

Chapter One

Henry Powell strolled into his science classroom, ready for the second school day of the year. He'd already survived his tumultuous first day of classes at Fortuna High School, a charter school in suburban Maryland that accepted monstrous students. Over a quarter of the students and even some faculty members came from the monstrous races.

Five years of teaching at other schools hadn't prepared him for the chaos. Only three years ago, a physics experiment had revealed the fractal nature of reality. Countless cryptids and beings from myth lived in the dimensional folds, even forming societies of their own. Now revealed, they sought to integrate into modern human society. Humans were still struggling to adjust.

And that included Henry Powell.

He gazed at the students chattering with each other. Of the twenty-six students in his homeroom class, seven came from the monstrous races.

He was still learning everyone's names, but had already familiarized himself with the seven monstrous teens in his homeroom. Eathadin, a diminutive brownie, sat in the front row in a booster seat, his wizened features focused on studying one of his textbooks. In contrast, the sasquatch named Nallun lounged in his desk in the back row and chatted with two human boys. Vossler, a quiet boy who resembled a traditional devil, sat in the second row. Behind him, Chloe and Jada, two normal human girls, chatted with Dedesy, a teenaged medusa; Chloe and Jada seemed unfazed by the danger of Dedesy's petrifying gaze, and the three girls giggled as they shared glimpses of each other's cell phones.

Younger people can adapt to change so easily, he reminded himself.

While the students listened to Principal Melissa Doyle's morning announcements, Henry peeled the post-it notes covering part of the periodic table poster on his wall. Someone—probably Nolitha the tokoloshe girl—had added several nonsensical elements at the bottom of the table. Though scientists were re-examining the laws of physics, Henry doubted elements named Stupidium and Fartium existed, even in the fractal folds.

"Do any of you have questions about the school?" Henry asked once the announcements finished.

Kynehild the black annis raised her hand, and Henry shuddered when he noticed her iron claws. "I got lost trying to find the art classroom," she admitted. When another student chuckled, she snapped at him, "I've never been to a human school before, you lubberwort!"

"I'm still learning my way around here, too, Kynehild," Henry admitted. "This is my first year teaching here. Don't be afraid to ask a teacher for directions. No one will blame you for not knowing your way around during the first week."

Mollified, the annis gathered her books and checked her supplies for the day.

[MAYBE A CAMEO HERE]

The bell sounded, announcing the end of homeroom, and the students filed out, their nervous faces mirroring Henry's own anxiety.

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The next day started easily enough, but by the time his third-period break arrived, Henry had already endured several pranks, accidentally offended a mermaid student, and had to clean up a chemistry experiment that had turned into a disaster.

Rather than remain in his classroom, he retreated to the teachers' lounge. After the chemistry debacle, he needed a break from student antics. He purchased a soda from the vending machine and tried to relax in a comfortable chair. But browsing the news on his phone only reminded him of his own challenges.

A low voice sounded behind him. "You look troubled, Henry."

He glanced over his shoulder to see Momu Tuntagar, the imposing minotaur gym coach, and his stomach quivered. Coach Tuntagar stood almost seven feet tall and had the musculature of a bodybuilder. The beastman looked like he could break Henry in half without a thought.

"Uh, hi, Momu," Henry squeaked.

Coach Tuntagar took a seat across from Henry and took several deep gulps from a quart bottle of apple juice. "Is everything okay?" he asked after draining the bottle.

"I suppose it is now. But my last class turned into something of a mess."

Momu tilted his head. "Anything I should worry about?"

"No. I was trying to demonstrate the vinegar-and-baking-soda volcano experiment, but

Ishiko accidentally froze the vinegar and shattered the beaker. I spent the rest of the class showing proper cleanup techniques.”

“Ishiko... She’s the yuki-onna, right?”

Henry nodded. “She felt horrible about it and offered to help clean up, but I couldn’t risk her freezing the rest of the chemicals.”

“Teens with powers frequently struggle to control them,” the minotaur rumbled.

Henry leaned back in his chair and sipped his soda. “We humans know so little about all the different races. Some elements match our myths, like Ishiko’s cold powers, but we don’t know how they work. And some stories contradict each other or make no sense.”

Coach Tuntagar shrugged, causing his chair to groan. “Myths are myths, after all. We’re all learning to live together.”

“So what is your homeland like?” Henry asked. He recalled a few snippets of mythology. “Is it like a maze?”

“Maze? Are you trying to make a joke?” The coach tensed, and an irritated expression flashed across his bovine features.

Henry wondered how many of his bones the powerful minotaur would break. “No! I’m sorry! I was just remembering the myths we have of the minotaur.”

Coach Tuntagar snorted, but rather than strike with a powerful fist, forced himself to calm down. “Myths are myths. We tell the story differently. Asterios, the minotaur from your myths, had been drinking heavily after a battle. He stumbled through a fractal rift into the human world and couldn’t find the way back.”

