

The Monster Diaries  
Part 2  
Diary of an Actress who Happens to be a Troll  
Part 1: The Sealing Hand

## Chapter 1

I get a phone call from my agent

When: 1:03 PM July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Where: My apartment

Having only been awoken by the shrill bell of my wind up alarm clock three minutes ago I was still sleepily yawning and petting Reves' head when the unexpected second bell, that of my old timey phone, startled me more awake. *Ugh, it's too early for this. And if this is another automated message about my car insurance, for a car I don't own, I swear I will track down whatever unholy machine delivers it and smash it to pieces with my bare hands.*

"Yes, yes," I yelled at the bell, groping for the phone. Reves lifted his huge head from the bed where I had been scratching his ears and bumped my hand a little, putting me more on track. He padded out of the room, probably disappointed at the length of this morning's headpats. "I'm blind, not deaf! Give me a second- here you are." I found the receiver and yanked it up. "What?" I managed.

"Oh, hey Tayna, I didn't wake you, did I?"

*My agent. Wonderful.* "Just about. What have I told about calling before one, Paul? You know I sleep late." *For various reasons, most of which you do not know and wouldn't believe if I told you. At least he did technically wait until after one. I should have told him one thirty, at least then I would be out of bed.*

"What do you mean?" He sounded a bit hurt, which frankly didn't bother me all that much. "It's after one. I waited three whole minutes!"

"You have the bearing of a true gentleman," I assured him sarcastically. "So to what do I owe the honor of hearing from my favorite talent agent?"

"What do you think?" He was starting to sound excited again. "I got you an audition for an upcoming movie! A big part, if I do say so myself. Book adaptation, gonna be huge! Come down to the office and you can sign the paperwork!"

"Just like that? You must be confident."

"Oh, I am, believe me. You'll..." He trailed off.

*Love it? Why am I sensing hesitation right now?*

"You'll be a natural for the role. You'll see. How soon can you get here?"

"By two thirty I suppose. I notice you're in no hurry to actually tell me what this role is."

"Am I?" He laughed nervously. "It's fine. It's better than fine, it's great! You'll see. Two thirty, I'll see you then!" The line went dead.

I sighed and followed the cord of the phone back to the base, setting it back in the cradle. "I'm gonna hate it," I announced, and Reves gave a doggy woof in answer from the other room. "But it is work..." Of course with the advent of OnlyFans I had a pretty steady stream of income so I could get by with just that, possibly indefinitely if I had to. And of course like most of my generation from the early 1900's, I had a sizable amount saved up. *But I do like the work, and maybe he's being coy because he actually found me what I've been asking for the last five years or so. A serious role in a serious film. Wouldn't that be a hoot?* I slipped out of bed, setting my bare feet into slippers and standing up. I stretched, my arms above my head and then reached down to take the hair tie out of my braid so I could shake it out. My long hair tickled my bare back, and I took a deep breath. There was no help for this part; that heavy, dragged down feeling that plagued me had nothing to do with having just woken up. The sun was still up, and that dragged people like me down no matter what we were doing. Letting my breath out I focused on my connection to magic and cast the now familiar spell of "Awareness." It was like an "inner eye" had opened, as suddenly I was aware of everything in the room with me. I knew my bed was behind me, and that it had a bunched up sheet on top of it, but not what "color" they were. I knew where my chair was, where the alarm clock was, where the window was. I knew a book was on the stand by the bed, but not how big it was or where the bookmark was in it. I grimaced a little, it was

a pretty crummy casting, but it was better than walking around my apartment in the dark like a blind human would have to. I shrugged and decided it was fine for the moment, heading for the bathroom. A plaintive “woof” came from the other room.

“Yes, I’ll feed you in a minute, you know the routine.”

“Wuff.”

I passed my camera setup, knowing my desk, computer, and other equipment were there so I could avoid them, and a small smile played across my lips. I hadn’t set any of it up, these “computer” things may as well be magic for all I knew, but there were technical people in my neighborhood who didn’t seem to mind helping me out. I knew enough to run my “shows” alone, despite many offers of assistance with camera work, lighting, etc. I knew they meant well, but the way to avoid “misunderstandings” was to be clear right at the start that they were free to look all they wanted, I couldn’t see them staring, but it wouldn’t go further than that. So far it hadn’t been a problem, oh I could defend myself if it was, but better to not let it get that far out of hand than have to explain to the police how a slight looking woman such as myself could lay out a bruiser of a man and not have a mark on me. There were *some* perks to being a troll, after all.

I showered, threw on some clothes I hoped “color matched” as I wasn’t recasting the spell just for that, and got breakfast around for Reves and myself. I didn’t hurry, the best thing about having a dog that can teleport (apart from him being able to take himself out when he needed to go) is it was hard to be late anywhere. There was no way I could take a cab to see my agent in any suitable timeframe anyway, we lived in different states. I would have to take a plane first. He didn’t know that, the number he called was a google voice number, but I assumed he thought I did given how “easily” I could come into his office. This let people who called me reach me at home or the rare times I had my cell phone actually turned on, without calling multiple numbers. It also further disguised my actual location, you couldn’t be too careful in the world today, as my mother was quite fond of telling me.

“Alexa, what time is it?” I asked the empty apartment as I slipped my shoes on.

“It’s two fourteen,” she answered. *Okay, plenty of time still.*

“Alexa, what’s the weather today?”

“The weather today is sunny, high of seventy five, with no chance of rain.”

*No need for a jacket. I do have to admit some technology is worth it, I don’t do any magic in here anyway. I mean I work magic, but not “magic” magic, just the magic of giving my fans what they want.* “Excellent, thanks.” *Oh, they say you don’t have to thank it, but when the robot revolution comes I want to be one who is remembered as being polite to our new robot overlords before they were our robot overlords.* “Okay Reves, you ready to go?”

“Woff!”

I harnessed him up, I didn’t have to remind him to take the form of a golden retriever, at least that’s what other people saw him as. He knew the score. He was much larger than your usual seeing eye dog in his real form, so it was just best to hide both our natures as we were able. I couldn’t do much about my looks, troll women were among the most beautiful non-humans in the world probably only beaten out by Nymphs, but I put my dark glasses on and jammed a baseball cap on my head in any case. I grabbed my purse, my spell telling me everything that was inside, and as my keys were in there I had everything I needed. Not that I needed them, we would come back in here without ever using the door, but it was better to be prepared. I stepped away from the room with the computers in it, back into my bedroom, where I had no technology. Not even a light bulb, for obvious reasons.

“Okay boy, let’s see if the coast is clear.” I concentrated, readying another spell, this one with a bit of extra oomph thrown into my willpower as I was now casting a spell while holding onto another, all while it was still daytime. “Remote Viewing.” I suddenly had a complete knowledge of a certain bathroom I used in my agent’s office building, along with the knowledge my previous spell was giving me about my apartment. Luck wasn’t with me, there was someone in there, so I waited while she finished up and went out the door. I waited another few seconds. “Okay, it’s clear Reves, let’s-”

And we were there.

“...go” I finished lamely. “Thank you.”

“Wooff.”

“Let’s go see what my agent has to say for himself.”

I headed down the hall, led by Reves, and knocked on the door to his office, which was partially open already. Yes, “my” dog was a heck of a lot smarter than most dogs, and I for one was glad he chose to stick with me even if he had to pretend to be a seeing eye dog most of the time in public. Even without magic to allow the two of us to talk, he understand me perfectly and responded much more intelligently than a regular old dog.

“Hey babe, come on in!”

I pushed the door open stepped to the side, waving my hand like I was waving someone else into the room.

“Er, what are you doing?”

“Letting this ‘babe’ go before me,” I explained. “I didn’t know you knew Babe Ruth. He’s still around, right?”

“He was dead before I was even born! How old do you think I am? I was talking to you, babe!”

*Wait, it’s been that long since the Babe died? I guess I haven’t heard about him recently, but shoot, time really does fly doesn’t it? Oh well, my agent is at his usual place so I can go sit down.* I actually had no idea how old he was, I never cared enough to ask my magic about it. It could tell me about him physically, if I managed to cast the spell well enough, but not details like that. I might be able to ask it how old he is, and get some kind of answer, but it wasn’t worth the effort trying to decode it. There was one thing about him I knew for sure though. My agent, Paul Whittaker, was unfortunately human. By that I didn’t mean it was unfortunate he was human. Many people were, and went on to do really well for themselves. And I interacted mostly with normal humans as well, I had nothing against them, unlike many of my kind. But Paul? He was unfortunately human. Balding, overweight, and killing himself with cigarettes if the smell that clung to him was any indication. I knew vaguely where he was thanks to my magic and looked over where he sat behind his desk. “You were talking to me...” I made an “out with it” gesture.

“Miss Vivante. Tayna. I shouldn’t have called you babe, I apologize.”

“That’s better.” I gave a nod to Reves who pulled me forward, and I groped for the chair by the desk. I knew what kind it was from long experience but my previous spell wasn’t telling me any more than there was a chair there. Orientation was beyond it. But I managed to catch the back and sat down, dropping Reves’ harness. He sat down next to me without me telling him to, because he was the best boy. “So what’s this part you’ve found for me?”

“Oh it’s great. You know how Hollywood is looking for properties to turn into movies or TV shows?”

“Sure, like game of thrones or wheel of time. That series took me forever to listen to.” *I’m always interested in systems of magic that the humans come up with, because they don’t know about the real magic all around them. Plus it sometimes gives me ideas for spells of my own. That was a long series though, too bad the guy writing it wasn’t one of my kind and died before he finished it. Another took his place of course but it just wasn’t the same.*

“Exactly, that’s it exactly. There’s been some talk of adapting- are you familiar with Piers Anthony?”

“Something about puns...”

He laughed. “Yeah, that’s one of his series. But another is the Adept series, part fantasy, part sci-fi. All about this planet that has an alternate reality right next to it, that some people know how to cross from one side to the other.”

“Okay, that sounds fine. What aren’t you telling me? How many times am I going to have to take my clothes off?”

Again a laugh, a little more nervous this time than reassuring. “None! So let me tell you about the part they want you to try out for.”

“Hold on, none? Is this actually the first serious role you’ve found for me? It’s not adult oriented?”

“Oh, well, there’s a lot of... what I mean to say is... It’s going to be a web release, not on any movie screens or netflix or anything so we can... The talk is that...”

“Spit it out, man! Either I’m taking my clothes off in this thing or I’m not!”

“That’s just it!” He sounded like he was making a point, but I didn’t get it. “See, on this planet there are two classes of people. Serfs and... What are the rich people called? Well, whatever, see, those with money get to wear all the clothes they want. Serfs, on the other hand, well, not so much.”

“Not so much meaning...”

“None at all, actually. The place is enclosed in a dome because they’ve ruined the planet’s surface with all their mining this energy crystal, so there’s no weather or anything.”

I started to get what he was saying. “So I’m not taking my clothes off because I’m playing a serf, and thus I can’t wear any in the first place.”

“Not just any serf! You’ll be playing an android, er that’s an artificial human, sent to protect the main character from assassination. That’s why the part is so perfect for you.”

*Yes, I know what an android is. I may not be up on my sci-fi like I am with my fantasy but who doesn’t know who Data is? “My martial arts experience?”*

“Yes!” he agreed a little too quickly. “And nothing else.”

*Right, not the fact I’m inhumanly beautiful which an android probably-* “What about my eyes though? I know people have told me they look different from theirs.”

“What about them? You have eyes, right, I’ve seen them in your other works!”

I was good enough to actually play a sighted character, using magic, as long as the cameras and such stayed at a distance so my spell wasn’t disrupted. Sure, I needed a little more direction than most, but for some reason directors were not at all annoyed at this, bending over backwards to help me. *And how many times have you viewed my ‘other works’ may I ask?* I lowered my glasses to show him. “I have eyes, but they have no color, right? At least that’s what I’ve been told.” *Whatever “color” is...*

“That’s fine. In the books the androids look completely human, they could pass for human in fact, but we’ll either have you fitted with contact lenses or just explain androids have white eyes. Don’t worry about that. They’ll make it work.”

“And someone is paying for this, to have a bunch of naked people running around a set because the book it’s based on says that’s how it is on this planet? Even for a direct to web release, that’s a bit much.”

“Hey, didn’t you hear about ‘naked and afraid?’ That was on TV. Let them worry about that, you get paid either way right? Don’t worry, we think the draw of having most of the cast naked the whole movie will drive enough sales we don’t need Netflix or other distribution networks.”

*That’s not what I meant.* “Why can’t you find me something normal?”

“What’s normal? Have you seen the world- I mean have you, uh...”

I sighed. “It’s fine, I know what you mean. And this man I’m protecting, I suppose my cover is some kind of sex robot?”

“So you have read the books!”

“I don’t believe you.”

“What?”

“Maybe you had better start at the top.”

“Okay, so the main male lead participates in these games of skill for the amusement of the rich people to try and win a spot at the top for himself. He soon meets his android guardian and they...”

So in the end he convinced me to go to the audition, the basic premise wasn't any worse than anything I had already done in my "career." I had been in countless "adult films" and in reality didn't have much to complain about. My services were in demand, I had been flown to many different countries and had met many interesting people because of how I looked. Men and woman alike seemed to fall all over themselves to be nice to me, so I must be fairly good looking as unlike Vampires (for instance) I didn't have any kind of animal magnetism that would otherwise account for it. *Such is my lot, I suppose.* I was a better actor than most that were hired for such "productions," the reason why I was starting to despair I would ever be offered a serious role in my life. *But one day for sure, I'll get out of the 'adult' film industry and into the actual film industry. It's just a matter of time.*

I went back to the bathroom I had arrived in, luck was on my side as it was again empty, and I told Reves we could go home now. I felt us shift, my magic telling me we were back in my house again. I immediately went to the phone and dialed a number. It rang several times and I heard a muffled grunt after it was picked up.

"Dad?"

"..."

"Dad, you're holding the phone the wrong way again! Turn it around!" I shouted.

"What?"

*Oh Lord, my parents are completely hopeless.* I heard a scuffle and a different voice came on. "Hello?"

"Hi mom!" *At least she can figure out which end of the phone is which.*

"Honey! How are you?"

"Good, I'm good mom. Guess who just got offered another part in a new movie!"

"Oh honey, that's great! Wait, can your father and I actually watch this one or..."

"Ummmm."

"Oh no, not another one."

"It's okay mom, it's sort of half and half, if you can believe it. Apparently someone thought it was a good idea to adapt a book series where most of the characters run around naked the entire time."

"And naturally they thought of my daughter!"

*I'm not sure if that's pride or despair in her voice, probably a mixture of both.* "Hey, only because they don't know about you. Paul says maybe next time for something I get to keep my clothes on for the entire movie."

"Didn't he say that the last time too?"

"Did he? I don't recall," I lied. He had. And the time before that, as well.

"Irregardless, I'm happy for you."

"You mean regardless, irregardless isn't a word."

"Are you sure? You know how language works, right?"

"Yes, I know how language works. I can speak at least six different ones to varying degree. Fine, irregardless of how language works, I don't think that's a word."

We both laughed.

"Thanks for letting me know. How's Reves doing?"

I heard his collar jingle, he must have heard his name and looked up at me. "Just fine. I'm sure he's excited about getting out of the house for the filming, his tail kept wagging as we were talking."

"Tell him he's a good boy from me, and give me a call when you get the part. We'll go out to dinner to celebrate."

"I will. And put a label on the phone or something, dad was holding it upside down again wasn't he?"

"He was," she replied with a snort. "I don't know what I see in that man."

*It's not his face, we women trolls get all the looks, the men are ugggggly. Or so I've been told, looks don't mean much to me.* "The fact he can lift a small car over his head?"

“That doesn’t hurt!” she replied with a giggle. “By the way,” she singsonged. “Any news on that front with you?”

“No, mom, where am I going to meet a nice troll around here?”

“Troll, Gahe, Pukwudgie-”

“Pukwudgie?” I gasped.

“You get the idea. Even a human, I just want you to be happy! Meet someone. Go out! Have a meaningful connection with someone instead of just, you know, your work for money. Give us some grandkids.”

“I am happy, mom. Believe me. But all people see is my pretty face, not me. I can’t live with someone like that.”

“We’re trolls dear, you can’t get away from that. Settle down with someone already, sheesh. I’ll let you go but don’t forget about dinner when you get the part!”

“I won’t mom. Talk to you then.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

I hung up the phone. *My mother. She means well, but honestly, how does a blind porn star find someone to share their life with? First I start getting serious roles, then I start getting serious boyfriend/girlfriends.* “Besides, I have you, don’t I Reves?”

“Woof.”

“Darn right. Let’s get some exercise and figure out how I’m getting to the audition next week.”

## Chapter 2

I get all wet at a campground

Where: Olive Dell Ranch, Colton, CA

When: August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 2:14 PM

As Reves had never seen the place we were going to, and it was difficult for me to show him any images of the place because I couldn't see them, we had to get there like a normal person. Luckily in the world of planes, buses, and ride sharing we made our way there without incident and I paid the driver after they dropped me off at the front gate of the place. This was going to be one of the odder auditions I had ever been to for a few reasons. For one, it lasted all weekend and two, it was taking place at a nudist campground instead of, you know, on a stage in an auditorium or something like that. We were being paid for the trip and the stay, and even if we didn't get chosen I was told everyone was getting a salary as though this was time and a half as it was happening on a weekend. *So someone with money is making this happen, and keeping us happy by essentially giving us a vacation for a weekend as we work. That's nice of them.* Reves looked around, gave a doggy woofing sound, and started moving. I had grabbed my meager belongings, didn't need any more than one change of clothes as I wouldn't be wearing any all weekend, so I only had a small tent, and the usual essentials one travels with in a small suitcase. A bit awkward to manage with one hand as the other was on Reves' harness, but one had to keep up appearances, mustn't one? Simply walking alongside him, as I knew right where he was with magic, would raise some eyebrows and call my being blind into question. But I managed.

I had been trying to adjust my sleep schedule for the last week and a half, so it more or less lined up with everyone else in the world. I was dragged down by the sun but what could I do? When in Rome, and all that, and the humans moved around most during the day. Still, my "disability" would cover any slips or spacing out as I really preferred to having breakfast at about this time. *What I do for my art. Oh well, let's see what the people at the front desk have to say about all this and get settled in.*

I entered the main building and Reves walked me over to the front counter, which I pretended to grope for once he sat down in front of it and I could let his harness go. I set my stuff down as the person behind the counter came over to me. I felt it there, along with the cash register on the desk, the various pamphlets in a metal rack, and the various snacks, fruits, and vegetables in baskets all through the place. *So it serves as a small store as well? That's reasonable, they have the whole building they may as well make some use of the space and provide things a camper might need. Though I'm feeling some strange things too, maybe merchandise with the name of the place on it? Like is that really a shelf of stuffed animals?*

"Hello," they greeted me.

*Ah, it's a woman, or at least someone with a high voice.* "Hi there! Looking to check in, is this the place?"

"It sure is. You're here for the audition?"

"That's right."

"You must be Tayna!" said another voice from my left. I had felt the other person moving in the store so I didn't jump or anything, but I did turn to face them.

"That's me, who am I speaking to?" *Don't recognize the voice...*

"John Shoemaker, I'm the casting director for the adaptation."

"Oh! I hope mine pass inspection." I bent one leg and pointed my toes up. "I would hate for my shoes to be mocked!"

"Wow, never heard that one before," he told me. "You are Tayna then?"

"That's me. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. Paul said he was sending over someone famous, and that I would know you when I saw you. He wasn't kidding."

"I guess I've been in a few productions in the past, but I wouldn't say famous." *I'm blushing!*

"And you've managed? I mean with your... Uh..."

*And now I'm not. Why does everyone have to bring that up? I suppose it's his job to ask, he needs to know I can do the job I'm being hired for.* "Being blind? Yes, I've managed just fine, you don't have to worry about that."

"So you have some sight then?"

*Not in the way you're thinking of.* "I can sometimes make out vague shapes," *when my magic cooperates more than that, but this should cover me reaching for something I couldn't have known was there any other way,* "but that's about it."

"Well, I like what I see so far. Anyway, I'm here to answer the inevitable questions so go ahead."

"Heard them many times already huh?"

"Yup, you're not the first and you won't be the last to arrive."

"Ok then." *Why not a printout then? It would be useless to me without magic but easier for them. I suppose he wanted to meet us right away?* "So why am I here?"

"You're here, and not in some studio someplace because I wanted to see how you would interact with everyone while, you know, undressed. You'll be spending a lot of time on set that way, so we needed to make sure everyone was comfortable with it."

*It's the story of my life. A whole campground full of young, attractive, and most importantly naked men and women and I can't see a single one of them. Such is my lot in life, maybe I was a really bad person in a previous life or something...* "I am, so no trouble there."

"Good! Given everyone signed up with little hesitation I figured that would be the case but I wanted to weed out anyone that might be a problem before it complicated filming."

*I can't fault them for that.* "Is it just us here?"

"Yes. We've rented the place out completely for the weekend. Everyone you meet, apart from normal staff I mean, will be a part of the production in some way. Get to know them, walk around, my assistants and I will be mingling too so think of the whole weekend as a mini-audition. I'll be doing a more formal audition with everyone one on one before Sunday night. So don't feel you have to 'perform' the whole time, just be yourself until one of us asks for something specific."

"Sounds good. Unless you think there's something else I should know, that's the questions I have."

"Great! Get checked in, I can have someone take you to your assigned lot if you want so you can set your tent up. Get out of those clothes and hit the pool or whatever."

"If someone can give me a vague verbal description of the place I'll find my way," I told him. "I'm fairly self sufficient."

"Glad to hear it. I can't wait to see what you can do. Paul said you were perfect for the role of Sheen so I'm expecting some good things. You have the body for the character, I just hope you can act well enough to do her justice."

*Wait, so is this a serious role or not? He's treating it like it is, but at the same time I'll be naked for the whole shooting. Very odd.* "I'll do my best!"

"Great, just great. I'll get out of that gorgeous red hair of yours then, enjoy your time here and I'll talk to you soon."

"Looking forward to it."

I got checked in, and the lady behind the counter gave me a description of how the place was laid out. It seemed to be a fairly popular place, with a restaurant, pool, hot tub, tennis courts, basketball court, nature trails, and more. They had been expanding as nudism was on the rise for whatever reason, which I had no problem with. I had a pretty good idea of where to go to reach the campsites, and the bathrooms so that was the main areas covered. I could wander around and find the rest of the place with

Reves. I thanked the woman, and she led me to the back door which opened into the campground, and I went inside. We headed to the campsite so I could get rid of my tent and suitcase, but we hadn't gotten more than a few meters inside when Reves suddenly stopped and turned his head suspiciously with a growl. I didn't feel anything nearby me, no person that would have caused such a reaction anyway, but then felt what he was feeling.

"Yeah, I feel it now," I told him. "There's something over there, isn't there?"

"Woof."

"But what could it be?" *Something powerful, that's for sure. Can there be another non-human here? A really old and powerful one? But that feels like spells, not a person.* "Come on, we can't just stand here. Let's set this stuff down and go investigate this."

"Wof."

*Maybe it's just the person bankrolling this? I know in another two hundred years or so I'll probably have more money than I know what to do with. If that was the case, sure, I would want to make a movie about a bunch of naked people, I mean if I could see them. This could be an older person than me, but it doesn't feel like a person. What could it be?* We headed off, Reves plodding along slowly so he was probably looking over in that direction but shook himself and picked up the pace. We went past rows of motor homes and then tents, people busy beside them setting up or just sitting around in the sunlight. The sites must have been marked in some way as Reves pulled me to the left, then stopped. Yes, he knows his numbers and his letters, thank you very much for asking.

"Oh, woe is me!" I cried out, dropping my stuff and putting the back of my hand to my forehead. "I am but a blind woman on her own, and now I must pitch this tent to have a place to sleep tonight! If only there was some strapping young man or-"

"I'll be glad to help you!" several people said all at once, running over to me.

*Works every time.* "Oh, thank you so much!" I gushed, bringing my hands together. It was awful, awful acting but as that's what I was currently going for, it was actually superb acting. You see? "I could do it myself, of course, but it was a real hassle when I practiced it a few days ago. If someone could put my tent up, I'll just stand right here and slip out of these clothes while they do it."

"I'll get it out of the bag!"

"I've got a hammer, I'll start putting the stakes in the ground."

"Do you need any help with your buttons, or anything?"

"What breed of dog is that? Is he friendly?"

"You can't pet a seeing eye dog, don't you know anything? You can see it's a service animal, right?"

"I guess it is!"

"Do you only have the one suitcase? I could go back to the entrance and get anything else you need brought up!"

"You are all so kind," I told them. Each of those had been a different voice, just how far had these people come from to help me, anyway? It was fine, I would reward them all momentarily. "This is just going to be the best weekend isn't it?"

With my tent pitched, clothes off, and everything stored in the tent I got away from the crowd with promises to return later and headed off towards the feeling of magic. I was glowing a bit from all the complements, trolls really did have most other races beat in that area but it was nice to be reminded from time to time that you were desirable. Of course they just wanted my body, which was a little sad, but like I told my mother I was used to it. *If I could find someone blind, like me, and they expressed an interest in me, then I would know they were a keeper. Those people back there, though I would take any one of them to bed with me, that's all it would be. Or more than one, meow! Oh, here we are.* I had come upon a fenced in area which my magic told me the pool was behind, and there was the source of that magic I was feeling. It was strong all right, but I needed to still get closer to feel it out. Reves took

me around the side and I unlatched the gate, knowing right where the latch was. To my left I heard a conversation between two ladies.

“No way!”

“I’m serious. Three times in the last month. It’s crazy.”

“And nothing was taken each time?”

“Yeah, it’s the strangest thing, they broke in- hello.”

“Hello! This is the pool right?” I asked, just for something to say. *The magic is right in front of me. My magic says there’s a person there, laying in a chair, and there’s someone next to her. Several people in the pool to my right. But what is she? That magic, I’ve never felt the like. It’s like it’s concentrated all in one place, rather than being spread across her or focused on her eyes like mine would be. What in the world?*

“It sure is, be careful you don’t fall in!”

“Oh, Reves here would have to go in first and I don’t expect he’s up for a swim right at the moment. Are you Reves?”

“Woof.”

“Do you want to lay out? There’s an empty chair here.”

“Actually, after the trip here I thought I might have a swim first. Would one of you mind watching Reves for me?”

There was a pause, they were probably looking at each other. “We don’t mind,” one said.

“Great, thanks!”

“Shower is straight ahead of you, probably fifteen paces? I’m Kelly, by the way.”

“I’m Tayna, thanks so much. Who is your friend?”

“This is... Uh... Sorry what was your-”

“I’m Najam. It’s fine. We just met. Basically everyone around here is a stranger.”

“Right, right. So you’re going to be in this crazy nudist movie too?”

“We hope so,” Kelly answered.

“I wish you good luck then. Can you hold my glasses, I’ll be back. Reves, stay with the nice ladies okay?”

“Woof.”

Handing magical Kelly my glasses I heard a faint gasp, she must have seen my eyes, which always produced that kind of reaction. Others said that they looked a bit strange without “color” but that only added to my appeal, because it was so rare. I focused on her as I handed her my glasses and I was right, the magic seemed to concentrated on her hand. *Interesting. Some kind of magical object, a ring maybe to be on her hand? On a regular human? How did that happen? I’ll have to find a way to ask about it.* I headed towards the shower, noting that there was a bottle of something (I assumed soap) there so I figured it was fine to use. I turned it on and stepped under the water, feeling the world go dark around me. *Stupid running water. Why does it negate magic? It’s like if I dropped a rock and it would fall but not when the wind was blowing. Oh well.* I groped for the soap, put some in my hand, and I noticed that as I soaped myself up conversation got a little quieter. *If I had to guess, they are all staring at me. Ah, it’s a curse, being me. Such a curse.* I rinsed off and turned the water off, squeezing out my hair to buy me some time. While I did that I concentrated on my magic again, calling up the spell that helped me see. Even with the drag on me from the sun (which felt amazing on my skin otherwise as I stood there by the way) I managed a good casting, thankful that magic didn’t produce any fancy lights or other effects when it was cast. I could just stand there and rebuild my ability to sense the world, which I did, and walked to the deep end of the pool. It was a good casting, I could feel every person around me, how deep the water was, where the edge was, what the fence looked like, and more. I had been breathing deeply the whole time I was soaping myself, not just to attract other’s eyes, but because I wanted to show off a little. “Everyone out of the way?” I called. I knew they weren’t, but

I wanted to give them a chance to move. There was a splashing and everyone said they were out of the way.

“But don’t worry about bumping anyone,” a voice called up to me. “I’m sure no one here will hold it against you.”

“What if I wanted it held against me?” I countered with a smile, and a little wiggle of my hips, taking a deep breath. They laughed and I dove. I was a fairly strong swimmer, my troll nature blessing me with increased strength allowing me to move through the water easily. I knew I could hold my breath more than a minute, thanks to my earlier breathing exercises, easily allowing me to reach the other side and then swim back before I had to surface again. The water was perfect, flowing around me as I kicked, my hair streaming behind me. *Swimming naked really is the best!* I knew where the other side was and turned, this being a pool and not *running* water my magic stayed with me. It was crazy that it worked that way, but a stream would knock any magic off me while a lake wouldn’t. I emerged to clapping, my hair plastered to my body and water running off my face. *That felt really good.*

“Wow, you’re a great swimmer,” the nearest person said to me.

“Thanks!”

“You know what they need to do? A live action Little Mermaid,” said another voice.

“Oh man, have you ever tried a mermaid tail?” someone asked me. “With your hair you would look just like her!”

“I would love to try one, I never have,” I admitted. *Wouldn’t he flip if he knew there are almost mermaids running around, er, swimming around, out there?*

“Maybe we can talk to the producer of this film, can you imagine a Little Mermaid where the mermaids are actually topless, *as they should be?*” asked the first voice.

“Who is the producer of this film?” someone asked.

No one answered.

“What, no one knows?”

“I don’t.” Everyone chorused.

“That’s odd. Well, you would be a natural for the role. If anyone is going to produce such a thing it’ll be whoever is producing this movie. But enough about that! Think you could manage to swim two lengths again?”

“I could. Who wants to race me?”

“Me!” said everyone.

*See, I’m already making tons of friends here. I hope one of the casting director’s assistants is watching!*

I splashed around with the others in the pool for a bit and finally swam over to the shallow end where Kelly, Najam, and Reves were. “He’s not giving you any trouble is he?” I called.

“He’s a well behaved gentleman,” Kelly said.

“Good.” I was about to climb out, bouncing to get a bit of momentum going so I could haul my naked butt out of the pool, but stopped. (Hair, especially wet hair, weighs a ton by the way) *Wait, here’s a chance!* “Can you give me a hand up?” *They don’t know how strong I am, and it might actually look suspicious if I could get out this way.*

“Sure!” she got up and headed over to me. I held out my hand but she didn’t take it. “Wait, this isn’t some ploy to yank me into the water, is it?”

“Would I do that?” *Hey, that’s a fantastic idea, thanks for giving it to me. I totally have to do it now.*

“I don’t know, I don’t know who you are. You could be a total prankster for all I know!”

“I know who she is,” said Najam. “You’re never going to believe it.”

## Chapter 3

I learn a little about Kelly and the magic she's carrying around

Where: The campground pool

When: Just after that

Everyone was silent for a moment, only the sounds of the wind, the bustle far away, and the usual lapping of the water around me. No one seemed to be moving, and I couldn't really tell which direction they were looking in. Were they looking at me? At her? What was going on? I could tell she was holding something up but what it was remained unclear. Finally Kelly broke the silence.

"You know she's blind, right? Najam, she's not going to be able to see a picture on your phone."

"Oh. Whoops, you're right. Sorry."

"Is that what you were doing?" I asked. *No wonder, if it really is a cell phone, that my magic would have a little trouble identifying it. My casting wasn't that good, especially in the daytime like this.* "So what's this all about?"

"I found out who you are!"

"I told you who I am. Tayna Vivante, what's the big deal?"

"But you have another name, don't you?" she purred.

"I guess?" I hedged. "Most of us do, right?"

"Well *I've* never been in anything pornographic," she huffed. "So no. Unlike you, little Venus Flytrap! That is your porn name, isn't it?"

"Venus Flytrap?" went around the others at a murmur.

"Hey wait a minute," one voice said, coming towards me. "You are her, aren't you? Of course, that hair, that body, I've seen you before!"

"So have I!" exclaimed another. "Oh wow, this is amazing!"

"It's really her!" a third said. It seemed everyone was coming over and hovering around me. "You've been in everything!"

"I wouldn't say everything," I countered, blushing a little.

"Are you kidding? I've seen you in Nuns Gone Bad, Naughty Flight Attendant, and Doing it Without Shorts, where you played an electrician. A female electrician, it was a twist on the usual category so I remember that one for sure."

"Wait, you're blind?" someone asked. "But in your films you're so confident and sure, I had no idea!"

"Well, it's easy when everything is planned out for you," I told them. *And when you can compensate for it with magic.* "I really am blind though."

"You're amazing! To hide that so well, and I always thought you were one of the better actresses I had seen. I mean, not that I watch *that* much porn."

Everyone laughed and teased him and said things like "sure you don't." because that is what one did in that situation, isn't it?

"But wait, I know you too, but it was filmed in Japan I thought. Everyone was speaking Japanese so..."

"Oh sure," I agreed. "I've been all over, strangely enough I get offers to star in things all the time." *Just nothing really serious, because one look at me and how could I be anything but an adult film star? Of course Paul isn't helping...* "Japan, Germany, Russia, France—"

"France?" someone asked.

"What, you think the French don't watch porn?" someone else chided.

"It is the language of love. Hey, you don't speak French do you?" someone asked, in French.

"I speak a little French," I told them, in French.

"Do you speak German?" someone asked, in German.

"I speak a little German," I answered, in German.

“Wow, she really has been everywhere.”

*I'm not sure speaking two languages is 'everywhere' but as I actually speak six to one extent or another it's close enough.*

“I'm gonna have to find your other stuff now. I loved you in that one about the teacher. Wow, to actually say I met you, this is amazing.”

“I'm not a celebrity or anything,” I told them, embarrassed. *But some actual recognition, even for that sort of stuff, is fairly nice. Usually it's-*

“Ugh, you're all missing the point,” Najam told them. “She's a porn actress!”

*That. That right there.*

“So?” someone said. “Hate to break it to you, but most of us are in the industry. Why do you think we're here?”

There was a general agreement. *Ah, really? So they're probably fairly fit, young-ish men who are good looking and naked. Don't I just have all the luck, I can't see a single one of them. Right, I suppose they would have to be. The people on that planet we're supposed to be on are all like Olympic level athletes competing to become rich and famous by winning the games. They wouldn't hire someone who wasn't totally fit. And I didn't even get to do my “oh let me feel what you look like” routine on a single one of them. Curses!*

“Besides,” someone reasoned slyly, “you were the one who first recognized her. So who watches the most porn out of all of us here? I think it's you, to have picked up on it so fast.”

“I don't believe this! I just happened to recognize her, that's all! I have a good memory.”

“Sure you do,” someone said. “Hey Kelly, did you know who she was?”

“Who me? Ah, no, not really, I don't watch a lot of... Um... Adult entertainment features. I prefer the real thing.”

“Adult entertainment features, hey I like that!”

“You're treating her like she was in the latest Marvel movie,” Najam complained. “She's not a serious actress!”

*Oh man, I would love to be in a Marvel movie. Heck I'd settle for a DC movie at this point.*

“And you are?”

“Of course I am! Now I see why I wasn't offered a more serious role. It's all just based on looks, not talent. I knew I shouldn't have come here.”

*Hey, I resent that. I'm a decent actress!*

“With that attitude, you're right,” Kelly agreed. “Give me your hand, Tayna.”

I held it out and she put her hand in mine, and I grabbed it with my other hand too. *Ah hah! There's something there all right.* I felt something clasped around her whole hand, cold and hard, like metal, extending across the back of her fingers about halfway down. At her palm was something thin, like a disk, and it was all connected to a bracelet at her wrist. *What in the world is that, and what is it doing for her magically?* I would need time to feel it out, and I really didn't have much experience feeling out magical artifacts. I had never made any, and only heard stories about them, usually made by dwarves. I didn't get a chance to do much more than verify I was in fact touching the magical objects as Kelly helped haul me out and water sloshed off me. “Thanks.” *My hair is going to take forever to dry, but oh well.* I started squeezing it out.

“Of course. Come on, grab your dog, you don't have to stand there and listen to her.”

“It's all right, it's nothing I haven't heard before.” *When people learn you're in the adult industry, any part of it, they react badly. Wouldn't want anyone thinking little Mr. or Mrs. Perfect stooped to watching something erotic to spice things up. Heaven forbid. But yet, if no one is watching, why is so much being produced? Answer me that one if you can!*

“That is the most horrible thing I've heard today. I would like to explore one of the trails.” she announced. “Will you come with me? Listen to the sounds of nature, I guess? I'm not staying to listen to this, if you want to lay down next to her-”

“No, I’ll come with you.” *With you, or one of these others tonight, given I’ll probably be joining someone in their little tent. Dinner tonight, that’s when the proposition will start. But how will I be able to choose? Ha! I should try to seduce Najam, show what a hypocrite she is when she wakes up in my bed tomorrow morning.* “It’ll be good for Reves, anyway.” *And I could adjust my spell to look out of his eyes if I had to.* “I’ll join you. Heel Reves!” He got up and came over to me, and I took his harness in hand.

“Oh, don’t leave because of her!” one of my former pool mates complained.

*It’s true, I hardly got to swim at all. Ah well, two more days for that and I’m sure I’ll be invited to the pool by, oh, everybody?*

“Yeah, make her leave and you stay! We hardly got to swim with you at all. It’s not your fault she has a problem with you.”

*It’s like I’m psychic or something.* I laughed and waved in their direction. “Don’t worry boys, you’ll be seeing lots of me the whole rest of the weekend. And if I get the part, during filming. Plenty of time to... talk.” *And anything else we might be able to ‘get it up’ to. Get it? Little adult humor there.*

“Okay,” Kelly told me, sounding a little surprised I had agreed to follow her. “I’ll open the gate for you.”

We headed out towards the trail, side by side, Reves knew her intent and where to take me.

“That breeze feels great,” I remarked. It did. My skin my still shedding water droplets, and the sun was hitting me now that we were back out in the open. There was a nice cool breeze every so often and while the sun felt great on my bare skin, the wind did too.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I can see why the nudist do it. I’ll have to come back here for my next vacation.”

“Do you get to vacation often? I know I’m just so busy a lot of the time. Plus it’s hard in my situation...”

“Were you born that way? If you don’t mind me asking, I mean. I don’t really know the, uh, protocol here. I don’t want to treat you differently but at the same time...”

*You’re curious. I get it, it’s only natural.* I nodded. “Don’t sweat it. To answer your question: Yup, born this way. Don’t really know what red is, or how far the horizon is away looking out at the ocean, or how the stars look at night.” *At least, with my own eyes. Reves’ eyes don’t really convey a lot of color and I’ve never asked anyone to borrow their eyes to see those things. But as far as she’s concerned, my magic doesn’t exist so I’ve never gotten an inkling of any of that.* “All these things have been described to me, but that’s like me describing the taste of chicken. When you eat chicken, you know it, you know you aren’t eating ham. But describe eating ham to someone that never has.”

“Yeah, I get it. It seems you’re doing fine for yourself otherwise though. You’re a famous actress!”

I snorted. “In certain circles, I suppose. More like infamous, most of the time. Do you know how many girlfriends have stormed away from how many boyfriends after they admit to knowing me on sight? When they find out *how* those guys know me-”

She burst out laughing. “I can imagine. Wow, I’m lucky people I work with remember me if we’re in another production together, but you must have people coming up to you in the street asking ‘hey, don’t I know you?’”

“Even if they don’t. I’ve been described as attractive by others-”

“That’s one word for it,” she muttered.

“So it’s a real pain, honestly. Mind your own business, why don’t you?”

“Yeah, that’s not right, people harassing you. Just because you’re gorgeous, they shouldn’t get in your face.”

“You think I’m...”

“Yeah,” she allowed softly.

“Thanks. I don’t even really know what that means, for people. I can equate it to someone looking like a nice piece of music sounds, but otherwise I tend to be attracted to people with nice voices. Nice skin helps too, I guess, but of course that comes later.” *Nice hair, love feeling hair. Of course being a good kisser, being patient with me, not treating me like an invalid or a moron just because my eyes don’t work right.*

“Nice... high voices or nice low voices?”

I laughed. “Asking my preferences? People are people, to me. As what they look like *can’t* factor into it for me, who cares what they’re like physically? Oh, sure, if someone was gross it might be a problem, long term. You’re not gross, are you?”

“I don’t think so...”

“Nothing to worry about then. You stood up for me, that’s worth a point at least. You seem nice, that’s another point.” *You have a mysterious magical artifact but are not of my kind, that’s a point too.* “I’d say you were doing fine so far.”

“Woof.”

“Ah, and my dog like you, so that’s a point.”

She laughed. “I like him too! What breed is he, do you know?”

“Oh, he’s a mix,” I hedged. *A mix of whatever kind of animal he wants to be at the time.*

“Eh, aren’t we all?”

*Not really, I’m pure troll as far as I know. As both my parents were trolls. But until I know how you got that artifact, telling you that might make me seem a bit crazy.* “At this point, yeah.”

“Three points, not bad,” she decided. “Hey, do me a favor?”

“Sure?”

“Let me know if I do anything to lose points. I mean, if you’re going through the trouble to keep track, I’d like to know what turns you off just in case. I assume if I lose too many at once you walk away, right?”

“It’s not a basketball game!” I protested. “It’s not really something I keep track of in my head. Apart from that Najam girl getting minus ten points off the bat.”

She giggled. “You know what I mean. Wait, basketball doesn’t use bats. That’s baseball.”

“Huh. She lost yards?”

“That’s football.”

“Basketball is the one they try to put the ball through the hoop, right?”

“That’s right.”

*I guess it’s a sighted person thing.* “Right off the... rim? I don’t think there’s a basketball metaphor I could really use.” *Not that I know much more about the game than there being a ball, and a basket, and the ball goes in the basket, hence the name.*

She considered a moment. “I guess you’re right. Do you actually follow any sports?”

“Football.”

“Really?”

“Once a year, when I get together with my family to watch the superbowl.”

She laughed. “I’m the same. I have two bothers and they’re pretty into it. I just like the commercials. And the tight... rear ends.”

“And you’re... Youngest?” I guessed.

“That’s right, I’m the baby sister. Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“Nope, just me. Some cousins and such though.” *When you live basically forever, you tend not to have too many kids. Otherwise our kind would have already overrun the Earth which, hey not a bad thing but too late now I guess.*

“Wish I was on only child. I love my brothers don’t get me wrong but growing up with two older brothers had its share of challenges.”

“I can’t even imagine. I would have loved a brother or sister.”

“Huh. Grass is greener, huh? Oh, you have no idea what green is, do you?”

“It’s the color of making cars move forward, or so my uber drivers tell me.”

She chuckled. “Right, exactly.”

We walked in silence a moment and Reves pulled towards the side. “Wait a second, I think Reves has to go.” I let his harness go and he bounded off the path into the trees. *Or is he just giving me a bit of alone time with her, that sly dog?*

“You let him go on his own?”

“He’s a big dog, I don’t need to wipe him after. He can do that scooting thing on his own.”

She snorted. “Scooting thing! That’s not what I meant. Aren’t you afraid he’ll see a rabbit or something and just go off chasing it?”

*If he did I pity the rabbit.* “Nah. We’re friends, he knows he’s my eyes, he’ll always come back to me.”

“You really rely on him, huh?”

“I do. It’s scary, being in the dark all the time. He’s the closest I have to eyes.”

“Yeah,” she said softly. “I tried closing my eyes and walking the path, I almost tripped right away!”

“You should have said! I’d have taken your hand if you wanted to walk as I do.”

“Oh! Maybe I will, when he gets back.”

“He won’t be long. Say, speaking of hands...” *Ha, master of the segue, that’s me!* “I felt a neat piece of jewelry on your hand, what is that!”

“A what?” She actually did sound confused for a second, and I felt her lift her hand and look at it through my magic. “Oh, yeah, this! Wild, I actually forgot I had it on, can you believe that? And no one else mentioned it. I expected at least someone to comment, especially as it’s the only thing I have on at the moment!”

*Don’t remind me.*

“It’s actually really cool looking. If you want to feel it, may I take your hand?”

I held it up. “You may.” She put her hand on mine, palm up, and I felt along the edges of it. “Huh. Reminds me of the bones I give to Reves as a treat.” Reves bound up with a woof. “No Reves, I’m not giving you a treat now. Where would I have a treat?” *Is he putting on a little show for her? I think he is!*

“Woff?”

“Exactly. Nowhere. Go finish your business, I’m talking to the lady here!” I finished with a Brooklyn accent.

“Woof woff wuf,” he complained, heading back out.

“How did you know he was there?”

“I said the word... T.r.e.a.t. Of course he heard me and came running!”

She laughed. “Of course. And you’re right. It’s made to resemble a skeleton hand. There are others like it I’ve seen on ebay, but none this fancy. It’s actually gold, real white gold, not just gold plated. Uh, that means nothing to you does it?”

“I know gold stuff is expensive, but not really why.”

“Rarity, more than anything else. I mean it’s just a metal like any other. Anyway, as you can tell it covers all my fingers, and the part on my palm, well, maybe you can feel it. Here.” She took my fingers and flipped her hand over, putting my fingertips at the center. “What do you think?”

I ran my fingers over the disk, and she was right. “Symbols.”

“Exactly. They’re almost like letters, or runes I guess? Can’t find any information about them online. Probably just gibberish but then why go through the trouble? The same sort of thing is on each ‘bone’ on the underside. And on the inside of the bracelet too. Weird, huh?”

*Not really. From what I understand materials have to be prepared to hold the magic, and carving them or modifying them in some way does that. So that checks out. But the fact they’re in the*

*shape of bones? That's freaking me out a little. Was this thing made to kill people? Or was it someone's idea of a joke?* "Pretty weird. Where did you get it? Sounds like a one of a kind item, so I wouldn't be able to get one?"

"I could easily find you something close, but this one is worth, well, a lot. The others I've seen on ebay are just cheap costume stuff. The appraiser I hired thinks this one was custom made. As for where I got it, an estate sale back home. It was just sitting there, I was lucky to see it given how late I got there. But I knew I had to have it, and here we are."

A faint bell was ringing in my head. "Hold on. When I walked up you were talking to Najam, something about a break in?"

"Yeah. We were just chatting, I hadn't met her before that, but I was telling her about this weird break in that happened recently."

"What happened?"

"To be completely honest, I'm still not really sure."

"Okay, now you're not making any sense."

"There's no sense to make. A few days after I sent the hand out to be appraised I came back to my apartment to find the door busted in. The place had been ransacked, and of course I freaked out and called the police. After they went in and made sure whoever had done it was gone, they let me in to look around. Oddly, it seemed nothing had been taken."

*Because there was nothing to find?*

"Of course they asked about cash, or small items like rings, but no, everything was still there. The place I rent from replaced the door locks, then gave me some upgraded ones the next day. The police didn't find anything and I figured maybe whoever was doing this got the wrong place. You know? That's why they didn't take anything. But a few days later I came back and, well, guess."

"The door was smashed down again."

"Bingo. Again, total mess inside. Again, nothing seemed to be missing. The cops all scratched their heads and poked around, but it's not like I had any drugs or anything in the place. But boy oh boy were they suspicious the *third* time it happened!"

"I can bet."

"They actually took me down to the station and started asking me a bunch of questions. Like how much money I kept there, and if something really was missing. And they had dogs combing the place--"

"Woof." I heard Reves say, coming back towards us. I grabbed his harness and we started walking again.

"That's right, Reves. Dogs, though not your kind. They were looking for drugs I guess. They seemed almost disappointed they didn't find anything."

*From what I know of police, mortal police anyway, I'm surprised they didn't bring a few things with them to 'find' after being called there three times. Were they really after the hand?*

"After that it was time to head to the audition. I got the hand back the day before, so I put it on and didn't think anything else of it. Hopefully my place isn't broken into a fourth time while I'm here. I've got my neighbors checking it every day..."

"That's got to be scary. I'm glad you weren't there when they broke in."

"Me too," she replied with a nervous laugh. "I'd be helpless in a fight."

"And you really found nothing missing?"

"Not a thing. I even counted my panties, all accounted for."

"Weird."

"Yeah. No clue why anyone would do such a thing, but if it keeps happening... I don't know what I'm going to do."

"It's a problem all right." *And it doesn't make sense. Anyone after the hand would realize, even through what counts as a threshold on an apartment, it wasn't there. I felt it from hundreds of meters*

away. *It's strong, whatever it is. So why break in? Did they think it was put under another enchantment, to hide it? But they seemed to be desperate for it. So strange.* "I wish there was something I could do."

"Thanks."

"This golden hand though, it's not worth, like, millions of dollars or anything, is it? I mean just what are you walking around with?"

"It's worth about a hundred and twenty thousand dollars, at least in terms of just the raw gold."

I missed a step and stumbled, but Kelly caught me. "And you just *happened* to find it at a garage sale?"

"Estate sale," she sniffed. "Though I suppose there were tools and such in the garage. Thing is, it isn't stamped that's it's gold. They had to do a chemical analysis on it. So no one would have known."

