

# **The Warrior Heir**

By Cinda Williams Chima

## CHAPTER 1--THE FLYING LOBECK

“Jack!”

His mother’s voice cut into his dreams and he reluctantly opened his eyes. It was late, he could tell. The light had lost that early morning watercolor quality and streamed boldly through the window. He’d stayed up too late the night before, stargazing with Nick. It was the night of the new moon, and some of the key constellations hadn’t slid over the horizon until after midnight.

“Coming!” he shouted. “Almost ready!” he lied as his feet hit the wood floor. His jeans lay in a heap next to the bed where he’d stepped out of them the night before. He jerked them on, pulled a fresh tee shirt from the drawer, and threw a pair of socks over his shoulder.

Jack careened around the corner into the bathroom. No time for a shower. He washed his face, wet his fingers and ran them through his hair.

“Jack!” His mother’s voice had that final warning note.

Jack leaped down the back stairs and into the kitchen.

His mom had granola and orange juice waiting for him. She must have been distracted, because she had also poured him a cup of coffee. She’d left her muesli unfinished and was sorting through a stack of papers.

That was Becka. His mother was a woman of a thousand passions. Although she had a PhD in medieval literature and a law degree, she had difficulty managing the household economy: things like school schedules, lunch money, and getting the library books back on time. Jack had taken on the task of organizing both himself and his mother from an early age.

Becka looked at her watch and groaned. “I’ve got to get dressed! I’m supposed to be at a meeting in an hour.” She shoved a large blue bottle across the table towards him. “Don’t forget to take your medicine.” She thrust her papers into a large portfolio. “I’ll be at the library this morning and in court this afternoon.”

“Don’t forget I have soccer tryouts after school,” Jack said. “In case you get home first.” His mother was a worrier. She always said it was because he’d almost died when he was a baby. Personally, Jack thought such things were hard-wired. Some people always worried, others never did. He supposed his father fell into the latter category. Maybe it was hard to worry from three states away.

“Soccer tryouts,” Becka repeated solemnly, as if to fix it in her mind. Then she raced up the stairs.

Someone pounded at the side door. Jack looked up, surprised. “Hey, Will. You’re early.”

It was Will Childers, stooping to peer through the screen. Although Jack was tall, Will towered over him, and he was built solidly enough to play tackle on the varsity football team. His trumpet case looked like a toy next to him. “Jack! We gotta move! We’ve got that jazz band practice this morning for the concert next week.”

Jack slapped his forehead and carried his cereal bowl to the sink. Pushing his feet into his shoes without untying them, he grabbed the book bag waiting by the door. Fortunately his saxophone was at school. "School starts early enough in the day as it is," he grumbled, as he followed Will down the street at a trot.

They cut across the grassy square and threaded their way between the classic sandstone buildings of the college. Trinity was the postcard Midwest college town, its streets lined with stately Victorian homes and ancient oaks and maples. Full of people who could recite every sin Jack had ever committed. He'd lived there all his life.

Thanks to Will, they were only a few minutes late for practice. It wasn't until Jack was seated in homeroom and the first bell had already rung that he realized he had forgotten to take his medicine.

What was amazing was that it had never happened before. The perfect record so far was his mother's doing. The medicine was priority one with her. She never forgot, not once, not this time, either. He was the one who'd messed up.

Jack knew the history well enough. Jessamine Longbranch, the famous London heart surgeon, had swept in from overseas to steal him from the jaws of death. She still visited the States once or twice a year, and would give Jack a checkup.

Her bedside manner left a lot to be desired. He'd strip to the waist and she'd do a brief physical, run her hands over the muscles in his arms and legs and chest, listen to his heart with an unusual cone-shaped stethoscope, check his height and weight and blood pressure, and proclaim him healthy.

He always felt like a piece of meat during those meetings with Dr. Longbranch, poked and prodded for fat and bone, interrogated about his exercise habits. Nick said it was a failing common to surgeons; they preferred to deal with people under anaesthesia.

Each visit ended with a reminder to take his medicine. Dr. Longbranch always delivered a new supply on her visits, and his mother ordered more from her office in London. The medicine in the blue bottle had taken on a kind of talisman quality, the elixir that kept evil away.

No one was home to bring it to him, he knew. Becka would be in the library at the university, and then in court, unreachable both places. His mother didn't carry a cell phone because she was convinced they caused brain tumors.

Perhaps he could reach Nick, though, at the house or his apartment. Nick would answer the phone if he were in the house, though he never checked his voice mail. Or maybe Penworthy could be persuaded to let him walk home and get it. It was worth a try. He asked for a hall pass just as the final bell rang.

