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Trixie Belden and the Anthrocon Mystery

Prologue

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Prologue

"Why are we coming down two days early, Dennis?" the pretty honey-blonde girl in the passenger seat asked.

"Well, Mad, I wanted to spend a couple days in Philadelphia, doing a little sightseeing," replied the dark-haired driver. "I've lived within two to three hours of Philly for most of my life, and I've never done anything concerning the city but come to this convention. I didn't think you'd complain about it, either."

"I'll admit that it's the convention that's got me a little worried. You hear a lot of weird stories about these, what do they call themselves?"

"We call ourselves furies, for the most part. Don't worry, I'm not offended. I know the stories you've probably heard. Hell, that Vanity Fair article from a while back didn't do us any favors. They interviewed a lot of people, and then chose the weird end of the spectrum to write about, as if that's all we're about. I know engineers, programmers, and any number of other people who you'd never knew were into anthropomorphics. Yeah, some of us like to dress up in costume, but then again, don't you get that at a science fiction convention?"

She laughed. "No, really, tell me what you really think!"

"Sorry," he answered, blushing slightly. "You know I get worked up over certain things."

"Luckily, one of them is me," she chuckled demurely. "Are all the costumes as elaborate as yours?"

"Honestly, no. Not everybody is willing to spend several years designing a costume. At least I finally got the fiber optics working on it, so that the wings look like they're on fire from within." He laughed self-deprecatingly. "After all, what else would you expect from a draco-phoenix?"

"Is that the role you play?"

"It's one of my personas. There's the draco-phoenix, named Kynsfyr, and for more realistic settings, a meerkat. No real name for him. If I did, it'd probably be from a character I created years ago."

"Why did you work so hard on the costume?"

"I guess for the same reason that any artist works on something - they have to bring this thing to fruition. Amusingly enough, I've already gotten job offers for costuming with some of the big special effects houses. Half tempted to start my own, though. Remember how I had you guys so certain that flash-bang magic really existed for a while?"

"Yeah, back when we first met you, after you'd moved onto Jim's uncle's old property. All those secret passages you built in, and the trap doors. Didn't that smoke stink, though?"

"Not really." He laughed. "To change the subject slightly: would you believe that someone already wants to buy this costume, sight unseen, because of all the electronics work in it? I've been talking about it, and asking questions, on one of the bulletin boards I visit online. When I described, after I was finished, exactly what was in this thing, I had an offer come in. Sweet offer, too, but I'm just not quite ready to sell it."

They drove on in silence for a little while longer, enjoying the radio, when he chuckled and said, "I'm glad I chose to leave when I did. The traffic has been great. We're almost there, and the only real traffic around is us and this guy coming up on my left."

As if mentioning the vehicle were a trigger, the car to his left suddenly pressed his front right quarter panel to Dennis' left rear one, and accelerated slightly. Dennis was thrown into a spin, and off the road. As he saw the tree coming up on his passenger side, he spun to look at the car, which was speeding away as if Satan himself were chasing them.

He only heard two more things: the sickening crunch as his car impacted with the tree, and Madeleine's shrieks suddenly silenced.

Then there was no more.

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Chapter 1

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Chapter 1 - Disaster!

RING!

Helen Belden smiled as she heard the thunder of feet running toward the telephone. "Belden residence," she answered. As she listened to the caller, the color drained from her face, and sat heavily in a kitchen chair. "Yes, I'll tell them. They'll be there in a little while."

"Moms? What is it?" her sandy-haired 18-year-old daughter asked as she came skidding into the kitchen. "You look like someone just died." Trixie Belden no longer looked the cute teenager she had a mere four years ago. She had blossomed into a striking young woman, not so much for astounding good looks, although she was attractive, with freckles enough on her face to give her a wholesome, girl-next-door kind of pretty. What struck anyone who really looked at her was her eyes, which were always looking, were now piercing, as if she could look right through you to the truth of whatever situation she happened to be investigating. Trixie's face was as white as her mother's.

"Trixie, you have no idea how close to the truth you are," Helen said. "That was Dennis Wilson. He and Honey are in a Philadelphia hospital after they went off the road. He's already contacted the Wheelers, and they'll be flying down to Philadelphia very shortly. They'll be taking their private jet, and any of us that wish to come are invited. I wish I could come along, but with your father out of town at the moment, someone will need to hold down the fort, so to speak. You kids grab a few days worth of clothes, and I'll call the Wheelers."

Mart, uncharacteristically silent until now murmured, "I find myself quite worried, Beatrix, dear sister. Notice that our mother didn't say a word about Honey?" He was eleven months Trixie's senior, but still they looked the part of twins. The only real difference in appearance was that Mart chose to keep a close-cropped haircut, in order to avoid the Belden curse of sandy-blond hair that always seemed in need of combing. His eyes also did not carry the same intensity that his sister's did.

As they ran upstairs to pack bags with a few days worth of clothing, she responded. "I caught that, Mart. The mere fact that the Wheeler's are flying to Philly in such a hurry does not bode well, as you might say."

With a chuckle that had no real humor to it, Mart responded, "Now I know you're worried, sister mine, when you start quoting me. All we can do, though, is hope for the best."

"I just wish I knew what possessed him to drive down," Mrs. Wheeler was saying, wringing her hands. "They could have taken a plane. He knows how to fly. He's taken Madeleine up in his Cessna any number of times."

"Calm yourself, dear," her husband replied. "There's no need for recriminations. If I know Dennis the way I think I do, then he's blaming himself enough for all of us." An uneasy silence filled the cabin then.

"Mr. Wheeler?" Trixie said, sounding loud in the cabin, even though she was speaking softly. "I'd like to thank you for bringing us along when you didn't have to. It means a lot to us."

"Yes, sir, it does," Mart agreed. "I just wish Brian and Di could have come along, but with him checking out Boston's hospitals, and her in Europe until the 15th..." He left the sentence unfinished, frowning.

Mr. Wheeler smiled, somewhat sadly. "You're our daughter's best friends. You'd worry unbelievably about her anyway, so you might as well worry about her, and laugh with her, and cry with her. Oh, by the way, Jim and Dan will be meeting us in Philadelphia. Jim was in New York City to talk with his brokers when the news came in, and he told me he was going to grab Dan and drive down. They may even beat us there, since it's only a two to three hour drive."

"We're flying, though, sir," Trixie said, puzzled. Her eyes sparkled quickly, and she smiled. "Then again, he could just grab his vehicle, and start driving. We had to get to an airport, and then in Philly, we have to get to the hospital from that airport."

"Speaking of Jim, while we happen to be, how's he doing?" Mart interjected.

"Well, he learned how to invest from somewhere, so he's managed to turn that \$500,000 dollars he inherited into a rather impressive sum. I expect that he'll be starting his school sometime soon, to be honest."

Mart laughed. "I'll admit, sir, that even five hundred thousand dollars sounds impressive to me."

Mr. Wheeler laughed. "I do toss that off like it's pocket change, don't I? Well, when you're used to phone calls that regularly transfer millions of dollars, I guess that's an easy trap to fall into."

The intercom activated, the pilot saying, "Mr. Wheeler, we're coming in for the approach. You and your passengers might want to buckle in now."

Minutes later, they were speeding toward the hospital in a chauffeured car.

At the hospital, they climbed out of the limousine just as a black haired young man walked up to the vehicle, his long hair braided tightly behind him. Trixie giggled as she saw him. "I see you liked what I did to your hair during that visit last year, Dan." She gave him a quick hug.

"Yeah, well, it keeps it out of my eyes a heck of a lot better than doing nothing at all does. Jim and I just got here ourselves; I got out to greet you when we saw the limo pull up. Mr. Wheeler. Mrs. Wheeler," he finished, nodding to them as they climbed from the vehicle. The lean, trim young man took the hand Mr. Wheeler offered and shook it strongly. "I know we're all here for the same reason, but I'm still sorry to hear about it. I hope she's okay."

"I hope Dennis is okay, too," said the tall redhead who had just walked up. "He sounded okay on the phone, but if I know him, he's kicking himself from here to Sleepyside and back, mentally, for not doing something different." Trixie gave him a quick hug as well.

"Shall we go inside and see how the two of them are doing?" Mr. Wheeler asked. "When we last talked to Dennis, he was sounding somewhat groggy, so he may be asleep." The six of them entered the hospital.

As they approached the main desk, an obviously unhappy voice said, "Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler. Hello, Bob-Whites." They turned to find a young man in his early twenties, battered and bruised, wearing a cast that started just below his hip on his right leg and covered the entire leg, leaning against one of the large columns in the lobby.

Trixie ran to him. "How are you?"

"Doing better than Honey," he said dejectedly. "At least I'm conscious. They airlifted her here. I came along for the ride, apparently." He pushed himself fully upright and added, "Let's get you to the doctor, so he can tell you what's wrong with her, other than seeing a guy who obviously needs more driving lessons."

Mr. Wheeler stopped the group. "Dennis, I want you to know, right now, that I will not stand for that sort of talk from you. I have seen you drive, and have seen you pull out from a skid that would have caused a lesser driver to crash their vehicle. If you went off the road, then it was undoubtedly because conditions prevented you from regaining control of the vehicle." They started moving again, and entered the elevator.

"Whether or not we were forced off the road, sir, I still think I should have found some way to prevent her from taking the brunt of the tree we impacted with."

"You were forced off the road?" Dan asked. "Was it deliberate?"

"Most definitely," Dennis replied. "His right front quarter panel against my left rear quarter panel, and then push!" He punctuated his description with gestures, and then winced as he moved things better off not moved. "Bruised ribs," he gasped. Dan's eyebrows rose, but he said nothing.

The elevator opened again on the ICU floor. A doctor was looking at the elevator doors as they opened. "Ah, Mr. Wilson! I was looking for you. Are these the relatives you told me were coming?" Dennis nodded, and the doctor led them to a quiet room and closed the door. "Do you mind everyone hearing what I'm going to tell you?" he asked the Wheelers. At the shake of their heads, he nodded. "Very well. Your daughter came out of surgery a while ago. We needed to repair her right arm and leg. Both have pins in them now. We also had some internal bleeding to deal with, so we did." He paused, and a worried look took over on his face. "What has us most worried is the head injury she took. We pulled glass from the wound on the right side of her head, and we think there may be internal swelling. We won't know for a while, though. We want to get her stable before we send her for a CT scan." He turned to Dennis. "You're doing surprisingly well for someone who was unconscious when the vehicle was found. I'd imagine your doctor will be unhappy, though, when he discovers that you're not in bed."

Dennis murmured, "I suppose that I should head back down, then." He opened the door, and was greeted with a voice down the hall saying, "There you are! I've been looking all over for you!" The speaker was a pretty young nurse who walked as if there should have been a burlesque show drum rhythm for her soundtrack. He replied to her, "I am at your beck and call, milady, and I apologize for worrying you. Fie upon me for worrying such a lovely young thing!" His voice bore no hint of either his injuries or his unhappiness at Honey's.

As the nurse giggled and said, "I'd imagine I'm a little older than you, Mr. Wilson, but I appreciate the 'lovely young thing' comment. You wouldn't be trying to seduce your nurse would you?" She began leading him down the hall.

"Are you seducible?" he asked with a humorous leer to his voice. "Is that even a word?" he added as an afterthought.

"It is now, and to answer your question, not if I want to keep my job!" she laughed. "Don't worry, Mr. Wilson, I'm used to banter from patients." The doors closed, and Trixie turned back, frowning fiercely.

"Hey there, sis, don't hold it against either of them," Mart said quickly. "You know he's joking, and it sounds like she did, too."

"I know that, Mart. I'm used to that from him. How happy he sounded with her tells me just how depressed he is about this whole thing. I've noticed that the sadder he is, the happier the face he shows to the world. I asked him about it once, and he wasn't even aware that he does it. I guess it's 'cause he's sick enough of pity from losing his parents so young."

"I don't know him as well as you do, Trixie, but I've learned to trust your hunches over the years," Jim said.

"Hunch, hell!" Mart exclaimed. "I've seen it, too. He's so used to being alone that he keeps everything inside."

"Alone?" Mrs. Wheeler asked. "He's had you as friends almost since he moved to Sleepyside."

"If you remember, though, Mrs. Wheeler, he was alone when he moved here," Trixie responded. "He was seventeen to our fourteen, and we were astonished by his living on his own. If I remember correctly, he was dealing with a trust fund..."

"One of a size that I consider impressive," Mr. Wheeler interjected with a smile.

Trixie nodded with an answering smile as she continued as if he hadn't spoken. "... and bought the Frayne property, and had a house built there. Even rebuilt that little summer cottage on the grounds. He lived in town and took classes with us while the house was being built." She paused for a moment. "Everyone around us is rich!" she laughed. "You, the Lynches, Dennis..."

Mart grinned. "Forget not the carboniferous legacy you discovered a scant few years ago, my sibling. Its value, while not in the monetary realm capable of exhausting avarice..."

"Okay, okay, my ring is worth some money, too," she scowled. Mart looked hurt for a moment, then grinned at her. "My point is, though, that he's pretty much spent his life lonely. If I know the way he's thinking right now, he looks at this as proof that he gets the dirty end of the stick from life."

"Yeah, there are better ways of inheriting money," Jim said wryly.

"Exactly," she said, looking a "Sorry," look at him. He shrugged with a small smile.

She stood. "If no one minds, I'm going to keep an eye on him while we wait for Honey to come around, okay? I think he needs a friendly face, and he's always been closer to us girls than to you guys."

"That just proves how smart he is!" Dan laughed. She chuckled too as she headed back down to the lobby to find Dennis' room number.

"Hey, Trixie!" he cried out as she came into his room. "How are you doing?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing, Den. Might seem like a stupid question, but just how badly are you hurt?"

"Well, I broke my leg, as you can tell, both above and below the knee. Luckily, the patella was undamaged. I was bruised and battered more than anything else, and the force of the sudden stop apparently knocked me unconscious for a while, so the doctor had a few choice words for me when I returned to the room." He snorted. "They're going to have to sedate me to keep me from Mad's bed when she wakes up."

"Don't think they won't," Trixie answered him. "If they think that sedating you will do more for your recovery than leaving you awake, then it's out you go, as Brian told me once." She met his eyes and held them. "Don't give them reason to, okay?"

He chuckled without humor. "Gotcha, cutie. No making the doctors pull out the morphine mallet."

"Y'know, Honey might get jealous if she hears you calling me cute, you know, so you might want to get out of the habit," she laughed.

"Not likely. She knows I'm a girl watcher, and I know she looks at the guys. Heck, we compare notes. I try to explain why I think a certain girl is attractive, and she does the same as far as the guys are concerned. She asked me once what I thought about you and Diana, and she was a little surprised by my answer."

"Which was..." she asked expectantly.

"That if you'd been free, you'd have been the only other girl in town that I'd have contemplated dating. You and Mad are both very intelligent, and I happen to be wise enough to find that sexy. Di is smart, too, but it's more a people smarts, if you know what I mean. Doesn't hurt that the three of you are also extremely easy on the eyes, too."

Trixie's jaw was hanging. She finally got the wits to say, "You actually find me attractive?"

"I said sexy, and yes. And no, I will follow it no further than that, Trixie, because Mad is much more suited to me, emotionally. Doesn't mean I'm going to stop enjoying the view whenever I see you in a swimsuit."

"See, Dan, I told you that guy was smart," they heard from the doorway. "First, he's got the brains to get involved with my sister. Proof number one. Second proof is that he knows enough to enjoy looking at Trixie."

Dan was looking at him. "Y'know, Jim, I'm still not quite used to the fact that you have no problems with me dating Trixie, but I agree with your assessment of why he's intelligent."

"Hey guys! Coming to make sure I don't take advantage of Trixie?"

"Other way around is more like it," Mart piped in.

"Mart!" she squeaked. She sputtered for a moment, drawing a laugh from the rest. Blushing, she turned back to Dennis. "Why was she surprised by what you said?"

"The same reason you were, just now. Everyone looks at the surface, and sees how beautiful Diana is. I don't deny that she is extremely nice to look at - 'easy on the eyes' I think I said, and that Mart is one lucky man. However, she doesn't have that certain spark that would make me even begin to contemplate dating her, assuming Mart here wasn't. Here, that is." He laughed. "You know what I mean. Then they look at Honey, and see how classically beautiful she is. I guarantee you, most people would think that's why I'm dating her. The truth of the matter is that both Honey and you have that certain spark, that 'je ne cest quoi' that attracts me. As I told you earlier, if you weren't with someone, I might have contemplated it."

Jim snorted. "Yeah, right. I remember the hoops we had to jump through to get you to finally ask my sister out."

"Well, she'd broken up with Brian, but they're still friends. I thought that maybe they might get back together. They certainly acted that way."

Trixie laughed. "Did it ever occur to you to ask either of them?"

"No. I don't interfere with other people's love lives."

Mart barked out his laughter. "Then what do you call threatening me with a beating if I broke up with Di?"

"Well, you'd misunderstood something you'd seen, and were being all noble about it. When you refused to listen to any other means of convincing you, I figure a threat of violence might work. It did, didn't it?"

"Well, considering it was you were the other party concerned in said misunderstanding, yeah," he answered.

"So that wasn't interfering any more than to put things back on track, the way they should be. I'm talking about adding myself into the equation, making it a triangle. With you, I was making you aware that there was no triangle."

"As it was," Trixie said, "I was starting to feel as if I was in a badly written romance novel. You're sitting there mooning over her, and we're sitting there wondering why the heck you don't just ask her out. Finally, I asked Honey if it was okay to trick you into a date with her, just so you'd finally get the idea."

Dennis blinked at her. "You mean to tell me that...the night the BobWhites were all supposed to get together to see a movie, and everyone but Honey and I had to cancel out..."

Jim laughed. "Yup. We all worked on that one, including Honey. As I recall, you were coming really close to cancelling out too, and then she batted her eyelashes at you."

"You may think you're joking," Dennis laughed, "but she looked at me and said, 'I really want to see that movie. Are you sure you're not interested?' with a voice...well, butter wouldn't have melted in her mouth, but if she'd asked me to carry her all the way to the movie theater, I would have. The fact that I would have been holding her would have been one of the major positive points." He grinned. "I don't even remember the movie - I was looking at her the whole time. And when we got a burger afterwards..."