"Stamped?"

"Sure. Rings and such that are gold have a tiny stamp somewhere, pressed into the metal. Shows the purity of the gold. Apart from the weird markings on the inside, no stamp. But they can do various things, I mean just weighing it shows how heavy it is for such a small thing, and determined it's a fairly high purity."

"I see. Will you sell it?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I wish you could see, it really does look good on me. I'd let you try it on, but I don't think you'd get much out of it."

"I wouldn't, it's true. But if someone's looking for it..."

She sighed. "I know. But I could just as easily lock it up in a safety deposit box until they stopped looking. I haven't decided yet. I figured, being here where no one knows me, I was safe enough. It is a lot of money, I could really use it. Who wouldn't? But then again I really like it..."

"I mean you could sell it, and have a copy made that wasn't pure gold from pictures. Wouldn't that be almost the same thing? Lighter too."

"Hey, that's a good point! You're pretty smart, Tayna."

*Oh, really trying to earn points now, are we?* I colored a little and smiled. "I do what I can." *So it could be simply mortals trying to make a quick buck. It was sold, so whoever owned it before didn't know it was magic, and I doubt Kelly here does. But there's no getting it away from her, though I could technically afford to buy it off her if I had to. For that kind of money I could see them coming back again and again looking for it. But how would they have known the value if the original owner didn't? Some kind of scam by the appraiser? No, if she sent it somewhere would it even have arrived by the time the first break in happened? I doubt it. Something odd is going on here, but what can I do about it? It's not really my concern anyway, apart from keeping a potentially dangerous magical item out of ignorant hands...*

"Let's head back. They're opening the restaurant for us while we're here, usually it's only open weekends. My treat!"

"Isn't-" *Aren't our meals paid for as part of our compensation for being here? But I think she's making a joke.* "Well, okay, but you asked for it. You have no idea how many ribs I can eat at one time."

"Woof."

Kelly laughed. "I'm sure they can find something for you too, Reves. Huh, your dog really seems smart it's like he's totally following our conversation. His tail is wagging a mile a minute so he knows the word ribs I guess!"

"Imagine that," I said with a laugh. "A talking dog!" I dropped his harness and grabbed Kelly's arm. "You're my seeing eye dog now, so deal with it!"

"Woof!" she told me, and we both laughed as Reves just shook his head.

## Chapter 4

I have a nice evening with Kelly

Where: Restaurant

When: After the nature walk

“Can I get a very rare hamburger?” I asked the person that was waiting on us.

“Rare like gold or rare like platinum?” they asked.

“Platinum!”

“That’s pretty rare,” they replied with a laugh. “You got it. What sort of side? We have fries, vegetables-”

*What about a side of a ham sandwich?* I held up a hand. “Fries is fine.”

“Very good.”

“And can I get a few, minus the bun, for my dog? Reves, you want a hamburger?”

“Woof! Woof! Woof!”

“He wants three of them.”

“Huh. I guess he does, judging from that answer. Okay pup, you got it. Three rare patties, no bun, definitely no onion, coming right up.”

“Thanks!”

“Sure thing.”

They turned to go, having already taken Kelly’s order, and I turned back towards her.

“Okay, that’s got to be coincidence,” she told me. “Or you taught him to do that, gave him a hand signal or something.”

“Nope. Just treat him like you would a person, a very quiet, short, hairy, smelly-”

“Woof!”

“What, you are because you don’t want me to bathe you and you roll in stuff,” I told him. “As I was saying. Smelly person and you’ll get along fine.”

“He can’t be all that smart, even with his training he can’t understand me. Can he? Can you?”

There was a pause. “He’s looking at me.”

“He wants you to decide for yourself.”

“What, is he some sort of atheist?”

“You mean an agnostic?”

“Uh, I guess?”

“Hey Reves, do all dogs go to Heaven?”

“Woof!”

“He says yes, so I guess not.”

“Wait that could easily have been a no!”

“No, no, a no answer is totally different. Reves, give her a no answer for comparison.”

“Woff.”

“Don’t say no to me, just give her a no answer so she can learn the difference.”

“Woff.”

“What? After I got you those hamburgers you’re not going to give her a no answer? And that nature walk today, we didn’t have to do that, did we?”

“Woff.”

“That’s right. So you better... ooooooh.”

“He’s looking at you like you’re insane. How does he do that? He’s just a dog.”

“Woff.”

“Wait, that a no, right? Okay, you’re both playing me somehow. It’s got to be hand signals or something, stop teasing me or I go sit with Najam again!”

“Where is Najam anyway?” I asked, fighting a grin.

“Sitting by herself, actually,” she reported, having paused probably to look around the room. “She didn’t win any friends back at the pool I guess.”

“Where is she, exactly?”

“Oh, uh, how to explain? I can never do that clock thing people do. You know, bogies at three o’clock. I would always think, and ruin tea time?”

I shook my head and held out a finger.

“What? You don’t want me to pull it or something, do you?”

“No, silly! Point me in her direction!”

“I don’t see why,” she muttered but did it. I stood up and waved. “Hey Najam!” I yelled, stunning the rest of the restaurant into silence.

“What are you doing?” Kelly hissed.

“Is she looking at me?”

“Everyone is looking at you, Tayna. Are you trying to kill me with embarrassment?”

“Eh, you’ll be fine. Najam, come over here, I want to talk to you!”

“She’s shaking her- no, she’s getting up. She’s coming over. Here she comes.”

“What?” Najam asked, nearing me. My magic told me she was and I turned towards her.

“I just wanted to say no hard feelings from before,” I told her. “I get it. My line of work isn’t what I would have chosen. It’s hard, demanding, and yes a little dangerous. But there’s a demand and it’s not like I’m selling myself on the street. Despite what you may think, I’m still an actress. Come and sit with us. I’m not some kind of monster,” *whew boy that’s a whopper of a lie if I ever told one but not in that way*, “and I’m sure the director’s assistants are watching you sitting alone. We’re supposed to get along. Sit and eat with us.” I stuck out my hand. “Maybe you’ll find I’m just a normal person like you after all.”

She made a “humph” sound. “If I’m passed over because I don’t want to sit and eat with the rest of you porn actors, then this stupid movie isn’t worth being in anyway.” She turned on her heel (I assumed) and stalked off. My eyes were wide behind my sunglasses, as you didn’t need to see to have emotions, and I slowly lowered my hand. Conversations started up again quietly as I slowly sank back into my chair. “That did *not* go as planned.”

“I should say not. Tayna, what... what was that?”

“What? It’s called an olive branch, right?”

“Yeah I guess, but, wow, I would not have done that. I would not have even thought to do that, not in a million years!”

*No, it doesn’t take a million years. Eighty years? Maybe. When you’ve seen humans you grew up with age and die while you’re still in your prime, it lends an interesting perspective to things. Carrying around anger like that, hatred for me and the people here just because of our job, I mean what good does that do her? But she’s going to cling to it like she would be swept over a waterfall otherwise. I tried, but odds are she’s not getting a part in this movie.* “Do you think I was wrong to offer?”

“Oh no! I didn’t mean it that way. You’re incredible, offering to let her sit with us like that? After what she said to you? What, are you some kind of saint?”

I checked above my head. “Nope, no halo so I guess not.” *Just a troll who was trying to be nice to someone and maybe try to get her to see things from my point of view. No hope of that now, I expect.*

“Don’t be so sure. You’re pretty gutsy, to shout across this place like that.”

“Well, I didn’t know how far away she was.” *My magic can’t really pick out people, just that there is a person there. And past a few meters, as more and more things get into my “vision zone” it becomes harder to keep track of them. Maybe a good enough casting could have told me where she was, specifically, but then not where anything else was.* “But guts? Oh sure, those I have.”

“Uh, why are you squeezing your breasts?”

“Isn’t that were guts are? My science teacher had a little trouble explaining what goes where inside the body. Are they here?” I flexed my arm and pointed to it.

“That’s guns.”

“Guts!” I pointed to my head.

“That’s braaaainssss.”

“Huh!” I waved it off. “Well, I’ll look it up later, they’re around somewhere.”

She laughed. “You’re a weirdo.”

“And you’re still sitting here.”

“Yeah,” she said softly. “I guess I am.”

We finished dinner, the place actually provided some large “bibs” as honestly, nudism is great but *maybe* not so much when you’re trying to eat. Though I had been involved in Nyotaimori, or eating sushi off an attractive (supposedly) young naked woman once. But that was a special case. (I wasn’t the naked one, I had to leave Japan before I could offer my “services” to see what it would be like. But I digress) After that we both waited an hour, talking and such while laying out in the setting sun, and then I finally convinced Kelly to join me in the pool and actually finish my earlier swim. It wasn’t very crowded at that point, but we were greeted warmly by the people there and spoke to them as well. It wasn’t until I walked with her back to our tents as the sun was nearly set (not that I cared but she did) that I realized something was wrong.

“What spot are you staying in?” she asked.

I told her. “Why? What’s wrong?” *My magic tells me the tent and all my possessions are still there, so there should be no problem.*

“I was afraid of that. Your tent fell down.”

“Fell down?!”

“Yeah, it’s collapsed.”

“You just want me to spend the night in your tent! You could just ask, you know.”

“No, no, I mean, yes, God yes that would be-” she cleared her throat. “No, it really is. Feel it, go ahead!”

I crept closer, hands out, expecting to find the tent where I had left it as after all, how many young men does it take to successfully put up a tent such that it doesn’t fall over? I kept going. Finally I was above where my magic told me the tent should be, and I knelt down. There it was! My stuff was there, focusing on it my magic told me everything that was in the bag, so it wasn’t like someone stole it and carried my bag off. But the tent had fallen down. “I guess you’re right.”

“Why in the world do you think that happened?” Her voice came from around the side, she must have been walking around it.

“Oh.”

“What? You know something?”

“I can guess something. See, when all those people came over to help put it up I, uh, well I was undressing at the same time. I had just arrived, you see. And it wasn’t fair I was still wearing clothes.”

“And that distracted them enough that they did a terrible job and now it’s all fallen over.”

“Seems that way.”

“Is there enough light to get it put back up?”

“...”

“Kelly?”

“Hmm? Oh, light! Right! Uh...” She seemed to be looking around maybe? “No, I guess not. Hard to tell where things would go in this light, yes. I mean flashlights exist, you know about them right?”

“I’ve never owned one, if that’s what you mean.”

“No, right, why would you?” A nervous giggle. “Not sure where I would find one of course. But it’s pretty dark now, yup. Maybe you should come with me, I mean just for tonight!”

“I’ll take you up on that!”

“You will? I mean, oh, you will? That’s great, fine! Super. Fantastic.”

I laughed. “I get it! Let me grab my stuff, I need to blow dry my hair, hopefully someone can direct me to a wall socket in the bathroom. Because you don’t want me sleeping with wet hair, believe me. And I should brush my teeth and everything...”

“I can imagine the mess it would be in the morning if you did. Okay, I can show, uh, Reves where it is so he can take you back there when you’re done.”

“No need, just tell me the number. He’ll find it.”

“He’ll find it?”

“Yup.”

“You’re serious?”

“He found me this site.”

“Did you?”

“Woof.”

“I guess he did. Okay, that’s the smartest dog I’ve ever heard of. Cool.” She sounded only a little suspicious but told me the number and I nodded.

“See you in a bit!”

“Yeah... or will you?”

“Wow, never heard that one before!”

“Was that insensitive of me? It just slipped out, I’m sorry, it’s just you’re so confident I can’t even believe you’re blind...”

*Well, the magic helps in that respect a ton. Maybe I should drop the spell for tomorrow... nah, she’s expecting me to get around well at this point.* “Thanks. It’s okay, really. I’ve had plenty of time to get used to it, and it’s part of who I am. Don’t take it too far, of course, but you haven’t lost any points.”

“That’s a relief. I hope I’ve gained some today though.”

I gave her what I hoped was a mysterious smile. “Maybe.”

“I’ll take your maybe as an affirmative. See you shortly.”

She walked off and I dug a few things out of my suitcase. “Looking” around I realized this was the best time and focused my will on Reves. “Talk to me,” I told him, releasing my magic. This was a mind spell, one I had used many times before. Reves was smart, not as smart as a person of course, but he could understand speech even if he couldn’t answer me back. And as nature magic only worked on actual animals, like you would find in a forest, it didn’t work on him to let him speak like I could with a bird or a chipmunk if I wanted. So this was the next best thing, a spell to allow him to send his thoughts to me. “How are you doing, you okay here?”

*Those burgers were good before, he told me mentally. Should have asked for four, they were smaller than I expected.*

“Glad you approved, I’ll get you a big breakfast tomorrow to make up for it. You’re good otherwise?”

*Sure. Odd to see you all without your coverings.*

“I suppose it would be weird for me too, but...” I indicated my eyes. “Let’s talk about the reason we’re talking; Kelly, what are your thoughts there?”

*Hummm... He hesitated. She smells nice.*

“That’s it?”

*She scratched my ears by the water.*

“So you don’t feel anything strange or off about her?”

*Do you?*

“No, that’s why I’m asking. You have an animal intuition I lack, and you picked up on the magic before I did. Was she telling the truth, is the thing on her hand bones?”

*It’s bones. Tiny. Don’t smell good to eat, not like the treats. Did you bring any treats?*

“Okay, at least she’s not trying to hide it. You didn’t notice her acting strangely, or using it in any way?”

*Nope. She seems normal, not like us. Didn’t seem to look at the bones at all.*

*Interesting, and she did say she forgot she had it on. Some kind of protection magic?* “Maybe she really did just find it. But who lets a powerful magic artifact out of their sight in the first place?”

*Could be old? I forgot where I buried a bone once.*

“It’s possible. Well, keep an eye on her for me.”

*Of course.*

“Do you need anything? You didn’t get any ticks on you in the woods, did you?”

*Don’t think so. I’m thirsty.*

“Shoot, sorry about that, I have your water bowl here I should have gotten it out right away.” I dug back into my suitcase for it.

*It’s okay. I would have gone and gotten some on my own tonight if you didn’t remember. You like this one I guess? You don’t forget usually.*

“She’s okay. We had a good time today, I think. I’m glad the hand made me want to learn more about her. I hope we stick together.”

*That’s fine then. Just don’t forget again.*

“Yes sir! Come on, let’s go get me dry and get you some water.” I broke the spell off and grabbed everything I would need.

We headed to the bathrooms, where I left Reves drinking outside and headed in to take care of things. Kelly passed through of course, as did many other women, and finally my hair was dry. I packed everything up and headed back, putting my stuff away and grabbing my sleeping bag and a small pillow. Reves walked me down the rows of tents, checking the numbers on the posts until we found Kelly again. *Wait, why didn’t she just wait for me, if she was going to be here anyway? She could have walked me back.*

“There you are!” she said, sounding pleased, and possibly nervous? “Wow, I seriously thought I might have to come find you but no, he really led you here. Reves, you’re amazing.”

*Huh, maybe she was nervous and wanted to get ready mentally for my coming to sleep in her tent tonight. Or maybe she wanted to see if I could really get here on my own?*

“Come on in, may I take your hand? Uh, is Reves coming in or... Don’t get me wrong pup you’re great and everything but it’s a pretty small tent.”

*Smaller than you think, as Reves is a bigger dog usually then the breed he emulates. Once he went to sleep suddenly we would have a huge black dog in our midst, and that might just freak you out. Let’s avoid that, shall we?* “He can sleep out here, and yes, you can but give me a second to get all this off him.” I dropped Reves’ harness and unhooked everything so he didn’t have to sleep with the harness on. I held my hand out and Kelly took it, guiding me through the opening in the tent. Reves was spinning in a circle no doubt about to lay down and she started zipping the opening up.

“He’ll really just stay there the whole night?”

“Sure will!”

“Okay, I guess it’s you who are out a dog if you’re wrong.”

“It’ll be fine, don’t worry about him.”

“Sure.” She finished zipping the door closed.

“Nice place you have here!” I told her, pretending to look around and taking off my glasses. *It must be dark in here, she won’t be made uncomfortable about my eyes.*

She snorted. "Thanks! Let me give you a tour. Uh, there's a window to your right and left, and I put my stuff over in the corner. That concludes the tour."

"I'm sold, where do I sign?"

We both laughed. "So, uh, set your sleeping bag down anywhere. I mean, there's really only one place and it's right next to mine so..."

I felt my trollish nature start to get the better of me but couldn't help myself from blurting out "We could sleep Japanese style if you don't mind us maybe waking up tangled together."

"I don't actually know what that means so that we would?"

"Oh, I mean I put my unzipped sleeping bag on top of yours to make a sort of futon, so it's a little softer for us. Then we just both lay side by side. It's too warm to be zipped up in a bag anyway."

"We could do that."

"It's just a suggestion, we don't have to," I quickly told her. "There's something about me you should know, I'm kind of forward when it comes to stuff like this. I don't want to make you uncomfortable or anything--"

She put a finger over my mouth. "It's fine, you just surprised me a little. It's a good idea, and I don't mind. If you were going to ravish me in the night one little zipper wouldn't hold you back would it?"

*She sounds equal parts joking and hopeful. Some trolls no doubt would, in fact most trolls would probably be just grabbing her up right now but I actually think I might like to take this one a little slower. She seems fairly genuine, and I did have a good time with her today. I think, after nearly 80 years, I can control myself for a while if there's the possibility of having her on a regular basis instead of just having a one night stand with her tonight. But she did leave it open so maybe she's just feeling me out? One way to find out.* "It would not! But I would only do any ravishing if you consented to that."

"Oh. Well. Um. Right. For the record I am not, currently, consenting to that. I mean if we happen to wake up tangled up like you said it's fine but with how close these tents are maybe we should save any nights of wild abandon for when we have actual walls? And maybe getting to know each other a little better. I don't normally jump into bed with people I just met."

"You should! It can be super fun, wild abandon I mean, uh, that is to say if that's what's on the table..."

"No, I get it. I mean we're both in the industry, so I guess what I mean is, when not in a professional setting--"

"I get what you mean," I told her. *When she walks onto a set, just like me, it's probably some stranger she's going to be all over. But this is her personal life, so naturally she wants to make sure it's not like work, where we spend one night together and I'm gone in the morning.* "So I will not pin you down and have my way with you tonight. Cross my heart." I made an X over my heart, not a cross, because trolls didn't go for that sort of thing. *Crosses. Ugh.* I shuddered.

"Good to know where things stand," she said. "But when I'm ready, there will be much pinning down and having ways with on both sides. Oh God I can't believe I just said that!"

"No take backs! Now get your sleeping bag unzipped so we can do this!"

We got settled, Kelly helping braid my hair and tie it at the bottom so I didn't strangle myself or her with it in the night and lay down, both on our backs.

"Can I hold your hand though?" she asked.

"I don't know, I get one of your hands and I might not be able to hold myself back."

"Good thing I didn't ask for a good night kiss then!"

"Wait is a good night kiss on the table?" I rolled to one side hopefully.

"Oh no, I think if I kissed you, I wouldn't be able to hold *myself* back," she replied playfully.

"Best not to risk it then," I agreed with a heavy sigh. "But I think the hand is safe enough." I felt her take mine.

“Hey Tayna?”

“Humm?”

“I have a confession to make.”

“Oh no, you’re a robot from the future!” I moaned. “This always happens to me! I can’t believe you didn’t tell me before!”

“Close. I’m actually a robot from the present,” she admitted. “I escaped a top secret lab two months ago and the government is currently on my trail. It may be dangerous to be around me, if they ever catch up to me, so I thought you should know right away.”

“Wait, really?”

“No,” she snorted. “Not really. No, my confession is I lied before.”

*She’s good at improv I guess. I was totally buying that because I’m a magical troll so what do I know about secret robot programs from the US government? If I can happen, that could happen.*

“Before what?”

“Before, when I said I didn’t know you as Venus. I did, I recognized you right away. Then Najam did and had to telling everyone, but at least I still managed to get you all to myself this afternoon.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I just felt you should know, that’s all. I didn’t want you to find out later and be like, no way, you knew who I was and you have all my stuff even the obscure German entries-”

“Wait do you have my obscure German work? And it’s not that obscure I’m sure half of Germany has seen my work in Germany.”

“Uh, do I have to answer?”

“Wow, you actually do?” I sat up.

She squeezed my hand and I didn’t let go. “I may have spent some time tracking down all of your work once I saw you the first time. Should I have told you right away? I should have, shouldn’t I? I’ve ruined it haven’t I?”

I laughed and squeezed her hand back. “You haven’t ruined anything Kelly. So you really like my work?”

“Yeah, I’m actually a huge fan. Of course I had no idea what you were like in real life, you could be a total jerk for all I knew. But then I actually got the chance to talk to you, and you seemed super chill, and we hung out, and I had such a great time today and here you are in my tent-”

“Whoa, slow down there cowgirl. Or is fangirl more appropriate? Anyway, it’s fine. It doesn’t change anything. You didn’t lie, you just tried to get to know me without fangirling all over me. And it worked.” *Like I’m not telling you I’m a literal magical troll and my dog isn’t exactly a dog and I see with magic and I’ll outlive you by a million years if I’m careful and so much more. I can’t begrudge her this little omission when there are so many on my side it’s not funny. I get upset with her over this, and the blow up if she ever learned I kept all that from her will be a magnitude greater.* “You didn’t gush over me, and ask me to sign your chest-”

“Has that happened?”

“Not as many times as I would have liked, honestly.”

“I see.”

“We just talked, and walked, and enjoyed each other’s company. So you knew of me before. Like you said, you knew Venus Flytrap, my character. But you got to know Tanya Vivante. How can I get mad at that?”

“You mean it?”

“I mean it.”

“Oh.” She was quiet for a bit. “Thanks.” More silence. “I really like Tanya the person. You’re funny, and caring, like the way you tried to get Najam on your side. And you treat Reves well,”

*Yeah, he would bite my leg off, literally, if I didn't. But he's a good friend too, so he would give me the chance to explain if I didn't at this point. We all have off days.*

She continued. "And the way you devoured that hamburger!"

"The... I'm sorry what?"

"You just tore into it like an animal! If you're that passionate about just a quarter pounder, what's being in bed with you like? I mean we're in bed together, I mean the other, you know what I mean!"

"Oh I do," I told her seductively. "Let's just say you would need more than one cigarette afterwards."

We both laughed.

"I can't wait!"

*So why wait? Give me the word, I perhaps wisely didn't say. We were sharing a moment here. "You're gonna have to, unless you're going back on what you said earlier."*

"No, best not to right now. But..." She scooted herself over and turned to face me. I could feel parts of her touching me, and she threw an arm around me. "I think this would be okay?"

"It's okay with me." I put an arm around her.

"Then it's good enough for now. Thanks for being so understanding. I'm going to close my eyes now, looking at your face makes me think of all the naughty things we could be doing and oh my goodness your skin is soft!"

I laughed again. "Go to sleep Kelly. Plenty of time to explore my skin when you're ready."

"Right. Sleep. If I even can. Good night."

"Sweet dreams."

I let my magic go, the darkness I now saw no longer augmented by it telling me what was around. All I had left was her arm around me, the feel of the sleeping bag under me, and the heat of her body next to mine. I knew what she was saying, my heart was beating rather fast, but I tried to relax despite all that. Tomorrow would no doubt be an important day, if the casting director wanted me to do my audition, so I figured I should get some sleep. I felt Kelly move a little closer to me and smiled, this could be someone who finally got my mother off my back. *As long as she's not hiding something sinister, like that hand steals life force and she's actually a 10,000 year old witch and I'm her latest victim.* I could use my magic to tell me more about her, but given how she sort of freaked out about how I would react to just not telling me right away she knew who I was I figured she was safe. *I have to have a little faith. She seems not the type to be an evil mastermind, so I'll trust for now she picked up the hand innocently enough and has no idea what it can do. The trouble is, how do I figure out what it does so I can make sure it's not dangerous, able to be triggered with a careless word that gets someone hurt? That's going to be the real trick...*

## Chapter 5

I prove myself and take on a new job

Where: The campground

When: August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021 10:18 AM

“Look sharp,” Kelly whispered to me. “I think that’s the casting director. And he’s got a couple of guys with him.”

It was about midway to lunch, Kelly and I had been hanging out through and after breakfast. We had simply taken my tent down and moved my stuff into hers, given I had been a perfect lady the night before. She said she trusted me after this, and that I may as well just stay with her. I was fine with it, for obvious reasons, and helped clean up my site. I hadn’t done any ravishing at all that night, though I hadn’t exactly gotten straight up after waking as we were, predictably, somewhat tangled together. I had to wonder if she wasn’t also feigning sleep, she seemed to be holding me a little more tightly than maybe a sleeping person would? I used my magic to first send a mental message to Reves to turn back into his “public face” and then reestablish my awareness. All too soon she stirred, “waking” and stretching, so I had to go along with it. We headed to the bathroom to take care of things, got some breakfast, and wondered what we should do now. They had tennis courts and equipment out for those that wanted to play, but that wasn’t really an option without giving myself away. Kind of hard to play tennis with a seeing eye dog. I wanted to go for a run, and she grudgingly agreed, saying I must do something to maintain those looks of mine. I kept my speed down (or more like Reves did, he was certainly faster than I was) and she kept up pretty well, saying pilates was more her thing. With my daily workout at least somewhat satisfied we looked around for something else to do. We goofed around trying to shoot some baskets on the court, my magic could tell me roughly where the hoop was so I amazed her by sinking maybe twenty percent of my shots. After that we just sort of wandered around, holding hands as she tried describing all the various tents and motor-homes that were around. Reves kept pace next to me, when I was holding her hand I didn’t need his help, which was probably fine with him.

“A couple of guys with machine guns?” I asked nervously. “Was the robot thing true after all?”

She laughed. “What? No, just some hunky looking naked guys.”

“Hello ladies!” called the person, who I was pretty sure I recognized as John, the casting director. “Can I steal the lovely Tayna away from you for a moment?”

“I guess I can give her up,” she sighed. “But each moment will be an agony without her!”

He laughed at that. “Come and watch then, you can do your audition right after.”

“That’s right,” she snapped her fingers. “I knew we were here for some reason. What’s with the hunks?”

“Sorry, what was your name again?”

“I’m Kelly.”

“Ah yes, thank you. Kelly, Tayna, may I introduce John, Harald, and Damian? Guys, this is Kelly and Tayna.”

*Another John? Very well, you are now J2.*

We greeted each other.

“They’re going to help me. You’ll have to forgive me, if I don’t exactly believe what your agent told me you could do, Tayna. These three are going to help me demonstrate your abilities. They’ve all professed at least some skill that can be useful.”

“No,” I assured him. “Checking me out is fine.” I stuck my chest out and stretched my arms high above my head, standing on my toes.

“Oh, he is,” Kelly muttered, and I barked a laugh.

“You didn’t have to tell her!” J1 said, sounding embarrassed.

“No?” she asked thoughtfully. “That’s weird, why did I think I did?”

“Anyway, if you’ll come with me, there’s a nice open space we can use not far from here.”

“Be glad to.”

“Great. Right this way please.”

We followed him, Kelly leaning close to me. “What’s he talking about anyway?” she asked me quietly. “And why does he need three guys just to see if you know your way around a man?”

“I don’t think it’s that,” I told her.

“Indeed not. I’m confident in her in that respect,” J1 told us. “I’ve seen her work.”

“Find me someone here who hasn’t,” she muttered.

“Yes, quite. No, it’s something else I’m after. If she’s going to be playing Sheen, well, you’ll see.”

“I get it,” I told him again. “Kelly, just sit tight and watch the master at work. This might be fun.”

“They look doubtful,” she told me.

“Yeah, are you really blind? I’m Damian by the way.”

“I’m Harald, we should have introduced ourselves if you are blind, so you can tell us by our voices.”

“I guess that leaves me with John.”

“What’s wrong with John?” J1 asked.

“Nothing but the fact there are at least three to be found anywhere you go, guaranteed. The third one is around here somewhere, mark my words.”

“Nice to meet you all. I’ll try to go easy on you, okay? Don’t worry so much.”

“Easy?” Harald repeated. “On us? Okay...”

“I guess if she’s confident,” Damian said.

“Here we are,” J1 told us.

My magic told me there wasn’t anything around, and I nodded. “Very well. Stay, Reeves. Kelly, stay with him?”

“What are you going to do?” she asked as I slipped my hand out of hers. I removed my sunglasses and handed them to her.

“Keep these safe for me? Prove myself, I guess.” I kept going, and J1 stopped by Kelly as the three continued with me. I moved only a few strides away and stopped, turning towards them.

“Prove yourself? Tayna, what’s going on?” She sounded concerned, but I just smiled.

“It’s fine, really. Well boys, how do you want to do this?” I started stretching a bit, limbering up. *I guess I’ll hold back a bunch, unless these three are true professionals and I doubt they are. I don’t want them to look too bad, or hurt them by accident. I’m at a handicap anyway, what with it being daytime and having a spell going. That should even it out a little, but if I showed my true skill it would be over before they could even blink.*

“Uh, I guess we’ll just try to grab you?” said J2.

“But you have experience?” I asked, tilting my head. *I need to know if I can throw them and they won’t just break, but know how to roll out of it.* “With this sort of thing, I mean.”

“In collage,” Damian admitted. “Not since then.”

“I’m not a master or anything,” admitted J2. “I do mostly stunt work honestly.”

“I only stopped my classes a few years ago, I’ll be totally rusty,” finished Harald.

*So nothing fancy then. That’s fine.* I laughed, and then told a huge, huge lie. Like that ex-president guy we had. “Believe me, my master gets after me for not training enough myself.” *The truth is he says I’ve surpassed him long ago.* “But I go at least once a week so here’s the rules. I’m going to hold back, so you take a hit you back off, okay? This is unscripted, during filming I assume I would work with a choreographer and we would practice a routine to make it look real?”

“That’s correct,” J1 told me.

“So this is just to make sure I don’t flail around like that frog. What’s his name?”

“Kermit? Kermit the frog?” J2 asked.

“That’s the one. At least I assume this is what you’re looking for, John One?”

“Close enough.”

“So I lose if you can pin me down or get a solid hit in, I win if I get a hit on all three of you. Deal?”

They indicated it was a deal.

“Wait, I think I know what’s going to happen,” Kelly said. “You sure you’ll be all right?”

“Oh, believe me,” I told her, dropping into a martial arts stance. “These guys aren’t going to know what’s hit them.” I motioned them forward with one hand. I felt them start to surround me, so they at least knew that much, to try and not get in each other’s way. I lost track of who was who, but whoever was in front of me went to grab me, and was either more skilled than they let on or I just misjudged because he totally got me on the arm.

*Great, not a good showing right off the bat, is it? There’s that baseball metaphor again.*

The guy to my left went to grab me on the left arm, so I used his momentum against him, grabbing his arm up and shoving him into the first guy. They didn’t collide, the first guy let go of me and hopped back, but the guy that had just reached for me went sprawling.

“Oh, good job!” Kelly shouted.

Now the guy at my right went to grab me, and he also managed it, clamping around my right arm. So I slugged him with my left, palm open because like I said I didn’t want to seriously injure him. (And yes, I was really strong and skilled enough to do more than bruise him. I wasn’t a male of my species, I wasn’t going to punch through this chest or anything, but I could mess him up with just a punch.)

Whack!

He stumbled back, the air in his lungs whooshing out, and backed off, following the rules of the game.

“You got him!” Kelly called, sounding more impressed now.

“I see how it is,” said the first one that attacked me. I sensed he was about to throw a punch, and threw up my arm to block it. I retaliated with a punch of my own with my other hand, but he dodged back.

“Grab her already!” said the one I had sprawled out, sounding like he had gotten up again.

“I’m trying!” he snarled back.

*Aw, are the three big, strong, men having trouble with little old me?*

I knew where he was, he had just opened his big mouth even without my magic to tell me, and so I tried slamming him with my palm as well. I hit only air.

“Ah ha! Missed me!”

As it seemed like I was attacking him I figured the other wouldn’t have his guard up, so I snapped a kick out at him.

“Woah!” he cried, barely avoiding my foot. I swear I felt my foot just graze him, but it wasn’t a solid hit so I allowed it. *They’re good at dodging if nothing else, I guess.*

It seemed the other was trying to use my strategy against me, stepping to the side away from his buddy to try and hit me from a direction I wasn’t expecting. I knew he had moved though, and switched legs, leaning away from him as he threw a punch at me. This one connected, staggering him back, and he too backed off.

*One on one now.*

“Well, crap,” said the remaining one. He dropped back, so I put my guard back up and waited for him to make his move. He went quiet, probably trying to mask where he was, and started circling around me. I turned my head, pretending to be trying to hear him.

“You giving up?” I called to him.

Silence.

He suddenly lunged forward, probably trying to tackle me around the middle. I slid my foot back as he sprang forward, locking myself in place and taking the hit. He got his arms around me but bounced back a little as I didn't go down like he expected.

"Oh crap," he managed as I brought my hands together and smacked him on the back. I hit something harder than I expected, it seemed I had managed to bonk his head, and he lost his grip on me and faceplanted into the grass.

"Woohoo!" Kelly yelled, "and that makes three! Ding Ding Ding, we have a winner!" She ran over and held my hand up.

"What are you doing?"

"This is what you do when you win a fight."

"I'll take your word for it. Everyone all right?"

"Were you really holding back?" Damian said. "You really nailed me!"

"Poor baby," I mocked. "You got hit by a girl." *Who happens to be a troll. But I wasn't seriously trying to kill you, either.* "You want me to kiss it and make it better?"

"That might actually help!" he said, sounding like he was brightening up.

"Oh, come here." I went over to him and grabbed him up, planting a kiss on his lips.

"Hey!" Kelly said.

I lingered a moment, feeling his body against mine but reluctantly broke it off.

"Wowza! Hit me baby, one more time!"

I snorted and turned to Kelly. "I offered last night, you turned me down."

"Yeah, but..."

"Hey, I'm hurt too," said J2.

"Dying!" croaked Harald.

"You are a bunch of babies." I thoroughly kissed J2, then hauled Harald up to his feet and kissed him as well for good measure.

"Er, we have to go now," Damian told us.

"Yes, we have, we need, it's best if, bye!" said J2. I felt them receding.

"See you later I... Oh, right," J1 agreed. "Yes, best if you don't hang around."

*Oh, did something naughty just happen?*

"You want to have dinner some time?" Harald asked.

"Depends on how mad Kelly is with me," I told him honestly.

"Oh, you'll be making it up to me tonight," she told me icily.

"Sounds like a win-win for me," I told her with a big grin. "So did I pass or what?"

"You can go," J1 told Harald, who quickly thanked him and left the scene. "I admit I'm pretty impressed. You would be able to handle the action scenes, wouldn't you?"

"Sure, I can do my own stunts and such. As long as I get a good feel for what you want."

"Hummm, there may be some driving scenes, like on a golf cart type of vehicle, but a pro driver would probably take care of that anyway. Yeah, I've seen enough. You've got the part."

"Congratulations!" Kelly told me.

"Thanks!"

"You can come sign the contracts later. Kelly, you want to show me what you've got? Do you have anything prepared for me?"

"I'm not fighting her!"

He laughed. "No, no, acting. Monologs and such."

"Say do you know the one about the dead parrot?" I asked her. "We could do that one."

"Oh yeah, maybe I remember that. I wish to register a complaint!"

Some time later John was satisfied with Kelly's performance, we had a blast doing the parrot skit, and he went away promising she was at least in, her part to be discussed later. We did our share of girlish squealing once he was out of earshot, both excited to be a part of the upcoming movie.

"Now, you have to tell me how you did that!" Kelly told me. "Because again, you don't seem that blind to me."

"You've heard of ninjas?"

"Sure, but what does that have to do with you?"

"Ninjas worked in the dark most of the time. They were assassins. So they trained to fight that way, too."

"Again, what does that have to do with you?"

"Just that if you look hard enough, you can still find people," *and by people of course I mean non-humans that were actually around at that time!* "who can train you in those arts. What did Obi-Wan say? Don't believe your eyes, they'll deceive you?"

"You know Star Trek?"

*I watched it when it originally came out in theaters.* "Star Wars you mean. Sure. It's the same principal here. They train to fight in the dark, or blind? Well, I can only train to fight blind."

"I suppose you could have heard them. And you reacted mostly, punching them when they spoke so you knew where they were, or after they grabbed you."

"Exactly." *And it's not magic at all, no sir. Just skill.* "Honestly my teacher says I surpassed him long ago, but I think he's just being nice to me." *Of course I regularly win our sparring sessions so there must be some truth to it.*

"Still, you can move a lot better than I can. You took on three people at once!"

"I guess," I answered modestly. *Watch me fight after sundown so I'm not dragged down by the daytime. I would have been better.*

"And we're both in the movie, that will start shooting in a few weeks, right?"

"Yeah, what's your point?"

"How about I hire you as my bodyguard?"

"What?"

"Yeah. I'm sort of scared to go back to my apartment. But if you come live with me, I would feel a lot better. You can come back with me, and then head to wherever the filming will be with me too. What do you say?"

"So if those goons who keep showing up to trash your place come when we're there, I can take care of them?"

"Exactly. Protect me, you've got the skills."

"And I suppose I would have to sleep in your bed, you know, to be near you in case something happened."

"You should be nearby, yes," she managed. "Catching them rather than driving them off would be ideal, so we can figure what exactly they're doing. Couch would be way too far away, clearly. They need to get into the apartment and not have an easy time getting out. Could you do that, catch them I mean?"

"Clearly. You really wouldn't mind me hanging around your place? Filming starts in a couple of weeks as I understand it. I could be a total slob for all you know, you would have to put up with me that whole time.."

"Better to find out now, then. I mean, uh, if it's only for a few weeks it's fine? Besides I doubt someone who can't see is a slob, you need to know where things are, you can't leave a mess to trip over later."

*She's right about that much at least.*

"And if I decide about the hand, maybe the attacks will stop anyway if I just sell it."

"If that's what they're looking for."

“What else? Why take nothing but break in three times?”

I shook my head. I had to admit there was no other reasonable explanation. “Can’t say. It is suspicious.”

“At least think about it, okay?” She grabbed my hand again. “You’re amazing, I had no idea you knew martial arts like that. What else don’t I know about you? Probably a lot. I want to get to know you.”

“Well,” I hedged. *She sounds sincere, I have to give her that much.* “I have Reves with me already. I don’t really have any plants to take care of, they’re sort of a visual thing so they don’t do anything for me. So there’s no reason I couldn’t go with you instead of going home until shooting starts.” *I turned my water off and such, and I can call a friend to take care of the mail. The lawn will get mowed, I have someone doing that for me anyway. What am I missing...*

“You mean it?”

“Obviously you’ll have to provide my meals, how similar are we in size? I only have two changes of clothes with me.”

“You couldn’t tell when we woke up this morning?”

I could, of course. We weren’t that dissimilar, though her bras wouldn’t fit me. That was fine, I hardly wore one anyway. “So probably I could wear some of your stuff, if you don’t mind. Plus whatever salary we agreed on.”

“Of course.”

“And I would want to give you some self defense lessons, just in case.”

“Sure, that’s fine.”

“I guess you’ve got yourself a bodyguard.”

“You mean it?” she asked, hopeful.

“I’m not teasing you.”

“Oh thank you, thank you!” she cried, throwing her arms around me. “I feel so much better about going back now. You have no idea. Thank you so much!”

*A blind troll actress bodyguard. What will they think of next?*

## Chapter 6

I help clean up the apartment and meet someone with answers

Where: Kelly's apartment in California

When: August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021 5:54 PM

We stood in front of the apartment door, that had, perhaps predictably, been smashed open again. Her apartment was on the third floor, and there was police tape blocking it off.

"You know, I would scream into a pillow," Kelly said, setting her suitcase down. "But I can't get into my apartment to get a pillow!"

"Oh, hey, you're back!" said a male voice, coming towards us.

"Hey Josh," Kelly said, sounding resigned. "Josh, this is Tayna, Tayna, my next door neighbor, Josh."

"Whoa," he said, by way of greeting. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"No," I told him. "I am a complete stranger to you. Especially if you have a girlfriend."

"Girlfriend? Whoa, I wish. Dude, oh yeah, your place got broke into again. I called the police, they were, like, not really happy to be back here again? And when they heard you were gone?" He made an explosion noise. "Nice dog by the way. Is he allowed in here?"

"He's a service animal."

"When was this, Josh?"

"When was what?"

I felt she was restraining herself from slugging this Josh guy. My magic wasn't telling me this, it was just a feeling I had.

"The break in, of course!"

"Oh yeah! Yesterday I guess? Like, we found it this morning, you know?"

"Thanks Josh. I'll call them back, make sure they say I can go in."

"That's cool. Hope you had fun on or trip or whatever. See you 'round."

*We did have a little fun. The rest of the weekend went really well, and I even got a good night kiss last night but nothing further. She still wanted to wait, I don't think she was pleased with my kissing those three guys, but I explained to her kissing people is basically what I do. And jumping into bed with them, or on counters, or couches, and one time in a pool. She gets it, that's what she does too, and why we both agreed to take this a bit slowly. As slowly as one can, when one is sleeping right next to someone, and is going to spend the next three weeks or so in that someone's apartment...*

"See you, Josh."

He moved past us down the hall and went into his apartment.

"And everybody thinks legal weed is a good idea," Kelly muttered. "Yet I'm not convinced of that." Then louder. "Sorry Tayna, we'll have to wait until they arrive. But at least they know the way, and I know the drill."

"It's okay. Tell them you have a blind," *troll*, "porn star actress as your new bodyguard. It'll at least give them a laugh."

"I don't want them laughing at you! You're amazing. I watched your practicing after yesterday's run, and so did a lot of people. I heard a lot of people saying even if you were blind, they wouldn't want to fight you."

"As well they shouldn't, picking on some poor old blind woman, for shame!"

"How old are you, anyway?"

*Uh, 86?* "How old do you think?"

"I don't know, you look really good. Mid thirties?"

"Exactly! Anyway, shouldn't you call and then we can hang out in this hallway here? It'll take some time for them to get here, right?"

“Right! Let’s get them back here, gonna be such a treat for both of us.” She got her phone out and made the call, stepping down the hall a little. I reached out with my senses, past the police tape, just to see what I could tell was there. It seemed like an apartment all right, here was the entrance, beyond was a living area with couch and TV, there was the kitchen, and as expected stuff was strewn all over. I wiggled around in my clothes. After two and a half days of not wearing any, and then the car ride back here, I wanted nothing more than to slam that door, shuck my clothes, jump in the shower (with Kelly if she would let me) and not wear anything until we had to go grocery shopping or whatever. *Oh well. Civilization, you sure have your ups and downs...*

“Okay, thank you,” she was saying. She came back over. “They’ll be here soon.” She slumped down with her back to the wall, sitting next to her stuff and patting the spot next to her. “Oh, you can’t see it, but I’m patting the space next to me. May as well sit down.”

“May as well,” I agreed, and sat next to her.

Finally the police showed up, and she went through the whole story with them. It seemed to be mostly rote by this point, I stayed out of the way while she took them on a tour of the place. I heard her explaining nothing seemed to be missing, they checked the whole place, and that no she had no idea who these clowns were.

“We’ve got something for you, if you’re interested,” one of the cops told her.

“What’s that?”

“Hidden cameras. As you say nothing is being taken, and these look like just USB charger wall plugs, if you don’t mind we’ll leave some with you and if this happens again, we can get some footage of who is doing it. Hopefully whoever is coming here won’t notice them and just leave them alone.”

“That would be wonderful!” she admitted. “I’ll gladly leave them plugged in everywhere!”

*Everywhere? So much for walking around naked... but I guess they don’t need to be plugged in when we’re actually there. And can you imagine a bunch of cops reviewing the “footage” and seeing us both just walking around naked? Would they fast forward past it or watch it carefully in case there was a “clue” to the “break in” issue?*

“Great. Let’s go look for some good spots.”

“What about right here?”

Finally they were done and left, allowing us to take the tape down and close the door.

“Ugh! This is insane!” she yelled into the room, and I heard her plopping down on the couch. “Why does someone keep doing this?”

*I wish I could tell you. But I don’t know for sure about the hand, and it doesn’t make sense anyone could be looking for it so soon after it was sold anyway. There is another possibility though.*

“Actually, that’s a thought,” I mused, making my way around the table and joining her. “You keep checking for things to be missing, right?”

“Yeah?”

“But what about things that have been *added*? If these camera things are so small to be overlooked, how do we know the first time they didn’t leave some cameras here, trash the place as cover, and just keep coming back to get the footage?”

“Oh, thanks. I wasn’t paranoid enough now I have to go looking for hidden cameras!” She considered. “No, these may have SD cards in them but if I was going to plant cameras inside someone’s place I would make them wireless. I’ll look, but I don’t think that’s it. Stay here, I’ll check the wall plugs and under the pictures and whatever.” She sighed and got up. “I’ll give you a tour in a minute, I’m too upset you wouldn’t want to be around me anyway.”

“Take your time.”

She started checking around as did I with my magic. I doubted that was it, but it wouldn’t hurt to check. At least in the local area nothing lit up to my magic as “camera” so that seemed fine. I

couldn't just sit there so when she went into the other room I got up, took Reves' harness off so he could nose around, and started straightening things up. He wandered off, sniffing the place out. I could easily tell things were on the floor and while I might not know exactly where they went or what direction they were facing (I mean books were easy but some of her little statues were just blobs so I had no idea) but I could at least put the room into some semblance of order. *Actually I think this one might be a cat.*

"Hey, you don't have to do that!" insisted Kelly when she passed by and saw me doing stuff.

"I know," I told her. "But I'm not just going to sit there. Hey does this face this way or this way?"

"The first way. Tayna, you're a guest, not a maid! Don't do that!" She came over and took my hands.

"I'm not a guest, I'm a friend. And a friend would help clean up."

"Okay that's dumb, you can be a guest and a friend. Honestly I've picked up this place so many times I could do it in my sleep. Why not run a bath, have a nice soak while I clean up, and we can get some dinner? Oh, I'll unplug the cameras while we're here, come with me to the bathroom."

*Ah, she thought of that too, huh?* "Or," I countered, resisting her pull, "I could help clean up, making it go faster, then you can join me in the bath, and we can eat dinner at the same time we would have with your plan but we've both had some fun in the meantime."

"Be naked together? But we just met!"

"We just- but haven't we- how are-"

She laughed. "I'm kidding! That sounds like a great idea, if you're not going to be persuaded I can handle this myself."

"Hey, if something needs doing, I do it. Think of it as me earning some points from you."

"Oh I see. You want to show me what it would be like if we were living together."

"Er, maybe?"

"Okay. Well, let's start in the bedroom that's usually the hardest hit because they always throw my drawers and closet all over the place."

"The bedroom you say? Now we're talking! Lead on!"

"You're terrible!" she said with a laugh.

So we straightened up, fit into her tub as best we could for a bit of a soak, and now wearing some robes were sitting on her couch after dinner. I hadn't really bothered to tie mine, and I suspected she hadn't either not that it was doing all that much for me. But now it was time to start earning my pay.

"The question is do we want to secure the door from this side with something, like a chair, so they can't get in quite as easily, or do the complete opposite and leave it unlocked so they can?"

"Why would we want them to come in here at this point?"

"To catch them. So far they've been content to break in when you're gone, like they don't want a confrontation with you. But after this many times I'm worried they'll get bold and come when you are here, demanding whatever it is they're looking for."

"I guess. But to make it that easy will certainly look like a trap."

"Huh, true. But at the same time I'm not crouching by the door all night to jump them if someone comes in."

"I don't expect you to do that! I wonder if walmart would have some kind of sensor that would trigger an alarm that we could put in the bedroom. The door opens and-"

\*Ding Dong\*

"What in the world?"

"That's what we usually call a doorbell, at least where I'm from," I told her.

“Yes I know what it was,” she said, getting up. I heard her robe rustle she must have been tying it. “But I’m not expecting anyone.”

“Maybe that kid Josh, coming to check on us?”

“Maybe. I’ll go see.”

“No, I’ll go see. To the extent that’s possible,” I clarified. I stood up and tied my robe shut as well. “That’s what you’re paying me for. Reves, come!”

“Good point.” She let me pass and both Reves and I went to the door.

“Wait,” she hissed. “I can still look and see who it is.”

“You can look through the *door*?” *What kind of magic is that? I mean I know about glass I’m not stupid but no one would put a glass panel on a door into an apartment. Right?*

“There’s a tiny hole I can look through, it only works one way, let me by.” She pressed close to the door. “It’s an elegantly dressed woman.”

“Do you know her?”

“Never seen her before in my life.”

*Elegantly dressed? Like, maybe she comes from money? Like maybe she would wear a distinctive golden hand.* “Well I doubt someone from high society is trashing your place but,” *it could be some kind of glamour, or other illusion. Or it could be her for all I know, if she’s a troll like me or another race with enhanced strength.* “Better safe than sorry. Stay back for now.”

“Okay. You can’t open the door all the way because of the chain.”

“Right, I know about it.”

She backed off and I unlocked the door, pulling it open as far as it would go. “Yes, can I help you?” I asked.

“I hope you can,” said a feminine voice. “I’m here looking for a piece of jewelry that was mistakenly sold in an estate sale about a month ago. I’m willing to pay its fair market value to get it back, as the mistake was ours, *not* what you originally paid for it. Can we make some kind of deal?”