Leotis Penworthy, the Trinity High School principal, was working cleanup in the school lobby, intercepting students who hadn't yet made it into their classrooms, and taking names from the unfortunates who still trickled through the front door.

Penworthy wore ankle-length pants and a powder blue polyester sports jacket three sizes too small. His stomach poured over a belt hidden somewhere beneath. His face was always flushed, as if the constriction at his waist had forced the blood upwards into his temples.

"MISTER Fitch!" he crowed, collaring a boy who was trying to slip past him. "Do you know what time it is?" It was a comical matchup. Fitch's clothes were a chaotic mix of Goodwill bargains and oversized military surplus chic, sleeves rolled to fit, pants

belted to keep them from sliding from his slender frame. His pale hair was bleached white at the tips and he wore three earrings in one ear.

“Sorry, Mr. Penworthy,” Fitch said. He glanced up at Jack, over Penworthy’s shoulder, then looked back at the floor. The corners of his mouth twitched, but his voice was solemn. “I had some updates to do online this morning, and I guess I lost track of time.” Fitch was webmaster for the school website, and unofficial systems administrator for the high school. A cheap source of high-grade technical expertise.

“Don’t think you can use the website as an excuse, Mister. We gave you that computer so you could do the work on your own time.”

Harmon Fitch had run late for a lifetime. His mother worked nights, and Fitch had four younger brothers and sisters to get on the bus.

“Mr. Penworthy,” Jack broke in. “Excuse me. I, ah, forgot something at home and wondered if I could go get it.” He kept his tone neutral.

The principal turned his attention to Jack.

Penworthy despised him, an opinion he communicated in a hundred different ways--body language, facial expression, a certain belittling tone of voice. Only he assumed Jack was too stupid to figure it out.

“Mr. Swift,” Penworthy said, lips spreading in a predatory smile. “I find it incredible that a boy of your intelligence could be so utterly disorganized.”

“You’re right,” said Jack politely. “And I apologize. I can be home and back before home room is over, if you’ll let me go.” Fitch was already halfway down the hallway. Penworthy didn’t notice. He had a new and better target.

“I’m sorry,” the principal said in a way that had no sorry in it. “Students are not allowed out of the building during school hours. It’s a matter of liability.”

Jack didn’t feel like explaining about the medicine to Penworthy. It wasn’t something he liked to talk about. But he knew an explanation was his ticket home. “I have to go home to get some medicine. It’s for my heart. I forgot to take it this morning.”

Penworthy scowled, rocking on his heels like one of those inflatable dolls that pops back up when you knock it down. Jack knew it would be difficult to deny this request (a matter of liability.) But the principal had weapons of his own.

“Fine,” Penworthy snapped. “By all means, sign yourself out in the office and go home and get it. But plan on serving a detention this afternoon to make up the time.”

“But I can’t,” Jack protested. “I have soccer tryouts.”

“Well, Mr. Swift, let this be a lesson to you.” Penworthy’s pale eyes gleamed with triumph. “Nothing reinforces memory like consequences.”

Jack knew he was stuck. If he didn’t make it to tryouts, he wouldn’t make the team. And he thought he had a chance to make JV at least. “Never mind, then,” he said, turning towards the pay phones next to the school office. Becka wouldn’t allow Jack to get a cell phone, either. “I’ll call home and see if I can get someone to bring it in to me.”

“Just make sure it’s an adult,” Penworthy warned. “We have a zero tolerance policy regarding drugs in school.”

There was no answer at the house or at Nick’s apartment. Surely a few hours delay in taking his medicine couldn’t hurt. In his sixteen years, he couldn’t recall so much as a single symptom. The surgery had cured him, as far as he could tell. Longbranch had never even explained exactly what the medication did. His mother, who was usually so full of questions, treated it like a magic potion.

He felt fine, anyway. If any symptoms developed, he would say he was sick and they would have to let him go home. He returned the phone to its cradle and headed back to homeroom.

Jack hadn't been back in his seat for more than a minute when Ellen Stephenson touched him on the shoulder.

"What kind of measurements did you get in the respiration lab?" she whispered. "I was working on my lab report last night and my numbers were all over the place."

Jack fished in his book bag, pulled out his science folder and passed it back to Ellen. "Mine were, too. I was wondering if the machine had been calibrated."

She bent her head over his data sheet, squinting at his sloppy notes, raking her chin-length brown hair behind her ears. It hung, straight and shining, like a kind of helmet. She half-turned in her seat, extending her long legs into the aisle. There was something different about her today, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Lipstick. She was wearing rosy pink lipstick. Jack couldn't remember seeing her wear makeup before. Or maybe he'd never paid attention. He drummed his fingers lightly on the desk, contemplating Ellen's lips at close range as she read down the page. It had been a long time since he'd looked at anyone but his ex, Leesha.