"You know, Dennis, I don't understand it. I thought I was attractive, at least, that's what I've been told, but now that Brian and I have broken up, no one's interested in me. Was I more attractive because I was with someone?" She batted her eyelashes alluringly at me.

"I don't know why guys aren't chasing you, to be honest." I opened my mouth to add something, but chose not to. It's straight out of a romance novel, and life doesn't work that way.

She took a deep breath, obviously steeling herself to ask a question. "Dennis, I need you to answer me truthfully. What's wrong with me? Why won't anyone look at me now that Brian and I aren't together?" I opened my mouth, but the words refused to come out. "You can tell me truthfully, Dennis. I'll try not to be hurt."

Rather than what I wanted to say, I ended up saying, "I really don't know why nobody's looking at a beautiful young woman like you. You're smart, beautiful, as I said, and you enjoy the heck out of life. Maybe people are afraid of not being able to keep up with you."

She locked eyes with mine. "Is that why you won't date me? Or is it the age difference?"

My jaw was on the table, and she was laughing. "I've seen how you react to me. I know you're a little worried about how people will react to a twenty-year-old dating a sixteen-year-old. If you'd like I can take you to talk to Miss Trask and my parents."

I was in shock, to say the least. When I could finally speak, I said, "I never said anything because life just doesn't work that way. First, you were with Brian. You're still friendly with him, friendly enough that I think it confuses everyone. 'Are they dating, or aren't they?' Second, I am twenty, and there are people who would be bothered by it."

"Answer me straight. Do you love me, or am I misreading you?"

"It certainly feels like love, Madeleine Wheeler. If you're willing to date a decrepit old man like me," I said, laughing, "I'm more than willing to let you. I get the better end of the deal."

"I don't know about that," she laughed. "You're rich, too!" Laughing, she leaned across the table and kissed me quickly on the mouth. The hamburger joint erupted spontaneously into applause.

"It started there, and I had thought that it just happened. Now I find out it was all a set up. If I weren't so darn happy with the outcome, I'd be annoyed," he laughed. "You're telling me she knew the answer even before she asked it?"

Trixie laughed again. "Of course she did. Remember how you used to talk to Di and me, but swore us to secrecy, because you knew she'd feel badly that she couldn't return the feelings? Well, when she and Brian parted, I talked to her. Turns out that part of the reason they were growing apart was that she was interested in you. She did some soul-searching and realized that it wasn't because of your age - after all, Brian is older than her as well. He'd been drifting away, too, so they parted as friends. So, I simply told her, flat out, about how you felt."

She chuckled. "After the 'suitable grieving period' was over, and you still wouldn't tell her, we set you two up, with her help. You were the only one

who didn't know what was coming!" The group joined her laughter as she finished.

He relaxed into the bed, which was cranked up to a sitting position. "Y'know, I'm glad you all made it here. It makes me feel better to know that almost everyone who cares for her is going to be nearby when she wakes up." He sighed, and it was obvious that the fatigue of the day had finally caught up to him. He opened his mouth to say something to them, and they all smiled as a snore came out instead.

It was about noon when he woke up again, this time finding Jim reading a magazine. "Sorry about that," he croaked, surprising Jim enough that the magazine actually became airborne for a moment. Laughing, he added, "and for that, too."

Jim chuckled as well. "My fault for getting so deep into the magazine. We've kept someone here as long as the visiting hours are in effect, just so you wouldn't feel too disoriented if you woke up in a strange place."

"I was hoping that the strangest place either of us would wake up would be at Anthrocon. By the way, Mad and I may have been sharing a room, but I was going to be sleeping on the couch."

Jim smiled. "I know. So does Honey, that's why she was willing to do this trip with you. She knows she can trust you."

A frown crossed Dennis' face. "Yeah, to hospitalize her."

"Enough of that, Dennis," Jim growled. "How were you supposed to know that someone was going to run you off the road?"

Dennis opened his mouth to speak, but Trixie came skidding into the room. "It looks like Honey's coming out of it! They're going to allow her some visitors in about half an hour, when she finishes coming out of the anesthesia." She looked to Dennis. "I've already okayed it with your doctor. We can take you up in a wheelchair. So," she stepped outside and rolled a wheelchair into the room. "We'll let you get dressed, and then we'll head up."

Within fifteen minutes, they were waiting anxiously with everyone else.

"Now, it's a bit unusual, but it might be a good idea if Mr. Wilson went in with you, Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler. Amnesia about an accident is normal, but not a guarantee. She might awaken and remember everything, and if she doesn't see him nearby..."

"Understood, doctor," Mr. Wheeler agreed. "Besides, he deserves to be there too, if only because he's been beating himself up over this situation." He took the handles on Dennis' wheelchair and pushed him into Honey's room.

The pretty honey-blonde girl didn't look quite so pretty with all the tubes and wires protruding from under her gown. Her eyes were bruised, and there were bruises running down her right side under the blankets. She moaned slightly. Mr. Wheeler pushed Dennis over by the bed, and motioned for him to talk to Honey.

"Hi, Honey, how are you feeling?" he asked softly.

"I ... hurt all ... over. What happened?" she asked thickly, not opening her eyes yet.

"You were in an auto accident. The car hit a tree, and the side air bags saved your life. They had to go in a fix a few things, though, which is why you can't move your right arm or leg right now."

"Oh, okay." She finally opened her eyes, and focused on Dennis with some obvious difficulty. "Something ... else I've ... got a question ... about," she said slowly, trying hard to find the right words.

"Go ahead. If I can answer it, I will."

"You ... you should ... be able ... to," she slurred very slightly. "Who are you?"id="Layer 1">

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PrologueChapter 2

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Trixie Belden and the Anthrocon Mystery

Chapter 2

Trixie Belden and the Anthrocon Mystery

Chapter 2- Questions are raised

“Madeleine, dear, that’s not funny,” Mrs. Wheeler said, the unshed tears evident in her voice.

“Madeleine. Is that my name?” she asked slowly. Concern wrinkled her pretty brow. “I really can’t remember anything. I don’t know who you are, or even who I am. Is that normal? Is there something wrong with me?”

Dennis jumped in before anything else could be said. “You were in an auto accident, Madeleine. You hit your head on the passenger side window hard enough to crack the glass through a side air bag. I’d say that your memory loss is due to that.” The Wheelers nodded. “Tell you what, I’ll leave you with your parents, to get reacquainted, if nothing else, and let your friends know that you’re awake.” He turned his wheelchair, and once she couldn’t see him anymore, the cheerful look on his face disappeared.

The first words from Trixie’s mouth when she saw him exit the room were, “What’s wrong with her?”

Dennis breathed deeply before saying, “Total amnesia. No memory of anything; not even her parents. I told her it was probably due to the impact of her head on the window. She’s already shaken up over not remembering anything.” He slumped in the wheelchair. “I’ll admit that it’s a bit disheartening to have your girlfriend wake up and ask you ‘Who are you?’ and mean it.”

Both her doctor and his arrived, and were quickly filled in. Her doctor shook his head. “I can’t say I’m entirely surprised by her amnesia, but I am surprised by its scope. Did anything else happen that you can remember?”

“No. I just remember the crunch, her scream stopping suddenly, and noticing that the car that had shoved us off the road had left as if, well, it was obvious that they really didn’t want to be there.”

“Well,” her doctor said, “I’d better head in and check her out. I’ll probably schedule a CT scan, just to ensure that the memory loss isn’t due to something we haven’t dealt with yet.” He walked into her room, and they heard, “Hello, Miss Wheeler, I’m your doctor. Let’s have…” before the door closed.

Before conversation could start, Dennis’ doctor spoke up. “You know, son, I don’t know whether to be amazed or infuriated, concerning you.”

“Try both,” Dennis quipped without humor. “It’ll save time.”

Ignoring him, the man continued. “I mean, the same day as a major auto accident in which you broke your left leg to the point where we placed that heavy cast on you, you get up on crutches and go down to the lobby! On the other hand, you’re showing none of the signs that we usually see with a concussion. To be honest, the EMTs said that it was almost as if someone had already treated you before they got there, with how fast you seemed to recover.” He shook his head. “Just to verify - you’re not feeling nausea, dizziness, lightheaded, or experiencing double vision?”

“None of the above. My leg hurts like a real sonovagun, but I’m not surprised by that, and my stomach is starting to ask if my throat has been cut, but beyond that, I’m fine to the best of my knowledge.”

The doctor looked to Mr. Wheeler as he left Honey’s room. “I understand you’re friends of his. With no family, can I release him into your care?” He looked back to Dennis. “I know that, legally, you can check yourself out of the hospital, but I’d prefer someone be around to catch you if you fall.”

“I understand completely, doctor. I’m not quite as stupid as I was yesterday. Your little, um, conversation with me when I got back to my room actually managed to make it through my thick skull. I have no problems with being released into the care of the Wheeler family, if they don’t have a problem with it.”

“It’s fine with me,” Mr. Wheeler answered.

“I’d prefer you stay here, but we have a bed shortage, like all the hospitals, and you’re well enough to handle things, as long as they’re around to keep an eye on you,” his doctor said. “Bring him back here immediately if he shows any signs of distress, other than the pain of the broken leg.” Mr. Wheeler nodded solemnly.

Dennis frowned. “Has anyone checked with the police about the remnants of my car?”

Mr. Wheeler replied. “I did. For anyone other than you to get anything out of the car, we’d need a signed statement from you. I took the liberty of writing one up, just in case you needed something from there immediately.”

“Well, our suitcases might be nice. Nothing else in the car I was worried about, other than the girl in that room over there.”

“What about that costume you built?” Dan asked. “I remember Brian going on about the workmanship you were putting into that thing. You’d said you were bringing it down for the convention.”

“Shipped it separately. It needed its own case. There’s a lot of parts to that thing, remember.”

I took the liberty of getting all the rooms at the Adams Mark hotel," Mr. Wheeler said. "It's close enough to the hospital, and on the off chance that you still feel like attending, Dennis, you'll be able to."

Dennis narrowed his eyes slightly. "Actually, I think I need to go to the convention. There are some people there I've needed to see for several months." He frowned. "Whether I want to or not." He shook his head, and nearly fell over in his chair. "I think I need to get to the cafeteria, like, yesterday," he muttered, and began rolling himself away.

"I'll join you," Jim said. "Let me push you, if you're that hungry. I can get us there faster." He headed off with Dennis. Mr. Wheeler, on the other hand, headed to fill out paperwork, both for Dennis, and for his own daughter.

Trixie was frowning, and Mart chuckled. "It seems my dear sister has sniffed out yet another mystery with what our chair-bound friend calls 'her unerring sense that something is amiss'."

"Whatever," she murmured, not really paying any attention to him, which made Dan's eyebrows rise. Unaware of this, she began to speak. "First, who shoved him off the road? Second, why? Third, what is so important that he's actually considering going to that convention? Fourth, and last one I can think of right now, what is so important that he's more worried about the convention than he is about his own girlfriend? Are three and four the same thing?" She looked up at Mart and Dan. "Actually, fifth, why do I have a feeling that this connects with the odd vandalisms that have been occurring around the old Frayne...I mean, around his property?"

"I think you do Dennis an injustice," Mart said. "Note, for example, the frown upon his countenance as he contemplated said convention. Dyspeptic, at the very least."

"I agree with Mart, I think," Dan laughed, "assuming he was saying that Dennis may not have ulterior motives. Remember, he's said a few times that there are people he simply doesn't like who are going to be there."

Mr. Wheeler walked back into the room. "I've got the paperwork dealt with. I also received a call from the Lynches. When I informed them of Madeleine's condition, they agreed to cut their vacation short."

"I'm glad she'll be here," Trixie said, "but I wish they hadn't had to end the vacation sooner than they wanted to."

"To be honest," Mr. Wheeler said, "they were getting a little sick of France. Attitudes toward Americans have never really been all that good. Nothing violent; just condescending. That gets tiresome after a while."

"I couldn't say," Trixie said with a wry grin. "I've never been there."

Mr. Wheeler laughed. "Point taken, Trixie. Anyway, they'll be flying directly into Philadelphia, and I'll send a limousine for them." He pulled out his cell phone. "Perhaps I'll see if the Adams Mark has any more rooms available." He pulled out his cell phone.

Trixie was lost in thought again, and said slowly, "Mr. Wheeler, make it one single room for them. I think Di and I will share Dennis' room." When everyone looked at her in shock, she answered, "What? He's trustworthy, as far as the bed is concerned. People are expecting him to have someone there with him, too. He's grumbled about someone who keeps making jokes about his fictional girlfriend, so Di and I can have a little fun there. And, to be honest, who do you think will be on the couch? Certainly not Di or me!" she laughed. "And can you imagine him chasing either one of us around the room with that leg of his right now? Really, though, it gives me a chance to see what the heck he's up to. Maybe he'll drop his guard enough to let something slip."

"Now that's my sister," Mart laughed. "Always for the mystery. No matter what it does to her reputation," he finished melodramatically. He didn't catch the amused look that Dan and Trixie shot each other momentarily.

A slight commotion caught everyone's attention, and Trixie squealed happily. "Brian! What the heck are you doing here?"

The handsome dark haired man ran up, talking a mile a minute. "You think I could concentrate on the hospitals when I know two of my best friends are in the hospital? How are they? Where's Honey? Where's Dennis? I stopped by his room, and he wasn't there!"

Mart laughed. "Brian, calm down! You're starting to sound like Trixie!"

Brian took a deep breath as Trixie shot Mart a dirty look. "You're right; I need to calm down. Okay. First question, I'll answer. I explained the situation to the hospitals I was going to see, and I'll reschedule as soon as I know everything is all right. They were quite understanding. The rest of my questions, though, are in your court. How are they doing?"

Trixie frowned. "Well, do you want the good news or the bad news first?" Brian's eyes widened, then narrowed as he frowned slightly. Grimacing, she said, "Good news is that Dennis is bruised and battered, and has a broken right leg, but he's mostly okay. Bad news is in there - Honey was on the side of the car that hit the tree. Her right arm and leg were broken, the leg badly enough that they had to pin it. They dealt with some internal bleeding too. Worst of it is that she's got no memory right now."

"Well, that's normal after a major shock..."

"No, Brian, she has no memory right now. She looked up at Dennis and her parents and asked who they were, apparently."

"Oof. I'd imagine Dennis wasn't terribly happy about that."

"No, I wasn't," came a voice from down the hall. "But, it was a major accident, with a concussion at the very least, so I'm not terribly surprised by it." He popped the tiny remains of his hamburger in his mouth, which he then wiped clean. After swallowing, he said, "As of tomorrow, the Bob-Whites will all be here. The Lynches are coming back, too." He chuckled, a wry noise. "The Wheelers have gotten everyone hotel space at the hotel where

the convention Mad and I were going to is being held. Be prepared for some major weirdness, people, if you hang around it at all.”

Trixie frowned for a second. “Maybe we ought to attend. It might make it easier to talk with some of the people we’ll need to talk to.”

Dennis was smiling with a raised eyebrow. “I’ve learned not to argue with you on this sort of thing. Can I ask you to tread very carefully, though? If the accident and the convention are linked, which I doubt, then you may very well be dealing with someone who really doesn’t value human life.”

“Actually,” Trixie said, “I’m almost certain that they’re connected. I have serious doubts that it was someone who randomly chooses to drive people off the road. That only happens in bad horror films. That means that it was someone who knows you and your car, and knew you’d be on that road. That means that they were lying in wait, probably with a stolen car, until you passed. Therefore, they knew you were going to that convention, and may very well be there themselves.” She cocked her head at him, smiling. “As for the other thought, have you ever known me to intentionally put myself in danger?” she asked. Dennis was saved the burden of answering that when the other Bob-Whites snickered and snorted their amusement. She spun on them, cheeks flaming.

Honey’s doctor came out of the room at that moment with a look that was hard to categorize. “I think we’ll need to do a CT scan, Mrs. Wheeler,” he said after the door closed, “but I don’t think that it’s going to show any problems. I only want to do it to verify that.”

“Why did she lose her memory, then, if nothing’s wrong with her?” she asked.

“I’m betting it’s simply the massive shock she took. I expect that those memories will start filtering back in any time now.” He looked up at the rest of the group. “You can go in and visit, but not all at once, please. And please, remember that she is likely not to remember who you are just yet. It’s unlikely that they’ll all come crashing back in on her”

“Doctor, may I talk to you for a moment?” Brian asked. “I’m studying to be a doctor, and I’m just wondering if I can ask you what you thought of, so that I can match it against my own thoughts. I already heard you mention the CT scan.”

“Certainly! Which field? Neurology? General practitioner? I understand that there’s always a need for...” as they walked off to the side. The others were smiling.

“Now there’s a dedicated young man,” Mrs. Wheeler exclaimed with a smile. She looked to the Bob-Whites and said, “According to the doctor, he truly believes that it’s purely a temporary thing due purely to the accident. I’m just sorry Dennis found out the way he did.”

Dennis smiled sadly. “Life happens, Mrs. Wheeler. I’d rather this than the alternative. It’s a bit harder to come back from dead.” He grimaced. “Sorry - thoughts taking a dark turn again.” He shook his head to clear it. “So, the Lynches arrive on Friday, and so does the convention. Any of you guys willing to share the room with me?” He looked at Jim and Dan, then over to Brian. “Well, I ought to ask him as well.”

Trixie was blushing as Mart laughed. “Trixie made the decision for us. She and Diana will take your bed, and you get the couch.”

“Um,” was all he managed for a few moments. “Not that I’m complaining about having two pretty girls in my room, but why?”

“Apparently you’ve muttered imprecations about the guy who keeps accusing you of having a virtual girlfriend? Well, Trixie figures that you walking the convention with two pretty girls on your arms might shut him or her up.” He laughed. “I’m also pretty sure you’re not interested in Diana, especially after that incident we rehashed, so I’m not worried...”

“...and either Jim or Dan could and would tear my arms off if I touched Trixie inappropriately. That assumes, of course, that you or Brian let it get to them.”

Trixie grinned a feral grin. “And that assumes that I left them anything. A pretty good sensei moved into town a while back, remember.”

