

The Monster Diaries

Part 3

Diary of an Actress who Happens to be a Troll  
Part 2: Helping the tuatha with their “little issue”

## Chapter 1

I get a call and I answer it

Where: Tayna's home

When: Several weeks after the Deogen incident

Things had been going great for me since we finished sealing Deogen back in his prison for another year. The three tuatha; Alithund, Betraxia, and Sereni seemed impressed when my (possible?) girlfriend Kelly and I told them what we had gone through to evade the cult, spirits, and traps laid out for us at each site and the fact we had succeeded at all. It seemed the cult had really stepped up efforts after they learned the Bane had passed out of Emeliata's hands as it did, as they had not faced anything like that for years. No doubt believing this was the best time to put an end to that pesky "resealing our master" once and for all. And it would have worked, had I not met Kelly and took an interest in her. But that was all behind us, and in the following weeks we recovered, got to know each other better, and made plans for the future. Naturally I fulfilled my part of the bargain with the director, performing my scenes for the Split Infinity adaptation. I was at the studio with guards at the entrances and minimal other staff, but the danger was over, and the movie was sure to be a big hit.

The biggest "wouldn't it be so funny if..." moment with Kelly was our discussions of moving in together. It was about time for me to move on anyway, Emeliata had reminded me that living next to someone for the last 40 years if you didn't seem to age and they did could cause no end of uncomfortable questions. So I would soon need to move, and get some new identity papers so people didn't start questioning why the 90 year old woman looked like she was in her early twenties. So we floated the idea of me moving to the Rochester NY area where she lived, so she could still be near her parents.

"I totally respect you not wanting to leave the neighborhood you grew up in," I told her. "I did, but I still call my mom once every other day or so just to check in. I don't think we would get on as well if you were willing to abandon them for me."

As I could live anywhere thanks to the power of the internet (and teleportation), and I had to have a house anyway, plus her lease being up on the apartment before too long, we figured "what the heck?" It would reduce her cost of living, she could be in a house, and even if we were just "roommates" for a couple of months (is there such a thing as kissing roommates?) what has the harm? But nothing had been decided yet. I still went back to see her, and kept my phone on more often in case she texted, and we were still getting along well so that wasn't an issue.

My phone being on was the reason I could take the call right away when it rang that evening. I had spoken to Kelly some time ago so I figured it wasn't her, and reached over it.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is this Tayna?"

"Yes." *If this is some kind of spam call I swear, I will use my magic to find you and punch your lights- hang on, that voice sounds familiar.* "Sereni?"

"Yes, it's me. I wonder are you busy at the moment?"

"Not particularly, what's going on?"

"Er, let me be more clear. By 'at the moment' I don't mean in the next five minutes for our phone conversation, but for... well the long and short of it is we would like your help again. It could take some time though."

"I'm not involved with any productions at the moment, so I would be free. When you say 'we' do you mean your little circle? Are the cultists starting to bothering you even though it's out of season for them?" *They said after Halloween normally the cult backs off until the next cycle, maybe this year they want revenge after killing a couple of their priests and fellow members? But why go after her and not me, she didn't even have anything to do with it this time.*

"No, it's not that. I mean the whole of the tuatha."

That set me back a second. “The entire tuatha race needs the services of a blind actress? I’m flattered!”

She snorted. “Of course not. We need your skills as- Look, I’ll start from the beginning, if this really is a good time to talk.”

“Sure, you’ve got my attention.” I went over to sit down, this sounded like it could take some time.

“Very well. You may recall how, when we first met, we said that there were certain circumstances surrounding the fact not many tuatha lived in this world anymore?”

“I do.”

“Fine. But we glossed over it. The truth of the matter is, it’s not by choice. We’re being targeted. And for the most part, that means killed. We don’t think it has anything to do with Deogen. Josellan we believe truly did die of a terrible accident, but others have been killed to send us a clear message. Our property has been vandalized or destroyed, in essence someone is ‘out to get us’ if you want a touch of the melodramatic. But enough is enough, we must find out who is doing this and why.”

“I agree. If you’re being targeted, and the mortal authorities will be clueless, it would fall to ‘the community’ to help you out. So far so good, we haven’t really discussed what bringing me into your order means, but that’s on me. I’ve been busy with work and dating Kelly for real at last. But I won’t hold that over your head, if you’re in danger maybe all of us are. Maybe this person or group is just starting with you, and will move on when you’re all gone. Makes sense to look into it now, before it gets that far.”

“So you’ll help us?”

“Hummm... I think this is the part of the conversation where I say-”

“We can pay you, of course! Unlike the Bane this is a special request from me, so I don’t expect you to do it for nothing. I’ve talked to the right people and secured what I hope will be enough money to make it worth your while. If it goes on longer than I’ve budgeted for, well, I can ask for more but let’s say I would rather not.”

“No, no, ‘why me?’ is my question. I mean you must have plenty of resources, person resources I mean...”

“Oh. Ah. The thing is...”

“Yes?”

“We’ve officially assigned the task to another, they would be in charge of the actual investigation. We have one other in mind to be the heavy lifter, if you need one and in all honesty your task would be keeping an eye, so to speak, on both of them. We- I need someone I can trust in this group, someone who is not a tuatha, can handle themselves, and actually *wants* to help us. So when I learned of this effort I immediately thought of you.”

“The others don’t want to help?” *Why involve them at all in this case.*

“The muscle is... complicated. He’s under a geas to help us, I don’t have the details as to how this came about but he’s a fomorian, a race we typically don’t get along very well with.” She sighed. “I know, I know, I can hear you thinking it. The tuatha don’t get along with many races, and isn’t that why we’re in this situation to begin with? That we have no one to turn to in our hour of need?”

“...I wasn’t thinking that,” I lied.

“Of course. In any case, if he can wiggle out of this he may try to, just to spite us. The other is a tuatha, and let us say he’s taken the extremes of our race to an extreme. He’s a gifted spellcaster, but at the same time no one that does that much bragging can actually have done all the things he’s done.”

“He’s Gilderoy Lockhart?”

“Who?”

“Eh, never mind. So you’re aren’t sure of either of them.”

“Not as much as I would like to be, for a task of this importance to us. You would be a perfect balance, having the physical combat skills of the fomorian, balanced by some of the spellcasting ability of the tuatha.”

*So if either one tried to stab me or the other in the back, or back out of the mission, or mess it up by accident I could probably handle it and come out on top. Smart. “I see.”*

“I know it’s not your regular line of work, you don’t have a PI license- unless you do?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“Pity. As I was saying, so you wouldn’t be able to tell the police you were officially investigating anything if you got into a tight spot. But it would mean a lot to me if you could help us.”

“I take it you don’t want an all tuatha team because that just paints a bigger target on their backs?”

“That is certainly a concern.”

*The tuatha further owing me favors. Could be useful. The opportunity to use the skills my master has taught me, and maybe save some lives in the process. “Yeah, okay, I’m in. I’ll do it. Where can I meet these two and what should I investigate first? You must have some clues after all this time.” A diamond placed into the lips of each victim? A white glove, laid atop their body? Pieces cut out of an old Sears catalog that appear to be watchmaker’s tools, shoved into a pocket? Huh, now I’m kinda getting excited about this!*

“Oh, but, but,” she sputtered. “We didn’t discuss your exact compensation. You want to know the numbers, right?”

“As to that, it could be I’m already wealthy enough and every tuatha that lives here owing me their lives could be useful in the future. Could be a situation where if you have to ask my rates, you can’t afford them. Could be saving people is its own reward. Which do you think I’m operating under?”

“Um.” She swallowed. “Okay. As I said I’ve got some funds set aside for when you’ve solved the case. And expenses, if you submit them. It could take some time, I wouldn’t want you needing to find other work because you were still waiting to solve our case and be paid a lump sum. We would take care of you.”

“Ha! Done,” I said with a laugh. “I’ll keep an expense report I can submit to be reimbursed weekly or something. I’ll still want that statement in writing though, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, of course. Now, your two, er, companions have been told to meet at Mt Hope Cemetery, you know the one, where we met the first time.”

“I can get there.” *Reves knows the way.*

“Fine. Meet there at 1:00 AM tonight. They will have further instructions.”

“Very well.”

“Tayna? Thank you. This really means a lot to me. I didn’t have to push too hard to get you included in this, everyone is grateful you could handle Deogen like you did. They don’t know the specifics, but I did, and knew you would be perfect. But please, come back in one piece? I know you’re skilled, to do what you did, so I hope it’s enough. But you may be going against a large group and they have killed before. They may not hold back just because you’re not tuatha yourself.”

“I’m sure it will be fine. You can count on me, I’ll save your people.”

“Thank you. Call me back with anything you find out.”

“Of course. Talk to you then.”

“Goodbye.”

“Bye.”

We hung up.

“Well Reves,” I said to him, and my magic told me he had lifted his head. “Looks like we’ve got a new adventure lined up.”

He sighed and set his head back down.

“Hey, none of that! Adventure! Excitement! Explosions! What’s not to like.”

He made a hurumphing sound.

“Spoilsport. Anyway, we’re going back to the cemetery, where we met the three tuatha ladies before the whole Deogen thing. You up for getting us there?”

His tail hit the floor once.

“Good enough for me. I’ll set an alarm for twelve fifty five. Until then I’ll email Kelly I may be out of touch for a bit while I’m looking into this.”

At that time we poofed into existence inside the cemetery, and Reves looked around. I did as well, though all I sensed with my magic were the same grave markers as I did before. Reves must have spotted something, he pulled me in one direction and we moved through the place. It wasn’t far until he stopped and sat down.

“So you’re here,” said a deep voice, from somewhat high above me.

*Shoot, we need some kind of call sign. All I can tell right now is that someone is standing there, but I have no idea if it’s a fomorian. The cock crows three times at dawn, that’s the kind of thing we would say in this situation, right?* “I’m here. You’re working for the tuatha?”

“Ha! Working for them. Good one. Hey, you’re not blind, are you?”

“I do happen to be blind. I sense my environment with magic.”

“Huh. Probably a blessing, you don’t have to look at me. How some races got so damn pretty I’ll never know.”

I smiled and tossed my hair back. “Flatterer. That’s easy to explain though,” I waved that off. “We steal it from the males. Have you ever seen a male Troll?”

He barked a laugh. “Yeah. As ugly as me, honestly. Well, you’re okay. Don’t have a stick up your- what the?”

“Greetings,” said a second voice from out of nowhere. Reves spun and gave a bit of a growl, but quickly quieted.

“What the heck?” said the voice. “Where did you come from?”

“Otherworld,” the voice said, as though talking to a child. “Is this all of us, then?”

“This is us.”

“Charming. Ugh, you’re a fomorian aren’t you? No wonder they wouldn’t tell me who was coming, I never would have agreed to it.”

“What’s it to you, tuatha?”

“Tell you what, you stay out of my way, (and downwind) and I’ll stay out of yours. Deal?”

“What was that other thing?”

“Nothing, nothing. I’ll assume you’ll behave yourself- and who do we have here? My, my, my, a troll? And one who is most lovely at that.” He took a step forward, probably with his hand out, but I felt the other guy step up beside me.

“No funny business now,” he growled.

The figure took a step back.

*My hero? But seriously, I can take care of myself you know.*

“Perish the thought! Now, I suggest we get on with this, I’m not sure how urgent our current mission is but I’d rather not spend hours explaining it in this, ugh, place. Ugh, it’s so dreary on this side.”

“Fine. What are we doing here?”

“Our current task is to look in on a human named Zane Tomlan. Apparently the man was starting some kind of non-human protection pact, where various races agreed to help each other out in a time of need. A mutual aid contract, if you will, sort of a non-human government.”

“Great, just what I need, more laws,” said the other one.

“Yes, quite. The man vanished some time ago, though his connection to the tuatha is tenuous at best. We offered to host his first meeting and so the timing is suspicious. Perhaps the same people killing my kind don’t want the races to start banding together, especially after so long. We’re to see what happened to him.”

*I could probably use my divination magic to at least get a starting point.*

“Our starting point,” the tuatha went on, “is a local contact named William. He works with bodies, or some such, I’m told.”

“Wait, William the vampire?” I blurted.

“Yes. So you’re familiar him him?”

“I met him once, a couple of months back. He wouldn’t give me a death certificate because it was ‘against the law,’ or something. Seemed annoyed at having to do the paperwork to explain how a couple of humans I had killed had died. So he wasn’t very helpful.”

“What happened?” asked the first man, sounding interested.

“Three cult members burst into my,” *oh what the heck go ahead and say it*, “girlfriend’s apartment to murder her and take a magical artifact off her corpse. They had guns. I killed them. They were the first of many cult members to fall in the weeks that followed.”

“You handled three men, with guns, on your own?”

“Well, Reves handled one, and I was naked at the time. They didn’t expect me to physically attack them, I mean would you say I was especially dangerous?” I indicated myself in a general way and did a little pose for them. I was wearing my ninja outfit so I knew they could see my curves and the fact I didn’t look all that muscular. Not like a male of my species, anyway.

“Nah.”

“So you see their mistake?”

He grunted.

“And you were naked?” asked the tuatha.

“I happened to be, yes.”

“I can’t even imagine...” He must have shaken himself. “Anyway, where were we?”

“William?” I prompted.

“Ah yes! The vampire. Seems he knows the man, and where to find his apartment. We must head to his place of employment and enlist his aid.”

“Fine.”

“So which one of you servants knows how to drive?”

There was a *very* pregnant pause. “I’m not your *servant*, tuatha.”

“Oh? Are you forgetting where you stand with us, mercenary?”

*This is going to be a laugh and a half the whole time, isn’t it? No wonder they wanted me in between these two. Yikes! Maybe defuse the situation with some humor?* “I’m not your servant either, but I sure hope you don’t think I’m going to be driving anywhere!” I indicated my eyes and Reves.

“Wait, are you...”

“You can’t see it, but I’m totally rolling my eyes,” I told him. “I can take the glasses off so you can see.” *He didn’t even notice? Really? I guess all he saw was a pretty face. Typical male.*

“Look I drove here, let’s just go,” sighed the fomorian. “But call me servant again, I dare you.”

“I will call you what I wish.”

“I’ll punch you out if I wish.”

*Yup, a laugh a minute.*

We settled into the car and he pulled out. Neither of them seemed to want to talk as the silence stretched as we drove through the city. So I took the opportunity to touch Reves and cast a quick spell.

*Can you hear me?*

*I can hear you. What's up?*

*What do you make of our two new friends?*

*The first man we saw is very big. Funny looking. Bulgy. If I had to take him out I would bite his ankle to make him fall. He will fall very hard. Then I would go for this throat, and tear it out. It would not matter how big he was then.*

*Somewhat gruesome, thanks for that. But what do you think of him?*

*He smells like wet.*

*You mean, like he wet his pants or something? I tried to suppress a cackle.*

*No, not marking. Just like wet. Fish. Water.*

*Huh, okay. I guess that makes sense. Nothing else?*

*Stared at you. Maybe he's in heat?*

*Okay, moving on!*

*The other one smells... old. Older than you. Magic clings to them. They're wearing a funny covering, not like other people around here. Don't know what it's called. He's pretty tall, not that strong looking.*

*Wait go back to the magic thing? I opened my senses, and let my impression of the two wash over me. It did seem there was an aura of power around the tuatha. Magic, done over many years, did tend to cling to a person and this magic felt old. Old and powerful. If there was this much echo of previous spells I would be outclassed in magic if it came to a one on one battle. Huh, maybe I use magic on the big guy and smack the other one if they give me trouble. It won't be what they're expecting. Do you think they'll work together long enough to solve this?*

*I think the growling and posturing is over. I don't know who showed their belly, so maybe not.*

*You may have to show you are the alpha to keep the pack on the hunt.*

*I guess if the opportunity arises, I'll keep it in mind. Okay, keep your guard up, I don't want to be in the middle if one decides to take a swing at the other.*

*Agreed.*

We reached the morgue and the fomorian (he still hadn't told me his name) called William with the number the tuatha gave him. *So the tuatha doesn't have a cell phone? Interesting. With the power of his magic why would he be worried about that? Does he have any identity at all in this world? Money? That could be a source of problems later.*

*"Okay, he says to go down, he left stuff unlocked for us."*

*Oh, sure, illegally keeping doors unlocked, you'll do that. One itty-bitty death cert? No, can't do that...*

We made our way down there and knocked, a voice from inside calling to come in. I swung the door open as neither of my two companions seemed willing to get closer to the other to go through the door, and a wave of smell hit me. Don't get me wrong- human meat, fresh off the bone and thrown onto the barbecue? Oh man I could go for a burger right now! Or maybe some ribs... But dead and decaying human, and chemicals, and general mustiness? Not so great.

*"Hey, be right with you," William called to us. "You're here about the- oh. It's you?"*

*"We meet again. How are you William?"*

*"Fine."*

*"Don't sound so grumpy. At least this body you've got going here isn't my work."*

*"Yeah, yeah, congratulations on not killing anyone in my city for the past twenty four hours."*

He did whatever he was doing and slid the body back into some kind of cavity in the wall.

*"Is that a pet?" the tuatha asked.*

*"I'm a person, thank you very much," said another voice.*

*Huh? Must have been beyond my range.*

*"Everyone, this is Nightstar, the talking bird. Nightstar, this is Tayna, and..."*

“Don’t look at me, they gave me their business cards but...”

“I’m Killian,” said the fomorian.

*Of course you are.*

“And you may address me as grandmaster Gwydion,” said the tuatha.

“Gaspasser Gwydion? Got it,” Killian told him.

“Grandmaster!”

“Sorry,” he seemed to be wiggling his finger in his ear. “Still just heard Gaspasser.”

I tried very, *very* hard not to giggle. Such low humor was beyond me. Wasn’t it? *Wasn’t it???*

“Right. I’m an associate of Zane’s. I came to ask William’s help but it turned out he was already contacted by the tuatha to do that very thing. And here you all are. The Heavens have brought us together for a reason, I truly believe that.”

“I still say it’s nothing,” William told us. “He’s a flake. It’s totally in character for him to vanish for weeks at a time and then show up like nothing happened.”

“Yeah, but we know what happened to Bertha Jorkins, don’t we?” I asked. “She was described that way, but it turned out she was killed by dark wizards. And had someone gone out to look for her, I think things would have gone very differently for Harry and the gang.”

“...”

“Am I supposed to know who that is?” Gwydion asked.

“Never mind,” I told them with a sigh. *Right, it’s the blind woman that knows books. Sure, that’s logical.*

“I don’t know who that is either,” admitted William, “but as for Zane, his apartment is not far from here. We can walk there and check the place out. Hopefully we’ll get some kind of clue and if not, well, you’re supposed to be the experts.”

*I can try my magic at that time. There should be hair there, at least, right?*

“Lead the way,” Killian told him.

We filed out of the place, but Reves stiffened and growled a little. I sensed something low to the ground appear from somewhere, must have been under a table or something.

“Oh, this is Argento,” Williams told us. “Play nice, Argento.”

Another black dog? *They really are everywhere.* “Go ahead,” I told Reves, letting his harness go. The two greeted each other and sniffed tails. He came back, apparently satisfied.

“What that out of the way,” William told us, “let’s get this done, I still have work to do tonight.”

“I suppose this apartment of his is some run down, nasty place I normally wouldn’t be caught dead in?” Gwydion asked after we walked a few minutes.

“Actually, he’s loaded,” William told us. “That’s how he had the resources to start this nonhuman UN or whatever he was calling it. He was funding it as a personal project. But yeah, he didn’t care much about the place so you would probably think it was a dump.”

“Wonderful.”

*I think that was sarcasm. Yes, my detector just went off, didn’t even need magic to hear it.*

“Well, here we are,” William said when we got near a large building. “Should be right up there.”

“That’s funny,” Nightstar said, sounding concerned. “If I’m counting right there’s someone in the place, and his light are on. I saw movement up there.”

*Maybe he’s back and really was okay the whole time?*

*Yeah, like that would ever happen...*

## Chapter 2

We check the apartment for clues, like real detectives or something!

Where: Outside the apartment

When: No time has passed

“If you want, I’ll go check the window,” Nightstar offered. “Maybe he’s come back and this whole thing was for nothing.”

“That would be just the kind of insensitive thing a human would do,” Gwydion drawled. “How typical. Yes, go up and see.”

“I’ll come with you,” William announced, and suddenly I sensed there wasn’t a man there anymore, but a bat. A bat struggling to get out of the pile of clothes they left behind. I heard grunting and wiggling, and finally his head popped out and he wiggled out of it. “Thanks for the help.”

“My good vampire,” Gwydion to him, “what help did you expect? Suddenly changing like that, if I started poking around in there you may have bitten me just on reflex. We could have waited a second for you to strip if that was your intent.”

“I would not,” he growled. “You would taste terrible for one thing. Come on.”

The two took to the air, nearly heading out of my range at the moment when there was a smashing sound from above and Gwydion exclaimed “my word, what was that?” I felt him using magic, and suddenly a wolf was lowered into our midst.

“Friend or foe?” Killian demanded.

“If you’re not an evil witch, totally a friend, dude!” he assured us. “Thanks for the save, I’m allergic to sudden stops after being thrown out of forth story windows!”

“Not your apartment, is it?”

“Nah bro, looking for Silverfang. But something attacked us!”

“Us?” I asked.

“Something?” Killian asked.

I heard a voice from above. “You okay bro?”

“Yeah bro! These people caught me!”

“Dude, sweet! Get back up- Yipes!”

*What is going on up there?*

“I better see what this is about,” Gwydion told us. He did magic and rose into the air.

*Huh, don’t know where you’re going, but around here we have a little thing called the threshold? Hope you have enough momentum going through that window, and can fight with your magical hands tied behind your back once you’re inside.*

“So I take it you’re looking for Zane as well?” Killian asked. “Popular guy.”

“Oh, uh, totally jank to use his real name, bro. Silverfang, please.”

“Sure, whatever. You’re friends of his?”

“We’re all the biz, dude. Gotta stick together, you know? Dude bros forever! You, uh, gonna help up there or what?”

As Killian looked up I heard various shoutings, smashing, and general something being on the receiving end of a not so great night.

*But is it our trusty companion or the thing that threw the wolf?* “I do have to agree, shouldn’t we at least head up there to provide backup?” I asked.

“Nah,” he replied. “Don’t see much need.”

“Really? Why is that?”

He considered a moment. “I’ll make my argument in three parts.”

*Okay, way to subvert my expectations.* “Go on.”

“Part number one: Our Great Gasspasser could just as easily have invited us along when he went up there. Magically lifting us should not have been terribly more difficult than just himself, after

all. He did not. Thus, he does not want or feel he requires our aid. If this gets him killed, well, it would be hilarious would it not?"

"Er..."

"Part number two: I want to see who I've been saddled with. There are two possible reasons he's been sent on this mission. The first is because he really is the best and has the best chance to succeed. That's the best case for me because it means I have the best chance of coming out alive. The second is the Chris Columbus defense. Remember that guy? May have been before your time. Horrible little man, everyone at the time said so. He was given money and ships just to get rid of him. Maybe it's the same with this guy. Someone is trying to get rid of him, and hoping this little quest of ours will do it. If that's so, let's find it out here and now before we're all put in danger because he can't do what he claims."

"Okay, I can at least see where you're coming from on that one."

"Third, and finally, let's say our friend up there tries to flee. Makes sense to have exactly half the team down here to intercept him. After all, we have two people and one wolf here, and two people and one wolf there. Perfectly balanced, as all things should be."

*Doesn't the bird count? And Argento is still down here, so it's still not perfectly balanced.*

"Plus we don't know if this guy," he indicated the wolf, "is friend or foe because he could be lying. If we leave or head up there he could stab us in the back."

"Hey, not bad," I praised. "We should keep an eye, such as it is, on him until we know for sure."

"Harsh, babe. I would never do something so gnarly. I'm a benandanti you know? One of the good ones."

"I'll believe you," Killian told him. "Until you try to betray me. Then I'll kill you."

"Never happen, dude, we're on the same side!"

"I hope that's true."

*He actually had some good reasons. Interesting. I shouldn't underestimate this guy I guess. He came up with all that in just a second, and they were logical reasons not to go up there. I might have said trying to join the fray would just mess them up, as that many people in an apartment would just be underfoot and get in each others way. But he actually came up with some good thoughts.*

We waited a moment, and William's head poked out of the broken window. At least I assume it did, as his voice came down to us.

"All clear, what are you still doing just standing there for?"

"Don't have any wings," Killian shouted back.

"And I really don't like thresholds!" I called up. *It'll drop my means of perceiving the world, and make it very hard to reestablish. I'll just stay out here.*

"I formally invite you in, how about that?"

"I guess if that will work." *Does he live here? Didn't seem like it.*

"Still don't have wings though," Killian yelled up, clearly having looked behind him to check.

"I can bust the door if you want. Say," he said to me. "Could your black dog get us up there?"

"Reves has never been here, how would he do that?"

"Oh right. How about you, pup?" Argento padded over to us. "Okay, I think he's willing to take us."

"Fine, just get up here!"

"Rude," Killian muttered.

*And odd, why did Argento not follow his master up there to help? Perhaps they have a different relationship than I do with Reves but it's still a bit strange. Maybe he's under orders to keep an eye on us? But when would he have been told that? We arrived and then headed here right away. Strange.*

And we were in the apartment. I took a moment to reorient myself and ‘looked around’ with my magic, which hadn’t dropped at all. *I guess it did work.* There was the clear remains of a couch that had been thrown at something, but otherwise the place was fairly clean. “What happened, anyway?” Killian asked.

“Some kind of defensive spirit was triggered, by these two knuckleheads breaking in,” William told us. “Nice work, by the way.”

“Thanks!”

“Dude, he was being sarcastic.”

“Whoa, that’s harsh.”

“I know, right? How were we supposed to know?”

“You were breaking in someplace! What did you expect?”

“What does that matter?”

“Actually,” I interrupted, “It is odd. They must have been invited at some time, so why did the security system go off?” *Could it not be Zane’s doing?*

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

“Look at the facts.” I went over to the door, which was still closed and tried the handle. It was locked. “They’re wolves, so they must have come in with magic. Even if it was unlocked, they couldn’t get in without thumbs.”

“That’s right,” one of them said. “But I don’t get it.”

I sighed. “Magic wouldn’t have worked past his threshold to get you in, I mean you could be good enough I guess.”

“Duh.”

“And the fact they’re here at all. This wolf form is some sort of magic, yes? The fact they got in at all and didn’t go poof means they were invited.”

“That’s right,” one agreed. “He did say we could come over some time.”

“Dude, he did say that! Must have been enough.”

“Must have been!”

“Rocking!” They made air guitar sounds.

*Oh my goodness how old are these two?*

“Fine,” William allowed. “So maybe it was someone trying to prevent us from finding where he went. Or it was just set to indiscriminately go off without the password or something. Let’s just look around, it’s gone now so it doesn’t matter.”