I felt her out, at first not feeling anything out of the ordinary about her but as with most things it wasn’t a perfect detector and it’s not like I really practiced feeling people out like this. But then I caught something, a feeling of otherness that said she wasn’t what she seemed. She knew it was magical, because she was. What sort of non-human I would have to spend more time feeling her out to know, but that was good enough for now. *But how in the world did she trace it here? Magic? That’s possible I guess.* “That depends. Have you been sending thugs to ransack the place looking for it the past month?”

“Heavens, no. Has that been happening? Oh dear, has it been noticed by them already? I am sorry for the inconvenience, no one has been hurt have they?”

*Them who? Darn it, what is this thing and what has it gotten Kelly into?* “No, they seem to come when the place is empty.”

“Oh, that’s a relief. Please, I must recover the artifact it’s very important. I am in the right place, aren’t I?”

“You are. Very well, I’ll leave it unlocked.” I pushed the door closed and undid the chain, stepping back. There was a pause and the door opened.

“You’re not inviting me in, are you?”

“I’m not actually the owner of this place, I’m her bodyguard, so it wouldn’t work anyway. But to answer your question, no, I’m not.”

“Oh dear, so the buyer actually found someone in the know? I wonder if that will make it harder or easier than I thought. Very well, not that there’s much of a threshold on a place like this.”

*I’ll take what I can get.*

She stepped through into the hall and closed the door behind her. “My name is Emeliata, I mean you no harm.”

“We’ll see. I’m Tayna, this is Reves. We can sit in the living room, this way.”

“Thank you.” But she didn’t get five steps into the apartment before she spotted Kelly. “Oh no!” she cried. “You put it on? This is the worst... possible... thing! It’s a disaster, is what it is.”

“Put what on?” she asked, taking a step back. “Who is this? Tayna, do you know her?”

I shook my head. “She claims to be the original owner of the hand.”

“The hand?”

“The set of rings you’re wearing, dear. I’m not surprised you keep forgetting about it.”

“Oh yeah!” she replied with a short laugh. “I did forget again. How about that?”

“Let’s get back to this disaster,” I interrupted. “Is the item dangerous?”

“Directly? No. But if certain things are not done with it, the results will be terrible.”

“What do you mean done with it?” Kelly asked.

“Let’s sit down, I think this is going to take awhile,” I suggested.

“Yes,” Emeliata managed. “I think that would be best.” She settled on the couch and Kelly took the seat next to her. I stood over by Emeliata, she hadn’t made any threatening moves but one could never be sure. “I’m Emeliata, you’re the owner of the apartment and the woman who bought the item?”

“Yes, I’m Kelly. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you as well. Oh dear, you seem like such a nice person too.”

“What does that mean?”

“I mean to have gotten mixed up in all this. Curse those workmen, I told them to stay out of that room, I should have moved my artifacts before they even set foot in the place. And of course this one would have to slip by me unnoticed. I really do apologize for this.”

“It’s not necessary, you can have it back,” Kelly told her. “I can see it’s important to you. You mentioned you would pay me the fair market price, but it’s fine. As selling it was a mistake I’m not going to hold it over you. Just give me my money back and-”

“Oh no dear,” she sighed. “We’re a long way past that now. You’ve put it on, so it’s become your responsibility.”

“So I’ll just take it off! Er..”

“Yes, I’m afraid that won’t be possible. When you put it on the bracelet was open at the bottom, wasn’t it?”

“It’s one solid piece now! Tayna, what’s going on, I can’t get it off! *I can’t get it off!*”

“Don’t fuss with it, you’ll only hurt yourself trying to rip it off your hand!”

“Calm down Kelly,” I told her, stepping over to her side. I grabbed her hands. “It’s okay, it’s okay. We’ll work this out. There must be an explanation.”

“Explanation? It looks different from when I put it on. How is that possible? It’s one solid ring now, it was open before! There’s no way I can slip it off now!”

“So she doesn’t know?” Emeliata asked.

“No, she doesn’t. I felt it and was concerned, but she didn’t seem to know what it was. So I figured it was just something old and the purpose for it had been lost to time.”

“Old yes, but the purpose for it is very much relevant today. Please try to stay calm my dear, I can explain everything.”

“Know what?” she yelled. “Who are you? Why did this change? You’re not making any sense.”

“Give me a chance to explain, please.”

“Fine, but this better be good. I’m fine,” she yanked her hands away. “I won’t try to take it off for now, I see it’s impossible despite that being impossible. I put it on, after all. You knew something about this?”

“Not really,” I told her. “Oh boy, this isn’t going to be easy.”

“It never is,” agreed Emeliata. “We must start at the beginning, I’m afraid.”

“Beginning of what?”

“Of the world, dear. Of the truth that has been kept from most of humanity since modern times began.”

“And that truth is?”

“That magic exists in the world, and that artifact you’ve accidentally bought from me is steeped in it.”

## Chapter 7

We have a bit of a talk and then disaster

Where: The apartment

When: No time has passed

Kelly reacted exactly as you would expect when given the pronouncement that magic was real. She accepted Emeliata's words on faith, asked us to please provide evidence for such a claim, and accepted it calmly.

Of course she didn't do any of that!

"Hold on, magic?" she asked.

"That's right. Magical creatures abound in this world. I'm one. Your friend there is one. Even this dog is one, if I'm not mistaken. We keep our heads down, try to get along in human society, and live as best we can."

"Okay, sure, Tayna is amazing looking enough that she could be some kind of magical creature but Reves? He's just a dog!"

"You really told her nothing?" she asked me.

"We've known each other three days now. And I had no idea what that artifact could do. If she freaked out and managed to trigger it somehow I had no idea what might happen. I just feel it's powerful, and it's in the shape of a skeleton's hand. What was I supposed to think?"

"So is that why you came over to talk to me? Because of this?" Kelly asked. I heard the artifact jingling, so she must have been shaking it at me.

"Originally, yes. Then you asked me on a walk and I found I liked your company. As you didn't seem like a maniac wielding dark magic to unpleasant ends I figured it was fine. We stuck together and I didn't think any more of it. You find artifacts every so often, mostly made by dwarves, but without their trigger word they're usually harmless."

"Dwarves?"

"Not like you're thinking. Most creatures in stories exist in one form or another, but usually with some details missing or misunderstood. To use your example, the dwarves. Media has them all wrong, they are shorter than average, yes, but not by as much as stories would have you believe. They are good at making things, and they do wear beards. That was all correct. What was not correct in most if not all accounts is their feet. You can tell a true dwarf because they have the feet of birds."

"Sure they do, which is why you see short people with bird's feet walking around the streets every day."

"You really do," Emeliata agreed. "But every non-human species is taught to cover up their inhuman traits with glamours, so we don't start any panics."

"Right. Panic. In thousands of years we've just been blissfully living next to, what, creatures of the night? What even are you, anyway?"

I sighed. "I'm a troll."

"My race is the Tuatha. You may know us as elves, we were the inspiration for those tales."

"And Reves?"

"Go ahead and change, Reves, and Kelly, don't freak out. He walks around looking like this, again to not freak people out. He's magical. You ready?"

"No! What's he going to change into?"

"His actual form. He's a black dog. He's still Reves, he's just going to drop the magic that disguises him."

“This should be good.” *Ah, she doesn't believe me and is humoring me. That's fine.* “Okay, go ahead boy! Change! Change into your- YAAAAAA!” She flattened herself against the wall across from him.

“Believe us now?”

“He's huge! Oh my goodness, what in the world? I guess if anything had to be described as a 'black dog' it would be him. His tail is wagging so I guess he's still the same dog. He won't bite, or anything, will he?”

“He won't bite a friend, of course not. Believe me, he's way smarter than just a dog.”

“Right, the hamburger thing, and finding the campsite despite the fact a dog shouldn't be able to read numbers. It was right in front of me the whole time, wasn't it? I guess you can hide in plain sight. Or I'm just a moron,” she grumbled.

“You're getting it! You're not a moron, you just saw what you expected to see and brushed off the rest. And thank goodness you do, we non-humans like it that way. Makes our jobs easier.”

“Usually it takes more than that,” Emeliata cautioned. “She still doesn't look convinced. Go ahead dear, you have more questions right?”

“Eh, yeah? You say magic but where did his extra mass go? I'm no scientist but I went to school. You can't just do that!” Kelly went on. “That big dog can't become a smaller dog!”

“Take a breath Kelly, it's fine. I know it's a lot to take in at once.”

“But it doesn't make any sense! Extra senses, sure, but where did the mass come from? Does he get denser? Is it magically held 'next' to him and just comes back when the spell goes away? I can't believe I'm even saying these things!”

“We know it's a lot,” Emeliata told her gently. “We'll answer your questions as best we can. You're in the middle of this world now, and I need your help. That artifact can come off you, but there's a set of actions you're going to have to take before that happens. I need you with me, so I'll explain as best we can so you know what you have to do. But you'll have to ask them one at a time.”

“I don't even know where to start!”

“Maybe start with me,” I suggested, “I'll be sure and give you as straight an answer as I can. You know me, so you have a frame of reference for what I can tell you.”

“Implying that I wouldn't?” Emeliata asked dryly.

“I didn't say that.” *But your race does have a reputation, even I know it.*

“Okay, how can you be a troll?” she asked me. “Stories all say trolls are ugly, stupid, monsters. Did they get that wrong, like the feet of dwarves?”

“Actually, I can show you easier than I can explain it. Go get my phone for me, will you?”

“Oh, sure I think I remember it.” She got up and went to the bedroom, where I had dumped my stuff and came back with it.

“Great, let me turn it on, and I can answer your question.”

“Don't tell me you have pictures on there. Are you really blind?”

“I'm really blind. I use magic to sense my surroundings. If you turned the TV on for example I could maybe tell it was an active TV versus an inactive TV but I still couldn't see what was on the screen. Magically I just get a sense of what's around me, trying to cram the detail of every second of what I've been told TV is, a series of pictures changing 30 times a second or more, would overwhelm me. Sight just being a million times more efficient than magic. I mean whole parts of your brain are dedicated to it, so of course you don't even think about how amazing it is to casually look around the room, have your brain identify every object, color, texture in view. Again, at least that's how I've been told vision works. Same with my phone. I can't 'see' the screen so I have to tell it what I want it to do. I was able to carry a flip phone before I could talk to it, because I could feel the buttons. Not so much with modern smartphones that are just a screen. Magic may be great but it's no substitute for the real senses.”

“Trolls and Tuatha,” Emeliata told her, “are both very magically adept. Many races, like Pukwudgie for example, have specific magical talents and no more. We are among the most fortunate, as we can learn to use basically any sort of magic.”

“But humans can’t, I take it? You couldn’t teach me magic, like a small spell right now?”

“Not the average human, no. I mean you could, if you believed in it, perform a ritual for an hour or two that might cause a specific magical effect. I don’t have any of my books but if it would help I could get them, and you could do a ritual and see magic done at your own hand in action. But just snapping your fingers and doing magic in the next ten minutes? No. A select few humans are born with the gift, but mostly it’s us non-humans that got the magic.”

“That’s crazy. The world doesn’t work that way.”

“I assure you it does.”

“It can’t. Unless magic is almost useless, it’s a survival trait. It would help you live longer, especially two thousand years ago when we didn’t have modern homes and roads and everything. You magic users should be the dominant species on Earth.”

“I can’t go into a complete history lesson at this time, of course, but yes, you would think that wouldn’t you? Suffice to say we’ve always lived longer than humans, and so we’re not in as much of a rush to have kids as you did. So we fell behind, and your kind became the dominant species.”

“Okay, my phone is ready. Hey Siri, facetime mom.” My phone started ringing. “She should be up now, it’s after sundown.”

“Hello? Tayna, this is a surprise, you don’t usually use the camera.”

“It’s a bit of an emergency, mom. I want you to talk to someone for me, and can you get dad?”

“Your father? Sure, he’s out chopping wood.”

“Great thanks.” I handed Kelly my phone. “Kelly, this is my mother, Tyana. My father’s name is Unk.”

“Unk?”

“You’ll see.”

She took the phone and looked at it. “Oh my God, that’s your mom?” she asked. “I can see where you got your looks from!”

“Wait for it.”

“Hey Unk, our daughter is calling, come talk to her friend.”

“Huh?”

“Just look into this with me.”

“Cell phone?”

“Yes, the cell. Can you see us?”

“What the Hell is that?”

“That’s my dad!” I told her. “Hey you two, wanted you to meet a friend of mine, I met her at the audition. Mom, Dad, this is Kelly.”

“Oh, this is the girl you talked about? How nice to meet you,” Tyana said. “Unk, our daughter finally has a girlfriend!”

Yes, I had called them to let them know I had gotten the part and casually mentioned I had made a friend.

“Delicious looking!”

“Now Unk, we don’t talk that way anymore, remember?”

“Still true.”

“That’s your dad? What? How?”

“Oh, are you telling her about you?” Tyana asked. “This must be serious. Do I hear wedding bells? And that behind her must be her apartment? My little girl moves fast!”

“Mom, we’ve known each other three days. But something came up so I had to tell her about us. A Tuatha is here about a magical artifact she accidentally sold so I’m showing her magic is real.”

“How can that be your husband? You look like totally different species!”

“Ah, bit of a culture shock, isn’t it,” Tyana commiserated. “Yes, he’s a brute but he’s my brute, aren’t you my big old teddy?”

“Not a teddy!” Unk complained.

“Oh yes you are. We are both trolls, I assure you. Now Tayana, you be careful around that Tuatha, you just can’t trust those people!”

“I’m right here,” Emeliata told her.

“Oh, how lovely to see you. Harm my daughter and we’ll find you and rip you apart.”

“Crunch bones!” my father screamed.

*He’s really playing the part today, must be trying to make a good impression on Kelly.*

“I mean none here any harm, I swear it.”

“Humm... Fine. You need anything else dear?”

“Well?” I asked Kelly. “Do you believe I’m a Troll now?”

“Well, your dad is basically who I picture when I think of a Troll,” she admitted. “But how?”

“Male Trolls get all the brawn, we get all the brains and looks,” my mother explained. “Don’t ask why, we just do.”

“And how have you stayed hidden? How has no one ever seen you? That glamour she was talking about?”

“That’s right. She can tell you all about that.”

“Okay. I guess I have to believe her. Thanks for talking to me.”

“Of course. Tayna, bring her for supper sometime soon, okay? I’m sure I can keep your father from eating her.”

“Mom!!!”

“Just a joke, joking of course.”

“Don’t even joke like that mom! She’s freaked out enough. Talk to you soon.” *It wasn’t that long ago we Trolls believed we had to eat human meat to survive. That’s obviously nonsense though, there’s no magical ‘human vitamin’ we can get by eating humans. Meat is meat. I mean humans are delicious, and I will occasionally indulge when ethically sourced, but we need to work to counter those kinds of attitudes.*

“And don’t let this one get away!”

“Yes mom. Bye mom!”

“Bye!”

“Bye!” said my dad.

The phone went off, and she handed it back. “Your mom... She sounds an awful lot like my mom, actually.”

“We’re not that far removed,” I told her.

“No? You have the body of a goddess, unknown magical power, your mom is super hot as well, and you say we aren’t far removed?”

“But we’re not, on a fundamental level. We’re both trying to live our best lives, we both are trying to make sense of the world we find ourselves in. So I’m a Troll. Get over it. I just want to be your friend, haven’t we had fun together these past few days? What does my being a different species have to do with that?”

“I guess nothing, you’re not an animal.”

“Woof!”

“I don’t mean it like that, Reves. Man, you’re going to take some getting used to. I mean I can’t have a relationship with you, can I? But I guess it’s fine with Tayna. But I still don’t get it. Just how long do you live that you have so few children?”

“I’m one thousand, seven hundred, and forty three years old,” Emeliata reported.

“What? But... No, that’s impossible. You’re... Look at you!”

“We don’t age the same way as humans, dear. If an accident doesn’t kill me, I’ll live forever.”

“Same with me,” I told her. “Same with most non-humans. Don’t know why, maybe because of our greater powers of recuperation? I don’t know.”

“You heal faster?”

“Much faster. I could break my leg and be fine in like, a few days.”

“So when you said you were ‘thirty something’ before...”

“Oh, yeah.” I looked away. “I’m actually eighty six.”

“You’re old enough to be my grandmother?”

“Look pretty good for my age, huh?” I fluffed my hair out behind me and stuck one hip out.

“Oh God. I have to sit down again.” She dropped into the chair.

*I will take that as a yes.*

Reeves padded over to her and she seemed to hesitantly put her hand on her head. His tail continued to wag, I could feel it from here. He was essentially a large, black, dog, far bigger than any human breed. So I knew he could be pretty scary to look at, and would have to remember to praise him for taking it slow with her later.

“Do you have any kids?” she asked Emeliata.

“Just haven’t gotten around to it,” she replied. “Maybe someday.”

“Right. Sure. Maybe as a two thousandth birthday gift to yourself,” she muttered. “So, I guess if I accept that Trolls, and Elves-”

“Tuatha, dear.”

“Right, Tuatha exist, I have to accept that magic does too. I suppose there’s no reason it couldn’t, I don’t know all the science that exists why should this be any different? So what’s it all about? What’s this thing do, I guess, more specifically.”

“That can do a fair amount,” she answered. “but I should probably give you some background first so you understand what you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“And it’s really, magically, stuck onto me? There’s no way to just take it off?”

“Yes. It’s a security feature, to help avoid theft. Over the years it’s been in use I’ve gotten a bit lax, I’m afraid. I wasn’t wearing it all the time between uses, and as I was cleaning house to begin taking up my new identity, it got mixed in with the other items and accidentally sold. I do apologize for my lapse in judgment.”

“New identity?”

“Of course, dear. If I went to get a car loan or buy more property and put my birthdate down as 278 AD no one would believe me. So every hundred years or so I take stock, sell off anything that isn’t holding my attention anymore, ‘die,’ and leave everything that’s left to my ‘daughter.’ There are various organizations that will help with that, as most non-humans that aren’t still frolicking in the ever shrinking forests need to go through the same thing.”

“Actually a lot of big companies have ties to our kind,” I told her. “Like Excellus is a front for basically the equivalent to our police. If we hear of some nasty coming through a portal into our world, or some vampire finally decides humans are just sheep and he’s going to treat them like such and starts killing them left and right, they are who would show up to stop it.”

“I see. That all makes sense.”

“So back to your question on magic. Magic is tricky, actually. In one sense what it can do is fairly broad, but on the other hand it’s very, very limited.”

“You lost me.”

“Take this, for example,” I waved the cell phone. “Just calling my parents like that. Magic would be hard pressed to make their images appear to anyone that looked, with sound, in real time. Why do you think I carry it, and struggle to learn how to use computers and cars and things? I’m fifty years older than you, remember. And I lived the first fifty years of my life before even the most primitive computers came on the scene. I only got my parents onto a cell phone so I could talk to them,

and had to be very patient trying to explain even the most simple things it could do. My father still talks into the wrong end of the phone if I call the house. Not that he's all that bright, but still. I call them on it, they don't call me. At least I got 'charging your phone' across to them so I can call them on it and the battery isn't dead half the time."

"She's fairly fortunate," Emeliata agreed. "Those much older than her mostly don't bother with any kind of modern technology. It's just too foreign to them. And it disrupts magic, so they'll take the thing they know over the thing they won't."

"How can it disrupt magic?"

"Don't ask me. But many things do. Sunrise, running water, too many non-believers in one spot, other, hostile magic."

"Heck, me just casting a spell on you, if you didn't want to be affected by it, you could just mentally will it away," I told her. "Depending on how much effort I put into casting it, I mean versus how much mental energy you put into fighting it off."

"So it's not all that useful? That's what you're telling me? Magic?"

"It is the only game in town for certain things," Emeliata admitted. "If you have the patience to study the narrowly defined areas magic has access to, well, it can literally allow the blind to see."

"Yes..."

"But there is much more to tell, we may be here for some time. Could I trouble you for something to drink?"

"What?" Kelly shot up again from her seat. "I'm so sorry! I've been a terrible host haven't I? All this talk of magic and whatnot, and my manners went out the window."

"It's all right dear, no need to apologize. I know it's a lot to take in, and I see that I may have been, uh, interrupting something."

I heard her robe rustle, she must have been closing it tighter. "Not at all! I have tea, if that's acceptable?"

"Tea would be lovely."

"Great. Tayna, would you mind helping me?"

*Help her get tea? Maybe she wants to talk without Emeliata nearby?* "Sure." I stood up. "If you'll excuse me a moment?"

"Take your time, dears."

We headed to the kitchen and Kelly got out a tray. Reves joined us, no doubt hoping we could get out something and he would get a snack. "I sensed some hostility between your peoples, so I didn't want to ask this in front of her, in case it was a secret or something. What kind of magic can you do?"

"I wouldn't have minded, it's not like it's a secret. Being as old as she is, she's probably both far better at magic than I am, and can do anything I could do. As far as hostility, well, they just have a certain reputation, that's all. I'll explain later. Like she said, magic has a narrow focus, but within that focus the application is almost limitless. If you want the whole list... I know the magic of vocation, so I can get information about using things I'm unfamiliar with or improve my ability to speak other languages. I can break spells, manipulate the energy in living beings to an extent, or change their bodies to be stronger or faster. I even know mind magic. So I can read minds, send thoughts, even plant thoughts into people's heads. And no, before you ask, I've never used it on you in any capacity. Nor will I. I know what happened on Buffy."

"Buffy?"

"Never mind. I can summon a few minor minions whose names I know, protect places or things, move faster when I need to, or change a person's fate. That one's a bit dangerous to use, so I'm pretty careful with it. The universe seems to balance out so if I change your fate to say, finding true love today, maybe your best friend finds out something about you and hates you for it. So don't ask unless it's a very, very minor change. I can move things with my mind, though I typically use it as a way to enhance what I can lift rather than trying to fly things around. My last two areas of study were

battle magic, allowing me to be better at combat or make my opponents worse at it, and divination, which is how I see. I can use it to glimpse the future, get answers to questions, that sort of thing.”

“I see. Is that a lot, because it seems like a lot of magic to know.”

“It’s the most useful magic I could learn, I don’t know any elemental stuff like- wait did you hear that?” I had heard a soft thump and what sounded like something being rolled across the floor.

“Hear what?”

“Now what is this?” Emeliata asked from the other room. I heard her get up and walk several paces. I turned and headed back that way, wondering what was going on. “This just came rolling into the room!” she told us, my magic telling me she was holding up something.

Which was of course “An explosive! Get down!” I threw myself at Kelly, knocking her over and to the ground. The grenade went off, and a second later I heard someone smashing through the window above me. Someone was coming into the apartment from the outside. It seemed whoever had been ransacking the place was now taking a more active role as we were under attack!

## Chapter 8

I remember how I learned my combat training, as things go from bad to worse

Where: Near a small dojo in the mountains of Japan

When: 63 years ago

My dog Reves and I stood and “looked out” at the surrounding countryside in the mountains of Japan. Breathing in the crisp mountain air all around us, my pack set aside for the moment as we rested. The war had never come here, there was no strategic value to bombing a mountain after all, but even so it had taken many years for me to be allowed to travel to Japan to seek the master that was said to reside in these hills. Naturally most of my kind had not taken much part in the conflict, leaving the humans to do what they did best- kill each other. But finally the world was coming back to some sense of normalcy, if a world where atomic bombs existed could be called normal. Human technology was outstripping us, with newer, faster planes, cars, and trains being almost afterthoughts in the newest human obsession. Space. The Soviet Union and the US were in some kind of standoff, each daring the other to attack first so they had an excuse to use their new “toys.” Both countries were talking about starting missions to space, launching rockets and seeing if people could survive up, up in the sky.

“It’s becoming a more dangerous world,” my father had told me. “You should take precautions to make sure you stay safe.” Though he had said it more like “Humans get more hurtful. You learn fight!” but it got the point across. I had agreed, ever since electricity had taken off in Human society it seemed greater and greater progress was inevitable. Who knew where it would stop, if it ever did. With this progress came new opportunities, and new dangers. Like organized crime, drive by shootings, and worse. Trolls like me, far more beautiful than any Human woman, were at risk the most of being grabbed up and locked away for some madman’s pleasures. So I was touring the world, seeing how things were going (for very loose definitions of “seeing” of course) and finding a master to teach me how to fight. I didn’t have the strength of the males of my species, they could just blunder through any sort of conflict and be fine. But woman like us? We needed to be smart about it. And everywhere I went the story was the same. If you wanted the best close combat fighters in the world, you went to Asia.

“What do you think Reves, are we close?” I asked him.

*I’m getting a faint whiff of smoke, we must be, he answered. And there is a very faint trail here, someone goes between this place and the city we left behind.*

“Good, because my feet are killing me. We’ve been walking for hours looking for this guy.”

*And why does he live way out in the country like this?*

“According to rumors, he’s been here for a hundred years. Since the fall of the shoguns and his way of life. The world changed, and he couldn’t deal with it. So now he trains a select few that manage to reach him, in the old ways.”

*And why don’t you want to be trained in the new ways?*

“Like guns, you mean? Maybe someday, but for now I need the basics. I could be attacked at any time, I need to know how to defend myself even if I don’t have a weapon handy. So I came here, because apparently his style of fighting is best for people like me. Those who can’t see. He knows all about battle magic as well, so we can learn both at the same time.”

*Don’t need to see. You have me. I’ll always protect you.*

I leaned down to hug him. “Thanks, Reves, I know you will. But what if it’s you who needs protecting?”

*Ha! From what, exactly?*

“Werewolf maybe? I don’t know. There are creatures out there that would not respect you.”

*I can take anything!*

“I know you can. I know. But shouldn’t we be able to look after each other? Come on, not getting any closer just standing here.”

*You got it.*

A month later my teacher said I was progressing swiftly, and it was time to nail down what would become my ultimate fighting style.

“You don’t have the raw strength you need to do more than make someone angry by hitting them,” he told me. “You are far stronger than you look, due to your heritage, but it is not enough.”

“I know, master. That is why I have learned the magic of changing my own body. In this way I can become strong enough to defend myself. And the magic of combat itself, so I can hit more accurately or keep my opponents from utilizing their full skill. Is this not enough?”

“So much magic will hinder you in a fight,” he explained. “You already need magic to see, and while you are coming along fighting without it, no, I do not believe it is enough. You need to use your magic to enhance yourself in some way that is absolute. While strengthening yourself or using battle magic can be useful at times, I recommend a maximum of two active spells if you are in danger. Any more would hinder your concentration so much as to make your combat skills useless. The one you use to sense your surroundings, and some sort of elemental magic that augments your strikes.”

*I see. Those with sight can substitute a battle magic spell for my ability to see, and use some other augmentation like strengthening themselves so their strikes are lethal. I don’t have that luxury, but on the other hand someone can’t sneak up behind me either so at least there’s some advantage I have over them.* “Like hitting someone and that sets them on fire?”

“Correct.”

I considered it. “If I trained to strike repeatedly, like Shalutha does, that would help overcome my lack of strength.”

“I agree. Why not speak to the other students about this? All have decided on their particular style, and most have at least one elemental magic they could pass on to you. Decide on what style suits you best, and we will begin to develop it.”

“I will do so, master. Thank you.”

Shalutha was a Dakini, a female race related to the Kitsune. She too, like myself and many non-humans, preferred human meat and often made trips to the nearby towns for “supplies.” She claimed to only take those who wouldn’t be missed, so as to not make trouble for the master because someone came looking for where all the people were dispersing to. Thus far it seemed she was on the level as no human authorities had come sniffing around the cave the master lived in. She was generous, offering to share her kills, so I joined her whenever she had fresh meat. I had to admit, there wasn’t a better meat than Human to eat. Having spoken to the other students (there were six of us total at the moment) I went to talk to her.

“Shalutha, may I talk with you a moment?”

“Of course, Tayna, why so serious? Has the master chided you? Or have you received unpleasant news from the outside world?”

“Nothing I that,” I replied with a shake of my head. “No, the master has bade me to begin honing my personal style, and I am talking with everyone here about what it might be.”

“Already? I was here for months before the master deemed me competent enough in the basics to choose my style. You are quite favored!”

“He has said I progress swiftly, yes.”

“So you must! What would you like to discuss?”

“All the master’s students augment themselves with magic, of course.”

“Naturally. It would be foolish to ignore our gifts if they can be used to strengthen us in combat. Why do you ask?”

“What magic do you use? You seem to strike so rapidly, yet unlike Hitsu your fists do not burst with flame, nor does your target freeze like Shikotsu. They have demonstrated this for me, and it seems reasonable. And yet, is it for me?”

She laughed. “Yes, nothing so flashy for me. As you know I am a Dakini, and knowledgeable in all things related to the spirit. Most of my magic centers around that as well. My combat style relies upon spirit magic, essentially weakening my opponent by attacking their spirits, all while strengthening my own.”

“That sounds very promising!”

“As well it should!” she agreed. “The more opponents I fight, the stronger I become. The others would weaken and falter, but as long as I can avoid my enemy’s strikes, I can fight without limit.”

“What an amazing thing. Tell me, would you be willing to teach me this spirit magic?”

She considered. “I suppose, as you are a Troll, and can learn any kind of magic you want. I was always a bit jealous of that, you know.”

“I’m sorry!”

She snorted. “It’s nothing to be sorry about. You are what you are, just as I am. We are all here to learn, and the master says the best way to learn is to teach. Very well, I will teach you my spirit magic, and help you develop a fast combat style like I use.”

“Thank you so much! If I can help you at some point in the future, please let me know!”

“I’ll remember your words...”

And so I spent several years there, honing my fighting skills with the others. Finally my master said that I had surpassed him, and there wasn’t much else he could teach me. The other students were impressed by my skills, and how quickly I had picked things up. But it did seem to be time I went back to the real world. I promised to return once a week with Reves, as he could bring me back there from anywhere in the world, and for the most part I kept that promise. This kept my skills from degrading, and let me see and help train any new students that had made their way there. I was always welcome, and Reves got to run around outside while I was there, so it was a nice break for him too.

All this flashed through my brain as the figure crashed through the window and I leapt up to defend Kelly. *Maybe I should have practiced a little more?* I felt he had a gun, and heard another crash in the other room meaning at least a second person was now in the apartment, and Reves dashed off toward the door which I heard being kicked open meaning at least three other people were now in the place. *Focus, time to use those skills and hopefully get both of us out of here in one piece!*

“You want a piece of me?” I screamed at the man, trying to keep his attention away from Kelly. “Come get some!”

“Wait your turn, girl,” a raspy voice said, and his gun barked three times. Kelly screamed.

“Kelly!” I screamed. *This guy is dead!*

## Chapter 9

I fight off the men, and talk to the police afterwords

Where: Back in the apartment

When: *Present day, Present time*

I threw my robe off, knowing this would further distract the gunman and let me fight more freely.

“Well now, you seem eager,” he said. “Maybe another time, eh? I have to get the holy relic and get out of here. Nice of her to be wearing it, I don’t have to search anymore!”

*Yeah, keep talking I need a second to cast a spell.* I focused, throwing my will into my magic so I could take this guy down and clear the other two out of the apartment.

He went on, raising his gun which was now probably pointed at me. “But you don’t have to die. Let me take the artifact and depart. You’re not a part of this, so you can just forget it happened and go back to your life.”

*Not a part of this? Forget it happened? You just shot my new friend. You think you’re walking away from this?*

I sprang at him, making him jump back as he clearly didn’t expect the “helpless” naked woman to actually *attack* him. But I did, using what I had practiced for many years to not so much strike him, though I wanted to feel his bones break under my blows, but simply to tap him and siphon off his life energy. I hit him four times, four quick blows, and his body slumped like it had been held up with strings that were now cut. Life energy flowed into me, replacing what I had spent on the attack, and I was torn between trying to help Kelly and making sure the other gunmen didn’t get away with this. I could hear her screaming, so she was somehow still alive.

“Keep pressure on the wounds,” I called to her. “There are at least two others, I have to deal with them.”

“He shot me, I’ve been shot!”

*Yes, that’s what guns do. If she can complain about it, maybe she’s going to be fine? Can’t help her, those two others get a shot at me and it’s all over. I might heal faster than she can, but someone puts a bullet in my head and I’m as dead as anyone else.* I raced out of the room towards the bedroom, where I heard the second crash, and found the man inside had raced towards me, almost causing us to collide.

“Whoa!” he managed, no doubt unable to help himself from looking me over. “Where you in such a rush to go Missy?”

“Your funeral,” I snarled.

“Huh?” he managed, before I struck out at him like I had done with the other man. Four precise hits, rapid fire, no more than a touch on him. He too didn’t expect me to go after him, but while he tried to get out of the way he too dropped to the ground. Life again flooded into me. I felt powerful, invincible, bursting with energy I had stolen and ready to lash out at the final man. I turned, rushing to the hallway where Reves had already knocked the man to the ground. I felt the gun there on the floor, and the remains of Emeliata who had clearly been ripped apart by the blast. A new wave of anger tore through me. *This is the guy who rolled the grenade into the place. This is the guy that killed Emeliata.*

“Hold him down,” I commanded Reves, who went for his throat, wrapping his teeth around it. The man went very still as I picked up the fallen gun off the floor. “Why?” I asked, iron in my voice as I brought the gun down, putting it against his temple.

“To release the great master from his bondage! Join us, and you will be rewarded. Kill me and I will go to my reward for dying in his service. And my brothers and sisters will descend upon you like a plague, and shall know true despair! The choice is yours.”

*Great, some kind of cultist, then? “What master do you serve?”*

"I am not worthy to speak his name. But look to the stars, for his name is writ large there. He is coming! The guardian is dead, and soon the veil will part and my master will again walk the Earth. You cannot stop it now. Your only choice is to join us, and hope he is merciful to you, who was ignorant of him."

"I think I have lots of other choices," I told him, relaxing my grip on the soul siphon spell. I touched his forehead. "Mind Meld."

"No! No! You can't!" he screamed, as I invaded his mind. Flashes of things flew into me. Cult ceremonies, pieces of his life, dark texts, ritual magic. "I won't let you have my mind!"

I was distracted with the spell, focused on getting as much out of his brain as possible that could help me destroy these people, or figure out why they had killed Emeliata. I wasn't prepared for him to reach past me, clamp his hand over the gun, and jerk my fingers, pulling the trigger. The shot seemed extra loud, this close to the gun, and the man's brains blasted out the back of his head.

He jerked once and was still.

I staggered back, Reves letting the body go, and the gun fell to the floor. *What? What just happened? Did he just kill himself? What the Hell! This is fu- Kelly!* I could spare no more thought to the dead, I had a friend who I could possibly still save. I rushed back into the place, to find Kelly still on the floor, freaking out.

"Kelly, where are you hurt?" I asked her. I had grabbed by robe on the way and held it up. "We have to put pressure on the wounds, stop the bleeding. *I can't see where you've been shot.* You have to show me, so I can get this tied on you and call an ambulance." I put my hands on her, looking for blood, but all I found was unbroken skin. *What in the world?*

"I don't know. I don't know!" she cried.

"What do you mean you don't know? Just show me where you've been shot! Was it the legs?" I moved lower.

"I don't think I have been."

"What?"

She sat up, throwing her robe off too. "He pointed his gun at me, and he fired. I know he did. But he must have missed?"

"Missed?"

I felt her checking herself, even turning to look at her back. "Yeah, I'm not actually hurt at all." She sounded calmer, now that she had taken stock of herself.

"You're kidding?"

"No, really. I'm somehow totally fine!"

I grabbed her up in a hug. "I was so afraid I had lost you!"

"It's okay, maybe he accidentally used blanks or something. What... What did you do that guy? You just touched him and he fell over. Is he dead? He looks dead."

"Magic. You're sure you're okay?"

"Completely."

"Better get dressed. The question is, do we leave or stay?"

"Leave? A crime scene?"

"That's better than trying to explain this." I waved my hand in that direction. "We've got a dead woman in the living room, killed by a--"

"Oh my God, that elf lady is dead?" She hauled herself up and went over there, stepping over the corpse. "Oh God, she is." She sounded muffled, like she had thrown her hands over her mouth. She turned away again, at least I hope she had. I didn't want to imagine the scene but at least I couldn't see it. "She was torn apart. What could do that?"

"My power told me it was some sort of explosive. Grenade maybe?"

“Who just has grenades to throw around? Why kill her?”

“They were members of some sort of cult. The cult of Deogen I think. I didn’t get much from that guy’s mind. Kelly, what are we going to do?”

“Wait, are *you* okay?”

“I’m fine, they didn’t expect a naked woman to use the touch of death on them. Their mistake. The police will be here any minute, I’m sure someone called them after hearing four gunshots and a grenade going off.”

“I don’t know. I just wanted a quiet night home with my new friend. Not to be told magic exists and then have cultists smashing through my windows. I can’t deal with this!”

*At least I was here. Think if I hadn’t been. She still would have been attacked, that Tuatha would still be dead. At least now she’s alive and unhurt.* “Look, just get dressed for now, we can’t see the cops or get out of here like this. I’ll think about our next move while we do that.”

“Sure, okay, get dressed. I can handle that.” She headed to the bedroom while I headed to the bathroom to get my clothes. My head whipped around as I heard a scream, and I headed for it.

“There’s another dead guy in the hall!” she managed.

“Oh yeah, sorry, should have mentioned,” I told her. “Don’t get freaked out by the dead guy in the hall.”

“Little late, don’t you think? This is not going to go well.”

*Yeah, you’re telling me.*

I pulled my clothes on, at least I thought they were my clothes there was just sort of a pile of them, but they did fit. I washed my face and hands, hoping I didn’t have blood splattered all over me from the gunshot. It was going to be clear that guy hadn’t shot himself, and I probably had gunpowder all over my hand because I had, in fact, been holding the thing when it went off. *Will they believe it was self defense? They’re not going to buy the fact two ladies repelled an attack by heavily armed men busting into the apartment. But what other story are we going to tell them?* Kelly seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“What are we going to tell them?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. Both our heads turned, sirens in the distance were coming closer. “But we don’t have time to come up with any cover story. We’ll just have to tell the truth. An antique dealer showed up, wanted to buy something of yours, suddenly these men came and attacked us, and I fought them off. Just tell them what you saw happened, otherwise our stories will be different and that will be much, much worse.”

“How are you going to explain your part? You can’t tell them you used magic. I don’t believe you used magic and we were sitting around talking about it! I mean you’re blind, you’re not going to be able to convince them you did anything but stand around the whole time!”

“You just leave that to me.” *I can use magic to invade their minds, make them believe whatever I want. I’ve got the life energy of two people inside me and it won’t last long. I can throw some spells around.*

“If you say so.”

The police, guns drawn, raced into the place.

“Jesus,” I heard someone say. “It’s a war zone in here.”

*And now to put those acting skills to the test. Kelly sounds shaken up and I think she’s been crying, so that’s fine.* “Officers, thank goodness you’re here,” I told them. “They came in, broke the windows. We were so scared!”

“You live here?”

“It’s my apartment,” Kelly told him. “She’s just a friend.”

“What the Hell,” said another voice. “Looks like a bomb went off in here. What did this, is that a person?”

“You ladies better wait out in the hall,” said the officer. “This is a crime scene now.”

“Of course, officer, of course. Are we safe now?”

“This guy seems to have been shot in the head, he’s not going anywhere.”

“Found another guy, he’s dead,” someone called from the inside.

“I’ve got one too.”

“Just... Just wait in the hall.”

“Okay.”

And so the apartment complex became an anthill of police activity. Josh came out, telling us he had called the police when he heard the noises and wanted to make sure we were okay.

“We’re fine, Josh,” Kelly told him. “You did the right thing.”

*That’s debatable. But others probably called as well so...*

“You better head back, you don’t want to be questioned by the police do you?”

“Not really. Hope your place won’t get broken into no more.”

“Me too. See you later.”

Maybe an hour later, it was hard to tell for sure, I felt someone coming over to us from the apartment.

“So, you ladies want to answer a few questions?” he asked.

*Not especially, no.*

“If we can,” Kelly told him.

“Good. Because I’ve got some doozies here. Like why do two of the three men look like they’re week old corpses, but don’t have a scratch on them? Why are there three bullet holes in the ceiling of the place? Who is the lady that ate the grenade-”

“You show some respect!” I snarled. *So that’s what happened to the bullets? They got redirected or something?*

“You’re right, that was outa line. Sorry about that. Who is the lady who was tragically killed by the explosive device? How did the third guy get his brains blown out? Why were they there in the first place? Why are they all wearing the same outfit? And most important of all, how did you two survive that?”

*Yeah, I’ve been trying to figure out some way to explain that myself...*

“I’m not really sure who she is,” Kelly admitted. “I had only just met her an hour before. She was an antique dealer, wanted to discuss the sale of an antique I recently purchased. She said her name was Emeliata, she didn’t give a last name.”

“Emeliata, huh? Okay, so you’re chatting about antiques, right.”

“We got up to prepare some tea, and suddenly she was saying that someone had thrown something into the apartment from the door.”

“You hadn’t locked it?”

“We couldn’t lock it! The locks were busted from the door being broken down for like the fourth time.”

“Yeah, some of the guys said they’ve been coming here a lot in the past few weeks. But go on with your story.”

“She must have picked it up or something, Tayna here threw herself over me and I heard the explosion.”

“She picked up a live grenade?”

*Sure, she didn’t know what it was. Why bother learning about human ways of killing people? Compared to how long she had been alive, grenades were invented last week. Crap, what’s going to*

*happen to her estate if she doesn't come back? Did she tell people where she was going? Did she just teleport here with magic? What if she lives several states from here and her staff saw her leave an hour ago? How do we explain how she got here so fast? Oh this is a mess.*

"She was saying something about it."

"Well, it was close to her, given the remains we found. It wasn't by her legs, they took less of the blast than the rest of her. So she must have been holding it for some reason. Go on."

"Then the windows smashed open and a man came through. He pointed the gun at me and I threw my arms over my head, and closed my eyes. I heard it fire three times but that's when he must have fired upwards for some reason? Because I wasn't shot."

"Clearly."

"But I was freaking out, my friend here knows martial arts, she defended me. I didn't get up off the floor until it was all over."

"Martial arts, huh? Mind explaining to me how you martial arted him to death without leaving a mark on him? I've seen people that got beat up, it takes a long time. They get bruised. There's torn skin, blood, you name it. But these two guys look like they were killed a week ago. You got some kinda poison around here? Is that what you used? Should I have my guys check for needle marks?"

"You should check for whatever you need to in order to solve this crime, officer," I told him. "I was fighting him, and he keeled over. I don't know what he looked like before, so I can't say why he looks the way he does now."

"Yeah, noticed your eyes. You blind?"

"Yes."

"And yet you say you defended your friend?"

"That's right."

"Uh huh. Tell you what, why don't you start at the beginning. What's your names?"

So we told him the whole story, who we were, why I was there, at least as much of it as we could. He separated us and questioned us one at a time. I stuck to what happened, there was not much else I could do. But when he came to talk to me, I took that opportunity to throw some mental magic at him, to make him believe whatever he heard from me and not question it very closely. I figured I couldn't take any chances with this, and dropped my usual spell so the world was completely dark, saving my whole attention for the spell of persuasion I cast over him. There probably weren't enough electronic devices around to hurt my spell too much, and he was only one guy, but he did carry a lot of things I was sure. And even I can do poorly casting a spell, or have it turn out the guy had a really strong will. Magic wasn't like the stories, where you just pointed your wand if you did the spell right, it always worked. I had to be careful, but something took, I felt the spell settle into him.

"So after we spoke to Emeliata for maybe ten minutes or so Kelly got up to get some tea and I went to help her. She said something like 'oh what's this?' and Kelly shouted it was a grenade."

"She said you shouted it was a grenade."

"How could I have told what it was? I'm blind! You must have misheard her."

"Yeah that must be right. Go on."

"I pulled her to the ground and it went off. Then that man smashed through the window near us. I got up as he fired three shots, maybe to scare us? But I was going to try and get the gun away from him and he just dropped. I heard my dog go after someone, and another window smashed in the bedroom, so I ran over there."

"You ran. Even though you're blind."

"I knew the layout of the place."

"Of course you did. Go on."

“Again I threw myself at the guy, he didn’t get a shot off, and he too just went down. I then tried helping my dog, he had the guy on the ground, and when we were struggling for the gun it went off. I guess it shot him in the head. I tried to get Kelly calmed down, we got dressed, we know someone would report the noise. Sure enough you all showed up right after that. That’s what happened.”

“That completely matches up with what your friend said,” he told me. “That all seems reasonable. I’m sorry you had to go through all that.”

“That’s fine, thank you for saying that.” *I think the spell worked. Despite the holes in the story, he’s going to buy it. At least for now, before his superiors look it over and he’s left stammering about why he accepted such a flimsy story. But that’s his problem.*

“We’re going to be here for a couple of hours yet. Photographing the place and such, removing the bodies. Why don’t you two check into a hotel or something? You’re not sleeping here tonight.”

“That sounds reasonable. Can you get my dog’s harness at least? I can’t walk without him.”

“Of course, of course. I saw it in there. Hang on.”

He left, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I dropped that spell and put my usual one back on myself. *Now we just have to figure out the reason we were attacked and what to do about it!*

## Chapter 10

We head to a hotel to spend the night

Where: The apartment's parking lot

When: A few moments later

The officers had grabbed us a few things and we walked out to the parking lot of the apartment complex. But rather than opening her door Kelly sank down next to the car, her back against it.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I asked her.

"I... I don't think I can drive," she told me.

"I hope you don't expect Reves to!" *I would have said me, but this is funnier.*

"No, of course not."

*Not even a giggle? It's worse than I thought.* I waited a moment and dropped Reves' harness, squatting down next to her and taking her hands. "What's wrong?" *She's trembling.*

"What's wrong?" she managed, not quite manic but her voice was changing. "What's wrong? Someone just tried to kill us, Tayna! How are you not freaked out about that?"

"Oh, that." *Yeah, I could see how that would concern her.* "It's not the first time it's happened to me."

"What?" She must have been staring at me, but of course my magic just told me she was there, not where she was looking.

"Well, maybe that's an exaggeration but I've been in plenty of hairy situations in my life. You have to understand, I've lived my entire life in fear of being discovered as non-human. Oh sure I look more human than most, so I'm not worried about my glamour failing and showing I have backwards facing feet or bird's wings. But it's always a danger. And the kind of attention I attract from men, well, I was ten years old when world war two ended. Attitudes haven't changed that much since then, believe me. I'm good looking, so I must be a whore, right? Anything I wear is a come on, being friendly is an invitation, and saying I'm pretty means I should jump into bed with you. And the man is always believed, but never the woman. Why do you think my parents said I needed to learn how to defend myself? My mother knew, she lived through the same thing."

"That's horrible!"

"Yes," I agreed. "It is. I've had to dissuade any number of eager young men who thought they had a right to me. When I fought back that just made them respond in kind, forcing me to use magic against them in fear of my life." I sighed, these were not pleasant memories. "But my years have given me a perspective you don't have. And that helps me stay calm in situations like this."

"You are three times my age, I guess. God, I'm like a baby to you!"

"More like a very energetic teenager. Kelly, listen to me. I know, learning about magic, about me, nearly getting killed over a bracelet, all at once like this? It's a lot to take in, and it's not fair to you. But I'm going to be at your side until we figure this whole thing out. I'll help you navigate this new world you find yourself in, until you get your feet under you. Think of it this way; You're starting your very own hero's journey now, and we all know refusing the call won't be possible. That artifact makes you a target, you have to figure out what it's for, what it can do, and how we can get it off you. Emeliata said it was possible, right? There were just certain steps we had to take. We'll take them, and you can go back to your old life of not having to worry about men with guns bursting in."

"How?"

"I have a few ideas about that, don't worry about it for now. Right now we need to get away from here. If those men had backups..." *Yeah, probably not the best idea to tell her that, she's freaked out enough, but it is a danger. I don't know how organized they are, but they seemed on the ball looking for the stupid thing. So this isn't over, not by a long shot. I need to calm her down not get her more worked up, but it is a real danger.*

"I'm shaking all over. I can't drive like this."

"I get it." *My first life and death situation wasn't pretty either. And I had Reves, obviously, I wasn't alone. Well, she's not going to be alone either. We'll get to the bottom of this and I'll keep you safe.* "I can offer two alternatives."

"With magic?"

"As it happens, yes. I can have Reves take us to my place. No one will know we're there," *Of course if that artifact can be tracked, it will lead them to us. But at least my place is far enough away it'll buy us some time.* "Or I can use mental magic on you to fortify your mind. You can process all this later."

"Your dog can do that?"

"Woof."

"It's like we were saying before. What magic can do, it does well, there's no substitute for it. It's just way more fragile than I would like to admit. You want to know the best way to clean your gutters or sharpen a knife? Get on the internet, that's what it's there for." *And porn.*

"Well, before we had planes I'm sure just wishing yourself somewhere could have been considered the power of a god."

"True. Not many non-humans can just wish themselves places and Reves can't exactly teach me how he does it but yeah, he can take us home."

"And the mental spell?"

"Easy. You want a short term solution to something, and I've studied the domain of magic that solution would fall under. Sure, I've got that in spades."

"I hear you. Which do you recommend?"

"Honestly, it's probably better to be more public. A hotel will have plenty of people around, I doubt these cultists will run through a place like that with guns. You can get some sleep, and I can make some calls."

"And it's better if we don't lead them to your place," she admitted. "Right now the only people that saw you are dead. They don't know you're involved. I don't want them targeting your place like they did mine. Trashing it again and again looking for this."