Dennis smiled. “Trust me, gentlemen - you do not want to learn to touch your nose with your elbow. Any of the ladies would teach me how to if I did something ... inappropriate.” Dan looked thoughtful for a moment, and then simply finished Dennis’ statement with a sympathetic “Ow.”

“I think it’s time we headed in to say hi to Honey,” Trixie said as Brian was walking back over with a smile. Honey’s doctor smiled and continued on his way.

“Not that I’m a doctor yet, but it’s nice to know that I pegged just about everything. There were a couple things I didn’t, but we haven’t gotten that far in my studies, and they were minor in any case. He recommended no more than three at a time, and that might even be too many. Why don’t Jim and Trixie go in first? Of the entire group, those two have known her longest.” He looked over to Dennis. “That may very well be why she didn’t recognize you when she woke up. You’re the newest to our little group.”

“What about her parents, though?” Dennis asked.

Mrs. Wheeler blushed as she answered it. “We weren’t as involved with Madeleine’s youth as we should have been. Rather than being there for her, I handed her off to a succession of governesses, and never really started to know my own daughter until we moved to Sleepyside. So the Bob-Whites might very well know my child better than I do.”

“Well, she’s here, so you can change that, Mrs. Wheeler,” Trixie said.

“Let’s head on in, Trixie,” Jim said. The two of them stepped into Honey’s room and the door closed behind them. When they came back out a few minutes later, Trixie had an odd look on her face, almost as if she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Jim was shaking his head, too. “She almost seemed to recognize us. She thought we looked familiar, but no names, yet.”

“It was almost funny, and I’m sure we’ll laugh about it someday. But I think I understand how Dennis feels right now. It’s odd to look at your best friend

and not have her know you.”

“Yeah,” Dennis replied. “Not fun, is it?” Mart and Brian headed in next. They came out a few minutes later, very excited.

“She recognized Brian!” Mart exclaimed. “We walked in and she focused on us with some trouble, and then she smiled. ‘Brian, right?’ she asked, and he...”

“I noted you’re leaving out your part, ‘Marvin’,” Brian laughed. “Honestly, it’s a good sign. For whatever reason, Mart and I triggered a memory or a series of memories. We talked with her for a while, and she even started to remember the name of the town we live in.” He shrugged. “Well, she was remembering that it ended in ‘-side’. It’s a good start, considering she was in horrible condition yesterday. I took a look at her charts,” he ended in explanation.

“I guess I’ll go in now,” Dan said.

“I’ll join you,” Dennis said. “Maybe she’ll start to recognize me now.”

When they left the room, Dennis was looking extremely bewildered, and Dan was looking puzzled and angry. “Why?” was all Dennis would say as he headed over for a corner.

“What happened?” Trixie asked. “Why are you so angry?”

“She was scared of him!” Dan growled softly. “She recognized me, not by name, though, and smiled. She recognized him as the guy who’d been there when she woke up. As we talked, she kept stealing glances back at him, and finally her eyes widened, and she started to whimper. When we asked what was wrong, she asked us to go. She was crying as we left the room.” He was scowling. “What the hell did he do that’s got her so scared of him?”

“Good question,” Trixie said, staring at Dennis, who was sitting in the corner of the room with his eyes closed and his forehead wrinkled with some obviously unpleasant thoughts, based on his scowl. She continued. “Definitely something to find out.”id="Layer 1">

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Chapter 1Chapter 3

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Trixie Belden and the Anthrocon Mystery

Chapter 3

Trixie Belden and the Anthrocon Mystery

Chapter 3- Complications are added

Friday arrived, and with it, the Lynches. Dennis had spent one more night in the hospital, and awoke in a mood best described as foul. At least, that's what Trixie told him.

"You almost bit my head off!"

Frowning, he replied, "I'm sorry, but I'm really not going to be good company. My girlfriend can't stand the sight of me, and I pretty much have to go to a convention that I'd rather just avoid right now, since she's here in the hospital. Especially since you rather vociferously pointed out that the person or people who tried to kill us are likely to be there. Did you realize that you may have removed Honey from the loop, by the way? Not likely a kidnapper would have been able to get sufficient information about our route in order to grab her in such a manner. Besides, to put it in my favorite super-hero role-playing terms, that was a killing attack. Not smart for a kidnapper."

"Maybe not. Any idea what they might have been after?"

"No," he answered, looking her straight in the eyes. "If I had some idea, I could tell the cops, and then we'd have something to go on. As it is, you're walking into the con, which I'm certain you've talked yourself into, and into a potentially deadly situation. If the guy who ran us off the road is there, then getting in too deep is quite possibly fatal, Trixie. I want you to think about that." Making sure their eyes were locked together, he repeated himself. "Think about that, Trixie. They were willing to kill Mad and me for some reason. You think they'll balk at killing you and the rest of the Bob-Whites of the Glen?"

"I know about the danger," Trixie replied. "Why do you think I've been working so hard this last year? I still have my dream to become a private detective. To do that in New York, though, I have to be able to get a job that will give me a minimum of three years worth of detective experience. So, I've decided to take Dan's route, and become a policewoman." She chuckled. "Well, Dan's not going to become a police woman, but you know what I mean. Once I'm off the force, I can apply for my P.I. license, and I'm pretty much assured of getting the thing. That'll also help in my advertising, too," she finished with a smile.

Dennis snorted an amused chuckle. "Your brothers haven't realized how much their baby sister has grown up, have they? Well, since I know better than to try to keep you from it, I will extract one promise from you - you do your damndest to stay safe, okay? I have already attended too many funerals in my short life, and I don't want to add one of my best friends to the list." He once again locked eyes with her, as she stared at him. He'd managed to kick in her stubborn streak when he insisted on the promise, and he could tell by looking at her that she was weighing whether or not she could get away with refusing to promise. "I mean it, Trixie. If you're right, and the people who tried to kill Mad and me are there, and you don't promise me to try to keep safe, then I will ask Mr. Lynch or Mr. Wheeler to send you back to Sleepyside. We almost had to bury your best friend. Don't make us bury you."

She blinked. He's serious! He'll ask Mr. Lynch or Mr. Wheeler to get me back home! She narrowed her eyes slightly. He's scared for me, which still makes me think that he knows more than he's letting on. "Okay, I promise, Dennis. I will do everything I can think of to stay safe while searching for the people who did this. I'm still going to ask questions, but I'm going to try to avoid drawing too much notice to myself." She chuckled again. "People don't answer questions when they know they're being grilled about something."

"You can't help but draw some attention to yourself, since you'll be a first time convention goer to a type of convention that can get a little bit odd. There are a lot of costumed individuals there, in fursuits." He paused. "I wonder if the docs can put a thinner cast on my leg? If they can do it safely, then I might still be able to wear that costume I built." She looked at him with raised eyebrows. "Hey, I put a lot of time and effort, not to mention some money, into building a costume that I'd like to think wouldn't be out of place in a movie. If I have a chance to wear the damn thing, which is why I built it, then I'm going to wear it!" He laughed.

From the doorway, his doctor spoke up. "Well, I just wanted something on that leg when you two came in. Actually, I'd prefer to put you in a different cast. The massively bulky thing you're wearing now is likely to hurt you as you wear it, because you'll keep running into it in one way or another. I take it you wouldn't be against the concept of a smoother, sleeker model?"

"I'd love to not have to wear something the size of Rhode Island on my leg! Lead on!" Dennis laughed.

As the doctor pushed Dennis' wheelchair, Trixie heard, "You'll have to promise me to always use crutches, though, Mr. Wilson..."

As she walked slowly back to the area where she knew everyone else would have congregated by now, outside Honey's room, she mulled over the information she had. Slim pickings, to be honest. We know that Honey is scared of him, for some reason. He's more aware of what's going on here than he's letting on. From the way he's reacting, I'll bet he knows why they shoved him off the road.

The people involved have to have known where he was going, so they have to have gotten into the convention, since they apparently didn't get what they were looking for. She stopped in her tracks. Or did they? She furrowed her brow. No, it comes back to him. He needs to see someone at the convention, and I'd bet a year's allowance that it's connected to why Honey and he were shoved off the road. She started walking again.

Why doesn't that car accident feel right? If someone was after something, which is what I feel Dennis is hinting at, why would they cause an accident that might very well kill him, and permanently keep them from getting IT, whatever IT is? The elevator doors opened onto the floor where Honey lay in

her room, still in an amnesiac fog.

"Ah, now arrives our female Sherlock!" cried Mart as she walked closer.

"Nah," she said. "Sherlock always seemed to know who did it from the beginning. I'm more like Watson, who had to work it out for himself."

Mart started to open his mouth, but pretty raven-haired Diana Lynch batted her violet eyes at him and said, "You know she's right, Mart."

He closed his mouth with a click. "Far be it for me to argue with my lady love."

"Not if you want to get kissed, you won't," she laughed, followed by a quick peck on the cheek. She turned toward Trixie. "How's Dennis doing?"

"He's getting the cast changed to something a little smaller," she replied. Before Brian could say anything, she added, "It was the doctor's idea. He'd wanted that thing Dennis has been wearing to immobilize until they knew how badly Dennis had been hurt. He's hurt far less than they expected, so they can go to a smaller cast." She laughed. "He's hoping to be able to wear the costume he built." She looked around. "Anyone been in to see Honey yet?"

"Not yet," Jim said. "Figured we might try it somewhat slower this time - one at a time. Who wants to go first?"

Mart spoke up. "Other than her parents, she's known Trixie the longest of any of us. Maybe she should." At Trixie's surprised look, he sobered and said, "Look, you're my sister, and I'm going to tease you mercilessly for the next hundred years because of that, but this is important. Have you ever known me to joke too much when it's truly been important?"

Trixie smiled. "No, you don't. Thank you, too." She walked over to him and kissed him on the cheek, surprising him. "I'm heading in, now." She walked through the door.

Honey looked nominally better - her color had returned to a healthier pink, and they had been able to remove some of the tubes and wires that had been attached to her. She was awake, and using the bed to help her sit up slightly. "It hurts a bit, with all the bruising," she told Trixie, "but from what they tell me, the pain is far better than the other option." She shuddered. "Things are slowly coming back to me. I'm remembering things as if I'm watching a movie. I know that you're Trixie, but I haven't remembered the feeling of you being my best friend. It's almost as if I bruised or broke my emotions in the ... the ..." She shivered again.

"Don't worry about it, Honey. That brings up a question. I'm used to calling you Honey, but your name is Madeleine. Which would you prefer to be called?"

"Why was I called Honey?"

"Well, there's two differing opinions on that. We always thought that it was because of your hair color, but the guys have always maintained that it was because of your disposition." She chuckled. "Of course, Dennis calls you Mad, short for ... what's wrong?"

"No! No Mad! I'll take Honey or Madeleine, but not Mad!" Honey nearly spat the words out. "Don't mention ... him ... again!"

"What did he do to you?" Trixie asked, eyes flashing.

"I don't know, anything, but I get a really bad feeling, a scary one, when I look at him. Don't let him in here again, okay, Trix?"

"Sure - no Dennis. I'll tell the nurses as well." She frowned, then chuckled. "If I hog all the time in here with you, they'll skin me alive. How about I let someone else come in?"

"Sure! Why not send Brian in?"

"Okay, I'll send him in, and then pass along the message to the nurses. I'll be coming back soon to talk with you for a lot longer, fairly soon, okay?"

The smile she got in return told her that the Honey she knew was still in there, even if things weren't quite right yet. "I look forward to it," Honey said. "I almost remember you, if you know what I mean. I know you're my friend. I just want to feel it again; do you understand?"

Trixie nodded. "I want you to, as well. I'll send Brian in." She left the room, scowling after Honey couldn't see her face anymore. "Brian, she specifically asked for you next. By the way, whatever you do, don't talk about Dennis in there. It was the second time today I've almost gotten my head bitten off. I've been instructed to tell the nurses not to let him visit." As she headed for the nurse's station, she thought, Sometime soon, Dennis and I are going to have a very long talk about this.

As Brian left the room, and motioned Jim inside, Dennis came up the hall on crutches, beaming at his newfound mobility. The new cast was much thinner, and looked much more comfortable. "I might even be able to put on the costume, with this thing on!" were the first words out of his mouth. He then noticed the look everyone was giving him; the friendliest was Diana's puzzled and hurt expression. "Okay, what happened?"

"Your presence is apparently no longer required by Honey," Brian scowled. He looked to Trixie. "She talked anyway; I didn't start it." Brian looked back to Dennis. "Any idea why she's terrified of you?"

Dennis found a chair and sat down heavily. "She doesn't want me around her? I scare her? I scare her?" He blinked for a few moments, and then looked up at the Bob-Whites, and their angry looks. "Nothing I say to you right now is going to be believable, so I see no reason to tell you anything, especially the truth, since you won't believe that I have no idea why she's scared of me." He struggled back to his feet. "I'm going to head back downstairs and get myself checked out of the hospital. I'll see you all at the hotel." He turned and walked away.

Several moments passed, with the group looking at his exit using varying shades of distrust. Excepted from that was Diana Lynch, who appeared to be puzzling something out in her head. Suddenly, a realization came to her, and she rounded on the group. "We've known him for four years, and we treat him like that. I'm ashamed of all of us, and I include myself. I'm going to find him and apologize, at least for my behavior."

Trixie spoke up. "Can you think of any reason why she'd be terrified of him, though? It doesn't make any sense!"

"Yes, it does!" barked Diana. "Think about it; she's getting her memories back, and she doesn't really remember the accident. An accident is a scary thing, and Dennis was driving. It's possible that she's remembering without remembering, a sub, um, sub..."

"Subconscious?" asked Mart gently.

"Yes, subconscious thing. Down below available memories, but still there. So she's remembering a really scary thing, and remembering that he has something to do with it. Since she can't remember him, or what happened, but the thought of him connects to that thing in her mind, so she's scared of him because he reminds her of something scary. If I know Honey, she'll apologize to him when she realizes what she did. And he, of course, will say that it's unnecessary because she had no control of it at the time." She sighed. "I also know that he won't accept our apology if we go to him right now, so we might as well wait for the hotel."

When they reached the hotel, at roughly 4 PM, they found Dennis sitting on a bench near the registration table, waiting for the registration line to thin out slightly. "Hello, Bob-Whites," he said in a neutral tone.

Di spoke first. "I owe you an apology, Dennis. I shouldn't have treated you the way I did. I've known you for four years, and I've known her for five. I should have...I can't say this right, darn it!" Tears started leaking from her eyes. "I want to apologize, and I don't know what to say!"

He reached out and took her hand, smiling sadly. "Don't worry about it. You've known her longer than you've known me. Yeah, I've been around for four years, so you can say that you've known me that long, but you really only got to know me in the last two and a half years." He patted her hand as his face lost the smile. "You've known her for five, and suddenly, this guy who basically stole her from Brian, as I've heard a few kids around town saying about me, is scaring the hell out of her. The immediate thought is going to be, 'What did he do to her?' I don't like it, but I understand it." He looked up at the rest of the Bob-Whites. "The same goes for all of you. This is a very trying time. Your best friend is lying in the hospital after almost dying, and I scare the hell out of her. Of course you're angry, and it's logical to take it out on the thing that's scaring her. Don't worry about it. If you think you need forgiveness from me, though, then I absolve you all of the guilt. It was natural." He smiled again, but it looked a little forced. "The world will go on. She'll get her memories back, and then she'll be able to tell you what scared her about me." He looked down the hall, and surprise registered in his eyes. "Hey Mike! Evan! Over here!"

Down the hall came two men, both looking to be in their late forties or early fifties. One of them was about 5'9", slightly heavy-set, wearing wire-frame glasses. His hair could best be described as straight, and in a contest between going gray and going out. From the reflection off his scalp, it appeared that going out was ahead on points.

The other man was a few inches shorter, with a fuller head of hair, a little wilder than his companion's, also graying a little bit, but definitely darker in color. He was slightly barrel-chested, looking very friendly, but with an ineffable air that he might be trouble if you managed to get him riled. From the smile on his face, riling him looked to be a difficult proposition.

"Hey Dennis, what happened?" asked the shorter of the two. The smile disappeared somewhat.

"Car accident, Mike," he frowned, and met the eyes of the taller one. Trixie caught something pass between them. "I get to get made fun of by you-know-who now. My girlfriend is in the hospital - she was almost killed. I'm only here because I need to be." He looked quickly at the taller one again. "Oh, by the way," he said to the shorter of the two, "these are some of my RL friends. Trixie Belden, Diana Lynch, Mart Belden, Brian Belden, Jim Wheeler, and Dan Mangan." He looked at the people he'd just introduced and said, "These two fine gentlemen are some of the interesting people into furry fandom. Mike Regan, also known as the Old Gray Raccoon, is the guy who runs the online Bookshelf I've mentioned a couple times. The other one is Evan Mayerle, also known as Cateagle. You may hear me referred to as Kynsfyr by a number of people."

Evan spoke up. "I think he just does it because he knows it bugs you. I don't think Concolor's quite as bad as you think. We've all gotten on each other's nerves before, over at Planetfurry."

"I don't know what it is, but the guy rubs me the wrong way. He's funny as hell, but I just..." He frowned.

Trixie cleared her throat. "Just a couple things, Dennis. What's RL mean?"

"Real Life. You know, the thing outside the computer screen." He grinned. "What's the second?"

"Remember that Di and I were going to, um, pose as your girlfriends? Sort of put that guy in his place?"

"The more I think about that, girls, the less I like the idea. That requires, almost, that you sleep in my room..."

"We already talked about that, remember? Di and I will take the bed, since I expect you'll complain if either of us tries to sleep on the couch." She smiled. "Besides, it gives us a better chance to discover what it is about this sort of thing that interests you."

"Yeah, but I'll bet you haven't thought of another aspect to it." He looked at Trixie and chuckled at her stubborn look. "I know that look, so I'll let you discover that one for yourself." He looked at them for a moment, and said, "Mind if I talk to Evan here for a minute? It's kind of important."

The group shrugged, and Mike said, "I'll get on the line for you then, Dennis. You might want to sit back down, though, and take some strain off that broken leg." Dennis nodded half-heartedly, and walked away from the group with Evan, whom he began talking to once out of earshot.