We started looking around for clues.

“This must be where his laptop usually is,” Nightstar told us. “His power cords and such are here.”

“No calendar, but there’s a lot of post it notes here,” Gwydion announced. “I’ll go through them.”

I had my own plan, and let Reves go to sniff around with Argento and the two wolves. If there was a scent here, one of them would find it. Meanwhile I wandered through the place until I found the bathroom, and found his brush was still there.

*Now that’s odd. He wasn’t planning on going anywhere. Okay, maybe he has a travel brush but how many brushes do guys have?* I brought it with me back to the main room.

“Find anything?” Killian asked.

“Yes, enough to try a tracking spell,” I told him, waving the brush. “How about out here?”

“No scent, not for a couple of weeks, according to our new wolf buddies.”

*A couple of weeks? And he didn’t bring his power cords to the laptop? I guess he does have a travel brush.*

“Wolf buddies forever!” sang the two.

“Yeah. A couple of notes that seem promising. One is PEACEMAKER in caps and circled. You have no idea what capital letters are, do you?”

“Are they like British or something?”

“I say, capital day old chap,” one of the wolves said in a fake accent.

“Oh I must agree, old chap, capital, just capital.”

“Anyway,” he sighed. “And the name James Sturgess and Tonawanda. That’s about an hour drive west of here, in case you didn’t know.”

“Doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“Peacemaker is another name for a Colt Single Action pistol. And I seem to recall the name James Sturgess from years ago, some up and coming shaman someplace.”

“I can tell you that Silverfang was looking for someone to be in charge of his MonsterUN project,” Nightstar told us. “He didn’t want the responsibility, so someone with ties to our world that was well respected would be best. Maybe he went to try recruiting this James fellow?”

“Whoa, he was still trying to get that off the ground?” one of the wolves said.

“Never work,” said the other. “Was a dumb idea from the start.”

“Right, because wandering around at night fighting witches is such a capital idea,” Williams told them sarcastically.

“Hey, dude, don’t diss our traditions.”

“Yeah, it’s worked for us so far, dude.”

“Has it?” he asked. “Has it really? Aren’t you guys a dying breed or something?”

“Dude, we don’t have to take this.”

“Yeah, dude, we have patrols to do anyway. We’re out of here!”

“Oh thank crap!” he breathed. “Let me get the door for you! Actually I need to go grab my clothes, as someone just left them lying there on the street.”

Killian snorted. “I guess we did do that, didn’t we? Whoops!”

*Oh yeah, he’s just been walking around naked the whole time since he was no longer a bat. I guess what does a vampire care? Still, why turn into a vampire and lose your clothes when you could have just used movement magic, vampires can do that, right?*

“You’ve got our numbers, though, right? Call us if you find anything or we can help.”

“Totally, we’re there for our bro Silverfang.”

“Yes,” William deadpanned. “I will, for sure, do that thing you said for sure.”

“Radical. Let’s roll out, dude.”

“Sweet!”

“Dude!”

“Sweet!”

Boys.

When William, now dressed again, came back I settled on the floor to ask my magic where Zane might be. Now that I had a piece of him I would do better than a vague riddle so hopefully we would get somewhere tonight. In that time I had asked Killian to get some paper and draw a circle on it, then number it with basic angles. I had also dropped my own vision spell, so I wasn’t trying to concentrate on two spells at once. *But what to ask first? Let’s start simple because maybe he’s dead. And trying to get an address he’s at, well, if he’s out in the forest or something that’s not going to be helpful. Trying to see through his eyes, again not useful unless he happens to be looking at a map with a “you are here” sticker on it. Let’s keep it simple so the magic has no chance to fail. I’ll ask for a direction first, then a distance, because getting two things will just be that much more difficult. So, magic at my call, what heading along this circle would I have to go in to find Zane, whose hair I have before me?* My consciousness seemed to expand as the magic took hold. I raced down the circle in my

mind, and then smashed into something, which jolted me back to my body. “What in the world,” I exclaimed.

“What happened?” Nightstar asked.

“I’m not actually sure,” I decided. “That’s never happened before. I got, like, bounced back. Something actively prevented me from getting an answer. Huh, so that’s what that’s like. I mean I know protection magic exists, I’ve just never run into it before.”

“Can you try again?” Killian asked. “Put more willpower into the spell?”

I shook my head. “Divination magic doesn’t work like that. Most other magic does, you can overpower something with enough willpower. But this magic is about feeling things out. Willpower is irrelevant. Which is a problem, because someone that really wanted to hide would put a lot of power into their protection spell to keep someone else out. I cast the spell, it went off, so I don’t know if trying again will do me any good. I will, obviously, but trying to get around this barrier? I don’t know.” *Great, now I look like the incompetent one. But what I said was true, divination versus protection, protection magic wins every time. Just because of the nature of how magic is cast. It’s not fair, but that’s how the world works.* I tried twice more, and despite “attacking” the problem from different angles I didn’t manage any better result. “He’s fairly well protected,” I told them. “Sorry. I’ll keep the brush, maybe I can slip in a second after sunrise if the spell isn’t put up again in that instant.” *Or it isn’t bound to an object, like Herman’s stuff.*

“We have other ways,” Killian told me. “Right?”

“I’ll try human channels,” William told us. “I’m going to go see if his car is still here, and call my police contact. See what he can find out about this guy, or if his car was found in a ditch someplace.”

“We’ll keep looking around here,” Gwydion told him. “Though I have a feeling this is going to be quite troublesome not just a simple missing person’s case.”

“Sure.” William told him, and wandered off.

I put my spell back on, and looked around some more. *Didn’t find anything out of place is that flour on the floor? What in the world? And here’s the remains of a glass jar I guess? Someone tossed the jar of flour?*

“I do not trust any information gained by mortals,” Gwydion finally announced. “I believe this calls for more drastic measures. Stand clear, all of you. I will summon a demon I know of, who specializes in finding lost things.”

I perked up at this. I knew of a few demons myself, but usually preferred to solve my own problems lest I add to my problems by owing demons something. *Gwydion must really be under some pressure to solve this quickly. Let’s see what he comes up with.* We all stepped back and he started calling out. I put my combat spell of energy draining on myself, if Gwydion messed this up and we got attacked, I wanted to be ready. “Hear me, and let the barriers between our worlds part!” *Please don’t, you know how much trouble I had putting them back just recently?* “I call upon you, Syrzelplex, demon of lost things, to appear before me now and be bound to my will!” *Oh give it a rest, I know how to summon demons, you’re going way over the top for this. We’re not some yokels at a county fair.* “Arise, arise, arise! Demon Syrzelplex, I, the great Gwydion, master of a thousand spells, Grandmaster supreme of the tuatha, made this demand of you!” *Come on already!*

And there was a new presence in the room.

“Who dares to call upon me!?”

“It is I, Grandmaster Gwydion! I bind you to my will, for answers true!”

“Ask what you wish of me but know that as always you must pay my price!”

“Have I not always done so in the past, oh mighty Syrzelplex?”

*Who are these two?*

“It is so, I know you, Gwydion. Very well, ask.”

“We must find the benandanti Moonshadow also known as Zane whose location has been blocked from our sight. This is what I command, oh demon.”

“How refreshing, to be paid up front and not have to wheedle it out of one like I was a common merchant. Very well, I will tell you what I can. Allow me a moment to collect my thoughts.”

*Er, what just happened? Because that seems waaaay too easy to have worked.*

There was silence for a moment.

“I have an answer. The one you seek is indeed lost, but can be recovered. It seems he has taken a journey but the outcome is not what we had hoped for. Seek that way.” I felt he was pointing in a direction, which made me scowl. *Though I suppose as a demon he would be better at this than I was. He could be ten thousand years old, and he does specialize in this after all. Stupid demons... Still, what spell did he do that worked so much better than mine did? That was awfully clear for divination magic, do demons have powers we don't have access to? He pointed, unless he's lying, so my spell should have done the same as I asked for a heading first myself. Very odd.* “He will be found outside of the civilized world at the edges of the civilization that still believes in the spirits. But he is not in their care at the moment. I must warn you, someone does not wish him found.” *Yeah, the protection on him. We know that already.* “This could be he himself, or it could be others.”

“Very well, Syrzplex. Once again has our transaction been fruitful on both sides. I will allow you to depart in peace, and hope our next meeting will be just as fruitful.”

“Not so fast, Gwydion. The rest of you, what will you pay me for the pleasure of my presence here?”

“How about a swift kick in the jimmies?” William said, having come back in during all that.

“Who said that?” he demanded, looking around. “I hear a voice but not the source. Show yourself, coward, and we will see whose jimmies remain un-kicked at the end of it.”

*Hello, what's this?*

“Do you even have jimmies?” he asked.

“Again, hiding behind cowardly magic? Show yourself!”

“I think that's enough,” Gwydion told him. “You got your price, begone!”

“Fine,” he managed, and his presence left again.

*He didn't let the thing linger here, he's got that much sense at least. Maybe he is worthy of Killian's respect after all. He did survive whatever security was here. I have to say I'm a little impressed.*

“What was that all about?” Williams asked.

“I... must admit I'm not sure,” Gwydion reluctantly told us. “It was like he couldn't see you.”

“Don't know why.”

“We can worry about that later. What did you get? Anything?”

“I got a few things,” he told us. “The car is gone, and this James fellow is indeed a medicine man and faith healer out on the Tonawanda reservation. I tried his number but it's a business number. No answer now. No hits on the car, or police reports lately of persons matching his description. I say we go out there.”

*Oh, fun. Another hour plus car ride with these guys. But I guess I can always come back with Reves I wouldn't have to... wait, couldn't we just get a picture of the area and teleport out there?*

“Hold up,” Nightstar chided. “You just gave away Zane's identity. Just like that? What were you thinking? To a demon no less!”

“Oh come on, this name thing again? How tiresome.”

“It's important to us. We have enemies!”

“So they know his first name is Zane. Big deal.”

“It is. That demon knows Zane’s apartment now. Has seen it himself. Knows he’s missing, vulnerable. Could find out his last name easily because a Zane Something owns this apartment he saw. It may not matter to you but it does to us. There are so few of us to begin with, we don’t need to hand our enemies more information about us. Remember, demons make witches, and we’re sworn to fight witches! They have a very cozy relationship. It’ll be out before the sun comes up.”

“It sounds like he was getting himself into trouble before I gave out part of his name.”

“Not the point and you know it.”

“Look, let’s worry about this later,” I told them, because it sounded like they were getting ready to argue for hours. “Let’s head out to the place there will be plenty of time to hash this out later.”

“We’re driving?” Killian groaned.

“Maybe not,” I told them, pulling out my cell phone. “I take it none of you knows about the magic of google maps?”

### Chapter 3

Having found our clues, we follow them up

Where: Zane's apartment

When: No time has passed

"I am familiar with all kinds of magic," Gwydion announced with a sniff. "Google maps doesn't sound like a thing."

"I assure you it is, it's how I get around. I show Reves a picture of where I want to go on the map, and he takes me there. Driving being a little questionable for me, after all. I propose the same here. I can put in the address we need to go to, and save us some time driving out there."

"I know teleport magic," he went on. "You cannot simply use a map, it's not detailed enough to create the mental picture necessary. Besides, where would we get such a map from?"

"See, this is what happens when you ignore what's going on in the world," I told him, getting out my phone. "It passes you by. Believe me, this little thing will show me a map, and it's detailed enough." I brought up google maps and dropped into street view, but there was a problem. Street view ended just inside the reservation, so they told me. Usually I would look through Reves' eyes so I could move the picture around, which was hard to do blind, but I had these guys to do it for me, and after a moment of instruction even Gwydion had to admit, however reluctantly, this was fairly useful "magic." So we would either have to walk the rest of the way, or... "We could open a gateway," I told them. "I usually do that if I'm going into a building just to make sure I'm not teleporting into someone. But making one big enough to drive a car through? We've never needed to do one that big, only big enough to step through. We'd have to try it."

"I can assist, having seen the area," Gwydion told us. "Naturally I could probably do such a thing all by myself but in the spirit of cooperation I am willing to share the limelight this time."

Reves let out a doggy woof that could mean anything. I let it slide.

"Then we have our plan. We'll set it up by the side of the road so we can look through and make sure there are no cars passing, then just drive through, make a quick turn, and head into the area we can't see on the map."

"Sounds good," Killian told us. "Let's go."

"How do we coordinate?" Gwydion asked when we were standing in front of the car. "You can understand me, can you not?"

"Woof," Reves answered.

"Was that coincidence or..."

"I'll just put my mind reading spell on you," I told him. "You can work it out between yourselves."

"Very well."

I did that, and the two stared at each other for a moment. Suddenly a hole in the air opened in front of the car, and I dropped the spell again. I felt him go over to it and poke his head through. "That seems to have worked," he announced. "Everyone, let us depart, the way is clear for the moment. Nightstar, will you be joining us?"

"Of course," said the crow. "I'll perch someplace."

So we all got in and the car inched forward, pulled through, and turned. I scratched Reves' ears and said "Thanks, I didn't know about an hour car ride with these two," softly to him. His tail went back and forth a few times.

I handed my phone over so Gwydion could give directions to Killian the rest of the way. Even if street view didn't work here the GPS did, that was based on satellite pictures, so once it reconnected it could lead us. We pulled in and the car stopped, so we got out.

“There’s a double wide trailer,” Killian told me. “That’s the address. Couple of houses to the side, bar across the street. No lights on in the trailer.”

“Thank you, that’s a bit too far for me,” I told him. “I appreciate it.”

“Oh, I don’t believe this!” William announced. “If he’s just been at a bar this whole time…”

“Bar?” everyone said to him.

“His car is over there by the bar! I’ll go see if he’s inside.”

“We’ll wait here, he only knows you,” Killian told us. “The lot of us burst into a bar around here, who knows what might happen.”

“Be right back. Come on Nightstar.”

“Right.”

The two passed out of my range and came back a moment later. “Looks like the car has been here some time. There’s his backpack inside but nothing else. No one has seen him in the bar.”

“Then I shall attempt to rouse the shaman,” Gwydion decided.

“I’m staying with the car, there’s some kids giving us dirty looks,” Killian told us.

“I’ll go with you,” I told Gwydion. “Come on Reves.”

“Very well.”

He started pounding on the door, and there was some yelling on his part. I had no idea what could be inside as my magic stopped at the outside wall like it was made of brick, but he announced a light was coming on. I heard movement inside and finally the door opened. A sleepy yet still somehow annoyed voice drifted out.

“Yes?”

“James Sturgess?” Gwydion asked.

“Yes. But this isn’t exactly normal service hours, you know.”

“Never mind that! We are on a mission of utmost importance.”

“A mission, huh? Did you just get up too?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“This bathrobe of yours-”

“I will have you know these are the finest silk robes of my homeland, as befits a person of my stature.”

“Ah, my apologies. What is this mission of yours?”

“Our acquaintance Zane came here and vanished, but before he did we have deduced he came to see you, so we have come to see you to pick up his trail. And here you are. Please assist us.”

“Who?”

He gave the man Zane’s description and said his car was right over there. “So please don’t try to play dumb as if you haven’t seen him. We know he made it here.”

“Zane, is that what his name was? Look, if that’s his car I don’t know what to tell you. Someone came looking for me, that’s true enough. I heard about it when I got back here myself just recently. But I’ve been here all day today, didn’t hear anything after that so I assumed he moved on.”

“So he arrived here to find you gone, parked across the street to wait, and now has vanished. Do such things happen often here?”

“People around here don’t go looking for trouble. Unless he came here with trouble in mind, I’m sure he would have been left alone. Is that a crow on your shoulder?”

“Yes, it is. Our friend has a very particular skill set, let us say. Look may we come in, standing out here does neither of us any good.”

He sighed. “Come in.”

I immediately got an impression of the man, and that he was holding the door open for us.

“Thank you,” I told him, as he stepped clear of Reves. I now got the sense there was something magical about him, so he wasn’t totally human by the feel of it. He led us into the office and offered us some seats. As we weren’t sure if he was telling the truth yet I figured it would be best to not let on I had the

means to perceive him and played the “helpless blind girl” but it seemed he had experience dealing with the blind. He was totally comfortable helping me to a seat, asking if he could take my hand and placing it gently on the back. My estimation of him went up a notch, could someone evil care enough to learn etiquette like that? “Thank you. I’m Tayna, and this is Reves,” I told him. “I do apologize for getting you up at this hour. We would not have done it without the greatest need.”

“Ah, I’m sure you could smooth over anything, couldn’t you? Nice to meet you.”

*Is that a dig at my looks or something?* I figured I might as well keep going. “The talkative one is Gwydion, and our other friend is Nightstar.”

“I did wonder if I would ever get any names. Nightstar, huh? So my suspicions were correct it seems. I’m James, but I guess you know that.”

“I do.”

We sat and Gwydion went on. “Yes, Grandmaster Gwydion, at your service. I take it you are aware of our status, then?”

“I realize none of you is human, if that’s what you’re asking. I have friends in that community as well.”

“Very good, that will save us some explanation. I will get straight to the point then. Zane, as I said, left two critical pieces of information behind before he vanished. The first was your name, and the second was a single word. Peacemakers. Does that mean anything to you?”

“I suppose, I am in fact of the Peacemaker lineage, but I’ve not taken the title for myself. Why would your friend have been interested in that, do you think?”

“He has been attempting to create a group of non-humans that would preside over the disparate groups that exist. A sort of UN for them, that would codify laws and such to avoid the sort of unpleasantness I’m told exists here because every group seems to have their own.”

“A bold plan, not sure it would work.”

“He was fairly naïve, so I’ve been told.”

“He would have to be. Don’t get me wrong, if such a thing was proposed, I wouldn’t have said no to being a part of it. Everything has to start somewhere, after all. But now he’s vanished, according to you.”

“That’s correct. The tuatha grew concerned, as we were providing him assistance as well. So they dispatched myself, and the others waiting outside you may meet shortly if you wish, to make sure it wasn’t simply another instance of our affairs in this world being disrupted.”

“The tuatha were?”

“In a neutral capacity, currently, but yes.”

“Seeing which way the winds blow, eh? Fine. If that’s what he came here for, then any number of people might mean him harm. None I know of here specifically, of course. But I could see how someone or some thing might want to keep such a thing from happening.”

“Indeed. You said though that he was seen in the area?”

“Yes. The folks that saw him poking around told me he went to the forest, maybe he went looking for me there, as that’s where I was. There aren’t that many dangers there but maybe he got lost?” He considered. “I suppose it could be dangerous, for a city man. I just know what to avoid, after all. I wonder...”

“I don’t know about that, for several reasons,” I spoke up. “For one, I’m sure he uses a smartphone as do most. I mean he has a computer so it would be more odd if he didn’t. It would have guided him out of the forest I’m pretty sure. But more directly after we searched his apartment I found enough hairs to try tracking magic. I was blocked. So there’s more to it than him just tripping and hitting his head or whatnot.” *Still would love to know what the demon did. Maybe I just need more practice.*

“Then it seems we must take this seriously.” He sighed. “Look, I know a guy that lives in the forest. If he went there, my friend would know about it by now. I can probably take you to see him, and we can maybe get this cleared up.”

“We could greatly appreciate any assistance.”

“I must ask, however, what do you intend once you find him? Do you mean him harm?”

“Of course not!” Gwydion protested. “We all have our reasons for looking, of course, but none of us means him harm.”

“Is that true, miss?”

“As far as I know, yes. Our friends outside include a vampire who has known Zane for some time as I understand it, and a fomorian... that is serving as our bodyguard in a way.” *I’m not sure what the story is with him, the tuatha have some hold over him, but I’m pretty sure he doesn’t mean Zane any harm. I mean if he is under a geas like Sereni said it’s possible he can’t hurt the person we’re looking for.*

“And you? Why have you joined the group?”

*Crap, what do I tell this guy? I guess some version of the truth.* “I’m doing it as a personal favor to a tuatha named Sereni who I’ve helped in the past. She simply wanted more eyes, such as they are, on the situation. I have certain skills that can be useful in a pinch.”

“I see. Very well.” He got up. “I can accept that. Let’s invite your friends in here to wait. If we’re going to find my friend in the forest I’ll need a bit of help. I need some coffee and there’s no need for them to stand around outside. This will take me a few minutes.”

He went to the door and a moment later the others came in to sit down. He offered coffee, which Gwydion and I accepted, and again he knew how to hand it to me as if I were blind. He petted Argento, who had come in with William, but simply nodded to Reves. I petted him once he left, just so he didn’t feel left out.

He came back in about ten minutes later, saying everything was ready and to please follow him. Of course we had brought the others up to speed, and we headed outside again. His property it seemed backed up to some woods, and we headed into them between the trees.

“I thought I felt something out of the ordinary a moment ago,” Gwydion said to James. “Might I ask, are you simply a human or is there something lurking beneath the surface?”

“I’m not sure if I should be offended, I’m just a man who has learned the ways of the world.”

“I mean no offense, of course. It was just something I had never felt and was curious.”

“Yes, I would be quite astonished if you had.”

“Er, not to alarm anyone,” I spoke up. Something was approaching us from the side, which my power said was a bear. *Hopefully James is expecting one but just to be safe-* “But I’m getting a faint whiff of bear. Is anyone else getting that?”

“Whiff?” James asked, sounding quite confused. I of course ignored him with my eyes, pretending to sniff the air. I mean I was sniffing the air, but I didn’t really smell anything. “In any case, yes, there’s nothing to fear, the bear is an associate of mine. He’ll be leading us to Alvin, who lives in the woods.”

“There is a bear!” Killian announced. The bear was now quite close to us, and James nodded to it.

“Simply a spirit that helps guide me, when I need it. Are you able to get us to Alvin?” he asked.

“Yes, I believe so, please follow me.”

*It can talk as well? Oh, I see, if it’s a spirit it probably doesn’t have a smell. Whoops. Well, he didn’t press the matter, so whatever.*

We trailed after the bear, deeper into the woods. We walked at least a half an hour after the bear, who was taking no determinable path I could determine. But the trees and things here were fairly close

together so I could sense them easily, and we had no trouble making our way though. Finally James put out a hand and we all stopped.

“That’s him, that’s Alvin,” he whispered. “Across that basin. Now he’s a bit skittish around people, so please don’t make any sudden moves. “I’ll go first, he knows me. I’ll tell him about you and you can come when I call, okay? Just stay here.”

“Right,” said Killian, and he moved off.

“What is it?” I asked, the figure clearly out of my range.

“Sasquatch,” William grunted. “Big hairy guy.”

“Ah.”

“And he’s booking it. Wonderful.”

“The what?” *What does being booked by the police have to do with anything?*

But I was talking to empty air as Killian and the others (presumably) took off after the creature. Reves looked back at me. “We’re not running through the forest, are you nuts?” I told him. “Besides, one more person chasing him isn’t going to make any difference. They’ll either catch him, or not. Still, we should head in that direction.” *Odd. Did he spot us or is James here overestimating the helpfulness of his “friend?” I guess we’ll find out, if they can catch him.*

He sighed, possibly with relief, and we headed that way. When I made my way over there it seemed he was on the ground, everyone standing over him. I felt he was big, really big, like four meters tall, and covered with thick hair. His arms and legs were overlong, he could never pass as human, that much was clear. *No wonder he lives out here in the woods. We’ve really done him a disservice, keeping knowledge of us secret for so long.*

“The faster you help us the sooner we can leave you alone,” William was saying.

“Or you could just accept I’m not going to help you and leave me alone right now!” said Alvin.

“Okay, we’ll do it the hard way.” I heard a camera phone clicking, William did have one even if the other two didn’t. “There. Now I leak this picture, and soon this whole place is crawling with humans looking for you. Is that what you want?”

*Is threatening him really the way to go, though?*

“You know, I could rip your arms off,” Alvin told him.

“Can you?” he asked back.

“I can.”

“Can you?” Killian asked, suddenly enlarging himself to be the same size.

“I... could.”

*Maybe it’s time for the good cop?* “But would you?” I asked sweetly. “Please, just help us find our friend and we’ll be on our way. I’ll make sure he deletes the picture, it was wrong to threaten you and I’m sure William here already feels awful about it.”

“I don- I do!” he assured us. “I mean what kind of monster would threaten someone like that? It just isn’t polite.”

He sighed and pushed himself up. “Fine, what are you doing here?”

We told him the story and he nodded. “Yeah, there was some guy wandering around a few days ago. Don’t know what he thought he was going to find out here. Then later that day I saw two guys, one of them matching that description, heading into the abandoned mine in the area. None of my business of course, but there you have it.”

“Why would Zane be looking at abandoned mines?” Nightstar asked.

*And how long was our new friend wandering around the forest here to have missed Zane? Did he sleep out here too? These two stories don’t exactly add up.*

“Not willingly, from the look of it. He was being forced.”

“And you did nothing?” William demanded.

“Like I said, none of my business.”

“Can you show us the mine at least?” Killian asked.

“I can point you to it. Past the ridge, follow the creek upstream, find the rocky area, follow the treeline, it’s right there. Can’t miss it.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Gwydion exclaimed. “Was that so difficult?”

“Yes.”

“Now now, Alvin,” James began.

“We’ll talk about this later,” Alvin told him. “You and I. Please leave me alone now.”

“I deleted the picture,” William told him. He grunted and walked off.

“I’m sorry if we’ve damaged the relationship with your friend in all this,” Gwydion told James. *Oh? Some bit of humanity showing through?*

“I’m sure it’ll be fine, come on, I know the mine I can take you there.”

“Thank you.”

We walked for a time. “I should make it clear, if there’s going to be trouble I’m not sticking around. I’m no fighter.”

“Of course, this is not your fight,” Killian assured him. “Just point us in the right direction. We’ll do the rest.”

“Just so long as you understand.”

It didn’t take long to reach the mine, and the bear was sniffing around. “This place doesn’t feel right anymore,” he told us. “Not that any of man’s works feel right to the spirits but it feels worse. It’s changed from when I was here last.”

“Perhaps that person with Zane is working some kind of ritual here for some reason?” Nightstar figured.

*To what end? Why not just kill Zane, he’s had at least a day right? Odd. Keeping him alive just means a greater chance he’ll interfere. He must need him, but for what?*

“If it is, taking care of him should put things right,” Killian told him. I realized he had a sword and shield in his hands now, and wondered where they had come from. *Though I guess that’s not the most odd thing I’ve seen even just today.*

“In any case, I’m heading back now,” James told us. “Good luck finding your friend. Oh, should I come get you in a few hours or...” He didn’t sound excited about that prospect.

“We can get ourselves back,” Gwydion assured him. “One way or the other.”

“Great! Though I do want to say, please do not to do anything that might further corrupt this place.”

“I’m not sure how we would do that,” Nightstar told him. “I can cleanse the area with magic before we leave in either case.”

“Very well. Goodbye.”

We all said goodbye and he started back towards his house.

“Now what?” Gwydion asked. “Anything we should prepare?”