*Wow. Even in the state she's in she's thinking about me. How about that?* "Okay. So mental magic it is?"

There was silence.

"Uh, if you're nodding your head or something I can't see it."

"Oh, sorry. Yes, do it. Cast your spell on me, I guess."

*Oh, I'm planning to.* "Very well." I gathered my will, shaping it into magic as I touched her. "Mental Fortitude."

There was another moment of silence.

"Wait, that's it?"

"What's it?"

"That was magic? You just touched me. There was no light show or anything."

"Sorry, I don't know light or illusion magic so that's all you get."

"What a crock. I get a spell cast on me for the first time ever and it's like nothing even happened."

*Why would it though? Creating any kind of effect like magical circles you sometimes see in movies would be a waste of energy. At least, from what other people have told me what magic users are doing in film when they cast spells. Where would that energy come from? How would it be focused into visible wavelength light instead of say x-rays or gamma radiation? No, this is really the only logical way for magic to express itself. Silently, without fanfare, doing exactly what is asked of it in the most efficient way possible.* "Wait, something did happen though, right? How do you feel?"

"I guess I feel better," she admitted, getting up. "It's not as bad. It was like these thoughts were pressing in on me before, you know. But now it's like those feelings have backed off. Huh. Is this what

being you is like, having almost ninety years of experience to draw on? You have a problem, but you've had lots of problems in your life. This one too will get solved somehow."

"Something like that."

"Okay, I think I'm okay to drive. Thanks. I can break down later, we do need to get out of here. Get in."

"You got it."

So we headed to a nearby hotel, but not *that* nearby if you get the picture. It wouldn't do to have more cult members wondering where we went, and start checking nearby hotels. Not when we could go another twenty or thirty miles without even thinking about it and leave them that many more to have to check before they found us. Neither of us spoke, I was concentrating on two spells at this point and Kelly needed time to process what she had just been though. But we parked, checked in, and went up to our room without incident.

"I'm going to drop the spell," I told her. "Are you prepared?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," she reported.

I did so, then waited a moment. "Are you okay?"

"Honestly? No. It's going to take months before I'm anything even close to okay. That guy shot me. He just smashed his way into my home, and with hardly a thought he pointed his weapon at me and pulled the trigger. I don't even know how I'm still alive."

"The artifact must protect you? It's the only thing I can think of. The bullets hit you, bounced off, and that's how they ended up in the ceiling." *Would have been hilarious if the bullets bounced back exactly the way they had come and he wound up shooting himself. But sadly the human body has lots of curves, and hers is no exception. So they probably just bounced off her at random.*

"Wait, I'm bulletproof now?"

"Possibly. But until we know exactly how the magic has been set up, let's hold off on you declaring to the world that you're Supergirl. But evidence suggests yes, so take your silver linings where you can find them." *I doubt you would just be immune to guns, so you're probably under some kind of very strong protection spell. It would explain why I felt the magic from so far away. But why that magic on the artifact? If only they had come ten minutes later we might know now.*

"You know, it's weird that there aren't more 'Batmen' in the world. You know, non-human types that roam the streets at night, using their magic and being super heroes. I mean come on, if I had magic? I would totally be out there as a super hero."

"That would be... extremely problematic. For everyone involved, actually." *We've only just started to get the really old members of our community to realize what cameras are, and accept the fact they're everywhere. They can't just stalk and murder humans anymore for fun, profit, or food. They have to actually find a place in society and behave themselves. It's a long leap to then getting them to use their abilities to actually help people.*

"Yeah, I guess. So what now? I doubt I'll get much sleep, I'm way too keyed up."

"You must have more questions. Ask them, and I'll see what I can answer."

Many of her questions were about me. My life. Where I was when we landed on the moon, the places I had been to, that sort of thing. Some questions were about what non-humans were real and which were just stories. She seemed very disappointed to learn the closest thing to real Mermaids were shapeshifting dolphins and intelligent octopuses. I wasn't sure if she was deliberately avoiding questions relating to magic or just that she didn't know what questions to ask, but finally she sat back on the bed. For my part I was pacing around the room like a caged animal. I wanted to get out and run, or swim, or maybe do some other pleasurable activity with a willing partner. The stolen life energy wouldn't last me long, and I was basically wasting it, but I couldn't just leave her here alone, could I?

"I'm probably just scratching the surface tonight, aren't I?" she asked.

"I can't say that's a wrong interpretation, no. I mean think about how ignorant you are, no offense, of other cultures. It's not a slight, you just have no *need* to know about them. People in other parts of the world are just as ignorant about your culture. Now you're trying to figure out the culture of not other lands, but in effect aliens. Aliens that have always been here, and have a power you can't hope to possess. We think differently than you, have different values, heck some like Ghouls only see you as food even now. Each group of us has our own culture, our own values, layered atop the cultures and values of the places we live. I'm still as American as apple pie, if you couldn't tell." *I mean could my profession be any more American? I think only if it somehow involved guns.*

"I could tell!" she said with a laugh.

"So there you have it. The world isn't what you thought, and that's going to take some figuring out. Plus the reason for your coming into this world." I tapped the artifact.

"Yeah." She took a deep breath. "So what exactly did you do to those two? I know you couldn't see them, but like the cop said they looked like they were dead a long time."

"I stole their life energy. When I was first being trained my master said adding fire or electricity to my strikes could make me a far more effective combatant. But a friend of mine showed me another technique. Using the magic of spirit I can hit someone and absorb some of their life energy. Because I'm so fast I can hit them a *lot*. So a regular person doesn't have much of a chance against me. Things from my side of the fence, that can throw magic at me from a distance? Yeah, that's a problem for me, but if I can get up close to something it's basically over for them."

"I see. So you ate their souls? Do souls exist?"

"No, no, at least I don't think so. No, in fact I'm sure this magic doesn't touch the soul. Necromancy exists, if I used necromancy magic in place of spirit I could probably sheer pieces off people's souls. But supposedly angels exist-"

"Seriously?"

"I've heard stories. I've never encountered one, and I hope I never do. I wouldn't want one tracking me down for doing something like that. I have no idea what it would mean, absorbing souls like I absorb life energy. Right now I feel like I have three times as much energy as I usually do. That's why I can't sit still. That's all."

"Wow. I have only scratched the surface. Angels, but that means..." She shook herself. "Never mind, I can think about that later. However you managed it, you took out two people with guns, by yourself."

"I got the drop on them, but yeah."

"So you were totally holding back against those three at the audition."

I barked a laugh. "Oh, you have no idea. If I had just smashed them one after another without any effort at all, it really would have looked suspicious." *And it was daytime at the time so I was dragged down a little.* "So I at least gave them a chance. Why? You paying me more now that you know how good I really am?"

"Oh no, you should have negotiated harder at the start if you wanted more money. You have to know your own worth, after all."

"I suppose I do." *And I don't need the money, so there.*

We were silent for a moment. "I don't think I can absorb any more tonight. You said you could make some calls? Maybe figure out why those people are after this artifact thing?"

"I can. I have a cousin that runs a shop in Rochester, NY selling magical components, and sometimes magical items. I'm sure she'll know someone we can talk to about this. Meanwhile I'll look online for mentions of this cult, and try to write down everything I got from that guy's brain before he, uh, put a hole in it."

"That sounds reasonable." She started stripping her clothes off. I could tell because my magic suddenly told me her shirt and pants were no longer on her body but on the floor next to her. "Come to bed when you can. And thanks for trying to explain all this to me."

“Hey, you’ve been thrust into this, if you just ran without knowing anything you would be in far more danger. We’ll figure this out, I promise.”

“But you stayed, even though it’s not your problem. You can still get shot, right?”

“Well, yeah.” *Given my training and the magic I have going all the time it would be difficult to get the drop on me, but someone could get lucky and put a bullet into me. They won’t bounce off me.*

“So you’re in danger too. Don’t think I don’t appreciate it.”

“Maybe I’m just hoping you’ll throw yourself into my arms with wild abandon to work off all this tension.”

“Maybe,” she allowed. “But I’m pretty sure you know I’m not wearing anything right now but you still are, and you got your phone out. You’re going to make the call. If what you said was true you would be over here right now. But you’re still respecting my wishes to take it slow. I appreciate that too.”

“It takes an iron will to perform magic,” I told her. “Don’t think it didn’t cross my mind.”

“Better solve this fast then, so you can get your reward...” She turned off the light (I heard the click of the switch) and slipped into bed. “Good night.”

“Night.”

I went into the bathroom so I wouldn’t disturb her and told my phone “call Linnea’s shop.”

The phone rang only a few times when a deep voice said into my ear “yeah?”

*Shoot, what was her brother’s name? Something about a rabbit. Br’er Rabbit? Usagi? No that’s Japanese for rabbit, he doesn’t have a Japanese name. Hoppers? Wait I remember.* “Hey Peder, your sister around? It’s Tayna, her cousin.”

“She’s here. Wait a second.”

I heard the phone get muffled and he bellowed her name, and the phone was passed over.

“Hello?”

“Hi Linnea, it’s Tayna, your cousin. Remember me?”

“No?”

“Oh, uh, we’ve known each other for years? We learned a lot of our magic together? Our last family reunion wasn’t that long ago, come on Linnea.”

“Wait, do you have red hair? Great body? Kinda tall, killer looks?”

“You just described every female Troll that ever lived.”

She laughed. “I did, didn’t I? I know who you are, Tayna. What’s up? Weird to hear from you like this.”

“I have a bit of a problem here, was hoping you could maybe introduce me to someone that can help. I know your store does a lot of business with different sorts of magic users.”

“True. What’s up?”

“Basically, I met a human recently that got her hands, accidentally, on some kind of magical relic. It won’t come off, and the person that lost it showed up like an hour ago to explain what it did and what she had gotten herself into. Then someone threw a grenade into the place, blew her up, and two more smashed into the place through the windows, nearly killed the both of us. It’s only because the bullets bounced off the girl that’s she’s even still alive.”

There was a moment of silence.

“You still there?”

“Uh, yeah, I’m here. Is this some kind of prank?”

“No, it’s what happened!”

“You’re okay?”

“Never laid a hand on me.”

“That’s good. So you want to know about the artifact?”

“And how to get it off. The lady said it was possible, but died before giving us any specifics.”

“You’re actually in luck. I do know a guy.”

“That’s great! We can head to your store in the morning, Reves has seen it-”

“I’ll be closed and asleep by then. You know that.”

“Crud, I’m on the human schedule at the moment, so I forgot.”

“It’s okay. You can come now, he doesn’t live too far away and I’m sure he’ll be happy to come down here.”

“Well Kelly’s trying to get some sleep. I’ve been hours trying to calm her down and answer her questions. I hate to get her up again, she’s just laid down.” *And taken her clothes off.*

“I see. And you can’t just bring it because you said it won’t come off. Right, right. He doesn’t sleep much from what he’s told me. He would probably be able to come to you, in the morning. You’ll just need to get me a picture.”

“Picture of what?”

“Wherever you are, of course.”

*He must be able to teleport too?* “You know I can’t work a camera...”

“Oh, right. Uh, okay where are you in general? I think he can manage something.”

I told her the name of the hotel, and the room we were in on the sixth floor.

“Got it. I’ll give him a call now and see if he can come. You can hang around the hotel tomorrow, right?”

“We can stay until eleven, yeah.”

“Great. I’ll tell him to come before then.”

“Thanks Linnea, I owe you one.”

“Don’t get killed. Tell me all about your adventure and we’ll be even.”

“Deal!”

“Call and let me know when it’s over, okay?”

“I will. Thanks.”

“Bye!”

“Bye.”

My next task was to open the voice memo app on my phone and dictate everything I remembered about the cult. There was something about a seal that would soon be broken, and promises kept, and general meetings, and the name. Deogen. I tried an internet search about him, but as usual just got the legends of a dark being that was often seen in forests. *Yeah, along with everything else that isn’t entirely human. But what does it mean?*

With that done I left the bathroom and sat on the floor next to the bed. Before I went to sleep it was my duty to my “client” to make sure we would be safe here. I couldn’t put any kind of protection onto the room, I had some skill at protection magic but using it meant I would have to stay up all night maintaining whatever spell I came up with, so I had to do the next best thing. I decided what I wanted to know and sent my magic into the world. In my head I suddenly knew something:

*In this room you sleep and wake very little chance you take.*

*Of being found by dogs of war now drawing closer to your door.*

So I figured they were still on our trail, but there wasn’t much risk of us staying here the right. Just to be safe I got up, wedged the chair under the door handle, checked the windows were locked, and asked Reves to sleep near the door as well. He went over and lay in front of it, so I thanked him and snuggled up to Kelly to try and get some sleep.

She seemed calmer the next morning, and we ordered breakfast up to the room. She had more questions about what sort of things I personally could do with magic, just so she had an idea of what

was reasonable for her to expect, when we both jumped at a knock from the opposite direction we expected. She made her way over to the window, after I told her the last people didn't knock, they just smashed. This might be our guy. It was.

“You're not going to believe this,” Kelly told me, “but it looks like Iron Man is hanging outside our window.”

## Chapter 11

I meet Iron Man and he figures part of the artifact out

Where: The hotel

When: August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021 9:02 AM

“Who?” I asked.

“The guy in the armor from the movies. Iron Man. Red and gold- sorry, forget I said that. Some kind of flying armor.”

“Flying armor, huh?” I went over to the window, and my magic did tell me a figure was out there. I sensed a lot of magic too, almost as much as was on the artifact. “You’re right, there’s someone magical out there.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute.” I heard her wake her phone up and start typing. “Yeah, I thought I heard that on the news. That’s why I asked you last night about super heroes. There’s been news stories lately of someone that appeared in a flying armor and was doing good deeds, then vanished again. Mostly at night.”

“I guess this is our guy. Huh, she really does know the right guy it seems. What’s he doing out there?”

“Just looking at us. Oh, he’s pointing to the ground. I’ll give him a thumbs up. Yeah, he’s heading down there now. Looks like it’s time to check out.”

“Yeah.” *Who exactly did she send us, that could build something like that?*

So we headed downstairs, settled the bill, while the hotel staff scurried around trying not to stare at the armored figure that had come in. I heard and felt him clanking over to us, my magic telling me a great metal *something* was now next to me. “You must be Linnea’s cousin,” he said. “I can see the resemblance.”

“That’s me,” I told him. *Might as well keep my cool, this is no big deal right? So it’s armor or something, who cares? It’s on my side, and all the staff will have a cool story to tell their family tonight. Hey, I saw a real Iron Man today, and these two ladies were all like, hey what’s up? No way! Yes way!* “Thanks for coming.”

“Sure thing. She’s helped me out in the past, it’s no big deal. Let’s head somewhere quiet we can talk.”

“Quiet. Right.” *Because a bunch of people aren’t going to track his every move.*

But we followed him to the back of the place, at least somewhat away from prying eyes. “Is that armor real?” Kelly asked.

“Touch it, see for yourself.”

The two got closer together, she must have been touching it. “It’s real metal, all right. What in the world?”

“What else could I do?” the figure told her. “Once I learned about Iron Man and figured I could probably build something very similar I had to try it. And now here we are. I can hopefully give the world a sense of, well, hope, again, that someone really is out there looking out for people. You may have noticed some erosion of trust in the typical institutions of late?”

“Sure.” *But that’s because of their behavior, the behavior of individuals that should know better and act better. Those places could be redeemed, if they wanted to be by the people working there.*

“That’s where I come in. But enough about that, you’re having some artifact troubles? Let’s focus on that before the hordes show up.”

“I really want to know more about- never mind, we can talk about that later. It’s this here.”

“I see.” There was a pause, he must have been looking it over. “Do you mind coming back to my workshop? I can get out of this and take a closer look at it.”

“Whatever you need to do in order to help.”

“Great. Bring your car back here and we’ll get going. I can open a portal big enough for a car to fit though.”

“Bring the car?”

*Portal?*

“Sure, unless you want to leave it there? You can always come back for it when we’re done.”

“Do you have a picture of your lab?” I asked.

“I... could get one,” he told me a bit hesitantly.

“Fine. Let’s drive back to your apartment,” I told Kelly. “Park the car there, they would have no interest in that. If this guy can show Reves here a picture of the place he can take us there. Then we can just go directly back to your apartment when the police give us the all clear.”

“Sounds good to me. Iron Man?”

“Sure, give me the address and I’ll meet you there. Reves must be this dog?”

“Yup, Reves, meet Iron Man. He’s a black dog normally, he’s taken his public persona at the moment.”

“Nice to meet you little buddy! A black dog huh, I know a vampire who hangs around with one of those.”

“That’s right.”

“Nice. Yeah, he’s been handy in the past for getting us places. That’ll be fine.”

She give him the address, and he silently lifted off the ground and shot into the air. “See you soon!”

“See, a super hero!” Kelly hissed at me. “I told you!”

“I guess you were right. That suit is very magical, he must be a master to fly it around both during the day and where a lot of people can see. I wouldn’t want to risk it.” *Is the world changing again? Are young non-humans taking their cues from the fantasy of the super hero and emulating that? But he can’t be that young, to have built an armor like that. Right?*

“So he is the person for the job then?”

“Looks that way. Come on, we shouldn’t keep him waiting.”

We parked the car at her apartment and the man in the suit landed next to us again. “Okay, here you go, I got a picture the place.” He knelt down by Reves who gave a woof and a doggy sneeze.

“He’s shaking his head,” Kelly told us. “What does that mean?”

“I’ll ask him.” I put the thought projection spell on Reves and asked him “What’s up, big guy?” *It’s that big guy. Don’t know if I can take him with us. He looks heavy.*

“Oh, that’s a problem. Reves says you’re probably too heavy for him to manage.”

“So open a hole in space that leads to the destination. Remember you can do anything relating to moving from one place to another with teleportation magic, so be creative with it. You don’t have to drag me along, I can just step through it like a doorway.”

*What’s he talking about?*

Herman explained more about what he wanted, coaching it in terms of teleportation magic which I had never studied. But Reves finally seemed to get it, and managed to open a hole in the air just as Herman had suggested.

“You did great,” he told Reves after we stepped through. “I should look into getting a black dog, way easier than making infinity stones to get around. Well, come in, workshop is over here. I’ll get out of the armor and we can see about your little problem.”

*Make what?*

He led us inside and I let Reves go to sniff around. The armor clanked over to the far side of the building and started making whirring noises and such, so I figured he was taking it off.

“This place is amazing,” breathed Kelly. “Is that Thor’s hammer?”

“That it is. Just finished it up recently, in fact. Oh, that’s Meowvis.”

“Hello,” said another voice. Something had come over to us, my magic telling me it was a metallic shape.

“Is that a robot cat?” Kelly asked.

“That’s right,” the thing said. “I help run the place, I’m actually an AI.”

“No way!”

“Way.”

“In that tiny body?”

“Of course not. I’m in the rack of computers over there. This body is controlled wirelessly.”

“Amazing. Are you magic too?”

“Partly,” they said. “It’s complicated.”

“I would guess that’s the case.”

“What is all this stuff?” I asked. My magic told me various pieces of machinery were scattered around the room, which was quite large. I knocked a fist on the nearest piece of equipment.

“Every tool known to man,” she guessed. “There’s a forge, a lathe, I think those are 3D printers, a whole row of them. I have no idea what that is you’re next to.”

“CNC machine,” the man called over.

“Sure, if you say so. Are you getting all this, Tayna? There’s Captain America’s shield hanging on the wall, an avengers arcade game, of course, a rack of computers sitting next to a huge screen, a platform where Iron Man is disrobing, for lack of a better term. And all sorts of machinery.”

“I’m getting some of it,” I admitted. My magic now said the large machine in front of me was a CNC machine, where before it was ‘big piece of machinery.’ That’s how it worked, magic wasn’t exactly intelligent, so I had to be told what something was before it would be specific about it later. But once I did know what something was, my magic could tell me. “This sure sounds like the place we need to be to figure out the artifact.”

“Yeah, your cousin really came through. Oh. Wait, you’re a Dwarf!”

“I’m a Troll,” I reminded her.

“Not you, silly. Our host! I recognize the feet!”

“I’m not going to give you my real name,” said the dwarf now coming towards us. “Bad enough you’re seeing the inside of the lab, but I guess I can trust you that far, given who asked for my help. I guess just call me Tony for now. Nice to meet you. Sorry for the delay.”

“I’m Kelly, this is Tayna but I’m sure you knew that.”

“I did. Now, let’s see this artifact giving you so much trouble.”

“Take a look.”

Tory took a long look at the item, exclaiming over the craftsmanship and magic. “This is old,” he told us. “And it’s really radiating magic. I’m not sure I can tell all the functions of it just by feeling it out, there’s too much of it in such a small area.”

“We know it made me bulletproof.”

“Did it now? There is another way, if we can shine a light on things. Here, come over to this workbench.” He led her over to a bench where there was a light and magnifier, whatever that did.

“Right, see here?”

“Yes, the writing on the disk at my palm. Does it mean something?”

“It sure does, that’s how the magic is carried. Lucky for you I’ve been digitizing my books, and a historian I know has been doing the same. Meowvis, get the drone over here and see if you can get some pictures of this. I’m guessing, ah, yes, there’s more if we flip these over. Going to be hard to get an angle on these bones but we’ll have to see what we can do. If we can figure out the symbols that have been used here, we can figure out what the item does. We can do that quite quickly as Meowvis can comb through the records a lot faster than we can.”

“That’s great!”

I heard a buzzing sound and my magic told me a flying thing was coming near us. “What’s that?”

“A drone. You know, a flying camera basically,” Tony told me.

“Oh!” My magic now told me the thing was a drone, so I guess it would recognize others in the future. “I’ve never been close enough to one to hear it.”

“Meowvis controls it too, and as it has a camera they can see the symbols and start looking for them in the books we have available.” The two of them flipped over the bones and did their best to get the symbols on the inside of the bracelet by holding it away from her wrist. With that done they went over to the computer and compared the symbols to what Meowvis was displaying on the screen. “Yeah, that’s it,” he decided. “Start the search.”

“Rodger, Rodger.”

“So it shouldn’t take long to-”

“Search completed.”

“-finish the... Never mind. What have you got for me?”

“I’ll explain verbally for the sake of Tayna, who I take it is not sighted?”

“Correct,” I answered.

“Very well. I’ll display it too. The large disk at the center has to do with sealing magic. Sealing a passageway through the astral plane between this world and Otherworld, by the looks of it.”

“I’ll, uh, hold my questions until the end,” Kelly announced.

“Very well. The bracelet has runes of protection carved on it, so that’s what is most likely to be making you bulletproof, as you’ve already experienced. No purely physical force should be able to harm you. Near the thumb are runes of creation, though creating what I’m not sure. On your index finger are runes of battle, probably making you a more effective combatant. Upon your middle finger are runes of body, those are fairly obvious, you should be much stronger than you would be normally. On the ring finger is a straightforward fire rune, so you should be able to catch something on fire. And on your little finger are runes of kinetics, so if you smacked something I think it would fly away from you. There are smaller runes on the chains holding the whole thing together but they’re tiny.”

“Yes, I wouldn’t want to do work that delicate,” Tony told us. “Someone must have worked on this for a year, to bind so much magic into such a small object.”

“It is far more efficient than the armor,” Meowvis agreed. “From what I can tell, they are runes of perception, making it easy to forget if you’re not clearly looking for it, and something about binding. I’m not familiar with the rest, they are either too small to be clearly visible or not recorded in the books we have thus far digitized.”

“Wow.”

“I’m sensing a theme,” I told them.

“Yes, it seems to be focused on combat,” Tony agreed. “But to what end?”

“At least it doesn’t sound like a stray word will cause anything to explode.”

“Catch on fire though,” he reminded me. “We don’t know how that’s triggered.”

“How can we know?” Kelly asked. “I don’t want to accidentally set something on fire!”

“I do know a scholar, a historian,” Tony told us. “He works at a nearby library. We can go see him, see if he knows anything about this.”

“You’ve already been such a huge help. Thank you!”

“Don’t mention it.”

“The ones you aren’t sure of, they must be what’s keeping it on your wrist, Kelly.”

“Yeah. See, it was open at the bottom before, that’s how I put it on. But after that it turned into a solid ring.”

“Really? That’s amazing!” Tony exclaimed. “It actually changed shape?”

“Yeah.”

“How about that?”

“Emeliata, that’s the Tuatha that had it before Kelly,” I explained, “said it was an anti-theft feature. More like an anti-loss feature if you ask me, but whatever. I guess she was supposed to be wearing it all the time, but did whatever she was supposed to be doing with it and got it off. Then just got lazy and didn’t wear it, hence it getting sold accidentally.”

“And now you’re stuck with it?”

“Exactly,” Kelly agreed. “But hey, because of it I got to meet the real Iron Man, and got introduced to a whole new world.”

“Oh, don’t get him started,” Meowvis told us. “He’ll sing you the whole song, believe me.”

“I would,” Tony agreed. “I totally would.”

“No time for a song,” I told them. “Let’s see this historian of yours. I’d feel a lot better if we could figure out exactly how to trigger all the magic on that thing so she doesn’t do it accidentally.”

“Right. I’ll go make a call.”

“I already did,” Meowvis told us. “The moment you mentioned him. He’s in, and expecting us soon.”

“Great! What would I do without you, Meowvis? Okay, we can take my car, no sense putting the whole armor on again.”

Kelly gave a shout as my magic told me something was flying across the room. “What in the world?”

“What? Did you think it was just a prop?”

“That thing actually works?” she gasped.

“Course it works. You don’t make Thor’s hammer without enchanting it, and I don’t go anywhere without protection. The shotgun is a little harder to explain than a ‘movie prop’ so...”

“I wondered about that. Why does the armor have a shotgun attached to it?”

He sighed. “Because I am a slave to reality, same as everybody else. Those energy beams on the real Iron Man suit may do whatever the real Tony needs them to do, but making something like that, even with magic, would be very tricky. Easier to just rely on what already exists, the plain old, reliable, shotgun. Maybe one day...”

“I guess so. Okay, let’s go.”

We piled into his car and it smoothly accelerated away from his house.

“Is this car electric?” Kelly asked.

“That’s right. I enchanted the battery pack to never run down with runes of electricity. So I don’t have to plug it in or put gas into it. Nice huh?”

“Very nice. Does the suit run the same way or is it powered by magic directly? I mean I assume there’s computers in it, like in the movie, so Meowvis can talk to you and show you things.”

“Sure, like maps when I’m flying. But no, it’s the same thing, the drone and Meowvis’ cat body too. They’re all just magic batteries. After all, nothing stops the governments of the world from making armor like that today. We’ve got the robotic systems to make it move, heck I’ve seen dancing robots, flipping robots, dog robots, the works. They could make armor that made soldiers stronger and faster, not too difficult. Meowvis helps run it normally, the AI smooths out the motion, so their suits wouldn’t move as nicely as mine. But that could be overcome one way or another. The problem is powering them. We hardly have the infrastructure to charge electric cars yet, can you imagine trying to keep a bunch of suits like that powered in the field? It would be impossible. Solve that problem, and you’ll have armies of those suits running around the world, mark my words. Not flying, that’s magic too, physics is against that ever working on a purely technological basis. Though one reason I am flying around is to spur research in that area. If someone thinks I’ve figured it out in my garage maybe governments will pour money into it and actually figure out a way to do it.”

“It’s a multi-faceted plan,” the car speakers said.

“The... Meowvis is here, too?” Kelly asked.

“Yeah, I was able to hook him in to the onboard computer, and he’s wirelessly attached to the car. He could drive it and honestly in the daytime I’m glad he is. I’m not a very good driver.”

*I know that feeling.*

He went on. “Normally it’s just lane assist but they’re a lot smarter than the car itself. So I turned it into a self driving car in that way.”

“Amazing. Are all dwarves as technologically savvy as you?”

He barked a laugh. “Hardly. Most won’t even touch it, given how it interferes with magic. I’ve studied for years how to make the two get along, it wasn’t easy. Most don’t want to put in the effort.”

“Too bad.”

“It really is. The things we could make...”

*He really sounds down about it.*

“Well, here we are,” he announced. “Let me find a place to park and we can go see Kieth.”

## Chapter 12

We figure out what the artifact can do and what it needs to do

Where: the library

When: after getting to the library

We walked through the library building towards the back, and Tony knocked on a door. A moment later it opened and my magic told me there was a crowded space beyond him full of books.

“Hey Tony!” he greeted the man.

“How did- Kieth, how are you?”

“Good thanks. Please, come in. Huh, going to be a bit crowded with the dog in here but we’ll manage, we’ll manage.”

We filed in and found a place to stand. My magic told me there were books everywhere, basically this small office was jammed full of shelves and on those shelves were books. Probably of every type and description but my spell just told me “it’s a book” about a thousand times. “Everyone this is Keith, the historian I mentioned. Keith, allow me to introduce Kelly, the person who has unfortunately gotten caught up in this, and Tayna, cousin of Linnea who I think you know.”

“Oh, everyone around here knows her. Welcome ladies, I hope I can be of some assistance to you.”

“Anything you can tell me about this would be great,” Kelly told him.

“Let’s take a look. May I?”

“Of course.”

“I see, I see, interesting. Look at the craftsmanship on this!”

“I know. It seems simple at a distance but you can really tell a master smith worked on it.”

*You can?*

“All right then. When you called I dug around for books of lost artifacts, as this probably would have been considered. As it was owned by someone and not in the public eye. So grab a book from this stack here and start looking through it. Hopefully we’ll find a depiction of the item and can get some clues from the name or story associated with it what we’re dealing with here.”

“Sounds boring,” I told them.

“Ah, yes, Tayna was it? I’m sorry, this part is probably not going to be very interesting for you.”

“If it’s all right with you I’ll just go take a walk around outside?”

“Of course, of course, can you find your way out again?”

“Naturally.”

“Fine. Do you carry a phone? We can call you when we’ve found something.”

“I’ll turn it on.” I got it out and did so. “Come on Reves, let’s go for a walk.”

We walked around the area for some time before the phone rang, and I answered it. “Hello.”

“Hi Tayna. We found it, come on back.”

“That’s great news! I’ll head back now.”

“Well, it’s news, anyway. You’ll see.”

“Or will I?”

“You’re right, probably not, but I have no idea what to say otherwise.”

I laughed. “No worries. Be back soon.”

“Bye.”

“Come on Reves, let’s go see what they discovered.”

“So what we discovered,” Keith said when I returned, “is that this item is the Bane of Deogen, which hasn’t been seen by our organization for more than a thousand years. The book describes the item exactly, and the powers it bestows matches up perfectly.”

“So that much checks out,” Kelly told me, sounding a bit shocked again. “You said something about a cult of Deogen, right?”

“Yes, it’s the name I took off that guy that attacked us. So it does relate to him, no wonder the cult wants it now that it’s not in Emeliata’s hands anymore.”

“That’s how we were sure we got the right item.”

“But how do we get it off you?”

“By completing the ritual it was created for and sealing Deogen away from our world for another year,” Keith cut in. “Apparently, the sealing part of the artifact was created to close the passageways that exist between Deogen’s prison in Otherworld through the astral plane to our world.”

“Those were mentioned before,” Kelly broke in. “Can I finally get an explanation as to what all that nonsense means?”

“Certainly, certainly. Otherworld is what we call the outer ring of reality, if you will. Containing Heaven, Hell, the fairy realms, it’s basically the home of beings great and terrible. Between this portion of reality and our world is the astral plane. Think of it like those dolls that stack inside each other. Our reality is the core, then you pass through the rather thin layer of the astral, and reach Otherworld. Moving ‘out’ from there if you will reality becomes less and less as we recognize it to finally be completely unrecognizable. Tuatha live somewhere ‘nearby’ the Astral, so their lives aren’t that different from ours. But move further out and soon you would hardly recognize even basic laws of physics, it’s that different from what we know. Do you understand?”

“I guess that makes sense. So the cult wants the item so we don’t use it to once again seal their boss’ passageway like the last thousand years?”

“That’s a fair guess.”

“But who is this Deogen, anyway? Tayna, you said you didn’t find much about him, right? I guess if it’s a thousand years since he’s been around that makes some sense.”

“Well apparently Deogen is a powerful spirit that was defeated and sealed up somewhere in Otherworld. But every so often the walls between his prison and our world thin a bit. To be absolutely sure he never escapes back to our reality this artifact was created to seal the holes. As I’ve heard no reports of a shadowy monster rampaging around I can only assume this Tuatha you met was performing this duty year after year. And now, sadly, that duty falls to you.”

“Wait, hold on! I can’t just do this forever like she was, I’m just a human. She said she was almost two thousand years old, I’ll be lucky to live to a hundred!”

“Yes, it’s a problem,” Keith agreed. “The artifact doesn’t seem to have any life extending magic, it was made for Tuatha who didn’t have to worry about that in the first place. My advice would be to perform the rituals, drain the item of the sealing magic for the time being, thus allowing you to remove it and give it to someone who will be around a thousand years from now. They will have to become the new protector of the Bane.”

“Hey Tayna, what are you doing for the next thousand years?”

“Why does it have to be me?”

“Because you’re the only person I know to give it to? Unless Tony here wants to wear it?”

“It would look fabulous on me,” Tony agreed, “but I’m not signing up for that either. It sounds like a huge responsibility, and I’m over here trying to be Iron Man. I already have one self imposed responsibility, to bring hope back to the world in the form of the first real super hero. I mean I guess it is about protecting people, but it’s also so secret no one knows about it. That doesn’t suit me at all.”

“You see?”

“I’ll think about it. She did say she didn’t have any kids right?”

“Exactly, she was going to get around to it in a few hundred years or so.”

“Crap. I better get her mansion and all her stuff if I’m going to be her from now on!”

“I’ll look into her estate,” Keith told us. “You know where you bought the item, yes?”

“I can give you the address, yes.”

“Fine. Maybe she has a will, in case she was killed in an accident. The item would surely be mentioned, perhaps we can find the next guardian that way.”

“I hope so. Perhaps another Tuatha would be willing to take up the mantle once we explain the situation to them? Someone from her family, perhaps? Meanwhile, do you know any more about what it does? Or how to avoid triggering it?”

“The Bane is said to bestow the power of sealing upon the wearer, and the ability to combat anything that finds its way through the gap before the seal is completed. Smaller, lesser spirits have an easier time coming through smaller holes, so the guardian has to be prepared to find minor spirits at the various sites. To that end legend tells of the wearer being blessed with a blazing sword, and the ability to throw back foes with a touch. So if that’s true, we must simply discover what the command word is to call forth the sword. The other functions of the artifact seem automatic, and need no command word to activate.”

“It must be fairly simple,” Tony told us. “Just make a fist and say the word ‘sword’ to start.”

“I can try it.”

“Wait!” Keith shouted. “It’s supposed to be a *flaming* sword! Perhaps we should do this trial outside? Away from my extremely valuable and much more importantly for this discussion flammable books packed in this extremely tiny office?”

“Oh yeah,” she agreed sheepishly. “That’s probably a good idea.”

So we went outside and again headed around back, there was a book drop back there so people were driving through but it wasn’t like the front parking lot with people walking around into the various stores that were nearby. Keith said this was probably fine, no one would bother us back here and to go ahead and try calling the sword out. Kelly took a deep breath. “Sword!” Nothing happened. “Blade! Knife! Edge! Weapon! Uh...”

“Oh dear,” Keith said. “That could be a problem.”

“Now what?” I asked.

“Wait, this was made a thousand years ago, right?” Tony asked.

“Correct,” Keith said.

“Where?”

“Ah, I see what you mean. Probably not an English speaking country, to be sure. Here, let me look up a few things.”

And so finally Kelly held up a large flaming sword, after discovering the trigger word of “sword” but in Hebrew which was “כֶּרֶב.” She was swinging it around, saying it was fairly light and easy to use, but that she didn’t really know anything about swords.

“And there is little time for you to learn,” Keith told her seriously.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s the end of August, and so you need to figure out where the sites are and close them. Probably she already knew, so it was easy to jump from one to the next. You’ll have to figure out where they are so you can be ready to go there when they start tearing open. You’ll have about two weeks, trying to seal them before that it won’t be open enough for you to ‘grab onto’ metaphysically. And of course after that, well, it’ll be too late to seal it, the hole will be too wide.”

“And when is ‘too late’ in this case?”

“When else? October 31<sup>st</sup>.”

“Halloween.”

“Naturally. That’s the day the boundary between the worlds is the thinnest, and these passageways are no exception.”

“Hold on,” I interrupted. “You keep saying ‘sites’ and ‘they.’ It’s not just one site?”

"I would not count on there being just one," he agreed. "Though I have no evidence either way at this time. But I would rather give you a worst case scenario than make you despair later if you thought there was only one and learned differently later."

"But if these are 'tunnels' through this astral plane," Kelly protested, "how can there be? You can only put one tunnel through something."

"In the physical world, yes, but multiple paths can lead to the same destination between them. As I was starting to explain before, the astral and Otherworld don't really follow the same rules as we do. Think of his prison as a dark cave, and ever so slowly various passageways open up, shining a light inside the cave. He might choose any one of them to escape through, and thus enter our world at any number of locations."

"Marvelous."

"Indeed. For him. So all of them will have to be closed, and you can expect all of them to be guarded by these people that attacked you and random spirits that may have come through from the other side. This spirit probably has followers on his side, he would send them through to prepare the way and keep everyone on this side guessing which path he's going to take. And to answer your next question, no I don't know how many there might be, the record of the item doesn't say. It could be different every year, due to 'stresses' if you will on the curtain that is the astral plane so it tears in different places each time."

"Actually, my next question was what kind of alcohol do you have in that office? I need a drink."

He laughed, the fakest laugh that was ever laughed and then "No."

"Fine. Let's try to find Emeliata's will then, and-"

We all jumped as Kelly's phone rang, and she opened her hand, my magic telling me the sword vanished back into whatever magical energy it came from. "Hello? Yes, that's me. Uh huh. It is? Thank you." She hung the phone up. "The police are done with my apartment, I can go back there now."

"I'll handle that part," Kieth told us. "The will, not the apartment."

"Right. Let's get it cleaned up," I told her, "and sealed up as best we can. We'll need to find you another place to stay until we get that Bane off you. Probably a different hotel room every night. Sir Dwarf, can I employ your services to construct a safe that cannot be scryed upon?"

"Of course, I have one of those myself, as well as an item on the armor so it can't be tracked magically either. I know those runes well."

"If I am going to take possession of this thing once it's off, I'll want a secure place to put it. You have a month and a half-"

"I can have it done in a week or two."

"Great. Spare no expense. Keith, do you think you'll have something for us by tomorrow?"

"I don't see why not."

"So Reves can bring us back here. We can call and you can give us the all clear, we can walk around the place so he's seen it, and can go into an unoccupied hallway or whatever. If we find the will and it has a record of what we need, great. If there is no will or it doesn't, I'll use my magic to try and narrow down where the sites may be. After that we'll visit them, and start practicing the sword. I can, again, use my magic to at least be passable with a blade, so I can spar with you Kelly. We'll at least get you into shape for the coming Halloween. I'm guessing you can still be hurt by magic, these spirits that may come through before him will still be a danger to you. You'll be vulnerable to magic and they'll probably have it, you'll need to know how to defend yourself."

"I'm in, if you'll have me," Tony told us. "I can help at the sites, I mean. And anything else I can do to help."

"Oh, I'm sure an armored figure with a shotgun will be the last thing this cult is expecting. They'll know where the sites are, to welcome their lord and master back into the world. All the help we can get will be appreciated."

“Yeah, thank you,” Kelly told him. “I actually am feeling a little better about this now.”  
“Knowledge will do that,” Keith agreed. “Sounds like we have a plan.”

We all traded phone numbers and contact info, and “Tony” told us his real name was Herman. “I have to trust you,” he told us. “You’re basically the second member of the Avengers, after me. I don’t think you’ll betray me.”

“Your secret is safe with us,” Kelly told him proudly. “I *am* sort of a super hero now, huh? I’m optimized to do one thing, but it’s still important.”

“Darn right. Keith, keep in touch. If you find something out don’t hesitate to call. I can remove the anti-tracking part of the armor, if you want to stay at my place tonight ladies. We can keep it near you, that will throw off any pursuit as well as changing location will. Head back to the workshop after you take care of the- what am I saying? Why don’t I come with you and help with the apartment? I am pretty handy, after all and while I always have a work backlog, this is more important than making some costume piece for someone.”

“I don’t mind you tagging along,” I told him. *It’ll make our job easier.*

“Neither do I,” Kelly agreed. “Who knows when the landlord might get to repairing the damage?”

So we headed back to the apartment, stopping for lunch on the way, and Herman got to work repairing the door while we cleaned the place up. They had removed the bodies of course but otherwise left the place as it was. Lots of stuff in her living room was smashed up from the explosion, and she kept sighing as we swept up broken glass and scrubbed the carpets clean.

“I’ll probably just throw the couch out,” she decided. “Trying to get all the bloodstain off it, as well as seeing it day after day and knowing a lady died right here...”

“Hey, it’s okay,” I told her, coming over. She sounded pretty sad, and I could understand why. It was sad, that woman could have lived thousands of years more, but her life had been taken from her and for what? *So a bunch of insane humans could help bring back some horrible monster after a thousand years. How do they even still know about it? Why in the world would they want it back? It doesn’t make sense to me.* “This isn’t your fault. She was the keeper of the thing, she let it out of her sight and sold it at a garage sale for crying out loud. You can’t blame yourself for that.”

“Sure, maybe I can buy that. But they’re going to be wherever these openings are, right? I doubt I’m going to be able to talk them into letting me proceed. I mean look at what they did! Rolling a grenade in here? Who does that? I’m going to have to kill them. Me!”

*She has a point. They may think they have a real shot now at keeping one of the doorways open. Because of her inexperience and perhaps gentle nature she might hesitate where Emeliata wouldn’t have. They may throw more forces at these locations than normal, just because this is their best chance of allowing this spirit back here.* “You’re not going to do it alone. We’ve got Herman, and you’ve got me for sure. Let us handle anyone in our way, you can just focus on sealing the rift.”

“I don’t know. I have to send them a clear message, that even though I may be new to this, they are not going to get away with letting this spirit back here. If I falter now, all her work the past thousand years will be for nothing. But it’s worse than that!”

“Worse? How so?”

“Because now you’ve been put in danger because of this. How can I ask you to risk yourself on this stupid sealing ritual? What if you die? I would never forgive myself!”

“Don’t worry about it,” I assured her. “I’ll be sure to use my magic and make sure I’ll be safe each time. If I get a bad result I’ll change what I’m going to do and ask again. Don’t worry about me, I can take care of myself.”

“You can do that?”

“I can get a vague understanding of the future, yes. It’s not as easy as just asking ‘will I die in the next twenty four hours’ but it’s close.”

“That at least makes me feel a little better. But we’re going to have to train like crazy and make sure we’re all safe.”

“That’s up to you.”

“I know. For now, let’s just finish this. Sorry to be such a downer.”

“Hey, you’re holding up really well. I’m impressed. You seem committed to getting this done, and you didn’t just start running and never stop when we told you about my side of things. That says a lot.”

“Maybe I just decided that if ‘your side’ of things as you call it can produce something as beautiful as you, it can’t be all bad.”

“Flatterer!”

We spent several hours cleaning and fixing the place up when the phone rang.

“It’s Keith,” Kelly told us, answering it. “I’ll put it on speaker. Hello?”

“Hi Kelly, it’s Keith.”

“Yeah, what’s up? Did you find anything out?”

“Ah, sort of. More like, we have a problem.”

## Chapter 13

We talk to a vampire. It doesn't go well

Where: Kelly's apartment

When: Just after answering the phone

"That's not ideal," Kelly told him after a moment.

"You're right, it's not but I figured I should let you know as soon as I could. So here I am."

"So what's the exact problem?" I asked.

"The problem is Emeliata was killed last night, right?"

"What about it?"

"In order for a will to be unsealed the person that wrote the will has to be dead. Standard procedure, of course."

"She is dead," Kelly insisted. "I was there when she was blown up. And then some dudes tried to murder me. Believe me, she's dead."

"I don't doubt your word. And five hundred years ago it might have been a lot easier to have that be believed by everybody. But now we have records of everything, and with all the fraud and scams that people have thought up things like this are more rigorously checked."

"I still don't know what the problem is," I told him. "Is there not enough left of her to identify?"

"That is a problem," he admitted, "but you see, this all wasn't supposed to happen. That address you gave me? Where you bought the artifact? It's up for sale, and it has a buyer. They'll probably close on it in a few weeks."

"Of course," Kelly breathed. "It was an estate sale, weeks ago. Naturally after the sale it went on the market. So where was she living then? Don't tell me it's out in California or something?"

"Worse. As far as I can tell she moved to France someplace. It's a pretty standard practice, that's why I knew to look for it. Less scrutiny if you die 'overseas' so it's a little easier to reappear as a descendant."

*Yeah, I'm getting up there in years too. I was putting it off, but it's almost time for my first persona change, isn't it? I should ask my parents who they used, when they switched identities. Huh, did my birth complicate that? She had a daughter, so she couldn't exactly become her daughter. I'll have to ask her.*

"Looking into it, a Tuatha named Emeliata purchased property in France four months ago, and has been living there ever since. That may be how the artifact wound up being sold, some confusion in the move. Whatever the case, she officially hasn't returned to the United States so finding her here, dead, thousands of miles away from where she should be, is going to be a problem."

"That could raise a lot of questions," I admitted. "But how do you know all this?"

"The Historian organization is dedicated to the preservation of all history," he explained. "We have agents and connections everywhere. You can't write down history if you never knew it happened, as my father always told me."

"But knowing the random movements of one woman? That's pretty scary," Kelly told him.

"Random? Not at all. There are only a few Tuatha who don't live in Otherworld. And she was one of the oldest. Now we know why, but the fact remains she was an oddity and so she was kept track of. A two thousand year old Tuatha can wreck a lot of havoc you know, if they've studied magic that whole time. And while we Historians wouldn't interfere if she went nuts, we record history not influence it, we might mention it to someone if she showed signs."

*So is helping us not influencing history, or is this just being helpful? I suppose if some evil spirit got loose there might be less history, so they have some kind of guidelines they follow if they can help someone or not?*

"So you knew she was sealing this Deogen every year? That she had the artifact?"

“Er, no, not exactly. That she apparently was doing in complete secrecy. Look we aren’t peeping into her windows every day, we just happen to know generally what she was up to and where she was living. That’s all.”

“And now she’s not living,” I went on. “She was preparing to leave everything to her ‘daughter’ that’s what started this whole thing. Her will is going to mention a person that doesn’t exist.” *Ugh, and if her daughter is now “missing” because that persona was already created and ready to inherit, there will be an investigation as to where she went. Right? I mean no one will report her missing because she doesn’t exist, has never been seen. But someone will want her income taxes eventually, right?*

“Yes, but one problem at a time. Clearly the house here is a dead end. Anyone who worked for her will be long gone, and any other family would have moved to France already. We’re going to have to head to her new residence in France, convince whoever is there she’s dead, and see if they can tell us who the next holder of the Bane should be.”

“Forget that,” Kelly told him. “We have a more immediate concern. I’m stuck with this on my hand until I use it. We need to know where the sites are.”

“Good point.”

“If you can track down where the house is, Reves can take us there. My French isn’t great, but hopefully I can get my point across.”

“But what about her body?” Kelly asked. “Once they identify her, isn’t that going to cause a problem for ‘your side’ of things?”

“As it turns out,” Herman spoke up, “I know the person who would have done the autopsies on the bodies. There’s a vampire by the name of William that works down at the hospital, the night shift obviously. I’ll give him a call, the bodies were only brought there recently they’re probably still there. Maybe he can help us sort this out.”

“There must be some method for dealing with things like this,” I mused. “Things that don’t make sense in the human world.”

“Eh, I wouldn’t count on that,” he cautioned. “But I guess we’ll see.”

“I’ll get you the address of the place,” Keith told us. “I don’t have any phone numbers, honestly she’s old enough she may not even use a phone. You may have to go there directly to speak to anyone in the house.”

“If she did have a phone it would be a cell phone, it would just ring in the morgue at this point,” I reasoned.

“True. I’ll let you know anything else I find out.”

“Thanks.”

So he sent us the address and I worked with Kelly to get some pictures of the place, thank you modern day technology. France was six hours ahead so it was about 8:00 PM there. William wouldn’t be in until 7:00 PM our time, and heading over there without some kind of death certificate was going to make us look like scammers or worse, especially if the staff there wasn’t “in the know.” (Because you know a lady as old and possibly rich as Emeliata was had *staff*. Not just a servant or two. Staff. You think she was cooking her own meals and cleaning her own toilet? No, I don’t think so.)

“Her house was huge,” Kelly told us. “It was odd, actually, that she was having an estate sale and not just shipping everything off to an auction house. I could see her having more than one maid, it was a nice place and even as late as I came, it had a fair amount of stuff still left in it.”

“Probably didn’t care about the money,” I decided. “She saw whatever was there as just junk, was probably tired of it after almost a hundred years of looking at it. So she just had a service run a sale and called it a day.” *Probably said mark everything cheap, I don’t want to see it again after the sale.*

“I can’t even imagine living like that. Having that kind of money?”

"I can, I hope after a few hundred years to have a lot more savings than I do now. Then I can produce my own movies, and finally stop having to do adult films. Or just take a few years, tour the world, live the good life for once."

"How much do you have saved up?" she asked shrewdly. "You've been working for sixty years or more, right?"