Trixie looked at Dennis, since he was the one facing them, and grumbled. "What the heck is he hiding? I couldn't read his lips if I tried! He's obviously talking to Evan, but he's got his teeth clenched tightly. He doesn't look mad, though."

Diana laughed quietly. "He knows you've been learning how to read lips, Trixie. Whatever it is, he thinks that man can help him, and he doesn't want people overhearing it."

"We know your reputation, Trixie," Mart said, "but I seriously doubt that the mystery is going to be solved here, at this convention."

"You may be right, Mart, but I'll bet that I get more information about what's happening by being at this convention." She looked at Dennis in time to see him smile and clasp Evan Mayerle's shoulder.

"It may not be anything, Evan, but I'd rather have someone like you, with your ... qualifications, in my corner," she overheard him say. What the heck is he talking about? she thought as she watched him walk over to Mike Regan. I keep coming back to that. Is the reason Honey's scared of him connected to the reason that he's here, and why he needed to talk to Mr. Mayerle?

As he limped off line a few minutes later, sporting a badge with a red, white, and blue ribbon that read "Super-Sponsor", she saw Dennis' face undergo some interesting contortions as she saw three people coming down the hall. One of them appeared African-American, and the other two were white, but rather different in heights. The taller of the two of the white men was over six foot tall, had dark brown hair, and appeared to have the faint remnant of a scar on his face. His left eyebrow, to be precise, she noted as he got closer, and she could see behind his glasses to his dark brown eyes. He was beginning a pot belly, and was dressed fairly conservatively. He was smiling broadly.

The other Caucasian was easily two-thirds of a foot shorter, and short blonde hair that dirty, dishwater color. He also wore glasses in front of his blue-grey eyes. He was also looking a little overweight, and was also smiling fairly broadly. "Kynsfyr!" he exclaimed as they got closer.

The final member of the trio was the African-American. His height fell between that of the other two (although he was closer to the blonde's height). He rounded out the trio in more ways than one, also tending toward the overweight side in his build. Had he lacked a smile, he would have stood out from the crowd., but he was also grinning. "Dee! Long time, no see!"

"Good to see you too, Kaye!" Dennis said, sticking out a hand which Kaye clasped warmly. "Let me perform some introductions, before we get too much more confused. Kaye, Galadrión, Concolor, let me introduce some of my friends from the area I'm living in right now." He quickly spun through the Bob-Whites' names again. He then looked to the Bob-Whites and said, "Now for the flip side. The tall gentleman is Clint McInnes, also called Concolor in his furry persona, which you'll also hear called a fursona. The next tallest one goes by nom de fur of Shirh Khan. Only call him Kaye if he gives you permission. Really, it's probably a good idea to call someone by their fursona name at this convention, unless they give you permission to use their real name. The last on our merry list today, but certainly not least, is the very talented writer who goes by the name of Galadrión." Dennis frowned. "Actually, they're all good writers. I'm hoping to run into some others, too, like Rava, and maybe even Fawkesfyre." Dennis laughed. "Not going to complain too much if I don't get a chance to see Fawkesfyre, though. His writing is okay, but really doesn't do much for me."

"Why don't you write something?" Galadrión asked.

"Because I've tried, and it'd even scare the Vagon, okay? I can write specs for electronics, and draw circuits, and I'll admit to a talent for drawing my intended finished designs, but I can't write worth beans."

Shirh Khan chuckled and asked, "I know you're going to hear this question a thousand times this con, but what happened to you?"

"Her boyfriend found out!" Dennis laughed. "No, seriously, I had a car accident on the way here. I was nothing compared to the passenger - she's still in the hospital. That's why they're here," he said, pointing at the Bob-Whites. "She's their friend, so they came to visit her. They've also got rooms in the hotel, since the hospital is a short distance away."

Concolor laughed. "I keep telling you, man - the girl-watching should be done with the car stopped! See what happens when the car's moving?" He frowned quickly. "Sorry, that was probably less than sensitive. Forgive me?" He stuck out his hand, and a still scowling Dennis shook it reluctantly.

"I'm sorry, Clint, it's just that...well, she's a good friend, and she could have been killed, so I'm a little touchy on the subject right now. Please forgive me if I snap at you, and it seems uncalled for." Clint smiled and nodded.

"Not to make you angry or anything, but you know that people are going to tease you about the mythical girlfriend. I was going to, until you explained that to me."

Trixie walked forward. "Who else is likely to?"

"There are a few," Concolor responded. "I was going to lead the pack, to be honest. Now isn't a good time, though."

She laughed. "Well, if you hear others saying it, tell him he's here with both his girlfriends."

Concolor's eyebrows rose. "Both?"

"Yeah, Di and I will walk parts of the con with him, on each arm. Given Di's looks, I think that'll make some people jealous."

Galadrión looked like he wanted to say something, but his face was reddening. "Yes?" Dennis asked.

"Nothing," stammered Galadrión. "Never mind."

Dennis noted that Galadrión had been looking at Trixie, and smiled. "Gotcha. I agree, by the way."

"What?" Trixie demanded. "I just missed something, I'm sure of it. What was it? Dennis?"

"None of your business, Trixie. Galadrión and I have known each other on-line long enough that we can employ shorthand. Any further info you'll have to work out of him." Galadrión's face reddened again. "Either way, if you're going to be hanging on my arm during this convention, you'll need memberships, so let's see to those." He led them to the registration table, where the line had thinned out, and paid for the Bob-White memberships. "Now, let's get to the convention."id="Layer 1">

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Chapter 2 Chapter 4

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Trixie Belden and the Anthrocon Mystery

Chapter 4

Trixie Belden and the Anthrocon Mystery

Chapter 4 - Learning the way around

“Ohmigoodness!” Diana said, face flushing as she looked at one of the books of artwork.

“Well, it was labeled ‘Adults Only’, darlin’,” said the smiling man behind the desk.

“I know, but...well, seeing the sign, and seeing the pictures are two different things.” The blush was a deep red, and had spread underneath her T-shirt. “I think I’ll play it safe and just look at the other books,” she giggled nervously.

“He really shouldn’t have let you look at that book,” Dennis grumbled after they’d walked away. “You’re not eighteen yet. You only look like you’re in your twenties.”

“Why’d you follow me, rather than Trixie? She’s the mystery solver in the group, and I know that you want her safe.”

“If I hung around her, she’d think I was hovering over her; she’d get angry, and then find a way to escape me, possibly to both our detriments. If I give her her head, though, she’ll ask questions, and probably turn something up. I just hope she doesn’t scare away the people who tried to kill Mad and me. Sorry, Madeleine. Until she okays the use of that nickname again, I don’t use it.”

“Isn’t that being a little ridiculous?” Diana frowned at him. “I mean, she’s already getting her memory back. It’s just a matter of time before she remembers why she’s so scared of you.”

“Memory is a tricky thing,” he answered. “She might remember everything, but not get all the emotions back. That was quite the blow to the head, remember. Also, remember who the first person she remembered was? She might end up back with him again. If that’s the case, then she really doesn’t need me using my pet name for her, when it might dredge up memories of feelings she no longer has. Far-fetched, I know, but it is possible.” He frowned. As she walked toward the next table, he murmured, “This is getting too dangerous. When this is over, I’m going to have to move.”

Out in the hallway, Trixie marvelled at some of the costumes that came by her. One poinged by her in a ferret costume, looking vaguely cartoonish, and someone shouted out “Hey there, Mejeep!” The ferret waved back, and continued poinging down the hall. A girl came by in a spandex body suit that had been painted to look like a cheetah’s fur, and she had carried the makeup onto her face, and even had put spots in her golden blonde hair.

“Enjoying your first convention?” a voice asked next to her.

“Eek!” was her response as she wheeled to face a slightly balding man, wearing a badge that read FawkesFyre. “Oh, Dennis is hoping to meet you during this convention!” she said. “Sorry about that, but you surprised me.”

“I’m sorry for scaring you,” the man replied. “You had the look I know I had the first time I came to this convention. It can be a bit much, no matter how much you prepare for it.” He smiled. “First, an introduction. As the badge says, my fursona name is FawkesFyre. My real name is Keith McComb, and I’m just as likely to answer to that as I am to FawkesFyre. From your exclamation, it sounds like you know the Beach Boy.” She looked puzzled. “Think about it for a second - what’s Dennis’ surname?”

She thought for a second, and then laughed. “I never thought of that before!”

“Oddly enough, not many do. Anything I can help you with, though? Maybe give you a little primer on how to handle Anthrocon?”

“Try not to stare seems to be order number one,” Trixie laughingly responded. “I think I can make my way through things, but I appreciate the offer.” She paused, and then added, as an afterthought, “I’ve heard some stories. Do these things ever get dangerous?”

“Dangerous how? To your wallet? Heck yeah, if you’re really interested in something. Physically? Not that I’m aware of. The stories I hear tend to be more along the lines of two people having a running feud, and bringing it here to snark at each other. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anything stronger than that. What kind of stories have you heard?”

“Someone was threatening violence to someone else, was what I overheard.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much. Probably someone just got really angry at someone and said, ‘I oughta break your neck!’ or something like that.” Keith smiled. “By the way, I never got your name. Either fursona or real, whichever you’re comfortable with. Sorry, but it makes it easier to explain to the wife why I’m talking to pretty girls.” He laughed.

“Sorry,” she laughed in return. “I’m Trixie Belden. I’m actually here because a friend is in the hospital down here.”

“So you’re here to blow off steam?” he asked, one eyebrow raised.

She looked him in the eye, made a quick decision, and prayed that it was the right choice. “She was driving down with Dennis, and someone

knocked off the road. I think it's tied to the con in some way." Her eyes slid past Keith as she spoke, for just an instant, and were drawn to a man who looked even more out of place than she felt. He was in a dark suit and tie, white shirt, and dark glasses. The outfit screamed out a purpose other than enjoying a convention. He saw her looking at him, and quickly moved away. "Excuse me, I need to check something out." She sped off in the direction that the man disappeared.

"Who was that, love?" a particularly curvaceous woman asked as she came up alongside Keith. Several of the males (and a few females) had been watching her tiger-striped form walk, and looked vaguely disappointed as she kissed him lovingly.

After a reluctant break in the kiss, he answered her. "A newbie, who seems to be involved in something she considers a mystery. This is going to be an interesting con, I think."

She spun around the corner and came across an elevator, and a set of stairs heading up. Pausing for only a second, she headed up the stairs as fast as the traffic would allow. As she spun around a corner, she came across a very puzzled looking Dennis. "Did you see someone come past here, Dennis? A man in a suit?"

"If it were a pinstripe suit, I'd think he was Mafia, with his shoulder width," Dennis responded. "Since it looked to be a solid suit, I'm guessing the Feds are here for some reason."

"Any ideas why?" she asked.

"Plenty, but they're all ranging from unlikely to downright weird. Remember who you're talking to here," he chuckled.

That chuckle didn't sound like there was much humor behind it, she mused. "Toss 'em at me," she replied with an answering chuckle, also partially devoid of humor.

He raised an eyebrow and answered. "Okay, in no particular order, and with no particular rhyme or reason. They've heard some disturbing rumors, and are here to check them out. Someone called them here for some reason. Aliens have landed, and they've agreed to meet them here, since they look like some earth species, anthropomorphized. They've decided that furry fans are the next big terrorist threat. And not last, and certainly something more than least, the guy could be here on a membership, but wants everyone to think he's a Fed, to stir up trouble."

"Why would he want to stir up trouble?"

"Some people do. Real life trolls, so to speak, to use computer jargon."

"Trolls are those guys who intentionally start fights online, right?" At Dennis' nod, she smiled. "See, I'm learning. Did you see where that guy went?"

"He headed straight for the elevator bank. And it's early enough that I doubt that he had much of a wait for an elevator. Wait 'til tomorrow, and then try to get an elevator. Go ahead, though. Maybe you'll be lucky and find him, but do be careful, okay?"

Trixie shot forward to the elevator banks, near the front desk, but there was no sign of the man. She thought for a moment, and then played a longshot. Walking to the front desk, she asked, "Did you just see a man, about six feet tall, in a suit, come by here?"

"Was the one you're looking for about as wide as he was tall? Line-backer material?" the hostess asked in return. At Trixie's nod, she said, "He got in the elevator."

"Can you tell me what room he's in?"

"Regulations prevent us from doing that, miss. I'm sorry."

"That's okay," Trixie replied. "I'm sure I'll see him around. He's certainly hard to miss!"

"That is true," the hostess laughed in reply. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Trixie walked away from the desk and headed for the couches in the lobby, actually managing to ignore the two young men in fox suits she walked past. Okay, we have a man who certainly appears to be doing something he doesn't want to be noticed. If we work under Dennis' idea that he's a troll, then we can basically ignore him. If he's Mafia or underworld, then somebody is in serious trouble. If he's Federal, then whoever he's looking for is in a whole world of trouble for some reason. I think that Dennis' first two ideas may go hand in hand. He's a Federal agent of some sort who was called here to hopefully prevent some trouble, or catch the people who start it, once it's begun. She frowned. I hate not knowing what's going on.

She stood up and headed back downstairs, almost bumping into someone. She finally focused, and laughed. The person she'd nearly collided with was in a fox costume, with an obviously fake "FBI badge" that read 'Fox Mulder'. "Sorry about that, 'Fox'."

"Not a problem," he replied, laughing. "Like I'm going to complain about running into pretty girls?" He started to walk away, then turned and said, "Enjoy the convention, miss."

"Thanks, I'll try." She continued the trek downstairs, and ran into one of the people she'd been introduced to. "Mr. Mayerle, I think?" she asked.

"That is correct, Miss Belden. May I help you?"

"I...I am utterly lost here at this convention, and I'm dealing with another problem at the same time."

Your friend in the hospital? Dennis mentioned that you're her best friend."

She nodded. "Yeah. Originally, it was just supposed to be Dennis and Honey, and then this happened. Why would someone shove them off the road?"

"Well, it is a clear effort to remove someone or something from circulation."

"Some thing?" she asked. "Like his costume?" Her next question came from pure frustration. "What the heck is so important about a costume?!?"

He smiled. "I'm an engineer, so I know something about the process of designing and creating something. When you consider how elaborate a costume can get, you realize that they involve quite an investment. Moreover, they can, and often do, incorporate quite a variety of materials."

"I guess so. I guess Dennis is something of an engineer, as well; he's hinted at the design of this costume he built, saying that it was going to cause some heads to turn when he showed it off."

"That alone could be cause for consternation amongst some parties, possibly. Some people go to great lengths to win a costume contest."

"Enough to drive him off the road?"

"Possibly. Are you certain that the incident that hospitalized your friend is connected somehow to this convention?"

"Not certain, but from clues that Dennis has dropped, the two seemed linked. I mean, he left the hospital to be here, as if it was a requirement. Why would he leave her hospital room?"

"Well, I'm not saying that this is his reason, but this is the largest convention of this genre; I've known people who took fairly drastic measures to attend similar cons in other genres, such as the World Science Fiction Convention."

"He's never struck me that way, before, though. How about you?"

"I've only ever known him online, but he's always struck me as interesting, and someone that I look forward to getting to know in person. As for the likelihood of the reason I gave before being the reason he's here, you would be a better judge of that."

"Is there anyone here at the convention that you might think could be involved with this problem?"

"No one known to me."

She thought for a second, then smiled. "Thank you. One last question, though. Can you think of why the FBI, or some such agency, would be here at this convention?"

If she was hoping for a surprised reaction she was sorely disappointed. What he told her was, "I would presume that they're looking for someone or something of importance. I'd hesitate to speculate further."

"What sort of things are there around the convention for a seventeen year old to enjoy?" she asked with a smile.

"Well, your age will prevent you from going into a certain section of the art show, but there's apparently always some excellent work in the general public's section. I've been told that Uncle Kage's Story Hour is not to be missed when it happens, which will be early tomorrow afternoon. Other than those, it really depends on your interests. There are some panels that I have an interest in going to, and you might want to look at your schedule to see if any might interest you." He smiled and finished with, "I really must get up to my room, Miss Belden, so I will bid you farewell for the moment, if I may." When she nodded at him, he returned it and continued his process toward the stairs.

Now there's a man who answers things without answering them, she thought. Those were some odd answers to a couple of those questions. Why would he be watching his words around me? And why wasn't he surprised by the question about the FBI? It's almost as if he knew they were supposed to be here. Why would he know that? Is he involved with this scenario somehow?

She shook her head. I can't go suspecting everyone. That's gotten me into trouble before. She chuckled to herself. When have I ever let that stop me? She walked back down the hallway, where Mike Regan, Shirh Khan, FawkesFyre, and Galadrión were talking animatedly to a tall, pale redheaded man. FawkesFyre was giving him a hearty handshake.

"Tygon, I wish we could see each other more often than at these conventions, when you and Maxx manage to make them. It's good to see you when we do see you, let me tell you that much, at least."

Tygon responded with a noticeable German accent, "It's good you see you too, FawkesFyre." He noticed Trixie standing near them, and the Old Gray Raccoon turned.

"Ah, Miss Belden! Welcome back. Since Kynsfyr isn't here to make introductions, let me introduce you to Tygon, another of the PlanETFurry alumni."

"Please to meet you, Tygon," she said, extending her hand. It was shaken firmly, but not too strongly.

"So you're a friend of Kynsfyr?" he asked.

She thought for a moment and smiled knowingly. "You could say that," she chuckled. "I admit that I'm not used to hearing him referred to that way. He's just Dennis to me and my friends."

"I can understand that." He smiled. "Any ideas about who he's going to be unveiling at the costume contest? He promised us that it would be unusual."

"I don't know much about his costume, other than the fact that he's been working on it for a long time." She shrugged. "Sorry."

"That's all right. I was just hoping for some inside info," he laughed. "Where is he, anyway?"

"Last I saw him, he was upstairs. Could be anywhere, though. I get the impression it can be difficult to find people around this convention."

"Only when you're looking for them," FawkesFyre quipped, and was rewarded with some chuckling.

"Well, I ought to find him at some point, since I'm sharing a room with him."

"Ah, so you are the one some are calling the 'mythical girlfriend'?"

She looked quickly at the rest, hoping they wouldn't correct her as she said, "Well, one of them. He was with the other one a little while ago."

