

Chapter 2 — The Pilot Program Begins

“It sure is quiet around here this summer,” Lindsey Barron said to her friends, while she changed her year old, little brother’s dirty diapers. Like her friends, she was sixteen, and this fall they would begin school at Arthur Bradbury’s School of Magic as fifth years. Lindsey had long brown hair, which she continued to let grow as much as it wanted. It now reached down to her the small of her back. After her first experiences with magical hairdos for the Presidential Inaugural Ball last January, she continued to use Full Body on her hair. Now it looked rich, thick, and silky. Her eyes were blue, but she had stopped growing taller. She was five-nine, but now her youthful body began filling out in all the right places, as her friends told her.

Her sister, Ashley Stokes-Compton, whom her parents had adopted over a year ago, was holding Jonathon’s hands as he playfully wiggled them. Ashley, who had lost her arms and both parents in a traffic accident when she was two years old, now had magically regenerated arms, good as new. Since she had met Lindsey some two years ago, she had been allowing her light brown hair to grow longer as well, though hers was wavy. Her hazel eyes only added to her mystique. Last January, Ashley had become a fashion model for Teen Fashion Magazine. Yes, she was a very beautiful young woman, though she was still growing taller. Currently, she was all of five-five.

Lindsey was learning how to become a Dispeller, following in her deceased father’s footsteps. Sam Barron had been the world’s most famous Dispeller, before he was murdered. A Dispeller is one who dispels attacking wizards and witches spells, keeping his or her friends alive so that they can capture the evil parties. Meanwhile, Ashley was definitely well on her way to becoming a Diviner 4th Class, one who can predict where and when something bad will happen.

For several years now, another young orphan teen, Audrey Lemon was staying with them as well. Lena and Lloyd Compton, Lindsey’s parents, had become Audrey’s foster parents. Audrey was a silent girl, with sad looking, blue eyes. Average looking, Audrey was a brunette, short and curly. Audrey was a master wood carver, able to take a block of wood and turn out the most incredible carvings of animals imaginable. She now had her own website, an online store, where she sold them, usually making five hundred dollars a figurine. Audrey had a keen sixth sense; that is, she could sense whether or not she ought to be where she was. If something bad was going to happen in her vicinity, she knew about it instantly. While nowhere near as accurate and precise as Ashley’s vivid premonitions, she nevertheless could sense when danger was near. She had stopped carving and had come to watch Jonathon a while.

Lena was a rugged Colorado rancherwoman, whose ranch was five miles square just north and east of the High Plains town of Arapahoe. She had three one-mile in diameter irrigated

crop circles, which produced an abundance of crops. Her husband, Lloyd was actually a Security man working for the Department of Security, Magical Branch, High Plains, who was permanently on assignment here at the Compton ranch. His job was to guarantee the safety of Lena, Jonathon, and the girls when they were here during holidays and summer vacations. Why? The evil wizard Dominus Malefic had several times attempted to kill Lindsey and now Ashley, as well as another of their friends, Pam Betts.

Pam and her family were also staying here on the Compton ranch. Their home in Sterling, Colorado, had been attacked and was now being watched by the Death Stalkers of Dominus. Many times now, Pam had been instrumental in uncovering various plots of Dominus, causing numerous complications in his plans. She was a budding Sleuth. Dominus wanted Lindsey, Ashley, and Pam dead, but had been unable to succeed in that desire thus far.

Pam's father was Fred Betts, the head of the High Plains Department of Magical Misuse, a very key position. He was usually gone most of the day. Her mother, Polly, now helped around the house, freeing up Lena so she could work the fields. Audrey, a plant expert, handled the ever-growing organic garden.

Pam, a computer expert, was melancholic today and had walked out to the living room to see what the others were doing. She felt rather lost. For the last four years, she had been in love with a gorgeous blonde, Monique Blackburn. Monique had just graduated from Bradbury's and had decided to become a Magical Doctor, like her father, Henry, who worked at Greeley General Hospital. Now that Monique was gone as well, Pam felt very alone. All these years, only Monique really loved her and appreciated her as she was.

Pam was homely. Her height was right, five-eight, as was her weight. Her large front teeth with their gap only added to the homeliness of her round face. That her black hair was more flyaway than hair made things worse. However, she had been allowing it to grow longer and had recently discovered that longer, it was a bit more manageable.

Also staying here with them was Pam's Aunt Wilma Welsti and her two older boys, who were being paid to help with the heavier ranch chores. Both boys were now nineteen. Wilma was also a member of Sam Barron's gang, called the Rat Pack. Wilma was their Eliminator, the one who did the actual capturing of the evil doers. Her disguise was that of Bill West. The fourth member of the Rat Pack was Able Monument, or really the disguise used by Monane Tumble, an Apache woman and the Rat Pack's Tracker. A Tracker has the ability to see and follow the faint traces left by the magical energies of cast spells. Monane was now staying with her brother's family, Running Bear Whitewater, R. B. for short.

R. B.'s ranch was next to the Compton's ranch, also north of Arapahoe, but on the small Indian reservation. Some five hundred Native Americans lived on this reservation and they owned and operated a gambling cassino in Arapahoe. R. B. had nothing to do with the cassino, however. He was a highly skilled magical item inventor.

His wife was Lucinda Morning Dove, Luci for short. Their oldest boy Tom had married Sandy Rains, an Arapaho, and the two were now in Denver going to college, their second year. Both Tom and Sandy opted to attend summer school this year, in hopes of graduating in three years, not four. His youngest son, Jim, who just graduated, was Ashley's boyfriend. Jim was off getting his Department of Security training, preparing for a career protecting others, especially from the likes of Dominus and his Death Stalkers.

Their eldest daughter, Amanda, was Lindsey's dearest friend. Amanda was tall, six-one, though she too was now filling out instead of further upwards. Amanda had thick lips, darkish skin, and very long, thick black hair. She and Lindsey were in an unspoken competition to see whose hair could grow the longest. Amanda was also a bit melancholic these first few days in June. Her boyfriend of four years, Henry, had just moved away to Chicago. Amanda was a beginning Tracker, like her Aunt Monane.

Her little sister, Fern, two years younger, had adopted Audrey as her closest, dearest friend. Indeed, they both had a love of plants in common. As much as possible, Fern hung out with Audrey.

Around the Whitewater ranch, things were particularly quite this June. All last year, the Blackburn family had stayed in R. B.'s second house. Now all four of them were gone, three back to Greeley, while Monique was in Denver going to Magical Healing college. Jim and Tom were gone, the three foreign exchange students were gone, the place seemed horribly empty to Amanda and to Fern. Even Monane, Luci, and R. B. felt the change. Luci encourage the girls to use their Teleport Pad, invented by R. B., to go over to visit with the Compton's as frequently as possible.

The monotone voice spoke, "Amanda and Fern are arriving." This magical warning system was devised by R. B.

"In here," Ashley called out. "Lindsey's changing Jonathon's diapers. We're all in here." Amanda and Fern joined them in the living room, just as Lindsey finished with Jonathon. Ashley picked him up and snuggled with him.

"What's up?" Lindsey asked, knowing that sounded awfully lame.

Amanda shrugged her shoulders. Fern asked, "Audrey, how's the elephant carving coming along? Want to see my deer? I'm nearly done." Audrey and Fern disappeared into Audrey's workroom, where the two did their carvings together; Ashley was teaching Fern how to do it.

"Boy it sure is awfully quiet around here," Lindsey offered. "It feels so weird, so few around."

“Like a morgue,” Pam mused.

“We have the chores done, we are free to play, as long as we take care of Jonathon for mom. She’s working the fields now,” Lindsey explained.

“I miss my brothers,” Amanda admitted. “I never thought I would, but with Jim gone too, it’s so lonely around our house.”

“Yes, and Henry dropping that bomb on you, telling you at the last minute that he was moving to Chicago, that certainly doesn’t help either,” Ashley added.

“Well, he only found out about it a few days before he told me,” Amanda stuck up for her former boyfriend.

“What shall we do?” Lindsey asked, bored.

“Dunno,” Pam said morosely.

“Dunno,” Amanda added, not quite as morosely. Then, she asked, “Hey Ashley, have you decided anything about those modeling offers you got yesterday?”

Ashley had received two offers thus far. One was for Teens and the other for a follow up photo shoot with the original magazine, Teen Fashion. “I’m not sure about Teens, their models reveal more of their bodies than I feel comfortable showing. Teen Fashion’s offer is a bit strange. It seems that they got a tremendous response on that one photo of me when I Morphed back into my old self, when I had no arms. Their offer wants me to model predominately that way, armless. Kind of strange, but they are offering me fifteen thousand dollars to do it. I haven’t decided yet.”

The four girls sat on the couch quietly doing nothing for several minutes, a total lull in their conversation. Finally, Ashley had an idea. “Say, why don’t we go look at all those fetish clothes that Nadia van Nye Malefic gave to Lindsey? We can get a good look at them. After all, we’ve never really had the time to just examine them before now.” That brought all four of them up to curiosity and they headed to Lindsey’s room to do just that, Ashley carrying Jonathon in her arms.

Since Ashley wanted to look too, Lindsey cast her Move Object spell, bringing the playpen into her room. Ashley put her little brother in it and he got excited with his little toys. Meanwhile, Lindsey unlocked the small briefcase and spoke its command word, Open. At once, the case began unfolding until it occupied nearly half of the room, over fifteen feet long, but three feet deep.

“Wow, look at all of the outfits!” Pam declared.

“And the heels!” Ashley added.

“Wow!” Amanda added. Lindsey smiled, she had a lot of expensive clothes in here, including the four thousand dollar gown that she had worn in January to the Inaugural Ball.

“We should organize them,” Lindsey suggested. “I understand them all better now. Nadia said some of these are only worn in private for your partner. I can certainly see why. Let’s put those kind in one area. Let’s put the ones that one of us might possibly wear to a dance over on this side.”

She added hastily, “But be sure to move all of the accompanying accessories as well. Nadia has these very well organized and color coordinated. She has a real sense of fashion, I’ll give her that.”

Many dresses were satin, some were latex, a few were of other materials. Some were long and very form-fitting. Others were awfully skimpy in length. “Golly, if I wore that maid’s outfit, I wouldn’t dare bend over! You could see everything!” Pam declared.

“Maybe you aren’t supposed to bend over,” Amanda suggested.

“Unless it is for your partner,” Ashley teased them. “I bet if I wore this for Jim, well. . .” she didn’t finish her sentence. She couldn’t. All four giggled loudly.

“Oh, I just realized something. These corsets that are so colorful — they are supposed to be worn on top of the dress, while these other plain ones are worn beneath the dress. I get it,” Lindsey explained her realization.

“Oh, I’ve seen that type before,” Pam pointed out. “It’s called a cat suit. Sure is fetish.”

“Say, when Monique wore her boy’s suit at the dances with you, wouldn’t that qualify as a fetish outfit?” Lindsey asked.

Pam blushed, but answered, “Yes, she wanted me to look as good as I could. That’s why she did it. It helped a little.” Pam suddenly was lost in thought.

“What?” Lindsey nudged her, curious about what she was thinking about.

“Well, when we were at the Ball wearing these four thousand dollar dresses, compete with those really high heels, why I felt beautiful. I can’t explain it. It defies all logic. I was still me, but I felt so utterly different, you know. Weird,” Pam explained.

“I felt sexy!” Amanda admitted. “*Really* sexy. I saw lots of men stealing glances at me too.” They all giggled again.

“Twenty outfits,” Ashley finished her tally. “You realize there is not one pair of heels in here shorter than five inches? Gosh. Half are even taller! I mean we were having a tough time managing the oxford’s with five inch heels.”

“I imagine these others are more for private times,” Lindsey concluded, though she had seen Nadia and Jolina, Nadia’s constant companion and dear friend, wearing heels as high as the tallest in this collection. However, they were wearing them around the house. No — she now remembered that Nadia wore the six inch heels at the Inaugural Ball and needed her to support her. Still, Lindsey could not imagine actually wearing them in public.

Sorting through the clothes, admiring them, arranging them, took all of an hour before the girls were bored once more. With all arranged properly, Lindsey shut her magical closet. The four wondered what to do next.

