was his hair and took a comb to it. His hair however refused to cooperate. In the end he was left staring at the mirror no closer to looking the part. He then said rather experimentally "I am not a number-" another voice joined in "I am a free man."

James felt a cold presence behind him and jumped. What vaguely appeared to ghostly white woman was floating behind him. Fen giggled and said "I like your costume, but you don't quite look the part."

James frowned and looked back at Fen. "I know, but I can't get my hair to go right. Could you try?"

Fen smiled and said “Alright, square your shoulders and face the mirror." James suppressed a chill as Fen put her hands on his shoulders. As she combed his hair she asked “So, what's this about you trying to dance with Ms. Ant-girl?"

James raised his eyebrows in surprise “Man, you do hear all. And her name is Forma."

James could just barely perceive Fen shrugging. "I hear a lot, that much is true. Do you like her?”

Nodding James said “She is my friend."

Fen gave an exasperated sigh "I don't mean like that James. I mean like like her."

James took a careful breath and responded "I don't think I can like like anybody to be honest. I’m not a person for romance, I loved a girl in elementary school, I probably still love her to be honest. I liked a girl in middle school but that didn't work out. I don't hang out with Forma because I wish to be romantically involved with her." James winced as Fen picked at his hair.

Fen paused for a second and then asked “So why do you hang out with her? You seem rather dedicated to her.” She patted his shoulder “There I think I’m done."

James looked at himself, she really had gotten the hair just right. “I’ll have to avoid hats like fire. I imagine you will hear the answer fairly soon." James paused for a second striking a pose and giving the mirror his most penetrating stare. “What are you going to do?"

Fen had come a little bit more into focus and James could just barely perceive Fen smiling "I love Halloween. It's the best time to jump out and scare people. You get the best reactions."

James smiled “So what do you do” just show up behind people and say boo? That has to get old after a while."

Fen came into focus a little bit more “Nah, I got a whole bunch of tricks. I can't give them away though.” She was smiling broadly. “You ever seen a pool of blood become rats and then run up someone’s legs?"

James had a shocked look, Fen giggling said "I guess not."

Glancing at his watch James said "I have to get to the dance. Have a good evening Fen."

James could just see Fen put a misty hand to her forehead. “Be seeing you." both giggled "James, I will be listening." they gave their farewells and James set off to the ball.

The ball was impressive. The hall had been strung up with hangings that looked like spider silk, there were multiple pumpkins carved with the faces of various monsters, there was also an impressive looking food spread.

Even considering the food spread it was the monsters that were the most impressive. All of the monsters were wearing amazing costumes, many of them were multicolored and very elaborate. James didn't know what most of them were but figured he could roll with it. His first goal he figured was to canvas the room and look for people he knew.

This was a bit difficult because the center of the hall had been given over to dancing leaving everyone who was not dancing to crowd around the sides. This made it trying to get just about anywhere and James had to carefully avoid many people.

As he moved through the crowd he saw Ms. Maria looking bored next to the food table. Waving he moved in to say hello. Ms. Maria was wearing a nurse outfit, to be very clear this was not an attractive nurse outfit; just a standard white nurse outfit complete with the folded hat. It did a lot to conceal her lower body giving a brief illusion of a human nurse in the middle of so many monsters. James waded over and said "I like your costume Ms. Maria."

Ms. Maria nodded in response, her tail came up to pass her a cup, shattering the illusion. “Thank you James. It's a surprise because everyone expects women to wear unnecessarily attractive costumes on Halloween.” She laughed.

James nodded “How did you get the hat right? The hat was indeed a perfect nurse's hat, the same as James had seen many times before.

Ms. Maria smiled "I had to look up how to do it from a nurse's handbook. If I had not become a librarian I would have been a nurse I think.” She looked James over “What is your costume James?"

James smiled and said "Patrick mcgoohan.” Seeing the blank stare that Ms. Maria had James continued “Very famous human actor, starred in two serials and a good number of movies as a spy."

Ms. Maria shrugged, her green hair poked out slightly from beneath her white cap. In a polite tone she said “It looks good on you James." with that James bid farewell and headed back into the party.

After circuiting the main hall twice looking for Eric and Sheena. James headed outside and into the gardens. Near the school the gardens were lit fairly brightly, but as you got away from the school they became the appropriate level of spooky darkness. Some of the monsters were grouped around the lights or relaxing on the benches.

A rather heavily decorated sign advertised a hunted hedge maze, next to it a rather bored looking elf stood. He was wearing a skeleton costume and did not appear to be enjoying anything.

Scanning the courtyard, he finally sighted Eric and his friends. They were crouched by one of the lights and glimpsed two of the figures passing a bottle. Squinting James could make out the distinctive form of Sally.

As he approached he could just barely hear Steven say “Sally, please hold it above yourself and pour onto yourself. I don't like the slimy taste.” As James entered the circle Steven stuffed the bottle into his jacket. Lana was watching from across the circle and looked on with bemused

Eric stood up to greet James “Ah James how good to see you. Don't worry Steven."

James strode up and shook Eric’s hand. Eric was wearing a very elaborate costume. It would be difficult to describe but it seemed to be a hero’s costume. He had a wreath of strangely shaped purple leaves on his head, he wore some very convincing armor painted red. He also was carrying what looked to be a gilded baton of command. (rewrite so references are more monsterish)

“Hello Eric." James glanced over at Steven. His costume seemed to be an officer of some kind, it was still vomit free amazingly. “It seems the party has already begun in earnest." Eric smiled and James made sure to add "I like your costume. It's very detailed."

Eric laughing said “If you think the party has started then go to the pool and party with the mermaids, trust me when I say don't drink the punch.” Smiling happily, he continued “I decided to go all out on my last Halloween costume. Can you guess the theme?"

James shrugged. “Not really. Eric, have you see-"

Eric interjected “It’s a hero, I thought we would see you with Forma."

Nodding sadly James said "I’m still looking for her, that and I might be too nervous to try and get her."

Eric put his hand on James' shoulders “Don't be, it doesn't help. I recommend just going up there, saying your bit and then getting Forma away as quickly as you can." James nodded, that might work with he was bold enough with it.

Trying to hide how nervous just thinking about doing it made him James responded. “I’ll try it. Do you know where the ant girls are?"

Eric called back to his group “Did anyone see where the ant-morphs are?"

Steven smiling broadly said "I think I saw them by the bathroom" he gave a cautious look around and then took another sip.

As James turned to leave, Eric stopped him. "James, before you go rescue your fair maiden I’d like to make a deal with you."

James shrugged in response "I’m not going to do anything crazy even if you dare me Eric."

Chuckling Eric said “No, nothing like that. It's bothering Sheena, and I’d like you to at least explain why you are angry at her. If you do i’ll show you this great spot I saw where you and Forma can sit privately."

James face went placid "Eric, my mother always told me that if you apologize then you should be sincere. Otherwise you are just going to fight with them again. Bribing people into reconciliation doesn’t help. I’ll talk to Sheena but I don't want to take your deal."

Having taken his stand, James walked over to the circle of Eric’s friends and gestured to Sheena. "I’d like to talk to you for a moment, if you please."

Sheena looked up slightly surprised, perhaps because someone had noticed her. Sheena had the tendency to kind of blend into the background if she didn't need to engage in the conversation. Her costume was plain compared to the outlandish costumes the other monsters were wearing. James guessed it to be a princess.

The pair walked some distance away, James made sure this was a good distance from Eric. Sheena stood up a bit straighter and said in a formal voice "James, please tell me what I did wrong."

James rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath. "I’m going to be frank with you Sheena. I’m angry because of the bullying, you didn't do a damn thing to stop it. You and the rest of the class, may you all rot together."

Sheena seemed surprised by this. “I-I thought you had forgotten about that."

Eric gave a steely stare “A point to remember is that humans tend to have long memories and rarely forgive slights, perceived or otherwise."

Sheena continued “It's not my fault that you were bullied by the class. What was I supposed to do? I didn't want to cause any trouble."

James crossed his arms and gazed off into the distance trying to suppress his anger "Sheena your brother is to be a great hero. You didn’t speak up to help someone because you were afraid of trouble? I would like an apology and your word that you won’t allow it again"

Sheena seemed defensive “Why do you want my word?"

Eric continued to stare off into the distance “So that when it happens again, you might be moved to help them. Your older brother may be the hero but surely some of that importance will rub off on you. How can an average person stand up for what’s right if you won’t?”

Sheena nodded slowly and in a very clear and precise tone said "I apologize to you, James Dantes and give my word that I will not allow pointless bullying to happen again."

James nodded and looked Sheena in the eyes for the first time that evening. “Thank you Sheena. Have a pleasant ball, I’m off to go find Forma."

As James raced off in what looked to be burglar’s clothes Sheena turned and went back to Eric. He was watching as a tipsy Steven tried to dance with Sally. The fact that Sally’s slime body had no legs was apparently giving him problems.

Sheena sat down next to Eric in his hero costume and scooted close to him. She sat there quietly lost in thought. Still watching the spectacle happening before him Eric asked “So what was giving the human so much trouble?"

Sheena was startled, and began to giggle at Steven tripping and Sally moving to catch him. Finally, she replied. “He was upset that no one in the class came forward to stop the bullying. Said he was still angry at me for not stepping forward."

Eric had a contemplative look for a second. “It’s strange that he is angry with you personally."

Sheena kept the somber look “He said he was angry at the whole class as well. Also asked me to promise that if I ever saw something similar I would step forward and stop it."

Sally had caught Steven as he stumbled and her blue slime was undulating as a result, the motion however was too much for Steven and he rolled to the ground saying “Oh god I’m going to be sick."

Eric rolled his eyes “Oh damn it. Sheena go get a lot of water, I’m going to have to nursemaid him."

Sheena had a hesitant look and then looked at Eric a bit worried “You told some stories but are all of the school dances like this?"

Eric put his hand to his forehead “Most of the ones with Steven, yes. Poor fool doesn’t know when to quit."

Back inside the main hall James tried to casually scan the crowd. After a few conspicuous attempts James decided he would of course look more natural and be more successful with a food plate in hand. As mentioned it was a truly impressive spread, it had almost every type of desert that could be imagined. Jellies, cakes, confections, it even had what looked to be iced shrimp. However, the many types of students meant that this was just a small sample of what was available. Most of the table was given over to things humans would not regularly consider eating for pleasure or sustenance.

As he pondered if you could consider anything involving worms as food he spotted the ant-girls standing near the bathrooms. True to what Forma had said they were all dressed identically, and they all looked about an equal amount of bored. Their costume consisted of modestly colored dresses, perhaps they were dressed as not ants, which seemed to James a weak costume.

Finishing his plate and trying to psyche himself up for what was going to happen James fidgeted. He nervously felt the hem of his shirt and then his collar. Deciding that it was unlikely that he was going to get less nervous and recalling the advice of Eric he decided to go big.

He approached the trio of ant-girls. Almost instinctively they formed a triangle in response to his approach, and their antenna began to twitch. The one in front seemed the most authoritative. James took a deep breath and said “Formal greetings Formica. How does this ball find you?" James said this in the loud oblivious tone that suggested a certain deficiency.

The leader ant gave James a steely look. The second girl-ant spoke up “It finds us well." the first continued “What is your purpose here?"

James took another breath trying to keep calm. If he got too excited, he would do it wrong and mess up his chance.

I need to make the time to identify Forma. He began to scan the trio of ant-girls. The first was clearly not Forma, being in front would make it very difficult to abscond with her. Well she could help it.

“You of course remember when we met at the club fair." James started to look over the one to the right of the leader. She looked much the same as the leader, her brown hair was combed the same way, she had the same style of shoes. Impeccably clean James noted.

The group shifted slightly. The third spoke up “As we recall you were rather enthusiastic towards the insect peoples." James scanned the ant-girl on the left. Her dress was arranged the same way, her sash tied the exact same as the front ant-girl. The leader spoke again “Your exact words were something along the lines that the insect people were cool so long as mantis men were not a thing." James chuckled slightly and then had a eureka moment. The clothes would have to be the same, if they were not that would make Forma stand out. Forma was expecting him, the signal would be subtle and something that only James would recognize.

James spoke slowly and carefully. "I would like to further build relations by entertaining Formica at this ball." that's right James keep it nice and general let them ponder the language. Mentally James tried to take a step back, and looked over the ant-girls again. Finally, he spotted it. The ant girl on the left had stepped ever slightly forward in imitation of a fighting stance. She had straightened up a little bit, her body language conveyed readiness.

The leader began to speak “Then in that case it will be necessa-" she was abruptly cut off by James lunging forward and grabbing the ant-girl on the left by the hand and saying "I will entertain this one, thank you" and rushing off.

This left the two identical ant girls looking at each other bewildered. “What?"

As the ant-girl and James rushed into crowds, James took the fact that she was running along with him as confirmation that it truly was Forma. Had he been able to turn around properly he would have seen that there was just the hint of an audacious smile on her lips.

Once they had got well and truly into the middle of a crowd fairly distant to the ant-girls, he turned and looked at the ant-girl in her eyes. “Have we met before?"

The ant girl smiled and put her other hand on James hand, and simply nodded. “It's me James."

James acted comically relieved “Whew, I’m glad that I was right. It would be very improper to simply grab and girl and run with her."

Standing still they were jostled by the crowd. Forma nervously shuffled a little bit. “So what is the plan? We can't duck them forever."

James smiled and led Forma by the hand again. "Eric said he found a secluded spot outside. Let's dance and then kick back a bit." Forma smiled.

As surreptitiously as possible the pair made their way through the crowd and went back to Eric’s group. Steven had collapsed, lying on a bench occasionally taking drinks of water handed to him by Sheena. The rest however had just moved a bit exclude him from the circle.

James started to say something loudly and then glancing back at Forma, stopped himself. He felt Forma move behind him as they grew close to the group. Still standing well outside of the circle James said "Eric, I believe it's time to collect."

Eric leaned a bit to look behind James and then nodded. Standing up he happily said “Hah, what did I tell you boldness. Now if the two of you will follow me."

As they turned to leave James felt a responsibility pinch and moved close to Eric saying “Is Steven all right? He looks a bit unwell."

Eric looking around nodded slightly “Oh yes, poor guy always drinks too much but he can shake off the hangover pretty quickly because he is an elf."

James nodded and responded “You aren't supposed to do this but I was going to offer some of my coke to see if that help him back to his feet. It seemed to excite him during the lunch."

Eric smiled and said “On his feet is about the furthest from where he wants to be right now."

James smiled and produced the can of coke he had stuffed in one of dangerman's very deep pockets. "I guess it'll just be for me and Forma then."

Eric said carefully “That may not be the best idea James. Has she had any before?"

James shook his head and Forma spoke up. “Why would that be a problem?"

Eric smiled his I know a secret smile and leaned forward. “This is not supposed to be common knowledge but caffeine gets spider-morphs drunk. I don't know what it does to ant-morphs."

Looking surprised James nodded. “Thank you Eric. I’ll hold this baby back then." James slipped the can back into his pocket. “Now lead on."

Eric lead the pair to a spot that was actually reasonably secluded due to be tucked away in the hedge. There was a small bench and just enough space to dance. Most importantly, it was just the right level of dark and the music from the hall could still be heard.

Eric bowed “As promised. Do keep an eye out though, teachers generally patrol pretty regularly." James and Forma both made puzzled expressions. Eric laughed and said “Don't worry about it." James strode forth smiling.

Trying to get a feel for the time of the music James offered his hand to Forma. “Shall we dance."

Forma smiled “Let's" Forma had not improved substantially and the darkness made tripping a constant threat. But they still had a reasonably good time, James congratulated himself on being able to dance with Forma at all. And Forma congratulated herself on being able to modestly keep up with James.

After a few dances James' shins had taken enough abuse and the pair sat down together a bit nervously. For a long minute there was silence as the two of them marshalled things to say. James was the first to break the silence “Thank you for coming with me Forma. I hope it doesn't get you into trouble."

Forma nodded and said “It might." the silence resumed until she said “May I ask why you invited me?"

James looked down for a second and then looked into the distance. “May I see your hand?" Forma offered one of her larger hands to James. James held it in his palm and examined Forma’s chitinus hand. "I read in a book that hands have to have softer chitin than arms. It needs to bend more." James examined the action of each of her fingers, it seemed much the same as his fingers. “My brother is much older than me. And that makes everything he says true. He once told me that one of the nicest things you can do is show someone a new experience." Forma’s chitin was not as warm as James' hands but it wasn't cold. “The insects here seem obsessed with routine, and being the same. Some of the books did not attribute insects with imagination." he started to feel Forma’s palms to see if they had creases like his. "I think I invited you because you are my friend." James looked into Forma’s black featureless eyes. “May I ask why you decided to come with me?"

Forma looked right back into James blue eyes. Her second pair of arms started to fidget with one another. “Because you are my friend."

“May I ask why you are my friend?" James' heart had begun to beat a bit fast.

“Because we spend every lunch together." Forma’s second set of hands began to hold one another.

James nodded slowly “Why do you always hang out with me at lunch?"

One of Forma’s hands had placed itself on James arm. “So we can have our swordfights."

James' eyes wavered nervously it seemed Forma was a bit closer. “Why did you swordfight with me for the first time?" only force of will kept his hands from shaking.

Forma’s other small hand had placed itself on James’s shoulder “Because you seemed so lonely."

James was about to speak but Forma seemed very close and he was certain that his heart was about to explode. To his mixed relief and terror, he heard some of the hedge rustle. Forma and James both moved apart at something approaching the speed of sound.

As they both leaned forward James just barely saw a flutter of blue feathers and whispered almost to himself “Play it distant."

Ms. Sialia strode into view, with a long very stout stick in wing. She was wearing a costume, a stylized skirt with polka dots, as well as a polka dotted ribbon sitting on Ms. Sialia’s head. James couldn't place the source of the costume but it seemed very familiar.

Ms. Sialia was quite surprised to see James and said as much. “Well it's surprising to see you here James. Given that I saw you at the dancing practices I thought you would still be inside.” She glanced over at Forma, pausing for things to say.

The parts of James' brain that were responsible for rational thought had at this point more or less shut down due to nervousness. Phones were ringing off hooks and people were shouting orders. James therefore decided to fudge it. "I like your costume Ms. Sialia. It seems very familiar."

James paused letting Ms. Sialia fill in the blank. “Oh thank you James. I based it off a serial character."

Nodding James paused in thought, things had begun to level out mentally but he still needed to play for time. “Oh right the cartoon. My older brother had a term for when you dressed up like a cartoon. Cos something, I think."

Ms. Sialia blushed slightly. “Don't worry about it James. I like your dangerman costume."

James stood up and moved to shake Ms. Sialia’s wing. “Thank you, someone finally recognizes my costume." His mind was mostly operational now.

Ms. Sialia was a bit surprised by this turn of events and shook James' hand gently. “So what are you doing back here James?"

Motioning back to Forma James said “Me and Formica were discussing the comparative merits of human and insectoid architecture."

Forma stood up and did a perfect impression of Formica. In a superior tone she said “We are of the opinion that the grand canal is a superior water way than any human aqueduct."

James turned and responded in a similarly cold tone “And the aqueduct carries water above ground making it a better method. A three-degree slope cannot be argued with."

Formica however was not having any of it and turned up her head in disapproval. “You may trumpet the so called achievements of your people but they pale in comparison to those of the colonies."

James nodded “As you can see there is much ground for debate." he looked at Ms. Sialia again “What is the stick for?"

Ms. Sialia blushed slightly again “Well if a teacher sees students being overly affectionate we are supposed to stop them." the embarrassment in Ms. Sialia’s voice was obvious.

James asked in the most innocent voice possible “Overly affectionate?"

Ms. Sialia reddened a bit more “Well you know?" James gave her an innocent look, Ms. Sialia seemed at a loss for words. “When teenagers are together you know."

James turned to Forma. "Ms. Formica do you know what she is referring to?" Forma hid her smile well and merely shook her head. James turned back to Ms. Sialia "I’m sorry we don't know what you are talking about."

Ms. Sialia’s red face made quite the contrast with her blue feathers and she started to back away. “Perhaps you will know when you get older. Oh, Formica the other ant-girls were looking for you."

After watching Ms. Sialia beat a hasty retreat both James and Forma looked at each other smiling. These smiles broke into giggles and the pair had a good laugh.

Once Forma was able to stop laughing she straightened up and said “If they are actively looking for me it won't be long until they sniff us out. Is there anything else we should do before then?"

James picked himself off the floor where he had collapsed from laughing so hard. “Whew, I have an idea follow me."

Forma closely followed James through the hedges until they came upon the haunted house again. The elf sitting there still looked bored out his mind. He had a fairly simple skeleton costume and was sitting reading a book he apparently didn't enjoy very much. The narrator says this because he would often get fed up with page he was on and pick a new one at random.

He looked both Forma and James up and down. Then in the driest tone possible he said “Lose a bet or something?"

“Something like that. What do we do to get in?" James suspected there was a fairly long and involved story behind him being there.

The elf looked back down at his book. He said this as if it was an afterthought "just sign the ledger."

James quickly scanned the ledger, it was nearly empty and there had been a sign out for everyone who had signed in. The pair signed in, Forma’s handwriting was very neat James noted. The haunted house wasn't much, a few cheap scares. A wet sponge on the neck, someone leaping out from the corner. James and Forma spent the time much more productively by talking to one another.

“So do you have any brothers and sisters?" James asked this peering around a corner cautiously.

Forma nodded and said happily, “Back home we consider just about everyone who hatched around the same time to be closely related. How is it done for you?" she surreptitiously pointed at a curtain which conspicuously had a pair of shoes below it.

James said in a distracted tone as he wandered closer to the curtain “My mother and father had only boys. My older brother has already graduated college, and my little brother is still in elementary school." he leapt at the curtain saying boo. The curtain however was empty and as James turned back to Forma he was sent reeling back by Darius who had been hiding in the hedge.

Darius was cracking up “Haha, I have been waiting all night for someone to fall for that." James looked up to see Forma laughing too and was forced to admit that it was pretty funny.

Getting up James said “Good one Darius. You should take a break though; I don't think anyone else is going to come."

Darius still laughing a little said “Nah, most of the dancing happens early on, once people get tired they start trying the haunted house." Darius looked at the both of them. "I hadn't expected you to be here James."

James rolled his eyes “Not the first time I have heard that.” He kept his tone friendly, “But, you should get back in position Darius. I don't want to ruin your fun."

Darius nodded, politely ignoring Forma. As the two walked away James said to Forma. “That's Darius, back when you were deturfing lawns I had to help him returf them."

Forma nodded, “You did a pretty good job of returfing them, I had a hard time telling that damage had been done at all.”

James bit back a comment complaining about how much of bother the returfing had been.

Continuing on they navigated the various hallways until they came to a hall of mirrors. James paused for a second and before going in said “You are very good at imitating Formica."

Forma got an unusual sad expression. "I have to. You know that."

James took Forma’s hand. "I’m not blaming you. You are my friend Forma." He paused trying to make sense of his appearance in a wavy mirror and then added “Besides I was able to pick you out of a line up."

Forma squeezed James hand “You did.” She smiled and teased “But I had to make it pretty obvious." looking at James’ quizzical expression "I did everything I could but put out pheromones." She stopped, looking at mirror that made her impossibly tall.

James nodded "I’m pretty bad at reading body language, so please make it obvious. Also you know I can't smell pheromones right?"

Forma rolled her eyes “Yes James, but the ant-girls next to me could."

As they came to the end of the haunted house, they were still holding hands. James with a sad expression looked over at Forma and let go. “We should probably let you go back."

Forma returned the expression "I suppose so. They are already looking for me"

James nodded and said "What is your cover story, in case they ask me?”

Forma nodded again, her second pair of arms rather anxiously playing with one another “We were rude to each other all night." James agreed.

James tried to put on a happy face and failed. “Thank you for coming." he hesitated and then said “Forma, please let's always be friends."

Forma smiled a little and said “Okay."

They both adopted cold expressions and walked silently towards the other two ant-girls.

James began with as passive aggressive tone as possible by saying “Thank you Formica for a lovely evening."

Formica responded “And to you as well James the human."

James looked over the two other ant-girls carefully. They seemed to be buying it. “The dance was unforgettable; my bruises will remind me of it constantly."

Formica kept the cold look and with venom in her voice said "I so enjoyed our discussion on why the grand canal is superior to the aqueduct."

James feigned anger but then restrained himself "I suppose that is a matter of opinion, good night." he then stalked off. Once he was quite sure he was out of view of the ant-girls, James let out a sigh of relief.

Returning to Eric James noted with some concern that Steven was now leaning mostly insensible against a bench. Eric was laughing at a joke that Sally was telling. As James approached again Eric stood up and greeted him.

Now that he was sitting in the circle he could see the group much better. James immediately looked to Steven and asked “Is he quite alright?"

Eric smiled and slapped Steven on the back to which he responded insensibly. “He looks pretty bad but he is recovering. How did your time with Forma go?"

“Oh, it was lovely." James rubbed his shins “It's a shame that it's so difficult to spend time with her."

Eric and Lana smiled at each other. Lana leaned forward and said “But some girls are definitely worth the trouble." Lana was wearing an excellent pirate costume, one of her tentacles was holding the hook.

James nodded “Oh she is a good friend of mine certainly. But dodging teachers can be a bit awkward." both Lana and Eric rolled their eyes.

Sheena had mostly faded into the background and watched this with mild amusement, she was enjoying one of the tarts. Sally was slowly absorbing one of the chocolates that Sheena had brought back with her and her eyes closed in enjoyment. Steven did seem to be recovering and was more animate by degrees. Lana was sitting next to Eric, looking happy as her tentacles occasionally played with her pirate hat. Finally, Eric was looking over the group with a content expression. The only one who did not look happy was James who had glumly popped open his coke and was now sipping it.

Eric leaned over to James and whispered “Ask my sister to dance."

James rolled his eyes and whispered back “Your sister can ask me to dance if she pleases." pausing for a second James shook the coke can and listened to the sound. He nudged Steven, and said “Drink this, it should help you feel better" passing the can.

Steven drained the can effortlessly, and sat up a little bit. Sally watched with an amused expression and then asked “Feeling better Steven?"

Steven turned to face Sally and said in happy tone. "I’m feeling better all the time. In fact, I think I should be feeling good enough to dance.

Sally drew back, flowing smoothly as she did so. “Not with me Steven. I learned my lesson when you almost threw up on me." James could not place Sally’s costume, all he could really tell was it had involved her giving her face a beard and curly mustache.

Steven had by this point stood up unsteadily and started to walk towards the main hall. Eric watched this and said to Sally “Could you go with him? Make sure he doesn't make a fool of himself."

Sally rolled her eyes, this was hard to tell because the eyes were transparent but still. “He has already accomplished that.” Sighing, she glided off after Steven.

Eric leaned over to his sister who had ladylike covered her mouth to avoid showing her giggling. James couldn't hear what he said but it was obviously something that very much interested Sheena.

Sheena stood up and dusted off her skirt. She walked over, seeming somewhat enthusiastic. "James, will you dance with me." there was no question in her tone.

James was a bit puzzled by this but decided to acquiesce. He offered his hand and Sheena took it. They both entered the main hall, where the party was going strong.

Outside however Eric and Lana were both relaxing on the chair. Eric looked around and then said “Man that took forever."

Lana took Eric’s hand “Shall we?"

Eric smiled wide “Oh let's, I found the perfect spot too."

Dancing with Sheena was a bit different in the main hall than in the library. Most importantly there were other people which meant James had to constantly check himself to avoid running into other people. Most of the monsters seemed to be fairly confident dancers, so they moved quickly that and the size of some of them meant James feared for his life more than once. Sheena seemed to be enjoying herself though.

As they moved close together during the waltz James asked “What did Eric bribe you with?"

Sheena looked evasive but finally answered “Candied lizards. I love those things."

James smiled “He asked me to ask you to dance. Does he always meddle this much?"

Sheena rolled her eyes. “You have no idea how much he meddles. He always prefers when things go as he wants, and is usually trying to make sure that they do.."

Nodding James mused, “Most royalty are like that I think. It’s funny, you always seem to fade into the background when he is around."

Sheena had an unhappy look. “Yeah, it's hard to compete with Eric for attention. I don't mind." Sheena shrugged. “What makes you think we are royalty?"

James shrugged "I assume a legendary hero would be made a noble on the spot. Besides Eric has the look, you kno-" James had been scanning the crowd as they danced, and he saw Cecilia being obviously harassed. “If you will excuse me." he bowed and went straight to Cecilia cutting the most direct path possible through the dance floor.

The large male centaur had an angry tone “You are going to dance with me." He had very short brown hair, and seemed to be a strapping fellow.

Countering almost as angry Cecilia said "I will certainly not."

From seemingly nowhere James said as smooth as silk “Ah, Cecilia I have been looking everywhere for you. Will you do me the honor of a dance?" he offered his hand.

Cecilia seemed a bit shocked to see James but recovered quickly. “Why of course James I would love to." the two walked back on the dance floor.

As they started to dance James said to Cecilia rather urgently “Please for the love of all that is good, do not step on my feet."

Cecilia smiled at James as he nervously hopped around trying not to be stepped on. “I’ll try, though the hopping is not helping I think.” She danced a little and then said "I don’t mind but what made you offer to dance with me?"

James was watching Cecilia’s feet intensely and said "I can't offer a friend of mine a dance?" he sobered a bit and looked at Cecilia in the eyes “Besides it looked like you needed help."

Cecilia stiffened a bit and said “It was under control."

James had a sad expression and nearly stopped dancing. “You should be careful; I don’t know him but he didn't seem like the kind of person to back down."

Cecilia said in explanatory tone “He certainly was not taking no for an answer.” And then spat out angrily “Asshole."

After a near miss with Cecilia’s foot, James had enough of living on the edge and when the dance ended said “Well, thank you for dancing for me."

Cecilia did a curtsey “And thank you for dancing with me.” She noticed James concerned expression “Don't worry i’ll be near my friends for the rest of the night."

James nodded and hit the buffet table again. As he relaxed against the table he saw the one completely unexpected thing of the night. Andrew was approaching the table wearing no costume but a look of complete disgust.

Unbidden, Andrew stood next James fidgeting slightly, he suddenly said “You know they poison the food, right?"

James looked over at a lamia who was positively stuffing himself and then looked back at Andrew. “It seems they would get a lot of casualties."

Andrew looked at James indigently “No, it's a poison that will only affect humans." he looked over the table nervously and with a bit of longing.

James nodded solemnly. “There are somethings worth dying for, and that spread is worth dying for." James noted Andrew’s unbelieving look and sought an out. “Do you not celebrate Halloween?"

Andrew shook his head. “Not with these subhumans. Come on we should get out of here, I have a whole bunch of chocolate in my room."

Holding up his hand, James nodded slightly. "I apologize Andrew but I cannot join you. I have my own less than sincere reasons to make them trust me."

Smiling broadly Andrew asked “Up to something?” James nodded. Andrew gave James a friendly nudge. “These subhumans can't figure out what a real human is up to can they? If you want to hang out I eat lunch behind the school building." James gave another polite nod. Andrew looked around suspiciously and then said "I have to get out of here. Good luck with your mission."

James smiled and waved as Andrew left. The smile died on his lips as soon as he was out of sight. Unable to restrain himself James muttered aloud “Crazy bastard."

Returning to where Eric had been he saw no one but Sheena sitting by herself book in hand. James sat down by her keeping a respectful distance. "I apologize for leaving suddenly. A friend of mine needed help."

Sheena nodded her long blond hair cascading over her shoulders. "I saw you with the centaur. What did she need help with?"

James nodded, and let his gaze rest on the ground. “A gentleman was quite certain that she wished to dance with him despite her disagreeing. I removed the problem by dancing with her."

Sheena sighed and leaned back. “Did you make out with the ant girl while you were away?"

James’ eyes widened in surprise and he glanced over at Sheena. “Of course not, that would be improper. Why do you ask?"

Sheena stared up at the night sky "I did not appreciate being left on the dance floor James. Besides why else would you go somewhere so private?"

James chuckled slightly “So are you and Eric royalty?"

Sheena nodded “Yes, we are technically of a royal house. Our star has not been rising lately, and it's been generations since we had someone on the council."

James glanced at Sheena’s shoes, he briefly wondered if all dragonet shoes had to be steel toed to prevent their claws from cutting them open. "Eric has that look which says no matter what I should be in charge.” Stretching James stood up saying "I have seen it in most of the royalty I have met."

Sheena shrugged. “People have always focused on Eric. Just part of being the hero I guess."

The coke was making James antsy and so he stood in front of Sheena and offered his hand. “Would the lady do me a favor of a dance?"

Sheena straightened up seeming surprised “Why would we dance here?"

James shrugged. “We can either wait here patiently and quietly because Eric is the center of the universe or we can take advantage of the moment while the music is still playing." James had a pallid face while saying this. He suddenly smiled and added “Besides you are a better dancer than I, so the practice will help."

Sheena smiled showing her fangs for just second before covering her mouth. “There really is more to you than it seems."

James let out a short harsh laugh. “Hardly, I’m just making this up as I go along." he offered his hand again and Sheena took it.

A bit later Eric and Lana emerged from the hedge maze looking a bit rumpled. He glanced back at Lana who happily returned the look. Lana had started to smooth out her clothes and black frizzy hair with her tentacles. Then Eric looked forward to see James dancing with his sister, this too made him smile.

Once the dance had ended the both of them looked around to see Eric and Lana sitting on the bench and clapping for them. Eric called out “You danced with him and I didn't even have to bribe you to do it this time."

Sheena looked slightly guilty, called back “You could always give me more candied lizards as a reward."

James chuckled silently at the reply. “What were you up to Eric?" James felt he could hazard a guess, but it would take attention off of him.

Eric smiled broadly putting his fangs on display. “Nothing that's any of your business James." He absentmindedly held hands with Lana.

James glanced at his watch. “Hey Eric, it's getting late when do these things normally end?

Eric smiled as if he knew something. “Normally pretty late, but when they do the teachers come out in force to make everyone go back to their rooms."

James yawned. He was starting to feel the fatigue; the coke had done its best but was obviously spent. “It's getting late for me, guys. I’m going to head back to my room."

James bowed and thanked Sheena for dancing with him. As he turned Eric called him over. He leaned in and whispered to James “Thank you for dancing with my sister. She just kinds of fades into the background."

James nodded and said quietly “No problem."

Going back to his room James cut through the main hall again. The party was still going strong although some patrons were obviously tired. James took the chance to wave to Cecilia as he passed. She was amongst a group of centaurs and returned a small wave.

James sat down rather heavily on the bed removing his shoes and then messaged his feet. He heard “Boo" directly behind him which made him jump to his feet.

Looking behind him he could just make out Fen smiling. He rolled his eyes, “Do you ever get tired of doing that?"

Fen shook her head smiling. “Nope."

James sat back down on the bed “Oh man my feet hurt something fierce." he managed to message just the right spot. “Ahhhh. So did you have a good evening?"

Fen smiled; this only showed white on white, so James imagined it as a roguish smile

James smiled and asked “So what's up Fen?"

Fen decided to float upside down keeping her head in about the same place. "Just thought I would check in. You seemed to enjoy yourself."

Taking off his turtleneck and putting his shoes away James said. “Well, of course.” He hesitated and then said “Were you listening for Forma and I?"

“Maybe” Fen sounded evasive.

“It would be a little frightening if you are always listening to everyone.” The mere thought was enough to make James’ skin crawl, but he hid it.

Fen seemed to look off into the distance, “I hear everything, but I only make sense of what I’m listening for” Fen shrugged slightly.

Peering forward slightly it seemed that Fen had come a little bit more into focus. She had very short hair James was forced to hesitantly conclude; this was uncertain because white hair on a pale white ghost is hard to see. “It must drive you mad at times."

Fen smiled and hovered a bit closer to James. “Oh, are you worried that I’m crazy?"

James shrugged “You are probably crazy already. But I can’t imagine how irritating to hear so many voices at once."

Fen got a slightly sad look and said “Yes, for the first while I just couldn't handle it.” She drew herself up slightly. “But I can handle it now."

Fen smiled, righted herself, and moved besides James hovering above him ever so slightly. “Hey, you kept your hair right”

Offering his hand again James said “Thanks again, it really completed the costume.” They shook hands, and James suppressed a chill.

“My pleasure, a good costume always makes Halloween more fun.” She nodded resolutely.

James suppressed a yawn and said “Well miss Fen, if you will excuse me I have to go to sleep sooner or later."

Fen smiled with almost motherly care at James. “Of course, go to sleep and have sweet dreams."

James bid good night to Fen. He got into bed happily and drifted off to pleasant dreams for once.

That Sunday morning, James all but floated down to the library and spent the morning very happily with Forma. Forma had seen a reference to frescos and was determined to discover what they were. The two of them spent the day overviewing the paintings and decorations that adorned walls throughout history. Forma was very taken with stained glass, often marveling at the intricate designs. James was more in favor of sculpture, often talking in favor of relief carvings. The two spent the morning in happy conversation.

Despite everything James almost enjoyed diplomat club. He focused on the various accusations and retorts and saw how they formed a subtle pattern. He was able to appreciate an argument that Eric gave and the subtle ways of undermining it Sally used in her attack.

James returned to his room happily and as he was shutting the door he glanced at his bed. There was of course a letter for him. The letter was unexpected but James recognized the thick package envelope immediately. In seeing the letter, the other shoe dropped and it came all at once. He was suddenly and immensely aware that there were facts he could not change in life.

He sat down heavily and read the letter. It was best wishes from his family commiserating that he could not spend Halloween with them, and showing sketches his mother had made of his little brother in his Halloween costume. With his eyes tearing up he penned a response, saying that he had dressed up as Patrick mcgoohan, gone to the Halloween ball and had a lovely time, finishing that he wished everyone the best.

Sniffing slightly, he faced the mirror and drew himself up as much as he could. “As much as I want to I shall never forget." he went to sleep unhappy that night, very cognizant of why exactly he was attending the school and how far from home he was.

Cecilia was glad to see him the next morning. She smiled as he approached reluctantly. “Thank you for your help at the dance."

James shrugged. “It was the right thing to do I thought. He didn't seem like he was going to back down." his eyes unfocused and he stared into the distance.

Cecilia smiled again. "I feel like I should do something to reward you. Is there anything you would like?"

Pausing for a second and James shook his head saying “Don't worry about it Cecilia, I don't deserve any reward."

Cecilia let out an exasperated sigh. “Come on, James"

James shrugged again and said in calm tone "I can't think of anything I would want anyway."

Cecilia sighed again. “Well think about it and get back to me." the two of them began jogging. Cecilia tried once or twice to start a conversation but James was happier with silence

As he got to class James noted the results from the test on Friday had been posted and the results did at least a little to buoy his spirits. He had once again made at least 5th in all of his subjects. He allowed himself a small smile and then reminded himself of where he was.

Class itself was a trial, it seemed pointless to pay attention. He would never have a use for poem writing technique. Trigonometry would be preparing him for a future he didn’t have. So he slumped back in his chair losing himself in idle daydreams.

He and Forma spent lunch fencing against one another. Maybe Forma noticed James’ change in mood, and thought that fencing would cheer him up. Whatever the reason she went at fencing especially hard that day.

James was used to Forma winning and it normally had no effect on him. However to match his surly mood decided to try and win for once, Forma, however was having none of that and parried most of his attacks without thinking. After a particularly nasty hit to the hand, Forma insisted she look at it and then said in a confident tone “It doesn’t look too serious."

As James dropped to his knees, holding his hand to his chest and breathing slowly trying to get through the pain he was forced to agree.

James' mood did not improve over the week. Where he would normally answer the question, he kept his hand down. The problem was the inescapable fact that he would never have any use for what he was learning. He spent most of class slumped in his chair trying to think about anything but where he was.

This continued until Thursday when as class ended for lunch Ms. Sialia came up to James. She had her wings crossed in front of her and a worried expression. “Are you alright James?" she asked in a concerned tone. “You seem to have been in a bad mood all week."

James tried to mount an enthusiastic response. “It's nothing Ms. Sialia, I’m quite alright." his attempts to be enthusiastic failed as usual.

Ms. Sialia kept her worried expression "James will you please see me in my office after class today?"

James nodded and then looked despondently off into the distance before starting to pack up.

He tried to beat Forma again that day and as usual failed. He messaged his sore hands as he went to Ms. Sialia’s office. He knocked twice, and was told to come in.

Ms. Sialia’s office was still altogether too small. Ms. Sialia motioned for James to sit on the couch. She smiled and tried to be pleasant. James however remained morose. “Now James I have called you here today because I think there is something wrong and I want to help you. If there is anything I can do please ask.” She smiled hopefully at James. “You can tell me anything in complete confidence." Her tone had a hint of desperation in it.

James took a deep breath "Ms. Sialia there is nothing wrong."

Ms. Sialia had a troubled expression “Are you sure? You are not being bullied again, are you?"

James shook his head. “No, I’m fine."

Ms. Sialia paused for a second and then asked “Why do you keep having bruises on your arms then?"

James subconsciously hid his hands. “That's mainly because I’m clumsy Ms. Sialia." James hoped very much she did not pursue this line of questioning.

"I’m sorry it's just that you seemed so happy at the dance and so sad in class afterwards." Ms. Sialia had a slightly troubled look.

James held in a sigh of relief. “It's just that I had a chance to realize how far away from home I am. I won't be able to go home for the holidays, and this is the first time I have been away from my family.

Ms. Sialia looked like her heart was breaking. "I’m very sorry James. I wish you could. But please feel free to confide in me. I know it's hard to be far from home, but I’m sure they will be thinking of you." James nodded sadly, he had jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

The next day passed with some difficulty, James woke up unhappy and was far from excited to go to class. His morning run however was unexpectedly pleasant. Cecilia strode up easily to James as he tried to maintain a constant jog. In between the cold morning air making his throat burn and the desire to sprint this was a bit difficult.

She addressed James in a friendly voice. “Hey James."

Breathing hard James responded “Hey Cecilia. How are you?"

She smiled and responded "I’m pretty good, can you meet me at the student kitchen after classes today?"

James kept his eyes ahead trying to go just a little bit further “Why?"

Cecilia had a broad smile “It's a surprise." James nodded and the two of them spent the rest of the morning chatting intermittently.

After classes James arrived to the student kitchen. It was very utilitarian in design; it was dominated by a series of fairly large counters to give space to the cooks. There were a few ovens and one specialty oven for the more exotic things. Various aprons and oven mitts of varying sizes were on easy to reach racks, and there were a few appliances James could not guess the function of but figured to be for specialty dishes.

James bypassed this and went to where they dispensed the ingredients with the same list he had every day. He made the sandwiches and quickly stowed his lunch in his backpack. All that was left to do was to wait.

Cecilia arrived a bit later, and once she was within the kitchen, she pulled back her hair and put on one of the especially long aprons with a practiced air. Now prepared she waved and trotted over to James.

James looked up at her with an unaffected air. “Hello Cecilia."

Cecilia nodded and smiled at James “Hello James.” She adopted an official tone "I’m sure you are curious why I asked you here today." James shrugged in response. “Well, in thanks for your help at the ball, I have decided to bake you something."

James smiled and said “It was nothing, what are you going to bake?"

Cecilia shrugged. "I bake all kinds of things at home, I could bake almost anything. What do you want?"

James seemed a bit puzzled by this question. “Well back at my home, mom makes cake for birthdays." He smiled briefly “She also makes amazing pies” he glanced around and tried to think back to the various pastries he had seen over the years. “What do you like to make?"

Cecilia nodded and said in a happy tone “Normally I prefer to bake cookies or brownies. Both are fairly easy to make and don't take very much work on my part."

James shrugged “Cookies then, it's the easiest thing to share. Did you bake very much at home?"

Cecilia smiled “Oh yes, I did. I used to bake for the class fairly often." her expression saddened a bit “Most of my friends couldn't make it to this school. But still I bake a lot for my friends here."

“Oh, well thank you. Do you need help?" Cecilia nodded and James clumsily put on an apron.

As Cecilia measured out various ingredients, James gathered the various pots and pans that would be needed. James decided to speak up “Why couldn't your friends go to this school?"

Cecilia furrowed her brow a bit, leaning down to the counter. "I imagine because it was too expensive for them. It was almost too expensive for my family.” She frowned “It sucks being the poor kid."

James smiled “You don't need to worry about that, I’m the poor kid out of everyone here.”

Looking at him surprised Cecilia asked “How are you the poor kid?”

James nodded and said fondly “I remember how surprised I was when there was meat in every meal" he sighed contentedly

Trying to change the subject, Cecilia straightened as she dumped the flour into the bowl. “You know I can't eat meat, right?" she said this with perfect seriousness

James rolled his eyes. “That's not what I was trying to say. Instead imagine, what is your favorite ingredient that is also expensive?"

“Bron mushrooms, I’m just pulling your leg James." She smiled and looked at James' surprised expression. “Don't be so serious all the time."

“Oh, right. Anyway to say what I was going to say anyway it's like having bron mushrooms in every meal for me." he pushed a tray of eggs to Cecilia.

Cecilia smiled and said “Not yet James. I have to measure out this salt and baking soda. How about you James, why did you come here? I know none of your friends made it."

Smiling a bitter smile James said "I’m sorry but that's a secret I hope to take to my grave."

Raising an eyebrow Cecilia shrugged. "I apologize I didn't know it was so touchy.” She put the salt and baking soda in with the flour. Taking another bowl, she started to measure out some sugar. “Add two sticks of butter in there please."

James did as he was commanded, trying his hardest to make sure he didn't get his fingers buttery. He failed as usual. Once they had added the sugar, brown sugar and vanilla extract Cecilia smiled and said “Right now here comes the fun part. Stir the hell out of that."

As James started to stir the mixture he asked Cecilia “Is this why you asked me here?"

Cecilia smiled and said “Maybe. So, what are human schools like?"

James shrugged. “Oh much the same as this one I suppose. All classrooms and desks." he took a moment to catch his breath “What are centaur schools like?"

Cecilia smiled and paused to reminisce. “All in the fields mostly. Centaur buildings don't like having stairs that much. One teacher would lecture to the students who crowded around him." She looked around disapprovingly, this style of school is much stuffier. Why are there so many desks and what’s with all the bells?”

“Most humans don’t like standing for long periods of time; the bells are so you always know where you are supposed to be.” Cecilia snorted in disgust. As he kept beating the mixture James asked “So was where you lived very different from here then?"

Cecilia nodded “Yes, the plains are much windy and more flat. I was a bit surprised to see the mountains around the school. There is nothing like them on the plains." James interrupted her to show the mixture. She inspected an egg carefully and then cracked it expertly putting it into the mix.

James sighed and began to stir the mixture again. “So did you live in a city or?"

Cecilia smiled “Oh yes, we lived in the suburbs of a city, we weren’t that far though.”

Looking at her curiously James asked “How far is not that far?”

Cecilia paused “I guess for someone with just two legs you would take a train.”

Nodding James said “Sounds like a big city.”

Cecilia nodded “Well all centaur cities have a lot of area sectioned off as plain."

James had finally beat the mixture into submission and was only depressed when Cecilia started to add the flour mixture making it thick once again. “Human cities are all scrunched up, maybe because it takes us longer to get anywhere. "

Cecilia smiled and said "I guess so. Stir this again."

James beat the mixture and had a thought “Will you return home for the winter holidays?"

Cecilia smiled “Oh yes, my family doesn’t live that far and it will give me a chance to spend time with my friends from middle school. How about you?" she added some chocolate chips to the mixture.

James gave a sad smile, "I don't think so, it would take like a week just to get home, in between that and trip back there is not that much time. Also it's expensive." James winced at the very thought of taking the trip.

Cecilia said in a sympathetic tone "I’m sorry James. Do you miss your family a lot?"

James nodded glumly. He looked at the mixture. “Is this about ready?"

Cecilia looked at mixture “Yes, I would say so.” She carefully spooned out portions of cookie dough onto a pan. After this was done she told James “It will take about ten minutes of cooking and then they need to cool."

James smiled a small smile “Thanks a lot Cecilia, I can't wait to share these with my friends at lunch." his tone tried and failed not to sound depressed.

Cecilia looked at James glum face and had an idea “How many people do you normally eat lunch with?"

James took second to think and said “Sometimes I eat with three other people. We eat out in field."

Cecilia smiled broadly “That's great. I was worried you ate by yourself every day." James gave a puzzled look. “Anyway i’ll bake some other things and then we can have a picnic."

Looking thoughtful James nodded and said “Would Thursday work? I want to make sure my friends can show up.”

Cecilia nodded happily and then pulled up her sleeves. "I get some done today and some done tomorrow.”

James seemed to brighten up some and said “Well do you need any help?"

Cecilia nodded and they got to work.

That evening James went to sleep unhappy. He was still there and his family was still elsewhere. He looked up at the ceiling and sighed.

He woke up unhappy again. Looking around he realized that the room was cold and he had to go running. Still that's what he said he was going to do so that's what he was going to do.

Cecilia made happy conversation with James telling him all about how various people on the track team were doing and the various bits of gossip that she had heard. James tried half-heartedly to reciprocate but it was mostly in vain. Before he left to go to class, Cecilia patted him on the back and said “Don't forget about tomorrow."

James smiled and went to class. As usual Eric had walked Sheena to class, letting the two of them idly chat as they did so. Eric normally did not greet James as he did so, this was mainly because after the first few times James had asked Eric to stop drawing attention to him.

James greeted the both of them and then said “Will you both please join me for lunch tomorrow? A friend of mine is bringing a whole bunch of baked stuff. It will be a picnic."

Eric was a bit surprised, thought for a second and then deferred the question to his sister. She hemmed and hawed for a second and then said “Yes, we would love to.” She nodded slightly allowing her long pale yellow hair to swing forward.

James smiled and then went into the classroom to collapse on the desk. He only poked his head up to ask Sheena as she passed by “What was that about?"