"Two? And you two ladies don't have any problems sharing him?"

"Why would we? We've been friends since before we met him. We're still friends." She was actually having some trouble keeping a straight face as she spoke, not from the facial contortions that FawkesFyre was undergoing as he heard this. At first his eyes had bugged slightly, then he had turned slightly calculating, and now he had his head down, his face in his right hand, and it was obvious, to her at least, that he was feigning a momentary head pain to keep from chuckling. That's right; I told him enough for him to put two and two together. At least they're all keeping the truth to themselves. A fat lot of good it'll do if we decide to do this, and tell everyone what we're doing. I just hope Diana's doing the same.

Kynsfyre made an appearance right about then, coming down the hallway at a surprisingly fast walk. He had a look of consternation on his face, until he saw Tygon. He walked up to the group, stood erect, and saluted. "Captain Panthera, good to see you again, sir," he said with a grin.

Returning the grin and the salute, Tygon replied, "At ease, soldier. How are you doing, my friend?"

Motioning to his leg, he said, "I've been better, but I've been worse, too."

"Hmph," Trixie said. "You come over here and ignore your so-called 'mythical girlfriend', and shoot right over to him. Not even a quick kiss on the cheek." Her eyes twinkled as he looked at her, and she could see that he'd gotten the point.

"You're right." He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

This gave her a moment to whisper in his ear, "Gotta start it somewhere, Dennis."

"I take it you've been introduced to Tygon, our most notable German member?"

"Only German member, I think," Tygon responded, still smiling.

"True, but mine sounds better," Dennis laughed. "Trixie, if you don't mind, I need to head up to the room for a minute or sixty, to get off this leg for a bit." He turned, and then turned back to the group. "Any of you want to come up, you can. I rented a suite."

The group headed to the main lobby's elevator bank, which was only just beginning to develop a crowd. "Tomorrow, there'll be lines like crazy for these elevators," Khan said. With all four elevators working perfectly, it was only a matter of minutes before they were on Dennis' floor. As they round the corner from the elevator bank, they saw a someone running through the door to the outside stairwell, and a person lying on the ground, half out of a room. Whoever was lying on the floor seemed to be coughing, and as they got closer, they realized that it was Diana Lynch, at Dennis' room. There was a strong smell of ammonia as they neared.

As most of the crowd checked on Diana's condition, Dennis exploded into the room. He headed immediately to the closet, and slammed it open. He relaxed somewhat, but quickly became worried again, and began searching madly in the closet for something.

"What are you looking for?" Trixie asked from next to his shoulder. He jumped, but before he could even think to answer, she hissed in his ear, "In case you're interested, Diana is fine." Before she could look inside, he closed the closet again.

He turned to look at her with relief in his eyes, but something else was there. Or maybe it's not there, she thought. Something is wrong, and I don't like it. He ignores his friend, lying on the floor, to run over and check something in his closet. He knows why someone was in his room.

He walked over to Diana and offered his hand. "I'm sorry I didn't immediately check on you, but with everyone else there, I would have been a fifth wheel on a bicycle, and I knew you'd be in good hands." She took it and he helped her to her feet.

She leaned forward and kissed him warmly, right next to his lips, then whispered in his ear, "We've got to start this charade somewhere. Tell Trixie, okay?" She let go of him to see him smiling broadly. She coughed a couple times and said, "I'd picked up the key from the front desk, and was in the process of opening it when someone burst out and sprayed whatever that was in my face. I started coughing immediately, so I really can't tell you much about him."

"You're sure it was a him?" Trixie asked.

"Yes. He apparently hit the door over there wrong, and I heard him grunt through all my coughing. It's either a man, or a woman with a serious respiratory problem, given the deepness of the voice."

Let's get in touch with Brian, and have him look at you," Trixie said. "It sounds like you're okay, though." She pulled her old friend into a hug.

As the hug finished, she noticed a couple things: first, a couple of the people were studiously ignoring her and Diana, and second, Dennis was talking on his cell phone. "Yeah, she's walking around, and seems fine, but we figured it would be good for you to give her a once-over. It smells like she got hit in the face with some ammonia compound. She must have been exhaling when it happened, or else she'd be coughing up a storm still. Okay, see you in a couple." He hung up the phone and looked at Trixie. "Brian. He's downstairs right now," he answered before she could even ask.

Galadrion asked the question that was probably on everyone's mind. "Do you have any idea why someone would want to break into your room, Dennis?"

"I know exactly why," he frowned.
id="Layer 1">

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Chapter 3 Chapter 5

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Trixie Belden and the Anthrocon Mystery

Chapter 5

Trixie Belden and the Anthrocon Mystery

Chapter 5 - A Deeper Understanding

Dennis scowled. "The problem comes down to telling you why. It's fairly safe to say that the person who broke in is not here in the room, since we saw him or her going out the door to the outside stairs. Thing is, I don't know if he or she is alone. I hate to distrust any of you, but for my own safety, I have to."

He took a deep breath. "You've all realized, those who've been following this for a while, that it has something to do with my fursuit." He chuckled a humorless chuckle. "When you see it, you'll realize that calling it a fursuit is something of a misnomer." He shook his head. "I so badly want to trust you all with what's wrong, but I can't. Only two other people at this convention know exactly why I'm here." His brow furrowed. "Well, three, actually."

There was a knock at the door. When he opened it, he was faced with hotel security and Brian Belden. "Ah, Brian! Diana's on one of the beds." He looked at hotel security.

A grim faced woman said, "We got word that there was an attack on a guest. What happened?"

"Well, as we came up the elevator, we saw someone shoot out that door at the end of the hall, and my roommate was lying on the ground, coughing. Apparently, whoever had broken into the room sprayed her in the face with some sort of ammonia compound." He shrugged. "That's all I know, and what she told me. If she's willing to talk to you, feel free to ask further questions."

He walked over and sat down heavily in one of the suite's chairs, then looked over at hotel security. "Sorry, ma'am. I'm in a little pain, my friend was attacked, and someone broke into my room. That's still no excuse to take it out on you. Please forgive me." Her eyes registered some surprise, but she smiled and nodded, and then turned back to Diana.

Galadrión walked over to him. "Anything I can do to help, Dennis?"

"Actually, yeah. Could you grab me a couple aspirin and a can of soda from the fridge? The aspirin are in the bathroom."

Smiling, he nodded, and a few moments later, came back. "Ah, blessed pain relief!" Dennis chuckled. Popping them both and swallowing them dry, he then popped open the can of soda. "Don't know if it's true, but I've heard that Coke helps aspirin work better."

"It's the caffeine," Galadrión responded. He was silent for a moment before asking, quietly, "Why three? First you said two, and then amended your estimate."

"Well, David," Dennis chuckled, "There are two guests here that I am positive know what's going on with this situation. One of them because I told him about it. The other knows for a different reason, but I'm aware of that, and expecting it. The third is the bad guy. He or she may not know exactly what's happening here, but he or she has a damned good idea. Of course, it could be more than three, but three's the minimum."

Trixie's eyes were focused somewhere between the two men talking as her mind wandered. *Interesting*, she thought. *That means that he has no problem with Evan knowing, and he's certain that Evan isn't the bad guy.* She frowned. *Could he be wrong about that? It's a perfect way of getting at whatever you're interested in; seem trustworthy, and then betray them. And if whatever it is Dennis is hiding is lucrative enough, then anyone could be a suspect. Heck, even Dennis could be arranging for a buyer for this whatever-it-is.* She frowned. *That way lies madness. He drove himself off the road, almost killing Honey and breaking his own leg?*

Evan and one other are the people that he trusts, and then there's at least one other person, who just hurt Diana. Looks like my work is cut out for me. She broke out of her reverie to see Dennis smiling at something, and David blushing furiously over something. "What did I miss?" she asked.

Dennis looked at David before saying, "I'll explain in a bit, Trixie. Promise."

"You know I'll hold you to that," she chuckled, remembering to put just enough spin in her voice to keep the girlfriend pretense going.

"I look forward to it," he said with a leer.

Keeping a smile on her face, she frowned inside. *That's not the Dennis I remember. There was nothing behind that. It's like he's dead inside.*

In short order, everyone decided to head to their own rooms, in order to give Di a little breathing room. David was the last to go, since he'd been talking with Dennis, and Trixie led him to the door. She noted that his face reddened again.

"Why do you do that?" she asked him, puzzlement evident on her face. "When it has something to do with me, you seem to get embarrassed. Why?"

He reddened even more before finally trying to answer. Dennis chuckled. "Take it into the hall, you two. Might be easier."

As they both stepped into the hall, they could hear Di asking, "Why do you do that? You know it gives people a bad impression of you." They didn't

hear his answer as the door closed.

Galadrión was obviously steeling himself for something. Finally, he looked at her and started to speak. "Feel free to call me David, before we go anywhere else. My real name is David Adrian. As for why I blush around you; well, I've always been attracted to smart women. Your being pretty doesn't help either. I know you're going to ask me questions at some point, so can we come to an agreement to respect each other's intelligence? I certainly respect yours, and I might very well ask you questions that make you think, as well."

She smiled as she realized that he was actually talking to her left ear. "I agree to respect your intelligence, Mr. Adrian. I'll admit that I'm not used to being thought of as pretty, so I'm not sure how to deal with the blushing."

"I'll deal with it the best I can, Miss Belden. And please, call me David. Mr. Adrian is my father."

"I'll call you David if you call me Trixie. Deal?" she asked with a grin, sticking her hand out. He grinned in return and shook on the deal.

"I'll do my best to focus on what you're after, rather than on you, Trixie, but...uh..." He reddened yet again, and then laughed. "Well, you can see how well that worked."

She laughed as well. "Want to head downstairs, and maybe hit the Denny's next door? Maybe you can relax if we just get a couple sodas and talk. Especially since I doubt they'll let me into any bar this hotel may have."

"I can agree to that." He walked over to the door to the outside stairs. "After you."

As they sat down in the Denny's, Trixie was surprised and pleased as David held her chair for her without blushing. *He's a natural gentleman. Don't think I'll draw attention to what he just did, or else he'll start stuttering again.* She chuckled internally. *I'm not used to that, to be honest. He's attracted to my mind, just like Dan, and just like Dan, he seems to think the package the mind comes in is worth looking at.* She shook her head. *Looks like I may have to start changing the way I think of myself.* She looked up to see David looking quizzically at her. "Sorry. Woolgathering."

"What an odd phrase," he responded with a wry grin. "Wouldn't you think that someone actually gathering wool would have to think about the task at hand, rather than letting their mind wander?"

She chuckled to herself. "Maybe in the beginning, but I'd imagine it becomes second nature after a while, and you can think about whatever you want to. Actually, as I understand from my oh-so-verbose brother, woolgathering came from the act of tracking down the extra pieces of wool torn off by bushes. Aimless wandering sort of thing, and grasping at effectively meaningless things, since you get so much more from shearing them that picking it off the bushes is useless." She laughed again. "He found an online etymology dictionary."

He pulled out a PDA and turned it on. "Online searches can yield some interesting finds. So, Dennis tells me you're a detective, and that I can expect to be questioned by you at some point. I guess this looks to be as good a time as any other. Problem is, you don't know whether or not I'm the dangerous one you're looking for."

"I have to trust that you're not, basically, or hope that, if you are, that you make some kind of slip up that I can catch." She smiled. "If I had a flashlight, I could shine it in your face and start asking questions, if you thought that would help you answer them." She nodded at the PDA. "Going to take notes?"

He laughed. "The flashlight's not necessary. All I ask is that you respect my intelligence. I already respect yours, if even half of what Dennis has said about you is true. As for the PDA, well, I talk with my hands, and this is a way to keep from getting too loud, so to speak."

She nodded, and then realized what he'd said just before. "He talks about me online?" she asked, obviously surprised.

"He talks about the whole group, this 'Bob-Whites of the Glen' that you're part of. He thinks you're all pretty damn...forgive me, that was uncalled for. Please accept my apology."

"Don't worry about it. I won't be offended if you say it again. What were you saying, though?"

"Still, I *am* sorry for it. As I was saying, though, he thinks that the entire group is special; a force to be reckoned with when focused. He also says that the driving force behind that focus is sitting at the table with me." As he spoke, he busied his hands, one holding the PDA, and the other writing. His eyes never looked to the PDA.

She sat back. "He's said that about me? I don't think I'm that...well, special."

David smiled. "Obviously, he does. You're the sister he never had, although I think there might be an undercurrent that's decidedly unbrotherly there."

She laughed. "Given what he told me when we showed up here, yeah, I'd say you're right."

"It's the girl in the hospital who's tearing him up, though, isn't it?" he asked. "She means a lot to him, and for some reason, he can't go see her. He's not the...well, I'm not sure how to explain it."

"Maybe you can explain it by explaining the space around it. What do you think of him? What might be different about him now?"

"I like him; I wouldn't be his friend, even online, if I didn't," he responded. "He's got rough spots, but we all do." He chuckled for a moment. "I think furries, especially, seem to have them." He paused to think again. "He's sometimes a bit quick-tempered - maybe too over-sensitive at times - but

that comes from being an outsider mostly. I'd say that overall, I trust him."

"Overall?" Trixie asked, eyebrow raised.

"I don't know. He's a little too...I don't know. Maybe too smooth describes it best." He chuckled again. "Then again, that could be jealousy speaking. I've never been able to do the kind of things he can do without thinking about it. I guess you could say that I'd trust him at my back...but not with my sister." He laughed outright. "Not that there'd be much chance of that - he's one of *my* friends; that's a strike against him right there."

She laughed with him for a moment, but became serious quickly. "He's already got a girlfriend, anyway." *I hope I'm not lying about that.* Quickly frowning, she asked, "What could be so important that he'd be willing to come to a convention, rather than be by her bed?" She added, murmuring, "Assuming his very presence wasn't scaring the hell out of her."

David's eyebrows rose when he heard the quiet comment, but he answered the question she'd asked, rather than the entire statement. "I don't know. I have a hunch that it's bigger than just this convention - I can't see Kynsyr blowing off someone as important to him as she must be for just this. But that's just a suspicion, based on what I know of him from chatting online. What it might be - I don't know. But if I'm guessing right, *it's* the reason he's here - Anthrocon is just a cover."

"Really!" Trixie breathed. "I won't ask what that might be, because you either know and won't tell, or are like me, and don't know. I will ask if you've got any suspicions. We know it has *something* to do with that suit of his." She found herself mildly annoyed that she couldn't read what he was writing. He wrote fairly fast, based on the gentle TK'ing noise as the stylus tapped the screen.

Galadrión frowned for a few moments before answering slowly. "This is pure speculation, understand. I've been very careful not to discuss that costume with Dennis, because my employer is known to get a little grabby with things their employees might have collaborated on. Most of the costumes here incorporate electronics of some type or another - mostly home-designed. Well, there are a lot of problems to overcome. Size of circuitry and motors, heat dissipation, noise, ease of repair, power supplies...and a lot of people could be interested if some amateur makes a revolutionary breakthrough."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, this is just an example - as I said, I know nothing of his suit - suppose someone came up with a new low-weight, long-lasting battery, with or without increased output? Who might be interested? NASA - it'd do wonders for their spacesuits - and maybe more than that. So anyone who supplies electronics for the space program is going to be interested too. To say nothing of car manufacturers - something like that would be a godsend for anyone designing a practical electric car. Shoot, the battery people would be lining up to talk to the inventor! Lots of big ideas that have shaped our world have come from amateur inventors - and Dennis knows it; we've talked about things like that in the past. And it may not just be batteries - I don't even have a clue how many man hours have gone into circuit design and other things for the costumes you'll see here. There are some ingenious people in fandom. An example - did Dennis ever tell you about the robot wolf that somebody made one year? That was a costume someone created - an anthropomorphic wolf robot with a cockroach pilot. It was astonishing, and there were some questions I heard as to whether or not the guy who built it had actually managed to build a remote controlled robot."

"Cool! Blue and silver thing, right? I remember the pictures. So that sort of thing might explain Federal officers being here at the convention?"

He blinked. "The Feds are here? Wow. That might be the reason, but it might not be. Nothing really obvious comes to mind. Maybe someone here is a VIP in real life? If so, I haven't heard about it - not surprising, really."

"Why isn't it that surprising?"

"Dennis has mentioned that ... um, let's see, what was his most polite reference to it - 'that fershlugginer Vanity Fair article'?" When she nodded, he continued. "Well, given that, can you really see someone like, oh, say John Ashcroft admitting he's a furry?" He grinned a wide grin, especially when he could see that she was contemplating it.

She shook her head to clear the image that came to mind, giggling. "That's just wrong, on so many levels." She continued to chuckle. "I was just seeing him with bunny ears."

David blinked again. "You're right - that picture *is* just wrong." He chuckled. Still smiling, he said, "Pray continue, Miss Marple."

"Nah. I'm too young, for one thing, and Agatha Christie had a tendency to tell you the vital information about the mystery as the character was solving it, so that you couldn't actually get there before the character. Can't be Nancy Drew, either. Not rich enough, and all her villains were obvious, because they were the ugly ones in the stories." She saw David open his mouth, and forestalled whatever he was going to say. "No, you would not be one of the villains in a Nancy Drew story."

He looked pole-axed, and actually stopped writing in his PDA. "Thank you," he finally replied, and she noticed that he sat up just a little straighter.

"While I've got you confused," she laughed, "let me ask you another question. Why might someone force them off the road?"

He blinked at her for a few seconds, and then laughed. "Nicely done, but it needs work. Very well done, actually. Seriously, though, it's a tough question, because I have no idea how smart 'they' might be. If they're not that smart, or if they haven't thought things through, they could have just been looking to stop Dennis and your friend - Madeleine, I believe? They might not have thought about how likely it was that they'd crash, and how badly hurt they were likely to be." He paused, scowling. On the other paw - um, hand - Dennis and Madeleine may not have been their targets...or their *main* targets. In that case, they may not have cared whether or not our friends survived, as long as that car stopped." His words trailed off as if he had more to say, and his face reddened again, only this time it was obviously deep anger.

I wonder what he's capable of right now, Trixie thought to herself. *He looks like he'd be willing to kill someone as callous as what he just*

described. She watched as he closed his eyes, and could see the anger draining away from him.

