

Modern Magic

Episode 1: Graduation Day

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The entire series, in print

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Spring, 1998

Liz

Everyone in my family, except me, is a sorcerer. So when the phone rang after I'd already had the line disconnected, I guessed it was a family call. I figured it was probably Mom and Dad trying again to persuade me to come home for the summer. They thought a seventeen-year-old was too young to stay in Raleigh by herself, college sophomore or not.

The caller was my brother, John, instead. That was a relief. He wouldn't try to drag me back into the magical subculture where I'd grown up but would never fit in.

"Hey, Liz. You're coming to my graduation next week, right?" John was only two years my elder, but was graduating because both of us were two years ahead in school. I'd skipped grades in mundane middle and high school because my early education had been so thorough, but in his case, he was just depressingly brilliant. He was even first in his class, despite being two years younger than most.

"Yeah, sure. I wouldn't miss your graduation." I'd rather be anywhere else, but Mom would kill me if I skipped it.

"Wanna come a few days early? To visit?"

Well, so much for not dragging me back into the magical world. He'd gone to school at Alton, a sorcerous university whose fame stemmed in part from its intensely studious environment. It had an isolated, self-contained campus to keep the students from being distracted by the attractions of a readily available city. When I turned up for his graduation, I'd probably be the only mundane person within fifty miles.

I couldn't help being curious. He'd never invited me for a visit before, and I'd certainly never expressed any desire to see Alton. "Why?"

"Well, your term has already ended, right? So this seems like a good time."

"Really why?"

He was silent for a moment. "You're still studying Latin, right?"

"Yes. Again, why?"

"Well . . . there's this guy in my senior seminar who thinks he's such a hotshot because he's the most fluent in Latin. I want you to come kick his butt for me. But just visit, too. I haven't seen you in ages."

I smiled. So, the great John Prospero had finally met his match at something. Although it apparently hadn't stopped him from becoming the nineteen-year-old valedictorian in a difficult major at one of the most prestigious sorcery schools in the world. But still.

Why not? It would only be for a few days. I needed time to move my stuff into my summer sublet, but my new job didn't start for two weeks. "Okay. Is Thursday a good day?"

"Sure. You're moving, right? Where should I portal up to get you?"

"I'll drive."

"That's silly. It's, like, a six-hour drive from Raleigh. I'll just portal up and get you and pay the power back later."

I knew Alton had a portal. They were too power-intensive for regular use, but his school needed one because it was in the middle of nowhere. Its coolness had been a major part of John's conversation during his first weeks in college. Nevertheless, I had no intention of letting him use it to carry me there. I didn't accept magical aid from my family. I had to learn to function like the mundane person I was. "No. I'm driving."

"Fine; have it your own way. Blow twelve hours on a pointless marathon round trip. I'll see if I can find driving directions."

"Dad already gave them to me, for the ceremony." I'd had basically the same argument with Mom and Dad, about the school having plenty of power and why didn't I just do something the easy way for once, but eventually Dad had given in and sent me directions.

"Did he tell you what it looks like? It's disguised as a closed rock quarry. And there's a keepaway spell, too. So when you get off the Interstate, drive exactly five and a quarter miles and then force yourself to pull off to the right. I'll come down to the gate to let you in."

I'd had to do the force-yourself thing before, so my arrival on Thursday was smooth. I just ignored my brain's insistence that pulling off here would be silly and pointless and even dangerous, and pulled off anyway. After that I waited a few minutes, ignoring the feeling that I really should get out of there right away, until John opened the gate from the inside. Then it just looked and seemed like an ordinary gate, so I drove on in and stopped the car and let John close up the gate.

A uniformed man was standing with him. “Sorry, miss, but I’m afraid I’ll have to read your mind before you can enter.”

“*What?*” I glared at John. “You could have mentioned that on the phone.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t know then. New policy. There was an anonymous call, some kind of threat to the keynote speaker, so now we have mind-reading for everyone.”

“May I?” The security guard waited patiently.

I couldn’t very well turn around and leave. “Yes.”

“Thank you.” He turned and left almost instantly. Reading a mundane mind took little effort.

