

Family Bonding
A Magic on Main Street Short Story
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At least once per season, the O'Neils took off—passing on jobs and contracts—to have “Family Bonding.”

Jade's parents—Fergus and Amber—had established the practice for the family to “relax” and bond over situations that didn't involve life-or-death moments. The tradition bemused the O'Neil children, but they did make some very *colorful* memories.

So when her parents brought the tradition up in the chaos that ensued after Jade announced she had accepted a job in Magiford, Amber and Fergus sold the experience to their kids as one last big party before sending Jade off.

What they meant for it to achieve was to make Jade feel regretful she was leaving her family behind.

Whether or not they achieved that goal was highly debatable.

“Okay Family!” Fergus O'Neil boomed. “Are we ready to have some lighthearted fun with paintball?”

“Yeah!” Peridot, Jasper, Alex, and Jade cheered.

“We're going against a team of wizards,” Amber announced. “They'll have the advantage as they play in a league.”

“But!” Fergus snapped his goggles into place, so his head resembled a red tumbleweed of hair between his bright red beard and shaggy red hair. “That'll make this a learning exercise! We can watch how the opposition operates and learn from it.”

“We have promised not to use our superior speed,” Amber announced.

“Awww,” Peridot complained.

“That's a good thing, because it will make this even more challenging,” Jade said.

“Yeah, and this is the one case in which we won't *die* if we're too slow,” Alex agreed.

“So, it'll be interesting to adapt our combat to compensate for it.”

“Truth,” Jasper judged.

Amber ignored her children and continued, “In return, the wizards will refrain from using elemental magic. No cheating!”

Jasper, Peridot, Alex, and Jade raised their paintball guns. “Understood!” they chorused.

“Good!” Fergus barked. “O'Neils, let's honorably enter this unfamiliar combat system!”

“I don't get it.” Jade handed her paintball gun over to the rental. “Why did the wizards cry?”

“Yeah—we should have been the ones to cry,” Peridot said. “We held up our end and didn't use our agility magic. They were the ones who broke their word and started shooting off fireballs. That was hazardous.”

“Maybe it was tears of shame.” Jasper peeled off the spotless jumpsuit that was supposed to protect his clothes from the paintball but had been completely unnecessary as none of the

O'Neils had gotten hit. "Their defense was *way* too sloppy considering they play in a league—it only took Jade and Peri to break through their ranks!"

"I don't know, they seemed pretty terrified of Dad." Alex handed over the five extra magazines full of paintballs that he'd bought—assuming the excessive ammo would be completely necessary. "I think it was fear. They screamed hard when Dad stood up after army crawling past their defense in his camouflage suit of leaves."

"That was unexpected," Jade said. "They knew we couldn't use our agility, so camouflage is the next obvious tactic to use."

"Yeah, I was worried our tactics were predictable," Alex agreed.

"Enough trash talk," Fergus growled, smoke still trailing from his singed camouflage suit. "Even if they cried, we still learned a lot from them! Report!"

Jasper raised his hand. "Camouflage suits are *highly* flammable and greatly susceptible to fire damage."

Fergus stabbed a finger in his direction. "Yes! Next!"

Jade shed her safety goggles and tried to comb her red hair back into place. "Strength in numbers. The wizards clumped up in sets of three. Since Dad had gone out by himself, none of us were there to help smother the flames of his camouflage suit."

Amber folded up her spotless jumpsuit and nodded. "A *very* good point—one I hope you took note of Fergus." She scowled at her husband, who grimaced.

"My mistake," Fergus rumbled. "I'll make sure to note the wizards' tactics in my post battle notes. However! You're right, Jade. A slayer separated from their family is in *dangerous territory*." He gave Jade a meaningful look.

Jade nodded. "I'll make sure not to wear a camouflage leaf suit in Magiford."

"I don't think that's the takeaway Dad wanted you to note," Peridot said.

Jade shrugged while her father scowled, but before he could launch into a lecture Jasper interrupted. "So, we've gone paintballing, what's next for family bonding?"

"We're going to the movies." Amber pulled out her phone and checked the day's itinerary. "We were supposed to go to an evening movie, but since we finished the paintball match so early, we can still catch the matinee."

"O'Neils," Fergus thundered. "To the cars!"

"Thanks, mom and dad, for paying for the movie." Jade held up the tub of popcorn she and her mom would split. "And the popcorn."

"Of course." Amber smiled as the family clustered together, standing a few feet away from the concession stand as they waited for the last tub of popcorn they'd ordered. "That's one of the perks of working with family," she not so subtly hinted.

"Mhmm," Fergus furrowed his eyebrows, giving himself a unibrow in his consternation.

"What are we watching?" Jasper asked, breaking the building tension as he flicked a piece of popcorn into the air.

He likely intended to catch it with his open mouth, but Peri elbowed him out of the way and caught it instead, eating it smugly.

Alex studied the printed tickets. “A human made film—a paranormal romance between a human and a vampire.”

“A romance? And with vampires?” Peri groaned.

“That’s right,” Fergus said. “Consider it research—into human culture and their attitudes towards vampires.”

“That’s insulting—we already have an excellent grasp on human culture,” Jasper said.

Jade glanced around the movie theater, taking in the humans wearing brightly colored hats and jackets compared to the O’Neils, who were all dressed in various shades of gray that would blend in with the darkness of the theaters, and their quiet, special-soled boots. “Do we really, though?” She asked.

“It’s also a good chance to see just how much of real lore has leaked into human common knowledge,” Alex piped in.

“A good point,” Fergus acknowledged. “O’Neils, let us enter into this entertainment with a learner’s attitude!”