"Not good to let myself get that angry when I have no real outlet for it," he answered the questioning look Trixie was giving him. "Best to just ground and let it flow away from me."

"Not to get you angry again, but I have another question in the vein of the previous one. Can you think of any reason someone might want him dead or injured? Obviously, this is assuming that forcing them off the road was the primary target - more precisely, that *they* were the primary target."

"That's a given with that question, but it's best stated. I can't think of any reasons that I would consider *sane*. Jealousy, possibly - does she have any ex-boyfriends who might want him gone?"

Trixie snorted. "Sorry, David, but I just can't see my brother trying to kill Dennis, especially with how long it took the group, him included, to get the Dennis and Honey - uh, Madeleine - together after the mutual break-up."

"Okay, that one's out," he laughed. "Pretty nickname. Where'd it come from?"

"She's a honey-blond with a disposition as sweet as honey. You tell me," Trixie chuckled.

"I hope I have the chance to meet her. Back to your question, though. I can't think of anyone in the furry community that holds that kind of a grudge - heck, for that matter, I can't remember hearing about him dating anyone in the furry community. To be honest, there are furies, and those who are fur fans. I'd say he's probably the latter. Be that as it may be, I can see some of them wanting him embarrassed, but actual harm...that's out of character for this bunch."

After a moment's thought, he continued. "It could be financial, though. Dennis has had some good ideas, in some fairly lucrative areas. He's dropped a few hints about this costume, and if I'm reading between the lines right, there are some revolutionary ideas incorporated into it. To someone in the right industries, that could be worth a *lot* of money." He grinned a rueful grin. "Or none at all. Like me; I've signed an agreement with my employer; anything I work on while I'm working for them, they get first refusal on...and I've never heard of them refusing *anything*. That's why I've been careful to keep from even asking certain questions...I'd hate to get a friend's work taken away from him." After a moment's thought, he finished with, "Given the choices that come to mind, I'd guess that probably 'they've' got some sort of financial outcome hoped for."

Trixie frowned as she thought about what seemed to be her last question for him. "I know that most of these people are your friends, but is there anyone here you know of that you think could do this sort of damage to him?"

He sat back in his chair, thinking deeply for several moments. "I'm trying to see the group I know from a completely outside point of view. My thought is that if it was someone that I know, then it started as a prank that snowballed out of control...but I can't reconcile that with pushing him off the road. Amusingly enough, the person who edges out everyone else as being most capable of doing this is Dennis himself." As Trixie started to open her mouth, he said quickly, "I'm not saying that he's behind it, or even that I think he's capable of doing it. Of all the people I know, he is the one least unthinkable about doing it, but the level of anger I think would be required would be phenomenal. But I reiterate that I can't really see *any* of our bunch being involved." He sighed. "I really don't want to think that something like this could be tied to the fandom. We're already enough of a fringe culture; I don't want to go through another D&D-Satanism battle."

"Agreed," Trixie replied with a grimace. "Dennis got us into roleplaying, and explained how some people look at it. I can definitely understand not wanting to be explored like that. You're already lied about in the media."

"Thanks for being so open-minded, Trixie. So, was I any help in figuring things out?" He smiled naturally at her.

She smiled back. *He's so much more at ease with me now, once he got past thinking I'm pretty.* "I really need to assimilate what you've said." Her eyes opened wide, and in mock horror she gasped, "Oh no, my brother has infected me with circumlocution!"

From behind David came a voice. "Cute, Beatrix. Quite endearing." Mart came around within David's view, while Dan, Di, Jim, and Brian stood near the door. "Might I enquire what your intentions toward my sister are?"

As David began to blush and opened his mouth to respond, Trixie looked at Mart and said, "Well, we were going to go looking for Dan and Di and go off somewhere and do unspeakably interesting things together, just the four of us, if you catch my drift." As Mart's jaw dropped, and his eyes widened, she began to giggle, while David blushed even more furiously as he laughed along with her. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek and whispered, "Thanks for the compliment, David." He turned so red that she thought he might pass out. "Seriously, though," she said, sitting back in her seat, "I need to think for a while. You gave me a lot of good information. If you want, you can stick around and learn a little more about us BWG's." *Got a chance to look at that PDA finally - I'm flattered. He's describing me and the way I move; the way my expressions change. He's quite the poet. No, the descriptive for what he's writing is prosaic, isn't it? Either way, I'm definitely flattered.*

"Maybe tomorrow, if I have a chance, but it looks to me as if they were looking for you for a reason." He motioned to the waitress, and in one of nature's great mysteries, successfully got her attention on the first try. She came over with the check, which he quickly grabbed and paid for. "Just being a gentleman, dear lady. I had an excellent time conversing with you."

"Well, I'm paying for our next set, David. I'd like to talk to you when I'm not solving a mystery."

Before David could react, Mart interjected, "Alas, dear sir, it seems that you shall never share another round of sodas with my sister, then." He was so over the top in his delivery that even patrons two seats away began chuckling. "Seriously, Mr. Adrian, we do want to talk to her. You are welcome to stay, though."

"As I said to her, it's David, or you can call me by my fursona name, Galadrión - I'll answer to either. It'll probably be easier on your group if I'm not around, so that you don't have to stop and explain things, and you don't need to worry about what you can say around me. I'll run into all of you later,

though." With a grin, he made a circle with his right hand's thumb and forefinger, put it to his eye, and said, "Be seeing you," as he dropped his hand, and left the restaurant, chuckling. Mart and Di started chuckling as well.

"We were thinking about heading over to the hospital to check on Honey. Want to come along?" Jim asked.

"Try and stop me!" she replied. "I can tell you guys some of what I've learned on the way there. How's that sound?"

"Like a new you," Di said. "You and Honey always seemed to work these out yourselves. It sometimes seemed as if we were just along for the ride." Her smile as she said it took any possible sting from the words, and Trixie knew that it was true.

"Well, for one thing, my partner is in the hospital, so I certainly can't talk to her about it, can I?" she laughed. "Besides, I need *someone* to bounce my harebrained ideas off!" They left the Denny's chuckling, headed for the vehicle.id="Layer 1">

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Chapter 4 Chapter 6

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Trixie Belden and the Anthrocon Mystery

Chapter 6

Trixie Belden and the Anthrocon Mystery

Chapter 6 - Clear as Mud

“Well, either David’s an extremely good liar, which I have problems with, given his tendency to blush when flustered, or he’s on the side of the angels,” Trixie said as they piled into the limousine. “I don’t know what to think of Mr. Mayerle, given his guarded answers. That makes me just a little suspicious.” She looked to the people already in the limo. “Mr. Wheeler, Mrs. Wheeler.” They all greeted Honey’s parents as they climbed in.

Diana chuckled. “Just a word to the wise, Trix. I happened to talk to Mr. Mayerle a bit, and it turns out that he has top secret clearances due to his job. He works in the aerospace industry.”

Trixie thought for a moment, then chuckled. “Damn! So much for accusing him! How dare he have a valid reason for evasive answers!” she finished with a laugh. “Well, there’s one innocent person I can cross off my list of people to accuse.”

Brian looked at his sister for a long moment. “You’ve gotten more able to laugh at yourself, Trixie; more self-assured. I think I like the change. I remember when you were fourteen, you’d have exploded if someone suggested that you had accused an innocent person.”

“Well, a detective pays attention to patterns. The Modus Operandi, if you will. When history shows a tendency for me to accuse at least one person who has nothing to do with the problem at hand, well, that’s a pattern that needs changing.” She smiled, unconsciously mimicking Galadrión’s rueful one. “It’s not a pattern I like, but I’m working on it. If I keep it to the forefront of my mind, I’m less likely to do it.”

Jim chuckled. “You’ve obviously been hanging around Mart too long as well, Trix, when you start tossing word like forefront around with even thinking about it.”

“Hey, I resemble that remark!” Mart laughed.

Mr. Wheeler looked to Trixie and asked, “What exactly is going on with your investigation?”

“Well, I can’t prove it yet, but I’m almost positive that the accident was no accident, and is connected to his costume that he built. There’s something quite interesting in that thing, and I’ll bet someone wants it. I’d lay all the money I have that David has nothing to do with it, either.”

“He seems sweet on you,” Di said with a giggle.

“Seems that way to me, too. He is someone I’d like to get to know better, but only as a friend. I’m rather happy with things as they are right now,” she replied, reaching over to hold Dan’s hand for a moment. “He’s open, honest - as far as I can tell, at least, and doesn’t react the way most adults do when they discover that I’m interested in detective work.” She chuckled. “He also didn’t have any of the reactions that I would have seen if he were a part of this whole thing. Given his pro...” She snorted. “Mart, it is your fault that I was actually about to use the word ‘propensity’. He blushes a lot, and with his shyness, I really doubt that he could blush on cue and lie without showing it. So, he drops off my list.” As they pulled into the hospital, she laughed, “Of course, I could officially accuse him, just to get my wrong choice out of the way!” The others joined her laughter.

Once inside and upstairs, the others headed to the lounge while Honey’s parents stepped in to see their daughter. About fifteen minutes later, they came back out of the room, beaming. Impetuously, Mrs. Wheeler walked over to Trixie as she stood and hugged her tightly. “She recognized us! Really knew who we were; not just remembering that we’ve been visiting! Our daughter is back!” She suddenly realized what she had done, and started to pull away. “I...I’m sorry, Trixie...I just...”

Trixie just laughed as Jim exited Honey’s room. “Sorry for what, Mrs. Wheeler? For being so happy that your daughter is back? I’m so happy to hear it that...” She finished her statement by pulling Mrs. Wheeler back into the hug, who looked stunned for a moment, and then returned the embrace shyly.

“You see, Madeleine? I told you these were good people,” her husband chuckled fondly. As Jim got closer, he grabbed him and pulled him into his own ecstatically happy hug. Jim was more than a little surprised by this, but Trixie was not surprised to see the dampness of unshed tears as he smilingly returned his adopted father’s embrace.

Trixie’s eyebrows rose as she realized what Mr. Wheeler had said. Looking at Mrs. Wheeler as they released the hug, she asked, “You and your daughter have the same first name? That must get confusing sometimes.”

“Not really. It’s a family tradition. Our middle names are the way to tell us all apart. Mine, Elaine, came from my mother’s favorite aunt, whereas our daughter’s came from appeasing his family.” She smiled over at Mr. Wheeler, who still had an arm around Jim’s shoulder. “Isn’t that right, Matthew?”

“Can I help it if my mother was named Gertrude?” he laughed.

Trixie mock-shivered. “I understand why she never told me anything past ‘Madeleine G. Wheeler’ now.”

The nurse walked into the lounge at that point, and asked, “Are you all visitors for the Wheeler girl?” Upon getting an affirmative, she continued, “Well, you’ll be happy to know that the doctor has upgraded her condition. He’s allowing as many as four of you to go in at one time, as opposed to

the normal one or two." She looked at Jim. "I'll pretend I didn't see you earlier," she chuckled at him, and then looked at Dan. "And if I know this group, I'll pretend I don't see you, either," she smiled. "All we ask is that if she seems in distress, let us know; and try not to tire her, if you can avoid it." The nurse headed back to her station. Dan, Trixie, and her brothers all headed for the room.

Inside, they found a much happier looking Honey sitting in the bed. "Hi guys! I actually know you now!" she said quietly but ecstatically. "Ribs hurt, so too much effort makes them hurt more. How are you guys handling things?"

"Well, other than the disturbing fact that one of our best friends is in the hospital, we're doing okay," Mart said. "Trixie is working on the Mysterious Costume Mystery in order to cause temporal expiration."

"'Mysterious Costume Mystery'?" Honey asked with a smile.

"Yeah," Trixie shrugged with a smile. "Something is up with that costume that..." She stopped as she saw Honey shiver. "Sorry. Nothing more about that." She grinned then. "'Gertrude'? Your mother blabbed to us when we found out you two share the same first name. As my circumloquacious brother would say, 'Your reticence in informing us of your intermediary appellation became blindingly apparent'." Trixie turned to look at the others, who were staring at her with jaws dropped. Mart's eyes were wide.

"You've consumed my Oxford Unabridged, haven't you?" he asked in mock horror. "'Circumloquacious'? That's a new one on me, I'll admit."

"It fits you, though, even if I did have to make it up. You're extremely talkative, and take forever to get to the point." He scowled at her until they realized that Honey was crying on her hospital bed. "What's wrong?" Trixie asked in alarm.

"Ow," came the response. "It's not fair, you doing this to an accident victim with broken ribs. Are you trying to kill me?" she laughed painfully, and was joined by the rest of the Bob-Whites, albeit a little slowly.

Back at the hotel, Di and Trixie headed up to the room they were sharing with Dennis to clean up a little before dinner. Dennis was nowhere to be seen.

"You seem troubled, Trixie," Diana said as Trixie headed into the bathroom.

"I just hate keeping aspects of the case from my partner," came the reply through the door. "Problem is, those aspects are giving her problems right now if they're mentioned, so I really can't mention them."

"I think I understand what you mean. It would be like me keeping something important from you or Mart."

"Exactly. But if you had to, you would. It would just bug you like this does me." Trixie exited the bathroom, and Di took it over. Trixie found herself looking at the closet, and opened it to find the outfit Dennis had made still in there. Hmm, let me see if I can figure out why everyone would want this thing, she thought to herself. She began to look at the costume. A few moments later, she found herself wondering if this thing could fly, because the wings appeared to unfold into something huge. I'm glad I didn't try to really unfold that wing. There's not enough room in here for it!

She realized quickly that there was an inordinate amount of electronics built into it, and began wondering about the size of the battery that was going to power this suit. The outfit looked like it was made of some stretchy material, but the inside seemed to have flat rivets throughout. No, wait a minute, those look like the leads that Brian showed us; the ones that are on those EKG tabs. What's he using these for? She continued to look. Where the heck is the battery in this thing? Where does it fit?

She heard a chuckle behind her, stood and spun to see Diana with a smile on her face and her hands on her hips. "What would you have done if I'd been Dennis? You know he'd probably be unhappy with you doing this."

Trixie frowned. "I know, but this is not the Dennis I know and think of as a friend. He can be secretive, but never like this. People can get hurt with his keeping this...situation quiet." Stepping away from the closet and closing it, she continued. "What is it about that costume? I have no idea where the batteries go, and it's got all those little leads inside it. What are they for?" She chuckled humorlessly. "Is this thing the reason for those vandals hitting his house? Were they trying to get in after it, or were they trying to send him a message? And why am I asking you?" she finished with a laugh, which Diana joined. "Let's go downstairs and find some food."

As they reached the lobby, they heard Dennis' voice around one of the columns, coming closer. "Good to see you too, Rava." He rounded the corner, and the emotion so evident in his voice was just subsiding from his face. The girls found themselves startled by the anger there. "Oh, hi!" he chirped at them, all traces of that anger disappearing as if it had never been. "Where are you girls off to?" He hobbled over and kissed them each on the cheek.

They blinked at him for a moment before Trixie found her voice. "We figured it was about time to get something to eat. Any suggestions?"

"Not Denny's," he laughed back. "It's not that the food is bad; it's just that it's ... well, it's basically fast food, delivered slow. That's my impression, at least. The Fridays is good, and there's a Chili's a short walk up the street. Anything else, I've never been to. Wait, did that last sentence make any sense?"

The other Bob-Whites arrived in time to know they'd missed something, what with Diana giggling at Dennis' last comment. "Any decisions on food, guys?" Jim asked. "And are you coming with us, Dennis?"

"Sure, why not? I can't be where I'd like to be, and really want to be elsewhere right now. I vote for Fridays, because they're within a reasonable walking distance, and they're not Denny's."

As they headed across the parking lot, they ran into Evan, Mike, his wife Christine, Fawkesfyre, and his wife Catspaw. Mike looked at the others and asked something the Bob-Whites couldn't hear, then called out as they got closer, "We're heading over to Fridays for dinner. Want to join us?"

"We were just headed there ourselves," Trixie replied. After a quick look at the rest of the group, she added, "Why not? Gives us a chance to get to know each other better." They quickly caught up with the group, and after a surprisingly short wait for a table, had placed their dinner orders.

Trixie frowned and looked at Dennis. "If it's none of my business, tell me so, but what was that business about when you came around the corner? You certainly didn't sound or look happy."

"Oh, I was getting chewed out by Rava. You haven't met her yet. She goes by the nom du Con 'Rava Purr'. I don't know her real name, to be honest."

"What was she chewing you out for?" Fawkesfyre asked.

"To be honest, Keith, it's something I agree with her about. I just didn't like her tone. She heard about the situation I'm in, and was basically informing me, whether she realized she was doing it or not, that I'm a worthless person for not staying at the hospital at Honey's side." Dennis' scowl colored his next words. "The two of us just do not get along. I found myself not telling her things because I was damned if I was going to sound like I was making excuses to her."

"We all can be abrasive, Dennis. I do it, you do it, and Rava does it."

"It does seem like she does it more often with me than with anyone else." He shrugged. "Then again, there is the age difference. I'm barely 21. Not to make it sound bad, but she is older than me, and I may be reacting to that. Or it may simply be that we will never be friends."

"Hey, we can't all get along like long lost brothers. Which reminds me; anyone seen Beau?"

Mike interjected, "Yes. He's around, but busy at the moment. He'd have been with us otherwise."

Food came, giving a welcome interruption to the direction of conversation. Talk moved to any number of odd things, and settled into a discussion of UFO's.

"Honey and I actually saw one of the biggest birds we've ever seen one night, just a couple months ago," Trixie was saying in response to Keith asking if she'd ever seen anything. "It was a full moon, and apparently, this tremendous bird crossed in front of the moon. The thing was huge! Of course, it was gone by the time any of the guys got outside, so they proceeded to make fun of us." She turned. "Are you okay, Dennis?"

He finally managed to swallow the small mouthful he had been attempting to inhale. "Pasta in stomach good," he coughed. "Pasta in lungs bad." He coughed some more before he could finally say, "So I wasn't the only one to see that thing? I thought it was a pterodactyl flying overhead!"

Something in his tone set off an alarm in Trixie's head. Again, there's something he's not saying. Does he know what that thing was? Verbally, though, she smiled and said, "Nice to know somebody backs up the story Honey and I told you boys," laughing at the end to take the sting out of it.