“Oh.” Henry stared at the coach’s cloven hooves. “I guess many stories from mythology

originate from similar events.”

The minotaur nodded. “Since you asked, I grew up on a pastoral farm. From the pictures I’ve seen, it resembles places in the American Midwest. I found it boring, so I immigrated to the human world.”

“You’ve adapted well. You’ve even learned to drive and—”

The school bell rang, announcing the end of the period. Momu grabbed his satchel and rose to his feet. “Chat later. Time to teach again.”

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By Thursday morning, Henry could remember the names of every student in his homeroom class and almost everyone in his classes throughout the day. He spotted the whoopee cushion in his chair and glanced at Nolitha. The small, hairy tokoloshe grinned, and her eyes twinkled with mischief even when Henry placed the cushion on her desk without saying a word. Henry’s casual handling of the prankster elicited chuckles throughout the classroom.

He took attendance, then let the students have a few minutes to socialize before the school day. Gwen and Sophia, two human girls, were wearing their junior-varsity cheerleader outfits, attracting the attention of several boys. Eathadin hopped onto Noah’s desk and helped the human boy with math homework. A few students asked questions about class schedules or concepts in chemistry, so he offered advice and guidance.

Dedesy and Chloe both flirted with Vossler; the devil-boy’s casual indifference fueled the girls’ interest rather than quashing it. But Henry noticed that the casual friendship between the two girls was transforming into a romantic rivalry.

He shook his head and returned his focus to his daily planner. *No sense in getting*

involved in teenage dramas.

Then, a shadow fell across his desk. Henry glanced up at Nallun, the sasquatch. “Do you want something, Nallun?”

“Uh, Mister Powell? I need your help. The coaches won’t let me join the football team.”

“I don’t know what I can do,” Henry replied. “That’s their call. Did they tell you why? I know you have to keep a certain GPA, but it’s too early in the school year for that to be a problem.”

Nallun shook his shaggy head, scattering a sprinkle of fur across the desk. “He said something about a team weight limit.”

“Oh, right. I overheard Coach Tuntagar arguing against that rule,” Henry recalled. “The school system enacted it to prevent large cryptids from dominating sports, particularly football.”

The sasquatch huffed. “But it’s not fair. Just because sasquatches are bigger than humans —”

Henry raised a hand. “I know, but life isn’t fair, Nallun. Imagine how much damage you’d cause a human if you tackled them.”

Nallun’s shoulders slumped, and he muttered, “I understand, Mister Powell.”

“Maybe you could try basketball,” Henry suggested. “Your height will still serve you well, and signups will start in a few weeks. Sign up early.”

The teen sasquatch brightened. “I’ll try that! Thanks, Mister Powell.”

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Friday morning, neither Dedesy nor Chloe attended homeroom. Ava and Sophia whispered about last night’s junior-varsity football game, but the atmosphere seemed subdued.

After taking attendance, Henry asked, “Does anyone know about Chloe or Dedesy? Are they sick?”

An uncomfortable silence filled the room, and several students averted their gaze. He focused on Jada, their mutual friend; when she noticed his scrutiny, she stifled a snuffle.

“Jada? Did something happen?” Henry asked.

She nodded but said nothing.

“Do you want to talk to me privately?”

She nodded again.

“Class, try to behave yourselves for a few minutes.” Then he stepped toward the door and motioned for Jada to follow him.

Once in the school hallway, he faced the teen girl again. “So where are Chloe and Dedesy, Jada?”

Rather than saying anything, she shuffled toward the nearest girls’ bathroom and opened the door. Dedesy was sitting on the floor, crying. Chloe stood across from her in an unmoving pose, an angry expression on her stone face.

“Dedesy?” Henry called from the doorway. “It’s Mister Powell. What happened?”

“She’s my best friend. I didn’t mean to,” Dedesy blubbered. She stood, fumbling to grasp the sink as she rose. She was squeezing her eyes shut, but tears streamed down her face.

Henry scanned the bathroom for other occupants, then stepped inside. He crouched beside her but avoided looking at her face, worried that she might petrify him, too. He lowered his voice, trying to project a calm confidence. “Take a deep breath, Dedesy. Try to calm down and tell me what happened.”

“We had a fight, and my gaze activated,” Dedesy admitted. “I didn’t mean to petrify her! Honest!”

“Is the petrification permanent?”

She shook her head, still keeping her eyes closed. “No, as long as she doesn’t break. It should wear off in a few hours.”

Henry stood and strode toward Jada, who was still standing in the doorway. “Jada, go to the office and tell them what happened. Let them know I’ll bring Dedesy in a few minutes. And ask them to send Coach Tuntagar to this bathroom as soon as possible, and someone else to monitor my classroom.”

Jada hurried away, leaving Henry with the saddened medusa. He sighed and muttered, “I still have to report this to the office, and we’ll need to notify Chloe’s parents.”

