

Deerslayer

Season 2, Episode 1

September 6, 2011

Mandy Hunter woke with a start. She lay silent in the darkness, looking out of the corner of her eye. A dream? She rubbed her eyes, trying to remember what woke her exactly. A sound. A crack.

She sat up, pulling the covers back, and padded barefoot across the floor to the door of her bedroom. She looked out into the main room, half expecting Cassie or Denorah to be up, but it was still and quiet. The dormitory style apartment was reserved for students, and the living room/kitchen combo served as a connecting point between four awkwardly placed bedrooms, each rented separately, though Mandy lucked out and managed to pick her suitemates. Two rooms had their own baths, and the other two shared a bathroom which was wedged uncomfortably between them.

She walked gingerly over to her sister's door; the floor was cold and Mandy wasn't fully awake. She held up a hand and contemplated knocking, although it was unlikely Kate was there. It was unfair to wake her, anyway. It was just a stupid dream. That she couldn't even remember. A sharp crackling sound. She probably snored and startled herself.

She shook her head and shuffled back to bed. She lay down, relaxed her breathing, and slowly started to drift off to sleep again.

Crack!

Her eyes fluttered open, and she looked around. The crackling continued, like the crunching of dried leaves underfoot. Coming from her closet, from—

The closet door, partially opened, swung forward, and she caught movement. She sat up, looked around, trying to figure out what she'd seen. Did she imagine it? Still partially dreaming, not fully awake. She breathed in and out quickly, trying to convince herself there was nothing to worry about. Dropped her head back on the pillow and stared up at the ceiling.

Her bed rocked; she tilted her head. A weight on her stomach, on her chest. Like a cat had joined her, but they didn't have a cat. She looked down, stared at a... a thing. It was the size of a large rat, but it resembled more closely an ant with no head. A translucent ant full of glowing blue fluid. She inhaled sharply and held her breath as the thing continued to crawl toward her. Its forelegs tickled her face as they struggled for purchase, and when she was about to scream for help, they pushed themselves deep up into her nostrils, breaking through deep into her head. She felt a rush of warmth and pressure beneath her face, which worked its way down her body, and she could see the fluid inside the creature gurgle and bubble as it was forced through the legs like water through a hose. The thing's body deflated, losing mass as it pumped its juices out into her. The pressure built; it felt like she might burst, and she couldn't breathe and it was hard to think and she couldn't scream and—

She sat bolt upright, breathing heavily. No... no ant-thing. No pain or pressure, other than a residual memory. "Oh, God," she gasped.

Her door opened and Cassie poked her cornrowed and beaded head in. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I just had the most fucked up dream in the world, but, yeah."

“Yeah, well, get up. I’ve got breakfast on, you’ve got a class in twenty minutes, and you don’t want to miss the first day.”

The New Normal

“We’re going to IHOP,” Madison said, as Kate crashed into the kitchen, Spongebob hat in one hand and backpack in the other. The small girl opened the fridge and grabbed a small glass bottle of juice, draining half of it as she dashed across the kitchen.

“Can’t. I have an 8 o’clock.” She tossed the empty bottle in the recycling as she dashed from kitchen back to her bedroom. “I have to be in New York, like, five minutes ago!” She hurtled through her room and opened the closet door, slamming it behind her.

She ran across the bedroom on the other side, having crossed the 700 miles from Indianapolis to New York in one portal. She ran up the hall, to the kitchenette, where her sister Mandy and roommate Cassie sat, eating cereal. “Breakfast?”

“Early class,” Kate replied, opening the fridge and grabbing a small bottle of juice. “You guys free at noon?”

“Yeah. Lunch?” Kate gave a thumbs up, and hustled out the door. It was 7:45 local time, and Mandy’s apartment was about five blocks from NYU. She would never have scheduled an 8 o’clock for herself, but the program she was enrolled in only offered the one session. She hadn’t been sure what to major in once she finished her groundwork at Gaston College back home, but when the scholarship to study Classics at New York University fell into her lap—without her even having applied for it—she couldn’t very well refuse it.