Meanwhile, John was studying my beat-up vehicle. “What’s that thing? I thought you said you were coming in a car.”

He was usually like that, so I ignored it. “Hi, John. Nice to see you, too. Where should I park? Where am I staying?”

He grinned at my lack of reaction. “Alton’s too small to be as formal as a mundane college. You can just leave the car inside the gate, and dump your stuff in one of the empty dorm rooms.” As I pulled my duffel bag out of the back, he peered inside the car with mock curiosity. “What’s that third pedal for?”

I knew he knew what a clutch was; we’d both learned to drive in our parents’ old manual transmission car. “It’s an eject button. It’s handy when a passenger annoys me.”

He was unfazed. “I can’t believe you got a manual transmission. *How* old is this thing?”

“It gets me where I want to go. I bought it used, so I didn’t have a choice about the transmission. It was a good deal.”

“I live for the day when you spend an unnecessary dime.”

“I live for the day when you have a job. I don’t have a full tuition waiver like some people.”

We both had the script of this argument memorized, so he gestured for me to follow him without ceasing to bicker. “You think leading freshman discussion sections isn’t a job? It sure isn’t something I’d do as a hobby, for God’s sake.”

I trailed after him. “You should try flipping burgers for a few months. It’d give you some perspective on how the rest of us live.”

“I wish I had the option. Then I wouldn’t have to eat in the cafeteria all the time. Speaking of which, that’s the cafeteria over there.”

“What’s that big round building?” It was the largest building in sight, at the center of the small campus and dominating the view.

His gaze followed mine. “It’s the Convocation Center. We call it the Convo for short. It’s where the ceremony will be. Oh, and the portal and battery are in the basement. You should come see the battery; it is *so* cool.”

The Convo was a huge circular building with a domed top. The main entrance was a pair of double doors, each about six feet wide. They were standing open, so we went in.

There was an inner wall which also appeared to be circular, a good twenty feet in from the exterior wall. That was a pretty impressive foyer. There were double doors on the inner wall as well, but John pulled me left. “That’s just the auditorium. We’re going to the basement.”

The foyer ring went all the way around the inside of the building, and we followed it almost to the back. Eventually we got to a door which opened onto a staircase going down. “The battery and portal are both down there,” he told me. “And this part of the foyer is where the pre-ceremony festivities will be centered, since it’s where the portal comes out. You *really* gotta see the battery.”

There was another guard downstairs, seated next to a door. John flashed his student ID and said, “She’s my sister. She’s here for graduation. Can I show her the battery?”

The guard looked at me. “Sure; why not? May I read your mind?” After I gritted my teeth and agreed, he nodded. He gestured at the door, presumably unlocking it.

Why not, indeed. What harm could *I* do?

We went into the room. It contained a large rock shot with quartz streaks, and nothing else.

John stretched out his arms, grooving on the vibes. “Mmm, feel that. The faculty gets together and charges it every week, to make sure it stays at full capacity. It powers the main school spells. And we’re allowed to borrow from it to use the portal, or for big projects, but then we have to pay back the power we use. This thing is just *so* amazing. It’s one of the biggest magical batteries in the world. When I’m standing right next to it, I feel like I could fly.”

“Yeah, it’s neat.” It was a big rock. For perhaps the millionth time, I wondered what everyone else in my family could feel that I couldn’t.

I also wondered why it was just sitting here behind an ordinary door, protected by a single man. “If it’s that powerful, shouldn’t it be better guarded?”

“Oh, it’s guarded.” John chuckled. “We don’t need a big security force here. I mean, look at the faculty. The guy at the door doesn’t have to be anything more than a sentinel. If anyone tried to force his way in, he’d be facing a dozen of the most powerful sorcerers in the world before he could get through the door.”

That made sense. Even magical force wouldn’t get you very far at Alton. They’d only have a problem if any of the faculty, who were already trusted, turned renegade or became unstable.

And, of course, there was the other criterion of being a sorcerer. To them it was a huge reservoir of extra power, but to me it really was just a big rock.

