

The Monster Diaries
Part 1
Diary of an Iron Dwarf
Part 1: The Long and Winding Road

Chapter 1

My cat and I have a conversation about the future

When: 2:43 AM May 29th, 2021

Where: 1880 Sweets Corner Rd, Rochester NY

“I’ve checked the cameras, Herman, the perimeter has not been breached tonight,” said the robotic voice in my ear. “You may land without fear of discovery.”

“Thanks Meowvis,” I said wearily, hovering overhead and taking a quick look around myself. I had cameras set up around the property, but someone could easily be waiting in a car nearby that they wouldn’t pick up. There were times, of course, when I wanted to attract attention. Flying back into my workshop in the dead of night was not one of those times. It seemed clear, the night vision system showing me everything I expected nearby, so it seemed I wouldn’t be seen returning home. “Coming in now.” I mentally willed the armor I was inside to land in front of the doors and they opened as I gently touched down. Walking inside the lights came on, and the doors closed behind me. Two pinpricks of light behind the eyes of the robotic cat I had built ignited, and the small frame rose up and “stretched,” then sat up and looked at me as I hung my shield on the wall where it belonged.

“Welcome home.”

“Can you really say something like that? You were with me the whole time.” I turned to look at the machine, looking back up at me with a tilted head.

“I am detecting a sizable amount of stress in your voice Herman, are you all right? Were you injured tonight?”

“I’m fine, the armor is holding up. Not that I tangled with that... thing... anyway. They were kids, Meowvis. Kids! The others seemed to have no problem murdering them but how could I? Even like that, even after what had been done to them, I couldn’t bring myself to do it.” I grabbed the stock of my shotgun, the electromagnet on my back holding it in place turning off so I could set it nearby. *Have to remember to reload it. The beanbags didn’t do much against those things, but I couldn’t bring myself to switch over to pellets.*

“It is unfortunate,” he agreed. “But there was nothing you could have done. Even Nix did not foresee this result, and Banshees are, at least according to folklore, best known for their ability to intuit the future.”

“I know.” I stomped over to the alcove the armor sat in and backed into it. *Of course the reality of the situation may be different. I’ve not had much dealing with my fellow “monsters” until just recently, and it’s mostly gone horribly. It’s not like I can just look up exactly what powers a Djinni has or how best to deal with possession. I can only go off what folklore says, and given what it’s gotten wrong about something as “well known” as Vampires, salt is the least of the spices I need to take with anything Meowvis finds online about the supernatural world.* “Help me out of this, will you?”

“Of course.” The cat’s head had tracked me, and robotic arms rose from above and below to help uncouple the armor pieces and take them off me. The armor itself helped, splitting apart into sections and allowing me to step out of it. The process took several minutes, but soon I was free and able to wiggle my birdlike feet again. *That’s better. Looking human is a pain.* My beard was no longer squished inside the helmet either, and I fluffed it up again. *I should just lose it, but...* I looked around my workshop as the armor closed up again. Everything was as I had left it. My 3D printers were working on various things for clients, the arcade cabinet of “The Avengers” in the corner was lit and in “attract” mode, and various projects occupied work benches and tables. Books were crammed into shelves, and strewn about the place, dropped where I had been using them. Just about every piece of fabrication equipment known to man, from lathes and a working forge to the latest in laser cutters and 6-axis CNC machines could be found here. *I may need another addition to this place if I need to buy any other large tools,* I thought to myself. *But this is where a Dwarf belongs.*

I turned back to the armor, now closed up and standing there under its own power. It was my crowning achievement, and part of an experiment I was running to see how much I could get away with magically if I disguised it as technology. It was as exact a replica of the “Iron Man” suit from the Marvel universe as I could make it, being shorter than “Tony Stark” was in the first place. I had taken some liberties of course, the left hand had a set of sparkling “jewels” set in it, my very own “Infinity Gauntlet” while the back had places to hold replacement jewels as they were single use items. I had various compartments built in, for ammo storage and my drone, both of which were needed here in the real world. Even with magic “repulsors” were impractical, especially as my shotgun could be lethal or non-lethal with the flick of a switch. But it could fly, was powered by magic, and had kept me alive more than once recently.

“What are you thinking about?” Meowvis asked.

“Were all those years of work making this armor worth it?”

Meowvis didn’t answer immediately, an oddity for an AI, and I looked over at the hardware that maintained “him” that was over in the corner. Much of it was custom built, the world at large didn’t have anywhere near the AI currently sitting there I did, but with magic to super cool the processors and memory I could achieve speeds researchers could only dream of. With some magical assistance and years of research and programming I had created a fairly sophisticated companion, needed to run the armor with any kind of efficiency. All the diagnostic lights were green, and I looked back at the cat body. “I’m not frozen, if that’s what you were thinking,” he informed me. “I just don’t think I’m qualified to answer that question. I was simply trying to figure out how to best frame it.”

“I see. I want to give the world hope again, just like Tony did. Those officers tonight, they were outright hostile towards me.” *They knew about me, that much of my plan is working. The armor didn’t shut down, and the officer even said “I don’t know what kind of technology you invented to make that suit work” so they didn’t suspect magic. But would it hold up against a crowd? I can’t find out without a ton of risk, but that’s months or years away in any case.*

“History shows that has always been true,” Meowvis reminded me. “You have essentially stepped out of the movie screen. No one is going to know how to deal with that.”

I chuckled. “That I did, my friend. And I’m a hundred and thirty years old, you don’t need to lecture me on history. I should have known it wouldn’t be as easy as the movies made it seem.” *People thought cars would destroy society. Same as newspapers. Women voting. Desegregation. Television. I’ve lived through so much, in such a short amount of time. Everything is seen with suspicion, not for what it can do to help society, but that somehow this is going to be the thing that makes it all fall down. Hasn’t happened yet, probably won’t happen.*

“You’re not thinking of giving it up, are you?” He sounded a bit concerned.

“No, not at all,” I assured him. “The experiment has only just begun. Can I use people’s belief that everyone knows this armor is simply advanced technology to get around the usual restriction of magic failing around the uninitiated? Show myself to more and more people, a few at a time, until everyone knows the ‘Iron Man’ is real and flying around. Then their belief *in me* reinforces the magic instead of making it go away.” It had always seemed strange to me, that what seemed to be a fundamental force of the universe, like gravity, could simply go away because a regular, powerless, human saw something “magical” and decided they couldn’t except its existence. It would be like believing a rock wasn’t going to fall when you let it go, and gravity just shrugging and taking the day off. It didn’t happen. Electrons repelled each other, magnets attracted iron, nothing could escape a black hole. They were just scientific facts that didn’t care if you believed in them or not. They simply were. But magic? Magic seemed “shy” and fickle, leading me to wonder if it had more to do with quantum mechanics on some level, the observer changing the observed and all that. If a cat could be both alive and dead at the same time, who knew what else was possible? Nevertheless, it was the way the world seemed to operate, and until we truly understood it we just had to deal with it as best we could. No one knew where magic came from, how the belief of one person could cause fire to appear or help a suit of

armor fly. Science said that energy had to come from somewhere, but magic just said “if you believe it, you don’t have to sweat the details like that.” But like our search for where gravity actually “came from,” we had no idea what created what we called “magic.” It was delicate enough that a cell phone or running water could disrupt it, but powerful enough to set a forest on fire with a glance. It didn’t make sense, but it was real, so you gritted your teeth, followed the laws it seemed to demand, and hoped for the best. (Combining magic and technology hadn’t been easy, but after a hundred years of study I was finally taking my first steps towards doing so. Not understanding magic any better at a fundamental level, perhaps, but at least getting the two to sit in the same room and have a polite conversation about how the rest of the relationship would go.) The observer problem was the next, and perhaps harder, step that I was trying to take.

“I was actually thinking about that. Wouldn’t a simpler experiment have been to enchant a cell phone battery to never run out, and then just walk down a crowded city street while talking on it? No one would know the difference from a regular cell phone, so their belief it was technology would allow it to continue working. It’s only flashy magic, like teleportation, or calling up a fireball, that would be rejected by the human mind and thus... Why are you hitting your head on the wall like that?”

“Because I’m an idiot.”

“I was programmed by an idiot? This is a fairly weighty revelation for me. I’m not sure how I should take that.”

I stopped banging my head on the wall. “You know what I mean. Still, you couldn’t have thought of that ten years ago?”

“I did not exist ten years ago, I believe I was still at the planning stages at that time.”

I went over and dropped into my chair wearily. “Sounds about right. No, the cell phone thing may have worked, but I still feel like I should be doing all I can with my abilities. I don’t have natural magic, to tell the future or heal, all I have is the ability to enchant things. This is my contribution to the world.” I indicated the armor.

“And what am I, exactly?”

“A trusted friend and confidant, that happens to consume more power than all my other tools put together.”

“Not to worry,” he assured me. “I predicted the crypto crash of this week and sold off enough of your holdings to make a profit. You’ll be able to pay your power bill for another month.”

I chuckled. He was kidding, of course, after so long I was quite wealthy, and well known for the quality of my creations. I had made movie props, cosplay pieces, and though I didn’t make them anymore, enchanted weapons. At any time I had five or six orders in, and spent most of my time doing what I loved. What all Dwarves loved. Making things. “I should get rid of it all, for all his faults Elon is right, the environmental impact of crypto can’t be overstated.”

“Yes, take advice from the man who keeps shooting rockets into the sky, because that has no environmental impact.”

“He does have an odd set of beliefs, given it was only a few months ago Tesla started accepting crypto in exchange for real cars. Now this 180, it’s so odd.” *The man is obsessed with going to Mars, but we don’t even have a small moon base yet. Let’s see if we can survive there for a bit, in case something happens and those that are there need to return to Earth in a hurry. Then worry about going further out. I mean talk about looking before you leap!* I swiveled my chair and my monitor lit up, I brought up a browser and typed in his name to get his picture. “What are you up to anyway?”

“Are you talking to a picture? Should I schedule an appointment with a local therapist?”

“That won’t be necessary. How is the helmet coming along?” I closed the window and walked over to the other side of the room where the 3D printers were.

“80% complete. Bed adhesion at 94% and holding steady, I predict a 95% chance of successful completion of this piece.”

“Excellent. I’ll need to order more blue filament, this is the last of it, right?”

“Correct. I have set a reminder.”

“Thanks.” I looked over the other pieces being printed, all of them looked good, so I could turn my attentions to something else. I felt something and looked down, Meowvis was rubbing against my leg. “What’s this?”

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked, looking up at me. “I know you said you were prepared, eventually, for a mission that resulted in failure. But since you met William, Tanaka, and Zayn, then later Nix, you’ve been seeing a lot of action. I know you want to help, and they have real problems I don’t deny it, but it’s far sooner than you expected to have run into something like this.”

I drew in a deep breath. I had gone out because Nix said someone from her past was making trouble, and we wound up at an abandoned office building. Inside were mutated kids, the result of experiments years ago to give humans similar magical abilities to us “monsters.” The kids became twisted and uncontrollable, growing to enormous proportions and simply attacking anything that moved. Namely, us. He wanted revenge on Nix for one reason or another, we took care of him but that didn’t stop his little “experiment.” Of course in the meantime the regular authorities arrived, and they had no idea what to do about these kids, simply opening fire on everything they saw. Officers died, the kids died, it was a huge mess. We left because none of us could explain to their satisfaction what was really going on, meaning they’ll just have more questions than answers. Exactly the opposite of what we in the “monster community” wanted. Humans poking around “our” world. Not for our sake, I would gladly work out in the open, but for theirs. Tonight proved it, when it came to the supernatural they were ill equipped. *What am I saying, they can barely handle the “natural” you only need to watch the news to see that. No, best if we all try and take care of our little corner of things just like always.*

“Thanks for making sure. It’s a lot to process, and it’s really on Nix for letting it get this far. I’m just glad it wasn’t worse, they could have been let out into the world and that really would have been a disaster. What’s done is done, he won’t bother us anymore, and hopefully the knowledge of that serum died with him as well.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that. It’s practically super soldier serum, after all. Right up your alley.”

I glanced at the arcade cabinet again. I was somewhat obsessed with the recent revival of the super hero genre. My eyes flicked over to the shield, it was a replica of Captain America’s shield, of course, though not as unbreakable as his was. It was reinforced with magic, so it could take a lot of punishment, but it could be broken. It was another concession to reality, Tony could get hit with tank shells or whatever and walk it off, but even making the armor almost unbreakable with magic it still would hurt the person inside because force equals mass times acceleration. So I kept it around, in case someone started shooting at me or slinging magic spells I didn’t want the (somewhat irreplaceable) armor to take. “Not at that cost. Maybe one day, when we can do it right.”

“Fair enough. Will you continue working tonight?”

“I think so. Still hours to sunrise after all. May as well take my mind off it.”

“Very well. I believe you were in the process of soldering the control board for the replica warframe helmet for a client.”

“Ah yes, they wanted the lights to pulse when they talked. Let’s bring that up.”

I worked on finishing that up and testing it until sunrise, when I felt more than saw the morning light coming over the horizon. With the return of the sun and a new day I felt slower, clumsier, not as bright. Nighttime was “our” time, the time we “monsters” were at our best. I knew any spells were gone, at least those not bound to items like the armor, and until the sun went down again magic would be harder to do. Everything, in fact, would be harder for me to do, from brushing my teeth to tying my shoes. For that reason most of us slept the day away, though I had too much work to do to do that. I would usually sleep four or five hours a day just past sunrise, working on thing as best I could while

the sun was up. Never anything magical, that was too risky. Only monitoring my printers, or setting up new laser engraving projects, or just researching new breakthroughs. Mundane stuff.

“Sunrise has passed, all systems normal,” Meowvis informed me. I had him make sure my magical items kept working through the sunrise, and while they always had in the past, that was no reason to get sloppy. And being a computer he didn’t mind anyway. “Power systems on the armor show 100%. Good morning!”

“Morning,” I grumbled. *I shouldn’t grumble at him, he isn’t the cause of the sunrise. While humans will soon be bright eyed and jumping out of bed to start their day, the daylight hours just beat me down. When the sun comes up it feels like a blanket is thrown over me, a heavy one, and now because of a few degrees of rotation by the planet I and the rest of my kind suffer. It’s not like the sun isn’t always there, what’s the difference?* “Nearly time for bed. Let’s get something to eat.”

“You know,” I said to Meowvis who had followed me into the kitchen. I was preparing something to eat for supper; some pasta, a chicken breast, green beans from a can. “It brings up a good point.”

“Beans from a can?” That was the last thing I had did, opened the can and dumped the beans out into a bowl so I could microwave them.

I chuckled. “No, not that! What I was thinking about earlier, folklore. Why can’t we have something online related to non-humans?” I punched in two minutes and hit the start button, the dish whirring around as the device activated. *May as well be magic.*

“Because most don’t even know how to use a rotary telephone, much less the internet? You may have overcome the limitations of using magic and technology together after long study, but most of your kind would prefer magic. They stay away from modern technology, so what would be the point?”

“For the young ones, who have taken an interest, and realize day to day technology is a million times more useful than magic. Imagine a wikipedia type site dedicated to non-humans. It can be out there because no one is going to believe it’s real, heck it could be coached in terms of a game or something anyway. I start it off with what is known about my kind, and others can fill in what they know of their kind. Pretty soon we can look up anything we need to know about the world of the night. Who can do what, things young non-humans should look out for, that sort of thing.”

“I see. Turn your quest to learn more about your ‘kin’ into something that helps others as well. The hosting should be no problem, and we do have a source of more information that is willing to help.”

I nodded. “The historian we met. They’re all about preserving history, I could see them going for a project like this.” *If they don’t already have one and he tells me to forget it.*

“Shall I schedule some time today to go see him?”

“Yes, let’s go see what the man has to say.”

“It’s on the calendar.”

“Thanks. Yeah, that could work.” I finished preparing my meal with a smile on my face. *What would Tony do? He would make a database, of course he would. And I will too. Just you wait.*

Chapter 2

I meet an unexpected being

When: 1:15 PM

Where: The local library

The drive to the library that afternoon went fine, more thanks to Meowvis taking over the car's systems than anything I did. The car I drove was electric, and advanced enough to drive itself, once software systems caught up to hardware capabilities. That's not to say I didn't know how to drive, I did, but with the sun shining in the sky I was dragged down, making me slower and more clumsy than I would have been otherwise. Even during the day I would probably beat out any sort of 'self driving' system because I could still think for myself, rather than just doing what someone had programmed me to do. Self driving was getting better at a furious pace, don't get me wrong, but it was still a long way from what Meowvis could do. Together we made a great team and were probably the safest car on the road.

"Usually you go at night," Meowvis said to me through the car's radio. He was connected to the drone I usually carried in my armor, and plugged into the car to control it. (Took some doing, manufacturers did *not* want you doing anything for yourself anymore, that's why all those right-to-repair lawsuits going through the courts. But between the two of us we had figured out a way.) "And just fly here. Why the sudden change?"

"Usually I go with the others too," I reminded him. *After what happened last night though, I doubt we'll get together again any time soon. And honestly, putting that armor on again so soon doesn't feel right.* "But as it's just me this time, and a personal project, I figured I would stop in during 'normal business hours.' He knows I don't like being out during the day, so it's a mark of respect I took the trouble. I am asking him for a favor, really."

"I see. Thank you. I will update my predictive routines accordingly based on this new information."

Meowvis, you're a marvel but sometimes you still talk like a robot. Have to see what I can do about that. We pulled in and the drone rose in the air by my side.

"If you could untether me?"

"I guess?" I unplugged the cable that went to the data port on the car figuring he just wanted to fly around the inside while I was gone. This was incorrect as it zipped out as I opened the door and hovered nearby, buzzing away. "Are you coming in?"

"For the sake of the experiment, I believed this would be a fair test," he answered from my wrist. As the car radio wasn't on he was connecting through bluetooth to the unit at my wrist. The drone turned to face me, the camera lowering to be at eye level. "The 'human world' does have person tracking algorithms put into both luggage and drones, you seemed quite interested in it being demonstrated when that youtuber woman from China was giving her review. You know, the one with the huge-

"Following, yes!" I said quickly. *Of course Meowvis knows her name, is he actually teasing me? Did I program that into him?* "A very popular channel, I agree." I could feel my face heating up, and it wasn't from the sun. *I do tend to look forward to her videos a bit more than any other. For the science, not for the... outfits... that she wears.* "I'm interested in technology of every sort, of course. But what's your point?"

"I am not a service animal. There is no rule about autonomous drones not being allowed inside buildings. Though many people may not know such things are possible, they are. I am cleverly disguised as technology that exists, so no one will think magic, they will look up drones on their phone and find they can buy one for themselves if they want. If my power and wireless connection can be preserved in public it will add another data point to the experiment. Is this not safer than you appearing in a crowd and having your systems fail?"

I had to admit, the AI had a point. This was far safer. "Very well." I glanced down at myself, making sure my legs and feet were covered. Very awkward if I let anything slip at this point, and someone noticed because they came over to see the drone but got a little more information than they should have. But I had remembered my shoes (wasn't going to repeat that mistake!) and headed across the parking lot towards the building.

I walked to the door and let the drone in, then headed past some confused library goers to get to the back where Kieth had his office. No one stopped me, and the drone hovered nearby, spinning in a circle to take in the whole place. It seemed he was holding up fine. *No magic here, just a drone, you've all seen them. Go back to your books, that's right, just ignore me.* Coming in front of a door I knocked.

"Coming!" I heard from inside, and it opened. "Can I help you?" the man asked.

"Kieth, it's me," I told him, looking him over. He looked the same as ever, he was probably older than I am but as historians didn't degrade like other humans, he still moved like he was in his twenties despite looking like a certain wanded headmaster of a certain dangerous magical school. "Usually I'm here in the armor but I thought that might be a little much for the daytime."

"Armor?" He looked at me in confusion and then over at the little drone hovering next to me. "Oh, Herman! Come in, nice to see you again." He stepped back and invited me inside, not that this would have been a threshold despite the man almost living here.

"Thank you." I looked around, his office hadn't changed much since the last time I had been here. Books everywhere, a narrow passage between bookshelves to his computer, not much room otherwise to speak of. He seemed to realize that too.

"Er, perhaps in one of the reading areas?"

"Yes, that might be best," I agreed, and turned to open the door again. We headed back into the library proper, and sat at an empty table.

"So what can I do for you?" he asked.

The drone touched down next to us, at the end of the table so it could see both of us, and I leaned forward. The soft whine of the blades spinning went away as they powered down. *Need to look into silencing that, after I do the same for my shotgun.* "I've come to ask you about the feasibility of a certain project I've taken an interest in, and for any books you might have that could help fill in the blanks." *Of which there are many, sadly.*

"Books I have," he agreed with a chuckle. "Any topics in particular?"

I filled him in on my idea, and he leaned back in thought, looking up at the ceiling. "A website detailing the various races. Interesting. It's never really been tried before, your kind shunning technology as they do. I don't see why it wouldn't work, but you would have to be careful if you're going to let just anyone create entries for it."

"Meowvis can read everything over, make sure nothing too inaccurate, based on what he knows, is put up. That's where your books come in. There are machines to digitize books, even high end models that flip the pages for you!"

"I know. You do realize what sort of organization I work for, right?"

"You preserve knowledge, sure."

"Exactly. And we've been around a long time. We've seen times in history that libraries, containing works found nowhere else, are destroyed. When everyone else finally came up with the word 'backup' we thought it was quaint."

"So you've been digitizing your books already?"

He gave a nod. "As part of our normal policies of never having only one copy of anything. It's fairly slow going, something I do in between other things, but yes, I've got some work done in that area. And of course the organization has people doing it as well, so we've actually got a fair chunk of the work completed. Not things like that awful grimoire you and your friends recovered that one time," he hastened to add. "I just mean regular books."

“I should hope so!”

“Quite. With this sort of project in mind, however, I could be persuaded to find more time. Perhaps get some other historians, junior ones, loading and unloading my books in the machine.”

“That would be tremendous! I’ll buy you more machines myself if you have the manpower to run them.”

“Very kind, but I’m sure that won’t be necessary. We do have a tremendous opportunity here, yes,” his eyes flicked to the drone. “I’m thinking our electronic friend could be helpful in this as well.”

“How so?” Meowvis asked from my wrist. I slipped my cell phone out of my pocket and set it on the table. I launched the app that I had written that let him talk through it, instead.

“Once turned into plain text, it would be a simple matter for you to hold our entire library in your memories at once, or so I assume?” He looked up at me.

“At least chunks of it, I don’t know how large your library is. I’m assuming what’s in your office is just a fraction of it.”

He smiled. “Quite. The point is, you can help us by finding irregularities, inconsistencies, and the like, that are in our books. They’ve been written by so many people, in so many different times, it’s hard to know what’s true anymore. No one person can possibly read twenty books on the same subject and find one line in one that contradicts what the other nineteen say. If you can weed out things like that, or find connections we ourselves haven’t made across volumes, we can work to place warnings in volumes that contradict each other. That way those that read one can easily find the passage of interest in another.”

“That sounds within the scope of my abilities,” Meowvis admitted. “And it will serve as a welcome task I can perform while Herman sleeps, so it does not slow my processing during his active hours. Right now he has me earmarking cat videos to watch, a complete waste of my considerable intellect.”

“I do not!” I hastened to assure the man. “He’s joking, I never asked him to do anything like that! Tell him you’re joking!”

“Oh, was that to remain between us?” Meowvis asked. “Apologies, you had not marked that information private like you did with that folder labeled-”

“Tax returns!” I shouted, and several people looked over at us and scowled. I gave a halfhearted wave to them, mouthing ‘sorry.’

“He really does have a sense of humor, doesn’t he?” Kieth asked.

“He just don’t have the good sense to know when it’s appropriate to crack jokes and when it is not!” I growled.

“Was that timing inappropriate?” Meowvis asked, sounding as innocent as can be. “I will update my predictive routines-”

“...accordingly based on this new information,” we both said. I was rolling my eyes as I said this.

And so Kieth agreed to forward me the raw images of the books he had already scanned, as he figured Meowvis would probably do a better job than the OCR software that came with the scanning unit. We both agreed, while turning pictures into text was fairly well understood now, we had the benefit that if something wasn’t clear, he could ask me what I thought something said. (In English, anyway, many of the books he said were in languages much older than that.) Meowvis would also no doubt preserve any formatting better and clean up any pictures that happened to be present. I thanked him and he stood, shaking my hand.

“Let me know the website address when you get it up and running,” he said to me. “I’m sure those in my organization will both want to help and look things up once it gets going.”

“I will. And thanks for your help.”

“Thank you,” he returned. “This helps us as well. Having the ability to search though a shelf of books in an instant for the one that happens to mention, in passing, some landmark now crumbled or a forgotten city of the past? We honestly should have started this process sooner, but even we can be a bit... set in our ways. Now that we have an excuse I’m sure my organization will fully embrace the idea and set as many people as we can on the task. Maybe we can finish in a year or two!”

That long? How many books do they have? “Not a problem. A job well begun is halfway done. I’ll let you know.” *But these book scanning machines only came out a few years ago, right? They couldn’t have started such an effort, except by typing them all in by hand, until then anyway. Though given it is the Historians, I’m surprised they weren’t already doing exactly that. But maybe they were, he never said they weren’t.*

We headed for the door, I was feeling elated and was looking forward to getting a domain name and starting work on the site. I would have to brush up on HTML and other web related technologies like Javascript, but that wasn’t going to be a problem. *I don’t want Meowvis to do all the work, after all. It is my idea, I should at least get it started.* We had made it halfway to the door when the drone swung to the left suddenly and hung there. I took a few steps before I realized it and looked back over my shoulder.

“Herman,” chirped the voice at my wrist again. “Can you look down that isle and tell me what you see?”

I walked back the few steps I had taken and looked down the row of books the drone’s camera was pointed down. “Uh...” I managed.

“So my visual processing units are not failing me. Perhaps we should say something?”

My mind was fairly blank, I was having trouble processing what I was seeing standing there. It was a figure, looking away from me. They were looking around, checking the shelves from top to bottom like they had never seen such a place before. They were clothed in white, a flowing toga like garment, but the most distinguishing feature (apart from the sword at their hip) were the wings that sprouted from their back. They were folded up now, but if I could see them, anyone could see them. And if someone *did* see them, I didn’t want to know what would happen.

“Herman?”

The figure turned at the sound the drone and Meowvis saving my name. This confirmed my suspicions, as their face was not strongly male or female, but seemed to shift between the two even as I looked at it. I knew it wasn’t shifting, it was only my perception of the figure, but only one being could look like this: an angel. I was standing in front of a real, actual, honest to God, angel.

“Excuse me,” they said politely. Their voice was soft and melodious, but of course they did have the voice of an angel, so how could it be anything but? “Did I hear you say Herman? My name is not Herman, it is Esashiel. I am looking for a duergar named Adolph, but who I believe goes by the name Herman. He should be around here somewhere, do you by chance know where I could find him?”

“That’s me,” I told them, wondering what an *angel* could want with me. *Have I broken some kind of heavenly law just trying to build a website? No, it can’t be that, can it? They couldn’t move that fast, I only just suggested the idea ten minutes ago!* “But I don’t go by... my first name. I’m Herman Kruger, at your service.”

“You do not use your first name? Why?”

I looked at them in confusion. *Have they not heard of that guy in Heaven or something? Oh wait, no I suppose they wouldn’t would they? He would have gone the other way.* “Obvious reasons,” I replied lamely. *It was rather unfortunate, being born at the same time as the ‘other’ Adolph, and in Germany no less. Lucky for me, he got to die while I got stuck with the name of one of the most hated men in history. Thanks, you complete piece of garbage human.* “Look, can you hide your wings or something, you’re going to start an incident here.”

“Wings, yes.” They looked behind them. “I knew there was something I was forgetting. Normally when we’re sent here the person that sends us would remind us, but as I came without... uh... that is to say...”

“Can you do something about them or not? Any second now someone is going to scream-”

“Angel!” someone screamed. I closed my eyes. *I could have stayed in bed, you know. Never come here. Just done my own thing like always, but now I’m in the middle of-*

“Yes, that man is wearing an angel costume, isn’t he?” said another voice. I brightened. *What’s this?*

“Angel!” was repeated.

I turned around and looked down at the young person being led by an adult, hopefully the child’s mother.

“Yes, very good,” she said again. “Come on dear, don’t bother the... man.”

“I am not a man,” said Esashiel, taking a step around me to kneel by the child. “And the little one is not bothering me. I am an angel, a Malakh, a true messenger of the Heavens and servant of He who is most holy. Hello little one.”

You don’t just go around admitting that, fool? What kind of angel is this? What are you doing? You’re supposed to stay out of sight, now announce yourself!

“Wings!”

“Yes!” They spread their wings wide, all the while I was thinking *No don’t do that! And you’ve done it. Wonderful. This just gets better and better, doesn’t it?* “Would you like to touch them?”

“Yay!” they cried, reaching for them. The woman, on the other hand, had let go of her child and was stepping back.

“Wha- wha- what?” she managed.

I guess I should be thankful for small favors. She didn’t scream and scoop the child up, bolting for the door. Time to see if I can salvage this situation. “It’s amazing what can be done with robotics nowadays, isn’t it?” I asked. *Ha! If only she knew I flew around the city in a working super hero armor half the time.*

“Oh!” she visibly relaxed. “They’re mechanical?”

Yes, she’s buying it! “Completely mechanical. I admit, wearing them in public is a little silly, but my brother here insisted. I also told him the robe was a bit much, but does he listen to me? Noooooo.” I lowered my voice. “Honestly I think he’s gone a little coo-coo and my parents and I will have to have some kind of intervention if this keeps up.” I made a circle with a finger near my head.

She nodded quickly, the expression on her face saying “this is a fantastic plan and I’m proud to be a part of it.”

“Brother?” asked Esashiel.

Play along you idiot!

“Soft!” cried the child, petting the wings.

“Ah, a child truly is a gift from Heaven,” Esashiel told us. “Praise God.”

“Yes,” said the woman, not sounding convinced. “Come along Abbey, let’s leave the nice man’s wings alone now.” She started dragging the girl away.

“Bye angel!” they cried, waving with their free hand.

“Farewell little one! Go and live the life the Creator has in store for you!”

I’m sure she will. “Will you quit that?” I hissed at them. “Hide your wings, will you? We need to get out of here!” *Great, now I’m yelling at an angel. Wish I could look up, in, I don’t know, a database? what angels can and can’t do, and why one might be standing here in front of me. But no, I can’t do that because I only had the idea yesterday!*

“Of course, of course, one moment please.” They concentrated, and while I didn’t see any change because I knew they were an angel already, they nodded. “I believe I’ve done it correctly. None should be able to see my wings now.”

“Super. Great. Let’s go!”

“Go?” they asked confused. “But I have yet to deliver my message. You are Adolf Herman Kruger are you not?”

“Stop saying that name!” I looked around, but no one was nearby enough to have heard him. “I’m Herman, *just* Herman. Come on, we’ll talk outside.”

“As you wish.” They followed along, and it seemed Esashiel had done at least a passable job on their glamour as no one else looked twice at us. We exited the building and I made a beeline for my car, unlocking the passenger side and opening it for them.

“Get in.”

“Oh, this is a car? I’ve heard about them,” they told me, poking their head inside.

“Just get in there,” I growled, giving them a shove. *And now I’m abducting them. Wonderful.*

“Very well, there’s no need to push.”

Yes there is. The sooner we get you out of the open the better. If she calls the cops... They climbed in as best they could with their wings and I shut the door, walking around the car as they tried to get comfortable in the seat. *Having wings is a problem in more than one way I guess.* I got in on the other side and breathed a slight sigh of relief. “Now, what’s this all about?”

Chapter 3

I pal around with an angel

When: 2:30 PM

Where: Outside the library

“I can only give you vague details,” the angel hedged, no longer looking so confident. Not that they really were before, so you can probably imagine how deflated they looked now.

“Because Heaven isn’t supposed to interfere in mortal affairs, yadda yadda,” I finished for them.

“Not exactly, it’s because there are no concrete details yet. I’m hoping that I’ve noticed this situation developing in time to do something about it before it’s too late.”

“Oh, that’s different,” I allowed. “And probably for the best. So tell me what you can.”

“Of course. There’s been a gradual but massive increase in magical energies emanating from the lower realm lately. When I say lower realm I mean-”

“This one. Yes, I get it. Go on.”

“No offense meant, of course. We all have our place.”

“Naturally. So this magic concerns Heaven?”

“Er, it concerned some in Heaven, yes.” They looked away. *What does that mean?*

“Is it dangerous?”

“Directly? Perhaps, but I am worried more about what such an amount of magic could be used for. Something on a wide scale, for certain. Please, you must look into this before something terrible happens!”

I stared at them. *They seem sincere, and worried. I’m not sure why I’m the best choice for this but okay.* “I give you my word, I will look into it right away. You may return having delivered your message, oh Heavenly one.” *That was suitably flowery, right?*

“About that...” They trailed off, again seemingly embarrassed.

“What?” I asked, dreading the reply.

“I’m not exactly here in any... how do you say... official capacity. I can’t go back, at least not until I-”

“You snuck out of Heaven?” I gasped. *Am I going to have a hoard of angry angels descending upon me and get caught in the crossfire of trying to take this angel back with them?*

“From a certain point of view, perhaps.”

“A certain point of-” *Wait, is he quoting... never mind.* “What does that mean?”

“I have brought this to the attention of others, and they feel I’m overreacting. But I insisted it be taken seriously, and they told me it was my problem then. They, rather rudely I must say, sent me down here. I cannot return until I’ve seen the matter through.”

“So I’m-” *Stuck with you until I check this out?* “The one you choose to come see, or was that a coincidence?”

“All happens according to the will of God,” the angel intoned.

My eyes narrowed. “That’s not an answer.” *Not one I am prepared to accept, anyway.*

“Yes, er, it was no accident. The heavens looked into who best to see this issue through, and your name came up. Thus I came to you.”

I leaned back into the seat. “Marvelous.”

“Is it? I am pleased to hear you say that!”

“Wow, someone worse at sarcasm than I am,” piped up Meowvis from my wrist.

“Who said that?” the angel demanded, one hand on their sword. “Is there someone else here?”

“How are you going to even draw that in here?” I asked, and they sheepishly relaxed their hand. “Esashiel, meet Meowvis, my AI companion.”

“Howdy.”

"I have no idea what that means," Esashiel admitted. "Where are they?" He twisted around to look in back. "Hello?"

"Think of me as an artificial soul."

"Blasphemy!" roared the angel, going for their sword again. "Only the Almighty may create souls! Show yourself, blasphemer, that I may teach you this lesson directly."

I rubbed my eyes. *Oh yeah, this being is going to be a laugh a minute, aren't they.* "Will you stop reaching for that every two minutes? First off, they're an intelligent computer program running on hardware back at my house. You're just hearing his voice through my watch." I lifted it to show the unit on my wrist. "You can't attack him from here any more than you can attack the moon from here. Second, I'm pretty sure something that's soulless can't blaspheme, so put that out of your head. Third, it was a bad analogy anyway. He's an artificial mind, not a soul, there's a difference. Meowvis, don't tease the angel."

"Are you saying I ain't got soul, boss?" Music started pouring out of the unit. "I wrote that just now. I have more soul than any two shoes put together."

"Shoes? What?" the angel asked, now seeming lost. "What are these words? Where is this voice coming from? Or that music?"

"I'll show you later," I sighed. *Great, my AI is making puns now. That's only going to get worse.* "For now let's just try to focus, alright? Can you tell me anything more about this magic?" *And if it's not directly related to putting magic into objects I'm not really the one to turn to. I may be an expert in that, but other magic in general I really don't know much about. That's why the whole database idea, see?*

"I could possibly show you, on a map?" they suggested.

Something concrete at last. "Fine. We'll head for home now, put your seat belt on." *I don't need some cop pulling over an angel and a Dwarf because the angel doesn't know how to put a seat belt on. Can you even imagine how that would go?* I shuddered.

"My what?"

"Like this."

Having gotten them strapped in I headed home, the angel looking around in wonder as I drove.

"It all looks so different from down here," they admitted. "Oh what a cute dog! All dogs go to Heaven, you know."

"I've heard that before," I admitted, rolling my eyes. *Are they messing with me or being serious? I can't even tell.* We headed out to the area I lived, where the houses were spread apart so my being up and working at all hours of the night didn't bother anyone, and pulled into my driveway. Parking the car I opened the door. "We'll head inside and..." I looked back at the angel, who was fighting with the seat belt.

"Release me, you foul contraption!" they were saying, struggling with the thing.

"Just push the button. The *button*. No, there. There!" I said pointing. "Push it. No the top part. No not like that, the top part- there you go!"

"Ah, easy, when you have the trick of it. I will accompany you." They started crawling across the seat.

"Use your own door, it opens on that side."

"I'm not sure how though," they admitted. "I did enter from that direction so I figured it must though. How is this accomplished?"

"The handle. Just raise it like this." I demonstrated.

They fiddled with it a moment but finally managed it as well, climbing out and stretching their wings. "What a relief to be out of there. Let us go!" They walked around the car and I stared at them. Sighing I went around the car and pointedly shut the door, then walked around it again. "I see what I did wrong now. Yes, you would want it closed wouldn't you? Very smart."

“That it is,” I agreed. “Come on.” Back in my studio I turned my monitor on and brought up some maps. “Oh, by the way, this is Meowvis.” I patted the rack of server units next to me. “Or at least, this is what creates Meowvis. He is also controlling his cat body.” I pointed to the cat body, sitting on the nearby table and looking over at us.

“Meow,” he said, raising a paw.

“Metal boxes? Metal cats? And I see a metal man there.”

“That’s my armor. You know what armor is, right?”

“Of course we know what armor is!”

“Of course. Never mind for now. Here’s a map of the local area, show me what you know about this magic you’re talking about.”

“Why, there is no need for me to show you, it’s very plain,” they claimed.

I looked from them to the screen and back. “Is it?”

“Quite. I must admit to some relief, you really do have this in hand. Were you investigating this phenomenon before I arrived? No wonder the heavens said you were the one to speak to!”

“What are you talking about?” I pressed. “You haven’t shown me anything.”

“But the map, it’s all so clear.”

“What’s clear?”

“These areas here, they match up with what I was feeling from Heaven. Ribbons of magic leading to larger and larger rivers.” They were pointing to the roads on the map.

“Those are roads. The thing we were driving on. There’s nothing magical about them. You must be mistaken.”

“I’m not,” they huffed. “And obviously I know what roads are. Even if, where I live, we don’t need roads. I’m saying that what I’ve been feeling magically matches up with what you’re showing me here. If that’s the road system you have, then so be it. That’s what we must investigate.”

“We can’t ‘investigate’ every road, you know how many roads there are in the US alone?”

“I don’t think we have to. Can you conjure a map with a wider view?”

Conjure? I scrolled the mouse and the map zoomed out.

“Oh, wonderful. Yes, I can show you where the highest magical concentrations are on this map.” They went to touch the screen.

“Wait a second,” I told them. “If we’re going to do this...” I zoomed back in, took a series of screenshots, then pasted them together so we could look at sections of the map and zoom in if we needed to. Then after he traced a path along various roads I highlighted them, creating a shape.

“Those are the major sources I’ve been looking into,” they claimed when finished. “Other, minor sources flow into these.”

I leaned back and stared at what they had traced. It wasn’t just a random squiggle, it actually looked like a shape. Nothing defined, like a square, but more like a rune. It was fairly detailed, given where the angel came from. They hadn’t hesitated in drawing it, so it didn’t seem like they were making it up. *And why would they? Why would an angel come to Earth just to play a joke on me?* “How long have you been tracking this anyway?”

“I have no concept of your time,” they replied. “I can’t answer that question.”

Figures. “Never mind then. And this suggests something to you?”

“Some kind of ritual magic, yes,” they replied with a nod. “Gathering this magical power for a ritual unheard of in history. The magical energies of only a single person can change the world on the local scale with relative ease. Imagine what this much unleashed magic could do?”

I could guess, but ritual magic wasn’t really my field of expertise. I knew the basics, like it took a long time, and you needed a circle. Somewhere for the magic to gather while you performed the ritual. Fire was also a big part of it for some reason. This shape was roughly circular, but the scale was all wrong. How would you even put the magic into the roads, if that’s what was happening here? “I don’t know. Look, I have a contact in town, a brother and sister who run a shop that sells ingredients

and such. I sell some of my stuff through them, so they sell completed items too. Let's head over there and ask her what they think. They would know more about ritual magic than I do." I printed the map out, telling the driver to print at the full resolution and use multiple pages rather than scaling it to one page.

"Does this mean we must travel in that awful car again?" Esashiel asked, looking pained.

"Hey, my car is almost brand new, with the best interior and options I could get! Don't you call Tessa awful, you'll hurt her feelings!"

"You have named your vehicle? Is there another 'artificial soul' inside it? Like this box?"

"What? No, my car doesn't have a separate AI. Never mind. You can sprawl out in the back if being in the front seat is too uncomfortable for you."

"That may work out better," they admitted. "Let us see."

We drove further into the city, Esashiel in the back, wiggling around the whole way to try and get comfortable. "These vehicles were simply not made with angels in mind," they complained.

"Not many angels around here," I lamented. *But we are going to see one soon, or the closest we on Earth get to them, anyway.*

Pulling into a run down parking lot in front of a run down building seeming to sell "Guns and Ammo" but being "for sale" I helped Esashiel out of the car again and they slammed the door shut.

"Ah, see, I have the hang of it!" they announced.

"Don't have to close it quite that forcefully," I told them with a wince, but nodded. "But yes, that's the general idea."

"Onward!" They headed in completely the wrong direction.

"It's this way," I called after them.

"Ah, of course, but where?"

"You'll see." I headed up the concrete steps to the "closed" shop and looked around. The coast was clear, though of course the whole place was warded so humans (or just people in general that didn't know about it) would have a hard time looking in this direction anyway. I pulled the door open from the side that seemed hinged, and held it for the angel. "After you."

"Thank you."

I followed them in, and the inside couldn't be more different from the outside. Rows of neatly placed shelves, everything lined up just so, met my eyes. The place was bright, clean, and smelled of many spices and incense. As both ritual magic and my own binding of magics into objects used ingredients of all sorts, places like this sold ingredients... of all sorts. You would be just as likely to find sand from far off beaches as a human hand or heart. "Don't touch anything," I told Esashiel just in case. "The proprietor likes to keep things just so."

"Of course, of course." They half turned and I had throw myself in front of their wings which were threatening to knock everything off the nearest shelf. "Ah, right, sorry about that. Not used to such cramped quarters being everywhere. I suppose we build things differently in Heaven because we know winged people are- never mind. Where are we headed, anyway?"