“One second, I’m going to get a look at our mystery man,” I told them.

“Magic?” Killian asked.

“Magic,” I agreed, casting a divination spell to rewind time in the area. I stood for a bit, watching this spot where nothing happened, until something happened. Then I moved it forward a bit and got a pretty good idea of what both men looked like. *Thankfully, my eyes don’t count at this sort of thing. So I still get an actual image, because I’m not “looking” at light bouncing off stuff I’m looking at magic in my mind.* “I don’t recognize the man but Zane doesn’t look happy to be with him. He was forced here, I don’t see a gun though.”

“Can you show us?” William asked.

“I could maybe use my mental magic to give you this image?” I suggested.

“Why not just give it to me,” Gwydion suggested, “and I’ll use illusion magic to show everyone.”

“Works for me.” It was a bit tricky, hanging onto my divination magic to “see,” and the time magic looking into the past *and* do a mental projection to Gwydion but it worked out and the others got to see what I had seen. No one said they recognized him, even Nightstar, and he let it go.

“If anyone wants to be obscured, I can do that,” Gwydion offered. “We should strike from surprise if we can.”

*Humm, I don’t know if he just wants to show off or is genuinely being helpful. But it seems he is taking this seriously, so maybe Sereni had nothing to worry about.*

“I’m fine,” Killian said.

“I’ll probably be a bat or a rat,” William said.

“I’m too small to bother with,” Nightstar told us. “And I’ll just hang back anyway. I’m only good for spellbreaking so I’ll just concentrate on that if it’s okay with you?”

“I shall rely on you, if you believe you are good enough at it,” Gwydion told them.

“Oh, I’m confident in my skills.”

“Very well. Tayna?”

“Actually, it’s not a bad idea, but Reves can do that for the two of us,” I told him. “What do you think Reves? At least some of us should strike from hiding, don’t you think?”

“Woof!” I felt magic, and we were obscured.

“Very well,” Gwydion told us, and worked magic on themselves. “Let’s go.”

So we went. All of about three meters, when something happened. Water suddenly gushed out of the walls and coalesced into some kind of creature, I felt it as vaguely human sized with arms and a dome “head.” We hardly had a chance to react before it fell upon Killian, who tried to dodge. It caught him in the gut, and he went flying backwards.

Right into my way, because I was tailing along behind him, ready to back him up if need be. But I hadn’t expected a water elemental or whatever this was, none of us did. Reves and I jumped to the side, out of the way, but Gwydion waved a hand and sent him flying back towards the thing. *Okay, that’s one way to defend yourself I guess. Use your friends to attack.* He swung his sword at it but it opened part of itself up and the blade passed harmlessly through the space. *Great, how am I supposed to hurt a creature made of water? Will it hurt me just to touch it? Like someone putting a water spell on themselves as a defensive measure, it’s elemental magic. It’ll hurt anyone that touches it. What are we going to do?*

“In the Abbess’ light, let all abominations of nature be banished!” Nightstar intoned. Nothing happened. “Whatever is holding this here is powerful magic.”

*Or you’re just not as good as you thought.*

It went for Killian again, who managed to dodge this time, and Gwydion took advantage of the distraction to shout “Begone!”

Water splashed all over the floor and silence took over the cave. Just in case I put my usual spirit draining spell on myself, feeling the magic pull me down a bit as I was concentrating on two spells now. *Is it over though? I expected a man I could punch but this was a spirit I couldn’t. Isn’t something similar what protected Zane’s apartment?*

“You made that look easy,” Nightstar told him. “I guess maybe I do need some more-”

“Watch out!” Killian shouted, and I felt the water coming back together. *Oh good, I was thinking that was too easy. Still don’t know what I can do about it.*

“I’ll freeze it in place,” Killian announced, and concentrated. It froze, making it stop and me perk up. *Wait, it’s stuck in place, and I can hit it now without fear of it just lashing out at me with elemental energy.*

“We need to find who the caster is, take care of it in that way,” Gwydion decided. I felt it shrink as well, but I still knew where the ice was. I smacked a hand over it and felt energy come into me. *Or I can just drain it to death, if it will just stay there a second.* But it didn’t feel like giving me the opportunity, and too late I realized it was doing something. More water rushed towards it, and I felt it smack my hand as I tried to get out of the way. It really did a number to it, gashing it up pretty good. *Great, figured that would happen.*

“It’s the walls!” shouted Nightstar.

*The what is?* She was doing something, and it staggered a little, while Gwydion was also targeting the walls. I felt William struggling to get out of their clothes, they were a rat now, and wondered how that was going to help. But then again, now that it was water I didn’t know what help I could be either. I backed off. Reves usually held things in place while I pummeled them, but that wasn’t going to work this time. We needed a new plan.

Rats and other small creatures were throwing themselves into the fray, at least distracting it, and I felt a huge pile of rats come into existence where Argento used to be. *Odd strategy. Oh, did William do that? Interesting.* It was thrashing around, trying to hit the rats.

“Should I freeze it again?” Killian asked.

“If you want me to hit it, yeah. I can drain all its energy and it should fall apart.”

“Right!” I felt his magic reach out but the creature resisted it. It also went for the Argento Rat Swarm or whatever it called itself now, making them stagger back.

*Great. Well, it was solid enough to hit the rats, and Killian when this started, and I’m already injured so let’s just try it.* I slammed a palm into it, hoping it didn’t shear my hand off, and for a wonder I hit it and seemed to be fine. I gathered more of its energy, so I smacked it with my other hand, letting go of Reves’ harness. I hit it again, but it must have resisted my energy drain, I didn’t feel anything that time. Killian came around the side and hit it with his sword, so it seemed it could be damaged that way as well. I kept up the attack, hitting it several more times before Gwydion shouted “enough!” and did something, the creature vanished. We were all pushed back, I had to do a flip to stay upright, and took a stance wondering what the heck had just happened.

“If it finds more water we’re still in trouble,” he announced. “I turned all the water around here into air for the moment.”

*Oh. That’s why the wind. Huh. Wait, are we going to die when the spell is let go and all that air in our lungs turns back into water?*

“I found another anchor,” Nightstar announced. “Oh Abbess, wipe this awful magic from the earth!”

“Oh, I see another on the floor,” announced Killian. “I’ll spellbreak it.” He did, and the sense of danger in the area vanished.

“That was unexpected,” Nightstar told us. “Well done, everyone. Oh, is anyone hurt?”

I held up my bleeding hand, and she hopped down and cast healing magic on it. Then on Argento, that was back looking like a dog.

“Where’s William?” Killian was asking, poking the pile of clothes on the floor.

“I think he went further down the tunnel,” told them. I had felt him moving off that way, in any case, and he wasn’t anywhere nearby now.

“Guy does like to get naked for some reason,” he remarked. “Well, that’s his problem. Let’s go see what other horrors await us in this place.”

“You’re okay?” I asked Reves, dropping down in front of him.

“Woof.”

“Good. I’m glad you didn’t go for that guy. I don’t know if you could have held him. You did the right thing. Ready to move on?”

“Woof!”

“Okay. Let’s head further in.”

## Chapter 4

We see what is at the end of the tunnel

Where: The mine

When: A moment later

“Nightstar, fly through the tunnel and find William. Tell him the danger is over and he can return.” Gwydion sounded terribly disappointed at his companion’s cowardice in the face of danger but also had a “what can you expect” attitude as well.

“Sure, be right back.” There was a flutter of wings and the crow was gone.

“Meanwhile, I will cast a protective dome on us, so any more little surprises down the corridor do not take us unawares. Protective Dome!” I felt magic surround us, and it felt fairly strong. “There, nothing that means us harm should be able to come near.”

Kililan just grunted. “We should probably just go, stupid to wait around as there’s no chance of the bird missing us.”

“I’ve had a thought,” Gwydion announced. “We will proceed and meet the bird halfway.”

“What a brilliant plan!”

“Thank you. Keep up now.”

“Ugh.”

We headed down the tunnel and actually didn’t get very far when Gwydion threw his arm up, blocking the path. “Did you hear that?” he hissed.

“Hear what?” I asked. “I actually didn’t hear anything.”

“I didn’t either, but there’s some kind of symbol here on the wall,” Killian told us, heading to the edge of the tunnel.

“I will examine it. Wait, there is another on this side,” Gwydion exclaimed, heading in the opposite direction. I tensed, if this was a tactic to separate us and surprise us, it had worked perfectly. But nothing happened. “I don’t recognize it.”

“Some kind of territory marker? But it does seem to be written in fresh blood. It’s still wet.”

*Gross. Wait...* “What’s it look like?”

“Uh, do you know what a- actually, may I take your hand?” Gwydion asked.

“I suppose,” I answered, offering it.

“Like this.” He made a small circle on my palm, with a triangle below it.

“Precarious rocks?” I guessed.

“Could be a boulder perched on a cliff,” Killian agreed. “Just in case, maybe we should spell break it?”

“A trivial task. Spell breaking!” Gwydion cast. Nothing happened. “Very well, let us proceed.”

We went on, and I gave a gasp as my awareness moved forward as well. The others saw it too.

“Nightstar!” I called. The benandante was lying there, a small rock next to her. “She’s been attacked!”

“There are loose rocks here, we’ll have to be careful.” Killian put his shield over his head.

*Would loose rocks have had that kind of accuracy though?*

“You can trust my magic you know,” Gwydion chided him. “Come on, before-”

Suddenly, rocks started flying out of the sides of the tunnel, smacking into the magical barrier that surrounded us.

“We’ve seen water, maybe this is some kind of earth elemental?” I offered.

“I certainly hope not,” Killian muttered. “We had enough trouble with the last one.”

“It should be tied to the location because of the anchor points, we can just push through,” Gwydion decided. “We don’t have to fight it.”

"I'm not seeing any." Rocks continued to pelt the shield. "How sure are we that something isn't living in this tunnel? Gremlins maybe?"

"Who are you calling gremlins?" a high pitched voice shrieked. "You'll pay for that insult!"

"Oh great, now you've done it," said another.

"What? What did I do?"

"Let them know we're here!"

"As we know you're here, come on out," Killian cried, raising his sword. And then lowering it again. Into my field of perception stepped two tiny individuals, each holding a tiny pebble in one hand and a spear in the other.

"We're redcaps, and you will know our fury for disturbing us!"

"There's no need for that," I hastened to say before things got out of hand. "We're sorry for disturbing your territory, but we need to get through here. Might we offer you something in exchange for your trouble?"

"Our caps have gotten dull, some fresh blood would make them nice and red again."

"You're threatening us?" Gwydion sounded like he couldn't believe it.

"Uh..." I felt more coming from all around us. "Gwydion?"

"You think because we're small we're helpless? Ha! We've got you surrounded and outnumbered!"

"Do you now? Red ring of fire!" There was a second of silence. "Huh, that should have worked."

"Ha ha, you suck! Take 'em, fellows!"

Two things happened at once. Killian pointed his sword and shouted "Grow!" and the tiny rocks they were holding resized, he must have been trying to squish them. They dived out of the way. Meanwhile Reves looked around wildly, and I felt the pebbles nearby us start to quiver.

"Magic can get through the barrier!" I tried to warn the others, but as I said "the barrier" I was talking to nobody. Reves had decided the best course of action was to protect his friend, i.e. me, and had teleported us back down the corridor.

"Crap, I hope the others are okay," I swore. I scratched Reves' head though. "Thank you my friend. I wouldn't have reacted fast enough, you did the right thing." *Getting all of them would have been the compassionate thing perhaps, but risky. If he missed, like with that fire ring Gwydion just tried to do, it may have been all our lives.*

"Woof."

"Let's head back, though I do hate to fight them, this is their tunnel. We are the ones in the wrong here. But how did Zane and the other guy get through? Made some kind of deal?" *Was there another path, hidden with magic? I'll have to pay more attention to the walls, I was sticking to the center to not bump into anything, so I would have missed any open spaces the sighted people would see as rock if an illusion was there.*

"Woff."

"You're right, we may never know. Come on."

I jogged back down the corridor to find Gwydion using wind magic to bowl over the redcaps, tossing them down the corridor and out of my range. Killian was covering Nightstar so her broken body wasn't tossed as well, and finally he put his arms down. "That should take care of them. Ah, Tayna, you're safe. Seems we have at least one coward returning to the fight."

*So were they killed in the end after all? Pity, there was no need of that.*

"Uh, what?" Killian said, sitting up with Nightstar in his hands. "Remind me again what you did when the rocks tried to squish us?"

"I... strategically placed myself further down the passageway, that's all."

*Must have teleported, just not as far.*

“Strategy. Right. Is she dead?”

“Let me look her over.”

*You have an understanding of bird anatomy?*

“Let this wound be sealed! Good, that should stabilize her. Now, how to proceed, she looks quite hurt. Expedite recovery! We should probably wait until she wakes up.”

“Isn’t it better to send her somewhere, maybe the apartment? This isn’t the place to just sit around,” I protested.

“I agree, we’re in the middle of enemy territory here,” Killian told him.

“I’m sure she’ll regain consciousness soon. We’ll need her to verify Zane is really Zane when we find him, as William seems to have vanished for some reason.”

“Yeah, where is that guy?” Killian looked around. “He did take a rock to the head too?”

“I think we would see him lying there in that case. Hopefully he is scouting the tunnel with a bit more stealth than Nightstar did and will simply wait for us to catch up.”

“I guess you’re in charge,” Killian told him, resigned.

“I’m glad you remembered that on your own. Make yourself useful and block off that passage.”

“Fine. Tayna, can you help me find some pebbles that were not blown away? I’ll just make them bigger to block it off.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

With the passageway at least mostly blocked off we waited. Gwydion was just sitting there, breathing deeply. I was pacing around, bored. *Is he meditating? I should do that, but concentrating on these spells will distract me. I never dropped my spell to absorb energy, not that I wanted to use it on those little guys in the first place, but it saves me casting it again. I’m so bored, are we really just sitting here? That guy must have heard something, but I suppose it’s been this long.*

I had no idea how long we waited, felt like hours and hours, dragging out and making me crazy, but finally Nightstar stirred.

“What hit me?” she managed.

“A rock,” Killian told her simply.

“Ah. I hope you taught it a lesson?”

“We blew it away!” Gwydion started laughing as if he had just told the greatest joke in the whole of the day. Maybe the week.

“Did you? Been a while since I got hit like that. Didn’t think I was getting that old, to be surprised by a rock. Did the tunnel collapse or something? Are we okay?”

“We got ambushed by some little critters,” Killian explained. “We took care of them.”

“That’s good, I guess.”

“We need to move on,” I reminded everyone. *Finally.* “Nightstar, do you want to keep going with us or have us send you someplace safe?”

“I better stay,” she decided after a moment. “I need to see this through. Best if I don’t fly though, my head is still ringing.”

“Reves, do you mind carrying her?”

He shook his head and went “Woff.”

“You can ride him.”

“Thanks.”

We got her situated and in position by the blocked end of the tunnel. “I’m letting the spell go,” he announced.

*Maybe Willam will be there on the other side? He’s been gone way too long, he must have wondered what happened to us.*

The boulders shrank back to nothing but the way was clear.

“Huh,” Killian grunted. “Odd. Wait, I hear something.”

We all stood and listened, it sounded like someone running toward us.

“Ah, must be William at last,” reasoned Gwydion. “Perhaps he’s rescued Zane single-handedly and-”

But it wasn’t William that pounded towards us, but one of the men I had seen in the vision. My magic was confused, it told me the man I was looking at had Zane’s hair, but he was wearing the clothes of the man my magic had shown me stuffing Zane into the cave in the first place. *Did Zane overpower his captor and take his clothes? Maybe the guy burned his as a sort of ‘now you really can’t escape’ moment.*

“Help me, there’s a crazed vampire after me!” he cried, waving his hands at us.

We were all a bit paralyzed, apparently they were having trouble figuring this out at well, and suddenly William appeared behind him, sinking his teeth into the man’s arm. “Aarg!” he cried as the two tumbled to the ground. “Get him off me! I’m Zane, I tell you!”

I recovered first. *I’ll just knock him out, we can get to the bottom of all this later. I trust William has a good reason for attacking this ‘Zane.’* “Mind Down,” I cast, pointing at the man. *That should turn his thoughts out- and it hasn’t worked. Shoot.*

Killian had the same idea, just with physical violence. He went over there and punched the guy in the head, making him go limp. *I could have done that you know.*

“That’s one mystery solved,” Gwydion announced. “This is the captor, where is the cage?”

William ripped himself off the guy’s arm, he had been drinking his blood apparently. “Zane is back that way, how did you know he was in a literal cage? And where have you guys been anyway? I got tired of waiting for you.”

*Yeah, tell me about it.*

“Never mind that, is Zane okay?”

“Sure. Tried to get him out sneakily but it’s locked up. Saw this guy practicing his Zane impression or whatever and figured you guys had died back here and figured I would take care of him. He ran away. Oh, you got my warning?”

“Warning?”

“The hat I drew on the walls!”

“Oh it’s a hat!” Gwydion exclaimed. “I did wonder. We have your clothes if you want.”

*I mean it was somewhat useful, but I think we would have had the barrier up in either case?*

“Nah, I’m good.”

“As you wish.”

Killian hauled the guy over his shoulder. “Let’s go meet the real Zane and get this guy’s story.”

“Great, we get to talk to Zane!” William sarcastically agreed. “I’ve missed him soooo much.”

We headed down the passageway which stayed clear, thankfully, and headed into a large chamber. Walking through it revealed a lot of camping equipment like a bed roll, lamps, and some coolers with food. Oh, and a cage containing one slightly exasperated human. *So there wasn’t another passageway. How did he convince the redcaps to leave him alone then?*

“Are these your friends?” he asked.

“Friends is a strong word,” William replied. “This is Gwydion, Kill-”

“Grandmaster Gwydion.”

There was a pause. “Killian, and Tayna.”

“Nice to meet you all. Now can someone let me out of here?”

“Padlock, doesn’t have a key,” Killian told us. “I doubt the combination is written anywhere around here. Anything we can do magically?”

“I hope so, magic won’t work inside here,” Zane told us. “Otherwise I could have gotten myself out.”

I went over there, and it seemed the cage bars were “decorated” with symbols, meaning the whole cage had been made into a magic item that blocked magic. *Interesting, and could come in handy later. If we can move it out of here easily.*

“I’ll get the lock,” Gwydion told us. “Rend!” The lock tore itself to bits and he shakily got out.

“Thank you for coming for me.”

“It wasn’t exactly our choice,” William told him.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Rebecca was pestering me to go look for you even before these others showed up and dragged me here. She would have kept doing that, I assume.”

“Who is Rebecca?” Gwydion asked.

“Oh crap. Forget I said that. I meant Nightstar.”

*Yeah, that ship has sailed I’m afraid. You would think they would be more careful about that sort of thing, given they call each other funny names like that.*

“Thanks a bunch,” she called from Reves’ back. “I’m fine by the way, thanks for asking. And you’re right, I would have.”

“I didn’t even see you there! What happened, are you okay?”

“Oh, remind me to tell you something important,” I told him. *Need to tell him his name was compromised.*

“I’m fine,” Nightstar told him. “Or I will be soon.”

“Glad to hear it. What’s so important that-”

“I’ve brought him up to speed on anything,” William told us. “I had like a week to do it while I was waiting for you. He knows about those two spilling his name to the demon.”

*Preaching to the choir, sir. Wait what happened now?*

“More importantly, what happened with you?” Killian demanded. “Why are you still alive?”

“Have you ever seen Harry Potter?”

“No.”

*I have! I will get this reference! I mean I listened to the audio books, I suppose I could listen to the audio of the movies...*

“Oh, that would have made this easier. Okay, he was keeping me around to learn my mannerisms and ask me stuff.”

“What?”

Zane sighed. “Let me start from the beginning. I came out here to find-”

“We know that part, skip to the part where this joker,” he prodded the unconscious man on the floor with his toe, “found you.”

“Right, okay. Right, he jumped me in the woods, don’t even know how he found me honestly, but he did. He forced me to go with him and put me in that cage. He was asking me about my plans for the non-human UN I want to set up, and then just stuff about me personally.”

“Sounds like he either wanted you to become best buds, not likely, or he was planning on replacing you.”

“That’s my thought too, why else keep me here like this. It must be related to the UN in some way.”

“I can find out,” I told them. “It shouldn’t be a problem.” *I can at least make myself useful that way, as I missed the fight with the little guys for the most part.*

“Must we stay in this hole?” Gwydion complained. “And would you put some clothes on, William?”

*Oh sure, now it’s all rush, rush, rush to leave. What about sitting around waiting for Nightstar? She wasn’t even useful.*

“I found some rope, let me tie up our ‘guest’ and we can get out of here,” Killian told him.

“Can we at least head back to my car, I’d like to get the stuff out of it.”

“We can go back to the edge of the forest, of course,” Gwydion told him. “My magic can take us anywhere!”

So we headed back there, stepping through a portal Gwydion made back to the treeline, and he headed back across the street. Zane collected a backpack from his car, but then stood looking around. “Crap, what time is it?”

“Little after two,” Killian told him.

“So nothing is open. Great. Maybe I can find a hotel somewhere off the reservation.”

“Let’s just head back to your apartment,” I suggested. “We can come back here tomorrow, get the cars, you can talk to the shaman, then plan your next move.”

He thought for a moment. “Nothing else for it I guess. Let’s go back there. I need a shower anyway.”

Back at the apartment Gwydion was busy repairing the window and the sofa that got destroyed earlier while I knelt by the guy. I put my hand on his head and did some mental magic. I got past his mental barriers (such as they were while he was unconscious) and was him for a little bit. I opened my eyes again not that anyone could see it behind my glasses. I cleared my throat and everyone came back over to me.

“So here’s the story,” I told everyone. “His name is Nick Bakay, an actor who has done voice work in the past. That’s why he was picked, because of his acting abilities He’s also a fomorian.”

“That figures,” Gwydion lamented.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Killian demanded.

“You know exactly what it means.”

*Right, he’s fomorian. Great.* I went on before that could get any further. “Some time ago he signed up to do ‘whatever was required’ to help his people and then basically forgot about it. He doesn’t recall exactly who he spoke to about that but he remembers being asked, and agreeing it was his duty to help his people as best he could. Recently he got a letter about a job for him, and money went into his bank account to do the job. That letter instructed Nick here to do what you suspected. He got told your location, what time you would be there, and was ordered to take over your life. When that was done he was told he would get further orders. He burned the letter, we can’t track it back that way.”

“So we’re not really any better off?” Killian asked.

“We know our enemy has a masterful grasp of magic, to have pinpointed Zane so exactly,” Gwydion told him. “plus providing him with the cage? I doubt he just had it sitting around. And that this man Nick was probably paid well to do this. This suggests a lot of resources.”

“He found the cage here,” I agreed.

“We do have a king, of sorts,” Killian informed us. “The tuatha hold most of the political power but we’ve managed to hold onto or claw back at least some of it. I suppose it’s no different from humans. Some are fanatically loyal to the ‘party’ while others are fearful speaking out against bad leaders will harm them politically. Either one is a problem because either can be exploited by others.”

“Exactly. So we have to be careful placing blame on the fomorian government, which may not be involved at all,” Gwydion told him. “We must get to the bottom of this using facts, though of course we’ve had our problems with the fomorians so it wouldn’t surprise me if they were behind it.”

“It is odd they would care,” I decided, “given how everyone we’ve talked to said what a far-fetched idea it was.”

“Perhaps my people feel they have been given the shaft enough in the past and this UN of yours, Zane, would simply be more of the same. So they wanted to get ahead of it, make sure they were in charge of it. To think some random actor was approached and asked to do jobs in the future though...” He shook his head. “Does that suggest others have been approached as well?”

*I suppose it’s possible.*

“Then they should have started it years ago themselves,” he told him. “Nothing stopped them, I mean I’m just one guy and I’m getting somewhere with the idea. In any case everyone gets a seat at the table, so to speak. It’s not worth anything unless it’s equal justice for all and all voices at least have a say.”

“And if it isn’t,” I mused, “it’s just more of the same. Disruption of anything the tuatha are involved in for a reason yet unknown.” *Even if only on the outskirts of it. But divination magic may have been employed, and the fomorians or whoever is behind the tuatha’s problems saw a way to strike at the future from here in the present and make the UN not happen. That would benefit them.*

“In any case,” Gwydion went on, “we have learned little apart from the attack not being random. Zane himself told us what he suspected which turned out to be accurate. Apart from reporting back that Zane has been found, we have little to tell Parthalàn.”

“Who?”

“The contact who sent us on this mission. Were you not contacted by the same individual?”

“No, someone else, probably works in the same office or something. It was a tuatha, I’d met her before that’s probably why she called me.”

“No doubt. So the question becomes what do we do with him?” He gestured at Nick.

“I could erase his memory of the whole thing,” I suggested, to get in front of any suggestions of killing him. “He has an apartment somewhere, so he pays rent, has friends over, that sort of thing. That stops and someone is going to look into it. An investigation would start and we don’t want that.”

“Agreed. But you are nothing thinking deviously enough, my new sidekick. I suggest we turn the tables on these perhaps so called fomorians and have Zane proceed as if he is Nick simply pretending to be Zane. Meanwhile Nick is placed in the cage and so when ‘Nick’ in this case Zane gets his next set of orders we will be informed.”

“Okay,” I agreed hesitantly. “But the fomorians, if they are really behind this, aren’t stupid?”

“No?” There was a pause. “I mean, no, of course what? I mean what do you mean?”

*Was Killian reaching for his sword or something?* “I mean they magically knew where Zane would be, you don’t think they’ll check and make sure they have the right guy before sending the next orders? They’re going to know this is the real Zane.”

“Guess your plan is terrible, and you should feel bad,” Killian told him.

“Do you have a better one?”

“I do.” Everyone looked over at William. “Hello? Vampire? Known for enthralling people? I just spend some time enthralling him and after awhile he’ll do whatever I say without me even trying. We’ll control him, and he reports to us when he gets new orders.”

*That could work, and keeps him alive.*

“So he becomes my assistant or something? I’m not going back in the cage to sell *that* lie,” Zane told us.

“Maybe we can find some anti-scrying talisman for you or something,” Killian told him. “Keep you off the... what’s that thing you have to stay off of?”

“Drugs?” he asked.

“Lawn?” I asked.

“Wanted poster?” Nightstar suggested.

“No, the thing that shows what’s coming!”

“Crystal ball?”

“Radar! Keep you off the radar!”

“Ooooooh,” everyone said. “What’s radar?” Gwydion asked.

“We’ll have to think of something in the morning,” Zane said. “I can barely stay awake here.”

“So let’s meet back up tomorrow,” I suggested. “Most of us can get home under our own power, right?”

Everyone nodded. "I'll take Nick here, so when he wakes up I can enthrall him," William told us.

"I'll send a message to Parthalàn," Gwydion told us. "What do you think it should say?"

