

The following is an excerpt from *Star Sons: Dawn of the Two* by Lynda Sappington.  
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## Chapter 1

April 1998

Will Payne lay sprawled on the grass of St. James's Park watching his boys fly their kites. Ten-year-old Ethan, already tall and broad-shouldered for his age, had his kite at the full extent of the string, serious as usual about doing things the right way. Impulsive seven-year-old Jake had his kite up for the moment, but Will knew it was only a matter of time before Jake tried to get it to do something more interesting than just staying aloft. The results of Jake's attempts at "fancy flying," as he called it, nearly always ended up with a broken or lost kite, but cheerful little Jake was never frustrated or upset for long.

Today the boys were having great success with their kites, giving their dad time to enjoy watching his boys play like any other children. Kite-flying didn't tempt them to use the powerful magic within them for some reason. They seemed to be content to play with the wind rather than trying to bend it to their will. The one time Jake had tried to make the wind do his bidding, his kite had blown away, as had most of the lawn chairs strewn about the park's perimeter. Recognizing his mistake, Jake had left the wind to its own devices since then.

Ethan was Will's pride and joy, a sweet-natured, considerate boy of great intelligence and surprising wisdom in one so young. And the way Ethan looked after his little brother made Will's heart swell with pride.

Jake, quicksilver Jake, the impulsive, endearing child of his heart. Ethan always thought things through before acting, but Jake raced headlong into whatever interested him, with sometimes frightening results. What was he going to do about Jake? The child's magic was tremendously powerful, and Jake rarely showed an interest in self-control. But then again, he was only seven.

Both boys were handsome, with Will's blue eyes and slight dimple in their chins. Jake was nearly a mirror image of his father, with Will's smile, infectious laughter, and thick dark hair with a slight bit of curl when it was long. Ethan had his mother's smile but apparently was going to be tall like Will's side of the family. Ethan's dark hair had the natural wave of his mother's.

The boys' laughter drifted across the greensward to Will, making him smile for a moment before sobering thoughts intruded again. Jake had to learn some self-control or he'd endanger both himself and Ethan. Will shook his head. Ever since Jake's magical power, along with his impulsive nature, became evident when Jake was a toddler, Will and Meg had tried to teach him to control himself, but nothing seemed to work. If only he were a little more like Ethan, there wouldn't be a problem.

Will looked at his watch, then sat up. "Come on, lads, time to go home!" He got up and helped Jake reel in his kite while Ethan folded his kite and slid it into the carrier Will had made so the kites wouldn't be a bother on the bus. Soon, Jake's kite was stowed as well.

Ethan hung the carrier strap over his shoulder and grinned. "Look, Dad! I'm tall enough to carry it now!"

"And so you are." Will returned Ethan's smile and took Jake's hand, leading him out of the park.

Ethan fell into step beside his little brother. "That was fun, wasn't it, Squirt?"

Jake grinned, showing the gap in his teeth that was so useful for squirting Ethan whenever possible. He skipped a bit, still near-to-bursting with playful energy even after running through the park all afternoon. "I love flying kites!"

"Me too."

"Hang on, lads," Will said, touching his sons to make certain they stopped when they reached the pavement. "This traffic's dreadful."

There seemed to be something going on at the palace. Several police cars lined the road near the gates, their blue lights flashing. Throngs of tourists jammed the pavements along the beautiful black-and-gold fence in front of Buckingham Palace. The Royal Standard was up, indicating that the Queen was in residence.

"The Queen must be coming out soon," Ethan said, standing on tiptoe to see past the crowds of tourists near the gates.

"Maybe," Will agreed.

Jake tugged on Will's hand, his face bright with excitement. "Do you think she'll be in a carriage?"

"I don't know." Will smiled down at his son. He knew how much Jake loved horses. "If she's in a carriage, we'll stop and watch."

Jake grinned again. "Brilliant!" He turned an intent gaze on the gates, barely blinking as he watched for any activity there.

Will and Ethan exchanged an amused look. It was obvious that Jake was nearly willing the Queen to emerge from the Palace gates in a carriage pulled by some of her beautiful horses.

Will turned his attention to the crossing light, letting go of Jake's hand so he could shade his eyes. He squinted, trying to see the signal despite the sun shining in his face.