Hearing him, Dedesy burst into a fresh round of crying, but Henry stepped into the bathroom again and examined Chloe. Fortunately, she hadn’t tipped, but he worried about someone knocking her over.

The bell sounded, and students filed out of classrooms, filling the hall. Henry guided the distraught medusa back into the girls’ bathroom, then stood in the doorway to prevent anyone else from entering until the hall cleared.

Once Coach Tuntagar arrived, he explained the situation to the minotaur. Then he escorted Dedesy to the office, dreading the upcoming discussion.

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“So she accidentally petrified Chloe Preston?” Principal Melissa Doyle asked Henry, though she was staring at Dedesy.

“Yes, ma’am,” Henry replied. “Apparently they had an argument, and her petrification gaze activated. I don’t think it was intentional, and Dedesy claims it will wear off in a few hours.”

“As long as she doesn’t break,” Dedesy added in a near-whisper.

“And what’s Chloe’s status?” Principal Doyle asked.

“Coach Tuntagar carried her to a storage closet and locked her inside it. She should be safe there, but he’s grabbing some padding from the gym, just in case.”

Principal Doyle nodded. “Thank you, Henry. You can return to your classroom now. I need to notify the parents.”

Henry stepped out of the principal’s office and closed the door behind him. Rather than hurry back to his classroom, he plopped in an office chair and rubbed his brow. “What a nightmare,” he grumbled.

The front door of the office opened, and Ligeia strolled in. “Sorry I’m late,” the siren announced to the office receptionist with absolutely no concern in her lyrical voice. As she checked in, Henry couldn’t help but admire the music teacher’s shapely figure. She wore an elegant dress, far too fancy for normal teachers, which barely revealed the aquatic fins lining her legs. Small feathers mixed in with the hair on her head and traced down her arms, enhancing her exotic beauty.

Then Ligeia noticed him. “What are you doing here? Don’t you have a class to teach?”

“Something came up.” Henry forced his professionalism to the forefront of his mind and related the morning’s events to the siren.

Ligeia sat next to him. “So what will you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Will you behead her? Isn’t that what humans do to medusas?”

“No! That’s just a myth!” Henry took a deep breath. “Dedesy is still young. I don’t want anything to happen to her, even if she is a medusa.”

Ligeia nodded. “Good. When my talents manifested, they frightened and excited me, and I can only entrance people, not petrify them. I’m sure today’s events terrified Dedesy.”

“I hope she’ll be okay,” Henry replied. “As long as Chloe survives, I think this will blow over.”

“So what will you do?” the music teacher asked again.

“I don’t know. I’m just an ordinary science teacher.”

“You’re *Dedesy*’s science teacher. What will you do?”

Henry pondered her question for several seconds before answering. “I’ll treat her like any other student, I suppose. I’ll try to guide her and help her when she needs it. And the same goes for any of my students.”

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After a peaceful weekend of fishing, Henry returned to Fortuna High School on Monday morning. On the way to class, [SPACE HERE FOR INSERTING STUDENT CHARACTER CAMEOS].

He glanced at the top of the doorway before entering his classroom, but didn’t spot any obvious prank traps. He didn’t notice any tampering with his desk chair, so he settled into his seat.

Dedesy was sitting in her seat, talking with Jada; a few other students stopped at her desk

to chat, but Dedesy avoided glancing at them.

Is she worried about petrifying other students? Or just embarrassed about what happened? Henry wondered. *Probably both.*

A few minutes later, Chloe strolled into the classroom. Henry held his breath as she took her seat next to Dedesy. But his fears vanished when the girls began chatting with no sign of either resentment or rivalry. Both ignored Vossler, and Chloe even helped Dedesy rearrange the venomous snakes that served as her hair.

Henry took attendance, then stepped in front of his desk. “Students, may I have your attention?” The class quieted. “Last week, we had a minor incident involving two students in this classroom.” Dedesy bit her lip, but Chloe whispered something to her, and she relaxed.

He continued, “Fortunately, nothing permanent happened, so you can focus on your classes instead of school rumors. You are all going through challenging times, both in your personal lives and in the weird world we all live in. If you ever need help or just friendly advice, talk to me. I might not be able to fix your problem, but I promise you I’ll do what I can. Thank you.”

He returned to his seat and glanced at Dedesy, Chloe, and Jada. The three girls were whispering to each other, only stopping to listen to Principal Doyle’s morning announcements. Then the bell sounded, and the students rose from their desks.

On her way out, Dedesy stopped at his desk. “Mister Powell? Thank you for helping us.”

“Are you okay?”

The young medusa nodded. “I apologized to Chloe over the weekend, and we talked things out. My mom is teaching me some tricks to avoid accidental gazing, too.”

“Good. Well, you should hurry to your first period class. Have a good day.”

She brightened and darted out of the room to catch up to her friends, and Henry recalled other students working through similar arguments in the past.

Maybe humans, medusas, sirens, and the rest aren't so different after all.

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