"Never you mind," I told her.

"Oh, that much? I like you better all the time, you know that?"

We laughed.

"So until this William can talk to us," Kelly decided, "we're stuck here cleaning?"

"I could head to the place in France, Reves can certainly get me onto the grounds. Teleporting so far is always a risk, both of being seen and running into something when you arrive. But you say just her front lawn is huge, we can probably shoot for that. Unless they're cutting the grass at that exact moment it shouldn't be a problem. I'm just wondering how to convince anyone there of all this."

"Good point. Especially in a language you're not totally familiar with."

"There's that too. Hey, I just teleported from America and by the way your boss is dead. Can I read her will and did she have any papers mentioning where she was going to go to seal passageways from Otherworld before Halloween night was over? No? Wait, why are you pointing guns at me? Wait don't shoot! Bang Bang! I mean how else is it going to go?"

"Yeah, that could be a problem. Do you think William will let us have the body?"

I blew out a breath. "Not likely. It's in the system now. A body vanishing probably isn't in the cards for us." *And it's been dead several days. How would we turn it into the French authorities as it's clearly been killed with an explosive device. Where are the devices' remains? Where was she? Why wasn't she found before now? No, that's not going to work.*

"So the cops showing up that last time is working against us now?"

"Yeah. I mean we couldn't have explained the explosion any other way, but it would have made this part easier. We could have just returned the body to France, staged it to look like some kind of accident or just burned her house down around her. Something. At least then she would be dead where she would be expected to be found, and at the time she would be expected to be found."

"If only all our systems from the police to the courts knew about you."

"I've heard it both ways."

So that night we headed over to the morgue William worked at. Herman joined us, and we waited in the parking lot until he arrived. He introduced us, and Kelly stood behind me, clearly not comfortable meeting an actual vampire.

"So you're the reason for those two that came in yesterday? The ones that looked to be dead a week or more? And the gibed woman, and the guy with the bullet in his head? Thanks for all that, really nice of you."

*Not exactly getting off on the right foot here, are we? Aren't vampires supposed to be cultured and smooth talkers?* "That was me," I admitted. "I couldn't risk hitting them with less than my full force."

"You know how difficult it is, filling out the paperwork for a body that doesn't have a mark on it? They were found with guns, so clearly they were there to hurt you but what was I supposed to put down as cause of death? What exactly did you do to them, anyway?"

"Drained their life energy."

"You mean like a Valkyrie?"

"No, I think they do something different. I used a spell, it's not a natural ability of mine."

"I see."

"Just out of curiosity, what did you put down?"

"Heart attack due to stress of the moment."

“For both? Will that be accepted, two people dying of a heart attack in the same building, at the same time, while trying to murder us?”

“What would you have suggested? At least the one with the gunshot wound was fairly easy. I can’t just write down ‘killed by magic’ and call it a day you know. I have to work within the system. Next time, shoot them or something, will you?”

*With what, their own guns? I think that would have looked more suspicious.* “Sorry. You don’t have a special code or something you can use, and everyone looks the other way for something like this?”

“I wish! I know a werewolf cop but that’s about it. Sometimes he can swing investigations away from things but there’s no way to cover up this one. It came in through normal channels. As far as everyone knows, I’m just a regular person doing my regular medical examiner’s job.”

“Really though? I would have thought our community would have infiltrated law enforcement hundreds of years ago, to cover up just such things happening.”

“Not from what I can tell.”

*So are you just ignorant of it, or does it really not exist? I mean if a place like Excellus exists, how can the police not be run by my kind? Strange stuff like this must happen all the time, right? But maybe the forms just get filled out, someone shakes their head in disbelief, and files it knowing nothing will ever come of it?* “Do you know who they were?”

“They didn’t carry ID, no. No match for fingerprints so we’re just going to have to rely on missing person’s reports.”

“What about the guns?” Kelly asked. “They have to be registered, right?”

“Not my department, I just look at bodies. Why?”

“If we knew who they were, maybe we could find other members of this cult and figure out what they know about what we need to do to stop them.”

“Can’t help you there. Why exactly are we meeting, Herman? I have to clock in and start my shift.”

“We can identify the woman that was killed in the blast,” I told him. “We need a death certificate so we can convince whoever is in her new house in France she’s dead and figure out our next move.”

“Are you a relative?”

“No.”

“Do you have a court order?”

“No.”

“Can’t help you.”

“What? Come on, she was killed right in front of me, in Kelly’s apartment. You want to know who she is, right? To fill out the paperwork. You’ll never find her otherwise.”

“Yeah, try explaining how she got here, from France, without coming through customs,” Kelly chimed in.

He sighed. “She teleported here?”

“She got here somehow, but her old house is for sale. She lives in France now, that’s where she’ll be missing from.”

“So she’ll just stay a Jane Doe. Maybe someone will match up her dental records with her name, and then start asking questions about how she came to be in your apartment. Sounds like a you problem, not a me problem.”

“Come on, William, don’t be like that,” Herman pleaded. “Haven’t we worked together enough that you know sometimes rules have to be bent a little?”

“It’s because of you, and Nix, and Tanaka, that I have so many problems now,” he growled. “How am I supposed to put her actual name down, huh? Where is it supposed to have come from if someone asks how I know her name but not the names of the others? She didn’t have any ID either, but

now I have to tell my supervisor, oh, yeah a random person walked up to me on the street and told me her name. And I believed them, for reasons. Honestly, I'm sick of it. You flying around, people getting killed by magic left and right, they all end up here, you know? Then I have to try and convince people that no, it wasn't magic it was some normal, everyday cause that killed somebody. You came here, you killed some people with magic, that put my job in jeopardy. Forgive me if I'm not bending over backwards to help you."

"Look, I didn't know they changed like that, I'm blind. I've never had to kill someone with that spell, usually I can just hit them once or twice and get someone to back off. These people were trying to kill me, I couldn't take the chance. Sorry to have inconvenienced you! It's not my fault our kind has had thousands of years to make sure things like this get taken care of and have done nothing to see that it is."

"It's not mine either. I have to get to work, Herman I'd rather you not call me anymore, all right?" He stalked away, heading somewhere my magic couldn't reach so probably in towards the building.

There was a moment of silence. "I'm really sorry about that," Herman said to us. "I didn't think he was, I mean he's always had a bit of a temper, but..."

"Yeah, are all vampires like that? I mean he was cute and all, but I could hardly see his face with that chip on his shoulder."

He sighed. "You have to understand, those people he mentioned? Nix and Tanaka?"

"What about them?"

"We worked some cases together, until recently. Nix is a Banshee, and someone she got put in prison got out and tried to kill her. Us included, as we happened to be nearby. He mutated some stolen kids with magic, turning them into killing machines. We took them out, but being magical once they were dead they turned back into normal looking kids. We had to leave, it would have looked really bad for us, but maybe they came here after that. Maybe William had to cut those kids open, and make up some excuse as to how they died. That probably wasn't easy for him. Tanaka went back to Japan right after that, and Nix never called us again, probably feeling guilty about what happened. So we just went our separate ways and didn't really get a chance to get any closure on the whole situation. So I can see why he would be a little bitter about it."

"Still. We were trying to help, he could have given him information about the men, and I could have told him more if I could use magic on them," I said.

"Yeah, I could have called up their spirits, gotten some answers that way. Can't exactly break in though, I don't want to make more trouble for him at this point."

"In any case, what are we going to do?" Kelly asked. "Head to France tomorrow and hope for the best?"

"Going to have to. With no evidence apart from her being gone the last two days. Hopefully they're on alert and she doesn't do this regularly. Just up and vanish for days at a time to go to the beach or whatever."

"What if we're not believed? Just told to leave and we're totally on our own?"

"I start trying to get some answers from my magic. They'll be totally vague but more than we have now. Let's just hope it doesn't come to that."

"Thanks for trying with the vampire, Herman," Kelly told him. "Even if it didn't work out very well."

"Sure. Want to head back to my place? I'll cook us up some dinner and you can practice your swordplay out in the yard."

"Oh yeah, that's a thing," Kelly grumbled. "Looking forward to it."

"There's probably training videos on youtube, we can look."

"I guess."

*Wonder if my master knows anything about weapons? He just trained me in ninjitsu unarmed because I can't carry a sword around in modern society and I have magic. But we could head there and ask him. I'm sure if I explained our need he wouldn't brush her off, even being a human. Yeah, after France we'll head there, see what he might be able to tell us. I'll have to translate though, but that's okay. Halloween, you've got to be kidding me, we really don't have enough time.*

## Chapter 14

We become burglars, and meet some people that might have some answers

Where: France

When: August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021 8:25 AM

“Now this is a house!” Kelly exclaimed, clearly looking around at the place Reves had teleported us to. “It’s huge. The furnace in a place like this must run continuously, same as the air conditioner in summer.”

“Pretty big, huh? Could you see yourself living here?”

“I don’t know. I mean maybe having room for an indoor pool might be nice, but short of having my own museum what would I do with all those rooms? I mean how much space does one person really need? I got my couch second hand, and I’ll get the replacement that way too. I got the one that looked a little off but was comfortable, because I knew I would use it all the time. Imagine having to buy furniture to match a house like this, knowing it will probably never be used, just shown off. If you’ve got the money for this place, maybe furniture isn’t even a consideration. Man.”

“I guess if you knew a lot of people and liked throwing parties? Anyway, seems we got here okay, good job Reves.”

“Woof.”

“House is straight ahead, and we’ve bypassed the gate which is behind us,” she reported. “Nice lawn too, how much water does it take to keep this much grass growing? What a waste. Anyway, I guess we better see who’s home. You’re sure this is the best way to do this? I feel vastly under dressed for this.”

“How do you think I feel? I’m not even wearing my clothes, these are yours! I don’t even know what I look like at the moment.”

“Hey wait a second.”

“What?”

“Couldn’t you have Reves take you home in the blink of an eye to get clothes, or anything else you needed? I mean we got here.”

“Woof woof woof,” Reves said, probably laughing.

“Figured it out, huh? I guess. Maybe I like wearing your clothes, maybe I think it’ll help me understand you, knowing you felt what I feel now wearing them.”

“You are a pervert, aren’t you?”

“Kelly,” I said seriously, suppressing a grin, “you have no idea.”

“Yeah, I guess- wait a second, did you go and get underwear? Because you said you didn’t want to wear mine, but what you said just now I would have said you’d jump at the chance...”

“I went back and forth on that one. Maybe I decided to not wear any, did you ever think of that?”

“You’re impossible!”

“You can check into it later. I mean unless it’s important for you to know right now?” I started lifting up the skirt with my left hand.

“No!” she slapped it down. “I don’t see anyone but that doesn’t mean they aren’t watching from the window. What would they be thinking?”

“Focus, right. Why are we here again? Oh yeah, to convince someone here that Emeliata isn’t coming back and to see if she has any contingency plans for her actual death. I just hope her servants aren’t regular humans so we can actually tell them the truth and be believed.”

“Thank you. Honestly, I don’t know what I’m going to do with you. Running around in my skirt without any- You can tell, right?”

“If given a few seconds, yes. I can either feel their magical nature, or the glamour they’re using, or if they have any active magic around them. I just wish we could do this at night so I’m not so dragged down. Anyway, let’s get this over with.”

“Yeah. Let’s go Reves.”

We headed up to the house and Kelly rang the bell. We waited. “How long do you think it would take someone to go from one end of the house to the other?” she asked. “I mean if I ring the bell and there’s only one person inside, and they’re the furthest from the door they can be, how long would it take to answer the door?”

“You know I can’t see the size of the house, right? How can I answer that question?”

“Oh, right. Guess we’ll just wait a moment and ring again. Ugh, what do we do if no one is home?”

“One problem at a time. Here, let me see... Spiritual Sight!” I cast a spell in the domain of spirit and opened myself up to any spiritual impressions that were around me. I felt Kelly and Reves, there were some trees and lots of flowers nearby, but in “that” way, towards the house, I felt nothing. *Could be the threshold cutting it out, could be no one is home. But I think I did pretty well that time so you would think I would get something if there was something to feel. Even a glimmer, the house can’t be that big.* “There’s no one home, from what I can tell.”

“Well that’s just great,” she grouched. “So I ask again, what do?”

“Maybe head around the back? I don’t know how far the property extends, don’t rich people have gardeners or something?”

“Landscapers maybe? You think someone may be working in back?”

“Could be. My spell is still limited because it’s daytime, so I can’t be sure how far it extended. Let’s take a quick walk around the house and see what you can see and I can feel. I’ve still got it going, maybe someone’s in the back and I’ll feel them. Or maybe there’s someone cutting bushes or something near the edge of the property who will be helpful if we can spot them.”

“Got it.”

We circled the place, which took a few minutes. Kelly wasn’t kidding, the house did seem pretty enormous. *Personally, even rich I wouldn’t live in a place like this. Like Kelly said, what would I do with this number of rooms? It’s not like I collect figurines or anything, so I’m not going to be displaying anything. A pool does sound nice. Maybe as a dog shelter or something? A big ‘ol animal shelter, yeah that could work.*

“No one seems to be around,” Kelly decided, when we were halfway around. “I guess we could sit in front and wait. Someone is bound to be around sooner or later, right?”

“I guess.”

Nothing presented itself on the second half of the grounds tour so we were back to where we started. I let my latest spell drop, keeping my “sight” spell of course. “Well this has been a waste of time,” she complained. “Maybe we can leave a note on the door to call us. Crud, it would be some kind of international call, how are we going to explain that? Maybe email would be easier, the staff would know what that is, if they’re human.”

“Let me try something else,” I decided, as I doubted she had anything to write with. Framing my question in my mind, I cast another spell, a divination spell to see what magic could tell me about what to do next.

*The answer you seek is out in plain sight.*

*But to grasp it you must do something not right.*

“Crud,” I spat. “I think we’re going to have to break in to the place.”

“Uh, Tayna, not sure you know about this but there’s this thing called a security system? Even a two thousand year old lady wants to protect her stuff. She may not know how it works, but I bet the house came with one. All she has to do is turn it on and off, that’s just pressing in a code. She could do it.”

“Unless it’s going to shoot us, it’s just going to be an alarm, right?”

“Yes...”

“So if we can figure out what is ‘in plain sight’ that will solve our issue. We can break in, grab it, and be away before the cops get here.”

“I guess,” she agreed, not sounding convinced. “Did you do magic or something?”

“I did. I asked what is most likely to solve our current problem of getting in touch with someone who can help us. I got back that the solution to our problem is out in the open, but we would have to do something ‘not right’ to take possession of it.”

“Yeah, that sounds like breaking in. Let’s circle the place again, maybe I can look through some windows and tell.”

“You’ll have to, my magic of telling what things are around me won’t reach inside the house. Even if I pressed myself up against the window it would just be blank.”

“Huh? Didn’t you just cast a spell to see if someone was inside?”

I shook my head. “I mean, yes, I did. But I put extra power into that one, for that very reason. And it was a general sense of life spell, I didn’t need any kind of accuracy that ‘there’s a person twenty meters to the left’ sort of thing. Even muted down as it was going to be, it would have worked. I don’t cast my morning divination all that strongly, because I just need to tell what’s around me.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Magic can be stronger or weaker? You’ll have to tell me how that’s possible sometime. Come on. Hopefully I’ll know what I’m looking for when I see it, as right now I have no idea what it could be.”

We toured the outside of the house again, Kelly peering into the windows she saw. When we got back to the front she headed back again, where we stood under a window. “Yeah, this looks right,” she decided. “It’s her office, by the looks of things. There’s a desk, a phone, some cabinets, that sort of thing.”

“You see something that might help?”

“I think so. See, a person like Emeliata probably wouldn’t bother putting every phone number she has into her phone, if she even had a cell phone. But she wouldn’t be able to remember two hundred years worth of phone numbers, either. To that end she would write them down, and to *that* end I see what I’m looking for. Her Rolodex.”

“Which I take it is a place to write phone numbers down?”

“Exactly. But how to get inside and get it, that’s the problem. Can Reves teleport us inside?”

“No, for the same reason my other magic can’t get in.”

“But you did magic at my place, why is this one special?”

“Because I don’t have permission to be there. We call it a threshold, it’s the separation of her space from the rest of the world. It too disrupts magic, for reasons.”

“Wait a second, you mentioned that to Emeliata when she showed up at my apartment!”

“That’s right.”

“Wow, there’s so many rules and restrictions on this magic stuff. I’m starting to develop a greater love of technology, it doesn’t fail if you move two feet. You had better clue me in if I’m going to be using the Bane for the next two months.”

“Yeah, you should write them down. I’ll give you a list when we get back. For now I think it’s going to have to be a smash and grab. Smash the window, climb in, grab it, pass it back out, and climb out again.”

“You know they could have glass breakage sensors.”

“The what now?”

“A microphone listening for a loud crash. That would indicate glass broke and trigger the alarm.”

“We would leave right after that.”

“You mean just bring the thing with us? I guess she won’t be needing it. Still seems wrong, and in the eyes of the law, stealing.”

“I suppose the perfect crime is one that leaves everyone scratching their heads, or doesn’t even get known about until later. We can do better than those cultists, smashing doors down. Get your sword out.”

“Okay?” She activated it, and I groped for her hand as I didn’t feel like burning myself on the flaming blade.

“Right, this should work. Sharpen!”

“You know a sword sharpening spell?”

“Not exactly. It’s the spell I use on my knives before I cut tomatoes. This is just a bigger knife, so it should be fine. Now, it should be sharp enough and hot enough. Just put it against the glass, point first, and rather than smashing the window in let’s just cut the glass out of the pane.”

“I’ll give it a try.” She stepped forward, setting the sword in position, and making a cut along one edge. “It’s working, it’s like cutting paper now it’s so sharp. Wild.” Then she repeated for two other edges. “I just have to do the top. But if this falls it still may shatter, making the noise we’re trying to avoid.”

“Can you get your fingers under it? Hold it while you cut?”

“You want me to slice my fingers open? It’s extremely sharp glass!”

“You can’t be hurt by stuff like that, remember getting shot?”

“... Right. Need to adjust my thinking a little. Hey wait a second, how come this is working?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the sword is magic, right? And it’s going inside the house.”

“No, the Bane is magic,” I countered. “And if you stuck your whole hand into the house with the sword active, it would vanish. The magic just made the blade, but it’s still being maintained by you. Who is still outside the house.” *Yeah, that’s got to be it. Make it seem like I know what I’m talking about. Good job, me, she totally is buying this.*

“I guess that makes sense. Okay, cutting the last part now.”

She cut the last stroke and left the glass sitting on the outside as she climbed into the window, grabbed the Rolodex, handed it to me, and climbed out again.

“Let’s get out of here. I don’t see any cameras on the outside of the house but that doesn’t mean there aren’t some. The less time we spend here the better.”

“Let’s go home, Reves.”

“Woof.”

Back at Herman’s she looked it over, going through hundreds of tiny cards dating back many years. Many of them had notes scribbled on them, and I could work out what some of them said, but others were in languages I had no idea about. Four of them, the ones at the very back of the stack, Kelly said looked suspicious.

“They don’t have notes on them, just a B,” she explained. “And one of them is marked with a big X through it. The paper is different, it looks like they were taken from a different Rolodex and put into this one. And the paper feels old. Plus the numbers have been updated about seven times.”

“B for Bane?”

“That’s what I was thinking. What do you say? Do we call one of the ones and just see what they have to say?”

“What’s the name and number?”

“Alithund is the first name, and her number is...” she told me.

I framed the question in my mind and focused on my magic.

*The loss of the second will not be taken well.*

*This newfound reality will be a hard sell.*

“Okay, that wasn’t exactly what I had in mind. But I didn’t get something completely negative, either. Make the call.”

“And say what?”

“Introduce yourself, ask if this is Alithund, and tell them you must speak to them about Emeliata and the Bane. If they know what you’re talking about, they should take care of the rest. If they ask what that is, just hang up.”

“Okay.” She dialed. It rang.

“Hello, is this Alithund?”

“...”

“My name is Kelly Northwood, I believe we know someone in common, a woman named Emeliata who was the caretaker of the Bane of Deogen? I must speak to someone about it as soon as possible and I hope that someone is you.”

“...”

“It’s a long story, but basically Emeliata died in an attack by several cult members, and now I’m stuck with the Bane until Deogen is-”

“...”

“I didn’t know that at the time. She accidentally sold it to me-”

“...”

“I’m not lying. Look, can we meet you somewhere, or can you come here? We need to talk.”

“...”

“Why would I be trying to trick you? Look, if you know something about this, you need to tell me. From what I’ve heard this Deogen coming back is bad news, and we only have a few weeks.”

“...”

“Thank you.”

“...”

“I’m in Rochester, NY.”

“...”

“No not Rochester, NH, Rochester NY. Near Buffalo NY. ... Yes, the place that gets all the snow.”

“...”

“Mount Hope Cemetery? Sure, I guess. Two hours? Fine, I’ll meet you-”

“...”

“She hung up on me.”

“That’s about what my magic told me. I take it we’re heading somewhere to meet her?”

“Yes. Why the cemetery I have no idea but we need to be there in two hours.”

“Okay. Write down the other two numbers just in case, and we’ll take the Rolodex back. Hopefully no one has discovered the break in yet, we can just put the thing back and head back here.”

“With our luck we’ll be discovered trying to put it back.”

*Actually we might want to set the alarm off now, before we leave. That way the cops can come out, see the window, and at least cover it over with a board or something until the estate gets sorted out.*

“You want me there?” Herman asked. “I can finish up this piece, and come with.”

“Oh, I don’t think we need to take you away from your work,” Kelly told him. “We’re meeting a lady in a cemetery, and I’m not paying for two bodyguards!”

“Very well. At least bring Meowvis.”

“My drone body will be happy to accompany you, just in case,” Meowvis told us.

“Happy to have you along!”

We were not discovered at the house, and two hours later Kelly parked the car and we both got out. The drone followed us, I could hear it buzzing in the air nearby. I had my phone on and on speaker, so Meowvis or Herman could talk to us if they needed to. I had it in one hand, with the other on Reves’ harness so I didn’t trip over anything low to the ground.

“Did she say where we should go?” I asked.

“No, just to meet her here.”

“I suppose if she’s Tuatha, she can feel the magic the same way I did and find us. Let’s walk around, if there’s trouble I don’t want to get into a shouting match here in the parking lot.”

“Do you think there will be?”

“From what you were saying on the phone, and what my magic told me? This probably won’t be easy.”

“Great.”

We walked around, my magic telling me there were a variety of stone monuments large and small throughout the place.

“Do ghosts exist?” Kelly asked.

*A suitable topic, given where we are.* “Sure. As well as Revenants, which is a ghost possessing its own body. And there are spirit creatures sometimes confused with ghosts, and undead creatures that exist between the living and the dead.”

“As if I didn’t have enough to worry about.”

I laughed. “Just because you know about this world doesn’t mean you’re going to get haunted or anything. And isn’t it better to know? Even without the Bane, there are ways to protect yourself if you did run into a spirit or something and I wasn’t around. Now you know, and won’t freak out, and can do something reasonable instead.”

“Debatable. It seems like the more I learn the less I know, because I more realize how much more I have to learn.”

“Yeah, that feeling never really goes away.”

“Of course, if this lady does know how to get this off, and agrees to see to Deogen, what happens to us?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I won’t need a bodyguard anymore. Will you just go home?”

“I’m here for you, Kelly. Bane or no Bane, until you tell me to leave or filming starts-”

“Filming? Oh no, the movie! With everything that’s been going on I totally forgot about that! How are we going to do that and do the sealing? Should we tell them we don’t want the parts?”

“The sealing we’ll have to do at night anyway. And I hope it won’t take long. A few sites, in and out, over the course of the two weeks we have. I don’t think it’ll be a problem.” *We can practice at night too, filming won’t take twelve hours every day we’ll just be called when we’re needed for scenes. Of course being somewhat of a main character I might be on set more often but we’ll deal with that when it comes.*

“Would it not work during the day?”

“It might, but better to have every advantage we can get. Magic, I won’t say it’s stronger at night, but it’s less restrained, let’s put it that way.”

“Okay.”

“Now what was I saying? Oh right, until you tell me to leave or filming starts-”

Suddenly, Reves started to growl.

“What is it, boy?”

“There’s three woman coming towards us,” Kelly told me. “And they don’t look happy.”

“Which way?” I tried to focus on my senses but the daylight and my spell were dragging me down too much, I didn’t feel anything out of the ordinary.

“Turn to your right. Here, they’re in front of us.”

I kept my senses open and yes, there were some magically active people coming towards us.

“They’re magic, all right,” I told her. “Did Alithund call the other two people from the cards?”

“Maybe. Hello!” she called. “I’m Kelly. Are you here about-”

“We know who you are,” said one.

“Outrageous,” said another. “A human and a Troll, if I’m not mistaken.”

“A defective Troll, by the looks,” said the third. “But the human does have the Bane. How could she have been so careless?”

“Defective?” Kelly stuttered. “You apologize to her this instant!”

“Or you’ll do what, human? I don’t know how you came into possession of the Bane but we are taking it back, and there is not a single thing you can do about it. Sisters, ready yourselves.”

*This went downhill fast.* I felt one of the speakers do magic, and Kelly gasped.

“You can’t just chop my hand off!” she protested. “And if you’re going to try, I warn you...  
בָּרַבְּ.”

*She got the sword out? Chop her hand off? Oh no, is that their plan? Is this going to be a fight?*

I dropped Reves’ harness, beginning to gather my will to cast my combat spell, and took a stance. He growled and went back to his normal form, the breakaway harness snapping as he grew in size next to me.

“Oh ho,” said one of the speakers. “Now isn’t this interesting?”

“You’ll have to get through me if you want to harm her,” I told them. “And we’ll see if you’re still spouting that kind of nonsense about me when I’ve got all three of you on the ground. I’ll show you what a ‘defective’ Troll can do. Come on!”

## Chapter 15

The Tuatha do not attack us, but they're still kind of rude the whole time

Where: Cemetery

When: No time has passed

"That won't be necessary," said the first speaker. "I think we've taken your measure, haven't we my friends?" I felt the magic she had cast vanish.

"Humph, I still don't see how a human and a Troll are going to do what is necessary but at least they show some spirit."

"Er, was that some sort of test?" Kelly asked. She too opened her hand and the sword went away.

*Good girl, waving a flaming sword around a cemetery would be bound to attract attention. Let's not have that.*

"In a way. I'm Alithund, the one you spoke to on the phone. My companions are Betraxia, and this is Sereni."

"Nice to meet you."

"You don't sound convinced. I'm not surprised, give the introduction we just had. You have to understand, this is a very strange situation and one I'd like some explanation for."

*Didn't really hear an apology there.* "Before that," I broke in. "Who are you three? Clearly you're connected to the Bane, Emeliata had your numbers, but that could mean anything."

"Is she really dead?" asked Sereni.

"I'm afraid so. She didn't know what a grenade was, so she picked one up and it exploded in her face. We killed the men who attacked us."

There was a moment of silence. "We grow fewer," Betraxia said. "What is to become of our order?"

"Perhaps a new generation will take up our duty," Alithund told them. "To answer your question we are the Tuatha who originally imprisoned Deogen, and made the Bane. The five of us, now three, took turns passing the Bane between us and doing the sealing every year. We lost Josellan some years ago to accident. Now Emeliata to these who wish to see Deogen restored to this world. Perhaps two thousand years simply was too long."

"But tell us what happened," Sereni demanded. "How did a human come to hold the Bane?"

We explained how Emeliata had grown careless, and during her move (we believed) the relic was accidentally sold to Kelly. We told them about the break ins, her showing up that night, and her death. By the time we were done we were seated on benches at the cemetery, and the three seemed lost in thought as no one spoke.

"So, will you help us?" Kelly finally asked.

"Humph. I'm inclined to just leave them to it," Betraxia said first. "Perhaps this is a sign we have done our part and should move on to other things."

"I concur," Alithund agreed. "It has been overlong. Perhaps it is time we simply went back home, to be among our own kind again. What was once a noble cause has paled, and I hardly recognize the human world now. Let it fend for itself, if it can."

"We can't just leave them like this," Sereni protested. "What if they should fail? What if Deogen walks the human world again?"

"Let them deal with it in their own way in that case," Betraxia told her. "Our solution has done us no good, after all these years."

"Yes, why should we give them any help? Do they even deserve it? Look at what they've done to their world," Alithund added.

“Deserving or not, the human has been drafted into this through no fault of her own. And the Troll, despite not being as noble as race as our own, is not unknown to us. They are an ancient people as well, and this one seems eager to help her human friend. This deserves some consideration. If it was just the human, it would be different. But the Troll should be respected.”

“You know we can hear you, right?” Kelly told them. “We’re right here.”

*Yeah, I’m blind, not deaf.*

“Perhaps this could serve as a trial,” Alithund went on, not responding to her. “If what you said is true Betraxia, that would reveal it. Let us give them minimal help for now, and give them a deadline of say the 29<sup>th</sup>? We can step in after that time, when they have failed. Two days would be enough time if all of us worked together after that, don’t you think? Then we can decide how to proceed.”

“Clearly. I do have to point out if they have failed no doubt the human will be dead, no?”

“Exactly my thinking. We will simply begin the rotation again with just us three, and let this serve as a lesson in what happens when you grow sloppy, as Emeliata did.”

“An excellent plan.”

*When we have failed? Thanks for the vote of confidence there!*

“And if they win through and have the job done by then?” Sereni asked.

“Then the job is now theirs, for all of time. Destiny itself wills it so.”

“Wait, I don’t want the job!” Kelly protested. “It was an accident! You can have it back at the end of the ritual. Heck if there’s magic to regrow limbs I will let you chop my hand off!”

“No, the matter is settled.” I heard them getting up. “Sereni, you seem the most interested, give them the locations, there’s no reason to withhold them. Otherwise, we will meet back here at sundown on the 29<sup>th</sup>, and hear of how you made out. Come along, Betraxia.”

“Good day to you.”

I felt two people move past me and out of range of my magic. *The nerve of those two! We win through and are stuck with the job Kelly doesn’t want, or we’re most likely dead. Great options, thanks for that. They didn’t consider the case of us not showing up here with it on the 29<sup>th</sup>. Are they so confident they can find it again if it’s lost? But if we succeed, they won’t take it back at all and we’re stuck doing this every year.*

“Well I despair of you ever grasping the finer points of the method we originally used to determine the sites each year, but I’ve been told to tell you so let’s get it over with.”

*Oh yes, you’re just a font of cheerfulness, aren’t you?*

“Now,” I heard her rustling around in her purse and she pulled out a book. “There are about a hundred possible sites each year around the world, but due to various forces I won’t go into no more than ten have ever been active at one time. And all ten being active is quite rare. It has to do with ley lines, and convergences, and the natural flow of energy around the world. Are you familiar with ley lines?”

“I mean I’ve heard the term, but I’ve never put much stock in it. I suppose if magic is real they have to be as well. Sounds like a lot of things I only thought were stories are turning out to be real. I’m going to have to reexamine everything I thought I knew about the world.”

“Yes, I would highly suggest this activity. But back to lines, they are real, and of tremendous value if you know how to use them. But we’re talking about the sites that may need to be sealed so you can look into ley lines later if you are are curious. If you visit the sites in order and the current one is not active, you can be sure the others in that specific sequence are likewise inactive. Now, here’s a table listing all the possible sites... Are you going to get something to write with?”

“You aren’t giving me this book?”

“My dear, this book is hundreds of years old. It is only one of four in the world, and if Emeliata had hers with her as I suspect it would have been taken when her body was collected. So who knows where it may end up. I’m not just handing it over to some human.”

“I’m not just ‘some human’ I’m the human who has been drafted into your little war with Deogen.”

“Nevertheless, you should be grateful I’m letting you look at this at all. It took years of scouring the globe to realize the extent of the sites, and even more to develop the prediction formula I’m now simply giving you without any effort at all. I mean do you even know what a geometric progression is?”

“I will in a second.” I heard her typing on her phone. “There, right here. In mathematics, a geometric progression, also known as a geometric sequence, is a sequence of non-zero numbers where each term after the first is found by multiplying the previous one by a fixed, non-zero number called the common ratio.”

“Very droll. I’m glad your little magic box can give you all the answers. Perhaps you can use it instead of writing down what I’m telling you, as well.”

She sighed. “I’ll take some pictures of the pages, I can print them out later.”

“Do what?”

“Just hold it up to the light, please. Let me frame it...” I heard her camera sound, again and again, it seemed there were quite a few pages in this book.

“This human technology of yours, is this really reliable?”

“I would trust it over an easily burned bit of paper. I can have these pictures in six different places an hour after I get home, so the probability of losing them would be close to zero. You do know how to calculate probabilities, right?”

*Oh my, if that sentence dripped any more sarcasm we would need a mop not just a cloth to wipe it up.*

“I assure you I do.”

“Good. So what’s the probability this one easily destroyed book and the information within will be lost, verses me putting the information on three different cloud services, a hundred CDs, a dozen flash drives, and printing out twenty copies, keeping each in a different location?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Your loss. Okay, let me make sure these are readable, as I’m not going to get to scan them, which would be the ideal situation, these pictures will have to do.” She spent a moment probably going over each picture. She seemed satisfied, and the two went over the notes. She referred only to her phone, making sure she understood what she was looking at, and only complaining a little about how faded the ink was on some pages. “My copies will never fade, another benefit over putting ink on paper, or having to recopy the book every few hundred years.” But the two worked it out, using where the sites had been the year before, what the new sites were, and Kelly seemed satisfied. She even asked how to calculate next year’s locations if these locations were correct, and they went through that.

“You seem to have a handle on it,” Sereni told her.

*Oh? Am I sensing just a tiny bit of growing respect for the mere human? But no, this cannot be, right?*

“I’d better. If I miss even one site it could be disaster, correct?”

“Yes, that’s true enough. Look.” She sighed. “It is somewhat unfair, you being dragged into this. I realize that. But there’s a lot going on among the Tuatha that are still living in this world for one reason or another. I won’t get into it, but there’s fewer and fewer of us around.”

*Maybe because you don’t have kids like you should?*

“So it’s not easy for us. Learning another one of us was killed, it’s not easy to hear. It puts us on the defensive. I know you had nothing to do with it directly, but the others, they’re going to see you in the same place and wonder how someone as old and powerful as one of our race was killed while a human was not.”

*By not realizing a fairly simple technological device can kill you and getting under cover instead of picking the stupid thing up? I mean explosives like that have been around since before I was born, she might have recognized it.*

“So I’ll tell you what. I’ll contact other Tuatha that still live in this world and tell them you’re on a mission from us. Look for this symbol.” I heard a pencil scratching on paper. “Businesses with Tuatha owners and homes where Tuatha live display this symbol so we can be known to each other.”

*That’s an interesting bit of information! I never would have guessed something like that. But then again, I’m not really big on visual information, so hopefully my magic can tell me if it finds a symbol like that now that I know it can exist.*

“If you run into trouble, and you can see that symbol somewhere, go there. It’s not as obvious as this, of course. We know you humans aren’t completely ignorant and if you saw that symbol everywhere you would start asking why. So it’s worked into other designs or hidden so only someone who knows what to look for will see it. Please don’t go spreading it around.”

“I won’t, your secret is safe with me. And the Tuatha will be willing to help me while I do this?”

“They’ll... at least they won’t give you too hard a time. I’d like to say they’ll offer what assistance they can but I can’t guarantee that. They’ll know you’re on a mission that relates to us and not just dismiss you. It’s all I can do. We do keep in touch, phones are easy enough to use even we can handle that, so we do have a network of sorts. I’ll get the word out.”

“Do others know about Deogen?” I asked. “Will they know our exact plans of sealing the currently opened corridors?”

“No. At least, not unless they lived through the times when he was still walking around the Earth. Some might remember, but most probably are too young. We’ve basically kept him a secret, I don’t know how these humans you killed found out about him. Or why they would want him back, for that matter. The less people know about him, the less people are trying to free him for their own ends. On either side.”

*I could see it going both ways. The more people that know means more people to resist his coming back, too.* “Do you think those three we took care of were the only ones?”

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

“Do you run into much trouble, doing the sealing?” Kelly asked. “Are we going to have to go through dozens of cult members?”

“I haven’t done my rotation in thirty five years, so I can only answer for the period before that. Usually it’s just minor spirits hanging around the sites. If this cult has been active the whole time, they knew enough not to interfere with a Tuatha.”

“Because you’re so good at magic?”

“Believe me, child, I was ‘good at magic’ a thousand years ago. I’ve only gotten better since then.”

“Yikes.”

*Meaning they may be gunning for us, now that a human is in charge of the Bane and not the ‘rightful owner.’ They knew where to find her, so they must keep tabs on it, or someone has magic like mine that can just tell them the time is right to strike and they narrowed it down from there.*

“Indeed. Is there anything else I can tell you?”

“Gee, I don’t know. Tayna?”

“I don’t think so. We know when we have to do this, where to go, and basically what to expect.” *I just hope the mapping software online extends to those places so we can get there early, figure the convergence out, and then go back right to it on the night.*

“That sounds about right. No, but can I at least call you if I do think of something else?”

“If you must. Good luck then, and perhaps I’ll see you back here on the 29<sup>th</sup>.”

“Count on it.”

She walked away.

“So those are Tuatha?” Kelly finally asked when she was out of earshot.

“Those are Tuatha. I’ve never had much dealing with them, but my parents have told me stories. They seemed about right.”

“I prefer Trolls, a thing I never thought I would be saying.”

I laughed and fluffed my hair out behind me. “We are superior, in every respect.”

“Woof.”

“See? He knows.”

“Let’s get home. I want to get these pictures uploaded, and make some more notes while it’s still fresh in my mind. I might actually recopy them completely, put the chart she had into an excel sheet, that sort of thing. This hand written nonsense is garbage.”

“Good idea. I suppose after so long it’s more an aid to memory for them, rather than being a definitive guide.”

“Heaven forbid anything happen to them, and suddenly no one knows how to keep Deogen sealed up.”

“After so long, I doubt they believed anything could go wrong in the process. Just goes to show how wrong that kind of thinking is.”

“Actually, you say ‘home’ but shouldn’t you head back to Herman’s place?” Meowvis asked from my phone. “I can be of great assistance cleaning up the notes if you would like to forward them to me as well.”

“That’s of course what I meant,” Kelly assured them. “Back to Herman’s place. I didn’t forget you existed at all!”

“I’ll let him know you’re on the way.”

“Thanks.”

“As a point of interest, I recorded your conversation and can make a transcript available for further review. I also have in my database several digitized volumes that relate to ley lines, if you would like to peruse them. Keith may have others, we can prioritize those volumes, which could perhaps help narrow down a more exact location for each site. According to historical accounts, ley lines do drift as populations move about the planet. So the notes created by the Tuatha ladies may now only be approximations, and we can do better with modern maps. It depends if they have kept them up to date or if these are the original coordinates from his initial sealing. This should be fairly easy to determine once we return.”

“Anything you can do to help will be appreciated. Wow, you know I’m really looking forward to when everyone can have an AI companion like you, Meowvis. When do you think that’ll be, anyway?”

“As I am partly sustained with magic, it may not be in your lifetime according to current projections. There are significant technical hurdles to overcome before conventional algorithms can approximate my functioning, including but not limited to; minimizing energy consumption, designing around thermal constraints, component wear, and the creation of algorithms sophisticated enough to be considered sentient. Herman spent almost 30 years, from when computers began to be small enough to be practical in the home, designing me. And it was only recently, even with magic, that hardware became capable of sustaining me in any meaningful way. Before that I did exist, but at a greatly reduced capacity. It is my hope that as new technologies, such as quantum computers, become more commonplace, he can incorporate them into my design as well. Again, solving complex problems with magic where needed, just as he did with my current design, and giving me even greater capacity.”

“Yes, getting magic and technology working together is something most magic users would deem impossible,” I told her. “It’s why I keep my cell phone off most of the time. Having it this close

to me can be the difference between a spell going off and not. I really should practice my magic more, so it was less of an issue. Hummmm...”

“Herman’s methods were the result of many years of study and experimentation. I do not believe even he knows exactly why certain methods of enchanting are less affected by technology, only that, through trial and error, he has discovered those methods and simply applies them by rote.”

“So if I wanted a copy of you...”

“You would require tens of thousands of dollars in conventional equipment, and Herman’s undivided attention enhancing those components with magic for at least a year. His services are not cheap, not that he needs the money given how I have been able to manage his savings, and his work is in high demand due to the quality of the items he creates. Still, it is hardly practical at this time.”

“Pity. Well, let’s head back to the car, we’ve got a lot of work to do yet today.”

“Agreed. Let us go.” The drone buzzed off, and Kelly took my hand and we headed back to the car.

## Chapter 16

I take care of some things at home, and introduce Kelly to my master

Where: Herman's place

When: August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021 12:04 PM

After lunch Kelly and Meowvis started going over the pictures of the notebook while I did some stuff at home. Mostly just checking the place out, making sure my water heater hadn't exploded or anything, and that all my windows were still intact. I answered my emails, updated my onlyFans page, there had been some rumors that onlyFans was going to ban explicit content but I listened to all my emails and there hadn't been any official communication from the company so I reassured my people even if something like that happened, I wouldn't be going anywhere. We could tone things down a bit and still have as much fun as we used to on chats and such. (Me exercising wasn't explicit, even doing it naked, after all!) But for now there was nothing from the company so please don't freak out. I updated my Facebook page with some pictures Kelly had taken of us together, (yes I had gotten her permission) and reassured everyone there I wasn't dead, just hanging out with her until filming started. And that yes, I would be in a new movie but no, I couldn't talk about it yet but get hyped because it was going to be a great part in a film I knew everyone that was on *my* friends list was going to love. (Okay, maybe not my parents but someday... Someday.) I immediately got messaged about "a new girlfriend???" and "relationship status change???" but told them we were just friends for now, though anything could happen and yes, she was into girls which of course prompted the whole 'pics or it didn't happen.'" My fans are so naughty, and I love them for it.

*With the whole 'ancient spirit of evil' thing going on we've put that on the back burner a little bit. We haven't taken it further than just sleeping in the same bed and some very nice good night kisses. But once that's over, provided we both live through the experience, I think there might be some potential.*

That all took a couple of hours so it was about 3:30 when I made it back to Herman's place.

"Oh hey, Tayna," Kelly greeted me. "Get everything updated? House still intact?"

"Yup, everything's fine. How did you two make out? And by make out I mean not like we would make out, not that I was thinking about that while I was apart from you in any way but rather how did translating the journal pictures into something more readable go?"

"Thanks for clarifying," she said with a chuckle. "We made out just fine, Meowvis is pretty amazing."

"I am simply able to cross reference various facts far more efficiently than a human, that's all," they said. "Though I do appreciate the complement."

"Play to your strengths, right? Anyway, yeah, instead of a bunch of hand written pages it's now electronic, so it can be much more easily read. And the tables are in a spreadsheet, so the formulas are basically automatic, you just plunk in a few values and it gives you the coordinates. Pretty slick! We've got it backed up in various places, Keith got a copy though he did lament not being able to archive the original book. They like their books, these historians, I guess. But they have a copy and will do their own backups, so we're covered that way too. He was pretty excited to look it over, I guess they don't get much in the way of new knowledge about something as old as the Bane. We've corrected for ley line drift, and Meowvis can fairly accurately predict where the next sites are going to be hundreds of years into the future. What Sereni predicted matched up with what Meowvis calculated so that's a good sign, we're ready to go."

"The pages even detailed how they made the Bane," Herman added, coming over. "Interesting to see such an ancient technique laid out. It wasn't as easy to make out, she clearly didn't copy that section over as often when it got faded, but we're pretty sure we reconstructed it fully."

"So you could make a new one if this one was lost?"

“At least the essential parts, yes. Most of the current Bane centers around the person using it being alone, that’s why the sword and the battle magic on it. Basically a complement to a Tuatha’s magic. I would just go with a group, so the new Bane wouldn’t need all that, just the sealing part, and the group takes care of the rest. Of course, each member would get their own Bane so whoever got closest first would be able to do the job.”

“That sounds way more reasonable than the way they did it,” I mused. “I mean I guess it makes sense, if a group knew about it there may not be a sense of urgency because ‘someone else in the group will take care of it.’ But if you’re the only one that can do the sealing, you better go do the sealing.”

“And speaking of urgency,” Kelly said, “what’s our next move?”

“How about I introduce you to my master, and we see if he knows anything about swords?”

“Why can’t there be an end of the world that requires a lot of laying out on beaches? Why does it always have to be swinging a heavy sword around?”

I laughed. “It is inconsiderate of the bad guys, isn’t it?”

“Totally. Fine, I better learn how to use this thing. Where are we headed?”

“Japan. I think it’s about three in the morning there, which is perfect as he’ll be up. He has the sleep during the day schedule I usually have, being a non-human like me and so weakened during the day.”

“What sort of person is he?”

“Fairly strict, but a good teacher. Doesn’t punish but guides-”

“No, I mean you’re a Troll...”

“Oh, he’s a Kitsune, a fox spirit. Large populations of them in Japan, for whatever reason. He’s been there forever.”

“A ninja fox spirit?”

“Yup!”

“Okay. And he’ll train a human?”

I wobbled my head back and forth. “Kinda? I mean if you got there the normal way, he would respect your strength and if you showed a willingness to learn, take you on as a student. That’s how I did it. Started at the base of the mountain, and worked my way up to where he lived. You’re going the easy way, just coming in with me. But you don’t want to become a ninja, you just want to not stab yourself with your own sword. So hopefully I can talk him into giving you some pointers.”

“And if not?”

I stuck out a hip and indicated myself in a general way. “Me? Fail? Who do you think I am, anyway?”

“I’m sure you won’t, but what if you do?”

I pouted. “In that case we find you someone else I guess. A normal class that meets like once a week isn’t going to cut it, but I’m sure we could come up with something. We’ll figure that out when it comes to it.”

“Okay. Thanks for the hospitality, Herman.”

“You’re welcome back here any time. In fact I almost insist on it, given the proximity to the anti-scrying magic I have on the suit. You don’t want to get attacked again, do you?”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to impose.”

“Of course I’m sure. And you are taking me when you go to the sealing sites, right?”

“We would be crazy not to!”

“So there you are. We’re in this together, don’t feel shy about staying.”

“Thanks.”

A few moments later and the three of us appeared in front of the master’s cave in the mountains of Japan.

“Let me go introduce you. Oh, he doesn’t speak English so I’ll have to hang out and translate. Or wait, no, what do I know all this magic for anyway? Give me your hand.” She did, and I focused my magical talents of vocation on us both. *I’m casting the spell, I might as well enhance my own understanding of Japanese at the same time. It’s been a little while and I never was fully fluent. It’s not like I went to classes or anything I just picked some up from living here.* “There. You should be able to understand him at least as well as I do now. I hope. Come along.” We entered the cave and my magic told me several students were at work inside, but they stopped no doubt looking at us.

“Ah, my prize pupil returns,” a voice said, a person coming towards us from the front of the class. “And with a human if I’m not mistaken.”

“Greetings, master Yokoashima. Please forgive my intrusion upon your class.”

“Ha! None of them will ever be as good as you. So what brings you here? Who is your friend?”

“Master, this is Northwood-san, who would like to receive training in the sword for the next few weeks, if that’s possible.”

“All things are possible, if one has the will to succeed. Welcome, Northwood-san, to the Den of the Fox Dojo.”

“Thank you? Tayna, it’s pitch black in here, I can’t see a thing. What’s going on?”

The master laughed. “Forgive me, it’s been some time since a human made their way here. Let me light a lamp for you.”

He moved off.

“Can you see in the dark? Not you, I mean, can other, can non-humans-”

“Yes, we can,” I rescued her. “Those that can see can see perfectly in the dark. It’s not exactly magical, because if I went into someone’s house uninvited it would still work. But at the same time there’s no biological reason for it so go figure, right?”

“Right. Oh, that’s better.”

“Please forgive me, now, where were we?”

“I was going to thank you for the welcome. And now that I can see you, I will. Please take good care of me.”

“Perhaps. Tomochomo-san?”

“Yes master?”

“Please lead the class in the rest of this exercise while I speak to Northwood-san.”

“Yes master.”

“Come this way, may I offer you some tea?”

“That would be lovely, thank you.”

“So you have been called to the sword,” the master said after we had sat down. “You are human, yet I sense a great deal of magic around you. Does this relate?”

“It does, master,” I told him. “Kelly, why not show him the sword?”

“Sure thing. בָּרָךְ”

“Interesting! A powerful weapon, if you can wield it.”

“That’s why were here.” I told him about the circumstances that led up to Kelly taking the Bane and how it would be best if she could learn at least something about handling a sword before having to fight for her life. He listened quietly, stroking his chin and looking wise.

“You never took up the sword, did you Vivante-san?”

“I did not. When you saw how quickly I picked up and improved upon your unarmed technique you said it would be a waste to mar my perfect curves with something as straight as a stick in my hand.”

“Did I say something like that? Goodness, something must have been lost in the translation. Still, the need does seem to warrant this emergency training, if you wish to call it that. We have such a

short time, even to cover the basics. And it's a different kind of sword than I am used to, the technique would surely be different."

"Master, please," Kelly pleaded. "Even just showing me how to stand and hold the sword properly would be more than I know now. I will do my best to learn whatever you have time to teach me."

"I suppose nothing motivates a student quite like an upcoming exam," he said with a chuckle. "Very well. If Vivante-san agrees to teach my class in my absence, I will see what I can teach you in the time we have."