Sheena smiled and said in coy tone “My favorite soup is tomorrow."

James shook his head and then went back to emulating sleep.

Class the next day passed painfully. James waited for lunch impatiently but once again he was confronted by the pointlessness of learning things he was never going to use.

At the student kitchen Cecilia was waiting, she had a large bag full of baked goods. She smiled at James and said “Lead the way."

James nodded and then after looking Cecilia over said “Be careful it's very easy to get dirty getting there."

The two of them trudged up a hill Cecilia smiled and said in a happy tone "You weren't joking about the dirt but darn if this isn't fun." James just looked back and shook his head.

When they finally arrived at the clearing Forma was already there. She was admiring the clouds. She stood up and tensed on seeing Cecilia

He strode forward confidently. " Forma, this my friend I told you about. Cecilia baked a lot." Forma softened a bit but still seemed uncertain.

Cecilia strode forward confidently and offered her hand to Forma saying “Hello I’m Cecilia." Forma shook her hand sheepishly and responded “Hello, I’m Forma." if Cecilia was uncertain at the pronunciation of the name she did not show it.

At this moment Eric and Sheena suddenly entered the clearing. Sheena had also brought a picnic basket. Cecilia seemed surprised to see this many people eating lunch with James. They had a round of introductions, with Eric smiling like he knew a secret.

Forma looked around. The two dragonets had arrived, the scales were both similar and different to her own skin she noted. James was laying down a picnic blanket but had yet to bring out his swords. She could smell the emotions coming off of him but could not discern what they were. The centaur was new and Forma was trying to memorize her face when she smelled the bag she was carrying. The smell seemed to fill the world once she noticed it, as if there was something ambrosial within.

Forma uncharacteristically spoke up “What do you mean by baked goods?"

The centaur spoke “Cookies, brownies that sort of thing."

James was suddenly seized by a point “Oh I never thought about how you guys might respond to cookies. Can everyone here handle chocolate?" James looked around.

Cecilia raised her hand "I can't handle it very well, but I figure just about everything under the sun can handle sugar cookies."

James smiled and then paused again. “Forma, only have one of the cookies. Those things are loaded with sugar and I’m not sure how you would react." Forma nodded.

James had put out the picnic blanket and Cecilia sat with some difficulty next to it. As everyone sat down James asked “What's in the basket Sheena?"

Sheena smiled and said "I figured I would bring enough stuff so everyone could make sandwiches.” She opened the basket revealing a loaf of bread and several types of sandwich material.

James had a sweet tooth most of his life. These cookies did not disappoint and he complimented Cecilia on it “These are really good Cecilia."

Cecilia beamed proudly. “Thank you James."

Forma rather hesitantly picked up a sugar cookie and brought it to her antenna. She very cautiously took nibble and then devoured it shortly afterward. Her expression suggested that it had been somewhere between divine and otherworldly.

On a thought James asked “Are you two going home for the holidays?"

Eric nodded. “Oh yes, it's always nice to be able to go home. I spend most of it being tutored though." Eric had a less than excited expression.

Cecilia cut in “Are you excited Sheena?"

Sheena seemed a bit surprised by the question but paused a second and then shook her head slowly "I’m going to be tutored just as much as Eric is."

James had a thought “Do you guys celebrate Christmas or anything like that?" he surreptitiously reached for another cookie.

Eric was puzzled for a second then said “Oh, well we celebrate the winter solstice, we go to all our friend's houses and wish them happiness in the coming year.”

James nodded and turned to Forma “How about you, Forma?"

Forma smiled and said “At the end of the year they announce our success of the last year and the plans for the next. Sometimes we celebrate for a day and then get back to work.” She seemed to recall the celebrations with a happy look.

Eric looked at Cecilia and asked “What do you do for the holidays Cecilia?"

Cecilia smiled. “We have a big fancy dinner and then we go out to the festival. Normally we burn something in effigy to celebrate the year.” She used her hands to simulate the burning making whoosh sounds as she did so. “Anyway, how about you James?"

James smiled a bit sadly and said in fond tone “We normally give each other presents. On Christmas eve we have to go to the Christmas ball. It's okay if you like dancing but people sometimes get altogether too drunk at those things. Shame I won't be able to go this year."

Forma listened to this and then quickly asked “So you won't be going home over the winter break?" James nodded in response and Forma seemed seized by an intense thought.

Eric spoke up “Why can't you go home over break James?" Sheena seemed to have an expression of envy.

James leaned back and said “Well, it just takes too long for me to get home. It's a week journey back and a week journey here. Besides, it costs too much."

Cecilia gave a sad smile and said “Don't worry James I’m sure they will be thinking of you."

Eric took this as his sign to jump in “Yeah, and besides staying here will be fun. I hear they have a great Christmas dinner." he surreptitiously elbowed Sheena.

Sheena got the hint and in as sincere a voice as she could muster said “Besides, we like having you here and happy you can be our friend." Cecilia tapped Forma on the shoulder.

Forma looked up from where she had been staring intensely and was by some miracle able to read the mood. She said nothing but simply gently took James hand in two of her's."

James looked around at everyone. They were all trying to make him feel better. It was at this point James made an important realization. There were some facts he was never going to be able to change, what he could change though was his reaction to those facts. Being far from home was not an inherently miserable experience, he was making himself so miserable.

His eyes got randomly wet for a second and then James drew himself up and said “Thank you everyone." the friends spoke happily except for Forma who was more distracted by the gears in her head turning.

As it grew close to the time to leave Cecilia looked at Forma and said “You don't talk very much do you?"

Forma looked around and at herself and then quickly replied “There is not much talk at the hive. We instead use other forms of communication.” And with that she went back to thinking.

James smiled “She talks when she has something to say and not very much besides." James’s watch chimed. “We should probably clean up and get ready to go back"

Cecilia seemed puzzled “Why? It's Saturday there are no more classes."

James smiled “Well, I like to get all of my homework done on Saturday so I don't need to worry about it later." this had been more or less standard procedure since the semester started.

Cecilia smiled “How very studious of you.” She stood up and bowed to everyone saying “It was nice to meet all of you."

After everyone exchanged farewells, James volunteered to lead Cecilia back as he doubted that she knew the way. As they cut down a hill Cecilia said “Your friends seem rather nice, but why do you eat lunch so far away?"

James tested a patch of dirt cautiously for mud, it was mud “Well, it means I can meet with Forma without anyone knowing. Please don't tell anyone."

Cecilia nodded as she tried to avoid tripping. “Of course, the dragonets seemed nice."

James sighted the school building with triumphant “Ha" then continued “They are nice. It is rude to speak behind people's back but Eric prefers when things go his way. Sheena is a bit hard to tell and prefers to be in the background."

Cecilia shared James excitement at seeing the school building. “Yeah, I noticed that. She is very ladylike though." Cecilia said this with a mix of distain and envy.

The pair bid each other bye as they both went back to the school building. James did not have a large amount of homework but he had slacked off on his studies while he was in a funk. As he tucked into the work he remarked to himself “What a difference mood makes."

Arriving the next day at the library right on time James was greeted by Ms. Maria. With a tired distant expression James said “Good morning Ms. Maria. I hope you are well."

Yawning Ms. Maria answered “Stayed up too late reading” she smiled sheepishly and then with a curious tone asked “Why is Forma here so early?" James gave a puzzled expression. Ms. Maria continued “She got here before I did. As soon as I opened the door she immediately went to work."

James shrugged and said in puzzled tone “Well let's go see what she is up to."

Ms. Maria had not been exaggerating when she said Forma had gotten straight to work. She sat at the desk quickly scanning pages surrounded by stacks of books. All four of her brown arms were at work. If work includes the smaller pair drumming the table.

James peaked around a bookcase at Forma, feeling something above him he looked up to see that Ms. Maria had stood up on her tail to look over him. James checked a few of the titles of the books. They all were fairly arcane, covering things like treaties with the insect peoples.

Hesitating then no longer James strode forward confidently and sat down next to Forma. “So what are we going to talk about today?"

Forma looked up, apparently far too engrossed in her reading to have seen James. She suppressed a sound of surprise, looking around she saw Ms. Maria still peaking from around the book case. “Hello James, I have a great idea." James leaned forward obviously interested, his eyes were fixed on Forma.

She smiled and stood up. "I think it's possible for you to come to my colony over the break.” She continued her gaze distant almost not looking at James. "I checked all the rules and my colony’s diplomatic status. And there shouldn't be a problem if you come as a temporary apprentice ambassador." She said this proudly as she subconsciously put her small hands on one of the books.

James paused for a second. Forma’s featureless eyes was returning his entranced gaze. “What would I do there?" he tried to keep a smile on his face.

“Oh just about everything. I have so many things I want to show you. There is this one great spot just above the cradle where you can look out and see the whole colony, it's amazing to see everyone working together. Part of the reason I want to be an architect actually."

James kept the smile and tried to sound enthusiastic “It sounds wonderful Forma."

Forma kept going excitedly “Oh and the engineering, part of what I’m going to be doing is engineering education. We build stuff and look for which design is the best, I think you would be good at it.” She paused to think for a second and then said “If you think the aqueduct is cool wait until you see the grand canal, it's huge."

Forma leaned forward with all of her hands together, she smiled broadly asking “Do you want to go with me?"

Sighing James let the smile drop into one of concern. “Would it really be you I would be spending time with? And like you said most the conversation is through pheromones, I don't think I could understand anything anyone said to me."

Looking slightly troubled Forma said “I could interpret for you, I think it could work.” All James could do in response was shake his head.

Forma however was not one to give up so easily. “But we could get an official interpreter, or I could try to teach you the signals we use when pheromones don’t work.”

She tried to keep confidence in her voice “I’m sure we could make it work, I could try and get deemed your official interpreter, or mayb-

Shaking his head James said resolutely, “I don’t think it would work.”

She kept giving ideas which James shot down in turn.

Ever so quietly James breathed a sigh of relief as Forma’s excitement died on her face. However, Forma continued to deflate, dropping her hands. “I guess I should have realized it couldn’t happen.” James’ relief turned to panic as Forma’s eyes teared up slightly “I was very excited at the prospect of you going.” She started to sniffle and looked about to cry.

James looked to Ms. Maria for help, she looked dismayed and could only shrug in response. James had to comfort his friend even if wasn't exactly sure how. He held the larger of her sets of hands. “Forma, I would love to see your home; I’m sure it's just as magnificent as you keep telling me. But it wouldn't work, they wouldn't let just you spend time with me, instead it would be Formica. If it could work, if it meant that we got to spend time with each other I would do it in a second. I’m sure we would learn a lot about architecture." James floundered for things to say and was left with "I’m sorry, it's not your fault."

Forma leaned forward, still crying a bit. James still not knowing what to do leaned forward a bit as well and their foreheads touched. Forma was a bit weepy and said quietly, “It just seemed so perfect, you have shown me a lot and I wanted to be able to show you something.”

James still bewildered as to what to do said in the most tender voice possible. "I’m sorry. But there's nothing we can do about it." he straightened up a little bit “Now what would you like to do today? Anything you want?" he thought back to his little brother as he said this, wondering if what worked on him would work on Forma.

Forma wiped some of the tears from her eyes. “Hmmm. We never did get to sword fight yesterday."

James swallowed back a small bit of fear. Fencing when emotional was almost always a bad idea, he had learned this lesson painfully during the last week. He smiled “Of course, let's go." he absentmindedly knocked on the table.

Ms. Maria got the hint and slithered away as quietly as she could. James stood up and

Forma his hand. She took his hand and the pair walked to their normal spot.

Thankfully it was still very early in the morning and James was mostly certain that no one saw the two. When they got to their spot, James threw Forma the better sword and they adopted the positions.

Forma fought with a vengeance that day. James often dodged Forma’s very illegal stabs by a hair. James like all young men thought himself fearless. It was a rare time when he felt fear in combat, and he was certain very little could but fear into him.

As Forma advanced James subconsciously started to fearfully edge away. Facing Forma now was asking for serious injury. Recognizing that he at least needed to stall the advancing angel of death, James asked in his most innocent tone. “Forma, I’m sorry I don't understand why not being able to visit your hive upsets you so much."

Forma stopped to James personal elation. She had a troubled look and said in a quiet voice. "I have to live two lives to be your friend, if the others here at the school knew what I did, then I would be ostracized.” She sounded frustrated. “I wanted to bring them together. So we could hang out in public, so I didn’t always need to watch my back."

Recognizing that Forma needed comfort, James advanced and dropped his sword. Looking for a fairly dry spot in the dirt, he beckoned Forma to sit down with him. She was still very sad and leaned on James.

James was at loss again, this was more familiar than he had every gotten with a girl and so he scrambled for something to say. He asked himself what his older brother would do and recognized in that instant a solution. Still holding Forma’s hands he said “If I can't go with you to your home tell me about it."

Forma smiled and with a bit of hesitation started to describe her home. She stumbled a bit trying to describe something so intrinsic to her, but hit her stride when it came time to describe the mushrooms they served in main eating hall. She went on in detail about how to tell if a mushroom had exactly the right texture, and about how to find the best spots to look out over the colony. What it was like to be among so many family members, to see someone so similar to yourself and know they were different.

Forma in turn asked James about his home. He went on to describe where he had spent his summers, how bikes worked, what it was like to ride a bike and feel the wind in his hair. The sorts of things his mother made for lunch and about the various silly games he would play with his little brother.

The two of them talked for a long time sitting in the sun. Eventually James watch chimed and he stood. Forma seemed reluctant to get up. James smiled and said “We can talk more later. I have to go to the club." pausing for a second he then looked back at Forma “What do you do while I’m at my club?"

Forma shrugged "I spend the time with the other ant-morphs. We make sure everyone is on the same page." Forma’s tone had dropped to being flat.

“Is that just like everyone talking or what?" James had caught the sudden shift in tone and wondered what it meant

Forma seemed puzzled and said slowly. “No, we use these." one of her hands pointed to her antenna "I guess we could, it would take a long time though." Forma’s tone remained flat though.

James got the feeling he was approaching the heart of the issue. “So what do you tell them about me?"

Forma’s smaller set of arms began to fidget uncomfortably. “What do you call not saying what happened but something that did not?"

James could see that Forma was conflicted and took a moment to choose his words carefully “An untruth. Is it hard to tell your family untruths?" Forma nodded somberly. "I’m sorry you have to do so and I wish you didn’t’. But thank you for telling untruths for me." James smiled and glanced at his watch. "I have to go but we will talk more later okay." Forma nodded and with that James was off like a shot.

When James finally got back to his room he opened the door to see a letter from his family. This he had expected and looked forward too. What he did not expect was the second letter beneath the first. It was in a black envelope of an unusual material.

James sat down at his desk and carefully examined the envelope. The material was an unusual blackish brown color that seemed to reflect light. The seal was made of yellowish beeswax and the symbol was unfamiliar to James. After a false start trying to open the envelope instead of break the seal, he very carefully broke the seal to preserve the symbol. Inside was a letter written in a pale green ink that seemed to glow, the letter was the same material as the envelope. The handwriting, looked Formal and precise.

“Human James," an interesting way to start a letter James thought.

“You have expressed interest in furthering cooperation between humans and the insect peoples. As a result, the insect relations clubs has seen fit to invite you to a relations dinner to be held next Saturday. Please attend. Sincerely, the club for insect relations."

James looked over the paper. It was one of the coolest things he had ever seen, he experimentally tried to tear off a corner of it. After a good deal of effort, a small tear appeared. He stopped fiddling with the paper and considered the contents. The only sound that escaped his lips was a profound “Hmmmm."

James put aside the insect letter to focus on the letter from his family. He wrote in broadly good terms about how he was doing in classes and how he was making friends. He asked his mother for advice on a number of things and wrote that he missed everyone.

With that done James went to sleep happily confident that things would at the very least break even.

Lunch on Monday went normally although James was hesitant to start sword fighting as Sunday had lead him to seriously question if he could even keep up with Forma.

During lunch that Tuesday Eric and Sheena showed up. Sheena seemed preoccupied with drawing something. James sat down instead drawing his sword and held out the letter he had received. Forma was quite surprised to see the letter and took it from James. She brought it close to her face and let her antenna almost trace over it.

With a worried expression she handed it back to James. James then handed it to Eric. “What do you think Eric."

Eric read it for a minute and then examined the paper. He looked it over and tried to tear off a corner. Eventually successful, he handed it to Sheena. He shrugged “If Forma says it's okay, you should go."

Both James and Forma had surprised expressions. Forma however beat James to asking “Why?"

Sheena held the letter up to the sunlight. The paper however was completely opaque. Eric continued “It's what they don't expect. A guilty conscience tends to hide." Eric smiled a little. "I know that much from experience."

Sheena passed the letter back to James asking “Why did they send you this letter?"

Both James and Forma were caught off guard and blushed in unison. However, James recovered first, and said “Probably because of what we did back at the ball." James smiled hoping it would cover his blushing. “After all my explanation was that I wanted to further insect human relations." both Eric and Sheena nodded.

James stood up hopeful, maybe today was the day he would beat Forma. It was not. As many times as he attacked her she had a defense ready, and always got the better of him when he was on the defensive.

Eventually James switched off with Eric and sat down unsatisfied. This of course left him in the awkward silence that always seemed to exist between him and Sheena. After staring off in space for a while, he glanced at Sheena and noticed something. Sheena was wearing a light sweater that had a good color complement to her blue school jacket.

“It's getting colder isn't it?" James said this more in the general direction of Sheena than to her.

Sheena looked up from her drawing and slowly nodded not quite sure of what to make of James’s behavior. “Oh yes, my brother says it often snows after the harvest dinner."

James adopted a puzzled expression. “Harvest dinner? I don't know about that one."

Sheena paused going “Ummmm" for a few seconds and then said “It happens the fourth Thursday of November?"

James said “Ah, you mean unity dinner. It's cool that they celebrate it here." his expression darkened for a second. "I don't think I brought heavy enough clothes for snow though."

Sheena just shrugged went back to drawing and James went back to admiring the sky, both lost in their own thoughts.

The next day in class Ms. Sialia announced to no one's excitement that the final examinations for that semester would take place in the second week of December. James filed this bit of information under things to forget. James did his homework as normal and read his book some.

The next day Eric showed up again. Fairly disheartened James fenced a bit with Eric to no avail. Although normally given to impetuous attacks that James held back, focusing more on dodging Eric than actually fighting him.

Eric had a pensive look and as James jumped away once again Eric asked “Hey, James you seem less enthusiastic today, what's the matter?"

Shrugging James answered slowly. “Why do you fence with me and Forma despite being better than both of us?"

Eric smiled a little. “Even if I am better than you two, I can still learn things from fencing with you. Forma keeps throwing me off guard as it is. Why do you ask?"

James looked around made sure that Forma was out earshot. He then quietly said. "Forma keeps beating me and I don't get why. Everything I try doesn't work."

Eric smiled. “Best thing to do is just ask her. Swordsmanship is one of those things you can always get better at." James nodded in response and attacked again. Eric handled it easily.

The next day at lunch, before drawing his swords James walked up to Forma and asked quite bluntly “Why do you keep beating me?"

Forma smiled a bit and responded in a modest tone “Because I know you."

James gave a puzzled expression and said "I don't understand."

Forma sat down and James joined her. "I know what you are going to do in a certain circumstance. When I go like this" she mimed a slashing motion with her lower set of arms. “You go like this." Forma mimed a blocking motion with her upper set of arms.

James had a surprised look. “Well how do you know that?"

Forma did not roll her eyes, the fact that they were all black was a major contributor to this but it was also true in the more general sense. This was one of those time that she would have done so. “We fence almost every day James, how can I not? You learn from me right?"

James shrugged a bit sheepishly “It feels like cheating if I know what you are going to do." He was fencing the same as he did at the beginning of the year; it would be dishonorable to do otherwise he thought.

Forma paused and then said reproachfully. “It is not, if you don't know what's going to happen how can you get anything done?" she adopted a slightly superior air, “You don't just build a bridge and see what happens, you make sure it won't collapse first."

James nodded dumbly and then muttered “It still feels like cheating."

Forma said in an official tone. “If you ever want to beat me, you need to know my rhythms."

James nodded and took a conflicted look. “How do you know to do that?"

Forma shrugged “Seems like common sense. Is that not common sense where you come from?"

James nodded “It does not seem honorable." James was supposed to lose anyway.

Forma just shrugged in response. “Now let's try it." they both stood up and fenced again. It very gradually dawned on James that when he paid attention to what Forma was doing there was a pattern at work. She would often give ground rather than do a straight crossing of swords, when possible she preferred to maneuver around James switching sword hands to be unpredictable.

As they fenced James smiled, it was getting interesting again.

The rest of the week passed mostly peacefully, the insect relations dinner was on Saturday and James did not worry overmuch about it. Forma on the other hand seemed more than a bit flustered by the prospect of James being near so many other insects.

On Friday during lunch Forma handed him a bar of soap that smelled slightly of soap and very strongly of burning. James looked at the pale, waxy soap and then looked back at Forma. “Are you saying I don't bathe enough?"

Forma shook her head. “No, but before you go to the dinner wash with that soap. It should cover any pheromones I accidentally put on you." James nodded finally getting her reasoning.

On Saturday after lunch James laid out his best clothes, very carefully made sure the bathroom was empty, and cleaned up for the dinner. Thankfully after a while of using the soap, he stopped being able to smell it. He also stopped being able to smell anything else.

The insect dinner was held in one of the smaller rooms in the main school building. He was able to pick it out immediately due to the spider silk decorations that festooned the door.

Before he entered he took a moment to look himself over and patted the coke he had stuck in his pocket. Trying to psyche himself up he entered the door. He was however unprepared for what was behind the door. The ceiling was all but littered with spider silk decorations that had been colored in gaudy iridescent paints. Scanning the room, he saw a large number of insect-morphs standing around in awkward little groups. In a vain attempt to liven the party there was a quartet of musicians in one corner.

There were two non-insect-morphs in the room. One of them was a very determined lamina who was playing a strange long stringed instrument with the rest of the insect-morph quartet. The other was an elf who looked like he wanted nothing more than to be as far away as possible.

James spied a trio of ant-girls on one side of the room. He quickly moved away, towards the elf and not incidentally the buffet table. A few of the insect morphs noticed him and shifted slightly in response. His cautious hope was destroyed as soon as he saw the buffet table, it quickly became apparent that almost none of the meals were fit for mammalian consumption.

As he walked down the buffet table James decided to make up diseases that each of the things would probably give him. What looked like baked beetles would give arm turns green disease, the still moving worms in a clear colored soup would give brain-melt disease, the what looked like grey predigested food which bubbled slightly would of course give dick-fall-off disease.

James giggled slightly as he did this, the elf was standing at the end of the table and James recognized him as the extremely sarcastic elf from the haunted house. James stood next to him and asked in his most polite tone. “Did you lose a bet or something?"

The elf looked at James curiously with an amused expression. "I lost a bet to be honest. Why are you here?"

James shrugged trying to keep a straight face. “Because I was invited, of course. What bet did you lose?"

The elf rolled his eyes. “The bet was over which member of the student council had to come to this thing. I lost." the elf momentarily grew angry but then calmed himself.

James looked back at the spread and then at the elf. “Have you tried any of the food?"

The elf shook his head emphatically, and said "I don't want any horrible parasites thank you. Feel free to try it though." the elf smiled slightly, “I’ll say nice things about you at your funeral."

James nodded. “And if you should happen to eat any then I will do much the same for you." James scanned the room again and saw to his horror that the Formica trio was approaching.

The trio were as usual all dressed in the same plain dress. However, this time they had an especially inquisitorial look. James took a deep breath as they began to speak to him. “How good of you to make it human James."

James nodded in response and said in a polite tone. "I normally go by James."

The trio shifted slightly and the second ant girl said. “We know many James, how are we supposed to distinguish between you without the title of human?"

James wondered briefly if Formica was experimenting with sarcasm but decided to answer earnestly in the chance she wasn't. “When a gentleman is directly addressed, it can be unnecessary to include the name at all."

The trio merely nodded slightly and then said “Please try some of the food."

James nearly drew back in horror but controlled himself. In his most diplomatic tone he asked “What do you recommend?"

“The buchnera worms in glucose sauce is most filling." if Formica was bluffing she didn't show it.

James tried very hard to keep his composure "I shall have to try it." Formica merely nodded and strode away.

The elf looked at James with an amused grin. “So now what are you going to do?"

The proper manners demanded that James have some, anything else would be rude. The prospect was horrifying.

James had a hesitant look. “Give me a second to think." he scanned the room quickly. He absentmindedly patted his pocket, remembering that he had a can of coke there. There seemed to be a fairly good number of spider-morphs in the room. “Ha, I have an idea. Can you be a distraction?"

The elf asked quizzically “Distraction? What kind of distraction?"

In a flat tone James answered “A distraction that everyone looks at for a minute or two."

The elf nodded and smiled widely “Okay I can do that. But, you owe me one."

James shrugged “Whatever you ask cannot suck more than the food." the elf nodded and then launched into a very loud rendition of James assumed to be a drinking song.

As the singing drew everyone's attention James coolly drew his can of coke and poured it into the punch bowl. Once it was half empty, James paused and couldn’t help but take a sip, and managed to pour the rest in though. The punch darkened ever so slightly and fizzed a bit.

James winked to the elf. The elf finished the song and bowed to the nonexistent applause. He returned to James who was trying to his hardest to look innocent.

The elf asked in an inconspicuously distracted tone “What was that all about?"

James looked around and saw that one of the spider-gentleman had poured himself a cup of punch and was taking a sip. He then took a much longer sip. “Well, if it works you will see. I’m James by the way." James offered his hand.

The elf shook his hand firmly and responded "I’m Charles, intermediate grades secretary of the student council."

The spider-gentleman blushed slightly and was beckoned over many of his comrades to try the punch. “Intermediate grades?"

Charles nodded “Oh yes, the elves are not on the same track as everyone else. So instead of having a representative for each of their grades we have just one for the intermediate grades."

The spider-gentleman's friends were all taking cautious sips of the punch, and finding it to their liking. “Oh, I see. Is student council very much work?"

Shrugging and leaning back slightly Charles said “Oh somewhat, mostly you just have to help teachers file things and other administrative work."

The spider-gentleman now had rosy checks and seemed to be enjoying themselves, often embracing insect-morphs unexpectedly to their obvious discomfort. In an earnest voice James asked “So why did you decide to join student council?"

Charles folded his arms and thought for a second. “To be honest it’s to pad my job applications. That and I kind of enjoy the work, it’s all very orderly.” Charles looked James up and down “Are you the human that Eric keeps hanging out with?”

James nodded still politely surveying the unfolding scene. “Yes.” He paused and then trying not sound paranoid asked “Am I talked of often?”

Charles shook his head. “No, I merely heard a rumor and wished to see if it was true. Eric can be a touch eccentric so it did not seem unreasonable.”

James glanced around the room again, more than a few of the spider morphs were openly spinning webs and casting them about the room. "I think that is our cue to leave." both James and Charles made a hasty exit from the room.

As they stood in the hallway just outside the room, Charles glanced back at the room and then at James. “What exactly did you do?"

Trying and failing to adopt an innocent look, James looked straight forward and said “Nothing, I don't know what you are talking about."

Charles put his hand to forehead and said “Wasn’t expecting this. Alright, we need to get a teacher, you stay here and keep watch." James nodded and with that Charles was off like a flash.

The party continued getting pretty wild and James watched with an expression of distant amusement. After a short time, Charles returned with an imperious looking wasp in tow. James vaguely remembered him as being a chemistry teacher and was mostly certain they were named dr. Polistes.

He glanced into the room and asked “What is happening in there?" his tone was somewhat shocked somewhat indignant.

James quickly stepped forward and said “We are not quite sure sir, all of a sudden some of the spider gentlemen became quite um..." James struggled for a word. Charles mouthed familiar “Familiar, and they seem only to be getting worse."

Dr. Polistes paused for a second, glancing back into the room. “One of them must have gotten their hands on caffeine somehow. Regardless we need to get them to their rooms. Conduct everyone out while I lead the spiders back to their rooms."

Charles and James both politely informed everyone that they needed to leave the room, while dr. Polistes looking angry he had all of the still very red, spider gentleman follow him back to the dormitories.

As the general flood of chitin and one lamia tail subsided James looked to Charles and asked “So now what?"

Charles looked around the room. It had been positively coated in spider webs, and these had clumped into large sticky masses. "I’m guessing we will have to clean the room."

James released a sigh of exasperation and said “How do we even are we even going to clean all this mess up? Spider web is sticky; it'll be like trying to pry chewing gum off the floor."

Charles shrugged “A lot of work I imagine. A lot of work and sticks I imagine." this prompted yet another exasperated sigh from James.

True to Charles' prediction dr. Polistes returned with Darius and a bemused looking spider-gentleman janitor.

After several hours of scraping the room was finally clean. Dr. Polistes curtly nodded to the pair and said “Good work, both of you should remember to only let a spider-morph have caffeine if you are prepared for the mess."

As the two students ambled off, Charles took the initiative “It was nice to meet you James. Please don't do that again."

James responded innocently “It was a pleasure Charles, and I don't know what you are talking about."

The party had eaten up most of the Saturday and gotten cobwebs into his best clothes, James was certain that he would never get those out.

That Sunday was spent with Forma and James reading about the arch, and to James amusement the flying buttress was well known by Forma. They as a result spent the morning in agreement that the flying buttress was arguably one of the greatest parts of architecture design that could be conceived. The narrator would like to point out to the unconvinced that it makes things the architecture so airy.

As a result of a good morning, James was more willing than usual to put up with diplomat club. As previously noted James was not one for public speaking, his thoughts scattered in front of large groups of people. Still when it was his turn he shakily got up in front of the group and attempted to convince his fellow students of the virtues of turnips.

The next Monday Forma was unable to attend lunch and so for a change of pace James had lunch with Eric’s friends. The conversation was somewhat subdued as Steven was extremely hungover.

As Steven held his head in his thin hands James asked good naturedly. “Why do you always party so hard?”

Steven winced as James talked. Given how quickly James had seen him recover there must have been a prodigious amount of drinking involved. Slowly Steven replied. “Well, I’m 9 now, so I’m going to university next year. In university I can’t party at all if I’m going to pass examinations and get a cushy job.

James trying to cover his surprise at Steven’s age James asked “Examinations?”

Yawning and still holding his head Steven answered “The best jobs are in the bureaucracy, but the exams are extremely tough. I already spend most of my free time studying for them.

Eyes wide all James could reply was “Damn that’s tough.” Looking at Steven’s discomfort James added “Don’t worry you can party again once you are a bureaucrat, I have it on good authority they party pretty hard.”

Steven looked up at James “How do you know?”

Shrugging James said “Family connection.”

Sally cut in, extending her arm to poke Steven, “That not the only reason.”

Looking at Steven confused James asked “What the other reason?”

Steven smiled. “Because I can.”

The Thursday of the next week James challenged Eric to a duel. It had been a fairly average week but swordsmanship had become entertaining once again. So in a fit of overconfidence James confidently challenged Eric to a duel.

Eric took the sword smiling and told James in a rather plain tone. "I don't think anything particularly unexpected is going to happen James."

James raised both his eyebrows in what he hoped was a cocksure gesture. “Sometimes surprising things happen Eric." nothing particularly surprising happened.

James was confident that he was starting to get a handle on Eric’s rhythms. However just about every time James thought he knew what Eric was going to do, Eric did something else that was very simple but unexpected.

Breathing heavily after he had been forced back once again James threw down his sword and in said in a tone approaching disgust "just once Eric, I would like to challenge you, make you breath hard."

Eric shrugged "I’m a good bit older than you James, don't feel bad about it."

James shook his fist trying to be overly dramatic. “Sometime after break I’m going to get you Eric."

Eric shrugged again, this was obviously not an event of consequence to him “Be ready to fight inside then, it's normally pretty cold after break." he then added in almost a distracted tone. “Lots of snow too."

James nodded, certain that Eric had politely caused his own doom. "I will keep that in mind Eric, but prepare yourself." Eric nodded nonchalantly. James picked back up his sword and went at it once again.

On the whole the period leading up to the fall dinner went quietly for James. He studied frequently and read in his spare time. Both he and Forma spent time together, often discussing their respective homes.

On the morning of the fall dinner James got out of bed mechanically, and got ready to go running. He appreciated the day off from classes but beyond that it was simply another day to endure.

Cecilia was running as usual and seemed to appreciate the chance to stop. “Hello James, how are you?"

James looked noncommittal “Good enough I guess, excited for the dinner today?"

Cecilia nodded “Yes, they have all my favorites."

James nodded “There is something I have been meaning to ask you Cecilia." Cecilia nodded “It's kind of unusual to have just one friend right?"

Cecilia shrugged. “If it's a really good friend I don't think it's a problem."

James gave a thoughtful look, “But still it's important to have friends right?"

Cecilia nodded “Friends can help a lot, why are you asking?"

James smiled “For a friend."

Once he had finished talking to Cecilia he returned to his room and got dressed, he looked in the mirror and tiredly thought to himself “Another day." he would have liked to spend the day hanging out with Forma but she couldn’t make it. So he read and talked with Ms. Maria. As the dinner approached he marked his place and then headed back to his room.

This sort of occasion required dress clothes. James had a single set of these, and they were mostly hand me downs from his older brother. He absentmindedly picked at the cobwebs still stuck on them, sighed, and put them on looking forward to the meal if nothing else.

Sheena’s preparation for the fall dinner went much differently. She woke up late and lazily pushed the curtain aside. The. She got out of bed with a stretch and a tremendous yawn. She rubbed her eyes looking over her room. It was a good sized room, more than big enough for two people. By mutual agreement the roommates had separated the room into two. Where the dividing line would be, they had put their two desks together.

Sheena’s side was neat, there were a few decorations, mostly drawings she had done and particularly liked. Much her spare space was given over to shelves with she kept stocked with books, and some of her journals. Very purposefully forgotten a small harp case laid in a corner.

Constance’s side was a bit more elaborate, she tended to keep at least three vases with flowers at a time. Next to each vase was an observation journal chronicling how long it took each flower to wither. Above her bed a map of her family’s lands was proudly displayed. The terraces made wavy patterns which Sheena had occasionally admired.

In the bed across the room Constance was lying down with her eyes closed. She was apparently not asleep as she called out “Why are you getting up so early?"

Sheena did a few more morning stretches "I wanted to hang out with my brother some before the dinner." She started looking through the drawers of her bedside table using her tail to help.

Yawning Constance said “You hang out with your brother a lot." Constance said in a matter of fact tone.

Sheena smiled “You always say that; my brother always says there is nothing more important than family.” She adopted a slightly annoyed look. She scanned the room again, asking herself where it could have gotten to.

Constance rolled her eyes. “And you always say that. Why are you making so much noise?"

Sheena paused to look under the bed. “Have you seen my toothbrush?"

“Check on top of the bedside table, silly." Constance yawned again and pulled the curtain around her bed closed. She had a good dream to get back to.

After Sheena had showered there came the rather large issue of taking care of her hair. Very long hair like Sheena had took a whole lot of care. She very carefully combed it, in parts not all at once. Then she had to dry all of it which took a long time. Finally, once that was done she put in her favorite headband and tied a ribbon around her tail for an extra compliment. She smiled at herself in the mirror, she was sure that today was going to be a good day.

Once that was done Sheena went back to her room to grab her book. Being careful to keep quiet Sheena grabbed the book off of the bedside table. With that done she retired to the front of the dorm to watch for her brother. The book she was reading has not been published in the world of humans, but it’s plot was similar to Romeo and Juliet.

Eventually she saw Eric outside, stranding up she waved to the lamia working the check in desk. The lamia returned the gesture and lazily used her tail to turn a page in her magazine.

She opened the dorm’s front door and there was Eric waiting just to the side of the door. They smiled at each other and Sheena said quietly. “Hello big brother"

Eric smiled back and said “Hello little sister." with that they left.

The pair of them went to the normal meeting spot. Eric and Lana talked and held hands a bit, Sheena for her part simply sat out of the discussion and read her book intently. Eric’s friends seemed to be having a good time and Sheena could often hear them laughing.

After a while Eric, gently nudged her. He helped her up and the pair of them went to main dining hall. The hall was magnificently decorated Sheena thought, all gold and red. A great fire had been arranged in the center of the hall and the various tables were splayed out around it.

Here Sheena and Eric parted ways but only with hesitation. Eric went off to the elevated student council table, this was just slightly below the even more elevated staff table. Sheena scanned the various freshman tables, she spotted where Constance and Emily were siting. She also saw where the human, James was sitting. He was sitting at the end of one a long table by himself seemingly staring off into the distance.

Sheena glanced up to where Eric was siting and sighed. She went over the human, as she approached she realized that rather than staring into the distance he was looking over at the tables where the insect students had congregated.

Thinking back after the Halloween ball, Eric had said she should try to get along better with James. But still, come on. Sighing loudly, she reached James and stood next to him.

She coughed loudly. He looked up at her silently with his normal inscrutable look.

Sheena paused for a second and then continued. “Would you like to join me and my friends?"

The human paused for a second. “Don't feel obligated to invite me." he turned back forward as if the matter was settled.

Sheena almost gave up there, but took a deep breath. “Are you always so rude?" Sheena glanced at James’ hands for a second, his talons seemed to need some trimming.

James turned again and said “One would think it rude to be where they are not wanted."

Sheena almost rolled her eyes but was able to restrain herself. “Ah, but I am inviting you.” She noted that his gaze had turned to where Eric was sitting. “My brother has nothing to do with it."

The human in his normal slow manner got up and bowed slightly. “Then if a lady asks me, I have no choice but to accept." he gestured for Sheena to lead and followed her silently.

Sheena looked over the tables and saw to her delight that they had begun to serve the food. All manner of food was on display, from large toasted beetles to mushroom salads, they even had a turkey. Sheena saw and tried to note where the tray of roasted lizards was.

Sheena sat down across the table from her friends. James sat next to her with a distant expression. She elbowed him and he focused back in. “Hello everyone, this is my brother's friend James." James did his best imitation of a smile and said “Hello", his eyes unfocused once again.

Both Constance and Juli gave James the cold shoulder, he apparently did not notice or at least didn’t care. Juli was a rather chipper dragonet, she had yellowish scales and kept her hair very short. She leaned in towards Sheena who reciprocated. Juli said in a whisper, “Is that the human that beat up Philip?"

Sheena nodded “Yeah, but he's harmless."

Constance joined the pair. “Harmless? Did you see what he did to Philip?"

Sheena nodded. “Don't worry, he’s harmless unless provoked. Spends most of his time staring off into space.”

All three of them glanced over at James who had begun to watch the servers with their various trays very intensely.

The trio shrugged and began to talk to gossip with one another. As this continued Sheena noticed that James had begun to mumble to himself. She took a second to listen into what he was saying. It seemed to be him praying for death to escape his current predicament.

Shortly afterwards the servers began to arrive. They were delivering the appetizer, Sheena and Juli stuck to soup while Constance and strangely James took undressed salads.

Looking at the minotaur and the human digging in Juli made a face. “Ugh, how can you guys stand to eat that."

James drifted back into paying attention. “It's all very crunchy. There is nothing quite like the crunch when you bite down a nice big leaf of lettuce."

Constance joined in “Also it's super tasty, every leaf has it's own flavor."

Juli rolled her eyes and ate a leaf from Constance’s plate, “Tastes like cardboard."

Constance said in an annoyed tone “That's just because you are a dragonet."

The soup was of course excellent. It was a creamy but had a slightly tangy taste as well. She watched with mixed feelings as both Constance and James went through their salads quickly. Once James had finished all of the leaves he offered Constance his tomatoes.

Once the appetizer was out of the way there was time again for the girls to gossip. They talked about the weather about how it was turning colder. About what coats they would wear, about the various going ons in school, about how classes had been going.

After a while the conversation turned to winter break. “What are you going to do during winter break?" Juli asked this while toying with her spoon.

Constance took a second to finger one of her braids. "I’m going to go home and relax. How about you Juli?"

Juli nodded “The same thing, it will be nice to see my family again." Her tail had begun to absentmindedly smooth down the hair on the back of her head, which stuck up when least convenient.

This prompted Sheena to but in “Ahh, I’m envious."

Juli gave Sheena a questioning look. “Why's that?" Juli asked a bit surprised.

“Oh, it's just that whenever I go home my parents make me study something. Over the summer it was the harp."

Both Constance and Juli shrugged in response and were about to continue talking when unexpectedly James spoke up “Why the harp?"

Sheena paused for a second and then shrugged. "I think it was because they had a spare harp lying around." Constance gave a knowing smile.

Juli continued “Well, every new year my family sets up a shrine. It's a lot of work but they keep insisting."

Constance responded “My family doesn’t do much, but I like the sweet fruit we eat for new year's."

Around then there was the sound of someone hitting a bell. Everyone turned to face a podium that had been erected on the platform at the end of the hall. A centaur was standing at the podium, he looked absolutely excited. After shuffling some note cards he said in a loud voice “Hello everyone I’m your student body president Jean-André." he went on in an excited voice to say how happy he was that everyone was here, and that the special significance of the November dinner was in the breaking of the bread. A human tradition that focused on reaching understanding over food. Sheena saw James nodding; she had seen that sort of thing often enough at home.

Jean-André then passed off the podium to Eric. Sheena smiled helplessly as Eric gave a similar speech but about the various things students could expect as the year drew to a close and the various things that they should remember to as they got ready to leave for home. Sheena heard James exclaim in excitement when her brother mentioned the three free days after the end of testing.

As Eric wished everyone an excellent dinner, James let out a sharp gasp and swore and the trio turned to face him. He was staring wide eyed at one of the servers carrying a standing rib roast. Sheena saw James put his hands to his face and all but swoon.

Sheena coveted the toasted lizards but ended up having to share some with Juli. All three of them took a perverse delight in watching James go at the roast with something between joy and zeal. Sheena happily noted that as always the toasted lizards were extremely excellent.

As the trio finished eating they began to talk again. For a while they traded the average gossip. Sheena noted however that Juli seemed to be a bit more agitated. During a lull in conversation Sheena turned to Juli and asked “You seem a bit upset, what's wrong?"

Juli dropped her smile and said. "Queenie pisses me off." Sheena gave her a questioning look. "I had a secret and she found out and then told everyone else."

Constance took this moment to speak up “What was the secret about?"

Juli withdrew a little and sighed saying “Everyone knows already. During the last physical exam, it turned out I’m a little over weight. Queenie told everyone, just because she saw my weight."

In a compassionate tone Sheena said “That is the worst."

Juli fumed a bit more as they continued to chat but seemed to feel better. Nothing broke the simple tranquility of friends except for James continually asking for more roast. Eventually reaching his limit James sat back and seemed to say to no one in particular. “The old man always hogs the roast. If this kills me, let everyone know that I have died happy."

The trio looked over at him and Juli said in a low voice “Pig"

James did not move but replied in a quiet almost private tone. "I don't get half this much good food at home." he gazed up at the ceiling sighing, in what Sheena hoped was contentment

As much as the roast had encumbered James it did not prevent him from siting up almost instantly once desert was announced. Sheena watched this with some bemusement. The deserts were on a single table to help keep them cold, Sheena noted that they were rather far from the table. Furthermore, that everyone else was already crowding towards the table. With a sigh the trio resolved to wait and were content to resume talking when suddenly Queenie approached.

Queenie was a royal bee-girl. As Sheena watched her approach she reflected that unlike Forma; Queenie had almost a tangible air of arrogance. Forma was always humble and when she bothered to pay attention almost always deferential. Sheena never appreciated this until confronted by it’s opposite.

She came with her head held up high, and was greeted by hostile stares from Constance and Juli. Sheena had been told by Eric that it was not politic to give hostile stares and so tried to restrain herself. James for his part had sat back in his seat and was staring at the ceiling again.

Queenie looked down haughtily and said in a dismissive tone “It's good to see that you are skipping dessert Juli." Juli apparently too angry to respond gripped the table, her talons leaving scratch marks. Queenie looked over at James with distain, James however was still staring at the ceiling. “And what terrible company you keep."

James continued to stare at the ceiling but responded in a tired tone. “It has often been said that one honest friend is worth any number of dishonest friends." he glanced meaningfully over at Queenie barely looking at her “Also you are one to talk about laying off the sweets."

Queenie seemed slightly offended by this and responded in a caustic tone “A simple insult for a simple creature.” James continued to passively look up at the ceiling. With everyone giving her the cold shoulder Queenie walked off, Sheena had a pensive look.

The desert table was fairly impressive, although it did not have the sweet soup that Sheena liked. For Constance there were rare fruits and Juli rather hesitantly took a few finger cakes. James for his part could not stop talking about how nice the deserts on display were. Despite having eaten a heroic amount of roast, James loaded his plate with desserts.

The rest of the dinner passed peacefully although more than once Sheena caught James’ gaze wandering over to the insect tables.

Once the dinner was finished everyone gathered up plates and started to clear the tables. James made an obvious effort to stand next to Sheena as they went to deposit the plates in the kitchen. He paused keeping his normal inscrutable look and then spoke with an unexpected vulnerability in his voice. “Can I ask you for a favor Sheena?"

Sheena looked at James with a confused expression. “What's the favor?"

James looked down for a second and then said "Forma doesn't have any non-insect friends besides from me. I have been thinking about it for a while and that's not for the best. Will you be her friend?"

Sheena was more than a bit surprised by this. She had always assumed that Forma kept the conversation to a minimum with her due to some grudge she was holding, perhaps the same grudge James had held against her. That or she just didn't want to. “If she wants to be friends with me then fine." Sheena tried to say this in a friendly tone, but it came out a little condescending.

James smiled “Thank you Sheena.” After the plates had been delivered Sheena found Eric. She smiled, it had been a good day.

The school seemed to have some sort of vendetta against long weekends and as a result there was class on Friday and going to be class on Saturday. This was another one of those things that James would have told just about anyone who would listen was complete bullshit, but he doubted that Cecilia would put up with his complaining.

Once lunch rolled around James put on his heaviest jacket. It helped a little once he got a good sprint up. But when standing still he had to actively work to keep his teeth from chattering.

Sheena and Eric showed up and Sheena sat down on picnic blanket next to Forma. James tossed a sword to Eric and they went at it once again. James took it much slower than normal and his maneuvers were almost contemplative as he tried to anticipate what Eric was going to do.

After thinking it over Sheena, it was probably possible to make friends with Forma. She was nice enough, just never very communicative. Her words seemed carefully chosen and she tended to answer questions in a short concise manner.

Sheena rubbed her hands together careful not to push too hard against the ends of her gloves. “How was your day Forma?"

Forma nodded, her antenna swaying and said “Good."

Sheena cast a glance upward. “Have your classes gone well so far?"

Forma nodded “Yes.” She took another bite of her sandwich.

Sheena searched her brain for something to talk about. “Do you like the book we have to read?"

Forma looked over slowly “My class is reading a human play."

Sheena asked again. “Do you like the play?"

For the first time Forma adopted an almost troubled expression “No, not really."

Sheena played with her tail for a second. Then she continued “Why don't you like it?"

Forma spoke with unusual conviction “Having to convey your emotions through speech and body language takes a long time.” She continued absentmindedly. “It's much faster to use these.” She motioned to her antenna.

Sheena smiled “Not everyone has those."

Form kept her frustrated expression “But still the whole thing is about an easily resolved misunderstanding. If you use your smells it's much hard to misunderstand."

Sheena smiled, happy that she seemed to be getting through. “Well, now you see what everyone has to deal with." Sheena motioned over to the two boys fighting. "He has to deal with misunderstandings all the time."

Forma glanced out at the two boys, and then gave Sheena an understanding look. "I know."

Sheena stumbled on an idea “Are there any other insect-people in your class?" Forma nodded a slight yes. Sheena looked around and then asked cautiously “Do you ever share homework?" Forma smiled and nodded a slight yes. The two of them began chatting despite the cold, Forma was always difficult to get an answer out of but over time they began to build a rapport.

Eventually James returned with Eric in tow, James to Eric’s apparent amusement was trying to keep in constant motion for warmth. James asked while jogging in place “It's getting too cold out here, we need to start having lunch inside. Does that work for you guys?"

Forma however had a troubled expression upon hearing this news and rubbed her smaller set hands together anxiously. James looked at Forma and Sheena and sighed. He looked at Eric with the sort of expression that suggested a need for immediate deliverance. Eric asked politely “Will that be hard Forma?"

Forma kept her troubled expression “A little, I can come out here because I am so far away from everyone else there is very little chance they will find me. But if I am inside the school then it will be much easier for them."

James gave a long and sustained hermmmmmmm. He then looked at Sheena and asked “Where do you normally eat lunch Sheena?"

Sheena looked up and gestured to Eric “With him, you know where we eat.

James looked at Sheena “Same place I had lunch with you guys?” Sheena nodded and James continued hermmmmmming, and then said “Let's look around and then regroup on Sunday to pick a spot." he looked at Forma who nodded.

Eric however was less committal “I might be there.” Sheena looked at Eric surprised.

On Sunday the James headed for the library expectantly. James was the first to arrive and going inside he spotted Ms. Maria. She appeared to be trying to comb her hair while simultaneously reading a book. She held the comb with one hand, and the book with one hand and her tail. She was however not making much progress with either it seemed.

To make matters worse James cheerfully greeted her making her drop both things. She looked down past her tail green tail with an expression of supreme disappointment. “Good morning James."

“Good morning Ms. Maria. It's been rather cold recently hasn't it?" James hoped that this was not too leading of a question.

As she leaned down to pick up her things she responded in an unhappy tone. "I know. I hate how sluggish you get in the cold.”

James asked in a surprised tone “Oh really?"

Ms. Maria adjusted her glasses and tried to start combing again. "I have to go to sleep under a pile of blankets.” She motioned down to her tail “It can be hard to cover everything."

James nodded understandingly. “At home it was less a problem of covering everything than having enough blankets." Forma tapped James on the shoulder. “Oh, hello Forma."