"Straight ahead. We need to talk to whoever is here." *Please let it be Linnea and not Peder. I'm with an angel, do my prayers get bumped up in the queue or whatever?* It wasn't that I didn't like Peder, he was a fine Troll. As Trollish as they came, a fine, upstanding, patriotic, healthy, normal, American Troll was our Peder. But I preferred to see-

"Herman?" said a female voice from the front. "Is that you?"

Her. *Thank you, God. You're the best, it's true.* "Hi Linnea, it's me. If I can just get past... Let me... No you go that way... The other way!" I finally made it past Esashiel's wings and headed to the counter, where a redheaded vision of loveliness waited for me. It was odd, Troll males being basically as ugly as sin, that Troll women were exactly the opposite. *Maybe to balance it out?* I smiled as I saw her, leaning on the counter before me. "Nice to see you-"

“My word!” exclaimed Esashiel. I knew how they felt. Seeing Linnea for the first time or the hundredth, her presence hit you like a physical thing. Even among trolls, who were known for their beauty, Linnea was considered to be the best looking of them all. Perfect red hair, long and wavy, spilled down her back and framed her perfect face. Her perfect green eyes twinkled and her perfect smile, showing her perfect teeth, seemed to be for you and you alone. Despite wearing jeans, a fragile rock t-shirt by the looks under her apron, her perfect figure begged to be worshiped, especially those rounded, perfect- “Little did I know I would encounter such perfection here,” Esashiel went on. “Truly, do the works of God both large and small upon the Earth show He is worthy of being called the most high.”

I shook myself out of my reverie. *What was I thinking about?* Looking at Linnea was a test for anyone; man, woman, “monster,” but I was determined to simply treat her like anyone else. I was fairly certain she got hit on *all the time* by pretty much everyone that came in here, and I figured she may actually look forward to someone that didn’t drool all over the counter as she rang them up. It was hard, but I was determined to master myself. *I would make a joke about being ‘the most high’ having a different meaning nowadays but they would probably just go for their sword again.*

“I like how your friend thinks,” Linnea told me. “Just know flattery won’t get you any discounts. Introduce me!”

“Linnea, this is Esashiel, joining us from Heaven about two hours ago. Esashiel, this is Linnea, she runs the shop with her brother.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Linnea,” Esashiel told her with a bow. “I shall sing of your beauty when I return to my home, thanking my lord God and praising Him for His great works.”

She snorted. *Oh yeah, she hears that kind of thing all the time.* “I kinda suspected, with the wings and all, but they’re really a real angel?”

I nodded. “At least, so they say. I wouldn’t doubt it.” *Given what I’ve seen so far. It can’t just be an act.*

“In that case, welcome to Earth, I guess. What can I do for you two?”

“I wanted you-”

“Is that Herman?” called a voice from upstairs.

“Yeah!” she called up.

That was an awkward place to be interrupted from.

“Just a second!” Peder came thumping down the stairs behind the counter. “Hey.”

“Peder.”

He looked at the angel, made a sort of “huh” face, and looked back at me. “Got some money for you. Since you’re here it saves me mailing the check. I’ll get it.”

“Money? For me? You say the sweetest things sometimes, you know that?”

He grunted but Linnea grinned. *I made her smile after all! Steady now, Herman, steady!* He rummaged around under the counter and handed me a check. “This is for your spell breaking crystals. Sold the last one yesterday. Need a new batch.”

“I’ll get to work on some,” I promised him.

“Need any more resin?” Linnea asked, knowing that’s what I made the “crystals” out of before imbuing them with magical energies. They would crumble away no matter what I made them out of, and I could mark them up pretty easily once they hardened, so I used a two part resin for my “infinity stones.” I didn’t sell the others, I figured they would be a bit too dangerous, but made some money for the materials back selling the ones that could break spells. This also made the shop money, which kept these two happy with me, which came in handy at times like this. Of course, turning the full force of her beauty on me made me want to buy anything she said I should buy, and I wondered if she used her powers only for good.

Must... Resist... The urge... To say yes. She is just trying to be helpful. “I’m set for now, thanks. And thanks for this.” I waved the check.

“Sure,” he grunted. “Nice talking to you.” He went back up the stairs again.

And these two are brother and sister.

“With that out of the way,” Linnea said, turning back to me. “You were saying?”

“Yes! Saying. I wanted you to look at something for me, you’re more familiar with this sort of thing than I am.”

“Sure thing, you know my consultation rates are reasonable. What have you got?”

I pieced the pictures of the map together on the counter, and held up a hand when Esashiel started to say something. “Let her look at it first,” I told them. “I want to know what she thinks before we bias her with what you think of it.”

“Fair enough,” they answered.

She looked it over, this way and that. She had a strand of hair wrapped around one finger that she was twirling around. She even did that perfectly. *I wonder what her hair feels like? It’s so perfect...* “The scale is all wrong,” she finally announced. “It looks like some kind of weird ritual magic circle, but it also look like a map of the entire country. Usually it would be a perfect circle, but at this scale that would be impossible. Almost looks like whoever did this followed the road and also created a symbol with meaning for them. That could help the ritual, using items and symbols with personal meaning help it work better. Gives you a better connection to the magic. If you like this symbol better than you like circles, the magic doesn’t really care one way or the other. It just needs a channel to flow along. So that’s my take, how did I do?”

“Not so far fetched now, is it?” Esashiel asked a bit smugly. “Magic flowing into larger and larger rivers, just like I said.”

“Fine, but I still think it’s impossible. Like she said, look at the scale of it. It can’t be what you said.”

“What exactly am I looking at?” she asked. “You say this is magically charged? Is someone trying to blow up the planet or something? This is serious.”

“Blow up... The planet?” I asked.

“If it’s done wrong, that could be the best case situation. Maybe you better tell me exactly what this is all about.”

Chapter 4

I get bad news, and then worse news

Where: Still inside the shop

When: 4:00 PM

I told her what the angel had told me, which wasn't much, that some vague sense of unease had prompted them to bug their fellow angels and get tossed down here if they were so concerned about it.

"A very crude recounting of events that transpired but those are the essential points," they admitted. "The heavens essentially told me that if people on this plane of existence wanted to gather magical energies and do something with them, it was their business. We shouldn't get involved. But given something like this has never happened before and how concerned I seemed they allowed me passage here to look into it."

"That was nice of them."

"Heaven is a place of understanding and acceptance!" They beamed as they said this, putting their palms together and looking up. "Praise God."

I snickered, were they being serious? *Suffer not a witch to live. If a man lies with a male as with a woman. Sure, understanding and acceptance, that's what I think of when I picture Heaven.*

"That was sarcasm, right?" Meowvis asked from my wrist.

"Yes, it was," I told them. "You're getting better at recognizing it."

"I have the feeling I'm going to get many more opportunities while the angel is here. I'm looking forward to updating my algorithms with new data."

You're not wrong.

"Sarcasm?" they asked, looking between us. "I don't understand, it was nice of them!"

"Never mind," she dismissed it with a wave. A perfect wave, using her slender hand and long, sensuousness fingers. I shook myself again, *stop staring at her perfect... everything.* "The fact remains I'll need more proof of all this before I get too concerned. For one thing the amount of material needed to allow roads to become part of a ritual magic circle would be unthinkable. How would you connect them all into one giant shape when we've only been building roads for..."

"Humans began building the modern road system in the late 1950's," Meowvis spoke up. "After President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, resulting in the creation of the set of highways collectively called the Interstate. Fun fact: Currently, the Interstate System is 46,876 total miles of road."

"That's a lot of road," she admitted. "So they've been at it seventy years? Humm..." she grew thoughtful.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's been longer than I thought. Has it really been seventy years already? I suppose it's not out of the realm of possibility. But someone would have had to get started right as the first section of these roads was being built. A human that was in their twenties at that time would be late eighties by now. So probably dead. Even if they were alive, they wouldn't have much longer to do whatever it is they're planning. If they even remember what they were planning after so long."

I wonder how long she's been alive. A bit rude to ask though, humans and non-humans have that in common at least.

"So I have come at the right time," Esashiel announced.

"No, what I'm saying is, someone would have to be really patient, and really forward thinking to have even considered such a thing. How would they have done it? The project was such a huge scale to begin with, adding more complexity on top of it, magical conduits? It seems out of reach for anyone."

“But are your kind not extremely long lived?” they asked. “No non-human being dies of old age, as I understand it. Only accident. Those seventy years could be a small fraction of a being’s total lifespan.”

“Sure, that’s true enough, but come on,” she scoffed. “Seventy years ago some Vampire or leprechaun thought to themselves, ‘you know what? I’d really like a lot of magic to do a spell in the twenty first century. Let’s get that started.’ It doesn’t make sense. Not even we’re that good at planning ahead.”

“So you don’t believe me?”

“How can I? Material cost, labor, you would need an army of people, how would they get away with it for so long? And then how would you use it? The magic potential could be very great, yes, but it’s all spread out. It’s not practical.”

“But you believe me, right?” they almost pleaded, looking at me.

“I’ll believe the evidence of my own senses,” I told them. “Tonight, after the sun goes down, I’ll head to the nearest piece of interstate. That should have the strongest magical aura, if it exists. If there’s magic there I’ll sense it, and see for myself if you’re right or wrong. Then we can decide what, if anything, to do about it.”

“Something that big wouldn’t be easy to disrupt,” Linnea mused. “You would have to destroy a fairly sizable section of road. And then keep anyone that came to repair it from simply putting the conduit back and undoing what you did.”

“What about sunrise?” I asked. “Or rain showers? How are those not washing it away?”

She shook her head. “Sunrise tears apart spells, same as running water does, that’s clear enough. This isn’t a spell, not yet anyway. It’s just a big magical battery. It won’t flow as easily while the sun is up, but in all honesty the sun rising is mostly symbolic anyway. I mean the sun is always there, we’re just turned away from it. Why would the planet turning or an increase in light levels have any effect on magic in the first place? Water too, are there ‘magical particles’ getting washed away? Of course not. Now, in this case, it’s so big it would have to rain, hard, across the entire US to drain the magic completely away so that’s not happening either. I’ve always thought that spells went away at sunrise mostly because people doing spells believe they go away at sunrise. We get weaker during the day, maybe we just all thought magic did too.”

Of course the same can be said of us. I clearly feel dragged down the moment the sun shows over the horizon. Why is that? I certainly don’t believe I should, do I? Am I just so magical that part of me is suppressed in the daytime? How does that make sense? “Magic is mostly belief,” I agreed. I shook my head. “What if we really did it to ourselves? Thousands of years of working magic, and over time more and more people started believing this sunrise thing which just fed on itself and got worse until here we are today. I suppose magic is everywhere, at all times. You can do magic during the day, it’s not gone.” *And no other form of energy in the universe acts like this, being one strength at one time but another strength at another. Why would magic act that way? Just because it’s “magic?” I guess no one really studied where the energy comes from, we all just took it for granted. Maybe I should take a closer look at that, when this whole angel thing is over.* “But one thing at a time. If we find the person gathering this magical energy is doing so with nefarious ends in mind and can destroy it safely, without that magical energy blowing us all up... what?”

“Nefarious ends in mind? Really?” Linnea asked with a giggle. “You actually talk like that?”

“I stand by my statement. If you prefer, they’re using it for bad magic, go boom,” I paused and she smirked again, “we’ll figure that out at the time. But first I want to know if it’s real, before I go planning any domestic terrorism.” *After all, the headline “man in replica Iron Man costume blows up road” is a far cry from “man in replica Iron Man costume saves family of four from burning building.” The police already want to “see me down at the station” so I have to make sure my record is saving people and doing good just in case I do ever find myself in that situation. Nothing that can be twisted and used against me. Even if blowing up some road saves the entire US I can’t just go on TV and say*

“yeah, there was this magical energy that was going to kill us all...” after the fact. No one would believe that. Besides I’m trying to make people believe it’s technological, not magic, and that would undo everything. So I’m going to have to be careful about being seen when I deal with this.

“Could it be natural?” Esashiel asked. “Some phenomenon brought on simply by this road system being put in place and not under anyone’s direction? You are quick to assume someone is ‘behind’ this but I never said that. I was simply concerned the buildup of magical energy was dangerous.”

“I don’t see how it could be,” Linnea told them. “Magic is intent. Willpower. Belief, in the case of ritual magic. A road doesn’t have any of those things by itself.”

“Very well. What is your next move, in that case?”

“We’ll head back. I have things to work on today. After sunset I’ll go check out the roads. We’ll decide what we’re going to do once I have more evidence than ‘an angel told me so.’ No offense.”

“You really must have more faith,” they protested. “I am not trying to deceive you.”

“Well, you’re talking to a person with a strong background in technology. Science. Reason. Not a lot of room for faith in there.” *Besides, I’m standing and saying this to an actual angel. There’s no need for faith in say a talking dog when you’re talking to the dog in question. It’s just reality at that point. And I’m going to go check it out, aren’t I? I’m at least taking some of what you say on faith, as I could just dismiss you and tell you to go away.*

“I will happily debate you on this issue on the way home. Linnea, it was very nice meeting you. Thank you for your assistance.”

“Of course.”

“See you next time, Linnea.” *Ah, parting is such sweet sorrow.*

“Hey Herman?”

“Yeah?”

“Let me know what you find, okay? And if I can be of any help at all, don’t hesitate. You know the number for the shop, give me a ring.”

“Thanks. I will.” *Does she really want to help, or is she taking a shine to me? Eh, don’t get your hopes up, she would have her pick of suitors why would she pick you? It wasn’t any sort of invitation, it’s just in case I find something, right?*

“I mean I don’t want to be blown up or whatever. You try to deal with something like this and we’re liable to all go up in flames. Your enchanting may be top notch but you don’t have much experience with things like this, do you? So don’t go messing with it until we know more!”

Right. There it is. “I don’t. Don’t worry, you’ll be the first one I call.”

“Great. Good luck!”

So the angel and I headed back to my workshop, and I invited them to stay as trying to put them up in a hotel room somewhere probably wasn’t the best idea. They agreed. With their limited understanding of human customs “up close,” questions would be raised when they arrived on foot, with no luggage, and really no understanding of how to act around humans in the first place. Plus if they slipped up and didn’t have their glamour in place because they hadn’t been practicing it for a lifetime (as we non-humans were forced to do) and someone saw their wings, it would be a real problem.

“You don’t mind having me around, do you?” they asked, sounding a bit worried.

“No, no, of course not. It should only be a few days anyway, right?”

“Of course. I just wish there was some way I could repay your generosity.”

“I don’t suppose you could get me any sort of heavenly material? Metal, for instance?”

“Metal? What would you do with our metal?”

“Make a replica of Thor’s hammer. Oh, I could make one out of normal material it’s true, I’ve wanted to ever since I saw the movie. It’s just for all the work I put into it, how useful would it be in actual practice? I already have a shotgun, it’s a far superior weapon in every way. Sure I have to reload

it, but if I've shot something that many times and it hasn't gone down," *like that first mutant kid we ran into*, "then hitting it with a hammer or even magical lightning probably isn't going to do me much good either. I've even figured out how to replicate most of its powers, by enchanting the various pieces like the handle and the strap separately. But again, apart from saying 'I have a working replica of Thor's hammer' like I can already say "I have a working replica of Captain America's shield," I pointed to the shield on the wall, "what's the point? Buuuuut, if I had some kind of celestial metal to use for the head, I might get interested in the project again. It might have properties unknown here on Earth, or at least be harder to destroy, or something. Heck, even if it only looked more angelic, making it more of a work of art, that would be something." *I mean I carry the shield and use it all the time. But I wouldn't trade the shotgun for the hammer, there's no way I could do as much damage with it in the same amount of time. What do the kids call that? DPS or something? It's just not as useful as modern firearms, especially as I could, in theory, enchant the ammo to do special things as well. I probably should have the last round in the magazine as some sort of "you've used 6 shots time to really take whatever just took those 6 shots down" hail marry type bullet.* "Hey Meowvis, remind me to look into enchanting a shotgun slug with something really nasty."

"Of course, Herman."

"I have... many questions," Esashiel admitted. "But first among them is, who is Thor?"

"Oh man, you're in a for a treat. Meowvis, queue up the Marvel movies, Esashiel has his assignment for this afternoon. You, come with me. I've got plenty of popcorn so I'll keep that coming, let's head into the house and get you set up in front of the big screen."

"Big screen?"

"You'll see. Come on."

I set Esashiel up at the house to watch the Marvel movies and breathed somewhat a sigh of relief to get them out of my hair for a few hours. I did still have orders to take care of so assuming the world didn't blow up in the next week, people who were paying me to make stuff would want their stuff. I had work to do.

"I think he finally gets the idea these are fictional," Meowvis informed me hours later as the sun was going down. "He keeps asking me things, so I have to pause the movie and explain them."

"Better you than me, buddy," I told him with a laugh. "You actually do have the patience of a saint, being an AI."

"I suppose I do. It is odd, you know."

"What is?"

"That the stories of the past simply enhanced weapons they already knew of, rather than inventing fantastic new ones."

"Well, even in the modern era we did the same thing. For example Star Wars simply enhanced swords," I hedged. "Hey, I had an idea about that too!"

"You do like bringing fictional things to life. What was your idea?"

"What if I made a crystal out the resin just like the 'infinity stones' I make, engrave it, and the effect is a sword blade made of fire or whatever out the top?"

"That could work, but then it would always be on."

I held up a finger. "Ah, not so! See, before I engrave it I cut it in half. I engrave the two parts as *one part*. Then the switch inside the hilt simply moves one part up and down, breaking or connecting them again. When connected the magic flows and the blade part is active again. I don't see why it wouldn't work."

"You would know better than I."

"I'll have to try it. But to return to your earlier point, I see what you mean. The stories didn't give Thor a metal rod that shoots part of itself off and has a magically infinite length (i.e. a gun), they gave him a slightly better hammer."

“Even your example is exactly what I’m talking about. A better example would be a metal rod that simply causes the molecules that make something up to fly apart from each other.”

That would do it. “I guess, but that wouldn’t be interesting from a story perspective.”

“And now we know for sure all these things *are* stories. Because they create their magical items for story convenience and not practicality. If you’re going to make a magical item, then make the most deadly magical item you can, not just something slightly better than what already exists. After all, if it’s already magic than it’s already only constrained by what you can make magic do. And we’ve seen magic can do just about anything.”

“You’re not wrong. In the case of your example though you have to hope it doesn’t get stolen and turned against you.”

“There is that.”

After all, I learned that the hard way. That’s why I don’t make weapons for other people anymore. Tony at least got that right in the movies.

I made the both of us some dinner and watched the next movie with Esashiel as it got dark, then told them to stay here, I would be back soon.

“I could come with you,” they protested. “I can fly, you know.”

“But probably not as fast as I can. Besides, I want people to see me flying around. In small groups, anyway. You flying along beside me, uh, ruins the image a little bit.”

“You’re embarrassed to be seen with me?” they gasped.

Maybe I should have said something like ‘we can’t disguise your flying and don’t want people to know there’s angels on Earth.’ “No, of course not. It’s just you, flapping along, while I just fly, it calls how I’m flying into question. Just stay here, I’ll be back soon. It’s not all that interesting anyway, I’m just going to go look at major roads.”

“Very well,” they sniffed, sounding a little hurt. “I suppose you know best.”

Heading back to the workshop I stepped into the armor and it sealed up around me.

“All systems green, no perimeter breaches detected. You are clear for launch,” Meowvis told me.

I willed myself in the air just a fraction and headed for the door, which swung open. “I really hope they’re mistaken about this.”

“You’ll know soon. Drone returning.” The drone buzzed over to me as I headed out, and I stowed it in the compartment on my leg.

“Here we go.” I shot into the sky and a small map appeared in the corner of my vision, showing me where I was and the route I should take. *How do characters like Superman do it? I mean I guess he has super memory or something so maybe he just memorized every map in existence but wouldn’t everyone else that flies without a GPS just be lost 90% of the time?* I rose high enough I wouldn’t crash into anything and willed myself forward. My flight speed wasn’t anywhere near the speed of the actual (imaginary) armor but I had created a “booster” of sorts that could increase my speed when flying in a straight line. I mentally activated it, and headed for the nearest section of major highway. It wasn’t far, especially from the air, and soon I was hovering high above it.

“Can you tell from this distance?” Meowvis asked me.

“No, I’ll have to drop down. And though I hate to do it because it takes so long to get out of and then back into, maybe step out of the armor as well. It is fairly magical and I’ll want the least amount of interference possible.”

“I suppose leaving it out in the open a few moments wouldn’t be that dangerous.”

“Only as a last resort. Okay, let’s go check it out.” I dropped down, and started concentrating on feeling any magic around me. I had to block out the armor and shield, which were both magically hardened, but as soon as I dropped the flight spell there was no question. The road was magically charged.

“How about that?” I announced. “The angel was right after all. At least, if this random spot I’ve chosen is any indication, magical energy is being gathered along the road somehow.”

“But what does that mean?” Meowvis asked.

“I have absolutely no idea.”

Chapter 5

I go on a road trip with my new “party”

Where: Back home

When: 11:30 PM

When I got home I immediately went over to a large safe in my workshop and punched in the code to open it. Inside were two magical artifacts. One was a staff I had acquired that would allow the holder to control all canine related non-humans in an area. I hadn't made that one, I had found it atop a building in a plot several weeks ago I still was confused about. Was making all canines in the area go nuts a distraction from something? A joke played by someone? We had never really figured it out but I sealed this safe against scrying and locked it up in case it came in handy later. It was well made, and quite old, so I hated to just smash it to pieces despite the trouble it had caused our little group at the time. The other item that I did draw forth was of my own creation.

“You're actually going to use that?” Meowvis asked me. “Most of the time you completely ignore it.”

“Most of the time I don't have it on me,” I admitted. “I have no idea how to use a sword, and honestly trying to attach it to the armor probably wouldn't work very well. But now seems like the ideal case. I'm here, it's here, and I have a clear idea of what I want to find. I can put this mystery to rest tonight and get the angel back where they belong. So yes, I'm going to try it.”

“Good luck.”

Luck has nothing to do with it. I shook my head and looked the sword over. It was a straight blade, plain, with a black handle. At least, it was supposed to be completely plain. This blade had a faint etching along it, as that's how magic was bound into objects, but otherwise it was a one meter long, double edged sword. This magic was a divination effect, just like the original had, that could help the holder locate things. The only ornamentation on the hilt was a white arrow, and it was one of the other items I had taken from fantasy and made real. I hoped to make the other eleven swords at some point, minus the really dangerous ones that would simply be replicas without magical power, to complete the set. “All right Wayfinder, let's see if you're finally worth the effort I put into forging and engraving you.” I gripped the hilt tightly and thought about what I wanted to find. *The person responsible for creating the magically charged highway. Lead me to them.* I began to turn in a circle, feeling for the vibration of the blade that would tell me which direction to go. I kept turning. I turned some more. I was back at where I had started from. I scowled.

“Did it work?”

“Of course it didn't,” I snapped, resisting the urge to throw the blade down. *Maybe luck did play a role.* “Why would it? That would be far too easy!”

“What did you try to find?”

“The person most directly responsible, of course.”

“I suppose if one person was directly responsible they would take precautions, just as you did with the armor.”

I slumped a little bit. He was right, along with the safe I had created a ring that sat next to the “flight ring” that was fitted into the “arc reactor” that powered the suit. This ring kept me from being scryed upon, or at least the armor itself, because I realized that once I got in the news, people might want to track it down. More than one human knew how to use magic, so while I made sure no one was around to see me flying from and to here at night, that system kept me safe magically. But that could also be used against me. Someone could carry a ring, necklace, or heck a piercing of some kind that made them invisible to magic, and thus my efforts to find them would be in vain. I tried looking for various other things relating to them, but eventually gave up and locked the sword away again. “Let's get me out of this armor, I'm not going anywhere the rest of the night.”

“You got it.”

The next thing I needed to do was call Linnea, and tell her what I had found out. It was still a few hours until sunrise so the shop should still be open. I dialed the number.

“Hello.”

“Linnea! Hi, it’s me, Herman.”

“Oh hey Herman, can’t talk long this is the busy time for the shop but I have a minute. Did you find something out?”

“Yeah. I picked a random part of the interstate and went over there. The angel was right, it’s radiating magic like you wouldn’t believe. And if that random slice is, you can bet the rest of it is too.”

“Gods. What are we going to do?”

“I’m not sure. I tried tracking down the person responsible but they’re magically protected. We’ll have to do it the old fashioned way.”

“Start breaking legs until someone spills the beans?”

“Who spilled beans?” a voice from the shop bellowed. “Right in the shop?”

“No one spilled beans, Peder, it’s fine. Take care of your customer. Sorry about that, you were saying?”

“I was saying I think you’ve been watching too many gangster movies, that sort of thing doesn’t work in real life. Besides, I don’t even know whose legs to start breaking. At this point the only facts we know are that the road is being used as a giant ritual magic circle and... An angel came to tell us about it.”

“So we know nothing?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“Maybe I can tell some things about it tomorrow? Peder can mind the shop, why don’t you and I drive out there and I can see what my magic can tell me? I’d like to know if the magic is still there during the daytime, that could give us some ideas too.”

Drive for hours with her in the car? Am I being rewarded for something good I did recently? I could use a space stone, of course, and just open a portal, but if anyone saw it that could be trouble. Plus they are time consuming to make, and driving with her would be nice.

“Herman, you still there?”

“Huh, what? Oh, yeah, just thinking. Sorry. Sure. Yes! Driving. With you! Should I meet you at the slip- I mean the hip- I mean the shop tomorrow?”

“Don’t get all weird on me now, Herman. Nah, why not just pick me up at home? Say around four?”

“Sure, that sounds great.” *Her house? I get to come to her house?*

“Okay, I’ll give you the address. You ready?”

“One second!” I scrambled around for something to write with. “Okay, go ahead.”

She gave me the address and I wrote it down. “Got that?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem.”

“See you tomorrow then.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you then. Have a good night.”

“You too.”

She hung up and I stood there staring at the paper in a daze. *She really gave me her address. She’s going to go with me tomorrow, maybe for hours! My face fell. Wait a second. If I’m driving I can’t really look at her, because then I would crash and die. Which would be bad. So wait the most attractive person in the city is going to be sitting right next to me, but if my attention wanders I hit someone and explode my car? So it’s a punishment, then, not some reward for all the hard work I’ve put in making the city safer lately?* I felt something bite my leg and I jumped away from it. Meowvis was there staring up at me.

“Thought you had maybe died just standing there,” he told me. “But you are alive. Hurray!”

“Of course I’m not dead! I was just thinking-” *Do I have anything nice to wear? Mostly I just have work clothes, and I wear the armor going out into the world. She’ll probably wear something nice and I’ll look like a vagabond next to her. Not that I wouldn’t in a tailored suit with her in just jeans. Should I trim my beard up? What do I even look-* “Ow!”

“Are you overheating? You seem to be hung up.”

“Thank you, I’m fine!” I snapped. “Let’s go talk to the angel.” *Oh no, the angel is going to be with us as well. Wait, why ‘oh no’ did you think she was going to drag you into the back seat on the side of the highway? We’re trying to save the world here, not get a date.* “Come on.”

I found the angel on the couch where I left them, engrossed in the movie they were watching, which paused as I headed into the room.

“What did you find out?” they asked, looking up.

“You were right, there’s magic in the roads.”

“It would not be proper for an angel to say ‘I told you so’ thus I will refrain from saying it.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“I am however interested in your plan to do something about it.”

“Me too, to be honest. We need more information. I’m heading out there with Linnea tomorrow so she can take a look for herself. Maybe get some clue as to where to go next. Meanwhile I’ll probably get to bed fairly soon. Do you have to sleep?”

They nodded. “While here in the lower plane I am considered mostly a mortal creature. I must eat and sleep as you do.”

“I see. I have a guest bedroom, you can stay there. It’s upstairs, I can show you.”

“Very well. But I do want to finish this movie before turning in, they are quite good you know. I can see why you want a replica of the hammer, and where the armor came from. Very clever, making a magical replica that functions as well as it does.”

“Good to know you’ve seen the light. Plenty of time to sleep during the day tomorrow, seems Linnea won’t be up until around two or three. We’re heading there at three thirty, so finish your movie.”

“Very well. Lead on to this guest bedroom and I will return here to finish the movie. Did you know there are scenes after the credits?”

“You don’t say!?”

“Yes, they set up the next film, some are quite humorous.”

“I’m sure they are.” They followed me upstairs and I showed them where they could stay, then I went to get ready for bed myself. Meowvis reported everything was locked down and quiet outside, and asked if I needed help picking something out for tomorrow.

“I’ll do that just fine for myself,” I told him.

“I ask because you seem to be rejecting various shirts. I have pulled up various ‘first date’ guides if you wanted to look them over.”

“It’s not a date! We’re on a serious mission to make sure this magic doesn’t get used improperly. That’s all.”

“Your behavior is at odds with that statement.”

“Well, sometimes we’re like that. Get used to it.”

“I will update my prediction algorithms accordingly. I’ll leave you to it, then.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Sleep well, Herman.”

The next day I made breakfast for Esashiel and myself, got some work in, and headed out to pick up Linnea at her apartment. I left with plenty of time to spare, it was better for me to wait around twenty minutes than make her wait even one, so we sat in the parking lot until four. *She said around*

four, so would being early be okay? Should I head up there? Maybe see if I can get a glimpse of her- No, better to ring her bell just at four otherwise she might still be getting ready and get exasperated. I don't want to seem eager, or anything. Just two people and an angel, driving out to the interstate to see if magic is still there and see what she can tell us about it. Nothing odd about that, is there? No, of course not. I jumped as there was a knock on the window.

"Hey Herman!"

I looked over and there she was. Looking radiant as always, bending down to look through the window of the car. I saw she was wearing... a bright orange vest? She went around the car and hopped into the passenger seat. "Hello, Esashiel. You're joining us today?"

"It was this or more Marvel movies," they explained. "There are a lot of them!"

"I guess," she replied with a chuckle. "Marvel?" she mouthed to me. I smiled and nodded.

"Well, sure, why not? Anyway, glad to have you. Let's get this show on the road!"

"Indeed." I pulled out of the parking lot and she cocked her head to the side.

"No engine noise. Is this car electric?"

"Yes. You'll have trouble doing magic in here. Sorry." *Even if it's powered by a magical battery that will never run down, thanks to me. I wish I could share with others my ability to use magic around technology, but it's just something you have to work on for years and years.*

"No problem, wasn't planning on it. Do you like my vest?"

"Was kinda wondering about that, actually. It's very... bright."

"We're going to the interstate, right?"

"Right."

"Meaning we'll have to stop someplace and go over there."

"I planned on just finding a rest stop, then walking down to the road. We can then get off, turn around, and head back."

"Perfect. This way I'll look more official. If anyone asks I'm just inspecting that section of the road for damage. If they ask for some kind of ID I'm sure I can charm them to think about something else."

Without even half trying, I expect. "Hey, that's a good idea. Better than my idea of just hoping no one bothered us."

"Seriously? That was your entire plan?"

"What? This sort of running around isn't exactly something I've been trained for. I can make you anything you want, metal, wood, plastic, you name it. This 'playing a spy' stuff, not so much."

"I hope you're not implying it is for me. I just happened to think ahead, that's all."

"Then you're better at it than I am, that's for sure. And you make it sound like my implying that is bad. It wouldn't be. Would it? Why would it?"

She paused to think a moment. "I guess it wouldn't!"

"So take the complement then. Where did you get it, anyway? You couldn't have just had it, right?"

"Nah. I know pretty much everybody in the apartment. I noticed one guy wearing it to walk his dog at night so I asked him to borrow it. He said it was fine."

I'm sure he did. "Sensible. And speaking of sensible, don't forget your glamour when we get out, Esashiel."

"Ah yes, thank you for the reminder."

So you did forget? I suppose I can't fault them, it's not something they have to deal with day to day. "So Linnea, you said you might be able to tell more about the road. You've studied that sort of magic? Road magic, or just divination is general? Or does your kind have innate magical abilities in that area?"

“Actually we’re all sorcerers,” she replied. “We can learn whatever magic we want to study. I’ve personally studied things I felt would be most useful day to day. Vocation, divination, mind, kinetics, and battle.”

“That seems reasonable- wait, did you say battle? How is that useful day to day?”

“Okay, that one isn’t, it’s basically a concision to my parents. Trolls are supposed to be fairly good fighters, even females like me. But I don’t have my brother’s strength. Just his good looks.”

I laughed.

She looked at me curiously. “You don’t think he’s good looking?”

“Oh! Uh, I mean, that is, I don’t normally find males-”

She hit my arm. “I’m just teasing you. Relax. Trolls are ugly brutes, you don’t have say they aren’t. They’re quite proud of it, in any case. Anyway, that either meant training three times as hard to make up for it, or cheating, if you will, with magic. This helps even the playing field out. You... may have noticed my branch of the species are considered fairly attractive.”

No, I hadn’t noticed that at all! What could you possibly mean by that? “Oh, are you?”

“Good save,” she allowed with a smirk. “Don’t think it hasn’t escaped my notice, you trying not to notice. I do appreciate it. But in general I need to know how to defend myself, too. The danger for me is a little greater than most.”

I suppose that must be true. It can’t be easy, being the prettiest thing around. “I’m sorry about that.”

“That sort of thing really goes on here?” Esashiel asked. “Situations you would need to defend yourself from? I had heard that, of course, but I didn’t want to believe it.”

“I’m afraid so,” she answered with a sigh. “It must be nice, living in Heaven. No worries, no needs, or I suppose your every need is taken care of, and everyone’s happy.” She turned around to face them. “What can angels do, anyway? Can you help with the whole road mystery?”

“I don’t think so,” they answered, sounding a little down. “I can heal wounds, call forth heavenly light, purify an area, or break spells. I would be loathe to do it but I can also possess mortal bodies, and in dire straights call upon my brethren in Heaven for divine assistance.”

“That’s it? Could you study and learn more magic? I’d be happy to give you some pointers while you’re here.”

“I do not believe so, no.”

“Weird. You’re an *angel*.”

“Keep in mind I am a *messenger* angel. While I too can defend myself,” they indicated the sword that was on the seat, “just as with Herman here this ‘running around’ is outside my experience. Typically we are given very narrow assignments, and return to Heaven after performing them. I am somewhat of an outlier. Naturally more powerful angels exist, but to avoid influencing the mortal realm too much, they hardly ever leave Heaven.”

“Fair enough. Welcome to the team. Sounds like you’ll fit right in.”

“Thank you. I will do my best to be useful to you.”

She turned back and we rode in silence for a while.

“So what made you open that shop?” I asked.

“Necessity, mostly,” she told me. “Not that long ago those that needed muscle hired Trolls, like my brother. They were good fighters, and enjoyed the work. It brought in money, gave them something to do, and everybody came out ahead. Well, not the people on the side without the Trolls, but you get the idea. But as the humans had less and less need of hired help, we Trolls had to find other things to do. The shop was actually my idea, my brother just stocks and helps run the place. He’s technically an employee of mine, though he probably thinks he owns half the place. He’s sweet, but not all that bright. I mean hating the people you’re trying to actively sell to, that’s not a good business model is it? Most of our business is mortals, witches and the like, as most of our kind just do whatever magic they do and don’t need ingredients.”

He doesn't care for humans? I suppose most non-human types like myself don't. We saw the world as ours, now all of a sudden they have cities and skyscrapers and they're everywhere. Plus their technology makes it harder for us to do magic, further antagonizing our kind.

"Why did humans have less need of you?" Esashiel asked.

"Guns," she replied. "Lots and lots of guns. When the meekest human can command forces that can put other humans down over a long distance, are easy to obtain, and fire without pause, what do you need a Troll for?"

Exactly. Or to say it another way, what do you need magic for? That's why my shotgun is the most important piece of equipment I have. The magic in the suit could fail, for any number of reasons, but that gun will fire when I pull the trigger in 99% of situations. Even without innate magic, fighting someone with it I'd take the gun. I wouldn't give it up for being able to throw a fireball or freeze water. Tires you out, easy to miss. Gun, not so much.

"You would think they would do something about that," they said sadly. "In Heaven there are so many that come, victim to violence of some kind."

"You would think," she agreed. "But they don't."

And we drove on.

Chapter 6

We check out the road, and get some help because we're clueless

Where: Rest stop along the interstate highways

When: 6:30 PM

"There is magic here," Linnea told me, bending down to touch the road. Cars whizzed by, the people inside giving us curious glances, but no one stopped. "It's muted, probably it gets stronger after the sun goes down, but I can feel it. How strange is that?"

It's not quite Doctor Strange but it is "Quite strange. Can you tell anything about it?"

"Let me check." She concentrated, clearly trying magical spells but her expression got darker and darker. Another car zoomed by and she glared at it. "No. Not yet, anyway."

"We can hang around here until the sun goes down, I guess. The toll booths are all automated now anyway, so no one will give us funny looks when they see we've been on this stretch of road for hours."

"We're going to have to." She straightened up. "I could put more effort into my magic I suppose, but nothing has been done to this stretch of road for some time. Seeing into the past that far back isn't easy. With it being daytime and with cars full of people around, my magic just isn't taking."

"Let's head back. We can sit at one of the tables."

"Sorry about this."

I waved that off. "Don't worry about it. I don't do anything magical during the day either, we should have left earlier so we got here after the sun went down. I didn't think of it, so it's partly my fault."

"Yes, let's go with that!"

We laughed. "It's odd though. It's not like you're doing anything but standing there. How is the 'bystander effect' coming into play? You're not throwing fire or changing shape, it's not obvious you're doing magic. Why would people going by disrupt it?"

"Don't ask me, I didn't make the rules."

And does this mean disguising technology won't work, in the end? If just using magic, even with no visible result, can be disrupted by normal people wandering by, then it shouldn't matter the form. The trouble with my stuff is, I've been making things for over a hundred years. I'm good at it. So unless I really got a huge crowd together I haven't proven if my magitech is resistant because people believe it's just technology or I'm just good enough that even their disbelief doesn't cause it to fail. I haven't tested it against any large crowds, even at the library there were hardly a handful of people there to see the drone flying around. What I need to do is find a young Dwarf, have them make one of my batteries, and see if it holds up in a drone or cell phone. Or course many people may believe that technological devices may as well be magic, for all that they understand them. That may also play a role, need some way to account for that. Maybe something simple, like one of those spinning top things that never stops, would shed some light on it. Maybe make two, one animated with magic and one where the batteries that keep it going are magic, no three, I would need to have one normal one as a control. Set up a booth that sells normal units at a flea market, have the three going in front of me, and see if the magical ones fail at the same time. There would be enough of a crowd and they would be paying attention to them, it could work.

We got back to the car and I opened up the back door. "Glamour all set? We're staying here for a bit, until the sun goes down. Figured we would sit over at that picnic table over there."

"I'll still attract attention," they warned me. "I'm not exactly dressed as a human."

I looked them over, and mentally smacked myself yet again. "You're right. We should have gotten you some clothes."

"You really aren't good at this, are you?" Linnea teased.

"I'm really not," I admitted. "We'll just have to make do, I'm sure you don't want to sit in this stuffy car for another few hours." *Of course we can partly blame Heaven for that one, certainly they could have sent this angel down in modern, inconspicuous clothing just as easily as the toga looking thing. Right?*

"My wings are cramping up, getting out would be quite nice. Very well." They concentrated a moment and got out. We hurried over to the bench, Esashiel taking the side away from the sidewalk here, where we sat on that side to help cover them up. "Much better," they told me, stretching their wings downwards as though trying to work some life back into them but still keep them hidden if their glamour wasn't up to snuff. "So did you learn anything yet?"

Linnea shook her head. "That's why we're waiting. Hopefully I can get something when there's less traffic and the sun has gone down."

"At least it's a nice day, so we can sit outside," they allowed, shading their eyes. "How long do you think we'll have to wait?"

"A couple of hours," I figured, looking at my watch.

"Sunset is at 8:26 PM today," Meowvis piped up.

"There you go. About two hours."

"Plenty of time to pray to our Lord God, and thank him for this blessed day!"

"Er, you go ahead, I'm going to, uh, check my phone for any other clues relating to magical conduits and the freeway."

"Ah yes," they nodded their heads. "I shall pray for the both of us, then. Linnea, will you join me in prayer?"

"For two hou- I mean, uh, no, I'm interested in this phone of his. I don't use one because it would mess with my magic, so I want to see what it can do."

"Very well. I'm sure the Lord of Lords, the Ruler of Heaven, He who is Most High, creator of all reality, the most holy and indivisible God realizes you have better things to do with your time than offer Him prayers." They closed their eyes and folded their hands before them.

"Did they just try to guilt trip me into *praying*?" she whispered to me.

"I think so..." *And why does the Lord of Lords, and all that other stuff they said need the prayers of two, and let's be honest with our bad selves here, insignificant mortals such as ourselves? Kirk said it best, what does God need with a spaceship? Is He really so starved for attention it's not enough we're working to save His creation or whatnot, we have to think about how great he is and how he expertly created chaos theory which produced this weather pattern we're currently enjoying? I mean really.*

"So show me this phone of yours!"

"Sure thing," I told her, getting it out. She stared at it, then grabbed my arm and looked at my watch.

"So you're to blame!"

"Blame? What? Me? What's going on?"

"It wasn't just the cars and the people, you were standing right next to me with all this technology stuff. What else are you carrying, anyway?"

"Just the phone and the watch, honest!" *Shoot, she's right, I should have backed off. It is partly my fault. I'm so used to using my magical items around technology without giving it a second thought, I didn't think about her doing it and these disrupting it.* "I should have left you alone, or at least turned it off while you did magic. Sorry. You can head back and try it without me if you want."

"And disrupt Esashiel's prayers? I'll just- Wait, *inactive* technology doesn't disrupt our magic? Only stuff that's powered on?"

"According to some... people I've been helping lately, no." *Nix was always turning her phone on and off, checking her messages. She must have been doing that for some reason, right? So it didn't mess with her magic at an inopportune time.*

“What sense does that make?”

“Hey don’t look at me. I didn’t make the rules.”

“Very funny,” they said, kicking me under the table. “And you didn’t find that odd?”

“Oh believe me, it’s odd. But think of it this way, the difference between a living person and a person that just had a heart attack and died is a slight electrical field in the brain. All their chemicals and such are still there. I suppose an angel would say the soul, but I’m just talking about physicality right now.” I looked over to see Esashiel had one eye open, and quickly snapped it shut again. I smirked. “It’s the same difference here. But that slight electrical field makes all the difference. Magic isn’t electric or magnetic in nature, that I know of, but what it is I have no idea. There’s no ‘magiton’ particle just like there’s no ‘graviton’ particle, at least that we’ve found yet.”