The scholarship was very generous. And very specific. Classics, with an emphasis on Arcane Studies, a program not mentioned in the course catalog, and which she had several discussions with her friends about. Several of them were nervous; this could be some sort of trap. But by who? The enemies she had that were still alive hardly had the kind of resources to invent and implement a college program. No. Somebody recommended her, and Kate figured it had to be Sarah. Sarah Kenyon had a lot of pull in the magic community before she died, and if she wanted Kate to study Arcane whatchacallits, well, if Kate didn’t like it, she had a semester to change majors.

She made her way through the halls of the Silver Center, scanning the doors for her room. “Gah! The numbers don’t go that high!” She reached the end of the hall, then turned around, starting in the other direction. She paused. “Wait.” She cast a cautious glance down the hall. “Where are you, door?”

A creak, and a door that hadn’t been there before opened, barely a crack. Positioned impossibly in the corner, where it should be intruding on the classroom beside it. There was no way there could be a room behind it. If the world was still logical, but she learned better than that months ago.

She slipped inside quickly to find a small classroom, with a smattering of desks in a circle around a larger desk, and two people: a brown-haired girl who looked like she could be in high school, and a middle-aged man in a brightly-colored African dashiki and fez. “Ah,” the man said. “Ms. Hunter, is it?”

“Mm-hmm.” She looked around, pretty sure she was late. “Where’s everybody else?”

“The others, I’ve worked with for two years. I know them, they are far ahead of you in practice. I have told them to enjoy their morning and I would see them Wednesday. *You*, I wish to assess.” He

handed her a small knife, sharp on both sides, made of bronze, with a bone handle. "Do you know what this is?" he asked in a thick African accent.

"A dagger," she said.

"Well, yes. In the simplest terms. But do you know what it is beyond that?"

"It's magic," she said.

"Ah! How do you know?"

"Because this is a magic class and it would be kind of pointless if you handed me a non-magic thing to identify."

He nodded, glanced at the girl who suppressed a smile. "Fair enough, but not the answer I was looking for." He pointed across the room to an archery target, well worn. "As this is your first session, I will allow concession. This dagger was crafted in ancient Sumeria. It is very old, such that its long burial should have dulled its edge and made it brittle, but its magic sustains it. It has a gift that can be accessed when thrown at an enemy," he gestured, "or other suitable target, but to use this gift, you must know not just a word, but a mindset, a focus, that will allow you—"

Kate threw the dagger at the target, said, "Do it." In flight, the dagger became three, striking the target in two different places, the third going wide and hitting the wall.

"That... wasn't the command word." He walked over and plucked one of the knives from the target. The other two vanished as he clutched it. He gave the hole in the wall a deep frown, then walked back to her.

"I'm not really trained with fighting stuff," Kate said.

"But you made the knife give up its magic without the command word or the focus," he noted, matter-of-factly. "Fascinating." He walked over to his desk, rather sparse except for a coffee mug, a Page-a-Day calendar, stapler and a few pens. He opened a drawer and produced a small clay bowl, a string of beads, and a piece of jade crafted into a fat little goblin thing. "Something I have placed on this desk is magic. Can you tell me which one?"

Kate scanned the desk intently, then said, "Magic, please." She glanced at the three old things, bit her lip, then her eyes lit up. "Coffee cup!" She picked it up. "It heated up, and I have got to get one of these."

The man quirked an eyebrow. "Very interesting. Mind you, I want you to be able to reach out and feel the magic without *activating* it. Suppose the device had been enchanted to release poisonous gas or summon swarms of locusts?"

Kate pursed her lips. "Hmm. Yeah, that would suck."

"I am Professor Abate," he introduced himself. "I wouldn't normally take a student as late as junior year, but Nora recommended you, and after your battle last spring—"

"Wait, her?" Kate asked, looking at the other girl. "Do I know you?"

"No, but I know Daimon, and he speaks really highly of you."

"Daimon speaks highly of people?"

"Well, of you. I'm his friend Nora."

"Daimon has friends?" She pointed at her dramatically. "Nora Creighton! You're the mayor's daughter! I didn't know you went here."