A crowd of tourists hurried up the pavement, cameras slung around their necks. "Move on, then, chaps!" their guide called. "Hurry now! We have about a minute to take pictures here, then we'll have to leg it to meet the bus on time at the Hyde Park gate."

Will reached for Jake to pull him out of the way of the rushing tourists, but before he could touch the boy, a man's huge camera bag knocked Jake into the street, right into the path of an oncoming car.

Jake threw both hands toward the car and yelled "Stop!" A flash of light surrounded him as he fell. With an uncanny silence, the car and those behind it stopped moving, their engines stilled, the drivers as immobile as statues. The light around Jake disappeared instantly. He had barely hit the ground when Will reached him.

With shaking hands, Will lifted Jake up in his arms and carried him back to the pavement. "Are you okay?" He heard people around them wondering aloud why the drivers of the nearby cars were sitting completely motionless, as if frozen in mid-gesture. Will glanced up at the cars, then realized Ethan wasn't next to him. He straightened, Jake in his arms, and looked around, his heart pounding with worry. "Ethan?"

Suddenly, he heard Ethan's voice. "Dad? Dad!"

"Let me through!" Will cried as he shouldered his way through the mass of tourists to Ethan, who'd been shoved away by the surging crowd. Will breathed a sigh of relief when he squatted in front of his older son. "Are you all right?"

Ethan relaxed visibly as soon as Will reached him. "I'm fine. How's Jake?"

Jake's arms were tight around his father's neck. He was pale and trembling, with a sheen of sweat on his face. "I'm okay."

"Are your boys all right?" an elderly lady said kindly.

"Yes, they're fine, thank you." Will stood up as he spoke to her and made a small gesture toward the street. The drivers stirred, looking as bewildered as the tourists on the pavement. A moment later, car engines started and traffic began moving again.

The palace gates opened and the crowd's attention turned there, leaving the Payne family alone at last.

"That was close, in more ways than one." Will sighed. "Jake, you simply must hold my hand when we're in crowds, okay?"

"Okay." The child was still trembling.

Will looked at his son for a long moment, his heart finally slowing down a bit from panic mode.

"You know what? It was my fault. I was the one not holding your hand. I'll be more careful in the future, okay?" Jake nodded. Will kissed Jake's soft cheek and held him close for a moment, breathing in the fresh grass and sunshine scent of his son. "Let's get you lot home." Still carrying Jake in one arm, Will took Ethan's hand and started across the street.

"Dad?" Ethan said, tugging on his father's hand as they crossed. "The cameras."

"What?"

Ethan nodded toward the security camera mounted above the traffic light. The way it was pointed, it would have captured Jake casting his spell.

"Bugger!" Will snarled, then gave his boys a guilty glance. "Sorry. Don't you say that word, it's a bad one."

Both boys nodded. Will noticed that Jake was quiet, his eyes wide at his father's rare show of temper. Will sighed, angry with himself for losing control. He tried to keep his face and voice calm so he wouldn't frighten the boys. "Well done, Ethan. Let's go over here."

Will led them to a quiet spot away from the roiling crowd of tourists jockeying for the best camera angles as the cavalcade of cars exited the palace grounds. He set Jake on his feet, but the boy wobbled.

"Used too much power, didn't you?" Jake nodded. "Sit down, then. Ethan, watch over him."

"Okay." Ethan sat next to his brother, his arm around Jake's shoulders. "I've got you, Squirt, don't worry."

Trusting Ethan to take good care of Jake, Will turned his attention to the vast number of security cameras in the area. How was he going to keep Jake's spell from showing on those films?



Jake wiped the sweat from his face, which Ethan thought was still much too pale. "It was a good spell, though, right?"

"Yeah. Brilliant, actually." Ethan grinned and ruffled Jake's hair while hiding the turmoil within him as well as he could. Ethan knew they weren't supposed to do magic in public. So did Jake, but he'd had a good reason to do it this time.

"There's that stupid git who knocked me into the street." Jake scowled at the impatient man who was still shoving his way through the crowds. Suddenly, Jake laughed, then held his hand out toward the man, casting a spell before Ethan could stop him. "That'll teach him."

"We can't do magic in public!" Ethan hissed.

Jake, caught up in a fit of giggles, ignored Ethan's warning. "That's another good one, isn't it?"

