

The Rites of Passage EP

An Inner Circle Short Story

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Just Like Christmas

DECEMBER 17, 2008

Christmas edged ever closer, but it didn't feel like Christmas to Corbin. Although dazzling arrays of lights sparkled in the night, and decorations littered the brown Dallas lawns, the temperature continued to hover in the sixties during the day. It was nothing like the brutal Montana cold he knew during his time in the cult. Corbin could finally bring himself to call the Celestial Ambassadors that, mostly because of Kirin, but with Christmas only a week away, she was the last thing on his mind.

He and Isaac moved into the creaky East Dallas home a little over a month ago, with Isaac claiming the master bedroom, but usually crashing on one of the living room couches. Mister said the previous owner had died suddenly, with no next of kin, which would explain the furnishings. Although calling the musty, miss-matched furniture and dusty collection of books, mementos, and knickknacks *furnishings* felt overly generous. Boxes and milk crates overflowed with decades-old magazines and scrapbooks, and sometimes Corbin picked through the forgotten accumulation of a lifetime and wondered about the man who had lived out his final few years there. Isaac mostly perused the collection of records and videos and rated the dead man's tastes. Corbin found that morbid, but he also found a computer

stashed away in the study, which gave him access to the world outside via the dial-up modem.

Mister had been good to his word and made all the law enforcement agencies that hounded Corbin disappear. Not that Corbin's name had ever appeared in the news, what with him being a minor at the time, but Mister and Isaac assured him he could now walk up to any cop in the country and give his full name, and it wouldn't mean a thing. It sounded impossible, but he believed them. Mister and Isaac had a habit of doing impossible things on the daily. With their guiding hands, he had dipped below everyone's radar, and now glided through life in stealth mode.

The other Celestial Ambassadors had not been so lucky. Corbin knew a little about computers from his short stint in the Oklahoma City school system, and Isaac spent time showing him how to refine his *Google-fu* to discover what he needed. In fact, Isaac had spent more time on the fine workings of internet searches than he ever did on his given job of teaching Corbin magic. But that little attention at least told Corbin that only two other members had been killed in the ensuing shootout that claimed Gideon's life. Agent Stipek had survived, and most of the leaderless Ambassadors surrendered when the F.B.I. rolled up in force. One report had even mentioned his mother by name, stating how she had helped usher the surrender, but it was an iReport from CNN, and he never saw another that verified it.

But then the article disappeared the next time he tried to pull it up. Never to be seen again.

Corbin wanted to reach out, to call and let her know he was okay. Isaac shot the idea down instantly, claiming that there was no reason to go poking the bear in the nose with his continued existence. But Corbin insisted they get word to his mother, and they finally compromised on a letter. Isaac remained adamant that Corbin not include

a return address, which left him wondering if she ever received it. He meant to write a second one, but kept putting it off as the days rolled on. Unable to mention his tutelage in magic, he really had nothing to add.

He found barely anything about them in the news anymore. Only quick mentions of their upcoming court appearances, and even those came less and less frequently. He found no indication of either Hailey or Henry, but had learned the other kids had been sent off to relatives while their parents languished in jail. Corbin racked his brain if Hailey had ever mentioned anyone outside the cult and came up empty. He had been willing to risk his life for her, and brought about the death of his surrogate father to save her, but realized now how little he actually knew about the girl he had sworn he loved.

Pushing away from the monitor after his afternoon search, Corbin regarded the Y-shaped stick on the bookshelf by the door. His grandmother Trudie had taught him to harness his knack, but it had been Mister who unlocked his ability, and now he practiced every day with Kirin. But his mind returned to Gideon as he grasped the dowsing rod.

They told him Raziel had sired him, just as the angel had many of the other kids conceived on the Spread. But he still called Gideon *father*. They all had, but Corbin had been special, had been singled out as Gideon's anointed successor. That was why Corbin bore the last name of James, unlike Wagner, like his mother or grandparents, and he wondered briefly why his mother had allowed him to bear that name when she had not taken it herself. She truly believed Raziel was his father—he knew that when she spoke about the angel choosing her—yet she still allowed him to call Gideon his father.

And what did it mean now that his father was dead?

Because of him.

Corbin reached for the knack, letting it rise up from the base of his spine, and flow out his arms into the dowsing rod. He sought Gideon, the only father he knew. The man he had killed so he could escape. The sensation came at once, eager to escape the confines of his body. But it dissipated into nothingness the moment it reached the rod, which refused to shift and show Corbin the way.

It refused to budge because he could not find Gideon.

Because Gideon was dead.

Because of him.

“Hey kid!” Corbin nearly snapped the stick in two as Isaac pounded on the door to the study. The man peered through the smudged glass panes with mismatched eyes. “I need you to make a run. We’re out of Milky Way and DP. You should probably get something for dinner too.”

“Jack?” he asked. Corbin tried to hide his surprise at Isaac’s sudden appearance, but doubted Isaac noticed. The man could supposedly detect incredibly minute differences between magical devices, but often failed to perceive anything he considered beneath his notice. Which happened to be everything.