"To be fair, my Dad hasn't been mayor in ten years."

“Still!” She raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you too young to be a college junior? Madison told me you were—“

“I graduated high school at 16.”

“Wow,” Kate said. “So you’re some kind of genius or something—“

“Yes,” Abate interrupted, “we can share backstories later, but for now, let us return to work, eh?”

Mandy quickly swallowed the last of her coffee as Cassie was grabbing her bag and heading for the door. “Ready?”

“Crap, no,” Mandy said, shifting direction and heading for her room. “I’m doing some in-front-of-camera stuff today. I need to change clothes.” She quickly opened her closet, peeling off her sweatshirt and she glanced through the choices. “Damn, damn, damn, why do I always shop casual?” She grabbed a nice blouse and her only suit jacket, then reached down for the shoes. “The hell?”

She picked up a shard of aqua colored ceramic from a pile in the corner of her closet. Broken pieces of... “Eggshell..?” She looked it over, frowning. “But the egg would have to be two feet...” Her jaw dropped, and the piece of shell fell to the floor and shattered.

“I have never seen anything like this before,” Abate said, as Kate packed up her bag and started out to her next class. “Mr. Hastings is very skilled at coaxing artifacts to expose their magic, but he works ritual to do so. It is... as if the objects want to please you.”

Kate shrugged. “I’m cool like that.” She paused at the door and looked back at the professor. “So, next time there’ll be students here besides me and Nora?”

“Yes, the others will be here Wednesday.”

Kate gave a thumbs up and walked down the hall with Nora. A few people glanced, unsure where they came from, but presumably the door to the classroom was enchanted so no one actually saw them go in or out. “He seems pretty cool,” Kate noted.

“He is,” Nora said. “Demanding, though. You’ll need to work hard, coming into class as a junior.”

Kate let out a deep breath. “So, you have a noon class?”

Nora shook her head. “I’m done by noon.”

“Done?” Kate bit her lip. “Wow. I scanned the schedule hard to avoid classes before 10.” She plugged the building for her next class into her phone’s GPS. “Anyway, I’m grabbing lunch with my sister and some friends. Meet me at the arch in the park?”

“Sure. Where are we going?”

“I dunno. Details. We’ll figure it out.”

Mandy stood outside her sister’s closet for a few moments, contemplating her options. If she was wrong, this was going to suck. But... but she couldn’t be wrong. She’d had three hours of weird happenings since she found the thing this morning to offer as evidence. She grabbed the handle, thought about the apartment in Indianapolis, and opened the door, stepping through into a bedroom in another city. Empty.

She walked out into the hallway, toward the living room. “Anyone home?”

“Mandy?” a clipped British voice came. A slim redhead in a red Indy t-shirt stood up, setting her textbook on the coffee table. “Kate’s not here.”

“No, I came to see Madison, but—you have super strength, right?”

“A bit, yeah.”

Mandy bit the tip of her fingernail, very nervous. “Throw a couple of punches.”

“Punches?”

“At me.”

“What, seriously?”

“Don’t try to hurt me, but like you were sparring with Mads.”

Anissa raised an eyebrow. “If I was sparring with Madison, I’d be going full out.”

“Okay, I don’t know. Just aim for like an inch in front of my face.”

Anissa’s face didn’t seem sure, but she threw a punch. Mandy deftly grabbed her wrist, pushed it away. “Again, faster,” Mandy said. Anissa threw a quicker punch, and again Mandy caught it. “Faster.” She repeated it over and over, Anissa throwing punches that were eventually coming too swiftly for most eyes to register, and Mandy deflected them all. On the last one, she stopped and took the punch full to the face, rolling her head just enough to keep it attached.

“Oh, damn!” Anissa swore.

“It’s okay,” Mandy said, clutching her eye. “I wanted to see if I could take it.”

“Damn risky. But—it’s that thing the doctor did to you last year?”

