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Ali Sparkes

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1

'—rren? Darren! Wake up, you lazy oaf!'

Darren Tyler rolled over in bed and groaned at Spook. His mousy hair was stuck up on one side and his grey eyes crinkled up as he realized what day it was. He settled heavily onto his back and yawned deeply at the high ceiling of their dorm. Spook was dressed already and had pulled back the thick blue curtains, letting light spill through the windows, which were high and mullioned with many old glass panes. They let a *lot* of light through.

'Spook—where *did* you learn to speak like that?' enquired Darren.

'Like what?'

'Like a medieval baron,' said Darren. 'Lazy *oaf*?'

Spook smirked. 'I'm descended from royalty, didn't you know? On my father's side.'

'Ah yes,' grinned Darren. 'I nearly forgot.' He sat up and kicked off the quilt. 'All ready for bone-cracking fun, then, your lordship?'

'I don't see why Mia can't mend you,' said Spook, checking his reflection in the tall mirror above the oak dresser. He thumbed a penny sized nugget of white wax out of a pot and worked it around his palms before running his long fingers through his close cropped hair. It was dark red, thick and slightly wavy. Spook was obsessed with keeping it under control.

'Because I don't want her to,' said Darren. 'And neither does Mrs Sartre.'

'She healed my broken ankle,' said Spook, and his eyes, in the mirror, took on a misty look that Darren could see even from his bed.

'Yep—and would you let her heal it again? If you could get it sorted in the usual way? Knowing what you know now?'

Spook turned to stare at Darren. Sometimes his friend was annoyingly on the ball, for a dozy little half baked glamourist. Mia *had* healed his ankle four years ago and saved him from considerable agony. He'd been very grateful at the time. Of all the other Children Of Limitless Ability who'd been

found by the government and brought together to be educated—and monitored—in secret, Spook couldn't rate one more highly than Mia. She was a healer of extraordinary talent even back then, when she was just twelve. Now, at sixteen, she was . . . well, Darren would probably say 'awesome'—but Spook didn't go in for such Americanisms.

'No. No, I wouldn't now,' he acknowledged. 'I can take my own pain.'

They had discovered that first year that Mia did not know how to release the pain she was taking from others. She'd very nearly killed herself. She'd later learned techniques to safely release the pain she took—but Spook still felt a belt of guilt when he thought of that roadside healing. He hadn't known then, though. Nobody had. And guilt wasn't a feeling Spook bothered with too much. It served no purpose.

'Anyway—it gets us out, doesn't it?' Darren was saying, stomping across to grab his robe. 'All the way to West Cumberland Hospital for specialist treatment to sort my wonky knee out for good! It'll be a laugh.'

Spook shook his head and snorted. 'Only a Cola would say that. Only a Cola would see a day trip to

get his bones skewered as a thrill. We really need to get out more.'

'Be grateful for what you can get,' said Darren, disappearing off to the shower room.

Spook pulled on some fine black leather boots which tapered to a squared off point at the toe. He didn't follow the obsession with trainers that every other student here had. He liked to look . . . sleek . . . dark . . . mysterious. And so he was. He did wear jeans—but only black ones with excellent cut and fit. Today's shirt was indigo blue which set off the amber tones in his eyes. He really did have *the look* . . . even if he did say so himself. His face was narrow with well defined jaw and cheekbones and his eyes were fringed with lashes of dark auburn . . . not that pale blond-y look which many redheads got saddled with. If he'd got *that* he might have had to resort to dyeing them. He'd also got lucky on the freckle front—just a very fine sprinkling across his straight nose—not that pebble-dashed effect that less fortunate gingers had to cope with.

No. He was a very good specimen and rarely got teased for his hair colour. Of course, that could also be something to do with being the best illusionist on the planet. If anyone dared to make fun of

him they paid for it. Spook could make them see quite horrific things. Illusions so detailed and so pulsatingly real that they briefly forgot that they *were* illusions. Sometimes they even screamed.

'D'you think it'll hurt much?' Darren came back into the room after very possibly the shortest shower in his personal history.

'What, putting one of your legs in a metal cage and drilling four bits of rusty steel into it? No! Why would it?' Spook arched an eyebrow.

'Why exactly *am* I your friend?' said Darren, getting dressed with as little care and attention as possible.

'Because I inspire you to be better,' said Spook, sitting down to check his silk-and-wool-mix black socks were smooth and evenly positioned above his ankles. 'And to get your lazy arse out of bed on time. They'll stop serving breakfast in ten minutes.'

A small green figure bounced onto his knee, turned its back and pulled down its trousers, giving Spook the benefit of two fluffy rounded buttocks. A dainty purple cloud of what he assumed was meant to be a fart rose from them. Then the creature broke up like a poor satellite feed.

'Hmmm—hard to see,' said Spook. 'As transparent

as usual . . . and no audio at all. A three out of ten, I'd say, but I can tell that your illusory wit is improving every day. With this kind of repartee you'll be rivalling Oscar Wilde!'

Darren merely laughed and supplied the fart noise for real. 'And I don't *need* to hurry to breakfast,' he said, opening their dorm door. 'I can't eat anything, remember? Operation? Nil by mouth since last night.'

'Well, you can watch me do what you can't then,' said Spook, walking past him with a smirk. 'you're used to that.'