Forma gave a slight nod and said in her usual even tone. “Hello James, hello Ms. Maria.” She motioned for James to follow her.

James said happily. “See you in a little bit Ms. Maria. Try to stay warm."

Ms. Maria smiled and nodded “You too James."

Forma sat across from James in their usual spot. She leaned forward attentively “Did you think of anything?"

James shrugged “Beyond asking Ms. Maria or Darius no." James paused for a second and then added " but, if we ask Darius it will probably be outside and cold."

Forma leaned back in thought “The main problem is that they will find me because of the proximity. On Sundays I’m supposed to be in the library. The only thing I can think of is if we hang out less often.” She paused for a second and then added “And you will need to use the soap more often." James hid his dismay.

At this point Sheena had arrived, rather conspicuously without her brother. This elicited a surprised expression from James. Forma retained her usual expression of stoic indifference.

James looked at Sheena hopefully. "Forma and I haven’t come up with much. Any ideas?"

Sheena sat down and began to dig in her backpack for a book, she eventually added in an unconcerned tone "I already told you where I normally have lunch with Eric."

James seemed a bit off put by this response and asked “So no ideas of anywhere else?"

Sheena looked for her place in the book “Nope."

James looked at Forma, Forma looked at James smiling slightly as she did so. Realizing that he was the only person who would get to the bottom of this he asked in his politest tone. “So why did you come by today?"

Sheena turned a page and said absentmindedly "Eric asked me to come, that and my friends are busy doing something else."

That hardly explained anything so James continued “What is Eric doing.”

With a hostile terseness Sheena responded “He wanted to spend the day with Lana.”

James turned slightly red and then turned back to Forma. They spent the day exploring the engineering behind varieties of roads. James was much in favor of the roman variety of road while Forma favored the style of roads suggested by macadam

As it came time to leave for his club James excused himself a bit early. He went back to the front desk; Ms. Maria was sitting at the front desk wearing a light jacket as she noted which books had been returned in a ledger. James politely cleared his throat, Ms. Maria looked up smiling. She took a small sip from a steaming mug and asked “What do you need James?"

James froze as he tried to think of how to gracefully and not in a self-incriminating manner ask a teacher for a private lunch spot. After going ahhh for a second he started “Me and Forma were considering meeting up during the week at lunch, but we don't know any good spots to do so privately."

Ms. Maria paused for a second. "I’m sorry James I don't think I know of any good spots for what you are asking. I can’t recommend doing so outside and the library gets a lot of traffic during lunch actually.” She looked around and then leaned forward surreptitiously "I think everyone is sleeping in on Sundays.” She smiled at him showing her fangs slightly.

James adopted a frustrated look and then said “Well, if you think of anything please tell her or me." James suddenly got a surprised expression and then sprinted back to where Forma was still sitting with Sheena.

James was surprised to find that the two of them holding a conversation, Sheena looked at him with mild surprise while Forma had started to gather up books to put them away. James said in an imperative tone “Forma, let's meet up on Tuesday at lunch to decide what to do." Forma nodded.

Sheena heard the bell tower chime and stood up. “Walk with me to club James?"

James was more than a little surprised by this and unthinkingly said “But you walk to club, I run to club."

Sheena was perhaps a little less patient without her brother and with a barely concealed contempt said. “Well, just jog in place next to me as we go there."

James shrugged at Forma who just shrugged back. Regardless James followed Sheena as she made her way from the library to club. Wondering if this was a portent he asked cautiously “So what's this about?"

Sheena said in an unconcerned tone "Juli asked me to thank you for what you did at the harvest dinner.”

James began searching his memory for anything nice he had done during the harvest dinner. “What did I do at the harvest dinner?”

Sheena looked at James with a you have to be kidding me expression “Remember when Queenie came by?"

James paused to try and remember the dinner, his recollection of events was mostly warm memories of beef roast and later cake. “There was roast, and then chocolate cake. I think you had toasted lizard soup. Anyway, who is Queenie?"

Sheena rolled her eyes very much unsure if James was teasing her. “The bee-girl who was harassing us”.

Thinking back there had been some talking to a bee-girl as he tried not to collapse from eating too much roast. James decided to respond truthfully. "I think I insulted her, that doesn’t sound helpful."

Sheena decided that James was teasing her so rolling her eyes “Anyway, thank you. Juli was very much offended, I was worried she was going to attack Queenie for a second there." James merely nodded in response. “Oh, by the way. Did the teacher say if we were doing group discussions today or if it was just single speeches?"

James closed his eyes and tried to recall. “Single speeches I believe." Sheena smiled and patted her book. Her tried and true strategy of ducking such things gave her a lot of time for reading.

On Monday morning James left jogging early to go visit Darius. Darius was true to form just finishing sharpening a scythe as James peaked in.

Darius paused to examine the blade and said “Hello James."

James smiled “Hello Darius." He looked at the bare earth floor of the shed and sat down on a stool next to the door of the maintenance shed.

Darius went back the blade. "I doubt you are here to turf more lawns."

James made a face and then went back to trying to conserve heat. It was a bit warmer in the shed but not by much. “No I’m not here to turf more lawns. I came to ask if you knew of any good places on campus where I could be outside but out of the cold so much."

Darius sat silently in thought for a second. And then resumed sharpening. “Well there is one place. But I’m not supposed to tell students about it."

James shrugged. "I just want to eat lunch outside but not freeze anything off."

Darius nodded slowly. "I suppose I can trust you. There is the actual gardening shed, I don't normally keep it locked. You could eat lunch in there."

James nodded “Where is the actual gardening shed?" he briefly wondered what made this the not actual gardening shed.

Darius stood up with a creaking that sounded suspiciously similar to trees in the wind. “Follow me."

James was no expert of the campus, which for its part was very large and sprawled a bit around the center castle. So he was only minimally surprised when he discovered in a neglected corner a rather large gardening shed. The building was borderline ancient, and in poor repair. Additionally, it was one of the few areas where the grass had been allowed to go long and unkempt. All of this contributed to a creepy shed vibe.

Darius opened the door with a bit of effort. Looking inside it was obvious that this had once been a very nice shed for the gardener to live in. It had a wooden floor and a fire place. It was certainly large enough for someone to live in. Glancing at the floor James was struck by a sudden insight.

James glanced at Darius as he stood outside the shed peering in. “You built the other shed didn't you?"

Darius nodded. “Oh, yes took a bit of doing. Had to erect it myself, get the trees to give me the wood that sort of thing."

James glanced down at the roots Darius used to move around. "I assume that the main reason you built the other shed was because you didn't like the floor on this one."

Darius smiled. “Rather observant young one. I can walk not connected to the ground but it's a bit like.... Holding something in you know."

James nodded “For a human at least I imagine it's a bit like having to hold your breath." Darius nodded in response.

Darius poked at some of the decaying gardening equipment left over from when the shed had been abandoned. A few mice fled from him. “It's probably infested with just about everything"

James drew back slightly and then calmed himself. Adopting a slightly troubled look he asked “So why aren't you supposed to tell students about this shed?"

Darius took a contemplative tone. "I think because it's pretty far away from adult supervision, you could get up to all kinds of trouble in here."

James wondered what sort of trouble he meant and then continued. “Well, thank you for showing me this. I will be here over winter break so if you need any help, feel free to ask me." James self-congratulation at his act of charity died as soon as he saw Darius' look of pleasure.

Darius laughed and slapped James on the back. “You should expect me to call on you then."

James' watch chimed and after glancing at it quickly, he then bade Darius farewell.

The next day at lunch he introduced Forma to the shed. She looked around curiously pacing the floor a few times. With a slightly concerned expression she said “It looks big enough to sword fight in but it's still close enough that they will be able to sense us."

James nodded troubled by this assessment and said in response. “You might not feel it but it's a bit less cold in here because it's sheltered. That and we can use the fire place if it really starts to get cold."

Forma replied with a slightly superior smile "I feel the cold, I can just stand it better than you." James let this pass with no comment as he examined the fire place. With his luck there was some kind of horrible monster living in the chimney.

The narrator would like to reassure our readers that there was no horrible monster living in the fire place. A family of birds vacated the chimney unharmed after James first disastrous attempt to start a fire.

James looked back at Forma, she was wearing what looked to James to be a coat that had an extra pair of sleeves. It was as plain as could be and was the same mud brown as most of her clothes. “So what days should we meet?"

Forma leaned in towards James, and her antenna wobbled ever so slightly. "Wednesday and Friday. Make sure to use the soap the night before.” She smiled at James “You have a very distinctive smell."

James took an experimental sniff at his armpit. Same as usual, perhaps it was his coat. He started to pace around in an attempt to keep warm, the shack was out of the wind but a suspicious amount of daylight kept coming in. He surveyed the ceiling and saw a largish hole that was not a chimney, this place was a mess.

He broken from his reverie by Forma clearing her throat. James looked to see that she had that look in her eye. The one James most often associated with desperate defenses. Looking around and recognizing the extreme lack of space to run away into, James very hesitantly passed Forma a wooden sword.

As James pushed himself to keep up with Forma, it distantly occurred to him that at this rate he would be rather good at the defense. This only served to exasperate him, he was certain that you won with offense.

As they both packed up to go Forma told James to wait until Friday for them to meet again. James let out an exasperated sigh. “But if I go that long without sword fighting, I will be rusty."

Forma just shrugged and smiling ever so slightly said "I should hope not; I don't plan to go easy on you."

Two days later as James got up from his desk in class, Sheena rather unexpectedly came up and said “Hello."

James nodded his head and said hello in return. A mere Formality of course. Therefore, James' surprise at Sheena still being there was understandable. “Can I help you?" James said this in a polite tone. He had already begun to try and remember exactly where in his book he had left off.

“Why don’t you come and eat lunch with me and Eric." Sheena’s tone seemed enthusiastic.

James shrugged. Lunch tasted much the same regardless of where he was. He shouldered his backpack nodding. Sheena seemed happy at this turn of events and lead James to one of the common rooms. James noted with some amusement that Sheena’s tail had the disconcerting tendency to play with her hair as she walked.

Stepping into the same common room as before, James surveyed the rather cozy space. All available space had been given over to sedan couches arranged around a small table.

All of Eric’s friends greeted Sheena as she entered the room. James noted that her smile was a bit larger than usual when this happened. There was less response when James entered excepting Eric who got up and shook James’s hand.

Before Sheena sat down she turned to Eric “I brought him. I was even nice about it. Right James?” James nodded noncommittally. “Now my reward.” Eric rolled his eyes and passed her a few candies.

Lana was sitting next to Eric, Sally was sitting across from them, and Steven was splayed out on the furthest couch. Sheena for her part sat down at the closest end of the closest couch, James seeing an opportunity, sat down at the furthest end of the closest couch and tried to act natural.

As previously mentioned this was a group of good friends, and so James needed to do little more than soak up the natural atmosphere.

Sally had just done a spot on impersonation of Eric when James’s watch chimed his need to go to class. As he stood up Eric looked directly at him and asked “So did you ever find an alternative place to have lunch?"

James paused for a second in surprise but then answered quickly “Oh yes, I could show it to you if you like."

Eric smiled and nodded “Tomorrow then."

Sally was the first to excuse herself and James tried to inconspicuously feel the spot where she had been sitting. It was a little bit warm and quite damp he noted.

The next day James showed Eric the shed. He was quite surprised that such a building existed and stepped into it excitedly “If only I had known that such a place was on campus."

James and Forma followed him into the shed. Forma asked calmly “What would you have done if you about this shed?"

Eric continued to survey the shed and said as he peered into the fire place. “You even have a fireplace." his voice lingered in the dead air as he stood up and then said “Oh, well I would have made a club house. This is quite the cozy little cabin and it would be fun to fix it up."

James looked over the cabin once again. It was still an old decaying building. “Given how much work would be required, I’m not quite sure that fixing up this cabin is my idea of a good time." James looked over at Forma for agreement.

Forma however was surveying the cabin wide eyed and all of her hands moved as if she was drawing something. Still in her own world Forma said absent-mindedly “Oh, there is so much to do. It would be quite fun I think." James smiled.

On the first Wednesday of December when James awoke up to snow flurries outside of his window. James had always liked snow, and was curious to see if it was much different in the world of monsters. He ran outside the first chance he got. A good bit of snow had begun to accumulate on the ground. James in the interests of scientific inquiry, began to play with it until he realized two very important things, first the snow was still a bit wet so he was getting soaked, second it was still true that it is very cold if you are wet when the snow is falling. James beat a hasty retreat.

After having changed out of his now wet pajamas, James got back on track and went out a little late to jog with Cecilia.

The track remained clear as the snow melted on contact. James did not notice this because he was instead looking at Cecilia who was only wearing a coat on her upper body. He looked up at her and asked “Aren't you cold." it took a good deal of will not to have his teeth chatter.

Cecilia shrugged "I don't feel it that much. Besides I handled the other cold weather didn't I?"

Gesturing at the snow excitedly James said “But it's snowing."

Cecilia shrugged again "I’m not out in waist deep snow am I? If it gets too windy I might head inside." James paused to consider exactly how much snow it would take to get to Cecilia’s waist.

He then continued. “But how are you not cold with all that exposed area?" James was altogether too excited to be tactful at this point.

Cecilia turned and looked at her legs. She was wearing the same running shorts she normally did. "I burn a lot of calories so I have heat from the inside James."

James nodded in agreement, he was almost certain that back at home giving a horse something to cover up in when cold was uncommon. He took a moment to crouch down and poke at some snow while Cecilia did her stretches.

She watched him with a bemused gaze. “Do you like snow?"

James nodded his head “Oh very much, there is always so much to do, and it looks so pretty." with that said they began to jog. Cecilia certainly didn't seem to mind the snow at all. James was mostly focusing on running at all in the cold.

The snow had continued up until lunch, when it stopped falling. James all but jumped out of his seat at the prospect of playing the snow with Forma. He was however stopped by Sheena.

James tried very very hard to conceal his impatience as Sheena said to him “Is it all right if me and my brother join you at the meeting spot?" James nodded and then was off like a shot.

Forma had awoken and prepared for school like normal. Her bunkmate had checked her over, and she had done the same for her. They both had the Formica costume on perfectly.

As the main group of ants left Forma dawdled to peruse an architectural text her colony had asked her to read. She was mentally repeating 1-part lime, 3 parts ash to herself as she climbed the stairs out of the insect dorm. Entering into the ground floor of the school building she glanced out the window.

Forgetting herself she rushed to the window and pushing her face and all four of her hands to the glass. Everything was white. Forma was too shocked for words until she remembered herself.

Before she had left her colony they had given her instruction on what sort of things to expect above ground. They had of course told her that water fell from the sky, and that sometimes the water froze into hail. They had not mentioned this fluffy white stuff.

She resisted the urge to drag the nearest person to the window and show them the marvel of the snow, or to signal her amazement at maximum intensity, instead she smoothed out her clothes and resumed decorum. Doing that sort of thing would get her scolded again for acting out of role. The last time it had happened was when she had first seen the sky and wandered off in a daze as a result. She wasn’t looking forward to that level of discipline again. She had already been told that it was okay to do that in her colony, not the dangerous outside world.

She looked around and saw two bee-girls looking at her smugly. It was a queen and a drone, the queen had an extremely bemused look of smugness. At the fastest speed that still seemed proper Forma made for an exit. She glanced at the white stuff again, it was covering everything, the leaves of the trees, the ground, even the roofs of the dorms.

Once she was outside and sure she was alone she began to cautiously poke the stuff. It was soft and yielded little resistance to her finger. She held some and noted that it began to melt in her hands. Very cautiously she tasted it and concluded that it was made of water.

Walking around in it she heard a crunching noise. She looked down to see that she was leaving footprints. How amazing! She would have to show James this stuff, he would probably whine about how cold it was but even then he would still be amazed.

Arriving at the gardening shed in record time James was greeted by Forma. Forma was crouching outside of the shed poking the snow. James joined her in poking it.

Forma asked James in a nonchalant tone. “Did you get a lot of this stuff back where you came from?"

James shook his head, “Sometimes, always was a gas when it happened. How about you?"

Forma said in a matter of fact tone “Not a lot falls from the sky underground. What do you do with all this stuff?"

James smiled as wide as he could. “All kinds of stuff, you can build snowmen, make snow angels, go sledding have snowball fights." Forma looked at him wide eyed, merely nodded her head like she knew what James was going on about.

Picking one at random she asked “So how do you build a snowman?"

“You make three balls of snow on top of one another, and then you put a face on the top one." James said this excitedly.

Forma nodded, this was something she could get behind.

They had managed to get the first big ball of snow done when Eric finally arrived. He was wearing a rather flattering coat, a sharp design and light purple to complement his scales. He was as usual flanked by Sheena who was wearing a rather attractive coat, complete with a muff to keep her hands warm. Eric and Forma greeted the both of them very happy and very wet.

Eric looked at them and said “Never gotten to play in the snow before huh?" Forma shook her head. James began to really feel the cold and told Forma they could finish the snowman later, so they headed inside.

This however only provided a new place to shiver. James true to form began to bitch about how cold he was. Eric noted this with some amusement and then said “Why don't we just light a fire in the fireplace?"

James paused to consider the idea. Surveying the shed there was some moldering wood. It was super damp and would likely not burn cleanly. But that beat being cold hands down. He arranged the wood making “A house for the fire to live in." looking around he found an ancient and decayed broom surrounded by straw it had shed. He stuffed the straw and whatever small pieces of wood he could scavenge from the shed underneath the logs.

Reaching deep into his backpack he produced a rather weathered box of matches. Striking a match, he held it to the straw. However, while the match was comfortable burning, the straw was not. He tried everything, he could think of: two matches at once, gently blowing on the matches. The straw just smoked a little.

Although it was funny for a while eventually Eric grew tired of watching James struggle, and had James move back. Eric drew himself up to his full height, and seemed to focus internally. Eventually with a clicking sound and a kind of retching motion he let out a thin lance of flame that proved to be too much for the straw.

James paused to look at the fire slowly growing larger and then said “Whoa, I had no idea you could barf fire Eric. Can you barf fire too Sheena?"

Sheena nodded but Eric then began to say in a slightly accusatory voice "James, I don't barf fire, I breathe fire."

James just shrugged “It looks like barfing fire to me." Eric did not seem especially placated by this explanation. As the room began to grow moderately warmer James relax a bit and began to eat lunch with Forma.

Once the fire had burned for a while Eric looked around in confusion. He tested the air with his tongue and then remarked to no one in particular “It is a nice place, but drafty though."

Forma spoke up, it’s all the holes in the roof. She pointed up. “It would be difficult to fix; it looks like there are more holes than roof up there.

Looking up Eric saw that she was right, sunlight streamed in almost everywhere and he could see the sky above him.

James let his mind wander some until Sheena once again broke the silence. “Are you ready for finals Forma?"

Turning to Forma James saw her become a little sheepish. Her voice was unusually uncertain as she said "I’m a little bit worried about the finals."

He had mostly forgotten about finals James turned to Eric. “Are finals here very hard?"

Eric nodded mouth full of sandwich. Clearing his throat, he added “They can be. It really depends on how much you study."

James noted Sheena’s very brief and very smug smile. James paused for a moment and then said “Well, that's a relief. I study a lot, so I should be okay."

Forma turned to James with a confused expression. “When do you study James?"

James shrugged “During the evenings, I don't have anything else to do." he paused for a second trying to think of something to say. “What happens after finals Eric?"

Eric smiled broadly, his tail whipping around his head. “There are three completely free days and then people leave."

James was surprised by this “What happens during those three free days?"

Eric kept the smile and said a little bit dreamily “All kinds of things."

Sighing James nodded and said in voice that was uncertainly sarcastic “Sounds wonderful." plenty of time to spend in the library he supposed.

Once finals started everyone spent their time taking finals or reviewing for the finals. In James’ case he thought that his finals went rather well. There is not much of a scale to judge the difficulty of a final while you are taking it but the answer seemed to come unbidden to James' hand as he answered. The English essay rambled a bit but almost all essays do.

On the Saturday the students were required to take a number of surveys. To James it was dreadfully almost painfully boring. They asked things like the number of hours spent studying, how long he had normally spent studying in middle school. James answered to the best of his memory and then sat back wondering what would be for lunch.

Once everyone had finally finished their surveys, everyone was anxious to leave. However, miss Sialia got up and shepherded everyone to the auditorium. It was quite crowded and James was more than a little squished by his neighbors. Still he passed the spare moment browsing a book.

After all of the students had finally arrived and quieted down, miss Araneae walked on to the stage with the student body president in tow. The student body president gave a speech in which he reminded students that they would be leaving in three days, the importance of not doing anything too foolish, and how there would be teachers on patrol so they should not get any ideas.

Miss Araneae then came up to the podium and said. “Another hard semester is over, and everyone worked very hard. It is as always an honor to preside over a school with so many excellent students like yourself.

A fairly large gong was wheeled into position behind Ms. Araneae. She gestured to it and said “For those freshmen in the audience in case you forgot, this gong is rung to signal the start and end of each semester. It is now my pleasure to end this semester."

She took up the mallet easily, everyone leaned forward in their seats ready to leave. The principal smiled and the said “But first one round of the school song.” Everyone groaned at this

James had no idea what the school song was and certainly couldn’t say after being the middle of the entire student body singing it. He was far too busy covering his ears trying not to go deaf. The principal smiled and then hit the gong making a loud booming noise.

After that students began to stream out of the auditorium of their own accord. James did his very best to not get stepped on as he followed the crowds.

When he was finally out of the auditorium James jumped for joy. Three days with no class and no club to hold him back. To him the sun was shining and life seemed unusually good. He would have jumped up and clicked his heels if he thought he could.

He spent that evening writing a letter to his family. As always he tried to cast things in a positive light. He had made friends; he had probably done well. James paused as he wrote that part and decided to tell his parents the grades he had actually gotten. This would mean he had to wait to send the letter but he figured that it was worth the delay.

The first morning he got up at the same time as he normally did quite unintentionally, he was taking his shower before he realized that he could have spent the whole morning asleep. Reasoning that he had gotten this far, he might as well go running with Cecilia.

Cecilia was as always already there by the time James arrived. She seemed to be really going at this morning though. When she finally stopped to chat with James all he could say was "What was that about?"

Cecilia gave a guilty smile. “When I’m home it's easy to forget to practice.” She paused and then sheepishly added “Too much good food as well."

James smiled "I’m envious. Think about me stuck here freezing while you enjoy the break."

Cecilia pushed James playfully. “If it’s so bad then just stay inside doofus."

James nodded "I wish; I have to help the groundskeeper."

Cecilia had a somewhat concerned expression upon hearing this. “But you always complain about how cold you are."

James rolled his eyes slightly. “He did me a favor, and besides it will give me something to do while no else is going to be here."

Cecilia smiled “Well try not to freeze to death while I am gone."

James smiled back, “Try to remember to practice while you are at home, in the lap of luxury, nice and warm, with home cooked meals to eat." Cecilia rolled her eyes

They exchanged their farewells and parted ways after that.

The one thing that had to be done that day was go to the end of semester club lunch. It was a modest affair held in the club room. The spread was okay, not great. The teacher tried to mingle with the students but James true to form did his level best to avoid him.

As he stood eating a particularly tasty bit of cake from the buffet James spied Eric and Sheena sitting together. James took a moment to weigh how he felt. After hearing arguments and counter arguments, he finally went over.

He greeted Eric and then asked the both of them “Are you excited to go home?"

Both of them nodded but Sheena was much more hesitant than Eric. Eric spoke up and replied “Of course, so many friends to see and things to learn. Isn’t that right Sheena?"

Sheena was outside of Eric’s cone of vision and with an expression of incredible distaste as she happily as possible “Of course”

Eric continued blissfully unaware “Will you be alright here?”

James nodded despondently "I guess." He then tried to fake a smile and said “It will be a good time to learn what I need, if I am finally going to beat you." he tried to adopt a comically imposing pose as he said this.

Eric just nodded and responded “Of course James, I look forward to it."

Taking another bite of cake James searched his mind to see if there was anything else he should ask. He suddenly had an idea “What time do you leave for the station? I would like to say goodbye to you right before you head off."

Eric thought for a second and then said “Mid-morning, we want to catch the earliest train that is running."

With this the conversation seemed finished, and James was about to give his goodbyes when Sheena leaned forward ever so slightly and asked “Do you plan to do the same with Forma?"

James was more than a bit surprised by the question and asked “Why do you ask?"

Sheena smiled an enigmatic smile, “From when I spoke to Forma it seemed that she would appreciate that sort of thing."

James said rather quickly “Well, I’m going to see her tomorrow, I was planning on saying good bye then.”

Eric looked at James thoughtfully and then and told James of an overlooked and hidden spot near the front of the school grounds.

James spent the rest of the day doing whatever he felt like, which was a wonderful change of pace he thought. He went to sleep happy that he could see Forma the next day.

He got up bright and early and used the strong soap just like Forma had told him. He made sure he combed his hair for once and took a moment to think about what he wanted to learn with Forma. Something about boats he decided.

Ms. Maria greeted him as he arrived at the library. “Good morning James, enjoying your day off?"

James nodded and asked “Are you going to leave over the break Ms. Maria?"

Ms. Maria shook her head. “No, I would need to get someone to watch the library for me and there were no volunteers.” She shrugged. “More books to read I guess.” She pulled her coat a bit closer.

James nodded and then said "I’m sorry you have to stay when it's so cold Ms. Maria. It sucks."

Ms. Maria nodded appreciatively. “I’ll tell Forma you are here when I see her. She turned back to her own book as James wandered off in the direction of the book cases.

James gathered a few books on boats and began to absentmindedly peruse them. After a while he checked his watch, he noted that this was time that Forma normally showed up.

James smiled to himself, she must be sleeping in he reckoned. He opened a large book that had many wonderful illustrations of sailing ships.

The minutes crept by as he glanced through the illustrations. James had to stop himself from checking the clock every few minutes. He resolved to slow down and look very carefully at the illustrations.

He had looked through all the pictures twice when he checked the clock again. It was getting close to lunch time and he hadn't seen Forma. His heart sank a bit at the prospect of her leaving without him saying good bye. It was a little thing but school had taught him that good byes were very important.

Still he resolved not to give up hope. Having a brainstorm, he decided to figure out which books he wanted to read over the break. This let him pass another hour as he searched through the bookshelves and agonized over whether he could bear to read “The man in the iron mask" he eventually decided he couldn't.

Lunch came and went with no sign of Forma. James after a massive stomach rumble James realized he had not had eaten all day. Sighing he went over to Ms. Maria with a glum expression.

Ms. Maria knew immediately what the problem was and gave a hopeful smile as she said "I’m sure she is just busy James."

James nodded and then said “If you do see her, tell her to meet me." he told Ms. Maria the spot Eric had suggested.

She nodded and said “Well, don’t be a stranger over break. Feel free to stop by."

James nodded and showed her the list of books he had written. "I am quite certain I will."

With that James headed off, but as he was about to leave the school building and brave the cold, he was struck with a thought.

The quality of the idea wasn’t great but he didn’t anything to do but wait. With a purpose he headed off to Ms. Sialia’s office. Hesitating only slightly he knocked on the door, and was invited in almost immediately.

Ms. Sialia smiled at James as he entered. The office now had multiple boxes, and exams were everywhere she had her blue hair tied back and looked to be in the middle of grading papers, very carefully holding them in her wings. Her feathers were ink-stained James noted. “How can I help you James?"

James smiled and did a small polite bow. "I just wanted to wish you a good vacation."

Ms. Sialia nodded pleasantly and responded “Oh, we will likely see each other, I’m one of the teachers who stays here over the break to watch the students."

James had never considered this possibility and was left momentarily speechless trying to think of a way to politely end the conversation. Ms. Sialia spoke up “Are you excited to stay over the break?"

James nodded with an unhappy expression and said in half-hearted tone “Of course."

Noting the less than enthusiastic response Ms. Sialia spoke up “How do you think you did on your finals?"

James shrugged a bit "I feel like I did okay” he added in a nonchalant tone “They were not that hard."

Smiling Ms. Sialia said "I’m sure you studied very hard James. Thank you for coming to wish me a happy break." James politely let himself out of the room as she got back to grading. He went to sleep that night hoping he would see Forma the next day. He had his doubts though and the regret at not saying good bye when he had the chance troubled him a bit.

He woke up that day bright and early once again. He complained to himself that while it was handy to wake up so early, it was wasted during vacation. Still he got up and used the special soap Forma had given him, he was not nearly so enthusiastic this time but he tried to remain hopeful.

The first order of business was to dash to the library. Ms. Maria had an excited look when she saw him. “She came by, late in the evening. She says to show up at around noon."

“Thanks Ms. Maria. It's a big help." James turned to leave.

Ms. Maria then added “Don't forget to check your grades James."

James’s his excitement, in all the drama he had forgotten. He ate breakfast slowly more waiting than enjoying his food. Eventually a cry went out that grades had been posted and there was a massive rush by almost all of the students to reach the board where they were posted.

The board was attached to the side of the school building and in large clear letters it said the class and the rankings within the class. James struggled to get close and then anxiously scanned for his name. He had to physically restrain himself from shouting when he saw his grade, by some miracle he had made third on every subject.

James’s face could barely contain his smile and he dashed back to his room to tell his parents the good news. He quite happily finished the letter now.

Checking his watch, he then dashed to school gate. Sheena and Eric were surrounded by a crowd of people. Eric seemed to being enjoying himself while all Sheena could muster was a tired smile. They had a good deal of luggage next to them and Sheena seemed to check a train schedule quite often. A good number of people had assembled to see Eric off and James was able to give no more than handshake and a goodbye.

Sheena for her part had ducked off to the side and was sitting on a chest, peacefully reading a book. James approached her smiling. Sheena did not look up from her book. James decided to broach the conversation. “Congratulations Sheena."

She looked up from the book and asked “For what?" she seemed tired, and more than a little stressed.

James tried to act friendly “For making second in all of the subjects. That's better than I did."

Sheena motioned subtly over to Eric. "I have a lot of time to study when it gets down to it.” She yawned rather deeply covering her mouth with her hand ladylike.

James smiled “My older brother told me to stay up late on the day before traveling. Said it made it easier to sleep on the train."

Sheena shrugged. “Also makes you irritable." James nodded as this was equally true. "I didn't want to stay up late, it's just that Eric can't pack."

James' surveyed the immense amount of luggage, it was more luggage than his entire family owned. Asking a bit awed James said “How long did it take you to pack all of that?”

Sheena nodded. "A long time,” she glanced at her brother, in the middle of a handshake with purple-green dragonet. “Because Eric won’t pack. He just throws everything into a suitcase. Sheena frowned. “It's a bit of a disgrace."

James nodded. “My family travels a lot so I have some experience with packing. It can be an incredible bother." he looked over at the crowd still surrounding Eric. “A lot of people come to see your brother don't they?"

Sheena gave a terse “Yes."

James smiled and laughed to himself. “Well, have a good break Sheena."

Sheena nodded and yawned a bit “Have a good break James." they briefly shook hands; Sheena’s grip was unenthusiastic but still ladylike.

With that taken care of, James resolved to wait for Forma. The spot Eric had suggested was a small wooded area a little removed from the central plaza. It was the downslope of a hill and out of the way. The snow was somewhat slick and James had to catch himself on a tree more than once. This invariably resulted in a tree shedding snow and soon James was covered in snow.

There was a small clearing, and James paused to take in the scenery. But then the cold got to him, and he began to move out of necessity. James made sure to trace some designs in the snow with a stick

Eventually he heard the sound of a stick breaking and swung his head around to see Forma entering the clearing. Her footing was apparently much better and she was not covered in snow. James smiled, Forma smiled. They stood facing one another not too far apart.

James’ nerves acted up and he was stumped at how to proceed. Should he wish her well? Should he ask what she was going to do once she got there? Surely she didn't have very much time.

Forma strode forward and said “Thank you for being my friend."

James was blindsided by this and managed to say “You are welcome." he took a second to straighten up and then offered his hand. “Thank you for being my friend."

Forma nodded and looked down at James’s hand thoughtfully, then she returned a too strong handshake. James tried not visibly wince, “Will we still be friends when you come back?"

Forma smiled and said “Of course.” She looked at James and her smile lessened a bit.

Suddenly both of them turned at the sound of a breaking twig. James frantically motioned at the snow he had been drawing in.

"...and you see that is why the grand canal is deficient. As a canal through dirt it loses water as it flows." James said this passionately to Forma who was standing next to him. A spider morph entered the clearing and James turned his head ever so slightly to see her out of the corner of his eye.

Formica rebutted in a stern tone “But you prove your inexpertise on the subject. Parts of the grand canal were prepared in such a way as to control the loss of the water. Great perfectly smooth sections were carved out to enable this. These were interspersed with perforated sections."

The spider girl had an amused look on her face and motioned for another to join her. James put his hands to his head. “And it is you who fail to understand. As a canal any such perforations will become clogged over time. What will you do cease the flow of the canal to clean them? Aqueducts do not suffer from this problem."

The spider-girl picked this moment to join the conversation. “You do enjoy arguing don't you Formica?"

Formica uncharacteristically bristled with anger "I argue only when I am right and the other is wrong."

The spider-girl rolled all of her eyes. This was a bit impressive to watch as it just radiated being fed-up. “Regardless, the train is soon to leave and the groups are forming.

Formica turned back to James with a stern look. “We will have to continue this conversation later.” She strode forward defiantly, with spider-girl leading the way. Turning she said "I will prove that you are wrong when we return." however she said this with a gentle smile that belied her tone. With that the insects set off into the woods leaving James to shiver slightly in the cold.

On his way back to the school building James had to fight his way through the crowds of students. He sighted Philip and moved to avoid him, as he was taking evasive action he glanced at Philip and their eyes met. The intensity of Philip’s gaze transfixed James, and he could feel the burning hatred coming off of Philip. Finally, James looked away, he then shrugged, experience had taught him that you don’t normally get along with those you fought.

Returning to the library James greeted Ms. Maria happily at the librarian’s desk. However, there was no librarian at the desk and in response he received a wave of a green tail. Ms. Maria had retreated from the librarian's desk to the room behind it. James peered into the room and discovered to his non-surprise that Ms. Maria had converted it into a breakroom complete with a small heater and what appeared to be a futon covered in thick blankets. Fittingly, Ms. Maria had burrowed into these blankets propped up on her shoulders to keep reading.

Not wanting to disturb Ms. Maria, James set about the difficult task of finding the on his reading list. The library was large and his list lead him high and low. Through his travels he discovered to his surprise that some other students were cloistered in the library. These students were often in the more isolated parts of the library reading or enjoying the company of friends.

When James’ odyssey had finally finished, he dropped all the books on the librarian's desk with a satisfying thump. This startled Ms. Maria enough that she came out to investigate.

As she slithered up she had to rise slightly on her tail to look over the books.

Happily, and with only the slightest hint of showing off James said “Can you please hold these books for me?"

Raising her eyebrows in disbelief Ms. Maria said flatly. “There is no way you are going to read this many books over the break."

James looked over the stack thoughtfully. This was going to be a tough decision. “You are probably right. Which means I have to decide which books I should focus on. Eric doesn't come for a month but I don't want to take any chances."

"Eric doesn't come for a month?" her green eyes wide open, Ms. Maria gave James a confused look

Waving his hand and smiling James tried to pass it off as nothing. “More importantly what do you recommend I do for reading?"

Ms. Maria pursed her lips. "I would think that you would want the heavier reading near the middle so you don't get discouraged as you start."

Nodding resolutely, James carefully modified the pile “Will you please hold these books for me?"

Ms. Maria smiled and then in an affectionate voice said “If you get lonely during the break feel free to come to the library to hang out.” She looked at James a bit sadly.

It took him a while to get there because of all the books, but when James reached his room he found a note to pinned to the door. The note was made of a green paper with the texture of leaves. Written in a plain slightly unruly scrawl was a request that James report to the gardener's shed at seven the next morning. A quiet almost familiar sensation of dread crept into James’ mind.

Trying to decide what to read James paced his room, this took very few steps. By chance he saw a book that had been forgotten on the floor. It had been left there so long ago that it was now covered in dust. It was about the size of small novel and had letters James could not read on the front.

The injustice that even while on break, James had to get up early was not lost on him. Next morning as dawn began to break, James was standing outside of the gardening shed shivering his butt off. He had put on so many extra clothes that it was hard to bend over or sit down. However, he was moderately warm so long as he stayed out of the wind, but of course it was a bit windy.

Opening the shed, Darius let James in. James looked at the many tools in the shed and then back at Darius “So what exactly do you need help doing?"

Darius smiled. “Well, we need to keep the grounds presentable for the important folks who visit around Christmas and new year’s." Darius motioned to a good deal of pots leaning against the wall. “We will need to put up decorations. Make a big Christmas tree and that sort of thing." Darius saw James’s horrified look and said “Now don't go panicking, right now I only need your help tending to the grounds so I have spare time to make sure the flowers and trees we need will be ready."

Lightening up a bit James asked “So not returfing lawns?" He leaned forward excitedly.

Giving a deep ominous laugh Darius continued. “Well, the centaurs tend to play large games of tag on the grounds before they leave for home. You would think that the ground would be too frozen but nope." James rolled his eyes.

“Do I at least get a break for lunch?" James said this hopefully.

Darius nodded “On most days we should be done before lunch but i’ll let you take a break. Don't take too long though, the days are short." James had a relieved look.

With that they got to work. James found that so long as he kept doing something the cold wasn't so bad. The work however was very hard; James was more or less completely sore by the time he took a break for lunch. Darius dismissed him with a wave and James headed off towards the library.

Ms. Maria saw the human enter the library still shivering. His face was a bit pale, and he had red cheeks. For some reason his clothes seemed puffy. He smiled as their eyes met and said hello. Smiling herself, Ms. Maria moved over to him fluidly. “Hard day?"

The human nodded. He took off his cap and brushed his hair from his eyes. “Definitely, but all the hard labor helps keep me warm."

Ms. Maria held out her hand. “Let me feel your hands."

With a surprised look James offered his hand. It was cold to the touch and strangely she could feel his heart beat. Ms. Maria beckoned James to her break room and had him stand in front of the heater. “It's very important to keep warm."

James giggled slightly "I think that's more for lamias than for me."

Ms. Maria had a puzzled expression. “You complain constantly about how cold it is. The human nodded his head. She continued in an obvious tone “Then you should keep warm."

The human tried to look proud, adopted a confident stance. "I’m tough. And it's pretty warm in the school already."

The end of Ms. Maria’s tail shrugged along with her shoulders. “Still James, if you ever need to warm up feel free to come here." James nodded politely and distantly. “Among lamia's it's considered very bad manners to not share heat when necessary."

James stepped away from the heater. He was getting a bit red. “It's very nice of you to share your heat Ms. Maria." he took off his coat and one of the shirts underneath. Putting down his backpack with a sigh he rummaged around to find his lunch.

By the time James had turned back around, Ms. Maria was already back in the blankets and started reading again. Looking at his lunch James paused to think, Fair was fair, and if he had extra he was honor bound to share. Kneeling down a bit heavily next to Ms. Maria he offered her some of his lunch. She smiled and politely declined. James munched on his lunch and then was suddenly struck by an idea.

He turned to Ms. Maria “Is it alright if I use the empty room again?"

Looking up from her book Ms. Maria looked at him and asked. “What for?"

Stumbling for a second and then finding salvation, James said experimentally “Dancing practice?"

Ms. Maria nodded and said “Okay.” As she turned back to her book.

James smiled and stood up. Grabbing his backpack, he rushed to the room. Pulling out a well-worn book he began to arrange the chairs counting his steps as he did so. Once he finished James smiled to himself and began to practice lunging across the distances.

The days of the first half of winter break followed this pattern. The work grew harder but James always stopped by the library to recover.

For a while it was good. On the second day he woke up happy, there was no school and he had something to do.

On the third day things seemed a little more grey, the silence a little more intense.

By the fourth day he was tired. All he could seem to think about was what he would be doing with his family these days.

By the fifth day he was tired and wanted nothing more to stay in bed.

By the sixth day he was still tired and lethargic. Everything seemed to irritate him, minor inconveniences left him swearing at nothing. His mind constantly wandered to what he would be doing with his family.

By the seventh day he had a hard time remembering a time when he ever felt well. Increasingly all he could think was that life was itself a cruel joke. A simple way to prolong how terrible he felt.

On the eighth day while relaxing in the library Ms. Maria asked him “What is bothering you so much?" she poured hot water into a cup and then added an off-blue ball. The ball made bubbles for a second and then dissolved turning the water a pale blue

James shrugged. “Nothing I guess."

Ms. Maria sipped some of her drink. She stuck out her long tongue. “Too strong. I know something is bothering you, you always act a certain way when you are moping."

James paused for a second trying to figure out a way to avoid the conversation. With no ideas he tried honesty. "I guess it's that normally I spent winter break with my family, but here I can't."

Ms. Maria nodded and poured more hot water into her drink, but did not add anything to the conversation.

This reasonably unhappy routine continued until five days before Christmas. The days of work grew longer as the days grew shorter. It was well into the evening as James and Darius tried to unclog and clean a particularly stubborn fountain. Darius stood up from kneeling at the fountain swearing. “Arghhh, my hands can't get around it right. James you try to open the far valve, that should let us clear out the blockage." Darius took the lamp and held it so James could see.

James was in a world of his own and could only nod dumbly. Kneeling down he began to struggle to open the near valve. He was finally successful but his triumphant exclamation was cut short by a deluge of water.

Shaking his head and Darius said “Right now close that valve and open the far valve."

James nodded mumbling “Sorry.” After a similar bit of effort the correct valve was opened, James however in his haste James had forgotten to close the near valve and so kept getting wet.

Darius added in a slightly louder and patronizing voice “The near valve James."

James nodded again and finally closed the near valve. He began to shiver as soon as he stood, his clothes were sopping wet. Darius shook his head again and said “You seem distracted, go for the day and sure to change your clothes.” Darius smiled “I don’t want you to miss work due to being sick."

The cold put James into survival mode, and he went to the closest source of warmth. As he walked through the school plotting the fastest way to his dorm, he passed the library by accident and was hailed by Ms. Maria.

Ms. Maria was halfway out of the library doors, looking around before she closed the library for the night. She spotted James dripping all over the place and with visible concern she slithered over to James feeling how wet his clothes were. "James you are soaked.” She felt his hands. “And freezing. We need to get you warm."

“Oh, hello Ms. Maria I was just heading to my room." James was still shivering but at least it was warmer in the school building. He had a slightly embarrassed look which was disrupted as his teeth took that moment to chatter slightly.

With a very concerned expression Ms. Maria shook her head. "I said you could come here to warm up and I meant it.” She wrapped one of James' hands with her tail and rather forcefully lead him to the break room. It was dark and the only illumination was the orange light of the heaters.

With more than a little bit of embarrassment James ended up taking all of his outer clothes off to hang up to dry in front of another heater. This left him with only his undershirt and long johns on. These were wet too, but James would have likely chosen death before being naked in front of a teacher.

Ms. Maria looked him over with a troubled expression. “Your underclothes are wet too."

James very politely bowed and then said with as much force as he could muster "Ms. Maria, I will not be naked in front of you." There was not that much force in the statement because he was almost too embarrassed to speak however made this difficult.

“You need to get dry James. What if you get too cold to move and are stuck somewhere cold?" James simply smiled politely wondering how he could correct her misunderstanding. Ms. Maria looked around and then had an aha expression. “Take this blanket and cover yourself while I wring out your clothes."

James kept blushing strongly as he considered the offer. Ms. Maria was in no mood for considering and tossed the blanket onto him. Ms. Maria looked like she would accept no disagreement, seeing no easy way out, James very gingerly took off his undershirt and handed it to Ms. Maria.

She paused for a second looking around. Finally, her eyes landed on a used coffee mug. Holding it steady she began to wring the shirt out over the coffee cup. James needed, something anything to avoid thinking about how he was shirtless. “So why are you so worried about me being cold?"

Ms. Maria had a sheepish grin. “Once when I was a little girl my family was traveling, I went out to play, but I got caught by a cold tide. It was so cold that I got stuck. But thankfully, my aunt found me, and then she lifted all of me up and took me back to the warmth.” She had a contemplative expression as she said this.

James pulled the blanket a little closer around him. “Were you afraid?"

Ms. Maria nodded. "I was lost, and I kept getting slower and slower trying to find my way home. It just got colder and colder and it became so hard to move. The world seemed to get smaller and smaller until it took everything I had to just crawl forward." Ms. Maria said this quietly.

Leaning forward James asked “And then what happened?"

"I couldn’t keep my eyes open. But then I felt something lifting me up. I looked up and I saw my aunt. I will never forget the expression her face." James gave an inquisitive look. “It was very worried but also so joyful." Ms. Maria looked off into the distance.

“Do you miss your aunt?" James thought this a fairly safe question.

Ms. Maria nodded. “Very much, she was always so supportive." Ms. Maria looked at the mostly dry shirt in her hands. Handing James back his shirt she said “You are very good at getting people to talk James." James simply shrugged in response. She motioned for the other garment.

Blushing about as much as his face could, James put on his shirt again. He was seriously hesitant about handing long johns to a teacher, a female teacher even more so. In theory, so long as she didn’t grab him on the way out, he could make the run to the dorm. It would be uncomfortable without shoes but it was doable.

Noting just how uncomfortable James was, Ms. Maria tried to lighten the mood and asked “So how exactly did you get this wet?"

James smiled sheepishly "I opened the wrong end of a water pipe."

Ms. Maria nodded and then asked for the long johns again. James made sure he was completely covered and then hesitated again.

Ms. Maria gave out an exasperated expression and slithered closer to James. “It's going to be fine James." James finally gave in, she had moved to block the door, and passed her the long johns, but only an uncomfortable silence followed. The long johns made squcheling noises as they were wrung. Eventually Ms. Maria became too uncomfortable and asked “Why have you been so absentminded? Is it because you miss your family?"

Caught off guard by this question James responded by saying “How have I been absentminded?"

Rolling her eyes Ms. Maria said “The other day you asked me for help finding a book, we looked together for ten minutes and then you realized it was in your hand.” She gave James a look that seemed to say I know you pretty well. She then glanced at the wet long johns in her hand. This caused only a mild blush by James.

James smiled a little. “Yeah, around this time my whole family would get together. We would always decorate for Christmas. Some of my uncles would visit and they always had the best stories to tell."

Ms. Maria handed James his damp long johns. James put them on while trying to protect his modesty. Once he had finished Ms. Maria ordered “Give me your hand." feeling James’ hand, Ms. Maria said in a concerned tone “You still aren't warm enough. You need more blankets, and you should move closer to the heater.”

James looked at her a bit surprised “Will you have enough blankets?”

Ms. Maria nodded, she handed James her extra blankets and then was under the blankets in a flash. As Ms. Maria took time to gather all of her tail and make sure it was covered James mused, mostly to himself “Why is it always so cold in here I wonder?"

As she poked her head from out of the covers Ms. Maria answered “It's because the library is so big, they can not heat all of the empty air." James nodded and then fell silent readjusting his own blanket against the cold. The light from the heaters flickered as he did so and silence seemed to flow in from the dark.

Ms. Maria tucked beneath her covers, looked like a child being told a story as they were tucked into bed and then suddenly asked “Tell me about what your family did for Christmas."

James took his time and tried to explain all the little things his family liked to do for Christmas, how his older brother always shook the packages to see if he could guess what was inside. His little brother always tried to resist doing so as he felt that it might ruin the surprise. James talked for a while and then sighed heavily. Quite suddenly he asked “Did you get to see your aunt during the holidays back home?"

Smiling, Ms. Maria nodded. “It was always the nicest thing to see my aunt. She was always the most cheerful person there."

After a second’s pause James asked “Do you get to see your aunt very much anymore?"

Ms. Maria shook her head and then seemed to withdraw from the conversation. James looking for a change of subject James asked “Do you like being a librarian?”

It’s difficult to shrug while laying down but the general message was conveyed, “It’s alright I guess.”

Looking at Ms. Maria good naturedly James said “Well, it gives you lots of time to read books doesn’t it?”

Ms. Maria didn’t take to this well grumbling something to the effect that reading books was all that she was good for. Trying to make her feel better “Well, it’s all that I’m good for. It’s a pretty good thing to be good at besides.” Ms. Maria remained dour, “It lets you go fantastic places.” This wasn’t working.

Trying to think of something, anything to change the subject, James suddenly asked suddenly asked “Why did you become a librarian?"

Although she was already withdrawn, Ms. Maria was completely caught off guard by this question and started for a second. She looked down sadly. "I didn't want to really."

James couldn’t think of anything else to say, and persisted “Why didn't you want to be a librarian?"

Ms. Maria began to look even more depressed “Because I didn't know what I wanted to do at all."

Trying to bring the subject to happier shores James asked “Well what were you good at?”

Looking glum Ms. Maria then answered "I was always the worst at everything, it always seemed like I would never be able to do anything right."

James then asked “Well then why a librarian?"

As Ms. Maria got teary eyed, suddenly there was the sound of a book dropping. Both James and Ms. Maria turned suddenly towards the noise and heard Ms. Sialia call out. “Are you here Juliet?"

James looked to Ms. Maria for guidance but she seemed too surprised say anything. Ms. Sialia came in the break room holding a large stack of books in her blue wings. She was carrying them with some difficulty and before looking up she said. "I’m bringing back those books Juliet.” She looked up with a happy expression and then noticed James wearing only his still damp underclothes and a blanket. Ms. Sialia was for a second very surprised, and as a result dropped the books. After everyone stopped wincing from the deafening noise, Ms. Sialia's expression changed quickly to a more serious one. "Hello, James."

James nodded politely “Hello, Ms. Sialia. What brings you to the library this late?"