"Wait, doesn't Killian's point apply to him too?" I asked, wondering how paranoid I should be now. "I mean I trust the person that called me but she could be under orders too. How do we know we're on the right side here?"

"Why would a person interested in the downfall of the tuatha send us out looking for the group responsible for the downfall of the tuatha? That makes no sense," Gwydion scoffed.

"It does if they want to find out about any holes in their operation," Killian agreed. "They send us out looking for answers, we find some, now the group eliminates us and fixes the issue. There was a sort of terrorist group I heard about within the tuatha society. Something something magical purity I think? This Parthalàn could be working for them on the side."

"I'll do divination magic later on who we should trust," I told him. "But we can't send back nothing, if the apartment is being watched and we don't tell him Zane is back he'll suspect we suspect."

"Now you're getting to the proper level of paranoia," Zane praised me. "You see why I warded my own place so strongly?"

*But you have to trust someone. Deal with betrayal if you must, but don't just give up trusting people.*

"I will be as vague as possible," Gwydion promised. "I will simply tell him the situation with Zane has been resolved, not that he has been found or brought back. That could mean anything. If he wants more detail, he can ask for it."

"Resolved possibly meaning he was killed. Sure, go with that," Killian allowed.

And with that the group broke up and went their separate ways. I went back to Kelly's place to get some sleep, knowing we still had a lot of work to do the next day. Take care of the cage, ask divination magic a few things, maybe collapse that mine, guard Zane while he talked to James, make sure Nightstar was okay, it went on and on. But at least we had succeeded and Gwydion and Killian hadn't come to blows. They were more professional than I had first thought, maybe we would all get through this in one piece.

## Chapter 5

We wait until the next piece of information surfaces

Where: Back with the gang

When: The next day

The group of us met up the next day in the afternoon to take care of the loose ends we had left the day before. Nightstar was still alive, though still fairly badly wounded, and would probably pull through just fine. We went to get the cars back, stopping to introduce James to Zane. The two spoke while we stood guard, and while James admitted the venture was more than likely doomed from the start, *not trying* was just as likely to insure nothing ever got done so he was in. Until the structure was more formalized there wasn't much he could do but he agreed to stay in touch and give Zane what advice he could from his long experience as a mediator. So at least that part of this whole mess got accomplished.

We folded the cage down and raided the camp, bringing anything useful back to the cars with us. By then it was dark enough and the reservation sparsely populated enough we could find a place to open a new gateway and get the cars through. As for our mission, Gwydion said he had met with Parthalàn the night before who had no further orders for us. We were, after all, supposed to be the ones investigating this because they had come up against so many dead ends. They were leaving the entire investigation in our hands, from how we got leads to what leads to follow up on. *Lucky us.*

"I can do some magic and see what our next steps might be," I told them.

"Good, good," Gwydion agreed, sounding a bit distracted. We were in front of Zane's apartment, having said good night to him as our dealings with him was now over. He promised to be more careful in future, perhaps hiring a bodyguard as one of us had suggested. He had his UN thing to worry about, he wasn't a part of the tuatha thing at all, so we probably wouldn't be seeing him again. William had gone to work, walking away muttering about being the only responsible one in the whole group.

*I'm responsible, I just have a job that sits at the fringes of society. It's not my fault that happened. And I can do my recording for the day any time.* "You okay, Gwydion?" I asked. "You sound distracted."

"I was... informed... by Parthalàn last night when he found me at my tower that being there was not conducive to communication with the others, meaning you. I was basically told to make myself available to all of you, but I fear I don't really know the human world very well."

*Okay, one, you have a tower? And two, you got chewed out and told to do your job, basically 'don't come back here until you've solved the case' is that it?*

"You aren't staying with me!" Killian insisted at once.

"Nor would I want to!" he retorted.

I felt both of them looking at me.

"Ah. Well, I don't actually live in this area yet, Kelly and I are still house hunting. Prices are out of sight now for some reason. Pun intended!"

No reaction. *These people have no souls.*

I cleared my throat. "Anyway, you're welcome to stay at my place. We switch back and forth, I sometimes go stay with her, sometimes she's over at my place. But I have a guest room you can use. I don't have any servants, or anything, so you're going to have to help keep the place clean and whatnot while you're there." *I mean I'm not inviting a friend over, this is basically a stranger and right now a beggar. If they have 'a tower' I bet they're not used to picking up after themselves? Might be good for them, seeing how the '99%' lives.*

"I'll do my best, of course."

*Hopefully it will only be a few days anyway, right? I mean, the three of us can easily solve a mystery that's plagued the entire tuatha race for months here in no time at all, right?* "You have to promise to stay off camera when we're filming, too. That would be awkward as heck."

"What is filming?"

"What's your occupation again?" Killian asked.

"Adult entertainment actress." I had no shame in telling him. *Wonder if he'll look up my work sometime?*

"Which you do at *home*? Not a studio?"

"Since OnlyFans became a thing, yeah. Why do you think I can do these little jaunts with you, unlike William that has to 'go back to work' all the time? I still do that sort of thing, of course. I'm turning down other paying work until I know my schedule is more regular again."

"Got it. Have fun you two. Call me when the next crisis hits."

"I'll ask my magic what we should be doing tonight, and leave you a voicemail or something."

"Looking forward to it." He got in his car and drove off.

"Well Reves, shall we?" I asked.

"Woof."

We appeared outside my house and I invited Gwydion in, then gave him a tour. He seemed out of sorts, but said how 'nice' everything looked. I reminded him I didn't really go for 'looks' being blind, able to tell at most what something was when it was nearby. He seemed to get it, saying he hadn't thought about it that way. Letting him get settled in I went to tell Kelly I had a guest and not to freak out. I sent her his picture so she would know who he was, and she sent hers not that she could get here without hopping a plane so if the two ever did meet, I would be right there with them. Reves went to stretch his legs, and finally I was able to sit down, away from my streaming rig, and do some magic.

"What is our next step in solving the mystery of who is killing the tuatha?" I asked the universe. I wasn't exactly pleased with what I got back.

*Events must travel down the course if you are to find the source.*

*A waiting game you now must play if you wish to save the day.*

*A name will come to William's eyes while you tell the truth from lies.*

*Once you learn you have a choice to lend an ear to this man's voice, or a different path to brave, with many innocents to save.*

"So apparently," I told Gwydion when he came back wandering around, "we're going to have to wait for a bit. Apparently William will get the name of our next target somehow."

"Perhaps from this actor he's enthralled? The one who was going to take over Zane's life?"

"Most likely," I agreed with a nod. "The magic simply told me we'll have to wait until the name surfaces. No idea when that will be though, not even a hint." *But something about telling truth from lies? I don't get that part but we'll see.*

"I see. If you don't mind me asking, what is your usual routine around here?"

"Well, I do at least an hour workout, this doesn't maintain itself you know." I indicated myself. "Then another hour keeping my martial arts skills sharp. Sometimes I head back to Japan to see my master, help out with his students or just spar with them. Then answer my fan mail—"

"You have fan mail?"

"Sure! Both electronic and physical. Sometimes it's outfits someone wants me to wear. Sometimes it's gifts, or toys they want me to film in use." *And return, more often than not.* "Special requests along with the necessary funds, whatever. So I catch up on that for a few hours. Talk with Kelly, we've been looking at houses recently. Walk with Reves just so he doesn't get harassed. Though

being a black dog he could be as stealthy as he wants, I think he walks with me just to humor me. House stuff, catching up on news, whatever.”

“You keep quite busy!”

“I do. And that’s all if I don’t have paid work at the moment, which like I said before I’m turning down at the moment.”

“You get a lot of offers?”

“I’m fairly in demand, yes,” I replied modestly. “I’ve actually filmed all over the world. I hope to one day be in a real movie, and call myself a real actress. But for now, well, I take what I can get.” *It’s tough to go from one to the other. No matter how good an actress I am, and I’m decent if I do say so myself, there always that stigma of being in the adult industry that producers are uncomfortable with.*

“I see. I’ll try to stay out of your way then.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. Let me know if you need anything, feel free to use the kitchen whenever, though I’ll have to do some shopping now that there will be two of us here on a more regular basis.”

“I would be interested in accompanying you. See how your markets differ from the ones back home.”

“Sure, I have no problem with that.”

So I went about my day and Gwydion excitedly came up to me while I was working at the computer.

“Is it safe to approach?” he asked from the doorframe.

“It’s safe,” I agreed with a laugh. *I should put up a sign or something. Visual people go for that sort of thing, right?* “What’s up?”

“What’s this?” he held something out, and my magic told me it was a small, circular, metal disk.

“Where did you find it?”

“Your basement level, on the floor.”

“Oh.” I wondered what the heck it could be, then snapped my fingers. “That might be a metal punch out from an electrical box I had replaced awhile ago. The electrician let me hold it, and I wondered how the wires went through it. He said he would knock out the metal circles in the back where they needed to go. I guess he didn’t clean up after himself, or that one got missed. Why?”

“So I can have it?”

“Sure, I would have just thrown it away had I noticed it.”

“Perfect. I’m going to get my tools, I’ll be back. That is, if you’ll help me with a little project I have in mind?”

“Project?”

“Yes. I hate to just sit around, so I decided to do some enchanting. It’s a good opportunity after all, as I don’t know divination magic but you do.”

“I do know divination magic, yes...”

“If you’re willing, could you cast a spell onto the disk such that it vibrates when a lie is told in its presence?”

“Uh...” *I see. Truth from lies, interesting. And who lied to you, Gwydion, that makes you think you need such a thing? It seems they hurt you fairly badly.* “Moving it would require kinetic magic, so not really. But I can make it seem to the person carrying it that it has vibrated when a lie is spoken, as that would be strictly mental.” *A fine distinction perhaps, but an important one if he really wanted it to move for some reason.*

“That’s completely acceptable!” he told me.

“Then sure,” I told him. “I even have a relative in the ingredient business we can go see to get what you’ll need for the process. Let me finish up here and we can head over there.”

“Wonderful, I can get my tools and meet you back here.”

“Sounds good.”

He went to get away from the computers and I had to shake my head. *Another surprise. I figured he would sit around, demand to be waited on, that sort of thing. But he’s actually going to make something useful in his down time, now that he has access to my magic. Easier than learning divination himself I guess, though I could offer to teach him that too. Maybe he won’t be so bad, if he’s going to busy himself with a project. Enchanting isn’t something I can really do, my ‘sight’ magic isn’t quite good enough to give me the knowledge of the fine detail I would need to bind magic into something. Might be interesting to feel it done though. And it’ll keep him out of my hair while he works.*

So a few weeks passed. Gwydion worked on and finished a successful enchanting of the small ‘coin’ that could let him know someone was lying, and our enthralled fomorian started to give us useful information. His main orders, it turned out, was not to completely disrupt the process but simply to slow it down. Sow discord, but keep the idea alive. Very odd, we all thought. Zane did move forward with the whole thing but was frustrated as rumors went around that if one group joined, another group would retaliate against them, and vice versa. So clearly there were a lot of players here, the whole thing, despite everybody saying ‘oh it won’t work it won’t work’ was seemingly determined to work against it rather than just let it implode on its own. Or perhaps that’s why they said it wouldn’t work, because they knew all the other groups would work against it like this? In any case, Nick was now quite enthralled by William and when he got his next envelope handed it over without burning it this time. We lucked out, it had a return address, just the thing we needed as our next step.

“Apparently,” William told us by phone that night, “his name is James McMullan, and he lives in Greece. We’ve got the address.”

We had met up at a nearby bar, a place open that late, though William was at work and couldn’t join us. But the three of us hired by the tuatha were there, and now I had a choice to make. *According to my divination efforts, we either go see what he has to say, or ‘brave the different path’ and save many innocents. I don’t see how one leads to the other, nor have I told the others about that line in the rhyme. Just because it’s not an absolute like the other stuff, and I’m not sure what it means. I guess we’ll just have to play it by ear for now, see what the others think.*

“I can drive out there,” Killian told us. “At least see what the place looks like. Maybe get a glimpse of the guy, see what his routine is.”

*I mean I could see what his place looks like from here, have they forgotten google maps already?* “If he does leave the house we could jump him,” I told them. “I could do the same mind reading spell as before, see what he knows and where his orders come from.”

“Do we want to let him know we’re onto him though?” Gwydion asked.

I considered that. “I could make him remember a mugging, swipe his wallet too, make it look real. He might just consider himself lucky to be alive and not think too much more about it. It’s another spell but I should be able to manage it.”

“Hard to come up with any plan,” Killian told us, “until we know more about the guy. Maybe he never leaves home, or has bodyguards, or throws massive parties every night.”

“No offense, but I’m not sitting in a car for hours with you, Killian. I mean what if someone I knew saw me?”

“Who is going to- you know what, the same goes double for me. Be seen with a tuatha? My rep in this town would plummet! What about you, Tayna? You coming?”

“Best not to go alone,” I told him. “In case he puts up his own divination magic that tells him enemies are nearby or something. We should treat him at least as paranoid as Zane.”

“Not possible,” came William’s voice from the phone. “Let me tell you about that guy.”

“Save it for the stakeout,” Killian told him. “We’ll be there hours with nothing to do but watch a house. Fun, fun, fun. Let’s get going, don’t want to lose a good parking spot.”

So we headed out, and Gwydion headed back to my place.

“Sorry about him,” I told Killian as we got in his car. “I’ve been working on him, but I think that one’s going to be with him awhile.”

“Don’t sweat it, not your job to try and convince a single tuatha that maybe other races too have value.”

“Still...”

We parked at a convenience store that was within sight of the house, luckily, and settled in to wait. There were other cars parked there too, Killian told me, so we didn’t stick out too much. This seemed to be a meeting spot for drug dealers, making me think that whole war on drugs was going great, huh? *You know, non-humans like myself are always complaining about ‘the good old days’ when humans feared the night and them. Well, without even trying here we are sitting inches next to what society would call ‘bad people.’ We want to rule the night again? Clean up places like this, as clearly the humans can’t do it for themselves. Fear comes back to the night, to the right people, we get to be active like we want, use our magic like we want, I mean who is going to believe a drug dealer’s story that someone was throwing fireballs around or whatever? Zane wants a crusade? Here’s one tailor made for him if his UN thing doesn’t work out.*

Quite early in the morning McMullan did step out of his house, just to take some trash out. Killian got some pictures of him, and described the place as being a small fortress. Bars on the windows *and* doors, and generally in need of a lot of upkeep. He seemed cautious but not really twitchy or nervous, looking around as one would in this kind of neighborhood.

“Another fomorian,” Killian remarked.

“But not a high ranking one, to live in a place like this, right?” I asked. *What’s a guy living in a place like this doing disrupting Zane’s plans for? Seems like he’s not living the high life, what does he have to lose if the plans go forward?*

“Hard to say, this could just be a base. He could teleport in and out, just because I never studied any more magic doesn’t mean he couldn’t.”

“Right. Well, we can send the picture to William, see if his police contact can tell us anything.”

“Sure. And how do we do that again?”

I sighed and showed him, and not long after William got back to us.

“No driver’s license, though he does have a state issued ID,” he said. “The house was built in the 1930s and his name has been on the lease since that time.”

*Oh sure, here’s me looking to move because it’s the right thing to do. Keep people from being suspicious of you. Conceal, don’t feel, that sort of thing. And he’s been living there almost a hundred years at this point without so much as a name change. Is he collecting social security? Will he when he’s a hundred and twenty? Some reporters might wind up there asking questions in that case.*

“No priors either, that’s all we can find on him.”

“So he knows to keep somewhat of a low profile,” Killian admitted. “Thanks for the information. We’ll stay until sunrise at least and come back later.”

“Whatever.” He hung up.

“How do I get all the—” He must have looked at me. “Present company excluded of course.”

“You don’t say?” I asked with a grin.

The next night Killian said he wanted to get a bit closer, and was going to just hang out in the area as a bum. He insisted it would be fine, refusing my offer to help, and I said it was his funeral. So we were just to wait in case he got into trouble, which of course I figured he would and asked about it once off the phone with him.

“Is Killian in any danger tonight?”

*Killian thinks big but he'll stay small, so he won't be seen at all.  
The five who come will pass him by, he'll never enter any eye.  
Safe and sound he'll ride the streets, never one of them he greets.*

That had to do, though it seemed McMullan was getting some visitors tonight. Perhaps while these men were meeting with him, he was going to hide in their vehicle? *It actually makes sense, given what I got last time. He's going to choose to not listen in on their conversation, taking the other path which ultimately leads to more innocents being saved. Somehow. So I won't press too much, given how everything is going to work out for the best.*

Little did I know how important talking to this guy would have been, had we been able to do so. I would have pressed to be there, it might have saved us a lot of work and blown the whole case wide open. But I didn't, and it wasn't.

Several hours later we got a phone call and a tiny but panicked voice was on the other end.

"Five people just broke into McMullan's house and I think they're shooting the place up!"

"What? We've got to get over there, save him! We can take five people!" *It would be the four of us against the five of them, and haven't I taken three home invaders out myself? Of course that was in Kelly's place so I could do my own magic but still...*

"Nah, listen I can't talk long. Shrinking my battery down means I don't have much juice left."

*Er, how does that even work? A tinier phone would have a tinier processor, would it even still... not the point.*

He went on. "I'm hiding in their van. I'll just see where they came from. I'm sure that's going to be far more useful than trying to save our guy at this point."

"Ahhhhhh.... Okay?" *Innocents saved, Tayna. Innocents saved. Remember that this leads to lives being saved.* "You're the expert here."

"I'll call you back soon, saving my battery. Bye."

The line went dead.

"So how are we going to get who he was working for now?" Gwydion asked me. "Are you sure we shouldn't have gone?"

*Should I suspect him of working against us at this point? Did he want the man murdered so the trail goes cold, just to spite the tuatha? But he's magically compelled to help, right? He can't betray us like that, can he?* "The man said no," I told him. "It's on his head now. I didn't want to pop in there against his wishes, get in the middle of whatever he's planning. Maybe he knows necromancy magic? Could speak to the man's spirit and get more truthful answers?"

"Ugly business, that," he admitted. "I wouldn't want to do it. Though of course I know how, having studied many branches of magic."

*Of course.*

"So now what?"

"I'm going to call William. Even if I'm not there, I know a crime has been committed, and against a fomorian. We need to get there before the regular cops do and find a non-human body!"

"Good idea," he agreed. I dialed.

## Chapter 6

I screw up just a tiny bit but it's fine

Where: The morgue

When: Some time later

Events had proceeded swiftly yet at the same time maddeningly slowly after I told William about the break in. He called his police contact, who said the gunshots had already been reported so the police were on their way. His contact headed there once he knew it was a fomorian, to try and smooth over any evidence of the now murdered non-human life-form. Then William was called to examine the body at the site, so he was out of touch for a while. Meanwhile I had no idea what was happening with Killian, so the two of us were forced to just sit around and wait while events played out. Finally William said he was back at the morgue, and that Killian had made his way back there too. We teleported over there to finally get the story.

"To begin with, there wasn't anything we could have done," Killian began. "The five jumped out of a van and rushed the place. It turned out magic was used to simply remove the lock on the gate he had up, and they smashed the door in. After they burst in they simply shot the guy dead. By the time I could have called you and gotten you there, it would have been too late. I felt it better to simply hide in their van and see who these people were."

"So who were they?" Gwydion asked.

"There were five of them. Some kind of monster hunters, seems like they do this a lot. They talked about a list, and their next target tomorrow somewhere in Buffalo."

"Hold on," William told him. "Let me get my contact on the phone. He needs to hear this." He dialed and reached a guy named Williams, which I knew wasn't going to get confusing any time soon.

"I don't suppose you got the license plate number off the van?" Williams asked.

"Of course I did," Killian replied. "He actually had them taken off, put them back on when he got home. I can give you the address, a description of the five, and you better hurry with it because they're going to do the same thing tomorrow night!"

"Okay, tell me everything."

He did, including that one of the people was a magic user of some kind, making Williams groan that was going to complicate things. He said one of them took a trophy, a finger, so if there was a rash of murders in the area all with a missing finger (or other body part) they could be tied to those murders as well.

"I noticed that," William told us. "I'll have to include that in my report, of course. Seems he was shot in the back the most, he was just trying to get away in the end. His place was pretty torn up."

"So that's all I can tell you," Killian finished. "Hope it helps."

"I'll submit it through normal 'anonymous' channels," he told us. "See what the man in charge thinks. Oh, and he's just a human by the way, so don't expect too much."

"I never do," Killian replied.

"So what do we do next?" Gwydion asked. "Leave it in the hands of the mortal authorities? I think not!"

"Can't look around his place, see if there's any notes relating to our tuatha issue," Killian told him. "At least until the cops leave and people stop paying attention to it. Who knows when that will be."

*Is it just me or does he sound a little relieved at that? Could just be me.*

"Could the next person on the list be related? You say they didn't say where it came from..."

"Maybe. But they were talking just about getting rid of 'monsters' like it was their mission from God or something. Nothing about tuatha."

“But we can’t let this continue. Perhaps it was a fomoran *this* time, and I will shed no tears that it was. But next time it could be a tuatha. Or a troll! You’re with me on this aren’t you Tayna? You’re the one that has to live here, do you feel safe with armed men wandering around with lists of non-humans? You could be on that list.”

“No, I don’t. On the other hand I don’t want to go to jail for murder, either. The way I see it, we have two options at this point,” I answered him. “We’ve handed the police five murderers. All they have to do is follow the van tomorrow and verify it’s headed to Buffalo like we said. Stop it, oh look it’s full of guns and the van matches a description of one at the murder scene last night. And they may even have a list of recently deceased people in their possession which will further implicate them. Case closed. But let’s say we take ‘revenge’ as you suggest, Gwydion. We meet them in the parking lot as they’re climbing into the van and proceed to kill them. Now we’re the ones in the wrong. Even if it’s proven they murdered this man and others, all the law will see are a bunch of vigilantes taking the law into their own hands. Like you said, I have to live here. You can vanish back into Otherworld but I can’t. No, the best way to go would be to follow the van ourselves. See where they go, follow behind them, and when they go to make the hit then we jump them. That way if some of them get hurt or killed,” *and believe me, they would be*, “at least we have self defense to fall back on. Explaining why we were there may be a bit difficult I admit, but it’s better than explaining a bunch of dead bodies. At that point the guns will be out, the guy they’re trying to kill will back us up, and they’ll get taken off the streets.”

“Ah, the old Rittenhouse defense, smart,” William agreed. “Even though we have no reason to be there, and probably started the whole thing anyway, we’ll get off because it was self defense. Nice.”

“Not exact- er, I guess maybe?” I admitted. “Again, that’s if the police do nothing despite everything we’ve told them. But we can at least plan out what to do in that case.”

“That’s easy,” Killian told us. “I know where to hide in the van now. I shrink down, take Gwydion here with me, and we just send a portal back for everyone else once they get where they’re going.”

“I suppose I could tolerate you for that length of time.”

“You’re all heart.”

“That sounds reasonable,” I agreed. *In this way my divination comes true. Some innocents are probably caught in the crossfire when they go there, and our intervention saves them. Or maybe it’s talking about their list, all the innocent people they won’t kill in the future? Had we just barged in there before and demanded answers we wouldn’t have been there watching the place when he was killed the next day. Thus we wouldn’t have known he was murdered or that others were targeted too. I think it’s working out the way the divination said it would.* “So there’s nothing to do but wait until we know what action the police are going to take?”

The others presumably shared a look, there was a moment of silence. “Seems that way,” Killian agreed.

“Assume they do nothing,” Gwydion decided. “What time do we meet to infiltrate the vehicle?”

“Let me ask!” I told them, brightening. I considered what question to ask my magic, and decided on “If Killian and Gwydion are not inside the van he last rode in, at sunset will they find it gone?”

*If you wish to be on board, as Buffalo the van goes toward,  
another time is probably best, perhaps by several hours less?*

“Okay, sunset is too late. Several hours, I’ll ask about noon, that seems safe enough.” I posed the same question but with noon instead of sunset.

*That’s a time that’s a-okay, as the van goes on its way,*

*to the place where life is lost, unless you mitigate the cost.*

“Noon it is. Be there and we should be all set,” I announced. “Unless you want me to narrow it down further?”

“No need,” Killian said. “That’s good enough for me.”

“It’s adequate,” Gwydion allowed. “As long as he doesn’t get distracted at a key moment and reveal us.”

“Hey, who made all this possible?”

“Right, let’s head back to the house,” I told Gwydion, feeling this was leading up to an argument. “No sense getting in William’s way.”

“Williams isn’t here,” William started to say. “Oh wait I get it. Never mind.”

We headed back and two hours later my phone rang. It was William.

“Williams called me, there’s bad news,” he told me. “The detective in charge of the case is a moron, as we expected. He’s going to do nothing. Claims it’s gang violence, he doesn’t seem interested in solving it, and thinks the tip is a false lead. Says he got a similar tip on another case like this one that turned out to be nothing so he doesn’t want to take the chance again.”

“Or the tip was good, and magic was used to make him think that,” I replied, thinking about my own mental magic.

“I’m not disagreeing. Maybe the tip was good and he screwed it up himself. Or he never looked into it and this is just an excuse. Anyway, got Williams to agree to come with us, lend some air of authority to the whole thing. It’s not his jurisdiction but having a cop on the ground who also doesn’t want our kind just killed at random could be useful.”

*Sure, he’ll have a gun, and it’ll even the numbers out a little. There are five of them but only four of us, not counting Reves. Which I would, obviously. But I would rather have the advantage of numbers than even numbers. Oh, I wonder if Argento will be there too? That will further ease my mind.* “Good thinking.”

“I think it’s more to keep an eye on us than anything else, but eh, I’ll take what I can get. He’ll be on standby.”

“Right. We can use your office? Gwydion will need to know where to open the portal to.”

“Sure.”

“Great, I’ll tell him. See you just after noon tomorrow.”

“See you then.”

I reported this to Gwydion and we got some sleep, it was going to be a long day tomorrow.

After lunch we headed to the morgue, and settled in to wait. I had asked that morning if they would be safe in the van, and gotten a positive result, so I wasn’t too worried. It was just sitting around waiting that was going to be the worst part. The portal to wherever these five were going could open at any moment, so we had to be ready. *Boredom city here I come.* I spent the time working out, something I needed to do that day anyway, and answered email with my phone. I used William’s small office for that, so I didn’t disturb him speaking the replies I was sending. Reves just napped.

“You’re not going to be too tired out if a portal opens in the next two minutes, are you?” William asked as I was doing some crunches.

“Oh, don’t you worry about that,” I told him with a grin. “We get into a fight and I’ll be as energetic as ever after I hit someone.”

“Okay...”

It was after 6:00 PM when the portal opened and Gwydion motioned us through. “They stopped at a museum, the Buffalo History Museum to be exact according to Killian. They’ve already gotten inside, their resident magic user walked them over to the astral so we’ll have to follow that way.”