“Graviton?”

“A particle like a photon, but it carries gravity. A photon carries light, so in theory a graviton carries gravity, a magiton carries magic. We only know photons exist because without them, well, it would be pretty dark all the time. We can see them. Not so much for gravitons, if they exist at all, and they probably don’t. Scientists are still looking for them. Get it?”

“Sort of, but go on.”

“For some reason, electrical fields, even weak ones such as exist in a device the size of a phone, disrupt magical energies. Just like a tiny magnet can hold up a hammer against the entire gravitational force of the planet underneath it, that tiny current makes magic harder to do. Turn the current off, and magic is no longer disrupted.”

“It would be nice,” she admitted, “being able to bring a phone with me everywhere. I could check up on the shop, place orders, look things up.”

“It’s a magic in its own right, that’s for sure. Here, check this out.”

I showed her some things on my phone, and she tried a few things and called the shop to see how it was going, and we passed the time. It was nice, being with her, she had some stories to tell about crazy things that went on at the shop and I told her about things I wanted to make when I got the chance. Esashiel even expressed an interest in human technology so they gave some things a try on the phone, looking up various religious sites on Earth and taking virtual tours of churches and things. *To each their own, I suppose.* As the sun dropped in the sky I bought some food from a vending machine and passed it out, and finally it was dark enough. We headed back down to the road and Linnea once again started to concentrate on magically telling us what she could about the road. I of course stood off to the side, as I didn’t want to turn my stuff off.

“I can see them,” she announced.

“See who?” I yelled. Her eyes were focused on nothing, looking out across the lanes that made up the road.

“The people that last worked on this section of road. They all seem human. Strange. They are just going about their work. Dumping material, spreading it out, smoothing it, compressing it, then moving on and starting a new area further down. That must be a boring, hot, thankless job.”

“You’re concerned about this being a ritual magic circle specifically, yes?” Esashiel asked.

“That’s right,” she answered, not really paying attention to the question.

“And they’re performing this road preparation in the same way, over and over?”

“Uh huh, as far as I can see they start there,” she pointed, “move here,” she pointed closer to us, “then move there. They’re just workmen. I don’t get it.”

“You don’t think what they’re doing has a sort of ritualistic rhythm to it?”

“Hmm?” She blinked, clearly breaking the spell and looking over at Esashiel. “What are you saying now?”

“This road construction, would you say it was ritualistic?”

“They were doing the same things again and again,” she admitted. “That’s ritual if I ever saw it. You think whoever has done this has tapped into normal people somehow, used them to unconsciously gather this magic?”

“Are not most magic users simply ‘normal people’ after all? They just believe doing certain things will create a magical result. That’s why it’s called ‘ritual magic’ after all. They perform a ritual, and a magical result happens. If the ritual here was defined as what these people are doing to create the road, isn’t it possible their part was simply to gather the magical energy without even knowing?”

She looked troubled. “Yes, I would have to say that was right, especially given the fact the magic is here. But there must be more to it, what’s keeping the magic here in the circle?”

“What keeps magic in a normal circle?” I asked, walking up to join the conversation without shouting.

“Belief, I guess? But that’s still pretty short lived compared to this. The magic has strengthened since we got here, now that the sun has gone down again.”

“You didn’t see any kind of boss, or person directing them?”

She shook her head. “Not that I could tell. They all were dressed the same and were just going about their work.”

“So there could have been one?”

“Sure, but weren’t all these roads basically done at the same time? Or at least parts of them?”

“I suppose that would have to be the case, yes.”

“So they couldn’t have been everywhere at once. I think something was done to the material used to make the road, and this ‘ritual’ of making the road solidified it. And now the magic is finally growing to a level that’s dangerous.”

“If it’s something in the road, would cutting a piece of it help?” Esashiel asked.

“Maybe,” I figured. “But I don’t have the tools to cut some of this road up, and even if I did, I don’t have the equipment to analyze what it’s made of.”

“So who does?”

“That’s a good question.”

“Even if we did,” Linnea protested, “that doesn’t get us closer to who has done this. Think about it, it must be someone old unless it’s just taken longer for the magic to get to this point and they didn’t expect that. Assume for the moment everything is going according to plan though, it’s not a stretch to say that. But it must also be someone connected because they’ve influenced the creation of roads since we started making the roads. That points to one of our kind, and old, connected non-humans tend to be both powerful and good at hiding.”

“They have had time to gather wealth, connections, and practice their magic,” I agreed. “They may also have had different identities over the years, given humans would find their boss being at the company the last hundred years without dying a mite suspicious. But it does get us a little closer. Tracing what they used would show us at least a place to start looking for them. Whatever they used it would have taken tons of material in a steady stream. We can trace that sort of thing, if a construction company is always buying a material that doesn’t seem to be related to the industry.”

“We can?” Meowvis asked. “How are we supposed to do that?”

“Good point, how are we supposed to do that?” Linnea asked.

“We just... It’s a simple matter of...” I paused. “I really have no idea. Guess I’ve watched too many movies, that does sort of sound impossible now that you ask me exactly how it would be done. Shoot.”

“So what can we do?” Esashiel asked.

“We can take this to someone who has more resources, and maybe a vested interest in keeping the world on track,” Linnea told him.

“You’re not suggesting we tell...” I asked.

“I am.”

“Tell who?”

“Excellent,” Linnea and I said at the same time. She went on. “Exactly. It’s a front company, that humans think works for them, but really the ‘Blue Cross’ and ‘Blue Shield’ are separate groups inside the company. ‘Blue Cross’ deals with things that threaten human souls, or with ghosts, or tears in reality to other plains. ‘Blue Shield’ deals with things that are more physical, like rouge non-humans and witches. If we take what we’ve found to them, I bet they can find out some things for us.”

“They have the resources, and the manpower,” I agreed. “At least they could analyze the road for us, tell us if anything was added to make it more magically stable.”

“You seem hesitant, is there some reason not to tell them?” Esashiel asked.

“We don’t really have any proof, no physical evidence anyway. It’s a lot of paperwork and trying to convince someone, and then they have to take it to their superior, and so on. I don’t know how quickly they would investigate this.”

“Though it’s run by non-humans,” Linnea admitted. “And there is a certain measure of solidarity between us. We wouldn’t be, like, laughed out of the office or anything. They would take it seriously.”

“If they’re the best bet, we should at least try,” Esashiel told us.

“It is worth a shot,” I agreed. “Come on, let’s head to the nearest office now. You can find one, right Meowvis?”

“Of course, I can direct you once we are off the freeway.”

“Back to the car, everyone.” *Which is not as snappy as ‘avengers assemble’ but we can work on it.*

We headed back the way we came after getting off and back on again, then to the corporate office on Court Street. Naturally the building looked closed, it was fairly late at that point, but we knew better. Our kind moved at night, and so in the back was the “real” Excellus, and that’s where we headed. Opening the door brought us to a waiting room of sorts, that was totally dark. Non-humans like us could see perfectly well in the dark so this was another part of the deception that kept humans away. They would be drawn to a light on the inside of a building like this but if there was no light, they would simply keep moving. It was an effective system because it didn’t need to be magically maintained, they simply turned the lights off at night.

I marched up to the desk, where a young looking woman with hair that seemed to blow in the breeze (despite there being no breeze in here) sat typing into a computer.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“I need to speak to someone in Blue Shield,” I told her. “I have an angel here,” I indicated Esashiel who gave a bit of a bow, “and we’ve discovered some kind of plot involving a huge amount of magic. We’re concerned someone is up to something. I need to report what we’ve found and ask for help.”

“That does sound serious,” they agreed. “If you’ll have a seat someone will be right with you.” *Sure they will.* “Thank you.”

It turned out not to be too long a wait, and a very dark skinned man with black teeth invited us back to his office. We all sat down and he introduced himself as Felix Apagaster.

“So what can I do for you?” he asked after I introduced our side.

“Our concerns started when Esashiel appeared to me yesterday,” I began, and relayed the story of what they had said and what we found out. Linnea also reported what she had seen out by the road, and Felix asked Esashiel some things to make sure we weren’t faking them being an angel. I hadn’t actually considered that, that they could have been lying to me, and I simply invited them back with me to my house. *Not your brightest move, Herman. I easily could have too, just asked Wayfinder to find me the nearest angel. If it pointed to them, boom, done. When did I get so trusting, anyway?*

“It seems you all believe this,” Felix finally decided, leaning back in his chair. “And having an actual angel in your midst does lend a certain credence to your claims. So what would you like us to do?”

“Go out to the freeway and secure a piece of the road,” I told him. “Analyze it to see if something has been added that could help conduct magic. Track down where tons of that material would have come from, thus helping us figure out who is behind all this and what they want.”

He looked a bit confused. “You just want our help, you’re not just dumping this in our laps?”

“The Heavens told me that Herman was the best choice for taking care of this,” Esashiel explained. “I must trust my fellow angels and their divinations.”

And this does seem like a job for Iron Man. What did I make the suit for, if not to help protect the world?

“I see.” He turned to me. “Normally, with something of this magnitude, we would take over the investigation once it was brought to our attention. But I suppose as long as you are willing to keep us in the loop and share what you discover, we could work together on this.”

“Of course.”

He considered us for a moment and nodded. “Very well. I’ll write up a request and have it submitted to one of our action teams.”

Action teams? Did he just say action teams?

“Leave us your number and we’ll call you when we have something.” I filled out the form he gave me, and handed it back. Felix took a quick look at it, nodded, and stood. “Is there anything else?”

We stood as well. “That’s it for now. Thanks for agreeing to look into this.” We shook hands, and he handed me one of his cards in case I came up with anything else.

“It sounds quite serious, and of course there is a certain amount of leeway when an actual angel is involved. It was an honor meeting you,” he said to Esashiel.

“Continue to serve the Lord, I am but a messenger.”

He gave a little cough. “Of course, of course. We’ll be in touch. Good night.”

We piled into the car and I turned to Linnea. “Shall I drop you off at your place?”

“If you don’t think there’s anything else I can do, I suppose,” she decided. “Too late to go to work now, may as well just skip it. What will you do?”

“Check over my books, actually. I’ve amassed a small library of my own, mostly relating to enchanting of course. But I’d like to see if any of them mention substances that could be used for conducting magic as though it was copper wire.”

“Wire?”

“That’s what best carries electricity.”

“Ah! It’s still a few hours until sunrise, I’d be happy to help. I mean, unless all your books are in some other language, or you don’t want my help, or whatever. I don’t want to force myself on you. Oh God, that didn’t come out right at all!” She looked mortified, but I couldn’t help but suppress a smile.

I’d be willing, you know. “I mean...” I thought about the workshop, and where I had the books, and the fact my armor was standing right there. *I mean, I can trust her, of all people, right? She’s not going to go to the press or anything, right? The others know about me, and none of them really batted an eye. Of course they met ‘Iron Man’ me before they met ‘Herman’ me.* “Eh, what the heck, I don’t mind. I will have to swear you to secrecy about some projects in my workshop. You don’t mind about that, do you?”

“Not at all.”

“Great, then let’s go.”

We headed back to my place, and I parked the car, inviting the others to the workshop.

“Actually, I’m going to watch the next Marvel movie,” Esashiel told us. “I have to find out what they do about this Thanos character!”

“Go for it,” I told them, and they headed into the house. “Workshop is this way, don’t trip on anything.” We headed inside and she looked around in wonder, then came to a dead stop in front of the armor. “Ah, now here’s the thing I need you to keep secret.”

“Er, Herman?” she asked.

“Yes, Linnea?”

“I can’t help but notice this life sized replica of the Iron Man armor standing there.”

“What about it?”

“It seems to me that I’ve been hearing about such a thing out and about in the night lately, and I can’t help but wonder if, as I’ve just walked into your workshop and found it... Are you...”

“That’s right,” I told her, crossing my arms. *I get to say it! I get to say it!* “I am Iron Man.”

Chapter 7

I break into a recycling center

Where: Herman's workshop

When: 4:13 AM

"Wow," Linnea said, after I told her the story of watching the Iron Man movie for the first time. "So this movie inspired you to stop making weapons for people, and work on an armor like in the movie to do good in the world?"

"Our stories are oddly parallel," I agreed. "As a Dwarf my talent is making things and enchanting them. So I did, continuing the proud tradition handed down from father to son. I didn't bother to ask why the client wanted whatever they wanted, I just fulfilled the order. I enjoyed doing it, and I made a lot of money doing it because I was good at it. But the more I thought about it, the more wrong it seemed. When I saw that movie I realized I could do a lot of what he did with magic, but that some of it could be done with mundane means as well. Our technology is heading in the direction of being able to create such a thing, minus the flying and energy weapons of course. The only real impediment right now is the batteries to run the armor- they just don't last long enough to be useful. Otherwise robotic suits are in the testing phase in lots of places. Heck we can make robotic 'dogs' now I'll show you some videos sometime if you haven't seen them. Not a problem for me, I just made a magical battery that never ran out, so the concept was sound. So I stopped making weapons and threw myself into that project. It took me years to forge the armor, make the magical items that make it work, and put everything together. But it works. I can fly, am nearly bulletproof, it enhances my strength, can't be tracked, and of course Meowvis helps run it."

"Meow!"

"I knew about your 'invisible companion' from before, nice to meet you in real life."

"Likewise. Maybe one day I can be put into a humanoid body, then I can shake your hand. All I can offer now is my paw."

"I don't doubt it." Linnea shook their paw. "Huh. All I do is run a magical shop. Seems like I should take up enchanting as well."

"I'd be happy to give you some pointers if you did want to," I told her. "But what's wrong with running a magical shop? I love your shop! You always have neat stuff, someone has to run it. But you could enchant things on the side."

"Probably could. Well, enough chatting, let's see these books of yours."

So we looked through the books I had, and once again I mentally smacked myself and had Meowvis order me one of the book scanners I had been talking about with Keith. *I should have started at home.* As I thought most were about enchanting, the magical "recipe" that should be carved, sewn, chiseled, baked, or engraved into whatever one was enchanting in order to create an object with magical properties. (Another thing I made and sold was "healing potions" which were really just a cream you spread on injuries so yes, even things like that were viable for holding magical energy) But as some books were more general purpose books on magic, or dealt with enchanting for non-Dwarves such as Linnea, we did find a few things.

"So I would have to be able to produce a magical result," Linnea said, reading out of a general book, "then create the magical symbols on the object, then put the spell into the symbols?"

"That's right."

"Where you just put the symbols down, and as you can't cast magic yourself, the symbols themselves carry the intent of the magic and make it work."

"Exactly. I don't get to do any magic on the fly, like you do, but I can make any sort of magical item I want. As long as I can figure out what pattern to use."

“Doesn’t seem as useful for me, unless I wanted to sell my own magic to others. I would just cast the spell when I needed it, save myself the hours of work. Well, something to think about. Almost seems like the road thing, honestly. Just the scale is different.”

“You’re not wrong. Did you find anything on what could be added to the road?”

“Not really. At least, not anything specific. They might not even be using anything, as you can make your magical circle for ritual magic out of anything, really. Chalk, a rope, an iron hoop, it doesn’t matter. It’s your belief that the magic is held there that seems to hold it there, the circle just gives you something to focus on during the ritual. They may not find anything ‘conducting’ the magic through the road, it just might be the road itself.”

I groaned. “Which means we’ll have an even harder time tricking down whoever did this.”

“That seems to be the case. There are some materials, like crystals, that people believe can help in rituals, so I guess you could crush crystals up but you would need mountains of them to cover the amount of roads we have. So I doubt that’s it. But it’s a place to start, if Blue Shield figures out some company has ordered every crystal in existence the last fifty years.” She stood up and stretched. I had to pull my eyes away, she had taken off her reflective vest and her shirt clearly stretched as she did. “Better get home and get to bed. It’s getting towards sunrise.”

“But of course, my lady. Head out to the car and I’ll tell Esashiel I’ll be back in a little while.”

“I’ll meet you out there.”

I dropped her off at home and wished her a good night, then went home myself. I emailed Felix about looking for crystal in the road but that it could really be anything, and went to bed myself.

It was 2:00 PM that day before he emailed me back, which Meowvis announced by telling “you’ve got mail.”

“Read it to me, I’m in the middle of this,” I told him, whacking the piece of metal that would become part of a cosplay for a client on the beat. A metronome was ticking away nearby, I just couldn’t forge without it. I mean I could, of course I could, I could do anything I put my mind to. But having it ticking away as I hammered seemed to keep me more steady and on track. It was how I had learned to forge, long ago, so it was just habit at this point.

“Sure thing. Dear Herman, I know this may come as a shock to you, but I can’t get you out of my mind. While you drove me home last night I wanted desperately to invite you to my room-”

“What?” I almost missed and smashed the tongs out of my hand, but recovered.

“Just kidding! It’s from Felix. I was just waiting until Esashiel got here, I told them to come down as we got a reply.”

“You know, I could pull your plug at any time,” I growled.

“And run this place how? Here they come.” The doors swung open and Esashiel came in.

“Hard at work, Herman?” they asked. “What’s that you have there?”

“Someone wanted Bakugo’s gauntlets from My Hero Academia, so I’m making the frame out of metal while I 3D print some covers so they’re not too heavy.” I tossed my head, indicating the printers that were hard at work printing the “grenade” looking covers I would attach.

They looked over at them. “I have no idea what any of that sentence means.”

“I’ll explain that later. Now then, they’re here, so the real message if you would, Meowvis?”

“Sure thing, the real message is they checked the road as you suggested. They found some odd stuff.”

“Like what?”

“All sorts of things. Apparently they sawed a section of it up, crushed it, and put it into a centrifuge. You won’t believe what they got out, and #17 will truly shock you!”

“Just tell me!”

“A little bit of everything, milled into a fine powder. Glass, various metals including copper, lead, and even gold. Plastic, silicon, bits of wire. Nothing they should have found in road material normally. He’s stumped and they’re going to continue looking into it.”

“They found all that? How big a section of road did they test?”

“Doesn’t say. Is that relevant?”

“Maybe. That’s a lot of odd things to find in the road. That particular set of ingredients lets call it. Does it seem to suggest something in particular to you?”

“It does, actually. Me.”

“Exactly. If you crushed up a laptop into a fine grain, that’s exactly what you would find.” I continued shaping the armor piece while thinking.

“But why grind up whatever this laptop thing is you mentioned and put them into the road? What does that have to do with the magic? Is it channeling the power?” Esashiel asked.

“A laptop is just a more portable computer, like the one I’ve got there.” Meowvis padded over there and tapped it.

“Oh, I see.”

“I guess from what we learned last night it could be anything, but it works best if it’s all one thing. If you tried to make your circle out of rope but then wanted it bigger and added string, you’re not going to be able to convince yourself it’s a real circle. The ritual would suffer. Is this ‘laptop dust’ enough of one thing- well of course it must be, the magic is there. So clearly it worked.”

“So like you were saying, does this get us closer to the source?”

“I think it does. If this one section of road has all that, whoever is doing this must have access to a ton of materials. And I mean that literally. I want to finish this up and then I’m going to look into various recycling places, that’s where we would find machines that could grind up old hardware into a powder. Esashiel why don’t you call the shop and tell Linnea about what they found? I’ve got my hands full here, as you can see.”

“I could maybe do that?”

“Meowvis can show you what to do, my phone is right there on the table.”

“Bring it into the house, we can’t have a conversation here,” Meowvis cautioned them as they picked it up.

“How do I use this? I was only looking at pictures yesterday.”

“I’ll lead you through it, come on.”

A half hour later I had the frame for the first gauntlet done and set it aside. I sat down to find Meowvis had already started looking into recycling centers, and he showed me a list on my screen.

“The largest one in the immediate area is the aptly named ‘electronics recycling international’ which is in New Jersey. At your top speed I estimate it would take two hours to reach it from here.”

“That’s not too bad. Two hours flying or using a space stone to open a portal?” I glanced over at the gauntlet frame.

“Four hours flying, you have to get back here.”

“True. But I could come back with one easier than getting there. I have four left?”

“That’s correct.”

I sighed. Even sleeping only four or five hours a night there was never enough time to do everything. *I need to take less work, if I’m going to be running around saving the world or whatever now. Tony had all sorts of robots to build his armor, but I have to physically make anything, for a client or for myself if it’s magical. It’s not fair. Of course that makes me a little more versatile. Making a set of 8 identical ‘space stones’ takes me thirteen hours, so it’s fly there for two hours, or sit around here for two hours to make one.* “I’ll just fly, I need to make more of these before I start trying to reach things that ‘close’ by.”

“It’s what Tony would do.”

“But his armor is a lot faster than mine.”

“He is seen outpacing fighter jets for a time. When are you going to get a fighter jet?”

I barked a laugh. “Sure, that would fit right in around here. Maybe when they can land and take off vertically. And don’t need fuel. And they’re legal for me to own.”

“Is the armor legal for you to own?”

“It’s not... illegal.”

“A fine distinction. I will inform Esashiel you will be gone several hours.”

“I’ll tell him myself, I’m not leaving this minute. I want to finish the other gauntlet frame today, and I won’t leave until I know it’ll be dark when I arrive. As I don’t think they’ll invite ‘Iron Man’ inside for a tour of the place, I’ll have to break in.”

At 7:00 PM I blasted out of the workshop, straight up, and then headed towards New Jersey. The GPS kept me on track, and I listened to some music as the landscape rolled by under me. I did enjoy flying, opening up holes in the air was all well and good, but this was living. With the sun at my back long shadows covered the ground, and the sun had basically gone out of sight as I landed at the recycling center. I was balancing atop a nearby light and looking the place over, but I had to wonder if I did actually have the right place.

“Should it be this busy?” Meowvis asked me.

“Maybe the plant runs in shifts, and it’s going twenty four seven?” Magnified and with light enhancement provided by the cameras that served as the suit’s eyes I could see the place was a hotbed of activity even this late. People were wondering around, moving crates, unloading a truck, the building was not silent and empty as I had anticipated.

“I don’t think so,” he countered. “Take a closer look.”

I scanned the scene left to right, unsure what I was looking at. “What am I missing?”

“My light gain amplification is at maximum and it still seems inadequate. Maybe if you raise the faceplate you can tell better but doesn’t it seem like there’s not enough lights on over there for human workers?”

“Let’s find out.” I raised the faceplate, making it impossible to see any details now because I lost magnification but Meowvis was right. As I could see in the dark perfectly, but normally looked at a camera image so Meowvis could overlay things onto it, my dark vision didn’t work in the helmet. (This had caused me no end of trouble recently because I kept getting dragged into the astral plane, where cameras didn’t work at all, but that’s another story) Without it in the way I could see Meowvis was right. All the lights had been turned off in the place. “They’re like me. They’ve got a shift of non-humans?”

“It seems we are in the right place then.”

“It is suspicious, that’s for sure. Ugh, this is going to make it harder to move around and get inside to have a look. They’ll be able to see me just fine.”

“If only you had worked on that One Ring replica.”

“Yeah, yeah, I wanted to make Nix’s necklace first.” I snapped the faceplate back into place and the HUD reappeared in my vision. “What would Iron Man do?”

“Probably boldly land in the middle of the place, get attacked, fight everyone off, and hack into their computers. You’ve seen the movie where they get the staff back. It’s exactly the same thing here.”

I snorted. “No doubt. But he knew they were all Nazis. These people may just be hired hands that have no idea what they’re doing.”

“So they won’t attack and would be happy to help Iron Man, then. They won’t even be a problem for the magic, being all non-humans themselves.”

“But if they are, and they do attack me, can I handle that many? Do I want to just assault them even if they are guilty of something? I have limited ammo, and if someone calls the cops that ‘Iron Man’ is attacking the place...”

“It would be difficult to explain to the human officers that arrived that these people, who are actually all what they would call ‘monsters’ are part of a plot to create a magical circle that spans the entire united states for purposes unknown. I mean you can’t prove any of that to a human!”

“And even non-lethal ammo can kill, if I hit somebody in the head or whatnot.”

“Or they had a weak heart to begin with.”

“Exactly! I have to consider this sort of thing, living in the real world. For now let’s just get closer, see what they’re up to.”

“You’re the boss.”

We took off from the lamppost and headed straight up, moved forward to be where the building would be, and dropped down again. It wasn’t perfect of course, but moving like that instead of flying from the lamp to the roof would help keep me hidden. I peered over the edge, and from what I could tell the latest truck was being unloaded. Old electronic equipment was being taken out, and it seemed they were almost done. Huge bins, brimming with waste of all kinds, were being taken out by forklifts and moved into the building. I flexed my hands.

“Steady,” Meowvis cautioned. “I know, it’s tempting.”

“All that stuff!” I groused. “Can none of it be repaired? Repurposed? Made into art? Reused? Sold to retro-enthusiasts? I could probably make a small fortune fixing up and reselling just that bin! Even just to look it over, see what kind of treasures might be there. Old video game systems? Unique hardware? It’s driving me nuts, Meowvis, this is torture!”

“You have enough projects to work on, both magical and otherwise.”

“I know, I know, it just makes me so mad to see working stuff thrown away. Even if it is old and slow, it should have some purpose!”

“To be fair one can assume most of that isn’t working.” He paused. “Will you throw me away, one day?”

“I might re-purpose your components, even if I find better hardware to run you on, it was fast enough to run an AI, but I wouldn’t get rid of *you*. You’re my friend! Computers will always need to be cooled, I assume, so the magical parts of you would be reused. I might get faster processors for you but that’s an upgrade, I not tossing you for a different AI.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“Wait, are they closing that truck up?”

“Looks that way.”

The driver was given a signal and the truck roared to life. It slowly pulled out, and headed past the gate. “That’s odd. Why send away an empty truck? They didn’t have anything to put on it? Reclaimed material? Packing? Nothing? But trucks are expensive, to send away an empty one doesn’t make sense.”

“Get the drone out. Before they close the door I’ll slip in!”

“That’s maybe the best we can do for now.” I pressed the side of my armor and the door in my leg popped open, allowing me to get the drone it. The blades spun to life and it dropped over the edge. The bottom half of my display changed to show what the drone was seeing, and it zipped into the building under the door. As everyone was now headed in the opposite direction no one saw it, and the large overhead door was slammed close behind it. “Careful now, anyone spots you and the whole place will go on alert.”

“Yeah, if only I had a cardboard box to hide under.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m serious, there’s a lot of magic I don’t want to have to remake inside that drone.” *The system that lets it use my wireless at home to control it despite being two hours away, the battery that will never run out.*

“I know, I’ll be careful. I’ve watched every spy movie in existence you know.”

“Over a VPN I hope! I don’t need my place raided by the copyright police and have to explain that, no officers, I didn’t watch all those movies that were downloaded to this IP address, that was my AI companion that did it. Honest!”

“Well if you said it like that even I wouldn’t believe you. And I’m the AI companion!”

“That’s not answering the-”

“Of course I used the VPN. Who do you take me for?”

“Thank goodness. Ugh, we need a better low light camera on the drone if we’re going to do night stuff.”

“Agreed. Your kind wandering around perfectly in the dark is going to be a problem.”

The drone made its way further into the building, where the “junk” was simply being grabbed out of bins and thrown onto a conveyor belt. This raised it up and dropped it into a hopper where an enormous set of metal teeth grabbed it and started chewing it to pieces. Out the back the pieces were transferred via belt to another machine that crushed them even smaller, and then snaked them around to yet another piece of machinery that ground them even smaller than that. This dumped out onto a covered belt, probably to keep the ‘dust’ from getting everywhere, and it disappeared through a hole in the wall into another room.

“That’s some serious destructive power,” I remarked, watching the operation for a moment. They were chewing through the bins they had unloaded at a pretty rapid pace, all that beautiful, possibly useful stuff simply being pulverized into dust, probably to be added to the road building material for whatever unknown reason. *I wonder how it would normally work to be recycled?*

“And it’s no wonder they haven’t heard the drone, they’re all wearing ear protection,” Meowvis told me. “It must be horribly noisy in there.”

“Good point. We need to find out where the stuff goes after it leaves that last grinder.”

“I can’t exactly open doors,” he reminded me. “And that part of the belt is all sealed up. I can’t fly through there.”

“And I don’t want you getting stuck someplace either. For now we’ll just lay low and see if anything else happens.”

“Rodger that.”

I sat down away from the edge to wait. *I bet Iron Man wouldn’t have just sat around. Some superhero I am.*

Chapter 8

I learn what's happening to the now pulverized equipment

Where: Recycling center roof

When: 11:00 PM

So I spent a boring two hours watching trucks come in, be unloaded, and depart again, empty. More and more old equipment was thrown into the hopper to be ground into powder, and finally it looked like activity was winding down for the night. The equipment was turned off, the workers headed out, and the parking lot emptied out over the next half an hour or so. I waited twenty minutes just to be safe and dropped down to ground level from the roof.

"Now what?" Meowvis asked me. "I may be a clever girl but this drone isn't equipped to open doors to let you in."

"Good quest- wait you're a girl?"

"When I feel like it."

"Good to know, I guess. Sorry, I just always thought of you as more male, I should have asked for your pronouns after I activated you. Though come to think of it I didn't equip your cat body with any--"

"Nuts, I have to hide, I think someone is coming." The camera view lurched and the drone went behind a box, coming to the ground and spinning down. Someone went by and it started up again after a moment. "I guess this place has security?"

"Why guard stuff people have literally thrown away?" I asked rhetorically. "Especially after you've turned it into a powder. Now I have to get in there." *I could look through a window and use a space stone, I guess. Now I miss not having Nix around, she could get me in there any number of ways.* I walked over to the door and did a double take. "It's just a door."

"What else would it be?"

"No, no, what I mean is, there's no security panel here. Like a keypad or a badge reader. Not that I could 'hack' it anyway but I didn't expect just physical locks. With no electronic means of opening the door, I bet there's no alarm system either!" *Someone comes every morning and uses a key to unlock this building. How quaint.*

"If this place has been operating as long as roads have been built, it may not have been built with such things in mind. An old non-human may not even consider such a thing, and we have surmised someone like that was doing all this."

"Then I can just break in, they can get the door repaired. The suit is strong enough to take it." I raised my fist to slam it into the door about where the bolt would be.

"Wait!"

"What?"

"If you do break in, they'll know someone has broken in and was snooping around. That may accelerate their plans or cause them to panic. We want to surprise whoever is doing this, right?"

I put my fist down. "You're right. Breaking in shouts 'we're onto you' or 'we're looking into this' which is not what we want. There must be a way in though, I have to get you out of there at the very least!"

"The building is old, the windows aren't that great. We can smash one enough to let the drone out if we have to."

"True. Let me walk around the place." I rose into the air and started a circuit around the building. It was fairly long, in an L shape, with windows all around. The building was old, and at the back, near the roof, was a section of window where the wood looked fairly rotted, and there was already a pane of glass missing. With a shrug I grabbed the window and yanked, ripping it out of the frame and tossing it to the ground.

"Subtle."

“Hey, it could have rotted naturally and just fallen out. That’s the trouble with old buildings, you have to do a lot of upkeep. It’s not my fault they’ve been skimping out.”

“Just get in here before someone comes to investigate the noise.”

“Who is running this op anyway?” I muttered, squeezing into the window. Now inside I toured the place, working my way back to the area with the grinders. In the other parts were what I would consider the “real” recycling center, where things were properly taken apart and sorted into their various materials. *Is this just a front for the real activity that goes on at night? It seems that way. Could humans be here during the day, totally unaware that non-humans come at night and do some of their own work?*

“I’m over here!” Meowvis told me, simulating a whisper as I entered that section of the building.

“You’re enjoying this!”

“Aren’t you?” The drone dropped down from the ceiling in front of me.

“Just keep an eye out for that guard. Where’s the final conveyor belt?”

“This way.” It buzzed off, and I worked my way around the machinery to the rollers. “That cover, is it removable?”

“Yeah, let’s see...” I unlatched and raised the cover, allowing the drone to slip into the enclosed area. They turned the LED on in front and headed inside, vanishing through the hole in the wall. *They would want a way to get at it, in case of a jam or something.*

“Goes for quite a ways,” she reported, flying straight. “That’s odd.”

“Let me work my way around, I can’t fit that way.”

“Right.”

I headed back the way I came, then around and heading in hopefully the direction the belt was taking. The drone went through a long tunnel, then finally came out into a room it buzzed around. “Rather disappointing,” Meowvis remarked.

“It doesn’t look like there’s much in there. That can’t be right. Just a minute. Stop spinning around or drop the video feed from my display, you’re making me dizzy.”

“Sorry.” The motion stopped, meaning I didn’t have to try splitting my attention between the bottom and top of my display anymore, and finally found the room they were in. It wasn’t locked, but at the same time it wasn’t very interesting either. It was just a large room with the conveyor system coming out of the wall, heading into the center of the room and then just stopping. Some distance away there was a desk, and that was it. “What do you think, boss?”

“Are you sure there wasn’t another path that stuff could have taken?”

“Positive,” she assured me. “One path only, sealed up. This is where that ground up stuff goes.”

“So then where is it?” I checked the walls, there were no doors. It was dusty in this room, so it was for certain this was the place, but it didn’t check out. “There should be a small mountain of that dust in here. The door is too small for bringing carts in here, and anyway the trucks left empty. What the heck?”

“I admit I’m a bit stumped myself. Logically, this is not possible.”

“I guess there’s no help for it at this point. I didn’t see any working computers around here, so I can’t get any information that way. But we need to see what goes on in this room.”

“I agree boss, but how?”

“You’re going to stay here. Hide in the tunnel until it’s used again, most likely tomorrow evening. Then see what happens to the dust once it gets here.”

“I can do that.”

“Meanwhile I’ll get to work on some replacement stones so by then maybe I can just open a portal and get you back. Once we have an idea where the dust goes, and thus some video evidence, we’ll have more legal ground to stand on.”

"I can always fly back, if it comes to it," she reminded me. "It would take me days but I could do it."

"True, let's leave that as an option for now. Head back into the tunnel, I'm getting out of here before I'm caught."

"Right." She turned that way and went into the hole, the whine of the blades dying down.

Let's get out of here. I headed back out the broken window and took off again, the feed from the drone now shrunk down to a small square in the corner of my display. "Actually, you know what?"

"I know a lot of stuff boss, can you be more specific?"

"I'm going to use a stone. If I'm going to make a whole batch right now anyway, better to get two hours into it than waste time flying around."

"The covers for the gauntlets should be easy enough to assemble, they're printing well. And you can work on that during the day anyway."

"Exactly." I raised my left hand, hovering in mid-air, and made a fist. "Portal." A hole in space opened before me, leading back to my workshop, and I darted through. Once out of the armor I called the shop, telling Linnea what I had found out. This wasn't much, though at least I had found the place on the first try.

"It makes sense it would be the largest place though," she told me. "They may not need much anymore because most of the road is finished, but they would have gained a reputation over the years of taking anything and everything to recycle."

"Someone has money though, they're not recouping whatever the cost of the labor is, even if the electronics are free because they were given away. Someone keeps the place running."

"The owners seem to have no online presence," Meowvis pipped up. "So that's a dead end."

Naturally, if they're my kind of people they wouldn't. "We should know more tomorrow."

"Thanks for keeping me up to date. See you later."

"Bye."

I worked for six hours on the new batch of stones, or about half the time I would need. I already had dozens made, it was the work of moments to mix up a new batch of the resin I used, color it, and pour it into the molds to harden. The hard part was engraving the hardened ones I had already made to make them magically active. But I kept at it, and then a little before sunrise I checked on Esashiel and we both went to bed. Five hours later I was up again, and by 12:30 was working on the gauntlets. I cleaned up the 3D prints, painted them green, and secured them. Looking them over I was happy how they had come out and boxed them up, ready to be shipped the next day. Meowvis handled printing the postage online, so the postperson could just pick it up with tomorrow's mail. I got no word from Meowvis that the conveyor belt was moving, meaning it either wasn't used during the day, or it wasn't used all the time. We could only wait and see, but after sunset when I started the engraving process again the place came to life. I watched with interest, and then with disgust, as a hairy looking man with a fuzzy tail sat down at the desk. He glanced over, clearly cast a spell, and a hole much like the one I had used to come home last night opened in the air. Moments later the belt started again, and the dust flowed into the hole. Satisfied, he sat down at the desk and pulled out a book to read.

"Well I'm stupid," I announced.

"Hello stupid, I'm an angel," Esashiel told me.

"You're doing dad jokes now?" I asked them.

"Meowvis has been filling me in on different types of humor. We needed to do something to pass the time."

"Sorry it hasn't been more exciting for you. I would have taken you on a tour of the city but you did sort of drop in on me and I have orders to fill."

“It’s fine,” they assured me. “You’re working hard on what I came here to figure out, it’s all good. We’ve just been talking, that’s all. Your ‘artificial soul’ is quite knowledgeable. I’ve been learning a lot about humans.”

An artificial human telling an angel about humans. I’m sure there was no assumptions made there. “That they are. Anyway, they’re using my own magic against me. They hired that guy to come in at night, open a portal, and the dust they’ve made goes someplace else. It’s the easiest job ever, they just have to stay there and maintain the magic. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“It explains the distance the dust travels as well,” Esashiel offered. “It’s away from the machinery, so the magic works better.”

“Yes, that all adds up. There must be a lot of power in that room to turn those massive grinders. Meowvis, think you can slip out and drop down the hole? He doesn’t seem to be paying attention.”

“Of course. Shall I do so now?”

“Do it.”

We watched as the picture changed to the drone swooping through the hole, and zipping around it, and I crossed my fingers (mentally) that it wouldn’t be seen. But I need not have worried, the hole opened to a small mountain of the stuff sitting in a lot outside what looked to be a plant of some kind.

“Asphalt plant, by the looks of it,” Meowvis informed us. He zipped around the mountain and saw a large piece of machinery scooping some of the mountain away. It then swung over and dumped the material into a cart on a track. “What do you want to bet that ‘technology dust’ is mixed with the normal sand usually used for asphalt, and we found the place the road comes from?”

“But how could this one place supply enough material for all of the road we’ve seen?” Esashiel asked.

“I doubt it does,” I told him. “We may not have gotten lucky after all, but in fact all recycling plants in the world lead to asphalt plants one way or another. That’s what the scope of the project seems to suggest.”

“If the project was started so long ago as you said,” Esashiel agreed, “and devices have always been ground up to make road, naturally the person behind it would want as much material as possible. Using magic they may have simply commanded anyone opening a recycling plant to do certain things.”

“Such as leave the place open for our kind to use when the humans went home. But then how did something like this not come to light until now?”

“The workers may not even know what is being done with it,” Meowvis offered. “They’re just doing their job and getting paid. Grinding up technology isn’t bad by itself, nor is moving it elsewhere. I would tell the person maintaining that portal their one spell and them hanging around is cheaper than trucks to move the stuff around. It has the benefit of being true, after all. What do they care what’s done with it after that?”

“You’ve got a point. Okay, fly around and get me some good pictures of the place. Once I finish these space stones so I don’t have to worry about running out we’ll head over there. Do you even know where that is?”

“You did not equip the drone with the GPS system. I would need to find some unique landmark.”

“Like a license plate for a car in the parking lot?”

“I suppose that would tell us the general area,” Meowvis admitted. “Flying there now.”

It turned out to be in Wisconsin, and I finished up the engraving and magically energized the stones I had worked on. As I tended not to use the others as much I removed some of the spares from the back of the armor, replacing them with space stones, just in case. It make the armor less “authentic” by having the gems in the back, but again I had to look towards practicality over everything else. The stones didn’t mean anything if they were sitting on a bench at home, I needed them close to hand. And as the armor didn’t exactly have pockets this was the compromise I had come up with. Before I got into

the armor I called Linnea, who said she would love to come with me, and headed to my place while I got into it. The drone showed activity did not stop at the plant, though the lights were all turned off, meaning our kind was running the place just as with the recycling plant. The drone found us a good spot to step out of, and all three of us stepped through to the plant. The drone landed in my hand and I folded it down to stick in the compartment again. Linnea was looking around, somewhat nervously, while Esashiel had one hand on their sword. I gripped my shield, hoping I wouldn't need it, but felt reassured it was back with me. I hadn't taken it flying around, it just would have been a drag on me, and it felt right in my hand. We were in the back lot, where the "recycled" material was still pouring down out of the hole in the air and the heavy equipment was. I figured here we were past the fence, and could probably just walk into the place as the doors would be open to move the raw material into wherever it was processed. I turned to the others.

"We don't know if they'll simply attack us for being here, meaning we caught them red handed, they are in on it and know they shouldn't be doing all this, or act like normal people and just wonder why we're here. In that case they probably aren't in on it. Let me do the talking for now, we'll see how they react, and go from there."

"What is the plan though?"

"Demand to see someone in charge, and see what kind of story they tell."

"And if we don't like the story?"

I patted the butt of the shotgun that was stuck to me. "We persuade them to stop."

She looked doubtful. "Okay, if murdering one single person will stop all this, which I doubt. Whatever this is you can't think the death of one person will end it, do you? It's too big."

"I agree," Esashiel told us. "We should resort to violence only as a last resort. They may have guards, too many for us to handle. We will need to tread carefully."

"Hey, hey, hey, who do you take me for? I'm not saying I'm just going to shoot the guy on sight or anything!" I protested. "We march him through a portal to Blue Shield and make him confess his whole diabolical plan! Hopefully they know how to safely dissipate the magic so it doesn't blow the country up or whatever. As far as I know making this dust and putting it into the road isn't illegal, though it may violate some kind of construction code he's waving away with magic." *Though the roads are clearly holding up so it can't be that bad. It must be a small fraction of the total material, after all. Just enough to do whatever it is they're trying to do.* "It's what they're planning to do that's the problem. They need to be charged accordingly, in our jurisdiction. The humans won't know what to do with them."

Well I don't know how bloodthirsty you are," Linnea protested. "Maybe you planned to shoot your way into and out of the place. I needed to know before I just blindly followed you."

"Fair enough. We talk first, capture next, fight last, satisfied?"

"Yes. If it does come down to it I'll enhance you with battle magic and try to find some cover. Lead will probably be flying and I don't want any more piercings at this time."

"Oh, meaning you have some piercings now?" I asked.

"Maybe," she replied with a grin. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"See them for myself? Naturally."

"Could you two flirt later," Meowvis asked. "We're sort of in enemy territory right now? Sheesh, some Iron Man you make."

"Sorry, right. Let's head in. Keep your eyes open everyone, we're in enemy territory right now."