“Nah, I’m feeling festive. Hit up Matt’s and get me an enchilada plate—one beef, one cheese. And get yourself something too. In fact, get two or three. We’ll eat like kings for days.” Isaac peeled several twenties off a wad of cash. Corbin would have believed his mentor’s magnanimity more if he had known the money didn’t come directly from Mister to keep the two of them on retainer, which boiled down to biding their time until Mister called with a job. Corbin hoped Isaac would teach him magic while they waited. Instead, Isaac perused the old books and albums that came with the house, as well as catching up on *Dancing with the Stars*, which he insisted he watched ironically.

All the while, Corbin ran his endless errands.

It made sense, since Isaac could not be seen in public. Not after the twisting that he received in the Nowhen. The white streak of hair and mismatched eyes still remained, although the latter's color slowly faded back to brown by the day, promising to return to normal if Isaac abstained from practicing magic. Those deformities he could hide, but the razorblades that protruded from his fingertips and gums gave away the magical impossibility of his condition, which forced him indoors. So, the former fugitive Corbin went out into the world on Isaac's behest.

Isaac said the cell phone and car were eighteenth birthday presents for Corbin. It was certainly the first vehicle Corbin had ever owned, and he knew he should feel grateful for it, but looking at the fading blue 1984 CRX hatchback parked in the driveway reminded him how Isaac always gave the bare minimum for Corbin to perform his duties. The beat-up car at least handled well, although Corbin had to reacquaint himself with driving stick, but he could not help but wonder why Isaac had opted for a wooden board for the front bumper instead of replacing it properly. Sure, he had mounted it up well and drilled it out to attach the headlights, which somehow passed inspection if the sticker on the license plate could be believed, but it left Corbin wondering why Isaac would give him such a conspicuous car when they were meant to keep a low profile.

Like everything Isaac gave as a gift, it consisted of contradictions, and Corbin again considered what they meant as he backed into the street and watched the strung-up lights wink on in the oncoming dusk.



Janice's oversized SUV in the driveway announced that Kirin was there, while the several new butts in the outside ashtray said Isaac was several beers in, but Corbin could not help but grin. Her official duty had been to magically heal Corbin's arm after Alec Rifkin broke it during the Sherman ordeal. And she had shown up every night after they arrived in Dallas, keeping her hands on his wounded appendage and muttering her strange language to chase the pain away. Two weeks flew by, with her as their only guest. When she declared his arm fully healed, he feared that it would be the last he would see of her, but Kirin showed up two days later with a twelve-pack of Shiner and a pack of Camel Lights.

Purchasing one of the two things the underage Corbin could not earned her admittance, and even a metal-tinged smile from Isaac as he availed himself of both. Kirin took the opportunity to escape Janice's tutelage, and she brought a break from the monotony with her that the three would share until Isaac eventually passed out on the couch. Then it would just be the two of them, and they could get to work.

"What do you mean you've never seen *Meet Me in St. Louis*?" Isaac blurted from the living room, where he and Kirin drank while Corbin finished the dishes. "How can you consider yourself an educated adult if you've never seen it?"

"Because I'm not a thousand years old," Kirin contended. "It's a musical, right? You sure you're straight?"

"It's a classic, in the best possible sense." Corbin craned his neck to see Isaac stumble to the television and rifle through the inordinate number of VHS tapes. "Knew I saw it in here. And taped straight off of the TV, no less. If we're in luck, we'll even catch some commercials from God-knows-when the old bastard recorded it. An actual honest-to-goodness time capsule."

He slipped it into the player before either could protest. Although neither of them would. They knew his routine, which kicked off as soon as Isaac stepped out to the front porch, where he kept his cigarettes. He claimed he only smoked when he drank, but Kirin kept him swimming in beer and the occasional handle of Evan Williams, which meant he would not make it through the first thirty minutes of the film. She slipped off into the house to do her part of their secret routine as he lingered on the porch.

Isaac didn't even make it to *The Boy Next Door* before his soft snores added an unintentional harmony. Corbin eyed him warily. "You think he's out?"

"Linkin Park are the greatest rappers of our generation." Kirin smirked when Isaac did not stir. "Yeah, we're good."

Digging into her pocket, she produced a small glass vial. Corbin retrieved his dowsing rod, then accepted the glass. Inside clinked a clipped thumbnail. Kirin's thumbnail.

He pulled the stopper and felt the trust Kirin placed in him as he let it fall into his hand. Magicians were scrupulously protective of two things: their true names and pieces of their own bodies. Possessing either gave another magician power over them, and was why, despite living like a feral pig in a compost bin, Isaac still scrubbed his bathroom down every day, to ensure no scrap of hair, drop of blood, or speck of skin remained for someone to claim. Giving another a piece of you gave them the ability to target you with spells or curses.

Or, in Corbin's case, the chance to find you.

"I left two," she told him.

Focusing on the residual sliver of Kirin's essence in the clipping, Corbin summoned his dowsing. With her scent in mind, the rod wanted to point at her, but he cast out further with his awareness until he felt three smaller tugs from deeper in the house. The strongest came

from far away, but he stepped into the adjoining study first. Letting his dowsing rod lead him, he found her first prize: a plastic figurine of a Hispanic man pushing an ice cream cart about the size of Corbin's thumb. She had nestled it between two books in the study, and he would not have differentiated this trinket among the previous owner's own if the rod had not drawn him to it. Corbin turned it over in his hand and wondered if she had kept it on her person for a long time for it to accumulate her psychic scent, or if the figurine meant something special to her.

