

# SCHOOL

“I’m outta here!” Brendan announced, cramming the last of his books into his backpack. “It’s Friday and I’m gonna go straight home. I might sit in my room and listen to music. I might lie on the couch and watch TV. I might just stare at the walls, drooling. I don’t care! It’s Friday and I’m going home.”

Harold looked annoyed. “We still haven’t gotten any work done on our presentation for social studies. No, let me rephrase that: *you* haven’t gotten any work done on our presentation for social studies.”

“We only have until next Friday, Brendan,” Dmitri agreed. “We’d better get on the bowl.”

“Ball,” Brendan laughed. “Not bowl, Dmitri.”

They were standing in front of Robertson Davies Academy’s main entrance. Students streamed past them down the stone steps, eager to start the weekend. Only one week remained before the Christmas break, and the mood was high. Exams would follow the two-week layoff, but no one worried about that now. All thoughts were on freedom.

“Can’t we just put in a couple of hours now?” Harold pleaded. “I’m serious. I don’t like leaving things until the last minute.”

Brendan swung his bag over his shoulder, shaking his head. “Sorry, guys. I just want some time to myself. I’ve been really busy lately.”

“Oh? We hadn’t noticed,” Harold said sarcastically.

“What have you been up to, Brendan?” Dmitri asked in a gentler tone. “You’ve been very reoccupied.”

“Preoccupied. And it’s just stuff. Family stuff,” Brendan said vaguely. He was telling the truth. Most of his time outside of school was being eaten up by “family” activities. His Faerie relatives were keeping him busy training him to harness his new abilities. He spent every extra minute with Kim, Greenleaf, and other Faerie tutors working on his new perceptive skills. When he wasn’t doing that, he was being thrashed in sparring sessions with Saskia, the Warp Warrior who tended the bar at the Swan of Liir on the Ward’s Island. So far, his schoolwork hadn’t suffered too badly, but his friendship with Harold and Dmitri had. He hardly saw them outside of class. As he looked into their faces, he saw that they were unhappy. He had to make a gesture of some kind.

“Listen,” he said. “Why don’t we get together on the weekend and do the work then? You guys can come to my house and we’ll get the presentation into shape.”

“I guess,” Harold said reluctantly.

“My mum will probably be baking this weekend.”

Harold’s face visibly brightened. The chubby boy was a fan of Brendan’s mum’s cookies. “Okay. When should we come over?”

“Tomorrow,” Brendan decided. “Let’s say, two o’clock.”

“Okay.” Dmitri smiled.

“See you then,” Brendan said. He waved and set off toward the park and home.

Dmitri and Harold watched him go.

“I wonder what kind of family business he’s got that keeps him busy every night of the week,” Harold pondered.

“Who knows?” Dmitri shrugged. “My family keeps me busy, I guess. My babka hasn’t been feeling well.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Harold said. “Tell her I say hello.”

“Really?” Dmitri asked, confused. “Okay. But you’ve never met her before.”

“Haven’t I? I thought I had once.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I could have sworn I had.” Harold’s eyebrows scrunched together as he tried to dredge his memory. “I could have sworn.”<sup>14</sup>

“Don’t worry about it.” Dmitri clapped him on the back. “Are you taking the streetcar?”

“Yeah,” Harold said. “Let’s ride.”

As Brendan waited at the crosswalk for the light to change, he saw Chester Dallaire on the other side of the street. They hadn’t spoken since he’d released Chester from the Compulsion in the hospital room weeks ago. Chester had only just returned to school after a long psychiatric evaluation.

He was no longer the same hulking bully who’d terrorized their little group every day. He was quieter. He kept pretty much to himself, having discarded the cadre of rough friends he’d once run with. He’d lost weight and cut his hair.

Brendan felt a pang of guilt. These changes were the result of his actions. He had unwittingly used his powers on Chester, powers he’d been unaware he even possessed. Chester had been bullying Brendan and Kim

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, Harold *has* met Dmitri’s babka, but that day was erased from their memories. Again, read the first book. If you haven’t yet, why are you reading this one, you strange, strange person?

when Brendan had said simply, “Get lost!” He’d learned the hard way that he had to be careful what he said to Humans. A Faerie can Compel people to do things with words alone, and the stronger the will behind the words, the stronger the Compulsion. Brendan’s command had sent Chester fleeing across the country in a desperate, mindless effort to lose himself. The police finally found him and sent him to the hospital until Brendan released him from the Compulsion. Brendan remembered that moment and the grateful reaction of Chester’s mother with a great deal of shame. He hoped that Chester was okay and had suffered no lasting damage. When they passed each other in the halls, Chester never spoke to him but just nodded in acknowledgment. At times, however, when Brendan was in the cafeteria or standing talking with his friends, he’d catch Chester staring at him. Brendan wondered how much of his ordeal Chester recalled and if he knew of Brendan’s involvement.