Amazingly, John noticed that I wasn’t exhilarated. “Well, anyway, this is the famous battery. Oh, and the portal’s next door in the other basement room. That’s how the families will arrive for the ceremony. Let’s go find you a room.”

So we trudged over to John’s dorm, where I found an empty room to dump my stuff. Emptied of the previous resident’s magical paraphernalia, it had the same bilious green vandals-were-here décor of my old room back in Raleigh. Apparently crummy dorm rooms were a universal constant.

“And now that you have a room, I want to take you to meet someone special.” John was dragging me off again.

“That Latin guy from your senior seminar?”

“What?” He laughed. “No. More special than that.”

He led me to a different floor and rapped on a door, and a young woman opened it.

“Miranda, this is my sister Liz. Liz, this is Miranda Clare. We’ve been seeing each other for a few months.”

A willowy blonde, quite pretty, stared at me as if I had just burst into flame. She grabbed John’s arm and whispered, “You didn’t tell me she was mundane!”

“It never came up. Why?”

“You could have warned me.”

“Warned you about what? What are you afraid she’s going to do, mundane you to death?”

This was not an auspicious beginning, but I could see why she would be startled if he'd never talked about me. I could get past that. I guessed.

Nevertheless "People? I'm standing right here. I'm not deaf."

Miranda let go of his arm and regained her composure. "Nice to meet you, Liz. So, uh . . . what are you majoring in?"

A boring but neutral topic. Maybe she wasn't so bad. "I'm in speech-language pathology now. I declared it this year."

"Speech-language pathology." Her smile was forced, but polite. "That must be very interesting."

John laughed. "That is so right for you, Liz. I remember how you used to help the other kids learn languages. And it was so funny when you told that one kid to eat Red Hots to wake up his mouth. Mr. Melner almost plotzed when that actually worked, after his tongue salve failed."

I remembered that, too. "The problem wasn't his tongue. He didn't have his cheeks in—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Miranda. "She went to the same elementary school as you?"

"Sure she did. We lived in the same house; where else would she go?"

"But . . . what was the point?"

This seemed like a good time to excuse myself. "I'm just going to go back and unpack my stuff and rest for a bit. Come by and get me for dinner, okay, John?"

"I guess so." He sounded perplexed.

Dinner was better. The cafeteria food was awful, but Miranda had gotten over her shock and was friendlier. And John had been saving some surprise news.

"So, you guys know the keynote speaker is Dr. Victor Piper." Yeah, I knew. John's childhood hero. He'd been talking about it ever since I'd seen him at Christmas. One of sorcery's greatest minds, retired, living in isolation, hadn't even left his house in years.

“It was such a coup to get him,” said John. “I’m totally psyched. The faculty is having a reception luncheon for him tomorrow, and they invited me to come! And you’re both coming too, of course.”

“Are you sure we’re invited?” I was having trouble imagining myself at a faculty luncheon to welcome the keynote speaker.

“They said I could bring one guest. I can get away with two. What are they going to do, make a scene and throw one of you out?” John was nothing if not self-confident.

I studied my dinner tray, wondering if that runny yellow stuff was really cheese or something more dubious. “Well, okay. I guess it beats eating in the cafeteria again.”

Between mouthfuls of greasy tater tots, Miranda agreed. “It’s usually not as bad as this, Liz. I think they’ve given up, since the underclassmen went home. Any kind of luncheon sounds good to me.”

We were both wrong, as it turned out. We had to have our minds read, again, just to get inside the Dean’s house. That wasn’t completely unreasonable, since Dr. Piper was supposed to be the target of the threat, but I thought they were going a little overboard. What could anyone do to him in the Dean’s house, with a dozen other sorcerers around?

The school apparently didn’t see it that way, though, so the guard gave me a quick glance and Miranda a longer examination. He then stared at John for a few minutes, asked us to wait, and called over the professor of mind magic. John rolled his eyes, but I suspected he was enjoying the extra attention.

The coronation chicken was better than the cafeteria mac and cheese, but aside from the catering, it was the dullest function imaginable. John quickly abandoned Miranda and me to get better acquainted with each other, as he put it, while he dove into the group trying to talk to the famous Dr. Piper. Miranda and I nibbled our food and made awkward conversation.