"Take over teaching?" I asked, not liking the sound of that at all. "I don't know anything about instructing people. Plus without pushing my divination magic further than I usually do I won't be able to know their form, and be able to correct them."

"But you could do this, no?"

"It's not daytime here, so I'm not dragged down," I admitted. "But I'm maintaining the magic that helps us talk to each other. That will drag me down."

"All these years, and you have yet to master my language?"

"I know six different languages, keeping them all straight isn't easy you know? But I admit, having the magic as a crutch means I haven't really tried. I'm sorry, master."

"Now now, it can't be as bad as all that. You have some knowledge of my language on your own, yes?"

"Yes."

"So see what you can do. Tomochomo-san can tell you what I've had them doing lately, you can pick up from there. It might be good for them to see another master at work. Even if all you did was spar with them, I'm sure they would learn much. As far as Northwood-san is concerned, as long as she can follow what I will show her, we won't need to talk all that much."

"If you say so. I suppose your ability to teach without words outweighs my ability to teach with them. If I don't know how to make myself be understood in what I know they are doing wrong, being able to write haiku won't be of much help."

"Now you understand, the path to mastery is, showing them the way."

"Did you just-" we both blurted. I heard Kelly counting under her breath.

"But that was in Japanese, right? How did it translate to be the same number of syllables?"

"It just must be one of those mysteries, right?"

"Fine," I told him, getting up. "I'll teach your stupid class so Northwood-san can get some introduction to the art of the sword. Anything you want to say to her before I drop the spell and pick up a better divination?"

"Only this. Please pay attention to my whole being. Where I place my feet, how I hold my blade. Move as I move, breathe as I breathe."

"I'll try, master."

"Good! When must you return?"

"What's a good starting length? Three hours? That puts it about time for dinner back home."

"Three hours?" she squeaked.

"Very well."

"Set an alarm for three hours, Kelly. We'll head home after that."

"Okay."

"See you soon. Work hard!"

"Huh..."

I dropped the spells I was concentrating on and took a deep breath, stepping away from Kelly and her cell phone, the only technology in the place. *Let's put as much power into this spell as I can, I'll need to know as much detail as I can get about what's around me.* I wasn't happy with my results

the first two times, but the third time seemed fine, I could tell the orientation of the teapot on the table and how the cushions on the floor were arranged. I may have been able to try that spell once more, but I figured I wouldn't push it. This was good enough, so I headed back to the main area. I took Reve's harness off so he could go run around outside, and introduced myself to the class. *I just hope I don't screw them up and then he has to straighten them out later...*

It turned out I was a pretty awful teacher, realizing fairly quickly that I had no idea what I was doing even with their help. I mean, it wasn't exactly me telling them the best way to defeat their enemies was by punching themselves in the face, but it was close. They seemed quite confused about what I was trying to convey, and my limited command of Japanese probably wasn't helping any. After about an hour of this agony I just had them fight me one on one, something I did know how to do fairly well, and then we discussed what they did wrong or could do differently in a similar situation. That went better, at least, because it was them discussing among themselves and trying things out, rather than me trying to make word bubbles at them.

Yes, I understand the concept of word bubbles.

Finally Kelly staggered out from the back room, and told Yokoashima-san that we would be back tomorrow. This caused a groan to escape from Kelly, who nevertheless bowed to the master and thanked him for the lesson. We headed out of the cave, Reves joining us before long, and I asked her how it went.

"Before that, did you know that guy had *tails*? They were so pretty, I wanted to stroke them but I figured that might be just a touch inappropriate."

*Or to put it another way, an inappropriate touch?* I laughed, imagining her petting the master's tails. "Yeah, he doesn't really keep up any pretense. Oh, he can't be in his natural fox form to teach the students it just wouldn't translate but he does keep the tails. Kitsune are quite proud of the number of tails they have, it's a mark of age and power and respect in their eyes. A Kitsune with less tails is supposed to defer to one that has more. It's a social thing."

"Cool. Cool. Meanwhile I want to die..."

"It can't be that bad!"

"It totally is. I feel stronger, the sword doesn't seem to weigh all that much but just carrying it around, trying to keep it in position while we did the footwork it got heavier and heavier."

"I guess they make swords light for a reason."

"Yeah."

"Still, do you think you got something out of it?"

"I think so. He showed me various ways to stand and move around, and had me push him over, or try to, to show how a stance can be more stable from certain angles. And how to not lift your feet off the floor because that makes you off balance. We only did a little actual sword swinging, at the end, and that was with wooden blades he had. We went back and forth, he would show me a move, then block the move, then try to get me to block the move. You know how scary it is seeing a sword, even a wooden one, coming at you?"

"I know the feeling, yes."

"How do you manage it?"

"Practice, I guess. Confidence you can deal with it, that sort of thing."

"That stupid oil lamp of his didn't help. It was still really dark, but I guess I can't expect modern lighting out in a cave."

"Hey, get used to it. We'll be doing the sealing at night, after all, it may be fairly dark where we have to be."

She groaned. "Great!"

"Come on, let's go back to my place before heading to Herman's for the night. A nice hot meal, a nice hot shower, and maybe a nice hot massage by your truly after?"

“Oh my god you’re not a Troll you’re an angel in disguise!”

## Chapter 17

Kelly gets hurt at the studio

Where: The studio

When: August 30th

So for the next two and a half weeks Kelly and I headed out to see the master once a day. She got a workout each time, training for hours in the sword, and I helped teach the class. He had put together some “lesson plans” for me, so I wasn’t just floundering around, which helped. After a few days Yokoashima-san was convinced the Bane’s magic was helping Kelly, not learn faster but subtly guide her hand or her feet because she seemed to sometimes do better than he would have expected. This was confirmed when I used spellbreaking magic to suppress that aspect of the Bane and that advantage she had went away. He told her she would need to learn to trust it, not fight against the magic if it was trying to guide her. We had known some part of the magic related to combat, it was nice to know exactly, and we updated the notes we had on the Bane with that exact description. As I too knew battle magic I could help explain what it meant because I could do something similar myself. I was good enough now not to really need it, though of course battle magic could slow my enemies or make swords sharper so it wasn’t totally useless to me.

She could communicate more easily now because Herman whipped up a batch of expendable “translators” she could use. They didn’t have to be pretty, they crumbled to dust when they were expended anyway, he could just engrave some metal disks he pounded out. We tried to pay him for them, but he wouldn’t take it. Said he would start selling them in the shop with his spellbreaking crystals and any profit he made would more than make up for making us a few. “I wouldn’t have had the idea for it without you two” he told us, so he called it even.

As the week began so did filming. We headed to the sound stage where we would shoot our first scenes, skipped wardrobe (obviously) and went into makeup. As I was completely perfect to begin with (humblebrag) they didn’t need to do much, basically taking one look at me and sending me out the door. I heard a lot of people coming up to talk to Kelly though.

“Wow, you’re looking great, have you been working out?” was the most common. And to be fair, she had been. I had her eating better, though we had looked up good workout meals online together as I was no nutritionist. (That’s right, I could eat as much junk food as I wanted and still have a knockout figure, I did love being a Troll.) She wasn’t exactly more tanned, (whatever that meant) as her training took place mostly at night in Japan, but her muscles were becoming more defined (believe me, I could feel them). I also figured it could be the way she moved, and carried herself. My master had been teaching various students that made their way to his cave for at least twice as long as I had been alive, he knew what he was doing. She was making good progress, like he said she was highly motivated, and it showed. She seemed more confident, and I hoped once this was all over she would keep it up, not swordplay in particular but the routine. After all without the Bane she couldn’t just whip a sword out at a moment’s notice and carrying one was probably illegal anyway. But if she wanted to become a ninja like I was, or at least get further in shape, then we could practice together and you know what they say: The couple that practices the ancient art of being an assassin together stays together.

We weren’t doing any major filming today it was more camera checks, and sound checks, and light checks, yes apparently a lot of work goes into making a movie, who knew? Honestly, if they just recorded the soundtrack it would have been fine for me, a lot of effort went into the visual aspect of the work. Seemed unnecessary, but most others seemed to enjoy it so I went along with it. We did some script readings, I had someone reading me my lines beforehand, (a nice touch on the part of the producers, I would have to remember to thank them for thinking of me) and while I didn’t have a super great memory I knew about acting and the dialog wasn’t all that complicated. In this scene Sheen (that’s me!) and Stile, the main male lead, were walking through a section of the dome we lived in and I had to be “taken apart” to check for bombs. Apparently he was just learning I was machine, I was that

lifelike, and he was concerned I was there to explode a hidden, internal bomb and kill his sponsor's horses. After that I had to be flustered because "re-soldered connections are never as strong as original solders," angry because he didn't trust me, and anxious because I believed he might send me away and so I couldn't fulfill my mission of protecting him if he did. I felt I did okay, even with the daylight and my divination magic dragging me down. I would study the lines later, now that they could send me a completed script to listen to, and refine my performance. Stile was canonically a pretty short guy, so I had to be careful to look down a little lower than I usually would as most men are as tall or taller than me. But the director said it was fine for a dry run, and I would probably have vocation magic going during the real filming. (If I could finagle my parts being filmed after sundown it would be even better!) But running that spell could *just* counteract the drag I would be under if I cast it well enough, and who was going to be looking at my face anyway? I mean, come on now!

We broke for lunch and Kelly and I sat together. She was telling me about maybe getting bumped up into a more substantial role now that she was "under the bright lights" and "looking fine." I said I was happy for her, she certainly deserved a better part in my mind! She had been working her little tush off, taking this sealing seriously after I had explained about all the various creatures and magics in the world. It was her one chance to be a part of that, and it seemed she wasn't going to shirk that duty in the least. She wasn't sure if she would put the Bane on after this time, or give it to me or if the Tuatha would take it back after all. But for now it was hers, and she was going to give it her best shot. This, of course, was super hot and I was glad the Bane had been passed to someone with a good work ethic. *Could they have been right? Could this have been 'fate' somehow? Like a higher being manipulated events to bring this situation about? No real way to know, I guess.*

Our work went on in the afternoon, when suddenly there was a shout and everyone stopped. The director was shouting something, someone was screaming, and I felt three men moving towards me. My instincts screamed at me, and I threw myself to one side, as shots rang out and more people started screaming. I heard a man swear as doggy paws raced from the sideline where I had told Reves to "sit" and he went down, most likely trying to avoid Reves' teeth from tearing his throat out. *More cultists? And they've just opened fire on me in the middle of all these people? I don't believe this. I have to take them down fast.* There was no time for subtlety or getting my energy drain spell going I just took off running towards the two, choosing the one on my right as my first target. I shot forward, then jumped into the air, planning on driving my knee into the man's chest. He went down, with me on top of him. His breath whooshed out of him as I drove my knee into him, knocking him over. I then smashed him in the face twice, and figuring he was down for the count I jumped back off him again.

"Holy crap!" said the man to my left.

*You have no idea, punk.* I jumped into the air, spinning end over end, trying to catch him in the head and drive him to the ground as well before he could shoot me. He went down with a crash, his gun spinning away from him. I was up again in an instant, raising my leg high and smashing it into his skull again. I felt it splatter beneath my heel.

The third man, terrified if his screaming was any indication, was shoving Reves off himself and trying to get up. I felt Reves off to the side, he must have really been shoved because he was no lightweight himself, but at least it gave me a clear shot. I crushed his skull too, or tried to. He managed to get out of the way of my descending strike, rolling to the side. *Oh no, you come here, you shoot the place up trying to kill me? You're not getting away.* Reves and I both jumped on him, Reves going for the throat while I punched him twice. *How do you like that? Not so much huh? Wait, if there are three going for me...* "They're after Kelly," I shouted to Reves. "Take care of him, I'm going after her!" He woofed at me and started shaking the man, who seemed pretty limp from what I could tell, and I shot off towards the last place I knew Kelly was. I shoved past people and headed past all the cameras and lights, towards another part of the building. *Please don't be dead, please don't be dead.* She couldn't be

physically harmed, it was true, but that didn't mean anything. Holding her down in a bucket of water would kill her, she was only a little stronger than she had been before putting the Bane on so if three men went after her like they did me, she was in trouble. I skidded to a halt, there was a wall of people before me.

"Kelly!" I shouted.

"I'm here," was a weak reply.

"You're okay? Let me through!" I shoved past everyone, and felt there was a dead man lying there. Kelly was on the ground too.

"I'm hurt pretty bad," she told me.

"What? Impossible! The Bane!"

"I know. Knifed me. Not doing so hot."

"Knife- did someone call an ambulance?"

"..."

"Oh for crying out loud. You!" I pointed randomly, it didn't matter. "Call 911 already."

"Right!" said a voice.

*Unbelievable. And here I am, the lady that never bothered to learn healing magic. Thanks a lot, past me.*

"Here, hold this on the wound," someone said, passing me a cloth of some kind. "She's bleeding pretty bad."

"Thanks." I did that, guided by Kelly, and pressed down hard. *Wait a minute, I do know magic relating to the body. But what would be useful in this situation?* I focused my magic on making her tougher, so that maybe the wound wasn't so bad after all. I felt it take, and she relaxed a little.

"Whatever you did, it doesn't feel as bad now."

"It's only temporary, I don't know healing magic," I told her. "I'm just sort of tricking your body out into thinking you're more tough than you actually are. What happened, anyway?"

"Guy came at me. From behind. Threw me down. Said something like 'Deogen sends his regards.' Drove the knife into me. Hurt. He was looking in my eyes, like he wanted to hurt me, to see how much it hurt me. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. I brought up my hand, told him 'tell him hi for me in Hell.' and triggered the blade. Went right through him. Then I fell over and people started screaming. Blood everywhere, of course."

"Wow, that was really metal."

"Yeah, it was, wasn't it."

"I'm proud of you." *Yeah, so hot.*

"Thanks. Hey, are you okay?"

"Look at this. My girlfriend, lying there bleeding on the floor, still wants to be sure *I'm* okay. What a trooper." *And some bodyguard I turned out to be. I mean, yes, I didn't expect to get attacked at work, but still. Maybe I should have done some divination magic about when the next attack would be. Guess I'll do that when I get a second.* I felt Reves coming in behind me, also pushing past the throng of people crowded around us.

She weakly laughed. "You must be. Hey Reves."

"Woof?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Gonna be fine. Modern medicine, not a problem. I'm sure an ambulance will be here soon."

"Yeah, just stay with me, Kelly. You're gonna be fine."

Moments later medical personnel took over, and strapped her to a gurney. By that time word was getting around, several people were freaking out because it seemed all three of my attackers were dead. One hysterical woman kept shouting "She killed them. She just killed them! Just like that!" over and over. It was a waste of good meat, don't get me wrong, but I had no sympathy for cult members.

Luckily no one else had been hit when they started shooting at me, but the police were there getting everyone out of the building and interviewing people as to what had happened.

“Interview me later,” I told the one that came up to me. “I’m riding with Kelly to the hospital.” *If they try again, she’s in no shape to defend herself.* There had been no opportunity to grab the knife, nor could I have really hidden it had I managed to get a hold of it. Someone did bring me my clothes so I was getting dressed.

“And what’s your relationship to the victim?”

“She’s my girlfriend. Follow the ambulance if you must, but I am not leaving her side until she is in surgery.”

“Very well, I suppose you are the victims here and there will be plenty of time for questioning later. I hope your friend pulls through.”

“Thank you.”

It was now maybe forty minutes later, I hadn’t exactly pulled my phone out to check. Once we made it to the hospital and she was admitted into surgery I dropped the spell, figuring she was in good hands now. I was in the waiting room, when suddenly someone rushed up to me. I almost decked them, but then figured it could be a cop so maybe hold off on that?

“Something’s wrong,” the person said to me. “I’m Doctor Meadows, by the way.”

“What? What is it?”

“The wound. It’s fairly deep, and we need to do some stitching. But the needle we’re using, it won’t penetrate her body. Staples aren’t working either, they just slide off her. As you came in with her I figured I would ask you? She’s been put under, so I can’t ask her and she’s still bleeding pretty badly. I’ve seen some strange things in this hospital, strange burns, ice damage in summer, that sort of thing. If there’s anything you can tell me...”

*Magic. He’s had people hurt by magic in this hospital but of course magic ‘doesn’t exist’ so he has no idea how those wounds would have happened. But he’s smart enough to figure out something odd is going on here and came to ask the only person he could who might know. Not bad, doc! Maybe I should tell you the truth when this is over? So you can at least be in the know? But what could the problem- Crud. The Bane is now working against us! She’s invulnerable, but not healing. Probably the Tuatha all know healing magic or couldn’t fit it into the Bane. But now that she’s been injured, and they want to work on her, they can’t. Think, you stupid Troll, think! I’m fighting something I can’t damage. How do I kill it? Answer, I just energy drain the crap out of it. Duh. Okay, it doesn’t have energy, maybe it’s a rock monster. What do I do? Wait, I think I may have a way.* “Show me the needle you’re going to use, I can help!”

“Come with me, then, I can’t keep going back and forth!”

“Right.”

We raced to the operating theater and he brought out the needle. I took it, focusing my battle magic on it, willing it to be able to pierce invulnerable things. *Never thought I would be using it like this.* “Okay, try it now.”

“But you just... Sure, that makes as much sense as anything else in the world. Wait here.” He went back, and I listened. Seemed that had done the trick, and they stitched her up and give her a transfusion. They chased me out again, and finally I was able to go up to her room and see her. I hadn’t been idle during that time, of course. We had technology for a reason, time to use it.

“Hello?”

“Herman? This is Tayna.”

“Hey Tayna, what’s up? How’s the filming going?”

“Not great. That’s why I’m calling.”

“You need a new leading man? Finally my big debut!”

“No, not about that. I have a question for you.”

“Oh.” He sounded disappointed. “Go ahead.”

“You make some sort of healing potion, right?”

“I do. Wait, if you’re asking...”

“Yeah, it’s Kelly. We got attacked by the cultists, and they used some kind of enchanted knife to get through her invulnerability. Must have realized the bullets bounced off the first time. She’s hurt pretty bad.”

“I can get you some, sure. Send me a picture and I’ll-”

“She’s stable for now, I think. I put a spell on the needle they were using to stitch her up, so they could actually do so. Once she’s released I’ll bring her over to you with Reves. Don’t waste one of your portal crystals.”

“If you’re sure...”

“Keep on standby, I’ll send you a picture of the place in case she starts going downhill, but we made it in time. Better if we get her back home, heal her then, rather than raising questions about why she’s healing so fast here.”

“I guess. I should warn you, healing magic isn’t easy. My stuff just helps you heal faster. It won’t just make the wound go away.”

“Oh. Well, in that case a few hours wouldn’t make that much difference anyway.”

“True. If she’s stable we can take care of it later. Glad you’re all right though.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t a problem.” *That comes later, when the cops show up to ask me what happened.* “Thanks.”

“Sure. Let me know if the situation changes.”

“I will. Talk to you soon.”

“Bye.”

“Hey there,” I said to Kelly as I walked into the room.

“Hi lover!” she managed, sounding a bit slurred.

“Oh, they’ve got you on the good stuff huh?”

“Yeah. Everything is so soft. Do unicorns exist? I think I saw a unicorn go by.”

“She’ll be out of it for a bit,” said a nurse. “But she’s not in any danger. You can stay here if you want, and I can send the police up, they’ve been asking when they can question you.”

“Of course they have. Any number of witnesses but they still have to hound the lady that got stabbed and her girlfriend. Best get it over with.”

“I’ll tell them you’re ready.”

“Thanks.”

So I told the cops what happened, and of course they had no follow up questions except for the million follow up questions. I told them the truth, that three cult members tried to keep me busy while the forth went to kill Kelly. He was somewhat incredulous that a blind woman could have dodged gunfire, closed the space, and killed them all like that, but the three bodies lent a certain unassailable truth to my tale. Then we started in on the details.

“Cult?” asked the officer.

“That’s right. They all, I don’t know if worship is the right word, but they’re all connected by this guy called Deogen. They’re after this golden jewelry Kelly has on her hand.” I showed him, while Kelly mumbled about it being gold. “Some kind of sacred object I guess? She bought it legally, it’s not stolen property or anything. They lost track of it, she found it, now it’s hers.” Okay, I didn’t tell them the whole truth, obviously. Telling them Deogen was an immortal spirit these guys wanted to bring forth from another dimension wasn’t going to go over very well. I kept it as mundane as possible.

“Uh huh. If they’re after it, why not just take it off? They do seem willing to kill for it.”

*Because we can't, moron. Oh my goodness this is tedious. Why, oh why hasn't the police been infiltrated by our kind so this kind of questioning isn't done? 'Oh, it's magic? Never mind then, we'll be on our way.'* So much easier. "Because we won't live our lives in fear. It's a cult, we're not carrying around the nails from the cross or anything. If it was so important to them they shouldn't have lost it. And eventually, if we kill enough of these cult members, they'll get the hint."

"Yes, the three that came after you... Their skulls were crushed."

"I work out."

"Uh huh. And the one was mauled by a dog, I don't suppose it was that animal there?"

"Yes, he's my seeing eye dog. He's a very good boy, aren't you Reves? Yes you are! Protecting your master like that."

"Right. Your seeing eye dog killed a man."

"In self defense."

"They did have guns, we did recover all three," he sighed. "And according to ballistics they were recently fired, and only one has a full magazine. The other eyewitnesses do report hearing gunfire. But I am wondering about the fourth man. He was stabbed as well, but clear through. We recovered the knife used to stab her, but not the second weapon."

"What second weapon? Clearly she must have wrestled the blade away from the man and stabbed him."

"I used my sword! Woosh!" Kelly told us. "Bachow! Splooch!"

"Sword?"

"She's on a lot of drugs," I told the officer.

"Yes, drugs. Before or after the stabbing?"

"After, of course! Drugs for the pain, she just got stabbed! We don't do drugs, you think a drug user could have had the presence of mind to do what she did?"

"I've seen drug addicts do some crazy things, yes. Now about this sword..."

"Don't listen to her! There was no sword. Look, we can prove it standing right here- Was a sword recovered from the scene?"

"Not that I've heard, no."

"Did anyone see her carrying a sword that she could have used?"

"Not from reports, no."

"Then it can't be a sword, can it?"

"But the knife was too small to have created such a wound."

"Don't know what to tell you." *Wow, she really angled it enough to go right through the guy? That was some quick thinking, Kelly.*

"We'll need to get her statement, once she's a bit more lucid. Now the attack took place at some kind of studio? You're filming a movie?"

"That's right."

"So you don't live around here?"

"Also correct."

He took the address of the place we were staying, provided by the filming company. "Please don't leave town until we get her statement."

"Right-o." *As far as you know. We're heading back to Herman's place as soon as she's mobile.*

"Then I'll leave you to it for now. Have a good afternoon."

"You too."

He left. *Finally. It may be a good thing I didn't have my energy drain magic going. A crushed skull they can at least accept, though not usually from a naked lady I'm sure. A hammer or dropping a bowling ball on somebody maybe. So at least I didn't have to try and explain why they looked a week dead, like I did before.* I went and took Kelly's hand again. "That could have gone worse, I suppose. Wonder if they'll cross reference this attack with your apartment? At least they'll know it is a cult, or

some organized group trying to kill us.” *Wonder if they’ll be able to figure out who these jokers are. Not that they would tell us, but finding where they’re based would be nice. We could bust in there and take the place out. Boom, no more attacks.*

“You’re so pretty! Come here give me kisses!”

“I’m not sure-”

“Kisses!”

“Oh boy...”

## Chapter 18

Kelly recovers, and we start the final leg of this journey

Where: The hospital

When: The next day

Kelly made it through the night, with an officer standing guard outside the door and with me at her bedside. Officially the hospital wouldn't normally allow such a thing, but I managed to "persuade" them to let me stay. She was far more lucid in the morning but still exhausted. She could get up to use the bathroom, and admired her new stitching, as long as she moved slowly and carefully to not reopen the wound. She was laying back down and I was on the phone with the director of the film.

"How is she?"

"She survived the night, and she's not looking so pale," I told him. "At least according to the nurse that came in. I don't know what looking pale means."

"Wonderful. I hate to lose her, but the show must go on as they say. When can I expect you back?"

"Yeah, about that..."

"Oh no, don't tell me."

"Sorry. Look, three men tried to shoot me *while on set*. Another almost knifed my girlfriend to death. We're heading home and I'm taking care of her. The doctors say she'll be out of commission for two months. She needs someone to take care of her, at home." *I mean she could stay with her parents or- crud her parents! I mean she's fine, and hopefully with magic will be back on her feet soon but I didn't even think to get her phone and call her parents.* "Yeah, I'm her new girlfriend and she's been dragged into the world of literal monsters and now she's been stabbed nice to meet you." *Would have gone over well. Anyway, we need to get back to Herman and his protection against scrying. Clearly they are going to keep coming after us, and using lethal force. I can't have anyone die from this!*

"I'll pay a private security company to make sure nothing like this happens again!"

"And a live in assistant for Kelly?"

"Er..."

"Exactly. It has to be done."

"But to lose you! Where else am I going to find a drop dead gorgeous martial artist willing to film a whole picture naked? We filmed the fight, I mean there were half a dozen cameras right there. Gave the footage to the police, but I watched it. Glorious! So brutal! The way you took off after those guys, and crushed their skulls with your bare hands? How did you even do that? When you said do your own stunts I wasn't buying it, but now... Wowza!"

"Clean living. You're not going to change my mind. Just be thankful we haven't actually done any shooting yet so you can easily replace me. Look, I am sorry but we just don't feel safe here. You understand that, don't you? I mean people running around with guns? What is this world coming to, the wild west coming back?"

"Sometimes I do wonder. The police think it was some kind of protest against the filming of the movie, due to how much nudity it would contain."

*Because they have no idea what's going on and just make stuff up? What sort of 'protest' targets just two people? And why three guns and one knife? Did they just not have enough money to get the forth gun? Come on, are you guys even trying?*

"Like it was anyone's business what we're doing in here, or who decides to watch it in the privacy of their own homes. So, would you come back after she was recovered? With security I mean. We could film your scenes then, having filmed everyone else's before then. Only the people that would need to be there would be there. By then most of the filming would be done so no protesters shooting the place up, I promise."

“Hummm...” *After Halloween Deogen will either be free or bound another year. The Bane can be put in a safe guarded against scrying, and we can move somewhere the cultists won't know about. I bet I could pay Herman to make some necklaces or rings- **wedding rings!** Whoa. Let's not get ahead of ourselves girl. Something to keep us from being scryed on. Cult activity would be zero, his 'security' wouldn't be needed at that point.* “You would really hold off filming my scenes like that?”

“Lady, you're going to make this picture, I can tell you that much right now. I've seen you in action! No one else will do. I won't wait forever, but if you want to be by your friend's side while she recovers, I can grudgingly accept it.”

*At least the timeframes match up well. Normally she would be out for about two months, and that's about the time we have before the deadline. If he really is willing to wait I would be silly to pass up the work.* “Okay, I'll be back for filming the first Monday of November.” *Assuming I'm still alive.*

“Ha! See, I did convince you. Great. I'll let everyone here know she's okay and once the cops are done digging the bullets out the walls and stomping around the place we'll get back to filming. I'll want you here bright and early on the... first of November.”

“Deal. I'll know my lines and whatnot by then so we can do the scenes as quickly as possible.”

“That's my girl. And we'll have the sets all done up so everything goes smoothly on our end. Thanks for reconsidering.”

“Just make sure you get a good security team. I'll touch base once a week, if she heals up faster I'll be back sooner.”

“Sounds great. Talk to you then.”

As Kelly had survived the night, and hospitals tended to want to get their beds back as quickly as possible because there was always someone waiting for them, by the afternoon we were ready to be discharged. We had a prescription for painkillers, antibiotics, a list of prohibited activities, and what to watch for as the wound healed. I told them I would baby her so much she would think she was back in diapers, but she got me back by saying that she was only going to use diapers, and guess who was going to change her?

“I'm glad to see you're in such good spirits,” the nurse told her. “Most people who are stabbed seem pretty down about it. Especially when the drugs start wearing off.”

“I'm alive,” she explained. “And I have someone to look after me. That's good enough for me.”

*Yeah, someone that's going to get her magical healing so she's not on her back for the next two months. I'd be chipper if I knew that was waiting for me outside this place too.*

So I got her checked out, and helped her change from the gown back into normal clothes. She was fairly shaky standing up, and being upright wasn't recommended for too long at this stage. That was fine, she really only needed to be upright the length of time it would take Reves to get us out of there. He whined a bit, looking around.

“I know there's a lot of electronics in here,” I sympathized. “Casting my divination magic to see this morning was pretty tough. But we're going to see Herman again, you liked his place right? Lots of space to run around, and he had plenty of sausage in his freezer.”

“Woof!”

“And we have to leave from here, we can't go downstairs, or back to the place we would have lived had we still been on the film's payroll. That's not fair to them. Just push past it, you only have to do it once. You're strong, you can do it.”

He seemed to grumble about it but stood next to her.

“Thanks.” She yelped as I swooped her up, and touched Reves. We vanished. *This will drive them nuts I thought as we did. Duur, where did they go? Magic doesn't exist! Hurp a durp. Me so intellectual.*

“Herman, we’re here,” I called, carefully carrying Kelly crosswise across the threshold into the workshop.

“Good to see you two again,” he called, coming over to us. “Got the healing salve right here. Have you good as new in no time!”

“That’s great, Herman,” Kelly said. “Thanks for being there for me.”

“I could do no less, given I wasn’t there to protect you in your hour of need. I mean, sure, might have been a wee bit difficult to explain why you needed Iron Man’s protection when filming a movie but this just shows we should have done it.”

“No, it’s my fault,” I told him. “If I had asked my magic if we were safe this never would have happened.”

“Glad you two are taking the blame,” Kelly told us. “Because here I was thinking it was my fault, for being stabbed my own self, because I wasn’t good enough to have avoided it.”

Reves whined a bit.

“Oh, no Reves, it’s not your fault at all. I know, you think you should have smelled him coming or something. If we’re all to blame then no one is, okay?”

“Is that how that works?” I asked. I felt his tail wagging next to me.

“Course it is. Now put me down and give me the magic!”

“Sure.” I brought her into the house and put her on the bed, then took the small tub that Herman had given me. Carefully taking the bandage off I did what he told me to do, smearing it all over the wound, and put the bandage back. I set the iron ring on the table so she would be covered by the anti-screaming field, though the house’s threshold should keep her safe enough. We couldn’t be too careful though, just because we were on the other side of the country now that didn’t mean they weren’t trying.

“Should we still get the antibiotics?” she asked.

“You were given some at the hospital, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I wonder. Wait, let’s use my head for once.” I framed the question in my mind and gathered my magic.

*The healing Kelly has to do will be so fast she won’t be blue.*

*Those tiny things that live inside they’ll have no chance to survive.*

“We’re in the clear,” I told her. “I’ll go get your stuff, like your laptop and the TV remote, then I’ll have to leave you for a bit. Have to head to Japan, tell the master you won’t be able to train for a few days. Then I’ll be back.”

“Okay, hurry back because I think I need a changing.”

“If you weren’t hurt I would hit you with a pillow, you know that right? I’m reserving it for later.”

“Naked pillow fight? Count me in!”

“I mean I guess it could be naked…” I mumbled. *And if we filmed it we could put it on OnlyFans and charge a premium. Spit it 50/50 with Kelly, yeah that could work.*

I got that done, the master expressing his concern for her well being and most of the class immediately signing up to watch over her. I laughed, thanked them all, and said she would be fine. The three of us would take turns watching over her (I had checked with Reves first of course) and we would be enough. They wished her a speedy recovery, and I headed back.

Nothing tried to attack us the next few days, and 45 hours later we carefully took Kelly’s stitching out because she reported feeling fine. There was a faint line where she had been stabbed, but

that was it. She marveled over it. “That seemed pretty fast to me! What were you worried about, Herman?”

“And don’t get me wrong, it is pretty good,” he agreed. “But there are beings out there that would heal that same wound in seconds. And I made the cream with the lowest common denominator in mind. If you were as seriously hurt but the cream tried to heal it in say an hour, it may not be strong enough. I mean mine probably would because I’m an expert but it goes without saying I’d rather it work in all cases, than smear it on and wait a day and find out it didn’t work at all.”

“Smart. Thank you.” She kissed his cheek.

“Yeah Herman, where would we be without you?” I kissed his other cheek. (On his face, his *face* not the other kind of cheek what were you thinking about?) *Wow, the beard on this guy. I guess he is a dwarf.*

“Oh, well, I, uh, that is, it’s no big deal.”

We both laughed. “So what’s the plan now? You want to call the director and say you’re coming back early?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Clearly they want me out of the way, and next time they won’t just send three. They’ll just send one guy, who will shoot me from across the street. Until this is over, we’re training and looking into the sites.”

“I suppose it’s not worth the risk,” she agreed. “I mean those three were to distract you so the fourth one could stab me. Clearly they felt you were three times the risk I was, despite me actually having the thing they wanted.”

“And with good reason. When their first attempt went so badly the people involved had to be carried out in body bags they probably looked into what happened. It may have been a news story, so they might not have even had to look all that long. When they realized magic had been used to kill their ‘brothers’ they knew they couldn’t take any chances. That’s why they shot as soon as they had a clear line of sight to me. Too bad I’m a ninja.”

“Being a ninja lets you dodge bullets?”

“In a way.”

“Huh. May have to look into that after all. So what’s the plan for the rest of today?”

“You’re going to take it easy the rest of the day. Then it’s back to training for two weeks. If I’ve got that right it’ll be the 18<sup>th</sup> of November. Right?”

“Right,” Herman agreed after a moment.

“That leaves us an entire month to figure out where the sites are and how to tackle them. Then we have the two weeks we need that they’re open enough to seal closed again, and can celebrate on the 31<sup>st</sup> for a job well done.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

“I’ll leave you two ladies to it then,” Herman told us. “Glad you’re on your feet again, Kelly. Not that there was any doubt about my magic, of course.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll be in the workshop if you need me.” *What a hard working fellow.* He walked out, and Kelly sighed.

“What? Are you still hurting?” *And could I kiss it and make it better?*

“No, I’m just worried. I’m not going to make money for two months now, because we’re not going to get paid. I guess technically I could go on disability, I am on record as being stabbed at a workplace, and they don’t know I was magically healed. But with paying you for bodyguard services, my rent, plus normal expenses I’m not sure my savings will hold out.”

“Well...” I drew out. “I have an idea about that.”

“Really?”

“Yup. You wouldn’t have to pay me, as your bodyguard, directly.” *I mean we’ve gone beyond that, haven’t we? We’re friends now, in fact it would be super awkward to charge her for hanging*

around now. So let's reduce her worries by making her some money and making it so she doesn't have to pay me at all.

"Oh? You have some alternate payment in mind?" she asked, a certain tone in her voice.

"In a way. As you are feeling better, maybe you would be up for that naked pillow fight?"

That night Kelly was hard at work with the master improving her skill with the sword. He had a local spirit that lived nearby called a Gahe check her over, to be sure she was fully healed. This was a mountain spirit, who I guess specialized in healing and had a good relationship with the students there as they were about as far from civilization as they could be, which the Gahe appreciated. He pronounced her fit enough, and the two went back at it, while I went back to teaching the class. We both had a fairly odd schedule at this point, Japan time being so far off from the US but we made the best of it, and again Kelly improved her use of the sword but had little energy for anything else once we went home. It was fine (it was, I swear!) we would have plenty of time together once this whole thing was over. I will say that many massages were given, and leave it at that. (Yes, some were filmed and posted, we did need to make money after all)

"So let's hear the list," I told Meowvis, after we had all gathered on the 19<sup>th</sup>.

"Of course. I will also display the graphic I created, showing a map of the entire Earth with some text on the side, marking the rough location of each site. As far as the sealing algorithm shows, the possible sites for this year are; Japan, China, Germany, Burma, India, The United States, Somalia, Canada, Finland, and Turkey. In that order. Considering the information Sereni gave you and her notes on the process, moving through these sites in order in the two week period the tears will be open should insure you close them all. An inactive site along that path will indicate the end of the sequence and of the task for that year. The Bane should then be able to be removed on the midnight of the 31<sup>st</sup>."

"We'll visit them all anyway," I told them. "Not that I don't trust your calculations, Meowvis, but we have to see them all anyway in case all ten are active so we can get there. But we can't screw this up. If we somehow got the order wrong or *this year* because of some quirk of fate number six doesn't open but number seven does we need to be there."

"Agreed," Herman said. "Let's not give the Tuatha any reason to complain later."

"Fine with me," Kelly told me. "Though I would have said any crack that this Deogen can slip through. I'd rather have disapproving glares than whatever is so dangerous about this spirit this has to go on every year."

"Woof."

"That's fair."

"The challenge with some of these sites," Meowvis went on, "is the lack of infrastructure for example in places like Burma or Somalia. Places with good roads, like the US and Japan have been quite well mapped. You will be able to see where you need to go online, and simply refine the exact location once you arrive. Staying out of sight as you arrive by appearing in back alleys is also possible. And while I can find various pictures of any country to display, many shots are simply unlabeled wilderness. Those places will be hard to reach especially if you want to not cause a local panic by simply appearing out of nowhere."

"GPS works everywhere though, right?" Kelly asked.

"To a certain extent, yes. Why?"

"So we'll at least have a good idea where we are in relation to where we need to be. If we need to go, say two hundred miles west of where we end up, we can worry about that at the time."

"I suppose that's true."

"One option, if it isn't too far," Herman spoke up, "is to just leave me there. I can fly a reasonable distance in a few hours, so if we are a bit off I can go there, transmit pictures when I arrive, and you all can come later."

“For short distances, the drone I can control can also make the journey,” Meowvis reminded us.

“You know what? That’s what I need. A really high speed drone. To bad flight magic is really so limited, it’s not going to give me the speed I’m talking about.”

“So what you’re saying is you need to buy, retrofit, and learn a pilot a jet of some kind?” Kelly asked.

“I like the way you think!”

“Unless you can accomplish that in the next two days, we’ll have to stick with what we’ve got,” I told them. “That just isn’t practical otherwise.”

“I know,” he sighed. “Not sure how I would replace jet fuel with magic in any case.”

“So let’s go to Japan, that’s first on our list. We can maybe hit China today too, depending on how it goes. I’d like to see them all as quickly as possible so we can develop any strategies we need once we find them.”

The others agreed.

“This could be fun, seeing the world a little,” Herman told us. I felt something whizzing towards him and he caught it. “Reves can handle moving all of us, right?”

“You’re not going in the armor?” Kelly asked him.

“Nah. During the assault on each site I’ll have to, obviously. But I’ve only ever been seen operating in this area. My armor isn’t as fast as the armor they show in the movies, and I’m trying to maintain the illusion it’s wholly technological in nature. I start popping up halfway around the world in a couple of hours and someone is going to start scratching their heads and asking why.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t worry, lass. The hammer is more than enough for now, believe me it hits harder than it looks like it would. We can take the drone so we still have Meowvis’ support, so what else would we need?”

She considered a moment. “I guess we can see what sites are easy to get to, and which aren’t. Then work out how to get to the places we can’t easily teleport to. Okay, let’s go to Japan.”

Meowvis showed a street view image to Reves, and he woofed. We were off.

## Chapter 19

We take a three hour tour of the world

Where: Japan someplace

When: A moment after teleporting

“One second,” I told everyone after I felt the surrounding air change. “I forgot to put a spell on you.” Both took one of my hands and I concentrated on casting a spell on them. “Spiritual Sight!”

“You know,” Kelly observed. “Sometimes you say something when you cast a spell, and sometimes you don’t. Why is that?”

“It’s cooler doing it one way or the other. Duh. It just depends on how I’m feeling. Only human sorcerers have to say the name of their spells to cast them at full strength.”

“Oh. Just wondered. And what the heck am I seeing now?”

I smirked. “I’ve just put a spell on you to see spiritual energy. Meowvis can lead us to the approximate location according to him but you two will have to narrow it down.”

“She’s right,” Herman agreed. “According to the notes the sites are convergences of ley lines. We find some lines, follow them, and the largest convergence we see is probably the target.”

“I have tried to account for all variables,” Meowvis reported. “You should be fairly close in each case, if the Tuatha’s notes on how to determine the sites are accurate.”

“Wow. I could really get used to this magic stuff. This is really neat!”

“What does it even- no, don’t try to answer that question,” I decided. “Pretty sure I won’t get the explanation. Let’s go.”

“We need to proceed somewhat west of here, follow me,” Meowvis drone told us, and buzzed off. “The way is clear, we can emerge without suspicion.”

We headed out, the two picking up the trail of a line and following it. The noise of the city was a little odd, most of the time I visited Japan it was to train with the master. No cars or other human generated noise there, just the sounds of nature. Oh, I had done filming in Japan, they liked ‘adult entertainment’ here as well, so it wasn’t totally foreign to me. Just odd to know I was in Japan but still hearing noises like I was in New York City or something. My magic told me we passed cars, and people, and trees, normal city stuff. Our group didn’t have to go far, as one of the places covered by Google Earth Meowvis got us fairly close, but when they turned and went into a building.

“What? What is it?” I asked. “It’s inside a building?”

“Not exactly,” Kelly replied. “But it’s past a building and in the back.”

“It’s going to be a problem,” Herman announced. “There’s a ley line convergence all right. I can see it from here through the back windows.”

“So what’s the issue? Where are we?” I felt a lot of people milling about, and was pretty sure I heard some announcements in Japanese about things arriving and departing.

“We’re in the middle of a train station. From what I can see out the window, there’s a bunch of tracks we would have to cross before we reached the convergence.”

“At least it doesn’t seem to be *on* the track,” Kelly told me hopefully. “But if we have to dodge trains while trying to seal this thing... Pretty sure the authorities would have something to say about us waving our hands around out there like crazy people. I mean that’s what we would be doing from their point of view, right?”

“Pretty much,” Herman agreed.

“And to even get out there we would have to pass through those doors,” Kelly went on. “I doubt they’re going to let just anyone out there. We would need to buy a ticket for a train, get out there, let it leave, then do the sealing before the authorities arrived because they would be called if we started running across the tracks.”

“Alternatively,” Meowvis told us, “you could simply follow a track from somewhere nearby to the spot. Under cover of darkness you may not be seen as readily.”

"I suppose if you two wore black, and I was hovering overhead in case I was needed," mused Herman. "It could work."

"In that case, let's head back outside," I suggested. We did, and we found a bench I could sit on so I could talk to Reves. "Okay Reves. Head around back and follow the tracks back. Find a good place for us to come back here when we need to. Got it?"

"Woof."

"Good dog." I unsnapped his harness and he slipped away.

We sat for a moment.

"Everyone's staring at us," Kelly reported.

"Oh no! Did I forget to put on clothes again? Why didn't you warn me?!"

"What? No," she replied, shoving me. "You look fine. They just look at us confused."

"Well, you might have noticed your girlfriend is rather attractive looking. I draw stares wherever I go."

"I guess that could be it."

"In all seriousness, there is a reason for it. From what I understand, Japan is still pretty insular," I explained. "Foreigners, or gaijin, are a pretty rare sight around here. It's only natural to be stared at this deep inside Japan."

"You don't have any magic that can help either, do you?"

"Don't know any illusion magic. Need to know what things look like to use that, and I don't. So even if I did, I couldn't, you know? I mean I guess I could make illusionary sounds, or smells? How would that even- Besides I don't know what the average Japanese person looks like. I could make us invisible to them, but they might freak out if we just did it now, out in the open. That would be worse."

"True. Wish you could read me the signs around here."

"Who says I can't? That one over there says do not litter, \$500 fine."

"Really? Which one? Where?"

I cocked my head and tilted my head down, pushing my glasses down my nose.

"Oh, you're terrible!"

"Bet it's still true though. They say the same things signs around a train station in America would say. I mean, why would it be different?"

"I guess it wouldn't."

It wasn't too long before Reves made his way back and I harnessed him up again. We made our way to the back alley again and Herman got out his phone. "Okay, our next stop is China. Here you go Reves."

"Woof." We were gone.

"Ah, this is better," I announced, listening. There was no sound of traffic, or trains, or all that many people. "Are we out in the country or something?"

"Seems like a rural area," Herman announced. "Yeah, this was a good jump I see a line. Which way, Meowvis?"

"This way."

"Let's go."

We headed that way and then around a wall my magic told me was looming up.

"We'll have to go around, the line goes through the wall," Kelly reported. "I wonder what's beyond. Oh."

"What is it?"

"Graveyard. Old one, by the looks."

"Most are," Meowvis reported. "Because China has so many people, but so little space to spare for the dead to just lay around until the end of time, not many new cemeteries are created. The main gate is on the wall just ahead."

“Let’s head in,” Herman told us.

We did, then headed back around to pick up the line again. We headed deeper into the cemetery, following it, and finally they stopped.

“Looks to be about the center,” Kelly remarked. “Interesting coincidence.”

“Not really,” Herman countered. “Even if they can’t see them, humans do get a vague sense of energies in the world. According to the books I’ve read, anyway. So they sometimes build things along lines like this, even without knowing why they’re doing it.”

“At least this one seems quieter than a railroad station. We can probably come here directly on the night, nobody’s going to be here.”

“Woof.”

“Very well, what’s next?”

“Germany,” Meowvis replied. “Had to put us fairly far out, couldn’t get a good angle on someplace that would be quiet enough right nearby.”

“Not a problem.”

We vanished again.

It was about a twenty minute walk towards our next destination, Meowvis announcing we were close.

“Uh, Meowvis, I hope you’re wrong. That’s a shopping mall by the looks of things. It’s a huge building, with an even bigger parking lot.”

“These are the rough coordinates. Do you see the lines?”

“I see a few. Herman?”

“Yeah, I see them. Come on.”

We headed into the building, cooler air hitting us as we went past the doors, and wound our way through.

“Are you looking for something? Do you need help?” a voice said in German.

“We’re fine, thank you very much,” I replied in kind.

“Very well.”

“Some kind of security guard,” Kelly told me after we moved on. “What did he say?”

“Wanted to know if we needed help.”

“Oh. That was scary, he suddenly started gibbering at me in what I assume was German.”

“It was. Luckily it wasn’t anything complex. Just how big is this place anyway?” It wasn’t too crowded, I had no idea what time of day it was, but I didn’t want to linger either.

“Pretty big,” Herman replied. “Here we are.”

“Great, it’s in the middle of a store. Meaning the gate will be down, we’ll have to break in.”

“Uh, maybe ixnay on the eaking-bray?” Herman told her.

“What? They can’t understand me.”

“But if someone does know English, let’s just not take any chances.”

She sighed. “Fine. Wait, will we have to do the thing I said? We can just go into the store directly right? Or does this place have that threshold thing you were talking about?”

“No, we can go right in,” I told her. “Only homes have a threshold. Reves, you good? You know what store they’re talking about?”

“Woof!”

“Okay, let’s head back out.”

The next place was Burma, which surprisingly (at least to me) had some google mapping done so we were able to find a major route to teleport to. The images, according to Herman, were three years old, and only about 1% of the roads were actually mapped, but it was enough. We headed there and

walked along the road, until we came to a bridge. I knew it was a bridge because the cars going by (there were a few, it was mostly motorcycles) sounded different. And my magic told me it was a bridge.

“That’s a problem,” Kelly announced.

“What? Is there some kind of checkpoint on the other side of the bridge?” I asked.

“No, it’s the line. It’s basically running parallel to the river we’re going over.”

“It’s actually a lake,” Meowvis told us. “This is just the narrowest part, where they put the bridge. It’s Meiktila Lake, to be specific.”

“Are we sure that’s the line?” I asked.

“There could be others. Let’s cross, and walk the edge of the lake. Maybe we’ll get lucky and this one isn’t the one we’re looking for,” Herman suggested.

“Or maybe the convergence is away from the lake?” Kelly hoped.

So we did, and it wasn’t. We found another maybe half a kilometer on, which the two said was slanted and would meet up with the one they had seen from the bridge.

“On the shore, right?” I asked. Neither answered. “Somewhere nice and open, easy to get to, and seal up. Right?”

“Looks like it’s in the middle of the lake,” Herman told me. “That’s going to be a problem.”

“Are we going to have to boat our way out there?” I asked.

“You mean sail our way out there? Don’t own a boat, just a flying armor. Awkward to carry someone, and it would have to be Kelly to do the sealing.”

“What about the hammer?” she asked. “You made it fly to your hand.”

“Sure, you could hold onto it, but you would be dangling from it. It wouldn’t make you fly.”

“Oh.”

“Exactly. I just hope the tear isn’t on the underside of the lake, rather than the top of it.”

“Is that possible?” Kelly asked, surprised.

“How should I know? We just have to prepare for everything to go wrong.”

“I guess you’re right. Dang, that’s going to be a tough one.”

“Now we know, at least we can talk about it later.”

“Yeah, let’s move on.”

Next up was India, heavily photographed so we had no trouble picking a good spot to teleport to. We again walked a bit, following the lines, but Kelly kept walking into things.

“Which of us is the blind one again? Remind me,” I teased her.

“Sorry, it’s just, what is this place? I keep getting distracted. It’s so different from anywhere I’ve ever seen.”

“India?”

“Yes I know that, thank you very much. But I mean there’s no rhyme or reason to these... I hesitate to call them streets. There’s people everywhere, bikes everywhere, these houses are all packed together seemingly just plopped wherever. I thought India was at least somewhat modern.”