He sent his knack out again, and his rod drew him down the hall to the bathroom. Inside the closet, he found his second prize: a hair clip stuffed under the third set of towels. Even with the dowsing rod, he almost missed it in the closet's heavy shadows. Corbin grinned.

She had told him only two prizes awaited him, but he followed his dowsing for the third, strongest, impression. In Isaac's unused master bedroom, under the pillow his instructor never slept on, Corbin's fingers found the glittering stud Kirin usually wore in her nose, and proudly brought all three back to her.

"Ah," she sighed. "I thought I had you with the white lie."

Corbin did not tell her he had noticed the nose ring's absence when she returned, but did not gloat as she threaded it back through her cartilage. He returned the hairpin and figurine next, then the thumbnail. She replaced it in the vial, then tucked it back into the pocket of her jeans.

"What's with the little dude?"

"Gift from my boyfriend." Kirin looked it over. "I thought it might still have some of his aura on it, and that might trip you up. Guess not." She placed it in her pocket. "Now give me a good look."

Corbin unfocused his eyes and let the auras come. In the past, it had taken him a few moments to bring them on, but now they came almost instantly, thanks to Kirin.

Unbeknownst to him, Corbin's grandmother had blacklisted him from the Circle, meaning no other member could train him in magic. He could join one of the many Territory clans, but had so far refused, despite Alec Rifkin's promise to make Corbin his right hand in the Spiraling Chains. Their penchant for collecting body parts, not only of their enemies, but of their own family members, made his decision for him. He could try his luck with the other Territories, but stuck with the devils he knew. Isaac had denounced the Circle to live as an Orphan with Corbin, making them magicians without homes and therefore free from the edict against teaching him.

Which is why Kirin tread a very fine line with these sessions. She could not teach him a thing about her magic, or what she and Alyssa learned under Janice's roof, but she could encourage him to practice the few skills he already knew. Magic was like a muscle, she informed him, and needed to be flexed to stay fit.

"You good?"

"I'm good," he answered. "You still look the same."

"Alright, then, let's hear it."

With the aura portion complete, Corbin pulled the black iPod out of his pocket, and claimed one earbud before handing the other to Kirin. Their half-headphones secured, Corbin pushed play. Jingle bells jangled along to the beat, before a woman sang about Stockholm and snow.

"Sounds familiar, but I can't place it," Kirin told him. "Does it mean anything to you?"

"No. Never heard it before."

"That still doesn't mean it doesn't mean anything."

She had a point, although Corbin sided with his snoring mentor on this one. Isaac had built the iPod with a stolen relic so it would play the perfect song at the perfect time. He insisted it did nothing more than that, but it had saved Corbin's life by providing him hints with the songs it played. Or at least he thought it had. Its inventor insisted it was simply projection on Corbin's part, that the songs had no bearing on his life other than what he gave them. They were just pleasant melodies and nothing more.

Kirin categorically rejected that notion and insisted that they listen to a song every session to see if they could glean its meaning. Corbin wanted to agree with her, but he felt like an idiot as the mumbling melody kicked in and he tried to decipher the lyrics. Especially when the chorus declared it just like Christmas when it, in fact, felt like anything but.

"It's a Christmas song, nothing more." Corbin pulled his earbud out.

"If you say so." She claimed a beer for the road, then gave him a small smile. "This will be the last time I see you until after New Year's. You take care of yourself, and don't let that grinch get too sloppy on eggnog." She frowned. "I should have gotten you something."

"It's fine," Corbin lied. "I didn't get you anything either. Just having you here is enough of a gift."

"That line would sound cheesy coming from anyone else."

He told the truth on that at least as he watched her climb into the oversized SUV. The secretive training sessions with Kirin, and long conversations in the night afterwards, were the one small breath of cheer in his monotonous little world. Corbin was always glad to see her when Kirin stopped by.



Kirin looked anything but glad as she and Alyssa approached the front door two days later, both of them laden with twelve packs. Corbin let them in, then dodged the hug Alyssa sent his way before she remembered his aversion to touch. Kirin kept her eyes down as Alyssa called Corbin and Isaac closer to witness her progress.

“Alright, ready? Ready?” Alyssa held out her hands, closed her eyes, and concentrated.

“Is something supposed to be happening?” Isaac asked.

Corbin took a step back as he felt a light brush of what felt like a fingertip tracing his cheek.

“Cool, right?” Alyssa appeared overjoyed at her brief display and Isaac forced the thinnest of grins. Corbin hoped he kept his envy hidden. It wasn’t much, but Alyssa’s advancement far eclipsed his own.

“I thought you were headed back to New York.” Isaac aimed his statement at Kirin.

“That got canceled for... reasons. Now I’m dropping Alyssa back home for the holidays before I start setting up.”

“For what?”

“Congratulations, you’ve been served.” The sullen Kirin handed over an envelope with card stock rough enough to be considered fancy. Isaac unceremoniously tore it open to read its contents:

*You are cordially invited to attend Janice’s Annual Holiday Gala
Please join us for an evening of elegance, fine dining, and entertainment
to celebrate the season
Wednesday, December 24th, 7 p.m.*

Cocktail Attire Required

Underneath it stood an embossed wreath that, even from his distance, Corbin could tell were two concentric circles.

“Shit,” Isaac said.

“Got that right,” Kirin agreed.