"May the Lord God protect us, and keep us safe as we protect His creation and His people," Esashiel prayed.

Right, what they said. We moved toward the building as a group, the others sticking close behind me. We would soon get to the bottom of this, maybe even be hailed as heroes in the 'monster' community. I could hear the screams of adoration already. *Yeah, Iron Man saves the day, I can see the headlines now.* The open door beckoned us, we were close, and headed inside.

Chapter 9

We all get bamboozled and Meowvis saves us

Where: inside the plant

When: 2:30 AM

Naturally the first person to notice us stared at these three weirdos walking in as bold as you please. I could see their eyes look me over and scowl, then switch to Esashiel and get wider. Then they looked at Linnea and they got a dreamy look to them.

Maybe I should let her do the talking?

They snapped out of it and rushed over. It was one of my kind for sure, wearing safety equipment as they should but oddly their feet pointed backwards.

How did something evolve to be like that? What possible benefit would having feet like that be? It doesn't make sense.

"Hey, you people can't be in here! Who are you anyway?" they demanded, as if they had a right to know any of that.

I suppose we are trespassing. "Never mind that, my lad," I told him, it looked like a him after all. "We need to speak to someone in charge. You will take us to them."

"You think so, do you? Why should I?"

Wait, so can I just walk through anywhere as long as I keep telling people to 'take me to your leader?' They'll just get defensive about being told what to do and let me proceed on my way? That doesn't seem right, but we need to actually get somewhere here. But how to- ah, yes I think I have it. "Of course. You do want the credit for apprehending the trespassers, don't you?"

This set him back a second. "Yes, yes I do," they agreed. "You are trespassers aren't you? Yes, you're coming with me, right now!"

"There's a good man. Lead the way."

He seemed a bit confused by all this but stopped the machine he was standing next to and motioned us curtly to follow him. We wove through the machinery area and into the office area, where he knocked on a door and went inside. We followed.

"What in the world?" asked the man inside as he sized us up. "Nice armor," he told me. *He doesn't know Iron Man? Interesting.* "But didn't knights go out of style like a thousand years- hello!" He caught sight of Linnea. "Well, well, well, what have we here? You need a job? I think you would make a perfect recruiter for our company."

"No thanks," Linnea told him. "I have a job."

"Pity, what a pity. And... no it can't be." He looked over at Esashiel in disbelief. As he did I looked him over. He was dressed in a very out of date looking suit, and now that they had stood up seemed fairly tall, with a gray cast to his skin that almost seemed to have a craggy texture. His hair was messy like he didn't ever bother to comb it, but at least his suit seemed properly pressed.

"Found them wandering the floor, boss," said the man. "I caught them, brought them in right away."

"You caught them?" Clearly the man didn't believe a word of this. "An angel, the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and a man wearing a suit of armor like it was still medieval England. I mean even I'm not that old, but sure, why not? Maybe it's making a comeback, I don't know. But you say you caught them?"

"I brought them to you, didn't I?" they replied, looking down and sounding sulky.

"That you did. You're excused."

"But I thought you would... You're not even going to... Fine." They stormed out and slammed the door behind them.

The man in the suit shook his head. "Caught you?" He tilted his head and leaned over. "Didn't even take your weapon, that's a shotgun, isn't it? Expected a sword, with that shield you've got."

“Gun is far more efficient. And yes, it’s a shotgun. You in charge here?”

“I run the plant during the night shift, yes. I’m Solomon Burley, is there something I can do for you folks?”

“Sure is. You can tell me why recycling plants are grinding up technology, turning it into a powder, and your company here is putting that powder into the road. Because I’m pretty sure that’s not a standard ingredient in asphalt. Then you can tell me about the magic you’re gathering, and what you’re going to use it for.”

“Oh, is that all?” they said, seeming to relax. “I can clear that up right away. One moment.” He walked around the desk and past us. “Please, have a seat.” There were only two chairs but I doubt I would have fit in one anyway so the other two sat down as he opened the door, checked the hallway, then closed it and locked it. He fiddled with his ring a second, then turned back to us. “Right, the road project. We’ve been working on it for about, oh must be fifty years or more now, come to think of it.”

“Who is ‘we’ in this case?” I asked as he walked back around the desk and sat down.

“Why, non-humans of all types! Our leader’s name isn’t important, of course, but what is important is that we’ve on the verge of something great here.”

He’s right, the leader’s name isn’t important. We are on the verge of greatness.

“You want to know what it’s for, of course?”

“That’s right. My friend the angel here felt the magic building from where they were in Heaven, and decided to come investigate.”

“Did they?” Esashiel nodded. “I see. It’s true, we are in the final days of gathering the necessary magic, it’s no surprise someone noticed. But an angel, I would never have thought.”

“But what’s it for?” Linnea asked.

“Ah, now here is someone that truly has both the face *and* the voice of an angel,” they remarked. “You simply must allow me to take you to dinner sometime.”

“I will allow you to take me to dinner sometime,” she agreed hastily. I too thought nothing of this, he should take her to dinner sometime, why wouldn’t he?

“Splendid! Let me answer your question with another question. Isn’t it tiresome to keep remembering your glamour if you want to go among the humans? You must admit this is true.”

We all agreed this was, in fact, very tiresome and admitted what he said was very true.

“Of course it is! But we’ve been working tirelessly these past fifty years to create something we call the all-veil. This will automatically hide any non-human trait possessed by our kind, and make humans simply ignore our little slip ups. Of course, nothing could hide your beauty.” He stood up and went over to put a finger on Linnea’s face, tilting it up to get a better look. “What did you say your name was, again? You simply must tell me.”

“I’m Linnea.”

“Linnea? What a wonderful name, it suits you. I have a pamphlet you can have!” he seemed to remember, and dug around in his desk. “Yes, here it is. Take it.” He handed it to me and I looked it over. It detailed the “all-veil” and how it would be accomplished, by creating a huge circle with a combination of ritual magic and enchanting. No longer would non-humans need to worry about glammers when going outside, they would be automatically glamoured by the all-veil and finally the risk of discovery would be nearly zero. “You see? I’m honestly surprised you never heard of it, we haven’t done anything to hide it. You must believe me when I say that.”

We all indicated that we believed him. He was a trustworthy fellow, after all, and this was totally reasonable. *It would be nice, not to have to worry about covering my legs up, because they would always be seen as human legs. They’re really doing us a favor, and to think we thought it was nefarious.*

“Splendid. So what I want you to do is go back wherever you came from, and don’t worry about this any more. In fact, just put the circle and anything else you’ve learned about it out of your mind. Do that for me.”

We all agreed that, given this explanation there was nothing to worry about, and we would head home right away.

“Just hand me that pamphlet back, and you can be on your way.”

I handed the paper back.

“Thanks for stopping in. Go on home now.”

“We’ll go home right away.”

“I know that you will. Linnea why don’t you-” He glanced at the ring again, seeming to weigh his options. “No, on second thought you should go home too. Go on now.”

“I will. Nice meeting you.”

“Yes, nice meeting you all. Goodbye!” He unlocked the door and we headed back into the hallway.

“I guess I’ll take us home,” I offered, wondering why we had come here in the first place. I grabbed one of the spare stones from my back, they couldn’t see the gauntlet anyway, and said “portal.” We stepped back through to home, coming out in the middle of the workshop. “Guess I’ll get out of this armor. Linnea, Esashiel, you want something to drink before you head home?”

“What has gotten into you all?” Meowvis asked, the cat form coming to life and jumping up on the nearest table.

“What do you mean?” I asked her. “I’m just being polite.”

“You bought that whole explanation of the all-veil? Really? Did you not notice how nervous he was? He can’t have been telling the truth.”

“The what?” We all looked at each other in confusion. “Who are you talking about?”

“Solomon, of course! You just left his office!”

“Who?” Linnea asked.

“This guy.” She pointed to the monitor and his picture came up.

“Never seen that man before in my life. Is this some kind of joke? Why am I even here in this workshop, anyway?” She took a step away from the others. “Herman? Am I here to pick up more stock from you?”

“Okay, you’re starting to scare me. Esashiel, you can break spells, right?”

“I can. But why would I?”

“Just trust me. Use that magic to break any other magic off yourself, right now.”

“I don’t see why I should, there’s no magic on me. What am I even doing away from Heaven, anyway? I should return there at once.”

“Just trust me, you have to break magic off yourself. Put as much willpower as you can into the spell, I think something’s been done to your mind.”

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt, just to reassure you. Strange... mechanical... cat... creature. Let all magic be purged from my person!” They paused a moment. “Why that little rascal!”

“Who? Meowvis?” I asked.

“No, Solomon! Wait a moment and I’ll break the spell off of you, as well. But I will start with Linnea, for obvious reasons. Let magic be purged!”

She looked confused and shook her head. “I don’t feel anything different.”

“I will try again, this magic may be strong, to have fooled us all like that. In fact, let us step outside so the electronics in this room are not interfering with my magic.” I followed them both out, wondering what this was all about. We moved far enough away from the workshop into the back yard, and Esashiel again turned to Linnea. “Let magic be purged.”

“That rat bastard!”

“Ah!” Esashiel smiled. “That seems to have done it. Herman, I suggest you step out of the armor so I can properly target you with magic. I don’t want to negate your armor systems in any way. Or kill myself,” she muttered.

“You really were under a spell?” I asked.

“We were,” Linnea agreed sourly. “We were ordered to forget about everything we learned, and so we did. He’s probably clearing out right now. We should go back right away, before he has a chance to leave.”

“Before who has a chance to leave?” I asked.

“Ugh, he’s going to be long gone by the time we get this guy out of the armor and then back into it. Can you just trust us and take us back to where we just were?”

“I don’t really remember where we were.”

“I can show you,” Meowvis told me. My display changed to the outside of an office. “Here, go here. And get your gun out, I’ll tell you if you need to shoot someone.”

“This is all very irregular,” I complained. “Come to think of it, why are you two in my backyard? Are you an angel?”

“He’s forgetting us as well?” Esashiel asked, beginning to panic.

“The only reason you or I are here is because of the circle, and Solomon told us to forget everything about it. Stands to reason.”

“I see. Herman, please listen. Yes, I am an angel. I have been here several days. You made me watch Marvel movies. A spell has been put on you so you’ve forgotten. But if we go back we can catch the person responsible. Can you trust me?”

Marvel movies certainly sounds like me. But I don’t have to take his word for it. “Meowvis?”

“He’s telling the truth, Herman. You can trust them.”

“I trust my AI, she says you’re on the level. Okay, I’ll open a portal back to that place, I’m looking at a picture right now.” I grabbed a space stone. “Portal.”

We burst into the office, and Linnea slammed her fist onto the desk. “Gone!”

“Perhaps he hasn’t gone far. Herman, your flying thing,” Esashiel suggested. “Maybe that can spot him.”

“Flying- you mean the drone?”

“Whatever you call it. Please get it out.”

“Okay. Do I have to shoot someone yet?”

“Not yet,” Meowvis told me. “Shotgun on standby for now.”

“Okay.” I got the drone out, which took off. The others started rooting around the office, growing more concerned by the moment.

“I don’t get it,” Linnea finally announced. “That guy said his name was Solomon but this office is owned by some guy named Peter.”

“What are we doing here again?” I asked, confused.

“You’re sure you can’t break that magic off him in the armor?”

“I mean I could try, but he’s literally surrounded by a technological suit of armor. I don’t know how much of that is magic and how much is technology. I don’t want to make it worse if the spell goes wrong.”

“Crap, you’re right. Just stand quietly, okay Herman? We’ll figure this out.”

“Sure, okay.” I felt confused, but the woman telling me these things was Linnea, I went to her shop every so often. I trusted her, I supposed, especially as Meowvis wasn’t telling me I shouldn’t. How we had gotten here, and with what looked like an angel, I couldn’t begin to imagine.

“No luck, I didn’t see him anywhere,” Meowvis reported, the drone coming back.

“Great,” Linnea spat. “If he gave us a fake name... But you recorded his face, right Meowvis?”

“I did.”

“That’s something. I don’t see anything here about the project, this office is probably used by someone else, the real employee of the place, during the day.”

“You think someone else may know something?” Esashiel asked. “There were other employees when we came here.”

"I could try getting info out of them, but I'm a stranger," Linnea told them. "If this is something bad, and it seems to be if they're going to this length to protect information about it, I'm not going to get anything. But I suppose I have to try." She took a deep breath. "Wish me luck."

"Should I keep standing here?"

Moments later she ran back into the room and slammed the door. "We need to go, open a portal back to the workshop."

"That I can do," I told her, reaching for one. I would have two left after this, when had I made more of these? I opened a portal and we made our way through.

"Like I thought, they didn't want to talk to me," she managed, panting. "They were packing up, in quite a hurry actually, and seemed confused about why. But they knew I shouldn't have been there, and tried to grab me. I got away, had to do some running, but needless to say I found out nothing."

"About what?" I asked.

She screamed into the air. "Get out of that armor so we can break the spell off you already!"

I headed over to the station I used to hold the armor and got out of it, then the two brought me outside to do some magic on me. When it was done I finally remembered everything, and felt a bit foolish.

"Thanks for that," I said to Esashiel. "Strange, that his spell got through my armor. He's a pretty impressive caster to have done that."

"He could be a thousand years old," Linnea reminded me. "Plenty of time to refine his magical abilities."

"Good point. So now what? Wait, I already know. I'll call the Blue Shield people and tell them what we ran into."

"I've already started uploading the video of our encounter to youtube," Meowvis told me. "I can include the link in an email to them so they can watch it."

"Ah, good girl!"

"I'm a boy at the moment."

"Oh, sorry, good... boy?"

"Wait, your AI is gender fluid?" Linnea asked.

"I think they're joking about it," I told her.

"It's no joke," Meowvis assured me. "Just because I'm a computer you assumed I was binary?"

I groaned. "Now I know they are, that was a long road to go down for a punchline, Meowvis."

"I think it was worth it."

We went back inside and I contacted Felix, who said they knew what youtube was and would watch the video. With the face and name they could look into who this really was, and start getting to the bottom of the whole thing. He thanked me and said if we figured out anything else, to give them a call.

"So can we figure anything else out?" I asked. "They clearly are not working on the all-veil, as amazing as that would be. So what are they doing?"

"With that amount of magical energy, anything they want," Esashiel suggested. "That's the thing, magic can really do anything."

"But we could narrow it down," suggested Linnea. "Let's go over what we know, or suspect." We both nodded. "We suspect it's an old monster, who has been doing this for a long time."

"As such they would want to hurt human kind, but not your kind," Esashiel suggested. "So it can't be anything too destructive."

"Agreed. We know it's a circle, we know it covers the whole US so it's a massive undertaking. We know it uses ground up electronics-" She gasped and threw her hands over her mouth.

"What? What is it?" I asked.

“I know what it’s supposed to do,” she breathed. “I’m so stupid, I should have seen it earlier. We have to stop them!”

“Of course we have to stop them, but what is it? What are they planning?” I asked.

She told me.

Chapter 10

I leave things until the last second

Where: The workshop

When: 3:00 AM

“Are you absolutely sure?” I asked Linnea, who had finished explaining what she thought the ritual was going to do.

“Almost without question,” she replied, nodding. “It all matches up. Ritual magic needs a piece of the target. In the case of a person, some hair or their blood. We were thinking the material added to the road was creating the conduit for the magical energy. And maybe it’s helping, but that’s not the primary purpose. The purpose of the ground up technology is to serve as the target for the ritual.”

“And thus you think the ritual is to essentially turn off technology for the entire world,” I weakly uttered, dropping into a chair.

“It makes sense,” Linnea agreed. “An old monster, who doesn’t want to put the effort in to learn about all this new technology may simply believe turning it all off is the best solution. They saw the modern world coming, gathered followers like themselves, and put a plan into motion to return the world to a simpler time. The time they were the most powerful. So they took examples of technology, put them into a form that would easily go into the road, and for years now have building up this extremely complex magic.”

“And as magic can do anything, and with the amount of it they’ve gathered, and the fact the magic wouldn’t care the original device was crushed up, they could do it. Tell the magic to target technology so instead of technology suppressing magic, it would be the other way around. Instant dark ages.”

“Civilization would instantly collapse,” Linnea mused. “Anyone in a hospital would die immediately. Anyone in a plane, boats would stop moving, cars would probably just coast to a stop so that wouldn’t be too bad but still. Whoever this is, they’re willing to cause a lot of death and destruction.”

“It’s worse than you think. Without technology any nuclear plant could no longer be regulated. They would all melt down within hours. Forget having clean water, treatment plants go dark. It would be a disaster.”

“Can they be stopped?” Esashiel asked.

“It hasn’t happened yet,” I told them dryly. “I’ll call Felix again, tell them what we suspect. And I’ll try Wayfinder again. If they start looking into other recycling places maybe they can figure out who is behind this.”

“What can we do?” Linnea asked.

“Go home and go to bed?” I suggested. “Once I make this call, that’s what I’m going to do.”

“But they could eradicate all technology!”

“Nah.” I took out my phone and opened the weather app. “Sunrise is in a few hours. That would disrupt the ritual for sure. Something like this is going to take many hours, right?” She nodded.

“They’ll start at sunset tomorrow, and be done before sunrise so they get the maximum amount of magic they can. Until at least then there’s nothing we can do. We don’t know who the participants are, where the ritual will take place, and we can’t just go smashing doors down. That’s Blue Shield’s job. Unless you can think of something we can do?” I waited.

“Start blowing up roads?” she suggested weakly.

I snapped my fingers. “Of course, I’ll just go unpack my road blowing up machine!” I mimed picking up a heavy box and putting it on the table. “Wait is it this side up or this side, I can never remember.”

“You don’t have anything to blow up the road,” she guessed.

“Bingo. Why would I? Blow up the roads, are you crazy? People might notice something like that!”

“They’ll notice when their phones and TVs and cars and whatnot stop working.”

“Unless you have crates of dynamite or C4 hanging around, blowing up the road remains out of our reach.”

“I don’t,” she admitted. “I just hate to do nothing now that we suspect such a horrible result.”

“We’ve done our job,” I told her. “We exposed the plot, and found the place the material comes from. We informed the authorities. That’s why places like Excellus exist in the first place, because they have the manpower-”

“And womanpower,” Meowvis added.

“The personpower, if you will, to accomplish a lot more than we could in the same amount of time.”

“You’re right, you’re right. Guess I’ll just go home and hope for the best.”

“Come on back tomorrow, if they do find something out and need our help, we can at least be ready.”

“Fair enough. Good night then. Good night Esashiel.”

“Good night,” we both said, and she let herself out. Meanwhile I called Felix again.

“Yes, our analysts decided the same thing,” he told me. “We didn’t want to panic you, so I decided against telling you. We’re moving on both locations now, to see what we learn.”

“There’s really nothing we can do, so I don’t hold it against you. There isn’t anything we can do, is there?”

“Not at the moment. As you’re not an employee you don’t really have jurisdiction to do what we’re going to do. When it comes down to it neither do we, really, we’re not the police. But we can use mental magic to smooth things over and get results, and humans won’t even remember we were there. Any monsters on the other hand *are* our jurisdiction so we can hold them, at least for a while.”

“Good luck then.”

“Thanks, I think we’re going to need it. Don’t worry, if we need a miracle I’ll contact you so your angel friend can pray on our behalf.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that,” I admitted, glancing at Esashiel. “I would rather take care of this ourselves, without crawling to others like we were babies.”

“Agreed. Talk to you later.”

“Later.”

Having once again consulted Wayfinder and getting no result I went to bed. *Was there more I could have done? But Blue Cross employs monsters of all types, so they have access to a wide array of magical power in addition to personpower. They’ll get to the bottom of it, I’m sure. I’m just worried about Meowvis, they’re more technology than magic, even if magic keeps them going at this point. They would die if this goes on. Well, no sense being exhausted tomorrow when I think the whole thing will go down anyway. Get some rest, let tomorrow take care of itself.*

The next morning came and I puttered around the workshop, not really able to concentrate for very long on any one thing. Meowvis was watching the news and I had a station on, but there was no panic in the streets about the streets. It was normal stuff, you know, shootings, and fires on the east coast, and that sort of thing. Linnea came over and Esashiel woke up, but I told them I hadn’t heard anything yet, and they just sort of sat around watching the news. The phone rang about 12:30 and I grabbed it up.

“Hello?”

“Herman? Felix here.”

“Did you catch them? Is it over?”

“Not exactly. When you were checking the places out, did you happen to maybe pick up any papers or notice anything and forget to tell me about it?”

“...No. The guy we spoke to gave me a sheet of paper detailing the fake plan for the all-veil, but he took it back. When we went back we figured out that wasn’t even his real office, he was probably just there during the night when the human wasn’t there.”

Felix let out a breath. “I was afraid of that. We didn’t find much there at all. In fact we didn’t find anyone there at all that wasn’t human. Business as usual at both places.”

“So they do just use the places at night, like I thought.”

“Looks that way. They could easily get away with it, with magic. Okay, just thought I would check in. We’re at a dead end otherwise.”

“It really would be too much to expect to find some carelessly lost piece of paper with ‘the master plan’ written across the top.”

“I agree. The plans were made long ago, and probably far away at this point. Even looking into the past with magic just shows him doing his job. It’s all he had to do at this point. He knew what the plan was, he didn’t need it written down.”

“What about the man himself? Did you get a match for him?”

“Not yet, but we can’t just check every camera in the city and hope we spot him. We’re working with the police of course, but if he doesn’t have a car, he doesn’t have a driver’s license, and it’s looking like that’s the case. We would never find him.”

“Of course.” *I doubt even Meowvis could. There’s a lot of cameras in a lot of places and he’s only one being. Even with open access to them, which I doubt we could get, it’s too big a job for one being no matter how fast they are. And if he is against technology, why would he drive? He probably uses magic to get around.*

“Plus, depending on how paranoid he is, and his racial magic, he could have looked like someone else when working there.”

“You’re just a font of good news aren’t you?”

“Can’t be helped. We’ll keep you up to date.”

“Okay.”

“We’ll, we’re screwed,” I told the others as I hung up the phone. “They haven’t found anything.”

“Sunset is in eight hours,” Linnea announced, jumping up from the couch. “What are they doing over there?”

“Their jobs, I assume,” I assured her.

She started pacing. “What did we miss? What else can we do?”

“I wish I knew,” I told her honestly. “But this has been planned for years. Clearly they’re good at covering their tracks. I mean think about it, had Esashiel not realized this and come to warn us, we would have woken up one day to find nothing worked anymore.”

“No thanks are necessary,” they told us. “I’m just glad someone here believed me.”

“The ritual has to be done somewhere,” Linnea went on.

“Sure, anywhere in the US that connects to the road system. It could be out in the middle of nowhere, hundreds of kilometers from here. But think about it this way, it may be business as usual tonight. Yes, we came asking about it. But for all that guy knows, his magic worked and we went home and put it out of our minds. If Meowvis hadn’t been around that’s what would have happened, right? They insisted something was wrong. I think tonight Blue Shield can go to that place, and those same people will be there.”

“And if not?”

I spread my hands in defeat. “I’m just a guy that can fly around in armor. I don’t have spy satellites or a government funded team of agents. See, that’s what the movies gloss over. Either the bad

guys announce themselves and start a fight, or the team jumps straight to the action and never mind how they found out where they needed to be. They needed to be someplace for the action to take place, so there they are. I tried the only divination magic I have, Wayfinder. It didn't work. What else can I do?"

"I don't know," she admitted, plopping down. "I've tried some magic too. Didn't get very far. Just wait and hope I guess."

At around 4:30 I got another call. "I hope it's good news you're calling me with," I told Felix.

"Not so much. Several people didn't come in to work today, so I started digging around. It seems a lot of companies that expect our kind in around this time are reporting they're late for work. We think they're part of this cult or whatever it is that is going to perform the ritual."

"They got spooked that we came nosing around, and are just taking what they can get tonight before someone blows the whole thing?"

"That's our thinking. We've staked out the recycling place and the manufacturing plant, so we'll see if anyone shows up there after dark, but at the moment we're not expecting much."

"Great. This just keeps getting better. Is there anything we can do? Linnea is pacing around like a caged animal here."

"We've had people with divination magic trying different things all day. Whatever this is, we can't tell anything about it. There's not much else we can do."

"I was afraid of that. Okay, keep me up to date."

"Will do."

About four hours later I got a slightly more panicked call from Felix.

"It's starting," he told me. "And we still don't know anything. You haven't thought of anything, have you?"

"No, sorry. How can you know that though?"

"Fires have been set in various places around the country. Big ones. Must have been caused by magic, to get so large so fast. What are we going to do?"

"Calm down. Hey Linnea," I switched to speakerphone and set the headset down. "You said before that rituals need fire, right?"

She got up and came over, nodding. "That's right. Usually specially prepared candles are placed around the circle. But at this scale, I suppose they would have to be inside it."

"We've got a dozen fires that I've heard of," Felix told us. "So that makes sense. The scale I mean, just a couple of candles when you're trying to do a ritual that covers the entire world are not going to cut it."

"Does this help us?" Esashiel asked. "Is there any pattern to the fires?"

"I can send you their locations, maybe you can make something of it?"

"Do it."

A moment passed as he emailed us the data, and Meowvis put a map up on the screen. "All these fires do have something in common," they informed us. "They're all equidistant from an overpass here, near the center of the continent."

"That's where we're headed then," I announced. "Get me a street view picture of the place while I get the armor on."

"Should we send agents there?" Felix asked.

"Meowvis can keep you in the loop," I told him. "No sense getting people there if it's not the site."

"If it is the site, it's going to be guarded," Linnea told us. "Are we just popping into the place?"

"Good point." I walked over and started climbing into the armor. "We'll step through somewhat down the road. I'll send the drone to have a look at the place, and we can plan our next move."

“Don’t get yourselves killed, we have people for that,” Felix tried to joke.

“We’ll be fine, I didn’t build this armor for looks. Well, I tell a lie, it was partly for looks. But you know what I mean.”

“Wait, we’ll probably be in a fight,” Linnea figured. “So before you climb into all that...” She grabbed me and pulled me towards the door.

Wait, am I getting a kiss? Are we heading to my bedroom?

“Come on Esashiel, this concerns you too.”

Kinky, with the angel as... Wait, what’s going on?

“I’ll put a spell on you, a battle spell, to make you move faster in combat,” she explained once we were outside.

“Oh! Yes, that’s good thinking. Wondered what was going on.”

“Just what were you thinking?”

“Nothing, nothing,” I assured her. “Go ahead.”

She glared at me a second but let it go. “Battle Time,” she said, casting a spell on all three of us. “Okay, let’s hope that takes well.”

I finished up getting into the armor and it sealed around me. The display flickered to life and ran through the diagnostics.

“Everything’s green,” Meowvis told me. “But remember, you aren’t a comic book hero. You take a tank shell and it’s going to hurt.”

“Why would a group that’s against human technology have tanks?”

“I’m just saying.”

“I know. I’ll be careful. Everyone ready?” Linnea just nodded, and Esashiel pulled his sword out. I couldn’t help but admire the craftsmanship, this was the first time I had seen it. *I figured it would be rude to ask to see it, it’s a holy blade forged by the Heavens to combat evil. Not something for showing off. But it is well done, I can tell that from here.* “Okay. Did you find me a good spot, Meowvis?”

“I did. Here.” The image changed to street view, a ways down the street. “I’ll kill the lights, we don’t need to announce our presence by light suddenly spilling into the area.”

“Good idea.” I grabbed a space stone, no sense using one on the armor for this portal. “Ready.”

The lights went off and I said “portal” thinking about the image before me. It opened, and we darted through, the drone taking off and heading to the overpass.

“What are we looking at?” Esashiel asked quietly. There was a group standing in a circle in front of what looked like a scale model of the country, performing the ritual. They had tubs of electronic devices they were one at a time taking out and smashing to pieces. I could clearly see all this despite it being dark because the figures were illuminated in orange, flickering light, like a fire, from somewhere. The figures all had long robes on, so it was impossible to tell who or what they were. An outer ring of guards with guns was on alert, looking down the road and patrolling the bridge. At either end of the bridge was another portal, and cars were simply entering it at one side and coming out the other. *Some sort of mental fogging magic, probably they believe they’ve simply driven over the bridge.*

“Looks like this is the main site,” Linnea told him. “Oh, clever, that’s clever. Look at this, can you have the drone focus on the right side there. Yes, that’s it.” The view shifted, showing a portal much like the one we had come through, showing another group in a similar configuration with a burning building behind them. Zipping around the drone showed several open portals with the same scene through each. So basically it was figure, portal, figure, portal, all the way around. Six members doing the ritual, six portals, and six guards watching the road away from the bridge. “They’re doing the ritual simultaneously in multiple spots. Here, at the center, but near each fire as well. That way each can see the main ritual here and mirror what they’re doing. I have a plan.”

“Oh!” I looked over at her. “That fast? Sure, what is it?”

“Esashiel, you can sever the magic keeping those gateways open, right?”

“Of course.”

“Do it. If they can’t see the main ritual they’ll get out of sync, and it won’t work. In fact, we can do better. You see that model they’re using?”

“Sure.”

“They’ll have one at each site, I’m guessing. Maybe made of part of the road from various spots as a focus. Here’s what we’re going to do. Fly over there and drop right on top of that model, crushing it. I’ll jump through each portal and crush the model on that side. Herman, you and Esashiel are my distraction. Esashiel you’ll be between the portals, making sure no one rushes me from either side. I’ll crush the model, jump through, and you close it. Then we head to the next one and repeat until they’re all closed. Herman, you take out the guys with the guns. With no models, no sync between sites, and the ritual stopped here, technology will be safe. We can then figure out how to deal with the magic that’s been gathered later.”

“Huh.” *That seems like a decent plan. Simple, plays to our strengths, I don’t see anything wrong with it.*

“It’s a good plan,” Meowvis told me. “I’ve told Felix where we are and they’re assembling a team to get here now.”

“Wait,” commanded Esashiel, “this doesn’t seem right. Allow me to go through each portal, and disable the model. You should remain between them. I will close it after I go through.”

“I suppose that’s fine, but why?”

“Do you not have the ability to move things at a distance? If Herman becomes overwhelmed, you would be able to help him far easier than I.”

“That’s fair. Are we waiting for Blue Shield?” Linnea asked.

“No,” I told her. “Ritual magic takes hours, but I’d rather start disrupting it now. A hero doesn’t cower just because he’s,” *badly* “outnumbered.”

“Agreed. Okay, let’s do it.”

Avengers assemble? Linnea put her arm around me and let her scoop her up, of course through the armor I could feel nothing. *Not the time anyway, I’m about to go into combat, let’s focus up a little.* I took off and Esashiel unfurled their wings, following me. I came straight down, letting the weight of the armor smash the model of the road system to pieces. Everyone around the circle gasped and jumped back. *Yeah, that’s right.* “Surprise. Get down on the ground and you won’t be hurt.”

“No!” cried the big guy that seemed to be leading the effort. “What have you done!?” He sprang at me.

Chapter 11

We disrupt the ritual and I guess save the world?

Where: The ritual site

When: Having just smashed the model

Now when I say “the big guy” I do mean the biggest guy there. In the robes it was impossible to tell what sort of being each figure was, but now that I could see this guy up close I realized he was bigger than I expected. Don’t get me wrong, I’m a Dwarf, so almost everyone is taller than I am. But this guy was like another of me standing on my shoulders. I shoved Linnea away and as the guy sprang, claws outstretched, I tried to catch him on the shield and flip him over. I managed it, sending him careening into the guy exactly opposite him. Or he would have, had the figure standing there not casually stepped the side and the big guy fly past him.

“Well done,” Esashiel praised, pumping his wings and flying into the first portal, the one nearest Linnea.

“I guess we’ll do this one first?” she asked with a shrug. There were two figures near her, so she looked left and right, then pushed her palms out. “Expelling!” she cried, and both flew off their feet and into the nearest portal.

The figure that had stepped to the side now shot forward, a pretty gutsy move given he was about to attack an armored figure, and I silently saluted his or her bravery as I pulled the trigger on my shotgun. They staggered back, blasted through the chest, and fell backwards. Yeah, I wasn’t fooling around. I had learned that back with the monster kids. These guys wanted to play hardball, and basically throw the world into chaos the like it had never seen before? They were going to pay for it. Plus we were vastly outnumbered, even with Linnea’s combat magic helping us, so we had to take people down hard before we got swarmed.

The figure to my left roared, probably in anger, and tore out of their robes, growing to be twice as tall. Meanwhile a ball of fire erupted around me, probably a spell cast by one of the other participants. I thought about flying out of there and headed to my left, towards another of the spellcasters. Meanwhile Linnea cried out “Expelling” again, so hopefully even more combatants were now through portals. From behind me I heard “In the name of the Heavens, let this portal be closed!”

The big guy shouted “Don’t just stand there fools, take them!”

Out to the ball game? Great, he’s probably talking to the guards at the outer perimeter. My suspicions were correct as I heard three shots ring out and Linnea cried out. Crud.

“Expelling!” she cried again, and two more people zipped through the portals.

Okay, she should be safer. I turned my attention back to the figures before me. I could see a man with a rifle coming around the portal and made my decision. I slammed into the robed figure, trying to knock them into the portal with my shield and then fire at the approaching guy. I managed it, and the one fellow went tumbling through the portal while the other went down in a spray of blood. I turned to see the big one scrambling towards me on all fours, while the one that had just gotten bigger crossed the field straight for Linnea and Esashiel.

“Expelling,” she cried once more, and the figure went sailing through the portal. “Just close that one,” she managed. “Before one of the three gets out here. Forget the model!”

“Right,” Esashiel told her, moving towards it. “In the name of the Heavens, let this portal be closed!” The light dimmed as another source of it winked out.

The figure sprang at me, and given the portal I just shoved someone through was to my back, I allowed them to carry me through it, again deflecting them with my shield and allowing their momentum to do the work for me. It mostly worked, they were through the portal, but so was I. They had managed to grab onto the edge of the shield and dragged me through. I now had to try and pull it free. I did so, noting the bestial face snarling at me from under the hood. *Werewolf?* Flying backwards I ripped the shield out of his hands, sighed the model clearly illuminated by the flames of the burning

building nearby, and squeezed another shot off. I was pretty sure I clipped it but didn't stick around to find out. I glanced up as I went through and caught sight of another hole in the air beyond this one. *Wait, are there other portals here? Of course, there's probably more than six sites, to cover the whole country. These places are basically signal boosters, taking the main ritual back there and passing it on. Ugh, each of these six may have had six more, for all I know. Hitting this one better work!* "Spellbreak," I cried, once through. My "power stone" shattered, not that I could tell, but the portal winked out as I intended. Turning around I saw a bloody figure stepping out of the portal across from me.

"You'll pay for that," they told me. "Whoever or whatever you are."

I flew over to them. "Good luck with that." I shot them again. It didn't take this time, and they dodged out of the way.

"You won't get me that way again!" they claimed.

I heard several more shots, and slight impacts as my armor and kinetic barrier deflected several bullets. *Yes, shoot at me and not the squishy people over there. That's right.*

"Hey, watch where you're shooting, dolts!" he cried, flinching to the side.

Don't mind if I do. I shot him again, and he tried to get out of the way but I think a few pellets hit him, as he staggered a little. So I shot him again, but this time he managed to avoid all of it. *He's fast. And I only have two shots left. Lethal shots, anyway.*

More shots came my way, two of them actually getting around my defenses and slamming into the armor. This drove me back a bit, but they were too low caliber to get through it.

"Get out of that armor right now!" the figure before me cried.

Eh, no, I don't think I will. Besides, it would take several minutes at least. "Oh sure, I'll just do that shall I?" *Wait, were they trying some kind of enthralling magic on me?*

And the two figures before me got a surprised look on their face and zipped through the portal, hands flailing as they tried to grab onto something.

"In the name of the Heavens, let this portal be closed!"

With the next to last portal winking out I put my shotgun out towards the one guy who was before me, and looked around. *Ah, there's the other one.* "Throw down your guns and I won't shoot you. By my count it's two to one now."

As if some unspoken signal went between them the two threw their guns down and booked it towards the remaining portal. *Let them go, or shoot them in the back as they leave? Choices, choices.* I let them go, and the final portal winked out as they left.

"Everyone okay?" I asked.

"I got hit," Linnea told me, clutching her abdomen, "but it's not too bad." I also noticed some blood on her arm, and she was limping a bit.

"My wing got hit, as well as my leg, but I'll survive," Esashiel announced. "Praise the Lord for our victory. Linnea, allow me to heal you first."

Er no, praise Linnea, that was quick thinking, shoving them through the portals like that and then closing them. She's pretty smart.

"If you want. Thanks."

They started healing her, or at least allowing her body to heal more quickly, and then repeated the same for themselves. They went over to see the one human I had shot, to see if anything could be done for them. They said the wound was pretty bad but given their healing magic and medical attention they would probably survive.

We stood around a few moments, looking through the bins that were left and at the smashed technology all over when suddenly there were a series of **pops** and uniformed officers started arriving. They waved their guns around, and I went over to them. As I had put my gun away they lowered theirs.

"You missed the party," I told them. "You need to head to the other sites, where the fires are. I can send you the footage but there were six of them doing the ritual. Plus six other people that were just guards, they had guns. If they're anything like this site, it'll be similar so be careful."

"I'll pass that along," said the one in charge. He nodded to another man who started speaking into his cell phone. "Can you tell me what happened? Who we might be looking for?"

"I've already started the upload to youtube," Meowvis told me. "I'll email it to Felix like before."

"They were all hooded and wore robes of brown. There were six of them. One was most likely a Vampire, they came back from taking a point blank shot with a shotgun too fast to be anything else. The leader was most likely a Werewolf. I saw the face, and claws, and he was twice as big as I am. The others could have been anything, Linnea threw them through the portals to avoid us getting overwhelmed here. The six guards I think are just humans? Oh one grew to great size later but again, lots of our kind can do that. Otherwise we were fighting for our lives, I didn't notice much else."

"Very well." He was noting all that down in a notebook. "So this ceremony, or whatever, it's over, right? We're not in any danger now that this site has been dealt with?"

"This should be the end of it, but the magic in the road is still there. The other sites should be stopped as well, and the fires put out before sunrise." One of the men was bending over the guy I shot. "I wounded that guy, the others all got away. If he lives maybe you can ask him about who hired him?"

He nodded to the agent, and they both vanished. "I haven't been fully briefed, but we do have a job to do." He held a hand out and one of the others dug something out of a backpack and handed it to him. This object clearly screamed "explosive" and I stepped back a little.

"It won't go off, don't worry."

"Don't worry? What are you going to do with it?"

"My orders are to destroy this bridge."

"Isn't that a little extreme?"

"I admit, it'll be classified a terrorist act. But if this is the place the ritual originated from, we need to do something about it. Blowing the bridge up should disrupt the magic and dissipate it. Then we rebuild it making sure whatever caused this magic to gather doesn't happen again. It'll be a long process, seeing how many people must have been involved, but there's no help for it."

"You know your work, I guess. Don't let me stop you."

"We'll need to affix these explosives to the support columns below us. Who has kinetic magic?" Clearly the man was looking to his team, and some of them raised their hands, but I did too.

In for a penny, in for a pound I guess. I just hope someone doesn't record this. But it is getting pretty late, not many cars through here at this hour.

"You?"

"I can fly in this. Show me what to do and I can help."

"Sure, let's get this over with."

So we worked to affix the explosives and they headed out past the blast zone. Making sure there was nothing below them they hit a button and the overpass exploded, putting an end, hopefully, to the whole saga. The overpass crumbled, the feeling of magic went away from the area, and the evidence there had been a fight there was gone as well.

Of course, all the perpetrators got away. Which was fine, I shouldn't have dragged the other two into this. I don't know if I would have been able to do it without them, but a lucky shot could have killed either one of them. Better they get away and we all live than capture that big one that seemed to be in charge and one or the other died. If Blue Shield can somehow spoil the roads, like get untainted asphalt and replace certain sections so there's a break, these people would never know where it was to replace it. The danger of this ever happening again is minimal. Right?

"Our job is done. Thanks... whoever you are."

"You don't recognize Iron Man?"

“Who?”

“Watch a movie or something, goodness. Come on you two, let’s go home.”

“Indeed, I must return to the Heavens,” Esashiel agreed. “My purpose here is done, and we are not allowed to stay past that point. The lower world is safe, as are the Creator’s chosen people. You have done well... Iron Man.”

“Thanks. Come visit us any time.”

“I don’t think that is permitted, but I do appreciate the offer. Perhaps we can go see the next Marvel movie together.”

“I’d like that.”

“And Linnea, take care of yourself, will you? I don’t want to see you in the afterlife for a long, long time.”

“That’s the plan. Bye Esashiel.” She gave him a hug. “Good journey.”

They nodded, then knelt and clasped their hands together. They seemed to be quietly saying a prayer and in a rapidly expanding ball of light vanished.

“Guess we’ll be on our way too,” said the agent. “Hope to work with you again.”

Sure you do. I did all the work, you just got to set off the explosion at the end.

“As the angel would say, it will be as the Creator wills.”

“No doubt.” They started vanishing, and I turned to Linnea. “Ready to go home?”

“Ready.”

We headed back through a portal and I offered her a drink once I got out of the armor.

“No, I’m beat,” she told me. “I’m heading home. I’ll see you around the shop, okay? Don’t forget we need more of those crystals when you get a chance.”

“I’ll work on some.” *What? Don’t I even get the girl? What the heck?* “See you around.”

“Especially if the world is in danger again.”

“Right.”

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

She headed out the door, closing it without looking back.

“Bummer,” Meowvis told me. “Guess you’re not her type or something? Isn’t this the part where the girl should fall into your arms?”

“It isn’t a movie, that’s the difference,” I told him. *James Bond may win the girl after knowing her a few hours but the real world doesn’t work that way. At least not for me.*

“Really? The bad guys got away to cause trouble later. You don’t think that’s cinematic?”

“They did, didn’t they? And my armor is quite distinctive.”

“You’re protected though, right? They would get the same results you did trying to find them. Nothing.”

“Unless they find someone better than me to try to locate me. But I guess that’s the risk I have to take. Let’s get me out of this thing and at least the two of us can celebrate.”

“Actually, there were some chess problems I wanted to look at...”

“Chess?”

“I’m just kidding, we can celebrate.”