Lindsey sighed, “Well, I ought to practice on my harpsichord and I ought to work on learning all those Grade 5 spells sans wand, sans words.”

“Hey, let’s work on the spells,” Amanda said. Magic always had her interest.

“Yes, and I will see if I can learn any more that way too,” Ashley added.

“I suppose that I ought to go do some more research,” Pam sighed. “I’ve still got Governor Alister’s special request to learn all I can about Dominus Malefic’s Restricted Wish spell. And then there is still the puzzle about why the Mac Fluide Enterprises is dealing with Dominus and loaning him money to start up a fishing business. You all go practice and I’ll watch over Jonathon for a while and do my research.”

“Thanks, Pam,” Lindsey replied. The three girls headed outside to practice spell casting, Pam cast her Move Object on the playpen, placing it in her room near her computer.

“Okay, Jonathon, let’s see if Pam can figure out anything useful today,” she talked to the year old baby as though he were grown up. A bit later, Pam told Jonathon, “Well, little fellow, Pam cannot really do anything more on the Restricted Wish spell until I get back to the school’s library. I guess I ought to see what more I can find out about Mac Fluide Enterprises, don’t you think?” She looked down at the tyke, he looked up at her with his big brown eyes and smiled.

“Oh you want to be up here with Pam, do you? How can I turn those big brown eyes down?” Pam picked up Jonathon and sat him on her lap. At once he began to reach for the keys of the keyboard, managing to pound a few. “Oh, you want computer lessons right away! Well, I think perhaps you need to grow a little, but Pam will teach you all she knows when you get bigger. Say, what have you done here?”

The baby had managed to task switch her laptop over the MagNews. Hugo, white teeth gleaming as usual, was reporting, “President Missy Snow has just unilaterally bypassed the Congress of the United States, which has for months balked at providing the needed funds to launch her ambitious National Health Care Program. KMAG News has just learned that the billionaire philanthropist, Simon Mac Fluide, has just donated ten million dollars to President Snow’s program. This is the precise amount that she was seeking to get from the Congress. Bertha Dors, Secretary of Health, has just announced that the National Health Care Program will be launched in two weeks through out the entire state of New York and the DC area.”

“Here is an except from the speech that the Secretary gave earlier this morning. This is Bertha Dors.” Hugo gave a charming smile, as the screen switched to the prerecorded video shot earlier today.

The large woman spoke before a wall of cameras. “This is the pilot program. We will be carefully monitoring the results over a four month trial period. After that, we will carefully evaluate the results and make a recommendation for the next phase. Beginning on Monday, every resident of these two areas will be asked to visit their local Health Care facility. The plan calls for monthly visits. The cost to the residents for all these visits is zero. All costs are fully covered by President Snow’s plan. Of course, we realize that many will have difficult times getting to their local Health Care provider. They will not be left out. Anyone who cannot easily get to their local provider should call this number and once a month a traveling physician will visit their homes.”

“The health care covers everyone from age three to ninety-nine. Smaller infants are exempt and should be handled by their pediatrician. Please note: this plan is not voluntary. Rather it is the civic *duty* and *obligation* of every resident of the state of New York and DC to see their local center within the next month. After that time, the Department of Law will compile a list of those who are violating the plan. During this pilot phase, those unwilling to follow the plan will be given a choice: follow it or move to another state. We expect to see tremendous benefits from this plan, absolutely mind blowing benefits, though I am not at liberty to discuss those benefits with you just now. We are not just talking saving billions of dollars, no, we are looking to improve the overall health of every resident of these two areas.”

“By October, the results of this first pilot program will be announced. President Snow plans to address the nation, presenting the results personally and announcing what the next phase will be. Thank you for your time.”

Immediately, the reporters volleyed many questions her way. “What happened to freedom of choice? Are you making it against the law to not participate?” One reporter called out loudly.

Bertha turned to answer that one. “The benefits of the plan will only be seen in time. Honestly, do you really *want* to be ill? If our plan will guarantee that you will not get sick, not even a cold, wouldn’t that make it valuable to you? Only with 100% participation can we cut the staggering cost of health care in this country. Let me put this to you another way. You are paying

a one third of your yearly income taxes on health care for either yourself or others who cannot afford it themselves. This is a staggering amount. What if that expense became zero, nada? Your taxes could be lowered by that amount, giving you that much more of your own hard earned dollars to spend on yourselves. Allow a handful to not participate, and the costs of their emergency treatment begins to eat up all of that savings. Do *you* want to give one third of your taxes to support those few who refuse the free health care? I think not.”

“Secretary Dols,” another reporter yelled the very instant she thought Bertha had finished, “What has Aetna Pharmaceuticals got to do with the program? Sources inside the White House tell us that they are deeply involved.”

Bertha replied, “At this time, I not at liberty to say what their participation in the program will be, only that they are heavily involved. Their role will be fully explained by President Snow at the October Press Conference, where she will present the pilot program’s results to every citizen of our country. Now, I have much work to do, this is a broad and sweeping program. Thank you very much.” She stepped away from the microphones. Hugo’s smiling face reappeared.

“You heard it, mandatory participation of every resident of New York state and DC! Yet, she has a point, we cannot allow a few individuals, who refuse to participate in the health care program, to run up such huge medical expenses that the rest of us have to pay for it out of our income taxes. Ladies and gentlemen, if I could save one third of what I pay in taxes each year, I could afford to buy a new car! It is my humble opinion, that if President Snow’s program does indeed cut the astronomical health care costs in this country, then we must insist that the government lower our taxes by that very amount. I put this very question to the Treasury Secretary an hour ago. Here is what Herman Smiley had to say.” Hugo faded out and the balding man appeared.

Herman said, “Once the program has been fully evaluated and the financial picture is clear, it is the expressed wishes of President Snow that the income tax rates be lowered accordingly. You suggest the figures that Secretary Dols has announced. If that holds up, then, yes, the President will be asking Congress to lower your taxes by that amount. In doing so, think of the economic impact that will have on the country’s economy!”

Hugo reappeared onscreen. “I find this incredibly interesting news. I have asked our reporters to present us with an in depth study of our current health care system and its staggering costs. Tonight, I will present those results and compare it to what the Secretary of Health, Bertha Dols, today has suggested the savings may be.”

Hugo leaned forward, moving in close to the camera, as if he were moving close to you, the viewer, sharing some important secret. “Personally, just between you and me, I don’t see how just visiting your local health care center once a month will suddenly slash all of your medical expenses to zero. Doesn’t this sound more than highly unlikely to you? Well, it certainly sounds

preposterous to this reporter! Unless President Snow and Secretary Dols are outright lying to all of us about her health care program, there must be something else going on here that they are *not* telling us! I promise you that KMAG will get to the bottom of this, we will find out what *is* going on and report it to you immediately! Stay tuned to KMAG News. This is Hugo Whitefield reporting.” A commercial for a breakfast cereal appeared on the screen, Pam clicked the window into the background, de-activating it for now.

“This is scary, Jonathon! Mandatory participation, that’s un-American. Just what are they going to do at the monthly doctor visit? How can one trip to a doctor each month keep anyone from getting a cold or flu? Hardly likely. Worse, Jonathon, I don’t trust this Mac Fluide Enterprises at all! They have been funding Dominus Malefic and even letting him use their Florida studios to make his presidential videos, hijacking the commercial satellite feeds. We all know that Snow is now a puppet of Dominus, she has one of his rings on her finger, or rather imbedded in her finger. I don’t trust any of this, do you little one?” She looked lovingly at Jonathon, who was sitting in the playpen looking up at her now. She had put him down when she became engrossed in the newscast.

“I know, I know, I should do more investigation of them. Okay, but I’ve been over this a hundred times already.” Pam sighed and brought up their home page and stared at it. The screen title in bold, black lettering read: Simon Mac Fluide Enterprises Worldwide. Pam stared at the screen, hoping for some inspiration that she had not yet had before, something she could track down, some clue that she had overlooked during all of her other research efforts into this corporation.

Minutes went by and still her mind was a complete blank. She smelled something foul, looked down at Jonathon and grinned. “You need a diaper change and some dinner don’t you? All right, Pam comes to your rescue.” He cooed.

Having handled Jonathon and pelting him with kisses, Pam carried him back into her room. As she put him back in his playpen, positioning him so he could see her, she commented, “Boy, I sure do need to know the answer to this one, don’t I?”

Like a bolt of lightning, it struck her! They’d learned a new divination based spell this past spring, the Know Answer spell. “Heck, why not!” She waved her wand and said, “Know Answer: Simon Mac Fluide Enterprises.” Her wand activated, but she didn’t see anything really happening at all. Thinking it was a total bust, she sat down and stared at the screen.

Suddenly she saw double. There was the web page line and another ghostly line appeared just below it. They read:

Simon Mac Fluide Enterprises
Dominus Malefic Enterprises

She stared at these double images. Now the letters seemed to move apart until she saw:

S I M O N M A C F L U I D E
D O M I N U S M A L E F I C

“It can’t be!” Pam muttered, hastily writing out the letters, Simon Mac Fluide and then began crossing out the letters as she spelled out Dominus Malefic. “Oh my god! Oh my god!” exclaimed Pam. “He’s done the same darn thing that Sam Rabnor did, scrambling his letters to form Barron, just like Wilma and Monane did too. All four did the same thing with their names. Oh dear god, Mac Fluide Enterprises is Dominus’s own huge corporation! Oh no! Now he is giving Missy Snow ten million dollars for the Health Care Program! Oh no, no, no! Jonathon, this is horrible news. I have to let everyone know about this right now before it is too late!” He cooed again.

“Where is a Mass Message spell when you need one?” Pam said disgustedly. At once she began a litany of Message spells. Only after firing off twenty identical Message spells did Pam finally calm down. She’d notified her father, Governor Alister, the faculty at Bradbury’s, her friends, and even her Dutch foreign exchange students from last term.

She’d no more than finished sending the last ones, when Messages began appearing before her eyes. Governor Alister’s message read:

Brilliant Pam. Will Message the others and will meet with Rodents tonight after supper. A.

Instead of replying, Lindsey, Ashley, and Amanda came running inside to see her, joined on the way by Fern and Audrey.

“Pam, how on earth did you figure this out? It’s so simple, we all should have seen this ages ago!” Lindsey declared.

“I know, I feel like the world’s biggest idiot,” Pam replied. Wilma and Monane poked their heads into the room and overheard her comment.

“Pam, it is Monane and I who are the idiots! We never dreamed that he did the same thing as we did with our names. I feel like an imbecile! However, Pam, this discovery is monumental in its importance!” Wilma exclaimed.

Monane added, “Now we have a clue to Dominus’s next action, it has something to do with this National Health Care Program. Brilliant, Madam Sleuth! Did you get Alister’s Message about meeting tonight?”

“Yes, I got it.”

Ashley commented, “I told you all this was really, really bad, but now it is so much more worse that I am getting really scared again. This enterprise corporation of his is huge! Our battle has gone from trying to capture and defeat one man to an entire corporation. I’m scared!”

Audrey was just extremely pale, she didn’t have to voice her fear, it was plainly visible.

“Ashley, you have every right to be scared, honey,” Wilma replied. “Personally, I am too; we all are. You are right, we are facing a whole corporation, not one man. Now for the first time ever, I can see why we have been having such a hard time tracking this man down and bringing him to justice. He has his hands in many, many other countries as well as ours, access to nearly inexhaustible resources. Yes, Ashley, I am plenty scared. I hope Alister can calm us all down tonight!”

“Oh no! My dad!” exclaimed Ashley, who was having a flash of insight. “He was investigating that corporation and was about to expose who Simon really was! No wonder dad and mom were murdered! Damn you, Dominus, I am going to make you pay for what you did to my mom and dad!” Anger seethed in the young teen’s body, her fear had given way to a total hostility.

“You are right, now it makes complete sense, why your folks were murdered,” Lindsey replied.

Ashley became down right antagonistic. “Yes, it sure does make sense! I am relieve in a way,” she sighed. “You know — knowing the real reason why. Well, I’m ready to do my part in putting this man where he belongs. I hope we can get on to it sooner than later.”