It was excruciating. We tried a few silly questions, gave each other the obligatory silly answers, and lapsed into silence.

I looked around the room. There were us wallflowers, sitting in silence or chatting awkwardly, and there were the people trying to talk to Dr. Piper.

The beleaguered speaker seemed to have given up on talking shop. He responded to direct questions, but mostly just gazed out the window across the campus with an

absent smile on his face. He only really came to life when someone asked him if he was concerned about the threat.

“Absolutely not,” he said. “I’ve been threatened before, and I’m still here. I have every confidence in Alton’s ability to handle the situation, if there even is a situation. Personally, I think it was probably a prank.”

He struck me as a little strange. I’d be more concerned if someone threatened my life, even if I was well-protected. Then again, what did I know? Maybe that sort of casual courage was normal for professors emeriti. The rising magical crime rate might have hardened him to such things. That odd smile still made him the most interesting thing in the room. Except perhaps for the wallpaper, which was growing more fascinating by the moment.

Finally we were free to go—or had to go, according to John. Miranda excused herself to go do something or other, perhaps afraid of being dragged to another official function. That left John and me, trying to figure out what to do with the rest of the day before the big day itself.

I wanted to do something completely nonmagical. “Is this a good time for me to meet that guy from your senior seminar? The Latin guy?”

“What? Oh, that. Later. Let’s do something more fun.”

“Oh. Okay, whatever.”

“Why do you keep mentioning that, anyway?”

“Well . . . I have to admit I was a little happy that you finally met someone who was better than you at something. Even if it was only Latin.”

“What are you talking about? *You’re* better than I am at Latin. That’s why I asked you to come here.”

I’d never thought of it that way.

He looked down. “Or at least it was the only reason you could believe.”

Say *what*? Did he make that up? And did he just practically admit it? That was nerve, even for him. “Why did you invite me here?”

“I wanted my family at my graduation. Is that so strange?”

“You *lied*! You lied to me to drag me down here, where you knew I’d be uncomfortable!”

He didn't look up. "Yeah, I lied. After I invited you and you couldn't even believe I was inviting you, I lied. I know you. I knew you'd rather watch someone embarrass me than watch me graduate from college. I knew you'd come down with the flu or invent some other lame excuse not to come, if you didn't think you'd have a chance to show me up. The only thing I don't know is why. What did I ever do to you? Why do you resent me so much?"

"Because you're a jerk!" I stomped off back to the dorm room I'd adopted. Good thing I'd brought a book, because I was not going to be dragged around this campus any more.

I thought about leaving. Going home to Raleigh sounded good, but I couldn't figure out how I'd explain to Mom and Dad that I'd come to Alton but left before the ceremony. Because we'd argued? We always did that, and they wouldn't understand that this time was different.

I ignored the knock at the door, and read until I fell asleep.

In the morning, calmer, I realized that I couldn't avoid John forever. I should confront him about his deceit now, not in front of our parents. I lacked the ability to scan around campus for him, but it wasn't quite time for the ceremony yet. He might still be in his room.

He was. When he answered the door, he looked at me neutrally and said, "You're back."

"Yep." I wouldn't say I was sorry for walking off until he apologized for lying to drag me to a sorcerer's university. He didn't, though. He just let me in, then quietly continued organizing his papers.

The silence stretched. Finally I couldn't stand it any more, so I cast around for a topic. "Where's Miranda?"

"We had an argument."

I couldn't help smiling. This was supposed to be his big day, and he was screwing it up by annoying everyone in sight. Even for him, this was a pretty impressive display of how to lose friends and irritate people.

He noticed my small smile, and glanced at me sharply. Then he shook his head and exhaled. "The party's already started in the Convo. I'm sure you'd rather be there."

Good idea. It would be chaotic, and I'd have to wander around to find our parents since I couldn't sense them magically, but it was better than sitting here being ignored by a jerk.

As I stood up, Miranda appeared in the open doorway. She stared at John for a few moments.