Father Christmas

“**W**hat do I do now?” Panic set in as the Porche’s taillights ahead of him flicked off and it rolled forward. Only the Audi ahead of it remained of the line of cars, and Corbin feared his turn.

“Follow it, obviously. Have you seriously never used a valet before?” Isaac eyed him from beneath his sunglasses. “Wait. Statement withdrawn. You leave the keys in the ignition, you get out, he hands you a ticket, and then parks your car. Then you hand it back to him with a few bucks when you want it back. Any other questions?”

“Can I borrow a few bucks?”

Isaac huffed a laugh, then took a swig from the whiskey bottle he had brought for the ten-minute drive. The button-down shirt with the western embroidery he scrounged from the dead man’s closet looked presentable enough. Isaac offset it with huge rips in his accompanying jeans, which Corbin suspected he added himself right before leaving. The sunglasses, cowboy hat, and gloves hid his deformities well enough that Corbin wondered if Isaac could pass as normal at night. Corbin opted for a far less ostentatious western shirt and chinos, and even uncovered a turquoise bolo tie he thought looked good at the time. But as he watched a man in a sharp suit emerge from the Porche, who then escorted a woman in a glittery red dress towards

the house as valets in vests hurried to park their costly car, Corbin regretted being born.

“Can’t we just leave? Like, drive away and never come back?”

“No. This soiree is nonnegotiable, or else we wouldn’t have gotten a formal invitation. And I can tell just by looking at it that it’s going to have a fountain of some kind. Edible fountain, mind you, not the peasant kind. Mark my words.” Isaac took one last swig just as the valet arrived and made a show of sticking the bottle under his threadbare seat. “There damn well better be the same amount when I get back.”

Isaac grabbed a shoulder bag that still somehow managed to clash with his mismatched attire and hopped out. Corbin set the CRX in park and emerged to realize the valet might be better dressed. He looked over the line of cars behind him, blinking at the gleam of their headlights, then at the glittering glare of the Christmas lights cascading off of Janice’s mansion. Accepting the proffered ticket, he followed Isaac towards the house.

“Uh, sir?” The valet looked from the car to Corbin. No one had called the boy ‘sir’ before. At least not without liberally applying sarcasm first, and Corbin wore it as uncomfortably as the bolo tie.

“Yes?”

“I don’t know how to drive stick.”

“Better figure it out,” Isaac called from halfway up the drive. “Come on, kid.”

The lights of the entrance blazed, and Corbin could not tell if he was more dazzled by them or by Janice’s greeting just inside the door. She wore a white dress, which accentuated her figure despite showing little skin. Her hair had been pulled high in an array of curls, and seemed to take on the hue of whatever colored light it caught.

“So glad you came.” She extended her hand, but Isaac marched right past her.

“Didn’t really have a choice. I assume everything’s set up?”

Her smile never faltered. “Of course. It may be the Circle gala of the year, but no mundanes will be able to step foot within for the main event. And all the set pieces are arranged. All we need now is our players.”

“Went with the chocolate fountain, I see. Probably wiser than a margarita, as fountains go.” Isaac nodded to Corbin. “If you need me, I’m going to be committing some war crimes on that shrimp cocktail.”

He disappeared inside as Corbin regarded Janice. Her stunning smile put the lights to shame. “It’s good to see you again, Corbin. I wish I could have made it out to visit, but things are as they are, and my time’s never my own. But know you’ve always been on my mind.” She reached for him, then stopped when he shied away. “Have fun, and try to make some friends.”

Janice turned her attention to the next couple winding up the steps, and Corbin pushed into the house. Dozens of people mingled in the first room, either accepting drinks from the waiters weaving between them, or refilling their tiny plates from the buffet table bisecting the dining room. All were decked out in clothes that made Corbin, with his second-hand attire, want to retreat. He scanned the room, searching for a safe harbor in a familiar face, but came up blank. Corbin considered seeking out Isaac and his shrimp when a man split off from a knot of party goers and aimed straight for Corbin. He stood a full head higher than the boy, and although the suit looked like it had been tailored for him, it still seemed to strain against his full form.

“So, you’re the new blood, huh?” The man’s smile seemed genuine enough. “Ransom, Circle.”

“Huh?”

The man pulled his sleeve back to display a tattoo of a circle on his wrist, initiating the greeting ritual all magicians followed upon meeting for the first time.

“Corbin. Um...” His lack of sigil and affiliation still felt unnatural. “Orphan.”

The man’s smile widened at Corbin’s admission. “No worries. I work with anyone and everyone.” A business card appeared in his hand with a practiced flourish. “You ever find yourself needing anything — mundane, mystical, or otherwise — you let me know. I work within any budget, and I’m the best friend a newbie magician can make.” His eyes flicked away, and Corbin followed his gaze to see Alec Rifkin heading their way. Ransom’s smile frayed at the edges as Rifkin arrived, and he shook the card pressed between his fingers to draw Corbin’s attention back to it.

The boy gingerly accepted the card, Rifkin conspicuously observing their exchange, before Ransom excused himself with a mumble. Rifkin watched him depart.

“I won’t be cliché and tell you to stay away from him,” Rifkin warned. “Although you should know, whatever he gets you is always of dubious legality. Due to a certain mystical quirk, he’s a bit of a necessary evil everyone uses from time to time.”