Ethan looked across the street and saw the man's pendulous jowls had lengthened considerably and were slapping him in the face. Ethan couldn't help himself. He broke into surprised laughter and clapped his brother on the back. "You'll have to show me that one."

Jake sat up straighter and gave his older brother an arch look. "I made it up!"

Dad turned and glared at his sons, which was enough to quell their laughter. Ethan watched his father glance around at the cameras, then surreptitiously flick his fingers to end Jake's spell. The rude man's jowls stopped flapping and returned to their normal size, leaving him with a bewildered look on his face. At least he wasn't plowing down people smaller than him anymore.

Ethan wrapped his arm around Jake's neck and gave him a rough big-brother squeeze. "That was brilliant. Abso-bloody-lutely brilliant."

Jake basked in the warmth of his brother's praise. "Thanks."

"Feeling better?"

"Yeah," Jake replied. "That was scary."

"It scared me and Dad, as well." Speaking of his father made Ethan glance up at him. Dad's head was bowed, his eyes closed, his fingers rubbing his temples.

Jake was watching their dad too. "What's he doing now?"

Ethan glanced around, then leaned close to his brother's ear. "I think he's searching for the security cameras that aren't easy to see."

Jake straightened, excitement energizing him. "Do you know how to do that? Can I try?"

"Not now." Ethan knew how to send his mage senses out to find things, although he wasn't very good at it yet. "I'll explain it later, okay?"

"Okay."

His spell finished, Dad rubbed his eyes in a weary gesture, then looked at his sons. "Do you feel well enough to walk now, Jake?"

"Yes."

"Good. Let's go." He was silent and tense on the way home, a fact that was noticed by his boys.

Jake looked up at his father's unusually stern face. "Dad?"

"Not now. We'll talk when we get home."

Ethan saw his brother's uneasiness. "It'll be okay, Squirt," he murmured.

Jake flashed him a grateful smile that was gone in a moment.



When they got home, Will said, "Go and wash your hands, then play in your room until we call you for dinner, okay?"

Jake chewed on his lip, looking nervous. "Don't you want to talk to me?"

"Not right now." Will sighed. *What am I going to do with this child who's both a wonderfully gifted mage and too impulsive for his own good?* He bent down and pulled Jake into his arms. "I was so scared. I was terrified the car would hit you, but you got your spell off before mine. That was a good thing. Well done."

Jake pulled back and studied his father's face. "So you're not angry with me?"

"Not about that. We'll talk about that hex you did later."

"Oh. Okay," Jake said in a small voice. "I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to make you angry."

Will sighed and smoothed his son's hair off his forehead. "You must be very careful to not do magic where other people can see you. We've told you that before. You have to control your impulses, Jake, or you'll endanger all of us."

With wide eyes and a solemn face, Jake nodded.

Will patted the boy's shoulder, then stood up and looked at his older son. "Ethan, thanks for your help out there. Your quick thinking about the cameras saved us a lot of problems. Good job, lad." He ruffled Ethan's hair. "I'm off to help Mum with dinner."



Ethan and Jake sat on the floor of their room playing with their building set. Jake was fully involved in play, but Ethan was troubled. He knew his father was far more upset than he'd admitted. Not only had his dad put a protective spell around them not long after they left the area in front of the palace, but he'd also cast worried glances behind and around them all the way home. Both the spell and Dad's obvious concern were unusual behavior for his normally-easygoing father, and he'd continued to act tense since they'd returned home.

Raised voices from the kitchen caught Ethan's attention. He watched Jake to make certain he was occupied with their building set, then got to his feet.

His movement broke Jake's concentration. "Where y'going?"

"Loo."

"K." Jake went back to work on the building he was constructing.

Ethan slipped into the hall as quietly as possible, easing down toward the kitchen, following the sound of his parents' voices.

"He's a little boy!" Mum was saying. "He's going to do impulsive things!"

"His impulsiveness will get us in trouble. Broga's people are everywhere. If they see a child with that kind of power—"

Mum sighed. Ethan thought it sounded like she was crying, too. *Why would she be crying?* He listened more closely as she spoke again.

"I know. I suppose it's time we did it. I just wish we didn't have to put that spell on Jake. It doesn't seem right."

*They're going to put a spell on Jake? What for?* Ethan felt as if he'd been kicked in the gut. He knew his parents loved both of them, but Jake's frequent acting-before-thinking caused a lot of problems. Jake enjoyed doing magic and the magic he did was as big and splashy as he could make it most of the time.