Ms. Sialia replied tersely “Bring back some books.” She shot a stern look at Ms. Maria. “What's going on?" Ms. Maria's guilty look was doing her no favors as she stayed silent. The fact that she was lying down was not helping her case either.

James trying to reduce the tension piped up "I was helping the groundskeeper when I got wet. Ms. Maria offered her heaters to help me dry off my clothes." James smiled.

Ms. Sialia looked down at Ms. Maria “When did that start?"

Suddenly finding her voice Ms. Maria replied "I saw him outside of the library right as I was going to lock the doors. He was positively dripping and shivering so I invited him inside."

Looking over at James Ms. Sialia asked in a reproachful tone “Is this true James?"

James nodded happily “Oh yes, Ms. Maria has been letting me warm up in the library whenever I finish helping the grounds keeper. I have been hanging out with her for most of the winter break." Ms. Maria tried to subtly convey her displeasure at this phrasing as Ms. Sialia shot daggers at her.

Ms. Sialia sighed. “It's very late James. Let me escort you back to your dorm." James got up and put on his now mostly dry clothes while trying to preserve his modesty.

James turned to Ms. Maria who was still lying down trying to look innocent. “Good night Ms. Maria, don't stay up too late reading."

Smiling Ms. Maria said “The same goes for you James, good night." they waved good bye and then Ms. Sialia walked James out into the dark hallway.

Thankfully Ms. Sialia had a lantern but it was still frightfully dark in the corridors. The moonlight reflecting off of the snow helped some but James could not help but draw a bit closer to Ms. Sialia as they walked through the hallways. Her light blue hair stood out a bight in the dark and the sound of her talons hitting the ground was easy to follow.

Ms. Sialia looked at James with a thoughtful expression, “Has anything been going on between you and Ms. Maria?"

Giving a look of polite obliviousness James shook his head. "I’m not sure I understand what you mean. We have been discussing books recently."

Ms. Sialia hesitated and then said "I mean have... You done anything with Ms. Maria recently."

James gave another charmingly oblivious look “She made tea once and this other time she had me try her blue drink." James tuck out his tongue, “Tasted buggy.”

Letting out an exasperated sigh Ms. Sialia said "James once you are finished helping the groundskeeper tomorrow will you please come by my office?"

James nodded and then asked cautiously "I am not in any trouble am I?" Ms. Sialia seemed upset for some reason.

Ms. Sialia said “No James, just please come by my office." eventually after crossing the very cold outside they arrived in front of the boy’s dorm.

As Ms. Sialia turned to leave James called after her. “Wait," with a questioning look she turned back. "I need you to put a signature next to mine in the logbook so I don't get in trouble." Ms. Sialia smiled and followed James inside.

The next day passed fairly slowly. With Christmas so close Darius had decided that it was finally time to put the Christmas tree into place. The tree was humongous and James was repeatedly thankful that he had Darius to help him raise the damn thing. Looking up at it however he noted with a sinking feeling that it would likely fall to him to help decorate the damn thing.

James needless to say did not finish until late that night. Through a good deal of diligence James had avoided breaking any of the baubles that adorned the tree, it had been a collaborative effort between James and Darrius, Darrius could stretch himself a bit but there had still been a lot of up and down on the ladder for James.

The Christmas tree was in the grand hall so for once it had been warm work. The day had passed fairly pleasantly with the pair making conversation. Darius had decided unilaterally that he was going to impart to James a good deal of information about gardening. James had no interest in gardening but had felt that it would be rude to interject. Privately James mused on how much of it would be of use due to his lack of roots.

Once that was finally finished, it was fairly late and feeling uncertain James asked Darius “Yesterday, a teacher told me to go to her office once I was done helping you. Do you think I should still go?"

Darius nodded. “If a teacher asked you then it would be better to err on the side of caution." he surveyed many empty boxes left to be taken care of. “You head off; I need to stretch my roots before I clean up the rest of this mess. With a look anticipation Darius headed off towards the outside.

James yawned and quickly walked towards Ms. Sialia's office. He made sure to straighten out his clothes a bit and dust himself off before knocking.

“Come in." Ms. Sialia was sitting at her desk quickly stuffing a book under some papers. She brightened slightly on seeing James. “Oh hello James, I didn't expect you so late."

James nodded. “Me and Darius were busy setting up the Christmas tree." James got an authoritative look “There are a lot of ornaments on that tree."

Ms. Sialia nodded “Your story about helping the groundskeeper and getting wet checks out. What exactly did you do with Ms. Maria yesterday?" Ms. Sialia had an inquisitorial look.

James said in a confused tone. "I went by the library. She invited me inside to dry my clothes. She asked me how I was doing away from my family and I told her about what my family normally does around Christmas. After I ran out of things to talk about she started to talk about why she became a librarian." James paused and then added "I think she has a phobia about getting too cold."

Ms. Sialia tried to give James a penetrating stare, James examined the room obliviously. “Your story checks out with what Ms. Maria said. Still please stop going to the library for the time being."

James was more than a little shocked by this and quickly said “Why?"

Ms. Sialia tried to look stern. “Because I asked you James.” This was given a full pause and then she continued “Why don't you stop by here instead?” James nodded. “Also are you doing anything Christmas eve?" James shook his head. “Then accompany me to the staff ball."

James asked in a puzzled tone “Can a student go to the staff ball?"

Ms. Sialia smiled and said “Yes, if accompanied by a teacher."

James then added “Why do you want me to come here and go with you to the staff ball?" he said this in an innocent tone.

Ms. Sialia leaned forward and said “So I can keep an eye on you.” She sat back up and put her wings on the desk. “Now is there anything else I can do for you?"

James thought for a moment and then said “What was the book?"

Ms. Sialia got a guilty smile and slowly produced the book. It was a large book with the title “Cities of Europe" in big capital letters. Ms. Sialia suddenly seemed to have an idea. “Have you been to any cities in Europe?"

James nodded “A few." this was true enough, although there had rarely been very much money to go sightseeing with.

Ms. Sialia leaned forward excitedly "Really? Which ones?"

James was more than a little surprised by this change of tone and answered carefully. He knew London best. He supposed that London counted as an European city although if you asked most of the people who lived there they might disagree. Ms. Sialia seemed especially entranced by his description of the crystal palace. As he spoke he saw that Ms. Sialia occasionally closed her eyes and seemed to move as if she was soaring through the building.

On a seeming tangent Ms. Sialia asked “Did you ever see the king?”

James looked at Ms. Sialia quite surprised and paused for a few seconds second. Recovering he said, “Twice, I think.” Ms. Sialia looked at James excitedly, James hesitantly continued “First time was in a parade as he went to declare a law infront of the nobles.” He paused apparently searching his memory. “The second he spoke at the opening of a railway.”

Ms. Sialia asked “Does he appear in public very often?”

Shaking his head James answered “He prefers to conduct matters of state in private I think. But he makes appearances occasionally.”

Ms. Sialia kept looking at James excitedly. “Did you ever see the queen?”

James paused again and then confidently answered “In the same parade as the king.”

To James’ growing discomfort Ms. Sialia asked “Did you ever see the prince or princess.”

Managing a smile James said “I never saw prince George or princess Elizabeth.”

Thinking for a second Ms. Sialia asked “Did you ever see the duke?”

James seemed a bit dismayed. “If possible could we speak of something else? You can’t expect every citizen of the greater empire to have seen the ruling family.” Their talk moved back to the city.

On a whim James asked to look at the book Ms. Sialia had tried to hide. It was an excellent book, full of wonderful engravings and the occasional photograph. After flipping through it James noted the bright red stamp from the foreign office on the inside cover. He also noted the scribbles in the margins. “Is this your own copy?”

Ms. Sialia looked sheepishly off into the distance and then answered shyly  
“Yes, it was hard to get.” James nodded and resumed the conversation.

Quite suddenly a clock on Ms. Sialia's desk chimed the hour. Ms. Sialia looked at it confusedly. “Oh, I hadn't realized that it was quite that late already."

James nodded. "I should probably head back to my dorm Ms. Sialia."

She nodded and then added without the least bit of hesitation “Remember, don't go to the library James."

James nodded politely and then left the room. He went to sleep quickly that night, perhaps happy for a chance to exercise his story telling ability.

The next day was the 23rd. Darius seemed determined to run James ragged that day and it was only with a great deal of difficulty did he managed to take a lunch break. He considered simply relaxing in the common area to eat lunch but had a thought.

He cautiously sprinted to the library and peaked his head in looking for Ms. Maria. Once he sighted her he waved her over. She slithered over with a confused expression.

“What's up James? I didn't see you yesterday." Ms. Maria said this cautiously.

James kept a straight slightly concerned face. “Yes, Ms. Sialia has told me not to come to the library.” A look of unmistakable disappointment flashed across Ms. Maria's face. James continued cautiously “And."

Ms. Maria leaned inward “And?"

James nodded “And, she asked me to go with her to the staff ball."

A very quick expression of anger flashed across Ms. Maria's face. She very quickly returned to her slightly disappointed expression. Her tail started to twirl her hair subconsciously. “You should go with her James. I will probably see you there.” She smiled a little “It will give you a chance to show off your dancing skills."

James smiled back, “See you there Ms. Maria." James then dashed off to eat as much lunch as quickly as possible. Once he was finished with that he dashed off to find Darius.

Darius had moved to one of the side halls. It was a fairly large hall to be sure but nowhere near as massive as the main hall. Darius was next to a truly massive chandelier that had been lowered. With a slightly vexed expression he was very slowly and carefully chipping off the wax that had accumulated on the chandelier. The chandelier it was as large as a table and had many rows of candles. James sighed.

By the time James finished helping Darius it was so late that James went to sleep almost as soon as he touched the bed.

That morning with more than a little consternation James recognized it as the day before Christmas. Darius had fortunately only a few things left to do and James was able to get off fairly early. He was however covered in dust from helping to fold and beat the dust out of the curtains for the smaller hall. Still he went to Ms. Sialia's office with no hesitation.

After knocking James entered Ms. Sialia's office. She looked at James with start and then asked after getting up “What happened to you?"

James started to dust himself off and said “Curtains really really big curtains."

Ms. Sialia ushered James out of her office and then began to dust James off using her wings. James took that as an opportunity to ask “What should I wear to the ball tonight?"

Ms. Sialia carefully brushed some dust out of James’s hair and said “Definitely not these clothes. Similar to what you wore at the last ball should be good enough."

James gave a very confused expression "I should dress like Patrick mcgoohan?"

Ms. Sialia rolled her eyes “Dress nice James."

Standing back Ms. Sialia looked James over, and James rather suddenly asked “Will I have to dance?"

Smiling Ms. Sialia answered "I won't make you dance. As I recall you dance fairly well though." Ms. Sialia paused for a second and then said “If you like you can dance with me when it starts."

James shook his head “That's not what I was going for Ms. Sialia."

Ms. Sialia then ushered James back inside and had him sit. “Now James, tell me more about London."

James smiled again. He told her about how the clouds were often black and the river often foul. Ms. Sialia noticeably drooped at hearing this. She brightened up a bit when James started to talk about the drawbridge and how the electric lampposts made the city as bright as day at night. Eventually James looked at his watched and begged a chance to go change.

Arriving at his room in fairly good spirts James very carefully changed his clothes into his best outfit. He took a chance to glance at the mirror once he had finished. He had failed to sprout any horns, fur, scales or wings. Often he had been cautioned that living among monsters tended to cause this.

His hair however had reached that annoying length where it began to reach into one's eyes. James brushed at it this way and that, trying to emulate his brother but his brushing was to no avail. Finally, he surrendered and brushed it like he normally did, although he normally didn’t.

As he put on his dress shoes, James’s mind briefly wandered on whether barbers did a good business in the world of monsters, and if so if he could find one on the school grounds. This was something that would take further thought.

James did his best to shrink into his own shadow as he was accompanied by Ms. Sialia to the staff ball. He all but hid behind her wings as she strode with purpose into the hall. The idea of being before so many teachers at once was distressing on multiple levels, much more so when having been asked to accompany one of them. The hall was decoratively themed with a very familiar Christmas tree prominently against one wall. It was the very image of a human Christmas celebration with none of the various savagery that James had been told was common in the world of monsters.

Pleading shyness James managed to convince Ms. Sialia to allow James to relax on one of the benches. The benches were near the grand windows which made up one side of the hall, and looked out onto the grounds. Sitting down with some relief James produced the can of coke he had been hiding on his person and took a few sips as he surveyed the hall.

The adult monsters did not seem to share the juvenile monsters taste for the bizarre and oddly colored dress that had been on display at the Halloween ball. Many of them were in their nicest dress clothes and all seemed to cut the very figure of professionalism. The glaring exception to this was of course the principal who for reasons James did not dare to fathom was wearing a Santa Claus outfit.

James contemplatively sipped his coke as he scanned the halls for any other students. They were there, although few and far between. He noted that Ms. Sialia was indeed making small talk with a few other teachers. James was hard pressed to describe Ms. Sialia's wear, although he could tell it was of very high quality. The clothes covered most of her and were fastened at the ends so James assumed they would not flutter over much should the wearer start to fly. He also noted that they seemed strategically designed, such that nothing could blow into her face.

James also caught sight of Ms. Maria. She was standing alone and sipping from a cup. She was wearing a very nice dress, however it required her to stand a little bit taller than usual to avoid catching on the ground. Her standing straight up was in marked contrast to how dejected she looked.

Sighing he turned his attention out the window, the light from the building reflected off the snowy plain stretched out into the darkness. The white expanse was bracketed by the dark silhouette of the wooded areas.

Surely he was a long way from where he had been all other Christmas' eves. A long way from his family as well. James sighed again, and passed the time in memories paying little attention to his surroundings.

Ms. Sialia was having a reasonable time at the staff ball and it was pleasant to see some of her co-workers unwind. Common curtsey had not stopped Mr. Hanz from drinking altogether too much. Dr. Polistes was doing a heroic job of supporting the inebriated centaur. The party had even allowed dr. Galen to drop his imperious facade a bit, although not much as he was lecturing another teacher on the importance of proper sanitation.

The principal was distributing gifts from her bag while trying to be as jolly as possible. As the principal tried to give a deep “Ho, ho, ho” Ms. Sialia shook her head.

Ms. Sialia rounded the room politely declining the occasional invitation to dance. Her drink was good and the room was warm and cheerful. She eventually returned to James staring out the window. The cold from the window and the heat from the room created a lukewarm temperature cline that was in contrast to the rest of the room.

“Are you having a good time James?" James jumped straight up nearly a foot from the bench upon hearing Ms. Sialia.

Patting his legs, James looked up at Ms. Sialia, his normal blank expression tinged with just a hint of sadness. “Of course, it is a wonderful party." the monotone this was delivered in did not convenience Ms. Sialia. James asked “Are you having a good time?"

Ms. Sialia turned to survey the room. On the whole the party was restrained but enjoyable she thought. “Yes, it's the first time I have been to a staff party.” She paused to survey the lack of response this garnered. James still looked silently depressed. “Will you dance with me?" nodding James stood up and walked side-by side with Ms. Sialia to the dance floor.

Her pulse quickened as they started to dance. But no one paid them any mind. She even saw a few other teachers dancing with students, mostly seniors but still students. James however was obviously perturbed. He danced almost mechanically, he worked with her to be sure but each movement felt stiff and self-conscious. After a few rounds of this Ms. Sialia lead James back to the window.

James resumed staring out of the window. Ms. Sialia thought for a second and then broached the subject. “You seem uncomfortable James, do you not like being here?" James shook his head no, rather emphatically for once. “Is something wrong?"

Looking obviously uncomfortable James squirmed for a second, opened his mouth to speak, shut his mouth and then quite suddenly said "Ms. Maria looks very depressed." he motioned over to where Ms. Maria was still standing alone.

Ms. Sialia agreed pleasantly, “Yes, she does." After all, she deserved it.

James continued “What did she do that was so wrong?"

Ms. Sialia looked at James sharply “Students and teachers are not supposed to get overly familiar."

James nodded and asked “Are new teachers trained to be harsh to other teachers?"

Ms. Sialia’s mouth gaped for a second then she said in a confused tone of voice "I’m sorry I don't understand."

James took a deep breath and then said “Well, Ms. Maria always seems so lonely, and now you have told me not to visit her anymore. I have never seen teachers be harsh to other teachers so I thought it must be something that they only recently started teaching."

Ms. Sialia stood silent for a minute trying to formulate a response. “What makes you think that I am being overly harsh to Ms. Maria?" she grew a little defensive. “She did something very wrong.”

James motioned casually over to where Ms. Maria was still hanging out alone. "I know that she wasn’t supposed to be that familiar but still, she seems very depressed. As much as I have been in the library you are just about the only other person who visits her regularly."

Slowly Ms. Sialia mentally conceded that James might have a point, and admitted as much “Maybe you have a point James."

James looked at her confused “A point about what?"

Ms. Sialia looked at James again, there was no trace of understanding on his face. “About me being harsh on Ms. Maria."

James said an in a puzzled tone. “But I asked about if teachers were trained to be harsh to one another." he looked down at himself and then back up at Ms. Sialia "I didn't try to make any point."

Ms. Sialia growing tired of James’ shenanigans said “I’ll be right back James." James nodded and turned back towards the window.

Rounding the room again Ms. Sialia noted that Mr. Hanz had righted himself but was trying to convince people to sit at a table with him, and was trying to sit in a chair himself. The principal was watching with a bemused expression which reassured Ms. Sialia greatly. After getting a fresh drink Ms. Sialia finally approached Ms. Maria.

The lamia had finally given up on keeping her dress uncreased and was slumped in a chair. She looked up at Ms. Sialia and said “Hello" rather lamely.

Ms. Sialia returned the greeting and then sat down next to the lamia. "I apologize for being so harsh on you."

A look of genuine surprise crossed Ms. Maria's face. “You did the right thing; I was wrong to get that familiar with a student."

Ms. Sialia shrugged. "I know why you did it. And I do not blame you for getting lonely.” She looked around the hall. “You are not exactly a social butterfly."

A look of consternation crossed Ms. Maria's face. "I can be as social as I like. And I’m not the one who invited a student just so she wouldn't have to dance with any of male teachers.” She gave a pointed look to Ms. Sialia.

Growing defensive all Ms. Sialia could say was “That's not why I invited him" she took a deep sip of her drink.

Ms. Maria grew a bit more aggressive. “Then why did you invite him?"

With frustration Ms. Sialia rebutted “So you wouldn't get in trouble. I was worried that with how much time he spent in the library and you inviting him people might start to gossip."

Ms. Maria grew contemplative. "I wasn’t going to invite him, but thanks for watching out for me.” She looked Ms. Sialia up and down. Ms. Maria sighed and then smiled. “You are my only friend here, aren't you?" she said this in an almost defeated tone.

Ms. Sialia took another sip. “Only because you don't make friends with any of the other teachers. That and we are the only two new teachers." Ms. Maria shrugged and with that the two started to gossip and talk with one another. Ms. Sialia was sipping her drink the whole time.

A good while later James was still staring out of the window. He was starting to wish that he had brought a book. Ms. Maria had seemed to brighten up by hanging out with Ms. Sialia which was nice. James was lost in thought when rather suddenly Ms. Sialia sat down rather unsteadily next to him. Her face was flush and she was giggling slightly. To James’ horror she put her wing around his shoulder

Looking up James saw Ms. Maria looking on with amusement. "Ms. Sialia apparently cannot hold her drinks very well." James would have agreed with that strongly.

Ms. Maria sat down next to Ms. Sialia and tried to get her to stop leaning on James. “Come on, stop grabbing him." James for his part had decided his best chance to get out alive was to sit stock still. Ms. Sialia held onto James trying not fall over and resist Ms. Maria at the same time.

After a good deal of this James suggested in a measured tone “Perhaps we should take Ms. Sialia back to her room?"

Ms. Sialia objected strongly and said "I already told you I’m not going to bed until you two dance.” She said this while rocking back and forth lazily.

James and Ms. Maria looked at each other and gave a shrug. As James got up Ms. Maria said “Wait up I have to fold this dress to the right length." She produced some bobby pins and after fiddling with them for a bit she added. “So uncomfortable."

As the two of them stood looking each other on the dance floor James said in an uncertain tone. "I’m not sure I remember the dance steps for dancing with a lamia."

Ms. Maria shrugged and said "I never knew them so try to be careful."

James asked cautiously “Only ever danced with other lamias?"

Ms. Maria nodded in response and added quietly “A few times”.

James for his part once again danced mechanically but with a supreme amount of caution, he upon reflection was glad that it was quite difficult for Ms. Maria to accidentally step on his feet even if it was rather easy to step on her foot. James was experienced enough to tell that Ms. Maria was having a hard time, and he did his best to help her.

After a few rounds of this the pair returned to Ms. Sialia who gave applause. “Bravo, bravo" she said.

With a great deal of gentleness Ms. Maria took one of her wings and helped Ms. Sialia to get upright. She motioned for James to help with the other wing.

Doing so hesitantly James was rather surprised, and said “She is very light, I think I could get her back by myself if you wish to stay."

Ms. Maria shook her head and added “It would perhaps not be politic to allow a student to escort a teacher back to her room alone."

They walked through the dark hallway, Ms. Sialia made a slight clacking sound with every step should took, Ms. Maria slid quietly, and James made footstep sounds as he walked along.

Quite suddenly Ms. Sialia asked "Juliet, why has James been so preoccupied this whole time?"

Ms. Maria answered “This is his first Christmas eve away from home. He misses his family something fierce."

James called out a little angrily. "Ms. Maria."

With an amused look Ms. Maria answered “Anyone can tell James."

Ms. Sialia tried to lecture at James saying “That’s what you are always unhappy about. You can't be depressed all the time James, everyone leaves the nest eventually.” Her tone dropped suddenly “Even me." the lecture effect was somewhat dampened by her overly familiar tone and the fact that James was supporting her. She smiled a happy familiar smile “Still I’m sorry you miss your family so much James. It's tough."

James nodded and said “Thank you."

Ms. Sialia was dozing when they finally reached her room and Ms. Maria slipped inside quietly to make sure she got into her bed alright. Just as quietly she slipped out and very carefully shut the door behind her.

James’ watch chimed and rather distantly the school's bell could be heard ringing. James smiled “Merry Christmas."

Ms. Maria smiled back “Merry Christmas.” And with that they went their separate ways, fading off into the darkness.

Christmas passed the way Christmas normally does. Waking up early jumping with anticipation at whatever gifts you have received. James was delighted to find that there had been a special delivery of mail for Christmas. The package his family had sent contained a much needed pair of shoes. His family was doing well which James was always happy to hear.

There was a stunning Christmas feast. There was a smorgasbord of different dishes. Some were so exotic that words failed James. There was fresh colorful fruit, even what looked pears from home. Each dish was accompanied by at least one flower. It was if spring had broken out in the middle of winter.

One of the centerpieces was what looked like a roasted griffon. James balked at the idea of eating such a thing and so was much reassured when he was told that it was just a very large oddly shaped bird.

As usual James ate to excess. Once he had eaten so much that the idea of eating again, (excepting desert) seemed repulsive, e James retired to his room. Darius had told him that he could have the day off, so James took the time to write to his family and relax. James rather glumly assumed that this meant there was going to be a lot more work tomorrow.

The day passed quickly and as evening fell James decided to try something. In his most authoritative voice he called out “Who is number 1"

On cue an ethereal voice cut in “You are number 6". James was startled by Fen appearing directly next to him.

“Merry Christmas" James smiled wondering how the ghost had passed the holiday.

“Merry Christmas, James" James could make an out a pure white smile. In a teasing voice Fen asked “Do you have a gift for me?"

James laughed a little. “Something like that Fen. Would you be willing to trade gifts?”

Fen said in humorous voice “Maybe, but what will my gift be?"

Holding up a pair of scissors James said “I’ll tell you one of the great stories of my family if in return you cut my hair."

Fen was a bit surprised by this and said in an uncertain voice “Do you really trust me to cut hair?"

James shrugged “My mom always cut my hair, you are a bit older than her so you should be able to cut hair better, right?"

Flashing her ghostly smile again Fen responded. "I’m not sure that logic works out. It's been a while since I gave a haircut."

Inquisitive, James asked “What like decades or centuries?"

James could see Fen making movement but the faint outline and white on white nature of her image made it hard to tell what she was doing. Maybe shaking her head? “No, like two years. I can do it though.” She floated around James looking him over. “Any particular way you want me to cut it?"

James shrugged “Shorter so it's not in my eyes so much. Make it look good I guess." he really could not care less so long as it did not draw attention.

James passed Fen the scissors, feeling them grow cold as she touched them. “But you have to tell me the story first."

James nodded and started and said “This is one of the great stories of triumph my family has." unfortunately the author does not wish to spoil the story for the audience. If you have ever heard the story it was the one about the country doctor, who among other things once accepted payment for a complicated surgery on a sculptor's child as having his hands be used in a statue the sculptor was making. This was one of James’ favorite stories and he loved to tell it.

Fen maybe nodded her head and said “Wow, this is a good trade.” She seemed to look around “We should do this in the bathroom so we don't get hair all over the place. They moved to the bathroom after James asked Fen to make sure it was empty.

James sat on a stool and felt a deathly cold touch on his shoulder and heard the scissors go snip. He felt a little bit of hair fall down his back. Looking up ever so slightly he could see the mirror. The scissors there seemed to merely float in mid-air and move of their own accord. Fen however was far from silent as she cut his hair making small talk and the like.

She looked down at him “You should probably take off your shirt.”

James looked more than a little shocked at the suggestion “Are you sure?” James thought that maybe Fen nodded.

“Why don’t you want to take off your shirt?”

James started to blush. “I don’t look good without a shirt.”

Fen probably shook her head. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“Alright” James took off his shirt and he was certain he heard Fen suppress a giggle. As Fen started to cut his hair in earnest James was eager to take the focus off what he looked like without a shirt “So who did you cut hair for before?" James did his very best to stay stock still.

Fen floated into view as she snipped one of his bangs “Oh, a couple of dragonets once, and the occasional elf. Thankfully most sentient species have hair so it's not very difficult to change species once you get the hang of it." James tried his best to resist shivering as Forma kept touching him.

“Do you do things like this a lot?” James said this while trying his darndest to keep his head steady.

Fen mused for a second. “I have done similar things, I played cards with a dragonet, showed a young spider around the place to see all the nooks and crannies.” She sighed “Far too many students to get to know them all.”

After a while of this Forma floated back to observe her handy work, wiping her hands on her ghostly shape. She looked him over “Not bad if I do say so myself."

James got up and checked his hair in the mirror. It was shorter, didn't have any obvious bald spots and seemed even. A good hair cut by his standards. “Looks good to me, thank you for the haircut"

As they returned to his room James asked “What did get for Christmas Fen?"

With a longing in her voice Fen said “It’s hard to give a ghost a gift.”

Putting his hands on his hips James did his best to emulate a pout, “Hey!”

Fen patted James head “Thank you for your gift James.”

Continuing James asked “Did you give any gifts?”

Fen rocked in the air a bit with what could be satisfied expression on her face. “You let me give one, thanks for that."

James suddenly had an idea “So just how much work do I have left to do with Darius?"

Forma gave the slightest hint of a devilish smile “Oh, quite a lot." James made a pained noise, "I’m sure he would let you stop if you are tired."

James shook his head “Nope I said I would do it and by Jove I’m going to do it." Pausing James tried to think of what else a ghost would be able to do around new year’s. “Do you have any new year's resolutions?"

Forma waved what was probably a hand “Nope, I’m too old for that sort of thing. How about you?"

James nodded "I have one, I’m going to try really hard to make sure it happens too."

Forma gave a motherly smile, or at least that's what James guessed it was. “It will work out for you I think."

James yawned and looked at the time. "I’m tired from staying up late last night. I think i’ll enjoy Christmas more if I spend a large part of it asleep."

Forma patted him on the head. "I think you have earned some rest. Keep working hard James.” She put her hand to her head “Be seeing you." James returned the gesture and got ready for bed.

James got up early that morning and treated himself to a hot shower. Getting dressed as warmly as he could he looked out the window. Everything beneath the purple sky was still covered in a thick blanket of snow. The snow itself seemed curiously purplish from reflecting the sky. Putting on his now looser cap James reflected to himself that getting a haircut while it was cold outside was perhaps not the best idea.

He found Darius already at work. The dryad was busy carrying large red potted plants from the greenhouse to a field just beneath a large bank of windows. James looked at him inquisitively and asked “What are we doing today?"

Darius gave James a smile that chilled him to the bones. “The principal is having an important dinner on new year's eve. She wants this field to filled with these red potted plants so it looks nice during the dinner." James looked to the potted plants and then at the field. Doing some mental approximation, it would take approximately a whole lot of plants to fill the field.

Rather hesitantly and fearing the answer James asked "just how long do you think this will take?"

Darius adopted a contemplative look “Well normally it takes me about five days. With you helping it should take about four and a half days." James let out a long pained sigh.

It was a monotonous pattern. Grab a pot, carry it half the way, let his arms rest carry it the rest of the distance. Make sure it fit in with all the rest of the plants. “Plant" it in the snow so only the red flowers were exposed. Repeat.

Darius passed what time they spent together telling James of his campaigns to keep the campus clear of poisonious chokeweed, the motile thieve’s regret and the various types of flesh eating fungus that inhabited the forest. When James was thoroughly tramatized Darius switched to what it took to keep the fauna away.

Reading books at night was just about James’ only reprieve. Still the work kept him from having too much time to think, which was in its own way a blessing.

As James planted the last flower late in the afternoon of the 30th he let out an exclamation of triumph. He then promptly sat down on the backed snow to rest. It was cold of course but several hours of strenuous labor had help keep him warm.

Darius looked on approvingly "I must say you are the hardest working human I have ever known."

James still panting slightly looked over to Darius and said “As many times as I have heard that it still has not become less insulting."

Darius smiled a gruff smile "I imagine it would get tiresome after a while. I know what it's like though." James looked at him inquisitively. "I went to the world of humans once. I cannot tell you the number of times I was told that I was the most polite walking tree anyone had ever seen."

James smiled. “Well, Mr. Walking tree do you need anything else today or can I go rest?"

Darius nodded “That's it for today, i’ll need your help tomorrow morning" he looked down at the face James was making. “Only for a little while though."

With everything done James headed to the library. He was behind on his practice. James smiled to himself when he saw both Ms. Maria and Ms. Sialia happily chatting with one another in the library break room.

Ms. Maria hailed him when he tried to walk past. “Hey James, are you finally done?"

James turned smiling. “For today, Darius says he will need me tomorrow."

Ms. Sialia spoke up "I saw the flowers; they look pretty good." through force of will James stopped himself from adding that they damn well better look good after the amount of effort that went into them.

James gave a positive reply and returned to trying to sneak away. This was however foiled when Ms. Maria said "Ms. Sialia was just telling me about how you have been to London, come tell us what it was like."

James smiled as genuine a smile as he could muster and regaled them both with tales of his time in London. He was careful to keep it as honest, and to never say too much. However, the smell was often mentioned. Ms. Maria listened politely while Ms. Sialia at it up. By the time that was over it was already time to go back to his room. James was mostly relieved that the day was finally over.

On new year's day James got up early once again and went to find Darius. He found him in the plaza directly in front of the school. He was setting up a large complicated framework with the help of a spider-gentleman janitor.

James looked it over and then said mostly to himself “A strange way to launch fireworks."

Darius overheard him and asked “What are fireworks?"

James shook his head and said “Nothing, so what exactly does this thing do anyway?"

The spider-gentleman smiled and spoke up “Never seen one of these before have you?" James shook his head. “For new year’s we will catch smoke with nets woven by yours truly, and then project lights onto the smoke."

James nodded his head “Sounds cool. What do you need me to do Darius?"

Darius grunted as he held different parts of the structure together growing to fit the task. “Help connect these pieces." James got to it with a will, it was a bit like connecting a large set of connects. By the time he finished the structure was over 10 feet tall and quite impressive. Darius waved James’ off fondly telling him not miss the presentation near mid-night.

James was not excited to repeat his performance from yesterday and decided that for at least today he would take the day to himself. Curling up with a book he sat in one of the common rooms. The fire was warm and the book interesting.

It was to his immense displeasure when he heard someone loudly clearing his throat in front of him. Looking up from his book James expected trouble, he saw that it was indeed something troublesome. To James’ dismay Andrew was standing in front of him.

Andrew’s normal unkempt appearance was now accented by a very ugly sweater. Andrew started “Hello James, I have been looking everywhere for you. You are a hard person to find."

James was at a loss. Politeness dictated that he make conversation with Andrew, his common decency suggested that he ignore Andrew in the hope that he would go away. Breathing deeply James said “Hello Andrew, how have you been?"

Andrew ran a hand through his wild hair “Oh as good as anyone can be in a place this infested." Andrew paused seemingly waiting for something. “Are you going to apologize?"

Looking at Andrew blankly James slowly said “Apologize for what?"

Andrew seemed to think this was a silly question and quickly elaborated saying “For being so hard to find."

James shrugged “It wasn't intentional Andrew, the school is quite large and it's hard to find any one person in the scramble." this was true enough, although it was also true that whenever James had seen Andrew and it looked like they might accidentally run into each other, he had taken a detour.

Andrew seemed to not hear this and said “Well, no offense taken." he sat down in a chair next to James. “So let us talk."

The color was draining from James’ face. “What about Andrew?"

Andrew smiled “Anything, it is very lonely to be the only humans in a school and there is so much time to think during the break."

James tried his hardest to make small talk. Andrew went on at length about the various things he did to pass the time. He claimed to be an expert at throwing playing cards into a hat.

Eventually talk turned to home. Andrew proudly proclaimed that he was the fourth child of an aristocratic family in the eastern empire. The second child had died in it's youth which left Andrew third in line to the inheritance. He often stressed this point at length although James was quite unsure why.

James for his part did everything in his power to ensure that any talk of his family remained respectfully vague. When Andrew grew insistent James went for a tried and true tactic. “So why do you think so little of fellow students Andrew?"

Andrew puffed out his chest and said “Any true human knows that monsters are no match for us." he gestured to the both of them.

James considered his response carefully. While he was not over fond of Andrew it was obvious that he was desperate for companionship. James very delicately replied. “While a gentleman may know that in his heart of hearts, surely it would be more diplomatic to hold that truth to himself. When in Rome do as the romans do and all that."

Andrew responded vigorously. “For a while I acted that way, tried to lull them into a sense of false security. But then I realized that there was no point in trying to make nice with the monsters at all. They are deceitful bunch and you cannot trust any of them."

James glanced at this watch. Noticing that it was almost on the hour James weighed his options. “Ah is that the time." James motioned to the watch. “If you will excuse me I have an appointment. I believe that it will keep me for the rest of today in fact."

Suppressing a look of dismay Andrew then nodded vigorously and said “Perhaps we could meet tomorrow then."

James tried not to cringe as he heard himself say “Of course that would be fine" and then work out where exactly he would meet Andrew after the work he no doubt imagined that Darius would need him to do.

Beating a hasty retreat James headed for the library. Many years of ingrained politeness prevented James from being openly rude to Andrew no matter how appealing it would be.

Entering the library James was waylaid by Ms. Maria. She was wearing a festive robe and looked at James happily. “Happy new year."

James checked his watch. “It's the new year already? My watch must be broken."

Ms. Maria had a look of being fed up. “Spoilsport. Are you going to watch the smoke show?"

James nodded “Of course, does it start at midnight?" Ms. Maria nodded, James fumbled for things to talk about. “Do you have any new year's resolutions?"

Ms. Maria looked confused “Resolutions?"

James smiled “At midnight you make a promise to yourself to change something in the coming year. I know what mine is going to be."

Ms. Maria looked perplexed and sat back on her tail. “Hmmm I’m going to have to think that one through." James took this hesitation as a sign that the conversation was over and he was free to go practice by himself.

James had the maneuver that he was going to try against Eric almost down to a science but he still had to work on his balance and what he was going to do afterwards.

This and reading allowed several hours to pass quickly. Eventually Ms. Maria poked her head in and said "James, I have to close the library, get out of here already."

James checked his watch and nodded surprised at how late it had gotten. He retreated to his room where he tried to dress sharpish and warmly, a mostly hopeless endeavor for James. He had almost headed out the door when James had a terrible premonition. Although Andrew may have believed that James was indeed occupied for the rest of the day, he was probably going to look for James at the new year's celebration. If James encountered Andrew manners would necessitate that he sat next to Andrew. James did not trust Andrew to refrain from audibly and at length insult the other attendees.

James sat down on his bed and pondered where else he might enjoy the performance. All of the work with Darius had given James a good idea of the layout of the school. James pondered and pondered until something that Eric had once said echoed faintly in his mind. He could see the plaza from the pool complex and supposedly mermaids threw the best parties. Ever cautious James grabbed his backpack and headed off to the pool complex.

Eric had not been lying about mermaid parties. The mermaids were having a jolly old time in the pool. Large group of them seemed to be playing something similar to water polo and some were doing acrobatics by jumping into the air. Additionally, there were multiple bottles of indeterminate origin and substance making the rounds. Despite the fairly early hour already there were a few mermaids floating around the pool pleasantly passed out.

James looked around for any supervision, to his surprise there was only a single teacher very calmly flipping through a book. James reasoned that there was likely a fairly hard limit on the amount of damage someone can do while confined to a pool.

The pool building was cavernous, with white tile floors and large glass windows to help let in the sun when possible. This made the happy sounds of the mermaids echo constantly. The pool itself was kept at a warm temperature for those who could not stand the cold very well. As a result, the air was moist and pleasant despite the cold outside. Looking through one of the large glass windows James could see the scaffolding he had put up earlier that day.

James was content enough to sit in peace on one of the pool chairs enjoying the warm until eventually he heard a voice coming from the water. “Hey landwalker"

James looked around and identified a fairly pleasant looking merman floating at the edge of the pool. James pointed to himself, the voice sounded a little exasperated “Yes you." James came over after making sure his backpack was secure.

The mermaid had a confident look, his black hair was slicked up and looked like it needed almost constant combing to stay that way. “What are you doing here?"

James shrugged “Relaxing, waiting for midnight."

“Huh." The mermaid offered up his hand, "Oliver."

James shook his hand firmly and said "James."

With a great deal of difficulty James hitched up his pant legs and then removed his shoes. Making sure where he was about to sit was reasonably dry he sat and idly kicked his feet in the water. “So why aren't you out there with them?"

Oliver smiled a self-assured smile "I’m taking a break; I was playing too hard.” He paused to make a drinking motion. “Unusual to see a human here. What's your story?"

James smiled and kicked his feet a little harder. “Its personal, I didn't think that many mermen would come to an above water school. How about you?"

Oliver adopted a scowl. “Let's just say that I was accused of some things. I didn't do them of course, but my parents thought that coming here would straighten me out."

James decided that this perhaps suggested that a change in topic was appropriate. “What it's like to swim as a mermaid?"

Oliver stopped to think for a second and then said “It's something you can just do without thinking. I guess it would be like flying for you, I see some place I want to be and I’m there like a flash."

James nodded “Sounds nice."

“Oh it's wonderful, you couldn't believe some of the tricks I could pull back home.” A scowl crossed over Oliver’s face. "I can't do nothing like that in a wheelchair though." he stared angrily at the wheel chairs lined up against the wall.

“That must suck, still it must be cool to see a completely new world." James tried to play up the positive in that sentence.

Oliver scoffed and shook his head. “Like hell it is, I haven't seen anything up here that was better than the stuff back home." James gave an inquisitive look. “Oh we had the biggest and grandest cities you ever seen, everything glows because of the moss we put on the buildings. "

Smiling James asked without thinking “Do you guys even have stairs? If you can just swim anywhere you must not need them."

Oliver looked very darkly at the row of wheelchairs, and grew silent. Cursing himself James felt that a change of topic would be for the best and searched his mind for something to talk about. “Do you play cards?"

Oliver nodded "I know whist of course." he thought for a second and then asked “Do you have a waterproof deck?"

James nodded “Yes, but we need two more people to play."

Smiling Oliver turned and dived into the water, shortly afterwards he returned with two fellow mermen in tow. One of them was a fairly muscular burly looking fellow who introduced himself as Womack and another slightly naive looking fellow named frangible.

James greeted them both graciously. Franzibald was slightly tipsy and shook James hand altogether over eagerly. The slightly moist skin was cool to James’s touch, and James wrinkled his nose at the fishy smell. From the corner of his eye, James saw the burly merman look to Oliver questioningly when James began to deal, and Oliver merely wink in response.

Whist is of course a fairly simple game and the narrator has no doubt that there are any in the audience who do not know the rules. By it's nature it is a quiet game while played so this short description of the outcomes must suffice. Whenever frangible and James were on opposing teams frangible seemed to do quite well for himself leading everyone to remark on how this new year's must be his lucky night, and how well it boded for the coming year.

After many rounds where frangible dominated the competition. Oliver suddenly suggested “With luck like that Franz would you be interested in playing for stakes?"

James quite suddenly interjected. "I apologize to everyone present but I do not have money to gamble with." James seeing Oliver about to respond then continued. “Also one of my uncles told me many times that whenever a gentleman enjoys a great streak of luck playing for enjoyment he should not ruin it by suddenly playing for stakes."

Frangible looked to James and playfully asked “And why was that?"

James shrugged in response "I don't know he never told me. Just whenever my uncles played cards with him he would repeat that. Maybe it's a bit of soldier wisdom?"

Frangible giggled suddenly and slapped Oliver rather heavily on the back. “Well who are we to argue with any soldier wisdom. Let's keep it light shall we?"

The game continued in a casual manner until eventually a break came, this was prompted by the entrance of a duo of mermaids with several more suspect bottles in their laps. Oliver took this chance to pull James aside and to a part of the pool away from any other mermaids.

He looked James over angrily “Why did you do that?"

James looked at him perplexed “What put down that last card? It's because I thought you ha-"

Oliver cut in “No, tell that story about your uncle?"

James shrugged “It's just what my uncle always said. I’m sorry if bringing up soldier wisdom seems inappropriate among gentlemen. Also I really don't have any money to gamble."

Oliver looked at James with a penetrating glare. “Is that your only reason for saying anything?"

James nodded dumbly “Yes, also I don't have any way of getting money, and I’m very unlucky so I don't feel comfortable borrowing any to gamble.” Oliver closed his eyes thinking, James could see his violet eyes waving around through his transparent eyelids. Finally, Oliver nodded slowly, seemingly satisfied.

The game continued, and for his part James’s luck seemed to have turned against him with a vengeance, and he lost almost continually. This streak went unbroken until the burly merman played a card. To his great surprise James exclaimed that he had an identical card. Oliver and the burly merman exchanged surprised looks as James compared the two cards. There were some slight differences he noted, the number of shafts coming out from the trident in particular.

Sensing the risk of getting his cards mixed up James begged an end to the game. Checking his watch, he noted that it was nearly midnight anyway and that it would be perhaps best to pass the time remaining quietly. So he made his way to watch the scaffold.

A flash of light went off near the scaffolding and a most particular thing had happened. The scaffolding began to fill with what looked like dark miniature clouds. They had a smoky sheen to them and seemed to be constrained into a screen by an invisible net. In front of this screen there was a circle of candles contained in colored glass. As the show began the glass was manipulated to make shapes and other figures appear on the screen.

There was a story of some sort being told, although James was forced to make up his own as he sat by himself. Presumably somewhere someone was narrating whatever events were happening. James was more entranced by the performance, the smoky sheen of the captured clouds gave all of the images a dream like quality and seemed to be not of his world. There were many stories told on the smoke, they seemed connected by a red figure going through perhaps some series of trials or adventures.

Eventually James tired of this, and he tried to find a quiet spot where he would be undisturbed. His watched ticked closer to midnight and he took the time for reflection.

When it was almost midnight James put his head to the cold glass window and quietly whispered to himself "I resolve to never become angry again. It has never helped me and far too often hurt me." he paused for a second "I am not a man of violence, and I will never use violence in anger again."

Quite suddenly the bell tolled out twelve. The chorus of mermaids broke out in singing a rather particular song that sound a bit like a warble mixed with a wet gurgle. The fact that they were all singing from underwater likely contributed to its distinctive sound. James tried his best rendition of auld lang syne but given that he only knew the first two lines he did not get especially far.

Due perhaps to the humidity in the air, as James sung what little of the song he knew, his eyes began to water a bit and he thought of those he would normally sing the song with.

Once the singing had finished James was left to reverie, he was snapped out of this when he heard a familiar voice calling out “Hey, landwalker come over here."

James turned and saw that it was frangible accompanied by a female mermaid. She seemed to be supporting him slightly enabling him to stand a little up out of the water. James walked over quite unsure to expect. Franzibald turned to his companion and said “This is the human I was talking about. Remind me when I’m not drunk to thank him." he smiled like a dope, “He really saved me."

James shook hands with the mermaid "James."

She smiled a tired smile, as if this was not an altogether uncommon occurrence. "I’m Aileen, what exactly did you do?"

James smiled sheepishly. "I was playing cards with frangible and two other gentlemen, in the course of the game it was suggested that we start to play for money. I suggested otherwise, it seems likely that the other fellows were not playing honestly."

Aileen smiled and frangible had laid his head on her shoulder to doze. James could see his eyes looking peaceful until Aileen startled him awake by smacking him on the head. She began to angrily reprimand him. “How many times have I told you don't play cards while drunk?" frangible could only meekly respond. This continued for a while and then Aileen turned back to James and very politely said “Then thank you very much, from me if not from him."

James had a bemused smile “This sort of thing happen fairly often?"

With a disgusted look Aileen responded “More than it should. This idiot cannot seem to help himself."

Frangible smiled "I’m lucky." both James and Aileen rolled their eyes. James bid Aileen good night. She swam off with frangible in unsteady tow. James looked back at the scaffold, now starting to empty, the little clouds had turned white and were drifting off into the starry sky. It made a rather nice image James thought.

Waking up James was less than excited, not only did he expect to do work with Darrius, the idea of meeting Andrew was far from appealing. As usual, James forced himself up and tried to muster what enthusiasm he could when he reported to Darius.

Darius seemed genuinely surprised to see James and said “You are hard worker, but I don't need you to help out anymore, besides from cleaning up the work is all done" Darius paused to muse. “Nothing left for me to do but garden I guess." he smiled at James “For all your help I’m going to have to figure out some kind of reward or something."

James smiled “Oh, don't worry about it. I appreciate just having something to do." this was broadly true, although James also very much enjoyed employing himself.

Andrew was at the appointed spot on the appointed hour. Rather depressingly he looked like he had arrived early just to wait for James. James knew this because he had arrived early to avoid being late and spied Andrew from a distance.

James was relieved that Andrew agreed to relocate so readily. Andrew's tendency to refer to the fellow students around them as subhuman was not exactly polite and a more private place to talk would help avoid any negative connotations.

James briefly stumbled trying to think of things to talk about. At last it occurred to ask Andrew about what he liked to read. Andrew smiled “Oh, I have all the latest periodicals delivered to me. Do you read science in north America?"

James nodded his head emphatically "I very much enjoy reading them but I have not had a chance to read them recently."

Andrew began to talk animatedly “Oh, have you seen their section on the new wireless telegraph systems?

James shook his head excitedly, he hadn’t.

Andrew began to recount at great length and in detail about the various articles he had read. James made sure to listen politely. After that they turned to discuss the various banal things that humans enjoy talking about, this included many topics such as the weather, the difficulty of various classes and teachers, the importance of warm clothes in the face of the cold. The narrator understands that any monsters in the audience would find such topics to be boring beyond compare, but these sorts of topics are what humans talk about when grouped together.

While James found this a stimulating conversation he still took the earliest possible route to end the conversation. Citing the time and a pressing need to begin writing to his family, he asked to leave. Andrew looked at him somewhat regretfully and asked if they could meet again, James agreed a bit more readily this time, having seen that he had some common ground with Andrew.

The last part of James' winter vacation passed in that manner, with James talking with Andrew and spending most of his time in the library. It turned out that James had to grudgingly admit they had a few things in common. They were both very interested in science, had an appreciation for the works of Jules Verne, and were keenly interested in what wonders the future would bring.

A few days before when everyone was scheduled to return from winter break. The two met in the evening and were sitting near a smoldering fire place. James had brought up the subject of various teachers.

“The harpy is nice I think, she complimented me on my test performance." James said this while very carefully sipping his hot chocolate, a scalded tongue informed him that it was still too hot.

Andrew slapped him on the back “Well of course you did well, you are a human after all."

James tried to suppress feelings of general distaste and hit upon a question to ask. "Andrew if you have such a low opinion of monsters, why did you come to this school? Surely a better education could be found somewhere else."

Andrew quieted and looked into the embers for a long while. Eventually he spoke "I was not always so studious, my parents were concerned that I would be an embarrassment to the family if I went to any school that was well known. They sent me here to make sure that I was well out of sight." he sighed and looked James in the eyes. "I hate it here so much, I am always alone and I just cannot trust anyone."

James very carefully considered his next words, “Surely it's not all bad, they may be monsters but some of the other students here have been friendly." Privately James reflected that this was a blessed few students but the point stood.

Andrew thought for a long time “There was the mermaid girl who let me copy her notes once or twice, and sometimes I have discussions with the science teacher. And there was that one elf girl." Andrew trailed off and then said rather loudly “But there are exceptions in every race and the majority of the monsters here are not fit to deal with."

James had anticipated this to some extent and quickly asked “Then why do you keep going here? Why not just tell your parents that you will do whatever they want just to avoid coming here?"

Andrew quieted for a while and then said "I know they sent me here because it was for the best. If I say I can't handle it here, then that feels like quitting."

James smiled “My brother always used to say that there was no shame in knowing when you had been beaten. You might as well at least try, the worst they can do is say no." James gestured to Andrew, “It has to be better than how you are feeling right now." James nodded “I have realized it’s important to learn from experience, only madmen do the same thing over and over again expecting something new.”