“Right,” I replied, following Reves through. He was looking forward to some action, I could tell, and started sniffing around. I felt the van was next to us, and there was a large open space beyond it, so we were probably (hopefully?) on the far side of it in case any cameras were pointed out into the parking lot. Once we were all through the gateway closed and we headed around the van.

“They went this way, it was about here they vanished. Give me a second and I’ll check the other side, I would hate to walk us into some kind of trap. They didn’t discuss such a thing on our ride over here but they may not have needed to. They seem only slightly paranoid.” He did some magic and declared it clear, so we headed through into the astral plane and then past where the wall would be. Meanwhile I readied my own magic, not wanting to risk leaving it to the last second if ran into trouble. I put as much mental effort into the spell as I could, knowing I would be refreshing myself if it came to a fight anyway. *I just have to be careful not to touch Reves, only the harness, while the spell is up. I don’t want to weaken him, after all.*

“It’s clear,” Gwydion announced. “We’ll head through.”

“Wait, what about cameras?” I cautioned. “They may have some even in this area!”

“Technology? Like those recording devices you use?” he asked.

“Exactly. If someone is watching them they’ll see us, and we’ll be recorded as just appearing out of nowhere!”

“If someone *is* watching,” Killian countered, “they’ve already seen the other group appear out of nowhere and are rushing to deal with that. They wouldn’t be watching for *more* people to appear.”

“It’s a fair point,” I agreed.

“I can do something about mortal vision seeing us at least,” Gwydion announced. “So if someone does come to investigate they will be unable to see is. That should confuse them a bit.” He worked more magic. “Done. However, I did not cover our canine companions as I know they can do the same to themselves. Just be careful not to bump into each other, now that we can’t see each other.”

Both gave a woof. *So they’re covered by obscuring magic, in theory, and they can’t see each other? It’s no different for me because I use magic to just sense my surroundings, which his magic wouldn’t be able to deal with. But how are they going to- huh, I guess they could sense the magic in the air moving around to get a decent idea where everybody is.*

“Anything else?”

I realized he was talking to me. “I guess not. I hate to be on camera and be tracked down as to why I was here but there’s nothing we can do about that.” *The magic won’t help us there, we’ll be recorded just fine. I’m wearing the black “ninja outfit” Herman made for me, but my red hair and “seeing eye dog” are going to be enough to identify me later. I should have worn the hood, but I didn’t think we would be in public. They last hit a house, I figured it would be the same here. Why are they here at a museum anyway? Do they want to steal something after murdering this guy? Safer to jump them at home, if they know who the guy is they can get his address, right? Just tail him home if you have to. Odd. I guess we’ll have to see.*

“Agreed. Stand clear, I’ll open the portal back to the mortal realm.”

With the gateway opened we slipped through, so I followed Reves who had their scent. We stayed far back enough, the others maintaining at least a sensible distance between themselves so they didn’t smash into each other. The group seemed to know the layout of the place and went straight to a set of double doors they tried.

“Locked,” said one, “and it’s dark in there.”

“Right, we’ll check the office then,” said another.

“Stairs should be this way,” said a third.

*They're trying to stay out of sight too, the elevator would be faster and I have to believe the place has one. So they don't have obscuring magic, just planeshifting? Interesting, probably not a witch then. But I still shouldn't underestimate them, maybe they just didn't learn that kind of magic even if they could and could fireball us.*

They headed upstairs, Gwydion catching the door with magic before it totally closed, probably just in case they had used some kind of key to open it. We followed them up. Unfortunately, I then screwed up. My attention was on them, straining to keep them all in "sight" as we tried to silently make our way up the stairs. I wasn't paying much attention to what was at my feet, and there must have been something on the stairs because as I passed it I whacked it with my foot, sending it careening down the flight of stairs and tumbling into the now closed door. It sounded like an empty soda can, and everyone froze as the sound echoed around the stairwell.

*Oops. Well, that's what happens when a blind woman tries to sneak around. What do you want from me? I'm not really cut out for this, the cultists were always in a position we just needed to attack. We didn't have to be subtle about it, though of course my master, who is a ninja, would die of shame and expect me to do the same after a display like that. What ninja goes around kicking empty soda cans?*

"What was that?" someone from above us said.

*Please say 'probably nothing,' please say 'probably nothing.'*

"Yeah, I heard it too. Don't see anything."

"I'll check it out," said another. "Maybe McNiven got tipped off we were coming or does divination daily to determine deadly danger. Yes, someone's using magic in the stairwell, someone's there!"

"Gun them down before they can work magic on us!"

*Crap!*

"I think not!" Gwydion announced, stepping forward. He gestured, not that anyone could see him unless he had dropped the obscuring magic on us, and the five vanished.

"You do know the meaning of 'sneak around' don't you?" Killian chided me.

"I can only focus my attention on so much, you know!" I retorted, waving my hand in front of my eyes. "I was focused up, not down!"

"What did you do with them, incidentally?" William asked.

"Teleported them outside. Maybe in the air, maybe not?" Gwydion replied smugly. "That should take some of the fight out of them. Let's go see."

*So much for self defense.*

We vanished and appeared outside again, near the van. Everyone looked around.

"Really?" Killian growled.

"They should be right here," he protested. "I don't understand. They went *somewhere* after all."

"The astral?" I suggested. "That seems to be the go-to spell of the group."

"That would protect them from a fall," he agreed. "Their spell caster must be on the ball though, I didn't put them that high. I'll check."

*Right, as they're more conceptual there in some ways, and while there is a 'ground' there, it's not really 'hard' in the way the ground here is. They could escape splattering here by going there, I suppose. Never thought about it that way but then, I've never fallen to my death so...*

"They are there. Let's go in after them!"

"Hold on," Williams cautioned. "Our plan has been blown to Hell obviously, are we just rushing them? They're no longer committing any crime if they're out here."

"But the bodies will not be found in this world if they are killed there."

"I thought you wanted information from them!"

"We have the name of their target, is that not enough for our purposes?"

"Amateurs, see this is why I insisted on coming along!"

"I had to twist your arm to get you to come," William protested.

"Same difference."

"They're going to attack us on sight, they know something shoved them out of the building," Killian told us. "We need to decide quickly what we're going to do."

"Wait, they're doing something," Gwydion announced, and I felt magic being done closer to the building.

"Too late to discuss it now," Killian told us. "They decided faster than we did."

"There!" one of them shouted. "By the van! Kill those monsters!"

*I'm just an innocent waif, I'm no monster! I'm also too far away they're going to open fire way before I get there. I guess I can use magic but being dragged down by the spells I've already got going is going to-*

William wasted no time, and even as I was deciding what to do I heard a loud scraping and a clanging. "That should hold them!"

"Cameras, William," Williams chided him. "You can't just do magic in the open like that, they could have cameras!"

"Whoops, forgot about that."

"Aarg!" He threw his jacket off.

"Your time is up, murderers," shouted Gwydion. "Tell us where you got that list!"

*I don't think they can hear you over being crushed or whatever William did.*

"Let's go Reves," I told him, and he nodded. We took off in their direction, I just hoped none of them was dead and I could get there and knock them out before anyone on either side got hurt. Shots rang out, I didn't sense any danger so I kept going. I was close enough now to sense that two dumpsters had apparently been thrown together, pinning them. More scraping occurred as they twisted, cutting off their line of sight to us. This didn't cut off the sound of their struggling to push the dumpsters away from themselves and cursing all monsters and each other for being in the way. Gwydion zipped past me, flying, and hovered above the scene.

"Foolish humans, if you value your lives you will tell us what we wish to know. Who gave you the list?"

*Still don't think they're thinking clearly enough to answer you.*

More shots rang out.

*Yeah, like I said. Hope he wasn't shot just then but I didn't hear him cry out so it's probably fine.*

I heard howling from behind me, and Reves took it up as well. *Good, that should help keep them off balance, good thinking Argento.*

I made it to one side of the dumpster sandwich as Killian made it to the other. I smacked the guy in front of me three times, simply tapping him rather than trying to do damage. *I don't want any bruises he can point to and say 'she did that to me' because that's assault, or maybe battery? A crime in any case, and I'd like to avoid that. My energy draining spell will hopefully take care of him and not leave a mark.* He went limp, but couldn't tumble to the ground because he was still pinned. The gun tumbled from his hand so I nodded. *One down, and I feel refreshed, win-win.* Energy had flooded into me, like I had drunk a whole pot of coffee at once. *We can do this, none of these guys has to die.* Meanwhile Killian was wrestling a gun away from another one, so I did a quick flip, landing on top of the one dumpster so I could get an angle on the others. *Scooping up the field mice and bopping them on the head* I singsonged to myself. Oh yes, draining energy always made me feel good. Reves joined me, having done a leap of his own and coming to my side again. Now above them it should be an easy matter to touch them a few times and make them go unconscious.

"You will tell me what I wish to know!" Gwydion demanded. I felt him using magic that time, but it splintered away. "What? Where is that magic user, I don't see him among you!"

William hadn't been idle after throwing the dumpsters around, he too arrived just after my leap and used similar magic. "You will obey my every command," he told them. "Stop struggling." This was just as I was about to strike the next closest one and take his energy, but this magic hadn't been negated. They stopped struggling, and I lowered my arms. *Spoilsport. Can't hit them now, it's not fair.*

"Good. You will tell me where this list you use comes from."

They all started babbling at once, making it rather difficult to understand them, but the gist of it seemed to be they just did research and their 'community' watched for behavior that wasn't quite human. Once you got on the list you were watched more closely and when it was determined you weren't human, they basically felt justified in doing whatever was necessary to kill you.

*So no divination magic is used? At least not by them. Say, wasn't there supposed to be five of these guys? Killian must have realized this as well, as Gwydion had already flown away and he went after the man. I hopped down again, grabbing the sword, of all things, from the next nearest guy before he hurt someone with that thing. I felt Williams on top of the other dumpster, strangely he had taken on a wolflike form, making me shake my head. Shouldn't you have been getting your badge and gun out? You know, 'police, freeze or I'll shoot' something like that? Now who is the amateur here? You had a perfectly serviceable weapon and authority, now you just look like a 'monster' so they're not going to listen to a word you say. I mean they'll listen to William obviously.* I reached in to grab the gun of the next closes guy, and he let me take it, probably having no orders to hold onto it from his new "master."

"Who else has the list?" William asked.

"Anyone on the hunter board," was the answer.

"You will delete the list with your phones, and post in its place a warning that your information was wrong and you have killed an innocent person who was human. The list should not be trusted anymore."

"But we have killed no one here!"

"You will believe you have killed an innocent person before coming here."

"We killed an innocent person? Oh no!"

"I'm deleting the list right now!" insisted one.

"How could we have been so stupid!" wailed one.

*Wow, this enthralling magic is quite powerful.* All three were now carrying on about how sorry they were and one in particular was taking it pretty hard. It seemed he had the situation in hand and I went over with Reves to help look for the fifth guy.

"He got away," Killian grumbled as we got closer. "Slippery little guy. Must be he could teleport after all?"

"Then why the van ride?" Gwydion asked.

"Got me. Anyway, better clean up, I think I hear sirens. Maybe someone was watching those cameras and saw the guns these guys were carrying."

I did too, so William hastily put the dumpsters back, we collected all the guns and William told the three they would confess to all their crimes once taken into custody. They all agreed wholeheartedly they would do just that, and we headed back to the morgue. Williams called for backup, he didn't have enough handcuffs for all these guys, meanwhile William grilled them for more information about the one that got away.

"He's a benandante, we only know him by the name Mouse," they insisted. "It's their custom to use a code name, everyone knows that."

*Wait, someone like Zane is helping regular people hunt down our kind? Wonder if he knows this "mouse" fellow.*

"I can at least go back to the parking lot their cars are in," Gwydion announced. "If he's not taken his car we can at least get the license plate number." He vanished.

*He does like throwing magic around, doesn't he? Flying around, and after just being reminded of cameras too. I really hope there were none outside that building, but they're starting to be everywhere so that's a faint hope at this point. At least no one died, and the list- My blood ran cold. William should have demanded access to the list before they erased it! There are other teams, we could have gotten the names and warned anyone one it. If others don't believe the 'we made a mistake' ploy and still go after the people on it using their personal copy... Crud. Well, too late now. Maybe these four can give up names of other 'hunters' and the whole ring can be broken up. Stupid, not to have thought of that earlier. Very stupid.*

Gwydion came back with the license number, making me wonder where Mouse could have gone if not back to his car to get away. *Maybe Otherworld? I don't know if they checked all possibilities, but I would have to assume they did they were looking for the guy.*

Williams and the other officers that arrived took the babbling three and the unconscious guy away, the three confessing to various murders.

"Are we going after this McNiven right now?" I asked. I was of course still keyed up from the energy I had stolen from the man, and was eager to continue.

"Nah, want to look into him," Killian decided. "We know the last name and where he works, shouldn't be too hard to track down some info. I don't want any more surprises."

"Oh. Okay?" *But isn't he the victim here? Does Killian recognize the name and wants to contact him first or something? But pushing here makes me seem suspicious, so I guess we'll just see how it plays out. What surprises would there be? Isn't he just a random person on a list of non-humans these hunter people were targeting? We just ask for him at the museum, make sure he's okay, and tell him we saved his life and to be careful in the future because that list is still out there.* "I guess in the meantime we could look through the fomorian's house, see if there are any more clues there as to where he was getting his orders from."

"Not a bad idea, we can see if the place is quiet. It's pretty late so it should be."

"I can get us there, but hopefully this will also give me a chance to rest," Gwydion told us. "Even my magic is not limitless."

*Yeah, especially when you're throwing it around like crazy...*

## Chapter 7

We get paid, but are suspicious of our next orders

Where: The dead fomorian's house

When: Ten minutes later

Reves was able to get us to the house as he was the only one with teleportation magic that had seen it directly, when we had staked the place out. The house was quiet, no police cars around according to the others, so we headed over to it.

"Front door has been boarded up, let's head to the side," Killian suggested. I followed the others over there, and as I did I realized we still had some work to do. My magic told me the door was covered with an iron gate that would need to be taken care of, before we could even work on the locks on the side door.

"I don't suppose anyone knows how to pick locks?" he asked.

"I could use my vocational magic to fake it for one of you," I told them. *Of course, it's done by feel not by sight so I suppose I could fake it for myself just as easily.* "I would need some lockpicks though, if someone knows creation magic."

"I will simply melt the lock," Gwydion announced, stepping up to it. "We need not worry about a dead man's property. They would need to be changed when the house is sold anyway."

*I'm not sure that's the point. And wouldn't Mouse's little trick of just sending the lock into the astral be faster? You can do that too right?* But I held my tongue as he had already started casting something on the lock.

"This is taking too long!" grumbled Killian. "We're just standing here out in the open."

"Patience, I don't want to start melting the door."

"I'm sure weird stuff happens all the time around here anyway," William told us. "We won't even be looked at twice."

"I still don't like it. Finally." He pulled the gate over the door open and before we could even take stock of the situation for the next door he smashed it in with his foot.

"Brutish thinking, how typical of your kind," Gwydion sniffed.

"Standing around thinking you have all the time in the world, typical of yours," he growled back. "Get inside before someone sees us."

We headed inside, the spell that let me sense my surroundings dropping as I passed through the now open doorway. *I guess the magic still considers this a home, despite the owner being dead.* I had plenty of stolen energy from the museum parking lot battle so I wasted no time in getting it back up, throwing willpower into the magic to compensate for the threshold. With my "vision" back I took in the place, which happened to be the kitchen as we had come in from the side.

"Let's split up, see if anything obvious jumps out at us," Killian decided. "The place isn't that big."

I wandered through the place just to see what my magic would tell me, and soon realized this guy had a problem. His rooms were stuffed with filing cabinets, boxes, storage containers, and accordion files the others (that could read) said dated back at least forty years. The man kept everything it seemed, rather an odd behavior as most of the records implicated him in crimes of all kinds so you think he would destroy that evidence as quickly as possible. Not so much. It seemed this guy had been some kind of major go between for the fomorian leadership and various agents they had around the world.

*A curious system, sending orders to someone who then passes them on further down the line. Why not just send those agents orders directly? Some kind of plausible deniability? Must be.*

"Here's something interesting," Killian shouted out. We headed to the kitchen table and he slammed a box down on top of it, taking the lid off again. William, who had been poking at the man's

computer and saving his records from there joined us. "Take a look at this. Recognize this name?" He pointed.

"Impossible!" I breathed, putting my hands over my mouth. "This blows the whole thing wide open! Who could have guessed we would see *that* name here in this house!? Wait, it's not *my* name is it?"

"You don't have to be a wise ass," he grumbled. "It's McNiven, the guy we just saved. Send to McNiven using normal channels it says here. Same with this one, and this one. Guy kept everything, even mailing envelopes."

"Oh, okay. Send what though?"

"I'm looking. I have to dig through these shipping boxes, this guy even saved the cardboard boxes he got? At least he flattened them down. Anyway, let me see here..." He rooted around in the box a bit. "Yeah, okay. Looks like he was forwarding stuff to the museum, small artifacts of some kind."

"Yes, these packing slips are not all that specific," Gwydion agreed. "But does this implicate McNiven in the plot as well?"

"Hard to tell," Killian admitted. "This guy was a go-between of some kind, that much is clear. Just because he got sent old locket or combs to then forward to the museum that doesn't mean the person getting the items is making trouble for the tuatha. I mean here's a slip for a medallion owned by some fomorian princess sent several years ago. He's not ordering the guy to kill anyone, just sending him stuff. Probably not even stolen, they wouldn't just put stolen items out on display so he may be legit and know nothing about the tuatha plot."

"Not display stolen item? Have you *been* to a museum?" William asked.

"Not really no. Why?"

"It's pretty much all they display."

"Huh. No kidding?"

"No kidding."

"Well, what do I know? Unless we see his name with orders against someone we know is a tuatha, we'll just assume he's not involved. He just happens to handle fomorian business and him having a file for McNiven here is a coincidence we're making too much of because we happen to have heard the name recently. Let's keep looking."

So they did. I was quite bored, there wasn't much for me to do as they were just looking through piles of papers and setting aside anything that seemed interesting. I didn't sense any hidden compartments, doors, or panels in the walls so I just sort of wandered around and tried to stay out of the way. I didn't want to just leave, if someone did show up to demand why we were there I could take care of them without hurting them. *Though I suppose William could just enthrall anyone that happened by. I'm sort of useless in this situation. I would ask my magic, but it would mean leaving and coming back, and my vision would drop again. I guess I could try it in here? But they don't seem concerned so...*

The others finally decided they had enough papers signed by the rather generic "fomorian leadership" that they weren't going to get any proper names out of any of this. *Naturally enough*, I thought, *best to not implicate oneself in crimes by signing one's own name to orders you're clearly sending through the mail.* Gwydion of course was both fuming and somewhat triumphant at what had been found.

"I knew it was all the fomorian's fault," he crowed. "This is the evidence we need to take action against them!"

"Against who, exactly?" Killian wanted to know. "You just want to start a civil war even though it may be only like, three people who are involved in this?"

"The whole government is complicit if any members are hatching plots of this magnitude. It's their job to make sure other members are behaving properly."

"That how it works in your government then?"

“I don’t expect you to understand. And of course you would take your people’s side in all this.”

“Just as you would if the situation were reversed.”

“If there were members of my government who were ordering assassinations and destruction of magical property I would of course want them stopped!”

“Sure you would. I may not have been to a museum but I do know enough history to know that statement isn’t true.”

“Are you suggesting I’m a liar?”

“What history?” I broke in, trying to head off an argument here, which was really my job anyway.

“My people settled in Ireland,” he told me. “Then the tuatha came along and decided they wanted it. So they went to war with us and drove us out of the place. But that isn’t the worst part. The worst part is having done so they decided they didn’t want to be there after all and went to live in Otherworld. So all that killing of *my* people was for nothing!”

“To be fair, we stayed over a thousand years...”

“To be *fair*?”

“I guess there is some bad blood between your people, but you shouting at each other isn’t going to solve it,” I told them. “Look, what is the leadership like? Can we trust any part of it if we bring these accusations up somehow.”

“We do have a central leader, we don’t think of them as a king at least we don’t give them that title,” he explained. “It’s mostly a council of elders, but it’s pretty secretive. After all, the tuatha still won’t leave us alone so having our leader’s name out of the public eye makes it harder to strike out at them. I certainly don’t know any of them personally, so I couldn’t just dump this evidence at their feet and ask them what they have to say about it.”

“So not signing a name to all these orders this guy kept isn’t actually all that suspicious?”

“No, not really. And this way even if we accused the entire government everyone would just point fingers at everyone else.”

“Plus how do you accuse a government of crimes?” William asked. “They have all the power anyway, it’s not like they would just say oh you caught me I’ll just put myself in jail.”

“So what do we do?” Gwydion asked.

“We’ve done our job,” Killian decided. “We were ‘hired’ to find out who was making trouble for the tuatha, and we’ve done that. At least there’s enough evidence here the tuatha government can make a formal declaration that can be challenged by my people... Somewhere. Huh, maybe we do need that UN thing after all. Anyway, let’s cart some of this away and you can hand it over. If they want to have us keep looking into it for more specifics, fine, but this in my mind completes my obligation.”

“I suppose.”

“Actually,” I spoke up. “I can probably use my magic to at least get some information about who wrote these notes. They are hand written, are they not?” *I can’t see fomorians using computers. Maybe typewriters?*

“They’re hand written, yes.”

“Done then. I won’t do it here, magic being harder to do, but grab up some boxes, we can head to my place and do that. Then move them to somewhere Gwydion can easily deliver them to his contact.”

“Now that actually sounds like a good idea,” Killian agreed. “You’re pretty strong, right? Make yourself useful and start gathering records in the kitchen.”

“The kitchen?” Gwydion asked.

“Sure, you want to open a portal in a dead man’s house, by my guest. But it’ll be way easier if we put it just outside his door and just pass the boxes through.”

“That seems... reasonable,” he admitted, sounding sour. “Even though I, of course, would have no trouble opening such a portal even here.”

“Uh huh,” he grunted.

So the group moved the records from the last year into the kitchen, and from there through a portal just outside the house over to my house. Once that was done Gwydion got busy opening a series of portals to his home.

“I’ll have to do this the right way,” he mused. “I’ll open a doorway to Otherworld and hope nothing is living there at this spot. Then right beyond that I’ll open a gateway to my tower. Then we can just pass through them both at once.”

“You live in a tow- you know what, I don’t care,” Killian decided. “Whatever you have to do.”

Meanwhile I sat at the table and concentrated on my spell to try and get an idea who it was that wrote this particular letter. We had found one that wasn’t that old, so I didn’t have to reach too far into the past, and I got the spell off.

*But now there’s another problem. I can’t exactly tell the others what he looks like, only what he feels like because the magic is being ‘filtered’ so to speak through my way of sensing the world. I don’t know what he looks like. I know my magic would be able to identify him if I ever got near enough to do so, but there must be a way to pass that information on to the others.*

“When you’re done we’ll need to try something,” I told them as they went back and forth between my spare bedroom and the tower. “I’ll try to give you the information I got from the magic using my mental magic, and see how your brains interpret it.”

They agreed.

So I managed this as well, sending the information into their brains, and they said something had happened.

“I don’t recognize the person writing this,” Killian admitted. “But I’m sure I would if I saw them. It’s enough. Well done, Tyana.”

“Thanks.”

“Would you tell us, even if you did?” Gwydion asked suspiciously.

“Of course I would!”

“Would you?”

“I won’t say it again.”

“Fine, fine, I’m sure you’re telling the truth.” He patted his pocket, and I had to stop myself from smirking. *He doesn’t know we worked on that truth item together. I wonder if it buzzed or not?* “I’ll head to my tower now, write my report and ask for further instructions. Hopefully it won’t be too long before we know we’re never to see each other again or they have more orders for us.”

“Fine, you know how to reach me.”

“If this is goodbye... Well. Goodbye.” He walked through and the portals closed behind him.

“Yeah, nice working with you too,” he grumbled. “Now, where in the heck did I leave my car, and where exactly are we anyway?”

So we got Killian and William back home and slept the day away. Of course not before texting Kelly that things were going well, I was safe, and our mission may soon be over. She said she was glad to hear it, maybe we could go house hunting soon and I wrote back and said that would be great, I hoped so. But not to get her hopes too high up, they may want more specifics.

But what they actually wanted, according to Gwydion when we got together the next night, was something a bit different.

“Run this by me again?” I asked. A small pile of gold coins lay on the table, our “pay” for the work we had done thus far. Gwydion had brought them, and a scroll secured with a blue and white (whatever that was) ribbon he had slipped off. It was the contents of the scroll that were now occupying my mind, not the gold.

“Our orders are to track down a person indicated here as John, who oversees the Casino Niagara and we must make him cease to live.”

“That’s an awful lot of writing, could have saved some ink by just telling us to kill the guy,” William remarked, snatching the parchment out of Gwydion’s hands to presumably read it for himself. I of course had to take their word for it.

“But who would say such a thing so crudely?”

“Whatever.”

“The point is,” I continued, “they really want to us to just kill someone. That’s not what I signed up for.” *Despite my training being done by an actual ninja that sort of thing is frowned upon now. Well, to be fair it was frowned upon at that time too.* “Defending myself in the course of the investigation or killing murderers to make my own kind safer is one thing.” *Which I argued against anyway.* “We can’t just gun this guy down in the street.”

“I agree,” William added. “This puts us on the wrong side of the law. Even planning something like that is a crime.”

“And their reasoning is to send a message to the fomorian leadership?” Killian asked. “Is this guy fomorian?”

“Does that matter?” Gwydion asked. “Remember that those who did this were fomorian and have already killed in this realm.”

“But did he?” I asked.

“That isn’t specified. Do you recognize the name?”

“John Hearthfire? Doesn’t even sound like a fomorian name. So no,” Killian replied.

“I’ve got his picture, and he does run a casino,” William told us, setting his phone on the table. The others looked it over, I of course didn’t bother.

“It’s a start,” Killian mused. “He’ll have security of course. Probably both physical and magical. If he owns a casino he can hire people to do that sort of thing, he wouldn’t need to know anything about it himself. So it would be tricky to get near him.”

“So wait are we even considering this?” I asked. “It sort of sounds like two opposed, two in favor.”

“It would take all of us,” Gwydion admitted. “Even as good as I am, only having a fomorian at my side to do a job of this nature? No offense.”

“The same goes double for me. I don’t know, I’ve done my share of shady missions in the past. This one doesn’t pass the smell test. Why a casino? What could this person have to do with killing tuatha or causing them trouble here? My concern is this is some kind of suicide mission to get rid of us.”

“Don’t think so narrowly,” Gwydion told him. “He could be the son of a fomorian official. There could be any number of reasons to target him. Maybe there’s a money trail that leads to the casino because he’s been supplying fomorian agents with weapons.”