"Speak out loud," he said. "It's rude to mindspeak when she's right here."

She pursed her lips. "What should I say, then?"

"How about nothing?"

That must have been some argument. About a topic which Miranda wouldn't discuss in a way I could hear, but John wouldn't discuss behind my back. That narrowed the list of topics down quite a bit. To one, in fact.

The same old mix of fury and shame washed over me. "There is nothing wrong with me!" I yelled. I clenched my fists, waiting for whatever sneer she had planned.

"I know," she said quietly. She threw John a meaningful glance, then turned and left.

John made a disgusted noise. "I think you just proved her point. She says you're too sensitive, and it's kind of hard to take. I said you had reason, and that she was rude to you when she met you, but I'm starting to agree with her. This is really getting old."

"Don't you see the way these people treat me?"

He dropped his papers and stared at me coldly. "I'm one of 'these people.'"

"Exactly, and you're the worst of the bunch." I knew that was unfair, but I didn't care. "You lied to get me to come here, where I'm a freak show. Hey, everybody, look at the mundane Prospero! The first thing you do is drag me to see your big magical battery, and you *know* it's just a big rock to me—"

His voice sharpened. "Because it's the only thing Alton has which resembles a tourist attraction. I couldn't use a nuclear reactor, but I'd still like to see one. I wouldn't call it a big pile of metal, either. That insults all the work that went into it."

"If you think—"

"Forget it. I'm already late, because of you and Miranda. I had to spend all last night scrying, because my faculty advisor wanted an extra brain trying to trace the phone call about the threat, and now you two are ruining the morning. Just go."

I would have preferred sweeping out grandly to being thrown out, but I'd blown my chance. Banished, I left for the Convo. There was no point in going home just as the ceremony was about to begin; I'd stuck it out this long.

I would not ask a stranger to help me find Mom and Dad, though. If I couldn't spot them in the crowd with my unmagical eyes, I'd just sit by myself until they found me.

I was almost there when I heard John running up behind me. "Liz! Wait up!"

I turned and waited. Apology time at last? Then I realized that he was carrying his bag of magical tools, and saw his shocked face. The cap and *summa cum laude* scarf fluttered to the ground behind him, forgotten. Something far more urgent had grabbed his attention.

I pushed aside my own anger. "What's up?"

"The Convo just vanished." What was he talking about? It was right in front of me, as big and solid as ever. "Vanished figuratively, I mean. Magically. Someone threw a huge shield over the whole thing. I can't feel anyone or anything inside. Something's wrong. The threat was real."

I gaped. "What do we do?"

"Don't know yet. I found Miranda in the student center and yelled for her mentally, since I had to catch you physically."

I looked around and saw her pelting towards us, her hair flying behind her. "What happened?" she called.

He waited until she reached us. "Someone must have taken control of the school battery. There's no other way to put up a shield like that."

Someone. A sorcerer, widely trusted, but who wasn't personally known here. The mysterious untraceable warning hadn't been *for* him; it had been *about* him. "Dr. Piper. It has to be Dr. Piper."

"Well, duh." Good grief, he was annoying. "The question is what we're going to do about it. All the faculty are inside."

The Convo looked just the same to me, of course. I went back to the side door and opened it. It opened easily, but when I tried to walk into the building I ran into an invisible wall. A chill trickled up my spine.

The other two were right behind me. John held out his hands close to the invisible wall. “I can’t even feel the shield itself until I’m right next to it. That’s bad news.”

He turned to Miranda. “I’ll examine the barrier. You send out a call for anyone else on campus who isn’t already inside the Convo, to meet us here. Plan?”

“Plan,” agreed Miranda. Their spat seemed forgotten in the face of the crisis. She closed her eyes.

Not wanting to be completely useless, I took a quick jog around the building to see if it was the same everywhere. The big main doors were standing open, but also blocked by the invisible wall. There were no people standing right next to the doors—John had said that the party tended to center around the portal exit—but I could see some in the distance, and they were unnaturally still. Frozen in place, in fact. Were my parents trapped in there?

I completed my circuit of the building and rejoined the other two. “It’s the same all around the Convo.”