*Something bad's going to happen to Jake. What should I do?* Ethan took his responsibilities as Jake's big brother very seriously. Although he would probably get in trouble for interfering, he'd take it like a man. He had to look after his brother, no matter what.

Swallowing the sudden fear that made his knees feel watery, Ethan stepped into the kitchen. "Put what spell on Jake?"

Both parents gave him a guilty look before putting on their stern, parental-warning faces. "Were you eavesdropping?" His father's voice was nervous.

Ethan stood as tall as he could and squared his shoulders. "What are you going to do to Jake? And why? Are you going to do it to me, too? Have we got a choice?"

He watched his parents look at each other, asking questions with their eyes that he couldn't understand. Finally, his mother wiped her eyes, reached out to him and gave him a small smile. "I'm sorry you heard that, sweetheart, but we would have told you about it soon anyway. It may as well be now. Come and sit down."

He moved hesitantly to his chair.

"You know how we've tried to protect both of you." Mum's voice was gentle, her eyes worried. "What Jake did today—"

"Meg! The telly!" Dad turned up the television a bit. A news story was playing, showing a video of the crowd along the fence in front of the palace. Near the right edge of the picture, a tall man stood at the curb with two young boys. As the camera panned the crowd, the smaller boy fell in front of a moving car and yelled "Stop!" just as a bright light enveloped his body. The picture of him falling also showed the cars closest to him, each of which had a driver who was frozen in mid-motion.

Dad's face was white with horror. "I thought I got all the security cameras! I erased five minutes of their memories!"

"Then how—" Mum said, then groaned. "Oh no. The text says this is from a tourist's camera."

Dad slammed a fist on the table. "Bugger!"

"Will! Ethan—"

"He's heard it before and knows not to say it," Dad growled as he dropped his head in his hands. He rubbed his eyes and kept his head bowed, looking like a defeated, exhausted man, which scared Ethan. He'd never seen his father like this.

Dad finally spoke again. "We need to leave, and soon. He needs to know everything now."

Ethan gasped. "Leave? Where are we going? What are you talking about?" He was surprised his voice was as steady as it was, since he felt like a trembling bowl of melting jelly inside. Something was terribly wrong. But what?

Mum put a gentle hand on Ethan's arm. "We have a lot to tell you, sweetheart. What's your brother doing?"

"Building something."

"Do you think that will that keep him busy for a while?"

"It should."

His parents looked at each other. Finally, Dad spoke.

"Perhaps you should go and stay with Jake so he won't interrupt us, Meg."

She looked from him to Ethan, then stood up, bent to kiss Ethan on the forehead, and left the room.

Dad sighed and took Ethan's right hand in his, slid the sleeve up, then held his hand above the inside of the boy's forearm and muttered an incantation. A small birthmark emerged on Ethan's pale skin. The spot was the color of dried blood with bumps around the edges at regular intervals.

Ethan knew that Jake had the same mark, and that his mum kept a spell on their arms to hide the spots. She'd done it all their lives, explaining it away as just making them even more handsome.

"Your mum and I fibbed to you and Jake about your birthmarks, lad," Dad said now. "These marks are very rare. They mean you boys are special people. Because of that, somebody is after you."

Ethan swallowed, trying to push his pounding heart back where it belonged. "Somebody's after us? Why?"

"There's a bad mage named Broga who wants to capture you boys. He has followers called Chimeras that are beasts he's created. You'll know them by their smell. They smell like death, like—like road kill that's been there for a while," Dad said. "Remember when we found that dead hedgehog on a walk? Remember how bad it smelled? Chimeras have a scent like that, but it's faint most of the time. The average person can't smell them, but your mum and I can. It could be a mage thing, that only mages are able to smell them, I don't know."

Ethan swallowed hard. He didn't like the sound of any of this so far.  
"What do they look like?"

"Here, I'll show you." Dad made a gesture that created a translucent television-like screen in mid-air. On the screen, a herd or pack of some kind of animal raced toward the viewer. They had huge mouths full of sharp teeth and ran with their mouths open, as if they were going to swallow in one gulp whatever they could catch.

Ethan recoiled from the image, shivering in sudden fear.