Mandy nodded. “I thought I had a nightmare last night, but it looks like it was real. Some sort of... of fluid bladder on legs injected me with this... stuff. All morning, I’ve having weird experiences. Too much force opening the door, running to class, like, way too fast. So confused, I actually stepped in front of a taxi. I left a dent, but I only had a limp for maybe three minutes. It was gone by the time I got to class.”

“Weird.”

“Tell me about it. It seems like I’ve got the full regiment of vampire slayer powers. I think. From what Kate has mentioned, or I’ve seen Madison do.” She reached in her backpack and pulled out a blue-green shard, the largest fragment of the eggshell she found in her closet. “Plus I found this in my room.” Anissa took it and looked it over. “I think the thing hatched from it.”

Anissa glanced it over, then looked back down the hall. “Trish!” A second later, a caramel-skinned girl in tie-dyed shirt, jean shorts and flip-flops emerged from the last door on the right. “Get your kit and look this over.”

Moments later, beakers, Bunsen burners, test tubes and eye of newt were broken out and Trish was at the dining table, holding the shell delicately with tweezers. “There’s some latent magic there, but mostly to facilitate some very dodgy science. It’s organic, but artificial at the same time. This is really more up Roxy’s alley.”

“Dr. Barnes placed it. It had to be one of his tests. Roxy said he’s probably intended me to be a permanent test subject, so he broke in and--” Mandy took a deep breath. “Okay, creepy. That means he’s been in my apartment. Or had somebody in there.”

“Scott can place some wards,” Trish said. “We probably should have done that months ago.”

“Yeah.” She nodded, then clapped her hands together. “Well, call Scott. If he’s free, Kate, Cassie and I are doing lunch in a few. You guys want to come?”

"I'm done with classes for today," Anissa said.

"Lab, but not until 3," Trish replied.

"Excellent."

"Okay," Trish added, "but we should probably call Roxy now and—"

Mandy shook her head. "I really don't want Roxy poking around at me right now. Anyway, we know my body processes magic alterations out, right? I'll be back to normal this time tomorrow."

"We *think* we know that—"

"Look," Mandy interrupted, "I know you guys want to help, and I like you as people, but I'd really prefer you do the magic stuff with Kate and let me at least pretend at normalcy."

"But you're still going to take the *magic door* back to New York."

Mandy nodded. "And thereafter hang out with my *perfectly normal* roommate and her... vampire whatever she is."

Cassie wriggled a bit as Denorah drank deep, fangs scratching the skin of her neck as she lapped up the blood that oozed from the tiny pinpricks. The human woman moaned, closed her eyes, her own teeth in danger of breaking the skin of her lip. Denorah slid a hand up her side, across her shoulder, down onto her breast.

"Hey!" Cassie sat up, slapping her hand away. "We said this stays non-sexual!"

Denorah licked the blood off her lip, baring fang. She was an attractive enough woman, with silky red hair and piercing amber eyes, but her face had a hardness to it. Especially now, interrupted in the middle of feeding. "Right. So how come you always get what you want, but I get nothing?"

"Nothing!? You get fed, don't you? This is for you, Dens."

"This is nothing *like* for me." She stood, a hint of flame dancing across her pupils. "Look, I like you, Cass. You're pretty much the bee's knees in my book. But, I've had a summer of eating you out 'round the neck and nothing below the belt. If all I wanted is a bite junkie, there's whole clubs full of those people." Little flickers of fire hopped around her hair, and she headed for the door. "You want to take this thing somewhere, give me a call." She left, slamming the door behind her.

"There's clubs?"

She sat up, dabbing the bites with a wet nap and bandaging it. She'd gotten to where she could do it without looking. She had just turned the television on when the door opened again.

"Denorah looks pissed," Kate said, escorting another girl with her. "Nora, this is my sister's roommate, Cassie. Cass, this is classmate and new bestie Nora Creighton."

"Hey." Cassie shifted around to shake Nora's hand. "Sorry about Denorah. I try to do her a favor—"

"Yeah," Kate said, deftly changing the subject. Nobody was really comfortable with Cassie and Denorah's... situation, but Kate especially had become adept at not dealing with it. "Mandy home?"