Chester was trudging north to the subway entrance. He must have sensed Brendan’s eyes on him because he looked up directly at him. He stared for an uncomfortable moment and then nodded his head once. Brendan lamely waved a hand and looked away, walking across the street into the park.

The high-pitched buzz of a small engine approached. Kim coasted up on her scooter, her silver crash helmet flashing in the weak December sunlight. Her real name was Ki-Mata, but she allowed Brendan to call her by the name she used in Human company, Kim.

“Is that a new scooter?” Brendan asked.

“Yep! Og totally freaked when I told him how the other one got trashed. I had to beg and plead and generally grovel,

but he agreed to build me a new one.” Og was Brendan’s Faerie uncle. A rough and hearty fellow, he hardly seemed the type to be good with his hands. Og was an Artificer, however, the Faerie equivalent of an engineer.<sup>15</sup> He had built a scooter for Kim, which she’d trashed during the headlong escape from the mad and dangerous Orcadia. “He wasn’t happy, but in the end, he couldn’t say no.”

“I’ll bet.” Brendan laughed. He couldn’t imagine many people, Faerie or Human, who’d stand in Kim’s way if she really wanted something. In spite of her toughness, she was what most of the boys at RDA would call a hottie. But should any of them call her that within earshot, she’d likely brain them with the field hockey stick that perpetually jutted out from her backpack. Brendan supposed that was part of the reason she was so appealing. She was pretty and kind of terrifying at the same time.

“What’s your problem?” Kim asked suddenly.

Brendan realized he’d been staring at her. He tried to look nonchalant. “Nothing.”

“How have your training sessions been going?” Kim asked.

“Brutal. I can’t seem to get anything right. I’ve lost whatever connection I had to my abilities.”

“Sorry, Brendan. You’ve got to get up to speed. You have to practise.”

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<sup>15</sup> Artificers use their Faerie powers and skill at working with their hands to create functional works of art. They harness spirits to build motors. They place extraordinary power within ordinary objects. They also reproduce Human technologies in forms that Fair Folk can use. Faeries adore Human gadgets: cellphones, MP3 players, DVDs, and computers are all fascinating to them. Sadly, because of the Faeries’ strong magical affinity, most Human technology won’t work for them. That’s where Artificers like Og come in. They build items that function just like the Humans’ versions but run on the natural ambient energy of the Earth.

“Why? What’s the big rush? Faeries live a really long time, right? I have years to practise. Decades! Centuries!” They crossed the street into Queen’s Park. The trees were stark and bare now. No snow had fallen yet, but Brendan could sense the winter in the rawness of the wind as it rattled the dead leaves around their feet. One of the benefits of being a Faerie was the way his senses were heightened and tuned to nature in a way he’d never imagined before the glamours that concealed them had been lifted.

“See ya ’round. Get some sleep tonight. Or better yet, work on your meditation!” She gunned the motor and took off across the park.

“Oi! I’m trying to get some shut-eye here!” a little voice cried. Brendan unzipped his jacket to reveal BLT stretching her tiny arms as she stood in his inner pocket. Ever since his uncle Og had gifted the Lesser Faerie’s services to Brendan on his Quest for the missing amulet, she’d been his constant companion. She had a taste for sweets that bordered on addiction. Blinking, she looked up at Brendan and flapped her gauzy wings.<sup>16</sup> “What’s the racket?”

“You shouldn’t sleep so much in the day,” Brendan scolded. “You end up being awake all night.”

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<sup>16</sup> Faeries are only one of many different types of what Humans might call Magical Races. The Faerie world is divided into two major types of Faerie: Greater and Lesser. Greater Faeries are of normal Human size and possess various kinds of powers. Lesser Faeries, or, if one is more politically correct, Diminutives, are small enough to sit in the palm of one’s hand. They come in a vast array of physical forms. Some resemble birds. Some are mammalian. Some look like insects. Many but not all varieties of Diminutives can fly. Some even live in and breathe water. BLT’s real name is Basra La Tir, but Brendan calls her BLT because he found her hidden in a sandwich.

“What can I say? I’m a night person.” She yawned and burped.<sup>17</sup>

“Well, I’m a sleep person. And I want to get some. So try to shift your schedule.”

BLT scowled. “What am I supposed to do all day while you’re in that idiotic Human school?”

“What did you do before you were assigned to me?”

“Sleep.”

“Oh brother,” Brendan groaned.

“Who are you talking to?”

Brendan nearly jumped out of his skin. He spun around to find a girl standing on the path. Thin and pale, she wore an oversized black leather motorcycle jacket over a Weezer T-shirt and tattered black jeans. Her black hair was gelled up into a spiky mohawk. On her hands, she wore black woollen gloves with the fingers cut off, revealing black painted nails.

“Sorry.” She laughed. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t,” Brendan said quickly. “I just didn’t see you there.”