"Your data are at least as variable as mine," she agreed, passing his folder back. Their hands collided as she did so and she jerked hers back and the folder fell to the floor, scattering his papers.

"Oh, man, I'm sorry." Kneeling next to his desk, she frantically scraped the pages into a pile. She looked up at him, mutely extending the wad of papers towards him. Her eyes were a clear gray under a smoky fringe of lashes, and her nose had a little bump at the bridge, as if it had been broken some time in the past. Jack resisted an urge to reach out and touch it. Instead, he stuffed his papers back into his folder and extended his hand to help her up.

This seemed to unsettle her again. She brushed at her skirt and fussed with her hair. "Well. Maybe we can ask Mr. Marshall about it in class."

"Ask him about...? Oh. Sure, okay." Jack cleared his throat. "If you want."

The bell rang, startlingly loud. Jack began shoving books and folders into his book bag.

"Um...Jack?"

He looked up to see Ellen standing between him and the door, her backpack slung over her shoulder. "I wondered if you felt like studying together tonight for the social studies test. I took some good notes," she added. "We...ah...could compare notes..."

Jack looked at her in surprise. Ellen had never shown any interest in him before, other than as a benchmark of sorts. She was new to Trinity High School, but she already had the reputation of being a high achiever. In fact, she had a few points on Jack in some of his honors classes.

Maybe she doesn't have much else to do, Jack thought. It sucked that she had to change schools in her sophomore year. Ellen didn't hang out much. He didn't recall seeing her at dances, or at Corcoran's after a game.

She was really cute, though, and he wasn't going out with anyone. Not since Leesha dumped him for that jerk Lobeck. He'd probably be at tryouts and...

Tryouts.

"I'd love to, I mean, I wish I could," he said, slinging the backpack over his shoulder. "But I've got soccer tryouts tonight and I'm not sure what time I'll be done."

"Soccer tryouts?" she repeated, looking him up and down. "Really? Do you play?"

Jack sent up a prayer to the gods of soccer. "Hopefully."

"All right," she said, dropping her gaze away from him, the color coming up into her cheeks. "Sure. Maybe another time." She shifted her book bag again and headed for the doorway, moving with a lithe, athletic grace that sucked the breath right out of him.

"Stephenson!" he called after her. She stopped in the doorway and turned back towards him. "Next time, promise?" He grinned at her, and she returned a tentative smile, and then was gone.

Dumb, he grumbled to himself. Really deft. He knew from experience that girls wouldn't ask twice. He had lots of friends who were girls, had known most of them since they'd shared apple cider and oatmeal cookies at the Trinity co-op nursery school. They even went to dances as a group. It wasn't easy to figure out how to move on from there. Small towns were kind of...incestuous.

Leesha Middleton had been different. She'd just moved to Trinity. You didn't make friends with Leesha. You surrendered. She could have gone out with anyone, but she chose Jack. And now she'd chosen Lobeck.

Ellen was new blood, also. Well, he'd probably have to make the next move.

Jack tried to call home again at lunch time. He tried the office too, but Becca hadn't checked in with Bernice. He shuddered, imagining his mother's reaction if she got the message in late afternoon. With any luck, he would beat her home. Anyway, he felt fine. Great, in fact.

By the time Jack and Will came out onto the field behind the high school, some of the early arrivals were helping Ted Slansky, the soccer coach, set up the goals. The sun emerged from the clouds at intervals, but it was a cold sun that seemed to draw away more heat than it provided.

The stands were peppered with a few spectators: interested parents, community coaches, friends. Jack shaded his eyes, scanning the bleachers to see if there was anyone he knew.

"Run up the colors," Fitch said behind him. "'Tis the queen and her court."

Turning, Jack saw a handful of Varsity players collected in a reverent half-circle at one end of the stands like wistful planets around the glittering sun.

"What's *she* doing here?" Jack said irritably. "She *hates* soccer." Knowing the answer even as he said it.

"'Tis not for us to ask, but only to serve, admire and desire."

Maybe Fitch had no idea how annoying this was. Maybe. "Shut up, Fitch."

Fitch's smile disappeared. "Dude. You're better off. Trust me."

Jack unclenched his fists and deliberately turned his back to the stands.

There was a large turnout. Jack tried to be optimistic. He was a good player, playing midfield and forward most of the time, but he had never been a star.

"Look who wandered into tryouts. It's Jackson Downey Swift. Or is it Swift Downey Jackson? I get so confused." The sneering voice came from behind him, but Jack knew right away who it was. Then a soccer ball hit him right between the shoulder blades. Hard.