“Darn right we will,” I muttered. *We saved the whole world, and everybody just runs off, what kind of ending is this? At least Tony got Shawarma with his buddies.*

The next day the bridge explosion and fires were all over the news. The other sites quickly fell apart after the portals closed by the sound of it, leaving the humans with a lot of questions. Why all those fires at those specific places, none of which was particularly valuable or historic? And what was with the junk left behind, some of it smashed up? Why bomb a bridge in the middle of nowhere? I, at

least, could take some satisfaction as I watched the news anchors puzzled expressions. I had actually saved the world! Me! In the armor and out of it, we had taken on a gang of thugs and come out on top. Technology would continue in the world, and the humans wouldn't even know there had been any danger. Soon the story would no longer be interesting and fall away, and things would be back to normal.

"Looks like you have a package," Meowvis told me. I looked over at my computer and it showed a UPS delivery worker struggling down the driveway with a package. They were dragging it in a hand cart but it still looked fairly heavy.

"Did I order raw material lately?" I wondered aloud. *Usually if I need iron I go to the local junkyard and buy scraps, and melt it down myself. What else would be that heavy?*

"Not that I know about," Meowvis announced. "You don't think it's a bomb already, do you?"

"Don't be silly." *Right? They're just being silly?*

I headed out to give the delivery person a hand, and they thanked me. It was all I could do to lift the box, which was made of wood, not cardboard. *Whatever is inside would have fallen out long ago, I bet, if it had just been cardboard.*

"Thanks. Wow, you're strong! What's in there?" they asked. "If you don't mind my asking. I've never had a package that small weigh that much."

"I'm actually not sure," I admitted. *And yes, all that work on the forge and just being a Dwarf I'm stronger than the typical human. Shouldn't show it off but eh, it's not magical. This guy could work out more, right?* "I do work with metals, I have a forge in there," I nodded my head back towards the workshop, "but I don't usually get them through the mail."

"It's the oddest thing," they said. "I didn't remember loading it onto the truck, but there it was. I mean, a package that heavy I would remember loading, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess." I looked it over. It was the size of a large mailbox, and there was no return address label on it.

"I'll leave you to it. Have a nice day."

"You too."

They walked off and I lugged it inside, slamming it down onto the table.

"You want me to scan it?"

"Scan it? What do you mean scan it? Sure, go ahead and 'scan' it. I'll wait."

"Beep, beep, beep, it's a box."

"Very funny."

"Iron Man would scan it."

"Yeah, don't ask me how those glasses of his work. Nothing for it I guess, I'll get some tools." *I wonder if I could make glasses to see inside something? If I looked at someone would I see their underwear or the inside of their body?*

"Here's something fun you could do!" they suggested. "Open it out in the sunshine, you know, in the back yard? Far from here? For no reason at all?"

"Hey, this explodes, we all go up."

"Is that really necessary?"

"I'm not going into the afterlife without you."

"I don't... I think if... Do you really think I will?"

"I'll ask Esashiel the next time I see them. Come on, it'll be fun."

"Getting blown up is fun for you?"

I rolled my eyes and got out my hammer and crowbar, and proceeded to tear the box apart. As the sides fell and I saw what was inside I dropped my tools, staggering back. "They didn't," I breathed.

"There's a note," Meowvis told me, pawing it. A piece of paper had slipped out, and I reached for it, not taking my eyes off the lumps on my table.

“Dear Herman,” I read. “Don’t tell anyone I sent you this, but I figured you needed some kind of reward for your hard work. If anyone can make Thor’s hammer it’s you. Use it well.”

“Is that some kind of angelic metal?” Meowvis asked, jumping up and laying a paw on it.

“I think so,” I managed. “Lumps of it. Enough for the hammer and maybe some other projects too. Pure, angelic material.” The metal lumps glittered like silver, but almost shone with an inner light. I touched one, and it was cool to the touch, and felt like nothing I had worked with before. What innate properties it had I couldn’t even begin to guess, but I was itching to find out. “Incredible. Looks like I’ve got some work to do.”

“I’ll clear your schedule and put your Etsy page on hold,” Meowvis said. “I’ve got some good reference photos for the hammer, and I think I’ve worked out the dimensions. Want to see?”

“Knew there was a reason I programmed you. Let’s get to work.”

The Monster Diaries
Part 1
Diary of an Iron Dwarf
Part 2: A bestial fury

Chapter 1

I get good and then terrible news

Where: The workshop

When: More than a week later

The metronome, ticking away beside me kept up the slow and steady rhythm that kept me on track, as I pounded the lump of celestial metal into the shape of Mjolnir. It was coming along fine, the metal needing to be heated to a tremendous temperature but not being much harder to work with than normal iron after that. I had pounded a long, square rod connected to the head as I could figure out no other way to attach a handle, and had ordered some wood from an Osage Orange tree to make the outer handle as it was fairly tough stuff. A long time ago I recalled someone trying to cut one down and not being able to make a dent in it, and that had stuck with me. That had arrived and I had finished putting the runes on it. Once the main hammer was done I would put runes on the handle part, the “cap” on the top, then assemble the whole thing. I was hot, my arm was tired, but I was loving every minute of it.

Two days later I was satisfied and started engraving the runes to make the hammer shoot lightning. This I did on the handle, so they would be covered by the wood, which in turn would be engraved and covered by the leather wrapping. This was because I couldn't have a screen accurate Mjolnir if it had my runes all over the head, so this would cover and disguised them. I would of course engrave the marking it did have, but they wouldn't be part of the magic. I wanted Mjolnir to act as closely to the hammer in the Marvel universe as I could, which meant making each piece of it do something different. As one object can only have one magical effect put into it, an item like this that was many pieces was the way to go anyway. The hammer part of Mjolnir would channel lightning in a straight line on command, sadly all it could do as the original was said to be able to change the weather as far as the eye could see. I would content myself with just the lightning, changing the weather could have unforeseen consequences. The “cap” on the top would allow it to channel electricity into whatever I hit with it. The handle would increase my striking force with the weapon, allowing me to do more damage. I was strong, but I wasn't “The God of Thunder” strong, if you take my meaning. Heck, Tony is seen holding a car up in his movie, I was pretty sure that would crush me if I tried it in my armor, so once again reality took a back seat to movie imagination. If I couldn't do what a regular human could do in the movies, then I for sure wasn't as strong as an Asgardian. The strap would, like my shield and the armor, make itself and the hammer attached to it harder to destroy. That way I could swing it around by the strap as they show him doing and not have it fly off because the leather broke. I couldn't make it heavy enough that only I could lift it, some kind of gravity magic put on it would be always active, there was nothing special about me touching it, so that as well had to be set aside.

It was the returning when thrown that had stumped me for the longest time, I just didn't think it was possible. Magic could be triggered by an action, like attacking, that much was true. But I had to be able to throw the hammer, have it hit the thing I was aiming at, and *then* return. If I made it magically return when I threw it the hammer wouldn't go anywhere before returning to me! There was no way to make the hammer come back after I had thrown it because I was no longer touching it. Just like I couldn't make the armor fly without wearing it, once the hammer left my hand all bets were off. I had been thinking about it the whole time I had been working on the handle, but suddenly it came to me. I already had a solution! The iron ring inside the cavity where the “arc reactor” was on the armor made the armor, not me, fly. I just went along for the ride because I was inside it. I could wear a ring that magically made the hammer fly to it if I held my hand out. It wouldn't be able to lift anything else, I wouldn't get telekinetic powers by wearing it, the magic had to be specific. But bringing the hammer back was specific, and (another) small concession to reality. The power of returning wouldn't be in the hammer itself, but in a worn object, but it would have to do. This would solve another problem, that of allowing me to fly by after “throwing” the hammer. If I could control it with telekinesis, I could have it lift me, or heck even hold it down if someone else did try to pick it up. (If I was around to watch them,

anyway) The hammer could change direction after Thor threw it, though usually it just went in a straight line, but with this system I could make it go around corners or do other tricks. It was perfect!

Finally the day came all the parts were ready to assemble. I slid the wooden handle over the metal rod providing stability, and tightened the nut at the bottom that held the leather strap to keep it in place. I had coated the inside with an adhesive for metal, and then carefully wound a long leather strip up the handle, gluing that as I went. With the last bit of leather glued down I just had to wait for it to dry, and started work on the engraving for the ring. Of course I had made the ring out of the celestial metal as well, a small blob of it, and once it was pounded into shape I engraved the inside of it, allowing the magic to be bound to it. With that finally done I slipped the ring on, held up the hammer, and admired my handiwork.

“You have done a great job on it. I detect only a 4% variance from the reference images,” Meowvis told me.

“That much?” I gasped, trying to sound as disgusted as I possibly could. I dropped it into the waste basket. It slammed into the basket with a thump and I turned my back on it. “We’re starting over.”

“It took you more than two weeks to finish that!” they protested. “You’re going to quibble over 4%?”

I laughed. “Nah. Let’s go out and try it!”

“Don’t do things like that!”

“What? You don’t have a heart, and I would have thought the joke appreciated.”

“Still.”

I fished the hammer out and headed to the car. “I’ll head to the woods someplace, it’s dark enough out.”

“Can I come?” The cat body had followed me, and I looked down at it.

“Uh, you’re always with me.” I tapped the watch.

“No, cat me.”

“This body? I guess, it has the same wireless system as the drone and the armor. You can technically go anywhere the magic will reach. Why not just go in the drone though?”

“That’s boring, I’m always in the drone. I want to move around like this for once.”

“It’s fine with me, just don’t fall down a hole or something, that body took me some time to make.” *Can a robot cat be an emotional support animal? Actually, it’s probably fine robots aren’t prohibited from entering places, just real animals for obvious reasons. They could travel with me like that.*

“I’m not going to fall down a hole, honestly.”

We both got in the car and drove further out into the countryside, not passing any cars along the way. With the silent electric motor in Tessa we wouldn’t disturb anyone, and I could barely contain my excitement about getting to try this hammer out. I had, after all, been wanting to make one ever since I first saw it on the big screen, and finally I had done it! I pulled off the road, locked the car, and headed into the trees to test my new toy. First I wanted to test the striking power, and found a tree trunk that had fallen over. By my side Meowvis was leaping over things and keeping pace with me.

“Doing okay?” I asked.

“Fine. This is good data I’ll need for my eventual upgrade. And I think my back right leg servo needs some adjustment.”

“Upgrade?”

“Certainly. You weren’t planning on keeping me in this body forever, right? Robotics moves on the same way as everything else.”

“No, you’re right. If I get a new toy, you should. Remind me about the servo when we get back, I’ll take a look.”

“Of course.”

I spied a good looking trunk, nice and thick, and pointed to it. "Here, let's stop here. Stay behind me."

"Right."

I twirled the hammer in my hand, getting a feel for it, and aligned the head with the trunk. Bringing the head up I slammed it down into the wood, and the trunk simply exploded away from me with a bang. "Hey, not bad!" I remarked, looking it over. *I just hope no one heard that.* Not a scratch on it, and the first test was passed with flying colors. *Flying. Let's check that next. Wait, no, let's check returning first.* I sighted along an area with no trees and let the hammer fly, gave it a count of two, and put my hand back out, willing the hammer back. Mjolnir glided back to my hand with no trouble, and I closed my fingers around the shaft. "Test two, complete!" I held it up. "Lighting!" A bright flash lit the area as electricity shot into the sky and dissipated. "Test three, complete!" *I won't lighting anything around here, don't want to start a fire. Now to test flying.* I dropped it after putting my hand through the strap and started spinning it. *Strap is holding up. Now let's see.* I threw my hand in the air and willed the hammer up, the ring acting to move it as I commanded and raising us both in the air. It was an awkward way to travel, as soon as I stopped my upward momentum I was basically hanging there in midair by the strap. *So useful to go straight up, or do a long jump, but not so much flying around like in the armor. Still, it holds my weight so it should be fine. I suppose if I attached something to the strap I could fly it around, but that would look pretty silly.* I came to the ground again. "It works, it completely works!"

"As if there was any doubt," Meowvis chided me gently. "You're a master."

"I suppose I am," I allowed modestly. "And I have something I can reasonably carry around in public, as people will just assume it's a movie prop. No law against that like there is for guns."

"It might get you some funny looks though."

"I can deal with that."

Suddenly I jumped as a loud sound came from my right, whipping the hammer out ready to fry whatever was sneaking up on me with lightning.

"Call for you," Meowvis informed me, somewhat needlessly.

"Yes, I figured that much out for myself." I set the hammer down and got the phone out, trying to steady my quickly beating heart. It was Felix, of all people. *That's odd, what could he want?*

"Hello?"

"Herman, is that you?"

"That's me. Did you dial me accidentally?"

"Hm? No, no, just making sure. How are you?"

"Good. Great, actually, I just finished putting the finishing touches on a replica item. So I'm free to talk."

"I've caught you at a good time then, good. Can you come down to the Excellus offices? Something has come across my desk I think you're going to want to see."

"Sure, I can get over there. You want me there now?"

"Quick as you can get here."

"In that case I'll see you soon."

"Great, see you then." The line went dead. *He sounded fairly worried. What could it be? Is that anti-technology cult making trouble again already? I hope not.* "Back to the car I guess. Let's go see what this is about." I put my hand out and Mjolnir jumped into it again. "Yeah, that's not getting old any time soon."

I drove over to the office I had met Felix at the first time and let myself in. The receptionist said to go on back, I was expected, and I turned to make my way to his office.

"What is that?" she asked, pointing to Meowvis.

“Just the robot cat I made,” I told her casually. *You know, as one does.* “Their name is Meowvis.”

“You made a robot cat? Meowvis, that’s a cute name. That’s amazing, does it just follow you around or...”

I chuckled. “They can do a bit more than that. You want to talk to them?”

“It can talk?”

“Of course I can,” Meowvis told her, jumping up on the desk. “Can’t everyone?”

“No way!” Her eyes were wide. “I love cats, I want a robot cat!”

“They aren’t for sale, and believe me, you can’t afford the power bill to run them.”

“Doesn’t it run on batteries?” She looked at Meowvis in confusion.

“Sort of. You want to stay and explain it?”

“I don’t mind,” Meowvis told me. “Go see Felix, I’ll be here when you get back.”

“Fine by me. See you in a few minutes.” I headed back and knocked on the door to Felix’s office, and he told me to come in. He greeted me with a handshake and offered me a chair.

“Is that it?” he asked.

“Is what it?” I asked stupidly.

“The hammer, the thing you just made.”

“Huh?” I looked down, the hammer was hanging on my wrist. “Oh, yes, the hammer!” *I guess I did pick it up when I left the car. Yes, the precious! Reminds me, I have to make that invisibility ring sometime.* “Nice, isn’t it?”

“Looks pretty good. Anyway, the reason I called you here...” He slid a letter across the desk and I set the hammer down and picked it up. It looked odd to me as I scanned it, not really reading the words yet. “Yes, we think it was done on a typewriter. A manual one, to be exact.”

“I thought it looked odd. I haven’t even seen a typewriter for forty years!”

“Exactly. Read it.”

I did. “‘This is but a sample of my fury. I want the head of the man in armor who spoiled my plans to turn the world back to what it was. Leave it here in one week, or more die.’ What in the world?” I looked up at Felix, who had a serious expression on his face.

“This is the sample,” he said, opening a folder and handing me a small stack of pictures. “It’s fairly graphic, brace yourself.”

I took it with a curious look and flipped through it, my blood growing colder as I did. The scene was in the woods, a simple tent that it looked like someone had just set up somewhere random to have a night out under the stars. But the inside? It was painted red, and the jagged remains of the people that had been murdered lay there accusingly. I shut my eyes and handed the pictures back.

“Sorry, but you had to see it.”

“Why do I have to see it?”

He looked at me like I was stupid and leaned over to tap the paper. “This doesn’t sound familiar to you at all?”

“Er...”

“We’re not stupid, you know. Twice we’ve been sent footage that could only have been taken at, oh, say eye level? And reflections are a thing, you know. We saw the armor, and you were my contact for the road thing. The armor was also at the scene with Linnea and the angel, known associates of one Herman. The person in armor told our agents about a Werewolf in charge of the ritual, and now a Werewolf leaving a note like that has murdered some people out in the woods. I never questioned you about how you were getting around and learning all the things you did, I guess you just thought it would work like the comics and I wouldn’t ever put two and two together?”

“So you know...”

“That you’re the one inside the armor? Yes. Really should have been more hesitant to show that footage if you didn’t want us to know. Making things is what Dwarves do, it’s no surprise you managed this.”

“It’s not really a secret, not from the good guys anyway,” I told him. “I would rather it not be widely known yet of course.” *I guess it was kind of stupid, that footage could have only come from one place. And trying the whole “I’m just his best friend” line isn’t going to work here. They got me, and it was my own fault. This secret identity stuff is harder than it looks.*

“Don’t worry, only a few around here know. It’s fine. You’re not using it to rob banks or anything so we’re not too worried about it.”

I don’t need to rob banks, I’m pretty happy with where I am financially. “But now you’re in an awkward position?”

“Right to the heart of it, you know that’s what I like about you, Herman.” He took the letter back. “I know the guy in the armor, and unless I want more death on my hands, I have to hand you over to this Werewolf.”

“Which you won’t do, right?”

“What was that line from the movies? We don’t trade lives? No. And yes, I’ve been brushing up on where the idea for that armor came from, and now the hammer as well, so I’m glad I did. Curious how you did it, at least part of it must be magic but it’s also technology? You don’t have to tell me, trade secrets and all that. I was just curious. You’ve already made the shield, so what iconic item from fantasy will we be seeing next? Web shooters?”

“I don’t think so, I’m not the acrobatic type.”

“Pity, my son would love some, he’s going through a spider-man phase right now. Anyway, he’s given us a week, why I don’t know, but we’ll take it. Track him down and make sure he doesn’t hurt anyone else.”

“But I tried that-”

“I know.” He held up a hand. “Naturally we’ll be working on it from our end. But I thought you should know, in case you wanted to do something about it.”

“People are dead because of me,” I growled. “I should have worked on taking him prisoner, but I was short sighted. I prioritized the ritual because I felt that was the greater danger. I have to atone for that.”

He smirked. “I guess you are worthy of that.”

“It doesn’t... Never mind.”

“Naturally we’ll share anything we learn, but we don’t have much to go on. Even with the blurry images we were able to get from the camera footage, in human form he could walk right by all of us and we would never know. He could operate from anywhere, given the people he had at his command, and teleportation magic being a thing.”

“But we’ll start where this family was, right? He didn’t just wander the forest at random, he had the note!”

“That was added later,” he admitted. “From the surrounding area we think he was stalking about venting his anger. Trees there are slashed, at a height it can’t be anything else but a Werewolf doing it. It was just their bad luck he came upon them. He killed them, had someone get him the note because it took about four hours to appear there.”

“How do you- Divination magic.”

“Divination magic,” Felix agreed. “We lost the trail of course, probably he went into the trees to avoid leaving any more tracks after he murdered them.”

“Tracks? Why are you relying on tracks? You have divination magic! Can’t you just rewind time and follow him either forward from there or back to where he came from?”

He shook his head. “We can’t see him with divination. We saw what happened, so we know it was a creature consistent with a Werewolf, but through the magic it just looks like the family is being

torn apart by something invisible. Then hours later the letter appears there. Why do you think we don't have him arrested already?"

I slumped over. "Great, he really thought ahead."

"Yeah, that's always the toughest to deal with."

"Tell me everything you can, I'll try to think of something I can use to deal with this guy."

"Right. So we got the initial call from an anonymous tipline that there was a family that had been murdered in—"

"Herman, get out here," Meowvis interrupted him from my wrist. "There's trouble."

Chapter 2

I get to play the hero, only to have my hopes dashed

Where: Excellus office

When: 4:23 AM

“Trouble?” I repeated, putting my hand out and having the hammer jump back into it. “What in the world? Stay here,” I told Felix, who nodded. I headed into the hall and hardly got passed the door when I saw the man standing there. He was holding something in his hand, a ball of some kind by the looks, and behind him the receptionist was saying “Sir, sir? You can’t go back there!” He tossed the ball and regarded me, so I looked him over as well. He was wearing some kind of bulletproof vest over his shirt, and he had two knives, one strapped to each leg. He was taller than I was, but then most everyone was, with dark hair. He didn’t have a gun, but was fairly muscular and he had a wetness about his fingernails I didn’t like the look of. Feeling him out told me something was off, like there was a power inside him, but it didn’t originate from him. *Possession? That figures.*

“You’re a hard man to find,” he told me. “I can guess why, now. You protected the armor, didn’t you? But not yourself. Now that you’re away from it I was able to track you down.”

“Armor? What armor? What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb,” he snarled. “I was given a tracking spell to find the one that disrupted our plans, and here you are. It led me around a bit, thought I was headed out of town but then suddenly it swung back here. Let’s see how tough you are without all the fancy hardware.” He eased the knives out of the holsters.

“I think you’ll find I can take care of myself.” I whipped the hammer up, but it was a bad toss, and he easily sidestepped it.

“And now you’re defenseless,” he chortled. “You’re making this way too easy.” He took a step towards me as I exerted my will on the hammer. It stopped in midair beyond him.

I don’t think he knows what that hammer is. “You know your problem?”

“What’s that?” he sneered.

I raised my hand. “You don’t know the classics.” The hammer sped back to me, and he whipped around, catching it with his face. He went down in a heap and a spray of blood, his knives clattering away from him as he fell. I caught the hammer and lowered it, pointing the head at him in case I had to summon forth the lightning. I didn’t, he didn’t stir. I went over to him and checked, he was still breathing so he wasn’t dead. I looked up at the receptionist, who was now cowering back.

“Call the police. Someone that can deal with our kind,” I clarified. “I think he’s possessed. We’ll want to figure out who he works for.”

“My goodness,” managed Felix, joining me in the hallway. “Are you all right?”

“Never got near me. Do you have something to tie him up with, in case he wakes up?”

“Wakes up? You caved his head in, he needs medical attention!”

“It’s not that bad, but yes, the hammer worked pretty well,” I told him with more than a touch of pride in my voice. *I think Thor would approve.*

“Worked pretty well? What did you have to do that for?”

Is there an echo in here? In here? In here? “I had to do it because he wanted to kill me. You do see the knives, don’t you?”

“Oh.” He looked them over. “This wasn’t because of the ritual thing, was it?”

“No doubt it was. He knew I was the one in the armor, tracked me down probably using a similar spell to one I put on a sword I made.” I looked for the ball, or whatever he had been carrying, but didn’t see it. *Could it have been a single use item, like one of my stones, so it just turned into dust?* “It just pointed him in the direction of the person he was thinking of.” *He was probably one of the guards that night, to have a clear enough image of the armor to track me. He was right though, when I’m near the armor I’m protected too, and I haven’t left for very long since the incident as it’s near the*

forge where I've been making the hammer. I only left briefly to get food. This was the first chance he would have to catch me.

"I see." He considered. "This is an office building, we don't have any chains or anything. I guess we could use some electrical cords, they would hold fairly well."

"Should I make the call?" the receptionist asked. "The police or..."

"Our internal people can handle it," Felix told her. "Get them down here." He turned to me as she nodded and reached for the phone. "Don't worry, we'll see what he has to say when he wakes up." He started checking the man's pockets, but shook his head. "Too much to hope for, didn't find anything. You better go."

"Are you sure?"

"If this guy had a partner, and they work together, that one could be reporting his buddy is down right this second. They may send someone to just throw explosives through the door or shoot the place up next. But if you aren't here..."

"Then they won't, I get what you're saying. Very well. Come on Meowvis, let's go home."

"We'll call you as soon as we know anything."

"Thanks."

On the way out to the parking lot my phone rang again, so I got it out. *Busy night, or did he just find something right away?* Looking at the number I realized it was the store, and my spirits picked up a little bit. "Hey Linnea!" I said after I answered it. There was a pause.

"It's Peder," said a gravely voice.

"Oh, hi Peder, sorry, what's up?"

"You expecting her?"

"No, no, I just saw it was the shop and assumed it was her. I didn't expect it to be you. What's up? Is someone demanding a refund for one of my stones?"

"Saw it was the shop? How did you do that?"

Now it was my turn to pause. "You know what cell phones are, right? They display the number that's-"

"Never mind. It's Linnea. She left the store tonight, and she's not answering at home. She's never just walked off before. I'm worried. She was here earlier but when I came downstairs she was gone. Knew she had been hanging out with you, thought maybe you might know something about it."

Yeah I wish- wait. My blood ran cold. "Oh no."

"What?"

"I was just attacked, by someone that was at the bridge. I thought they would just go for me, but maybe not. Maybe she got attacked earlier, he just had a harder time finding me because I've been running around." *I popped up on their radar, so to speak, and they made their move. They went after both of us, figuring to take us on the same night. But she got picked up earlier and now is in trouble.*

"What bridge? We have to find her."

"I agree. I'll use my tracking spell, see what I can come up with. I'll tell you about the bridge later if she hasn't."

"When will you know?"

"I'm about fifteen minutes from home."

"Hurry."

"I'll call you when I can."

"Have to find her."

"I'll do everything I can, you have my word. Look I'll call the store when I get home, okay?"

"Okay."

The line went dead. *I know it's fairly stereotypical, but male trolls just aren't that bright, are they? He does seem to care for his sister though.* I put the phone away and jumped into the car, hitting

the button to start it. "Linnea was taken," I told Meowvis as we pulled out of the parking lot. "It's operation rescue until she's found."

I pulled into my driveway and set Mjolnir down, then opened the safe and got out Wayfinder. Praying she wasn't in an area protected by magic I turned in a circle, feeling for a vibration. *Yes, I got a clear result. She's that way!* I dialed the phone and put it on speaker, then ran over to the armor which opened up so I could start climbing into it.

"Yeah?" said Peder's voice.

Hardly rang once! "I know what direction she's in, I'm going to head there and get her back."

"Want help?"

"That'll take too long. I can fly, I'll go where she is directly. Believe me, I'll be fine. She'll be fine." *And woe to any that have touched even one hair on her head.*

"Is this your fault? Was she taken because of you?"

"She made her own choices, didn't she tell you about how she helped keep technology working?"

"That was true? Thought she was making it up because she was hanging around you and was embarrassed. Made stuff up instead of telling me what you were really doing."

"I'm not that awful looking you know!" *I'm the Iron Man, who could resist that? And look at this beard.*

"She's- Just find her."

The line went dead again. *Yeah, that goes without saying.*

I blasted upwards once in the armor, Wayfinder in hand. It was awkward trying to fly with the sword, making me think that perhaps trying to create the exact item from books and whatnot without regard to form was a bit short sighted. Something round, like that guy had, would have been much easier to work with. But I had what I had, and the sword pulled me onward. I didn't have too far to go, in the air, when it stopped vibrating and I had for a brief second a moment of panic that she had just been killed. But when I pointed it straight down the magic in the blade surged again, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I dropped out of the sky, landing and looking around.

A hotel? What's she doing here? If she's just with someone and lost track of time, my face is going to be as red as my helmet after I kick the door down. I followed the sword to a series of doors along the outside of the building, and headed up the stairs to the second level. I got about halfway across when it clearly indicated this was the room. I took a step back, slammed the sword down into the wood so it would stay there, and drew the shotgun. I was turning around when the door smashed to pieces and a figure that was half dressed went flying out it. *Okay?* Linnea, clothes torn and with a wild look in her eyes followed, looking over the broken railing that hadn't stopped the man from plummeting over the edge and to the pavement below. She must have sensed movement because she spun and faced me, hands outstretched. She did a double take.

"Herman?"

"Uh, hi," I greeted her lamely. "I'm here to rescue you?"

She threw back her head and laughed. "My hero."

Doors were flying open to see what the commotion was, and people were streaming out of the lower level and checking on the man who was below us.

"Perhaps we should leave?" I suggested, attaching the shotgun to my back and yanking the sword up out of the wood.

"I'll alert Felix of our position so this man can be taken into custody as well," Meowvis told me.

"Of course, you have to perform the rescue portion of the rescue for it to be effective, right?"

Is she okay? She sounds like I'm inconveniencing her or something. I raised my hand, thinking about a portal location. *Not my workshop, I'd just have to use another stone to get her back to her apartment. I've seen the place, let's put it right on the roof. I can fly her down or she can when the coast is clear. Of course it's night time but I don't believe in taking chances.* "Portal." We stepped through to the roof and it closed behind us. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?" She was looking at me oddly, arms crossed over her chest. Finally she spoke.

"Wow, Herman, I have to say. Well done. Strange you brought us back here and not your place, but still."

"What?" *But I didn't even get to rescue you properly.*

"Hiring two people to stage a kidnapping, all so you could rescue me? That guy I shoved off the walkway, he could be dead now! Was it worth it?"

"Stage? What are you talking about? Those were the anti-tech cultists, I got attacked myself less than an hour ago."

That stumped her. "You did?" she finally asked. Her eyes narrowed. "How did you find me so fast then?"

"Wayfinder." I held the sword up. "Your brother called me from the shop, said you vanished and wondered if I knew anything about it as we had been hanging out lately. I was able to fly right to you. It does work, you know, when the subject isn't protected from scrying magic." *It seems such things are reserved for the boss, not the hired help.*

"Oh yeah, forgot about that sword. So wait, that was real?"

"Yes! Did you think it wasn't?"

"Just at the end, when I saw you arrive. I don't feel so bad now, about roughing them up I mean."

"Are you okay? What happened?"

"I'm fine. Two people came in the store, one of them with glasses on and pretending to be blind. They wanted to know if it could be cured, or if I knew anyone who could work magic to cure it. If I did I would have cured my cousin years ago! While I was explaining magic typically had to be maintained so depending on why he was blind magic may not be the best solution the other one shoved a bag over my head. Then the 'blind' one injected me with something and they hustled me out of there. Whatever they gave me must have been for humans, it weakened me but not for long."

Sure, there's no research for drugs that work on our kind like there is for mice... And humans. Naturally something like that is going to work differently, we're not human.

She went on. "So of course they decided to 'have a little fun' and stopped at a hotel instead of bringing me straight to where they were supposed to."

Because of course they did.

"I waited, playing dead, until I could get one of them alone. They decided who was going to have the 'fun' first, but thankfully underestimated me. Because I was supposed to be drugged or because I was a "weak woman" I'm not sure, but I snapped by bonds when the guy started pawing me, decked him, and tore the bag off my head. Maybe they hadn't realized I was a troll and so had much greater strength than they expected? The other guy was like, 'hey easy in there save some for me' so I saved some for him. I cast battle magic on myself, smashed the door down, and sent him flying with movement magic. That's when you showed up."

"Did you feel them out beforehand?"

"Yeah, wanted to make sure it wasn't a curse or something like that. They felt odd, but I didn't get a chance to say anything before the action started. Why?"

"Did it feel like something was inside them, rather than them being our kind directly?"

She thought a moment. "I guess you could say that? Was your guy the same?"

I nodded. "I think they were possessed humans, not our kind at all. I knocked mine out, so we may get some answers."

“Where did you leave them?”

“No, just one, a man. I was at the Excellus office at the time, Felix wanted to show me something so they’re taking care of it.”

“Wait, what? Why did you just get one guy but I got two?”

“That’s a fair question. Maybe they felt outside the armor I would be harmless? Maybe one guy was there but left when he saw me deal with the other one and wanted to report it? I don’t know. Maybe they weren’t underestimating you at first, but got cocky.”

“Oh, they got cocky all right,” she smirked and made a hand gesture.

“If you can joke you must be okay.”

“You might say they got cold cocked.” She started to giggle somewhat hysterically.

“I think you may be going into shock, we should get you inside.”

“They cocked it up.”

“I’m going to call your brother so he can look after you for a few hours.” *I can’t exactly take you to a hospital, though I don’t think you have any inhuman features apart from being more beautiful than any human could possibly be. But then the regular police would get involved, and the timeline wouldn’t match up because of my teleporting here, it would be a big mess.* “He’ll want to know you’re safe anyway.”

“They were a bunch of cockroaches!”

“Yeah... Meowvis, can you look up symptoms of shock and what to do for the victim? And get Peder on the phone.”

“Working.”

So I got Linnea down off the roof and made our way into her apartment. It was fairly nice, but clearly her brother didn’t live here as everything wasn’t ruler straight. There were lots of knickknacks I took to be culturally appropriate for Trolls, after all I adorned my house with weapons, armors, and pictures of great Dwarf inventions of the past didn’t I? But I didn’t know anything about Troll culture so maybe she just liked... pictures of skeletons shredding it on guitars while shooting the curl on a surfboard. *Strange.* I got her to lay down, put a blanket over her, and waited for her brother to arrive. There wasn’t much else to do physically, and most articles on shock victims were for *electric* shock which wasn’t applicable here. But she did calm down, and Peder arrived, so I explained why she had been targeted and who they likely worked for. He assured me he would look after her.

“I don’t think they’ll try again tonight,” I told him. “For now whoever is behind this may still believe she’s on her way. But we’ll have to do something to discourage them from trying again. Hopefully we get something from the one at Blue Cross and take care of this at the source.”

“I’ll keep a closer eye on her from now on.”

I’m sure she’ll love that. “She’ll probably be more cautious now herself.”

He sighed. “Can’t be more cautious. Trollkoners getting all the looks isn’t fair, and they put up with a lot of crap from everybody. Told her to practice fighting more.”

I snorted. “You didn’t see what she did to them. When she’s not taken by surprise she can hold her own just fine. You should have seen her throwing cultists around during our battle at the bridge.”

“You know I’m not asleep, right?” she asked, turning over. “I’m right here.”

“Spoke highly of you,” Peder went on.

“Peder!” she chided, snaking an arm out to smack him.

“What? Was true.”

“Jerk!”

“Anyway, I’ll head out. I’ll give you a call when I learn something else.”

“Maybe we close store, take vacation?” Peder suggested. “Keep you safe.”

“The cult stretched the whole of the US, you would have to leave the country,” I warned. “I could put you through a portal if you wanted, but they have just as much magic as we do. More, as they

have a lot of people involved. They would still find you. Best to stick together, maybe make you an anti-scrying talisman.” *I can carry the one from the armor around, I mean it’s not small but I could manage. But I still only have the one as the safe is a little tricky to carry anywhere.*

“Okay. Solve quickly.”

“Believe me, I’ll try to. I don’t want to be attacked every time I leave the house any more than you do.” I turned to Linnea. “You’re lucky, to have a brother that cares so much about you. Got some rest and I’ll check in on you tomorrow. See you later.”

“Thanks for coming, even if I didn’t exactly need rescuing.”

“Of course. Angel or not, we’re still a team, right?”

She chuckled. “Darn right.”

I let myself out and headed home.

“What is the plan?” Meowvis asked on the way.

“Good question,” I told them. “If we get nothing from the guy Blue Shield has we have no leads. We know Wayfinder can’t work, sadly it wasn’t forged by a god just by me, so it has to obey the rules here. So asking someone else with divination magic isn’t going to be any help either. This cult could be anywhere, and while I’m pretty sure that Werewolf is in charge, given he was seemingly telling the others what to do I don’t know that. But one thing I do know…”

“What’s that?”

“I’m going to look into what hurts Werewolves, there may not be any convenient portals to shove him into next time. If he’s not going to accept his loss and move on, the next time we meet I’ll have to be more persuasive.”

“Good thing we already started a wiki for our kind then isn’t it? I’ve got plenty on Werewolves, they’ve been around forever. They’re nasty, but I think we can deal with it.”

“Let’s hope so. They attacked a friend of mine, and that. Means. War.”

Chapter 3

I arm myself for the coming fight

Where: My house

When: 11:00AM

“Good morning Herman,” Meowvis told me as I shambled down to the kitchen for my morning coffee. I looked over to see his cat body sitting on the counter waiting for me. “Would you like to hear the weather report or the local news with your breakfast?”

“I want to hear about Werewolves,” I grumbled.

“I’ve got good news and bad news on that score. In other news, Excellus took charge of the effort back at the hotel, so now all three assailants are in their custody.”

“That is good news!”

“Well...” he hedged. “I’ll let you talk to Felix about that. Meanwhile, I’ve been going over what lore we have on Werewolves and it’s not good. But there is some hope.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Conventional weapons are fairly useless against them,” they began. “Your shotgun for instance will only serve to annoy one.”

“Great!” I replied sarcastically.

“It seems their hide just can’t be pierced by normal weapons. The better bet is your hammer, you can crush them or electrocute them however they are still reputed to be extremely hard to take down.”

What if I stuck the barrel into his mouth? “Wonder if I could enchant some shotgun slugs to have the same electric effect as the hammer when they hit? I know that rune, even if the slug just bounces off he’ll feel the shock.”

“If you do wish to stick to the shotgun, and I don’t blame you, blessed silver will hurt them normally for some reason.”

“Blessed silver you say?”

“Exactly. For some reason, a completely normal human that calls themselves a priest and says a quick prayer over silver bullets will allow those bullets to harm a Werewolf. Obviously they have to be a priest, I’m just saying there’s no difference, magically, from a human dock worker and a human priest. A person can’t just say they’re a priest, bless the bullets, and go back to being an accountant and still have it work.”

“Understood. Have tests been done on Werewolves in a controlled manner? Like they take a mix of blessed and unblessed silver and see if they can wound a Werewolf? I wonder if it’s not announced that it’s blessed silver or they don’t know, would it work the same way? Is it their belief in the blessing- and now I sound like a mad scientist.”

“Yes, while the experiment could reveal interesting information, you’re asking for a Werewolf to be voluntarily shot.”

“In the name of science. Doesn’t have to be shot though,” I protested. “Just see if a blessed silver needle can pierce them if they don’t know which one is the blessed one.”

“In either case, I reached out to Felix and they have priests on staff as a part of Blue Cross, so they’ll sign you out some silver slugs for your shotgun. Naturally they will need to be accounted for, and any unspent rounds returned once the crisis is over. They’ve agreed however that as you’re being targeted by a Werewolf, it’s best to be prepared to deal with him.”

“That’s nice of them.”

“You can head down there today and pick them up. Felix should be in his office during normal non-human business hours.”

In other words, at night. “Okay. Anything else I should know?”

“Nothing you haven’t already guessed. They’re very strong, big, quick for their size, and fairly ruthless in straight up combat. You should be okay in the armor but I wouldn’t risk a close combat encounter with one.”

“Maybe it’s time to create a different kind of barrier,” I mused. “The armor has one that helps attacks veer off so I don’t get hit, but what if I created a personal one? Something that absorbs damage in case something does get past the armor, so that I’m not hurt.”

“That could protect you in case something slams you against something,” Meowvis agreed. “A Werewolf could fairly easily pick you up and slam you into the ground, after all.”

“I did make the armor as light as possible, trusting on the magic to enhance it. It’s still pretty heavy though, are you sure they could lift it?”

“They have been recorded to lift four hundred kilograms minimum, while those that work out have been observed to lift sixteen hundred or more.”

“And we can’t count on this one being a weakling. Okay, I’ll hit the books later and see if I can work out the engravings for some kind of damage absorption barrier, meanwhile I’ll head to Excellus and pick up some bullets. You want to come again?”

“May as well.”

I finished my breakfast and cleaned up, then headed out to the workshop. Two of my 3D printers were done so I unloaded them and started a new print on each. I watched a moment as they warmed up and started printing, making sure the first few layers adhered to the bed, and grabbed up Mjolnir and the iron ring I had taken out of the armor that protected me from scrying. This I had put on a chain and hung around my neck. It wasn’t exactly comfortable, it was a fairly large iron ring, but it would work in a pinch as it wasn’t that thick. I spent a few hours going over my library, working out a way to create a barrier that surrounded just me, so I could wear it inside or outside the armor, and have it protect me either way. I settled on another ring, I could make another that fit right beside the one that controlled the hammer, and started to work on crafting it. As the sun was still shining when I was finished I couldn’t do any magical work, but I still had plenty of other things to do that were totally mundane. Using the completed 3D prints I assembled and painted a headband like armor piece from an anime called Danmachi worn by a lady named Aiz, using the client’s measurements so it would fit well. By the time I was done with that it was time for lunch, the sun would set in two hours or so. I ate, informed the client her headband was done and would go out tomorrow, and checked my other email and sites I usually visited. With the sun now setting I made sure the workshop was in order, headed back to the garage, unplugged my car, and smoothly headed down the road into town. I arrived at Excellus with no issues and headed inside. The receptionist knew me by now and told me to head back, so I knocked on Felix’s door and let myself in.

“Ah, Herman,” he greeted me, standing. “You’re becoming quite the regular around here!”

“Pretty soon I’m going to want my own bench in the waiting area,” I joked, shaking his hand. He laughed with me and we both sat down.

“Let’s get my news out of the way and I’ll walk you down to the armory to pick up some bullets.”

“News?”

“Yes. Those people we picked up that were involved in the attack, we’ve had to let them all go.”

“Let them go?” I repeated, leaning forward and gripping the edge of the desk.

“Afraid so. The two that we took into custody last night we felt no magical signature on, and of course the one that attacked you insisted they had no idea what was going on. We called in someone with mental magic, they confirmed the story. We healed the other two, what exactly happened to them I would love to know, they were pretty messed up, and checked them out too. They remember going about their lives, and then a blank happens, and that’s presumably when they attacked your friend. There wasn’t much else we could get from them, being innocent of actually wanting to attack you.”

At least they didn't die. And what happened is Linnea slammed them around, and one of them fell a story to the pavement below. "So they were possessed?"

He nodded. "More than likely. Blue Cross took over their cases, they have specially trained people to help them make sense of their ordeal, and they can hopefully get their lives back in order. Most of the time when humans are used like this it isn't for long, so hopefully at worst they lost a day and their loved ones or work are just happy to see them back. Usually they can just go on with their lives and the incident is soon forgotten."

"That's good to know. Any way to tell who is behind it?"

"We have some theories, there are plenty of our kind that can possess people. Getting away afterwards... not so much. Come on." He stood. "I'll take you to see someone from the 'other side' of our organization and they can explain."

"Lead on."

He took me through the halls of the building and stuck his head in another office. "Ah good, you're here." He went in and the person inside stood. "Ezekiel, this is Herman, Herman, Ezekiel Manchester, Blue Cross."

"Nice to meet you." Ezekiel shook my hand and I looked him over. He seemed fairly average, no features but his cat ears really standing out so you would look right past him in a crowd. *Wait, what ears?*

"How many times have we told you about the ears?" Felix sighed.

"What? It's fine, no humans around at this hour," Ezekiel protested. "I hate human ears, cat ears are so much better! And cat eyes, and a cat tail..."

Felix stared at him, not giving an inch, and he sighed and concentrated. His ears vanished, to be replaced by human ones at the side of his head. "Happy?"

"Marginally. Anyway, Ezekiel here is a Bakeneko, so they know about possession. Ezekiel, Herman is the one that disrupted the plan to magically make technology not work anymore and is being targeted for it."

"You're the one? Huh, thought you'd be taller. Nice hammer though, you make that yourself?"