Andrew nodded slowly “Maybe you are right, I will have to give it a try, but let me ask you why are you here? I know you don't enjoy being so far from your family."

It was James’s turn to look deeply into the burning embers. "I have to be here; I don't want to be here. It's to keep my family safe."

Andrew shrugged, “If it’s only for your family, why spend so much time with those monsters?"

James looked at Andrew with a serious expression “Don't tell this to anyone else, alright." Andrew nodded James continued deadly serious, almost threatening “No I’m serious don't tell anyone else"

Andrew seemed taken aback by this sudden show of sincerity “All right, I won't."

James nodded "I’m trying for a scholarship; I need to get it so I can stay in the world of monsters. Hanging out with those monsters is just a means to an end." James looked into Andrew’s eyes again “Don't tell them or the jig will be up."

Andrew smiled "I would never rat you out to a monster after all. If you don't mind me asking, what exactly did you do?"

James took a sip of hot chocolate. He quietly responded "I do mind.” And then resumed his sip.

Although the joy of snow had been quite strong at the beginning of winter, by the end of winter break James had grown quite tired of the endless dismal grey days. This was especially pronounced as he sat in his room during the two days that everyone was to return from trips. Recognizing that it would be general mayhem with everyone arriving, moving luggage and greeting one another that James had resolved to simply stay in his room.

This strategy seemed promising to James, it’s flaws were illuminated as he started to get hungry. As he returned from an extremely harried lunch, James was completely content; until he remembered the winter break homework he had forgotten to do. So the last two days of break sharply contrasted the relaxed mood of the days before.

The next day however was a momentous occasion, as once again James had to get up at an ungodly hour. He would have remarked to anyone listening that this was a sign of divine disfavor and he was truly the most cursed being on earth. However as there was no one to listen to him he kept it to himself.

He headed to the track, and saw to his joy that Cecilia was already there doing her equivalent of stretching. She waved to him, she too had gotten a haircut over the break, her long red hair was a bit shorter and had been stylishly trimmed.

He jogged over to her and said “Good morning, ready to get back into practice?"

She gave a smile and said “Hey, I practiced over break.” She hesitated as James merely politely smiled then added “Some." She said this while shifting her eyes.

James started to stretch himself. “Well, then we need to work extra hard for the time you missed."

Cecilia looked James over and asked good-naturedly, “Did you end up having to help the gardener?"

James nodded his head. “It was a trial and a half, trust me. Still good exercise I guess."

Cecilia motioned over to the track “Shall we?" James smiled and did his best to keep up with Cecilia, however a centaur that's out of practice still has two legs up on a human.

Bit later a very out of breath James signaled for a stop. He panted hating the way his throat hurt in the cold. “Does the track team have meets in spring semester?"

Cecilia nodded “Yep, closer to the end of the semester though."

James smiled "I should go to one."

Cecilia nodded emphatically. “Feel free, it would be nice to have someone in the stands cheering for me."

Class that day started fairly slowly, Ms. Sialia was more focused on getting everyone back into the general habit of doing class things than actually teaching. James caught sight of Sheena once or twice, but he did not pay her very much mind. Her hair was braided now, but as previously noted James did not pay that much attention to it.

When lunch finally came James was off like a shot, he went at full speed to the former gardening shed, stopping for absolutely nothing, it was therefore not particularly surprising that he ran into a few doorframes and the occasional wall.

He arrived at the shed only slightly bruised and eagerly took off his backpack, retrieving his lunch and watching the door he began to wait with the greatest possible haste.

Lunch was half-way over when someone finally stepped through the door. It was an ant-girl, James' mind raced as he considered all the possible situations that might occur. As a result, he considered that this ant-girl might not be Forma, that it might just be another very similar looking Formica. What then was the right attitude to take?

James decided to play it safe. He bowed slightly, “Hello."

The ant-girl, curtseyed slightly and said “Hello."

Mentally begging for a sign James tried to think of what he could do to surreptitiously tell that it was Forma, she wasn't giving him any body language signs. Lacking any better options James said “Have we met before?"

The ant-girl reared back with an imaginary sword in hand and lunged forward.

James quickly deflected Forma’s imaginary slash with his own imaginary sword. As they struggled against one another both trying to force the other's sword back, Forma said “Hello James. Your hair is different."

James smiled “Hello Forma." with re-introductions out of the way, James happily shared his lunch and they began to talk about what they had done over the break.

James talked about the tedium and difficulty of working for Darius, how much time carrying what felt like a thousand potted red flowers had taken and the cold involved. Forma listened attentively but did not seem to understand why the physical labor had sucked so much.

Forma for her part had spent most of the break doing various engineering exercises. Her other free time had been spent touring the various parts of the colony to see how those engineering principles were applied and occasionally in helping with the digging that had to be done. In particular, she focused on a building competition that she won. It did not sound like much of a big deal but from the way Forma focused on how she had beaten her peers, James thought it very important to Forma.

With a rather triumphant smile she produced a wire pyramid made of a strange white glossy substance and gave it to James. James looked at her with a questioning expression and she said “It's a gift.” Turning the pyramid in his hand he saw that whichever way he deformed it, it quickly sprang back into shape. He smiled and thanked Forma for the gift.

James tried his best to look humble and said "I’m sorry Forma, I don't have a gift for you."

She smiled “It's okay, I’m not sure why I was supposed to give you one anyway. Sheena just said that you would like it.” She shrugged and gave a look that suggested she simply didn't understand.

After that the lunch passed in peace with James doing his best to try and make his break sound interesting, this in James’s opinion failed and instead he was dazzled by Forma’s tales of her colony. These tales were so dazzling that for a second James caught himself wondering if he had done the right thing to stay at the school, he shook his head. It was decided now.

The next day James managed to catch Eric and Sheena before they left for lunch. James smiled and asked Eric “Hey, Eric if it's not too inconvenient can we settle things today?"

Eric looked at him blankly. James gently said “Our duel?

Suddenly remembering Eric nodded and gave a mildly amused smile and said “If you think that now's the time then okay." James merely smiled humbly.

Near the former gardening shed James had gone to some trouble to clear the snow from the ground. It had taken like half an hour and a snow shovel but the ground was reasonably clear and he was confident that he could fence there.

Sheena watched from the sidelines with an unamused look. This was clearly not her idea of a good time and she grumbled more than once that she was missing soup in the cafeteria.

James passed Eric the inferior of the two wooden swords, keeping the better for himself. With a great deal of deliberation James removed his extra clothes; facing Eric in nothing more than his undershirt and pants. He paced to the edge of the clearing doing his best to breathe deeply. At the edge he turned and unwavering fixed his eyes on Eric.

Eric seemed slightly impressed by this display and betrayed a small smile. Still he laughed and joked like always. This was until James called out “Ready yourself Eric, I’m going to challenge you no matter what."

With that James was off at a dash, the very edge of Eric's range was the decisive spot. Eric tried to match swords with James but James always gave ground, until finally James saw an opening, James lunged as far forward as he could push himself, and turned to face Eric as soon as he landed. He began to lay down a flurry of blows from Eric's periphery, every time Eric tried to turn and face James cleanly, James put all of his strength into dashing to prevent this. This left Eric to fend off blows with the sword in his off hand, this allowed James to score more than a few blows on his arm and back.

Eventually a lucky blow (although James would have called it expertly measured) knocked the sword from Eric's hand. James immediately redoubled his attack, however it seemed Eric had lost patience with the game. Rapidly flapping one of his light purple wings at James’ face, Eric forced James to stumble in surprise. He proceeded to entrap James’s leg with his tail and finished with a powerful choke slam that left James on the ground gasping for air.

Standing above James victorious, Eric seemed a powerful dragonet warrior snarling in victory. With a simple motion he could swoop down and tear out James’s throat. Some primitive part of James’ mind recognized this, and in a moment of weakness whispered up “Do it."

Suddenly Sheena shouted “Stop!" she had stood up and walked forward. She had a look of pure anger at both boys. "Eric, what do you think you are doing? You can't kill him." Eric had a suddenly sheepish look. She glared down at James. “And you, trying to bait my brother into hurting you. Bastard." James suddenly became rather aware of how vulnerable he was to kicking lying on the ground.

Eric help James up. “Sorry about that James. It seems I have underestimated you."

James tried to get air back into lungs but managed to ask “Did I get you?"

Eric smiled an annoyed smile “In your own way you did."

Despite her anger Sheena managed restrain herself. She only kicked James once or twice.

James had been seriously winded from the choke slam, and it took several minutes to get his breathing back under control. The duo however did him the favor of hanging around.

James still panting and feeling his neck looked to Eric, “Did you see the lunge?” It had taken most of winter break to perfect

Eric nodded “It was a good maneuver; it’s the only reason were able to disarm me. How did you come up with it?”

James smiled proudly. “I looked through some books on dragonet fencing, I saw the fencing stuff you tend to do, so I needed to come up with that worked against that.” Eric nodded thoughtfully.

James had mostly recovered but Sheena was still glaring at him. Eric was lost and thought and desperate to break the tension James asked. “Why is your hair braided Sheena?" her blonde green hair had been put into a long braid that trailed down her back.

Taking one of the braids in her hands Sheena said. “My mom always does this whenever I come home. I normally take them out immediately but I promised my mom I would wait a week."

James tried to smile “Why do you dislike them so much?"

Sheena was about to answer but was cut off by Eric lightly tugging her braid. “That, and they are annoying to have to keep redoing." Eric gave a superior smile.

As they walked back to school the full implications of what he had done managed to hit James. "I’m sorry guys. This would be a bad death for me. It would royally screw you guys for one thing."

Sheena gave James a look of disgust “No shit, it would not help my brother at all to have killed a human, even one who wanted it."

Eric had a slightly puzzled look on his face. “Why did you want me to do it?"

James gave a bitter smile. “Sometimes a death is worth a lot more than a life.” James gave a hollow laugh “Besides I can do worse than dying in combat."

Eric gave James an enigmatic look, he then glanced over to Sheena who was still toying with her braid. "Sheena, do you think James should see the puzzle?"

Sheena seemed taken aback by the question and stopped walking to think. Both James and Eric turned to face her. After a few moments she responded. “He almost made you kill him, are you sure we can trust him?"

Eric nodded “It wasn't intentional, and I think this has proven that he can be quite resourceful."

Sheena nodded thoughtfully “If you think it will work out alright, then I suppose we could. Still I’m not sure it will help."

James took this moment to speak up and ask the question that had been on his mind. “What puzzle?"

Eric smiled, showing his teeth a little. “It's a long story, hangout with me and Sheena this Sunday."

James nodded and then said “Can Forma come?"

Both Eric and Sheena started to act a little anxious. “Maybe it would be better if she didn't." Sheena said this uneasily.

Eric seemed to decide on something. “She can come but she can’t' see what we are showing you." James nodded, this seemed fair enough.

With the matter settled the duo of dragonets strode of purposefully, James called out. “Wait up, you are both taller than me.” Sheena merely looked back at him smiling a superior smile.

James was a bit sore after how badly he had been manhandled by Eric and made sure to go to sleep early that night. It was however difficult to find a position where James had not taken some bruising so he tossed and turned.

As a result, the next day he was more tired than usual, and after running with Cecilia he wanted nothing more than go back to sleep. He tried to create his best approximation of sleep using a desk and his arms to cover his eyes.

This was of course offered little respite. James was almost physically unable to sleep in places with people still awake and moving about. But it seemed to offer some respite.

It was James desperate need for any relief that prevented him from looking up when he was approached by another student. She was a mermaid with her reddish pink hair pulled into long curls.

She in a motion of hostility unmatched in modern history said rather brightly “Good morning." She had precisely wheeled her wheel chair up infront of James’ desk. As a result, the noise was deafening.

James immediately on the defensive said “Good morning."

The mermaid continued brightly. "I have to ask what's your secret for doing so well in classes?" James noted a slight fishy odor, and that she had bright orange scales.

James asked in a matter of fact voice “Can you read?"

The mermaid seemed taken aback by this question and with some hesitation said “Yes"

Still without looking up James responded "I don't have anything to do in the evening so all I can do is read the book." this was the most concise answer to the question James could think of and therefore the most polite.

The mermaid wheeled away looking back at James strangely.

The rest of the week passed mostly without incident. James went to class and tried to get into the routine of not having to do manual labor every morning. Eventually it was Sunday, James had been sure to ask Forma if she wanted to come along. She had shrugged and said she might as well.

Most of the school looked like a modern school building despite having been built on a castle. However, as one went further down, the school’s roots as a castle became more and more apparent. James had mused on this multiple times, but he couldn’t say that he knew the school all that well. Where a stairwell bottomed out into a basement, there was a passage hidden away carefully behind the stairs.

Eric lead the expedition from the library to passage. The passage was secured with a large heavy wooden door. After a few moments of fumbling Eric produced a key and allowed everyone inside. Inside the passage any pretense of looking like a modern school was abandoned, the passage was dark, and dug directly into the dirt itself. Eric grabbed one of the torches and lit it with a retching motion.

The passage was fairly short and had a shallow grade. It let out into a much larger passage. It was a huge passage far taller than James. There were stone walls, sconces for torches and bare dirt floors, that had been cobbled at one point, but the few remaining cobble stones next to the walls.

James looked around with a confused expression. “The castle was built as a home for a dragon, the underground was where servants and other common folk were expected to live." Eric smiled “It was left after the dragon was evicted."

Sheena quite helpfully added “It's like there is a giant ring encircling the castle. If we go down the passage we eventually come out here."

Forma tapped the walls and examined the arches finally she declared “Good stonework." She looked down. “What happened to the floor?”

With a surprised look Eric answered “After the dragon was evicted, they dug up the floors to try and find treasure.”

Forma asked eagerly “Was there treasure?”

Eric just shrugged “I don’t know.”

James simply nodded dumbly to the conversation. These were the biggest underground passages he had ever seen, as far as he was concerned this was something ripped from a story book.

After a fair bit of walking they reached a very ornately decorated door. With no ceremony at all Eric went in. Inside there was a small chamber about the size of a bedroom, with a smooth tile floor. At the far end of the room was a great mass of cogs and gears around a fairly small door.

Forma spoke for James when she asked “What's that?"

Eric paused for a second and then spoke. “It was a door guarded by a logic puzzle. It was difficult but I managed to solve it within the first year I was here." he smiled to himself "I was so excited to have solved it."

Sheena joined in. "I remember how excited you were to show it to us when we came to pick you up. You could not stay still, you kept grabbing my hand and trying to lead me here."

They walked through two more rooms similar to that one. The first was a colorful room covered in a mosaic of many colors. Looking at the color closely James saw that each splotch of color was actually it’s own tile. Around the door leading out of the room James saw that a pattern had been pressed out of the colors.

The third had a large number of mirrors and glass figures. There was a spot for a candle and James could perhaps see the mirrors all reflecting to one point to make an image in sum. James hadn’t the slightest idea of what it would have been though.

Arriving at the door to the fourth chamber, Eric looked to Forma politely "Forma will you please wait here? I have to show James the puzzle within." Forma nodded and produced a book. James only glanced the cover but it looked like it said “De architectura." Eric made sure to light a torch for her, although he used his own torch this time.

Eric and then Sheena disappeared through the door, and James followed him not sure what to expect.

The room was about the same size of the previous room, and lanterns littered the floor. A wooden table and chairs had been set up next to the door. These were in turn littered with notebooks, some of which had obviously been destroyed in frustration.

James however did not notice any of this his attention was instead transfixed by the metal relief at the end of the room. It was so realistic that James was only lead to realize it to be a piece of art by the lack of color.

It showed was looked to be a military tent looking out onto a field or battle. Within the tent was an aged male dragonet obviously tired. Into his ear whispered a much younger female dragonet, the female had a ghostly appearance in a similar manner to Fen. Within the tent as well it was possible to see a military map obviously corresponding to the outside.

But it was the detail which completed the picture, you could see the grain of the wood in the table, the grass swaying in the breeze on the field, every line that was seemingly etched into the aged dragonet's face.

James immediately rushed forward to touch it and confirm that it was indeed false not some incredible portal to another time and place. Eric caught his shoulder and restrained him.

Eric smiled "I wanted to do the same thing when I first saw it. But it's very old and fragile."

In front of wall stood a dull orange metal podium with a large heavy metal quill. There was an obvious blank space for someone to write something.

With a tired sigh Eric strode forward and taking the metal pen in hand wrote something in the blank space. James had never seen the characters before, and after being written they glowed on the metal. Once he was done writing the characters faded into nothingness.

Turning as if to present the picture to James Eric began to speak. “As part of my legacy as the chosen hero I have to solve this puzzle. I know everything there is to know about this picture, and I can't get the answer."

James was still mostly speechless “What will happen when you solve the puzzle?"

Eric smiled “Knowing my luck another door will open with an even harder puzzle behind it." he gave a hollow laugh "I really don't know."

James looked around the room, and then back at the picture. "I’m guessing what you are supposed to write is what the girl is saying." James reflected that she could be saying any number of things from comments on the weather to I love you. “Have you tried I love you?"

Eric nodded sadly. “Yeah. Let me give you more background about the picture. The old dragonet is reun-melthuss."

James took the opportunity to observe “That's a long name."

Sheena smiled and Eric laughed. “That's the short version of his name. If I did the long version with all of his titles we would be here all day. This guy is the legendary hero I’m supposed to be following in the footsteps of. Long epic poems have been written about each part of this guy's life. I have read them all. For the purpose of this story I’m just going to call him Dave."

James smiled “So the legendary hero, the guy you have spent most of your life studying, you call Dave."

Eric rolled his eyes. “Look, I know that guy about as well as his parents did, I have the right to call him Dave after all of that." James just nodded dumbly. “How much do you know about dragonet ancient history?"

James smiled and said quite confidently “Nothing, well next to nothing. I know what dragonets are."

Sheena went ahead and grabbed a seat with a bored look on her face, this was apparently not a new occurrence to her. James followed suit leaving his backpack leaning against the wall. Eric started strong. “In the very beginning of dragonet history it is said that there were just dragons. Well dragons and elves. Dragons can pull off badass acts of magic where elves can just put magic into things."

James chimed in “What's the difference?"

Sheena took this as an opportunity to speak “Dragons could for example control the weather, elves can make things like your sword." James nodded, simple enough.

“So dragons being fairly dangerous creatures took elves as slaves a long time ago. Dragons live a long time and elves live a short amount of time. This made the elves bad slaves, the dragons had to keep giving orders to each generation. So a dragon whose name is lost to history figured “Let's just cross elves and dragons.” James gave an incredulous look. If dragons looked anything like what he was imagining this would be an impressive feat.

Eric seeing this laughed “It wasn't easy; you can't imagine the acts of magic involved. Anyway eventually this mad wizard dragon succeeded and made dragonets. Dragonets made better slaves because they lived for a longer amount of time. After a long period of slavery, Dave comes onto the picture. Dave was wronged many times by the dragons and eventually decided to launch a rebellion against the dragons."

James figured that something this important was worth at least asking about “Was it hard?"

Eric nodded emphatically. “So after this daring and sweeping rebellion the dragons’ power is broken and he has to decide what to do with the oldest most powerful dragon. Dragons that old and that powerful were worshipped by most dragonets as being essentially gods. Dave has just fought this hard rebellion and the last thing he wants to do is fight a civil war with those dragonets sore about someone killing a god."

Despite the rather casual way the story was being told James had become entranced and leaned forward asking “So what did Dave do?"

“He consults this seer and asks for advice. The seer says that in a thousand years another legendary hero will show up and he should just seal the dragon in the meantime." Eric seemed to think this a fitting end.

James briefly pondered if he should try to bluff that he knew anything about magic. He decided to hedge. “Is it hard to seal a dragon?"

Sheena seemed most excited about this topic and answered excitedly “Oh yes, it was so hard it dropped the magic concentration for the whole world of monsters by a noticeable amount."

James nodded dumbly and said “So how does this relate to you having to answer a puzzle?"

Eric gave a tired look. “After he sealed the dragon Dave decided on all the virtues his successor would need. He then asked his followers to design ways to test these virtues." Eric pointed his thumb at the wall. “That's one of the them."

James looked at the picture again. “What’s the story behind the picture?"

Eric gave the picture an expert look over again, perhaps hoping to see something he had missed. Finally, he began to talk. “It's a picture of the final battle of the rebellion right before they sealed away the great dragon." he paused “Well it's supposed to be, but a lot the details are wrong. Some of the grasses have flowers that only bloom in the months before the battle. Also Dave’s army isn't as big as all the stories say. There are a bunch of other inconsistencies."

James decided to go for broke. Although he hoped that Forma wasn't getting too bored outside. “What happened in the battle?"

Eric smiled. "Dave kicked ass is what. While marching to the field of battle he was reinforced by the elves, when he got there he confronted the dragon's last army and swept it from the field."

James thought it over, and then asked “Who is the girl?"

Eric gave a sad look. “It was Dave’s true love. He asked that her name be forgotten because just hearing it made him so sad."

James gave it another minute “Did you try some variation on her name or maybe revenge?"

Eric said in bored tone “Tried it."

Suddenly James had an idea “Did you try asking Fen?"

Sheena gave a confused look. “Who is Fen?"

“The phantom of the high school, I call her Fen. She might know the answer." This seemed to James the correct solution, when one did not know one asked for the answer.

Eric made a frustrated face. “She might know it but I don’t think she would tell me. Besides I want to figure it out myself. That's why I brought you, to see if your perspective might let me see something new."

James had another idea “This is supposed to test a virtue, right? Which one is it? That might give us a clue."

Eric gave a frustrated sigh “Tried that. Dave made sure the list was kept secret to stop me. I don't even know if the list had traditional virtues on it. The other puzzles didn't have anything to do modesty or temperance."

In the silence that followed Sheena took this chance to interject. "James how do you know the phantom of the high school?"

James gave a curious look at Sheena, “She didn't visit you too? She dropped by my room the first day I was here to give some advice."

Eric looked over at Sheena “Don't worry about it, she sees everyone in her own good time." James briefly wondered if being the one of the few humans in the school of monsters put him on the same level of priority for the hero of the dragonets. He sincerely doubted it.

James had a few more minor ideas which Eric shot down in turn. Finally, he was left to apologize “Sorry Eric, that's all I can think of. If I think of anything else i’ll tell you right away."

Eric had a conciliatory expression. “Don't worry about it, I show this puzzle to a lot of people and I still haven't gotten it. Just don't tell anyone else about it okay? I want to solve it myself." James nodded strongly. There was certain logic to making sure he could solve the puzzle himself.

As they got up to leave Eric tried to pass James his backpack but grunted heavily as he lifted it off the floor. He gave James a bewildered look “What is in there?"

James smiled happily “A little bit of everything Eric."

Forma had lit another torch from the first and was still reading. She simply stood up and nodded once the trio exited the puzzle room. “Did you have fun?" this question did not seem to be directed to anyone in general so James decided to answer.

“Kind of, Eric has a strange way of telling stories." James grinned.

Eric gave James a look "I do not. I was just compressing the story so it was easier to understand."

James responded saying "I’m not sure that Dave was the best name to pick as a replacement, it just doesn't fit the part very well."

Eric seemed especially offended by this comment “Look, replacing complicated names with simple ones makes the story a lot easier to understand. Long tiresome names are not necessary to enjoy the story."

James just shrugged in response. “If you say so."

They all left the dark dungeons joking and laughing. Afterwards whenever he had a spare minute James would think on the puzzle. The answer always eluded him though.

The day was mostly over but Forma and James still got some time to hang out. This mostly consisted of Forma trying to teach James what had been in the book she read.

The next week only two really interesting things happened.

In the break between classes one day Ms. Sialia called James over to her desk. She readjusted her glasses and looked at James with a smile. "I have been asked to ask you what you like to do."

James immediately asked the obvious question “Who asked you to ask me?"

Ms. Sialia's smile took on a devious aspect “It's a secret."

James paused to reflect and try to think of the best way to answer a question like that. Ms. Sialia already knew that he like to read books so that would probably not be the best answer. Sticking to his guns James said "I quite like to bicycle."

Nodding Ms. Sialia said “Oh lovely devices, I can't use one of course but I think that will work." James merely nodded figuring it would reveal itself in time.

The other interesting thing that happened was that nature finally got sick of snow and instead switched to driving rain, fearsome gusts and generally being cold. James who appreciated that snow was less likely to make him wet was not over joyed by this development. He often and at length cursed his lack of proper coat.

The next week during that Saturday James was having lunch with Eric and friends. They were in the middle of conversation when quite suddenly Lana exclaimed “When it's raining the orange petal blooms." Her tentacles moved to emphasize the point.

Eric looked back at her and asked “Would you like to go see it in the evening?” Lana smiled and nodded. The conversation as if nothing had happened. Sheena looked curiously but seemed to take her cues from Eric and returned to reading her book.

James had never heard of such a thing and so said “What's an orange petal?"

Lana smiled. “It's this very beautiful flower and when it blooms you are supposed to be able to smell what you want most."

Eric brightened up saying “You should show the flower to Sheena.” Neither party seemed overly excited by this prospect.

James cut in "I’m game to go smell the thing if you will lead me there Lana." Lana gave a smile and Sheena looked conflicted.

Eric poked his sister. "Sheena, you should go with them.”

Sheena thought for a moment and then put her book into her backpack. “Alright."

The trio left and as they were about head outside, Lana suddenly said “Do you have an umbrella I could borrow, James?"

James paused for a second, as a Scylla Lana would be waterproof. He then did some further mental arithmetic, a gentleman could not let a lady go without an umbrella; and produced an umbrella from his backpack and handed it to Lana. She was troubled by this “But now you don't have one."

James simply grinned and said "I can take it." he looked over at Sheena and asked “Will you be okay?"

Sheena just smiled and tapped the red scales covering her arm “Waterproof."

In respect to James predicament they sprinted through the rain. James had a fairly good mental map of the ground surrounding the school but was still surprised to find out exactly where the flower was. It was beneath a vine covered arbor. It was a large bluish-orange flower about the size of James' face. James had a horrible premonition about man-eating flowers and so allowed Lana to go first.

Lana positioned herself carefully and then put her whole face within the flower taking a sniff from its innermost recesses. She faced Forma and James smiling. “Absolutely wonderful."

Sheena repeated this performance and returned with an awe-struck expression.

James steeled himself, and tried to empty his mind of any smells to see if that would help him. He gingerly pushed his face forward and took a sniff. The smells were richer than anything he had ever smelled and completely indescribable, but they strongly reminded him of home, the rich smell of the earth and the feeling of safety a child has in its mother's arms.

Beneath the hair plastered to her head by the rain Lana had a grim like a madwoman. She chuckled to herself “It worked, it worked."

Sheena admiring the flowers sat down and the other two joined her. The vines had grown around the arbor so thickly that one would be forgiven for thinking the arbor fruited from the vines. This some protection from rain but with alarming frequency James could feel a big fat drop of cold water hit his neck. Looking out into the gardens, James saw that there was a light mist hovering just above the ground which prevented him from seeing very far. The rain had lessened to a gentler pitter-patter sound and he could hear it on a thousand leaves. It was peaceful if cold.

Lana suddenly spoke up “What did you smell James?"

Trying to find words for the indescribable James hesitated and then answered "I smelled home, kind of a dirt smell and safety."

Sheena had a bemused expression “Strange things to smell."

Lana quickly spoke up “Well then what did you smell Sheena?"

Sheena seemed to be troubled for a second and then replied "I smelled my brother, books and summer" she shrugged “Nothing special."

Lana smiled a knowing smile "I smelled your brother as well, that and freedom along with hope."

James for a good while afterwards wondered exactly what the expression that Sheena had made upon hearing this news meant. It only lasted for a second and then she hid it behind polite curiosity.

Sheena paused for a second and then asked “What exactly do you like about my brother?" she tried to broach this topic with the greatest care.

Lana gave Sheena a curious look and suddenly James felt very isolated in this conversation. Lana said rather delicately “Your brother is a very nice person, and a gentleman."

“But what exactly is it?" Sheena politely insisted.

"I trust your brother and he cares about me." Lana said this while staring off into space. “And he has this kind of sensation when you are around him you know?" everyone nodded in agreement, Eric's charisma was so strong it could be felt outside of the room.

Lana continued “Also we have a lot in common." Sheena glowered at this comment.

Sheena asked in a very polite and only slightly menacing tone “What exactly do you have in common?" James looked at Sheena's eyes, there was slight iciness to her red eyes that belied her polite tone.

Lana smiled and James tried to believe that there were only good intentions in that smile. “We are both seniors for one thing. Besides we both face big unknowns once we graduate." only the slightest hint of smugness pervaded that smile.

Sheena seemed slightly perturbed by this comment and an icy mood prevailed. However, James tried his best to defuse the uncomfortableness. “What exactly is love like?”

Looking at James a little taken aback Sheena asked. “What, have you never felt love?”

James became slightly defensive. “I love my family.”

Lana seemed genuinely surprised. “Do humans feel love to ones not related to them?”

Regarding Lana strangely, James more than a little embarrassed answered. “I loved a girl once but I don’t know if that was real love.”

Sheena had that ever so slightly smug look on her face again. “Oh, who was the girl?”

James looked off into the distance. “I loved her when I was six, I don’t think that counts as real love. Or at least like the love you have for Eric.”

Lana used one her tentacles to pat James on the shoulder, this did not help how cold James was feeling at all. “It is probably a bit different, well what do you think love is like?”

James thought for a minute, staring off into space regarding the mist. A sad look crept onto his face and he answered. “To me I always thought that love was service. That if you loved someone you cared about them more than anything else in the world.” James gave a bitter smile. “That if needed you would defend them, that if they asked, you would gladly cut off your arm for them.” Focusing again he looked over at two girls, “Kind of a chivalric love, where you try to prove yourself worthy.”

Sheena looked at James, and she took a moment to message one of her black horns. Finally, she spoke. “In the books I read love is always an immediate thing, suddenly you are seized by the realization that you care about this person more than anything else.” She smiled “But normally they have to rescue you from a great danger or take you on an incredible adventure.”

Lana smiled and then jokingly said “Shows what you know about love.” Sheena glowered. She sat up a bit, and used one of her tentacles to push back her hair. “Love is a kind of familiarity. Love is when you are totally comfortable with someone, when you can trust them completely, when they complete you.” Lana smiled. “It’s when the other person also trusts you, when they don’t hold anything back from you.” Sheena glowered some more.

All three of them stared out into the mist in silence. James sighed heavily, this was joined by the other two. It was the cold temperature that eventually broke up the meeting. James had been shivering pretty badly and said “How about we go inside? It's cold and wet." Lana looked at James surprised and used her tentacles to put the umbrella above James.

The two girls still regarded each other coldly, but there was no arguing with the logic of the temperature. They seemed to reach accord and James lead them back to the school at a trot.

Entering the blessedly warm school building, James’ first priority was wring out his clothes in the bathroom. However, this took a while because of the sheer volume of water. Even afterwards he was still cold and wet.

Looking forward to a warm shower, James left the bathroom at a dash all but whooping in anticipation as he left. Connecting the school building to the dorms, there were covered walkways. James had appreciated their existence during the snow and once again was appreciative that they existed.

As he dashed he saw Sally approaching and stopped as quickly as he could. She was calmly sliding along on her blue goo. She seemed to be doing her level best to avoid the rain and as a result was in the direct center of the walkway.

As Sally approached James briefly pondered what to do, then realizing that if he was to be a gentleman he should act like it. He then stepped into the rain so Sally could pass unimpeded. The rain began beating down on him and he smiled distantly at the sound it made as it hit the covered walkway. Sally stopped and stared at him with featureless eyes.

James had never been alone with Sally before, he had always seen her among company when they were both trying to fit in. Alone with just her and this close he was taken aback by just how alien she seemed. Her features were difficult to distinguish due to be the same transparent light blue color as the slime of which she was made. The glaring exception to this was her black opaque eyes, which reminded James strongly of Forma. It is an unusual thing to see the inside of another's clothes, it is even more so when you are seeing these through the person.

Sally stared at him and James stared back becoming more and more drenched. Eventually Sally's crystal clear voice rung out “Why are you doing that?"

James had always been taught to assume the best of the other person and so charitably answered “So you can pass" he noted that any rain that landed on Sally seemed to be absorbed.

Sally looked James up and down “A curious thing to do.” She continued on her way silently. James briefly wondered why Sally was coming from the male dormitory but then realized he was far too cold and wet to really care.

After finally getting to his room he took a blissfully warm shower. He responded to his correspondence and went to blissfully warm sleep.

Despite the next day being Sunday James felt less than stellar. It was a little hard to pay attention and his face felt hot. He still had a good time with Forma. For reasons James felt best kept private, Sheena appeared by herself.

As the day progressed James felt less and less coherent and it was harder and harder to make sense of what the others were saying. It got so bad that eventually Forma poked him and asked “What's wrong, James?"

James put his head down on the table and rooted through his back pack “It's nothing Forma."

Forma turned to Sheena and asked in a concerned tone “What's wrong with him?"

Sheena was engrossed in a book and was a bit surprised to be disturbed. “He has a cold. It should be better in a day or two.” She seemed a bit more distant than usual and returned to her book quickly.

James sat up holding a coke in hand triumphantly. He showed it to Forma and tapped the can “Cold medicine. Don't worry I normally get sick once a year." he offered the girls a sip, both respectfully declined, took a long drink himself and then tried to manage his headache while having a conversation.

His handkerchief found frequent use and eventually, he pleaded a pressing need to return to his room. His headache was so bad that hearing the diplomacy club teacher drone on and on would be ruinous to his health.

After trying reading to no avail, James collapsed into his bed, incapable of doing anything else. He slept swallowing as much of his mucus as he put out.

Waking up the next day was close to torture. He had to go to class no matter what, too much was riding on him doing well. He tried to get up only to encounter difficulty, after about half an hour of debate he tried to get up again. He got up and then had to lay back down as his legs had decided to revolt on him. He was sweating and shaking occasionally which wasn’t helped by his guilt.

Falling again into uneasy fever dreams, he felt as if he were hurtling towards a certain grave with little to stop his fall. He dreamt that he was all alone with no one to help him. He felt immensely afraid but of nothing he could name. He awoke briefly and felt something soft and vaguely slimy on his face but was too tired to open his eyes. He passed out again and awoke thirsty. To his immense delight he found water by the bed and drank greedily only to let out a groan as his stomach hurt. After that he went back to the sweet confines of sleep.

Dr. Galen looked down at the sleeping human and consulted his big book of medicine again. The dragonet had been right about the human being sick. They had suggested that it had a cold which seemed correct. The big book of medicine was rather light on the subject of human colds but suggested bed rest and allowing it run its course.

The human moaned in its sleep and seemed frightened. Dr. Galen gave an impassive look he briefly considered checking the human for marks from the fight with the minotaur. He smiled and refrained from doing so, anything so fragile as to still be injured that long afterwards would not be able to survive even in the world of humans. There was little reason to believe that it was dying and decided he would check back the next morning.

In the middle of the night James awoke with the peculiar sensation of his mouth sweating. With a frustrated sigh he knew what that meant. Summoning all of his strength he managed to sit up and put his feet on the floor. This made him feel woozy, then the mouth sweat got worse and that was enough to spur him unsteadily to the bathroom.

He vomited into the toilet and then collapsed. He vomited a few more times and the sickly smell of vomit filled the bathroom. James with some effort got up and went to the sink to rinse. Still feeling his headache James slowly made his way back to bed. Eventually the fever broke and he began to feel better.

The next morning, he was still not feeling well. He got up unsteadily and had managed to get fully dressed when a knock came on his door. James froze, he hoped desperately that it was not one of his neighbors who he had avoided so studiously.

Lacking any other options James opened the door and was quite surprised to see dr. Galen outside. He had his usual slightly smug look and as usual his brown hair was unruly. Without invitation he walked inside and presented James with a thermometer. “Put this under your tongue." James was so surprised by this turn of events that he did so without complaint.

Eventually doctor Galen retrieved the thermometer with one of his pink tentacles. Holding it close, he examined it carefully. Checking his clipboard, he then said in an official tone. “Standard temperature for a human." James noted to his amusement that there were in fact many things in his satellite tentacles. Whenever he needed the object his tentacle unconsciously moved into position.

Dr. Galen moved to take James’ blood pressure and James shivered at how slimy his tentacles were. Dr. Galen was a bit imposing at the best of times and the aftermath of the cold gave James the boldness necessary to try to make small talk. “How did you know I was sick?"

Dr. Galen kept silent until he was done counting. As he made a mark on his clipboard he said “A dragonet told your teacher and your teacher told me." he looked at James closely, “Lift up your shirt."

After some reservations and a promise that dr. Galen would never tell anyone what James looked like without a shirt, James lifted his shirt, “Is it tough to be a doctor at this school?"

Dr. Galen examined James' midriff from all angles and then responded “Oh it has its advantages.

James tried to stay still as dr. Galen measured his height. “Must be hard with all the different species."

Dr. Galen nodded slightly and then straightened up. “Take it easy for the next few days." he gave an ever so slight smile and then said “If all patients were as obedient as you it would be easy." one of dr. Galen’s tentacles passed James some cloth wrapped rock candy.

They both bid farewell and James left puzzled but enriched by the experience. After all, rock candy was hard to come by. James still didn't feel well enough to go running so he drank a coke and tried to eat a breakfast soft enough to stay down.

James did his best to manage his headache and when Sheena finally arrived he went up to her and with little prelude said "Sheena, what did I miss yesterday?"

Sheena looked back at him and said “Let's discuss during lunch.” She then resumed the conversation with her brother that she had been so rudely pulled from.

James shrugged and put his head back on his desk. Once lunch finally rolled around he followed Sheena to the lunchroom. He tried to conceal his impatience as he waited for Eric and Sheena to get their lunch and finally, followed them to the common room. It was the same scene as usual with Eric’s friends greeting them enthusiastically.

Sheena as usual sat down at the end of one of the couches. This left James with a difficult dilemma, biting the bullet he sat down in-between Sheena and Eric. Something about bears and cubs flashed through James’ mind. Sheena gave him a look. James responded by calmly saying “I need the notes for the class I missed.”

After looking at her brother who was engaged in the conversation she sighed and opened her notebook. Sheena had very neat handing writing James noted. As James began to copy down Sheena’s notes in his messy scrawl; Sheena asked dryly. “Can you read that afterwards?”

James nodded and said “Most of the time.” Trying to defuse the mood between the two of them at a break in the conversation James asked “So what happens during spring break?”

Eric smiled and said “It alternates based on the year." James gave Eric an inquisitive look. “This year it will just be a week with no school, and most of the clubs will send people on trips to conferences and stuff."

Both James and Sheena looked at Eric quickly. A bit of Sheena’s hair got into James' face but he didn’t dare complain. Eric smiled “Diplomacy club sends people to conferences to compete. I’m going to the debate competition." he gestured to both Eric and Sheena “You two should try to go next year, it's a good experience." both of them squirmed in their seats.

Asking quickly; to move the topic off of his lack of conversation skills James said “What happens the other years?"

Eric smiled a very toothy smile “It's two weeks off. One week is spent on a whole school trip to this great beach." he looked at Sheena fondly, “Sorry I can't go with you Sheena. I know you will love it." he reached over James and patted her head.

Once James surprise had subsided he asked in a cautious voice “Everyone goes? It doesn't cost money?"

Lana picked this moment to but in “Yes James, it is free.” She took a moment to look sullen “The weather isn't always good though." James pondered that perhaps some especially good moment had been ruined by this. Sheena gave a cold look.

The rest of the lunch passed quickly enough. As James got up to sprint to his next class he suddenly remembered something. He looked at Sheena “Thank you for telling the teacher I was sick."

Sheena seemed surprised by this. “I didn’t tell the teacher you were sick.”

James looked uncertain and said “The doctor said a dragonet told the teacher.”

Sheena shrugged and then looked to her bag “I mentioned it to my brother, I think.” She saw James’ look of disapproval. “I figured you could get well enough on your own.”

The next day James felt good enough to go running. With a smile Cecilia asked James where he had been. Answering that he had been sick both James and Cecilia commiserated.

For lunch that day James met with Forma. She a slightly worried look but said nothing until Sheena covertly nudged her, “Are you feeling better James?"

James smiled and said "I feel good enough to do fencing." Forma’s face lit up.

The rain had stopped for a while but the ground was still muddy. James stood across from Forma and tried to quiet the growing dread he was feeling. Using the lessons, he had preparing to fight Eric against Forma, James tried to do his best. He did his best to keep moving a flowing motion, and to always face Forma.

Forma still knew when he was vulnerable and didn't need to get around James or to force him back. Still she was the first one to slip in the mud. James laughed, and then offered his hand to help her up. She grabbed his hand with three of hers and pulled James into the mud, she started to laugh. Laughing together James reflected that on the whole life was good.

They spent the rest of lunch fencing and slipping and sliding in the mud. When James finally went back to class his clothes were the muddiest they had been in weeks.

That Sunday it was just Forma and James. They passed the time happily looking at the various types of ancient plumbing. Any system which still worked a thousand years later was impressive indeed.

As they made small talk, James asked on a whim “So what do you talk about with Sheena? I see you guys chatting all the time.

Forma looked at James and shrugged. “It’s mostly her talking to me, she talks about her friends, about Eric, books she has read. That sort of thing.” Suddenly Forma looked at James with an expression he couldn’t quite place. “She mentioned that you fought with Eric, she thinks you were trying to get him to kill you.” There was a hardness in that statement which James very rarely heard from Forma. She began to stare at him intensely and continued “I figured she was wrong, I know you would go down fighting.”

This was making James uncomfortable and he squirmed a bit. “I was just trying to beat him for once.” James tried to smile sheepishly, but Forma was having none of it. “I even managed to disarm him. He got serious and knocked me down right afterwards. Then he helped me up.” James shrugged. “Same thing we do together.”

Forma nodded slowly relaxing as she did so. “It’s impressive you disarmed him.” She leaned forward conspiratorially “What’s the secret?”

Smiling James replied “I kept circling fairly close to him, otherwise not much.” James paused to think and then decided that there were few secrets between friends “I got close by lunging through the middle distance.”

Forma nodded appreciatively. “Good trick.” She looked at James once more “You won’t do it again will you?”

James shook his head, “Nope, hurt too much. How was your week?” He said this quickly.

Resuming her stare Forma asked purposefully. “Are you sure you won’t do it again.”

Shaking his head and desperate to change the subject James said “I won’t Forma, how was your week?”

Forma visibly detensed, “About the same as usual, lots of homework.” James nodded in agreement.

They talked for a while and then James had a eureka moment. He looked at Forma. “You probably shouldn’t have told me what you talk to Sheena about.”

Forma looked at him confused. “Then why did you ask?”

Looking a bit sheepish James responded “I wasn’t thinking. But for a conversation like girl talk, it’s expected that you won’t tell anyone else”

Putting her small set of hands to her chin Forma nodded slowly. “Alright, you are the expert after all.” James reflected on how this was the blind leading the blind if he was the expert.

Indeed, life was good for James all the way up until two weeks before spring break. In the morning James woke up feeling reasonably good and got dressed to go running. It was still rather cold and wet but James had not been expecting any change on that front.

He ran with Cecilia who for her part seemed to enjoy the wetness. James thinking this was odd asked her "Hey Cecilia why do you like the weather so much?"

Cecilia shook her hair and smiled "It's not like this back home. It's just cold and windy. It rarely rains.” She stopped and let some rain fall on her tongue before saying “Besides don't you know that rain is a good omen?"

James gave a wry smile back “It's been good omens for the last few weeks." Cecilia rolled her eyes.

Indeed, the rain might have been a good omen, right up until while waking back from running James saw Philip. He did not have a happy look on his face. James had in his mind a split second to make a decision. Fight or run, fight with weapons or without. James acknowledged on some basic level that the smart thing was to run. After so long of being constantly afraid, James also acknowledged that he was tired of running. His vow to never become angry again did not enter his mind.

Putting down his backpack James turned to face Philip. He was in the grassy field outside of the arena which helped to separate the arena from the school buildings proper. There was no one else in sight, and the morning was still a bit misty. James checked the ground it was muddy but not so muddy as to be slippery.

Philip walked right up to James and looked down at him. "I’m here to settle things."

James was sure that there was something to be learned from this but was at a loss as to what. “Well, then let's settle it." Eying Philip’s fists, James wished very very badly that he had a mouth guard to protect his teeth.

James for his part moved first, lunging forward strongly to try and put Philip off balance.

A general thing to know about fights between schoolboys is that they only become as brutal as the combatants are willing to make it. Once one lowers the civility of combat the other matches brutality to compensate. James knew that in all honesty he should just take his licks before Philip started fighting seriously and hope that settled it. In a fair fight there was no real chance of James winning, Philip was a head taller and good deal more muscular. However, James regarded fair fights as foolish endeavors at the best of times.

The fighting became more and more desperate as time went on. James lacked anything to use as a weapon or obstacle, none of the unfair advantages that James used as stock and trade, his only real advantage was the Philip was inexperienced. Experience told him that Philip’s advantage was mostly his size, and that if he ever got a good hold on James, he could squeeze the fight out of him. So he moved as slippery as possible, always trying to keep Philip off balance, going for the unexpected attacks whenever possible.

Philip had come to win and sought to humble James. James knew that he was going to lose, but would, could not surrender, so by degrees the fighting became more brutal. Punching soft places became the norm. Eye gouging was threatened and attempted without success. Finally, as the flashes of pain got converted into anger James flirted with the red mist.

The red mist threatened to descend over him like an angry waterfall, and James recognized distantly that if he did give into rage he would likely win. So James did.

With a distant horror he watched himself fight more brutally than he thought possible and relished the look of surprise in Philip’s eyes. He ignored pain, he ignored injury and he never stopped attacking. This and a superior determination carried the day.

It was when Philip lay defeated and the red mist had James move to kick Philip as hard as he could in the head that James fought to regain control. With a supreme effort he was able to calm down. James stood over the defeated Philip, he had managed to stop just short of doing kicking Philip’s head. He was left panting and bleeding, he felt empty and his new year's resolution left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He took a moment to feel internally. He was hurt, he was bruised in new and exciting ways. He spat onto the back of his hand to see how much blood was in his mouth, more than he was comfortable with. Philip had very nearly won and another fight would likely end with James losing and at the mercy of Philip.

James was not cognizant of any choice in that moment, to him it seemed the only reasonable solution.

He steadied himself and then offered down his hand. He tried to smile but the bruises on his face hurt too much. "You almost won that time Philip. Come on let's go see the doctor."

Philip looked up at him with a shocked expression. "Why are you doing this?"

James paused and tried to reason out why in fact he was doing this. In the most basic terms Philip was his enemy; this should be the moment to cripple him beyond any ability to hurt him again. "If you don't bury conflicts, conflict will eventually bury you." He offered his hand again.

Philip took it unsteadily; as he started to pull him up James felt every bruise on his stomach. As they both stood panting, Philip said "Forgiveness is an unexpected virtue in you."

Shrugging James responded "Why did you hunt me down anyway?"

Philip gave James a look "To settle things for my honor."

James started to help Philip to walk to the nurses’ office. "Is it settled now? You almost beat me and we are both bloodied."

Nodding Philip said in a matter of fact tone "You stay out of my way, I stay out of yours."

James nodded "Works for me." He wondered if he was going too far “Don't speak of me and I won't speak of you."

It took a while but they made it to the nurses’ office, not bothering to knock and going straight in. Dr. Galen had been sitting peacefully at his desk but a look of shock was painted on his face as he surveyed the two. With barely restrained venom the doctor said "I didn't expect to see you again. Another fight?"

James gave a confused expression and then looked to Philip "Fighting? What's he talking about?"

Philip gave an innocent look. "We both fell while doing some damn fool thing."

James nodded and then looked at Dr. Galen “It's a good thing we found each other or we would have had a hard time getting here." he looked back at Philip. “But, together we seem to attract bad luck, maybe we should stay apart from now on."

Philip nodded “Yeah, I’m not going to mess about with you again."

Dr. Galen had a completely skeptical expression through this. He took a breath and then released it “So between you there will be no further interaction?"

James nodded emphatically “None, sorry Philip."

Philip looked over at James “No contact at all."

Dr. Galen had a look of incredible distain. "I will tell the principal that this horrible accident has happened, and I think she will be happy to hear that you have both decided to stop associating with one another." one of his tentacles passed him a cotton ball. “Now let's get to looking at the both of you."

James’ eye and cheek were all swollen up, but he barely screamed when the doctor reset his nose.

James missed the first two periods of school. When he finally got to class, the students by and large ignored his various injuries, although there was a gasp or two. The math teacher looked at him, seemed confused and then consulted something on his desk. The teacher motioned for James to sit and then continued teaching.

Never before had James done that much fighting without being reprimanded. As a result, James was paranoid that he would soon be gathered by a teacher and summarily expelled. He spent the periods until lunch going over what had happened in his head; trying to find any explanation good enough to avoid being expelled. His best defense consisted of saying that Philip started it, however he assumed that Philip would contest this by saying James started it. His greatest fear was the principal would make good on her promise. He was panicking by the time lunch rolled around.

But as he left for lunch with no visible reprimand James despite his many aches and pains felt a little better, he got see Forma.

That day he had lunch with both Forma and the dragonet siblings. Eric looked James over with a critical eye and then kept his mouth shut. Sheena seemed a bit surprised at just how injured James was but simply shrugged and went back to her book.

Forma however distressed and asked James what injuries he had suffered. When he pulled up his sleeves she began to feel and inspect his bumps and bruises. Blushing James asked "What are you doing Forma?"

Forma looked at James with a solemn look "Looking for holes in your chitin, we need to patch them right away."

With a bemused smile James said "I’ll be all right, humans work a bit differently." Forma however did not believe James and continued to stare and go over and over his arm in detail. When she got to his shoulder James still blushing said “That's enough Forma I already went to Dr. Galen about it."