Corbin unfocused his eyes to watch Ransom, who quickly attached himself to another cluster of acquaintances, and his auras soon arrived. He expected Ransom to have a flare of white overlaying the same red, yellow, and blue rings all humans possessed, which would indicate the presence of magic. Instead, Ransom bore nothing; no colors at all. Corbin wanted to ask Rifkin about this, or about Mari’s fate, but he could only manage, “And you use him?”

“No, not after he tried to kill me.” Rifkin waved the statement away. “Just a misunderstanding that has since been resolved. Are you doing well?”

Corbin slipped the card into his pocket and gazed over all the glittering guests. “I guess. Don’t really know what to say to that. Or what I’m doing here. Or what this even is.”

“Janice’s parties are notorious and not to be missed. It’s Christmas Eve, and we should all be with our families, yet here we all come running when she calls. And you have just as much right to be here as anyone else. More really, since this is your coming out party to magical society.” Corbin gasped at Rifkin’s admission. “You didn’t know?”

“No,” Corbin sputtered. “But I probably wouldn’t have come if I did.” He regarded the other guests slowly revolving around the room, while he remained stuck there. “They’re all magicians?”

“Mundanes mostly, although there are some magicians mixed in.” Rifkin nodded to a shorter man in a plain blue suit, whose tight grip on his beer bottle made him look only slightly less uncomfortable than Corbin. “He’s one of mine. My plus-one for the event later.”

“Event?”

Rifkin eyed him again. “We mingle with the mundanes for a while, then slip away for our own little yuletide celebration later. Janice was very specific when it came to that guest list. One might say exclusive. Congratulations on the invitation.”

Corbin wanted to ask after that when another familiar face approached. And were it not for his familiarity with Kirin’s face, he might not have recognized her. He was so used to her jeans, T-shirt or tank top combination that her red dress took him aback. It cut barely lower than her clavicles, bones her usual outfits also exposed, but he feared he would have trouble maintaining eye contact that night. Kirin

greeted Rifkin with air kisses on either cheek. She thankfully did not repeat the greeting with Corbin.

“Well, what do you think?” She twirled in a mock pirouette.

Corbin’s tongue tangled, and he fought to form any semblance of a sentence when Rifkin came to his rescue. “You look lovely. And I think Corbin’s still coming to terms with the fact he’s the guest of honor tonight.”

“Going to burn off your name,” Kirin exclaimed. “How exciting is that?”

“Going to do what?” Horror boiled in Corbin’s stomach. He felt like he had been thrust onto the stage on opening night without ever having seen the script.

“You didn’t know?” Kirin asked. “Why didn’t Isaac tell you what all this is about?”

“Because he doesn’t tell me anything!”

Kirin looked to Rifkin for help, but the man just shrugged. “Alright, chill. It’s not really a big deal. Just a sort of rite of passage a lot of well-known magicians go through. You should never let someone get a hold of your true name, what you call yourself in your head when you think about yourself. But the name you’re given is sort of the default, which can lead to problems down the line. Most magicians get around that by never telling people their true name, and giving another one instead of what they were born with.”

“Like Mister?”

“Or Janice. Or half the other bigwigs out there who no one really knows where they came from. But then you have those of us who come from well-known families, like the Ogburns.” She nodded to Alec. “Or the Rifkins. We don’t get the luxury of not being known, so we do a little ceremony where we burn off that identity, getting rid of it so we’re free of that connection. Then others can’t use it to put

a curse on you or any of that other shit. Janice has already set all this up, so all you have to do is show up and pick a new true name. And we'll all still call you Corbin, since that's who you are to us. It's just that that's not who you're going to be to you." She reached to comfort him, then remembered herself. "You'll be fine. Just choose something important to you, something secret that only you know about. Two to three names is probably best, just like first, middle, and last, so it's a harder combination for others to guess. Think of it like setting a password so no one can hack into your soul."

Corbin's mind flailed for something, anything to latch on to that could define him, and came up blank. She winced. "I just made it worse, didn't I?"

Merry Christmas from the Family

The next few hours whirled by as Kirin and Rifkin steered him through the soiree. They swam effortlessly from one island of merry-makers to the next, Corbin floundering in their wake. Most of the mundanes forgot about him as soon as the introductions concluded, in favor of small talk with his charismatic companions. The dozen or so magicians eyed him after he announced himself as an Orphan, but were too polite to inquire into it any further.

Corbin could barely remember their names, faces, or affiliations. He knew only the impending doom of soon being the center of attention. He tried to focus on Kirin's task of coming up with a new true name, but his head remained empty when he found Janice at his side.

"It's time." She said it kindly, but it felt like a command. Corbin had no choice but to follow her, Kirin, and Rifkin deeper into the house. Janice doled out well wishes to everyone she passed by name, but did not engage any further as she steered them through to an unused den. Isaac awaited them next to a bookcase, an empty margarita glass on the shelf beside him. Janice's brow furrowed. "I thought you'd let yourself in."

"We all know how well that went last time."

Janice pressed her thumb into the spine of the book beside Isaac's glass. She whispered something softly, and the shelf swung aside to reveal another room. "After y'all."

Rifkin went first, followed by Kirin. Corbin glared at Isaac as he followed, only to receive a metal sneer in return. Isaac's smile deserted him when he stepped through to see Rifkin's man in a blue suit and a woman with graying dreadlocks in a tan sport coat. Her scorn reflected his own, but her face brightened when Janice shut the secret door behind them.

