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The blade sang by Jax's ear and grazed the padding on his shoulder. Another quarter inch and it would have taken his head off. He gritted his teeth and parried the next blow, then lashed out with his own weapon, going for a stab at the chest. But his opponent was too quick for him. He danced away, and came back strong.

The next thing Jax knew, the sword was slicing straight for his throat, and he felt the end was near. At the last second, he flailed blindly with his own weapon. There was a clash of metal on metal, and somehow the thrust was swept aside. But the battle was not going well. That was plain. Sensing the tide turning, his adversary pressed his advantage, growing more aggressive with every move. Jax fought back with all his skill but still found himself backing up, giving ground, his breath heaving in his chest, sweat stinging his eyes.

When his back bumped up against the wall, there was nowhere else to retreat.

The game was up.

"Okay, okay!" he gasped. "I give!"

But the enemy was unwilling to leave it at that. One

final thrust, and Jax felt the end of the foil pressing against his stomach. Angrily, he flipped up his fencing mask and barked, “Really, man? Back off!”

Too late, he saw the fleeting vision of himself standing there in full fencing gear, mask raised. It was like a picture-in-picture image from a TV, and Jax knew better than anyone what it signified. No sword could match the power of Jackson Opus’s remarkable eyes. By flipping up his mask and glaring at Gary Northrop, he had accidentally hypnotized the boy.

Just a few months before, Jax would have had no idea what he was seeing. It had taken Dr. Elias Mako and his Sentia Institute to explain it to him. A mesmeric link had formed between Jax and Gary. In a way, part of Jax was inside his opponent’s head, peering at himself through Gary’s eyes.

Still masked and in full gear, Gary began to reverse across the gym, heading for the exit, heels first.

“What are you doing?” Jax asked in bewilderment as his opponent passed between other fencers, almost getting skewered a couple of times. He kept on going, right through the half-court basketball game on the other side of the gym.

Then Jax remembered. His exact words had been *Back off*. To a subject under hypnotic control, that was nothing less than a specific instruction. Gary was backing off.

“It’s okay, man, I didn’t mean it!” But by this time, the subject was lost in the shouts of the game and the percussion of the basketball on the hardwood floor. He retreated,

straight out the door of the gym, a bounce pass twanging his foil as he shuffled by.

Jax started after him, pulling down his mask as he ran. No sense looking at the guy again. All subjects were different, but it was obvious that Gary was easily “bent.” Much of the science of hypnotism was unknown, even by Dr. Mako, who was the world’s foremost authority on the subject. How long would Gary keep going? Who knew? He wasn’t going to backpedal around the world, but the effect might not wear off until he found himself out in traffic somewhere.

Anything that happened to the guy would be 100 percent Jax’s fault.

He caught up with Gary, who was half-buried in the flower bed on the front lawn of Haywood Middle School. He’d fallen over a plaster garden gnome and was thrashing around, still trying to back up. His white fencing uniform was caked with damp black soil.

Jax rushed over and helped him to his feet. It was only recently that he’d discovered he was a mind-bender. He was just learning to control the effects of his powers.

“It’s okay, Gary,” he said. “You can stop now.”

But Gary was deep in his trance, kicking up dirt as he scrambled to withdraw.

With a sigh, Jax flipped his mask up again, and also Gary’s, to make sure there was eye contact. Jax had the old Opus family trait of eyes that changed color, ranging from pale green to deep purple. At that moment, he was passing from charcoal gray into royal blue. Obviously, he wasn’t

going to get away with a shortcut here. In order to release Gary from the last command, he would have to be re-hypnotized, this time by the book.

“You will stop backing off,” he said when the PIP image reappeared. Gary’s struggles ceased abruptly. “When I count to three, you’ll wake up in a happy and relaxed mood. You’ll remember nothing about this — especially the part with me in it. Oh, yeah — and there’s a worm on your shoulder. Go get yourself cleaned up. One, two, three.”

Gary popped up and disappeared inside the school, leaving a trail of black earth and mashed chrysanthemums behind.

Jax exhaled in relief. The last thing he needed was for the Haywood staff to think that Jackson Opus was the cause of anything peculiar. That was the whole reason he’d dragged his parents to this Connecticut town, seventy-seven miles away from everything they knew and cared about in New York City. It was also why he was no longer Jackson Opus. Here in Haywood, he went by the name Jack Magnus. It was all part of an elaborate story — one that had turned his life and the lives of his family upside down. This was the hypnotist’s version of the Witness Protection Program. They were hiding out here — hiding from the evil intentions of Dr. Elias Mako.

Jax had started out as the Sentia Institute’s brightest star — but all that had turned sour when he’d refused to go along with Mako’s plan to use mass hypnotism to rig a presidential election. The director didn’t like to be told no.

In fact, he'd tried to murder Jax's parents and had very nearly succeeded in killing Jax as well.

A mesmeric homicide attempt left no evidence, so there was no way to go to the police. A hypnotist was always armed with an invisible weapon. You could be defeated before you guessed that you were in a fight. Police could provide zero protection from such a threat. They probably couldn't be persuaded that the danger even existed.

The Opuses' only solution had been to vanish.

In the gym, Coach Riley regarded the returning Jax disapprovingly. "Gotta work harder, Magnus. Northrop was all over you. Your stamina has to improve if you want to make this team."

"I will, Coach." Jax promised. He had very little interest in fencing. He'd only chosen the sport because he'd have to wear the mask. Anything to keep his treacherous multicolored eyes from doing any damage.

And I couldn't even get that right, he told himself bitterly.

He cast an envious glance at the basketball game. *That* was his sport, and he was pretty good at it, too. But he'd played back in New York. Dr. Mako would know that. And while no one could monitor every seventh-grade basketball game in the country, it never paid to underestimate Dr. Mako.

The locker room was a scene of raucous towel-snapping and laughter as the team made fun of the hapless Gary, who was still shaking soil out of his hair.

“I don’t know how it happened,” he said for the umpteenth time. He turned his attention to Jax. “You were there, Jack! How did I end up in the mud?”

Jax shrugged. “Beats me. You just went. I figured you needed some air or something.”

Gary clung to this theory like a drowning man. “I needed some air, so chill out!”

That was one of the things Jax had learned when Dr. Mako had been his mentor, not his mortal enemy: After a hypnotic experience, most subjects filled in the blanks in their memories naturally enough. It was a lot easier than wrapping their minds around the idea that something truly paranormal had taken place.

As soon as Jax’s fencing mask came off, a pair of dark sunglasses went on. He wore these all day, even in class. It was a sore point with the Haywood faculty, who suspected that he was either arrogant or asleep behind those shades. The real reason, of course, was to keep his ever-changing eyes and their power away from innocent bystanders. His homeroom teacher, Mr. Isaacs, called him the movie star, and it was definitely not a compliment. If his fellow students thought he was a conceited jerk, well, then so be it. It was better than the whole school backing up into a mud bog, like Gary. Jax was here to hide, not to be elected Mr. Popularity. And, anyway, no one in this one-horse town could ever be a best friend like Tommy Cicerelli, whom he’d left behind in New York. He’d had to cut all ties with the guy, for safety’s sake, and Tommy’s own protection.

Of all the miserable things he’d had to do because of Elias Mako, that one was still the toughest.