Forma straightened back up and nodded confidently "He's a pretty good doctor.” She sat down like nothing had happened. James looked over at Eric questioningly and Eric simply shrugged in response.

Reflecting afterwards James was uncertain about how he felt about the dragonet siblings not asking about his injuries, were they uninterested and simply did not care? Or perhaps they simply trusted him to manage his own business.

Regardless of how the dragonets felt, Ms. Sialia felt quite differently and stared at him wide eyed as he entered the classroom. Immediately she asked James to see her after class. James spent the rest of the classes that day purposefully avoiding both Philip’s and Ms. Sialia's gaze.

James considered simply ditching going to see Ms. Sialia. He dutifully went, though. It was curious, he reflected that he had felt little fear facing down Philip, but seeing the teacher was enough to make him consider retreat. He knocked rather briskly on the door hoping against hope that she was not there.

She heard a sharp lyrical voice call out “Come in."

James entered and sat, the whole experience was very familiar, James mused to himself that now he could say he had been called into a teacher’s office in both worlds. Ms. Sialia looked down at him from her chair. Her wings had steeped like someone steepling their fingers. She gave James a disappointed look and James did his best to stare into space.

It was however in a voice tinged with concern that she spoke. "James, what the hell happened? I received a memo from the principal’s office telling all teachers to ignore any injuries on Philip and the human.” She pressed forward with genuine worry in her voice “Are you being bullied again? Did you start a fight?"

Shaking his head James said "Philip started a fight, I barely won and then helped him to the nurse's office." he shrugged still carefully addressing the empty space "I imagine that dr. Galen was the one who told the principal."

Ms. Sialia gave James surprised glance before resuming her worried expression “Why did you help him?"

James looked at Ms. Sialia surprised himself "I’m sorry?"

Ms. Sialia repeated calmly “Why did you help him?"

James had a truly perplexed expression on his face. “He was hurt, he had almost won, I sought to make sure I would not have to fight him again."

Putting her wing to her chin Ms. Sialia said carefully “The last time I saw you fight Philip, you attacked him while he was on the ground with every expression of hatred on your face. I thought you truly hated him."

Still not understanding what was happening James said "I most surely do." taking a moment James imagined all the creative torments he had dreamed of inflicting on the minotaur during that hellish week.

Dropping her wing back on the table Ms. Sialia said in tone of surrender “Must be some human quality.” She straightened up trying her hardest to look stern. Her short cloud blue hair did not seem suited to this James noted. “The principal for her own reasons has decided not to punish you or Philip. But I will.”

Despite himself James shot back “For defending myself?”

Ms. Sialia was unmoved. “You could have runaway James and I have seen how badly you hurt Philip. The next round of tests is coming up and I want the rest of your free afternoons this week to be spent here as mandatory study periods."

James face dropped noticeably at this pronouncement. He already spent the evenings studying, but now valuable laze around in the library time would be wasted. He however kept himself from saying anything, as much fighting as he had done would have gotten him suspended back home.

The next morning James saw Cecilia and she was aghast by how bad James looked. She strode over briskly and looked down at him with a concerned look. “Are you alright James?"

Nodding James said “Yep, I didn’t get hit in the legs that much so I can still go running."

Cecilia leaned over him trying to look imperious. “No, really are you alright?"

Nodding once again. “Yes, I’m fine. I put an end to it."

Still holding that frustrated look Cecilia asked “Who were you fighting with?"

James answered quickly hoping to end the conversation quickly "I fought Philip. You should see him."

Cecilia gave James a sad look. She patted him on the head, which James thought a bit familiar “Be careful, you may get lucky but humans are fragile."

James did get some good studying done while he was forced to stay in Ms. Sialia’s office, but at least half of the time he was confined there was spent recounting stories about the world of humans to a completely engrossed Ms. Sialia. James did not mind of course, it beat the pants off studying for his various tests and kept him from feeling homesick.

That Sunday it was Sheena and Forma again. Sheena still seemed sullen but had switched to books on relationships which James found amusing. James decided to bite the bullet and asked her what was wrong. “Hey, Sheena what's wrong?"

Sheena hesitated a bit and then said “It's Eric, he's starting to get worried about solving the puzzle.” She had a troubled expression and then said “He's asking Lana for help on it." this brought a scowl to her face.

James figured that perhaps he could improve her mood a bit by asking about the puzzle. The narrator would like to note that this was a mistake. "James said the puzzles were meant to test the virtues of a hero, what are those exactly?"

Shooting a hard look at James, Sheena then looked over at Forma. Forma was peacefully flipping through a book on sailing. James smiling said “She won't tell anyone else." Forma looked up smiled fondly at Sheena, nodded and then returned to her book

Sheena shrugged and then mused for a bit staring into the air. “A bit like what you would expect, honesty, loyalty, making it just in time, doing the heroic thing everyone is too afraid to do.”

James thought a second trying to think about what were heroic virtues in humans. He asked hesitatingly “So is there anything like compassion or mercy?"

Sheena seemed a bit unsettled by these questions “Compassion in victory I guess, the rebellion was a terrible war so no one expected any hesitation in what Dave did."

James was a little troubled by this. He shrugged figuring that likely the virtues expected by heroes were different in the world of monsters.

The last week before the spring break was filled with tests. James found these dreadfully boring; the need to study even got into lunches and whole halls were filled with nothing but students studying. Not necessarily quietly but studying all the same.

Even when meeting with Cecilia in the morning she would often bemoan her need to study and just how much studying sucked.

This was a tired topic even to James “How is track going? Are you going anywhere to compete?"

Cecilia gave a beaming smile. “Yep, my section is going to another school to compete for part of the week and then coming back to have a meet on Saturday.” She seemed to be struck by an idea “You should come."

James had no plans for the break and it would be something different. “Okay, i’ll come to your meet. What's your event again?" Cecilia made a face.

The upside of all this studying for James was that it gave him a lot to think. His subjects ranged wide and far from how some students got their hair to stick up just right, to wondering where exactly the cafeteria got all of its exotic food from, to Eric’s puzzle. It was on the fourth day of finals right as they were supposed to turn a page in a math test that James had his epiphany. He stood up and almost shouted before realizing exactly where he was. The centaur math teacher gave him such a look.

On the Friday James excitedly sought out Eric. His smile almost split his face in half. "Eric, I think I have the solution to your puzzle. I even wrote it down so I wouldn't forget."

Eric who was in the middle of lunch with his friends just looked up at James and nodded. “There is no class on Saturday so we can try later today. What is it James?"

Actually entering the solution had never occurred to James. He smiled sheepishly “It's kind of abstract and doesn't make sense unless we are near the picture."

Eric almost rolled his eyes. "James, I get suggestions like this all the time. I want to know if I’m going to waste my time or not." this brought a general chorus of agreement from Eric’s circle of friends.

James got a sheepish look and then shook his head. Eric put one of his hands to his head and said “All right, just find me at the door once classes finish."

Hesitating James asked cautiously “Can Forma come?"

Eric shook his head and said in a defeated voice "I guess, if she can make it." James all but skipped around happily. He then was struck by the difficulty of actually signaling Forma. This he thought would take some thought.

Eric stood impatiently in front of the door, it was large and imposing as usual. Lana was dressed casually while Sheena was still wearing her school uniform, they were both politely ignoring each other.

Eric had picked up Sheena from her class at a brisk walk with Lana in tow. He had wasted a lot of free time just getting to and from that damn puzzle. Going through the hallway he happened to glance out the window and saw that one of the trees was blooming, they were medium sized, attractive black flowers.

He looked to Sheena and Lana, then smiled. He stopped walking and went outside, using his talons he clipped off two flowers and the with exaggerated ceremony presented them to both Lana and Sheena.

Sheena immediately put it in her hair very carefully tucking it next to one of her horns. The flower clashed strongly with her blond hair, but it made her look lovely all the same.

Lana took it in hand and then with some difficulty affixed it to her school uniform.

Eric nodded at both of them and said “Right, let’s keep going”

Back at the door Eric sighed and checked his pocket watch. It wasn't that Eric didn't appreciate the human trying to help, it was just that particularly after showing someone the puzzle they always thought they had the big idea to solve the puzzle. These had all failed.

Suddenly Eric heard a sort of galloping noise and saw the human bizarrely skipping down the hallway with the ant-girl in tow. He was beaming and stopped just short of running into Lana.

Panting slightly the human began to speak. “Oh man have I got a story for you, it was incredible."

Eric put the key into door with a loud grating noise. The door seemed permanently rusty no matter how much it was oiled or cleaned. With some effort he opened the door. Cutting the human off he said “All right everyone follow me."

As Eric went down the hall in silence trying to block out the sound of the human chattering, he began to mentally list the various school assignments he needed to get done over spring break. There was that book report, that essay, he should get started studying for the next math test. There was also the speech he needed to prepare for the debate competition.

Eric was slightly surprised when he arrived at the door to the puzzle and led everyone inside. He watched as the human did it's best to make things comfortable for the ant-girl just outside of the door. Why did it associate so much with the ant girl? Any relationship; even a friendship was ultimately doomed. He allowed himself a slight smile. He was something of an expert on doomed relationships though.

As the ant-girl waited outside the group entered the puzzle room. That damn room, so much time had been wasted in this damn room staring at a puzzle that likely didn't have an answer. This whole puzzle had just been his predecessors practical joke on him.

The human was all but jumping up and down in front of the picture. Eric said in a nonchalant tone “All right James tell us what has you so excited."

The human put his hands out in front of his face. “Right, but I need you guys to check my logic on this." Eric simply nodded, he took a moment to look over at his sister, she seemed just as bored as he was.

The human tried to calm himself and then said “So the ghost is his dead love right?" obviously “And this is the battle where Dave smashes the last of the dragon's troops right?" Eric had told the human that. “Everyone would expect Dave the hero to be full of righteous fury and attack no matter what." just as a hero should.

The human smiled a smug smile “But the test is trying to make us realize that the hero did an unheroic thing. He's waiting for reinforcements; the ghost isn't egging him forward; it's telling him to wait." the human tried to take a big breath. “The ghost loves Dave, it wants him to win, he can't win at the moment but everyone is expecting him to attack."

Eric’s eyes widened slowly, such a simple idea but that was it. Eric was sure of it; everyone viewed Dave as infallible, even Eric fell into that at times. But Dave, Dave had to of known he facing long odds. He had tried every combination of attack or vengeance; Eric always expected that the ghost of his love would be demanding retribution. It had never occurred to him that the hero might simply wait, that the ghost was foremost concerned with Eric’s safety. He looked at the human with a completely awed expression and then strode and patted it on the head. "I think that is it. How did you get the idea?"

The human smiled a happy smile. “That is a long story let me tell you."

Quite unexpectedly his sister spoke up “Tell it then, we need to work out combinations of the words.” She had already gone to the table was excitedly writing out words on the small table.

James looked triumphant for a second and then launched into his explanation. Eric did not listen too closely it was some confused tale, about that minotaur he had fought saying something, combined with sister saying something about the virtues expected in the legendary hero. This continued with a self-congratulatory tone about realizing something during a math test. It ended talking about the ant-girl and a blue handkerchief. Similar to most of what the human said it bordered on gibberish. The human when excited tended to pause awkwardly and struggle with pronunciation. Afterwards he smiled like a child showing a parent a clay pot they had made in class.

Once Eric finished his list he compared it to Sheena’s. She had many of the same words but favored more archaic terms. This left simply entering them.

The first one approximately meant waiting in anticipation, this failed.

The second one approximately meant to wait in grief.

The third one was a more poetic expression that best translated as the sorrow one feels when their love leaves, and acknowledgement that they must go, mixed with the joy of the anticipation of their return.

With a tremendous groan that eased into a low rumble the entirety of the picture started to slide ever so slowly to the right. The picture itself was preserved but the wall had simply decided to exit stage right, this happened very very slowly opening a black portal.

As this happened Eric pointed to the human and said "I knew he was lucky". Eric hugged his sister happily. His sister may have shot a glance at Lana but Eric decided to ignore it. It was a hug of success, the sort of hug given after overcoming a great trial.

The human however simply loitered around the room looking happy. His attention was caught by the dais however. The human looked at it carefully and then looking curious beckoned over Lana.

After looking over the dais carefully Lana said “Hey Eric, some new writing has appeared.

Eric let go of his sister gently and walked over to the dais quickly. Lana was right, some ancient draconic letters had lit up making a new word. Eric hoped that it was some hint as to what was behind the door. He also hoped very much that it was not another puzzle.

Tracing his finger over the words Eric tried to desperately remember the word. Then, it hit him like a ton of bricks. In glowing runes, it spelled basilisk. He put his hand to his head, his ancestor did so love to screw with him.

James saw Eric putting his hand to his head and was not at all concerned by what had happened. He was way too happy about having been right about the puzzle. His enthusiasm dropped considerably when Eric told everyone what letters on the dais had said.

However, today was looking like a good day and he didn’t want that ruined so James spoke up “The puzzle is like a thousand years old, how could there be a basilisk in there?"

Sheena looked at him “Sealing spells." there was a hint of frustration in her voice.

Eric had quickly retrieved a strange looking instrument that had been stashed in the room. It looked like a small glass tube going into a liquid filled bowl except the whole thing was upside down. The door finally ceased its low rumble and then a bubble seemed to pop letting a very musty breeze enter the room.

Eric had called Sheena over to the strange instrument and the two were having a quick conference. When the breeze hit the instrument they both quite loudly exclaimed “Holy shit."

Lana said “What is the matter?" she had a concerned look on her face.

Eric looked up and looked at her with wide eyes. “There is a huge amount of magic in that room." he shook his head "Lana could you watch the door?"

James watched Lana go the door and let out a deep breath. This was looking like a bad thing even if he didn't quite understand all of what was happening. He called over to Eric, " is it alright if I let Forma in the room?" Eric nodded distractedly as he stared at the door.

James poked his head through the door, Forma was still reading her book. James smiled “Hey Forma get in here."

She put her book away and follow James into the room. She took a moment to examine the room in its entirety, looking at the picture with a special interest. Once that was done she nodded to herself, looked at James and asked “What's happening?"

Lana called back to Eric, "I hear something moving, very slowly though."

Eric put his hand to his head and sighed deeply. James looked over at Forma. “We had to answer a puzzle, opened the door, we think there is some monster in there."

Maintaining her normal unperturbed expression. "I can see in low light, you stay here, I will go in and check." James shook his head emphatically no.

James searched his memory for what he remembered about basilisks. He found that there was very little, there had been far too many horrible monsters to read about them all. He had focused on the more civilized species he was likely to encounter. Not that they were in the same books as the horrible monsters, of course. “How dangerous are basilisks?"

Sheena had been sitting next to Eric who was mulling something over. She piped up. “Big ferocious lizards, sharp claws and they can drive you blind by looking you in the eyes.” She seemed to be searching her memory, “Their spit is some kind of horrible poison as well."

James mentioned that this was about what one could expect in the world of monsters.

Eric stood up seeming to have decided something “Right, I’m supposed to go in there and kill the monster."

No one except for Forma looked happy with that idea. Forma just looked noncommittal. James tried to form the right words and said hesitantly “The puzzle tried to teach you that heroes do unheroic things. Killing a basilisk in the dark by yourself doesn't follow that."

Lana seized on the idea “Exactly Eric, this is a challenge trying to teach you not to do the stupid thing even if it seems heroic. A storybook hero goes in alone to face the monster, anyone with sense brings friends and weapons."

Forma added in a helpful tone “We still don't know if it's a basilisk at all." everyone just gave her a look.

Eric looked at his sister “What are we supposed to do then? We can't just wait for the damn thing to attack us; we would all get blinded. I have to go; I’m the only one with natural weapons." Sheena was about to pipe up when Eric said "I’m not having you go into danger again." this brought a scowl from Sheena."

James spoke up "I have a sword."

Eric gave him an incredulous look. “It’s a lovely sword but I don’t think that a wooden sword will be of much help James."

James shook his head “It's not just a wooden sword." he rather excitedly drew the sword from his backpack. “It's a sword cane." this did not garner the gasps he had expected. James grew a bit defensive. “Look i’ll show you." he began to tap out a rhythm on the sword, it sounded a bit like “God save the queen" only backwards. James only hit certain squares and then with a triumphant grin twisted the wooden sword.

Pulling hard and very carefully a bit of metal began to show as the sword emerged. James gingerly held it out in front of him. “You guys have no idea how much I have practiced that. The instruction manual was a small novel." he had an especially smug look as he said that. “What I did was the hard way, the other way means I have to take off my shoes but it’s muddy down here.”

Eric looked at Forma, “Forma, will you help me?"

James eyes almost bugged out of his skull. “If you use my sword then I have to be the one to go in."

Eric looked at James and tried to tell him in the least patronizing tone. "James, it's not that we doubt that you can do it, it's just that Forma is a lot better suited for the job."

Forma looked at James with a matter of fact expression. "I’m stronger than you, I can see in the dark, you can't." there was no real hint of emotion in her voice, it was just a simple recounting of the facts.

James did not feel betrayed, he recognized that this was too important to be hurt about. "Forma can run the fastest of anyone here. She uses all six legs, i’ve seen it." he lowered the sword with the utmost care, “We send her to go get help, or at least anti-venom for basilisk poison.”

Forma slowly nodded her head "I can do that. But if you go in there you could get hurt. I’m a better with the sword and you know it.” She seemed to be almost pleading

James tried to look more confident than he felt. "I want to go in there and I want Forma to be safe. It's my sword and it will help no one unless I get to go in."

Eric looked at James for a long moment and then said. “It will likely be your death; you understand that?

A certain grim satisfaction crept into James’ smile “I understand that.”

“If you know that it’s suicide and want to go anyway then I accept your terms." James nodded

Eric looked around trying to take everything in. “Right, I’m going in there with James in support." he pointed at Forma “Forma, will go run and get help.” She nodded. "Lana and Sheena will guard the entrance to make sure the basilisk doesn't escape." Lana seemed cool with this but Sheena glowered at Eric. He turned to James. “You use the sword if you get a chance."

James slowly shook his head, "I have another idea, you take the sword. I’ll take the sheath, and try to distract the basilisk while you cut off its head." Eric gave James an incredulous look. "I’m just going to panic if it jumps me, the sword won’t help anyone if I drop it."

Eric still looked surprised “It's a very dangerous plan for you."

James shrugged “My death is worth a lot to some people." James could feel Forma staring at him and tried to ignore it. Very very carefully he handed the sword to Eric. “Be careful with that damn thing, it is sharp enough to hurt you easily."

Eric looked at the blade, he admired the craftsmanship and the blade itself. A simple blade to be sure, but straight and true. “How sharp is it?"

James shrugged "I don't know how these things are measured. I dropped a piece of paper on it and it got cut in two. I dropped an apple on it and got a sliced apple. I dropped a stick on it and got two sticks. That kept happening until I ran out of things to drop on it."

Eric looked at the blade with a new found care. Pausing Eric looked at James curiously, “And you said this was a gift?”

Nodding James said “My brother refused to let me go to the world of monsters unarmed and unarmored.” Producing the second sword from his backpack, he handed it to the girls. Sheena didn’t want it and Lana took it up uncertainly.

Still looking thoughtful Eric said “A very extravagant gift. He seemed to suddenly remember something, "James tie something so it covers an eye, that way you won't go fully blind." Eric helped James fix his handkerchief before doing so for himself.

He took a deep breath “Alright shall we go in?" Forma was off with a start, and Sheena said “This is really stupid" then she hugged Eric before he took the plunge.

The dark portal opened out onto a room full of columns. The columns seemed to form a grid, the room itself was dim and it was hard to tell sure if there was anything more than 10 feet away. James searched for the light source and could not seem to find it, the ceiling itself seemed to faintly glow.

It was difficult for James to describe what it was like being around that much magic. The air seemed clammy and tense as if it would swallow any words. But every noise seemed amplified. There seemed to be an expectation in the air itself, as if anything could happen. Feeling his nose prickle James wondered briefly if he would die with a nosebleed.

James followed Eric as the went down the central hallway. The immediate drawbacks of his plan became apparent to James immediately. It was one thing to say in the light that he was not afraid of death, but in the dark it became much harder to stay brave. He tried to steel himself like the hero always did in the stories but this didn't make his knees stop from trying to knock together.

James jumped noticeably when he heard a skittering sound. The sound echoed off the pillars, and James looked around feverishly for the source. Eric seemed to remain calm although he kept the sword at the ready.

Trying their hardest to stay silent the pair moved slowly. James kept the sheath in front of him and tried to walk carefully. Every sound he made seemed to echo endlessly. James cursed mentally every time he stepped wrong and his shoes made a crrk sound ever so slightly.

Suddenly James heard a skittering to his right, he turned his head but kept the sheath in front of him. This was what saved him at first. Quite suddenly he was tackled to the ground.

James thought little in what happened, some primitive reflex in his brain told him to keep his eyes shut. He pushed against the sheath and whatever was on the other side with all of his strength. He felt a sharp stabbing pain on the back of his left wrist.

Then there was a wet snicker-snack noise and something hit him in the head with a dull thump. There was a heavy weight on him and that had stopped moving. Keeping his eyes closed he carefully called out “Is it safe to open my eyes?"

He heard Eric say in a relieved voice above him “Not just yet." whatever had hit him the head was removed, Eric then said almost cheerfully “Alright it's safe to open your eyes."

James very carefully opened his exposed eye and looked up. Eric was standing there smiling holding the head of a basilisk, with its eyes shut James noted. After struggling a bit with basilisk body James looked to Eric and said “A bit of help Eric?"

Eric smiled and took James the shoulder and pulled him out from under the body of the basilisk. It was a big gnarly creature that looked very fearsome. It had horned scales and large claws. James dusted himself off “Well that was hardly heroic."

James looked back at Eric whose eyes were opened wide. “Oh, hell it got you on the wrist."

Looking at his own wrist James began to feel slightly faint. “Oh dear."

In less than a moment Eric had lifted James in a bridal carry and ran him to the door. A worried expression on his face he said "James lie on the ground, try to keep your heart rate low. Breathe deeply, it's going to be okay."

James briefly reflected that in it's own way being told that everything was going to be okay was the most distressing thing one could be told. Still he did as he was instructed, trying to breathe deeply and evenly. Everything seemed a bit distant which helped some.

James asked as calmly as he could “Is this what you are supposed to do when poisoned?"

Eric shrugged "I don't know what you are supposed to do for humans, I’m just trying to keep you comfortable."

Sheena spoke up “Try to stay awake for as long as you can."

Things were quiet for a moment when suddenly Lana came beside James and held his uninjured hand, in a gentle voice “Thank you for protecting Eric." James only nodded slightly in response.

Then also quite unexpectedly Sheena took the handkerchief off of James’ head and held his hand. “Yes, thank you James. If you hadn't been there I’m sure my brother would have been bitten."

Eric gave a devilish smile to James "If you don’t make it, i’ll tell your family you died bravely, and that I will always be indebted to you.” He held James’ hand.

James heard Lana gasp. His wrist felt cold and so he lifted his head slightly to look at the wound. The flesh around it had begun to turn to stone. James sighed trying to keep his heart still, nothing to do now but wait.

Forma once again urged the doctor to go faster. He claimed he was going as fast as he could, Forma suggested that the principal carry the doctor so they could make greater haste. The principal merely gave Forma a look with all of her eyes and Forma quieted down almost immediately.

They were running through the subterranean tunnels beneath the school. Forma looked at the walls and winced. She had hit them many times trying to go as quickly as she could. Eventually she had realized she was losing more time than she was gaining and slowed down enough to allow her compound eyes to see better.

She glanced again at the doctor, he seemed perfectly unperturbed by this series of events. Forma had burst into his office and hurriedly began shouting about needing basilisk anti-venom. The doctor had merely looked at her with his light colored eyes and calmly asked if this was a practical joke. Forma had nearly grabbed him and shaken him but then calmed herself. Formica then asked if she had ever been known to joke.

The doctor seemed more than a bit perturbed by that and stood up quickly. He had used most of his tentacles to search through cabinets based on feel while he asked matter of factly was species would need it. Forma quickly rattled off the affected. The doctor then turned and looked at her asking “Is it Eric?" Forma had emphatically nodded while the doctor sighed heavily.

The doctor carefully put several vials into his long white coat and then loped off with Forma in tow. The first teacher he saw had been the centaur math teacher. Forma had never bothered to learn his spoken name. The doctor had pulled close to the teacher and whispered something. All Forma could hear were a few words they sounded like Eric, door, and damn fool. Forma had been positively besides herself at the delay all of her arms fidgeting nervously.

The centaur teacher left at a gallop and the doctor loped off again. On two legs it was a challenge for Forma to keep up with him. She was breathing hard by the time the principal joined them. The principal was running at full speed to catch up with them; given her size this was quite fast and Forma tremored a bit at the noise the principal made at full speed.

The two had a quick conference, which gave Forma time enough to catch her breath. Still, she would had torn apart the castle and put it together again if it made them go faster. James was feeble normally, he was practically defenseless without her there. She wasn’t sure if she could trust the dragonets to protect James. Once the conference finished the principal looked down at Forma with all of her black lightless eyes eyes saying nothing. Forma was almost petrified to the spot. Spider-morphs were frightening without any other ant-girls around most of the time, but now with her secret all but revealed it was terrifying. The look seemed long but likely was short, to Forma’s surprise no pheromone communication happened. There was nothing, just silence finally the principal said “Let's go." with that all of them broke into a run again.

When they finally arrived at the room James was lying on the floor with the others sitting near him. He heard Forma gasp and suddenly she was over him saying “We need to amputate the arm; someone pass me th-." James managed to bring his good arm up to his mouth and put a finger on his lips. Forma seemed to get the message but still looked panicked.

Then dr. Galen was over him looking extremely pleased with himself and as he fished in his pockets he said "I knew it was going to be the human." finally his tentacles found what he was looking for and held it up to his eyes. Then James could feel many tentacles gently but firmly around his head moving him into position to drink the foul smelling concoction offered by another tentacle. James winced but did his best to drink it.

He drank it and then was lowered back to the floor. He did not feel any different and was too distressed to check his arm again. Clearing his throat, he said “Are there any side-effects?"

Dr. Galen brought the vial back to his eyes again. “In humans causes purging, and loss of motor control for around three days.” Dr. Galen had not finished speaking before James started retching. With a truly distressed look Forma was supporting him so he could vomit off to the side. Once the first time was finished James had barely enough time to say “Twice in a year isn't fair." Looking up, James was too distressed to really think, but he caught sight of the black flower Sheena had put in her hair, in the floating hazy thoughts of the moment he supposed that it was a pretty flower and contrasted her hair well.

James laid dazed and distantly a conversation happened over him. The principal looked over the scene with an unhappy expression. She looked to Eric “What happened here?"

Eric had a happy expression "I finally opened the door." he gestured towards the room that had just been opened “Turns out there had been a basilisk put in suspended animation inside."

James didn't hear any more of the conversation because at the moment he messed himself. If he had the strength to blush he would have turned a deep shade of scarlet. Having now humiliated himself in front of oh god, three girls and two teachers. Lying on the ground all but whimpering he prayed for a death that would not come.

He did however hear the principal say in an icy tone "Eric, you caused this mess, you have to nursemaid him until he's better." James imagined pointing was involved with this.

Eric presumably made a face and then replied "I would like to but, could we make some consideration to my debate competition on Monday?"

Maybe the principal rolled her eyes. Which raised the question, did she roll all of her eyes or just some of them? “Then your sister can take over, we have to suppress how badly injured he was." James could really really easily imagine Sheena making a face upon hearing that one.

After that James stopped paying attention to the conversation happening over him and slipped into blissful unconsciousness.

On the whole the day had been going well for Eric. He was confident about his success on the various tests, he had spent lunch with Lana and now he had managed to open that damn door and slay the basilisk that was within. This definitely put today in maybe the top five of all his days at the academy.

He had noted with some pity as the human; no James messed himself and then passed out. He owed the human a lot and that elevated him to first name status in Eric’s eyes.

The principal had then asked for privacy with Eric. The two stood together in the newly opened room. The principal was taller than Eric by a bit, however legendary hero Eric was able to give her a confident gaze.

She sighed heavily and then looked at Eric. "I understand that you feel certain obligations due to your ancestry. But show some common sense, Eric."

Eric became slightly defensive "I was afraid the basilisk was going to escape. If it attacked us we could of all been driven blind."

The teacher shook his head. “But why take the human in there? You had to know what was going to happen. Why didn't you immediately send for help, why did you wait?" she said this in a tired tone.

This was not Eric’s first time at the horse field. He answered smoothly "James was instrumental in helping me realize the answer to the puzzle." Eric noted that two pairs of the principal's eyes looked up when he said that. “He asked to go in with me because of that. He knew what was going to happen, he said so. The reason we didn't send help earlier was because the ant-girl did not want to miss anything that was happening."

The principal took a deep breath and faced Eric. “She will tell everything to her sisters I imagine. But it was the human who helped you open the door? Really?"

Eric nodded slowly and then added “His name is James."

The principal chuckled "I know his name. But the important thing is that he is a human. If what had happened here happened to a normal person, parents would withdraw students for fear of more beasts coming out of the castle. There would be no real way to reassure them.” The principal smiled. “But since it was a human and not a monster that got hurt they will all assume it was due to the human’s frailty.” She seemed to look beyond Eric for a second and then refocused. “There will be minimal damage to the school."

Eric nodded slowly. He cautiously said “Same routine as when I opened the other doors?"

The principal nodded her eyes never leaving Eric. “Yes, but make sure the human is in the picture they take."

The principal turned to let everyone into the room. Eric sighed, there went the weekend.

Sheena fumbled with the key for James’ door. “While he doesn’t weigh that much this is still uncomfortable.” Eric said this as he held James in a fireman’s carry. Finally, the door opened onto James’ room, Sheena was a bit surprised by what she saw.

Sheena was of course not totally naïve about humans, she hadn’t thought that he would live in a web like a spider, or have a pool for a room like a mermaid. But she was still a bit surprised.

The first thing that caught her attention was that the walls were covered in letters. They seemed to be arranged randomly, towards the ceiling it had started in a neat row but this had been quickly abandoned.

The second thing overwhelmed her attention, the smell while not very unpleasant was still powerful. It smelled like James, more specifically like when he didn’t take a shower in the morning, or after an intense duel with Forma.

Doing her best not to be driven back she scanned the room for the source. James had the boyish habit of waiting far too long to send his clothes off to the laundry it seemed. With no little effort she removed the hamper from the room.

She looked at James who was still on Eric’s shoulders. “Are you just allergic to getting your laundry done?”

James mumbled back “Do…my…self”

Sheena shrugged and helped Eric lay James on the bed. This was an uncomfortable exercise, the room was barely large enough to contain the three of them. Scanning the room, she noted that Forma’s gift had a place of honor on his desk. Pausing she read one of the letters off the wall “Dear brother, thank you for asking about work. It is boring as usual, but that’s what you should expect working for the…” Forma was startled and couldn’t finish.

Unexpectedly James sat straight up and asked in the clearest voice he had used since his bite “Where’s Forma?”

In a soothing voice Eric responded “She’s fine James, sleep now.” With that James crumpled back into sleeping position.

Sheena turned to Eric “This is going to be unpleasant.”

Eric shook his head “Don’t be like that. Just think of it as a vacation from your vacation.”

James felt a bit like he had been hit in the head with a cricket bat, and then the whole team had joined in on beating the shit out of him. He woke up and tried to move. His limbs disagreed saying that the bed was holding them down and proceeded to question if moving at all was necessary.

He managed to move a little and Eric put his face cautiously over the side of the bed. Eric smiled and said “Good morning James."

James opened his mouth to speak but found his mouth seemed to be full of cotton and his tongue seemed to be more cucumber than muscle. Blissfully Sheena suddenly appeared and helped him drink from a cup.

Both Sheena and Eric seemed to be in their most relaxed clothes. Eric for example was still in his pajamas. He helped James up onto his pillows so he could look around a little.

James' room was cozy when it was just him. With three people it was barely large enough. Still it looked like the two dragonet siblings had decided to nest there. James noted with some amusement that Sheena had brought a stack of books to work through.

With some difficulty James said “Why?" he made what he hoped was an inquisitive face.

Eric gave a look of frustration. “The principal said that since it was my fault that you got so messed up I had to care for you until you got better." James tilted his head slightly towards Sheena. "Sheena decided to come so we wouldn't be lonely." Eric shrugged smiling, and then did a stage whisper "I think she feels like she owes you." Sheena gave Eric a playful push.

James tried to say hungry. He managed something that sounded like “Hurng", this did not elicit looks of understanding. “Lunch?" that came out better, his lips seemed to be made of rubber.

Eric smiled and then began to spoon feed him soup. James noted that instead of something like chicken noodle soup it was actually the lizard-herb soup that Sheena liked. His eyes widened in horror as the spoon began to approach. Eric didn't seem to notice, and quite gently put the spoon in his mouth.

The taste was unique to say the least. In James’ opinion the herbs were not what would of been traditionally used in human cooking. The experience of having to chew the chopped lizard made James' stomach turn but there was no escaping.

When that was over James breathed a sigh of relief. The siblings made sure that James was comfortable and then went back to their respective activities. Sheena had made a small pillow fort, or perhaps a pillow nest. She relaxed in this, surrounded by various books spread out on the floor.

Looking over his room James suddenly panicked. The walls were covered in letters from home. Trying as hard as he could to be loud he said “Don’t read” this came out at about half of speaking volume.

Eric looked up from the desk curiously, and saw James trying to frantically signal with his eyes. “We didn’t” he seemed sincere enough.

Eric had claimed the chair and was drafting a speech. At times he would read a few snippets of the speech out loud to see how the wording sounded. When he finally finished he addressed a mirror that he had put up on the desk. He did his best to present the speech but seemed to be continually frustrated by the lack of pacing space.

When he was finished Sheena turned a page in her book and then looked up. “Too grandiose."

Eric looked down slightly frustrated at Sheena. “What do you mean too grandiose."

Sheena shrugged “The tone doesn't seem to match the subject."

Eric mulled it over for a second and then said "I’m trying to make the subject seem important."

Sheena looked back to her book “Then make it relate to the audience."

Eric looked down at Sheena still frustrated. “How do you know it was too grandiose?"

Sheena kept looking at her book. “Because it was boring to listen to.” She smiled slightly. Eric let a hrmph and went back to drafting.

James relaxed and looked up at the ceiling. He briefly tried to find shapes in the ceiling. It could be worse he supposed, after all he could still be vomiting. Besides it would give him time to clear his mind. This thought held James for a good half an hour before boredom started to drive him crazy. He tried thinking about his encounter with the basilisk. His memory was very hazy on the subject, he recalled the adrenaline he had felt going into the basilisk's lair but he could also recall the terror he felt at walking through the lair, jumping at every sound. This led him to decide to try and bury the memory of the whole thing as much as possible.

With a bit of effort James managed to say “Does.....she....edit....all?"

Eric seemed a bit surprised by James saying anything but quickly smiled “Only for this year." He glanced at Sheena.

Sheena held her place in the book and looked back at Eric, “Yeah and he's done better in debate competitions than ever before."

Eric put his hand to his head. “Thank you for your help Sheena." he paused and then added quietly “However annoying it might be."

Sheena went back to reading and said "I heard that."

Eric then leaned towards Sheena. “In fact if you are so keen on speeches why don't you make more speeches during diplomacy club?"

Sheena visibly withdrew as Eric said this. She let out an affected exasperated sigh. "I already told you Eric that I’m too shy to speak in front of people."

Eric pressed the subject “If I can do it Sheena so can you. It just takes practice; all you have to do is try."

Sheena became distressed and said "I told you I’m too shy."

James recognized when a comrade in arms was in trouble. So he tried his hardest to clearly say “Is...it....always....like....this?"

Eric leaned back. “It's just what siblings do; don't you do something similar with your brothers?"

James nodded slightly. There was teasing between his brothers although James tended to dote on his younger brother.

The day continued with Sheena occasionally rolling him over on his side and helping him to the bathroom. Eric remained editing his speech until finally he loudly exclaimed that it was perfect. After reading it to Sheena she very hesitantly said “It's okay, still needs work on the language I think."

Eric simply responded by scowling and made a few more edits. After that was done he produced a very dog-eared book that he seemed to have marked heavily. Eventually the two siblings bid James good night.

James was tired but mentally restless, the lack of stimulation had left his mind little to do but go over the same tracks again and again. It gave him a chance to relive memories of hanging out with his brothers and being at home. Finally, he drifted off to sleep while thinking of pie. In James' defense it had been an excellent pie.

Waking up the next morning James was quite surprised to find Eric at the edge of his bed. James smiled “Hey Eric, I had the craziest dream. We finally opened the door right, and then there was this monster inside, it bit me but you cut off its head." James with a little difficulty managed to survey the room. “Why are you in my room?"

Eric seemed a bit saddened. “All that stuff happened. I’m supposed to help nurse you while you recover remember?"

It all came back to James in a flood. “Oh right. Where's Sheena?"

“She left to go hangout with her friends remember?" Eric was nonchalant about this. “How are you feeling?”

Shivering a bit James said, “Cold.” He was covered in blankets so this didn’t make the most sense.

James felt a scaly hand put on his forehead. “You might have a fever, let me find the thermometer." James was extremely relieved when Eric produced an oral thermometer.

After a while Eric removed the thermometer and checked it “What's the standard temperature for humans?"

James answered "37 Celsius"

Eric seemed a little impressed “Do all humans know that?"

James managed a small shrug “My father is a doctor. Medicine runs in the family."

Eric had an inquisitive look “Tell me about your family."

This was not an entirely original line of attack to James. “Lovely people, I love them all very much." Eric gave him a “Go on." face. James thought for a second and then said “My older brother is a lot like you, you both always think you are right. You both watch out for the little sibling and try to protect them. You are both compassionate.”

Eric nodded “That’s a nice thing to say James. How about the rest of your family?”

James merely laid back with a smile on his face and then tried to feign sleep.

Eric sighed and resumed his reading, pausing occasionally scribble notes. James got bored of pretending to sleep fairly quickly. Finally, he said “What are you reading?"

Eric stopped reading and looked over the cover. “One of the stories about Dave. I have to do a book report and I already read this one."

James nodded and then said “Read me some, I’m bored." Eric read some, it was epic poetry often using long metaphors interspersed with long boring descriptions of routine activities. These tended to break up the flow like sandbars when swimming at the beach.

The story was mildly interesting, mostly about the various plots leading up to Dave starting his rebellion. James had forgotten the real name of Dave but Eric was nice enough to substitute when it came up in the reading.

When Eric paused to use the restroom, James took a moment to think, Eric was a fairly impressive fellow. Supposedly the thing to do when you meet someone famous was to ask them what their secret was. At least that's what was done in the newspapers.

As Eric returned to the room, James cleared his throat and asked "Eric what's your secret?"

Sitting back down Eric looked at James with a confused expression. “What do you mean?"

James acknowledged to himself that it was a good question. He licked his lips and then said slowly "just, how do you manage it all? There must be so much work and responsibility."

Leaning back Eric sighed and then shrugged, a good natured smile came on his face "I guess it's because I’m always doing something which helps reduce the workload. I don't read many novels or spend much time playing card games." James gave him a look “Except during lunch, and sometimes I skip lunch to work on homework."

James tried to figure out if this was what he had meant to ask Eric. There was the question that was really gnawing at him. “Why weren't you afraid?"

Eric gave James another confused look “When?"

James rolled his eyes. “When we went to kill the basilisk. My knees were knocking together and I thought my heart was going to stop." he stopped to recall the experience. “But you didn't seem afraid, it was amazing." Eric had stridden confidently into the dark.

Eric gave a sad smile. “That was brave of you, never forget that. You were afraid but you did it anyway. As for me I was very afraid. I was afraid it might get past me and hurt Sheena and Lana. I was afraid that it might rip out your throat before I could get it. I’m very good at not acting afraid, and if you can do that you can eventually stop being afraid."

James gave a skeptical smile “You just don't act afraid? But how?" it seemed a bit fantastic to James.

Eric pulled the chair close to James. “Let me tell you a story. When I was five some people came and said I was going to be a legendary hero. My life changed dramatically, I starting being tutored and every week there was an official something or other that I had to attend. They took me away from a lot of my old friends, but Sheena and I were always together.”

“I had no idea what any of this actually meant, it was just life, so I went along with it. But, when I was 8 and Sheena was 5, people tried to kidnap me and Sheena. They got Sheena but I managed to get away. I had to help rescue Sheena. I was terrified when it happened, and I wasn't very healthy as a child so I thought I was going to fail. But I acted brave because I had to do it." Eric smiled.

“I still don’t know what all this hero stuff is about, people want me to perform miracles, right wrongs, and settle feuds that have lasted for a 1000 years. Maybe i’ll do it right, maybe I won’t.” Eric looked distant, “But I act brave and I feel more like it’s doable. I also found a reason try so hard, I act brave to protect Sheena.” He gave a dry laugh “I’m more worried about what will happen to her than to me.”

James smiled "I’m sure she can take care of herself." James was fairly confident about that and it was the sort of thing you say in these situations.

Eric gave James a worried look. "I want to believe that but you can't stop a brother from worrying." Eric quieted down.

Figuring that was as good a sign as any to change the topic James spoke up. "I know what you mean. My little brother is eight. He's a fearless little bastard, always doing some damn fool thing."

Giving a compassionate smile Eric asked “If it came down to it would you risk life and limb for him?"

James immediately James said “Yes. I’m the walking dead, he isn't. Besides I don't think I could stand him getting hurt if I might have prevented it."

Eric gave a thoughtful smiled “It's the same for me and Sheena." he brightened up smiling a happy toothy smile, “Siblings am I right?" James nodded. Eric stood up and looked down at James. “Anyway, remember don't act afraid and you gradually stop being afraid."

Nodding James said “Is that what Dave did?" Eric launched into a long talk about Dave and the various trials he overcame. Eric also spent just as much time talking about why he thought Dave had solved his challenges that way, and what he was thinking as he did so. The rest of the day passed quietly, Eric read some more which helped to pass the time. By the end of the day, James felt a little better but still was bedridden.

The next morning James was legitimately surprised to see Sheena standing over the bed. She was shaking him “Wake up."

James was disorientated and looked at Sheena confusedly. “Hello, Sheena I’m surprised you are here."

Sheena had a guarded expression. “Why are you surprised that I’m here?"

Her tone made emergency neurons fire in James’s brain. “Happily surprised, you were a much better caretaker than Eric."

Sheena nodded "I know, you said so at length yesterday morning."

Shrugging James tried to give his best blameless voice "I don't remember."

Sheena nodded, "Eric mentioned that your memory seemed to be going in and out yesterday." Her grin was devious.

Seeing that grin and blushing slightly James asked rather cautiously “Did I do anything embarrassing?"

Looking at James superiorly Sheena said. “You did keep asking what happened to Forma."

James nodded and then added cautiously “Did anything happen to Forma?"

Rolling her eyes Sheena said “No."

James nodded “Good to hear. Help me I want to get up." with some difficulty Sheena helped James sit up in the bed. With some effort James managed to move his feet so he could sit on the edge of the bed.

Sheena caught him easily when he fell forward trying to stand. She smiled at him with a hint of triumph. "I figure if let you fail once; you won’t try again." James gave Sheena a look. “Doctor said that you need to be in bed until at least tomorrow."

After fluffing his pillow and helping James settle back into bed, James was moved to ask “Why are you so good at being a nurse?"

Sheena shrugged. "I paid attention when I was little, I guess." then in her characteristic manner she sat back in her seat, retrieved a book and started to read.

James became bored fairly quickly and looked at what Sheena was reading. He had no idea what it was but the title suggested that it was part of a series. So lacking anything better to do he asked Sheena about her book.

Sheena started slowly, being hesitant to give much more than a cursory description of the book. However, after a bit of prodding she began gushing about the book, it's relative merit to the other books of its series, and then it's merit relative to other books of its type. James for his part merely nodded politely and asked questions to seem engaged.

It was a romance about an aristocratic female dragonet falling in love with an impassioned revolutionary lower class male dragonet. James did not really appreciate romances so he merely nodded along while trying to follow what seemed a serpentine plot of betrayals and misunderstandings.

Finally, James hit jackpot with a question. “So what makes it so engaging?"

Sheena smiled a toothy, happy smile. “It's all very unbelievable but the characters go through so many adventures and come out triumphantly in the end." Sheena looked sad for a second. “They get to be with the ones they love, and always escape the danger unharmed."

James nodded and then said “Your brother must have taken you on a few adventures."

Sheena shook her head “No happy adventures."

Trying to change the subject James said the next thing that came to mind. “It was lucky that Eric decided to show me the puzzle."

Sheena nodded slowly “You did do your part to help, I admit.” Sheena looked a little haughty “But, Eric would have solved the puzzle eventually." Then she smiled ever so smugly. "I should at least thank you, solving the puzzle helped Eric and it also helped me."

Sheena was about to return to her book when James asked. “How so?"

Sheena did not look up from her book. "I’m trying for a scholarship; it requires being known by the student body to qualify."

A look of complete distress flashed across James’ face. Trying very hard to control his voice James asked “What is the scholarship for?"

Sheena turned a page. “Oh, it's a scholarship for people who want to go into diplomacy. It pays for college, which would help out my family some." it was good that Sheena was looking at her book as a look of frustration and despair crossed James face and stayed there far longer than it should of.

Managing to regain control just as Sheena looked up and said. “If I’m going to help Eric, a background in diplomacy will help."

James nodded slightly, while gears grinded in his head. He had never stopped to think that there would be other people trying to get the same scholarship as he was. The fact that there could be any number of far more qualified people also trying to get the scholarship caused James horrible despair.

“Why would opening the door get us known by the student body?"

Sheena smiled “It’s a pretty amazing thing isn’t it? An ancient door opens containing an ancient monster. My brother valiantly slays the monster. Everyone is talking about it.” She looked down at James once again with just a hint of smugness. “Sometimes they even mention the human."

Rolling his eyes James said "I assume that they know my name is James."

Sheena shrugged and then had a shock of realization “Oh don’t forget, this Sunday we are taking a photograph.” She paused to look over the room. “Make sure that you are dressed nicely."

James paused and wondered if Forma would show up. Sheena took him finally shutting up as an open invitation to go back to reading. James passed some more time staring at the ceiling until he got bored again. He looked over at Sheena and said “Hey Sheena read to me."

She gave him an uncharitable look and replied “Why?"

Not expecting such a response James started for a moment before trying to authoritatively say. "Eric read to me. I’m bored and it helps pass the time."

Sheena had a no nonsense look. “If you want to pass the time go back to sleep.” She turned back to her book.

James tried the pity ploy. “Why won't you read to lonely old me?"

Sheena seemed to look at her book harder as if to block James. “Because I don't want to."

Trying to hold back coy smile James asked “Why?"

Sheena held the book less than a foot in front of her face “Because it's slower than reading silently."

James suppressed a giggle. “Why?"

Sheena all but shoved her face into the book. “Because I’m bad at reading out loud."

James smiled to himself. “Well let's talk."

Sheena put down her book and looked at James with murderous intensity. “Alright then let's talk."

James nodded and talked to Sheena about books mostly. James told her about the swashbuckling adventures of d’artagan, and Sheena told him about the romantic adventures she had read. Swashbucklers often had romance in them so James had some common ground to talk about with Sheena. This was a fertile topic and they talked a great deal about what they preferred and how human and monster literature differed.

When this was finally exhausted James laid back in his bed rather tired. He let his mind wander and then was struck by a thought. He tried to sit bolt upright but that hurt so he merely rolled to his side. Sheena looked up as she turned a page and then looked back down. Finally, James asked “What do you and Forma talk about?"

Sheena kept looking at the book. “Girl stuff."

As James was outside of that club this was not a particularly informative response. “What kind of girl stuff?"

Sheena finally looked over the edge of her book and said in a deadpan. “The private kind of girl stuff. Besides, Forma already told me that you asked her about our conversations."

Looking a bit sheepish James responded “I didn’t honestly expect her to answer so frankly. Forma tends to be very open.”

Sheena gave James an enigmatic look. “Forma is a little naïve, and she didn’t mind at all telling me what you and her talk about.”

“Well no worries there, unless you are interested in our homes or architecture.” Sheena kept staring at him. James figured that was as good a sign as any to give it up and laid back in bed.

The next morning James felt better. Not great but better. Sheena helped him finally stand up. James wavered a bit but was able to walk around his small room with only a little bit of difficulty.

Sheena took this a sign that she could finally leave. She packed up her stuff and made sure that the room was about as neat as it had been when she arrived. This was not particularly difficult because the room had not been very neat.

Once finished, Sheena looked to James. "I’m supposed to take you to the doctor's.” She guided him out of the room. James would have said that his limbs were heavy and that is why it took so much effort to move. More accurately it was that every movement took a lot of deliberation and convincing to help him go anywhere. Besides from James having to rest at the end of every hallway, the pair made good time. As they walked, James noticed that Sheena received the occasional deferential look and that even James seemed to be ignored slightly less than normal.

When he finally reached the doctor's office, dr. Galen examined him thoroughly. The scarring on his left wrist had been pretty savage, but thankfully, James retained the full range of motion. It was rather ugly scarring and James asked hopefully “Can you do anything for the scarring?"

Dr. Galen looked at it carefully and said quite matter of factly “Nope." Some of his tentacles seemed to shrug as he said this. James grumbled a bit but just switched his watch to his left wrist. After a few more examinations, dr. Galen looked at James calmly and said. “You should be feeling better by the end of the week, take it easy and don't over exert yourself in the meantime."

As the examination finished James asked hopefully “Lollipop?”

The doctor gave a disbelieving look “I won’t reward you getting yourself hurt.”

James still unsteady, exited the doctor's office and turned to Sheena. “Thank you for your help Sheena."

Sheena almost mechanically curtsied. "I am happy that you are feeling better James. Remember that we are taking the picture this Sunday." with that she seemed to think her duty was fulfilled and walked away.