Dad flicked his hand, making the images vanish. "I'm sorry that frightened you, but you need to know about them. They're excellent trackers and completely violent. Not only can you smell them, but I've sensed them too. They made the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck prickle when they were still at a distance, long before I could smell them."

Ethan gasped. "What did you do?" He'd never thought of his dad as a warrior, but the sudden fierce look on his dad's face made him look like the warrior kings in his story books. Thinking of his dad as a warrior was better than thinking about the idea that some madman and his beasts were after Ethan and his little brother.

"I killed as many as I could, then escaped." His father's eyes were distant and troubled.

Ethan goggled at his father. He really was a warrior!

What he'd heard so far was beginning to untangle itself in Ethan's mind now. He took some deep breaths, trying to control his sudden nausea.

"These . . . beasts . . . are after us?"

"I'm sorry, lad. There's no easy way to tell you these things. You're a strong boy. You'll be all right once I explain everything."

Mum stepped into the kitchen. "How's it going?"

"As well as can be expected," Dad said. "How's Jake?"

"Still busy with his building." She turned to Ethan. "Are you all right?" She stroked his cheek gently, a soothing gesture she'd used all of Ethan's life.

Ethan licked his lips nervously, but nodded.

"Good lad. I know this all sounds very frightening, but we're doing our very best to protect you and your brother. We have a charm on you boys so your magic isn't easy to detect, but Jake's spell today was on the telly. Even if it wasn't detected . . . well, we're just going to have to deal with it, that's all." She pushed her wavy hair out of her face and sighed. "We'll answer your questions and explain everything in more detail later, sweetheart, but for now, we need to tell you something, so let us finish, okay?"

Ethan swallowed hard. "Okay."

"I want you to be very brave, love," Mum said. "We have some awful things to tell you."

"More awful than the fact that beasts are after us?" Ethan said when he could find his voice. "Why are they after us?"

"Because of who you are. You can't do anything about that. What you can do is help us keep you and your brother safe until you're both grown, trained mages. But you must keep what we tell you a secret until Jake's seventeen or until we decide to tell him ourselves. Do you promise?"

"Why can't Jake be told?"

"You know what a temper he has, and how impulsive he is," Dad said. "If he knew, he'd throw a complete wobbly, quite possibly in public. He's doesn't have control of his emotions, his magic or his mouth yet, not like you do. Your temper used to be worse than Jake's, do you remember?"

Ethan shrugged. "It still is. I just don't let it out anymore."

"And I'm proud of you for that. We haven't needed to replace windows or mirrors for several years now, thanks to your self-control. But Jake isn't as deliberate as you are, and he doesn't control his emotions as well as you do. He'll grow out of that, but for now, we have to protect him. Will you help us do that?"

Ethan considered their words for a moment, then sat up straighter. "Yes. I'll keep the secrets, and I'll protect Jake." To Ethan, this was a solemn vow, one he'd never break. He crossed his heart, then spat in his palm and held his hand out to his mother. Mum gave him a serious look, spat in her own palm and shook her son's hand. Ethan repeated the gesture with his father, Dad's big hand engulfing Ethan's.

"Good man," Dad said as he released the boy's hand. "Here's the problem. We need to put a spell on Jake to bind his magic. It's an awful thing to do to a mage, but if we're to keep you two safe until you're old enough to take care of yourselves, it's necessary."

Ethan felt dizzy, his stomach hurt, and he felt off-balance, as if the world itself had tilted. He gulped before speaking again. "Are you going to bind my magic too?"

Dad gave Ethan's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "No, lad, we're not going to bind your magic. You're very good at controlling your emotions now, and you very rarely do accidental magic. But Jake needs this protection or he'll endanger both of you. Do you understand? We need to put this spell on Jake to protect both of your lives."

"But . . . but Jake saved his own life today—"

"Yes, he did, Ethan, but I was standing beside him. I was starting to summon him back to me when he cast his spell. I would have saved him, and without stopping traffic. He just got his spell off faster than I did."

Ethan didn't want to ask the question burning in his mind, but something compelled him to. "Y-you think it's safe to leave my magic unbound?"

"Yes, I do."

Everything he'd heard so far suddenly made some kind of terrifying sense to Ethan. Someone was after him and Jake. Dad had said Jake could endanger their lives, hadn't he? Did that . . . could that mean someone wanted to *kill* them? It must. He shivered for a moment, but then his temper flared to life.