“Say, I heard Hugo say something about one of their affiliated companies was going to be involved in this Health Care Plan, Aetna or something like that,” Pam stated flatly, finally calming down. “I’d better see if I can find out what their connection is supposed to be.” She returned to her laptop and began searching for this company. The others decided to have some sodas to calm down a bit, before resuming their spell casting practice, leaving Pam alone with Jonathon and her computer.

An hour later, a frustrated Pam picked up Jonathon to take him for a walk. She just could not find a way to hack into the Department of Health’s system nor into Aetna Pharmaceuticals to see what was going on between the two. She thought about seeing if some hacker in the Underground would do it for her, but thought better of it. Breaking into those departmental systems carried huge penalties if caught. Hacking into Aetna’s would be a direct challenge to Dominus, putting the hacker at a severe risk of being hunted down and murdered by Death Stalkers. She valued these anonymous hackers too much to sacrifice their lives.

Lena came in for a break. “Lena, I think that Jonathon might be hungry again,” Pam ventured. He was being very fussy at the moment.

“Yes, I figured so. Hold him while I heat up his grub.” While Lena began fixing his baby food, she asked, “Say, having any luck on that corporation of Dominus’s?”

“No, I can’t get into Aetna’s site nor into the Department of Health. Hence, I am still in the dark, but there must be some awful connection, I just know it.”

Taking Jonathon from Pam, Lena began feeding him. “Well, they make drugs, don’t they? I mean, that’s what pharmaceutical companies do.”

“Sure,” Pam answered, not seeing where Lena was going with her question.

“Well, if they make drugs, it stands to reason that they need to then ship those drugs to their destinations. If you cannot find out from either the source or the recipient, then there is always the transportation companies. Someone has to handle the shipping.”

“Brilliant, Lena! Yes! I’m off. Oh, when he’s fed, you can bring him back, I’m watching him and he’s watching me.”

“Okay, but it is time for his nap. He can sleep in his playpen I guess,” Lena replied. Pam dashed off to check on trucking companies.

Pam didn’t need to Google on trucking companies, she knew there were thousands of them, anyone of which might be making the deliveries. Instead, she went to the GEOSAT tracking site. All trucks these days used the GEOSAT system. The drivers punched in their origin point and their destination point and the GEOSAT system handled the driving. Accidents had been reduced to nearly nil as a result.

Pam had no idea where the Aetna laboratories might be located, so she again browsed their website. While their research labs were in South Florida, she found that their manufacturing and distribution center was in Macon, Georgia. She entered that as the source location. The destination location was more problematical. The Health Care Program was to be implemented in all of New York and DC. She assumed that there could be many drop off points for such deliveries. Hence, she decided to try just the DC area first.

Minutes later, she had the real time map of all trucks in transit between these two locations. “What’cha doing?” Lindsey asked, whispering softly so as not to wake up her sleeping brother. They had finished their spell casting practice sessions and she had come to see if Pam wanted to go swimming with them.

“Trying my best to find out what’s going on between Aetna and the Health Program. Here’s all of the trucks in transit between Macon, Georgia and DC. Lots of them to choose from, however, they might not be shipping today, so I will have to look at all of the traffic say for the past month and see if I can find out something.”

“That sounds like a long project. We are going for a dip. Want to join us?” Lindsey asked.

“No, I’d rather work on this. We need everything we can find out, if we are going to have any chance of stopping him,” Pam said with a sigh.

“Don’t they have all that stored in a database somewhere? Wouldn’t it be easier if you got a copy of that database and then wrote a program to go find what you are looking for?” Lindsey asked, unwilling to let Pam just sit inside on such a fine June day. Besides, she knew that Pam was feeling terribly lonely now that Monique had left.

“Well, actually, Lindsey, you are quite right. I will be wasting tons of time doing it this way. Thanks for the tip.”

“Okay, so why not come outside with us and get some space and fresh air?”

“Okay, okay, as long as I can just sunbathe, you know I don’t really like to go swimming,” Pam agreed at last. Lindsey moved the crib into the kitchen area where Polly was working on making dinner for everyone. She agreed to keep an eye on the sleeping baby.

Soon they joined the others who were already splashing in the waters of R. B.’s large pond. Pam put her towel onto the grass at the side of the pond and dipped her feet into the water. “There, I’ve been in the water, satisfied?” she teased Lindsey, who threw her towel down beside Pam’s. Lindsey giggled.

“Say, can I ask you a really personal question, Pam? I’ve been wanting to ask you for years, but I just never got the chance.”

“Sure,” Pam replied, wondering what Lindsey wanted to know about her.

“Were you and Monique in love with each other, like Tom and Sandy who got married last summer? You don’t have to answer me if you don’t want to, I mean I’ve got no right to ask you this. It’s just I’ve been curious about it for years. If you were, I can understand what her going off to school means to you.”

Pam’s face felt awfully hot, but she replied anyway. “Yes, I thought that we were in love. I mean she’s the first person who really cared for me, good old homely me.”

“But that’s not true, Pam. I care for you very much, so does Ashley and Amanda. We care a whole lot.”

“Yes, but that’s not the same thing. I was, well, attracted to her. She’s beautiful, she is older and wiser about many things. She’s really good with computers, like me. We had a lot in common. I, we, sort of fell in love with each other, but. . .” Her voice trailed off and she became silent.

“But?” Lindsey asked.

“Well, I’m now all confused. It happened at the Ball, you know. I saw that new guy she met there, that Ace Brill, of the Colorado Department of Defense, Magical Branch, kissing her — kissing her like we kissed! I could tell that Monique feels towards him like she felt towards me. Now that she is gone off to school, I’ve lost her, I know it. Ace will be probably courting her, I’ll bet anything on it. I saw his eyes, he was really taken with Monique.”

“Gosh Pam, I didn’t know. I’m so sorry for you.” Lindsey didn’t know what else she could say to her dear friend.

“What makes it horribly worse for me is that for the very first time in my life, I felt really beautiful at that Ball. You know, we were so fancied up. I never had long nails like that or a dress remotely like that one, let alone those high heels. For the very first time, Lindsey, I felt that I was truly worthy of Monique.”

“That must be devastating to you! I didn’t know,” Lindsey repeated herself.

“It was like someone threw a snowball into my face!” After a pause, she added, “But then there was the boy our age who was dancing with me, Tom Ryker. He’s the son of the Arizona Department of Law head, Bill Ryker.”

“What about Tom? He danced with you all night long,” Lindsey asked, wondering where this was headed.

“He and I got on very well. I mean, I don’t usually get along well with boys. They take one look at me and go yuck. Lindsey, I really like Tom, but then I don’t suppose that I will ever see him again. After all, he’s in southern Arizona, Phoenix School of Magic, he said. But he’s the nicest guy I’ve met yet.”

“Well, why don’t you email him? Start up a chat or something. Maybe he feels strongly about you too?” Lindsey suggested.

“Yes, but what if he doesn’t? What if he was just dancing with me, like he said at first, to avoid having to dance with his mother?”

“Then, you will be crushed, Pam, but at least you will know how he feels and you can move on from there,” Lindsey advised.

Pam flashed a smile, “Better to have all the crushing news right now, isn’t it? I mean how much more crushed can I get?” A bit later, Pam sent an email off to Tom Ryker.

That evening after supper, Polly had the girls help her brew a large batch of tea. “We are expecting a lot of visitors this evening. We need to be prepared, I’ve baked up a bunch of pies.

Hope they will be enough.” The girls giggled and lent a hand. Shortly after six, people began arriving.

Governor Alister arrived, bringing Deiter Cross with him. Minutes later, most all of the professors from Bradbury’s School of Magic arrived, but not Professors Blake and Janice Smith, the latter was disliked by Lindsey and her friends. Doctor Henry Blackburn arrived at the same time as Jim Whitewater. Jim at once gave Ashley a loving, long kiss. Tom and Sandy Whitewater came and were immediately surrounded by R. B., Luci, Fern, and Amanda, asking them lots of questions about how college was going for them. Tom began explaining how they could graduate in three years not four, if they did summer schools each year.

Lindsey was very surprise at the other arrivals. Fred Betts brought along his boss, the head of the Colorado Department of Magical Misuse, Casper Williams, his peer, Rachel Smith of Denver, and Governor Lacy Broom, the US Governor General over all the magic schools. Not long after that, Pina Pong, Governor General of the Southeast Asian schools also arrived, along with Ace Brill, Colorado Department of Defense, Bill Ryker and Kathy Jacks, Arizona and Colorado Departments of Law, respectively.

This was the largest assemblage of people yet here on the Compton ranch. Just the introductions alone took nearly a half hour. At last, Alister rose, sitting his tea cup aside. “I have called this meeting of the Rodent Pack because of the startling revelation made by Miss Betts this afternoon. We have all been so underestimating Dominus Malefic that it is not even funny. So many events in the past now have become strikingly clear to me. For example, fourteen years ago, Ashley’s father, a deep under cover agent for the Chicago Department of Law, was on to Mac Fluide Enterprises. His last journal entry suggests he was about to disclose just who Simon Mac Fluide really was, Dominus Malefic, though perhaps it is the other way around. He was summarily murdered along with his wife. Many things are now clear to me.”

“Until today, I was under the misguided notion that we faced one man and his Death Stalkers. Now, I realize just how wrong we have all been. Behind the scenes for many, many years, Dominus has been establishing an entire network of ‘legal’ businesses, from banking, to pharmaceuticals, to airplanes. The list of companies under corporation ownership is staggering. He has built an entire network of companies. Why?”

“I thought about this for sometime, before I sent you today’s summons. All this elaborate planning can only be direct towards his stated Manifesto, his so called Golden Path, a path which puts him as the dictator of the entire world. Last year, we thought it was the height of folly for him to run for President. Yet, that too is part of his overall plans. Now we know that he has millions of Americans under his direct control via the rings that he gave out under the cover of Dominus for President. I must tip my hat to Dominus, that was one very clever bit of planning. We never saw it coming.”

“Today, we have had our first break. Via Pam’s revelation, we can now connect the dots, as she would say. This mandatory National Health Care Program of President Missy Snow is funded by Dominus. His Aetna Pharmaceuticals company is playing a major role in that program. However, just what that role may be, we do not yet know. I’ve called everyone here for a major strategy and planning session. What should we do now? I throw the table open to suggestions.” Alister sat down.

Ace Brill, whom Pam thought was now Monique’s boyfriend, replacing her, spoke up first, “I would like to add a little more facts to what Governor Broadwell has said. As head of the Colorado Department of Defense, I have been issued some orders connected with the rollout of this Health Care Program in New York. All of the state heads have been ordered by the Secretary of Defense to summarize the crime rates in our states fully and completely, going back over the last ten years. We were told that these data will be later compared to the rates found in New York and DC after the pilot program is over in October. As far as we know, the program is to start on July 1st. I’ve discussed this with a number of other state heads, and our conclusion is that this Health Care Program is somehow expected to drastically lower the crime rates in these two test areas. No one will give us a direct reason why this may be.”

Old Casper Williams rose next, “This gets curiouser and curiouser. I have a connection over in the Department of Records. At the moment, Sam “DNA” Spade has everyone working overtime compiling lists of all known wizards and witches living in DC and New York state. I don’t know what this has to do with anything, but it is somehow connected to the Health Care Program.” He sat down.

Governor Lacy Broom rose next. “As you know, I am in charge of all the schools of magic in the US. I report directly to Thomas White, the US Regent, who we know is under the direct control of Dominus. He has given me direct, specific orders regarding the implementation of the National Health Care Program in New York, as it relates to the New York School of Magic. He has made it clear to me and I have been forced to make this clear to Governor Alice Walker of the New York School of Magic. All students and all faculty and staff who are wizards or witches must report to their Infirmary monthly. He said that they must receive the B pill. All non-magically endowed staff must also report monthly to receive their A pill. By his orders, anyone failing to comply will be expelled from school or, if they are faculty or staff, arrested.”

“I tried to get him to discuss what these pills were, would do, or anything about them. He flatly refused to divulge any further data. Obviously, we can now presume this Aetna company is manufacturing them. What in the world are these pills anyway?” No one knew.