Darren rolled his eyes. 'Again . . . note to self. Why *is* Spook Williams my friend?'

Breakfast was hurried. Only Gideon, Lisa and Dax were left, loitering over tea and toast at one end of the table, discussing Luke's speech patterns.

Spook collected a bowl of porridge and sprinkled it liberally with soft brown sugar before sitting at the other end of the table. Darren got some peppermint tea, and sipped it without much satisfaction, not saying much, trying not to think about his upcoming surgery. Spook had no choice but to listen in to the conversation between Gideon, Lisa and Dax.

‘I heard him again last night,’ said Gideon. ‘On the way to the showers. He said “Damn! Forgot the shampoo!”.’

‘Did he really?’ said Dax, grinning as if Luke was a toddler who’d just started reciting Shakespeare. Luke was sixteen, for pity’s sake. What was the big deal? Just because Gideon’s twin brother had been mute for a few months after a bit of trauma in France. Spook felt his lip rise in a sneer. He really couldn’t help it. He was surrounded by idiots.

‘It’s so weird, the way it just comes out of the blue,’ went on Gideon. ‘And so . . . brilliant after all this time. I just wish he could, you know . . . talk more.’

‘Gideon,’ sighed Spook, reaching languidly for the teapot. ‘You talk easily enough for half a dozen mute Reader brothers. Why don’t you just leave Luke to his meaningful silences?’

Of course, all three glared at him as if he’d just shot their dog. They never could get a joke.

‘Well,’ said Gideon, swiping the teapot out of Spook’s hands without leaving his seat and sending it high into the air on a telekinetic pulse. ‘For someone who’s had his life saved at least *twice* by a Reader brother, you really should appreciate ANY noise either of us makes.’

Spook sighed and tried to ignore the showing off. The teapot was poised above his head, ready to splash boiling beverage on him at any second. He forced himself to continue eating his porridge and with a wave of one hand sent an illusion shimmying down the carpet past the cutlery table. Lisa squawked and slapped her hand over her mouth, trying to stifle her giggles. Spook was delighted to see Gideon's face go pink.

Gideon's phantom double was now performing a cancan, wearing nothing but an ill-fitting pink bikini and high-heeled sandals and swinging a sequinny handbag. Lisa was now in fits. Even Dax was gripping her shoulder and trying to get a faint image. As a shapeshifter, who spent a lot of time in animal form, he was the only Cola known to be resistant to glamour and could never see the illusions Spook conjured. He could catch a vague impression of them, though, sometimes—if in physical contact with someone else who was witnessing the spectacle. 'What is it, Lees?' he was asking, fascinated.

'Cut it OUT, Williams!' snapped Gideon and the teapot shook threateningly.

'Pour me some tea and I will,' said Spook, calmly

spooning up more porridge and getting bikini-Gideon to do the splits while blowing kisses. Darren was also guffawing by now and Gideon, gritting his teeth, swiftly set down the teapot with a judder. A slop of escaped brown liquid shot from its spout and arced into Spook's mug. Spook ended the illusion.

'Later,' said Gideon, pointing at him. 'Just . . . later.'

'Come on. Let's find Mia and see if she can persuade Luke to say a few words,' said Lisa. The three got up and walked out, but Lisa paused at the door, sweeping her long blonde hair up into a scrunchy, and stared back at Spook.

'Oooh! Big sharp pain coming, Spook!' she said, achieving the ponytail and letting it swing down.

'You really think Gideon can land one on *me*?' said Spook. 'I'd like to see him try without using tele power. Now *that* would impress me.'

Lisa's eyes went a bit fluttery, as they often did when some psychic or spirit message was coming through. 'Through a joint. Sharp pain. Nasty!'

'Um . . .' Darren put down his peppermint tea and looked slightly queasy. 'That would be *me*, Lisa! Remember—knee operation today? Thanks

for reminding me how much it'll hurt. Nice one.'

Lisa's eyes refocused. She shrugged. 'Sorry, Darren. Thought it was for the Great Self-Obsessedo next to you. You shouldn't sit so close to him. You might catch Git Disease.'

She went to go after Dax and Gideon, but then stopped again, twisting round and grabbing the door frame as if to stop herself falling. She looked confused and her dark blue eyes were fixed, staring back into the room at nothing. 'Collector's coming,' she said, sounding deeply surprised. '*Very* blue . . . Which way do you go? Get ready to choose.'

Spook felt goose pimples rise on his arms and across his neck. Darren was frozen, staring at Lisa.

'Oi! Get a move on, Hardman!' bellowed Gideon from somewhere in the hallway.

Lisa suddenly snapped back to reality. 'Good luck today, Darren. Sorry you're going to have the Great Self-Obsessedo holding your hand!'

And then she was gone.

'What was *that* about?' asked Darren. 'Get ready to choose? Choose what?'

'Darren, how many times do you have to watch Lisa Hardman wind you up before you realize she's just messing with your mind?' said Spook.

‘Well,’ said Darren, with a nervous click in his voice. ‘She’s right sometimes . . . quite a lot right . . .’

‘Yes, well, I dare say you’ll get to choose between pink or blue knee bolts today,’ smiled Spook, getting to his feet. ‘Come on. The coach will be waiting now. To say nothing of the SAS nannies. Welcome to another jolly Cola day out . . .’