James looked up and wondered what exactly he had done, and who he had done it to, for this sort of thing to happen to him. He then recalled some of the things that he in fact had done, this lead him to reason, that yes they were pretty bad but come on, they were not this bad. Sighing, he began the arduous journey to the cafeteria, it was high time he thought, for something other than soup.

The next day with a bit of effort James managed the energy to go to the library. Ms. Maria was a bit concerned with how unsteady he seemed, but was happy enough to talk books with him. Being so disabled James found the week to be long and boring. In fact, James had so little to do that he actually did his break homework ahead of time.

During that week James noticed that public opinion had softened ever so slightly towards him. A few well-meaning students helped steady him when he seemed about to tip over. James appreciated that once he stopped flinching whenever they tried to touch him.

When it came to Saturday morning, James woke up nice and warm and comfortable in bed. It was one of those rare truly pleasant awakenings, where suddenly your eyes opened and you had a golden moment to reflect on how nice it was. He had no obligations and nothing to do.

Like thunder on a clear day James remembered that he had in fact told Cecilia he would go to her track meet. He made best possible time to the track, this was a light jog that left him gasping in his current condition. Upon arriving he put his hands to his forehead and swore, he had forgotten to ask when the meeting was.

Eventually however he was able to watch the meeting. It was slightly chilly and James felt it acutely but he persisted. The different events seemed to be separated by the number of legs of the competitors.

Cecilia’s long hair was tied into a ponytail pulled tight behind her head and she had that intense look she got whenever it was time to sprint. She competed in several events often placing second or third. James had no idea what the events were but he did his best to cheer loudly whenever he saw Cecilia take the field. She didn't seem to notice, James loudest was only a few weak yells so he didn't mind

Once the event was over, James carefully navigated down the stands making sure he didn't trip. Eventually however he reached the track and found Cecilia to congratulate her.

She was panting a bit and looked obviously tired. She smiled on seeing James. Putting out his hand James said “Good job."

Cecilia’s response was not heard because almost immediately another female centaur almost crashed into her loudly saying "Cecilia, is this the human you talked about?"

Cecilia was less surprised than James but still hesitated before responding. "Peggy, this is my friend James." James offered up his hand. "James this is my friend Peggy." Peggy had a confident over-enthusiastic handshake and she pumped James’ hand up and down. James just rolled with it.

Pushing her short unruly blond hair out of her blue eyes, Peggy said "I’m starving shall we get lunch?"

James looked at Cecilia hoping to find some cue, she just shrugged. Nodding slowly James cautious said “Okay” James paused “Do we have to clean up here or anything?" there will still those things that you jump over littering the track.

Peggy shook her hand “It's okay.” She smiled “Come on let's go."

The girls unsurprisingly got salads. James trying to fit in also got a salad. Peggy seemed a bit surprised by the fact that he got a plain salad saying “Huh, most people put stuff on their salad.” All James could do was shrug in response, he was here for the crunch.

James sat down at one of the cafeteria tables and looked at the two of them. They were chatting to one another and occasionally giving each other high fives. James decided to try and join the conversation “Did the event go well?"

Cecilia smiled. “My friend here was on fire today."

Peggy tried to act modest. “Oh I just did okay; you did pretty well Cecilia."

Cecilia rolled her eyes. “Not as good as you did."

The conversation died down as everyone started to dig in. All of a sudden Peggy asked “So what really happened with the puzzle?"

James' mouth was full of salad so all he could do was give a start. The principal had suggested to James that he not advertise what really happened with the puzzle. Self-consciously he started to rub his left wrist. “What are they saying happened?"

Cecilia gave James a curious look while Peggy happily continued. "Eric says that you gave him the inspiration for how to solve the puzzle."

James smiled. “Yeah, I did. Eric is smart but he had been overthinking the whole thing. He thought it was some minutely complicated word." James gave a sheepish smile. “All I did was give a fresh perspective."

Peggy pointed to her self with a bit of pride. "I want to be a veterinarian, so I have to ask what did the basilisk head look like?"

James hesitated as he wondered if monsters kept pets, and given how monsters are, what they looked like. “It was big and heavy. Eric made sure to close the eyes just to be safe." he paused rubbing his wrist again. “Also it had really big teeth."

Peggy kept asking questions about the basilisk until James longed for a change of subject. Sensing an opening he with lightning speed asked “So have you two known each other for a while?"

Cecilia smiled. “Only since I got here."

Peggy added “We are roommates you see."

James nodded, wondering how the hell having a roommate worked for centaurs. Bunk beds he assumed were out of the question. “It must be nice to have a roommate you get along with so well."

Cecilia nodded “We fight sometimes. Usually it's just misunderstandings though."

Peggy smiled. “We always make up. It is really nice though.” She put her arm around Cecilia’s shoulders. “There is no one I would rather be roommates with."

Cecilia blushed slightly and said. “Thank you Peggy."

With that they resumed eating, the salad was bland but crunchy, which in the end was all that James could hope for. The centaurs seemed to really enjoy their salads digging in with a zeal James had only ever matched when it came to roast. They savored each mouthful.

Once lunch was over Cecilia walked James back to his dorm. She walked behind him making sure he didn't fall over whenever he started to wobble. The day passed quietly with James having the quiet satisfaction of not having to scramble to get his homework done for once.

Sheena’s Saturday had been similarly pleasant. She had spent first part of the day reading, and then hanging out with her roommates. The trio had grand discussions and poked fun at one another.

Eventually when the clock tower chimed the right hour, Sheena made herself look presentable and then headed off to meet Eric.

Supposedly the reason that Eric had called Sheena to meet him was to celebrate his success at the debate competition. Sheena had known her brother long enough to see when he had an ulterior motive.

He was grinning broadly as she exited the dorm, “There is my favorite sister.”

Sheena grinned right back at him. “There is my next to favorite brother.”

Giving her a disbelieving look, Eric teased back “Oh, well I guess that makes you my next to favorite sister. So there.” This playfully escalated to them both declaring each other their least favorite sibling. Eventually despite all of their teasing they managed to reach the dining room.

It was Sheena’s favorite soup and Eric had already prepared places for the both of them. They sat down next to each other, staying close together to make it easier to talk between the two of them.

Eric passed the bread as he complimented her. The theater was not lost on Sheena; Eric wanted something, and apparently he thought it fairly important.

Sheena didn’t spend much time thinking about it was there was a three course meal to get through. They made conversation, and Eric told her all about the competition and the various things he had seen there. After she had eaten her fill, and made sure to show off her lady like manners to Eric, came desert.

It was a light sharp sorbet, in between nibbles Sheena shot a look up at Eric. He was getting that look he got when he was about to come to the actual substance of the matter. She briefly wondered what this would all be about. But the light conversation continued unabated.

Eric though wasn’t going to say anything, fine. But it was rare for her brother to be cagey about anything. “What is this all about Eric?”

Eric leaned back looking at Sheena. “We need to talk about what’s going to happen next year.”

On Sunday James put on his set of dress clothes and went to the library to meet Eric. Quite unexpectedly Forma was reading away when arrived. James was a little shocked to see her but shrugged and joined her in reading.

It wasn't until Eric, Sheena and Lana showed up that things got exciting. One of the first things Sheena said was a good natured “Where were you all week Forma?"

Forma didn't look up from her book and Formica said. “Partaking in activities designed to strengthen the bond between the different insect peoples."

James looked at Forma confusedly “Is there some difficulty in maintaining the insect peoples' unity?"

Forma still didn't look up from the book, she was tracing one of the illustrations with her small pair of hands. She plainly answered “Nope."

Everyone sat down at the table and began to relax. Eric took a second to look James over. “Nice clothes."

James shrugged “They are hand me downs from my brother. Will we take the picture down in the dungeons?" Eric nodded. James gave a frustrated sigh “Then I should have worn something else. I can’t get the mud out if it mixes with the cobwebs."

Giving James a look Lana added. “It will be okay James. Your clothes will be fine.” She looked him over “Your hair on the other hand.” She searched about for a comb and began to arrange James' hair. James took this mostly without complaint although he now had a good deal more sympathy for a sheep being sheared.

Once it was over James said in a flat tone. “Ow." he looked around the table. Everyone except for Forma was dressed sharply. Eric was wearing an obviously tailor made suit that would not have been out of place in the world of humans. Both Lana and Sheena had on modest dresses. Forma however was dressed the same as she ever was. James made a rare critical leap “Is Forma going to be in the picture with us?"

Eric spoke up “In the official version of the story she was never there."

Forma looked at James and gave him a slightly sad smile. “It's for the best." James gave a frown and reluctantly nodded his head. Without Forma he would be dead. That had to count for something.

They passed the time together doing a lot of nothing. Everyone except for Forma complained about spring homework, everyone except James and Forma expressed regret that spring break was over. Forma did not seem that thrilled about whatever she had been doing, and James hoped that going back to class would help him get his strength back. Lana and Eric held hands the whole time.

Eventually two adult dragonets arrived in the library looking official. They were flanked by duo of students looking very unofficial. The one in the lead was a dragonet who grinned sharply while the second was a Scylla who seemed to be perpetually distracted.

The older dragonets held out their hands and said “If you will follow us please." the group was lead down back to the puzzle room. James gave exacting amounts of care to make sure that his pants legs did not get muddy.

The chamber where he had encountered the basilisk had been lit up by multiple torches dispelling the dusk that had reigned there. The curious feeling was still in the air although not as strong as before. All four of them were made to pose behind the basilisk which had apparently been preserved. Eric held the head forward triumphantly, he was flanked by both Lana and Sheena. James hung out on the end and tried his best to look like he belonged there.

The cameraman stuck his head into the photobox taking care that the cloth did not catch on his horns. He removed his head and consulted a pocket watch. “Right, now nobody move once the flash goes off for a minute." he looked at Eric “Don't even breathe and no tricks like last time."

James had only an instant to wonder what that mean had been before the blinding flash went off, he tried his hardest not to breathe though. After a few moments he became aware of just how hard not breathing was. Still he managed to persevere to the end.

The camera man shouted out, “Finished.” And everyone detensed considerably. Eric looked around the chamber once more, and then carefully put the basilisk head next to the basilisk. James spoke up his voice echoing in the chamber “What will they do with the basilisk?"

Eric shrugged his shoulders. “Mount it somewhere probably." he gave it a slight nudge “You are famous now buddy."

As James left the puzzle room, he was approached by the dragonet and Scylla. The dragonet put out his hand excitedly. “Hello I’m Kevin, this my friend Miguel." one of the Scylla’s tentacles waved a lazy hello.

James was a little off put by the energy and could only weakly respond to Kevin’s strong handshake. Smiling James said “The hero of the hour is over there gentlemen.

Kevin laughed a quick reflexive laugh. “Oh we know. Both of us are from the art club. Have you seen the large murals on the dorms? James dumbly nodded, they were after all hard to miss. Kevin continued “Well you see, our club makes those every year to chronicle what happened in the year. We have already saved a spot for Eric opening the door of course."

James shrugged "I don't see what this has to do with me."

Kevin gave the same reflexive laugh “Well there are already sketchings of Eric and his friends. However, we had not counted on you being there. We need to take some sketchings of your face so we can put you in the mural. Do we have your permission? We don’t want you to look funny"

James was not sure about how he felt to see his visage in large. James did not consider himself attractive and it would not help him dodge attention, but what the hell. Nodding slowly while wondering if he would regret this James said “Alright."

Kevin lead him to one of the common rooms where the light was good. He motioned to Miguel saying “Do your magic."

Miguel lazily agreed and then had James stand and give a smile. He then began sketching James rather quickly, with multiple tentacles helping him. However, the whole process did take a while so James asked “Is all this hero business a big deal to dragonets?"

Kevin gave that hollow laugh. “Oh yes, very important. Most of the very distinguished families owe their status to either the hero or the dragon." Kevin’s gaze darkened for just a second. “Still one has to hope it won't come to violence."

Silence fell as Miguel had James turn. James felt like he was floundering in the silence and so asked “What do you think about all this Miguel?"

Miguel looked up from his sketching, his tentacles all falling limp. "I don't really care to be honest. It's an out of water problem that will be solved by those who are out of the water." he turned back to sketch and his tentacles became animate again. “All it means to me is that I get a chance to practice sketching a human." James had a sudden flash of concern about how he was going to look on the mural.

Once Miguel finished James shook hands with both of them. “So when will the mural be complete?"

Kevin smiled a sincere smile. “We did most of the work this week, the grand unveiling normally happens just before finals start." with that the duo went off in complete silence.

With that done James went back to the library and hung out with Forma some more. She wouldn't talk about what she had done besides from her stock line but she politely listened to James talk about what he did. She even seemed concerned when he described how weak he had been feeling.

She looked him over carefully. “Too weak to do fencing?" she seemed a bit desperate as she asked this.

James considered his response very carefully and then said "I should be well enough by tomorrow." Forma smiled happily.

Happy to get some more sleep, James was borderline excited to get ready for bed. He already had his pajamas on when he heard a knocking on the door. Not expecting visitors James seriously considered just pretending he wasn’t there and hoping the person outside just went away.

Eric called out in a friendly voice “Come on James, let’s go watch the serial.”

Blinking in surprise James collected himself, Eric had never visited him except for when he was sick. Taking a breath James opened the door.

Eric was casually dressed and looked at him happily, he greeted James with a wave. “Would you like to watch the serials with me?”

Looking up with a look of polite cluelessness James answered “Serials?”

Smiling Eric said “They normally show them every Saturday, you didn’t know?”

James shook his head, “I don’t get out much.”

Beckoning for James to follow him Eric said “Well come on.”

“What are they showing today?” James was more or less at a loss as to the kind of serials they would show in the world of monsters.

As they walked down the hallway Eric called back “A travelogue and a Chaplin film.” James brightened up, Chaplin films were always excellent.

The projector was an old one that still used a candle, and both films were silent. Still the assorted monsters seemed excited to be watching them. The travelogue was first, it was an old film. James smiled to himself as he saw the red seal of the foreign ministry in the first few frames of the film.

The audience of monsters seemed mostly uninterested in this one. Mostly talking among themselves, it was perhaps appropriate that the human was most interested in the human film.

It was about Amundsen’s south pole expedition, the travelogue itself was very old having no sound. But it did have some beautiful vistas of the artic wasteland. It started with a picture of the expedition members before and after the expedition.

During one of the title cards Eric leaned over and asked “Why did they go there?”

James looked at Eric, the flickering light cast his face half into shadow meaning James couldn’t see his expression. “Because it was there.” Humans had generally needed no more reason that that.

Eric persisted. “But it was so dangerous.”

“Surely there are explorers in the world of monsters, Eric” perhaps Eric was having fun at James’ expense again.

Eric nodded “Certainly, but it was so empty.” He hesitated “And humans are so fragile.”

Gesturing back to the film James said “It didn’t stop them.” The explorers had returned from the waste, safely.

Eric looked at James thoughtfully, then the Chaplin film came on. It was milk out of the nose funny. The audience of monsters enjoyed this one, including Eric and James who both roared with laughter.

Once the films were over James had to wipe the sleep from his eyes. It was late for him. Eric shook James’s hand. “Perhaps you should come out and watch another film. I watch them fairly often.”

Not meeting Eric’s gaze James nodded and responded noncommittally.

James did feel better the next day despite the fact that classes were starting again. He even managed to go jogging with Cecilia although she made sure to keep an eye on him as he did so. There were the regular boring parts of class where the teacher talked about what they would now go over as the semester got closer to the end. The only truly eventful thing happened in diplomat club.

James had mostly tuned out as the teacher droned on. Then quite suddenly James caught the word tea.

The diplomacy club teacher was the sort of dull teacher who always seemed interested in whatever he was talking about but bad at communicating it in any sort of engaging way. “If you ever interact with humans from the greater empire you will likely be asked to take tea with them." James reflected on how that needed a certain level of closeness or require respect to be true.

The teacher pointed to James. “If you could come here and demonstrate proper tea procedure James."

James swallowed down reflexively saying no. To go up in front of the class was not a particularly appealing prospect. He got up carefully hoping that no one would notice how badly his legs were shaking. To top it off, all of a sudden he had a stomach ache. As he stood next to the teacher he said “Why don't you show me what you think the method looks like so I can correct you." James hoped this would minimize the time he had to do anything and his fellow students would not have a chance to see how badly his hands were shaking.

The teacher prepared tea, however the teacher prepared tea in a manner that wounded James inner gentleman. He boiled the tea for far too long, he did not keep the cup at his waist, he even slurped his tea.

The narrator would like to note that if you ever wish for a someone from the greater empire to think less of you then prepare and drink tea incorrectly, their opinion of you will drop like a stone.

James tried to use his rage to block out the audience and turned to the teacher and said as politely as he could manage “Perhaps it would be better if I showed them how to make tea."

James began to lead the class through making tea, starting by getting fresh water. “You warm the teapot and then add the tea leaves. And then you pour the water." he made sure to give time for the tea brew. “Normally during this time is when you make light conversation or nibble on the biscuit if you don't want to talk." he then carefully demonstrated on how to use the tea strainer. “Now it is a matter of some debate on whether to add the milk before or after you pour the tea. I’m for after." he carefully added a tad of milk to his tea and half a sugar cube. Then he demonstrated the proper procedure of drinking tea “Don't put any fingers out or anything silly like that, you raise the tea carefully, take a sip not a slurp." here he demonstrated proper procedure “Then you put it back into the saucer.

The students looked on with a bemused expression. The teacher however seemed genuinely surprised by how much care James had given to his tea.

Once he was done making tea his nervousness returned and James quickly returned to his seat at little less than a sprint. He did however catch Eric looking contemplative.

The teacher still looked surprised “Thank you James." he looked at the class “Let's give a round of applause for James.” A smattering of applause happened.

For a quite long period afterwards James was popularly referred to afterwards by his classmates as the “Tea human"

The rest of the club passed reasonably quickly, the teacher began detailing what the equivalent of tea was for other species. Apparently the elves took thin hard cakes smeared with honey.

Once club was finally over Eric stood up and strode over to James, James' wavered between defensive and fleeing behavior and was so consumed by his indecision. He said carefully “Hello, Eric. How are you?"

Eric smiled at James. “Would you take tea with me on Sunday morning at eight o'clock?"

Sheena pulled Eric's sleeve. "I was hoping to sleep in on Sunday."

Eric still smiling turned to her and said “You don't have to be there Sheena." Sheena gave him a stunned, bewildered look.

James also confused could only answer “That's a bit early for tea time" there was also the issue of missing hanging out with Forma.

Eric paused to think “How about nine o'clock then?"

James paused and started to say Forma but was cut off by Eric. "I’m sure Forma will understand if we need to have a private conversation after the whole basilisk event." he turned to Sheena. “Would you join us at ten o'clock?"

Sheena remained silent but gave Eric an incredulous look. James could do little more than nod

The other interesting event that week happened on Wednesday. Forma and James were taking lunch together. Eric and Sheena had joined them, Eric for his part was making a deliberate show of drinking tea.

As James sat on the picnic blanket he noted to no one in particular “The weather has become very nice recently." this brought general sounds of agreement. Once James ran out of food, Forma poked him. He looked at Forma with a resigned smile. “All right. Let's get to it."

James was getting back to full speed but still wasn't as fast as normal. Forma seemed to sense this and pressed her advantage fully. She was not inhibited about hitting James as they spared, and James could do little more than take it. After hitting him on the arm quite hard, the pain turned to anger and James gave in momentarily. He swung as hard as he could and tried to hit Forma back.

Forma was caught off guard, and the hit landed on one of her arms, she let out a yelp and began rolling on the ground in pain. And for a fraction of a second James felt superior in finally getting Forma. This evaporated as soon as he recognized that it meant he had hurt Forma.

With panic in his eyes he rushed to Forma’s side. "I’m sorry, oh shit, I’m sorry. I didn't mean it." Forma was still cradling her arm and she turned to him.

The pain had caused her to tear up slightly and she said. “Why did you hit me so hard?"

James was past any pretense and answered frantically and honestly. “Because it hurts when you hit me, oh god I’m so sorry I lost my temper." James felt guilty that he had given into his anger once again.

Forma breathed carefully and kept cradling her arm. Once the pain had passed a bit she said in a clear voice “It hurts you when I hit you?"

James nodded frantically “Why do you think I keep holding my hand so close, or roll around cursing so often?" this was his fault he thought, he should have just taken it like a man.

Forma looked up with distress in her eyes. "I’m sorry, I didn't realize. I thought you were just being a wimp about it. Like you are with cold."

James shook his head “It doesn't matter now, is your arm okay?"

Nodding although still breathing hard from the pain Forma said “It's okay" she looked up at him trying to smile “It will be sore for a while though." both Eric and Sheena were standing next to them looking concerned. For a split second James thought he saw Eric with a satisfied smile.

After a bit of a rest Forma was up again and back to sword fighting. She was however far more gentle about it. She pressed her advantage just as much but refrained from hitting James hard when she had the opportunity. James no longer had to reflexively flinch every time Forma looked about to hit him and so fought just a little bit faster and a little bit better. This seemed to make some difference, or maybe Forma was just going easy on him, regardless he managed to about match Forma.

Lunch came to an end and as they cleaned up Forma came to James and said “So it really hurt when I hit you all those times?"

James nodded, “Yes. I got the soft skin and you have hard skin." Forma seemed to consider this for a second and then quite suddenly reached forward and pinched James. “Ow. Why did you do that?"

Forma nodded to herself. “So that hurt?"

James looked at the ant girl incredulously, her antennae were moving slightly in the breeze and she had seemed to be concentrating on him. “A little bit."

Forma nodded and went “Hmmmmm."

Sheena chose this moment to cut in. “Forma, you just have to hit him softer than you would another ant-person."

Forma turned to Sheena. "I wouldn't hit another ant-person." this had a defensive tone behind it.

Sheena rolled her eyes. “It's an example Forma. Here, pinch me on the scales as hard as you pinch James." Forma did so, and Sheena shrugged it off. “Now pinch me on the skin." Sheena offered the rough skin on the inside of her upper arm for examination. “Ow, damn that hurts."

Forma looked to James questioningly, James looked back at Forma just as questioningly. "I don't know where she is going with this either."

Sheena seemed a bit annoyed. “Look, I’m just trying to show Forma that she needs to be more gentle with you."

James had a perplexed expression. “And with you from the sounds of it."

Sheena gave James a murderous glare. “Hit James about as hard as you would hit an elf."

Forma just shrugged still not getting it. James decided to speak up. “We will have to feel it out I guess."

Forma nodded. “Well, if I hurt you in the future please tell me. I don't mean to."

James nodded back. “The same for me. If I hurt you in the future tell me right away." with that they cleared up after lunch and rushed back to class.

When Sunday arrived James woke up on time and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He had gotten dressed and was almost out the door when he remembered that he was going to meet Eric. As a result, James arrived at the designated drawing room with his clothes slightly rumpled and breathing hard.

Eric welcomed him in. The table was set up in the center of the room with a window to James’ left. The sun had just started to peak through a window and illuminated a rather ornate, if worn tea set. The table cloth was fine white linen, and the napkins were almost as fine as the table cloth. There was even only slightly tarnished silverware. James marveled at this bit of home brought to the world of monsters and gaped slightly just looking at it.

Eric noted James look of wonder with amusement. “The principal let me borrow her tea set."

James trying to save face straightened up and noted dryly. "I’m a bit surprised the principal has a tea set at all."

With that they both took seats facing one another, and began to serve tea. As the tea brewed James made the polite tea time conversation. Smiling he said to Eric “Did you know that in the world of humans it is widely believed that dragons always take tea with two cubes of sugar"

Eric was willing to play along and chuckled. “Is that so?"

James nodded and leaned forward slightly. “There was a popular children's book where the main character travels through dreams to the world of monsters. He among other things takes tea with a dragon."

Straightening his jacket Eric smiled and laughed again. “It would be a frightening thing to take tea with a dragon I should think." he glanced at James. "I was of the belief that humans ignored the world of monsters."

James nodded Formally, “Oh they do. But at least in isles of the greater empire the world of monsters is known to exist. It is however no place for a proper gentleman to go." James had a shocked expression. “We left the tea for too long."

They poured tea and James gingerly took a sip. A bit strong but still drinkable. James looked across the table to see Eric stirring his tea with his tail. He hesitated at the sight but then returned to strictly observing his tea.

Still stirring his tea Eric took this as chance to ask. "I have a question of etiquette for you." James nodded. “Would it be considered rude to stir your tea with your tail?"

James thought on this for a second. “Stirring yes, drinking no."

They both enjoyed their tea quietly and then Eric quite suddenly said. “Tell me about yourself James."

James busied himself dunking a biscuit into his cup of tea. "I am a human who goes to school in the world of monsters." he took a tentative nibble.

Smiling grandly Eric continued, “Why James that hardly tells me anything about you at all. Please do go on." there was a soft edge to his words.

James smiled politely in response. “There is little to tell Eric. My father is a doctor. I have two brothers, one older than me and one younger than me."

Maintaining his polite smile asked “Your older brother is an adult human?” James nodded. “What does he do?”

“Works in the archives of the foreign office” was James’ curt response.

Sipping his tea Eric paused to say “It seems strange that when I ask you about yourself you talk about someone else." he resumed his sip.

James had heard a quote that related to his situation. He paused stirring his tea trying to remember. He had an aha moment. "I have heard that we define ourselves in relation to others."

Eric put down his teacup and looked straight at James. "I’m sure you have wondered why I asked you here." James simply shrugged and split a sugar cube into eighths. "I just wish to know more about you."

James smiled and then looked off into space. “There is little to know Eric."

Leaning forward Eric's words had the soft edge, just the hint of forcefulness to them. “How would you describe your strengths and weaknesses?"

James leaned back still staring into space. “Oh, for weakness I would say that I get distracted easily, I’m short, I’m shy. I am a coward. I’m...."

Eric cut in here. “You are not a coward James. You insisted on following me to fight the basilisk." James shrugged. “Not once did you try to run away, you did not panic once you realized you were in danger. You took a lethal blow for me."

James continued "I get into fights, I’m stubborn."

Eric cut in. “Determined."

James shot a look at Eric and rather defiantly said "I am a dead man walking."

Eric leaned forward and in quietly determined voice he asked, “Why do you keep saying that?"

James smiled pleasantly and resumed addressing empty space. “Because it's true. He then continued "I’m a human in a school of monsters."

Eric began slicing some fruit with his talons. “Your strengths?"

Pausing to laugh to himself James said “Few and far between, Eric. I have been told that I’m smart although I don't believe it. I can remember almost anything if I read it twice." he seemed to run out of steam. “Ah, I’m a human in a school of monsters." he held up his hand to refuse a piece of the fruit Eric had just sliced.

Eric said quite calmly “You are brave, tenacious, and lucky." James laughed under his breath at that, quite hard but he tried not to show it too much. “You follow a code of honor." James tried not snort in response. “You remained calm even in the middle of a crisis."

James shrugged “Where are you going with this Eric?" this had all been getting rather probing.

Eric smiled and gave James a piercing stare. “Do you think that you can get better?"

James gave him a confused look “What do you mean?"

“You mentioned that you are shy. Do you think you could overcome that?" Eric seemed the most sincere when he asked that.

James sighed collecting his thoughts for a second “If I really tried maybe. I tend to stick to what I know. I have tried to get good at things over time but I never had the dedication to follow through." he shrugged. “With someone to push me I might. But I have always thought that what ever I was born bad at is something I will always be bad at."

Eric raised an eye brow “What about fencing? I know you got better at that."

James sipped his tea and then shook his head “That's something I do for fun, and I’m still not very good at it."

Eric kept giving James that piercing look. James idly considered trying to leap out of a window to escape. “How well do you get along with my sister?"

James returned the gaze for just a moment before staring off into space again. “Why don't you ask her?"

Eric shook his head ever so slightly. "I want to hear your opinion."

James shrugged. "I’m not mad at her about not sticking up for me anymore. She hasn't liked me very much since our fight. We kind of got along when she was taking care of me but I don't really know. I’m bad at telling what people think of me."

Eric seemed if not satisfied at least accepting of that answer. Some time passed in silence. Then Eric seemed to give up what ever he was getting at and made pleasant conversation. Eric asked about some of the stranger human features of the school and what their purpose was. James asked him about how he felt about the school, about what sorts of food he preferred. He took pains to make sure the conversation never focused on him.

Quite all of a sudden James’s watch chimed ten. James then saw something that made him seriously consider jumping out of the window. Both Lana and Sheena entered the room. The Formality of the occasion meant James had the wherewithal to greet the both of them.

They were both modestly dressed and visibly uncomfortable in the presence of each other. James squirmed like an animal in a trap. He should have made an excuse and left before Sheena was supposed to show up. In his defense James had been forced to go a painfully long time without taking tea.

Eric served the two girls tea. The room remained icy while this happened. Finally, Eric said "I know the two of you have a disagreement, let's work it out here." He paused to take a deep sip of his tea and then let out a contented sigh full of steam.

The two girls stared each other down until finally Lana spoke "I have no problem with your sister, it's her who has a problem with me."

Sheena quickly answered "I do not, there is no problem." Sheena made to get up when Eric put a hand on her shoulder.

James figured to himself that he could probably break the window with a chair, the problem would be landing.

Lana said in accusatory tone. "I think she does not approve of our relationship, Eric." Her tentacles pointed especially accusingly.

Eric smiled enigmatically. "I don't think that is it. Please Sheena if you have some disagreement with Lana let's work it out."

Sheena squirmed uncomfortably a bit and then said “You don't spend as much time with me here as back home."

The broken legs weren't that much of a problem, the real problem was that James was wearing his good jacket. Crawling would no doubt grind mud deep into it.

Eric shrugged and then smiled. "I know that you like to spend time with me but we are at school here. You spend time with your friends."

Sheena nodded slowly and then said. “But you are my brother."

Eric nodded staying calm. "Sheena, don't act like you are spoiled. You can't always get what you want."

Sheena became defensive about this. "I’m not spoiled.” She turned to James and said “Do I act like I’m spoiled?"

This snapped James out of his reverie, the tone of the question had implied that the answer should be no. James decided to hedge “Sometimes?"

Sheena sat back angrily. Eric said again calmly. "Lana is my girlfriend, I want to spend time with her by myself sometimes."

Lana added in “So it's just that you miss your brother? Not that we are in a relationship?"

It took her a minute but Sheena admitted “You both get along quite well."

Lana softened on hearing this. "I’m sorry for taking up time with your brother. We just really enjoy spending time together." Eric nodded. “But we can share some." Sheena brightened up on hearing this. “Deal?"

Sheena and Lana shook hands. Eric cast what was likely supposed to be a meaningful glance at James. “See how much better things are when sit down and talk everything out?"

James nodded slowly. He estimated how many paces it would take to reach the door. Eric stood up and then said “Now let us have tea."

After a good deal of light tea conversation James finally managed to get away. When he got back to the library, Forma looked up and smiled to see him. She was reading a book on mermaid architecture and simply asked “How was tea?"

James nodded sagely. “One should always be very careful when taking tea with dragonets." he then spent the rest of time listening to Forma talk about mermaid design. It was very interesting because mermaids did not need stairs but had to give some thought to currents and so could design building much differently.

The school year began to grind to a halt as finals approached. James was only truly aware of this when Cecilia began to complain about studying for finals.

The weather was continually getting better but still in the mornings it was damp and cold. Cecilia had begun to complain loudly. “Studying is just so boring."

James nodded in response. The sky was also purple. James also decided to say something in respond “What do you do to study?"

Cecilia shrugged and said "I just do the reading. But I still don’t do very well”

That was all James ever did, and so it seemed like a viable strategy for Cecilia. James shrugged “Sorry, I don't know."

Cecilia tried to sound optimistic “It will work out, it always does."

James looked at Cecilia thoughtfully. James did not have that margin of error.

So James spent a lot of time studying for the finals, he wasn't that sure on what to study. Some of teachers would only say it was a review of the whole semester. This was not especially helpful. James ended up quizzing himself on the various things and then trying to focus on what he was weak at. This was an imperfect method but the best he felt he could do.

Everyone was tense leading up to the finals. The Sunday before finals week started was a bit tense with everyone meeting in the library. Unusually even Sally and Steven showed up to study as well. Even Eric who was normally imperturbable was unusually tense as he nervously picked things at random to review. Sheena frantically tried to read various textbooks from start to finish only for Eric to calm her down.

Even Forma had given up on reading about architecture for a set of extremely brief notes, that she occasionally paused to sniff.

James eventually broke the atmosphere by asking “So what happens after the finals?"

Lana spoke up “There are three free days and then we say goodbyes."

Eric added in “One of those days gets eaten up by the festival."

Steven rather unusually added in happily “Don't forget the dance afterwards."

Smiling Lana added “For the seniors we spend about half a day in the graduation ceremony."

Graduation had never occurred to James. “Do parents come to attend the ceremony?"

Sheena smiled nodding. “Yep, my parents always took me out of school to see Eric. The first thing we did whenever we got here was to go look at the puzzle Eric had solved." Eric smiled triumphantly upon hearing that.

Steven added in. “It's fun to see your parents I imagine, but less fun to have to travel home with them I would think." this brought a general chorus of agreement.

James thought carefully and then said “Thinking about that would probably take some of the fun out of the graduation ceremony." it already took a week to get home, a week in close quarters with his parents would be trying.

Steven smiled again. “Also it's a good thing that the festival and graduation are a day apart."

James looked to him and asked “Why's that?"

Steven holding back laughter said “No one wants to go to their graduation hungover." he giggled upon saying this. He added laughing. “Also it would make keeping those ridiculous robes clean hard.”

Out of the corner of his eye James saw Eric nodding sagely. The studying continued until James had difficulty memorizing all the various identities in the unit circle. He could memorize some of it by rote but tended to get a mixed up on the far side of the circle.

Quite unexpectedly Forma spoke up repeating a mnemonic about the identities. James looked at her a bit surprised and said “Why do you know that?"

Forma allowed herself a bit of a smile and said “Trigonometry is important to surveying." James smiled and thanked her.

The final meeting of diplomat club also happened, it was noteworthy only in that James ducked out early after eating far too much cake.

On the day of the first final James got to class early, he sat at his desk wondering if he could fall asleep after jogging so much. As he put his head on the desk he happened to look out the window. The trees which were common on the campus had begun to flower and were shedding purple petals. It made for quite a pretty scene James decided.

Enthusiastically James got up and went to Ms. Sialia’s desk. “Ms. Sialia look at the trees.”

Ms. Sialia smiled at James “Oh yes it’s very pretty. Did you have anything like this at home James?”

James shook his head. “Not in the greater empire. But it’s so pretty.” This seemed an important point to James. James smiled to himself “If my little brother were here he would want to taste one I think.”

Ms. Sialia looked quite surprised. “Oh thank you for reminding me James.”

Before finals proper started Ms. Sialia gave a talk on how students were forbidden from eating the petals, a single petal would make anyone gag, and a handful of them would cause intensive purging. She smiled at James as she said this.

Absentmindedly James wondered how many students would eat a petal just because they had been told not to.

The finals were difficult to describe. Some of the questions were specific, some were general. There were the most hated of all creations, essay questions. James did his best, he hoped he did well but there was no way to tell. He slept soundly each night, too tired to do much else.

Each lunch, there was optional dancing practice for the students. James went to these to take his mind off of the finals. When he ate lunch with Forma, James did his best to try and teach her the dances he had practiced but it was still hopeless.

Finally, on the afternoon of Sunday the class as a whole was marched to the auditorium.

It started out with the class president giving a speech. They speech was very self-congratulatory and more than once they were told to applaud themselves. James was a bit anxious about being in the crowd but he clapped with everyone else. As the class president finished up his remarks about it being an honor to be the class president and wishing everyone a good summer. Ms. Araneae took the stage.

She made similar remarks, telling the students about the various events that would happen over the next few days. She urged everyone to act responsibly, and to be safe.

It was what happened next that made the biggest impression on James. The principal’s stern demeanor softened and she smiled a gentle smile. “It is as always my honor and privilege to lead this school.” She smiled happily and then said “One round of the school anthem and then we are done.” The anthem was sung at extreme volume, and then the principal rang a large gong marking the end of the semester. This was greeted by riotous applause that made James worry that he would be driven deaf.

With that the student body streamed out of the auditorium shouting and whooping. James managed to get some distance from the crowd and a moment to think. What to do, he needed to say a good deal of goodbyes he felt. School had taught him that a proper goodbye can mean a lot. Forma would be hard, probably needed to say goodbye to Eric and his gang, definitely needed to say goodbye to some teachers, had to say good bye to Cecilia.

James heard a rather irate throat clearing next him and quickly turned to see Sheena. Trying to be polite James asked “Apologies, have you been waiting very long?"

Nodding quickly Sheena said “Yes, I have. Eric would like to see you tomorrow. He says find him at the festival.” She said this in a bored tone, and she seemed impatient.

James asked “Why?" politely.

Sheena shrugged still fidgeting “He didn't say. Said it was important though." before James had the chance to ask any questions Sheena quickly added "I have to be going." then she walked off smiling and happy to some enjoyable not-final activity.

James for his part was a bit stumped about what to do next. It seemed like a waste of time to read. That time could be spent doing something to enjoy the fact that school was ending. There were reveling groups of students all over the campus. However, James felt isolated, he might track down some of his friends and insert himself into their celebration but that would be rude, and make him look desperate.

Whenever he was about to leave a place he had known fairly well, James tried to see all the things he had never had a chance to see and do the things he had been too afraid to do. He had done that at the end of middle school and James smiled fondly at the memory. However, there was still business to take care of.

Ms. Maria seemed genuinely surprised to see James. He was panting due to sprinting and took a moment to speak. She said in an apologetic tone. “Sorry James, I have to close the library early."

James managed a why. Ms. Maria gave a frustrated expression “They draft me to help grade the tests. We need to get them done as quickly as possible."

Finally recovering a bit James smiled and said "I understand. But can you pass a message for me?"

Ms. Maria have a knowing smiled, “For Forma i'm guessing?" James nodded a bit sheepishly. “You guys just need to start mailing each other I think."

James slightly giggled at the thought. “Can you ask her where we should meet on leaving day?"

Ms. Maria reached out and patted James on the shoulder. “Of course James. If I see her I will ask her.” As Ms. Maria started to close up the library James searched his mind for what to do now.

Number a was to put his backpack in his room. He didn’t like leaving it behind but the thing was damnsome heavy. After a bit of thought he finally decided that part 2 was to go around the school building and look for anything he had missed and burn the place into his memory. This would also give him a chance to watch all the monsters partying.

This let James spend a happy few hours dashing around, enjoying the improving weather. He did not attract much attention and was able to see all the monsters enjoying themselves.

On a whim he stopped to survey the dormitory decorations, they were complete but same as last year’s decorations they were perhaps a bit abstract. A dragonet holding a fencing trophy, a mermaid winning an award, a shooting star, the student body president looking happy, a grand gate containing a basilisk, Eric and friends standing looking triumphant. He smiled upon seeing that he was up there. They had managed to capture his least bad side.

Well that would be something to talk about, he had been painted on the side of a building. It would probably be better to talk about that than why exactly he had been painted on the side of the building.

James slept soundly that night and awoke at the same time as usual. About halfway through getting ready to go running, James heard a thunderous noise. Once he had covered his ears James was able to identify the sound as a marching band.

More than little curious James looked through a window to see that the marching band was parading directly outside of the boy's dormitory. Marching bands are by necessity loud but this one in particular was going for volume.

After he had made his desperate escape to the relative quiet of the track, he saw that both Cecilia and Peggy were on the track. They stopped and waved as they saw him. James asked Cecilia “What the hell is going on?"

Cecilia smiled impishly. “They have the marching band go to both dormitories to make sure that everyone wakes up in time to go to the festival."

James looked off into the distance as the marching band played on and said with only a small hint of sarcasm. “Back in the world of humans they talked about the cruelty of monsters. This demonstrates the sheer inhumanity better than any else I have seen."

Both the centaurs giggled slightly before Peggy added “About half of the seniors have hangovers too."

James gave a mournful look. “Man that must suck." he looked up at both of them with a smile. “Good thing we are all early risers right?" this brought a chorus of agreement and a few high fives.

Peggy walked up to James looking him over. "Cecilia says you can run pretty good for a biped."

James shrugged, "I guess."

Cecilia gave James a playful look. “Show her what you can do James."

Giving a motion of surrender James said "I want to be awake for the festival."

After a great deal of running James was reconsidering ever moving again. Peggy had done her best to encourage James to run faster and James had done his best to keep up. This was perhaps in some way a mistake.

Panting sitting on the ground, James watched the two girls jog around the track together. When they got close he bid them goodbye.

The school grounds were full of students in various states of wakefulness milling around. However once a large popping sound echoed across campus they all started moving towards a field where various booths were set up.

The booths were run by a club and in contrast to the club fair all were ornately decorated. For reasons beyond human comprehension the monsters had taken to painting one another in swirls of color. One elven girl had what looked to be a large wave painted on her face. One Scylla had painted each of her tentacles a different color. James was not one to stop and stare but he had to work to restrain himself. The clothes in marked contrast were all simple. Perhaps everyone had thrown off their high school costumes, James wondered.

The decorations extended to the booths, they were painted multiple colors and more than one was heavily adorned with flowers or spider silk decorations. James surveyed the various booths, many of them had games or food on offer. It reminded James strongly of a carnival. James had tended to shy away from the games, they were often reliant on luck. James did not trust his luck at all, and the last year had proven to James that his luck was terrible.

The food was a wide variety of monster specialties. James saw exotic things fried, normal things grilled and then put on kebabs, unidentifiable things being sold as they were. There was blessed little James felt comfortable to eat.

James walked around in a daze overwhelmed by all there was to see. Sometime later James ran into Eric, who had picked an inconspicuous place to sit. Inconspicuous of course meaning a crowded table full of students. Eric however seemed to not be interacting with any of them.

Through some kind of miracle James had found a booth that was selling a close approximation of a pretzel if not the real thing. Sitting down next to Eric James gave him a questioning look with a mouth full of pretzel.

Eric turned around putting his back to table and looked out into the crowd. At a volume that only James could hear he said. “Make sure you are not overheard James."

James kept his questioning look. “That seems rather cloak and dagger to me" he looked around him. There was reveling as the monsters told each other stories or chatted. The sheer volume of the crowd however was almost deafening.

Eric nodded slightly. “That is because it is cloak and dagger."

James gave a stupefied look and then said “This hardly seems the place."

Eric gave a wide grin for a second and then composed himself. "I do not think that anyone would ever suspect you capable of deception. That and the people around us are friends of mine." He paused to greet a purple green dragonet who sat down nearby.

James paused for a second and then said. "I’m hardly the sort to be engaged in conspiracies. What is all this about?"

Eric kept his stoic look. "I would like you to do something for me. It's a very serious thing, and I want you to accept only if you honestly believe you can do it."

James was momentarily distracted by a trio of bee girls walking past, each with an armful of prizes. “Depends on what it is, Eric"

Eric ran his tongue across his teeth, hesitating to the increasing frustration of James. “It might be dangerous, and I won’t be able to pay you for a long time. But it's something that I think you are uniquely suited to do."

James tried to remain cool for espionage purposes but said a bit louder than he intended “Well, what is it Eric?"

Eric looked over a James for a second. "I would like you to be Sheena's bodyguard for the rest of the time she goes to school here."

James looked over at Eric confused. “It doesn't seem that big a deal."

Eric returned his gaze to the crowd, but seriousness seemed to radiate off of him. “It's a bigger deal than you would think. Sheena has been kidnapped once and I would rather it did not happen again."

If he was going to do this, not saying he would. Then he needed more information. “Who was behind the kidnapping?

“The themistoclites, they are led by an individual known as john. He’s a ruthless bastard and totally dedicated to his cause.” Anger briefly surfaced on Eric’s face and then sank back down beneath the self-confident façade.

Pausing, confused by the name, James eventually asked; “Are they anti-Dave?” James understanding of dragonet politics was limited.

“Anti-everything. They wanted to kidnap her to get concessions after I face the dragon.” Eric’s face remained cool but contempt crept into his voice.

James surveyed the crowd in front of them gesturing slightly with his hand. “She is safe here, if was to be her bodyguard I don't think it would make a difference."

Eric kept his stoic look and said almost too quietly for James to hear “She was safe the last time it happened."

James continued “Even if I did accept, not saying that I would. Is this not something that Sheena should decide on? If she can't stand her bodyguard then they will hardly be able to keep her safe."

Eric seemed to calm slightly. “She doesn't hate you as much as you think. Besides if I suggest you she will go along with it."

James paused for a second “just what would being a bodyguard entail?”

Eric smiled that smug smile. “It means you would watch out for her the rest of time she is here. It means that if you had to you would risk yourself to keep her safe.”

Shrugging James kept looking into the crowd. “Wouldn’t a friend do that if they had to?”

Shaking his head Eric replied. “You would be surprised at what people do when it looks dangerous and safety is uncertain. I would like her to have someone who is dedicated to keeping her safe no matter what.”

James rolled his eyes. "I’m hardly bodyguard material.” An elf walked by eating what looked suspiciously like cotton candy.

Eric looked over at James. “You are brave, tenacious, honorable."

James laughed slightly. "I am a long way from a knight Eric. There is a lot I don't know about monsters and besides I’m a human."

Eric paused to wave at a friend in the crowd. “What about you being a human?"

Breaking cover James gave Eric a serious look. "I’m not very strong compared to most monsters. I stick out where ever I go and I couldn't rescue Sheena if she were ever captured." He then continued “And you didn’t make it easy for Sheena to blend in, everyone knows she is your sister.”

Eric kept his purposefully distracted look. “That’s why I need you.” He looked a bit sheepish. “I couldn’t help myself.” Then Eric stood up suddenly. In a shocked tone he said "I have to go."

Looking around wildly James said “Are we being watched?"

With a serious expression Eric looked down at James. “No, but I forgot to win a prize for Lana." he smiled “Give it some thought and then get back to me at the dance."

It was James turn to look shocked. “There is a dance?"

Eric nodded saying “After the festival yes, we have a bonfire and everything."

James swore loudly and put his hands to his head. Eric gave him a questioning look. James explained. "I forgot there was a dance. Which means I forgot to invite Forma." he swore again.

Eric was smiling rather broadly at him now. “Why did you think there was dancing practice during lunch?"

James shrugged saying, "I was too busy concentrating on finals and I was too happy to take a break."

Eric patted James on the shoulder “It will work out, Forma is smart. She probably knew there was a dance and has figured out a way to come." James remained looking glum. “Have hope." Eric smiled.

As Eric went off into the crowd James sat looking glum. As much as he didn't enjoy getting his shins raked by Forma, it would of been nice to see her at the dance. He tried to look on the bright side, going to the dance had made Forma nervous so she should be more relaxed if she missed this one. With Forma not there, he would probably dance a few times with Sheena, and then spend the rest of the time sitting somewhere. Could a book fit into his pants pocket he wondered?

James went and tried his hand at a few games, it would be nice to bring his little brother something back from the world of monsters.

A bit later as the sun started to set James went towards the great hall where he assumed the dance was to be held. He saw that rather surprisingly the dancing had been split into two categories. Within the great hall there were a great deal of monsters dressed to the nines, in the field where previously there had been the festival there was an almost as a great number of monsters dancing barefoot. James sighed, looked down at his one nice set of clothes and pondered on how he just couldn't win.

James decided to search the field first. All of the monsters there were dressed modestly and many of them were barefoot. The field was a little muddy, and a bit slippery as a result. James reflected on his misfortune after he had to catch himself to stop from slipping the third time.

A large bonfire illuminated the field from a raised platform in the center. How a bonfire could be on a raised platform perplexed James. The fire logs and all were just there on the platform. He spent a few minutes looking it over but could not understand how it was not setting the platform on fire.

There were a good number of what seemed to be folk dances going. The elves in particular were doing some rather intricate square dances that James had no idea how to do. Additionally, the centaurs seemed to be enjoying the extra space to prance about. James kept about as far away as he could out of fear for his feet. He saw Cecilia doing the rounds and waved to her.

Finally, there was an unusually high number of insect peoples on the field. Given that at the last dance there had been about three ant-girls this very much intrigued James. It also slightly depressed him, there were so many that it seemed very unlikely that he could spirit Forma away. He sighed, hoping that she would understand. They seemed to be doing their own rather complicated dances. They danced with an almost hypnotic intensity and James had no hope of understanding them.

At the edges of the field where it grew dark James was surprised to see a large number of dryads ringing the field. They seemed to be keeping a close watch and more than once James noted that they strode forward to break up some inappropriate behavior.

The party was fairly wild in the field. But James didn't know the dances, there was no snack table, and he couldn't find Eric. He therefore resolved to search the great hall.

Walking very carefully James noted the lavish decorations that had gone into the great hall, a great shimmering chandelier illuminated the room. The shimmering light served to emphasize the different colors. James sighed upon looking at the chandelier.

The monsters love of color reached even their dress clothes and he saw all manner of different colored jackets and skirts. He briefly wondered what it would look like as a masquerade, but this did not seem to be the theme. There was ballroom dancing happening in the center of the room and as usual James was forced to work his way through the outside. He ran into Ms. Sialia who was watching over the punch bowls.

He smiled at her. “Are you having a good time Ms. Sialia?" she was wearing a strange blue dress obviously tailored to accommodate her wings.

Ms. Sialia was obviously bored. “Of course James."

The fact that she looked so bored in the midst of some much revelry distressed James slightly. “Would you like to dance with me?"

Ms. Sialia seemed a bit surprised “I'm really supposed to keep watch over the buffet table James.” She seemed uncertain.

Thinking James paused for second and then said “Are you sure you can't find someone else to watch them for a few dances? I could show you one or two of the popular human dances."