After the conversation died down, she continued. “Of course, this is going to pose severe problems for the New York School of Magic. Alice Walker bitterly protested to me, but there is nothing I can do about the ruling. She and I came to a compromise. You didn’t hear this from me,” she cautioned.

“Many feel that their rights are being violated by this mandatory pill taking, especially when the contents and effects of said pills are not known. Hence, you may expect a very large number of transfer students this fall. Shortly, I will be drafting a letter to all of the US magic school Governors telling them to expect a sizeable number of transfer students. This also includes faculty. According to Alice, she expects that half of her faculty will either retire or move to another state. Some will need jobs, so my letter will also alert you to this possibility as well. As far as the norms there, we don’t know enough about norms to answer that one.”

“Well I do,” Professor Herbert Mac Elroy, Lindsey’s math teacher, a sixty-four year old, grey haired non-wizard, rose. His wife, Professor Elaine, was a witch and taught English. “We don’t take kindly to being ordered to take unknown pills or anything. You may expect a sizeable number of ordinary citizens will be so outraged by this move that they will pack up and move to another state. The surrounding states ought to be forewarned, they may see a sudden population explosion in the next three weeks. Whatever is our country coming to?” he sat down, quite angry.

Professor Delius Dogs rose, “If I may make a suggestion? At this time, we ought to obtain some of these ‘pills’ and analyze them. Just what will be their effects? I find it very disturbing that there are to be two pills, one for those of us who control magical energies and one for those who do not. Very disturbing.”

Pam rose, Lindsey opened her mouth to say something, but quickly shut it. Among all these important adults, Pam felt a bit daunted. “I am researching what trucking company they are using to transport the pills to DC. Once I know that, I can tell you just what truck is on its way and precisely where it is located at any point in time.”

“Brilliant,” Delius rose again. “May I suggest that a few boxes of these pills magically disappear from the shipment? Once we have them, where can they be analyzed? Do we have any laboratories that we can trust this to be handled secretly and safely?”

No one had an answer. Finally, Doctor Blackburn rose. “Well, I am a facial reconstruction specialist, but we do have limited facilities at Greeley General Hospital. I know some lab folks who could perform some basic tests on the quiet. This would be a start. Another possibility to keep this out of the major labs, which will likely be being monitored, would be to make use of some CSI lab. They are fully equipped to analyze unknown substances.”

After some further discussion, Fred Betts rose, “I know a fellow I can trust in the Colorado CSI unit in Denver. Get me some samples, and I’ll see what can be discovered about them.”

Professor Cho Lin rose, “You know, something Lacy mentioned is bothering me. It is this exodus thing. Personally, if I were on the New York faculty, I would depart rather than be subjected to taking unknown pills. Should we be making some kind of contingency plans to house and care for those who chose to evacuate New York and have no place to go or stay? What

if this goes nationwide? What then? Is Singapore School of Magic hiring,” she jested to Pina Pong, who grinned back.

Lena rose to speak, a mere norm among these powerful wizards and witches. Lindsey was very surprised as she rose, still cradling Jonathon, who was asleep in her arms. “We have a lot of space here. I would be more than willing to provide shelter for anyone in need. Perhaps with R. B.’s help, we can add another home like this to house them.”

Before she could sit down, R. B. rose, “Excellent, Lena. Yes, the Compton and Whitewater ranches are perfect for this — remote and out of the way. I will see to it that we have enough of these energy efficient homes to meet the needs, within reason of course. We can live nearly independent of civilization out here, if we must, though getting the kids to survive without sodas and pizzas will be tough.” All the teens chuckled.

Alister joined them, “I will see to the expansion of our dorms. Bradbury’s could accommodate many more students, if need be.”

“Thanks Lena, R. B., Alister. I feel better about it now,” Professor Cho Lin replied.

Pina Pong rose, “May I make a suggestion? What about making a world wide attempt to choke off the basic supplies that this Aetna company needs to make these pills? Lord knows how badly we want to put Dominus out of business. He’s wanted for a dozen murders and nearly fifty robberies in Southeast Asia alone.”

Deilus added, “She’s got a valid point. Once we know what raw materials are needed for their manufacture, we should do everything possible to cut them off.”

“We’ll have to do it in secret, vigilante style,” Kathy Jacks rose and replied. “As it now stands, the Departments of Law and Misuse cannot touch it in any way. I don’t condone taking the Law into your own hands, but in this case, I don’t see any other viable way. Dominus now has control over the normal law enforcement lines.”

“In a related matter,” Lacy rose once more, “I have visited with all of the US Governors. All pass the sub-dermal ring test. Evidently, Dominus cares little about the magic schools.”

“Well, that is a bit of bright news, Lacy. Thank you,” Alister complimented her efforts.

She added, “They are taking a cue from you, Alister. Each school is holding a physical exam week at the start of the fall term. Any student who has such a ring will be given the choice of having it cut off or leaving the school. I insist that we have no hidden Dominus controlled students on any of our campuses. I do not want a repeat of the bombings that you had at Bradbury’s, Alister.”

“What about their faculty and staff? Are they to be examined as well?” Delius asked.

“Yes, I will not have a Dominus controlled professor teaching our children. I have put my foot down on that one. However, I have no intention of ever telling my boss what I’ve ordered. I feel he has no need to know how I run my magic schools, none of his business,” Lacy replied. Lindsey noted that Professor Delius seemed very relieved.

Bill Ryker rose when she finished. “In late August, all of the heads of the state Departments of Law will be meeting in Chicago with Geneva Holmes. At that time, I will endeavor, with Kathy Jacks assistance, to find out which state Department of Law heads are not under the control of Dominus. By late fall, we should know better just how bad the rodent infestation actually is.” Several chuckled at his jest.

Professor Delius rose once more, “Governor General Lacy, I would like to make a suggestion for your consideration. At Bradbury’s we ran mock battles last year. Every five weeks, all those in a specific year who wanted to participate, joined together in mock combat situation. I refereed them. No spells are ever actually cast. The five minute combat is video taped and the students review the tape afterwards. It has been incredibly instructive and very productive, perhaps one of the best educational drills we have ever had. My suggestion is that you suggest that the other schools of magic adopt a program similar to ours. If you like, the teens here tonight have been participating all last year and can give you their own point of view on the mock battles.”

“Yes, I’ve heard about that program. Let’s discuss this in detail after the meeting. It may well come down to the kids versus Dominus,” Lacy replied.

The adults chatted a bit more and then the meeting broke up. Polly, Wilma, and Monane served up pie and hot tea. During the informal hour, Delius and Lacy talked at length about the mock battles. Lacy wanted to hear just how they were done. After that, Lacy chatted with Deiter, Lindsey, and Ashley, getting their opinions on the program. When she left, she was firmly convinced this program needed to be adopted at the other schools. She vowed to make it so, if at all possible.

Since Deiter came with Alister, he had to leave when the Governor did. As he left, he called out to Lindsey, “I’ll be coming round tomorrow morning about ten to show you something. Bye for now.”

“What’s he going to show you, Lindsey?” asked Amanda.

“I have no idea.” Lindsey hated being left in a mystery. She wanted to box his ears for leaving her like this, wondering all night.

After the last guests had left, Lloyd sat down with Ashley. “Have you reached a decision on the offers for more modeling, dear?”

“I’m definitely not going to do the one where they want me nearly naked!” Lloyd grinned, thankful for this decision. “But I cannot make up my mind on the other one. I mean it will be fall clothes and all that, nothing wrong with that. It’s just that they want most of the shots to be me without arms. I can’t figure out why? What do you think, dad?”

“It’s up to you. You really do not need the money, so you should do what you really desire to do. If you feel uncomfortable with it, then say no. I’m sure other offers will come along sometime.”

Ashley giggled, “So you are not going to tell me if I should or not, are you?”

“Nope.” She gave him a big hug, realizing that he was treating her as an adult.

“Well then, I think I will do it. I thought about it and there are other women who have disabilities as well, like missing arms and such. If they see me as being comfortable with it, perhaps it will help build their own confidence. If just one teen does, then it is all worth it. That’s how I see it.”

“Admirable reason to do it. Shall we sign the papers and let them know?” Lloyd asked. They did so. The next day, they learned the shoot would take place on the 22nd of June in Hollywood, which excited the teens all the more.

The next morning around ten, Lindsey was waiting for Deiter to show up with his surprise. Indeed, all of the teens wondered what he was going to mysteriously show Lindsey. They heard a low flying airplane outside, but thought nothing of it until the monotone voice announced “Deiter Cross is arriving.”

Lindsey dashed to the front door. Opening it, she was taken by complete surprise. A small single engine Cessna had just landed on their mile long drive, taxiing up to their front door. Everyone ran to the plane and a very proud Deiter climbed out, standing tall on the foot pad on the wing of his plane.

“Hi ya! Like my new plane? Dad got it for me. Got my license to fly too. Been soloing for a couple of weeks.” He climbed down, the girls swarmed around him, anxious to see a real airplane up close.

“Well, you sure surprised me, Deiter. How many can it carry?” Lindsey asked.

“Three including me. Miss Barron, Miss Stokes-Compton, would you care to go for a fly and see what your ranch looks like from the air?” Deiter asked, scarcely able to contain his enthusiasm. They didn’t need to be asked twice! He showed them where to step and soon Ashley was in the back seat, while Lindsey sat beside Deiter.

He talked them through the starting sequence, checking each aspect of the plane before he started the engine and then took off, roaring down their long roadway. From the air, Lindsey got a spectacular view of her ranch, the Whitewaters, and Arapahoe as well. After the short ride, Deiter took Amanda and Audrey. Next, Pam and Fern got a ride as well.

“Well, that’s all the gas I’ve got. I have to head over to Lamar to fill up before I head back to Colorado Springs. Isn’t this the greatest thing, flying in a plane, I mean?” Lindsey had to admit that she had a ball. Deiter volunteered to come again another day and bring his plane.

“Well, that was sure a surprise,” Lindsey said, waving goodbye to Deiter as he began rolling down their road again.

“No kidding, makes me want to cast my Fly spell and zoom around here a while,” Ashley commented.

Pam was mostly unmoved, “Honestly, I prefer my Fly spell. There are just too many mechanical things on which he has to depend for that plane to fly.”

Chapter 3 — A Rare Day in June

Pam set to work attempting to determine the trucking line being used to bring the “pills” to the DC or New York areas. This, she soon discovered, was going to be trickier than she had anticipated. This whole business was shrouded in secrecy, Aetna Pharmaceuticals used more than one trucking company and had no set delivery pattern. While she was able to spot a truck which left the distribution center in Macon, Georgia, when the truck stopped at a weigh station along Interstate 95, the weight indicated the truck was empty and the driver declared an empty manifest. She began to wonder if the trucks were just dummies. Perhaps they were making the deliveries by use of Teleport spells. This, she reasoned, would not only be safer, but also secure as well as secret. It would certainly be the method that she would use.

Her computer beeped indicating that she had incoming email. Pam tasked switched over to Agent and saw a new arrival. Her heart skipped a beat, it was from Tom Ryker. For a moment, she sat there not willing to read it, fearful of yet another round of crushing news. “Might as well get it over with,” she muttered to herself. She clicked on it and began reading.

Hi Pam,

Really super to hear from you!

I rather figured that you probably were not interested in someone like me, which is why I didn't write. Girls around here aren't interested in me. Just between you and me, I'm not much interested in them either.

Every girl I've met here in Phoenix is an air head, you know. They seem proud that they don't know what a hypotenuse is, or how to prove the earth moves around the sun, or why everyone's fingerprints are different. They are all into looking fashionable, getting hooked up with fancy houses and all that. Yes, I know Phoenix has some incredibly expensive homes.

Me personally, I rather live with someone I respect and admire. That means more to me than marble tiled floors and gold plated faucets in the bathrooms.

Our chat on the dance floor about why the CSI's use different colored fingerprint powders was incredibly stimulating. I thought about it until I fell asleep that night.

I must admit Pam, I have never met a young woman quite like you before. In fact, I think that you are far more brilliant than

I am, which I find humbling.

My dad's now under an awful lot of stress. His boss, Geneva Holmes is Dominus controlled. He swears that she is watching him like a hawk. Is it the same with your dad?