"I think she went to your place." She flicked off the TV. "It's about lunch time, anyway, isn't it?"

"Yeah. You mind eating in Indy? Trish wants to hit this place called Rock Bottom. It's got a brewery right there in—"

"Done!" Cassie said, grabbing Kate's arm and leading the way to her room.

The three of them emerged in the Indianapolis apartment, and quickly made their way to the living room, where Madison, Mandy, Anissa, and Trish awaited. Kate made quick introductions for Nora, adding, "My boyfriend Scott's going to meet us there."

"Hey," a lanky boy with neck length dusty hair and a smattering of freckles emerged from the closet. "Mind if I tag along?"

"And this is Justin, my best friend from home," Kate added, unshaken by his sudden appearance. "Where's the girlfriend?"

"Amelia's neck deep in family business. She found the last of the bank accounts, but she also found some outstanding debts attached to some unsavory clients that she needs to sort out." He rubbed his neck. "After that thing with *al Queda* in June, I'd prefer to stay away from that mess."

"He's the guy dating the former weredeer slaver, I guess?" Nora asked.

"Daimon talks about *Justin*, too?" Kate raised an eyebrow. "Weird."

It was a pretty easy guess as to who had afternoon classes, as it was in direct correlation with who *didn't* have beers. Cassie had gotten some kind of mad sampler, that had six beers on it, adding up to about three drinks altogether.

"...but her Dad is totally freaking out," Justin said. "I mean, I'm in a relationship, and Stephenie's a *kid*, c'mon! I'm not going to mess with her."

"So *why* did Stephenie move in with you?" Trish asked.

"Fort Mill, South Carolina has about as much need for multiple Huntresses as... you know, some other place with no monsters. But with Sarah and Jillian and Liu all dead, and Madison living *here*, Gastonia's kind of got a reputation as being open season right now." He shrugged. "David moved to Gastonia, too, so we've got that going for us."

"Mm, speaking of," Cassie said, not speaking of at all, "the beers are making a break for it." She headed for the bathroom.

"Coming with," Mandy said, following.

Cassie shuffled into a stall and groaned. "Man, good beer. Oh, hey! You think we can have lunch in Boston tomorrow, or... who has good beer? Germany! Can we go to Germany?"

"Germany?"

"Kate's magic closet."

"I'm pretty sure Kate has to know the actual location of a door to open to it. She's never been to Germany."

"Sucks. We should have German beer." She continued her business while Kate washed her hands. "Have you ever heard of vampire clubs? Where people get bit by vampires and—"

"If there is such a thing, there is no way in *hell* we are going to one."

"Yeah... I just wondered if you ever heard of it. I mean, I wouldn't... what the hell is this?"

"What's what?" She saw Cassie drop to her knees in front of the toilet, blocked by the door to the stall. Mandy closed her eyes and sighed. Barely afternoon and her roommate had already drunk herself sick. She girded herself for the retching, but was instead met by more questions.

"This big thing behind the toilet. Looks like a football or... Shit, I think this is an egg. What the..."

"Get out of there!" Mandy yelled. Cassie hopped up quickly, knocking the back of her head against the stall door. Mandy grabbed the door and ripped it from its hinges, pulling her friend away

from the big, aqua-colored egg that was even now hatching. She slid into the stall, shuffling against the wall until she had an angle to get her foot between toilet and wall and stomped hard. Blue-green goo splashed up her sneaker and pants leg. “Ugh,” she muttered, trying to mop it up with toilet paper and failing utterly. “Cassie, can you get Trish in here?”

Soon enough, the tan-skinned girl in the hemp shirt and jeans was kneeling beside the puddle of ichor, with a handful of glass slides and test tubes. “Ugh. Well, at least it’s a good sample. We’ll need to gather as much as we can—”

“No,” Mandy interrupted. “You will. I’m... going to take a shower.”

“Yeah, but—”

“The magic is your job. I’ve got another class to get ready for.” She returned to the restaurant, slapped her share of the bill on the table, and she and Cassie headed out with barely a good-bye to the rest of the group. Kate got up and hurried after.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“Your weirdness is invading my life, and I really not happy about it.”