“Then we should go after the father, not the son. Or plan a heist not a murder. These orders came back awfully quickly, it wasn’t considered for very long. If we are going to be tasked with ‘striking back’ at the fomorians I for one want to be very sure we’re pointing at the right target. These are my people we’re talking about after all. If your contact really is an important tuatha official they must have means to arrest this person or send actual hit squads after them. Why a bunch of random people like us?”

“Indeed,” I agreed. “And what if he has a son, who now vows revenge against us? Or he’s put some sort of insurance policy in place where if he’s killed a contract goes out on his killer’s lives? I.e. us. There’s any number of ways to retaliate against us, if we get anywhere near the place it would have to be in pretty good disguises.”

“And not leave any hair or blood behind so we could be tracked with magic,” Killian agreed.

“Exactly.” *And if he’s even somewhat paranoid he could have divination magic users seeing if he’s in danger every day. He could know we’re coming before we even decide to take the mission.* “But go back to what you said. Why suddenly decide to kill us? We gave them what they wanted, it isn’t us knowing too much, or something like that.”

“Maybe there was something in those records even the tuatha didn’t want revealed, and he’s concerned we saw it.”

“But we gave the evidence over to him. It’s no danger to anyone now, he could have set it all on fire at this point.”

“I just think it’s suspicious that’s all.”

“So you’re *not* suggesting we go through with it otherwise?”

“Not without a lot more information on him, the place, and planning how to make sure it’s clear this was ordered by the tuathan government and we’re not just doing this on our own.”

“Our orders do not specify a timeframe,” Gwydion told us. “So we don’t need to rush off to do the deed in the next 24 hours or what have you.”

“Yeah, that’s another thing. Usually with things like this it’s ‘your target will be in such and such a place at such and such a time, take them out there using this means’ where this just says go kill the guy.”

“Just how many-” I started to ask.

“Don’t ask.”

“Okay then.”

“I suggest then,” Gwydion went on, “that we head back to the house and spend more time moving the rest of the records to a secure location. Perhaps there is more to them than we first imagined. Consider what we have given over lost, but keeping some evidence for ourselves would not be amiss. Meanwhile we can use whatever contacts we have at our disposal to try and find more information about this John fellow. If a horrible person that has killed many tuatha babies or whatnot we will come up with a plan to attack and kill him. Otherwise we can perhaps suggest a different target or simply say we tried and failed. Even speak to the man and get him to pretend he fought us off.”

“Yeah all right,” he agreed. “I’ll go rent a storage shed, I don’t want to put you in danger, Tayna, if someone comes looking for them.”

“I appreciate that.”

“While we do keep an eye out for his name on anything, maybe you can use divination to point us to any cabinets after the move?”

“Sure!”

“Fine. You three want to start stacking stuff in the kitchen so we can get it out of there?”

We all nodded.

“Shoot, that won’t work. I can’t open a portal to the place.”

“Argento can go with you,” William offered. “Buy him a hot dog or something on the way.”

“Do you mind?”

He gave a doggy sneeze.

“I guess not. Okay gent, you’re with me. Let’s get this done.”

*And put off talking about murdering someone in cold blood for a few hours...*

## Chapter 8

We do the smart thing and don't get killed

Where: Back at the morgue

When: Several days later

We got back together after several days of moving filing cabinets to the storage unit (yes, there were that many! His house was positively empty by the time we were done and it was a minor miracle we hadn't been discovered but maybe he had no family to claim the house and it would just sit there until the state took it or however that worked) at the morgue to compare notes and talk about our next moves. It was hours past sundown, and everyone said they had some information to report. I told them my magic had told me the name of John Hearthfire would not be found in the room after we finished raiding the house so that was a dead end. Also that my magic had indicated it was a bad idea to attack John in the first place.

*A beast of fire, fury, and woe, into his belly you're sure to go  
if you should decide to attack, I suggest that you turn back.  
He wants to turn over a leaf, so leave your sword where it sits in its sheaf  
and try to find another way before you wade into the fray.  
No mercy will he show to any, if you're in for a pound you're in for the penny  
but make nice and see how it goes, from his coffers you'll find a bit of wealth flows.*

So not all that encouraging. Killian said his contacts (the few he had) hadn't heard of this guy, while Gwydion had a similar tale to tell.

"I wrote my contact for more information and was basically told to stop asking questions and get on with it," he told us. "So I called up our friend Syrzelpex to see if he could find anything out. He told me two things; that John has indeed caused a great deal of suffering over his long life, and that it's a bad idea to attack him. I was hoping for more specifics like he kills kittens for fun or something so we would have a clear reason to take him out, but no such luck. And I'm more concerned now hearing what Tayna found out with her magic."

"It does sound pretty dire," I agreed. "It still doesn't make sense though, why we would be sent against someone that dangerous?"

"Prove a point maybe, if we really could kill someone like that and get away?" Killian decided. "But still show they had nothing to do with it if we failed?"

"Do you have anything to report, William?" asked Gwydion.

"I asked Nick if he knew anything about the guy, but he hasn't heard the name either. He suggested calling James, because of course all native Americans know each other. I told him to stop being so racist."

"Still, he is well connected," mused Killian. "And famous for his ability to broker peace, that's why Zane wanted him in the first place. Perhaps we could enlist his services in this case? I for one would like to scope the place out, see what defenses this John has. If we can get James to go with us, he would be less likely to attack once we told him we were ordered to kill him."

"Would we just come out and say that directly?" Gwydion asked.

"Why else would we need to meet with him? There's no excuse we can give for wanting to see him otherwise, unless you can think of one."

"I suppose it's worth a shot," he agreed. "William, do you mind calling him?"

"Not at all." He got his phone out and put it in the center of the table while it rang.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Sturgess? This is William, Zane's friend that you met when we were there looking for him in the woods?"

"I remember. He can't have been taken again, I just spoke to him not that long ago!"

"No, not that I've heard. I'm actually calling to see if you would be interested in serving as a go-between for us and a man named John Hearthfire. We've learned of a plot to kill him and need to inform him right away."

*Hey, if we could coach it like that, tip him off there's a threat maybe we get rewarded and he can look into it himself? Great idea William!*

"How did you know I knew the man?"

"Wait, you do know him?"

"I don't see him regularly, of course, but I've met him enough times through my work to call him a passing acquaintance at least. But why do you need me? If you've uncovered some kind of plot can't you just tell him directly? I'm sure his email address can't be that hard to find."

"There's a bit of a snag you see. We're the ones who have been tasked with killing him."

*Well if you just tell him it's no good. I take back the praise I had for you a second ago.*

There was a pause. "I see. I'll contribute some money for a nice floral arrangement for your collective funeral."

"We're getting that impression, yes, just who is this guy?"

"I am not at liberty to say much."

"Is he a fomorian?"

"A what?" There was laughter on the other end. "Oh, no, no, certainly not. What a notion."

"So you do know what he is?"

"I do, but it's not really my place to say as he has struggled to keep his true nature a secret. I would not betray that trust."

*Some kind of minor deity? No longer worshiped but still dangerous?*

"Can you tell us anything?"

"I can tell you he has been named Soul Seer, and Keeper of Ways. He is quite dangerous if crossed, but no longer goes out of his way to make trouble in the world of humans. This current persona of his is fairly recent so if you were looking into his past and he seemed to come from nowhere that's why."

*We actually didn't, but good to know.*

"He has always struck me as fair, he would hear you out, possibly even be amused you were ordered to kill him but decided to come talk instead. Incidentally, why have you been ordered to kill him?"

"We're trying to figure that out too," Killian told him. "It doesn't make sense. We're looking into the tuatha situation, don't know how much you know about that. We recently found out the fomorian government seems to be behind it. Our orders said it would send a message to them, but if he's not one, I don't see why they would care."

"Indeed, that doesn't make sense at all."

"We think it's a way to get rid of us, even though we've actually done what they asked. I mean sending us to just kill someone, even someone weaker than us? It doesn't make a lot of sense."

"This would be one way, but risking his ire if it ever got back to him that it was the tuatha sending some kind of death squad after him randomly? Someone isn't thinking this through."

"Or someone is, there's just information we don't have."

He sighed. "True, true. So, knowing now what I've told you, would you still like to speak to him?"

Now there was silence on our end, presumably everyone was sharing a look around the table. "We better," Killian decided. "Maybe we can convince him to go into hiding for a few weeks, make it seem like he was killed so we can figure out the real reason for all this. In either case he should know someone has a grudge against him, or is using him like you said and if we can point him in that direction without getting ourselves killed, so much the better."

“Very well. I’ll make some calls and see if I can get a meeting with him.”

“We appreciate it,” William told him.

“I’ll call you back when I know more.”

“Thanks. Have a good evening.”

“Goodbye.”

“That worked out well,” Gwydion remarked as William pocketed his phone again. “But our orders are even more confusing to me now.” He got up. “Come, Tayna. We shall return to your home and I will work to summon Syrzelpex again. Perhaps he can find out more.”

“Why not just do it here?” Killian asked.

“I assumed William didn’t want us hanging around his place of employment any more than was necessary.”

“You got that right,” he agreed.

So we headed back home and he went to the basement to do the summoning. The demon was called up and the two had a talk.

“You call upon me again, so soon?” asked the demon. “Perhaps I will own your soul even faster than I expected?” He laughed.

“Not today, Syrzelpex. I have another mission for you.”

“Very well, what is it?”

“As you know we’ve been ordered to kill Hearthfire but like you said before that would be a fools errand. Killian may be right that someone just wants us dead and is using him as a tool. My task for you is thus; observe the tuatha Parthalàn and discover if it is his plot to simply kill us, or if something else transpires here we are unaware of. Perhaps these orders were forged, or he has turned traitor to his own people and doesn’t want our evidence to be seen? Find out the truth and bring it back to me.”

“Very well. But know that the tuatha you speak of is head of security. If discovered there are ways to reveal who summoned me for this task. If I even wished to protect you and not give up your name immediately, which I fully admit I do not, and would.”

“We must take this risk. I trust you, demon, you are one of my more competent servants. Go.”

“As you command.” He vanished.

“Now we wait,” Gwydion told me.

*Just how many servants do you have, anyway?*

Hours later, just before sunrise when the summoning would break anyway the demon returned. Gwydion called me down to the basement and we listened to what it had to say.

“I have good news and bad news,” it told us. “The good news is, I did not have to give up your name because I was not discovered. This person seems to be off his game, quite frankly.”

“This person? What person? I told you to spy upon Parthalàn, demon! Did you not understand my orders?”

“I did. This is the bad news. It seems the person you wished me to spy upon is dead. He has been replaced by a fomorian. I will take this information as a partial payment by the way, but you will still owe me.”

“Fine, fine,” he waved a hand, clearly sounding shocked. “Do you know how long?”

“Recently, by all accounts.”

“Recently they say. This was the piece we were missing. The man I knew is dead, and a fomorian has taken his place? It’s unthinkable! How many others in my government have been replaced in this way?”

“I have little time left before sunrise. If you wish me to find this information-”

“No, no, that’s all for now, Syrzelpex. Did you learn the name of the fomorian?”

"I did not. Perhaps with more time..."

"I'll think about it. You may go."

"Very well. I'll put this on your tab, so don't forget you still owe me."

"I know." He vanished.

"So, that's a problem," Gwydion finally said to me.

"I should say so," I agreed. "Not only have we sent the last year's worth of evidence to the enemy, who has now destroyed it if they're smart, we can't trust our orders anymore. Plus we don't know who to trust to tell about the replacement." *They're really serious about this, it seems. And I'm not actually sure who I'm rooting for, given what Killian said about the tuatha warring with them over land they simply left anyway. They do have a point, and should be given some kind of reparations for it, even after so long.*

"So what are we going to do?"

"Talk it over with the others to start, I guess. We can't go our separate ways, the fomorian may try more direct means of taking us out if the Hearthfire plan doesn't work. We'll need to figure out *something* I mean we can't exactly leave a counterfeit security officer in power, if he's even the only one. But at the same time we don't know Otherworld, and would stick out if we walked around there any length of time. So I don't know."

"Perhaps the others will have some ideas. I need a drink."

William texted me that the meeting with John was set up for the next night. Killian would pick us up and drive us there, and James would meet us in the parking lot and introduce us. I figured there would be plenty of time to tell them what we had just learned on the drive over there, so just texted back that would be fine. But I didn't leave it to chance, asking my magic how the meeting was going to go.

*The magpie covets shining things, and all the sparkle that it brings  
so if you shine like gold that night it seems things all turn out all right.  
Respect the man and praise his nest, he'll make you his special guest  
though disappointment you will know when his words deal you a blow.*

Well, I thought to myself. *If just looking nice is going to help the cause and keep him on our good side then that's what I'll do.* The next day I got up before sunset and went shopping, not that I didn't have some nice dresses that could have been suitable of course. I really wanted to "shine" and picked out something special. I spent some time doing my hair, choosing just the right earrings and necklace and getting my makeup right. I wanted to look even more fabulous than usual for this. Naturally I recorded getting showered, dressed, and ready, and promised my OnlyFans family I would be back to take the dress off for them again and tell them about my night later. Comments were positive so I was pretty sure I looked good, and even brushed out Reves (he didn't like bathing any more than a "regular" dog did) and gave him a bit of a trim. We both looked good, and he enjoyed the attention. When it was time we hopped in the car with Gwydion, William already in the front seat.

"Sorry it's not a limo, you look like you deserve one," he told me.

"Never mind that," I said with a laugh. "I've been in plenty in my life. Now, we have some news you're going to want to hear." We told him what we learned from the demon, and he smacked the steering wheel.

"Great, that's just great. How can the tuatha be so careless, letting a government official be replaced? Don't they have measures in place? I mean they know magic exists, right?"

"I admit I've been thinking about that very thing," Gwydion agreed. "I don't know how such a thing would be kept from discovery, especially for more than a week. They must have help, they cannot be acting alone. Rooting out this rouge element may be next to impossible though."

"Sure, we can't just march into their white house or whatever. I mean I'm a fomorian!"

"I admit to certain difficulties. In any event, focus on what we're going to talk to Mr. Hearthfire about so we can survive this evening. Then we can think about the ones after that."

"Yeah, yeah."

We arrived and met James as intended. "You're looking wonderful this evening. May I?" He offered his arm and I took it.

"Aren't you a gentleman," I told him, taking it. "Lead on then."

It was a good thing I had taken his arm, walking into the place knocked my spell off because of all the technology in the place. Of course Reves was at my side and I was holding onto his harness with my other hand so I wouldn't have fallen over or anything, but at least I didn't run into anything while I got it back up. I wasn't used to being "blind" after all. I again threw my willpower into it, knowing it probably wouldn't be as bad as before behind the threshold but not wanting it to get knocked off again. It worked out fine, and we were met by security who took us to the back to an elevator. They flipped open a door after unlocking it and pressed the button. The elevator took us down three floors and we stepped out. I had to pause, I was afraid my spell had been dropped again somehow but no, I could still tell that James was there, and were Killian and Gwydion. So my spell wasn't gone, the place was so big my magic couldn't reach far enough currently to tell me what the others were seeing. Killian whistled.

"Now this is a treasure room," he remarked.

"What do you see?" I asked as we stepped forward. The security people hung back, standing just outside the elevator doors. We got near enough something I could tell it was there, but it was just one of the support pillars for the rest of the building.

"Statues, display cases full of jewelry, there's art on the walls. I think that's an actual chest of pirate gold over there! Gemstones, I think that's a sealed copy of Super Mario Brothers."

"Super what now?"

"Video game from the 80s. You're not getting any of this?"

"Too far away."

"Yeah, this place is huge. There's a desk in front of us, our guy is behind it."

"Got it, thanks. I should be able to tell for myself once we get closer."

And get closer we did. The man behind the desk sprang up and came around it. "I was told it would be a rather strange group of individuals that was coming to see me, but not that one so lovely would be among them. Please, there is a seat here if you would like to sit down. May I take your hand and guide you?"

*Happens when you're beautiful.* "Of course," I told him, dropping James' arm and holding my hand out. He took it, turned it over, kissed it, and gently guided me forward, placing my hand on the chair.

"Here you are madam, please, sit, all of you. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Actually I'm sure you're a busy man," Killian told him. "We just have a few questions and we can get out of your hair."

"Oh it's no bother. James, please introduce me to your friends, don't leave me in suspense."

"John, may I present Tayna, Killian, William, and Gwydion."

"Grandmas- Er..." I sensed him shifting around a little. "Gwydion, yes."

"Splendid. Please, be at ease, don't let my displays of wealth and power intimidate you. They are mere trifles, a diversion. Nothing more."

"Of course, I have... That is to say in my tower... I... Um..." He trailed off.

“They were telling me about it as we walked over,” I told him. “It all sounds so wonderful and elegant! I wish I could see it for myself.”

“Yes, anyway,” Killian broke in. “You are John Hearthfire?”

“Currently.”

“Of course. Did James tell you anything of why we came to see you?”

“Something about someone wanting me dead?”

“Yes, exactly. We recently learned it isn’t actually a tuatha, but a fomorian pretending to be a tuatha who gave us those orders. Do you know of any fomorian that wants you dead?”

“Perhaps you should start at the beginning?”

“The basic premise is that lately someone has been harassing the tuatha that choose to live here. Killing them, destroying their property, the usual.”

“It’s always something,” he agreed. “Go on.”

“The tuatha ‘hired’ us, if you will, to get to the bottom of it. Is it many small groups that happened to all strike at once or one large group, that sort of thing. We’ve found evidence it’s the second, a concentrated effort by one or more fomorian officials. After we sent the evidence to our tuatha contact, a man named Parthalàn we got a strange order.”

“To kill me.”

“Correct. We went from being investigators to being assassins. It didn’t sit right with me. Our divinations pointed to an outright attack of this place being a very bad idea-”

“I should say so!”

“And so we decided to come speak to you directly. It was only after that meeting was set up we discovered the replacement of Parthalàn with a fomorian whose identity we have yet to learn. But the question remains, who wants you dead?”

“I can think of any number of people that might want to plunder my treasures but at the moment no one that might want my demise specifically.”

“So you were simply a cat’s paw?” I asked. “Getting rid of us really was the goal?”

“More than likely my dear. My security forces have been staying away at my insistence, but they would return in force should I be threatened. Apart from that my own powers are considerable, and they are bolstered by the many enchanted objects I have commissioned over the years. You would find me quite formidable.”

“Would you be willing to help us, then?” I asked, sounding hopeful. “We must get to the bottom of this, we could use your help against someone that can replace a high ranking tuathan official and get away with it for so long. And if this fomorian is using you sending a message to anyone else who might be so foolish would not go amiss.”

He made a humming sound. “Your offer is quite tempting. Striking back at someone that would dare to use me like this does have an appeal, of course. And working beside someone such as yourself would no doubt be pleasant. But honestly this is an old ‘disagreement’ become new again between these two peoples. Personally I have no wish to get embroiled in another war. I kill this fomorian, now his government is after me meaning I have to side with the tuatha. Don’t get me wrong, I have no strong feelings for either side, good or bad. But this would force me into a position I would be quite uncomfortable in.”

“I completely understand. Thank you for considering it.”

“I believe our business is concluded then,” Killian announced, rising. “We’ll leave you in peace, and find some other way to strike back or alert the tuatha of the traitor in their midst.”

“You don’t want *anything* from me specifically?”

“If you are set on staying out of it, which I totally have no problem with, best to avoid even the illusion of helping us. That way if he uses divination magic he’ll always get a negative answer if he asks if you helped us. That keeps you out of it.”

“Agreed. Very well, I wish you luck then.”

“Although... As I’m here and you’re a being that’s been around for some time, perhaps I can get your thoughts on something?”

“Go on.”

“There’s a man we know with a dream, he’s a benandanti. He wants to unite all us various species and create some kind of UN for our kind that would handle disputes on our side of things.”

John snorted, and my power told me he had actually blown smoke out his nose. *Is he smoking? I didn’t get the impression he had a cigar or anything. Odd.*

“That was my initial reaction as well, and tells me all I need to know,” Killian went on.

He raised a hand. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful to your friend’s dream. Tell him he’s not the first to try such a thing. It’s a shame, really,” he went on, sounding a bit wistful. “We’ve been around so long and while I don’t think such a thing is a bad idea, in fact I would support such an effort! But in the past such ideas haven’t persisted long, and any formal organization that has come together quickly breaks apart again. But perhaps this time will be different?”

“We just have to want it badly enough,” I suggested. “Everyone we’ve talked to has said it’s a good idea but it would never work because everyone *else* just won’t play ball. But no one, even the fomorian who abducted the guy has said they oppose the idea outright. He just wanted to slow the idea down a little and take the effort over himself. Not stop it from happening. If everyone is willing to come to the table why couldn’t it work out in the long run? Are we really so different, do we want such different things we can never agree on anything? Even laws to keep us safe in a human world full of cameras and suspicion and technology that weakens us? Aren’t we supposed to be older and wiser than they are? You wouldn’t know it to look at us. I mean this current fomorian tuatha business could be avoided if our UN existed, to mediate reparations and such instead of all this cloak and dagger nonsense.”

He sighed but chuckled as he shook his head. “You’re right. Our long perspective should give us wisdom, shouldn’t it? Yet our squabbles remain. Strange, when you think about it. We all fall back into our old, familiar patterns. Does that answer your question?”

“Quite. Thank you for your time, Mr. Hearthfire.”

“It was a pleasure speaking with you. I wish you luck taking care of this situation you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“We’ll need it.”

We all stood and turned to go, but suddenly John went into a flurry of action, tearing his desk drawers open and calling for us to wait. “You’ve come all this way, I would hate for you just leave again,” he told us. “Tayna, you’ve given me some things to think about. Allow me to repay you. Hold out your hands, please.”

Of course I knew what he was carrying, this close my power identified it, but I dropped Reves’ harness and cupped my hands out before me. He poured a handful of plastic chips into them. “Accept these and have some fun tonight, all of you.”

“That is most generous,” I gushed, pretending to explore the chips with my fingers. “We will, thank you!”

“And of course you’re always welcome here. I mean all of you, of course, not just Tayna. And let me know how the UN thing goes.”

“I will, thank you.”

“Good luck. Please don’t die.”

“That’s the plan,” I replied with a smile.

We rode the elevator back up and I held the chips out. “Any takers?”

“I’ll take a couple, but I’m just cashing them in,” William said. “Gambling isn’t for me.” He lifted a couple from the pile.

*Not exactly what he had in mind. He only gave them to us figuring we would just lose them again-* in his casino. *But that's on your head, I guess.*

"Some here, but I'll check out the bar," Killian said, taking some.

"Up to you. Gwydion?"

"I actually know nothing of what these games entail," he admitted. "Perhaps... You could show me?"

"It would be my pleasure to be your date tonight," I told him. "Let's go try our luck, shall we? Don't wait up you two, we can both teleport so go ahead and drive back. We'll make our own way."

"I suppose you're safe enough here," Killian agreed. "Have fun."

And for a wonder, we did! I wasn't sure if John had somehow fixed it or I was just running a lucky streak but every game I tried resulted in an overall win, not a loss. I had been planning to spend some time here anyway, with my own money, just as a subtle nod to thank him for his time, but it turned out his chips grew rather than shrank. I walked around the place telling Gwydion about each game and showed him how to play. He was impressed with my knowledge of them, but I hadn't always been in film. There had been a time when I was an escort, and that meant hanging out with people in places like this, to be seen with them and cheer them on. So I had picked up enough to get by even in modern times.

"What about those card games going on?" he asked though, as the night wore on. "You've stayed away from them."

"That's right. We won't go near those tables!"

"Oh?"

"I'll tell you later, not here."

"Okay..."

*While things like craps and slots and roulette are basically chance, games like blackjack and poker do have some element of skill. Especially if you have a magical spell going that allows you to know what things are so you're not bumping into anything. It doesn't distinguish between a face up card and a face down card, so playing poker for example I know every card in everyone's hand. If this place has magic going near the table to detect that kind of magic or even if I won a little too much for someone's liking, even meeting the owner tonight wouldn't save me. Let's not even chance it, shall we?*

After a few hours I had doubled the money the others had left me, and we headed out. It seemed seeing all that wealth on display had really shaken Gwydion, he hadn't acted pompous or entitled the whole night. He was quite genuine, and I had to admit we had managed a fun evening. I silently thanked John for the opportunity, not sure if we had "donated" to our cause or simply did want me to have some fun and I happened to luck out, but either way I wasn't complaining. But it would be back to reality the next day, as we had a fomorian agent posing as a tuatha to take care of, and that was going to be tricky no matter how you approached it.

## Chapter 9

We try to strike first

Where: The morgue

When: The next night

“We have to stop meeting like this,” William told us that night as we headed down the stairs.

“Nice to see you too, William,” Killian grunted.

“I’m serious, go rent some office space or something you guys can’t keep hanging around here. I work here you know! There’s such a thing as keeping a low profile, I don’t want people getting suspicious when they see you all hanging around here all the time.”

“Oh.”

“Do not despair,” Gwydion told him. “We know the face of our foe now, it simply falls to us to capture him, find what he knows about the plot, and then perhaps our task will be complete.”

“Let’s hope so.”

“To that end, are we doing anything about it?” Killian asked. “He basically has the high ground and the only evidence we have this switch has taken place at all is the word of a demon. We can’t exactly march into the place and simply announce he’s an impostor. As far as I’m concerned I’ve done what was asked of me and I’m done here. Let the tuatha take care of this internal matter themselves.”

“Oh I see!” Gwydion announced. “What a surprise, that we learn of a fomorian taking over a position of power in tuatha government and *suddenly* our friendly fomorian here feels his job is done. Strange, how that happened, isn’t it? And if it hadn’t been a fomorian? What then? Would you be so blasé about it?”

“The race doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does. We were tasked with finding out who was behind the attacks and we are far from fulfilling that goal I remind you. We have some signatures and some records yes, but no proof which individuals in your government ordered all this. Was it all of them? A handful? One in particular? You aren’t done until those directly responsible pay for their crimes against my people.”

“And what about the crimes your people have inflicted upon us over the years? Your hands aren’t exactly clean Mr. Gaspasser.”

“Let’s not get into that,” I interjected, stepping between them. “Killian, whatever your feelings on the matter we know this guy is onto us, and has already tried to kill us once. Very indirectly, yes, but once he knows we’re still running around he’ll be more direct. Do you want that hanging over your head?”

“He probably believes he’s safe, being a fomorian himself,” Gwydion reasoned.

“That fact would probably protect me, it’s true,” he admitted. “If I dropped it right now they would see me as a loyal fomorian that got you all to back off. I’d probably get a medal or something for my service. Yeah, I could live with that.”

“The rest of us are not so ‘lucky.’ Would you have Tayna here murdered in cold blood because you got bored of your assignment or it got a little tricky?”