"Why us? It's not fair! We haven't done anything to this Broga or his beasts!" Dishes in the cupboard clattered ominously.

"Ethan, please. You must control yourself," Dad warned.

"I'm trying," Ethan growled, but the windows were rattling now.

Mum ran toward the boys' room while Dad grabbed Ethan's shoulder in a firm grip. "Ethan! Stop it!"

Ethan saw his mum stop outside his room and cast a spell. The vibrations from Ethan's fury stopped where she stood. Everything past her was as still as normal. He took a deep breath and blew it out, then did it again, concentrating on the calming thoughts his father had taught him. Finally, his anger was in check.

"I know we're asking a great deal of you, but it's necessary," Dad said, his face sadder than Ethan had ever seen it. "It's nobody's fault. None of us did anything wrong. It's fated that men in our bloodline are sometimes Star Sons. I don't have the mark, but both of you boys do. If I could take this fate away from you, I would, but I can't. I'm sorry."

"That mark makes us Star Sons?"

"That mark means you were both born as Star Sons. There's a lot more to it, but I don't have time to explain more right now. Can you accept what I've said and leave the rest for later?"

"I suppose." Ethan sat and stared at his father for a few minutes, pondering all he'd heard. Finally, he licked his lips nervously and said, "If you can bind Jake's magic, can this Broga bind mine, or yours?"

"No, Broga can't do that. This spell is one your mum and I made up. It took both of us working together for years to create it."

"So you've been planning to bind Jake's magic for years?"

"We thought it might be necessary, yes."

Ethan frowned, trying hard to understand, but fear was interfering with his curiosity. When he got his thoughts in some kind of order, he said, "Why are you telling me about it? I won't need to use the spell myself, will I?"

"You're old enough to start learning complex spells," his dad explained. "We want you to know how it's done and how to reverse it as part of your training."

"But my magic won't manifest fully until I'm seventeen," Ethan said in confusion. "I won't be able to do complex spells until then."

"But you can learn them, even if you can't do them yet," his father assured him. "It's good training for you. I want you to watch as we cast the spell and memorize the incantations used. I'll explain the process and the reversal charm to you after Jake's asleep."

Ethan sat quietly for a few minutes, digesting all he'd heard. Finally, he sighed. "Okay."

Dad sat looking at Ethan for a long moment, then rubbed his hands on his knees and stood up. "Come on, let's get started," he told Ethan. Dad glanced up at Mum, who had come back into the kitchen a few minutes earlier. "You'd better check our bags, see if we've forgotten anything."

"Bags?" Ethan said as his mum hurried away.

"We've been packed for months. We knew it was only a matter of time before we had to leave," Dad said as he led Ethan down the hall to the boys' room.

"Look at my castle, Dad!" Jake said when his father and brother entered the room.

Ethan felt as if someone were squeezing his heart. Would Jake be the same with his magic bound? He was funny and cheerful and so creative with the little magic he was able to do at his age. Jake took great joy in being able to do magic. How would he feel with it gone?

"That's wonderful, Squirt," Dad said, hunkering down in front of the building Jake had made. "Good job." As he spoke, he held his hand, palm forward, in front of his son.

Ethan saw a soft beam of pale gold light as magic flowed between his father's hand and his brother's body. Jake's eyes fluttered closed and he slumped as if asleep. Dad caught him before he fell, lifted him in his arms and sat on Jake's bed.

"Meg? He's ready." Dad held Jake tenderly for a moment, then kissed his forehead and laid him down. "I'm sorry to do this to you, Jake."

"Please forgive us, baby," Mum said as she bent down and kissed the boy's cheek. "We're trying to protect you. I hope you'll understand."

Ethan could see tears sparkling in her lashes as he sat nervously on his bed and watched them begin the spell. It was far more complex than any magic Ethan had seen his parents perform. He watched in awe as they sang and wove magic in the air around their younger son, Mum's soprano a strange but beautiful harmony to Dad's tenor. Tears streamed down their faces as they bound Jake's magic. When they were finished, Dad sniffled and wiped his eyes, then hugged the limp child to him.

Ethan felt his tension ease a little as he saw how carefully his parents worked the spell and how lovingly they held Jake when it was finished. Nothing created with that much love could be harmful, could it? His mind whirled with unformed questions, incomprehensible fears.