“That’s called a pass,” said Garrett Lobeck. “Better pay attention if you want to play with the men.”

Jack swung around. Lobeck had a crooked grin on his face, thinking he’d made this really witty remark. He was one of four brothers known for their good looks, bad habits, expensive toys, and a talent for violence on and off the field. At seventeen, Garrett was the youngest, and on pace to be the worst of the lot.

“Maybe you’d better paint your name on your butt, so Coach knows your mama’s on the school board,” Lobeck went on. “That’s the only way you’ll make the cut.”

“I’m surprised to see you, too, Lobeck,” Jack replied. “I thought they made you ineligible after that game against Garfield last year.”

Lobeck had broken the goalie’s leg on a nasty penalty play. There’d been a huge stink about it. But Lobeck was a talented running back, and his father owned half the town, so they’d let him play football in the fall. Becca had been the only member of the school board to vote against it.

Jack lifted the ball with his instep, juggled it a moment, then passed it off to Fitch. “So assault and battery is okay. Did they scrap the academic standards, too? Or are you in some kind of mainstreaming program for idiots?”

There was a kind of time delay while Lobeck processed this. The word ‘idiot’ must have been the giveaway, because his face flushed a deep russet color and he took a step towards Jack.

Suddenly Will was there. “What’s up, Lobeck? No sixth graders to pick on?” Lobeck was big, but Will was in the same weight class at least, and it was all muscle. Lobeck didn’t like the new odds.

“Ease up, Childers. Don’t get your shorts in a bunch.” Lobeck scowled at Jack, then trotted off down the field.

They started out doing drills, dribbling and passing, throw-ins and goal shots. Jack was standing on the sidelines, waiting his turn for the throw-in, when he heard another familiar voice behind him.

“Jackson.” She said his name in two disappointed syllables. “Aren’t you even going to say hi?”

He had to turn around, then, or make it plain she was getting to him. “Hi, Leesha.”

She wore a pale pink hoodie, and her masses of dark curls were pulled back in a clip. She put her hand on his arm. Each nail was tipped with rose. He stared at it, swallowing hard, trying to ignore the pulse pounding in his ears. “I still miss you, sometimes, Jack.” Guileless brown eyes looked into his.

He knew better than to fall into that trap. “Sure you do, Leesha. Let’s ask Lobeck, why don’t we?” He thought he managed to keep his voice light and even. He gazed off across the field, knowing without looking that she was pouting, a little frown line between her brows, her lower lip thrust out. Her hand was still on his arm.

“I don’t know about *Garrett*,” she said. “Sometimes he’s so...possessive.” When Jack didn’t respond, Leesha said, “Are you coming to my party?”

Jack blinked and looked down at her. “What?”

“Are you coming to my party? Daddy’s having it at the Lakeside Club.”

Daddy was provost of the college. No doubt it would be the party of the year.

His turn was coming up. He removed Leesha's hand from his arm. But she grabbed a fistful of his sweatshirt, stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. A virtuous kiss, for her, but Jack reared back like he was burnt.

"I'll send you a special invitation, Jack," Leesha promised, letting him go.

Something made him look up, over her head, into the stands beyond. Into Ellen Stephenson's clear gray eyes. She glanced from Leesha to Jack, her expression unreadable. Then she turned away, leaping nimbly from her seat to the ground. In a few long strides, she was at the gate, and then gone.

Swearing under his breath, he turned back towards the field. To see Garrett Lobeck glaring at him like a thundercloud come to earth.

"Swift!" It was Jack's turn. Finally. He blew the throw-in.

They began a series of scrimmages, switching off positions.

Jack rotated through fullback, midfielder and then forward. *Mentally*, he was a mess, but *physically*, he felt good, not tired at all, although he'd been constantly on the field. It was good to be outside again, after the long winter. The late afternoon sun slanted across the grass, almost blinding him when they faced into it. The field was still wet, and after an hour and a half of punishment, was getting slippery.

Jack had just accepted a long pass from Harmon Fitch, and turned to move it upfield, when suddenly his legs were swept from beneath him. He landed hard, flat on his back in the mud. It took him a moment to regain his breath. Propping himself up on his elbows, he saw Lobeck heading the other way with the ball. Lobeck: king of the sliding tackle.

Fitch helped him to his feet. "You okay, Jack?"

Jack shook off his hand. He stared after Lobeck. Maybe it was time to teach him a lesson.

Fitch noticed. "Come on, Jack. That way lies morbidity and mortality. You gotta pick your battles. Wait till there's a Mathathon, or something. Kick his butt." He grinned. "If you want, I'll hack in and change his grades, but I doubt I could do much damage there."