I put on my most innocent waif face, looking as scared and alone as I could with my giant dog sitting there next to me. My bottom lip started to quiver. *Oh yeah, I’m selling it.*

“...”

“I’m waiting for an-”

“Of course not. Fine, what do you suggest then?”

“We must come up with a plan to get him away from his place of power and protection and into our hands. I’m sure he doesn’t live at the office but I have no idea where his home might be. Word is Parthalàn transferred to the Rochester office from Ireland so if the impostor has taken over-”

“Hold on.”

“What now?”

“Rochester office? He’s that close? And why does the head of tuatha security have an office here of all places?”

“I think you have misunderstood something. He’s not *that* high up on the ladder. He’s a director of a local office, yes, but he answers to others further up the chain.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” His voice was muffled like he was holding his head in his hands. “This isn’t even a top guy. Wonderful. I was sure we were close to finishing this. Glad to know this now I guess, I thought he was half a world away in some super secure location. Rochester office, I don’t believe this.”

“I’m sorry if you misunderstood but you should have asked for more clarification if there was some doubt.”

*I didn’t really understand that either, maybe I should have asked. Well, it’s only just come up anyway we weren’t getting orders from there directly. Only Gwydion needed to know the location of it.*

“You should have been more clear from the beginning!”

“Again, not really the time to go into it,” I told them. “Anyway this makes it easier for us, right? It’s not tuatha pentagon it’s just tuatha FBI office.”

“I guess,” Killian agreed reluctantly. “Go on, you were saying.”

“What was I saying? Oh right, I don’t know where he might live. His own place, Parthalàn’s place, a safe house unrelated to either while this deception goes on. We have no way to know.”

*I mean I suppose I could ask magic, we might be able to interpret the answer as there’s only a few possibilities of where the guy lives currently.*

“Or how he goes to and from there,” Killian mused. “Teleportation magic? Driving? Walking?”

“I doubt the man walks anywhere. He wouldn’t drive, don’t be absurd.”

“You don’t know. I know how to drive, just because you don’t doesn’t mean anything.”

“I do, actually, but never mind that. Not the driving you’re right about- We know where the office is, let’s start there.”

“Actually,” I spoke up, having a thought. “I thought it might be in Otherworld but if it’s just here in Rochester it must have an address. Let’s at least see what the building looks like in google maps, maybe there’s some big open window we can use. I mean you don’t know,” I finished with a grin.

“Ah, no, you’ve misunderstood again,” he told me. “It’s in Otherworld for sure. Simply the part of it that corresponds to the Rochester area. That’s why I said it was ridiculous thinking he drove anywhere.”

*That’s extremely coincidental. Why in the world did they come here?* “I see. But you’ve gotten orders from there, right? Do they have phones there or what?”

“We typically use courier spirits, but more to the point I know exactly where it is. I’ve been there,” Gwydion told us. “I don’t think watching the place, no matter how quietly we do so-”

I waved him off. “No, no, that’s even better. Just send him a sheet of paper in that case. One with a very weak spell on it, that will teleport him outside the building when he touches it.”

“Into our waiting arms,” Killian breathed, sounding excited. “I like it.”

“That could work,” Gwydion agreed. “The trick will be getting the spell weak enough he doesn’t sense it right away and opens the missive, but strong enough to get him out of the building and into a location of our choosing.”

“So you could do it?”

“I do have the skills, yes. But this is rather indirect, isn’t it? As I’ve said I’ve seen the location, even been in the office. I could simply open my own portal into that space and we could grab him through it.”

“But how would we know he was there in his own office and not a meeting or something?”

“Naturally an impostor would keep to himself as much as possible to not give himself away. I’m certain we will find him in his office. And if not, we will simply close it and wait a bit. I doubt

anyone else would be allowed in the office at this point, to see a portal opening and closing during the day.”

*Wouldn't he have to keep up the same routine so as to not draw suspicion?* “Killian? William? Any thoughts?”

“I like the direct plan, let's do that,” Killian agreed.

“Sounds fine to me,” William put in. “Sounds like it's the fastest way to get you out of my hair and let me go back to my actual job. You recall I just signed up to find Zane, you've all sort of been using this as your base of operations and I've tagged along but it really has nothing to do with me.”

*We have been presuming a little bit, haven't we?* “Okay, it sounds too dangerous to me but you're the one that's been there,” I told him. “I've been out voted. When should we do it?”

“Let us get together at 9:30 tomorrow morning. I know, after sunrise but we will head to Otherworld from there where we will not be as weakened. We can attempt the abduction then, they keep normal business hours there so he should be in.”

“I'll see you all tomorrow then.”

We got together the next day, I was wearing my full outfit including the “daredevil” hood, but I felt the others were just in regular clothes.

“He's going to put up a fight,” I protested. “Your faces aren't even covered. If this goes wrong, I mean I suppose he knows who we are but aren't you going to wear some type of protective clothing?”

“It'll be fine,” Killian told me. “Don't worry so much.”

“Okay?”

*Seems silly to me to take risks we don't have to, but it's your head not mine.*

The portal between realms was opened and we headed through, and then Gwydion teleported us out into what seemed to be a forested area.

“This is near the place,” he explained. “But also nowhere associated with any of us directly. See, I know how to take some precautions, Tayna.”

*Not nearly enough though.* “Whatever you think is best.”

“Everyone ready?”

I put my energy draining spell on myself and Reves hid us behind an obscuring spell in case we needed to strike from hiding. The others said they were and he opened the portal.

Of course he wasn't in there, as Gwydion announced after sticking his head through.

*You have got to be kidding me.* “What's that noise?” Killian asked.

“Some kind of alarm?” William decided.

“They can do that?”

“Don't look at me, I'm just a vampire!”

*That's a good point, how do you make an alarm for teleportation magic being used somewhere? It's an audible alarm, I can see a place having objects that keep teleportation from working nearby, and placing them around a building but what magic makes noise like this? And can be hooked to another spell that tells teleportation magic is nearby.*

“Close it, close it!” he yelled, and Gwydion did.

*See, this is why you have the spell go off when he's touching something. It makes sure he's there. I really shouldn't say I told you so. I'm not going to say it. Don't say it. Don't.* “I did try-”

“We should get out of here maybe?” William asked.

*Right I'm still hidden, they can't hear me.*

“No, we'll need to see if there's any pursuit. Gwydion, be ready to step us back over to Rochester.”

“Right.”

“If something appears in the air I’ll spellbreak it, that should give them pause. We’ll head out after that, and plan our next move.”

“I’m ready.”

We waited, and it was only a moment later when a portal opened near us. He used spellbreaking to close it, and Gwydion spelled us back to the real world. *How were they so accurate with the portal? I thought as I climbed through the gateway. They knew right where to find us. That’s impossible. Crap, Gwydion has been to the office, he just admitted it. Could his hair or something of his have been taken and he was made to forget it? That would allow him to be easily tracked, right? Could have easily broken into his ‘tower’ as he calls it too, gotten some hair that way. I guess we’ll get more evidence of that if they can find us again in the real world.*

We headed to a restaurant that was nearby, it was an odd time but we could get a coffee or something. Reves kept us hidden, which I thought was smart given I was now the odd one out. Wandering around in my ninja clothes in broad daylight wasn’t the best way to keep a low profile. *But there’s nothing I can do about it now.* I took a seat near them and we waited to see what would happen next.

We only waited about twenty minutes before Killian whispered “They tracked us. Dang, how did they do that? Maybe if we don’t pay too much attention to them they’ll-”

“Over here!” Gwydion called to them, waving.

“What are you *doing*?” Killian hissed.

“We’ve gotten their attention, and they won’t do anything here with humans around. Let’s explain ourselves and see what they have to say.”

*How did they know? Are they dressed wrong or something?*

“You really have no idea what the words ‘covert ops’ mean do you?”

“Nope! This way is better, believe me. I have a plan.”

*You don’t have to sound so pleased about it. So it seems they do have some piece of Gwydion, there’s no way they could have found us so quickly otherwise. Huh, unless they have an item like Herman made, that sword of his. Something that points the way to something they ask about. Wonder how he’s doing nowadays anyway.*

“Greetings gentleman,” Gwydion was saying. “Have a seat.”

“I think you’re coming with us,” said one of them.

“Are you going to make a scene here?” he asked sweetly. “Hear me out before you do anything rash. We’re not going anywhere, after all.”

“You want to *talk*?”

“That’s right. We went to an awful lot of trouble to lure- I mean- insure someone would come to investigate our little faux break in. We need your help and didn’t know any other way to get our story heard.”

*First I’m hearing of it. Wait, are you going to claim this was the plan all along? That could work, actually. Huh, well done, in that case calling them over does make it look like we have less to hide.*

“You can tell it to the judge.”

“It will be too late by then. Look, your boss isn’t who you think. Hear us out, what do you have to lose?”

“A lot,” said one man. “I could personally lose a lot.”

“Oh, shut up Elmorth, you brought it on yourself. Fine, but this better be good.” He and the others sat down.

“Thank you. Now, we were actually contacted by Parthalàn originally to look into who had been making trouble for tuatha in this world...” He went on, explaining the whole thing, even handing over the letter “he” sent to get us killed.

*Good thing he was carrying that around I guess. Insurance of a sort?*

“This is all very irregular,” said the man after a moment. “So you’re saying you triggered that alarm to get some of us away from the building so we could be told this and then confront our boss who you say is now replaced with a fomorian agent?”

“What other reason could we possibly have for doing it?” he asked with a bit of forced laughter.

*Yes, what other reason indeed?*

“But you can’t prove it? I mean that’s a fomorian sitting right there!”

“You are questioning the loyalty of Grandmaster Gwydion? I am insulted by your insinuation and demand an apology.”

“Oh, no, of course not,” was the extremely sarcastic reply. “I would never call your loyalty into question.”

“Who?” one person whispered.

“Got me,” was the reply.

“Believe me, I’d rather not be here,” Killian told him. “But this was the job, so I have to see it through. Personal reasons.”

“As far as I know he’s done everything he can,” Gwydion agreed. “And I believe I can prove it to you.” He got out the coin he had made from his pocket and slapped it down on the table. “Go ahead, hold it.”

The men shifted. “If this is some kind of trick…”

“You saw me take it out of my pocket just now, would I carry around something dangerous? It’s a truth telling device that I will loan you.”

*That could actually be the most dangerous thing that can be carried. I mean, think about it.*

“Truth telling device, huh?” He picked it up.

“I love elves,” Killian announced.

“Huh. Something happened. You, tell me something embarrassing about yourself.”

“Me? I’ve never done anything I would be embarrassed about!”

“Uh huh. Say, did you take my pudding that one time or not?”

“I didn’t!”

“I see.”

“Do you see now?” Gwydion asked.

“I think so. You want me to confront my boss and just straight up ask him if he’s been replaced with a fomorian?”

“Er, no, I wouldn’t ask it that way at all,” Gwydion told him. “Of course the fomorian hasn’t been replaced with a fomorian. You have to ask ‘are you currently a fomorian’ or something like that.”

“Yes, yes, I’m not stupid. Then if it indicates he’s lying spellbreak him and apprehend him.”

“You’ll be a hero in the organization!”

“I suppose I will be, at that. Fine, you and you will come with me. We’ll head back and- say…” He must have been looking the group over. “Are you a tuatha? I want a yes/no answer from each of you.”

*Hey, he’s not stupid, at that.*

They all said yes and he seemed satisfied. “Fine. You two come with me, you others stay here and watch them. Hopefully we’ll be back soon, this shouldn’t take too long to figure out.”

“Right boss,” they replied. He got up and without another word walked out of the place.

“Now we wait,” Killian announced. “Yay.”

We waited an hour, the three getting more and more antsy with each passing moment. They headed to the other side of the place and I followed, figuring if they hadn’t figured out I was there by now they weren’t going to.

“So what do we do?” said one.

“They haven’t made trouble, and Zabunean never came back. They could be telling the truth and now only we know about the plot.”

“But three on one? He couldn’t have killed them, they must have known to not let their guard down.”

“What else could have happened? They would have sent word by now one way or the other.”

“We can’t just leave these guys! They tried to break in.”

“To get our attention, according to them. We found them easily enough this time, we could do it again.”

“How did Zabunean do that, anyway?”

“Wait, you don’t suppose he was in on it, do you? He got replaced like these guys are claiming?”

“Impossible!”

“But is it? Two on two is not great odds.”

“That’s a good point. But if only two of us go it might be two on two again. We all have to go.”

“We have to get help when we get back.”

“But who do we trust?”

“I don’t know!”

“This is messed up.”

“I agree but we have to do something.”

“Let’s just go. We’ll go in the back, quietly make some inquiries, and go from there.”

“Yeah, all right. There’s no way any of us were replaced so we can trust each other, right?”

“Wait, can we? If Zabunean was compromised the coin could have said any one of us was lying and he would have just nodded and said it didn’t. He wouldn’t out *his own agents*. I can’t trust either of you!”

“Then that goes double for me!” both other ones said. They must have been glaring at each other.

*Oh boy. Shapechanging magic does complicate things, doesn’t it? They could just spellbreak each other though.*

“Let’s just get out of here. The human world gives me the creeps anyway. We’ll just have to watch each other.”

“Yeah, easier said than done.”

They came back to the table. “We’re heading back to see what happened. Don’t leave town or anything!”

“Right, sure,” Killian told them. “You got it.”

“I mean it.”

“I’m suitably cowed, believe me.”

“Come on,” said another. They left.

We waited again.

And again no one returned.

## Chapter 10

A sudden but inevitable betrayal

Where: Back in Otherworld

When: Just after lunch

When neither of the three agents returned we had some lunch and headed back to Otherworld to put our next plan into action. The goal was to track the coin as I had helped make it, giving me enough of a connection to it to maybe see where our fomorian agent was. Then do the same trick, as he wouldn't be expecting that so soon after trying it the first time. I had agreed and we were all in position. Gwydion and I were sitting on a log, as I had canceled out my spell of vision for the moment so it wasn't interfering in this.

"I'm going to use mind magic first this time," I decided, "rather than the other way around. This way you should see what my magic sees and can more easily put the teleportal in the right place."

"And if needed, wait until the best possible chance, agreed," he agreed. I took his hand and cast the first spell, linking us together, and then the second, to try and discover the coin. We both felt the magic bounce off something and it shattered away from me. I knew what it felt like now, and the feeling didn't get any more pleasant the second time around.

"He's protected," he spat as I got my barrings again. I put my vision spell back on, the world coming back to me as I once again knew where things were. "Can you try again?"

"I could try without the magical drag of the mind spell, but I feel I did pretty well on the divination spell anyway. His anti-scrying could be supported by a dozen inscribed objects at this point. He's taking precautions, he's onto us."

"I doubt he's alone," Killian agreed. "Either he's taken the place over or tricked them into activating their defenses on his behalf."

"Going to be hard to explain why six people are no longer showing up, he must have killed them," William said.

"Long term, sure," Killian agreed. "We have to survive the next few days. Do we have any other options?"

"There is one," Gwydion decided. "Our friend the demon. He got in before, and don't tell him I said this but he's expendable. If something happened the worst that would happen to him is a slight inconvenience before he's summoned again. He could probably get in again."

"We're probably not getting near the place, go for it," Killian told him.

*Wait, what is this all costing you? I've studied summoning magic a little myself but even summoning something minor from Otherworld I would only consider it as a last resort. He seems to call up this demon quite a lot. Is he going to be okay?*

"Very well. Stand back!" He summoned the demon and it appeared. "Greetings, Syrzelplex."

"Well, well, my services have certainly been in demand lately, haven't they? What paltry piece of information do you wish me to uncover this time?"

"Actually, I have lost something and need it recovered. A trinket at best, but I did put some work into it."

"Did you indeed? Dropped it down a sewer grate then?"

"Not exactly. I believe it to be in the hands of the impostor you spied upon before."

"How foolish of you!"

"I gave it to someone expecting to get it back. But it seems they were captured or killed and have not returned. We would like you to retrieve the item and tell us what's going on in the area around the item."

"Describe it to me."

We did, and he vanished.

"Are we waiting around for him to come back?" William asked.

“No,” Gwydion decided. “We can make our attack from anywhere I suppose. Let’s not stand around in this forest any longer than we have to.”

“Can you send me back through in that case? I’d like to get some sleep as some people have to work for a living!”

“Of course, of course.”

With William taken care of Gwydion took us to his tower, and we settled in to wait. Reves sniffed around, and I poked around with interest. There were many books lying around, and he had a lab of some kind, but I felt the place could still use a woman’s touch. We hung out for maybe two hours before we heard a bell ringing.

“It’s what we tuatha call a door-bell,” Gwydion explained. “Basically a rope that leads to a series of bells so I can hear someone at the door no matter what floor I’m on.”

“I know what a doorbell is,” Killian grumbled. We headed downstairs and got into position, Killian in front and us behind him, ready to fight in case something charged through. *Of course the threshold is still a thing even here, they would lose any magic and have a harder time so would they risk attacking him here?* But it was just Syrzelpex, back from his mission.

“Well?” Gwydion asked.

“Sadly, I have been unable to recover the coin. You were right, however, the impostor does have it in his possession.”

*So were we betrayed, or were those six tuatha really killed? Again, this whole situation would have been avoided if we had gone with my plan.*

“And the impostor is where?” he pressed.

“Still in his office. Taking steps to increase security for the building and shouting at people to track you all down.”

“Great, and now he’s paranoid,” Killian decided. “We’ll never get near him.”

“That is probably the case,” the demon agreed. “Now, was there something else?”

“Not right now,” Gwydion told him. “You have failed me, demon, see that you do not fail me when next I call upon you!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m still changing you for the information.”

“Hardly worth it.”

“So go yourself next time.”

“Fine. Now begone!”

“So what’s our next move?” Killian asked. “Clearly we have to take care of this. I don’t want him attacking you Tayna.”

*Or Kelly, if she gets in the middle of this. She can’t defend herself without the Bane attaching itself to her and then we would have to go through the whole sealing again.* “Agreed.”

“Direct attack is out,” Gwydion decided.

“Obviously. However, as we did recently learn this is just another office, and he’s not the head guy of all places, we could go to another location,” he suggested. “I could act as a fomorian defector, and we still have plenty of older evidence to turn over. I could say I managed to smuggle some older records out they weren’t watching closely enough and heard of a plot to replace someone.”

*I suppose all the people at the top can’t be replaced. Can they?*

“They might still grill you for hours, and you would need a good story of misdeeds they could corroborate. Perhaps trying the truth again would be the best move?”

“I guess it did work with those agents we just met. They believed us.”

“Or were outnumbered by loyal people and broke up the group to kill them more easily now that they heard the truth,” I countered.

“Or that,” he admitted. “You’re right though, it would take hours to convince them I was telling the truth.”

The chiming of the bell rang out through the tower again, making us all jump.

“What the?” Gwydion sounded surprised. “I’m not expecting anyone.”

“Maybe he’s decided to surrender after all. Couldn’t take the pressure of not knowing what we might do to him next.”

“I doubt that?” I reasoned.

“Let’s go see.”

We took up the same positions and Killian flung the door open again. There was a small demon standing there holding what my magic told me was a small box. It was wrapped in a brown paper but that’s all my magic could tell me. Nothing about what was under that layer.

“Delivery,” he squeaked. “For one Gwydion.”

“That’s me,” he said, pushing past Killian. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” The figure vanished.

“Courier spirit?” Killian asked.

“Obviously. Now what in the world could this be? I don’t think I’ve ordered anything recently.”

“Does Amazon deliver here anyway? Don’t open it, stupid!” Killian barked. “It’s probably from our impostor buddy.”

“I was just looking at the wrapping, I wasn’t going to open it. I’m not stupid!”

*Wait, is he using our trick on us now? The thing I was going to do to him, he’s now doing to us? No fair. No fair at all. You can’t have my trick, that’s copyright infringement or something.*

“Let’s take it outside, don’t use any spells on it we don’t know what might set it off.”

“What if carrying it somewhere sets it off?”

“Then the spirit wouldn’t have been able to carry it here.”

“Ah, yes. Outside, right. Of course.” We headed outside, and I wasted no time in asking the universe what this box was.

*A fancy trap, under the wrap, the unwary sap, it’s in your lap.*

*The box goes boom, it goes off soon, your death will bloom, you loon.*

“Well, it’s nothing good,” I announced. “I think it’s going to explode.”

“I think there’s some kind of magic,” Gwydion told us, holding the box as far away from themselves as they could. “But it’s muted. I think the paper wrapped around it is made to make it harder to sense. Luckily I am a master so…”

“So set it down over there and teleport away from it,” Killian decided. “In case taking your hand away from it triggers the spell.”

“I doubt it, the spirit took their hands off it.”

“When you touched it. What’s the first thing you would do to a package like this?”

“Er, set it down and get something to cut the paper, yes I see where you’re going with this.” He took a few steps away from the tower, kept one hand on it, and gestured with the other. He appeared behind us, and nothing happened. “I guess we’re safe.”

“But we still have to deal with this. Let me go get a candle.” He went back into the tower and reappeared with a candle. “I’ll burn the outer paper off.”

“Pity, I would have liked it for study,” Gwydion told us sadly. “But I suppose it must be done.”

“Wait, let me put a protection spell on you, against fire, just in case,” I told him.

“I won’t say no to that.”

I did so, and he approached the box. Carefully lighting a corner of it he backed off again, and the paper burned away leaving a wooden box I could now sense. We got near it carefully, the fire not catching the box ablaze so it was still potentially deadly. Sensing it out we came to the conclusion it was going to trigger when it was opened, and probably erupt in fire. Knowing that we all used spellbreaking on the box, carefully severing the magic from the symbols carved into it, and finally it was just a plain wooden box. Gwydion pronounced it safe and opened it, finding it empty.

“We should return it with a gift of our own,” he decided. “But what spell would be appropriate?”

“He’s not going to fall for his own trick,” Killian scoffed. “I mean come on.”

“True. And without the paper it would be obvious. Not that it helped much in my case, of course.”

“And we’re supposed to be capturing him,” I reminded them both. “We need information about who is really behind all this!”

“No, it’s war now,” Gwydion protested. “He tried to kill us multiple times. We need to take him out, get ourselves safe, and just go from there.”

“I agree,” Killian decided. “We’re not getting close to him now, as we botched the element of surprise. Once he’s dead there the tuatha will look into it I’m sure, and discover he got switched. But he’s not letting anything magical near him, that would be incredibly foolish. Maybe we should just go there, make our case and hope someone believes us or we get a chance to spell break the guy.”

“If you really want him dead, what if it was just a physical explosive wired up to go off when the box was opened?” I asked. “If he’s expecting magic and there is none, maybe he’ll just think we’re sending it back to taunt him. Would he expect something like that?” *And more to the point could we actually make something like that? Maybe Herman could wire something up...*

“You’ve been on a roll lately,” Gwydion praised. “I know just the thing, come with me.” He took the box and headed inside, making both of us shrug and follow him. He got out a small jar with a lid that would fit into the box, and he filled it with water. “My study of alchemy shall come in handy now,” he explained. “I will transmute this liquid permanently into another, one that explodes if too much shock is delivered to it. There should be no magical signature. Killian, why don’t you look around for anything we can pack into the box around this jar? Nails, perhaps we can break some glass, whatever you find. Rocks could even be used I expect.”

“You want to make a bomb?”

“Exactly. He shakes it or throws it down thinking he failed and blows himself up.”

“I’ll look around.”

*Would he have someone innocent open it, or have others around when it was opened? I mean this comes right back and he’s going to suspect something right?*

Moments later we carefully placed the glass jar into the box, filled it up with the odds and ends Killian found, and closed it up. Gwydion fit the wooden top onto it and summoned that courier spirit again.

“Didn’t I just leave here?”

“Yes. Take this rather fragile item to the place you came from. Deliver it only to the tuatha Parthalàn at the office you just left.”

“Yeah all right. Hand it over.”

He gingerly handed it over and the demon vanished.

We didn’t have long to wait before there was another knock at the door, and the same demon spirit stood there with a rolled up parchment. “I’m to wait for your reply,” it said, handing it over.

“Let’s see what we have here,” Gwydion remarked as he checked it over. “No magic, it should be safe.” He hummed a bit as he read it over and let it roll up again. “He survived, of course. It seems they check for non-magical explosives as well before they let something into the building. Pity. He

wants to call a truce though, and meet us in one of several eating establishments he has listed, at our discretion, no more than ten minutes from now.”

“Probably to make sure we can’t set up any kind of ambush,” Killian decided. “Are we going?”

“I would be interested to see what he had to say. He says he won’t come with any more than we bring, and I’m not going to count you, Reves, so I’ll tell him to meet us at the Golden Leaf and to bring no more than two others. I have been there and can get us there without any issues.”

“Yeah, I guess he can’t set up an ambush in that time either. Fine.”

Gwydion wrote up this reply and handed it to the demon. “Thanks for almost getting me killed, by the way,” it remarked. “Getting blown up still hurts you know!”

“Does it?” he asked innocently. “I shall keep this in mind in the future for sure!”

“See that you do.” It vanished.

“Let’s go,” Gwydion told us. “I don’t want him getting there early and setting something up.”

“How do we know he hasn’t set something up at *all* those locations, and it doesn’t matter which one we picked?”

“Really, Killian, he couldn’t have foreseen this and gone that far. Be reasonable.”

“I hope you’re right.”

We appeared in the “teleportation area” of the place, a roped off area in the back kept clear so people could have a place to teleport to and from without fear of intersecting something, and quickly moved into the restaurant proper. I was pretty sure people were staring at us, it was mostly tuatha here and formorians were sure to be a rare sight. Trolls too but at least my race had been around just as long as theirs, and was respected to a certain degree as equal in magical stature if not culture. I was still dressed in my tight leather “ninja suit” which I wasn’t sure would work for me or against me around here, but clearly I was an out-of-towner and most here wouldn’t be up on Earth fashion anyway. *Besides, at least it shows me off well.* I had my hair down and the hood off, may as well show them who I really was, right? We were seated and told our server another three were expected so they brought us water and left us alone for the moment. The place wasn’t packed, but no one seemed to be taking that much interest in us (according to Killian) so we were probably fine in that regard.

“Are these seats taken?” a voice asked several minutes later. My magic told me there were three people there, one which it picked out as having been in my presence before.

“Zabuneean, I assume?” Killian asked. “Much is explained.”

“Thanks for the coin, it’ll come in handy in my work,” he replied, sitting down.

“I want that coin back!” Gwydion told him.

“What coin?”

“Now, now, let’s not bicker,” said another voice. “Ah, how nice to see you all in person.”

“Parthalàn, or whatever your real name is,” Gwydion greeted him.

“That name will be fine for now. Wasn’t there another of your group?”

“They have a real job,” Killian told him. “They aren’t here.”

“I suppose someone has to keep the lights on, so to speak. Ah, will you have wine? I’ll be buying of course.”

*Ah, the server returned.*

“Fancy wines will be lost on me.”