"All is ready."

Other bookshelves lined the walls, with a collection of tomes and scrolls. Corbin did not know what to make of all the pillows, scarves, and feathers alongside them, but his eyes were drawn to the painted circle on the floor. Even with his novice knowledge of magic, he could recognize a pentagram. Other glyphs and designs adorned the spaces between the five-pointed star and surrounding circle, but the symbol had always been tied to Satan in his upbringing.

"You'll sit in the center," the new woman instructed Corbin.

He remained planted, and Isaac shook his head. "Go on; it's not dangerous. A little crude, but it should suffice. Basically, everyone positioned at the edges sort of Voltrons together to... basically a magic sandblaster that will erode away your true name. If everything goes right."

"It will," the woman interjected. "Provided you have a sufficient sacrifice."

"Yeah, yeah, that." Isaac removed a folder from his bag and thrust it at Corbin.

The boy opened it to find an ornate piece of paper with embellishments on the edges, stating that Corbin James had been born to Jessie Wagner and Gideon James on November 9th, 1990. He had never seen

a birth certificate before, but recognized it. He also suspected this was not a copy, but rather the genuine article that should be stored in a county office.

Isaac nodded at the burning brazier in the center of the circle. “Just toss that in when it’s time, and you should be good to go. There’s another piece of paper there too, which you’ll write your new true name on. Throw that one in after you’re done, and the whole thing will be finished. Shouldn’t take more than two minutes, tops.”

Corbin remained speechless, and could barely remember to breathe as the others took positions at the edges of the pentacle: Janice at its head, Kirin on her right, and Rifkin on the left, with his unnamed companion taking the location beside him.

Isaac and the new woman took a step towards the empty spot at the same time.

Both then froze, she regarding him with confusion, while a spark of anger ignited in his eye.

“Seriously?” he yelled at Janice. “It’s bad enough you hire this cut-rate enchanter to design the damn thing, but then you expect her to light the fuse too? I’m the one who’s training him! I’m the one who should be pulling the trigger on this damn ritual! So why the hell is she still even here?”

Janice did not skip a beat, her heels clicking as she made her way to the irate Isaac. “You’re right. This is a terrible slight on my part. I thought this would be easier for all involved, to pool our abilities for Corbin instead of forcing you to shoulder the whole burden alone. I figured there must be a problem, since you hadn’t taken care of this yet, and tried to step in. Quite clumsily, it looks like.” She arrived at his side, hand alighting on Isaac’s shoulder. Corbin knew firsthand the unnatural calming effect her sheer presence had and how her physical contact could overcome any emotional barrier.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Isaac whispered. “You were just looking out for Corbin.”

“But if you would like to add anything to the design, or step in for the ritual itself, I’m sure that will be fine. I just figured you wouldn’t want to because of your condition.”

“Condition?” Isaac’s rage came roaring back, and he bared his metal teeth. “Is that the euphemism you’re using? You think I haven’t sacrificed enough for the cause? You think I haven’t given enough to the kid? That I can’t!” His voice dropped to a deadly hiss. “I forget how subtly insidious you are sometimes.”

Isaac tore his shoulder free and stormed from the room. “Go on and finish up. Wouldn’t want to upset the evening’s itinerary. And do make sure to send him home when you’re done with him. If he’s not too broken from all your scheming.”

Corbin did not know how Isaac managed to slam the secret door, but the man found a way. Janice pinched the bridge of her nose, and Kirin gave an uncomfortable smile. Rifkin grinned openly, as did the other enchanter, while the man in the blue suit looked like he wanted to disappear. Corbin felt similarly.

“Alright, let’s see if we can salvage this.” Janice shook her head and her immaculate smile returned. “We all have better things to be doing on our Christmas Eves. Well, except Corbin. This is some long-overdue housekeeping.”

She returned to her point of the star, and all eyes returned to Corbin. He reluctantly took his spot at the center and felt the warmth of the brazier beside him. The flames only rose a few inches, but he swore he saw no bottom to the fire.

The other enchanter finished up the lineup and intoned a low note that resonated deep in her chest. The others added their voices, but could not match the tenor of the enchanter. Corbin felt the effects at

once, the stirring of magic around him. It flowed out from each participant to the next, linking them and redirecting that shared energy to Corbin. He felt it nibbling at his edges, active entropy wearing away at him. He considered bringing the auras to bear to see the magic work but feared remaining at its center any longer than he had to.

He could feel a thrumming in his feet, like excavators chipping away at the earth underneath. Everything grew thinner around him, the air strained and ready to give way at the slightest nudge. And he knew the final act required to finish the ritual.

Not a minute had gone by, but sweat shone on Kirin's brow. Rifkin eyed him unhappily, and even Janice's tireless smile strained. Corbin gave them what they wanted, and tossed his birth certificate into the flame without another glance, lest the slightest interaction with a document he did not know existed a few moments ago keep him from going through with their ritual.

He felt the identity of Corbin James torn away from him as soon as the flames licked the page. As it shriveled in the brazier, he felt himself shriven from the identity given him by his mother and the man who claimed him as his son; their definition of who he was and who he would become turned to ash. He was free of them, free to form his own identity.