“Of course you didn’t.” She smiled. “Nobody sees me unless I want them to.” Her blue eyes sparkled. They were a blue that Brendan had never seen on any person before: sapphire shimmering with deeper shades of violet. He realized then that she was a Faerie like him.

His heart raced. He’d been told by Ariel, Greenleaf, and Kim to be wary of any Fair Folk who approached him

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<sup>17</sup> Greater Faeries, unlike Humans, require very little sleep. They replace sleep with short periods of silent, trance-like meditation. Lesser Faeries, however, are like Humans in their need for sleep. No one knows why. One theory is that they burn more energy, like birds. Another is that they’re too high-strung to meditate. Yet another is that Lesser Faeries are just too lazy to learn how to meditate. I’d subscribe to the last theory.

without a proper introduction. After his experience with Orcadia, that seemed like sound advice.

The girl stepped closer and held out a hand. "I'm Charles." She pronounced it "Sharles." "My friends call me Charlie. You can, too, if you like." She spoke with a soft accent. She sounded French or maybe Quebecois.

Brendan stared at the hand but didn't reach for it. "Charles? That's a boy's name."

"Real smooth." BLT had crawled out of her hiding place to sit on Brendan's shoulder.

"Shut up, you little pest," Brendan said.

The girl dropped her hand and shrugged. "It's my name. I'm a girl. That makes it a girl's name, doesn't it? Don't I look like a girl to you?"

"Uh, yeah. I guess so," Brendan said dumbly. She was a little punk for his taste. Still, he could see that under the makeup, hair, and shredded clothes, there might be a pretty cute girl. He pushed the thought away. He had to concentrate. This could be a potentially dangerous situation.

He looked around for Kim but she was long gone on her scooter. He had to deal with this on his own.

"What's the matter?" Charlie pressed. "Am I scaring you?" She laughed, crinkling up her nose. He felt sure she was mocking him. "You look a little worried."

"I'm fine." Brendan didn't know what to do. He knew other Faeries lived in the city. He saw lots of them in the Swan and sometimes on the street, going about their business like ordinary citizens. He sensed them. More accurately, he felt they were different, like him. They never approached him, however. They nodded or smiled and went on their way. Ariel had laid down the rules where Brendan was concerned, and the Fair Folk in Toronto

followed them. He was not to be approached, and his Human family was off limits.

In spite of the rules, here was this Faerie stopping him on his way home from school. He didn't know what to do.

"I've got to be going," he said and started walking away.

She trotted after him and matched his stride. "You don't want to meet me?"

"No thanks."

"You're very rude." She pouted.

"Just leave me alone, okay?" Brendan said, trying to walk faster.

She matched his pace easily. "Don't you like girls?"

Brendan stopped and faced her. "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers." As soon as he said it, he felt like an idiot. "Just leave me alone, all right?"

"He's right! He's not supposed to talk to you!" BLT confirmed. Somehow, a tiny person sticking up for him made the situation seem even more childish and humiliating.

"Lose the big idiot and spend a little time with Lord Chitter, yer ladyship!" came a voice from below. "I can certainly appreciate a pretty girl." They looked down to see a tiny man dressed in what appeared to be the fur of a grey squirrel. He held a minute spear in his hand. He blinked his glossy black eyes and grinned. Chitter bowed low, sweeping off his little cap. Brendan had made Chitter's acquaintance only a few short weeks before on the fateful day he'd spent running from Orcadia. The Lesser Faerie ran with the squirrels of Queen's Park, pilfering picnic baskets and generally making a nuisance of himself.

"*You're* the idiot," Brendan shot back. "And you're only five inches tall."

“You’re the idiot,” Chitter retorted, “’cause you ain’t interested in her.”

BLT fluttered into the air, pushing up her sleeves. “Don’t you call Brendan an idiot!”

“Or what?” Chitter stuck out his tiny chin.

“Or I’ll thrash you, you furry little creep!”

“He’s an idiot and that’s the truth.”

BLT snarled. “All right. You called down the thunder!”

“Hold on, there!” Brendan quickly grabbed BLT before she could launch herself at Lord Chitter and stuffed her into his jacket pocket. BLT shrieked and struggled but Brendan zipped up his pocket, trapping her safely inside.

“Now look what you’ve done!” he snapped at the strange girl. “Just leave me alone.” Brendan turned on his heel and marched away.

The girl caught up with him as he reached the far end of the park. “I don’t want to cause you any trouble. I just want us to get to know each other.”

Brendan whirled on her. “I’m not interested, all right? I can barely keep the friends I have. I don’t need any new ones.”

“I want to help you,” she said. “I know the training is hard for you.”

“And you’re making it harder. If you really want to help, just leave me alone.” His voice rose to a shout. A couple walking by stared. Embarrassed, he simply turned and walked away.

Charlie didn’t follow. When he ventured a look over his shoulder, he saw her standing at the edge of the park, watching him. She gave him a cheeky little wave. Brendan sneered and turned toward home.