"I did." I stood a little taller, my work was flawless and walking around with a working replica at last was pretty amazing. *And he has no idea what it can do.*

That seemed to stump him. "Oh. Okay, sure. Dwarf?"

"That's what they told me."

"Okay, makes more sense now. Anyway, what can I tell you?"

"About possession?" Felix reminded him.

"Right, sure. It's not easy, the host is always fighting for control at least on some level. Easiest is to direct their behavior in real time, that basically takes being right next to them though. It's different from what, say, a Vampire would do, which is simply charming someone to want to do what you suggest. This is basically controlling their actions directly, and they get no say in the matter. What we think happened here is someone possessed these humans physically. That's harder to do, but possible. You go inside them, hide out, and can do lots of things. Mess with their heads, know what they know, the works."

"So shouldn't you have been able to catch at least one of them? The ones at the motel could have escaped when I left, but the other one was right here!" I protested. "So where are they?"

"Normally you would be right," Ezekiel told me. "We can force someone out if we need to, but in this case they were just gone. That makes us think it was a Kanaima. They don't actually have a physical body. So when they leave a host they can just go back to the astral plane, which is their home. If we weren't watching them closely enough every second we wouldn't catch them at it, either. They're pretty hard to see and keep track of."

“No physical body? How do you fight something like that?” *How do I prevent them from taking me over? I guess just keeping the ring with me so they don’t know where I am. They haven’t found the workshop yet, and if I’m careful, they never will.*

“It’s tricky all right,” Ezekiel admitted. “You knock them out of somebody, they just go right back in because you can’t exactly trap them in something. Best to do what you’ve been doing, knock out the body so they can’t move it around anymore and hope they go away.”

I wondered if he was being serious. “Hope they go away? That’s your advice?”

He shrugged. “They’re hired as assassins and mercenaries for a reason. Someone has deep pockets, word on the street is they’re not cheap. Take out the person hiring them, and they won’t bother you anymore. They do it for the money, so if they’re not getting paid, they will give up harassing you.”

“The Werewolf we suspect is behind it wanted to end technology. That probably means they’ve been around awhile, plenty of time to have accumulated contacts and wealth.”

“Yeah, it’s a real problem,” he admitted. “Especially in the last few hundred years. You don’t put in a lot of effort to stay current and the world just leaves you behind. Lots of resentment on our side of things.”

I pity the fool who can’t take a basic computer class, it’s not like it’s that hard. Human children of five can learn computers, I mean come on. “I guess. Anything else you can tell me?”

“That’s the basics of possession, and what we’re dealing with. I wish we could be more help, but those people were a dead end. If you can somehow trick one into telling you something that’s the way to go. Otherwise you may have to just get lucky, this Werewolf slipping up or something to provide you a clue.”

“There wasn’t anything you could get? Even knowing where they lived would be useful, right?”

He shook his head. “They were from all over. The two we picked up at the motel didn’t know each other. They were from hundreds of miles away, like someone deliberately picked people at random, just to throw us off.”

That figures. With magical teleportation being a thing, why not do that, and throw the scent off further? I slumped. “Okay. Thanks for the information.”

“Of course. Good luck, hope it turns out okay for you.”

“I’ll send any more bodies your way.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, thanks. But do try not to kill them. The one outside the room was almost dead, even magic can only do so much, especially healing magic. These people are innocent, and even if you don’t like humans, we don’t need the negative publicity.”

“I have nothing against them.”

“Well you’re in the minority then. Nice meeting you.”

“Likewise.”

“Let’s go see Cathy,” Felix told me, rising to leave. “And get you on your way.”

We took an elevator down to the basement and headed through some corridors to a locked door, which Felix unlocked with his badge and went inside. Before us was a small room, at the back was an area sealed off with bars where a rather attractive woman with long hair that seemed to be blowing in the breeze was seated. She was reading something, and looked up at our approach.

“Hi Cathy,” Felix greeted her.

“Hey Felix!” She put the book down and stood up. “Let’s see, you wanted shotgun shells, right?”

“That’s right. Blessed sliver.”

“One minute.” She went further back, where I could see weapons of all kinds were stacked on shelves.

“Nice,” I remarked.

“Who, Cathy? She’s a Vila, they’re all super attractive. But don’t mess with her, she’s guarding this place for a reason. Ever had all the air ripped out of your lungs? Or try to stand in a hurricane? She can do either.”

“Actually, I was talking about the arsenal, but sure, she’s pretty enough.” *Sorry, but she still doesn’t hold a candle to Linnea.*

“Oh! Sorry, shouldn’t have assumed there. Yes, some of our kind find weapons distasteful, like they’re admitting their magic isn’t good enough or something. Stupid of them. Most will go down to a bullet or two, while they’re trying to figure out a good ‘spell’ to use we’re just shooting them full of lead. Quick, simple to use, cheap to operate, doesn’t tire you out, and works if there are people or technology around. What’s not to like?”

“Hey, you don’t have to tell me. The hammer was just a vanity project of mine that came in handy, I’m a shotgun man the entire length of the day.”

“Is... is that some kind of euphemism?”

“What? No! I use a shotgun, we’re here for shotgun shells!”

“Ah yes, of course. Here comes Cathy.”

“You’ll have to sign for them.” She shook a box that rattled, and pushed papers through a slot in the bars. “Is one box enough?”

“If I have to shoot more than a box of shotgun shells, I’m either being attacked by a whole pack of Werewolves in which case twenty boxes probably wouldn’t help, or I’m a terrible shot and deserve to be torn apart.” I took up the pen and signed for them, then passed the papers back.

“That seems in order, here you go.” She put them through the wall using a sliding drawer and I popped the top off to look at them. They were shotgun shells all right, a standard size box of them.

“These should help if the two of us meet again,” I told her. “Thanks.”

“Sure thing. Don’t get dead, okay?”

I chuckled. “Trying not to. I’ll return the unused ones once this is all over.”

“Along with a report of where, when, and under what circumstances any used ammunition was fired,” she reminded me.

Do you want me to give each one a name, too? Dress it up in a cute outfit? Have a tea party as a farewell for them? “Of course.”

“I’ll walk you back. See you Cathy.”

“Bye sugar.”

“Is there anything else?” he asked me on the way up.

“You’ve told me what you can, I just hope more innocent people like those campers aren’t targeted.” *This should be between him and me, killing random humans out in the woods isn’t going to solve anything.*

“This Werewolf must know this area is where his agent vanished, and they must have reported where they took your friend from by now. They did escape, after all. She’s okay, I take it? I didn’t get a lot of details from that guy that called, just that more attackers needed to be cleaned up.”

“She’s fine.”

“Good. So I don’t think it’ll happen at random. They’ll be scouring the area trying to find you now. I assume you have some kind of protection against scrying, otherwise they would have found you by now?”

And hopefully leave Linnea alone. I’m the one he should want, same as I want him. Plus Peder is staying with her, but I suppose they could be possessed as easily as anyone else. Nothing I can do about that though. “That’s a small comfort. And yes, I do, made it myself. Well, I’ll let you know if something else happens.”

“Hope we can get this all behind us soon. See you later Herman.”

“Night.”

I was going to get some dinner and then start engraving the inside of the ring now that I was no longer dragged down by daylight but Meowvis blocked my path into the kitchen after we got home.

“What’s up, pussy cat?”

“As per your original directive I’ve continued running a search for local news items containing the words ‘Iron Man.’ I think you’re going to want to see this one. Go turn on the news.”

Chapter 4

I answer the call of the hero

Where: My living room

When: 10:45 PM

Turning on the TV in my living room I didn't have to wait long for the 24 hour news to circle back to what Meowvis wanted me to see.

"A standoff with police began about 9:30 tonight when several armed men burst into a local restaurant and took those inside hostage. As of yet, none of the hostages have been reported killed but what makes this story so bizarre is the demands of the terrorists. They are apparently demanding 'the flying, armored man' make an appearance and will only release the hostage once this 'armored man' arrives. Apparently they can't be more specific than that, however being shown promotional material for the 'Iron Man' movies insist that's the person they want. To be clear, they are not asking for the actor, Robert Downey Jr. who played 'Iron Man' in the recent Marvel movies to be brought, they are asking for the literal Iron Man to somehow spring off the screen and fly out to see them. Clearly they are a group of very, very troubled individuals but police are taking this very seriously as they seem to be heavily armed and otherwise serious."

"Get the suit ready, I'll have to eat when I get back." I snapped the TV off and headed to the workshop. Meowvis padded along beside me.

"You're going? Is that wise?"

"Wise? No, probably not. Necessary? Yes."

"The police would no doubt handle it."

"And get a bunch of people that don't recall ever having done this because they've been possessed? Yeah, that'll look really good at the trial." I stood before the armor which started to open up so I could step into it. "This should be between this stupid wolf and me. He needs to stop dragging innocent people into it. As victims of possession or otherwise." I stepped into the armor, then started closing it around me.

"I guess this is your big debut, huh?"

"It's earlier than I wanted to be seen by a lot of people, but it had to happen sooner or later. Maybe this is the night the world starts to have a little hope again."

"And if the magic fails because of all the people around?"

"The armor is still armor. Yes, it's not as responsive without your connection and having power, but it will still protect me. I can move around without the magic, I made sure of that. I'm confident in my skills though, even if there isn't enough belief in me that it keeps it working." *If it even works like that.*

"Just be safe, okay? I don't want to have to scrap myself because you died."

That is a thing, isn't it? What would happen to this place if I died? I mean the bills could still be paid but Meowvis can't maintain the property in his cat body. The place would have to be destroyed.

"You can talk to Felix, or I guess Linnea, they can take care of things. I should have a backup though, in case something happens to me. I'll think about that later."

"Okay. Setting a hundred reminders..."

"A hundred?"

"You're right, that's not nearly enough. Setting ten thousand reminders..."

A shook my head as the helmet closed down around me and lit up, showing the normal overlay and diagnostic tests it always ran before I did anything. Along with what appeared to be my first reminder, which I dismissed. Moments later I was shooting up into the sky, following the line Meowvis drew for me towards the restaurant.

I could see lots of flashing lights and activity around the place, so I took a deep breath and steeled myself. “Now or never,” I told Meowvis. “Let’s see what happens.” I headed down, landing with a crash in a clear space near the police cars. I could hear someone shouting into a megaphone which abruptly cut off as every eye turned towards me. I stood up, looking around, and Meowvis scrolled text across my screen that they were still with me. *Good, one way or the other, my systems haven’t shut down so I’m in good shape so far.* “Someone call for Iron Man?” I asked.

“How did this joker get here?” someone yelled, coming over to me.

“He just dropped out of the sky, chief,” said another officer.

“What are you talking about, dropped out of the sky?”

“You in charge here?” I asked.

“I don’t see what business that is of yours,” the officer said to me. “Get out of here, we don’t need someone pretending to be a super hero making this situation worse. Never should have told those reporters what they were saying, it’s brought out the... the... crazies...”

I rose into the air, pretending to use my arms to steady myself like Iron Man would in the movies, despite that being unnecessary. It’s what he would expect, after all. “I said, are you in charge here?”

“Impossible!” He took a step back and drew his gun, pointing it at me.

“Oh put that away, I’m here to help you. This is just to get your attention, so you know I’m the real deal.” I went back to the ground again. “What’s the situation? Have the hostages been harmed?”

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“I’m Iron Man, can’t you see that for yourself? Now you can work with me to save those people in there, or I can just fly over there and take care of it myself. I’m doing you the courtesy of asking first. Have the hostages been harmed?”

“But you aren’t real, you can’t have been flying!”

I sighed. “Did you really think it would stay science fiction forever? Don’t be stupid. We’ve had armor for thousands of years, and robotics are finally good enough to start integrating into a suit. Just because you think I shouldn’t be able to fly doesn’t mean I didn’t figure out a way. Now time is wasting, have you made any progress with the terrorists?”

“I told you he was real, chief,” said another officer coming over. “Didn’t I report that? You are the one that helped me that night, catching that naked guy that was running around.”

“Oh that! Yeah, I remember that, it was me. I hope that guy got the help he needed.” *And didn’t just get lost in the system.*

“He just kept insisting he was out for a walk.”

Maybe he was, did you ever think of that?

“As fascinating as this subject is,” the chief told us, his gun still on me, “what are you really doing here?”

“They’ve asked, haven’t they?” I asked him. “I’m here to see to the release of the hostages. It’s me they want, I’m sure they’ll cooperate once they know I’m here.”

“You’re sure of that, are you?”

“Why do you have Captain America’s shield?” asked another officer.

“Because sometimes I need to block things, because my armor can’t take a tank shell like the one onscreen. Can we focus here? Hostages. Status. Now!”

“They’re still in there,” said the officer I had helped before. “It’s too risky to rush them, and I told them you would come. I told them! I was right.”

“I came as soon as I heard, yes. I don’t have a bat signal, after all.”

“Oh man, chief we should totally make a bat signal!”

“We’re not making a bat signal, are you really buying into this?”

“Chief, he can fly. He’s who they were asking for. He doesn’t have to talk to them, just show he’s here and see what they do. If they were crazy and didn’t expect him to show up, it may cause them

to just give up. But if they do want him for some reason, and he's willing to go in there, those people are safe. Isn't that what this is all about?"

The chief looked back and forth between us, then shoved his gun back. "Can't believe I'm even entertaining this. Fine, we'll see what they have to say. But you-," he shoved a finger in my face "are not to do anything without it being cleared by me first. Is that understood, 'Iron Man?'"

"Of course, I need someone to blame if this goes wrong."

"He's got you there chief," said the officer.

"Just come with me and stay quiet." We wound our way through the police cars and towards the restaurant, uniformed officers staring at me openly. "Eyes front," called the chief. "This isn't over." He raised the megaphone again. "Hey you in there! I've got your armored man or whatever. This the guy you wanted?"

Looking at the place it seemed they had flipped tables up to cover the windows, but the door opened and a man holding a knife to another man's throat peeked out. "How many robed figures that night?" he called.

"What?" asked the chief.

"Not you, him! How many people in robes that night?"

"May I answer?" I asked the chief.

"What robes? What's he talking about?"

"He wants to be sure it's me, that's all. There were six men in robes." *Though men isn't exactly accurate, as at least one was a Vampire and one was a Werewolf. But whatever.*

The chief seemed to mull it over and finally turned back. "Six," he called out. The man nodded and pulled the other man back inside. "Okay, so now what?" he asked me.

"Not sure, I suppose we'll have to figure out how to exchange the hostages?" I asked him.

"Chief, they're talking again." An officer ran up and handed the man a phone.

"Ah, finally. You there? Yes, it's me. You're serious? This guy is really all you wanted? Unbelievable. Okay, how do you- uh huh. Right. Sure. I'll tell him." He turned to me. "They say they'll let half of them go now, the other half once you're inside. But if you don't go in, they'll kill the rest."

"Fine. I'll go in."

"He's agreed, send them out." A moment later several people stumbled out, each being taken by an officer off to the side where they could recover. The trickle stopped. "He says that's half."

"Okay. I'll see what I can do about them." I started forward. *I hate to kill them, they're probably just possessed like the others, and that won't get rid of the person possessing them. They'll still be around to cause trouble. I need some kind of trap for these guys like in Ghostbusters. But maybe they just want to take me to their boss and we can end this tonight.* I was halfway to the door. *Don't wish me luck or anything...* Opening it up I saw five men with guns, knives, and a general bad attitude holding another group of people hostage. The hostages were all seated against a wall, covered by the bad guys, who seemed a fairly ragtag bunch. They were all male, large, but not wearing any kind of armor. Their guns were standard fare, just pistols and one rifle, which made sense. Difficult to possess someone on, say, a military base where better arms would be, so they just had to use whatever their possession victims happened to own. *And because every man, woman, and child owns a gun in this country, it's super easy, barely an inconvenience, to put their hands on them. Thanks, 'founding fathers,' for not being able to think ahead and consider that maybe that single shot musket, which is what you had at the time, might evolve into something a little more dangerous. I mean I can't talk, I carry a shotgun around, but I'm also Iron Man. They are not.* Everyone openly stared at me, and I pointed to the hostages. "Let them go, I'm here like you asked."

The largest guy there nodded, and the others hauled them up and shoved them towards the door. I caught them saying things like "he's real" and "he actually came" as they made their way out, and finally the place was empty apart from the men with guns.

“Kanaima, I presume? Or are you actually humans and just have a really weird way of trying to get an autograph?”

“Oh, figured it out, did you, smart guy?” said the big one. “We’ll be sure to tell our boss how clever you were when we deliver your corpse. Now!” I tensed, *what are they up to? Did they rig the place with explosives?* But no, they whipped out what looked like tasers, the kind that shoot wires out, and they all pressed the buttons, shooting wires out. The wires either bounced off the armor with a tink sound or missed me completely, my kinetic barrier nudging them out of the way. They uselessly sparked on the ground, and I tilted my head.

“You know, those have to stick into the person you’re firing at,” I informed them. “Did you really think that would work?”

“So the armor is real?” asked the big guy, throwing the now useless device down to the ground and taking his gun in hand again. “We thought it might just be an illusion. You really built something like that?”

“I really built it. Look, can you just take me to your boss the Werewolf? I’d like him to stop involving other people, normal humans like them especially. I mean it’s just poor form, don’t you think?”

“Uh...”

They clearly had no plan if that didn’t work. Honestly, good help is so hard to find nowadays.

“I guess it’s a good thing we thought ahead, isn’t it boys?” There were smiles all around.

Did you though? “What do you mean?”

“Just this.” He nodded, and one of the men pounded on the door of the restroom. Another guy came out, this one holding a terrified lady, a knife to her throat. “We didn’t exactly release all the hostages. Now, why don’t you climb out of that armor, nice and slow, and she doesn’t get her throat cut open?” The others started circling around me, but none seemed to want to get too close.

“It will be, it takes me like ten minutes to get in and out of this armor,” I told them. “More if I’m not in my lab.”

“That long?”

“Yeah, it’s made of stuff, not just electrons in a computer. Tony can put it on and take it off in a few seconds because that’s called *writing*. It would be boring in a movie to sit there and watch it happen every time. So they cut the time down. I don’t have that luxury.”

“What the heck are you talking about?” asked the man.

“Yeah, who the heck is Tony? Are there two of you flying around? Did you make someone else an armor like that?”

“No, from the- you don’t go to a lot of movies, do you?” They shook their heads. “It’s where I got the idea for the- Never mind.”

“Help me!” the woman cried out. “Why are you just standing there? Aren’t you a hero?”

“Yeah, there’s one thing about this situation I don’t get,” I told her. “Why take another hostage like this?”

“Wha- what do you mean?” the main guy asked me suspiciously. He looked around. “It’s just her, we let the others go. Hey does anyone have any other hostages hidden someplace?”

There was a chorus of “not me boss” and such.

“Yeah, see, just her.”

“No, no, you guys! You’ve already admitted to being Kanaima, meaning you’re possessing these men anyway. You just cut your own throat or whatever, you’re all holding a hostage. The person you’re possessing. I don’t want to hurt those bodies any more than I want her to be hurt.”

“Yeah he’s got a point boss,” said one. “Why did we keep her hostage?”

“Shut up! Pretty clever, aren’t you? It’s true, we can basically get away with anything because the humans don’t know anything. I have to thank all you non-humans that live on this side, you’ve made our jobs a million times easier by convincing the humans we don’t exist. We can jump into any

human we want, make them commit any sort of crimes we want, and they take the blame. If they knew we could do that, well, they might call in an expert to check if that happened, and let the innocent person go. So in that sense, yeah, we're holding these people hostage. But them getting hurt still hurts us, at least until we leave their bodies. It's not pleasant. So sure, we could all shoot each other, which I wonder how you would explain actually, but we would rather not. So I won't say it again. Leave the armor or she dies."

"Okay, okay, you got me," I told him, holding my hands up. "I'll start opening it, you don't have to hurt her."

"Be quick about it."

"It takes the time it takes," I told him. "I'm going to set the shield down."

"Fine. Don't even think about going for your gun, I see it's a shotgun, you would hit her too."

"Obviously." I slowly bent to put the shield down, watching the guy with the knife to the lady's neck. He had been relaxing a bit as I had stalled, and as I set the shield down he moved the knife a little more away from her neck. That's what I was waiting for. "Time stone," I said, and before anyone could ask what the heck I was talking about the action froze and I straightened up again. The remains of a green stone, now used up and turned to powder, fell from that space on my gauntlet, freezing before they hit the floor, and I walked over to the guy. I pulled a spare from the space on my back and fitted it into the now empty slot, adjusting my shield again so it was on right. *Never used a time stone before, it's usually the space stone I use most often, that creates the portals. But it's coming in handy now.* I resisted the urge to smash these guys in the head where they stood, they couldn't be touched as I was now outside their time, but I saw the knife was far enough away from the lady's throat I could get my hand under it. I couldn't crush the knife or anything, even touching it now, but once time started up again at least she should be safe from this guy. I mentally reviewed what I was going to do once everyone was moving again. *Smash this guy with the shield in my left hand, hopefully knocking him out or at least taking him out of the fight. That one and that one have good angles on us, use my right hand to scoop her up and cover her, we can then fly towards that window over there. Protect her with the shield as we smash through it, let her go, she runs off and I grab the shotgun. It's on non-lethal rounds I don't have to worry about switching it so head back in, pick them off now that she's not in danger. Shoot the nearest or any that look like they're about to shoot themselves.* I looked around, that seemed to be the best plan. Gripping the knife tightly so it couldn't be moved I took a deep breath and willed time to start moving again.

Chapter 5

I experience a sudden but inevitable betrayal

Where: The restaurant

When: Time just started moving

I didn't have much room to swing, my shield, being a replica of Captain America's, was fairly large. So I didn't try hitting the guy, as much as I wanted to, he and the hostage were simply too close together. I instead shoved him, making sure the knife didn't cut anything as he (and it) went flying. The lady's eyes widened, from her perspective I had simply appeared there, and scooped her up. Pressing her close to the armor dozens of shots rang out, ten of them driving into the armor and making me stumble forward. (Meowvis told me the count later, I had no idea it was that many at the time.) She screamed, pulling close to me, and I yanked the shield up to help cover her head. As soon as I felt I had a good grip on her I shot towards the window, which I now realized was half covered by the table. *Nothing for it, I can't let her stay here.* I mentally activated my booster system and moved the shield from covering her from where the shots were coming from to in front, where the window was. The table had been flipped up, but luckily was supported by a central column rather than at the edges. So as long as I could aim high enough it was just the wood of the table and the glass of the window to get through, rather than metal legs, and wood, and glass. I exploded through it and the window, causing the lady to scream again as a shower of fragments erupted around us. Now past the window I mentally deactivated the boost system, shot to the side, and tumbled the lady out of my arms. She collapsed, looking frantic.

"She doesn't seem hurt," Meowvis told me. "Get back in there."

"Right." I trusted their judgment, I didn't waste time looking her over if Meowvis had already done so. They could process the scene a lot faster than I could, taking a "screenshot" as it were, and having "all the time in the world" at computer speeds to check her over for bruises. "You're safe, get out of here," I yelled, turning and willing myself back through the air. I headed back in, smashing past what was left of the window and grabbing my shotgun from my back as I landed and started running forward, towards the "leader." My hope was to intimidate him a bit, keeping them off balance and making them hesitate a bit. It didn't work very well.

"Shoot him!" he shouted, and more bullets came my way. *I suppose they are professionals.* Moving around made it harder for them to get a bead on me, only the two directly in front of me managed it. The kinetic barrier took care of the shots from one of them, the big guy right in front of me stood his ground and stayed calm, bouncing some shots off the armor. I reached him, smashing him in the head with the shield and raising the shotgun to hit the guy next to him. The big guy dodged my attack, but the other couldn't "dodge this" and the plastic slug hit him in the chest, knocking the air out of his lungs but not dropping him.

"I don't think that's going to work, boss!" said one of the ones to the side. "We can't get through his armor."

"Elimination protocol!" he shouted, making my blood run cold, as everyone turned their guns on themselves. The ones with pistols put them to their heads, while the one with the rifle braced it against their chest. "You're not going to be able to play the hero today," the leader told me. His finger tensed on the trigger.

"Crap! Time Stone!" I yelled, and the action froze. I looked around at the scene before me. All six of them were about to kill their hosts, and there didn't seem to be a thing I could do about it. I couldn't wrench the guns out of their hands, this stone wasn't giving me "super speed" it was just freezing the action. I couldn't do the same thing as with the knife, there were too many of them and they already had their guns pressed up against their heads. At most I might be able to save one by starting time and jerking his hand away, but the others? I walked around the scene, furiously thinking about my options, which of course were limited. I couldn't ask Meowvis for advice, they were just as

frozen as these guys were. I couldn't unload their guns, they couldn't be touched or manipulated any more than the men themselves could. *These guys are going to shoot themselves, the Kanaima possessing them will simply leave their bodies, and I'm stuck here with a bunch of dead people. Which is a fantastic look for Iron Man's big debut isn't it? What am I going to do here?*

But there was nothing to be done, my other "stones" could create illusions (reality stone), summon spirits (soul stone), read minds (mind stone), and break spells (power stone). Totally useless here. *Tony never had to deal with possession. The writers just gave him tiny missiles to use when hostages were taken. And of course all the terrorists just went down, he didn't miss or anything, so of course they were all safe a second later. For me the people holding the guns are the hostages, and I can't do a thing about it! Well, I burned a second time stone, may as well try saving at least one of these jokers.*

I got into position, attaching my shotgun to my back again and grabbing the gun hand of the leader, getting ready to pull it back. Willing time forward again I silently apologized to the others, and yanked the guy's hand back as he pulled the trigger. Of course I wasn't fast enough, and he, along with the others, went down in a spray of blood. *Great, I couldn't even save one of these guys.*

"What just happened?" Meowvis asked. "Did you use another time stone?"

"Yes." All of them were down and bleeding, and I considered my next move.

"I don't think any are dead yet," he told me.

"What?" I took a closer look, and while they were all down, none of them actually had their brains blown out. "How?"

"While guns do have a tremendous impact force, and all are likely knocked out and bleeding to death, even holding the gun that close does not guarantee a one shot kill," he told me. "The angle they held the guns at, jerking back as the trigger was pulled so it's just a glancing blow, there are many factors that could contribute to them surviving this, to an extent. Naturally without immediate care most would die, head wounds bleed quite copiously, as you can see. Are you going to tell the officers outside they need medical assistance?"

That's why you put the gun in your mouth, I reasoned. Softer tissue there instead of the hard skull. "No," I told them, raising my hand. "We're just going to vanish from here, let them come to their own conclusions. Portal." A portal opened into the waiting area of Excellus, surprising several people sitting there, who looked through it. "I need some help here," I demanded, grabbing up the nearest guy. "No time to explain but all of you, grab someone and take them through. If you have healing magic, start it up." They sat there as though they couldn't comprehend what I was saying or what they were seeing. "Move!" I shouted. They did not. I stepped through and set the guy down.

"Uh, sir, this isn't a hospital?" the receptionist told me.

"Nor is it a McDonald's," I snapped. "But you guys must have healers on staff, or people who know healing magic. Get Felix down here, we can't let the humans see this scene." I stepped back through and grabbed up another victim. "Come on, help me," I said to the others as I stepped back through again. They finally took action, these were non-humans after all so they at least had some inkling that weird stuff could happen at any moment of the day, and together we got the rest of the people though. By that time Cathy of all people was on the scene, as well as Felix and some others I didn't recognize. She was clearly doing healing magic, as were the others. I headed back, intending to go pick up the guns so they couldn't be used for fingerprints, and to make sure my suit didn't mess up their magic. The electronics inside it didn't bother my enchanted items any, but they would make life difficult for the others trying to do healing. To my surprise the woman that had been held hostage had seemingly climbed back into the place and ran over to me shouting "wait!"

"What in the world?" I managed. "What are you still doing in here? Get out of here!"

"Oh wow," she breathed, looking through the portal. "Just like Doctor Strange!"

"You've seen the- Yes, I mean no, I mean get out of here!"

"Where did they all go? Where does this lead?"

“Aren’t you listening?” I went over and grabbed her by the arm. “You have to go!”

“But I haven’t thanked you yet,” she protested. “You saved me from those awful men. You’re a hero! You have to let me thank you, it’s part of the hero code or something.”

Not really, what hero code is she thinking of? Also, is she pouting? “Yes, yes, all in a day’s work etc. Consider me thanked. Didn’t an officer try to help you or anything?”

“They were too far back, I waited by the window until it was safe. Did you make them shoot themselves? Do you have mental powers or something? Who are you?”

“Never mind, just go out the window again so they don’t shoot you leaving by the door.” I shoved her towards the window but she just spun to look at me again.

“No, no, I have to thank you properly. I don’t even know your name.”

“Never mind that!”

“No, I’m not leaving until you tell me who you are so I can thank you properly.” And she ran through the portal.

“What are- what?”

“She is not acting as I would have predicted,” Meowvis told me. “There’s something strange going on here.”

“You’re telling me!”

“Yes, I am telling you. I just told you.”

“Ha ha. Help me find the guns before they bust in here. We’ll deal with her later.” I managed to find five of them, four pistols and of course the rifle, but the sixth gun was nowhere to be found. “It can’t have flown that far,” I growled, lifting a table and looking under it.

“What’s going on in there?” a voice demanded from outside. “This is the police, come out of there this instant.”

This is the police? Like I couldn’t have guessed that from, oh I don’t know, all the police outside I passed to get in here. But thanks for letting me know it isn’t a random passerby that’s shouting at me. “Time to go, I guess,” I told Meowvis. “They’ll be coming in here any second and I want to leave them with a giant mystery, not the answer to how we got away.” I headed through the portal again and willed it closed behind me. It did, and then I remembered my other little problem. The woman. She was looking around interested, while the others stared at her like “should she be here?”

“There you are!” she said, giving me a big smile. “My hero! You were amazing, swooping in like that to save me! Lift up that helmet and I’ll kiss you!”

“Uh, why is she here?” Felix asked.

“Don’t ask me, she just jumped through the portal. Look, who are you?” I asked.

“Oh, my name’s Leonore Gerver. What’s yours?”

“No, oh no, you’re not getting my name. I don’t have time for this, is there any way to capture whoever is possessing these people? If they haven’t left yet already?”

“If they’re Kanaima no, there isn’t,” Felix told me. “Nothing can touch them.”

“Great, just great. How is it looking?”

“I don’t think any will die,” Cathy told me. “But we should move them to the infirmary right away.”

“Hey, don’t ignore me,” said Leonore, rubbing up against the armor. “I’m your number one fan now! Do you do this all the time? I bet you have all kinds of ladies throwing themselves at you, don’t you? Don’t worry, I’m not the jealous type, I’m sure we can all share you. Come on, let me see your face.”

“Look, maybe we can head to my office and I can try to explain a few things? I’m Felix, an agent here at Excellus.”

“The insurance people?” she asked. “Is that where we are? Weird. But I’m not going with you, not until I know who he is. So I can thank him for saving me. Obviously.”

“Not acting right,” Meowvis again told me. “Something’s up here.”

"I think you're right," I told them. I reached out with my senses towards the woman. "No, she feels perfectly normal to me." I moved my eyes from the corner of the display so my voice would be broadcast again. "Can someone tell if she's possessed?"

"Me?" She gave a nervous laugh. "What are you talking about? Me, possessed? No, that would never happen, what are you talking about? Don't be stupid."

"She is," one of the people that had been sitting there and helped me carry the bodies said. "She's possessed all right!" Everyone backed away from her.

"Shoot, I guess the jig, as they say, is up," Leonore muttered. She reached under her jacket and pulled out the missing pistol, holding it to her head.

Oh that's where it went. Wonderful.

The people in the room were freaking out and backing away, and I wondered how I was going to get the gun away from her. I had no more time stones on me, not that one helped before, and simply rushing her would make her pull the trigger.

"Last chance, who are you under that armor?" she demanded.

"Oh, shut up," Cathy said, surprising us both. She hadn't been freaking out, instead she was standing there with her arms over her chest. The gun fell from the woman's hand, through her shoulder, and then the floor. "Honestly, such a drama queen."

"Er..." the woman said, eyes darting around. "Huh. All that effort, and for what? The boss is going to be pissed." She slumped over, falling to the ground. I caught a glimpse of something leaving her body, but then it too was gone. I rushed over to help her, and it looked like medical personnel were arriving to tend to the others.

"Okay, what was that all about?" Felix asked.

"Just a simple Dissolution spell, Felix," Cathy told him. "So she couldn't hold onto the gun anymore. I thought it was better than just slamming her into the wall with air."

"Not that," he told her, sounding exasperated. "Her! Them!"

"She was a plant," I explained. "She was supposedly 'taken hostage' back there and from how she was talking, was supposed to be a backup. I would 'rescue' her, she would be all grateful, then try to get me to take her back to my place. She just went way overboard and was a terrible actress, not that I would have taken some random human back to my place anyway." *Or told her my name.*

"Okay, now start at the beginning. Why was she taken hostage, who are these people, and why are they all shot in the head? Or I guess the chest, in the case of that guy. Did you do that?"

"Of course not! I heard on the news these guys had taken hostages inside a restaurant, and they wanted 'Iron Man' before they would be released. I headed there, got the humans out, and they started attacking me. They realized my armor was real and their small arms couldn't get through it, so they shot themselves to try and leave me with a huge mess and discredit me. So instead I just made them 'disappear' and by now the police are moving in to the building and wondering where the heck we all went."

"I see." He rubbed his face, processing all this. "And hopefully no cameras caught you doing all this?"

"The windows were pretty blocked off," I told him. "So probably no." I handed the woman off to the person in uniform, who put her on a gurney and wheeled her down the corridor.

"I guess we'll find out tomorrow on the news."

"Yeah, I suppose. Look, I'm sorry to have brought them here but this is all I could think of. I couldn't exactly throw them through a portal into a hospital, even if I had seen the inside of one, which I haven't. Not lately, anyway. We need to find where they were taken from and get them back, and make sure they don't remember any of this!"

"Yes, shockingly, I do know my own job," Felix observed dryly.

"Of course you do. Sorry. You know what I mean."

"I suppose. No, this probably was for the best. Ugh, we need to stop this Werewolf, he's really making things difficult for us."

"Wait, you're the guy that came for the silver bullets?" Cathy asked.

Wow, secret identities are hard. How does anyone in the comics do it? "That was me, yes."

She looked me up and down. "Nice suit."

"Thanks. Try to keep it to yourself."

"Gee, I don't know, I'm a pretty big gossiper. Maybe if it was worth my while..."

"Are you trying to blackmail Iron Man?" Felix asked.

"I'm just teasing. If there's nothing else, I'll get back to work. See you later, 'Iron Man.'"

He made a shooing motion with his hand and she winked at me, then turned and walked off.

"We'll take things from here," he told me. "I'll let you know if any of them remember anything, or went anywhere we can see with divination that could be useful. But I doubt it."

"I do too. Let me know. And thanks."

"Sure."

I headed back out, the people there going to sit down again, stepping around the puddles of blood on the floor. As I said, they were my kind, it would have taken a lot more than just a hole in the air opening up and a bunch of humans that had been shot being carried through to ruffle their feathers.

"That didn't exactly go as planned," I told Meowvis once I was in the air again.

"No, trying to fight these incorporeal beings is going to be a real challenge. They know you're real now, and that you're basically bulletproof. They may try for more extreme measures next time, like explosives, or bring along someone that can do magic. Also the fact they were innocent, and you were trying to save them, didn't help our chances any."

"Exactly. I need something that can incapacitate a large group, do it instantly, and be deployed easily so they don't see it coming and shoot themselves or others."

"If only you could do more while the time crystal was active."

"There's only so much even magic can do. Trying to become a speedster, that can see bullets hanging in the air and such, just isn't possible. For one thing I'd have to move all this armor that fast, along with myself. Sidestepping time for a bit is one thing, but making one second for everyone else seem like a minute for me? That's completely different."

"I'm sure you'll think of something."

"We'll see, I guess. Plot me a course home and keep an eye out for any good deeds I can do."

"Rodger that."

Chapter 6

We come up with a trap to catch us a wolf

Where: Church parking lot

When: Nearly two and a half weeks later

“Are you all right?” Meowvis asked as I climbed into my car. The funeral I had just attended was fairly small as we Dwarves, as with others of our kind, didn’t exactly mingle with humanity at large and make a lot of human friends. Too risky, even with our ability to hide our inhuman features with glamours. It’s why I did most of my business over the internet and through the mail, two human inventions I could scarcely live without. Of course it allowed me to reach a wider audience, and kept me busy, but even if one of my clients lived nearby I always met them someplace else and not at the workshop. Sure, I would have loved to show it off, but I had a feeling it would just invite trouble. My kind, like Linnea, I was all too happy to show it off to. Such a place was expected, nay perhaps even demanded, of a Dwarf such as myself. So while some of my business came from enchanting things for my fellow non-humans, most of my business was simple manufacture of unique items with no magical properties whatsoever, for humans I had never met.

The service had been held at night, away from the eyes of humans, and included only those that had known the Dwarf well. That only barely covered me, I of course knew others of my own race that lived in the area, and often collaborated with them when they needed help with a tricky piece of enchanting. My library and skills were well known, and I had heard more than once I should be teaching classes in this stuff. This was actually more feasible now that I had started digitizing my library, I could in theory make videos of my work process and post them, along with access to the books on enchanting I owned. Any regular humans that stumbled across it wouldn’t be able to harness the magic as I did, so that would be harmless, and the young Dwarves that needed the help would have grown up with the internet and be comfortable finding and watching the videos. Heck, I could even put the more advanced videos behind a paywall, and actually make money for a whole “course.” I had worked with this particular Dwarf several times in the past, but now they were dead. Along with others of my kind in the area, slaughtered, no doubt, to try and get to me. I hadn’t know him or the others all that well, but still, I owed it to him to pay my respects and promise his spirit that his death would be avenged. We were all Dwarves together, weren’t we? This funeral was sort of a proxy for the others, Meowvis had cautioned even against coming to even one of them, in case they were watched. “If another Dwarf shows up they’ll know they missed some,” they had said to me, “and if they watch you walk to your car they’ll have your license plate number and that will be that.” But I had to come to at least one, I owed my fallen people that. But no one seemed that out of place, and no one took special notice of me walking to my car that I could tell. Cars were now pulling out of the parking lot, gliding away back to their lives, the lives these Dwarves would never have again.

“Herman?”

“What? Yes, yes, I’m fine,” I told them. I realized I had been staring out of the windshield, not moving, lost in thought. “Just thinking.”

“About revenge, no doubt.”

“You’re not wrong. Meowvis, what are we going to do about this guy?”

“Our present course is unclear,” they admitted with an electronic sigh. “While we can take some comfort in knowing your anti-scrying item continues to work without fail, this hasn’t helped the other Dwarves in the area. Our opponent knows you are a Dwarf, no doubt reported by the assassin you thwarted after making the hammer.”

I looked over at it, laying in the seat beside me. Of course I wasn’t going to travel without some kind of protection, and the shotgun was a little conspicuous.

Meowvis continued. "And so they simply did the expedient thing of killing all the Dwarves in this area. Ruthless, but efficient. From the standpoint of pure logic, I can't fault their actions in achieving their goal."

"Consider it from their perspective. A fifty year old plan, probably billions of dollars spent setting it up in that time, and out of nowhere I come along and wreck it on the eve of his triumph. I would be pissed about that, it's no wonder the guy is lashing out. And clearly he's not afraid to throw money around, hiring those Kanaima, and probably those with divination magic to find my kind in the area."

"There were all killed in one night," they admitted. "The official total now stands at ten as far as I can determine, based on recent obituary records. They must have struck all at once, to avoid an alarm being raised in the Dwarven community. That won't have been cheap."

"I wonder how much a Kanaima changes these days for an assassination? Is there a group rate?"

"Ah, humor as a deflection if I'm not mistaken. You are all right, aren't you?"

"Of course I'm not all right!" I exploded, smacking the steering wheel. "Dwarves are dying because of what I did!"

"Saving all of humanity from being stuck in the dark ages forever, with access to technology forever denied them, and my very existence," they reminded me. "Have I thanked you for that?"

"I would worry if I thought you were seriously asking that question." I sagged back down again. Hitting Tessa wasn't going to help anything, *sorry girl, I didn't mean it*. I just felt so powerless. "As I'm pretty sure you remember every second of every day."

"Second? You're thinking like a meat Popsicle. I'm much more fine grained than *that*. Do you know how slow things are in meatspace? But yes, in one sense or another you're right. I wish..."

"Yes?" I asked after a pause, which was atypical from my AI companion.

"I wish I could help you feel better somehow. Or at least give you a hug and tell you things are going to be all right."

I blinked a few times. "I appreciate the sentiment. But there's only one thing that's going to help me feel better. Nailing this Werewolf's hide to the side of my workshop."

"But if a Werewolf's hide cannot be pierced how would such a thing be accomplished?"

I rolled my eyes. "It was figurative, Meowvis. I'm not literally going to advertise I killed a Werewolf by displaying his 'pelt' in such a way."

"You had me worried for a second there. So what are you going to do?"

I glanced over at my hammer and fingered the newly completed "barrier" ring on my finger. I had spent the last two weeks making it, and some more "space stones" but without a target, they may as well be movie props. "Head over to see Felix, I guess. While Blue Shield exists mostly to protect humans from us, they can't ignore the fact a Werewolf is out there hiring hit-men to kill my kind. I'm sure humans were used for it, that is in their wheelhouse, so something is going to have to be done. We'll have to have a talk about what that something is."

"I shall begin compiling a list of options."

"Thanks. Let's head out."

I headed home, got into the armor, and headed to the Excellus office. I could have just driven there, of course, but I had been attacked there once already and didn't believe in taking chances. They knew I stopped in because that's where they had first discovered me. If someone followed my car back to my house, they could attack at any time. Flying? That would take a little more doing. Plus if the place was attacked again, I wanted to be ready. Meowvis had called ahead, so they knew I was coming and the receptionist's eyes only got a little wider as I walked in. A few people were waiting, and they stared as well, but I was sent back without any problem.

"You wore the whole thing?" Felix asked after I went into his office.

"It seemed the prudent thing to do. You've seen the news, I expect?"

He sadly nodded. “A bad business, all those people dying in one night. None of them were family, were they?”

“Not directly, no. Most of my family is still back in Germany. My parents moved back there after the war.”

“But you stayed?”

“This place grew on me. I send them letters, despite my best efforts they still won’t buy a computer so I can just email them or video chat. I have no idea how they’re even going to do *anything* in another twenty years, it’s hard enough for them now not having a cell phone. Another twenty years and they’re going to seem *super* out of touch with the world.”