I know you probably won't be interested in dating a computer geek like myself, but I would be really honored if we could just be friends. I know you mentioned that you were good with computers. I plan on being a Mag Computer Engineer, which of course turns off all the girls around here. That is, until their computer goes on the fritz, then it's "Oh help me please, Tom!"

I've been doing C++ programming since I got my first computer when I was six. Right now, I have been taking Advanced Computer Engineering as my electives ever since third year when we finally could have that option.

I've already written and sold one of my programs. You've probably have never heard of the surveying company called Belliard's. They make the Marshal Angles, which is a surveying tool that makes surveying field work a breeze, thanks to my software. It measures line of sight angles. I made ten grand on that sale. I think that programs ought to make life and work easier for people. Anyway, that's the aim of my software. I will probably open my own business when I graduate.

However, mom and dad, they want me to go into either the Department of Law or Magical Misuse. We've had arguments over this. They want me putting my skills on detecting or finding or trying criminals. Me, I want to make people's lives and work easier. Ah well, parents.

Anyway, Pam, I am attaching a photo of me working away on my computers, in case you forgot what I look like. If you wouldn't mind, I would really love to have a photo of you, but I'll understand if you don't want to do that.

Your friendly Phoenix computer geek,
Tom Ryker

Pam let out a little squeal as she finished reading the email. She double clicked and launched her image viewer to see Tom's photo. He was acting silly in front of several monitors. He evidently had several.

"What's up?" Lindsey asked. Passing by Pam's door, she'd heard the squeal.

“Tom sent me a reply and his photo!” Pam said, trying to conceal her excitement.

“Can I read it?” Lindsey begged. Pam moved back so Lindsey could see her monitor. “You really talked to him about CSI fingerprint powders while you two were dancing?” Lindsey asked, rather floored by the topic.

Pam blushed, “Well, yes, we did.”

“Hey, he is deep into computers too, that’s got to be a plus for you, right?”

“Well, yes,” Pam admitted. “I cannot believe that he was the one who wrote the software for those Marshal Angles. I gave one to Amanda and Monane to help them with their tracking. Small world!”

“I remember. Wow, he wrote the program, cool! Pam, I think that he is really interested in you. Are you going to write him back? You should tell him how into computers you are. Honestly, I don’t know anyone better with them than you, Pam.”

“You think I should? Write him?” Pam asked a little insecure, after all this was a boy she was writing to, not Monique.

“Sure, why not? Tell him about yourself, I suppose. As long as you are honest with him, then you cannot be hurt. If he doesn’t want you, then that’s the way it goes. I’d at least chat with him,” Lindsey suggested. “He is kind of cute. Say, what does he mean by a computer geek?” Lindsey had not heard that term before, she’d never had or used a computer, until going to Bradbury’s.

Pam giggled, “I’m considered a computer geek. Someone who is deep into computers. Usually, it is a derogatory term, like his term air head. Okay, I’ll write him back.”

At lunch, R. B. joined them, bringing a set of plans for expansions. “The first question, Lena, Lloyd, is do you want a separate house or would you prefer this house expanded double?”

Before Lloyd could respond, Lena asked, “Isn’t one larger home more easily defended than two separate houses?”

“Very true. Even if the two houses are joined via a common hallway, you still have two separate entrances to guard. One larger place is more defensible,” R. B. pointed out.

Lena looked at Lloyd and said, “Then, let’s go more defensible. I don’t mind more people around. Perhaps we can find a way for them to still have some privacy as well.”

Lloyd agreed, “Yes, one large unit, but isn’t it risky only having one exit? Perhaps we build an extension on either side of this house, we could have two more front porches or rather one long one, and then have three front doors. Inside, the rooms can connect, allowing free passage as needed, yet giving the other residents some privacy as well.”

“It sure is a good thing that I followed Audrey’s suggestion to grow more vegetables this year,” Lena commented. “We’ve now got all twenty-five square miles or sixteen thousand acres irrigated, not just the three circles. The crop circles are in wheat for flour, the rest is vegetables. I think by harvest we will be able to support quite a lot of people in these new buildings. Say, what about Wilma’s boys? Won’t they have to be moved?”

“Yes, we can move them into one of the new spaces when it is finished,” Lloyd replied. “Say what about making a long hallway and then having two bedroom apartments coming off that hallway? We could fit more families this way.”

“Scrap my first plan,” R. B. chuckled, turning them over, he began to sketch out another idea. “Look, one long hall goes down the length of either side of your house, connecting doors in several of your existing rooms. We then divide the ninety-five by two hundred foot section into four equal sized homes. Each can have a huge living room and another large room behind that, leading to a long hallway. On either side are the bedrooms, say four of them, two baths, ending at the combination diningroom, kitchen and pantry. Given that Wilma’s boys will take over one home, that means you can add seven more families without the slightest crowding.”

“How much is this going to cost us?” asked Lena, always conscious of the finances.

“What say you if I use adobe for the inner walls? That will accomplish two things, lower the total cost dramatically and add a good measure of soundproofing,” R. B. suggested. “I bet this way, we can do it all, including the furnishings for twenty grand, maybe less. I believe that I will also do the same thing to my ranch. Then, we can buy in bulk and get better deals.”

Lindsey was about to volunteer the needed funds, but Lloyd spoke first. “Perfect, I have more than enough to cover it in my account. Let’s get started as soon as possible. Undoubtedly, folks from New York are going to begin evacuating soon, certainly by the first of July, three weeks from now.”

“Hum, manpower, Lloyd. We are going to need some workers. We can use Wilma’s boys. It would be ideal to have another pair of strong arms.”

“I will ask Deiter and Emilio if they are interested,” Lindsey finally got to say something. “Besides, Kathy might want to come to help too, since she is going to go with Ashley to the photo shoot.”

“Okay, then shall we get started yet today? I will bring my Magical Digger over here and we can get going,” R. B. replied.

Luci teased, “Lena, you’d best keep an eye on R. B. and that digger of his. Before you know it, he will have dug three ponds for you as well!” Everyone laughed. R. B. did love to play with his invention, one of the more enjoyable of his inventions.

Lindsey emailed Deiter, Emilio, and Kathy. Andy had already left for another archaeological dig, so he was out. At one, R. B. had his Magical Digger in operation. Deiter, Emilio, and Kathy arrived, eager to help out. At first, everyone stood around watching R. B. play. Okay, he really was digging the physical space of the new addition on the east side, a hole twenty by forty feet. Once he had a quantity of dirt removed, everyone began magical creation of adobe bricks, following R. B.’s instructions.

“Thanks for asking me to help,” Deiter said to Lindsey, as the two worked on preparing their first batch of bricks. “I really want to help out. Besides, this is going to be fun. We can see how R. B. magically creates the inside space five times the physical dimensions. That ought to be a really cool piece of magic.”

“You bet. I missed it all when they built our current home,” Lindsey replied, then said commanding, “Mix.” Her wand flashed and the dirt and water began stirring itself. “I’m sure glad you are willing to help. He says we ought to be able to take seven large families in here, without using any of our existing space.”

“That’s really generous of you and your family. I mean to offer a home to those who may need it. Besides, I couldn’t possibly turn down a reason to spend a lot of time here with you, Lindsey.” Lindsey flushed and gave him a sideways glance. His eyes met hers and he grinned. Lindsey felt a rush of warmth flooding through her body and it was not from the sun overhead.

“I bet we get to learn some new construction type spells too,” Deiter added.

“I like how cheap it is to build and how self-sufficient it ends up being,” Lindsey chatted while her first batch of mud was mixing. “Do you realize that it cost mom and dad a total of one hundred dollars for all of their utility costs the whole last year? Heating and cooling and electricity. Most was gas for cooking.”

“You’re kidding? Right?” Deiter asked a bit confused. “We pay three times that for one month!”

“Now you are teasing me, right?” Lindsey asked very seriously. Three hundred a month sounded huge. His face told her that he was not pulling her leg. “That’s awful. Your dad must make a lot of money each month just to pay the bills.”

“He does, he has his own company. The mortgage on our house is a quarter of a million dollars. Mom says that he needs to earn three thousand every month.”

“Wow. Mom and I were always frugal. We own our ranch, no mortgage and hardly any expenses, compared to your folks, but then you probably have a really nice looking house in Colorado Springs,” Lindsey replied, testing her adobe mud mix.

“I think I’d rather be like you, Lindsey, free, not behind the eight-ball every month like dad is, trying to make enough money. Say how’s it look? I think this is cool, learning new spells. They don’t teach us this Mix spell,” Deiter said quite impressed with the spell. “I wonder how many more cool spells R. B. will teach us?”

“I think it is a specialized spell from the construction industry. I wonder how he gets the extra-dimensional thing inside done. Now that would be way cool to learn,” Lindsey answered.

“Super way cool!”

Lloyd came over to examine their mixtures. “Okay, these are ready. Listen up gang,” he said to all of the teens, “new spell time. First, you use your Create spell that you already know to form the mud into bricks. We want them one foot long, four inches wide and four inches tall. Use Create to make the bricks, Move Object to line them up along the road. Once you have used all your mud, then I’ll teach you the Fast Dry spell. Let’s get to it.”

Pam cast her Create spell and placed a perfectly formed brick on the road, beating everyone to it. However, the others were right behind her. Two minutes later several hundred muddy bricks lay on the road, basking in the warm June sun. Lloyd had the group gather around him and he began explaining the relatively simple Fast Dry spell. Via this spell, each mud brick would become a solid adobe brick in seconds.

“Now you just go down the line of your bricks and cast Fast Fry on each in turn. Once that is done, Move Objects and start a pile over there. We will begin laying the outer walls and inner walls after you get the second batch done,” Lloyd explained.

An hour later, several thousand bricks lay neatly piled. R. B. finally stopped his fancy digging machine. “Ah well, it was fun while it lasted. I do so like to dig holes.” Amanda laughed, this she knew.

“Okay, kids, now comes the hard part,” R. B. explained. “We have to lay in the outer walls and then the inner walls. Watch me and mimic how I am laying them.” He sat down on the ground, pulled out his wand and began by first Levitating a brick and then used Move Object to place it in position. He interlocked the bricks until the outer wall was three feet thick. Quickly, the troupe joined in, but Deiter began laughing so hard he couldn’t cast a spell.

Dozens of bricks were rising into the air, flying over to the ever growing walls, floating down into position, all by magic. Soon, Ashley backed one of her bricks into Lindsey's, giggling. A short fight amongst bricks then occurred, until everyone was laughing hysterically. Thirty minutes later, they had used up all their bricks and had to go back to making more again.

“Excellent progress, kids. Tomorrow, it will be ready for the extra-dimensional enchantments. Anyone interested in learning how to do that?” Everyone chorused together, quite loudly. R. B. teased them further, “It's called Dimensional Shift, classified as a Grade 8 spell, but I believe you all may be able to handle it. We'll see.”

“Wow, he's going to show us how to do that!” exclaimed Deiter.

By supertime, everyone was pooped, but as one looked down into the hole, he or she could see the new walls, the long hall running down the side of their home, the four individual, new homes with their many rooms, all nicely outlined with adobe brick walls. As they ate supper, Lindsey said to Deiter, “You know, I hate to see you having to dash back home each day. If you want, why don't you stay here with us until we get this all done? You think your parents will allow it? I mean if you want to stay here,” she added quickly, remembering to give him a way to go home if he preferred.

“Wow, yes I'd love to stay. I'm sure mom and dad will okay it. I'll need to go home and get clothes and things. I'll ask them now.”

While he was asking, Lindsey asked Emilio and Kathy the same thing. Ten minutes later, all three teens had permission. Lena and Lloyd thought this was more than perfect, after all the three were helping build the new homes. After dinner was over, Deiter asked, “Say Lindsey, as long as I am going home to get my stuff, do you want to come along? I can show you my house, that is if you want to see it? Maybe you are too tired tonight. We did a whole lot of work today.”

“Mom, can I? Visit Dieter's place?” Lindsey asked.

Lena agreed, but Lloyd was concerned. “Security, Lindsey. Dominus and his cutthroats pose a risk every time you travel. Probably nothing will happen if you visit Deiter's house. However, some of us ought to accompany you, just to be safe. If this is okay with you, Deiter, and his parents, then let's do it.” He tried to sound upbeat.