“If you get above the roofs you can see the city in the distance,” Meowvis told us. “That’s where you’ll find the skyscrapers and such. India... It’s a study in contrasts, I can tell you that. This is a poor area, that’s clearly obvious. You’re right though, we’re way off target. We need to work our way back and around.”

“I’ve totally lost track of the lines,” Herman complained. “We’re not even close anymore, are we?”

“No. Let’s head down this way.”

We finally managed to pick up the trail again, and it led us, as far as we could tell, into a house. The lines radiated out of it according to Herman and Kelly. They checked the back yard, such as it was, it wasn’t behind the place. It was inside.

“So wait, we’re going to have to like, what, break in there?” Kelly asked. “And don’t shush me, clearly no one around here is paying us any attention.”

“You don’t speak the language around here, do you?” Herman asked me.

“I do not. Never been here before. Not that I wouldn’t you understand, girls from India can be just as hot as anywhere else. Just never got invited. Can my magic help me speak a language I don’t even know? I think so, I usually use it to enhance what I can already do. Not going to be as good though. You think on the day we should knock, try to explain why we want to come in?”

“Magic will be harder if we don’t.”

“True.” *And I would have to be extra careful crossing the threshold until I got my spell going again so I could perceive again. They would have to go first.* “Well, we know where it is, we don’t have to try working our way through the streets. I would say just pick a spot we think will be empty, Reves. We don’t want to teleport into anything, but we want to come pretty much right back here.”

“Woof.” He sniffed around the area and came back.

“Okay, where to next?”

Next was back home in the good old US of A so it wasn’t hard to find the next convergence. Up to a point, that is.

“Oh, wonderful,” Kelly complained as we walked down what seemed to be a fairly quiet street.

“End of the line,” Herman agreed. “Yeah, don’t tell me we’re getting closer to the coordinates, Meowvis? We are moving the right way?”

“You’re getting closer.”

“I thought I told you not to tell me that!”

“If you’re done with the comedy routine,” I chided them, “my magic says there’s a sign there. What’s the, oh, and a fence, I guess?”

“Yeah, it’s the sign that worries me. There’s a surprising amount of text for how small the sign is,” Kelly told me. “But it’s the top and bottom that are the important parts. The top says ‘warning restricted area’ and the bottom says ‘use of deadly force authorized.’”

“Lovely. Wish I could see it. Wish I could see a lot of things, really.”

“I wish I couldn’t see this. The line keeps going. The convergence must be inside somewhere.”

“Don’t really want to tangle with the US military,” Herman told us.

“Say, you don’t think they know about the convergence, do you?” Meowvis asked, hovering lower in case other cameras were around to see him. “That they put this fence around the whole place exactly because of that?”

“I suppose anything is possible,” Herman admitted. “Some of our kind must be in military positions, they might know the convergence was important. But it’s not really that useful, is it?”

“I don’t know, with spirit magic I could draw power from it,” I told him.

“That’s useful! No way to know, really. Could be coincidence, of course. When was this site last active, Meowvis?”

“Extrapolating backwards from the notes given to me, I would say one hundred, seventy six years ago.”

“Doesn’t really prove anything,” Kelly remarked.

“You’ve got that right. Let’s not hang around here. I’ll pull up the next location.”

“Oh, that one is going to be a major problem,” Meowvis told him.

“Again with the saying things I don’t want to hear.”

“Can’t be helped, boss. This is Somalia, and while I have plenty of online pictures of random scrub brush, and some fairly modern looking buildings somewhere, nothing is labeled with GPS coordinates. And google doesn’t seem to have any presence there because street view of the place

doesn't exist. Anywhere. Not that there are many streets there to begin with, there aren't, looking at the place from above. It's mostly just desert, from what I can tell from satellite imagery."

He sighed. "Okay, skip that one. Tayna can put her spell on me tomorrow and I'll check out what pictures we do have of the place, Reves can get me there and I can do some flying around in the direction of the coordinates."

"You don't mind, do you Reves?" I asked him.

"Woff."

"He doesn't mind."

"Okay, What's next? Ah of course, our neighbor to the north, Oh, Canada. This should be a good spot."

Like before we were not far from the place and found ourselves in a fairly populated area. The line we followed joined others but again, there was a problem.

"It's a nursing home by the looks of it, not offices," Kelly reported. "Getting into the hallways isn't a concern, right?"

"Right, only individual apartments have what passes for a threshold here," I agreed.

"Going to be tricky to get into," Kelly went on. "Not as tricky as the military base with the guns and the soldiers of course, I'm just saying."

"Can you see the convergence through the window?"

"No. It must be further in."

"Ok. Well, as long as Reves can see into the place we can get past the door. We can worry about anyone patrolling the halls later."

"Agreed. Only one more place?"

"Two more."

She sighed.

Next up we went to Finland, a country where I'd like to be. Lots of mapping done there, so again we picked what should be a quiet spot and headed towards where the convergence should be. We were seemingly walking on a hard surface with a lot of lamp posts but not much else.

"Where are we now?" I asked.

"Looks like a stadium," Herman told me. "We're in the parking lot now."

"Ah, sports! The old crack of the bat. The peanuts and cracker jacks. The roar of the crowd!"

"Not so much here, this place is pretty empty. Still doesn't mean cops won't show up if we tried to break in."

"Do we know what stadium this is?"

"I get what you're thinking," Meowvis told us. "Get some pictures of the inside and just go to the field directly."

"Exactly."

"Yeah, let me pull some up."

A moment later we were standing in the field, and both reported this was as close as we had ever come to the actual convergence.

"Where is it?" I asked. They led me to it, and I used magic to 'recharge' Reves, in case he was getting tired of ferrying us around. "But only one more place, then we can go home and rest."

"Woof!"

The last place we headed was the coast of Turkey, specifically near the Black Sea. We walked along the coast, and Kelly spotted the line. "And it goes inland, right?" she asked hopefully.

"Afraid not, coordinates are further out that way."

“Ah.” She turned, probably to look out at the water. Which I could hear lapping against the shore, but wasn’t doing much for me otherwise. “It’s never easy.”

“Very low probability all ten sites will be active,” Meowvis reminded us. “Let us hope this one is not. This is as close to the coordinates on land as I can get you. The convergence must be some distance out.”

“We’ll need to make a plan for it,” Herman told us, sounding resigned. “We can’t just hope it won’t be active and leave it at that.”

“He’s right. So that’s all the sites but one. Let’s go home and see what we can plan on doing for each one.”

“Woof!”

“Yes Reves, and snacks. Plenty of snacks, you did good.”

We vanished again.

## Chapter 20

The first sealing

Where: Herman's place

When: October 17<sup>th</sup>

The four of us were ready. The last month we had spent going over various plans for each site, based on what could go wrong at each site. With ten sites and thirteen days to get the job done we figured we could close one site a day and still have three days in case something went completely wrong. Kelly had suggested working our way backwards, starting with the site at Turkey and picking it up that way. Then we could hit as many as it took in one shot to find the first open tear, which was the last one, and start with it. We wouldn't be exhausted fighting spirits or cult members, as we were sure to be doing it the other way. But Meowvis cautioned us against that.

"From the books that Kieth has digitized and provided, and the specific nature of the algorithm the Tuatha gave us as to how to find the sites, I don't think that will be a viable solution."

"Why not?" I asked.

"From what I understand they actually open in order, rather than all opening at once. Like a crack in a dam, if the 'water' in this case dimensional energies flow out of the first crack they will not flow out of the others. Closing that first crack will force the energies through the subsequent weakness in the dimensional barrier, causing the additional 'leaks.'"

"It never rains but it pours?"

"An acceptable metaphor, yes."

"Then it's even easier," Kelly told us excitedly. "Why did we look into any of the other sites at all? We *ignore* the problem for thirteen days, then just close that one. By then the Halloween energies will be gone, and no more will open. We don't have to run around!"

"Sadly, that is not possible either," Meowvis told her.

"Someone's a negative Nancy. Okay, tell me why."

"Just as with our dam analogy, this dimensional energy acts like water. It will widen the opening the longer it stays open. If not closed after a day or two, it will likely be too big to close. Plus such waiting will endanger lives, both as more spirits use the widening pathway to enter our world and in the case someone from this side stumbles through to the other. When the pathway is new only non-corporeal entities will be able to traverse from one side to the other. Several days without closing and we would risk corporeal entities coming across. As we do not know how "deep" the prison is they could be of unknown intent and ability, and even if not connected to Deogen dangerous in their own way. We must tackle them in the order they open, and as quickly as possible."

"Okay fine," she sighed. "I can see where a thousand years of doing this have taught them a few things about the process, and it's not good to start changing it now."

"I do not agree. Stagnated thinking is no good either," Meowvis cautioned her. "It is good to explore alternatives. However, in this case, without more time to study the problem, following the normal routine is best. If, after this event, we wish to put other measures in place, we will have the time to discuss and implement them."

*We will, after all, know the sites a year in advance now, and could maybe come up with some kind of magic to strengthen the barrier so they never tear open.*

"Do it the hard way this time, find an easier way after we survive it?"

"An excellent summary."

Herman presented us with some gifts, and we walked out wearing them into the workshop. He had gotten in the armor and was waiting for us, and nodded his head in appreciation as we came in.

"Looking good ladies, everything fit all right?"

“Everything fits a little too well,” I complained. “What, did you sneak into our rooms to measure us when we were asleep?”

He laughed. “Nothing so crass. You think Meowvis can’t get someone’s measurements just by looking at them?”

“Did you make them yourself?”

“I did. Had to improvise a bit, I’ve made leather armor before of course, but not clothes as such. This wasn’t exactly the same thing, but I’m pretty good at crafting in general so it worked out.”

“I helped,” Meowvis told us. “There are many ‘cosplay’ guides online, so I was able to put them to use. We bought a catsuit online to take apart, I was able to create the modified pattern for each of you based on that using your dimensions.”

“Well thanks, to both of you. These must have taken a lot of work.”

“Seeing you in them has made the whole thing worth it.”

“Men,” we both said.

“But he’s not wrong,” Kelly hastened to assure me.

“Don’t you start!”

We laughed.

We were both decked out in a black (whatever that was) leather “catsuit” that fit us like a glove. They radiated magic, so I figured they would be tougher than your usual leather outfit too. Kelly said it would help hide us, making us less visible, comparing it to passing a fish swimming through almost cold enough to freeze water. “Try to find the fish by letting it swim past you in the water and telling which side it’s on based on the fish’s temperature. You’re not going to do it.” I appreciated the analogy. If it was “dark” outside and our outfits were “dark” then we would be harder to see. Like trying to hear a flute when there were twenty tubas playing. I had a hood that covered the top part of my face, modeled after a character Kelly said was named Daredevil. A separate “pouch” could be snapped into place on my back, just below my neck, to hide my hair. Kelly had braided it and loosely snapped it inside, so I could still turn my head and move around without it hampering me.

“He’s another Marvel character, like Iron Man,” Kelly had explained while she did that. “He’s a blind super hero, just like you!”

“Herman does have a thing for Marvel characters, doesn’t he?”

Kelly’s of course was missing one hand, and had more zippers to help get her sleeve on that side up her arm. Otherwise we had leather gloves, and sturdy leather soles on our feet so we were basically wearing tight fitting leather boots as well, just without the bulk.

We had both stretched out a bit, finding the suits didn’t hamper us, and while they left nothing to the imagination, the whole point was to avoid being seen in the first place. Kelly said her outfit included some goggles, modified to work like the inside of Herman’s helmet, so she could keep in touch with Meowvis. It had some kind of display on the left eye, so they could send her text messages, enhance low light vision, do object outlining, that sort of thing. The right eye was just regular old glass, because she needed to see the ley line convergence in order to know where the tear was. Couldn’t do that looking at a camera image, so this was a good compromise. She said it wasn’t perfect, her left eye seemed a tiny bit “behind” the right, so Meowvis simply turned the camera off for the time being and left the other information up.

“I can turn it back once we’re in the dark, and you won’t be seeing much with your other eye,” they told her.

“That should help.”

My magic told me Herman was holding his shield, and Reves was sitting there expectantly too. The drone hovered nearby, and he checked to make sure his shotgun was attached. It was. “Any last minute thoughts?” he asked.

I waited, Kelly didn't say anything. "I guess not. This one, being out in the open like this, is basically a practice run. Reves will teleport us some ways down the track, and you're sure there's no train coming?"

"I checked the schedule again as you were asking," Meowvis told us. "No train inbound for the next twenty minutes."

"Great. We'll head there, fight off anything that's around, covering Kelly who will be sealing the tear. She'll fight only if we get overwhelmed. The point is to seal the tear, and get out of there again. Much as I would rather kill any cult members there so they aren't at the next site, and the next site, and so on, the longer we're there the more danger innocent people will be in."

"Sounds good. If one little old lady Tuatha can manage this, on her own, I'm sure we can handle it," Herman said.

"Then let's do it!"

While Reves created the now standard portal in the air like the ones Herman used, I got out my energy draining magic. It wasn't quite sundown here, as we wanted it as dark as possible in Japan so I was dragged down a little by the sun and my usual divination magic. But I threw my will into the spell, this was either going to be a cakewalk, because there would be no one there to oppose us, or I would have plenty of targets to drain in a minute. We were of course outside, so his room full of electronics didn't interfere, so at least I didn't have to fight that off as well. With it open we all walked through the hole and onto the train tracks. "Train station up ahead this way," Meowvis reported. "I'll scout the area." The drone buzzed off. Herman must have been floating, I didn't hear his footsteps but my magic told me he was there. *This is it, this is the start of what we've been working towards the last two months. Let's take care of things and have a great Halloween party at the end of it. At least I'm not dragged down by the sun anymore, just all the magic I have going.*

We didn't try to be stealthy on our approach, as the gaudy Iron Man armor made that impossible. Had it just been the two of us, Kelly and I, we may have tried to stick more to the shadows. You know, like ninjas? Because we sort of were ninjas, by training? Instead we just followed the tracks and headed towards the station.

"There's trouble," Herman reported. "Meowvis is seeing some activity. Crud, there must be a dozen of them! They've taken over the station! And the police are here too, great."

"They must be inside the building," I decided.

"Yeah, wait a second, the drone is checking. Could be three or four people outside too, watching where the convergence is."

"So we show up, they start shooting us, the ones inside hear it and shoot their hostages, is that it?" I asked.

"Pretty much."

"So give them a different target," Kelly suggested. "Herman, you go in the front, smashing through the doors so they focus on you. Tayna, I know you can handle a couple of guys, you hit them from behind, and I'll head to the convergence."

"It's about all we've got," he agreed. "Really wish Tanaka was here, he knew light magic and was always blinding our opponents. Good luck."

"You too."

He shot into the air, and I lost track of him as he moved out of range. I was pretty sure I would know the signal though, a smashing noise and lots of gunfire. We separated, I followed Reves who was keeping his speed down and presumably heading towards the building. In our last fight, Reves had done the smart thing and gotten his opponent on the ground. I figured they would probably have guns, and it was smart to get those guns away from them. Knocking them over was probably the best way to go as well, so as he would no doubt do that I would get in on the action as well. As soon as the first one

came into range I focused on magic again, my magic of movement, and willed a quick spell to boost me into the air. I wasn't great at this type of magic, but again I poured my will into it. I fairly flew into the air, flipped, and slammed into him with my heel. Clearly not expecting an attack from above he smashed into the pavement, his gun clattering away from him. From my right I heard the sound of breaking glass, Herman was making his move so we had timed this pretty well. (Probably Meowvis was to thank for that) Energy flooded me, and I landed to what was no doubt the surprised looks of the three goons were left.

Bullets went wide as Reves slammed into the next guy, knocking him over, and taking him out of the fight for the moment. The guy next to him was fairly on the ball though, while he probably couldn't see Reves (I had been told he was also "black" like the leather and hard to see at night) he did see me. I was probably standing in a "light" or something, and my intuition said I better move, so I did. A shot whizzed past me, and I closed the distance between us as quickly as I could. Once I reached him I simply slammed both palms into his chest, hoping to knock him into his buddy the fourth man standing in the line. That worked a treat, though I heard another shot go off. As nothing slammed into me I figured it was fine, the guy I hit went flying and slammed into his buddy. They both hit the ground with a crunch. Now I had a choice to make; continue the assault, possibly killing these people, or just keep them from getting their guns back. Then I remembered that, right, they were in a very real sense terrorists, having taken over a train station and I heard gunfire and cries from inside. They were not deserving of my *mercy!* I went after them, simply placing a hand on each one. I heard a thump from behind me and Reves was growling, he must have slammed the man or shook him. My two were screaming as their energy was drained out of them, and then went silent. I took my hands off them and straightened up. I felt the first cultist stirring where I had left him on the pavement, so I yanked the nearest man up and tossed him in that direction. They collided, and I heard some bones snap I'm pretty sure. Figuring that took care of them for a bit I went over to the one trying to keep Reves' teeth away from his throat and touched him too. He too spasmed as energy was ripped out of his body, and he too went limp. Reves dropped him like a landlord dropping a tenant that missed a single payment, and I called out to Kelly. "How's it going?"

"I think I found the tear," she called back. "I don't really know what to do now!"

*Oh yeah, we did sort of overlook that part, didn't we?*

"I'm just going to touch the Bane to it, and hope that starts sealing it."

"Good plan, I'm going to go help Her- Iron Man."

"I should be fine here. I don't think they're getting up again."

"Not if they know what's good for them." I turned, focusing my attention on the building before me. *There must be a door leading out here. Ah, here we are.* There was a slab of metal and glass before me, which my magic told me was a door, and there was someone beyond it. They had a gun, my magic told me that much, so I pointed at them, and then crooked my finger. They backed away and fled. *Oh, he doesn't want to play? Now, how to get this door open...* I pulled and pushed and yanked and slid it, but it seemed to be locked. That was fine. I dropped my spirit spell, I had enough stolen power flowing through me at the moment and touched the door. Forcing magic into it I basically "stuck" my hands to it, then yanked it with mobility magic. There was the sound of shattering glass and twisting metal and I ripped it out of the frame. Swinging it around so it would fit I charged up the stairs, then let it fly at the nearest men with guns I felt. They tried to dodge it but it smashed into them. "This way is clear," I yelled at the grouping of people on my right, in Japanese of course. I figured they were hostages, and I gestured towards the door. "Get out, now!" They started moving towards me. I felt there were more people with guns in here, and whirled to face them. *But I have to protect these people!* Throwing my will into protection magic I shouted "Mienai barrier!" and willed a wall of force, a protection spell, into existence from my outstretched hands. This was another branch of magic I wasn't great at, and there were a lot of electronics in here, as well as witnesses. But hey, they had just seen Iron Man himself swoop in to save them so if they didn't believe *anything* was possible at this point, there was no hope

for them. And maybe the remaining gunmen would be freaked out by all this their aim wouldn't be so hot anyway? The spell at least went off, and a second later I heard bullets smashing off something so I was hoping it this and it would hold.

"Sugoi," I heard a young voice say as it was pulled past me.

*Yeah, I'm pretty amazing, kid. Now get out of here.* I held the barrier, Herman's shotgun going off and his shield slamming into cultists beyond it. When the last person was out I heard Kelly's voice behind me. I felt she had her sword out, warmth was radiating from her like a fire. "It's closed, looks like the people here are safe. Time to go."

"Help Iron Man, at least smash their guns so when we leave there isn't still a shootout in here."

"Right."

With the people safe I dropped the spell and focused on anyone still up. *Your energy is mine.* I simply held my hand up and willed it into me, throwing my will into another spirit spell. (After all, I didn't have to touch them, it's just I was faster damaging people by punching them and draining their energy than just using magic to do it at a distance) One of them fought it off, another gave a strangled cry and fell over as their life energy flowed into me, and the final one lost energy but stayed standing. But then he had to contend with Kelly, who started harassing him with her sword. I didn't bother protecting her as the one that had resisted me followed her with his gun, shooting. I did, however, grab up the door as I knew right where it had fallen, with kinetic magic again. This I flung into him, hearing a tearing sound that had nothing to do with metal, and everything to do with flesh. As Kelly put a few slashes into the man she was fighting Herman flew over to me. "That's should do it," he yelled. "The other gunmen are down. Let's get out of here before the cops break those doors down or decide to climb in through the hole I made."

"Right."

Kelly turned back towards me and we raced down the stairs again and back into the night air. The people we rescued were moving around the front of the building, which suited us just fine, and we raced down the track again. When we were some distance away we slowed, I gave Reves some of my energy just in case with another spirit spell, and he opened a portal back home.

The first of the tears was sealed, and for another night Deogen would stay exactly where he was.

## Chapter 21

We talk with our foe, and then I send my girlfriend from the frying pan into the fire

Where: China

When: The next night

When it would be nighttime in China we headed there, geared up as before, back to the graveyard. We were currently creeping along the outer wall, or flying in the case of Herman. He was floating just a few inches off the ground, stretched out like a bench. It probably would have been hilarious had I been able to see it, but I couldn't, so it was fine. We headed around to the gate and Kelly peeked around the entrance.

"No people walking around," she announced. "Do you think the cult isn't active here?"

"Meowvis reports no cars in the parking lot," Herman added. "The drone is coming back now. It can do a quick pass and then we can head in."

"Sounds good."

We waited a moment, the whine of the drone passing overhead, and then waited a bit more for it to fly around the place.

"Strange," Herman remarked. "All seems quiet. Maybe we can do this one without any fuss?"

"Let's hope so," I told him. "But they could use magic to make themselves invisible." *Heck, I could use magic to make us invisible. But trying to keep track of three different spells doesn't seem advisable. I can't drop either, my 'vision' spell or the spell that lets them see ley lines. We need to know where exactly to look after all.*

"Let's go through together," Kelly finally decided. "No more hiding. Stick with us Herman."

"You got it." He must have went vertical again and I heard his feet hitting the ground.

We headed through the gate and started wandering through, Herman with his shotgun out, Kelly with the sword out. Both so she could see better, holding the sword up high like a torch, and to defend herself if something jumped out. Reves of course was by my side, guiding me around any flowers or gravestones or rocks that might trip me up. The two wasted no time in picking up the line and following it, but then both stopped.

"Ah, here you are," said a voice. "I was beginning to think you weren't coming."

"What? Who said that?" I demanded. *My magic isn't telling me anyone is there. Some kind of protection magic? But how would they know I use a spell to "see" and defend against it?* I raised my hands into a guard position, and Reves went in front of me.

"We're at the site of the tear," Kelly told me. "I can see it. There's something standing in front of it."

"Something?"

"I guess it's a ghost?"

"Please, come closer!" said the voice. "There's no need for us to shout."

"What are you?" Herman demanded.

"Okay, I guess we do need to shout? No matter, I'll just come to you if you won't come to me it's no trouble." There was a pause and the other two took a step back. Reves growled, but I still couldn't figure out what everyone was reacting to. "There, see? Now, let me look at you."

"Is there really something there?" I asked. "I don't sense anything. I do hear it though."

"It's some kind of vague shape," Kelly told me. "You did say ghosts existed, right?"

"Indeed!" said the voice. "This body is that of a local spirit. Something seems to have riled up my followers here, given what happened at the last crack in my prison wall so I thought I would see what was going on. I couldn't see very well, too far from the action last time. You don't look like the Tuatha that usually come to meddle in my affairs. They haven't take ill, have they? Or even worse, *died?*" The voice sounded quite excited for this to be so.

*Great. As there's nothing really there, no physical object, there's nothing for my power to lock onto. I've trained fighting blind of course, in case my magic wasn't working due to, well, all the reasons magic can fail, I'll have to rely on that. But I can't punch a ghost. What the heck am I going to do with it?*

"Wait, you can see through these cracks?" Kelly asked.

"But of course! Can't you see through cracks in your walls?"

"I guess if they were big enough."

"Well, these are not quite big enough for me yet. If you could just leave this one be for a few, what do you call them? Days? Yes days. I would be most grateful. I assume, as you are carrying the *delightful* little object that seals them up again that you have at least been in contact with my jailers? I'm sure they told you of the awful, perverted, disgusting, horrific, and downright naughty things I would do should I be let back into this world?"

"You forgot expensive," I told them.

"So they did go on at length about it? But it's all lies. I have no interest in humanity. They would be quite safe from me. I just wish to be free, and really, isn't that what we all long for?"

"So we let you out," Herman asked, "and you just go about your business? No making trouble?"

"No trouble at all, I assure you! Really, my whole imprisonment was simply a misunderstanding but they would never listen to me again. I'm glad you are reasonable people, at last. You are people, aren't you? I mean I see the barer, and the animal, and the long haired one, but I have no idea what you are. Some kind of metal... golem? Is that the right word? Has your world figured out how to make such things?"

I ignored the question. "Wait, so is this a ghost or is it you?" I asked. "I'm confused."

"The gap is only wide enough for me to peek though," the spirit explained. "But on this side were some lovely spirits and so, temporarily, and with no harm intended to it, I took it over. Just to talk, obviously."

"Obviously."

"I told the other spirits to beat it, so we could talk as we are now. I mean I could hardly invite you to my side, you wouldn't have trusted me at all! Even if I could have somehow gotten you some kind of message I wanted you to step through."

"That's right."

*We wouldn't have anyway. I don't want to get trapped in his prison. Or widen the tear by using it. Come now, how stupid do you think we are?*

"So this is the next best thing, don't you agree?"

"I agree it's probably the best you're going get."

"And when our little talk is over, I'll let it go, and it can go back to shambling around here or whatever it usually does, with my thanks."

"You're a reasonable guy."

"Finally! Someone who sees me for who I really am!"

*Or not, as the case may be.*

"How can we just take your word for it though?" Kelly asked. "I mean you see our position. Your 'followers' are all violent, they've tried killing me three times now, and almost succeeded once. You have to admit that looks bad for you."

"Don't talk to me about *those* people," the ghost insisted. "I want nothing to do with them. Again, just another huge misunderstanding. It's been so long I'm sure stories of me have been quite exaggerated so the being they want freed isn't even me. I'm sure they would be quite disappointed if they ever saw me. They run around, causing all this grief in my name but did I ever ask them to do that? No! Not once. I mean you know how humans are, no offense meant if some of you are humans of course I mean other humans, the type of humans that would join a cult dedicated to a guy sealed away for as long as I have. I mean, really!"

“Uh huh. And again, we’re just supposed to believe this?” Herman asked.

The ghost made a sighing sound. “I know, it’s an uphill battle, getting you to trust me. But I had to make the attempt, it’s my only chance at freedom.”

“But you know about them?” I pressed.

“I mean, I see people trying to keep those Tuatha from sealing the cracks in my prison every so often. I was rooting for them and all but I’ve never really talked to any.”

“Hummmmm...”

“If we could just have a minute?” Kelly asked.

“Oh, of course, discuss it with your friends, obviously. No rush. I’ll just take a few steps back.”

“They’ve moved back,” Kelly whispered. “What do we do?” I realized she had put the sword away, probably so she didn’t burn us to a crisp as we gathered around in a huddle to talk out our next step.

“Obviously we can’t trust it. It’ll say anything,” Herman told us. “I mean come on, the cult has been active more than a thousand years, if he really had no contact with them don’t you think it would have died out by now?”

“Use your magic,” Kelly suggested. “Get an answer to what would happen if we left this crack alone and this thing got out!”

“Good idea.” *I never really thought to check the Tuatha out, see if they were on the level. I had no reason to doubt them before, but I guess now is a good a time as any to make sure they were on the level.* I got the question straight in my head and cast my spell, naturally dropping the spirit spell as we knew where the gateway was now.

*You must be crazy to ask this, don't you know the peace you'll miss?*

*Fires red and sky of black, if Deogen slips through that crack.*

“Yeah, he’s getting sealed up again,” I announced. *Never had the magic be so snippy before, but I guess it did answer the question.*

“I was afraid you would say that,” said the voice, now closer to us again.

“Crap!” said just about everyone, and suddenly the other two jumped away from me.

“Where did it go?” Herman demanded to know. “Where are you, Deogen?”

“I’m right here, metal one,” said Kelly. “Wasn’t sure that would work, but, ah! הָרָב There it is!”

My magic told me the sword had come back. *She got possessed? We let our guard down, crap, and now it’s got command of Kelly?*

“And now for one less carrier in the world.” The sword came down like she was going to stab herself in the stomach with it.

“No!” I cried, but Herman quickly stepped over to her again, trying to grab hold of the sword.

“Nope!” Kelly cried, getting out of the way. “Too slow, metal man! Bad dog!” Reves went for her as well, but again she dodged out of the way.

“Wait,” I cried to him, as he circled around for another pass. “Don’t touch her, or the possession might transfer to you!”

“We can’t let her kill herself!” Herman told me.

“Agreed!” I struck with my magic, trying to grab onto her hand as I knew right where it was. “I think I’ve got her, go for the sword again!”

“Right!” He swung his shotgun at it, not wanting to risk touching her even with the armor. I heard it clang but she held onto it. “Oh come on!”

“Just shoot her in the hand, she can’t be hurt by it anyway!”

“Oh yeah.”

“What are you up to?” Kelly asked.

*I bet Deogen doesn't know what guns are.* Herman reoriented the shotgun and pulled the trigger. The sword went flying out of her hand, as I figured. Even if she couldn't be hurt by it, my magic holding her hand in place but still being smacked with whatever came out of a shotgun would mean she couldn't hold onto it anymore. As it was flung free I shoved Kelly back by the hand, basically yanking her hand so the rest of her followed.

"Where's the portal?" I yelled to Herman.

"Further back, back and to the left, keep going!"

"No!" Kelly cried, but I kept dragging her back.

"There, hold her there!" Herman told me, so I did.

*I just hope she doesn't have to do anything, that touch is enough.*

"Bring her hand to the left slowly. That's it. A little more. It's closed."

"Whoa, what happened?" Kelly said.

"Are you back?"

"The ghost or spirit popped out," Herman said. "It's just sort of drifting away now."

"So Deogen possessed the ghost, and made the ghost possess Kelly?"

"I guess."

I let Kelly's hand go and I could tell she was looking around. "How did I get over here? Hey, the tear is closed, when did that happen?"

We filled her in on her possession, and she was apologizing like crazy.

"It's fine, Kelly. We didn't think it could move that fast, or those of you with working eyes took them off the thing. We know better if it tries such a trick again. It worked out, don't beat yourself up over it."

"And you just dragged me with your magic over to the tear and let the Bane do the work?"

"It's all I could think of. I couldn't hurt you, even if I could hurt you, punches wouldn't do it. I needed to cut off his control, and that meant closing it. I'm just glad we didn't have to activate it in some way."

"Agreed. Well, before we get jumped by more cultists, let's go home."

"Not a bad idea."

So we rested up and then headed to our next destination the next day. The shopping mall. Which, of course, was in the process of burning down. Reves had opened a gateway into the place we needed to be, behind the store grating we pointed out to him before, and we immediately felt the heat of the fire and smoke poured through. Reves wasted no time in closing it again. We all coughed a bit (well, not Herman who was in the armor as usual) but finally we decided to head further out so we could see what the situation was. He opened another portal, we made sure the coast was clear, then stood there looking over the scene. At least the others did, I couldn't sense that far away with my magic. I could have recast it to "see" *just* down there, but figured we had the eyeball department covered.

"They burned the entire mall down?" Kelly spat, sounding disgusted. "Talk about overkill."

"Yeah we can't get near the place now," Herman agreed. "It is a bit extreme, yes, but tactically sound. I'm somewhat in awe of how far these zealots are willing to go."

"Is that's what's going on?" I asked. "The place is on fire, the whole place?"

"Yeah, it's chaos over there," Kelly told me. "Fire trucks all over, the entire building looks to be ablaze. We're not getting anywhere near that place for hours."

"Unless you can make us fireproof?" Herman asked.

"Would I need to? Kelly can't be hurt by normal fire, right? She could walk through fire."

"I suppose if I don't get my hand blasted off by a shotgun, a little fire, scarecrow, shouldn't be a problem. Still have to breathe though, there must be a lot of smoke there now."

"I could use my magic to let you need less oxygen."

“...Okay...” She sounded very hesitant. “But trying to walk to where we need to be from an entrance would take minutes, even if I knew exactly where I was going. I would need the spirit sight spell as well.”

“Reves can just open the portal to the room like before. We were just surprised and standing too near it. This time just you can go through, we’ll stay back.”

“You don’t understand, I guess you couldn’t sense through the portal. It was a mess in there, and isn’t that just an approximate location anyway? Stuff is collapsing, I couldn’t even have climbed through that portal he made last time, there was too much burning debris in the way. The fire probably started there, it’s what I would do if I was a cultist who knew where the tear was going to be. And I have to assume their information is as good as ours.”

“Oh. Yes, that’s a problem. Herman, can your suit withstand the heat?”

“The heat? Probably, at least for a time. Seeing through the smoke that much fire is going to be making inside that place? That’s something else entirely.”

“Darn it, but wait, I could put my spell on you, so you could just tell where things are!”

“But you couldn’t tell where the tear was, it’s not a physical thing, right?”

I paused. “Is there a wall or a tree around here?”

“A tree?”

“Yes, something I can bang my head into. I feel the urge.”

“Come on, this situation can’t be impossible. Let’s carefully go over what we can do, and figure something out.”

I sighed. “Fine. Let me think.” I mentally reviewed the areas of magic I had studied and had command of. It was possible, I could cover us in spells that would allow us to walk in there and get back out again. But pushing that much magic was going to be a problem. I had no qualms about holding onto a spell or two, I did it all the time with my divination magic so I didn’t stumble around. It reduced my blindness to a mere annoyance, something most who were blind would probably give anything for. But the number of spells I would need for this? I looked over at Kelly, not that I needed to, my magic told me she was there if my eyeballs were pointed in her direction or not. Could she do it alone? And could I send her into danger like that? *Come on, show a little faith in her. What has she been training for, if not this? Believe in your friend, everything will turn out right.* “Okay, it can be done, but you’ll probably have to go alone.”

“Alone?” she squeaked. “Why?”

I took a deep breath. “I can stuff enough magic inside you that you should have no problem getting in and out, even if the place is burning down around you. But I’m going to have to concentrate on it. That much magic, keeping track of it all in my mind, I would probably trip over my own feet if I tried to move a single step. That means it’s my job to stand here, or sit down probably, and maintain the spells while you go in and seal the rift.”

“You are the only one who can,” agreed Herman. “But Tayna, are you sure about this?”

“No, of course I’m not sure about it!” I snarled. “You think I want to cast half a dozen spells on my friend and then say ‘hope you don’t die’ and sit here in the dark sick to death with worry as she heads off? No, I want to be by her side in case she gets into trouble. But I can’t do both. She has to go alone.”

“Why not just wait?” Kelly asked. “We have a three day window right? Fourteen days, but ten possible sites.”

“I don’t know,” Herman mused. “This situation won’t get much better once the fire is out. If most of it collapses how would we get to the tear? Plus it’s going to be fenced off as unsafe, people will be milling around trying to find out how the fire started.”

“And this is only the third site,” I reminded her. “If every three sites we have to wait a day, we might not make it!”

“True,” Herman admitted. “If they can delay us like this at every site somehow, that would be pretty bad.”

“If you think you can do it, I’m willing to make the attempt,” she said at last.

“What spells are you thinking about?” Herman asked.

“We know the Bane increases her strength, so I figure a mobility type spell to help her move faster. The spirit spell to let her see the lines, a body spell to help her with the smoke-”

“Oh, we can do that without magic,” Herman told me. “Firefighters wear oxygen masks, we can just steal- I mean borrow one.”

“That sounds reasonable. They can’t be so hard to use you couldn’t figure it out. So divination to help with the smoke, so you don’t trip on stuff while following the line. Obscuring to get her past everyone down there and into the building. Protection against heat, you may not be able to be burned by fire but you’re walking into essentially an oven. You’ll lose moisture in your body because it’ll still be hot. You’ll try and sweat but it won’t help, your body could still shut down.” *I’m tempted to use fateweaving as well, to make sure her fate is to come out of that place alive. But then my place might burn down, or a relative of hers might burn to death instead. Is it worth it?* “Did I forget anything?”

“That is a lot of magic,” Herman decided. “Are you sure you can handle it?”

“As long as we don’t have to do any fighting tonight, probably. In fact, would you mind if I took some of your energy? I’ll need to throw a lot of power into each spell as each one before it will drag me down.”

“If you can get it through the armor, it’s all yours.”

“Oh, right, that armor. Well, wait what have we been following around all this time? Ley lines. I’ll just hook into them if one of you can direct me to it.”

“Then lay it on me,” Kelly said, trying to sound chipper. “Turn me into Miss Magic.”

So I dropped my usual divination spell and took her hands so I knew where she was. Then I cast it on her, and it needed to be first because it was the only one I couldn’t put more willpower into. It was strange that 90% of spells were fueled by willpower, but this one specifically wasn’t. But hey, I didn’t make the rules of magic, did I? I just had to follow them. When she indicated she could close her eyes and still know where things were I went on with the mobility spell, as it and protection were my least practiced magics. I pulled them all off, one at a time, and was now holding five spells at once, the most I had in my life. I didn’t feel too wiped out, having taken energies from the local lines beforehand, and told her I was done.

“Get in and out,” I told her seriously. “I’ll stand here and concentrate on them.”

“In and out? And miss this huge fire sale the place is having?”

I tried to stifle a laugh and smack her in the head, but she easily dodged. “I’m trying to concentrate here!”

“Sorry, couldn’t resist. I’ll be back soon.” She kissed me and took off running. I plopped down to the ground.

*It is true though, everything in there is going to be ruined. If we could somehow pull anything still intact out, I bet we could wind up with a mountain of stuff. Oh well.*

“I’ll watch her as far as I can,” Herman told me. (He knew right where she was, so the obscuring spell didn’t do anything against him. If he lost sight of her though, he wouldn’t be able to find her again.) “Be back in a moment.”

“Right.”

He took off, and Reves set his head in my lap. I patted his head. “I’ll see her again, right old man?”

He whined.

“I know, I feel the same way. Thanks buddy.”

We waited.

## Chapter 22

We close a portal a day, to keep Deogen away

Where: Herman's place

When: The next day

It had been a nerve racking twenty minutes or so after Kelly vanished into the burning mall and Herman came back. On the one hand I wanted to rush down there myself, to be there when she came back out or if she didn't come back out because she needed my help. But on the other I knew that if anything broke my concentration, Kelly would probably die. So I sat there, very quietly with Herman watching over me, as my girlfriend picked her way through the burning building and tried not to imagine her being crushed by falling beams, or falling through the floor into a basement she couldn't get out of, or getting tangled up in something and not being able to get free, or anything. Obviously there was no other way this could be done, but that didn't stop me thinking I should have somehow been at her side, in case she got into some kind of trouble. But finally I heard her voice again, and she said everything was fine, and I couldn't stop telling her how brave she had been, and how worried I had been, and how I hoped we never had to split up on these stupid missions again. She said it was fine, she kept her cool and made her way fairly slowly through the place, wanting to err on the side of caution and take a little longer instead of rushing it and stumbling into something. Herman of course was also glad she made it out.

"Too bad I couldn't find the convergence or the tear," she lamented. "Still, maybe the fire closed it?"

"*You didn't find it?*" I shouted. "I'm going to have to put all that magic back on you? Why did you come out? It must still be—"

"Kidding!"

"..."

"..."

"You're going to pay for that one."

It was now the next day, and we had followed Reves through the portal to India. We again picked a time it would be fairly late, though we saw a few people still wandering the "streets" in the area. Kelly had the spirit magic on again, and reported that yes, the convergence was located inside a small house.

"So we're really going to terrify these people?" Kelly asked.

"Believe me, it's better this way," I told her. "If they're home, trying to explain why we need to go into their house for a moment will take all night. Herman is going to smash the door down, step through, activate the translation item, threaten them with the shotgun, get them to sit someplace, then we can go in. My divination spell will drop but I'll put it back on so I'm not stumbling around blind. We'll head to wherever the portal is, close it, and retreat, leaving them unharmed and very confused." *I suppose I could stay on guard out here, in case once we go in cult members try to get in behind us. But after leaving her alone at the mall I'm not leaving her side. We stick together from now on!*

"That's why no Iron Man suit, huh?" she asked Herman.

"You think I want it getting out that the guy that's been in the news lately doing all sorts of great works is suddenly smashing doors down in a slum somewhere random in India? Of course not! That's why you ladies aren't wearing those outfits I made for you either, and are wearing those ski masks. We do not want to be identified later."

"You know, this would all be unnecessary if thousands of years ago you guys just admitted magic was real, and everybody knew about it," Kelly complained. "We could just explain there's a magic thing in there and we need to take care of it."

“Sadly, we live in the reality we didn’t do that,” Herman shot back. “So we’re stuck with this plan. You didn’t come up with anything better.”

“I know,” she sighed. “This is, ironically, the safest and quickest way to get this done. So let’s get this done so we aren’t standing here in the street being noticed.”

“Right.” Herman stepped up to the door and raised his leg to kick it down. I had put a spell on him before we got here to augment his strength, so he should have no trouble doing so. It would of course fall like any other spell once he went through the door, but he wouldn’t need it after that. “Here goes- wait a second. I think it’s open.” He gave the door an experimental push with one finger and it opened a bit more. “Maybe they don’t lock their doors around here?”

*Sure, sure, from what you guys have said and what I’ve felt with my magic this is a classy neighborhood where everyone trusts each other and locks aren’t needed.*

“Maybe they aren’t home?” Kelly asked. “That would be a stroke of luck.”

“Go on, we stick to the plan. See if they’re inside, Herman,” I ordered.

“Don’t call me by name when I’m breaking and entering! Why do you think I left the cell phone at home, totally depriving myself of... my... partner’s help?”

“Sorry! Not used to this...”

We stepped through after Herman said the hallway was clear, and I put the spells back on myself and Kelly. I didn’t bother with Herman’s, he didn’t need the extra strength now, and I didn’t want to be dragged down by three spells at once. The house seemed quiet, but it wasn’t that big so it didn’t take us long to cover the first floor.

“Basement,” Herman whispered.

“Lead the way,” I told him.

“Uh, I’m not the one that’s bulletproof at the moment!”

“I can’t see in the dark!” Kelly protested.

“There’s a light on down the stairs.”

“... Oh. So there is. Should we call out?”

“They must have heard Herman stomping around,” I told them. “Come on, maybe they went for a walk let’s just get this over with. No one came up so maybe there really is no one home. They’re either down there and we stick to the plan of Herman threatening them, or they aren’t and we’re out of here in ten seconds.” *I don’t like it though, we can’t have seen the last of the cult, can we?*

And of course I was right. As we exited the stairs we saw two older people tied up at the corner of the basement, while a man stood over them holding something in his hand. The tied up people wiggled around and tried to speak past their gags, but the man kicked them without taking his eyes off us. “That’s far enough,” he told us.

“One guard?” Herman asked, raising the gun. “That’s hardly a challenge at this point. I’ll try to make this quick, hold still.” He aimed for the head.

“I wouldn’t do that,” the figure said, holding his hand out. My magic felt it move, but it couldn’t tell me what was in his hand apart from “an electronic device.” “I lose my grip on this, and we all go up.”

“Go up and have a sandwich?” Kelly offered hopefully.

“No.” He did something and she gasped. “Ah, now you see.”

“What? What is it?” I asked.

“He’s wired. Under his coat, what looks like explosives.”

“He’s bluffing!”

“I’m not,” the man assured us.

“You would volunteer for a suicide mission? Come on...” I didn’t believe a word of it.

“I did more than that, I fought for the honor to stand here. To destroy the enemies of Deogen, that will earn me a place by his side when he is freed.”

*Wow, talk about grade A crazy. How many of you jerks are there? Why don't cults of love and peace and helping the homeless ever display this level of commitment?*

"But you'll be dead," Herman told him.

"You think that means anything to the great one? You know nothing! I will live again, and he will grant me power such as I have never dreamed of!"

"Or he won't," he countered. "It's been over a thousand years, all you have is his words, you don't actually know what he can do."

*And that's just the sort of thing I would tell my evil followers to get them to free me from my thousand year old prison too. Anything I thought they would lap up and sacrifice themselves for.*

"The texts are clear!" he snarled. "Now are you going to back away, or shall I die in a blaze of glory?"

"Sounds like you're rooting for the glory option, but let's not be hasty," Herman told him. "I'm putting the gun down. Why not let them go? They don't have to get blown up with the rest of us."

"And lose my hostages? You must think me a fool!"

*Is this guy for real?*

"If any of us even take a step towards the stairs or you, you can release that button."

"Humm... true."

While they were talking I framed a question in my mind and sent it into my magic.

*Flash and fire, torn asunder,  
if you make the slightest blunder.*

*Short and to the point. Yup, they're real explosives all right, he's not bluffing. Great. How in the heck are we going to deal with this? From what he's saying he's already triggered the explosives he's actually holding them back now with that thing in his hand. He lets go of it, like we kill him, and we all explode. Chopping his hand off won't do it, like Thor should have done in that movie. Can I cast movement magic on it, keep the button held down? I could maybe get his thumb, if I could cast my divination spell well enough in a threshold to get that level of detail, anyway. But what to do with it after, I can't float it around like that forever. Ask my vocation magic how he's getting out of it? He must have a way to stop the explosion again, in case he did get us to back off. If I could trigger that...*

Herman and the two were going back and forth when suddenly the man was just gone, mid-sentence. We stood in silence for a second, wondering what the heck was going on, when suddenly Reves appeared out of nowhere wagging his tail. He was standing behind where the guy would have been, and cocked his head as if to say "well, get on with it then!"

"What just happened?" Kelly asked softly.

Herman started laughing. "Oh, you tricky bastard. You really did it to him, didn't you?"

"What?"

"Think about it lass. Black Dog, right? He's been teleporting us around the whole time."

I was starting to get the picture. "He can make himself invisible too," I added.

"So he waited out of sight, used magic to make himself invisible, snuck up behind the guy and what, teleported him someplace?"

"Exactly. Magic is largely what we believe we can do with the type of magic we study," I explained. "And he knows the magic of wishing things from place to place. So he just did that, and didn't go himself. Well done, Reves. Extra treats tonight." *I just hope he took the guy to, like, the lake or something and not our apartment. Maybe high over the lake, so he started falling, lost his grip on the thing, hit the water, and blew himself to pieces with no other loss of life. That would be the ideal situation.*

His tail wagged faster and slammed into the floor.

"I guess I'll get the rift closed," Kelly said in a daze.

"I'll get these people out of their bonds," Herman announced.

"I'll stand here looking pretty," I told them. "The most important contribution, to be sure."

"Woff."

"You're pretty too, Reves, don't worry about it."

He sighed.

"But you're wearing a mask, no one can see your face," Kelly reminded me.

With that crisis out of the way we headed to Burma, a place I wasn't looking forward to, the next day.

"So here we are, at the lake," Kelly told us. We were at the edge of the water, having arrived near the bridge and making our way around and down to the lake. The drone had gone ahead, zipping across the lake looking for possible cult activity, but so far not finding anyone out there. "In our swim suits, in case we have to get wet for all this, instead of those nice leather outfits you made us. Standing here, for everyone to see. But I don't see that anyone brought a boat, so how are we getting out there?"

"The way I figure it," I told her, "I'll just put movement magic on us, allowing us to fly. It won't be all that fast, but then again we don't have that far to go."

"Hummm. I'll need the sight spell again too, won't that be three spells for you?"

I sighed. "Just two. I'm going to cut my own sight spell. You'll just have to drag me over the spot. Honestly I don't even have to go, but I'd feel better about it. No offense, Iron Man."

"None taken," Herman assured me.

Reves whined.

"Yes, you can come," I told him. "I can just as easily get three people with the flight spell as two, after all."

"Woof!"

"Ready?"

"No, not really. I've never flown before, and sticking my toe in this water isn't exactly the warmest. But I guess I have to try."

"We can practice for a few minutes, don't worry about it."

"Oh, sure, two flying ladies skimming over the lake. Even at night that might raise a few eyebrows."

"Well, up to you. Now come here so I know where you are." I took her hand and put my other on Reves' back, dropping my own spell. I gathered my willpower for the magic I would need to put on us all, and released it. I started with the mobility spell, my poorest spell, but put as much willpower into it as I could. I felt it take, and then cast the spiritual sight spell after that. "Okay, just think about what direction you want to move in and you'll do it," I told her. "It's actually not that hard. I don't do it that often because it basically makes me blind again. I get out of range of everything and it's hard to tell how fast I'm going or if I'm going to smash into something before I can stop. But I have done it."

"Like swimming with your eyes closed underwater. I get it. I'll give it a try. I can see the line, we can at least head in that direction."

"Here we go."

I didn't hear any cars nearby so the coast must have been clear, the four of us lifting off the ground and heading in the direction Kelly told us to go. I kept hold of her hand, more being dragged by her than anything else, but keeping myself going in that direction.

"Okay, this is sort of fun," she admitted after a moment.

I smiled. "Sometime we'll find you a big empty field with no one around for miles and you can fly around all you want."

“Sure, that could work. Ah, I think we’re getting close, there’s another line coming up on us.”

“Keep your eyes open, they could have a boat or something and be ready to shoot us down.”

“Meowvis reports no boats yet,” Herman told us. “The drone is heading to our location again.”

“Maybe they don’t have a presence here? Wait, hold up, this has to be the spot. Yeah, several lines here, but where’s the tear?” She pulled me down, and I could almost feel the water brushing my toes. We “stood” there, Kelly turning in place to look around.