Meg held her husband's hands as her voice intertwined with his, singing the incantation that would block their young son's magic. She shuddered, repulsed by the thought of having her own magic bound. What an awful experience that would be! They were doing something ghastly to their son, but it was the only way they could think of to keep him safe, and to keep Ethan safe as well.

She forced herself to concentrate on the spell. They couldn't make any mistakes with it. It had to be perfect, so it could be reversed properly when Jake was ready. She lifted her streaming eyes to gaze at Will and saw that he was crying too. The lamp by Jake's bed cast Will's handsome face into planes of light and shadow. *That's what Jake will look like when he's grown. I hope we can protect him well enough that he can grow to manhood. Oh please, dear God, keep my baby safe!* She sobbed and her voice wavered. Will looked up and she took strength from the power in his blue eyes. Her voice strengthened again and they finished the spell, leaving her exhausted. Another glance at Will showed her that he felt as drained and heartbroken as she did.

She looked at Ethan, who was transfixed, his eyes huge as he stared at his little brother lying too still in his bed. Meg knew he must be horrified at what they'd done, but the muscle in Ethan's jaw clenching and unclenching as it always did when he was tense was his only sign of stress.

*We'll have time to talk to him about it more on the trip. He'll understand. He has to.*

Meg looked at Jake again. He was sleeping peacefully, as if nothing had happened. Ethan was the one who needed her now.



Mum gave Ethan a slight smile. "All right, lad?"

Ethan shrugged. His stomach was still tied in nauseating knots. His fears had solidified now. His parents had cast the spell on Jake with no warning. Jake never saw it coming. They could do the same to him if they wanted.

Mum moved to Ethan's bed and held him tightly, weeping as she nestled his head on her shoulder. "Don't worry, my darling boy. Jake will be all right. He's too little to understand, and things are so dangerous now . . . we simply had to do this to protect you both." She pushed him away from her to look in his eyes. "Do you understand, Ethan? Do you really?"

He had to give her an honest answer. He couldn't lie about something this important. "No. But I'm trying."

She pulled him to her again. "That's all we can ask, love."

Meanwhile, Dad was talking to Jake, who seemed to be sleeping. "You'll be alright, lad. You will. When you're more mature, we'll release your magic and you'll be one of the

most powerful mages in the world. But for now, to keep you safe . . ." Dad wiped his eyes, then kissed the child's forehead, took off Jake's shoes and tucked him into bed.

"He'll need to sleep a while." Dad rested his hand on Jake's head for a moment, then bent down and murmured something in his ear. He sighed and straightened again.

"What did you do then? It sounded like an incantation," Ethan said.

"I put a spell of forgetfulness on him so he won't remember being able to do magic."

Ethan chewed his lip uncertainly, but he had to ask. He just had to. "You won't do any of this to me, will you?"

"No, lad, we won't. I promise you that," Dad said. "But you'll have to avoid doing magic in front of him as much as possible so he won't be tempted to try it himself. We made this spell as strong as possible, but we aren't certain how long it will hold."

"I'll be careful, Dad."

"Good. I knew we could count on you."

While Mum went to finish packing, Dad spent some time explaining how to reverse the spells on Jake. Ethan concentrated hard, memorizing the concept behind the spells, each gesture and incantation.

"You understand how to reverse them now, right?"

"I think so."

"We'll walk you through it on the trip, but there's no time now. Gather up your favorite things, and Jake's. You can take two small toys each. That's all we'll have room for."

Ethan stood up and looked around the room, wondering what he should pack. He felt strange, as if he was leaving his life behind him: his favorite books, cherished toys, his home—he gulped, determined not to cry—Jake's memories.

He pushed his uneasiness to the back of his mind. Mum and Dad loved both of them. They'd be safe as long as they were together. They had to be. All they had was each other, the four of them against some stupid mage and his beasts. The muscle in his jaw flexed and relaxed, flexed and relaxed. He shook off the chill running down his spine. "Where are we going?"

"We'll talk about it on the way, okay? Get moving. And when Jake wakes up, just act as if he's had a nap and get him to choose what he wants to take on holiday."

Ethan's dark brows rose in surprise. "Holiday?"

His father's mouth quirked in a sad, ironic smile. "That sounds better than running away, doesn't it?"

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