Her blue feathers visibly perked up at hearing this and Ms. Sialia looked around before leaning over to James. Staring rather intently into his face she said “Wait here for five minutes, I’m going to find someone to watch the bowls.” She gave James a serious look. “Make sure no one put anything in these alright?"

James peeled off a mock salute. “Yes." He wasn’t that worried though, no one could be that depraved; it was like poisoning a well.

About ten minutes later Ms. Sialia came back with ms. Maria in tow. James was about halfway through a cookie so he didn't notice them until they were next to him. He managed not to choke.

Ms. Maria said in a loud happy voice “Hello James.” She was wearing a green dress that would of been a little short on a human about her height.

James smiled “Hello Ms. Maria. Are you having a good time?"

Ms. Maria nodded happily “Are you ready to dance?"

Nodding James said “Certainly, what kind of dance were you thinking of?"

Her green hair fluttered in front of her eyes as Ms. Maria shook her head. “Not me, Ms. Sialia said she was going to dance with you." looking around she leaned forward to whisper into James' ear “She also said that one thing was forgotten."

James looked at Ms. Maria with a questioning expression. “What thing?"

Ms. Maria patted his head and said “Good man."

James very cautiously took Ms. Sialia's wing and began to dance with her. Once he got over his fear of her very sharp looking talons landing on his feet it was not all that difficult to dance. She was extremely eager to learn the dance steps to any human dance even if the monster equivalent was very close.

After a few rounds of this James tried to leave the floor but Ms. Sialia insisted they dance some more. She seemed to be very much enjoying herself.

Forma was troubled. She had left a complicated series of instructions with Ms. Maria that morning. She had then through a great deal of trouble been to see Ms. Maria during the day only to find that James had forgotten to return to the library.

All this trouble had been in order to tell James that there was likely no way she could go to the dance with him. Having the same thing happen twice would be highly suspicious. Her hope had been to then dance with James in the library. She wanted to dance at least one more time before the semester ended

She was in the insect common room. It had been dug out of the ground underneath the school. There was a small fireplace and bare earthen floor. The dirt was rich and reminded of Forma of home. None of this made her feel any better.

In her rare moments alone, she had practiced a few of the dances that Sheena and James had taught her. She was supremely confident that she had improved enough so that James would not be hurt when she danced with him. It would be an excellent chance to show off how much she had improved.

But how to get there remained an open question.

She looked up from the book she was pretending to read to see a bee-girl practicing dance steps in the common room. The bees tended to be more individualistic than the ants. They were also tended to be far more insufferable as a result.

Insect pheremonal communication is fairly complicated. Imagine being able to make a cloud that whenever anyone focuses on the cloud they can “Hear” a message and the emotions it would contain. The narrator could go on at length about its many situational uses and exactly what glands are involved. Instead they will simply add that it could be extremely specific among a species of insects and fairly general between species of insects.

Forma released a short quickly decaying burst of -purpose?-

The bee girl did not look up but she responded -influence-

Forma continued to look like she was reading her book. -clarify-

-if the “Other" see us dancing they will better understand “Pheremonal signal for all insects"-

Forma kept her stoic expression but mentally her eyes widened. -scale?-

The bee girl looked up at Forma. -clarify-

Forma tried not to betray anything -how many “Scent for the polite way to refer to bees" will dance-

The bee girl released a scent of confusion -myself. Purpose of inquiry?-

Forma scrambled to think of what to do. The insect thing to do would be to release a general inquiry scent so that all insects in the area would hear it. But what would James do? He tended to try and avoid the limelight, Forma knew that James would have avoided standing out. It made sense for her to be subtle.

-no purpose- Forma quickly got up and went to rooms reserved for the ants. How to phrase this? -idea needing evaluation quickly, dance as a group to enhance outsider understanding of insect species. Feasible?- she added an inflection of “Urgency given time and complexity."

The awake ant girls began to respond. -that annoyed and exasperated feeling you get when someone suggests more work- -good but unnecessary idea- however Forma was able to sense that the ant-girls assigned to the council of insect peoples were sending -exemplary idea, clarify?-

Forma took a breath and responded very carefully. -”Polite word for bees" was observed dancing, when asked for clairification, it was claimed that it would enhance influence.- pausing for a second she then added an inflection of distain -will we allow them to dictate “Sensation of being watched by multiple enemies" understanding?-

The ants on the insect council were up and openly conferencing with one another now. -to avoid “Sensation of smug hostility by another" we will propose this to insects at large.- the pheromones shifted to a command -”Order" answer and repeat message once, query: can insects provide dancers to promote “Outsider" understanding?

All of the ant-girls did so and the message rolled out of the room in a small cloud. An almost palpable wave of annoyance rolled right back. Then suddenly the spiders responded “The spiders can certainly provide dancers. Do not believe other “Polite way to refer to other insects" can.

This of course aroused the bees to compete and they quickly signaled -wonderful idea, we will be able to dance-

Even the wasps got in on the conversation adding -if allowed, we will dance-

As the ants on the insect council signaled in the affirmative, everyone else groaned in frustration. They all got up and made ready to send off the dancers. Forma made sure to join the groan.

-calling for all dance trained ants to assemble.- the ants did so, there were not many as dance was not an important activity. Forma of course, had some experience in dancing but not the right kind.

One of the ants signaled -query: what dances can we actually do?-

The leader ants visibly started at that. After a prolonged pause -”Regret caused by haste" any suggestions?-

One the ant girls spoke up -answer: “Timidity due to uncertainty" in my colony we perform coronation dances as part of celebrations-

The leader ants nodded to this putting out general signals of approval. -”Understanding inflection" this will necessitate practice, order: dancers practice.-

The ants started to dance, it was clumsy at first and Forma noted with a quiet superiority that they tended to bump into eachother like she had with James. But the pheremornal communication allowed them to quickly right the mistakes. In no time at all they were dancing in sync.

A few queries about who had had the idea to go dancing drifted in. These were always answered with “Polite word for ants"

Forma hands played with eachother but she stopped them quickly. Now there were ant girls going to the dance. This did not necessarily include her though. -query: how will we “Expression used for assessing structural integrity of bridge" of effect?"

This caused the leader ants to stop again. They looked at one another uncertainly and exchanged a few whispers and private signal. -we will have ants roam the crowds to ensure dance is having effect. Query: volunteers?"-

Forma trying desperately not to look guilty stepped forward. This prompted a sigh from her bunk mate who got out of the bed and stood next to Forma. Forma may as well have been looking into a mirror. Sure the faces were ever so slightly different, and the arms were a slightly different length. But in style and clothing her bunkmate was identical.

As her bunkmate fussed over the various details of Forma’s Formica costume one ant signaled out. -query: what other “Disparaging way to refer to other insects" dances will be performed?-

One of the dancers quickly answered -factual response: the “Impolite way to refer to bees" will do their signal dances.-

A wit called out. -how pleasant that they will have something to say- everyone smiled at that one.

-factual response: the spiders will be doing mating dances-

The wit answered again -does this mean that one of them will eat the other at the end?- this brought audible chuckles from around the room.

As Forma’s bunkmate looked her over she said “You look good."

Forma smiled and looked back “Of course we do."

As the insects walked to the dance together the signals of annoyance stayed strong, more than once Forma saw the ants jostled intentionally. When they finally arrived at the field where the dancing was to take place, Forma was given leave to split off.

The question now was where to find Eric. Forma closed her eyes and tried to smell for him. It was no good though, non-insects signals were a mess of colors and gibberish. Still she tried hard for a second, but she got nothing. She had to solve the problem with logic then. Where would Eric be? Sheena didn't like being around crowds and Eric had been in the gardens previously.

Searching through the gardens she found them in the same spot they had been when James had lead her here. Remembering what had happened that time made Forma blush ever so slightly.

Surprisingly though James was not here and that was a problem, Forma didn’t know if she could trust the Eric’s friends.

She almost released pheromones to signal to Sheena for advice but managed to catch herself. What to do?

Sheena was reading sitting on a bench in the gardens near Eric’s friends. Far more importantly her novel was just coming to a climax. The brave dragonet was about to fight the evil dragon to save her captured love. The princess had been forced to grow a lot since her dashing love was captured at the end of book 2; this was going to cathartic and run to read.

She then however heard a “Psst” Sheena paid more attention to her book.

Another “Psst” Sheena sighed frustrated. She kept reading.

Finally, something poked her in the back. Which was odd because Sheena was sitting with her back to a hedge. More than a little surprised she turned around quickly. There was a dark chitin arm sticking through the hedge. “Hello Forma.”

“Hello Sheena.” Forma’s voice had an unusual hint of anxiety. “Is it safe for me? That’s not the right thing” Forma paused trying to think of the right thing to say.

Sheena cut in “I’ll ask everyone to keep silent about you being here.”

Happily, Forma responded “Thank you”

A good deal later after he had start dancing with Ms. Sialia, James was finally able to get away from her. With the main ballroom thoroughly search he headed to the gardens on a hunch. To his pleasant surprise he saw Forma and Sheena chatting like old friends and Eric's friends in the same circle he seen them at the last dance. Steven was not as drunk though.

Steven was entertaining the group, glass in hand and a happy look on his face. James figured he had done well on his tests. He was telling a joke, something about how the difference between harpies and centaurs was how centaurs had to give permission to be ridden while harpies had to be asked to give rides. It was indecipherable to James but given how it made Lana drop to her tentacles it was hilarious.

Eric stood up smiling “Ah James what took you so long?"

James shook his head and massaged his legs “When a teacher asks you to teach her a dance, always politely decline." he paused for a second. “She seemed to be having a very good time though." James looked Forma up and down, she was wearing the exact same dress she had been wearing at the last party. “How did you get away Forma?"

Forma smiled her enigmatic smile and simply said “That's a secret." Sheena giggled at this.

James looked at Eric and said “Should we talk now?"

Eric shook his head. “No there is still enough time to do some dancing first." he looked over to Lana “Shall we?"

She took his hand and they headed off to the main hall. This left James with nothing to do but to go and sit over by Sheena and Forma. Getting closer he could see that Sheena looked a bit different. “You look different." She had a nice dress on and her hair was arranged, but there was a subtle difference James, couldn’t put his finger on.

Sheena smiled excitedly. "Lana showed me how to put on makeup." the makeup made Sheena look fearsome. “Does it make me look good?"

It made her look fearsome, however deep almost instinctual knowledge within James made him answer quickly. “Of course."

Sheena smiled "I knew it made me look fearsome." James remarked to himself about how true that was.

Taking some time to let his feet rest James made idle conversation with the two. Once his feet had rested enough and James had regained his appetite for punishment he stood up and offered his hand to Forma. “Shall we dance?"

Forma excitedly nodded "I have been practicing, I’m much better." James gave a dubious look to Sheena who just smiled.

Much and better were perhaps overstatements, together they were definitely overstatements. James had his shins raked continuously and did his level best to not step on Forma’s feet. After a few rounds of this punishment James cited tiredness and sat down again.

Forma looked at James confidently. “So am I better?"

Trying to think of a polite way to answer James finally said “A little, although you still need some more practice. She seemed to accept this happily enough.

James then offered his hand to Sheena, who seemed happy enough to dance with him. She was much less stiff this time and followed James' lead more easily. As they danced James asked “Did Eric tell you about the thing?"

Sheena nodded slowly, “He said you were considering it."

James snorted slightly. “Screw what he said, what do you think about it?"

Sheena eyed James carefully. “You are reasonably capable; I have seen you fight Forma a lot. Also I saw you beat Philip."

James very carefully twirled Sheena, when they faced each other again he said “That's not what I meant. If I’m to bodyguard you, we will have to spend a lot of time hanging out."

Sheena shrugged. “You don't smell that bad." James just gave her a look. "I like hanging out with Forma."

James shrugged in return. “Well, if you were not okay with it, I was going to say no. Since you seem okay with it, i’ll consider it."

Nodding Sheena said slowly. “Thank you James."

Eventually Eric returned looking at James and Sheena dancing he smiled and said “Shall we?"

Eric lead James to a secluded spot in the gardens. They sat next to each other. Eric looked James over carefully. “So have you decided?"

James paused for a second and then said "I still don't get why I’m so qualified for the job."

Eric looked off into space. “Let's say I ask another dragonet to do this." James nodded. “That dragonet has family in the world of monsters. The people who want to hurt me might threaten his family. He might have to make a hard choice between protecting Sheena and protecting his family." he looked over at James. “Your family is in the world of humans, it's much less likely that they will be threatened."

Getting a slight smile on his face James asked “Will there be any reward?”

Eric chuckled “You don’t need one.” James nodded this was true; as a gentleman James could hardly refuse the chance to be a hero. “But i’ll give you a treasure beyond value. The trust, friendship and brotherhood of the hero of the dragonets.”

James nodded slowly. “But I still don't think I will be that good at protecting your sister. After all she can protect herself."

Eric looked off into the distance again. “You would do anything to protect your little brother wouldn't you?"

James nodded and said yes. "I get what you are saying Eric, but your little sister is stronger than me, can breathe fire, and has very sharp claws. There is not much I can do in comparison."

Smiling Eric patted James on the shoulder. “There is a safety in numbers. Besides you have been vulnerable all this semester and still came out okay. You have a good head on your shoulders."

James snorted. Eric continued. "I want to protect my little sister as much as you would want to protect your little brother. One of the ways that I can do that is set someone to watch over her while I’m gone. I know you pretty well James, you are brave, honest and a good person...."

James quickly held up his hand. "I dispute the good person part. I am not so good as you would think."

Eric gave James a doubtful look. “Here look into my eyes."

James drew away slightly. “You aren't going to hypnotize me are you?"

Chuckling slightly Eric said “No. I’m going to look into your eyes and see if I can get a feel for the kind of person you are."

Crossing his arms James said. "I don't think it works like that."

Eric gave James a look. "just do it." they stared into each other eyes fiercely. James was barely cognizant of Eric coming slightly closer to James. How long this went on James could not say. Until suddenly he heard someone clearing his throat.

At speeds approaching the speed of sound James turned to see Darius looking at the two of them. Darius was grinning broadly "I’m less surprised to find you here Eric, but you James, I’m surprised with."

Frantically James said. “Nothing was happening Darius." he looked to Eric for confirmation only to find that he was grinning broadly.

In a tone of mock politeness Eric said. "I’m always happy to experience new things James."

Still blushing intensely James loudly said. “Shut up Eric." he turned back to Darius trying to regain composure. “Nothing was happening."

Darius could barely contain his grin. “Let no one say that I am not a dryad of the world." he paused. “A dryad of two worlds, but the principal has asked us to keep any students from hiding out in the gardens." he snickered. “Especially ones that are being overly affectionate."

James had more or less turned pink at this point. Eric still grinning put his hands on James shoulders and in a tone of mock politeness said "I’m sorry James I don't think it will work out. You just aren't very attractive by dragonet standards.” Still smiling he turned to Darius. "I’m talking to him about the thing."

Darius nodded. “Ah, well then carry on." he looked at James who was still various shades of crimson. “Lighten up it's a joke." with that he resumed his patrol.

James immediately turned to Eric. "Eric! What the hell?"

Eric rolled his eyes. “It's just a joke James." he straightened up slightly. “You might say that you aren't a good person. But for what I’m asking I think you are good enough." he then quickly asked “By the way do you drink?"

James shook his head emphatically. Eric looked perplexed “Why not?"

Smiling a bit James said “When I came to the world of monsters they said the whole place was dangerous. But that if you stuck to the civilized parts and kept your wits about you it was manageably dangerous." he smiled like this was self-explanatory.

Eric waved his hand in a circular motion and asked “And?"

James smiled again. “Alcohol has been show to make people lose their wits."

Eric nodded. “An extra set of wits, especially one as sharp as yours won't hurt my sister either. So what do you say?"

James looked at Eric and said “Need a minute to think". James thought, and thought. And then thought a little bit more. At last he made up his mind. He would accept but manners and humility demanded that he make it appear as if he was unwilling.

“I don’t think your sister needs watching, but I understand how much something like this could help give peace of mind.” James nodded

Eric gave him a serious look. “Accept only if you are willing to risk your life if necessary.”

"I accept, because in many respects I owe you my life." James said this solemnly.

Eric have James a questioning look. “How is that true?"

James tried to look serious “Well you killed the basilisk that tackled me." he tried to look super serious.

Eric gave James a disbelieving look. “And you volunteered to be there. Also if anything I owe you for being there and making sure it didn't tackle me."

James maintained his serious facade. “Still."

Eric sighed. “Will the debt be paid if I tell you two really good secrets?"

His facade cracking slightly James perked up and said “Oh, what are they?"

Eric nodded and told him the secrets. The narrator would like to apologize but the secrets themselves are far too important to commit to paper. As Eric finished tell James these secrets “Now, don't tell these to anyone."

James was more than a little awed. “So that's how you smu-."

He was sharply cut off by Eric saying “What did I just say?"

James looked sheepish for a second and then said “Oh, sorry. Alright that makes up for most of it. Still just ask me to do something and then we're even." he looked at Eric almost pleadingly. “That would include protecting your sister."

Eric shook his head. "I want you to choose to protect my sister out of your own free will." he paused. “Tell me what you are running from?"

James adopted a blank look. "I would rather not. I assure you it’s not something that will harm Sheena. So pick something else."

Eric paused and looked out into the distance, he gained a slightly superior smile and turned back to James. “Kiss Forma."

If James had been drinking anything he would have spat it out. “What?"

Eric kept his smug look. “You hang out all the time. It would be a learning experience for both of you I think."

James rolled his eyes and muttered “Meddler."

Eric shrugged. “Look it's that or telling me what makes you a dead man walking. Are you frightened to have your first time kissing a girl?” Eric had the most shit eating grin.

Blushing and folding his arms James said “If she isn't okay with it you are going to pick something else."

Eric simply smiled that damn smug smile of his and said “Well let's see if she is okay with it then."

As they walked back to where Eric's friends were gather James fervently prayed that Forma would say no, and also kicked himself for not just saying yes when asked.

Forma looked up at James expectantly. “Ready for more dancing?"

James started to fidget nervously. As he tried to work up the courage to say anything Eric cut in. "James owes me a favor, I said he had to kiss you to make square. Is that alright with you Forma?"

Forma did an inexpressive shrug “Alright. What's kissing?"

Cutting in Sheena said. “It's when you push your lips to someone else's lips."

Forma nodded. “It doesn't seem like that big a deal."

Loudly James said "I need to go visit the buffet table first." he then dashed off. He tried to calm himself while eating some cake. Sighing, he wrapped some cookies in a napkin to share.

Returning he saw Forma and Sheena sitting together, Forma smiled when she saw him and beckoned him over. James looked around everyone was pointedly minding their own business; although Sheena had the hints of smile. He very slowly sat down next to Forma, all but certain his heart was going to leap out of his chest.

Deciding that it would be easier to just do it and be done with it, he repeated to himself just a quick peck on the lips. He moved in closer to Forma, she smiled warmly at him. She put her arms around his shoulders. James’s hands just hung limply at his sides completely uncertain of what to do. Finally, he leaned in and gave her a quick peck on the lips.

As he tried to pull back Forma embraced him with all four arms and then slipped him some tongue. James' eyes widened in panic. What the fuck. If asked to describe what kissing Forma felt like James' best description would of been along the lines of “Warm" and “She put her fucking tongue in my mouth."

James' panic subsided for a brief instant, where an electric current seemed to fill his brain. Then his panic returned in full swing and he pushed away from Forma frantically.

Looking at James perplexed Forma asked in a concerned tone. “Did I do something wrong?" her black eyes betrayed no hint of malice.

James was still too frazzled to say much but he managed “What was that?"

Forma shrugged and then pointed at Sheena. “She said that's what you do when kissing."

Shooting a look of pure malice at Sheena he loudly said “Meddler." Everyone around him may have been suppressing laughter all though James was far too frazzled to tell. This left James to eat his cookies angrily. This is fairly hard to do. Once he was done James stood up and went over to Eric. Offering his hand James said "I accept."

Eric’s hands were much larger than James’, but Eric had an excellent handshake, and shook James’ hand while smiling warmly. “Thank you James. I always knew you would."

Cocking his head to the side James asked “Always knew I would what?"

Eric nodded saying "I knew you would be lucky." Eric paused thinking. “Tomorrow morning go to Ms. Aranae's office. She'll go over what all this means with you."

James nodded. “All right." he sat down next to Sheena. She gave him a curious glance. “We need to meet tomorrow morning; we have to talk through what all of this means."

Sheena gave James an uncomprehending look. Her tail flicked around her head for a moment and then she said “What do we have to talk about?"

James stared off into the night sky. So many stars he thought to himself. “We are partners now. We have to figure out how we are going to make this partnership work." Sheena simply nodded lost in her own thoughts.

The trio sat enjoying each other’s company when James asked. “Sheena, what are you going to miss when you go back home?”

Sheena smiled and looked around making sure Eric was not listening. “The free time, once I go home it’s going to be nonstop work.” She turned to Forma, “What will you miss, Forma?”

Pausing to think Forma’s antennae twitched. “Being above ground, there is so much wonder here.”

James had caught hints of this from Forma before and so asked “What is so wondrous?”

Forma smiled excitedly, “The sky, the wind, the trees. There is so much beauty. So much I could never see underground.” She sighed and looked up. “The stars are so beautiful.” This brought sounds of agreement. Forma looked at her two companions “You know what else is beautiful?”

Sheena asked “What else is beautiful?”

Forma happily declared. “The moon.” Silence reigned for a little while longer until rather suddenly Forma said “Oh, what will you miss James?”

That was a hell of a question, what would he miss? The answer that sprung to mind was the food but that was a less than diplomatic answer. Maybe his friends, although he missed his family a lot whenever he was away.

James rubbed his legs. He leaned past Sheena to Forma. “My friends” smiling he asked “Are you up for some dancing Forma?"

Forma seemed surprised and then smiled back. “Of course.” She stood up and started to dance. James began to wince pre-emptively but by some miracle all the training and lessons had finally gotten to Forma. She didn't step on James’s feet, she swayed in time to the music. James actually had a fairly good time dancing with Forma. She wasn't always certain about where to put her small arms but otherwise it went smoothly.

After a good deal of dancing Forma signaled for a stop. Sitting down she said. “That was fun. I got better just like I told you."

James nodded and said happily. “You really did."

It was growing late and the dances were coming to an end. Forma bid farewell to everyone and headed off into the dark. As James made to leave he was stopped by Lana. “Hold, James.” She propelled herself up easily and offered her hand. “It has been a pleasure to meet you.”

James smiled and kissed the hand, as a gentleman should. “And it has been a pleasure to meet you Lana. I hope the future treats you well.”

One of Lana’s tentacles mussed James’ hair, “The same to you James.”

James woke up early the next day. He wondered if he could wake up late after so many mornings of waking up early. He kind of doubted it. He took his exercise; it was a hard thing to notice but he was in better running shape than he had been at the start of the semester. He didn't get tired as quickly and he seemed to be a bit faster.

He arrived at the dining hall before Sheena and got his breakfast almost cheerfully. There was everything he enjoyed eating despite being in the world of monsters.

Sitting down he took a sip of his milk. One of the compromises James had made with himself upon coming to the world of monsters was that he assumed all milk was from cows. These were hopefully the most beautiful, well-bred cows, with no match in the world of humans, fit for the king himself. James had more than once acknowledged to himself that he could find out with relative ease what kind of milk it was. However, as he often told himself an intelligent gentleman does not make more problems for himself.

Rather suddenly Sheena sat down across from him. She was dressed a bit more Formally than James expected.

She stiffly greeted him as James sipped his milk. Looking at James carefully she asked “So, what do you mean by partnership?"

“We are going to have to work together if I’m going to be your bodyguard. That makes us partners I think.” James said this while looking into Sheena’s red slit eyes.

Sheena nodded “I suppose so.”

Looking off into the distance James said “I’m a bit surprised you accepted me as your bodyguard at all. I have always gotten the impression that you don’t like me.”

Sheena shrugged eating some of her own breakfast. An exotic variety of fish James noted “You do act crazy a good deal of the time.”

Still staring off into the distance James sampled some of his eggs. They needed salt he thought. “How so?”

Breathing deeply Sheena replied “You do keep fighting Philip. One would expect only an insane human to keep fighting a minotaur one on one.”

James turned to Sheena sharply “I only fought him twice.” Sheena’s smug look reminded him that perhaps that was not the strongest position to take.

“You tried to bait my brother into killing you. You say it was an accident but you won’t tell us why you did it.” Sheena had a fairly harsh glare.

James ignored Sheena’s stares “My reasons are my own Sheena. Even if I become your bodyguard, do not expect me to tell you that.”

Sheena continued. “You associate with an ant-girl.”

James gave Sheena curious look. “I thought you liked Forma.”

Nodding Sheena said “I do, it’s just very unusual. As a human you are unpredictable, and a bit weak.”

James shrugged. This was not something he got reminded of everyday or anything.

Sheena gave another smug smile. “But you want to know why despite all that I still accept you as my bodyguard?” James nodded, hopefully this would be good. “My brother trusts you, and when it really mattered you took the hit for him.”

Staring off into space again, James quietly said. “I try not to think about that.”

“Unpredictable doesn’t have to mean bad.” Sheena began going at her breakfast with abandon.

James chuckled to himself. “I know you respect Eric but I have to say this all seems a little silly.”

Not looking up Sheena said “Hm?”

“I’m just a human, you are a dragonet. I already told your brother that you don’t need guarding.” Sheena looked up at him curiously and James stammered nervously. He had thought all of this so self-obvious that there would be no explanation “Well, you are stronger than me. You can breathe fire, have claws and scales.” He sniffed “All I have is a gifted sword and the ability to fight badly.”

Sheena looked at James carefully “You practice with Forma, that certainly makes you a more experienced fighter than me.”

Shrugging James said “I’m enthusiastic, but one of my uncles said that enthusiastic soldiers make bad soldiers without training.”

Sheena paused in thought and then said. “Maybe we should see if the school has any clubs that cover self-defense.”

James nodded. “Maybe we should, it’s always better to be prepared. I’ll ask my uncles back home if they have anybody guarding advice.” Looking off into the distance James added. “Next year is going to be different huh?”

Sheena looked a little sad and then said “Eric won’t be here.”

Nodding James added “No more of his lunch parties.” Both of them stopped to think. “On the bright side you will have a lot more free time right? I rarely saw the two of you apart.”

Sheena rather slowly said “I did spend a lot of time with Eric.” Quietly and mostly to herself Sheena said “I’ll have to figure out something else.”

“Eric won’t be around for the rest of the time you are in high school.” He noticed Sheena looking glum. “He won’t be around to force you to dance with me.” James said this trying to lighten the mood. It didn’t work. “It will be great; he won’t be around to always tell you what to do.” James smiled at Sheena hoping for a smile back.

Sheena looked despondent staring at what was left of her breakfast. James spoke up “I’m sorry Sheena, did I say something wrong?”

Forcing a smile Sheena looked up. “No, nothing is wrong. We will have to hang out a lot if you are my bodyguard right?”

James nodded “We should probably try to take the same classes, maybe have lunches together. Ummmm”

Sheena added in “Maybe study together.”

James nodded. “For the big spring vacation trip we should probably stick together.” He shrugged again. “Still this is a little silly, the school is very safe.”

Looking up at James Sheena in a very serious tone said. “It’s when you feel safest that you are the most vulnerable.”

James blandly replied. “Always good advice.” He looked Sheena in her eyes again. “Let’s work together to make sure this goes successfully.” He offered his hand across the table.”

Sheena shook his hand; it was the same lady like grip with a little bit more firmness this time. “We will be partners.”

With the official business out of the way James sat back. “Hey Sheena. What’s the first thing you are going to do when you get home?”

Sheena resumed eating her now cold breakfast. “Not sure, maybe hug some relatives, see how the garden is doing. How about you?

James smiled sadly. “Hug my family.”

James made his way to Ms. Aranae's office quickly, the day was nice and waiting in a school office was tantamount to torture. The mousey elven secretary looked at him a bit surprised.

“You are remarkably clean. How can I help you?" she said this in a chipper voice.

James smiled and nodded. "I was told to see the principal about me being a bodyguard."

The secretary sagely nodded and said in a conspiratorial voice. “You will go in next."

James relaxed on one of the very comfortably couches. He read intensely trying to finish the book he was on before the library closed. He quickly stood up when the door to the principal's office opened however. Of all people Eric strode out looking confident.

He gave James a surprised glance and then said. “Ah, James. I’ll see you once you get out."

The principal's voice beckoned James in, and he quickly hopped too.

As James strode into the office the principal smiled at him warmly. Because she was still very tall this remained a little threatening. “Good to see you again."

James nodded trying not to let his intimidation show. His eyes swept the room. He had never noticed before but the ceiling was black, his eyes then settled on a familiar looking creature in one of the corners. “Is that the basilisk?"

The principal smiled and said “Yes, I had it stuffed and mounted in case Eric ever wanted it. It also makes for a good conversation piece.” She became more Formal and focused on James again. "Eric tells me that you have agreed to be Sheena's bodyguard while the both of you are in school." James nodded in response. “May I ask why you accepted?"

James paused for a second trying to order his thoughts. “It's something to do. Eric can be very convincing." James sighed. “It guarantees friends, before Eric took an interest in me I had two friends, when Eric leaves it would be nice to have more than two friends."

The principal regard James carefully. “You realize that it will be a lot of work, and it might involve risk."

James seemed surprised “Oh, I thought the school was safe."

The principal's eyes narrowed. “The school is safe from any obvious threat. But given what Sheena is mixed up in, there will no doubt be any number of conspiracies looking to ensnare her. Do you think you can protect her from those?"

James paused for another moment. Then he slowly shook his head. “No I doubt it. I have little skill in conspiracy or any other sort of deception." James let out a soft laugh. "I have little use for conspiracy as I am not from here, it simply has no chance of helping me."

The principal smiled broadly, this revealed some rather sharp looking teeth. “Then perhaps you will do better than you think. If Sheena is in any danger and you feel you are not up to the challenge, then come to my office immediately.” She paused to look out the window. "I promise that I will give you a fair hearing if nothing else. The real risk may come when we are outside of school grounds."

James tilted his head slightly. “Why is that?"

The principal scratched her leg and then replied. “Any spider can weave a very secure web and a spider is safest on their web. Danger comes when the spider is coaxed off the web. I expect you to act in a responsible manner in situations where Sheena might be in danger."

James looked out the window this time. The grounds were well maintained, and wildflowers were blooming in profusion near the forest. “That seems sensible."

The principal looked at James. “Regarding the more practical matters of you guarding Sheena. As much as is feasible you will be in the same class, your tendency to get into fights will be overlooked if it is defense of Sheena. You will have very limited leave to enter the girl's dormitory."

“What do you mean by limited leave?" James had seen the girl's dormitory but entrance was strictly forbidden.

"If Sheena expressly invites you to her room, then you have permission to go with her directly to her room." the principal used all of her eyes to give James a stern look. "This is a privilege that will be revoked if you abuse it." James was taken aback by this comment, what was that supposed to mean? "Do you have any questions?"

James thought for about half a minute then said "I have a question but it's not related to body guarding."

"Save it for tomorrow then."

Perking up James said excitedly "I have another question then, why is this being allowed to happen?"

The principal gave James an inquisitive look. "You are being allowed to guard Sheena because Eric has raised mostly substantiated fears about a conspiracy against him and his family. You specifically are being allowed to guard Sheena because you are human. There is a limited amount of trouble you could cause and you are unlikely to be swayed by outside forces.” She paused for a long second. “You also have testimonials on your behalf that speak to a strong character."

Looking off into the distance the principal smiled. “It's an extraordinary step, but this is an exceptional case.” She looked back at James. "I apologize but I need to see my next appointment."

James nodded and left the room. God she was intimidating. Eric smiled upon seeing James and moved to shake his hand immediately. “She gave you the okay I’m guessing. Thank you again for doing this James." he looked around cautiously. “Now, follow me I have to show you something."

James followed a bit perplexed. Once they had reached a secluded spot Eric handed James a heavy, large stone coin. It looked a bit like it was made of jade and had a flowing design engraved on it with a red material. Once James was finished looking it over Eric took it back from James a little forcefully.

Trying to look serious Eric said to James. “If there is ever a situation where Sheena thinks that she is in a lot of danger, she is going to give you this coin. Go to any draconic family and show them this coin. Then request protection. They will be honor bound to give it." Eric looked a bit nervous. “The coin is about as valuable as your life so under no circumstances lose the damn thing."

James was taken aback by all of this. “What is the coin?"

Eric laughed softly and smiled slightly. “That's on a need to know basis. If it's really necessary Sheena will tell you."

James looked at Eric. “A bit strange to be honest." he paused and then said something he wanted to say for a while. "I have to say Eric, having a human guard your sister does not seem like what Dave would do."

Eric gave a smug smile to James. "If I had another brother I would ask him. Besides acting how people expect a hero to act is not necessarily the right thing to do. You helped me realize that." Eric paused and then laughed softly to himself. "In that chamber we opened; at the very back was a small plaque. It was addressed to me specifically." Eric looked back at James. "You know what it said?" James shook his head. "Dave told me that people might call him a hero, he didn't think he was. He was always just a dragonet trying to do the right thing. He reminded me not to get caught up in the whole hero thing."

James paused wondering how to respond to something like that. "That was nice of him, it shows that he trusts you, wants you to be your own person."

Eric put his hand on James' shoulder. "Quite right. Will you wish me and my sister farewell when we go to leave?"

James nodded “Of course. Will your parents go to your graduation?"

Beaming Eric said “Yes, you can come if you like. It’s boring though." with that the pair bid their farewells and went separate ways.

When James returned to his room he was surprised to find that he had missed the mail. There was a small ornate note to him. It told James to go to the principal's office the next morning for scholarship evaluation.

James had little left to do that day. He spent most of it reading, and enjoying the improving weather.

The next morning as usual James woke up bright and early. He managed to go running with Cecilia. She was as usual enthusiastic, although she didn't push herself as hard.

Once that was over James got Formally dressed and went to the principal's office at the appointed hour. He saw Sheena leaving the office as he approached and successfully dodged her. As he sat waiting James finally finished the book he was on. It had been an exciting one, all swash and buckle. As a result, when James entered the principal's office he was still riding the wave of contentment a good book can bring.

The principal looked a little tired but was otherwise her prim and proper self. She nodded stiffly as James entered the room. Speaking directly the principal recited “You have been called her to evaluate your criteria for the diplomat scholarship."

“There are two parts of these criteria. Your academics and engagement with the student body.” She paused to look at the papers on her desk. “Your academics are excellent, good job.” She seemed a bit surprised when looking at James' academics. “Your engagement with the student body,” she paused for effect “Is acceptable. It is understood that as a human you would likely have a hard time fitting in with the student body. You were lucky that Eric took an interest in you and that you helped him open the vault."

She took a slightly conspiratorial tone. “Your bravery in dealing what was inside the vault is also noted.” She straightened up. “Do you have any questions?"

Pausing James ran his tongue over his lips, and then said “There is one question that has been bugging me for a while. Why does the foremost school for human monster relations have all of two humans in it?"

The principal seemed genuinely surprised and paused for an awkward second before resuming her stride. “That is a good question. You deserve the answer." the principal looked out the window sadly. “When I was young, my parents died. They were wealthy and using my inheritance I decided to go the world of humans."

James cut in “Did you go with Darius?"

The principal looked at James and smiled. “Yes, I did. He has been a retainer for my family since I was a child. In the world of humans, I did a grand tour of the cities. I was heckled and harassed in most places excepting one, the city of Constantinople." James mentally corrected her but kept it too himself.

The principal seemed lost in reminiscencing. As she paused James examined the office again, he noticed the two maps on the wall. One was of the world of monsters, but the other was a shape James instantly recognized, the world of humans.

The principal smiled slightly and then continued “It was a huge hodgepodge of people; they did not seem to notice monsters that much. As I went to the various sights, it occurred to me that many problems in the world of monsters could be solved if the various species were brought together."

The principal looked at James almost sadly. “It is difficult to change adult’s minds; they have mostly decided on what think. Very few collages accept multiple species and there are no schools like this one. Once, I had the idea, there was the problem of implementation, do you know why this school is patterned after human schools?”

James stared at his feet trying to think. He looked back at the principal. “My brother read a book on the romans once. He told me that the romans tried to destroy the local culture before introducing their own. He said that this made it easier for the romans to manage the conquered people. The school itself doesn't need humans."

The principal smiled warmly at James. “That's almost right. It was so they would have something to come together about and way to help them leave their past bias behind." the principal gave a very quick roguish smile before resuming her stern look. “Many of the students loathe the uniforms, and the rituals. But they can loathe such things together."

James gave a slight quiet laugh at this. It was true as far as he could tell. The principal continued. “It was very difficult to build the school. It took most of my inheritance, a good number of sponsors and a lot of gardening."

James cut in “Did the various conspiracies around Eric make you put the school here?"

The principal nodded. “Yes, essentially. There are so many conspiracies around the dragonet's chosen one that they poured a lot of money into the building of the school." the principal gave a contented sigh. “Most insect species don't live very long compared to humans or dragonets. I’m in my 30's, I will likely die of old age in my 60's. This school is my life's work." -help my school and prosper, hurt my school and perish-

The principal paused slightly which gave an awestruck James a chance to say. “It's amazing what you are doing here."

The principal smiled saying “Thank you James.” She glanced at the grandfather clock, “Oh, I went way over time with you. I have to ask you to leave.” As James turned to leave the principal said in a confident voice. “There is more to you than it seems James."

James turned back smiling. “So I have been told, good bye."

Leaving the principal's office, he saw a large number of other students waiting outside of the office. Trying and failing to look inconspicuous he quickly left. As James jogged down a hall he glanced at the now finished library book. He had returned all of the other library books so it would be best to take care of this now.

Arriving at the library James was surprised to see another student, a lamia returning a book on string instruments. He waited patiently behind her and was struck by an idea. As the other student made to leave Ms. Maria happily greeted James. “Getting the last book back in?"

James nodded sliding the book to her. Then he asked “Can I see the record book of who checked out what?"

Watching the lamia leave Ms. Maria said “Why, of course not ja-." the other student had left and was hopefully out of earshot. “Sure, why?"

Rolling his eyes James said in a tired voice. “Do you know about all the bodyguard stuff?"

Ms. Maria shrugged. “Vaguely, what's it got to do with this?"

James smiled “Well, I have a hard time talking to Sheena. I figured if I read some of the books she read here over the summer we will have more to talk about."

Ms. Maria let out a big toothy grin. “That's pretty smart of you James. Come on into the back room and i’ll let you look through them." it took a while because there were so many books to scan through but eventually James found Sheena's name. The books were mostly romantic adventures. James stuck out his tongue at the thought of reading them but persevered.

As James finished, Ms. Sialia returned to the back room. “Get what you needed?"

James nodded “Took a while but here it is."

Ms. Maria put out her hand experimentally. “Well, it has been nice to have you visit the library so often. How was your first year here?"

James paused to think, that was a bit of a question. Finally, he nodded resolutely. “It was tough at first but it evened out towards the end. How was your first year of being a librarian?" James gently shook her hand.

It was Ms. Maria's turn to pause. James noted that her tail went limp as she thought. “Not what I expected and less frightening than I thought it would be." She brightened slightly and looked at James. “Fun once I got to know the students a bit better."

As the pair exited the back room Ms. Sialia entred with another pile of travel books. “Hello." Ms. Sialia looked momentarily suspicious.

James smiled and nodded back. “Hello, how was your first year of teaching?"

Taken aback by the sudden question Ms. Sialia simply stared at James. “Okay, harder than I thought and not quite what I hoped it would be. Still good enough for me."

James puzzled by what was said offered his hand. “It has been very nice to know you."

Offering her wing James very gingerly shook it. “It has been nice to know you too James. Feel free to come knock on my door next year if you need help." James nodded resolutely.

With that taken care of James left the library and returned to his room. He had deficit of books and a surfeit of time. So on a whim he went to the graduation ceremony.

The ceremony was laid out at one of the school’s plazas, a stage had been erected with masses of chairs infront of it and on one side there was a beautiful food spread. The graduating class was fairly large, and all of them were in traditional graduation robes. James considered making the plunge but the disapproving looks he got just hanging out on the periphery dissuaded him. Ms. Maria and Ms. Sialia were sitting next to one another on the stage, talking to one another and trying hard to look official. The principal was working the crowd and shaking hands. The ceremony looked long and boring so James went back to his room.

After packing he passed the day peacefully thinking of home and what stories he could tell his family. He also gave some thought to what stories it would be better to not tell his family, there were arguably more of these than the first category. He could tell his brother that he had finally kissed a girl, but that would require admitting to kissing an ant-girl. His brother’s teasing would get worse after that James reckoned.

As he got ready to go to sleep he felt a ghostly presence poking his shoulder. “Hello Fen, how are you?"

James turned around to see the blurry outline of Fen. “Sad"

Raising an eyebrow James asked “Why are you sad?"

Fen said in playful voice. “Because with all the students leaving I’m going to be bored."

James nodded “That sucks, you can't leave the school?"

Fen came a little bit into focus, “Nope. What are you going to do over the summer?"

James mused for a second and then said. “Try as hard as I can to forget everything I learned this year."

Laughing Fen said “But you did pretty well this year."

Looking at Fen with a serious expression James said. “Yep, but it was super boring."

Fen seemed to straighten up a little. “But seriously, at the beginning of the year you said it was impossible that you would be able to get the scholarship."

James flopped down on his bed, “It is impossible. It took a miracle for me to get the scholarship fulfilled this year." letting out a depressed sigh James continued. "I don't know what I will do for the next three years."

Forma reached out tentatively and gently held James' hand. “You will figure something out. I know you will. After all you just have to make your own miracle"

James kept himself from flinching at the cold touch and looked at her a bit surprised. “How can you know I will?"

Fen smiled roguishly and then shrugged. "I don't, but I have faith."

Sitting up James let out a soft laugh. “At least one of us does." James scrambled to change the subject. “Why are you here Fen?"

Fen floated up again lazily, “To wish you a good summer of course."

Making a face James looked up at her. “No, why are you stuck here?"

Turning away from James Fen said "I can't tell you."

James offered his hand out in a handshake. “Well I hope you have a good summer Fen."

Fen floated back down and shook James’ hand. "I hope you have a good summer James." Fen floated back up into the ceiling. James went to sleep with a slight shiver and a smile on his face.

James woke up and bolted out of bed the next morning. He was standing uncertainly when he actually checked his watch. He let out a sigh of relief. He got dressed quickly, and went to where he had said he was going to meet Forma.

Forma however had gotten there first. She smiled upon seeing him. “Hello James."

“Hello Forma." James struggled for something to say, should he start saying good bye immediately or try to make conversation first. James scrambled and managed to say “Did you sleep well?"

Forma nodded. She then began to speak quite stiffly. “It was very nice to meet you James. I hope you have a good summer. Perhaps we could meet next year."

Smiling and nodding James replied “Of course we can. Same place as we originally met for lunch?" Forma nodded. James began to scramble again for something to say.

Forma also looked at a loss for words until she said quite suddenly. “One last fencing match."

James nodded and after a bit of rifling through his backpack tossed Forma the better sword. As she adopted the position James said “Don't hold anything back."

Forma dropped the position and then leaning forward asked in a concerned voice. “Are you sure?"

James braced himself and nodded. The two faced off holding their swords infront of them. Breathing deeply James considered what Forma was going to do, she liked switching hands to keep him on the defensive, she was also strong enough to normally win when James attacked.

Forma was having a similar internal conversation, she considered carefully how to beat James without hurting him. He liked to attack when he could, but Forma tended to win when she was on the offensive. She should let him have the first attack and then try to lure him into exposing himself so Forma could switch to the offense.

James took a tentative step towards Forma, she wasn’t attacking nor was she switching which hand her sword was in. This normally meant she was going to try and bait him into attacking. Forma rarely hesitated when they were fencing, she legitimately had little to fear. James considered the situation carefully, if she wanted to give him the initiative should he take it. But since he was likely going to be put on the defensive he needed to pick his terrain carefully.

Smiling to herself Forma also advanced. James had that spaced out slightly timid posture that he got when he was thinking too much, he almost always defaulted to attack anyway.

For a few fleeting minutes it seemed that James might actually be able to equal Forma, then Forma stopped holding back and James was quickly put to shame.

After a bit of this as they both sat panting James said “You are very good at this."

Forma shrugged. “The fact that you are missing two arms helps." Eventually however even this came to an end and it was time for Forma to leave.

James bowed “It has been a lot of fun to do this with you" Forma was duly impressed that he could do this after the drubbing he had just received.

Forma looked at James carefully and sniffed the air. There was this cloud of blue above him and his expression differed from the usual. Forma responded “It has been very nice to know you James.” As she walked away she turned to look at James one last time and it all clicked. The blue was because he was sad to see her go, and the expression was because he was worried that she wouldn't see her again.

Forma rushed back to James and took of his hands. It was warm as usual. “I’ll come back.” She squeezed his hand and then walked away again. James had his unsettled expression where he didn't react very much to anything. As she reached the edge of the hiding place, Forma straightened her clothes, adopted the Formica expression and went to join the members of her colony.

James had been quite surprised by all of this and took a moment to breathe and then went towards the pavilion where the leaving students were supposed to congregate. He loitered near a bench. His train did not arrive until the afternoon, he had already packed and it didn't make any sense to carry his luggage everywhere.

As James stared off vacantly into the crowd, he would have noticed a slightly familiar bee-girl walk by. She sniffed the air, her antenna swaying as she did so and then looked confused at James. She shrugged and kept walking.

Quite unexpectedly someone came up to James. It was Andrew looking a little less wild and bit more groomed. He offered his hand.

James hesitated a second and then shook Andrew’s hand strongly. Andrew was smiling like it was his birthday. James good naturedly asked “Happy to leave?"

Andrew nodded strongly. “So, so happy to finally leave this horrible place. Are you catching the second train?" James had barely time to nod before Andrew continued. "I must thank you for your advice."

James searched his memory, advice on what? Most of the time James had spent with Andrew was blanked out. "I’m happy that it helped you." He tried to sound confident.

Andrew finally let go of James hand and slapped him on the shoulder. “My parents agreed that so long as I behave myself I can go to another school." He looked with concern for a moment at James. "I’m sorry your situation is not the same and you have to keep going to this horrible school."

James nodded slowly. Andrew continued again “What are you going to do when you get home?"

Brightening slightly James replied happily. “Hug my family I should think. You?"

Looking very homesick for a moment Andrew responded “The same. It will be so good to be away from this terrible place won't it?"

James licked his lips. “Home isn't perfect, but I’ll get to see my brothers and my parents."

Andrew nodded sadly. "I can say the same, and I will see them much more thanks to you." Smiled at James again. “But how pleasant it will be to be back among our fellow humans, how wonderful, how joyful, how div-.“ He glanced at his pocket watch and looked panicked. "I have to go. You will always have a friend in me." They exchanged hurried goodbyes and Andrew was off as fast as his lanky legs would carry him. James watched as with an unusual look of hope Andrew headed off into the crowds.

This lead James to sit down, so many goodbyes at once was exhausting. As if on cue Cecilia then came ambling up. “Hello James"

James looked up at Cecilia and smiled “Hello, Cecilia. Happy to go home?"

Cecilia nodded, smiling herself. “Very happy. It's been longer since you were home than I was, so you must be super happy."

James nodded emphatically. “Don't forget to keep running when you go home." He offered his hand. “It has been very nice to meet you and I hope we meet again.”

Cecilia became defensive playfully and shook his hand. "I could say much the same to you.” She ruffled his hair easily. “Why are you so formal?”

For an unguarded second James looked morose but recovered quickly. “School taught me to always say farewells, you never know what could happen.”

Cecilia patted him on the head “Don’t worry we’ll meet again. Take care."

James rolled his eyes and waved "Take care Cecilia." With that she was off into the crowd again. She looked forward confidently, seeming unstoppable.

James went to the appointed time and place to meet Eric. He waited, and then waited some more. Eventually however Eric showed up with Sheena in tow. James waved as they approached and Eric waved back. They shook hands in turn with James. “It's good to see you James." Eric said confidently. “Sorry we are late, we had to ditch the parents and say good bye to Lana." Sheena rolled her eyes.

James nodded, no doubt Eric and Lana farewell had been touching, but that was theirs not his. “It's good to see the both of you. Are you happy to go home?”

Sheena made a face but Eric responded “Yes, it will be good to take some time to relax."

Sheena cut in “Not that we will have much time to relax."

Eric added. “Are you happy to go home?"

James nodded slowly. “Everywhere has its own problems, but there I will have my family with me."

Eric was miffed. “You had friends here to help, you know."

Shrugging James carefully said "I also get home cooking there." Sheena nodded to this. James then added “And no homework”

Eric nodded and laughed. “Well, have a good summer James. Don't forget about the deal we made." James rolled his eyes and nodded.

James extended his hand to Sheena, who after some hesitation shook it gently. "I look forward to working with you next year Sheena, also don't forget what I said."

Sheena nodded slowly. "I’ll think about it."

James added “Have a good summer you two." Sheena rolled her eyes again.

Eric strode away if not happily then purposefully, Sheena followed along seemingly overshadowed by her brother.

Eventually it came time for James to take the carriage down to the train station. Carriages in the world of monsters were moved by large wooly things that James couldn’t name.

Finally, his train arrived, billowing steam and taking on coal as it stopped. James got on and took his seat. He looked back at the school through the window and thought to himself “What a hell of a school year. He had been tackled by horrible monsters, agreed to a clandestine deal with a species’ chosen one, beaten a minotaur in a fight.”

James looked forward already imagining home, and then mentally added “Made a few friends and kissed a girl.” He glanced at Forma’s gift, and then at the purple skies. James reflected that all he could do was hope the next year would go better, he wasn't a man of violence any longer. It would be hard, but he would persevere. After all he didn't have much of a choice.

He sat back and tried to smile. Looking up at the purple sky he began to imagine that it was blue.