Jack wiped his muddy hands on his sweatshirt. Fitch was right. There was no way he'd win a fight with Lobeck. Besides, he wasn't hurt. He was soaked through, but not cold at all, despite the wind. His extremities tingled, as if the blood was returning after a long absence. He looked downfield with a sudden clarity, judging the players, mapping the obstacles in his path.

Lobeck's team had scored and kicked off. Once again, Jack's team moved the ball towards the goal. Jack had dribbled the ball into the corner of the box when Lobeck loomed up in front of him like a wall, grinning in anticipation. Jack feinted to the left and drove for the center. He felt rather than saw Lobeck right behind him, saw his massive shape hurtling towards him out of the corner of his eye just as he took his shot. He half-turned, raising his hands, palms outward, and steeled himself for the impact.

Jack couldn't say what happened next. As his shot flew past the goalie, he extended his arms to fend off the tackle. There was a detonation at his center, and something like hot metal surged through his arms and out his fingertips. Lobeck screamed and then he too went flying, following the ball into the net. He hit with such force he almost bounced back out onto the field. He lay there, dazed, for a good five seconds before he slowly rolled to his stomach and got to his hands and knees. It took

him another minute or two to catch his breath. Then, like an engine slowly sputtering to life, he began to swear.

“You fouled me!” he gasped, jabbing a thick finger at Jack. “You shoved me into the goal.” He was literally shaking with anger and indignation.

“I didn’t touch you!” Jack was sweating, practically steaming. Still tingling, yet somehow drained. He glanced over into the stands. Leesha was leaning forward, watching avidly. Leesha might be bored by soccer, but she loved a fight.

Lobeck staggered to his feet. His entire front was layered in mud and his lip was bleeding where he must have struck the frame of the goal. “This turd threw me into the net!” He turned to the goalie for backup. “Didn’t he?” The goalie just shook his head. He had been busy trying to block Jack’s shot.

Jack widened his stance and raised his hands, ready to fend off an attack. To his amazement, Lobeck flinched and stepped back a pace. And Lobeck outweighed him by fifty pounds at least.

“Give it up, Garrett,” Will said. “There was daylight between you and Jack. You must have tripped. Besides, the shot was clean away. It didn’t look like you were going after the ball at all.”

Coach Slansky had followed the ball to that end of the field and stood, watching, just outside the box. Lobeck squinted at the coach, and then glowered at Jack.

“All right, boys, we’re done,” Slansky said. “I think I’ve seen all I need to see today. Besides, it looks like it’s going to snow or something.”

Lobeck grabbed his gym bag and water bottle and stalked off the field. Will and Jack and several other players helped Slansky stow the equipment. The sun had slid behind the clouds, and the horizon to the west looked threatening. Will and Jack retrieved their gear from their lockers and headed for the parking lot. Leesha had disappeared.

“Funny,” said Will. “I thought it was supposed to be nice today.”

They cut between the buildings towards the street. The swings pitched crazily in the wind as they passed the playground at the elementary school. The tops of the evergreens along the border of the parking lot tossed and shimmied. Bits of debris skittered along the ground. Jack shivered, feeling exposed under the boiling sky.

“Great shot, Jack.” Will was grinning. “I wish I’d had a camera. The expression on Lobeck’s face was priceless.”

Jack shrugged, pulling his jacket closer around him. “I didn’t really see what happened. I guess he did trip.” He scanned the street ahead, an empty tunnel under the heaving trees. A gauntlet. The flesh on his arms prickled. Why was he so jumpy? Lobeck had left before they did, but it was unlikely he would try an ambush. Not with Will around.

He glanced back over his shoulder in time to see someone emerge from between two houses and move quickly toward them, as if he were floating over the grass. Someone dressed in a long coat that flapped around his legs, too tall and spare to be Garrett Lobeck.

“Will!” Jack grabbed his friend’s arm. Will turned, following his gaze. Then he grinned.

“Hey, Nick!” Will shouted. “Where’d you come from?”

And the dimensions of the stranger changed, became suddenly recognizable. There was the neatly trimmed beard, the piercing black eyes, the fringe of white hair.

Why had he seemed so unfamiliar? But when Nick Snowbeard spoke, the voice was unfamiliar as the image. “Jack!” It stung like a lash, sent him staggering backward. “Go home now and take your medicine! Hurry! Your mother is waiting for you.”

“Nick?” Jack said uncertainly.

“I said go! Will, you see that he gets there. We’ll talk later.” Nick turned away from them, his face fierce and intent, looking back down the street towards the high school. Will grabbed Jack by the arm, literally dragging him towards home.