Kate stopped walking. “Oh. Okay—”

Mandy managed another three steps before she stopped and turned. “Look, that’s not what—I’m still kind of shaken up about that nightmare last night, and the idea that somebody was in our apartment and—and now there’s more of those egg things showing up here... Which is way too much to be coincidence, but—”

Cassie, still buzzed but concentrating deftly, interrupted. “But how would anybody know you’d be here?”

“I don’t... I don’t know, but,” she took a deep breath. “Anyway, Kate, I didn’t mean anything directed at you, it’s just... I’m not ready to deal with the stuff you deal with. I’m not sure how *you* manage, honestly.”

“Mostly blind acceptance. It happens, I can’t stop it. So I just go with—”

“You’re taking classes in it!” Mandy threw her head back and continued toward the girls’ apartment. “And who knows what this blue crap on my leg is going to do to me?”

Kate walked alongside, silent for a while, taking it in. Mandy pitched right in with the battle with Fiona von Blitzen and her minions last spring, and the summer had been pretty quiet, short of a couple of rather inept cult of Mammon worshipers, the Hashishans that tried to kill Justin, and that 14-year-old lich who tried to kill Steve Jackson at GenCon, and none of that involved Mandy. Kate simply hadn’t considered how her sister really felt about this new world she was thrust into.

Thankfully Cassie was kind enough to break the tension by pointing at the trio handing out pamphlets outside Kate’s building. “Hey, street preachers!”

“Watchtower or Chick tracts?” Kate asked. “I’m betting it’s Chick tracts.”

The two men and one woman were all wearing white shirt with ties and neatly pressed slacks. The handsome blonde man that seemed to be in charge was very passionately proselytizing, and his smile was contagious as he did so. “Or Mormon tracts... what do Mormons pass out?”

“I think it’s Tee-Aitchers,” Cassie said.

“A wha?”

“Church of the Twin Helix,” Mandy said. “Some stupid parody religion that sprung up on campus last year. It started as a response to some religious guys calling science another religion and belief in

evolution being faith-based. These guys started doing kind of over-the-top street preaching about DNA being God and—it's really just gotten ridiculous now. Some of these guys almost seem to believe it."

"It started at NYU?"

"Yeah, I think." She shrugged. "These memes get around."

The blond man stepped in front of them, handing a flyer to Mandy. "Have you let the fullness of Life into your life?"

"No thanks," Mandy said, stepping around him. He stepped to the side to block her.

"You know, the desire for faith is actually *in* the genes. Gene VMAT2, to be specific. The Holy Gene, in whose name we do our works. Blessed be the genes for giving us the will to honor them."

"Yeah, that's weird," Kate said.

Blond guy ignored her. "We would love to welcome you into our Helix," he replied, and Mandy used just a touch of her temporary speed to sidestep and duck around him, "Amanda Hunter." She stopped in her tracks.

"How did you know my name?"

The THer grinned, lightning crackling along his body. "You're the Bringer. You were chosen by the Prophet to bring about the wisdom the Helix has to unleash."

Her eyes widened, hands clenching and releasing in nervous anxiety, and she spun around. "Fuck you."

"Come back to the fold," he said, and beside him, his allies started to change. The other man's shoulders broadened, the shirt ripping as insectoid wings burst forth, his eyes bulging out and becoming multifaceted. The woman began glistening, as if she were suddenly overcome with perspiration, liquid dripping from her in rivulets, burning her clothing. Kate and Cassie stepped back.

"I've never been in your fold to come—Okay, that just sounds gross." She threw a punch at him, an awkward, unpracticed punch that was still enough to shatter a brick. It connected with a field of electricity millimeters from his body, throwing both of them back as St. Elmo's fire leapt from their bodies. The man hit a Dumpster, barely stunned when he should have been crippled.

"Run!" Kate told Cassie.

"Mandy needs—"

"Mandy is a lot more capable of dealing with this than you are."