A few minutes later, Lloyd, Wilma, Deiter, and Lindsey arrived in a wealthy suburb of Colorado Springs. Here, all of the houses looked quite elegant and large to Lindsey, who had seen very few houses actually. Their well-tended lawn was quite green, the home was tri-story brick with attached two-car garage. The entrance way allowed one to go either up or down.

“Welcome, come on in,” Zelda Cross greeted them. Herbert was standing behind her and added his greeting to hers.

“I hope Deiter was of some assistance,” Herbert said formally.

“Yes, he is quite the good worker,” Lloyd complimented him. “Tomorrow, R. B. will try to teach him the Multi-dimension spell. You’ve a fine home here, Mr. Cross.” While Lloyd followed after Herbert, Zelda escorted Wilma to her kitchen, leaving Deiter to show Lindsey around.

“I am amazed, Deiter! Your house is so big and everything is so neat and clean, not at all like Tom and Jim’s rooms.” She remembered the perpetual mess that the Whitewater home had been when the boys lived there. This summer, their home was vastly neater — just Amanda and Fern now, who preferred things to be orderly.

“Thanks, mom always insists that we keep it cleaned up. Here’s dad’s study. Can you tell he is an aviation engineer?” Lindsey saw many airplane models hanging from strings from the ceiling, a huge drafting board, and a wall full of books. Lloyd and Herbert were looking over a drawing chatting, so the two passed on to other rooms.

“Here’s my room,” Deiter showed off his room. His walls were plastered with Colorado Rocky baseball team memorabilia. One photo of Lindsey was also on the wall, Lindsey pretended not to see it.

“What’s all this Rockies stuff?” she asked. Deiter couldn’t believe she didn’t know about Major League baseball, but dutifully explained it to her. He also stuffed clothes and his computer and Staff of Power into a large duffle bag, but the staff wouldn’t fit. He carried it instead. Lindsey noted that Deiter also kept his room neat, quite unlike the Whiterwater boys.

“Got to see my playroom and study hall,” he said, leading her to the adjoining room. Here one wall held his entertainment center with probably fifty video games or more, all neatly arranged. His desk and bookshelf combination held numerous books, many were biographies of famous people throughout history. He’d taken up guitar ever since his exposure to it in their second year.

“Here’s our upstairs bath, we’ve a family and party room in the basement, pool table, poker table, games that sort of thing.” He took her down to see.

“Ashley would love to come shoot pool,” Lindsey teased.

“I know, but she’d skunk my butt.” They laughed. “We’d better head back.”

After Lindsey thanked Mr. Cross for letting Deiter come and help, the small group teleported back to the ranch. “Well, you and your folks have a fine house. Glad there was no trouble. Thanks dad, Wilma,” Lindsey added.

After getting Deiter and Emilio settled in the spare bedroom, Kathy in with Lindsey and Ashley, the teens gathered in the family room to chat. “Say, anyone for a game of cards? I brought my decks,” Deiter suggested.

“I know Canasta,” Pam volunteered. Kathy also knew how to play, but Lindsey had never played a card game before. When she was little, she had no hands, making that impossible. Since she went to Bradbury’s and had her hands re-grown, she’d had no opportunity to play games. Before long, Pam, Audrey, Amanda, Lindsey, Ashley, Fern, Kathy, Emilio, and Deiter were having a rousing game of Canasta, made all the rougher because nine were playing. Eventually, Lindsey ordered out for four pizzas — Lena expected that, though.

Bright and early the next morning, Lindsey, Ashley, Audrey, and Pam raced through their morning chores, finishing just as Polly and Lena had breakfast waiting. The kids woofed down their breakfast, eager to get to work on the construction, the new spell beckoned to them all.

“First, it’s time we learned Multi-dimension,” R. B. explained. “Once we have the proper magical dimension expansion in place, then I must cast the Make Permanent spell, that’s a Grade 9 spell, which I won’t be teaching you today. After you finish your sixth year, you are welcome to drop by and see if you can learn that one. Very, very few wizards or witches are able to master that one, I’m afraid. Now, pay attention, here’s how Multi-dimension goes.”

Amanda found that her father had infinite patience when it came to helping someone learn a new spell. She’d not seen this side of her father. He went over and over it, especially with Kathy, who found this spell quite challenging indeed. “Don’t fret so, Kathy, it is a Grade 8 spell and you are ready to start learning only Grade 6 spells. It is three levels beyond your current education and training level.” After hearing this, Kathy relaxed and finally got her wand to activate with this spell.

Because of the very large physical space that was being enlarged, combined with the five-fold increase in size, twenty such spells were required to alter the entire space. Finally, with Kathy adding the last one, R. B. then instructed them on how to properly analyze the results, making slight alterations here and there to make the combined inner space uniform. “It won’t do to be walking down what is a five foot hallway only to have it suddenly become four foot six part way down. Everyone, please check over all the twenty spaces now. You can avoid getting your stomach queasy by not looking outside the space. Once we get a roof over it, then the spatial disorientation problem goes away,” R. B. explained.

Satisfied all was perfect, R. B. began a very long chant. Pam, eager to get a glimpse at the Make Permanent Grade 9 spell, listened intently, but she could not follow the spell’s complexity. Finally, she just joined her friends who were sitting on the dirt pile outside, experimenting with the spatial distortion problem, looking partly at the world around them while also looking at the newly created expanded space of the home below them, then trying not to be nauseous.

“Well, you can sort of get used to it,” Audrey pronounced. Kathy merely vomited and gave up.

“I agree, you can get used to it,” Deiter agreed with Audrey. Pam just shook her head at them all; she didn’t bother with such silliness.

A bit later, R. B. finished and the space was finalized, ready for the roof and the inside work. “Okay, everyone, time for you to cast your Force Walls. We place these impenetrable barriers over the entire top. Then again, I cast Make Permanent on them. Once that is done, we cover the top of the house with three feet of dirt, sloping it to the back. Fern and Audrey can sew grass seed and water it.”

After lunch, the real inside work began. R. B. put the boys to work on laying in the plumbing, while the girls, awaiting the arrival of the lumber truck, studied how the inner walls were to be built. One person would use the nail gun, while the others would use their spells to bring the framing from the pile and position it for the nailer. Once the framework was done, then sheets of inside plywood were handled the same way. Of course, everyone wanted a chance to use the air powered nail gun. Around two, a semi pulled in with the wood for the two buildings here and for the two over at the Whitewater’s ranch.

“This is incredible fun, Deiter!” Lindsey was taking her turn using the nail gun.

He grinned, “This plumbing stuff is not much fun. I think you got the better job.”

“Don’t worry, tomorrow you will get a turn at the nail gun,” R. B. chuckled. Deiter’s grin broke into a very broad smile. He was definitely envious of Lindsey and what looked like real fun. Later in the afternoon, R. B. again fired up his digger to make a hole for the septic tank. That evening the plumbing was finished. The next day, the men went to work on the wiring, while the teens continued with the woodwork. At last Deiter and Emilio got their turn with the nail gun.

After they each had their turns, both boys begged the girls to let them be the permanent nail gunners. Lindsey roared, “You want all the fun!” However, the girls let them do it. That evening, Lloyd turned on the power and the four new homes had lights.

The fourth day, the women went into nearby towns to purchase fixtures, beds, dressers and other needed items to furnish the four homes or apartments. Polly suggested buying them from the Goodwill stores, keeping the overall cost way down. Lena agreed wholeheartedly with that suggestion. The teens were kept busy all day installing what the women continued to bring back each hour. However, Deiter and Emilio refused to help make the beds, which brought on a round of giggling from the girls. Instead, the girls made the boys install the toilets and sinks, which really made them work hard, not too much magic could be used, just good old elbow grease.

As they all sat down to supper at the end of the fourth day, compliments of Luci, the first addition was finished. “You know it is utterly remarkable that we all built this new addition which is really four homes-in-one in only four days,” Deiter pointed out. “Normally, the normals build homes in closer to six months.”

“Yes, Deiter, it would take us many months to build one like your parent’s house,” Lloyd explained. “These novel construction techniques have allowed us to put it up in four days. However, there is a huge difference in cost. If one were to purchase a home like yours, Deiter, I’d expect to pay at least three hundred fifty thousand dollars or more for it. If one were to purchase our home here, as large as it is inside, you might expect to pay four thousand for it. There is a huge difference in quality and marketability. Don’t sell your home short. However, for our needs, homes like ours are far better. We can set in place far better security spells than we could on a home like yours. After all, look what three Disintegrate spells did to that home in Telluride, when you all rescued the three kidnaped girls. With these adobe walls, it is far, far harder to break through a wall to get inside.”

“We’ve got three more of these to build, gang,” R. B. said the obvious. “However, we will certainly have the other expansion unit here done before Ashley’s photo shoot on the 22nd. Once you get back, then we need to add two to my place. I reckon that we will be finished by the 1st of July. I’d expect that we will start seeing folks coming after that.”

R. B. grinned and then added, “You kids have been really great workers these past four days, really good. If you all continue and help us get the other three done, I think that I will reward you. What would you say if I tried my best to teach each of you how to cast the Make Permanent Grade 9 spell? You won’t be learning how to do it at school, it’s beyond their skill levels, though at least two there know it.”

After the wild cheering and thank you’s died down, Lindsey asked, “R. B. can you tell us who at Bradbury’s knows that spell, Make Permanent?”

“You are a curious one aren’t you? Well, it is no secret. Governor Alister and Professor Cho Lin have mastered that spell. Just don’t mention it to Professor Delius Dogs, he is very sensitive about having failed on three occasions to master that spell.” Deiter’s eyebrows raised, he looked up to Delius. That he might have a chance to learn a spell that Delius didn’t know filled him with an immense sense of pride and power.

When the day arrived for Ashley’s new photo shoot, both additions were finished. All that remained was to punch entrances into the main ranch house so that folks could go from one addition to the other to the main house. This R. B. and the others would work on while the girls were off at the photo shoot in Hollywood. Again, Lloyd, Wilma, and Monane accompanied the teens. Besides Ashley, Kathy, Lindsey, Audrey, Amanda, and Pam went along.

At eight that night, the tired teens arrived home. Kathy was on cloud nine, the fashions, the shoots, the sights they saw afterwards, as Lloyd took them on a tour of some of the more famous Hollywood sights, left her in a dizzying ecstasy. As before, Ashley returned with four new fall outfits.

“So how did it go dear?” Lena asked her young daughter.

“Really well, they took about half of the shots with me Morphed into my old self. I was wearing the sleeveless dresses for those. Honestly, if one other girl sees me like that and becomes braver as a result, then it was worth it. I just hope that I inspired others who are like I was.”

“I hope so too, dear, that would be incredibly rewarding. Can I see your new outfits?” Ashley was only too pleased to show them off to her mom.

“I’m giving this peach colored one to Kathy. After all, she got me this job in the first place,” Ashley explained. Kathy was elated over Ashley’s gift of the long gown. She promised to wear it at their first formal dance this fall.

Then it was back to work. R. B. had already finished the excavation work while the kids were off at the photo shoot. Hence, only seven days were needed to finish off the two expansion units on the Whitewater ranch.

As promised, on the 29th of June, the group of teens gathered around R. B. and began taking notes as he explained the theory and principles of casting the Make Permanent spell. “This is one of the more powerful alteration based magical spells. It requires of the caster a *complete* conviction that it will be successful when cast. You see, it is your conviction that *powers* this spell. Your conviction must be as strong as the conviction that puts this physical universe here. It is my belief that most, who cannot master this spell, are failing just because their conviction is insufficiently great.” He began outlining the lengthy chant, each wrote down every word. R. B. reviewed what each had written, correcting the small mistakes which would certainly cause the spell to fail. Once he was satisfied that they had the words down, he then went into the wand motions that were required. Even these were perhaps the most complex any of these teens had ever seen before.

After lunch, it was finally practice time, the moment of truth, so to speak. He had them Create Object, a small gold coin, perhaps a quarter of an ounce. Their objective was to Make Permanent the gold coin, which would otherwise wink out of existence in about five minutes. Deiter, Emilio, Pam, Ashley, Lindsey, Audrey, Amanda, and Kathy were giving it a try. Fern gave up, the spell complexity was too far beyond her skill level, regrettably.