They broke into a run, side by side, feet thudding on the pavement. Jack remembered the message he’d left on the answering machine. Becca must have sent Nick out looking for him. She was angry he’d gone to soccer practice instead of coming right home. He was toast.

He began to wonder if he really should be *running* home to take his heart medication, but by then they were turning into Jefferson Street.

The neighbors were out in force, despite the weather. Mercedes was in her front garden in a heavy cotton Japanese jacket. With her long, thin legs, and pointed features, she looked like some exotic wading bird.

“Jackson!” she said, when she saw them, looking greatly relieved. “You’d better get into the house. Your mother’s looking for you.”

Iris Bolingame leaned over her front gate to tell him the same thing. She was a tall, imposing woman, who wore her long blonde hair in a single fat braid decorated with glass trinkets, like some Norse goddess. Even Blaise Highbourne was walking up the street, swinging his leonine head from side to side, searching the cross streets. It was as if the entire street was ushering him home.

But then, that’s the way it was in a small town. Everybody knew your business.

Sleet slanted across the street as he and Will parted on the sidewalk. Jack went in to take his medicine. Literally and figuratively.

His mother was seated at the kitchen table, her face blotchy from crying, surrounded by a garland of tissues, like offerings at a shrine.

“Jack!” she cried, leaping to her feet. “I didn’t get home until an hour ago. When I got your message, I was so worried. And when you were late....” Her voice broke.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I wanted to come home and get my medicine, but Mr. Penworthy wouldn’t let me. Well, he would have, but then I’d have had to serve a detention. And then I would have missed soccer tryouts.” He hesitated, realizing he was making matters worse. “Remember? I told you about tryouts this afternoon?”

“Soccer tryouts! You should have come right home! I’ve already called the school, the hospital, and the police station. The neighbors are out looking for you.” Now she was really pissed.

He nodded, his face hot with embarrassment. “I know. I ran into Nick.”

“Nick?” She blinked, distracted. “I didn’t even talk to him.” Then refocused. “How could you be so thoughtless? What if something happened to your heart?”

“Really, Mom, I feel great.” And it was true. Despite a three-hour workout, being thrown to the ground and covered with mud, he felt positively light on his feet. It was hard to explain. The world seemed unusually sharp, more in focus. There was a keen, primitive edge to everything. The wind shrieked, and he could hear the harsh splatter of ice on the roof. The old windows rattled in their wooden frames. He felt like going back out into the wind, shaking his fist, and howling back.

“Well, you look awful! You have mud in your hair!” she said, pulling him in for a hug. She reached for the bottle on the table. “Here, you’d better take your medicine right away. Dr. Longbranch said if you ever forgot a dose, to take it as soon as you remember.”

She poured out a tablespoon of the nut-brown liquid and handed it to Jack. It carried the scent of damp basements and old paper, last fall’s leaves stirred from the bottom of a pile. He swallowed it down.

“Now you’d better get upstairs for a shower. And maybe lie down for a little while before supper. I have some work to do tonight. How’s Thai food sound?”

“Sure. Great,” he said, the flavor of the medicine lingering on the back of his tongue. It tasted somehow of old sorrows, old regrets. He brushed his fingers across his eyes, feeling an uncanny sense of loss.

Becka was unloading her briefcase. “Your Aunt Linda is coming tomorrow.”

“She is?” Jack’s head snapped up. It had been more than a year since his aunt had visited. What was even more surprising was that she’d called ahead to warn them. “What’s up?”

“Don’t know,” said Becka. “She says she’s coming to see you.”

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Ted Slansky was seated at the battered table in the equipment room, nursing a cherry soda and reviewing his notes from the afternoon’s scrimmage. He liked to scout the community games, so he was already familiar with many of the boys who’d come to tryouts. Only this year he had few slots to fill on varsity, since he was fortunate enough to have quite a few returning players. He rubbed his chin, informally matching players and positions, faintly conscious of the stench of old sweat and leather that permeated the place. The papers stirred with a sudden movement of air as the door opened.

He looked up, expecting to see one of the players, someone hoping for some early feedback. But two men stood in the doorway, long coats hanging loosely from their shoulders, open in front, as if they did not feel the cold. They were strangers to him. One was an older man, tall and slender, with a neatly-trimmed beard. The other was young and athletic looking, with a sharp jawline and straight dark hair. They glanced quickly about the room, and then back at Slansky.

“Was there a boy here?” the older one asked. It was an odd question, and spoken with a faint accent, as of someone born overseas.