The O’Neils were silent as they exited the theater, depositing their empty popcorn tubs in trash cans before they headed for the cinema’s lobby.

As they passed the concession stand, Jade wasn’t sure which disturbed her more: her family’s silence, or the soles of her boots sticking to the suspiciously crusty carpet.

It wasn’t until her family left the lobby and stood in the glass entryway that they talked.

“It’s official. Jade, you can’t go.” Alex rested his hands on her shoulders and squeezed.

“That was a movie, Alex. It’s pretend,” Jade said.

“Yes, but you’re going to be living among humans who think it’s fun to *pretend* that a human-vampire romance is romantic,” Alex said.

“The relationship wasn’t the problem—vampires do occasionally grow a heart and fall for humans,” Jasper argued.

“Yeah, that romance was way more realistic than their portrayal of fae. Can you believe they just let that fae lady in the sparkly gown *give* the heroine a dress? That is the *classic* definition of a gift. That girl is going to be a fae servant by morning, mark my words,” Peridot ranted.

“That was supposed to be a fairy godmother,” Jade said.

“Yeah, well talk about setting dangerous expectations!” Peri shook his head in disappointment. “Even I know better than to mess with fae!”

Jasper waved the comment off. “Forget believability. The real issue was how they romanticized vampires themselves—using modern technology, wearing modern clothes...none of them complained about humans running the world or how restrictive Curia Cloister laws are. They failed to capture their general whininess.”

“That they did.” Fergus pushed his bushy eyebrows up his forehead and watched Jade. “Are you so sure you want to work for the Curia Cloisters when this is what they allow humans to fantasize over?”

“Yes,” Jade firmly said. “In case you missed it, there were no blood bath fighting scenes.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Peri said.

Jade ignored her brother. “The movie’s plot was resolved peacefully.”

“With a lot of dramatic crying,” Jasper added.

“Enough,” Amber snapped her fingers, and her four children automatically straightened their shoulders and clasped their hands behind their backs. “Any positive lessons to take away from the experience?”

The O’Neils fell silent as they pondered the question.

“Feigning a romantic attraction might actually be a good way to distract a vampire,” Alex finally said. “It appeals to their inflated egos.”

“Correct,” Fergus said. “But none of us are skilled enough at acting to carry that out. Anything else?”

Jade adjusted her winter jacket. “Strong friendships are key to emotional stability?”

“Very true.” Amber nodded. “Family is of course important, but you need a varied support network. Anything else?”

Peri raised his hand. “What’s our final experience today—for family bonding I mean.”

“Ah.” Fergus stood at attention, his back ramrod straight. “We will be mimicking our ancestors and practicing a careful art—one that even you lot haven’t mastered yet. It will require all your senses, and your most delicate of skills. Are you up for the challenge?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Why isn’t the dough popping out of the cookie cutter?” Peri frowned at the cookie cutter—a custom made cutter fashioned by one of Jade’s Carter uncles, which was the shape of a scimitar.

“You didn’t dust the cookie cutter with flour before pressing it,” Amber said. “Also, the pommel, guards, and grip are thin so you’re going to have a tough time getting the dough to fall free without stretching and or warping.”

“Rats,” Peri muttered.

“You could try the ninja gingerbread man cutout,” Jade suggested.

“Forget it,” Jasper said. “It’s a pain to get the ninjas crouched in proper fighting stances and not stretch their arms or legs out. I’m just cutting the dough into strips with a knife—it can be a bo staff.”

“We could use some of the more human-themed cookie cutters,” Alex suggested as he looked through the plastic tub that contained all the family’s metal cookie cutters. “Like a heart. But it’s not even an anatomically correct heart.” He scowled as he held up a large cookie cutter shaped like a stereotypical cartoon heart.

“Why are we so bad at this?” Jade asked. “We make these cookies every year in February.”

Peri, Jasper, and Alex all nodded in agreement, then looked expectantly at their father.

Fergus cleared his throat as he dusted the rolling pin he wielded with flour. “Even the best warriors have skills they will eternally work on and yet never master.”

“It’s good you recognize that, Fergus,” Amber said. “Because you just rolled out the dough too thin.”

“Aww, Dad!” Jasper groaned. “We already made a tray of thin cookies—this was supposed to be *thick* cookies! They’re superior.”

“Thin, crispy cookies are better,” Alex said.

“No, thicker—they’re soft and they don’t turn into dust if you throw them in an overnight bag to take on a mission,” Jasper said.

“Enough,” Fergus boomed. “Takeaways from the experience?”

Jade studied the baking sheet of cookie-weapons. “We were fools to attempt this without Nan.”

Peri looked from the cookies Amber was completing to his own mangled attempts. “Even with teamwork, if someone is holding out key information the mission will fail.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Alex asked.

“That Mom is holding out and isn’t sharing necessary information with us—there’s no way she can just *happen to* produce the perfect cookie every time,” Peri said.

“That is a dangerous accusation,” Fergus said.

“It’s just practice,” Amber said.

“Second take away,” Peri said. “Have a cover story ready at all times.”

Amber frowned. “You should already have that practice down—it’s necessary for our jobs.”

“Yes, I meant it as a refresher,” Peri said.

Jade smiled fondly as she studied her family.

I will miss them. There’s no one who understands me more. She watched her squabbling brothers and shifted her gaze to her parents—Fergus pointing out an incorrect curve in one of the failed scimitar cookies—and set her shoulders. *But...I need to go to Magiford. Because surely there’s a lot more about living—peacefully—that we don’t know.*

The End