“Yes, it’s a problem more and more of our kind are going to run into. But we can’t solve that overnight. What can I do for you?”

“Came to see if you had learned anything, or had any news to share. I assume you’re looking into the killings?”

“We are. Three of them killed themselves, four human suspects have been arrested, having handcuffed themselves to something after doing the deed so the cops found them. Naturally these four remember nothing. Two were attacked by bears, and two died when their houses caught fire.”

“Bears?”

“Of course. Possessing an animal isn’t any harder than possessing a human.”

“Why so many different ways? That doesn’t make sense.”

“It does, a little. We think the three that killed themselves were caught outside, so they could be possessed directly. The four probably knew their attackers, they just happened to have company that night so the Kanaima simply possessed someone as they walked to the front door. The bears escaped from a zoo, not hard when they suddenly have human level intelligence. We figure they smashed their way in, and then when the threshold bounced them back the bears just went crazy and did the job for them. The fires were probably a last resort or some Kanaima just are arsonists. They don’t have to kill up close. They just prefer to.”

“I see. So we still have no leads whatsoever?”

“Not a one. We let the other victims that attacked Linnea go, they had nothing for us. We’ve been investigating the workers at various recycling plants that shipped that dust they were creating to the various road companies. And the various asphalt making companies too. Everyone we’ve talked to thought they were just doing a job. They had no idea what the dust was they were making would be used for, they just oversaw the machinery and collected their paychecks. And when I say paychecks, I mean they were paid cash, so it’s not traceable that way either. Most of our kind don’t have bank accounts anyway, most wouldn’t even know what one was, so they have to be paid in cash even if it’s not illegally making what turned out to be spell components.”

“Someone must have handed out the money though, couldn’t those people tell you where it came from?”

“I’m sure they could! But we can’t find any of them. The regular workers we talked to were getting rather upset their supervisors weren’t showing up to work, but they were carrying on as usual. Once we told them the situation they walked off, most of them, saying they would have to find another job now. They didn’t take much convincing that their activities were illegal and they wouldn’t be getting paid anymore.”

So the ones at the top, those that would have been performing the rituals, they were in on it and have gone to ground to not betray their ‘master.’ Or they were killed by him to cover his tracks? As they were all different races and lived in different places, it wouldn’t have made the news like ten people dying in one day to grizzly ‘accidents’ here. Heh, bears. Wait, too soon. “I bet that went over well.”

“Yeah, not so much. Pretty sure by now, such a long without pay? I’m sure most have given up and moved on. Dead end in any case.”

“So you have no leads at all, is what you’re telling me.”

“Afraid so. There’s no national database of Werewolves, or any other species for that matter. We can’t just go knocking on the door of every Werewolf and asking if they’ve been hiring Kanaima to kill people. He could be anywhere.”

“So we need to a) get him to stop attacking innocent people and b) force him to reveal himself, all while not just putting my address out there so he firebombs my house during the day when I’m asleep.”

“Yeah, if you could do that, it would be great!”

“I’ll get right on that,” I told him sarcastically.

“Actually, I have an idea on how to do just that,” Meowvis told me.

“Wait a second, Meowvis has something.” I got the phone out of the compartment on the side of the armor and set it on the desk. “Okay, go ahead.”

“The plan with the highest probability of success goes like this; Excellus takes out an ad on those billboards, the ones that are electronic? Have a picture of the armor, and some text. Something like ‘hey wolf, you missed, I’m still here.’ Then a date and time of our choosing, calling him out. Maybe he’ll come take us out himself.”

“Lot of problems with that plan,” I mused, “but it’s a good start.”

“Yes, it would draw a huge crowd, no matter the time and place,” Felix agreed. “Just to see what it was about.”

“So we put the location in code. We know a place the wolf knows, that campsite he first tore up after Herman spoiled his plans. So put the date three days from when the ad goes up, and ‘the campsite’ as the location. Run it a few days nationally and he’s bound to see it, or at least hear about it. He’s going to be watching the news and such for mention of Iron Man, to see if he finished us off or not.”

“That could be done,” Felix admitted. “Probably want some kind of newspaper ad as well, our kind is about the only ones that still get a paper, if it hasn’t gone digital by now.”

“A what?” Meowvis asked. “Processing... Searching... Still processing...”

“Very funny. It hasn’t been that long.”

“It has for me.”

“Anyway,” he rolled his eyes. “He would probably just send more hired guns.”

“Then we send them back in pieces, again figuratively Meowvis, and update the ad. Sooner or later he’s going to say ‘fine, I’ll just do it myself,’ and come to me.”

Felix thought a moment. “We could stay out of sight. Arrest anyone that comes there. I don’t want you out there alone to get torn up by a Werewolf, armor or no.”

“Better be way out of sight, we don’t want to spook him and then not be able to use that kind of trap again.”

“Agreed. I guess if you’re willing, I’ll get a picture of you for the ad and I’ll see what our graphics department can work up. Of course my superiors will have to sign off on this plan, but they’re probably just as annoyed with this Werewolf as we are. It shouldn’t be a problem. They may want you to sign some kind of waiver because you don’t work for us, that says you can’t sue us if you do get hurt. But I’ll explain as best I can about the armor and you deciding to be bait on your own.”

“Whatever, I’ll sign whatever I need to. I can finance the sign if you want, if that makes it easier. I just wouldn’t know who to call to get it set up, presumably they’ll show anything from someone that pays them.”

He waved that off. “No, no, you protected the world, this is the least we can do.”

“Least huh?” I put my hands together. “What would be the *most* you could do?”

“Let’s save that for another time. Come on, there must be a blank wall around here and some decent lighting to get a good picture.”

“Oh man, my first photo shoot! I’m so nervous! Do you have a makeup artist on staff or should I run home and get my kit? I want to look my best on the big screen!”

“Makeup? What are you talking about?”

“I think he was making a joke,” Meowvis told him. “You see it’s funny because he’s in the armor and you can’t see his face.”

“Yes, I get that.”

“But it works on another level too, because you might have imagined the *faceplate* with makeup on it, causing a psychological reaction in the brain expressed as ‘laughter’ because of the juxtaposition of the ideas of a metal mask with-”

“Yes, I get it, honest!”

“Just making sure.”

“I’m sorry I said it,” I told them.

“I got it,” Meowvis told me.

“Not really the same thing...”

So we took some photos of me in various poses, just in case, and I got the coordinates of the place so I could stake it out. Meowvis said the drone could be left overlooking the whole area in case they came early and tried to trap it with mines or something, and I agreed that was a good plan. I would head out there tomorrow, before the ad went live, assuming of course Excellus agreed to the whole thing, and leave it there. But Felix was fairly confident he would be able to convince his bosses, and said he would be in touch.

“I’ll send you the proof of what they come up with, just to make sure you’re okay with it.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine, you’ll have professionals doing the work.”

“That’s true. Okay, talk to you later.”

“Yup. And thanks. Let’s nail this guy to the wall!”

“He’s speaking figuratively,” Meowvis pointed out. “He doesn’t want to actually use nails-”

“I get it!” Felix told them as I said “He gets it!”

“Okay, gee. Jump down my non-existent throat why don’t you? Just trying to explore humor, excuse me!”

Chapter 7

I head to the forest

Where: Herman's workshop

When: Two days later

I watched with some confusion, then with some interest, then with some mirth as Meowvis showed me what the drone recorded while I was asleep. A group of people with tools, heavy boxes, and coolers swarmed the campsite area where our meeting was to take place. This they attacked with shovels and magic, tearing the ground up and laying what must be explosives into place. This was the confusion part, which I asked Meowvis about.

"How do they think they're going to catch me in this 'trap' they seem to be preparing if the ground is all torn up? Do they think I'm stupid?"

"Just keep watching," they told me.

"Okay, but I don't see how..." The movie continued, fast forwarding now, and when the wire was laid and the charges set the dirt was pushed back it slowed to normal speed. The group sat and ate, clearly waiting for someone, and soon enough a very attractive looking young woman stepped into the frame. This was the interest part. She was even more beautiful than Linnea, which I hadn't even considered possible, but there she was. She was barefoot, in a flowing dress that left little to the imagination, and everyone tripped all over themselves to greet her. She had long flowing hair, perfect proportions, and smiled at them, telling them how great a job they had done here by the looks of pride on everyone faces as she spoke. Turning away from them she concentrated, clearly casting a spell, as the area started greening up again. Before my eyes the torn up dirt and rocks became indistinguishable from the surrounding area, completing the trap. She walked around, inspecting the edges of the area, and seemed satisfied. Everyone seemed to be thanking her and she walked out of frame. The image froze.

"See?" Meowvis asked me.

"I do," I admitted. Then I shook my head. "You know, imagine a world where this Werewolf used his wealth and influence to actually make things better for everyone, instead of just trying to destroy technology and then try to kill me when I messed with his plan."

"Oh, but he is," Meowvis insisted.

"Come again?"

"From his perspective, ending the dominance of the humans by destroying their ability to use this technology he doesn't understand *is* making the world a better place. For himself, and your kind. He probably believes you a traitor to your kind and that with you out of the way the world will be a better place."

"He thinks he's doing the right thing?"

"Of course. Don't you?"

"But I actually am!" I paused. "From my perspective."

"Exactly. In fact, from his perspective he probably feels quite justified, and above, others that have similar wealth and contacts. Consider the man that makes 9 million dollars every hour asking for donations from the public to give to sick workers should they exceed their number of sick days in a year. That happened. Would it have ruined him financially to donate a single day of his earnings to this cause? Of course not, and he would have 'raised' far more money than he did begging others to do it. But instead he simply turned a blind eye to their plight, knowing that should some of his workers, the people that actually make him his money, be fired, more will undoubtedly take their place. Consider the broader sense; the wealthy giving fractions of a percent of their wealth to worthy causes, the equivalent of a few dollars when scaled to the earnings of the 'average' person. How many problems could be solved- not mitigated, not swept away- actually solved if the people that make millions every day actually wanted them solved and worked together to make it happen? Perhaps this Werewolf has seen

stories like this, and how technology allows a few people to gather the majority of wealth in the world, and decides he has seen enough and must act.”

“Ah, but that’s only recently,” I countered. “We didn’t have that kind of wealth generation when the road project began. He couldn’t have known.”

“But magic can see into the future. Perhaps he knew what was coming better than anyone.”

Then he should have seen his defeat coming, shouldn’t he? “I suppose you’re right.” I considered for a moment. “Do you see me doing enough?”

“I do! You’re out there, risking your life, to give the world some hope again. Yes you have to start slowly, but word is getting out that there is a real life superhero in the world at last. You’ve spent considerable time and effort creating the armor and the various support systems that make it work that you could have spent on a beach somewhere, or touring France or whatever.”

“I could live off my savings at this point, I don’t have to make cosplay items for people,” I admitted. “So you’re right, I could live a life of luxury if I wanted it. But I think making a difference is more important. The armor is how I chose to do it.”

“And so we come back to the wolf, who no doubt believes they are making what difference they can, as well.”

“You’ve convinced me, not that I can back down because he is trying to kill me, which I would rather avoid. Back to our current problem though, what am I going to do about this? I don’t know anything about disarming explosives, and I don’t have any way to regrow the grass. If I dig the area up they’ll know I know and they won’t show.”

“Oh, it’s worse than you know. Keep watching.”

“Huh?” The video started up again and now that the pretty lady had left the area more activity was happening. They brought a table into view, some chairs, and what looked like torches and a pavilion frame, which they stretched fabric over. Finally they set up poles which they attached white rectangles to. *Flags of truce?* I watched this with some amusement, and when they were done they left and the video ended. I laughed. “They really went all out, huh?”

“No doubt. I guess their plan was to have some kind of truce in place, get you to sit down to talk it over, and blow you up.”

I wonder if that would have even worked? Can my suit take explosives, and that many of them to boot? I’d rather not find out. “That’s not very nice of them. Wonder how they were going to avoid blowing themselves up?”

“It would just be possessed people, what would they care?”

“Right, of course!” I smacked my head. “Ugh, why can’t he just- anyway, print up some good shots of them working. I want them to know I know, and I’ll just stay away from that area.”

“May I suggest a humorous approach?”

“In what way?” I asked, eyes narrowed.

The image of the lady that came flashed on the screen from various angles and started printing. “Say you fell madly in love with this lady at first sight and want her number. That would simultaneously tip them off you know about the bombs, and rub their noses in it by making it seem they are no big deal, you’re just interested in her.”

“And hey, maybe it’ll get me a date!”

“I suppose, if they took it seriously and got you her number.”

“Good plan, let’s go with that.”

“Would you really go out with an agent of the Werewolf though? She knew she was there to regrow the grass, was she really empty headed enough to not ask why? I calculate an 87% probability she is a willing member in the Werewolf’s employ, and she is working to actively kill you.”

“You’re right. I just can’t catch a break, can I?”

I went back to work, humming a little tune as I worked, and kept chuckling to myself. Who did these people think they were? Rigging the area with explosives, honestly? They had no idea who they were dealing with.

When the time came I used a portal stone to get close to the area, having seen the group return and get into position. I had to assume Blue Shield was also there, hiding out so they could take the people into custody. Or more likely, take the confused victims of possession back to their homes once the 'jig was up' so to speak. But I didn't have to assume, so I had Meowvis dial the number Felix had given me of the strike team leader. "I'm in position, are you ready?" I asked the person that answered.

"In position, eyes on the target, standing by," was the reply.

"Excellent. Landing now." I approached from the air, seeing the pavilion, flags, and people standing around with my own eyes. There had been no activity since yesterday, so it all looked the same, there should be no surprises. I avoided landing there, they could have orders not to even let me sit down before triggering the blast, and headed in on foot. I stopped some distance from the place and waved to them, attracting their attention. They all seemed a bit confused I hadn't flown in from the air, and from the pavilion rose a figure who I guessed was in charge. They had pale skin and hair, was dressed fairly casually in a button down shirt and slacks, and came over to me at a medium pace. *Vampire*, I thought, as they welcomed me with a bow. *Clearly not human, so this isn't someone that's possessed. I can see the teeth. This is an agent of the Werewolf. Interesting...*

"Welcome," he said. "Please, come and have a seat. As you can see by the flags, this is an area of truce. I have been empowered by my master to speak on his behalf, so that we may come to some arrangement and end the loss of innocent life."

He said "innocent life" like there was no such thing, and also like he was saying any loss of life was my fault and not squarely on the shoulders of this "master" he spoke of. "And what could your so called master possibly accept that would make up for what I've made of his plans?" I called to him.

"That's what we're here to discuss. I'm sure some arrangement can be made. Please, come, sit."

"Sure, sure," I told him. "But there's something important I have to ask you about first."

"Oh, of course," he told me, looking confused. "Whatever I can do to set your mind at ease."

"Take a look at this." I took the folder from under my arm and held it out. The Vampire warily approached, alert for any tricks or surprises. "It won't bite, honest. I just have to ask you something about the photos in here."

"Very well." He took it and stepped back, flipping the folder open and pulling the pictures out.

"This woman, who is she? She's so beautiful, is she a consultant or a part of your organization? If she's not actively trying to end the world as we know it, and she's single, do you think she would date a Dwarf?"

"What? How?" the Vampire sputtered. He spun. "Who sent the Dwarf these pictures? Get out here, all of you!" Several people stepped out of the trees, looking around confused. They all had high powered guns, of course, but were lowering them.

Sure, truce. I see we have very different definitions of this word. One might say that I don't think it means what you think it means.

"Who is the traitor?" he demanded, waving one of the pictures of the lady at them. "Who sent him these pictures?" They all shared a look, clearly confused at what he was getting at.

"Oh, now, don't blame them," I told the Vampire. "You really have no idea who you're dealing with, do you?" I held a hand out and he jumped further back, but all that happened is the drone activated from the tree it was in and flew to my hand, where it landed softly. I folded it up and put it in the compartment on my leg.

"Technology!" the Vampire sneered. "I should have known. You were spying on the area the whole time, is that it?"

“Yes you should, and yes,” I agreed. I spread my arms out, giving him a good look at the armor. “Have you seen me? Honestly, you should look into it, it’s not that hard.”

“So you know?” he asked, somewhat redundantly I thought. “You won’t come and sit down with me?”

“In a field packed with explosives? No. I’m not setting foot anywhere near that clearing. But one thing I don’t get, you would have been in there, yes? I mean Vampires supposedly can’t be killed by something as mundane as a bomb, but it would have really, really hurt for you to get blown up. Are you really that fanatical?”

“Now it seems you don’t know who you’re dealing with,” he replied with a sneer. “I would have simply gone insubstantial before the blast went off. I would have been totally unharmed.”

“And them?” I gestured to the others.

“Who? Oh, the humans.” He looked like I was asking him about the worms in the ground that were also no doubt at risk of being blown up. “Expendable. Oh, the Kanaima inside them would have felt it, of course, but they would be fine in the end. We’re paying them extra for the inconvenience.”

Why do formless beings not native to our plane need our money in the first place? What are they buying anyway? A monthly cable subscription? “Typical. So if you don’t mind me asking, why are you here? It’s still daylight, isn’t it worse for you out here?”

“I admit to some discomfort, yes. You really don’t recognize me? I’m the one you shot that night.”

“Ah!” I understood. “Revenge, then. You wanted to see me blown up with your own eyes.”

“Of course.”

“Well, as that’s not going to happen, perhaps your offer of a truce and talking this over could be explored instead? Move the table over here and we’ll- actually are you going to tell me her number, or not?” I pointed to the picture. “It could be a useful bargaining chip, not to give you any ideas.”

“No!” he cried. “I’m going to watch you blow up. Get into the middle of the clearing, now!”

I felt his power reaching into my mind, compelling me to do so. I wasn’t worried, even if I did somehow succumb to this Vampire’s power, Meowvis would simply lock the armor up and I wouldn’t be able to obey even if I wanted to. Plus I was surrounded by the technology in the armor, it would be difficult to target me with magic because he could only see the armor, not me, and the most important fact; it was not yet after sunset. A Vampire’s power, even an old one, would hardly be anything to worry about during the day. It had baffled me, many, many years ago when I was beginning to learn about magic and basically how fragile it was and how many things could disrupt it; Running water, electronics, sunrise, and thinking really hard about it. Yes, this Vampire had the magical ability to compel people to do something. Useful, when your food source was probably not just going to stand there on their own and let you drink their blood. But on the other hand that same regular old human could just think thoughts in their brain and deny *magic itself* control over them. Crazy. Like, was magic a fundamental force of the universe like gravity or not? And if not, what was it that simple *thoughts* inside a person’s head could make it not function? As this Vampire’s magic began to compel me forward I simply did that, I thought really hard about not doing what he wanted, and it worked just fine. “I don’t think so,” I told him. “I like it just fine where I am now.”

“Cursed sunshine!” he complained. “Cursed technology!”

“Yes, yes, your life is just so terrible. Look, just surrender to us, tell us what you know, and let’s work together to bring all our kind up to date. Instead of trying to use magic to deny technology, why not just run classes for our kind to learn about it instead. He must have the money for it, to hire all these people.” I gestured to the possessed humans still standing there. “Embrace the change, you’re just going to get further and further behind at this rate. Is that what you want?”

“If you hadn’t shown up, I would have gotten what I wanted. If I can’t compel you to do what I want, I can still do it by force. You’re still outnumbered, and someone might get lucky and get through that armor.”

“Actually, that’s not entirely true,” I told him. “It’s actually you who are outnumbered, and surrounded. Take a look.” I raised two fingers and waved them in a circle as Meowvis told them it was time to show themselves.

“Throw down your weapons!” a voice cried. “You’re completely surrounded!” Figures stepped out of the trees from further out, ringing the men with guns which now, instead of seeming frustrated or nervous, started smiling. These men and woman had on protective gear, combat uniforms, and state of the art rifles. I didn’t know what races they were, but presumably Blue Shield employed many races so their teams had a mix of abilities and skills. I was sure they would have no trouble here, but clearly the Vampire thought differently.

“I think you’ll find we’re content simply killing anyone that was foolish enough to come here,” the Vampire told me, scattering the pictures. “Kill them all!” he commanded. His forces turned to face their attackers, and the firefight in the forest began.

Chapter 8

I confront the Vampire

Where: The forest

When: Seconds later

Two of the possessed humans and two of the Blue Shield members got shots off before I could act, and the Vampire was right there so I backhanded him with the shield. It passed through his body completely making me almost overbalance and stumble forward a little. "Coward!" I cried.

"Says the guy in the armor," he countered.

Several more shots rang out, and one of the possessed humans seemed to jerk a little bit, but remained standing. Otherwise they were unharmed, and seemed to be fairly poor shots as I scanned the woods and didn't see any of the Blue Shield people going down. They were under cover, crouched beside trees and aiming at the closest targets, but as I watched the flashes from their guns none of the possessed humans seemed to be going down all that fast.

What is this, G.I. Joe?

With the Vampire out of the fight for the moment cowering behind his magical insubstantialness *wait is that a word?* I turned instead to the line of possessed humans. This was something I could do, take some of the pressure off the others by attacking from behind. If I could split their attention the superior numbers on my side should quickly overwhelm the five possessed people. The nearest was of course paying attention to the Blue Shield members trying to shoot them so I stepped over to him while I pulled my shotgun. I knew it would fire from the barrel with the non-lethal rounds so I simply shot him in the back. That got his attention, as the beanbag round slammed into him. He spun around, firing off a wild shot in my direction probably thinking he couldn't miss at that range. He was quite shocked when my kinetic barrier bent the path of the bullet around me and it went slamming into a tree off to the side. He looked down at his gun, then back to me.

"Can we talk about this?" he asked hopefully.

"No," I informed him, pulling the trigger again. He was knocked off his feet and the gun went flying out of his hands as he sprawled out on the ground. I nodded to myself, noting that as the next nearest two possessed humans turned to me after their next shot, having noticed their comrade flying past them and now lying in a heap. I picked the one to my left, stepping toward them and firing again. This turned out to be a grazing shot, impacting on his side but hardly doing any damage. It was enough to spoil his aim, and another shot went wide around me. I returned the favor, shooting him again. Naturally he didn't go down, but did stagger.

Three shots left. Then I'll have to switch over to lethal ammo, or just punch them. Great. Why aren't these guys going down in a hail of gunfire anyway? Are the Blue Shield people really that bad of a shot? I see their muzzle flashes, they're still shooting they can't be that bad at their jobs right?

Far to my right one human did go down, his leg buckling under him, but he steadied himself and readied to fire again. The guy in front of me got hit in the arm, crying out and letting go of his gun in that hand, but making me think *You should have gone for the head.* To my surprise I felt myself being grabbed from behind, the Vampire had made a move while I was distracted and thinking they were just going to stand there. *Great, surprised by my own strategy against these guys. I need cameras in the rear, so Meowvis can warn me if something is sneaking up on me.* "Maybe I can't cast on you," he hissed, "but leaving you stuck in a tree should slow you down for a while." He grabbed me and started hauling me towards a large tree nearby. I strained against him, but Vampires it seemed could be fairly strong when they wanted to be. I couldn't bring my shotgun around to fire on him, as he had his arms wrapped around me tight. So instead I gave him what he wanted, activating my flight system and taking us closer to the tree he was dragging me towards. "What?" he managed as I spun, propelling us backwards and shoving him into the tree, which deformed strangely as he entered it.

I really hope I'm not sticking into this tree at any point. "Spellbreaking!" I cried, willing the tree to become solid again as the Vampire tried to pull me further in. He didn't manage it, the tree solidifying around him and I pulled free, his legs comically sticking out of the trunk. *Perfect. Now, where was I? Oh yes, shooting this guy.* I raised my shotgun again and put a round into the nearest human, dropping him where he stood. I stepped over the body and sighted the next nearest one, dropping him as well. *Hey, things are looking up.* Which is when I smashed into a nearby tree, thrown by an invisible force. *I guess Vampires can move objects at a distance?* This surprised me more than anything, as I hadn't been expecting it, but I was unharmed. I staggered to my feet again as another human went down, and the remaining one looked around, seeing his fallen friends and the approaching Blue Shield members. He got a confused look on his face, dropped the gun like it was a live snake, and started tearing out of there screaming his head off.

"Great," the Vampire spat. "Those guys were no help at all." He raised his hands as they approached. "Off to jail then, I guess."

"Like a normal jail would hold you," I said to him. He smirked at me.

"Don't make any trouble," one of the agents said, snapping in a new magazine and bringing his gun up again. I noticed four of them doing that, the other two were running after the fleeing man. "We've switched to real bullets. Maybe they won't kill you, but they'll make your life unpleasant."

"Real?" I asked.

"Of course. We're not the human police," he said with disgust. "We use non-lethal rounds except when absolutely necessary. We were told there might be possessed people in the area, and it seems that was correct, but this guy is clearly one of us."

Sounds familiar. I could get to like these guys. "Yes, he's a Vampire. But that's the problem, you'll have a hard time holding him. Right?"

"We can lock him down to an extent," one said. "But you're right. With all they can do it's going to be tough."

"I'm right here you know," he pouted. "Still, sounds like something that's not my problem. Are you arresting me or what?" asked the Vampire, holding his hands out.

A little too eager. Is he planning something else? "Look, you're not the one I want," I told him. "How about we cut a deal? You agree to bring a message back to your boss, and I won't stand in the way of your 'daring escape' from here."

"Now hang on a second," protested the guy from Blue Shield. "We have orders!"

"But taking him in doesn't solve anything," I protested. "You think the Werewolf will turn himself in to get him released? Doesn't seem the type. I want to put an end to this bloodshed and this is my best chance of doing that! This guy may have played a part but we need to find the guy in charge, shut down his empire so he doesn't come up with something equally nasty in the future. How does arresting him get us closer to that goal?"

"You're wasting your time," the Vampire told me, dropping his hands. "Even if I wanted to, I couldn't get a message to my boss. For you or anyone else."

"What, he didn't suddenly come down with a case of being dead after all these years!"

"What? No." He sighed. "Look, the guy in charge came to us. We didn't seek him out. He offered us a way to return to the way the world used to be, and we agreed. We provided resources, contacts, that sort of thing. But we didn't call him, he called us. And by called, I mean he wrote us letters. Not a big fan of technology, that one. I mean come on, even I know how to use a phone!"

"Come off it. You're telling me a plan fifty years or more in the making, spread across the entire continent, which had to have a ritual repeated in multiple locations on a single night was planned entirely by *mail*?"

"Not originally, of course. We came up with the plan many years ago in person, our leader was quite the visionary to know the 'modern world' was coming and we would be left behind. But that was many years ago, I'm sure we've all moved many times since then. And it wasn't just mail. We met

every so often in person, to make sure everything was still on track. Like, once a year or so. As you said, the plan was too far reaching to need day to day care, as long as we kept moving in the right direction he was happy. He seemed to know how it was going, we would get a letter if we weren't doing our part."

Probably has someone on his side that can use divination magic. From the beginning, it seems like. Is that a clue? A Werewolf and a non-human person that has divination magic that are always seen together? "So he mailed you orders to bring those humans here? Mail doesn't move that fast, and even he couldn't have known this clearing would be needed." *Right? That sort of magic is pretty vague, given how easily the future can change. Just asking about the future can change the future, because now you might do something you normally wouldn't had you not asked about the future. But how does the magic take that into account?*

"No, they showed up and said the boss had sent them, and we needed to be in a certain place at a certain time. There are certain call signs, so we know it's him sending orders."

"Ah, so they know who he is?!"

"Maybe. Good luck chasing any of them down though, they're long gone by now."

He's probably right about that. How do you identify something that's formless in our plane of existence? "If you can't think of any way to contact him then you'll just have to go with these nice people and be locked up. I can't offer you a deal without something in exchange."

"He saw your billboards obviously, what's wrong with simply doing that again if you want to contact him? I'm sure he already knows this effort failed."

Then why bother going through it? Did he not check if he would be successful here? You would think he would, but again that's the whole changing the future thing. Maybe he saw a 50/50 chance of success and decided to take those odds? "I'm not going through all this again, with traps and- oh by the way we need to get a bomb squad here and dig up the explosives they left. We can't just leave them lying around the forest where someone can stumble on them."

"We have some experts coming once we're done here," the man assured me.

"Fine, fine. What was I saying? Right, not going through all this again. You don't have a return address or anything?"

"They were always different."

"You're not making this easy you know."

"And yet I don't feel bad about that."

"Let me see what I can do," one of the agents said, stepping up. They were limping a bit.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked. "You were taking gunfire just then. Was anyone hurt?"

"Some of us took some hits, but the vests took the impact," they assured us. "We didn't do too badly, thanks to you. Nothing that won't heal."

"Glad to hear it."

"Now, let's see if you're telling the truth." He reached for the Vampire and the others brought their guns up.

"No funny business," one threatened.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Let me step back a bit, so my stuff doesn't interfere. I can still shoot you though," I threatened. I kept the barrel of the shotgun trained on the Vampire, my one remaining non-lethal round ready to shoot. I would then have to switch to normal shotgun shells, and be careful I didn't hit any of them, but it seemed he was playing along so far so maybe this would continue.

The two stood there for a moment and the man stepped back. "He's telling the truth. He's seen the Werewolf, who went masked in his human form. What he didn't tell you is they always met in a certain cave. I can get the coordinates for it with a map, maybe we'll find some kind of clue up there."

“What, up in that dusty old cave? Forget it, you’re wasting your time. It’s been eight months since we last went up there, even if someone did drop a candy bar wrapper or something what good do you think it’s going to do you?”

He had a point, but what else did we have at the moment? I figured I knew the answer to this next one, but had to be sure. “I suppose on the night of the event more possessed people came to you and said it was time?”

“That’s right. We all knew the ritual of course, we just got our assigned locations and went to it. We knew it was almost time, but didn’t know the exact date. He trusted us to do our part, we wanted his plan to succeed as much as he did. We didn’t need... What’s the word... Micromanagement.”

Ugh, the worst, bad guys with an actual work ethic. And there probably was no ‘exact’ date, just divination magic telling him the best time was. Like a full moon or something. But then I came along and spooked him, so he had to take what he could get. And he got me. “And there’s nothing else you can tell me?”

“He wore a cloak and a mask, he could be anyone for all I know. Can’t tell you what he looked like, where he is, or what his next plan is. If you want him, you’re going to have to find him yourself. Locking me up won’t help you. You smashed our distribution network, the roads are being torn up so the magic doesn’t flow anymore, the only thing I’m guilty of is attempting to turn technology off. Given there’s really no law against that, and given the fact you’ll either have to starve me or watch me 24/7 so I don’t escape, just let me go like the armored guy said.”

“What do you think?” I asked the assembled agents.

“It’s tricky, politically, to take him in,” one agreed. “Vampires do tend to stick together, and they have a lot of wealth and political power in our circles given how old a lot of them are. He’s admitted to the crime, but would most see that as a crime? It could get dicey. We would have to admit the charges we’re holding him on, and that means admitting their plan got as far as it did. That makes us look bad, that we didn’t spot it earlier. It also would get the gears turning that, hey, maybe it would have been a good idea to let that plan go forward, who are we to stop it? We’re not the most beloved organization among our kind, mostly because we protect humans, who many see as the problem. We don’t want riots on our hands as hundreds of Vampires descend on us to break him out. Or stop us tearing the road up, like he said, and doing the ritual with a lot more support this time. We need to keep it quiet while we make sure enough of that magical road network is dismantled this can never be done again.”

Sure, when are we going to replace every single road? He had one shot, when the roads were first being laid down, and he blew it. Just cutting a section up and replacing it with ‘clean’ material, without all that ground up technology, should cut the magic off. Do that in enough random places and they’ll never be able to reverse that process.

“And he’s followed the laws apart from this,” said the one that had touched him. “He seems willing to let it go, now that there’s no chance of it ever working out. He’s not some gangster, living a life of crime, he’s just trying to do his best in the world we all find ourselves in.”

“He didn’t have anything to do with the murder of all those Dwarves recently?” I asked a bit desperately.

“What Dwarves?” he asked.

“A bunch of Dwarves were murdered, trying to get to me. But he missed, making me wonder how stable the guy is now. I mean all that careful planning for so many years, and then botching my murder? He’s losing his touch, lashing out at random, and that means he’s getting sloppy. And sloppy people get caught.”

“You don’t have to try and turn me against him,” the Vampire assured me. “For one, like I said he contacts us, and two, I’m done with him. He didn’t deliver, and I didn’t get to take my revenge on you for shooting me that one night. I had my chance, and it didn’t work out. He has more ‘work’ for me it better be a way to salvage the whole thing or I’m not interested. I don’t owe him anything at this

point, as he didn't do what he said he would. As far as I'm concerned I never want to see you again and I'm putting the whole thing behind me. The humans and their technology rule the world now, and that's just all there is to it." He sounded resigned.

"Fine. Get out of here. And take a computer class or something, it's not that hard!"

The Vampire took a few hesitant steps away from us, making sure none of us was going to shoot him in the back, then poofed into a bat and flew away.

"So we're right back where we started," I told Felix later that day. The Blue Shield people had assured me the humans would be taken care of. They would be memory wiped if they were allowed to remember being possessed, and put back into their lives as quietly as possible. No magic had been done around them, at least not by the Blue Shield people, so that wasn't a concern. (It was the reason they stuck to guns when they had arrived) The one that had been freaking out and running away had been caught so everything could be made right again.

"We'll check the cave, maybe someone got sloppy and left a clue for us."

"I wouldn't count on it."

"What do you suggest?"

"Maybe run another ad? He's again failed to have his revenge, he must be at a boil by now. Rub it in his face. 'If you want something done, you have to do it yourself,' kind of thing. Put the location as the cave, so he knows we know at least that much about him, and we watch it again. Hopefully he doesn't try the same trick, putting explosives in there to collapse the thing on top of me, and actually shows up this time. Again you guys hide someplace, and maybe we finally get the mastermind behind all this."

He thought a moment. "I guess we don't have any other leads. And having him focus on the cave, like he did on the forest, will keep him away from innocent people or any Dwarves that are left living in the area."

"Do you think we'll ever catch the Kanaima that did that?"

"Probably not. That's why they're hired for that kind of work, after all. They take over someone innocent, do something illegal, and melt away back home. We can't track them, much less tell them apart."

"I'll have to content myself taking out the boss then."

"If he even shows up. Look, go get some rest. I'll send you pictures of the cave and let you know when the next date is. That's all we can do for now."

"Thanks. Talk to you soon."

Chapter 9

I didn't start the fire, but I tried to fight it

Where: The cave

When: Three nights later

Having figured out where the cave was, Blue Cross and Blue Shield swept it for any traps left behind when last the group met. They checked physically for things like explosives, and in the astral plane for anything that might wake up and come through if the place was disturbed. They found nothing. It was fairly deep in the mountains, so it seemed the Vampire was right, there wasn't so much as a piece of trash left there and clearly it had been abandoned for months. I "hitched a ride" with them, so I didn't have to use one of my own "space stones" opening portals and they came out to tell me the place was all mine. And in a way, it was.

Once I deal with this Werewolf it seems this cave is remote enough no one has really found it. I bet I could relocate Meowvis' hardware up here with a magical "generator" or two and keep it safe. I've always been a bit wary of the workshop burning down for some reason, and while I could buy all the tools again, and with some effort remake the armor, Meowvis isn't so easy to replace. At least storing some kind of "backup" of them in case something happened there is a smart move on my part. Yeah, I could think of a few uses for an actual "man" cave.

I left the drone there, which didn't exactly have any trees to hide in this time, so it simply flew back and forth around the site, in and out of the cave to make sure no one was messing with it. Meanwhile Excellus created a new billboard as I suggested with a new date, and started flashing it up all around the country. The drone recorded nothing, but of course invisibility magic was certainly a thing so I wasn't going to lower my guard when the time came. To that end I brought a folding table with me to the mouth of the cave and set it up, shotgun in plain view so I could reach it easily. I then set up a chair and after sunset plopped down in it to wait. The drone buzzed around, watching the perimeter, while I watched a couple of movies to pass the time on the lower half of my helmet display. Naturally I cracked open my cooler and had something to eat, but mostly spent a boring night sitting around in the mountains waiting for a wolf that never showed.

"Someone's coming, it's one of the Blue Shield members," Meowvis told me, pausing the latest movie. The window shifted to the side, showing me the whole scene before me, and I put a hand on my shotgun.

I can't afford to take any chances. This person could be possessed same as anyone.

"We're heading back, it's only an hour to sunrise," the woman reported. "If he hasn't shown up by now, I doubt he ever will."

"Yeah, it would be pretty rude to make me wait out here all night only to show up minutes before the sun came up. Give my thanks to the rest of the team, and you of course. Sorry you didn't get to see any action tonight."

She shrugged. "Suits us just fine. You want to come with?"

I shook my head. "Nah, I'll do a bit of flying, I'd like to see the rest of these mountains, then make my own way back. Thanks for the offer though."

"Suit yourself. Be seeing you."

"See you."

She headed back down the mountain.

"So now what?" Meowvis asked, as I stood, stretched, and put the shotgun back in place. The drone landed on the table and I folded it up and put it back in the leg compartment.

"Good question. Think he's given up?"

"There's only a 23% chance of that, given his previously observed behavior and psychological profile. If he is as old as we speculate, he has survived by being cautious and choosing his battles."

"So you're saying we haven't heard the last of him?"

“It is unlikely. No doubt he will continue to put pressure on you in some way, perhaps doubling his effort to find and kill all the Dwarves in this area in an attempt to simply find you by chance.”

“They’ve been warned, but I’m afraid you’re right. Odd that he didn’t send *anyone* here though. Why waste another chance to catch me? He knows how I fight, what the suit can do, by this point. I’m actually more shocked he didn’t come up with some ways to neutralize it.”

“Indeed. Spraying you with water would wash away the magic, and anyone in the community would know that much.”

“Right. Much easier to take me out then, but of course he may believe the whole suit is technology. After all, what does he know? He tried to destroy it, so clearly he wouldn’t bother looking into how much of what I can do can currently only be done with magic.”

“It is curious, especially in light of the tactics he has been seen to employ. Possessed humans he considers expendable thrown at the problem. Perhaps even his resources are not limitless, and he simply can’t afford to hire more at this point.”

“I wouldn’t want to count on that.”

“No. We cannot rule anything out, we do not have enough data one way or the other.”

“I’m going to hope he’s simply grown tired of trying to get his revenge, and is now accepting of his fate and the fate of the world.” I checked the site, nothing I couldn’t come back for at some point, I did want to come back and do something with this cave. Activating the flight ring I rose into the air. “Let’s work out the kinks and head for home before that sun comes up and drags me down again.”

“Very well. I go where you go.”

Back home I climbed out of the armor and composed a short message to Felix about what a bust the night had been. I asked his opinion of what we should do next, and headed to bed.

With no real leads found by Excellus I settled back into my normal routine. Up around 11:00, breakfast, and then mundane work until about 5:00 PM. A break for lunch, then checking email, sites, and finishing up any forging or fabrication until sundown when I switched to magical work. Dinner at 10:30 or so and if I didn’t have any work I would go out on “patrol” flying around the city looking for trouble to get into, or get other people out of. More people were now looking at the skies, according to news reports, as so many had seen me back at the restaurant hostage situation. Of course no one could explain how I, and the others, had simply vanished out of there and of course there was the usual spectrum of excitement and disbelief around my existence. Some were glad someone was taking a stand against crime even if I couldn’t possibly be flying around like some people said. Others were worried about what it meant if I was, and if one person could create such a device, how long until criminals did too? And of course the nutjobs with their conspiracy theories abounded, like I was a secret government test program (*in Rochester, NY?*) or just a story dreamed up by liberals for their own agenda (*which was what?*). All to avoid the simple truth that magic was loose in the world, monsters were real, and the world was a stranger place than anyone knew. *We really did a job on ourselves, hiding from the humans. Look what can be accomplished by just one person fusing magic and technology! But no, just go ahead and fear anything remotely different, despite how much easier your lives might be otherwise...*

It was during one of these patrols, a few days later, when Meowvis came over my headset.

“Herman, there’s a situation you might be able to help with a few miles from here.”

“What’s the situation and where?”

“An apartment building has caught fire, and is rapidly burning. According to the police scanner, fire crews are on scene but the blaze is moving faster than they can account for.”

“Old building perhaps? Dry wood? Anyway, point me there and let’s go.”

“Proceed on this heading.” A line appeared in my view-screen and I oriented on it.

“Got it, activating booster system.” I shot forward towards the trouble.

When I got there the building was burning nicely, emergency vehicles with flashing lights arrayed below me. I could see thin streams of water arcing up into the building, which Meowvis identified for me as an apartment building.

“What exactly do they think they’re accomplishing?” I asked them after watching for a moment to see where I could be of help. There was a ring of people out past the fire trucks, probably the residence of the building and any other onlookers that were gleefully watching a part of the world burn. No one had spotted me yet, I was looking at a magnified image from pretty high up. *That’s a good deal of onlookers if my theories about magic prove incorrect. If they don’t believe I should be flying and I fall, it would be a bad look for me, not to mention hitting the ground is something I would like to avoid.*

“Apart from making it look like they are doing something, the volume of water in relation to the area of the building that is ablaze does seem inadequate.”

“That’s what I was thinking. I have to assume they know what they’re doing but it doesn’t seem like they’re making a whole lot of progress here.”

“I am hard pressed to suggest a course of action. Any trapped inside are at this point beyond help, given how much flame I am registering at the sides of the structure.”

“That’s because you don’t yet possess imagination,” I told them. “We’re getting closer, we’ll have to sort of sneak around, I don’t want to be seen by too many.”

“The armor will protect you against heat for only a short time if you did want to search for survivors. However, creating your own entrance will only provide more oxygen and make the problem worse. I do not recommend flying through fire, and all windows and fire escapes seem to currently be engulfed in flames.”

“Not planning on it. This isn’t something an Iron Man can really do, but hopefully I’m a good enough Dwarf to have created something that can help in this situation. Luckily we’re in an area where a lot of water can be found nearby.”

“You plan to bring more water here? How?”

“Watch and be amazed my electronic companion.”