"Mea culpa!" Mart said. "You have to admit that it was a pretty strange story, though, Trixie."

"I forgive you, Mart. After all, I was right!" she laughed.

"Such largesse," he said melodramatically, drawing chuckles from around the table. Turning to Dennis, he asked, "So, Dennis, will you be able to wear that costume of yours around your cast?"

"I'm certainly going to try. Trixie and Di are going to be the first people outside myself and..." He stopped with a scowl. "Well, they'll be the first to know why the costume is so special. Everyone else finds out Saturday after the masquerade." Trixie raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything. Dinner finished without any further attempts by anyone to fire foodstuffs from their nostrils.

Back in the hotel, as they entered the lobby, they saw 'Fox Mulder' standing against a post, reading a book. Dennis grinned, although it looked a little forced to Trixie. "I'll be right back - there's something I want to ask that guy." He hobbled quickly to him. For once she was close enough to hear Dennis say to 'Fox', "I'll have to give it to you on Sunday - tonight's right out, and Saturday's gonna be too damned busy." A nod was his response.

Dennis walked over and said, "He's waiting for someone. I'll have to ask him tomorrow or Sunday, when we both have more time." The girls simply nodded.

Up in the room, as soon as the door closed, Trixie said, "Okay. I know something is up, Dennis. What is going on with this suit, and does it have anything to do with 'Fox' downstairs?"

He looked at her for a long moment. "Those two things are connected, but not connected at the same time. Believe me when I say that I want to explain what's going on with this thing, but I can't. And won't. If you knew too much, and talked to the wrong people, then your lives would probably be forfeit."

Trixie crossed her arms in front under her breasts and gave a look that crossed angry with "Yeah right". Even Diana was looking annoyed at him. "Do you actually expect me to believe you when you say something like that?"

"You're going to ask questions until I tell you, or you ask the wrong person, aren't you? What am I saying, you're Trixie, and your best friend was almost killed. Of course you are." He sighed, almost melodramatically. "I will tell you just enough, but not the entire thing. I can even prove part of it to you."

His next actions surprised the girls, and embarrassed them slightly as well. Dennis closed the window and stripped to his underwear. Opening the closet, he pulled out the costume and began putting it on, carefully over the cast. When it was completely on except for the head, he smiled. "Now for the fun part." On went the head, and after a click, the girls noticed that the body of the suit had a faint shimmer that it didn't before. A closer look told them that the feathers were lit. "Fiber optics are fun, aren't they?" Dennis said.

The girls looked up and noticed that as Dennis continued to speak, the mouth of the costume moved as well. "Holy cow!" Trixie exclaimed. More quietly she added, "That mouth movement looks real! If I didn't know better, I'd assume you were a real ... umm ... whatever you are."

"Draco-phoenix," he chuckled. High quality speakers made his voice sound almost proper, as if he were speaking, and not filtering through speakers. He moved his arms slightly. "You should see this thing when I have the other set of wings on it." The snort of laughter made them jump. "I forgot - you and Honey already have."

"That was you?!" Trixie squeaked. "That thing can fly?"

"Well, really, it's glide more than anything else, but I have a launcher in my back yard. I'm working on methods of powering the flight, but at the moment they make this thing too bulky." He reached up and clicked whatever it was that allowed the head to disengage, and the feathers stopped shimmering. "Best these wings would do right now would be to hopefully slow you enough to not kill yourself falling off a tall building. And look damned impressive."

"Where did you hide the battery?" Trixie asked. "When I was looking at...oops..." She had the grace to blush as she realized that she'd just admitted to snooping.

He snorted. "I thought as much. Only a real electronics and techno-wizard is going to solve that one, though, to answer your question." With a wide grin, he bowed. "You're looking at the battery. It's designed to power the lights for the fiber optics off the human body. Heat and other much fainter emissions of the human body. Most people don't realize that the human body has it's own electromagnetic field. The suit works mostly off heat, but it can deal with the interaction of the human electromagnetic field's interaction with other fields. Sounds like Star Trek technology, but it's real. I just figured out how to pull more power than previous people have."

"And that technology is what whoever is after you wants, right?"

"Pretty much," he smiled, and began removing the suit. Back down to his underwear, he tossed on a pair of shorts and grinned. "Sorry if I embarrassed you girls, but I didn't go as far as you can with this thing. There are leads everywhere, so the more skin contact, the more power for the suit. None of us really wanted that."

The girls looked blank for a moment, and suddenly Trixie blushed to her hair. Diana followed her a moment behind. He chuckled. "Sorry. Well, I want to get dressed and go down to see if I can find a couple of the other furs...I mean people that I'd like to see. You going to stay here, or bounce about yourselves?"

"I think I'll look around," Trixie said.

"I'll go find Mart," Diana answered with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Why don't you ladies do that whilst I get dressed again?" he grinned at them. Trixie noted that it was back - he was joking with them as always, but there wasn't the feeling behind it anymore. It's as if it were an old habit that he either can't break or doesn't know about. Or doesn't care to change.

As the girls reached the elevators, Trixie suddenly got an indignant look on her face. "Hey, he never answered my question!"id="Layer 1">

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Chapter 5 Chapter 7

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Trixie Belden and the Anthrocon Mystery

Chapter 7

Trixie Belden and the Anthrocon Mystery

Chapter 7- Arrogance and Anger Equals Trouble

Saturday morning came, and the girls awoke to find Dennis already in the bathroom, quietly getting dressed. "How can you do that?" Trixie groaned. "I thought you got in late last night."

"Early this morning, and I've been looking forward to this con." He frowned. "I was looking forward to sharing the con with Honey, but that was obviously not meant to be."

Interesting, Trixie thought. Not only are his humorous comments without humor anymore, but stuff that's supposed to feel sad or depressed doesn't sound right, either. Almost like he feels nothing.

"So what's the plan?" Diana asked.

"Well, I was going to go downstairs and see if any of my friends from Planetfurry are around and want to go to breakfast with me. I'll probably hit the Denny's for something that resembles food, at least."

Trixie scowled. "Last night, you didn't answer my question. When I asked if the suit was why they were chasing you, you said 'Pretty much'. That doesn't actually answer the question, Dennis. Why are they chasing you?"

He stared at her. "Y'know, it can be interesting to watch you on a case, but when I happen to be the case...I'd forgotten just how much like a pit bull you can be. Yes, I did not actually answer your question. The suit is in fact part of it, but not as large a part as it might seem. There is something else involved that I am not at liberty to tell you about, and even if I were, I wouldn't because of how damned dangerous this is. There are people at this convention who are willing to commit murder in order to get their hands on a certain something that is very dear to a number of people. Further than that, I will not say, even if it means the loss of your friendship."

That's the first completely honest statement he's made so far since this started! She thought with a start. Why is it, whatever it is, so important? "I don't think you need to worry about losing my friendship, unless you were directly involved with Honey's wounding." She started again as he seemed to twitch at the statement. "Okay, spit it out. You had something to do with her being in the hospital?"

"You tell me, Trixie," he barked. "I'm dealing with something so dangerous that people are willing to kill for it. I come someplace I know these people are going to be. And I intentionally invite my girlfriend to come down with me? You tell me if I'm directly involved with her near-death experience!" He stalked out the door, barely stopping himself from slamming it behind him.

"Well, at least he still feels some emotions," Trixie said to a particularly stunned Diana. "He's been going through the motions for the past couple days." She shook her head and finished getting dressed.

Downstairs, as she walked toward the stairs, she was grabbed and yanked into a somewhat private area; as private an area as you can find on the main floor of a hotel. Whoever had pulled her into the room got several rather rough gropes in before Trixie was able to elbow them rather roughly in the stomach and escape. By the time she'd turned back around, all she was was the back side of a grey anthropomorphic horse costume. She tried to follow the groper, but the crowds were already thick enough to slow her down. She turned back around and continued on her original heading, grumbling.

On the convention level, she ran into Brian, Dan, and Dennis standing together. Dan caught sight of her and headed over. "Trixie, what's wrong?" he asked. "You look angry enough to bite through wrought iron."

"Some ... thing in a horse costume grabbed me and put his hands all over me, in places no one has touched me before." She was clenching her teeth so tightly that her jaw was starting to hurt.

Dennis went cold, based on the look on his face. "I'll bet I know who it was, too." As he spoke, several costumed people came by, looking like a herd of horses. The final one in the line was grey, and Trixie noted that he was bent over slightly as well. His eyes went from cold to hot, and he practically screamed "DaneGeld!" and launched himself at the straggler, who suddenly found himself up against a wall, with Dennis at his shoulders. "You son of a b... If you did what I think you did just a couple minutes ago, then I'm going to rip your heart out and feed it to the dogs! And then I'll pour acid down your neck after I rip your head off! And then I'll get nasty!" Dennis was roughly pulled off the person he'd slammed into the wall, and he turned to face the people, but found himself doubling over as DaneGeld carefully placed a kick between his thighs.

"Just because I'm a gelding doesn't mean I can't defend myself, bastard," a high tenor voice said to the now writhing Dennis just before he fell weakly to the ground. The two who had pulled Dennis off DaneGeld lowered him gently to the floor. DaneGeld watched, and started to walk over.

"Might want to watch out, DaneGeld," Trixie said darkly. "Sexual harassment claims can cause all sorts of employment problems."

"Prove it was me," was the jaunty reply.

"You forget something, DaneGeld," rumbled Mike Regan, one of the two who had pulled Dennis away. "Just the claim runs the risk of getting you

bounced from the con. After all, you are notorious.”

“Yeah, but he attacked me. Bounce me, and I’ll get him bounced for life.”

“DaneGeld,” said Dennis from the floor, surprising everyone with how fast he had recovered, “if you ever touch my friends again, I will kill you. That’s not a threat; that’s a promise. If you touch her again, I will hunt you down, and they will have trouble identifying your corpse.” With the help of his friends and his crutches, he stood again. “Leave. Now.”

Brian and Dan were looking at Dennis in shock, since this was the first time they had ever heard him threaten someone seriously. Trixie was the only one close enough to hear, “She wants something to be scared of, I’ll give her something to be scared of.” He looked up and said, “You’re still here, DaneGeld. Be somewhere else.”

“Or else what?”

“Or else we’ll decide that you’re inciting a fight, and kick you out, DaneGeld,” a red-shirted man said. The shirt said, in large letters, SECURITY. “You’re already on thin ice what with that stunt you pulled last night. If you want to stay at the convention, I’d recommend you go elsewhere. Anywhere but here, DaneGeld,” he added as DaneGeld opened his mouth to say something. “If you’re not here, we can’t say you’re trying to start a fight now, can we?” As DaneGeld walked away grumbling, the man in the red shirt turned to Dennis. “Give me a valid reason why you shouldn’t be bounced from the convention for attacking DaneGeld.”

“I can’t,” he said. “I lost my temper.”

“I can,” Trixie interjected. “It’s not something I could prove in a court of law, but DaneGeld grabbed me and performed some rough fondling on me. And I was not interested. I mentioned it to my brother and my friends just as DaneGeld was walking by, looking as if he’d just been elbowed in the stomach. Considering I’d elbowed my attacker in the stomach...” She finished. “Please don’t kick Dennis out for trying to protect my honor.”

The man in the red shirt smiled. “Thank you, miss. I’d hate to have had to have bounced him out for doing what I think everyone has wanted to do.” He turned to Dennis. “Just try not to let it happen again, okay? Unless there are witnesses saying that DaneGeld did the attacking, if this happens again, I’ll have to ban you from the con for the remainder.” He looked meaningfully at the assembled group around Trixie and Dennis, and then left, whistling, ‘I Shot the Sherriff.’

Dennis turned around to face everyone, and the emotion he had shown so strongly before was now gone again. “Thank you, Trixie. And thank you Mike and Galadrion for pulling me off him. If I was going to kill him, I guarantee you I wouldn’t be doing it in a crowded hallway with a lot of witnesses.” He shook his head, and then shrugged. “Again, thank you all.” He stumped off on his crutches toward the doors to the outdoors.

Trixie turned to the rest. “He’s starting to scare me. He’s not the guy we’ve known these last few years.”

Brian nodded, frowning, but Dan voiced what the three Bob-Whites were all thinking. “I’m wondering how well we really know him.”

“I doubt you have that much to worry about,” Mike said. “I’ve seen him explode on the forums before, but there was usually some provocation, and he always cooled quickly.”

“I have to echo Mike’s sentiments,” Galadrion added. “Remember also that this is a very trying time for him as well. He’d like to be by his girlfriend, but she can’t stand to be near him right now. He’s waiting for something or someone, and both of his female friends that he’s sharing the room with have been attacked. I have to admit that I’d have been tempted to perform a bit of impromptu facial surgery on DaneGeld using only blunt instruments myself,” he said, punctuating it with a gentle smack of one fist into the other palm, “rather than helping to pull him off DaneGeld.” He looked to Mike. “I never really thought I had the kind of strength that required, Mike. It’s a bit of a pleasant surprise.”

They looked down the hallway to the doors that Dennis had stepped through. Mike and Galadrion were surprised to see Clint and Dennis talking in what seemed to be a genuinely friendly manner. It was sealed with a fairly hearty handshake, and Clint limped gently through the door, smiling.

As he approached the group, Mike said, “Don’t take this wrong, Clint, but I never thought I’d see what I just saw.” He smiled widely as he said it.

“Hey, I’m not going to stop needling him forever; just for the con and until he and his girlfriend are feeling better. I’m not a total pri...stinker,” he laughed, barely changed his intended phrasing. His own eyes went dark, though, and he continued, “He told me about DaneGeld. She really needs to be put in her place.”

“She?” Trixie asked, suddenly sensing a new wrinkle to the mystery.

“Just my way of needling DaneGeld. With that high voice, and a real first name of Marion, and a disposition like his; well, ‘she’ brings out the worst in me.”

“Oh,” she replied, a bit crestfallen, and her brother laughed.

“They can’t all be clues to something, Trixie,” he chuckled.

“Noticed you limping, Clint,” Mike said. “What happened?”

“Got up in the middle of the night for micturition purposes, and forgot I wasn’t at home. Ran into that thing that houses the fu...flippin’ television set. I’m good; just a little bruised.”

“Glad to hear it’s nothing serious,” Mike replied. “So, what’s on for today’s doings?”

I know Dennis had been coming down to see if anyone else was interested in going to breakfast with him," Trixie said.

"I have already broken fast," Clint said, bowing, "and I have a few places I need to be this morning, before things get into full swing."

"I, on the other hand, have not," Galadrión said with a chuckle. "If the group of you were going, would you complain if I joined you?"

Dan grinned a wide grin and put on his best stereotypical Brooklyn accent: "Are you puttin' da moves on my goil?" He tried to look tough and angry, but the laugh just below the surface was just too evident.

That was enough to keep David from getting flustered. "I am afraid, good sir, that I must answer that question in some general form of the affirmative," he laughed in response.

"Oh, okay. Carry on then," Dan chuckled in response.

Had either Trixie or David been drinking anything, they would have performed classic spit takes. Dan began laughing so hard that Brian had to hold him up. It was at this point that Dennis rejoined the group, eyebrows sketching the obvious question. "This is one of those situations where I really had to be there, isn't it?" he asked with a smile.

Trixie frowned inwardly. Nothing. At a point when other people would be at least chuckling, he merely smiles a smile without any real meaning.

"You should have seen the looks on your faces, you two!" Brian was laughing. "I wish I'd had a camera ready for that one."

"Well," Dennis said with a further smile, "as much as I hate to suggest it, I think Denny's is our best bet breakfast-wise, unless we choose to spend too much money on hotel food."

"You really dislike that place, don't you?" Trixie asked with a ghost of a smile.

"Not really," he replied. "It just seems too much like fast food, and I want something more than that when I'm at a convention. It's certainly a good enough place to eat. Don't worry; I haven't heard anything horrific about this particular one, either."

"Good. We were starting to get a little worried," Brian chuckled.

"Sorry 'bout that." The group walked to the Denny's (hobbling in Dennis' case), and had a surprisingly short wait for a table.

As it approached noon, with everyone having gone their separate ways after breakfast, Trixie was walking the convention area and the lobby, trying to get a glimpse of the linebacker again. Instead, she happened to see Clint and DaneGeld talking against a wall. Neither one looked terribly happy. When she realized that neither one had seen her, she took the opportunity to sidle close enough to hear their conversation.

"...ever catch you doing that again, Marion, I will make you regret it."

"What, you'll kill me?" came the snide answer.

"No," Clint replied in a voice that chilled Trixie's blood. "There's already been a death threat out on you. Besides, if I killed you, how could you regret it? I can do things to you that would make you wish I'd killed you, though."

Trixie heard a gulp. "Point taken, Concolor. I'll definitely take that under advisement."

"Good. Now get out of here."

DaneGeld shot past Trixie at a surprisingly high speed. Clint walked quietly past her, then stopped, and turned around. "Ah, Miss Belden!"

"Trixie, please, Mr. McInnes," she smiled at him. "How'd you know I was here?"

"Good peripheral vision, Trixie. Call me Clint. I take it you heard the conversation with DaneGeld?"

"Just the tail-end of it," she said, and then winced. "Sorry."

"Well, yes, since he can be something of a horse's ass, if you'll pardon the language..." Clint replied with a grin.

"No problem," Trixie grinned back. "Mind if I pump you for information, like I've been doing to the others?"

"Go right ahead," he laughed. "Don't know how much help I can be, though."

"Hey, anything can help," Trixie answered with a laugh.

"Before you start with your questions, I think I can answer one immediately; one I'm certain you're dying to know. Why is it that Dennis and I don't get along?"

"Well, yeah, I was kind of curious."

"Unfortunately, it's no deep dark secret from our pasts. We rub each other the wrong way. Both online and in person, he comes across to me as a bit arrogant and a little too full of himself. He strikes me as being a little too willing to pull out the pity act when things are going wrong."

How do you mean?" Trixie asked him. "I've never really noticed that."

"What do you know about him?" Clint asked in return.

"Well, he was orphaned a few years ago - never told us how his folks died," she replied. "He's been pretty much alone since then. Never really had anyone in his life romantically until Honey came along."