Slansky might have laughed, but didn’t. Somehow it didn’t seem like a good idea. “There were about thirty boys here, as a matter of fact, but I think they’re all gone now,” he replied. “Did you look out front? Some of them may still be waiting for rides.”

“There are no boys out front,” the older man said, as if it were Slansky’s fault.

Slansky shrugged, feeling uneasy. There was something threatening about the two men. “Which one is your boy? I can tell you whether he was here or not.” He spread the signup list in front of him on the table.

“We don’t know which one it is,” the younger man hissed. “That’s why we are here.” At this, the older man lifted a hand to still the other. He picked up the sheet from the table, scanned it quickly, then folded it and put it in his pocket.

“Hey!” Slansky protested. “I need that.” He would have said more, but the bearded man put out a hand and rested it on his shoulder. Slansky was very conscious of

the shape and weight of it, the heat of it burning through his sweatshirt. He fell silent, eyes wide, overtaken by an unreasoning fear.

The building shuddered under the assault of the wind. The younger man stood, head cocked as if listening. "This shouldn't be so difficult if the boy's untrained," he growled. "There's some disruption about, someone interfering..." His voice trailed off.

"Why were thirty boys here?" the older man asked softly, speaking to Slansky. He tightened his grip, and Slansky felt his heart respond, as if the man could stop it with a touch. Sweat trickled down between his shoulder blades.

"Soccer tryouts," he replied, swallowing hard.

"Soccer tryouts," the man repeated, as if in disbelief. "There was a release of power here," the man continued. "Was there, perhaps, a fight?"

Slansky shook his head. "It gets pretty competitive sometimes, but..." He shook his head again. "No fights."

"Did you notice anything unusual? Did any of the players...stand out? Perhaps a new player who did something remarkable?"

Slansky desperately reviewed the afternoon's scrimmage. "There were some good plays, but...perhaps if you tell me what the...what you're looking for I could help you."

The bearded man made an impatient gesture. He pulled the list of players out of his pocket and shoved it towards Slansky. "Circle your five best players," he ordered. "We'll start there."

When the coach had done that, the stranger slid it back into his pocket. The younger man shifted from one foot to the other, as if impatient to be off. The Questioner moved his hand from Slansky's shoulder to his head. His scalp prickled, as if all of his hairs were standing at attention. He quivered with dread.

"Ana memorare," the man whispered. That was what it sounded like, some kind of Latin phrase Slansky might have remembered from Catholic school.

Slansky awoke some time later and lifted his face from the table. He realized he must have been asleep for awhile, because it was getting dark and the room was cold. Somehow, he'd knocked over his can of cherry pop. He wondered why the door was open and where the signup list had gotten to.

\* \* \*

After supper, Jack slipped out the back door and crossed the gravel driveway to the garage, carrying his social studies book and notebook under his arm. He climbed the stairs to Nick's apartment and was lifting his hand to knock when he heard Nick's voice from within. "Come on in, Jack."

As usual, the old caretaker's apartment was tidy, though several books lay open on the desk. Only three rooms, and the place was packed with stuff: books, models, a miniature steam engine that Nick and Jack had built the year before, jars of chemicals and plant extractions. Bunches of drying plants hung from the ceiling, like some exotic upside-down garden. There was a large wooden cabinet that had been a store display, with rows of tiny drawers full of parts and scavenged items. One whole room was devoted to books, layered two deep on shelves from floor to ceiling on every wall. The apartment always smelled of paint and varnish and spices and dust: exotic, like one of the Indian markets down by the university.

Nick Snowbeard looked up from his solitary dinner. "Sit down, Jack. You're just in time for dessert." Warily, Jack dropped into the offered chair. Nick shuffled around the apartment, clad in his usual attire of flannel shirt and work pants.

Dessert was chocolate marshmallow ice cream with fudge sauce. Nick ate relentlessly, carefully wiping chocolate from his beard as he did so. This allowed Jack to get partway through his ice cream before he started in on him.

"So you forgot to take your medicine," Nick said abruptly. "Your mother must have been beside herself." He still seemed unusually hard-edged and intense.

"I guess." Jack looked away from Nick, towards the window. A shallow tray was laid out on the table. It had been spread with different colors of sand, raked into what looked like a cosmic design, littered with small metal objects.

"Why didn't you come home and get it when you remembered?" Nick's voice broke into his reverie.

"Mr. Penworthy said I'd have to serve a detention after school if I left school to go get it. And I didn't want to miss soccer tryouts."

Nick shook his head, his exaggerated brows drawing together in a frown. "You should have come home anyway, detention or not. It's a small thing for your mother to ask, your cooperation in taking care of yourself. What you did today could have important consequences. You cannot imagine what it is like to lose a child."