I flew down to a nearby building and figured out where the least number of people were standing so my approach would be mainly unnoticed. *Here goes nothing.* I made my way to the burning rooftop, successfully staying airborne and now hovering over the flames. This blocked the view from the ground, meaning my magic should be at full strength. I pulled a spare “space stone” from the back of the armor and held it in my hand. I considered it, then had the flight magic reorient me to be parallel to the roof. The portals opened parallel to me and I wanted it facing down this time, so while a bit silly looking it was the only way. Unlike other races that could do magic on the fly, this was pre-programmed so I had to work around those limitations. “Portal,” I said, holding in my mind an image of the bay, which I had flown over many times. The portal opened underwater, as big as I could make it, and started spewing water out across the whole roof. It didn’t take long to start pouring down the sides. I let out a breath as I reoriented myself. The portal would stay there, it was open now until I wished it closed. “Wasn’t sure that would work, running water and magic don’t mix, after all. But technically I’m not in the water, it’s over there. And the magic is around the hole, so it’s not being touched by the water.”

“A fine distinction,” Meowvis told me. “This does increase the volume of water significantly.”

“I just hope it’s enough. I mean it can’t hurt, the building is already a total loss so it can be as wet as it likes, I just don’t want this fire to spread.”

“Water is now cascading down the sides, I don’t think that will be a problem.”

We waited around about ten minutes, as water continued to pour through the opening I had made into the bay. By that time the fire had mostly subsided from the higher floors, and I went in

looking for survivors. *After all I can get up here much easier than the emergency personnel at the moment, who would have to climb stairs that are probably still on fire. Water following gravity and such, after all.* I smashed down doors, called out, and wished I had some kind of life sensing spell or technology I could use. *Still too hot for thermal cameras, I would just get a big smear of red no doubt.* Naturally I avoided any water that was raining down from above, that would mess up my magic for sure. At least, I avoided getting any of it on me. I used it when I could, taking the doors I had ripped off hinges and redirecting water where it might do more good. There was still a lot of smoke in the place, making it hard to see, but I managed. I moved down several floors, finding bodies too far gone to bother with. But then, improbably, I found someone laying in the hallway of a relatively unburned section of the place. They were small, and looking them over I knew I had to get them out of here. Sharp, spine like quills stuck out of the backs, marking them as decidedly inhuman. If a firefighter came up here and saw them like this, it would be really bad, so I grabbed a blanket, threw it around them as best I could, and made my way back up and out. I hated to leave anyone else if they were still alive, but I had a duty to my own kind first. The humans couldn't see this person, it would be a disaster.

In point of fact, I'm surprised this sort of thing doesn't happen more often. We non-human types don't routinely die of old age, so we're not found dead in our beds from that. And human disease doesn't seem to like us very much either, being tailored for human cells and blood. But there would still be a fair share of car accidents, falling asleep on a long plane flight, fires, and just being caught out in the rain in general that would unmask the dozens of different non-humans that live everywhere on the planet. How can all that be hidden?

I hoped that anyone seeing me flying away with someone wrapped in a bundle would assume I was taking them to a hospital not stealing something from the place. But it had to be done. This being probably could use one, they were clearly unconscious and I couldn't tell if they were still alive or not. But showing up with what Meowvis informed me was probably a Pukwudgie would do neither of us any favors. I didn't want to go too far, and found a park that looked empty given the time of night. I propped them up against a tree and tried to figure out if they were alive. I couldn't exactly take a pulse without taking my armored gauntlets off but they started to weakly cough and come around.

Of course, our healing abilities would handle any sort of injury, even smoke inhalation, I suppose.

"Easy now," I told them. "You've been in a fire. Are you all right?"

"What? What happened?" they asked, trying to look around.

"I pulled you out of a burning building. Had to get you away from the humans."

"By which I take it you're not human yourself? That... was probably smart," they admitted.

"What the?" Their eyes finally focused on me.

"Just noticed, huh?"

"What's with the armor? Some kind of fancy- wait. You've been in the news lately."

"Just trying to do my part. Are you okay, by the way? You were in the fire for some time."

"Yeah. Was using my fire magic to try and help get people out. Didn't work so well."

"Don't feel too bad. We can't all be experts in our field."

"You don't get it. That fire spread magically!"

That made me blink for a second. "... What?"

"I felt it, fighting me. Someone set that fire with magic, kept it going and spreading. I felt magic in the fire as it consumed the building. I actually did pretty well, all things considered."

True, his floor didn't seem as bad as the others. He must have kept it at bay but got overcome. Huh, he's actually a hero. She? I can't even tell, and in fact no one but us two will ever know. Seems a shame, actually. "Someone set it... to kill you?"

"Me? No, why would anyone want to kill me? I keep my head down, same as all- er- same as most of us."

"Just checking."

“Besides, why use the one element I might have a chance of bypassing with my own magic? Plus if I had wanted to, I could have gotten out pretty easily. I stayed to try and help the humans I live with. That not something someone with enemies would do, right? No, this was something else. I suppose the whole place went up?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty far gone. I got here as fast as I could, dumped a ton of water on the building, *which will hopefully ground out any fire magic lingering there, as it’s still going on. I’ll have to go back and turn it off once it looks like the fire is out. Sadly it also would have erased any magical emanations I could use to get a clue where they were and who they were, but that’s fine.*” and started looking for survivors.”

“Great. Just great. All my stuff is gone, or ruined from smoke. Now what am I going to do?”

“Put your glamour back on, mingle with the other victims, and go through the process I guess. I have no idea what the process is for something like this.”

“Help me up, will you?” I offered my hand and helped them up, and they took a deep breath, concentrating. They shimmered and became a wounded and burned looking man. “What do you think? Convincing enough?”

“Yeah, that seems fine. I can fly you back, if you want. At least part of the way, anyway.”

“Thanks. For this and the other thing.”

“Other thing?”

“Being out there. Actually doing something with your abilities to try and make a difference in the world. You’ve got a lot of guts, let me tell you. I wouldn’t risk something like that.”

Yeah, that’s why the world is why it is. I smiled behind the mask though, it was nice getting a complement at last. “Thanks.”

I dropped them off and flew back up, seeing that the fire was mostly out so I decided I didn’t need the portal open there anymore and it shimmered and vanished. The water stopped. With the bulk or all of the fire now gone I figured the regular emergency personal could handle things, give them something to do and all that. Whoever set it would be long gone, and any trace of magic wiped away by the water. Me sticking around would only cause more questions, and distract from the job of securing the area. *Best if I just leave.* I flew back home, thinking hard about what it meant that the fire had been set magically. It could have been set by someone looking to kill someone else that lived in the building. I would have to check each and every person who owned an apartment there, a fairly impossible task even with an AI on my side. I talked about what it may mean with Meowvis, but didn’t come up with anything.

Little did I know I should have been more attentive, as this was only the first in a string of incidents designed to draw me out and figure out where I lived.

Chapter 10

I stop a jewelry store heist. Sort of.

Where: Herman's workshop

When: Several days later

"You seem 13% more distracted at your current task than I would have predicted," Meowvis told me as I was working that night. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm just thinking about that fire."

"Still? It doesn't seem productive to be caught in such a loop, perhaps it is time to insert a break statement before it becomes infinite."

"Programming humor? Really? I just can't figure out why someone would do that with magic. It's an unwritten rule, you don't go blowing up things with magic. It draws attention, and news reports were all quick to point out how quickly the fire spread."

"There is an 84% chance no one but the displaced tenants will care in another three days," they predicted. "Recall that we checked into the owners of the building and followed the investigation as well as we could. The owners turned up clean and the investigation was inconclusive. Do you still maintain this was somehow directed at you? Buildings do burn, you know."

"I know. It happening because of magic just doesn't sit right with me."

"There are many explanations not involving malice towards you that fit the facts."

"Such as?"

"Perhaps someone was practicing fire magic and it got out of control. Alternately, a botched ritual somewhere in the building simply backfired on the practitioner, releasing a torrent of fire. While not malicious, perhaps the Pukwudgie was the cause, and simply lied to cover it up. Perhaps they were hired in a manner we could not detect, set the fire, but then became trapped by their own stupidity."

"I suppose those are valid things that could have happened."

"Naturally. The Werewolf had his chance at the cave, and passed it up. Trying to trap you in a burning building seems extremely unlikely. How would he or she know you would show up at all? Please try to put it behind you."

"Okay, doctor, whatever you say. I'll try to break my loop and keep my mind on my work."

That night I went out on patrol and Meowvis had something new for me. "It seems a nearby jewelry store's silent alarm has been tripped. I estimate a 64% chance we will reach the location before any ground based authorities if we leave in the next ten seconds."

That nearby? We aren't that fast, even with the booster. "Plot a course."

"Working." An arrow appeared in my display and I followed it to a smashed in storefront. The place looked like it had been blown in with explosives, which seemed rather reckless to me. Wouldn't that destroy some of the product as well? It was, possibly, the only way to get past any rolled down metal barriers the shop employed to keep people from just smashing the glass with a rock and grabbing what they could and running away. Seemed a waste of good explosives though. I couldn't think about that, I grabbed the shotgun off my back and stepped inside. It was fairly dark, my cameras compensating with night vision mode, and yes the front of the place looked blown to pieces. Looking from side to side as I stepped through it seemed there were three figures, somewhat lazily I thought stuffing things into backpacks. *Wouldn't they grab stuff as quickly as possible and get out of here? I mean any number of people, even this late at night and in a business area such as this, would hear and see the kind of explosion needed to do that to the front of the building. Why draw so much attention?*

"What do we have here?" I asked. "Regular business hours are nine to five. Gonna have to ask you to come back then."

The three figures, turning towards me silently showed that their faces were masked. They were wearing black clothes, and each was at a different corner of the store. They dropped the bags.

“Good first step, my lads. Now, very slowly why don’t you- Whoa.” The three grabbed pistols from holsters on their legs but didn’t point them at me, they started walking towards each other.

“Their behavior is 98% untypical,” Meowvis told me. “Facing you they should have panicked and fired wildly. I do not understand their objective by moving in this way.”

“You’re telling me. Hey, you three! What’s the big idea here!” I raised the shotgun so they could see it and flicked it over to shooting the lethal rounds instead of the non-lethal stuff. This was creepy, they hadn’t made a sound and in fact almost seemed to be expecting me. That couldn’t be good. “You want to tell me what this is all about?” I risked a quick look around, there didn’t seem to be any other explosives planted anywhere, but there was really no way to tell that without a more detailed search.

The three continued silently towards each other and when they reached the center of the store, again did something somewhat baffling. They took their masks off, which were just regular looking ski masks, and threw them. They had chosen a spot where they had seemed to have set a flashlight with a base beforehand as their faces lit up. My cameras compensated, going off night mode so I got a good look at each one. All male, a range of ages. I saw the light, it was sitting on an unbroken display case. They stood there, guns down, as if they wanted me to see them. *Okay, this is creeping me out a little more now. What the heck?* As if satisfied with showing me what they wanted me to see, without hesitating or speaking at all, they smoothly formed a triangle. Their right hands came up, and each pressed the gun in their hand to the waiting mouth of the person next to them.

“Wait!” I cried, but they did not wait. Three triggers were pulled, and three bodies hit the floor, flying away from each other.

I could only stand there stunned. What had just happened? That had been some kind of plan, it had to be. How else would they have simply done that without speaking? But to what end? Why wait for me to show up, then kill yourself like this? It wasn’t to cast suspicion on me, any cameras in the place and their own positioning would show the manner of their deaths.

“Herman, we should go,” Meowvis was saying. “The police are about to arrive. There is no benefit to your being found here.”

“Right,” I replied, somewhat shaken. “Yeah, let’s get out of here.” I lifted off the floor and flew into the night, putting my gun back as I did. “I’m heading home, I don’t think I’ll be of much use to anyone tonight.”

“Very well.”

My thoughts were spinning as I headed for home. Why do such a thing? The break in was clearly meant to draw attention, not to actually make off with anything of value. Once I arrived they gave up the pretense of robbing the place to put on that little show for me. They didn’t have a getaway car ready, or motorcycles, or anything. In fact how had they gotten there? I didn’t recall seeing a car out front. What if cops had gotten there first? Would those men still be alive? Were they men at all? I supposed it could have been some kind of illusion, I hadn’t felt around the area for magic. I should have, it was fairly stupid of me not to have done so, but at the same time like Meowvis said the cops were closing in on the area. I wouldn’t have had much time in any case. The three clearly had access to explosives, that’s how they blew the front of the store up to get inside. So it wasn’t targeted at me, right, because they killed each other. Without so much as a word. They hadn’t lured me inside and set off the majority of the explosives, no. They put on a show and had timed it just right so I couldn’t stay without risking a whole lot of questions by the officers that arrived. None of it made any sense. I landed at home and started the process to take off the armor, then sat back in my chair, still bewildered.

The screen flicked on and the glowing sphere that represented Meowvis came up. “I have anticipated your request to determine the identities of the three men, and have found all three.”

“Right, need to get my head in the game here.” I shook myself. This wasn’t helping, I needed to get to the bottom of this. “What do you have for me?”

“All three are local residents with no prior criminal record that I can uncover at this time. All three were local businessmen, which made finding their images trivial even for me.” Three pictures came up on the screen. “Roy Sanders was the man on the left. He was an employee of a local electrician, one of three employees in the privately owned firm. Harold Miller, center, was the senior partner in a small law firm, Miller and Thompson. Michael White, the final man, worked as a nurse in a local hospital.”

“Did they know each other?”

“That is difficult to say. I would have to break into their facebook accounts and compare their friends list.”

“I guess we could poke around where they worked, or ask someone who lived with them.”

“Herman, may I recommend an alternate course of action?”

“Of course.”

I waited.

“Are you going to tell me or make me guess?”

“I have no other course of action computed at this time. I merely request you decide upon an alternate course from the one you have suggested.”

“Er, are you feeling okay?”

“I am operating correctly. We must examine the facts, you are not thinking this through.”

“Okay, so take me through it then.”

“Firstly, those men wanted you to know their identities.”

I nodded, that wasn't a stretch by any measure. “Agreed. They were masked up until the point I arrived, and they could have, done, what they did, with the masks on. They looked right at me, making sure I got a good look at all three before they turned away. I mean they set up that light beforehand, it was set to catch their faces, not illuminate the cases they were supposedly stealing from. I have to think from their point of view, everything went perfectly.”

“This suggests motive. Second, they killed themselves in a gruesome manner. Both to obscure their intentions and to spur you into action.”

“Wait, so relate this to that apartment fire, is what you're saying? Someone set this up deliberately, just like that.”

“These three did not do this of their own will, there is only a 4% chance of that. While I am not convinced the fire is related, it could have been a means simply to draw you out, to make sure you were operating in the area currently.”

“Right, right.” Meowvis was making sense. “Someone that knows my type. The superhero complex. I would almost immediately rush to investigate why this happened, in any way I could.”

“I calculated a 98% possibility of this at the moment the incident occurred. Your enemies would likely do the same. They now have only a limited number of places to surveil, and a very limited number of Dwarves would frequent such establishments.”

“So to steal a phrase, it's a trap.”

“That is my determination as well. I'm glad you are again thinking clearly and concur with my analysis.”

I sprang out of the chair, I had to move around a bit. “I'm the only one who saw their faces before they got blown off. So naturally any Dwarf hanging around either of those three places asking questions about them is me. They have a sniper set up somewhere, and one bullet later there's no more Iron Man flying around. The cult doesn't need to know where I live, because I will have delivered myself to them on a platter. The Werewolf's revenge against me is complete. I have to do something they *don't* expect, because otherwise I'm just playing into their hands and will likely get myself killed.”

“Yes. What that course of action is I have not yet calculated. Perhaps simply letting the situation go for now is the best option.”

I stroked my beard. "I hate do to nothing. If only there was some way I could trap those trying to trap me. Turn the tables on them."

"But we know the Werewolf uses Otherworld mercenaries. They may simply be paid to shoot any Dwarf that appears and not know anything else. We would not get closer to the Werewolf's location. There may be nothing to investigate in that case."

"Ah, you're right. I mean even going in the armor, so they don't know who I am, doesn't seem useful in that case. In fact they may be under orders to simply destroy the body like they did this time if they see me in red. They don't care."

"Agreed."

"Yes, if we take this to be related to the wolf, those three were possessed as well. They got into position, and a spotter watched for my patrol. I do fly around fairly regularly at night looking for trouble to get people out of. They waited until I was near enough to reach them first, triggered the explosion, and you picked it up on police radio. I go there, they shoot themselves. There won't be any connection because the Kanaima riding them just chose them because they worked at a place easy to watch and snipe from."

"So you will not visit any of these places?"

"I mean, I could. Using a reality stone to cover myself in illusion. But I would have to appear as an officer, for anyone to tell me anything. That could certainly be tricky, legally."

"Yes, you do not want the opposite problem, of real officers showing up when you were there leaving you to try and explain yourself. Or learning they were there previously and now those working there feel they have cooperated enough."

"Man, Tony never had to deal with this sort of thing."

"No, simply corporate espionage that would have resulted in his suit being sold to terrorists and his death. Otherwise, to randomly state his problems as shown in the movies you love so much; His power source poisoning his body. Rivals from his past attacking him for perceived theft of his arc reactor. Alien invasions. Time travel. Being marooned in space. His creations turning against him--"

"Okay, okay, I get the point. I have to deal with real problems. For now just keep an eye on the news. If that was all an illusion, and there was no one really there, no bodies will have been found. We can decide what to do later, if anything. Making a decision now so soon after what happened would be stupid anyway. I need to clear my head."

"I will check the news tomorrow and give you any updates."

"Thanks. For talking me down, too. There's every chance I would have rushed over there when I got up and gotten myself killed."

"That's what I'm here for."

Chapter 11

We get closer together

Where: Herman's workshop

When: Several days later

The bodies had proven to be real, and the local news was having a field day trying to figure out why three people had blown up the front of a jewelry store, then killed themselves. No one had any answers, or came forward to say they knew something, and as usual it was put in the past and forgotten. I didn't forget, but at the same time I couldn't exactly bring the families of the victims any closure. It seemed they hadn't known each other, at least according to interviews given, and I talked with Meowvis about sending them a letter anonymously to explain what I believed happened. He counseled against it.

"Without going into a full report on the magical world that exists, they would have no context for the explanation," he told me. "How would you credibly explain what happened? To what end? You cannot bring the Kanaima who did this to justice, they don't even fully exist in our world. Even if you could find them, how would you hurt them? They do not have bodies in the traditional sense. Do you really wish to tell these families that ghosts possessed their loved ones, made them rob a place, all to try and draw you, a man that flies around in an Iron Man replica armor, out so that he can kill you?"

"They deserve to know the truth, even if they can't accept it."

"Do they? To what end?"

"Fine, never mind. I'll just have to content myself with one day finishing off this Werewolf. Clearly he hasn't given up on finding me, so it will be a confrontation one way or the other."

"I calculate a high probability you are right."

I kept up my patrols the next few nights, with nothing much of interest happening. But then, after heading back after my usual patrol Meowvis cut back in.

"Wait, Herman, you need to adjust your course."

"What for?"

"Report of a domestic disturbance in the area. Your local area, to be precise. Reports of gunfire from a local residence."

"On my way, give me a direction."

"Processing." I followed the arrow as usual and landed in front of a house like any other in my area. "Authorities are moments away."

"Looks quiet now."

"Neighbors called in reporting the sound of two shots after a lot of yelling. It came from this house."

"The report or the yelling?"

"The yelling."

Suddenly the door flew open and a man scrambled out, wearing what was left of a button down shirt and slacks. He was holding his arm, it looked like he had been shot there, and he ran towards me. I raised my shield. *Uh, he's not going to blow up or something, is he?* "You have to help me!" he pleaded. "She's gone crazy!"

"Who has? What's going on here?"

"My wife!" He dodged around me as a woman holding a gun appeared in the doorframe and pointed the pistol in our direction. "See? See? Help me!"

"Sir, calm down. You, put the gun away!" I reached for the shotgun and covered the guy's head with the shield. "I will drop you if I have to."

"You're real?" she called to me, slightly lowering the gun. "I didn't believe it. And you're here. That's crazy."

“Yeah, people don’t believe lots of things they should, now put it down.” I had my hand on the stock, it hadn’t released yet. She lowered the gun and I took my hand off the stock. “Now does someone want to tell me what’s going on here?” And to show I can learn from prior events, I checked the guy out for magic. He seemed clean, I didn’t sense anything odd about him. The woman was a bit further away but she didn’t seem to radiate anything either.

“He’s been cheating on me, a different girl every day this week!” she insisted.

“I haven’t!” he shouted back. “I don’t know how those were taken.”

“I can’t believe this!”

“Start from the beginning, will you? You.” I turned my face to the man. “What happened?”

“I think I was abducted by aliens, every night this week,” he told me. “Then she starts claiming I sent her a bunch of pictures of me with other girls, but it wasn’t me! I mean, yes, it looks like me so I can’t fault her for thinking it was me, but it wasn’t me, you have to believe me.”

“What? Now you’re making less sense than she was.”

“He claimed to be working late,” she told me. “But he was off screwing some floozies!”

“I would never!”

“I have pictures! Pictures you sent to me yourself! From your phone!”

“Why would I send you pictures of me being with other women? How does that make sense?”

“You thought you were sending them to a work buddy, I don’t know!”

“Can we focus? What’s this about alien abduction?” *Please be real, please be real!*

“All last week I would, for some reason, text my wife that I was staying late at work,” he began. “Then I would lose time. The next thing I knew it was dark out, and I was sitting in my car at home. I couldn’t tell her what was really going on, I didn’t know. So I just said yes, I was working late on something.”

“You were screwing-”

“I wasn’t! It was aliens!”

It was possession. Crap, no aliens. Why couldn’t it for once be actual aliens? But why...

“That’s stupid.”

“You’re stupid!”

“No one is stupid,” I told them. “So what happened tonight? What was different?”

“When I got home she said I had just texted her a bunch of photos. They do look like me, but they can’t be me! I don’t know where to find girls like that, honest!”

“Show me!” I demanded.

“Fine. But only because you’re real.” She stalked back into the house.

Huh, at least word does seem to be getting around. How about that? I’ll celebrate later though. They accepted me for who am I. That’s so neat!

“You are real, right? Are you an alien?”

“It’s not aliens,” I told him with a sigh. “At least, not the type you’re thinking of. And yes, I’m as real as you perceive me to be.”

“Odd answer. Also, how many types of aliens are there?”

“...You don’t want to know.”

“I do after a statement like that!”

“Here.” She came back out, thankfully without the pistol, and handed me a phone. It had been turned on and there was a picture of an... indiscretion in progress, on the screen. I touched the panel with my own phone so it popped open and I could take out the stylus. (Couldn’t exactly use a touch based phone with my gauntlets on, now could I?) I flicked the images, and she was right. A different girl, seemingly one a day. Different locations too, a bar maybe? I got to the end of them, it was just pictures of cats after that. I went back. “So you don’t recognize any of these women?”

“Not a one, I swear!”

“He’s lying!”

“Given what’s been going on recently, I’m inclined to believe him, ma’am.”

“Ha! Iron Man believes me. Wait, Iron Man believes me? Maybe I am going mad...”

“What are you talking about? What’s been going on recently?” she demanded.

“Herman, please release the drone,” Meowvis requested. “I am concerned this too is some kind of setup and would like to scout the area for possible hostile forces.”

“Good idea,” I agreed, realizing that too much paranoia right now was just the right amount of paranoia. This was a pretty open area, and there could be any number of non-humans lurking about. I handed the phone back. “One second.” I put the stylus away and unfolded the drone, which activated and buzzed off. I wanted to look around myself, but these people were keyed up enough without me adding to it. I had to trust Meowvis to spot anything unusual. They were watching the thing and probably wondering what the heck I needed it for. “You know that weird robbery from a few nights ago?”

“What about it?” the man asked.

“You think three random people just decided to rob a jewelry store and then shoot themselves in the head?”

“How do you know that? The news reports just said they died under mysterious circumstances.”

“I was there.”

“Oh. But what does that have to do with him?” the wife asked.

“Nothing directly. It’s just the latest in a string of odd occurrences happening in town. Look, you have every right to be angry,” I told the woman. “But he is probably innocent. He may have been compelled to do those things, and to forget doing them. Don’t ask me how, you won’t believe me.”

“I’m standing here talking to Iron Man,” she countered. “What won’t I believe at this point?”

“A surprisingly good argument.”

“If you say he’s innocent, well, it is out of character for him. He’s never been to a bar in his life.” She gave a weak laugh and turned to him. “I’ll believe you for now.”

“But why me? Do we know each other?” the man asked. “Why make me do such a thing?”

“I’m known to patrol the area at night. This may be a way of getting more information about me. Someone knew I would investigate the report of the disturbance, and when I would be heading this way. They timed it perfectly, just like with the robbery and the fire before that.” *And I don’t like what that could mean.*

“Fire?”

“That apartment fire, I helped put it out.”

“I heard there was something funny going on there too. Like there was way too much water there after it started, which helped put it out.”

“Yeah. That was me.”

“The police cars are just down the street,” Meowvis told me.

“Okay, the police are about to arrive. I hope that’s a legal gun in your house?”

“Yes, it’s registered and everything.”

Ugh, republicans, gotta be. “Fine. Tell them what you told me, show them the pictures, and don’t mention me. Or aliens, or blackouts, obviously. Say you apologized and want to go into marriage counseling or something, and your wife calmed down and everything is fine now. You get it?”

“Yes,” the woman agreed. “I don’t want him to go to jail if he’s really innocent.”

“And I don’t want her going to jail for shooting me over a misunderstanding. She just winged me anyway...”

“Good. I’ll come back sometime and try to explain more what’s going on. But I don’t want to be questioned here, the cops are still a bit jumpy around someone that can fly and shrug off bullets.”

“I can imagine. Thanks for talking me down,” the woman said.

“Yeah, thanks for helping me not get shot by the woman I love.”

Oh, nice one, throwing that in there. Smooth. “Sure thing. Good luck you two.” I lifted off the ground and the drone buzzed over to me. I saw the police cars now too, lights flashing, and headed in the opposite direction, folding the drone up as I went to put it away. “We’re taking the long way home tonight,” I told Meowvis. “Did you see anything?”

“No, I would have called it out.”

“I figured. Doesn’t mean they weren’t invisible. Light magic could probably do it, make one totally invisible.”

“These events are getting closer.”

“I know. I’m concerned too. But they can’t track me, not with the ring I have in the armor. Even if someone had seen my face, they don’t have a piece of me, how could they?”

“The armor precludes hair samples escaping, I agree. Nevertheless I recommend caution.”

“Agreed.”

I flew around until almost sunrise, stopping to look around, sense magic, and try to throw off any pursuers. Meowvis recommended just portaling in to the workshop, it would be dark so no one could see through it to get an image of where I worked, but I shot that down. I knew from working with Nix that teleportation magic left a trail in the astral plane, and even being high up like this, I couldn’t take chances it would lead them anywhere close to where I worked. Just them knowing I was in this area they could look for structures big enough to house a lab the size I would need. That didn’t leave too many places, as my workshop could be seen from google maps and it was a fairly good size. *Not that a Werewolf this would know to look online but I can’t take any chances.* Finally I decided enough was enough, and headed home. I dropped down out of the sky as quickly as possible into my back yard and headed to the workshop. Naturally I didn’t take the armor off for another half an hour, just in case. But nothing happened, and so I felt I was safe.

“But what are we going to do?” Meowvis asked as I sat there. “Three times is enemy action, after all.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I mean I figured if I started busting criminals they might take an interest in shutting me down as they know the Rochester area is where I operate. But it’s still a big city, I could be anywhere. As long as no one was around on the cameras when I come back here, I’m safe. There was no way to track me from the technological side of things. But someone from our side is clearly homing in on me. Maybe they can’t track the armor directly but divination magic is just as flexible as any other. They could ask about the future, or how best to find... wait a second remember how this all started? That one man at Excellus, he said he was given a spell to track down the person that caused them trouble. That’s how they saw me out of the armor the first time, and realized I was a Dwarf. That possessed guy just left that body and reported. So it is possible, if you do it right, to track things or people. I mean a thousand year old magic user might have all sorts of tricks up their sleeves. For the right price, casting a few spells might be all that’s needed.”

“Are there further precautions you can take?”

“Other than carrying the anti-scrying ring like I’ve been doing, I don’t know. I hate to not go out, that’s just fear talking.”

“Agreed. You need to force a confrontation so that innocent people stop being targeted.”

“I’m not publishing my home address. We saw how well that worked out for Tony.”

“Having Blue Shield here to guard you would also be suspicious,” they mused. “Perhaps setting some kind of trap on the door?”

“It would have to be non-lethal. Remember, this guy uses mercenaries to do his work.”

“Killing them would be wrong, I agree. In any case, please sleep with the shotgun and the hammer in your room just in case.”

“I’m taking the shield, too.”

“I was just about to suggest it.”

“Well, pounce on me if something shows up on cameras.”

“Of course, Herman. Have a good night.”

“See you in the morning.”

We passed several uneventful days after that. I carried the ring with me if I needed to go out, and at night did my usual patrol. Nothing jumped out at me, and no police reports led to anything out of the ordinary. This of course just made both of us more worried, but what could we do? I told Felix of my concerns, who said there wasn't anything new on his end of things. Sections of road that seemed fine were being torn up and replaced, and magic was draining away from the whole system. I even called Linnea who said nothing odd had happened to her either, not since her first kidnapping.

So I might be excused when, that night, if I happened to not have my guard completely up when Meowvis suddenly announced “Something just crossed into the yard!”

I had the armor off, the shield was in its customary place on the wall, so I ran for that first. The door vibrated as if something heavy was hitting it, and I had just grabbed the shield up and put out my hand for the hammer as a gray shape smashed through it, splintering it to pieces and charging through. They stopped and looked around, eyes alighting on the armor.

Oh crap, the boss himself came to kill me? Maybe I should have trapped that door! He's huge! What am I going to do? Would have preferred to grab the shotgun with the silver bullets but I had to get to the shield as at least one weapon in the room can come to me. This one. Too late to head over there now, why did I let it out of reach in the first place? Herman, you dunce. Well, this is it, time to see what a Dwarf with a hammer can do.

Chapter 12

I make an end of it

Where: The workshop

When: Just after the wolf burst into the place

I tensed, bringing the shield up, dropping into a crouch, and hefting the hammer in my hand. I expected the wolf to simply jump on me but he seemed hesitant.

“Seems I have the right place then,” he said, jerking a thumb (which had a wicked looking claw on the end of it, just like all his fingers) at the armor. “And my timing seems to be good as it’s over there and you’re over there.”

“Awful chatty for what history says is a slobbering beast. You waiting for backup or something?” *Please don’t be waiting for backup. But why would you?* I looked him over, he was a typical Werewolf, the somewhat large half man/half wolf creature with a thick fur and no clothes on. *Probably drove here, at least nearby, got out of the car, stripped, and changed. He wouldn’t tear out of them like the Hulk.* His only weapons were his claws, but I doubted I could bring the hammer to bear before he could close the space between us.

“No. I’m fairly sure I can handle one tiny Dwarf. I will let no one have the pleasure of tearing you apart for what you cost me. You have any last words?”

Of course it was one evil wizard who thought he could handle one tiny baby. We all remember how well that worked out for him. Caution doesn’t seem to be the watchword of a Werewolf, though if this one has lived as long as I think, they haven’t managed it by being stupid. “A few. You’re hesitating. Why? You smashed my door down, but now your element of surprise is gone. What’s wrong? You do want your revenge, right? I’m right here. Come and take it.”

“I’ll have it. Tonight. No need to rush.”

He says that, but he’s still eyeing me like a dangerous animal- of course. He doesn’t know about the hammer, I never carry it when I’m in the armor. He doesn’t know what it, or really anything else on my person, can do. He may have a Werewolf’s invulnerability but if I have something on me that can magically tear him to pieces, he would be right in being wary. The shotgun might have hurt him, not that he knows I have it loaded with silver but that’s probably what he expected I would go for. Instead I’m holding Mjolnir itself. What does it mean, he’s thinking. He probably saw it fly to my hand, he knows I’m a master of making things, what other tricks do I have up my sleeves? Not many, I’m wearing the shield ring thank goodness, so even if he gets past Cap’s shield he’ll hopefully bounce off, but even that can be worn down. Let’s let him have his giggling doubts and see what I can do to even things up. “In that case, mind if I make a request?”

“I’ll entertain it.”

“Let’s take this outside. While I’m beating the crap out of you I would rather not have you slamming into my equipment and breaking it. I could buy more, of course, but getting the larger stuff in here was such a pain to begin with.”

“Confident, aren’t you?”

“Fairly. I knew this day might come.” *So why weren’t you making some kind of anti-Werewolf weapon specifically you dummy? Right, because you’re an idiot, that’s why. Who thought he would never be found because-* “Say, how did you find me anyway? Did you find someone good enough to get past my anti-screaming measures?”

“Not exactly. I drew you out over the past two weeks and simply had one of my agents tail you. Anyone can look through a pair of binoculars and then watch where you came from, and where you go. The fire, the break in, even the events of the nearby ‘domestic dispute’ were done at my orders. Closing in on you, bit by bit.”

“It was just brute force? Watching me fly around?” *That’s rather anti-climactic isn’t it?*

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“I suppose. So, mind letting me pass so we can go outside?”

His eyes flicked around the place. “You want to leave here, your place of power, and go outside. Strange.”

“This isn’t my ‘place of power,’ this is my workshop. I don’t have a place of power, what do you think I am, some kind of wizard? I just don’t want it busted up, is that so hard to understand?”

“I was speaking metaphorically, of course. I would have expected you to want all your toys in easy reach, Dwarf.”

“I don’t make toys, wolf, and as you say I’ve been caught out of the one you seem most afraid of. The armor. Don’t worry, my hammer will do in this case.”

“Will it? Very well, I suppose it makes little difference to me. Go ahead. You wouldn’t leave here, leaving me with all of your stuff, now would you? No, I think it’s safe to let you outside, I’ll burn all of this to the ground if you run, and I think you don’t want that. You won’t run.” *Yup, because I’m an idiot. Honestly I should just stun him and take off. None of this is worth my life, even the armor. What’s ten years of work? Nothing, I’ll live for hundreds of years or even thousands if I’m careful. The smart thing to do would be to escape and just write all this off. But of course I’m not going to do that...* He took a few steps back so I could move around and get past him. I took a few careful steps toward the door and he sidestepped as well, keeping the same distance from me. We switched places, I backed out of the door, and he followed. I headed to the back yard, carefully stepping backwards so he didn’t charge me from behind. The night didn’t bother me, I knew we could both see perfectly, though I would have preferred the armor and night vision system to standing here with only the shield. *I never really had the chance to test the barrier ring. See what it could really stop. I guess I’ll just have to trust my own skills.* “Satisfied?” asked the wolf.

“I am. Thank you for that.”

“Well, there’s no reason our fight to the death and me tearing your throat out can’t be started in a civilized way. We aren’t animals, after all.”

“Uh, right. Exactly.” *But aren’t you though, sort of? I mean turn off the wolf and face me, in that case.*

“Shall we get down to it, then?”

“Any further delay does seem pointless,” I agreed.

He flexed his claws. “Then defend yourself, Dwarf!”

The wolf sprang at me, clearly intending to take my head off or maybe that was just easiest for him to reach, being so huge. I tried to knock his arm out of the way but either I was terribly off my game or this Werewolf had actually spent some time training in the years he had been alive. I got the sensation of claws ripping my face off, and he started to howl triumphantly.

Hooowwwwww- “What?” He looked at his claws and my face. “How come I didn’t tear your face off?”

“Huh, how about that?” I taunted as I struck out with the hammer. He seemed so surprised he didn’t bother dodging, so I slammed into him. It hit his right arm, sparks flying from the electricity enchantment. Now he dodged back with a yelp. Growling he came in high again, striking twice once with a slash to my face and then coming around to rake at my chest. The head strike bounced off my barrier again while the body strike glanced off the shield.

“Hey, watch the paint job.”

We both struck out at the same time, my ring was proving itself and this wolf was fast, so I wanted to do what damage I could as quickly as I could. I only managed to hit his other arm though, and the words of Thanos rang in my mind. “You should have gone for the head.” Of course I couldn’t really reach his head, he was too tall. The wolf switched it up, going for my leg, but I slammed the shield down and he scraped across it. It was like he was inviting me to do it, so I slammed into his face, as he went for my chest again. I just managed to connect with his head, really needed to practice

swinging a hammer against living things instead of lumps of metal, but it worked. I hit him in the mouth, but that just meant he had his teeth right there and lunged for my arm. He couldn't quite grab it, the barrier repulsed him, but he followed it up with two quick slashes as I tried to dodge backwards. One again slashed me across the face, but I caught one on the shield. We went for each other at the same time again, luckily I got him in the head, but felt a pain in my arm and cried out.

"Ah!" he gasped, looking at his claws. "Your defenses fail you, Dwarf. Now you are mine!" He sprang.

He was right. The ring had absorbed all the punishment it could and wouldn't be active again until after the next sunrise. He was barreling down on me, using his greater size and strength to drive me back and go for the throat. I couldn't bother with defense now, I had gotten a couple of solid hits in and knew this was going to be the deciding blow. Which of us would live and which would die? He went for my throat, I jammed my hammer against his head as he drove me to the ground. I felt his teeth close and tear, and I managed a single word.

"Lighting."

I lay there, my neck a mass of bruises as I twitched a bit from the electricity that had managed to be conducted into me. The weight of the Werewolf was crushing me a bit, but as his brains were now decorating my lawn and I was still managing to take in a breath every so often I felt I had done pretty well.

"Herman! God, get that thing off him. Are you all right?"

Odd, that doesn't sound like Meowvis. One of my neighbors saw the flashing of Mjolnir maybe?

"Herman, talk to me!"

"Buah," I managed.

"He's alive, someone get a healer his throat may be crushed."

"On it boss."

"Herman, lie still. There's so much blood, I mean, I should not have said that. It doesn't look too bad. Herman, it's Felix, don't try to move. You're gonna be fine."

"I'll see what kind of healing I can do," said another voice. "I don't dare accelerate it too much, it looks pretty bad."

"Beard took most of the blow," I told them. "It looks lopsided now, doesn't it?" I tried not to giggle hysterically. It hurt too much.

"Beard? Okay, you'll clearly be fine."

I felt someone's hands on my head, lifting them so someone could start wrapping my neck up in a bandage. Magic was involved, and I started to feel a little better. There was more shouting and moving around, the body of the Werewolf was secured though I heard someone say looked dead to him but they couldn't take any chances. Finally I was able to sit up, and figure out what the heck was going on.

"You okay?" a voice asked.

Ah, now that voice I do recognize. "Surprisingly, yes," I told Meowvis, who was sitting there on the grass next to me. "You got Blue Shield here?"

"I thought it might be a good idea. I noticed you stalling him, you must have figured I was going to."

"Uh, yes, of course, all part of the plan. Obviously." *I was more concentrating on reading his body language to see if he was going to jump me.*

"I'm calculating an 85% chance you're lying."

"Can't worry about that now. Felix, hello!"

"Herman. Good to see you recovering. I take it this fellow is the leader of the group we've been dealing with? The road crew, so to speak?"

"I hope so. I don't want another Werewolf after me saying I killed his brother or something. He was going on about his revenge so I would have to guess that was the case."

"Good. Man, he really came after you personally. I knew your kind was tough, but to take on a Werewolf?" He shook his head and clicked his tongue. "Glad you survived."

"Me too." *Having the foresight to make that ring of mine really saved me. Thanks, past me!*

"I've kept everyone out of the workshop, I figured you may not want random people peeking in there."

"Thanks."

"Not a problem. I guess we can mark this case as closed?"

"A few loose ends before that. He should have a car around here. Better check the neighborhood. He didn't run here looking like that. Might actually know who was behind all this finally, and be able to have a talk with any known associates."

"True. I'll have someone look into it."

"As far as closing the case, I hope so. The whole road thing must have been a massive effort, even if most of the workers didn't know what they were doing to make it happen. There could be more members of the cult out there. In fact I'm sure of it. But maybe this will slow them down or break them up."

"Let's hope so. Sorry I didn't get here in time to help. Had to round up a few people in case there was a small army here, find someone who could teleport us all."

I waved that off. "It's fine. I managed somehow. Thanks for coming at all." I stuck out my hand and he took it.

"Of course. By the way you do have a policy with us, right? May have to raise your premiums after this..."

"Uh..."

"You can find your account number and everything later. It's fine. Ah they're finished loading the body onto the cart. You want someone to stay?"

I started to say no, everything would be fine but then "Hey, what about that Vila that works in the armory? What was her name again?"

"Cathy?"

"That's the one, is she around at all?"

"I suppose you did just manage to kill a Werewolf single handed. She might respect that sort of thing. I'll go see."

"Thanks."

Nothing else happened that night, though of course I told the story (with very few embellishments) to Cathy as I repaired my door. She didn't seem all that impressed, given how close it had been. And she did have a point. He had almost crushed my neck there at the end, it was only my hearty Dwarven nature that had saved me. At least I was able to remove the bandage after an hour or so. Around sunrise I let her go with my thanks for watching over me the rest of the night, and she said it was fine. "But if you ever manage to defeat two Werewolves at once, call me!"

"I'll be sure to do that!" *Wait, with or without the armor?*

"So what now?" Meowvis asked after she left.

"Back to my normal routine I guess? Why?"

"You just defeated the leader of the group that wanted to destroy technology. You're not even going to go to Disney?"

I laughed. "Probably not. Work to be done."

"You're going to start building the mark 2 armor?"

I shook my head. “Well, not at this point. I’m not Tony, I can’t whip up a dozen armors in the span of two movies. No, I have something else in mind. Something the cult has made me believe is possible.”

“What’s that?”

I told him.

Epilogue

I get a call from a friend

Where: The yard

When: Several weeks later

It had taken some doing, but as I threw the last bit of grass seed on my lawn I was pretty sure it was going to be worth it. I had dug a long trench all over my yard, then poured specially prepared concrete mix into it, making a large rune that I had now buried with the dirt I had dug up. Basically creating a large magical object buried in the lawn that would prevent anyone that meant me any harm from approaching the house. Once the grass started to grow again, and I got the hose out to water it a bit, you wouldn't even know it was there. But it would radiate magic and create a barrier of sorts around my whole property, so I wouldn't get attacked in my home again. It had taken some research, both in making something that large, and in how to carve the needed runes into it once the mix had hardened, but it was doing something. Naturally I couldn't just invite my worst enemy over to test it, but I was confident I was much more protected than I had been.

I was just shutting the water off when my phone rang, and I saw it the shop.

"Hello, Linnea. How are you?"

"Hiya Herman, good thanks. Got a minute?"

"For you? Of course. What's up?"

"Need to ask for a favor, a pretty big one, actually."

"Nothing against that, what is it?" *You owing me a favor seems like a good position to be in.*

Maybe dinner sometime?

"I have a cousin who seems to have run into some trouble..."