"Would you be able to classify him as 'standoff-ish'?" he asked with a slight smile.

She frowned for a moment in thought. "Yeah, I guess you could call it that. I just chalked it up to his life so far. Same benefits as Honey, what with wealthy parents, but they apparently didn't really give him the affection her parents give her. So he never really learned to relate well with people, I think."

"Now imagine that without benefit of knowing him for a while, like you have, and only meeting him occasionally at conventions."

She thought again, and then nodded. "Yeah, I can see how that could end up causing friction."

"I have no real problems with Dennis; we're just not ever going to be 'best of buddies'. So I needle him, he fires back, and we have a friendly little war going on, and he seems to realize that it's not meant seriously."

"Still bugs him, I know that much," Trixie murmured.

"Anything that teaches a valuable lesson is likely to be bothersome, Trixie. If I can deflate him a bit, then maybe the annoyance will be worth it for him." He grinned. "That one out of the way, shall we go on with your other questions?"

"Well, you answered one of them," he laughed. "Do you think that explains why someone would have wanted him either dead or seriously injured?"

"It's hard to say, Trixie," Clint replied, thinking for a long moment. "Yeah, he rubs a few people the wrong way, but I can't think of anyone in the furry community who wants him actively dead. Our neuroses and psychoses tend to run more toward what the Vanity Fair article implied, and those people are few and far between. Worst I've ever wanted to do to him is pound him flat a couple times when he said the wrong thing in the wrong way. I can't say that I can really answer your question. Yes, it does explain both of those, but I don't think anyone in the community would, if that makes sense."

"I think so," Trixie said with a half-smile as she thought through his statements. "So I take it you wouldn't exactly trust him?"

"With what? That's the question you really have to answer. With someone's sister - probably. With someone's feeling - less likely. With national security - who the heck knows?"

"Why that last one?" Trixie asked with a laugh.

"Just an example of what you need to think of when you're asking if we trust someone. Trust them with what?"

She nodded. "Do you think DaneGeld could do this sort of injury to him?"

"No. DaneGeld is more of the 'annoy you until you do something stupid' type. DaneGeld is famous for getting others banned from forums and cons. Trying to kill someone talks balls that DaneGeld simply doesn't have." He shook his head. "I'm sorry. You can see what I mean about DaneGeld bringing out the worst in people."

"My brother Mart would probably make a pun about people wanting to make wurst out of DaneGeld," Trixie chuckled. "He's not here, so I'll do it for him." She paused. "Any idea what he'd consider so important that he'd leave the hospital, and his girlfriend's side?"

"Not the slightest. I have no idea what makes that brain of his tick."

She laughed. "I've gotten a hint that it might have something to do with a costume. What could be so darn important about a costume?" she asked, a bit ingenuously.

"Is that what this whole bullsh...crap is about? A costume? I know people do some pretty impressive ones, but I can't think of any costume so interesting people would injure for it. Running someone off the road because of a damned costume?" He smacked a fist into his palm, with considerably more force than Galadrion had done earlier in referring to DaneGeld. "Someone was almost killed in that accident you've talked about. Someone did a PIT maneuver do drive him off the road for a costume?!?"

"PIT maneuver'?" Trixie asked.

"It's that maneuver you guys talked about that caused the accident. A pursuit car puts their front quarter panel against the rear quarter panel of the car being pursued, and then accelerates into the car being pursued. This forces the car out of control." He shrugged. "It's amazing what you can pick up from The Learning Channel. It's the short form of Pursuit Intervention Technique."

"Ah, thank you!" Trixie said. "Now I know what it's called, and what it stands for."

Clint looked down at his watch. "Well, I'm running slightly late. I paid good money for my super-sponsor badge, so I'm going to go eat the food. Talk to you later!"

"Enjoy your rubber chicken," Trixie called after him, which he awarded a short burst of laughter before disappearing. She headed downstairs, to see

if she could find anyone interesting down there, and bumped into 'Fox Mulder' again. "We really have to stop meeting this way," she chuckled.

"Are you kidding?" came the laugh from inside the headpiece. "This is the only way I get to meet pretty girls!" He bowed slightly, and headed off, but not before saying a jaunty "Adieu, Miss Belden!"

She shook her head, chuckling, and continued onward. Downstairs, after searching for quite some time, she found Dan and the group watching someone sketch Diana. An attractive young woman finished a movement and turned the sketchbook around. Trixie was close enough now to see what it was. She'd never considered what any of the BWG might be if they were animals, but the picture of Diana as a lioness looked somehow perfect. Not an alpha lioness, though, and that even comes through in the picture. But don't get between her and those she chooses to protect.

She was going to say something more when she saw Shirh Khan and a blonde man walking in her general direction. "Back in a second guys - beautiful picture, miss," she said in passing as she headed toward them. The blonde man saw her and pointed her out to Khan, who looked up and smiled.

"Ah, Miss Belden," he said. "Don't take this wrong, but I take it that it's my turn?"

"Trixie, please. Actually, I just wanted to find out when I could talk to you about this a little more. If you're busy..."

"If this is important, I can always meet up with you later, SK," the blonde said.

"No, she'll want to talk to you as well, once she finds out you know him," Khan laughed. "Trixie, this is Beau Wolff, real name Jonathon Northwood."

"Oh? I've read your stories, Mr. Northwood. If I'd known you were going to be here ..." she laughed. "So you're the Beau that FawkesFyre was looking for yesterday?"

"Guilty as charged, dear lady. How is Fawkes doing?"

"I don't know him very well, but he seems to be doing all right. Happy enough to be here, from what I could see."

"Good, good. What is this driving force that propels you about the convention, looking to question people?" he said with a smile.

"Remember how I told you Kynsfyr was in an auto accident? Her best friend was in the car, and took the worst of the collision. She thinks that it's connected to the convention. Is that a fairly concise recap of the situation?" Khan asked, turning to Trixie.

"Perfect," she laughed again. "I'm asking people who know him about a few things, in hopes of figuring this out. I intend to be a private detective someday."

"Excellent. I wish you the best of luck in your endeavor, Miss Belden," Beau said. Her eyes told her that he was dead serious.

"Mind if I question both of you while I'm right here? Shouldn't take too long, I hope," she said hopefully. Both men chuckled slightly and motioned her to continue. "Let's start with the obvious one first - what do you think of Dennis?"

Khan spoke up first, grinning. "What should I think of him? What do you think of him? You know him well enough to ask me my opinion of him ... what's he like when he's not his online self? I can only tell you what little I know of him."

"Okay then, what's he like online?" Trixie asked.

"Now that I can answer. He's a bit of a cocky type, sliding just a bit into arrogance, but if someone calls him on it, he's quick to try to make things right. I'd think that his cockiness might get him into trouble sometimes, though."

"Why?"

"It's easy to say the wrong thing to someone online. When you're typing out your words, it's hard to press the inflections of your voice or the cold sterility of a screen. So sometimes you could say something to someone in jest, and they might take your words the wrong way. His cockiness could potentially be taken as full-blown arrogance, something that someone else might find upsetting."

"How about you, Beau? What do you think of Dennis, taking into account the things that Khan pointed out?"

"You mean about online and offline personalities? I think that Dennis, for the most part, seems to be in the wrong place at the wrong time as far as this scenario is concerned. What I've seen of him online, I'd say that he's trying desperately to keep everyone around him safe without admitting that he needs help to do that. I'll also bet that he's not admitting that those same people may not want to be protected, and would rather be involved in protecting him." He looked meaningfully at Trixie, which made her blush.

"Well, would you trust him?" she asked.

"I would trust Dennis as far as I ever trust anyone," Beau replied. "If I knew him as well as I know, say, Galadrión or Fawkesfyr, then I'd most likely trust him to a deeper level than I currently do. As things stand right now ... he sets off a few 'jangles'."

She looked to Khan, who replied, "Would you trust him? Would you trust me? I mean, how can we really trust anyone? Everyone has the capacity for doing great deeds of good, and terrible acts of evil. I don't even trust myself, at times, especially because I know just what I'm capable of, so I can't really trust someone else when I can't trust myself. On the other paw—hand, excuse me; I've spent too much time being a furry person online—but, as I was saying, on the other hand, I don't have any reason not to trust him, so why shouldn't I give him the benefit of the doubt? But then again, there are things about him that I don't know, and I will always have to have faith that I can trust that those things I don't know won't be things that come

back to hurt me. And in thinking some more about your question, should I trust you? I mean, you're asking a awful lot of questions, especially about Dennis, and while I don't know him all that well, I don't really know you at all. Maybe I shouldn't be so trusting of you, asking questions about someone who I like to think of as a friend. What is it that you're after in asking me the questions you are? I think if you're going to get this personal with me, that you owe me some answers."

She opened her mouth to snap back at him, but clicked her mouth shut as she thought for a moment longer. "You're right," she finally said. "I like to think of him as my friend, but I want to know why the hell someone shoved him and my best friend off the road, and I fully intend to see that person in prison. And honestly, if Dennis was a knowing part of this, then I'll work at seeing him in prison, too. I don't like thinking that about my best friend's boyfriend, but it's a fact I have to face. Someone almost killed my friend, and I'll know why."

"Even if you don't like what it tells you?" Beau asked.

"Even if," she replied. "Justice needs to be done." She turned to Shirh Khan. "Ask me what you will, sir. I'll answer to my best ability. Quid pro quo, I think it's called."

He smiled. "Maybe later. You tell me quite a lot with that offer alone; perhaps more than you know. What's your next question?"

"It sort of blends together. Why would someone force him off the road? Why would they want him dead or injured? Third and or fourth is 'Who, if anyone, at the convention is likely to try to do that kind of damage to him?'"

Shirh Khan started this time. "Well, I'm certain that there are plenty of reasons why someone would try to purposefully run another off the road, but I can't say that any of the reasons are really good ones. I guess it would depend on who the people involved were. I wouldn't try to guess without knowing at least that."

"It could honestly be anything as the reason," Beau interjected. "Jealousy, intrigue, 'road rage', a case of mistaken identity, seeking to keep someone from revealing something, a drug deal gone wrong, uncorrected sociopathic tendencies ... mind you, those are any number of reasons; I don't say that I ascribe any validity to any of them." He shrugged. "The same goes for the reasons for wanting him dead or injured. Keep him from revealing some secret; keep him from finding out a secret; some sort of misplaced rage; revenge for a real or imagined slight, the list really goes on and on. Not enough information on my part for a real answer."

"It's news to me that someone wants him dead," Khan said. "I can't think of why someone might want him dead. What do you know about it?"

"Just that the maneuver is dangerous enough that it can kill someone if done wrong. Logic says that the person doing it really didn't care if he died, at the very least, or may have wanted him dead, at the worst." She grimaced. "No one here seems to think that anyone at the convention could do that sort of thing. Annoying, because Dennis's attitude screams that he thinks the culprit is here."

Khan shrugged. "I can't say I know enough people to hazard a guess. I'm familiar with the PlanetFurry crew, since we all seem to talk to each other, but I can't vouch for the other thousand or so furies here. As far as I know, we all generally like one another. I don't know anyone in our group who would have that much hate in their hearts to want to kill him. Concolor and Dennis fight with each other, but there's no real hatred there, from what I've seen."

"If the Feds were here, I'd suspect them," Beau said with a laugh.

Trixie's eyes went wide. "Why?"

"You act like they are here, miss," he reacted with some worry. "I was merely joking when I said that. Are they here?"

"I think so," she answered. "I've seen at least one man who seems to simply scream 'Federal Agent' in the way he dresses and carries himself. I don't think he's someone just trying to pass himself off as one."

Khan's eyes widened. "Feds? Oh, holy Christmas." He grinned. "Sorry- that's my 'trying not to swear' swear word. I'd heard from a few other furies that a few media types snuck in to the con one year, and then reported about all the worst aspects of it they could find fit to print. I'd imagine the Feds are here as much to keep an eye on us weirdos as to keep watch over some of the true crazies who might wanna hurt us. We might be weird, but we're only here to have fun."

Beau nodded his agreement. "For all we know, they may have been tipped off to drugs here, there could be a vice issue, they might be 'closet furs', they could be here for that costume I've heard so much and so little about. Then again, they might be something other than Feds, and are good at posing as them."

"You say 'they'. Why?"

"If they are Feds," Beau replied, "they aren't likely to send someone here singular. I'd bet money that the one you pegged may be here as obvious bait, to drive whomever they're here for out. I'll bet that there's another one in a position no one would suspect."

She nodded. "I hadn't thought of that." She scowled. "I wonder if they're involved in this thing he's doing. I know that his costume has something to do with it, but that's not all. I'm just wondering what about it is so ... damned ... important to keep him from paying more attention to his girl, lying in that hospital bed down the road." She blushed. "Sorry, I don't curse often, but it seemed to fit."

Beau simply said, "He may have a very important meeting here, with a patent official, or one of those Federal agents; a meeting he couldn't really reschedule."

Khan grimaced. "As far as I know about him and his mythical girlfriend - but, I guess I can give him the benefit of the doubt, as you're here and you

say you know her- right? Anyway, I don't believe he'd leave her side unless something else even more important came up. Maybe if someone was trying to run them off the road, he came to the convention because he has an idea of who it was and wants to be the first to kick their ass? I think that that would be the only reason I'd leave my wife in the hospital to visit this con; I love being a furry person, but real life - and my family - come first."

"I can understand that," Trixie replied. "He certainly acts like it's that important. I can't shake the feeling that he knows who it is - he's warned me that the person is willing to kill to get what they want, and that if I get in the way, that person might decide to remove me as an obstruction." She looked at Khan again. "Trust me as to her existence. She's lying in a hospital bed as we speak, after they rebuilt her from the crash."

"Apologies, but you have to understand that he raves about her, but has refused to post even the simplest picture of her. After a while, the rumor gets to be that he created her out of whole cloth."

"He chose not to because of her parents. Matthew Wheeler is her father." Khan shrugged, but Beau's eyes widened slightly. "You know him?"

"I've never met the man, but I suddenly understand Dennis's reluctance to post photos of her." He turned to Khan. "He owns the company that published my last two books. A small publishing house called Random House. He's extremely wealthy. How'd they meet?" he asked, turning back to Trixie.

"He moved into the area a few years ago. After I solved the mystery, such as it was, of the weird things happening around his house, we started to become friends. I know he's a genius with electronics and a few other things - he's put a lot into that costume. I just wish I knew what was so important about a stupid costume."

Khan spoke first. "That depends on who put the costume together. I mean, imagine: you've put a lot of time and not a little bit of money into creating something that you want to be able to show off to other folks who think like you. Wouldn't you be a little bit p ... annoyed if someone came along and tried to wreck your creation? Personally, I can't see the desire to create something like that, but as a fellow artist, I know that we all like to be appreciated for our efforts, and I'd imagine that I'd be just as upset over someone spilling a drink on one of my books, as a fur suited furry would be upset over someone trying to wreck his costume."

Beau interjected, "The costume could incorporate any number of innovations: a hydraulic wing set that actually allows gliding flight, laser-tracking eyes, full-feature facial animatronics controlled by an encapsulated-gel mask, micro-cell batteries that are self-recharging, a micro-dynamo system to increase strength, a gyroscopic stabilizer to allow comfortable digitigrade movement, a demi-cloaking unit to subtly disguise features, a new camera design to emulate eyes but allow a more broad-spectrum view of what's going on outside the suit, a vocal harmonics unit to completely change the voice ... that's just a few things off the top of my head. If he's managed to fit any one of those things into a suit that can be comfortably worn, then he's got a serious money-maker there. And that could explain the attempts on his life."

Trixie blinked for several seconds, and hoped that it came across as information overload. That costume could be worth millions? I know it's got a face that looks real when he talks, as well as that voice, and I've seen the thing fly. He's probably got the camera idea in there too, or else it could get pretty dangerous to fly that at night. "I can't think of anything else right now," she finally said. "I think I've got too much as it is." She looked at Khan. "I will answer those questions later, when you decide."

"Actually, you've answered a few of them already, Trixie. If I come up with others, though, I'll remember to ask them," he smiled. The two of them walked further down the hall after Beau wished her luck on her investigations.

She walked back over to the Bob-Whites, shaking her head. Seeing that it was only them around, she huddled them closely and said, "I just found out that his costume may be worth millions of dollars to him. The blonde guy, Beau, doesn't know it, but he just described at least three things in that costume, any one of which he said is worth a lot to the inventor."

Mike and his wife came down with Evan, with Keith and his wife shortly behind them.. "We're going to get seats for Uncle Kage's Story Hour. Come on in and listen; he's funny," Mike was saying.

"More than that," Keith was saying. "The man is hilarious. And they aren't jokes aimed at furies, either. You'll get them." He started laughing. "Remember the story about locking his keys in the car?" Mike laughed as he nodded.

"Sounds like we need to hear this guy," Brian said. They joined the PlanETFurry crew in the ballroom, which was already quite filled.

"What did you learn today?" Mart asked a little later, after they'd laughed themselves hoarse listening to Sam Conway, aka Uncle Kage do at least an hour's worth of stand-up material, all about his latest set of misadventures.

"Well, I know what the name of the maneuver was that moved them off the road," Trixie replied. "Beyond that, a little bit of new things, but nothing major. No one here at the convention seems geared to doing that sort of thing."

"What's the maneuver called?" Dan asked.

"Clint called it the PIT maneuver, Pursuit Intervention Technique."

Dan's eyes widened. "That answers a big question right there, Trixie. Our culprit driver was trained by the police; may even be police."

Trixie's jaw dropped. "So he was wanted by the police? He was running from them?" She sat down hard on the floor. "That explains a lot of the evidence at hand, if you think about it. A police maneuver is used to drive him from the road, and given the speed he had to have been moving when he struck that tree, he was probably evading pursuit. It would also explain why Honey's so scared of him." She blinked again for several seconds. "Plus, I overheard him talking to that guy in the 'Fox Mulder' costume. He's delivering something to him on Sunday." She scowled. "But if

they were after him, why wasn't there a police presence at the hospital for him? Were the Feds the ones doing it, and they got chased off?" She shook her head. "Either way, I think I need to find the linebacker Fed and let him know something is up." This doesn't add up, but it's certainly making Dennis look worse. Maybe we don't know him very well."id="Layer 1">

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