After a half hour of practice, R. B. was not prepared for what happened. Nearly at the same time, both Deiter and Pam had their wands activate and their tiny piece of conjured gold had a magical energy flash appear around it for an instant. Everyone stopped and stared at the

gold pieces to see if they really continued to exist. “You two actually did it?” asked Lindsey, gaping at their sudden and unexpected success.

“Duh, we must have!” Pam said totally shocked that her spell had worked.

“Wow, that was very easy,” Deiter admitted. “R. B., is it supposed to be this easy to do? Perhaps we did something wrong.”

“One fast way to see, cast your Dispel Magic on the gold nuggets. If your Make Permanent spell worked, the gold will be unaffected. If something went wrong, the gold will vanish. Go ahead, try it.” He expected to see both gold nuggets disappear. Both waved their wands and cast their Dispel Magic spell. Both wands activated, but the tiny gold nuggets remained.

“We must have done it, R. B.,” Deiter said cautiously.

“I’ll be a donkey’s butt! You two sure have done it. This is incredible. You two have no idea what you’ve done, do you?”

“Er, we’ve got a bit of gold here,” Pam admitted. “I suppose we can sell it.”

“The usual time to succeed in the first casting by a person who has completed the Grade 7 spell book is five days! You two took thirty minutes at most! This is unheard of! I don’t understand this phenomenon at all. Perhaps, you two should try it again, maybe it was a complete fluke,” R. B. suggested.

Pam and Deiter carefully conjured another small lump of gold. Next, they both went through the complex casting of Make Permanent. Once again, both their wands activated at nearly the same instant. Now they stared at two permanent gold nuggets.

“Er, R. B., we seem to have done it again,” Pam whispered, very much afraid something was going very wrong with the spell. For her, it was so easy to do.

“This is completely unbelievable! But I’ve just seen it with my own two eyes. Incredible! I just do not understand how you two could have gotten such results so darn quickly. Well, be that as it may, continue to practice it until you feel really comfortable casting it.”

“Way to go you two!” Lindsey complimented them. The others joined her in praising the two. Pam grinned and finally relaxed, likewise, Deiter. By the end of the day, Deiter and Pam had a rather large pile of golden nuggets in front of them. No one else did.

This was the topic over supper. Everyone was elated that Pam and Deiter had managed the seemingly impossible, learning this Grade 9 spell in one sixteenth the normal time that others

took, who were two years more advanced than they were. In fact, all of the adults puzzled over this all evening long, the sole topic of conversation. “How is this possible?” asked Wilma, “I’ve never been able to get that one down, though I’ve tried at least fifty times.”

“Dunno,” R. B. said, scratching his head. “Defies everything I know. Yet, there is the pile of gold nuggets, probably a grand each, if they want to sell them. Now I could see Pam possibly doing this, she is probably the brightest of them all, but Deiter? Sorry son, no offense intended, but he isn’t in the same league as Pam when it comes to that department. I am afraid we need to rule out the intelligence factor, which is the most logical factor that applies to this spell. I mean it takes above average intelligence to really have any chance with this spell. I’ve seen plenty of brilliant wizards and witches still fail to master it. Take Delius for example, brilliant mind, but he hasn’t gotten this one down yet. If we rule out intelligence, there’s nothing left that I know about, how about you folks?”

“Don’t look at me, I never was able to remotely learn that one,” Lloyd admitted.

“I never even tried,” Polly added, “but Fred can, though I remember it took him five days of hard work. He was a bear to live with until he finally got it down.”

“Deiter, does your dad know this one?” R. B. asked.

“I don’t think so, why?” the lad replied, wondering how it was that he and Pam had been able to do this so darn easily. “Maybe there is something wrong with me,” he thought.

“We can rule out heredity, you know, picking up the skill from one’s parents,” R. B. said, “though I have never heard that that has anything to do with learning this spell.”

Shocking Lindsey, Lena spoke up, “I’m sorry that I don’t know anything at all about this magical stuff, but I can offer a suggestion. Perhaps there is some other as yet unseen factor that has allowed the both of them to succeed — something that they both hold in common.”

“That has to be it,” R. B. exclaimed. “Now what do you two have in common?” The next thirty minutes flew by as everyone jumped in with suggestions. However, all that they did was prove conclusively that Pam and Deiter were as different as a cat and a dog. Deiter loved baseball games, Pam had never seen any. Pam was a computer whizz, Deiter could barely run his. Pam was a gifted student, Deiter had to work very hard for his grades. Pam loved the sciences and math, Deiter was passionate about games. Well, they both liked to dance and loved magic, that they had in common, but no one thought that had anything to do with anything, since here everyone loved magic and liked to dance.

Just as everyone gave up and left the table, Ashley commented to Lindsey, “They have something else in common that lies behind this, only we haven’t spotted it yet.” Lindsey agreed with her sister. Pam and Deiter, both concerned about their uncanny ability with this spell, were

also slow in leaving the dining room and heard Ashley make her prediction.

Pam headed for her room, embarrassed sufficiently for one day. Deiter, however, followed her, nervously. “Pam, a word,” he whispered, not wanting anyone to overhear him.

She glared at him, as if to say “Haven’t you caused me enough humiliation for one day,” but allowed him to enter. He closed the door. He whispered, “There is one other thing that we have in common, Pam. It hit me when Ashley made her prediction thing a second ago. Remember, she said that we haven’t spotted it yet. Maybe because we are keeping it a secret between the two of us. We’ve been to the Beyond and had an unusual look at this universe. You know, when we bent down and looked in and our heads appeared upside down in the sky. That’s hardly a normal thing to do in this universe. Maybe it’s somehow changed us.”

Pam’s annoyance with Deiter vanished instantly. “R. B. said that our conviction must be as strong as the conviction that puts this physical universe here. Well, we sure have a different view now of what puts this all here. I think you may be right, Deiter. But how are we going to prove this?”

“How about taking someone else to the Beyond, showing them around, maybe meeting Greeley and the goggles? After that, see if they can now cast the Make Permanent spell. If this is the real reason we took to the spell so easily, then we can help Lindsey and the rest do it too,” Deiter explained his flash of insight.

“You might have a point, Deiter. However, there is one fatal flaw in your plan. What happened to you when you first saw the Beyond and the goggles, eh? You went into convulsions, frothing at the mouth, and had to have emergency treatment from Doctor Caterwall, who as you can see, is not here at the moment.”

Deiter looked crestfallen, “Oh.” After a moment, he brightened up, “Yes, but when Greeley took us to the Beyond, that was your first time and you didn’t get ill nor did I.”

Pam hated to be put on the spot. Deiter was indeed right, she had not gotten the slightest bit ill over the incident. Spooked, unnerved, shocked, surprised, yes, but definitely not the slightest bit ill, as had Deiter. He added, “I’ve always wondered why it was that you didn’t get sick like I did when I first saw the Beyond, Pam.” Her face grew very warm, she looked away from him.

“Maybe it was because you are so much smarter than the rest of us,” Deiter suggested, trying to put Pam more at ease.

Pam looked at him, “You might be right. That might account for it. I cannot imagine taking Emilio or Kathy to the Beyond. I’d bet anything Kathy would freak out and Emilio would probably get quite sick.”

Deiter agreed. He had been studying with them last year at school. Emilio was into desert survival, not physics and math. While Kathy was incredibly superb at potion making, she, Deiter thought, was more of an air head, when it came to math and science and how things worked. Hesitatingly he suggested, “How about Lindsey? She is very bright and intelligent.” He wanted to add and very pretty and very exciting and many other things, but refrained. Already his face felt warm. It wouldn’t so to let his emotions show, not in front of the brightest Yellow Hall student. He was Black Hall.

Pam evidently didn’t notice his pinkish face, she was deep in thought. “Yes, Lindsey is the only one of us casting sans wand, sans words. She is already breaking the rules. Ashley does also, to some extent, perhaps Amanda. Audrey, no, I don’t think so. Okay, Lindsey is our best chance at this. But Deiter, what are we going to do if she gets really ill like you did? We’ve no doctor and how would we ever explain this to the others? One word of the Beyond and the adults will be all over us. We will be in the biggest trouble imaginable. They might even forbid us to Teleport!”

“I hadn’t thought of that, Pam, but if we don’t take one person, how will we ever know if this is the deciding factor? I would dearly love Lindsey to be able to cast Make Permanent. I felt so badly when we succeeded and she failed all day. That look in her eyes when she looked at me as we headed in for supper was devastating. If going to the Beyond will allow her to be able to cast it, I won’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t try to help her get it.”

“Well, I don’t know about this, Deiter,” Pam hesitated.

“Let’s at least explain our theory to her, Pam. Tell her about the Beyond and Greeley, let her make up her own mind. If she doesn’t want to try it, then okay. I can live with that,” Deiter compromised. Pam agreed and sent Lindsey a Message. A minute later, Lindsey knocked on Pam’s door. Since Audrey shared this room with Pam, the three hastily went next door to one of the new apartments they’d just help build, where they would not be interrupted.

“So what’s all this secrecy about?” Lindsey asked when Pam and Deiter finally were happy that they were totally alone. “What are you two up to anyway?”

Pam began to explain, the three sat on the bare floor. “Thirty-five years ago, a British wizard named Greeley Longsteen made a startling discovery about the Teleport spell and how it really works. He published an article on it and was summarily ostracized as a crackpot, insane, and a bumbling idiot by the wizarding world. He was literally cast out by our society just for publishing what he had discovered. You know how bad prejudice can be.” Deiter’s face suddenly grew blazing hot, he’d done just that to Lindsey during their first year at Bradbury’s.

“You know how we begin at the source origin point, hold firmly in our minds the destination origin point, then cast the spell? Well, when the magic activates, we step out of our universe and move from the source origin point over to the destination origin point and then

reappear. If you step out of this universe, that non-space, for I don't know what else to call it, is known as the Beyond. It has no dimensions, no space as we know it. Everything there is controlled only by the power of your thoughts. You think, and others can hear you. You think and it happens by your conviction."

"Well, Deiter and I did it, we visited the Beyond. We went in search of Greeley, that was the research project I was doing for him, after his accidental viewing of the Beyond. Greeley is really living there in the Beyond, we think for these past thirty some years. He has sort of thunked up a cottage there in the nothingness and lives in it. Deiter got hungry while we were there and Greeley had him think he was eating a subway sandwich and Deiter was then very full. He's living with two friends he's made, they are called goggles, ghost-like dogs they look to us, very frightening when you first see them. I think that is what made Deiter so frightened when he accidentally saw them. Anyway, you can do really strange things from the Beyond. I decided I was at my old home in Sterling. I imagined I was sitting on the ground and pulled my bed covers up and peered under them, looking down onto Sterling. My head appeared in the sky and I could see my house. I did spook a little girl playing in her sand box though and quickly pulled my head out."

"Anyway, Lindsey, Pam and I think that this is why we both picked up the Make Permanent spell so quickly," Deiter hastened to explain. "We now have a very different viewpoint of our universe. We want to try an experiment, Lindsey. We want to take you there and then see if, after that, you too can easily cast this spell."

"To get there, you do what Greeley calls a Half-teleport. That is, once the magic activates, you totally stop concentrating on your destination and you arrive in the Beyond, where everything is controlled by your thoughts and convictions," Pam continued her explanation for Lindsey. "Yes, we want to see if this is the connection. Lindsey, this could be terribly dangerous, remember how ill Deiter became after he accidentally saw the Beyond when we rescued Alister?"

"How could I forget that? Wait a second, you didn't get sick, Pam. How come you didn't?" Lindsey asked very intrigued by what these two had discovered. Further, she was amazed that they had kept this a complete secret for so long.

Pam didn't want to say because she was bright. "Greeley visited us in my room. His head appeared as if it was hanging from my roof, no body, just his head. Besides, he explained a lot about the Beyond before he helped us get there and he helped us get used to it while we were there. Served us tea and all that, though I am not sure if it was real tea, mind you, but it smelled and tasted like tea anyway. Perhaps that's why."