The small blank piece of paper beckoned to him, demanding that he give himself a new name, one that he chose for himself. He could forge a new path with the new identity, setting aside all familial expectations to become something new and solely his own.

He just needed to write the new name down.

The shared song between the other five participants wavered as indecision ran rampant through him. Their confusion gave way to disappointment as he slid the slip into his pocket and turned his back to the flame.

“I don’t know,” Corbin whispered. “I don’t know who to be.”

Fairytale of New York

“Don’t worry, it happens to every guy at some point.” Kirin failed to hide her smirk as she drove Corbin home. Her face grew more serious as she steered them around a corner. “You’ll want to pick something soon, though. Doesn’t have to be right away, but bad stuff can climb into you if you go without a true name for too long. Some argue that it’s actually a piece of your soul.”

“Great,” Corbin grunted. “Just great.” Normally, he would be overjoyed at the chance to spend another few minutes with Kirin. But the fact that Isaac had claimed the CRX on his retreat, stranding Corbin there with everyone who had witnessed his failure, did not help. The valets told him Isaac made quite the scene, until they gave him the car out of pity, making Corbin want to shrink away until he disappeared completely. Kirin tried to play it off, but it only irritated him further.

“It’s not that bad,” she reassured him. “You can be anyone you want to be now. You can even pick the most ridiculous name possible, and it won’t matter since no one else will know it. Call yourself Gynox the Grand Thorple for all it matters.”

“But that’s not who I am,” Corbin shot back. He sounded far too whiny, even to his ears. “I mean, I thought I knew who I was, but now you all tell me that’s gone. And it is, I felt it burn off. Now I’m a no

one, but that's not true either. I came from other people, and am still a part of them even if they're not here. Like, my grandmother was in the Inner Circle, and she taught me to dowse, how to harness the knack. I can't just 'be free' of her, even if she's the one who said no one in the Circle can teach me magic. So, I thought about maybe their last name, Wagner, but that doesn't fit me either. My mom, she obviously gave birth to me, and I can't say that I'm cut free from that, no matter how much I want to be free of Gideon, whose last name has been mine since birth, even if he's not supposed to be my father."

"The angel again?" Kirin never believed in the angel that supposedly sired Corbin, but he had seen Raziel with his own eyes, and let silence fill the car instead of reigniting the argument.

She said nothing the last few minutes of the drive, and offered no reason why she parked the stylish SUV behind the shabby CRX in the driveway, nor why she got out to walk him to the door. Corbin suspected she wanted to say something more, but caught the whiff of Isaac once they reached the front door. The stink of cigarettes gave him away right before a cherry flared from the porch swing. Isaac had not bothered to turn on the light, and sat smoking in the dark. The empty beer bottles at his feet said that was not all he got up to.

"Good of you to escort him home." Corbin could hear Isaac's sneer in the dark. "Another great donation for Janice to dole out to those of us less fortunates. Well, you tell her we don't need her charity." He staggered to his feet and pushed a small plastic rectangle in Corbin's direction. Corbin carefully took it and turned it over to reveal a driver's license. But the name stated 'Gordon Shumway' and had the picture of a dark-skinned middle-aged man with a mustache. Corbin examined it in his hand as Kirin peered over his shoulder.

"How'd you get him a fake ID so fast?"

"I didn't," Isaac answered. "Look closer." Kirin's eyes went wide as the glamor fell away. "One of my earliest enchantments, back when I was younger than him. No one notices that the name and picture don't match whoever's holding it, so long as you don't draw too much attention to it. And it's yours now, kid. Merry Christmas."

"So cool," Kirin said. Corbin agreed with her assessment.

"And now he can make his own beer runs. We don't need you anymore."

His words hit Kirin like a body shot, with the delayed pain not setting in until she realized the full ramifications of Isaac's statement. Her face slowly scrunched as she stuttered, "I... I... I..."

"Stop with the act, missy. I know Janice sends you by so you can keep an eye on us. No one's that generous without an ulterior motive."

"Janice doesn't know I come here." Kirin's jaw set as she stared Isaac down. "And so what if she does? I bring you beer and cigarettes because I know you like those things, and you bring your friends what they like when you visit. It's part of being friends. But if you want to pretend you don't need any of that, fine. That's your choice. But don't drag Corbin down with you just because you're too proud to accept a lifeline when you're drowning."

Isaac tore off his sunglasses to study her with mismatched eyes. Kirin stared back defiantly, and his forehead furrowed as he hunted after something impossible to understand. "You actually come here because you like it? To this place? Here?"

"Yeah, it's nice. It feels real, no pretense. The exact opposite of where I'm at most of the time. And I like that. And the two of you. Most of the time. When you're not being an asshole."

Isaac's face softened. "I forget what it's like sometimes. Everyone needs a foxhole they can climb into whenever everything out there gets to be too much. So, welcome to the hole. Come by whenever."

Stumbling back to the swing, Isaac claimed a beer and handed it to Kirin. She popped the top and clinked it to his before taking a solidarity sip. The three then stood in silence on the porch, unsure what to do.

"You want to finish St. Louis?"

Kirin claimed one couch, and Corbin a chair, as Isaac readied the VCR. He had barely hit play when a knock came from the door. Isaac stumbled over to find Janice there.