“I knew that already,” said John. Yes, naturally he would have. “It’s a sphere surrounding the whole building, including the basement. The portal won’t be working either.”

“Did you find anyone else outside the building?”

“Only three others,” said Miranda. “They’re on their way. They felt the jolt, too; they know it’s urgent.”

I looked around to see who was approaching. I saw them; two women and one man, running from different directions as fast as they could. They all looked young. Students, not faculty.

None of them seemed inclined to take charge. Everyone looked at John expectantly. After a moment’s pondering, he announced, “We have a small problem and a big problem. One is that the school is clearly visible to the outside world, and the other is that something very bad is going on inside the Convo.”

“I can take care of the first one,” said Miranda. “The illusion is simple, and I can maintain the keepaway for a while.” John nodded, and she sat down on the ground and closed her eyes to concentrate.

“Great; that’s that. The second problem is a lot harder.”

“Should we call Mom and Dad?” I suggested.

“They’re already inside; I felt them arrive. Someone else, maybe. No one can get here with the portal not working, but maybe they’ll have an idea.” He dug his communication crystal out of his tool bag. “It’s not working. The sheer power of the shield is interfering with other spells.”

“Would it work from farther away?” asked one of the new arrivals.

“Maybe. Take it, if you want to try. I think it’s a waste of power.” John looked grim, and she didn’t move.

“This is bad,” he informed us unnecessarily. “We have a team of six college undergrads, and we have to break through a barrier being powered by one of the biggest magical sources in the world.”

The guy frowned. “Six? You’re counting the mundane?”

That earned him a full dose of John’s impressive contempt. “The mundane is my sister, and she’s being as useful as you are. What are *you* doing that’s so helpful?”

He looked like he wanted to melt into the ground. Even though he’d just been picking on me, I felt a little sorry for him. I knew the feeling.

Perhaps we should concentrate on our problem instead of our meager team. “John, you can’t break the barrier? Not even with your tools, and the others to help?”

“Are you serious? It’s being powered by the school battery, and you think I can just walk up and punch through it? I do magic, not miracles. I’m not Superman, for God’s sake.”

“Then what’s your bright idea?”

He shook his head, slowly. “Something very bad is going on in there. We have to break it open somehow.”

The woman who’d asked about the crystal said, “You’re John Prospero, aren’t you? I saw your dispelling demo last year. You’re easily the most powerful person here. If you can’t break it open, none of us can.”

John smiled at her, a little too patiently. “Thank you for that helpful analysis. Does anyone have any actual ideas?”

The other woman—girl, really—began sniffing. “I want to go home.”

“Christ, that’s just great,” muttered John. “That is *just* what we need right now.”

She started crying in earnest, and the first woman put an arm around her. Miranda kept her eyes closed, doing her part with her spells, starting to look too tired to do anything else. The guy just stood there looking as useless as I was. John kept staring at the Convo barrier, trying to think of something, searching for a weak point we all knew wouldn't be there.

Our parents were trapped in there, along with a lot of other people, and something dangerous was going to happen.

John's expression deepened my chill to subzero. I could tell he had no idea what to do. He'd keep trying, because he always did, but he was as lost as the rest of us. We were all waiting for him to fix everything, as usual, but what if he couldn't? What if this time, when it really mattered, was his first failure?

Wait a minute. Something John had said a minute ago, about not being Superman. Something in my head about faster than a speeding bullet . . . but not faster than a bullet. No, the other way around.

"Okay, John, I'm remembering things from elementary school, so correct me if I'm wrong."

"Whatever. Any idea is welcome at this point."

"This is a magical barrier to keep out both spells and physical objects, such as people. Its strength is great, but it can't be infinite. Right?"

"Yep." He was only half-listening.

"So this magical barrier can be broken by a physical projectile of sufficient momentum. Right?"

"Right. But we don't have any way of moving something that fast. I can move a rock at about sixty miles an hour. That's not even in the ballpark of fast enough."

"Momentum is mass times velocity. Right?"

"Basically. Do you have a point?"

"If something weighed about 3500 pounds, how fast would it have to be moving?"