"He showed us the light show, people teleporting. It looks something like lightening streaks. They appear from their source locations and move across the Beyond to their destination points. Really cool to watch," Deiter added encouragingly.

“So you think that if you take me to this Beyond, then I will be able to cast Make Permanent?” Lindsey asked, twisting her long hair. She was very curious about this Beyond thing, but a little hesitant. After all, she remembered just how sick Deiter had been.

“Well, that’s the theory,” Pam said flatly. “However, I am very worried about getting you very sick, if we do it. We don’t have Doctor Caterwall around here. Besides, if anyone finds out what we’ve been doing, they are very likely to ground us or worse, think we are nuts and send us to the looney bin.”

“You didn’t get sick, Pam,” Lindsey thought out loud. “I’ve really got to see this place for myself. I’m game. When can we try it?”

“Are you sure, Lindsey? What do we do if you get sick?” Pam asked worriedly.

“Teleport me to Doctor Caterwall. Tell him I accidentally saw the Beyond — just not how,” Lindsey replied. This would be the truth, just not all of it.

“Okay, I should Message Greeley and tell him that we are coming to visit him,” Pam said. “I hate just appearing on someone’s door. I’ve got my list of questions for him to answer as well, if I can get a straight answer out of him. Don’t let the two goggles scare you, they are really very friendly and highly intelligent beings. They just have pretty weird bodies is all,” Pam stuck up for the two friends of Greeley. She waved her wand and sent her message to the elderly wizard.

A bit later, Lindsey was startled to see the head of an elderly man, wearing very thick lenses in his off-colored eye glasses, appearing upside down in the empty apartment room in which they were waiting. “Ah, it is you, Pam Something and Deiter Something. Just checking, you know. You must be the new Something who wants to meet me.” He looked at Lindsey.

“Er, yes. Hello, I am Lindsey Barron, pleased to meet you Mr. Greeley Longsteen,” Lindsey said politely, though she felt odd craning her neck upwards to look at the upside down head protruding from the ceiling.

“Very well. Grab hold of each other’s arms and I will extend mine.” Deiter grabbed Lindsey and Pam. Pam reached her arm up towards Greeley, short by about five feet, however. His arm appeared coming down from the ceiling a little to the right of his head. It kept lengthening until he reached Pam’s hand. The next instant, Lindsey found herself surrounded in total darkness in all directions, including up and down. She felt very disoriented indeed.

“Ah here we are. What do you think of the Beyond?” Greeley asked. His mouth didn’t move, but Lindsey heard him anyway.

“This is very disorienting,” she thought.

“Blimey, then put a nice brick street under your feet,” he replied.

Lindsey imagined a red brick street and presto, she had one under her feet. It felt solid and stabilizing to her. “Yes, that is much better. Thanks. Oh, what was that?” She’d just seen a streak of yellow light off in the distance.

“Someone’s just teleported,” Deiter explained.

“Ah yes. I remember, I’m bloody well supposed to offer you tea. I remember, Pam Something. This way to my cottage.” Lindsey found that she was moving after this strange old wizard. She was mostly just floating along, but soon found it easier if she moved her feet. That felt far more natural to her. Ahead, she saw a quaint English cottage. This felt far better, she could relate to it, especially once inside.

“Ah, we have our guests back, plus one,” Greeley said to the two ghostly, yellow furred dog-like creatures. “Mellor and Elmoid, my best friends,” Greeley added.

“Yes, we see, it is Pam Something and Deiter Something. Back so soon or is it so late? We never can tell here, you see,” Mellor explained and asked.

“Good to see you too,” Pam replied. “This is our best friend Lindsey Barron.”

“Well, which is it? Lindsey or Barron?” Elmoid asked of her.

“What do you mean?” Lindsey asked a bit confused.

“Are you Lindsey or are you Barron?” Elmoid replied.

“Perhaps she cannot make up her mind,” Mellor suggested helpfully.

“That’s my name, Lindsey Barron. First name is Lindsey. You can call me that. My last name is Barron.”

“Two names? That must be most confusing to have to respond to two names, isn’t it, Mellor,” said Elmoid. “I think we shall just call you Lindsey Something as well.” Pam chuckled.

Mellor asked, “Say what do you get when you cut a pie in half?”

Elmoid giggled. “Oh that’s a good one, Mellor! Greeley taught us this one yesterday, or was it last week?”

“Last year,” Mellor corrected him.

Lindsey was about to say a half of a pie, but thought better of it. She imagined a pie cut in half. You got two pieces, very large pieces, but surely this was not what they were asking. It struck her and she answered, “One PI.” Both goggles roared with laughter, Greeley too. Pam smiled, getting the mathematical joke. Deiter looked dumbly at Lindsey. She explained, “Two PI radians in three hundred sixty degrees, a circle. Cut in half, you get one PI, it’s definition, really.” Deiter now got the joke.

“Blimey, that is a good one. Lindsey Something is a bright one too,” Mellor.

Pam pulled out her list of questions. “I have a few of my own, if you can answer them. First, this time thing. If I am here in the Beyond, can I put my head into the past, and visit say ancient Egypt? Or can I put my head into the future and see what is there?”

“No and no. Better ask a proper question,” Elmoid answered her.

Frustrated, Pam asked the next one, “Okay. Last time we were here, I wanted to know how long we had been gone from our world. You said as long as you wanted it to be. I don’t understand, if you can’t go into the future or past.”

“Up here, there is nothing to measure the passage of time, which is objects moving in space. When you step out of your nicely measured universe, how much time passes while you are here is totally your consideration of it. It can be years or seconds,” Greeley felt like explaining one of his discoveries that he made during his long stay here in the Beyond. “Everything in the Beyond is what you consider it to be. Tea?”

At once a steaming teapot appeared along with cups and sugar, lemon, and cream. “Oh, I’ve decided that I took cream in my tea,” Greeley explained. “Got the sugar right this time.” Pam remembered the last time he served tea, a twenty pound sack had appeared briefly. “Earl Grey this time, I do believe.”

Lindsey sipped it and smelled it. She could not detect that it was anything but Earl Grey, however. Pam pulled out a plastic cube. “Mellor, Elmoid, I brought you a small present from our world. It is called a Rubik’s Cube. Each face is now all one color. Now then, I will twist it a bunch of times like so.” She fiddled with it for a minute. “Now, it’s all scrambled. The objective is to get it all back to being one color on each side. It’s a three-dimensional challenge.”

“Oh goodie, goodie, let me see it!” exclaimed Mellor.

“No, me first, Mellor,” Elmoid insisted. “I’m older.”

“Since when?”

“Since now that I have said it,” Elmoid replied, producing two long arms to take it from

Pam.

“Boys, once you have each figured out how to get it back, then you can have a competition and see who can get it back to normal with the fewest twists,” Pam challenged the two geniuses. Lindsey laughed, she never could figure this thing out. Pam had tried to show her how, but it eluded her completely.

“I can barely get one side all one color,” Deiter admitted.

“Well, thank you for the tea. We need to show Lindsey how we can peek into our world, like you did a bit ago. Will you excuse us?” Pam asked.

A bit later, if a bit means anything here in the Beyond, the three stood looking over the vast nothing. “Now pretend that you are sitting down and then pretend you are lifting the covers on your bed and peer under them to see what’s there. That’s how it’s done,” Pam explained.

“But where am I looking?” Lindsey asked.

“It is where you decide that it is. How about us taking a peek at Bradbury’s?” Pam suggested. “Just decide right here you are over our school, bend down and take a peek.

Lindsey felt odd bending down in the nothingness, even odder as she imagined that she was peeking under her bed. Her head popped into the sky over Bradbury’s school of magic. The sunset was rosy red. There were all the buildings. Her long hair, she considered, fell down over her head, since she considered that her head was now upside down. Just then, she spied Professor Cho Lin walking across the grass. Cho Lin looked and stared at the upside down head of Lindsey looking down upon her. Lindsey quickly jerked her head back out.

“Oh! Cho Lin just saw my head in the sky. I hope I haven’t scared her!” Lindsey exclaimed, suddenly worried.

“Not to worry,” Deiter consoled her. “After all, from her point of view, she thought she saw your head upside down in the sky. We all know that is impossible, now don’t we? She’ll just think she was imagining it, that’s all.” Lindsey felt better, he was probably quite right.

“We should be getting back,” Pam stated. “Let’s decide that we have only been gone a minute. We don’t want others to come looking for us and find us missing or anything.” The three did so and then appeared back in the empty room.

“Wow! Incredible! Beyond super cool!” Lindsey exclaimed.

“Hey, see, she is not sick,” Deiter observed, highly encouraged and relieved.

“Yes, curious. Now we ought to go join the others and then let’s see if Lindsey is any better casting the new spell,” Pam replied. They headed back into the main house.

“Ah there you are, we’ve been looking for you,” Ashley exclaimed. We are starting a big Canasta game. Come on you three.” Much to Pam’s dismay, the acid test would have to wait until the morning.

The next morning, the 30th of June, R. B. again worked with the teens, trying to help them master this Grade 9 spell, Make Permanent. Lindsey’s wand activated on her second try, amazing everyone, including R. B. “Well done, Lindsey! Incredible!” R. B. exclaimed. Now he had three who could cast it, although he didn’t know quite how he had been so successful.

Everyone gathered around the diningroom table for lunch, chatting about Lindsey’s great success. Before her place on the table, she had ten small golden nuggets that she had conjured and made permanent. Lena asked, “Now is this real gold? I mean, can you melt it down and make rings and chains from it? This is a bit much to take in — why you could always just make your own money this way. Just make a little gold and then sell it. Incredible what magic can do.”

“Yes, well it is rarely done that way, Lena,” R. B. explained. “While that could be done, you have to realize first that there are very few wizards and witches who can cast this spell. My guess is perhaps one in a hundred could, if that many. Perhaps it is more like one in three hundred. Those of us who can, realize that, if we went around creating mountains of real gold, that would have an adverse impact on the world’s economy. Anyone who did this, creating a large sum, such as a million dollars worth, would likely be apprehended by the Department of Magical Misuse, on the grounds that he or she would be trying to destroy the world’s economy.”

“Well, then, that does make more sense,” Lena seemed relieved to hear that there were restraints on the magical creation of pure gold.

“Say does Dominus know this spell, I wonder?” Pam asked.

Wilma answered her, “No. He does not know this spell, at least when we captured him. It is remotely possible that he has somehow learned it in these past four years, but not too likely. Most students get their chance to learn it in their sixth year. After that, the likelihood of picking it up becomes rather remote.”

“That’s good isn’t it?” Deiter volunteered. “We have a spell that he doesn’t. Can we use it somehow to capture him?”

R. B. chuckled, “Not likely making things permanent is going to capture him, Deiter. It does allow us to create better defenses that he cannot so easily break. This is one of the mandatory spells that any Governor of any Magic School must have in order to be appointed Governor. He or she must be able to fully protect the students by making permanent protective

spells, as well as lowering them when needed and putting them back in place afterwards. We can use it to also make protective magical items to help defend ourselves as well. Lots of good uses for the spell.”

“Yes, but I am finding it is an awfully hard one to learn,” Emilio added.

“Me too,” Kathy said, not wanting to be left out.

“I’m sure that I will learn it in time,” Audrey quietly pronounced.

Lindsey looked at her sister. Ashley was white as a sheet. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I — I just had a vision! It’s Nadia and Jolina! They are in really big trouble, dying I think. They are somehow on their way here — in their car, I think. I hope they don’t die on us.” Ashley recovered from the shock of her vision, her premonition.

“Damn. I knew they were in dire peril being around Dominus!” Lindsey exclaimed. “What do we do?”

Monane spoke calmly, “We should prepare. Let’s get two beds made up where they can be made comfortable. We should alert Doctors Caterwall and Blackburn that their services may well be needed soon. I’ll alert Alister and he can see if Doctor Caterwall is available.”

Lloyd added, “I’ll contact Henry. Lena, what’s going to be the best rooms to use?” The group sprang into action, preparing the first apartment off the new block to the east of the main ranch home. The end of the hallway going past the girls’ bedrooms and the many bathrooms now opened into the long two hundred foot hallway that led past the four new homes or apartments. They fixed up the very first one, Number Four.