He squinted as if her white dress hurt his eyes. It certainly made the house they squatted in seem shabbier. "Don't you have your own thing going on?"

"I do. The same party that happens every year. And every year it's the same people, all of them clambering over each other to get closer to me. They all want something, be it my attention, my good graces, or even some free shrimp. And every year I bring them close, stir them up, and simmer their collective desires into a nice nourishing orison to sustain me for the next few months while I slip out the back and have a little me time. And every year no one even notices I'm gone."

"But what are you doing here?"

"With all those hangers-on grasping for more, it's refreshing to be around folks who don't want anything from me, those who refuse anything I give, even when it's freely offered. So, I thought I'd stop by and tell you that I appreciate that sentiment."

"You want to be with us because we don't want to be with you?"

"That's a contradiction I thought you, of all people, might understand." The lion roared on screen to announce the start of the movie, and Janice peered around him to catch the opening credits. "Oh, I

remember when this came out. An absolute Christmas classic, in the best possible sense.”

“You remember when it came out?” Isaac eyed her. “How old are you, exactly?”

“You should know never to ask a lady that.”

“But I’m only asking... because... You’re right. I shouldn’t have done that.” Isaac shuffled his feet sheepishly. “Would you like to come in?”

Janice took his arm and breezed inside. “As I know you hate charity, everything I brought with me is for my own consumption, although I’d be more than happy to share if the children could bring it inside.”

Corbin and Kirin got to work, hauling in a case of champagne, several boxes of chocolate, a bucket of popcorn, and even a portion of cocktail shrimp. By the time they brought it all inside, Janice knelt by the fireplace, coaxing a burgeoning blaze from the scorched sticks Isaac had discarded as defective. She sang along to *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *Louis* playing on the TV, and Corbin swore the temperature had risen ten degrees since she had arrived.

The movie acted as background noise to the cheer Janice brought with her, offering only musical asides that she soon had them singing along to as they shared champagne. Corbin did not know the words to the songs, but added his voice to theirs where he could.

They quaffed their cups and returned for more, with only Corbin not imbibing. Their voices grew louder as their cheeks brightened, and Corbin felt far warmer than the temperature in the room could account for. They swapped stories and shared jokes Corbin did not understand, yet laughed along with. It felt so normal to be among these abnormal individuals, to be included as one of their number, and he could not remember the last time he had felt that. He had experienced it briefly as a kid when his grandparents took custody

of him, and temporarily rescued him from the cult. The little fleeting moments like setting up the tree and singing over cups of hot chocolate rang with the same resonance as the moment he stood in now, and Corbin could not understand how he had not recognized its importance then.

Guilt swept in to cool the merriment from a moment before, but it could not extinguish the flame entirely. The pang of what he would never have again with his grandparents heightened the significance of the now. Corbin held both sensations close to his heart as he slunk out the front door for a moment to himself.

The chill of the night felt refreshing after the warmth inside, and he savored it as he wondered what his grandparents would think of his strange new companions. While Grandpa Jay knew nothing about this life, his grandmother had been a part of the Inner Circle, and her edict said she clearly did not want him to have any part of it. Anger at her depriving him of this for so long kindled in his heart, but could not overcome his gratitude for all the two of them had done for him. He knew she had to have her reasons for her decision, but could not fathom them.

Grandpa Jay always called him “Corbie” as a kid, but Gramma hated it, and so the nickname never stuck. She insisted her husband never call him that in her presence, so it had become a little secret the two of them shared.

Corbin reached into his pockets to find his newly acquired ID, the iPod he earned for saving both Isaac and Rifkin, and the slip of paper for his new name. He set the first two on the porch swing beside him, but clutched the slip lest the wind whip it and any chance at forging his new name away with it.

He had settled on part of his new identity, but it was not enough. ‘Corbie’ was easy to guess from his given name, and he needed more.

He remembered Mister saying he knew his Gramma as Trudie Gimple, not the name Wagner she took when she married Grandpa Jay, and then passed along to his mother. The Wagner name had ended at his birth when his mother listed Gideon as his father, just as Gimple had ended when his grandmother took his grandfather's name. Corbin reckoned he should honor her too and scribbled *Corbie Gimple* on the strip of paper.

He found Isaac's lighter inside the forgotten pack, and it provided the flame that turned his new true name to ash. It now existed only in his memory, and he vowed to keep it close and share it with no one else.

His task complete, he knew he should return to the fold, but picked up the iPod instead. Isaac refused to admit it could predict the future, and sometimes Corbin doubted his own intuition about the thing. He decided to put it to the test as he mentally asked the device what the new year would bring.

A piano and strings came on, followed by a man's voice that sounded like a bag of rocks tossed down a flight of stairs declaring it Christmas Eve in a drunk tank. Corbin could barely make out the slurred lyrics but enjoyed the melody. He liked it better when the tempo picked up and the woman with a voice like fire came on, although he could still barely understand her accent. All he could ever make out was how the bells were ringing out on Christmas Day.

He found no more enlightenment when the song wound down than he had discovered at its start. Pulling out the earbuds, he returned both of Isaac's gifts to his pockets and pondered what the song portended for his future.

Suddenly he heard them cheering "Merry Christmas" inside and realized they had barreled past midnight and on to Christmas Day without him noticing. Breathing deep, he opened the front door and

rejoined the other outsiders within, to be instantly accepted as one of their own.