"Didn't you hear me? I can't lift something that heavy, much less throw it. I can barely lift Miranda."

He spent his free time levitating his girlfriend? "Thank you for that delightful mental image. And I'm talking about my car, you dope. You don't throw it; I drive it."

Comprehension dawned. “The car. Of course. It can slam through the front entrance where the main double doors are open. Maybe it could work. If there aren’t any people right there”

“There aren’t. I looked when I jogged around the building.”

It was nice to be the center of attention just for once. Even Miranda opened her eyes to look at me with something like respect. Or maybe it was just surprise.

John went over to the barrier and extended his hands again, feeling it up, getting his best estimate of its strength. “Who has a calculator?”

Silence.

“Okay, I’ll do it the hard way. Who has some paper?”

More silence.

“Some bunch of college students we are. Fine, I’ll do it the *really* hard way. Everybody shut up for a minute.”

Nobody else was talking anyway, so that was easy.

“Yes, the car can do it. I estimate eighty-two miles an hour. Make it ninety to be safe, since we’re not sure exactly how much the car weighs. Let’s go get it.”

We left Miranda concentrating on her spells and the others to their fretting, and raced back to the main gate.

John held out his hand. “Okay, give me the keys.”

“Forget it. I’m driving my own car.”

“Don’t be stupid. The energy will be conserved. The barrier will break, and so will the car. There will be a big crash.”

“Well, duh. But the main thing is to get the car through the door. I drive every day, and you’ve barely driven a car since you came to Alton. I’m a better driver than you are.”

“I don’t doubt it. But I have an advantage you lack, which is that I can survive the crash.”

“I have air bags.”

“I have shields.”

“You can’t expect to drive a strange car through a twelve-foot gap at ninety miles an hour.”

He made a frustrated hissing noise. “We’re wasting time. Where are the keys?”

“In my pocket, where they’re staying until you get out of the way. You can’t master a strange car in a few minutes, John. Not even you. It takes practice.”

“Give me the keys. I won’t let you kill yourself just to prove a point that doesn’t need proving. I’m not letting you do it, and that’s final.”

“Well, *I’m* not letting *you* do it.”

“You don’t have a choice.” His expression changed, just slightly, and the world disappeared.

I came out of the trance to the sound of a terrible crash. I ran back towards the Convo, where people were streaming out the doors around the wreck of my car. I fought the crowd and made it to the wreck.

Front end totally crushed, smashed all the way back to the seats. Airbags didn’t deploy; damn used car, did the previous owner disable them without telling me? Blood inside; oh God, blood. Seatbelt unfastened—no, *cut*, cut open—and car empty.

I grabbed a stranger running past me. “Where’s John?”

“What?”

“John Prospero! The guy driving the car! Where is he?”

He gestured wildly towards my right and tore away from me. I forced my way through the crowd off to the right.

I found John half-sitting half-lying in a chair just inside the foyer, with a professor watching over him. He was bleeding in at least a dozen places, pale, shaken, but awake and intact. He gave me a weak version of his usual grin. “I told you I could do it.”

I didn’t know whether to hug him or strangle him. “If you ever do that to me again, I will find you when you’re sleeping.”

“Come on. You didn’t really think I was going to let you be the hero, did you?”

I knew at least part of his reason for pushing me aside had been to protect me, not steal my credit. Still, how annoying was it that he couldn't just *say* that? "And what happened to your famous mighty shields?"

"I think they're the reason I'm alive."

"Oh." That was a conversation-stopper. I took a closer look at him. If that cut on his neck were any deeper, it could have opened his throat. If I'd driven, I probably would have been killed instantly.

He'd been right. Again. And not mentioning it was more grating than anything he could possibly have said.

The professor, seeing him well enough to talk, asked what had happened. John replied simply that he'd driven my car into the barrier. Mom and Dad found us as he was explaining—quick hugs for me, then full attention on John. Mom was mostly just concerned for his well-being, while Dad was more impressed with the quick lateral thinking.

Suddenly exhausted, I turned away before I could hear his response.