Kate raised a fist, activating Cool-Wrist-Shield-Thingy 2.0. The metal band on her wrist, not much bigger than an ID bracelet, glowed brightly, surrounding her body in a tight yellow aura. Just as protective and with greater mobility than her old and destroyed Cool-Wrist-Shield-Thingy 1.0. She was as good as invulnerable with the shield activated. Too bad she couldn't actually fight to back it up.

She charged at Acid Girl, slamming her into the alley between apartment building and hotel, hoping the others would follow. Corrosive splashed off the woman, sizzling the grime on pavement and walls. She pushed her caustic opponent against the wall, pinning her there.

Kate noted that Cassie didn't run. And why would she? She was a Marine. A drunk Marine. She wasn't going to run from a fight. Even a really stupid one.

The blond guy was still dazed, but he was already working his way to a sitting position. His body was still electrically charged, but his eyes were slightly glassy. Meanwhile, the man with the wings was flying toward Mandy, leading with hands that were topped with long, barbed stingers.

Mandy got to her feet and grabbed the Insect Guy, hurling him back across the street and slamming him against the wall with an unsettling crunch. He fell to the ground, his body limp, and she dashed after Blond Guy.

Kate noticed the panic in Acid Girl's eyes and how her corrosive sweat seemed to drip even more intensely, and realized that, powers aside, these people had no idea how to fight any more than Kate or Mandy did. Genetically altered religious fanatics forced into battle they weren't trained for. She shoved the now-almost-naked woman backwards, so she toppled onto the electric guy. He charged up, evaporating most of the corrosive before it burned him, but causing her to crackle with his voltage, and blowing her unconscious form across the alley and into the wall.

The blond man sat up, looking concernedly at the three women standing over him. Funny, since of all Kate's social group—except probably Justin—these were the *least* effective combatants among them. "I'm Brad, by the way," he said, as if the conversation hadn't been interrupted by violence.

"Get the fuck out of here, Brad," Mandy said. "And don't come near me again."

Brad stood, brushing himself off. He casually checked his friend, helping the dazed Acid Girl to her feet, and picking up Insect Boy, who seemed, at least, to be breathing. "The Helix will provide," he told Acid Girl. "The Helix will make us stronger." As they left the alley, no longer emitting acid or electricity, Brad looked back. "We shall see you again, Bringer."

Mandy stood in the alley for several long minutes, taking very deep breaths and staring at the alley walls. Kate and Cassie shifted, unsure what to say or do.

"THIS SUCKS!" Mandy screamed, finally, and punched the Dumpster, buckling the sheet metal sides.

"Welcome to the new normal," Kate said.

"The new normal sucks."

"Pfft. Religious idiots with super-powers. Piece of cake. Be glad you aren't the Deerslayer."

"Man," Madison said, taking a long sip of Dr. Pepper as they powered through Doctor Whos. "I wish I could fight Electricity Boy."

"You're welcome to him," Mandy said. "So what's going on in this show again?"

"He's a Time Lord and he travels time and space fighting evil," Justin explained. "It's like Madison, but charismatic."

"He's got a hot girlfriend," Madison noted.

"She's not his girlfriend; the Doctor doesn't date his female companions."

"Oh. So he's actually more like you, then." Justin shot her a look, and she grinned back at him.

Scott popped out of Kate's room, holding a small sack of magic components. "Okay, I've got the New York apartment all warded up. We shouldn't have a repeat of last night."

Mandy bit her lip. "Okay. The doctor who saved my life turned me into the Messiah for some weird church of evil genetic experiments. Kate is now officially the normal sister."

"Screw that," Kate replied.

"Will you please shut up," Justin said. "Cybermen! There are Cybermen on the TV."

Mandy grunted. "Well, there *are* Cybermen," Kate agreed. "You know. Me and Justin, Doctor Who marathon. Grape soda. Just like old times. Here's your normal, sis. Bask in the normal."

Her sister chuckled. "Okay. Basking in the normal." She rolled her eyes as Justin grabbed Kate and began applying noogies, Madison assaulted him with popcorn and Trish casually turned the TV up to drown out the screams and laughter. "Basking in the normal."