“Could be the last one was the final one?” I dared to hope.

“Be nice if it was,” Kelly agreed. “But I better go down and check. We can’t risk not looking.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I admitted. “Will you be okay?”

“חָרָב” I felt the heat of the sword as it appeared. “This will light the way. It shouldn’t go out under the water, it’s magical fire, right?”

“As long as it’s not running water, the magic won’t get washed away,” I agreed. “Herman, can you go with her?”

“I mean I could,” he hedged. “But I’m not exactly water tight. Water would start getting into the suit, and there are electronics in here. I never made it to be submersible. Rain proof? Sure, but not this.”

“I can still ‘fly’ underwater though, right? So I’ll be a lot faster. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“True,” I agreed. “Okay, good luck.”

“Thanks. Oh, don’t look so sour, I’ll be gone and back, and you can help warm me up after. This will be way easier than the mall thing.”

“Deal. But wait, let me switch out the spirit sight spell for my divination spell. Even with the sword it’ll probably be pretty dark down there.”

“The spell didn’t tell you where the tear was, did it?”

“No, but neither will the spirit spell. We know it’s this general area. I would rather you not hit your head on a rock because you were swim-flying so fast it sneaks up on you.”

“Whatever you think is best.”

I switched the spells out, and she said closing her eyes she still knew what was around her. “See you in a second.” She took a deep breath and shot downwards, causing barely a splash as she entered the water.

“She’s a brave one,” Herman remarked. “Hope you two work out after all this is done.”

“I do too, she’s really stepped up-” I got cut off as Kelly shot out of the water again, splashed me, grabbed my hand, and pulled me up.

“There’s a problem, fly up, fly up!” I did, not understanding what could be wrong, but we were soon above the lake. She was shivering and holding the sword close to try and warm up.

“What happened?” I demanded.

“There were *things* down there!”

“Things?”

“We aren’t things, we’re people, thank you very much!” A voice called from below us.

*What in the world?*

“What are they?” Kelly hissed.

“Speak up, we can’t hear you!”

*We?*

“Who are you?”

“My name is Pothios, this is Yanzeith and Makrukaru. Who are you?”

“I’m Kelly, this is... Oh crap I should not have said that,” she muttered. “This is the Iron Man and, uh, Mary. And her dog Toto.”

*Toto?*

“You gave me quite a fright, I didn’t expect anyone to be around here. Sorry if I disturbed you.”

“Not a problem. You’ll be on your way then?”

“Uh, probably. Will you be moving on soon?”

“No.”

There was a pause.

“I see. Right. Of course. Do you live here?”

“No.”

Another pause.

“I see. Right. So what in the world are you doing here, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I do mind you asking. I don’t see how that’s any of your business. What are you doing here?”

“Just, I don’t know, looking around, I guess. Out for a fly, a swim, I mean, you know, seeing the sights.”

“The sights underwater? With a flaming sword in your hand?”

“Oh, this, uh…” she gave a weak laugh. “I can see how you might think that strange.”

“Very strange. We’ll leave when you do. This is no place for non-Naw.”

“Mamau?”

“Naw.”

“Naw what? Did I pronounce it wrong?”

“Naw.”

“So I didn’t pronounce it wrong?”

“They’re called the Naw,” Herman told her. “They’re intelligent, giant, octopuses. As you can see.”

“At least he gets it. We are the Naw, now be on your way!”

“They are pretty big. Look, I just need to look around a bit underwater. Do you mind? I’m not going to scare the fish away or anything.”

“You surface people are all the same,” they called up to us. “Think you own everything. Well we do mind. And in a few days, you’ll get yours and make no mistake!”

“I suppose Deogen gave you his word on that, did he?” I asked.

“They are the ones who want to close the portal! Brothers, attack them!”

## Chapter 23

We keep trying to close tears in reality

Where: Above the lake

When: Just after the Naw issued the order to attacked

*No thank you.* I grabbed Kelly's hand and shot into the sky as a wave of water rose to where we were. I felt it coming with my sense of magic and avoided it, and no further strike came, we were too high. We were safe from them for the moment, they couldn't exactly reach us, but at the same time we needed to get down there are close the tear. *Stalemate.*

"So now what?" Kelly asked.

"Good question," agreed Herman. "All they have to do is keep us from going down there. We three are not really a match for them."

"What can they do?"

"Meowvis is bringing that up now, based on the books we've digitized from the archivists. They have water magic, so of course they're in their element at the moment. They can resize themselves to be even bigger than they are now, or shrink us if they wanted to. Or just turn us into tiny fish, or birds. They can even become like water themselves, making it very tough to fight them."

"Great, now he finds some competent help."

"Yeah, Reves can't just blip them out of here this time," he agreed. "Can you?"

Reves started barking and yipping.

"Er, what's wrong with him? Is he saying he could do just that?"

"I don't know, what's he doing?" I asked.

"Jumping around like a puppy and wagging his tail."

"Let me ask. I'm dropping your spell, Kelly."

"Okay."

"Oh no I dropped the wrong one!" I started to drop a little. "Save meeeeeee!"

"Tayna!" She swooped down and "caught" me.

"You do care!" I hugged her back and rose again.

"Wait, what's this?"

"A little payback. Now, let's see what Reves has to say."

"You're awful, scaring me like that!"

I grinned at her. I dropped the correct spell and turned to Reves, who came over and let me touch his head. "Okay, what have you got for us, big guy?"

*I can make her invisible, if that would help. She could fly past them, dive down, then swim up while they're focused on us.*

"Interesting, that could be useful." I relayed what Reves had to say. *I suppose I could as well, if I didn't want to save my stamina for the inevitable fight we're going to have in a minute.*

"Humm, they are still just floating there," Herman told us. "Which gives me an idea. The 'reality' stone I have can do illusions. If she can go invisible at the same time I make the illusion she's still here, they won't notice she's gone. We can keep them distracted or at least I can, while she makes her way around them. Then we just leave."

"You still don't know where the thing is though, and having the sword out is going to be a dead giveaway," I mused.

*So we'll both go. I can see in the dark just fine, and I can sense what doesn't belong. I can find the tear, even underwater. She'll just have to hold onto me.*

"You would be willing to do that?"

*No choice. But this is my world too, and I am your partner. You would go if you could. I want to do my part in all this, not just be the way you get around.*

I gave him a hug. "You're the best dog ever, Reves!"

*Humph, nice to hear it once in a while. Who saved you in India again?*

“Okay, here’s the plan,” I told them. “I’m going to put more magic on you, both of you. Body magic so you can hold your breath longer. You’ll still have flight, plus one more divination spell. Reves is coming with you, I’m going to link your eyes together. He can see in the dark, so hold onto him and when you find the portal, you’ll know where the edge is to close it. He’ll lead you to the tear while Herman makes it seem like we’re arguing about what to do up here. That should hold their attention while you close the tear and get back here.”

“How much longer, exactly?”

“Don’t know how long you can hold your breath now. If you relax, let the flight magic do the work instead of your own muscles? And it depends on how good my casting of the magic is. There’s too many variables to say.”

“Okay. If I tap you, Reves, I need to breathe so start heading to the surface again.”

*Tell her I understand.*

“He gets it.”

“I guess we have our plan then.”

So I dropped the mind spell and put the spells they needed on. Meanwhile Reves got close to Kelly and when I nodded, Herman did his part.

“I’m going to count to three. After three I’ll trigger the illusion. You vanish, and make your way to the tear. Got it?”

“Woof!”

“Okay, here we go. One. Two. Three. Reality!”

“Now we have to do our part,” I said. “Let’s give them a show.”

We made grand sweeping gestures with our arms, pointing and yelling about nonsense as they couldn’t possibly hear us from the distance we were from them. I had to hope the illusion Herman was controlling was good enough, but he seemed to know his stuff so it was probably fine. It must have been only thirty seconds later when he suddenly said “they’re doing something,” and dropped a little, throwing an arm across me protectively. “What in the world?”

“What?” *You know, I don’t really mind being blind most of the time but not being blind would certainly come in handy right about now. If they’re going to start attacking us from way up here there’s not going to be much I can do. Three spells is just going to be too much to concentrate on and fight!*

“The two of them must be lifting the third one with magic, they’re creating a column of water.”

“Which the last one is using to swim up here?”

“Yeah, here they come.”

“What are you doing up here?” the Naw, now at the top of the water column, demanded.

“I don’t see what business that is of yours!” roared Herman.

“No, no, it’s okay,” I told him. *Have to keep their attention on us two, so they don’t look too carefully at the illusion members of our team.* “Look, the truth is we’re trying to figure out a way to bypass you, but we’re coming up empty. You’re just so powerful and strong, anything we think of you could easily counter!”

“It is true,” said the Naw, sounding a bit more proud. “We are masters of the oceans. It’s nice to be recognized.”

*Indeed. Everyone likes to have their efforts noticed and commented on.* “Well, you are the toughest opponents we’ve faced thus far in our mission. Attacking you would be suicide!”

“No doubt,” they agreed. “I, for one, and glad you’re being reasonable about the whole thing. We hated to attack non-humans but any enemy of Deogen is an enemy of ours.”

“We do appreciate that,” I assured them.

“Yes, it’s just not possible to ignore all that water,” Herman jumped in. “Quite apart from the fact you outnumber us in terms of arms, how exactly would we attack you? All you have to do is hold

us under water for a bit and your problem is solved. But add your magic into all that, how would we stand a chance?"

"Stop, now you're just embarrassing me!"

"No, no, it's true. If one of us had water magic maybe, *maybe*, we could distract you enough to push enough water out of the way to find the tear, but I doubt we could match three Naw. But we don't, and what am I going to do? Shoot you? Firing into water really doesn't work all that well, and you wouldn't just float there and let me do it. We're sunk, if you'll forgive the phrasing."

"If you don't mind me asking," genuinely curious, "how did you find out about Deogen in the first place? Have you been a follower long? Are you members of the cult or..."

"Deogen has many allies," they explained. "Both attempting to break him out of prison on his end, and this one. We were simply contacted by some of those agents, and told that if we cooperated in this, and guarded the spot against any that might come, we would be rewarded."

"You're doing this for personal gain?" Herman asked, sounding stunned. "Not out of loyalty? Maybe we can top his offer?"

"I doubt it. When I say 'we' I mean the Naw. His offer was, essentially, to leave the oceans alone after he returned. His agent said that, through our efforts, he would know our species was worthy of his mercy. Unlike humanity, which he has some grudge with. Once humanity has been put in their proper place, they will stop polluting our home, a further win for us."

*It is a real problem, I can't say they're off base there.* "But that's-"

"Did you ever think-"

Herman and I had spoken at the same time. "Go ahead," I told him.

"Thank you. Did you ever think about who you were making that deal with? You think a being like that will honor his deals?"

"He has no reason not to."

*Yeah, but you didn't even speak to the man himself, but to an agent. Probably a cultist. Not the most reliable of messengers, right?* "That's what I was going to say," I told him. "He probably had no designs on the ocean to begin with. You're putting yourself in harms way for something he would have given you anyway! Apathy. He's simply using you." *And could we attack them, knowing this? They aren't evil, they just want to survive what they see as the coming storm. I can only partially fault them for that.*

"Can we take that chance?"

"Yes? Look, let us by and we seal the gate. Then he's not coming through and you don't have to worry about him one way or the other. Do you really want all the deaths Deogen will cause to be on your, uh, tentacles?"

"Or you miss sealing a different gateway, yes we know this isn't the only one of these, and he comes through knowing we betrayed or abandoned him, and makes life difficult for all Naw. Say you do succeed. His agents found us once, perhaps they would find us again with revenge on their minds. No, this is our safest course of action for the moment."

"I suppose there's no reason for you to trust us to finish this job. As far as the other, yes, you're not wrong."

"Exactly."

"Still, he's going to be awfully angry when he learns this tear too was closed," Kelly told them. "I really do hope any other agents of his don't come after you for a bit of revenge. For your sake. Maybe lay low for a while?" *Wait, can Herman's illusions have sound?* "You should have thrown in with us, we would have pledged to protect you, but too late now I guess. We won and there's nothing you can do about it."

"What do you mean, you've won? You've all been- Wait, are there two of you?" the Naw asked. "Why is one of you wet?"

“Not exactly. Well, it was nice talking to you.” I felt a hand grab mine. *She’s back! It’s the real her!* “Let’s go. NOW.” We took off, a spear of water slicing through the air after us but we dodged it.

“Mission accomplished,” Kelly informed us. “Let’s go home. Someone promised to help me warm up, after all.”

I rewarded both my companions, separately, and in different ways, and Kelly told me about flying through the water like a real mermaid to close the portal. She said our distraction worked perfectly, as did the spell and Reves’ guidance to the tear, which she closed without them even realizing it. I told her I hoped the other one around the water wasn’t open, because if it was that trick probably wouldn’t work again. I could see a bunch of Naw using water magic to hollow out a huge sphere around the next underwater tear, creating a vacuum. By making the outer “shell” of the sphere rotate at a high speed it might be next to impossible to get near the thing. She agreed, an aquatic creature having control of water was a nasty combination.

It was now the next day, and we were once again standing near the fence outside the military base in the middle of nowhere. However, the last time I had come it was fairly quiet, this time however I heard the distant rumble of thunder.

“Is it going to rain?” I asked, holding a hand up. The two of us were back in the ‘catsuits’ Herman had made for us, while he was in the armor. We weren’t going into an army base unprepared, after all.

“That’s not thunder,” Herman told us. “That’s gunfire. I can see the flashes. Look over there.”

“Oh yeah,” I agreed, facing away from where my magic told me the fence was. “I think you’re right.”

“I was talking to Kelly and Reves, mostly,” he groaned. “You do realize that right?”

“Were you?”

“What are we going to do?” Kelly asked.

“This.” Herman did something and there was the sound of metal being ripped apart. “There, that should get you ladies inside. I’m going to fly ahead, see what the situation is. Hopefully they won’t shoot me down and I can tell them you’re coming.”

“What if it’s just a regular wargame exercise?” Kelly asked.

“There’s some kind of open tear into Otherworld beyond this fence,” he reminded her. “Do you really think that’s the case here?”

“No. Better get going.”

“Right.”

He took off, leaving us to shove our way through the ripped apart fence. “Did he just tear this apart with his bare hands?” I asked, wiggling the one edge of it while Kelly held the other so I could step through without hurting myself.

“Yeah, oh right. Meowvis is telling me the suit does have some robotics in it, so it makes him stronger. Nice. I can see what he’s seeing with the glasses. Man, this place is messed up, what happened? He’s landing, they seem pretty surprised.”

“Let’s get over there, he may need our help.” I grabbed Reves’ harness after we got through. I had no idea which way to go apart from away from the fence, there wasn’t anything around here but a few low bushes and plants for my magic to lock onto.

“Should we go invisible?”

“He’s supposed to be telling them we’re coming. I’d rather save my strength for whatever they’re shooting at.”

“Okay. Reves, you can get us out if it goes south, right?”

“Woof!”

“I feel better already. This way.”

We followed her, presumably towards whatever buildings were set back from the fence, and it didn't take us long to near the source of the noise.

"Here they are now," Herman was saying. "Over here!"

We headed to what my magic told me was the outer wall of a building, brick, but I smelled smoke in the air so there must be fires burning nearby too. The sound of bullets filled the air and people were shouting all over the place.

"These are the two you were talking about? You can't be serious one of them seems to be blind!"

"She'll still kick your butt into next week, sergeant. You want this situation taken care of or not?"

"I can't have a couple of civilians running around here! Just because you made a flying armor you can't just swoop in and take over."

"If you want that tear in reality closed, you'll let us through and cover us. Otherwise things are going to get worse."

"What happened, anyway, who are you fighting?" Kelly asked.

"That's classified!"

"Uh huh," Herman told him. "Look, let me see if I can guess what happened, okay? Sometime after sunset today a strange phenomenon occurred. There's a hole in the air floating somewhere around here, and right after that, something came out of it. You're trying to beat it back. Only we can close that tear. How did I do?"

"You got the first part right," he admitted. "A hole in the air did open. But nothing came out that we could tell. Not that we even noticed at first, it's just in a random corner of the base. However, a bunch of my men just suddenly went crazy. They broke into the weapon lockers and started taking over tanks. They then went into a defensive position around the hole. That's the only reason we know it's there at all. We've been trying to get them away from it ever since."

"Possession, probably," Herman told him. "I dealt with that myself, not too long ago when someone was using the road to create a large enough pool of magic to disable technology on the planet forever. It's not going to be pretty."

"Magic huh? Figured. That armor isn't technology, is it? That's how you're able to get it to fly around. And what about you two? Are you even human?"

"You know about that?" Kelly blurted.

"Ma'am this is the United States Armed Forces. If you think we don't know about threats from all areas of the world, including the non-human kind within our own borders, you are sadly mistaken."

*Thank goodness no one told that one president about us. With how he wanted to build that wall to keep just people south of here out, imagine how he would foam at the mouth knowing all of us non-humans were just running around...*

"So you know at least a little of what you're dealing with!" she insisted. "It's magical in nature. Let us deal with it, as you clearly can't."

"Again, I cannot have civilians, human or otherwise, running around my base!"

"The trouble is you're not going to *have* a base in a few hours," Herman insisted. "You kill those that are possessed, and the thing possessing them just moves into another body. Pretty soon everyone is dead."

"What do you suggest then? Can you drive them out?"

"When I was dealing with them before I spoke to a... man... named Ezekiel. His advice for dealing with them was to knock out the human host and hope the thing possessing them went away on its own. So that's what I did."

"And why would that work?" the sergeant asked.

"Apparently the being possessing someone is knocked out at the same time. So you can separate them from anyone they could later possess and with the tear closed, they would have no reason to stay."

Killing someone possessed, well, the possessor would just pop out and take someone else over. So don't do that."

"Wondered why that wasn't working," he muttered. "So we have to, what? Run towards them past a hailfire of bullets and punch them in the face until they drop?"

"And do it quickly enough the being possessing the one you're beating up doesn't just leave and possess you instead."

"Sounds fun."

"You say fun, but I'm kinda thinking you mean the other thing," Herman told him.

"Wasn't that Fury- never mind. So in fact, my best bet would be to pull my men back and retreat out of this area, making sure they don't have fresh bodies to possess. Can they possess you?"

"Me? It would be difficult, getting past the electronics in the armor. The others? Yes."

"I guess that's your problem. In either case my people aren't put at risk, nor do they see something they're just going to have to 'forget' later on. Like a portal to another layer of reality. That would be the tactically sound decision to make."

"You would just leave us here?"

He chuckled. "Isn't that what you 'super hero' types are supposed to do? Swoop in and save the day against incredible odds?" I felt he was looking Kelly and me up and down. "You put on a suit like that, armor or leather, and stick your neck out, you better be prepared for the consequences. Honestly a bit surprised it's taken your kind this long to start doing things like this."

"Our powers aren't exactly like the comics, sergeant," Kelly told him. "We're a lot more vulnerable than even the least powerful x-man or DC hero."

"Doesn't seem that way to me."

"Hold on a second, she's right," Herman announced. "Weaknesses. That's the key here. I don't think about them much, I've been honing my craft three times longer than you've been alive. Same with my blind friend here. We're good at what we do, and we know to avoid certain things by long association. But we could get ground down as easily as the next person in the right circumstance. Sergeant, that's our answer, and we'll need your help. Hopefully you've got the right equipment somewhere around here, and we can end this whole thing without another life lost."

"I'm all ears."

"We're going to make it rain."

## Chapter 24

We finally get a shot at a boss battle

Where: US army base

When: A few moments later

Possession is magic.

Not in the same way friendship is magic, that's a difference thing entirely. The actual act of possession, done by beings from Malakh to Shaitan, is still just a spell. And therefore it has to follow the rules. In this case, time was on our side, as sunrise would knock whatever spirits or beings had possessed these humans out at least momentarily. They would then have to recast the spell, and again hope the human they were casting on didn't fight it off. Enough time for Kelly to reach the tear and seal it, especially with some body magic cast on her the second sunrise was over to make her faster. (Or I suppose Reves could teleport her over there, obviously) All we had to do was pull the army personal back, make sure no one got killed and those guarding the tear didn't go anywhere, and wait. Once the sun was up she could rush the portal and as bullets would bounce off her, even if a few were fast enough to repossess someone and start shooting, she would get through. But there was another, faster option, that we could use *right now*.

Water.

We explained to the sergeant that running water would work to disrupt the spell allowing control over these people, and suggested any fire fighting equipment on base be brought to use. After all, even colonels know things burn, buildings or paratroopers, (though who would set fire to them?) so they must have some.

"I'll do you one better than that," he told us. "We can have our fire trucks roll out, of course, but I can also offer you our crowd control vehicles, the ones with water guns on the front."

So we watched (the others watched, I just stood there) as the fire trucks rolled up, and started spraying water into the air. This created a nice mist effect, and helped ground the magic out while the water gun vehicles did the bulk of the work spraying down the soldiers that were possessed. This kept the area locked down as whoever was doing the possession couldn't work with all that water flying around. Kelly then simply sauntered over there, they stopped spraying water everywhere so her magic would work, and before you know it the hole was sealed. The water started up again, making sure the area could be cleared out and the weapons gotten under control. In the end, Herman and I didn't have to lift a finger for this one, which was fine with us.

"What I don't understand is why the water didn't close this 'tear' as you call it," the sergeant remarked. "Isn't it magic?"

"It's not a spell though," Herman told him. "It's just a hole. You can't wash a hole away, you need to brick it up."

"Which is what she did?"

"In a sense I think it's more stitching up a wound but yeah, the principal is the same."

"Interesting. This has given me some ideas for new policies I'm going to suggest to the higher ups. All high level meetings take place in shower rooms! Or at least we figure out how much running water is needed and have generals and such pass through a 'thief's downfall' of sorts to make sure they are who they say they are. If a mist will do it, rather than drenching them, I doubt they would mind if it meant they all knew everyone was acting of their own free will. I know we recruit heavily among some of the more, uh, aggressive races, to try and give them an outlet for their behaviors that better serves their country, and they know magic. We can do some experiments to find out how much water is needed."

“One wonders why that isn’t already done,” I mused. “After all, you say the military knows about magic and employs non-humans like us. And if there’s one thing I know about the military, it will turn anything into a weapon, and figure out how to defend against that thing. First time a magic user walks around in the rain they figure out right quick what running water does to spells. So they must know about its limitations as well.”

“Uh...” I had never heard a man sound so paranoid with one single utterance.

*Ah. He’s now thinking maybe those measures aren’t put in place because the people at the top are already possessed most of the time, and that would disrupt their plans. Which actually explains a lot about our country’s military decisions over the years. What a cheery thought.*

“On that note,” Herman decided, “we should be on our way. Pleasure working with you, sergeant, glad we were able to at least give you the idea for how to deal with this.”

“Sure, sure, thanks for the help, ‘Iron Man.’”

“My pleasure. Oh, may want to check your perimeter, you know, just a precaution in case some of the fence was damaged, for reasons totally unrelated to us being here? Yeah, just a thought. Shall we?”

“Let’s go,” I said to no one in particular, if this guy didn’t know about Black Dogs I wasn’t going to be the one to reveal Reves knew magic too. But the portal opened to Herman’s back yard and we stepped through.

And so from water and military bases we now came to Somalia. Which could go either way, really. It was flat desert, so there could be a million guards there by now, or just one really tough one, or nobody because it was in the middle of the freaking desert. Only way to know? Go out there and see for ourselves.

“I’ve scouted the place out, using the technique we spoke of when we were first visiting the sites,” Herman told us. “I managed to get close enough to the convergence using the pictures that I could fly there, take my own pictures of the area, and get home. Reves now knows where to go, so we should be able to just go.”

“Woof.”

“The problem is how do we want to approach it? I doubt we’ll be able to drop right on top of the tear, we’ve seen the convergence is only a rough marker for where it’s going to ultimately be. But I’m worried. There aren’t many chances left to stop us, and we know the cult has connections. If they’ve been spending some time burying mines or something out there we could walk right into it and blow ourselves up. By the same token there’s no cover, so if we do approach from further away, we’ll be seen for miles.”

“We can be invisible though,” I reminded him. “I mean, those of us on the ground can be. I don’t know about making the armor invisible.”

“And technically we could all be flying too,” Kelly suggested. “Just like at the lake, put your movement magic on us so we don’t trip any mines. My vote is dropping in as close to the site as possible. Go in invisible and flying, heck if you can change the orientation of the portal we can drop in from above. They won’t be expecting that!”

“Not a bad idea,” Herman agreed. “I don’t see why you couldn’t. Reves?”

“Woof!”

“Naturally I would go in first, to serve as a distraction,” Herman told us. “You can follow, basically using the same technique as before. Get in behind any guards, seal the thing, and get out.”

“Suits me,” Kelly told us. “It worked before.”

So of course it didn’t work this time. In fact, we couldn’t even get there at first. Reves tried and tried, but he just couldn’t create a portal anywhere near where we figured the site would be. He seemed pretty down about it, and we discussed what it could mean.

"I think it means they're employing magic against us," I told the others. "Some kind of protection spell maybe? To keep us from doing exactly what we've just discussed."

"So now what?" Kelly asked.

"Same plan, just further away," Herman decided. "I have footage from the approach I made, I'll show it to Reves. They can't have covered the whole desert with magic. I'll still go first, but you three follow invisible and hovering until we know what we're dealing with."

"That sounds about all we can do," I agreed. "Though wait, let me do a divination first, just to see what magic can tell us."

"If we can't teleport there, can magic reach there to tell us anything?" Kelly asked.

"Sure, protection would just be against one thing, teleporting. Unless they also covered the area with anti-scrying magic as well. It doesn't hurt to check."

"Okay."

I thought about the location and what we were going to face there, and cast the spell.

*The ancient ones, unbent and proud this is the day they choose their ground.  
They gird their loins and gather troops as you jump through all their hoops.  
The battle lines are drawn at last as curtain rises on the cast.  
Snarling masters you will face as you keep this frantic pace.  
Battleground lies undisturbed your approach is undeterred.  
Fear no death from down below only magic do they know.*

"I think we're in trouble," I told them. *But at least it seems to indicate we don't have to worry about mines, they don't know about them. Only magic.*

"What did you get back?" Kelly asked.

"Nothing good. I think this cult is going to be bringing in some heavy guns. We should be ready for anything."

"Like literal guns?" Herman asked. "Machine guns or something?"

"I mean non-humans that have been around since Deogen was imprisoned. Ancient ones, the magic told me. It indicates we'll be facing a lot of magic, though I wouldn't rule out more mundane cultists with guns, it mentioned troops, so..."

"Great," Kelly told us. "And here we are without any explosives or anything. Should have asked that army guy for..." She paused. "Hold on a minute. What if we did ask that army guy? Just tell him we've got another tear to close and can he loan us some soldiers?"

"I think they may have regulations about that sort of thing," Herman told her.

"Yes, this would be on foreign soil," I told her. "I can't imagine that going over well."

"Fine, it was just a suggestion. Could we at least ask for some grenades or something?"

"You want the hammer?" Herman asked her. "I can show you how to use it, it shoots *lightning*, and it's enchanted to help you smash stuff!"

"That's a start. Let's see if I can lift the thing."

"Doesn't have that property. Here, put this ring on and think about the hammer flying to your hand."

There were not many other preparations to make. I put on my usual energy draining magic. Herman had snapped his fingers and opened his safe, handing me a necklace and saying it was an item he had acquired with his old group, Tanaka, William, and Nix. "It'll hold a spell for you, so you don't have to maintain it yourself," he told me. "Haven't gotten around to studying how it was made, and there's no benefit to me so I sort of threw it in here and forgot about it. But it would certainly come in handy for someone like yourself."

“Yeah, it would!” I agreed, resisting the urge to smack him for producing such an item only now. Where was this thing the last 86 years of my life? So I put a battle spell on Kelly and myself, to help keep us ahead of whatever we would find out there, and had the necklace hold it. So I was only dragged down by two spells, not three, and we were ready to go. Reves put invisibility magic on us, and opened a portal (which worked this time) to a point a few hundred meters from the actual site.

“So that’s a problem,” Herman told us after we stepped through.

“What do you see?” I asked.

“Yeah, I see it too,” Kelly said. “Is it too late to go with my soldier plan?”

“Just tell me!”

“There must be a dozen people with guns out there,” Herman reported, “all sitting in the shade of a big tent. Also under the tent is a big old metal box, probably where the tear is. We’re going to have to rip the box apart before we can even seal the rift. But to do that we’re going to have to take care of the cultists. They aren’t just going to let us unwrap their little gift.”

“Our invisibility should help though, right?” Kelly asked.

“No,” I told her. “We attack or draw attention to ourselves by smashing the box apart, and we go visible. Remember it’s not invisibility, we’re just being ignored. If we do something that can’t be ignored-”

“They’ll know we’re there, and see through it. Right. Man, magic sucks, remind me to never rely on it again!”

I snorted. “I guess we’ll just get into position?”

“Nothing else for it. Pick your targets carefully, and Tayna, stay behind us, you’re not bulletproof.”

“I realize that.”

We walked forward, I was alert to anyone drawing a bead on me and needing to dodge gunfire. But I didn’t feel my instincts warning me about any imminent danger, just a general feeling of unease. *For all I know they have glasses that let them see through this sort of magic. I can’t drop my guard for a second around here.*

Reves whined and pulled me to a stop. “What’s wrong boy?”

“Hostile magic,” Herman reported. “I feel it now. I think we just became visible.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Everyone just stood up and is looking our way.”

“Crap, and there’s nothing to hide behind around here?” My magic had told me this place was basically barren, small rocks and hearty plant life, but you never know.

“Nothing. Wait, something’s happening. Looks like someone is coming out to meet us.”

“Coming to surrender, no doubt.”

“No doubt.”

We waited a moment and a voice boomed out. “That’s far enough!”

“We weren’t moving!” I shouted back.

“Quiet! It is good we laced the area with several defensive spells, so your approach could not be undetected. Take another step and my followers will open fire.”

“Hold on, *your* followers?” Kelly yelled. “You’re in charge of it? As in we kill you and the cult of Deogen is just over forever? Thanks for coming!”

“No,” they hastened to add. “I am but one of the elders that preside over the followers of Deogen. As if a mere human could kill us anyway. Preposterous!”

“Are they here as well?”

“Yes, we three high priests of Deogen have come to make this place your end. Hear my words and despair! We have been in this world since the beginning, and we ancient ones are now arrayed

against you. Your puny measures to stop our master end here. We have seen your tricks, and they will avail you nothing!”

“Wow, did you practice that speech or what? One old Tuatha at a time seems to have run rings around you for more than a thousand years. There’s three of us now, you think you can stop us?”

“Ha!” they barked a laugh. “The Tuatha at least have our respect. They too are ancient and powerful, with great magics at their disposal. But finally they have made a single mistake, and it cost one of them their lives. We are seizing our time to strike, to put an end to this imprisonment of our master now that they have foolishly decided to step aside. You cannot believe you can stand against so many. Look before you, with us are a dozen humans, with their finest weapons, ready to cut you down. Oh yes, I know of the magic you employ, you cannot be harmed by such things. But what of your friends? Are they so fortunate?”

“My belief in them is far stronger than your belief in people you refer to as ‘a dozen humans.’ Do you even know their names?”

“I do not care to know their names. They live for Deogen, and only him, but they are far below us, the true masters of the world. You have heard my warning. Come any closer and we will open fire. I will give you five minutes to decide your fate.”

“The nerve of that guy! He’s just turned his back on us and is walking away. I should lightning him in the back!”

“It’s an illusion,” Herman told her. “Don’t bother.”

“So what is the plan?” I asked. “I don’t really feel comfortable rushing into what does seem to be a shooting gallery.”

“While he was talking I’ve been feeling the place out,” Herman told us. “There’s a few layers of defensive spells on the area all right. One of them is what kept us from teleporting any closer than this. Despite what he says, none of those weapons look high enough caliber to get through my armor. And as long as Kelly isn’t grabbed, she can’t be hurt by guns. I do caution you though, if there are three non-humans here, they could have more weapons like that knife that hurt you. Stay away from them. Heck, anyone can carry a knife like that, so be careful if you get close to the line.”

“Obviously,” she told with with a ‘how stupid do you think I am’ tone of voice. “I can learn from experience you know.”

“Right. So here’s the plan. Kelly and I will start moving forward, drawing their fire. Hopefully they will actually shoot us, and use up some ammo. You hang back. I’ll use a stone to spellbreak the protection magic that keeps you from teleporting. Reves, you take her right into their midst, okay? Start taking them out, and hope they don’t risk shooting each other by your being in such close quarters. They’ve made a sort of staggered line, not bothering to defend their rear at all. Hit them from behind, if you wait until we’re about halfway there it’ll panic them, and we’ll be right there to back you up.”

“Woof.”

“That should do it. Any questions?”

“Yeah, can we get Shawarma after?” Kelly asked with a laugh.

“Marry me!” Herman told her, sticking his hand towards us. *No fair, I saw her first. ... In a manner of speaking.* Kelly put the hammer down and put her hand on top. I hovered mine over top of them, touching her would start draining her energy after all, and I didn’t want that.

“Avengers... assemble. Go!” Herman cried.

The two shot forward, running or flying towards the group, who did start shooting them. I hunkered down, making myself a smaller target.

“I’m counting on you,” I told Reves. “Get me there when you feel that magic go down!”

“Woof.”

We didn’t have long to wait, and suddenly I felt myself behind the enemy line, and they were too busy shooting to have noticed. The battle was on!

## Chapter 25

We find out what's in the box

Where: Behind the enemy line

When: Just after teleporting behind the enemy line

With my magic I could tell, without any effort, what was going on nearby me. Reves has dropped us both behind what appeared to be the three priests, as near them, and at the edges of the box were men with guns. They weren't carrying them, probably thinking their magic was going to be enough to take care of us. But I had to wonder, even if they had been alive hundreds or even thousands of years, had they spent that time practicing and maintaining a high level of skill? We were about to find out.

Kelly was off swinging her sword at one of the men with a larger gun, who skipped back and avoided it. Gunfire rang out, and I heard what sounded like bullets bouncing off something metal. Almost in front of me the figure slightly to my left gestured and I felt magic build up. The ground nearby seemed to rise up, trapping Herman and stopping his forward motion. Reves was about to jump him, so I focused on the guy right in front of me. Five quick jabs, left and right, and he went down as energy flooded into me. One down, many to go.

My instincts told me to dodge, and I did, but the feeling didn't go away. I hopped further back, and a shot went by me. *Thank you battle magic, you're already worth the drag on my systems for trying to keep so many spells going.* A bullet slammed into the box next to me, and I nodded. But there were so many people here I wasn't out of danger yet, and again had to dodge to the side as another bullet whizzed past me.

Kelly connected with the man she was fighting, slashing him and throwing him back into several others, who went down in a tumble in limbs and were out of the fight for a second. She was probably looking for another target but I had to dodge again, ducking down behind the figure to my right, who by now was turning because the element of surprise was gone. I had just dropped his companion a second ago after all. He was going to be next.

I blinked, that was odd. The guy to my left just suddenly vanished. *Did he see his friend go down and realize maybe the middle of a gunfight wasn't the place for a priest? Even a priest of Deogen?* I wasn't complaining, and I had more important things to worry about. At least the magic went away, so the rock holding Herman should relax a little and let him wiggle his way out.

The guy next to Kelly pulled a knife, I wasn't sure if she was facing him or not but realized she wasn't as she was shouting "Hang on a second, I'll get you out of there," and throwing the hammer. It smashed into the rock holding Herman and cracked it.

"Kelly, knife!" I shouted. She whirled, slashing at him with her blade. He moved, but at least he was further back now and couldn't bring that knife into play.

Reves gave some yips, what was he even doing, it didn't seem like he had grabbed that guy and now he was complaining? *Of course, I didn't include him in the battle magic because I know he can take care of himself. What's his problem through?*

By now the figure to my right was over his shock at seeing me and was reading a spell. He thrust his hand out, which I thought was a bit rude, and kicked it, knocking it aside. A bolt of electricity shot out, heading off into the distance further than I could reliably sense with my magic. Eh, it was probably fine. I still had momentum from the battle spell and smacked him in the chest, or at least I tried to. He pulled away and it missed. *Rats.*

Kelly put her hand out and the hammer leapt to her hand. *That is pretty neat.* She slashed with her other hand, catching him in the arm but he braced himself, probably knowing what the sword did from seeing his buddies go flying, and didn't move an inch.

I heard more bullets bouncing off the box behind me, someone was shooting in our direction and missing a bunch. Herman shouted his thanks to Kelly, tearing free of the rock he had been stuck in, and shot someone in the back. They went down.

I felt another combatant leave the battlefield, and realized what Reves was doing. He was simply teleporting them away to who knows where. Someplace we had been at one time, hopefully somewhere over water. That was a good strategy, much faster than him jumping on them and worrying them to death. *My dog is the best dog in the whole dog universe of dogs.*

My sense of danger was acting up again, but I had a handy piece of cover right there, so I simply skipped behind it. The guy who shot lighting jerked as he got shot instead of me, and cried “you idiots, watch where you’re shooting!” Weakly, I mean he had just been shot a few times, but I heard it. *I mean, honestly, what does he expect? Even if these people go to a shooting range once a week or whatever, I bet they’ve never actually been in a fight for their lives. Of course they’re not going to have very good combat instincts. They should have held off firing until I wasn’t so close to the priest guy. Well, it works out for me. What also might work for me is trying something out of Kelly’s bluebook. Playbook, that’s the thing. Playbook.* A pistol wielding thug was rushing me, so I shoved the guy who had been shot as clearly he would be concerned for his boss, right? Rushing to the man’s aid? “You want him, you can have him,” I said, shoving both palms into his back and causing him to stumble forward. More of his life energy flooded into me. I loved that magic! Both went down in a heap.

“Reves has been shot!” Kelly yelled, rushing to his side. She threw the hammer again, scattering a few gunmen in the distance, and basically hugged him with her invulnerable body. “I don’t know how badly he’s hurt.”

“Shot? Who shot my dog? I’ll make you pay for it!” *He’s pretty tough though, but he’s not invulnerable. I hope nothing critical has been hit. That must have been why he was yelping before. Sorry Reves, didn’t think they would shoot a dog when three people were running around. Guess I was wrong. Let’s keep up the pace here, take a few more dudes out of the picture at once.* I stepped around him, and by stepped I mean dashed, slamming into a guy with a rifle. He tried to get out of the way but didn’t manage it, so his energy flowed into me and he went flying into two of his buddies behind him.

I heard the shotgun go off again, and another cultist went down, so we were doing pretty good at the moment I thought. Kelly put her hand out and the hammer returned.

“If you’re sure,” Kelly said mysteriously, leaving his side and heading towards the shooters again. She was planning something, she ran straight for them but then shot to the side. She swung, missing the nearest one. Reves did something magical, maybe making himself invisible? *That would explain why he nudged her to go. Now he can just hunker down and crawl away. If he still has the presence of mind to do magic, he’s probably fine. Oh crap!* I dodged to the side as another bullet whizzed by me, smacking into the box behind me. *That was close. Still, close isn’t hit so it may as well have been a mile away. What is Kelly doing?*

She had lined it up right, and poked the lead guy in the chest. He took it, flying backwards and taking out three others. Guns flew everywhere as the four impacted each other, and I had to smile. *Well done, Kelly. Now I’ll just go energy drain them before they can get up.* They had flown pretty far so I started in that direction. Bullets shot by me as I ran, I didn’t sense I was in danger so I let them. Herman flew off in that direction, so I figured they would be shooting him or be dead in a second so I gave them no further thought.

“Tayna, no, these guys are mine!” Kelly shouted. She pointed the hammer at them. “Lightning!” A bolt of power shot out of the head, slamming into the pile of men trying to get up again. They sizzled and went still.

“I guess you do,” I admitted. “Any more nearby?”

“No.”

“Okay, Iron Man can handle those over there,” I gestured basically where I thought the bullets had come from. “Let’s tackle this box and get out of here.”

“Right.” We ran over to it, and I concentrated on trying to figure out how to get it open. “I hope Reves is all right, he was shot a couple of times but nudged me away like I should help not protect him. I don’t see him so maybe he teleported away?”

“He’s tough, but smart too. He’s just invisible, waiting this out on the other side of the box. My magic can track him.”

“He’s still moving? Good, he can’t be too hurt then. How does this thing open?”

We heard the shotgun roar again, then a panicked voice shouting they surrendered. Another burst of rifle fire, more bullets bouncing everywhere, and another blast from the shotgun. More calling to surrender. “We just want to leave, let us leave!” they were calling.

*Leave? This is the middle of a desert, isn’t it? Where are they going to go if they leave?* The shotgun fired again.

“Now you can leave,” Herman told them.

*Huh?*

And so with Herman’s help we got the box open and Kelly sealed the tear. Several cultists were dead or would be soon, they weren’t going anywhere. Herman looked over the bodies and said it was probably an Asurakumara who was dead from being shot, while the first one I hit was a Fomorian, also dead. The third one had been teleported by Reves, so he was still alive. Several humans fled into the desert, the ones he had spared, and told us he had finished the Asurakumara off himself. “They were trying to carry him, but I couldn’t have him getting out of this alive, now could I? He may have already been dead but I figured, why take chances? It’s just a shame one of the priests got away. Bah, I doubt these was all of them anyway.”

“No, if this cult has lasted this long,” Kelly mused, rubbing the disk on her palm, “it will no doubt continue past this, as well.”

“You want me to run the other cultists down?” Herman asked. “I can still see them, and I can fly, so...”

“No.” I shook my head. “It would probably be a greater kindness to just finish them off now, rather than let them dehydrate in the desert, but they’re the ones that ran away. Let them figure it out.”

“Fair enough. Shall we go?”

“Just a second.” I dropped my battle and energy drain spell, than put the mind reading spell on Reves. “How bad is it?” I asked.

*I was hit several times. All over. I’ll live, but I don’t know how much use I’ll be to you for the next couple of days.*

“Sorry about that. I should have protected you.”

*Not your fault. It was night and I’m a black dog. Didn’t expect the place to be lit up like this.*

“Lit up?” I looked around.

“Yeah, some kind of generator over there and some electric lights are strung up on the inside of this tent,” Herman reported. “The humans needed it to see.”

“Ah.”

*Plus I’m tougher than you. Rather me get hit than you, I can handle this much at least. I doubt you could have.*

“True. Why do you think I was ducking and weaving like that? Don’t know how many shots I dodged. Okay, we’ll give you some time off, and a medal for being wounded in action.”

*Rather have biscuits.*

I laughed. “You got it. He’ll live,” I told the others. “But for now let’s go home.”

*I think I can mange that.*

“I’ll have to check him,” Herman told me. “Don’t want any bullets in him.”

*Tell him thanks.*

“He says thanks.”

“No problem Reves.”

So we headed home and let Reves rest, after Herman looked him over to make sure he would heal okay. He also applied some of his healing cream, which would help.

The next night was Canada, the apartment building. I made Reves stay home, though he did open the portal for us of course. As he was at Herman’s Meowvis said he would let Reves know when we wanted to come back, and just open it in the same place. We were a bit stealthier this time, Herman hanging out at the top of the building, while Kelly and I veiled ourselves and waited by the door until someone went in. She of course had the spirit magic on, so I was maintaining two spells, plus the pendent holding one. We simply followed them in, and she headed to where the convergence was. We saw a few suspicious characters hanging around, but scouring the place we found no evidence of an open tear.

“Could it be inside an apartment?” Kelly asked. “We should check the basement too, if we can find how to get to it.”

“It’s visible though,” I figured, “Right?”

“Yeah, I could see through it. It was just a sort of grey corridor that went into nothing.”

“Something like that appears in your apartment, you’re going to notice.”

“I guess. We don’t know that all these apartments are occupied though. Should you use your magic, just in case?”

“Better safe than sorry. We’ll also hit up the other two sites, just in case we got the calculations wrong and we have the right location on the wrong night.”

“Oh, good idea.”

“I’m dropping your spell.”

“Go ahead.”

I thought about what to ask the universe and gathered magic again.

*As you seek and cannot find I notice that you’re in a bind.*

*Go back home, you’ve earned some rest, signs point the passing of this test.*

“You know what?” I told her with a grin. “I have a feeling we’re going to be fine.”

And so it ended, just like that. We checked the other two sites for any signs of tears, but nothing came up. Then just to be safe we headed back to all three sites the next day, because we were professionals, darn it! Nothing. We were in the clear, and spent a great Halloween night together waiting for midnight. Herman lived out in the boonies so there weren’t that many trick or treaters roaming the streets, but that just left more candy for us. We weren’t drinking or anything, our guard was still somewhat up, there was every possibility the cult had tracked us down somehow. We had of course met the Tuatha at the correct time and told them of our adventures. They accepted it, and said they would discuss the fate of the Bane now that they knew we could handle it. Finally at midnight, November 1<sup>st</sup> began and the Bane could be removed. We had done it! The world was protected from Deogen another year, and he could rattle his cage in Otherworld all he wanted at the incompetence of his “priests.” With little ceremony she undid the now visible clasp, removed the rings, and stowed it in Herman’s safe for the time being along with his sword, the staff, and the necklace which I reluctantly handed back.

*But maybe he’ll figure out how it was made and then can make me one, I justified to myself. Yeah, that’s it.*

“So you’ll still want to hang out, or whatever, now that this is done?” Kelly asked quietly as we got ready for bed. We were back at my place, Reves was moving around fine as his wounds healed just as fast as any I would have taken did.

“Of course,” I told her, somewhat surprised. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily. I mean, unless you’re trying to get rid of me?”

“I’m not,” she assured me. “It’s just been constant danger since we met. I just wanted to be sure you weren’t tired of me.”

“Come on, Kelly. I think we both know the answer to that. Look, I want to get to know you better, now that we have the time. You really came through with the Bane, how many people can say they could have done what you did? You’re one in a million, and I’m glad to have met you. Don’t worry, this is only the start of our adventures together.”

“Okay!” She seemed to be putting her doubts aside. “I want to get to know you better too. Maybe starting with this part?” She touched me, tickling me.

“Oh is that how it is?” I challenged, starting my counter-attack.

“That’s right!”

The next morning (getting up fairly late by the way, for no particular reason) we called up Sereni to see what she wanted done with the Bane. We were on speakerphone with her, Kelly and I, sitting at the kitchen table.

“Emeliata had three years left on her ‘rotation’ before passing the Bane. My fellow order members have talked it over. The most fair thing would be to simply include you in the rotation, if you’re willing. Of course, you’ll become part of the order and we’ll gladly train you in magic and anything else we’ve picked up over the years. In fact, if you knew anyone, of our kind I mean, someone who will benefit from our teachings for a long time and can be trusted, we might entertain the idea of replacing Josellan. Get some new blood, new ways of looking at things into our little group. Heaven knows we could use a bit of a shakeup after so long. I mean really, Emeliata just selling it by accident? Clearly we were getting sloppy. It was just our good fortune someone capable picked it up and not someone just looking to sell it again and have it vanish into some private collection, never to be worn. I think we need you.”

“I’ll keep my metaphorical eyes open,” I promised her. “For now I think that’s a fair deal. I won’t ask Kelly to put it on next year if she doesn’t want to, if we’re even still together which I hope that we are,” I hastened to add. “For myself, I would be honored to be inducted into your order and help keep the world safe around this time. You have my support.”

“Thank you. We don’t want to recruit more than five people, it just seems like that’s a good way to dilute our effectiveness, but one more trusted person would bring things back into the balance we had at the beginning.”

“For what it’s worth,” Kelly put in, “you do have my support as well. I know I won’t live a fraction of the time you all will, but I won’t give up my studies. With the sword, with what Tayna and her master can teach me about martial arts. I’ve got a lot of good years left, don’t sell me short. Maybe I can’t use magic, that’s not in my soul or whatever, but Herman could make me some things I would think. I want to help too.”

“A human?” She cleared her throat. “I mean, yes, of course. You’ve proven yourself, obviously. Yes, yes, the others may not be exactly happy about it, but it’s only for another sixty or so years, right? Hardly worth bickering about. Yes, it could be six, or I guess five with a plus one?”

“Plus two. Reves will always be by my side.”

“Woof.”

“Yes, the dog. Can’t really wear the Bane so not really sure- Anyway, Kelly. You keep up your end of things and maybe there’s things we can show you, as well. Business skills and whatnot, maybe give you some better options in life.”

“I’d like that.”

“Very well. The Bane is secure, I take it?”

“Yes, it’s in a secure place. And I’m having my own safe constructed that will keep it hidden from scrying.” *I told Herman not to bother until it was over. If they wanted it back making it would have been a wasted effort. But now I can tell him to go ahead, and get him the money for the materials and such.*

“Very well. I’ll be in touch soon so we can meet and go over exactly what we can do for each other.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

“Goodbye for now.”

“Bye.”

And that was that. I called the studio to let them know I was ready to film my parts for the movie, and get back to my normal life. With one addition, of course, Kelly. I wanted her to be a part of my life from now on, and I had a pretty good idea of how to make that happen. (Apart from what we got up to in bed, that is.) Several weeks passed, I worked with the Tuatha to see if there was any magic they could teach me and about their people in general. However it was with some surprise my phone announced I was getting a call from one of them unexpectedly.

*I wonder what they could want?* I asked myself, answering it. “Hello?”