Another professor saw me and patted me on the shoulder reassuringly. "He'll be fine as soon as the healer gets here. We've already called for her."

"Good. What was going on in here?"

"We were paralyzed. It appears that Dr. Piper has lost his mind. No one here has seen him in years, so we didn't notice the signs."

Lost his mind? "What was he doing?"

"He was using the main battery to seal the center off and paralyze us, and was in the middle of constructing a constellation of spells when the car crashed in. That broke his concentration and freed us from the paralysis."

"I see." Like the way I'd come out of my trance when John had crashed.

With the paralysis lifted, the older generation had taken charge again. Mom and Dad wanted both of us to come home with them immediately.

I wasn't sure. Going home with my parents sounded pretty good after the day I'd had, but I didn't want to give up my hard-won independence. "Home" was supposed to mean Raleigh now. And I definitely didn't want to spend the next week listening to Mom nagging me to move back to Boston while Dad bragged about John's brilliant heroism.

I had to argue with them for a few minutes. I finally won by pointing out that Raleigh was actually farther away than Boston, as well as being magic-free. Mom was unhappy, but Dad at least was getting used to the idea that I was on my own now.

We were all relieved when the faculty handed out the diplomas without formality instead of reorganizing the ceremony. It hadn't been a good day for the school, either.

Since the law didn't cover magic, or even know anything about it, sorcerers had their own informal system of turning miscreants over to their families. Someone looked up the Piper family tree, and the Dean of Alton called Dr. Piper's brother, Joseph, to take him into custody.

Officially, we never did find out what Victor Piper was trying to do. The school hushed it up, describing it in their newsletter as an unfortunate disturbance which was quickly resolved. Nobody liked to discuss the problem of insanity in the higher echelons of sorcery.

Off the record, John wormed the truth out of his faculty advisor. You couldn't hide much from a woman with a doctorate in scrying. While the Dean had called Dr. Piper's brother, she'd investigated. She'd scried the podium, dissected the spell Dr. Piper had been constructing, and concluded that'd been trying to destroy the Convo and everyone else inside.

Why he'd been trying to do this was anyone's guess, since he was too powerful for her to pull his thoughts out of a shielded podium. We didn't learn more, about that or about the warning call, until much later. But she was personally sure he'd planned a mass killing, and that was sobering enough. Maybe someone else would have come up with an idea in time, but maybe not. My laughable used car had just saved a lot of lives.

With my car totaled, I had no choice but to let John portal me home. He took the opportunity to poke around my new apartment, with his usual running commentary. Traditional or not, his remarks about my cheap stuff were starting to get a little tiresome. Especially after all we'd just been through. Yes, the laws of magic and physics had required the amazing John Prospero to save the day, but it had been my idea and my crummy car had been a vital part of it.

Regardless, he was clearly unimpressed by my new apartment. He was particularly underwhelmed by the cockroaches in the bathroom. Even I had to admit it wasn't the apartment's nicest feature, but it was the best I could find in my designated price range. "We don't all have magical gifts out the wazoo and scholarships thrown at us from all directions, okay? Some of us work for a living."

"That doesn't mean you have to live in a pit."

"It does, actually. I just don't have as many options as you do. Don't you get that?"

He rolled his eyes. “Christ, Liz, I wish you’d get over the idea that you’re some kind of cripple. You’re plenty smart, and you’re good at the field you’ve chosen, and your life is going to be just fine. You’re not crippled; you’re just mundane. Just like almost everybody else on the planet.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.” He walked back over to the portal extension in my living room. “I just hope there comes a day when it’s easy for *you* to say.”

And with that he stepped through the portal and vanished, leaving me speechless. Had he just said something serious? Even nice, in an oblique and sarcastic way? Who was that guy, and what had he done with my brother?

A week later, Alton presented me with a letter of thanks and a brand-new blue sedan. The letter assured me that the air bags worked, and they’d even paid for a year of insurance.

The letter implied that John had given me all the credit. He hadn’t even mentioned doing the magical probing and the calculations; he’d insisted that I had a great idea and all he did was drive. Alton thought I was the heroine of the hour.

It was almost worth it.

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