The old man spoke as if from personal experience. Jack sighed, a frustrated explosion of air.

"You're an adolescent. You think you're immortal." Nick collected their dishes and set them in the sink, put the teakettle on to heat. "How did tryouts go?"

Jack told Nick all about the business with Lobeck. By the time, Jack finished his story, Nick was frowning again. "Garrett Lobeck went flying through the air? And you didn't touch him?"

Jack shrugged. "I don't really know what happened. He was pissed about it. I think he was just looking for an excuse for blowing the play."

"Was he hurt?" Nick persisted.

Why this sudden interest in Lobeck? "His lip was bleeding. He must've banged it against the goal. He'll have a fat lip tomorrow. To match his head," Jack added.

"Do you think he'll make a big deal about it? Tell people he was attacked, and so on?" Snowbeard leaned forward, placing his hands flat on the table in front of him, as if he were holding it down. The old man's hands looked smooth and remarkably young for someone his age. Whatever his age was.

"Who knows? He said I fouled him. Seriously, someone should've kicked his ass a long time ago."

Nick smiled thinly. "Don't misunderstand me, Jack. It is not that I object to a little ass-kicking when it's deserved." He stood, abruptly and walked to the window, nudging the metal tokens on their bed of sand with his forefinger.

"What's that?" Jack asked, eager to distract Nick, who seemed intent on interrogating him.

"Mmmm? This? It's nothing. A charm against evil. Old magic. The eccentricities of an old man." Typical Nick Snowbeard. He could say any outrageous thing that came into his head, and get away with it.

When Nick had things arranged to his satisfaction, he returned to the table. And the topic of Lobeck.

“Did anyone else see what happened? Was anyone there to watch the tryouts?”

Jack shook his head. “The goalie was the closest, and I don’t think he saw it.” He tried to think of who was in the bleachers. Thought of Leesha and Ellen. “There were some people in the stands.” Jack regarded Nick curiously. “Why, do you think he’ll sue me or something?”

The kettle shrilled. Nick rose, lifting it from the heat, and poured hot water into the teapot. He set out a china cup, cream and sugar.

The weather was getting worse. Sleet clattered against the glass of the windows, and the oaks behind the garage creaked in protest. A damp cold seemed to find its way through a hundred unseen passages, running cold fingers down Jack’s spine.

Jack was still irritated about the medicine. Today, he hadn’t taken it, and he’d felt...different. More alive. Now he felt...anaesthetized. As if he were smothering.

“I just don’t see what the big deal is about the medicine. Dr. Longbranch says I have to keep taking it. She never runs any tests, so how would she know? I feel fine, and I felt good today without it. Maybe it’s time I weaned myself off the stuff. I think we should find another doctor, someone from around here. I’ve never liked Dr. Longbranch that much, anyway.”

“Have you told your mother how you feel?”

“I’ve tried, but she doesn’t want to hear it. It’s like she thinks Longbranch is some kind of...of wizard.”

Nick choked, sputtering, spraying tea across the table.

“Are you okay?”

“Perfectly.” Nick blotted at his beard with a napkin. “I suggest you speak with your Aunt Linda before you do anything rash.”

Jack stared at him. Aunt Linda? Why did he need to get a second opinion from her? Becka often joked that Nick had been a present from Aunt Linda, since she was the one who had recommended him. All of her presents were unusual, from exotic African carvings to a chemistry set his parents had vetoed when he was three to sailing lessons and beach weekends. Some gifts were dangerous, some extravagant and impractical, but all were interesting. Never a golf shirt or a gift card.

Nick never said much about his personal history, if he had any family, or how he knew Aunt Linda. Somehow, he seemed to be able to deflect those questions effortlessly. He was from northern Britain, had attended Cambridge, though never finished his degree. Aunt Linda had attended private school in Britain when she was Jack’s age. Perhaps they’d met there.

It didn’t matter. Jack was tired of being the miracle child, the survivor, tired of swallowing down the medicine that was emblematic of his special status. “Sure, Nick, whatever. I’ll ask her. She’s coming tomorrow, you know,” he said.

Nick’s black eyes glittered under bushy brows. “Is she? That’s a good thing, I suppose,” he said.

Impatiently, Jack grabbed his social studies book, and leafed through until he found the appropriate page. “Well, back to important stuff. I have a social studies test tomorrow. Can you quiz me on the explorers?” He shoved the book towards Nick, a little

rudely. History was Snowbeard's specialty. Sometimes he spoke of events long in the past as if he had participated personally.

The old man sat for a moment, tapping a forefinger against his pursed lips. He sighed and rotated the book so he could read it. He found the spot with his finger. "Vasco da Gama," he said.