“No doubt.” He rattled off some brand or other and the server went away again. “Now, to business. What are we going to do about our little stand off here?”

“You could always surrender,” I told him.

“As could you!” was his reply. “If you allow me to take you into custody it would reflect well on you, and we would go easy on you at your sentencing.”

“I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Actually, sending a- what you did- to a government building is a fairly serious crime, even here.”

“Hey, I tried to stop them. They tied me up. Brought me down to the old saw mill and said with an evil eye, if I didn’t give them the help they wanted they would saw me right in half!”

“I highly suspect that isn’t true.”

“What do you want?” Killian growled.

“To be left alone, perhaps? For the evidence to be burned? Come now, you and I share a certain outlook I’m sure, as a fomorian. You could even join me.”

“Even if I wanted to, I can’t. I’m cursed to follow the commands of tuatha.”

“Are you now? I’m sure we could take care of that somehow.”

There was a pause. “Really?”

“Truly. I do command certain forces as a tuatha intelligence agent after all, and I have friends in high places among our people as well. Even such a tricky bit of magic as a curse can be dealt with.”

“That’s... I never thought...”

“Of course not. The tuatha probably told you it was incurable, what incentive would they have to tell you otherwise? But if you joined me and your friends here gave me certain assurances, they would be left alone from now on.”

“You’re not buying this, are you?” Gwydion asked.

“It’s an interesting offer,” he countered. “If I can really be ‘cured’ as it were, why not do it?”

“You would betray- but what am I saying? You’re fomorian, you were probably secretly pleased with what your race was doing to ours. Cheering them on, and all that?”

“Your race has been a bit unpleasant to ours over the years. Even you can’t deny that.”

“Tayna, help me out here!”

*How can I? He’s right. These two races have been at it since before humans even came around.*

“We can’t keep him against his will,” I told him. “And he did say he considered our job to look into the people that did this finished. It would be a dick move, but I wouldn’t just attack him if he decided to walk out of here. If he worked against us, if we met again on the battlefield, well, I wouldn’t be forgiving at that point. I would rather he leave than always be suspicious of him that he was going to change his mind and stab me in the back.”

“So it’s decided then!” Parthalàn asked brightly.

“Nothing is decided,” Gwydion angrily spat. “Were we not under a banner of truce for the moment I would burn you down where you stand. For your crimes personally against members of my race and for your involvement in this current plot. Killian, you leave here with this... person... and we will be enemies forevermore.”

“Forgive me if I’m not quaking in my boots. Your people did nothing but chain me up. Now my people are going to set me free.”

“Splendid! Shall we drink to our new friendship?”

“I will not sit here and drink with an enemy! Come along, Tayna!” He got up.

“Hold on,” I told everyone. “Your deal with Killian is separate from your deal with us. He’s on our hit list now too, so he’s the same as you. We want something from you if you really want us to stop harassing you at the office.”

“Yes, the building could suffer a tragic fire,” mused Gwydion, sitting back down again.

“So what do you propose?”

“We want two things. The coin back,” I offered, “and the name of someone higher up in your little scheme. We were hired to finger the people at the top, and that’s what we still plan to do!”

“Speaking of that, don’t I know you?” asked the third tuatha that was sitting there. “Have you done any films?”

I tried hard not to color, I hated being caught out like this but by a tuatha of all people? Just how widely distributed was my stuff? “I’ve done many films, actually. Can we stay on topic here?”

“I thought so. Venus, isn’t it?”

“Venus?” everyone else chorused.

“Never mind!”

“So I get your friend, and you start going after the guy above me,” Parthalàn went on, “leaving me alone. And I give you your coin back. Do I have that right?”

*I doubt we could ask for better concessions than that. “That’s right.” We don’t want the low hanging fruit anyway, our task is to get the names of the people that have orchestrated this latest attack.*

“I would want your word that you would stop your attacks on the building and me personally.”

“Very well. You have my word that I will not go after you. For a period of six months.” *Then you’re mine again, if you’re still hanging around. Of course, I didn’t say anything about just giving your name to others who might go after you.*

“I also,” Gwydion managed, “will wait six months before beginning any further attack on you personally.”

He paused a moment. “Very well.” He pulled a notebook out of his pocket and a pen, then scribbled something down. “Here is the name you requested, a person higher in the organization than myself and where to find them.”

“Coin.” Gwydion held his hand out.

“Ah yes, of course, you would want to verify it. Here you go.” The coin was handed over and he repeated his statement.

“Fine. Now get out of here.”

“Very well. I’ll go pay for the wine, feel free to enjoy it. Killian, come along.”

And without even a goodbye Killian got up and walked away with Parthalàn.

## Chapter 11

We keep the ball rolling

Where: Still the restaurant

When: Seconds later

“He actually left!” Gwydion cursed. “I can’t believe it! After all we’ve been through. I’ll find him again, mark my words. He thinks he was cursed before? Ha! After I’m done with him he’ll *long* for the curse he had before. I’ll make the inside of his eyeballs itch nonstop. I’ll give him a thirst that can never be quenched. I’ll make his ears whistle sea shanties!”

“That all sounds fairly horrible.”

“Tyana, I can’t help but notice you don’t seem terribly upset about this.”

“I’m just hoping it’s all part of a ploy on Killian’s part,” I told him, pouring some wine into two glasses. “Think about it.”

“You don’t mean...” He sat in silence a moment, sipping the wine. “He’s trying to be an inside man?”

“That’s one of the two possibilities. Either we’ll start getting reports from nowhere but really come from him about movement in fomorian society against your people or...”

“The next time we see him it’ll be as enemies,” he finished.

“I’m afraid so.”

“He could have said something to us!”

“Not really. He couldn’t have known the guy would offer, and your outrage couldn’t be faked. This may have been a spur of the moment thing based on the one time deal the guy made. He felt he had to act fast and this was a good time to ‘defect’ as it were. If he can keep up the act and get them to trust him, maybe he can start getting good intel on the whole thing.”

“You really think we’ll see him again?”

“I hope so.”

“As do I. At least we got another lead, this Besumian fellow. I know where he works, a bank back in your world. We will just need a plan to take care of him.”

“He won’t be expecting us, that should work in our favor.”

“Indeed. We may as well drink the wine, he did pay for it.”

“So he said.”

“Wait, yes you’re right, I’ll be right back!”

He hadn’t.

That taken care of we went back to the tower to discuss our next move. Which oddly enough turned out to be a literal one, as I remembered the crates and cabinets of evidence we had moved to “safe keeping” which now may not be so safe.

“You’re right,” Gwydion agreed. “If he has turned on us, we need to move all of those we can before he gets the chance to move them elsewhere. He’ll have some kind of initiation or proving ceremony, however that works for them, so he may be tied up (hopefully literally) for only a short time.”

We headed back to the real world and simply rented another storage unit in the same place as Killian had before. Having seen the inside of the previous one it was a simple matter for Reves to open a portal between the two and for us to simply use movement magic to shove them (gently) from one to the other. Gwydion was rather surprised when I gestured and a quarter of the boxes simply flew from where they were sitting to the back of the new unit, past me.

“You’ve been holding out on us, haven’t you?” he asked. “We were carrying these things- heck you helped to carry these one at a time into here!”

I looked over at where my magic told me he was. “Yes,” I answered simply. “I have. But there’s no time for that now, so let’s get this done.”

“What other surprises will you unveil now that Killian is gone?”

I smirked at him. “You’ll just have to tag along and find out.”

Moving the boxes didn’t take long, after all a lot of the initial move was getting the filing cabinets past the doors and such with magic. With a straight shot from one unit to the other we got the job done in barely twenty minutes. I wanted to go hit something and get some of my pep back but it was fine. Gwydion basically fireballed the old one once we were done, to make sure there were no usable hairs left behind, and we closed it up. *Defending against someone you thought was a friend and now knows all the places you live and go to is hard. I just hope I’m right and he’s just working under cover, and not truly against us. He could have collected hair from either of us, Kelly is always joking about finding mine in odd places now that we’re together so much, I wouldn’t even have noticed.*

“Let’s hit the banker up right away too,” I suggested. “He gave us the name and it’s a good one, but that’s his boss, right? He may call the guy and tell them to watch out for us. We didn’t get any sort of guarantee he wouldn’t, after all.”

“Another stakeout? And we don’t have Killian’s car anymore...”

“So we’ll have to try another tactic, Reves, let’s go home I need to change.”

We went back home and did something I didn’t like to do, cast a fateweaving spell on myself to make sure I could talk to this guy. The general rule of thumb for magic of this type was the longer you could maintain it, giving the universe a chance to work out in your favor, the less likely it was to smack you later. For example if I changed my fate to win great wealth and then bought a lottery ticket two minutes before the next drawing reality would “grumble” and I might suddenly fall ill, and it would take all the money I had won in hospital bills to become well again. (Our US health care system being what it was) But give it a chance to work, maybe cast it in the morning and in the evening buy a scratch off ticket, the magic could ensure enough people bought a ticket before you to make sure you got the winning one. And as those were typically less payout reality didn’t “care” as much. The more minor the change the less risk there was of complications later so I felt just meeting a certain person at a bank, something I had a high chance of anyway, was worth the risk. To that end I wanted to give the magic plenty of time to fill up the bank with other customers before I got there, leaving him free to come see me when I arrived. I changed into some nicer clothes, and we figured out the area the bank was in using google maps. I felt enough time had passed so I got out a bunch of cash, refreshed my sight spell with all the willpower I could throw into it, and we teleported nearby enough we could walk the rest of the way without appearing somewhere and having someone see us. The usual standard operating procedure for us, in other words. Gwydion was somewhat confused by all this but I told him I had a plan, and to wait for me outside in case he attacked me or something on sight. The place was fairly busy as I anticipated, and sat down in their waiting area to, well, wait.

“Can I help you?” a voice finally asked. Naturally I hadn’t looked over when he approached, though I had felt it.

“Yes, I would like to inquire about making a payment on my car loan?”

“Of course madam. If you would like to come this way?”

“Follow, Reves,” I told Reves, quite unneeded of course but the banker would expect it. He got up as I did and helped me “follow” the man back to his desk.

“I’m Besumian Longfellow, may I get your name?”

*Bingo. I don’t need the fateweaving spell anymore. Thank you, universe. But he kept his fomorian name? Didn’t change it to- no Bess would be a female name, well something that sounded more human anyway. Odd.* I dropped that spell and flashed him a smile. “Georgina Ingleton,” I told

him, getting the stack of cash out of my purse. I spelled the name and set the cash down so he could take it. "You can get my account number from the name I trust? I can never remember it!" I laughed.

"Of course, of course. Ingleton, one moment."

"No rush." There really wasn't. While he was typing away at his computer (one of the reasons I had tried to cast the spell so strongly, knowing there would be a lot of technology around here) I mentally sorted through everything nearby. There were various pictures of course, but it was the contents of his desk I was really interested in. As my magical "sight" didn't care about light (whatever that was) bouncing around for me to see I could use it in this way too. Knowing what was around you meant knowing what *everything* was around you, if it was out in the open or not. That's how I knew he had a gun (*naughty, naughty*) in the lower drawer and something quite interesting in the upper drawer. Casino chips. *Ah, a bank teller that gambles? Not with other people's money, I hope?* There were the usual odds and ends, notebooks and pencils, nothing else I figured I could use. But a gambler? Yes, that could be exploited.

"I'm sorry, I'm not seeing an account under that name," he finally spoke up.

"Really? Ingleton? My car loan hasn't been paid off, and I have various accounts you should find with this bank. Wait, this is a Key bank, isn't it?"

"No madam, this is an HSBC."

"Oh my goodness," I snapped. "Honestly, my driver brought me to the wrong bank? I was quite specific, that's what you get when there's a substitution. HSBC, how is that even remotely like a Key bank? It's not your fault of course," I took the money back and put it away again. "I'm sorry to have taken up your time, I'll go and berate my driver, then have them take me to the correct place."

"Of course, it was no trouble. If you do need services in the future we'll be here."

"I'll keep that in mind. Reves, out." We stood up and giving a small bow to Besumian I followed him out again.

"So what was that all about?" Gwydion asked as we walked away.

"I wanted to get a sense of him, see if there was something he had on his person we could exploit. And see if he gave a fake name we would have to look up. But no, he just uses his real one. So we can probably find out where he lives. But I think I found something better. He's a gambler, he had some chips he hadn't cashed in sitting in his desk. That means he's probably going back to the casino fairly soon. I mean they're worthless otherwise. I'll ask the universe about it, there can't be that many places for him to go, and we can have a 'chance' meeting there. If I can get him across a poker table he's mine. Otherwise we'll just grab him when he leaves."

"Put a black bag over his head, that sort of thing?"

"Exactly. We'll head back when the coast is clear, stay close."

"Right."

"Of course if he's not going back there any time soon we just come back here at closing time and grab him. But my way should be more fun..."

Once back at home and rested for a bit I sent my question out into the universe, and I got this answer back:

*Take a round patty, put it on a bun,  
eat it watching horses, so much fun.  
Coming up this weekend you will find your prey,  
when you take the jackpot you can yell hooray!*

"So what does that mean?" Gwydion asked.

"Not sure, let me look into casinos in the area that may fit this description."

It only took a quick search of casinos in the Rochester area for the Hamburg Gaming “Buffalo Raceway at the Fairgrounds” to come up, clearly what the rhyme meant about a patty and a bun. So we had our time and our place, we just had to wait for the weekend. We made plans to meet back at my place Saturday afternoon, the most likely time he would be there (I hoped) and Gwydion went back to his tower. I did the prudent thing of asking if I would be in danger from any fomorian forces until that time, and was pleased to get back a no answer. So for the next few days I hung out with Kelly, catching her up on everything that had been happening.

“Couldn’t you ask your magic about this Killian person?” she asked me that evening. “Get at least some sense if he’s betrayed you or not?”

“I suppose I could,” I decided at last. “But honestly, I’d rather give him the benefit of the doubt. He will either help us from the shadows, or not. When I see him next he will either explain himself to my satisfaction, or if he attacks me I will defend myself. I won’t just attack him for the sake of it, he has to do what he believes in. I mean as long as he’s not kicking a puppy at the time or anything.”

“Or he’ll get in trouble because he’s not careful enough and need rescuing.”

“That’s something I hadn’t considered,” I admitted. “Tell you what. Every few days I’ll ask if he’s safe, that should be a simple yes or no answer. If I get a no we’ll try to track him down and rescue him.”

“That sounds like everything you can do.”

“I mean the man did just run off. He could have mentioned, oh, by the way, if there’s ever a chance I can get in with the people doing these attacks I’m taking it and being a double agent. I mean maybe it was implied by them picking a fomorian in the first place, who would probably not want to work against his own people? It was their risk to take, the tuatha I mean, hiring him to do this job. He really had no stake in succeeding, as long as he could say he did enough if questioned later why he didn’t succeed.”

“It was strange, them picking a fomorian when it’s their people that have the biggest beef with the tuatha and would be the most likely candidates for being the ones causing trouble.”

“Who knows what they were thinking. Anyway, no more work talk. How’s your latest film going?”

“Wait that’s still work talk just a different kind of work!”

“Shoot, you’re right!”

When the day came Kelly insisted on driving us down there, rather than risking us teleporting nearby.

“I wanted to keep you out of this, Kelly,” I told her.

“You’re down a person, you need someone to watch your back. Even if I am *only* human.”

“I have Reves for that.” He lifted his head and his tail thumped on the floor. *And I could call William, because really we’re down two people. Problem is he seemed to be getting pretty tired of us too, always using the morgue to meet in. He’s trying to keep a low profile and his job, he didn’t seem that interested in continuing when we phoned him that Killian had left. He might come to this though, it’s my operation and should be an in and out job, my favorite. Well, maybe in and out, in and out, in and out but you get the picture. But if it’s so easy, she would say, what’s the risk in having her along? Other humans will be there, he won’t try anything. Right?*

“Can’t argue with that, I guess. But you’re going to be there a few hours, right? Trying to catch sight of this guy? It would be less suspicious if it’s a bigger group going, three instead of two. I get a date, I can watch you in action, and there’s less risk of you being seen appearing out of nowhere.”

“Oh I see,” I told her slyly. “If you wanted a casino date you could have just asked.”

“I just don’t like the thought of you being in danger without me there to help. I know, you’re far older and more capable than I am. But I’ve been practicing my ninjitsu, I’m not useless.”

“I know you’re not.”

“Besides, from what you’ve said of this Gwydion fellow he may be more interested in saving his own skin than protecting you. You need someone, yes I have faith in you Reves, in case someone needs to yell ‘duck’ or something.”

“I don’t think a duck is going to threaten me all that much...”

“You know what I mean, dummy!” She gave my arm a playful slap.

“Yes, all right. Honestly I may have read him wrong when we first met. I mean he’s still pretty haughty but he does seem dedicated to this task. I think we can count on him.”

“Great, I’ll go get changed!”

I introduced the two when Gwydion arrived at the house and we headed to Kelly’s apartment, then took her car out to the casino. I told them my plan was to try and get him into a poker game and clean him out, then offer to play him one last hand for the name of *his* superior.

“And if he doesn’t go for it?” Kelly asked.

“It won’t matter,” I told her with a grin. “That’s the best part. Just before I offer I’ll use mental magic to start reading his mind. Naturally when I bring it up he won’t be able to resist thinking the name. I’ll just pluck it out of his thoughts. Now we may have to research it if he doesn’t go for it and tell us where to find the person, but it’ll be more than we have now.”

“And we follow up on that person, and their boss, until we get to the top,” Gwydion announced.

“Then our mission will actually be complete,” I agreed with a nod. “We turn that information over to my contact, and they take it from there.”

“I get it,” Kelly decided. “We wouldn’t just randomly think of the name, and grabbing him to try and download his whole brain wouldn’t work. You need him off balance and to mention you know who he really is and what you really want, to make him think of it.”

“That’s the plan.”

“You have been holding out on me,” Gwydion remarked. “Killian would have just said ‘let’s grab the guy’ and you probably would have gone along with it.”

“You’re probably right,” I admitted. “I was hired to be support for you two, but with a third of the team-”

“Gurrrrr,” said Reves.

“Sorry, with a quarter of the team gone...” *Though maybe I should count William too?*

“Hurumph.”

“It was time to step into the spotlight. We need to finish this quickly and follow up on this break in the case before it goes cold.”

“I wasn’t giving you enough credit, Tayna. You have my apology.”

“Just remember, I saw her first!” Kelly told him with a laugh.

“Here we are,” she announced, pulling into the place. “Let’s get operation: Mind Read underway.”

## Chapter 12

Where we don't learn as much as we had hoped

Where: Inside the casino

When: Two hours or so later

I made the rounds every twenty minutes or so, with either Kelly or Gwydion on my arm, to see if I spotted my mark and finally I did. The place smelled of desperation, and cleaning fluid, and ozone from all the electronics. Most of my kind would be utterly lost in such a place, but I recognized the machines for what they were. A fantasy someone could live for a time, that they could push a button and suddenly gain great wealth. But it didn't work like that, did it?

"That's him," I said to Kelly as we moved away from him. "The one on the left."

"Bit ugly, isn't he?"

"I wouldn't know." *But I am to understand that somehow the worse a fomorian looks, the better their magic is. Odd how that works out, given trolls like me exist and we get by with magic just fine.*

"Right. So, what's the plan?"

"I need to 'coincidentally' run into him. To that end, let's head over by the penny machines again. I think I sensed what we needed over there." We headed back that way and I was remembering right, there was an unattended glass sitting there that I could take. I took it over to the water fountain, rinsed it out, and put some water in it. *No sense wasting good alcohol on this.* "Okay, wish me luck. Go find Gwydion and hang out near the poker tables. I'll try to get us a private room and I'll mentally call you with magic when I need you, so don't go anywhere."

"Right."

We split up, and I headed back to the table. When I was near enough I pretended to stumble and threw the water all over him. *Time for the meet cute!*

"What the?" he exclaimed, jumping up.

"Oh no, I'm so sorry!" I told him. "Reves pulled suddenly and knocked me off balance. He's never done that before I don't know what he could have seen. I'm not drunk, I swear!"

Reves huffed, probably saying "don't involve me in this."

"It's quite all right. No harm done."

"But your whatever I spilled on. Will it be okay?"

"I'm sure it- Wait a minute, I know you!"

"I've heard that one before," I told him. "Don't try to reduce the sting, even without being blind I would still trip over my own feet." *Okay, maybe a little too far, pull it back, Tayna.* "Look I'm just going to go over in a corner and die please go back to your game."

"No, no, I'm serious, you came into the bank. I wouldn't forget that red hair, oh what was your name? Ing something, right? It's me, Besumian Longfellow. You came into the wrong bank? Did you berate your driver like you said?"

"Wait, really? It is you, no one else would know that. Now this is just too funny. Oh, you must think I'm a total ditz now. What are you doing here? Right, playing cards, it's a casino stupid, what must you think of me? Oh I'm so embarrassed about all this."

"Please, don't be. Yes, yes, finish the hand without me. Goodness have a little patience will you? Are you all right? You didn't hurt yourself, did you?"

"I'm fine, really, it's just my pride. It is odd, us running into each other again like this, isn't it?"

"Certainly is. Are you going to tell me your name or make me keep guessing? Because I will, which would be embarrassing for both of us."

I laughed. "That wouldn't do. I'm Georgina, good to see you, so to speak, again."

"Georgina, yes, how wonderful to see you again. I don't think I've ever seen you here before, do you come often?"

"I come here all the time. This is the Casino Niagara, isn't it?" I pretended to look around.

“Not even close, don’t tell me your driver...”

I laughed again. “I wondered why nothing seemed to be where it should be! I’m kidding of course. Yes, usually I go up to that one but I thought a change of pace would be nice. For some reason I just can’t see the difference. But I guess I found one, if this is the one you frequent.”

“You’ll often find me here, it’s true. Can I buy you a drink?”

“Better not, I’ve already proven I can’t hold it.” He laughed. “But are those cards I hear being shuffled? Perhaps I can join you here instead?”

“You... play poker?” he asked.

“I’ve been known to,” I told him. “If this place has some braille cards, of course?”

“I can get some,” the dealer replied. “We want all people to enjoy themselves here.”

*Translation, we want everyone to be able to lose their money here.* “Will you be joining the next hand?”

“What’s the buy in?”

He told me.

“Oh.” My face fell. “I don’t usually play for such low stakes, but it’s all in good fun am I right? Perhaps my new friend will get lucky and win enough off me to replace his shirt.”

“I could set you up in a back room if you wished to play for higher stakes,” said the dealer, not one to let an opportunity to make the casino money pass them by.

“You’re really that serious about it?” Besumian asked, sounding concerned. “I mean you are at a severe disadvantage are you not? I don’t mean to be rude of course I’m just afraid of you being taken advantage of. I wouldn’t, of course.” *Of course not.* “But be reasonable, you can’t really tell what your opponent is thinking without seeing them, can you? That’s most of the game right there.”

“Oh, there are ways around that,” I replied slyly. “But does this mean *you* would be interested in a higher stakes game?”

“If you really feel I wouldn’t be taking advantage. I mean, us running into each other again like this? Maybe the universe is trying to tell us something? I’d love to spend some more time with you.”

*Nope, it’s not. And do you use lines this corny on all the women you meet?* “I guess it must be!”

“Then yes, I accept!”

*Oh, you poor fool.* “Wonderful!”

We made our way to a back room and the dealer let me feel the cards we were going to use. They all had the standard braille markings in the corners, and I nodded these would be fine. I changed two thousand dollars into chips, as did Besumian, and we began to play. The challenge, for me at least, was playing in such a way he didn’t immediately suspect something was amiss. After all, I knew my own hand, his hand, and what cards would next be coming out of the deck thanks to my divination magic that told me what everything around me was. I did fairly poorly on the first hand, won the second, bombed out of the third *completely*, made it back and more on the forth, and on the fifth hand I knew there was nothing he could do but that he had a hand that would seem very good to him. Naturally all through this I kept him talking, about himself mostly while pretending to be *very* interested in the banking industry. And leaning over, don’t forget the leaning over. I hated to debase myself in this way but it was all a part of the mission. I mean, what man isn’t going to look, especially if he thinks the person can’t see him doing so!? It was time to strike. I gestured under the table to cast a mental spell connecting me to Kelly and I sent her a mental message it was time and to watch the door. *I’m going to spring it on him*, I sent to her, *he may try to run so be ready to stop him if he does*. That done I followed up with a mind reading spell on him.

“I think I would like to get to know you better, Mr. Longfellow. How about I go all in on this hand, and offer you a special bet?” I pushed my chips towards the center. “You win this hand and you get me for the rest of the weekend. Whatever you want to do, I’ll say yes to it, how does that sound?”

*What's happening? He thought to himself, showing my spell was working. Is this really happening? I must be more on my game than I thought, if she's throwing herself at me like this. That body, I couldn't get her back to my place fast enough!*

*Don't get too excited, I thought to myself. I went on. "But you have to make a special wager as well, one I would find of equal value."*

*"What do you want?" I can win this, I know I can! She did okay there for a few hands but she's overconfident. Or maybe she wants to lose to me? I mean she can't see, how do you play poker that way? But she knew the rules, curious. What exactly does she have in mind, offering herself to me like that?*

*Keep thinking that, mister. "I want the name of your fomorian boss, the one that orders things done to tuatha in this world."*

*"What?" She knows about Dorian? Crap, crap, crap, was this whole thing a setup? "I don't know what you're talking about?"*

*"I think you do. I want Dorian's last name, any recent plots that haven't been carried out, and your chips on the table. That's the wager. What, don't you want a chance at me?"*

*"I understand now. You're a troll! You're cheating using-" Magic, she's using magic but I can't just say that, there's a human standing right there! And I don't even know Dorian's last name! "I feel it now, it's all over you. I should have checked before, I'm so stupid!" I let her completely play me, didn't I?*

*Oh you've got to be kidding me?*

*"I have to get out of here!" He stumbled back, knocking his chair over and running to the door. But Kelly and Gwydion were right there on the other side of it when he flung it open.*

*"Going somewhere?" Gwydion asked him.*

*"Let me by!" Trapped, I have to get out. They know. I warned him sooner or later someone would come, and now they have. I could take them out with a spell but-*

*"Sit down and finish the bet," I told him coldly. "I'll spellbreak you in the instant I feel magic gathering around you. It's that or we take you in to the tuatha and see what they can get out of you about these plots."*

*"What are you people talking about?" asked the dealer. "Is this some kind of joke? Magic? Trolls?"*

*"It's no joke," I told him. "You might want to back up a bit though, just in case. Well? Make your choice."*

*"Please," Gwydion told him. "Choose the violence option. You think the tuatha would send someone unable to take you in a fight?"*

*"No violence here, please!" pleaded the dealer.*

*"That's up to him," I told him. "I'm still waiting, you can walk out of here in the clear. Finish the hand."*

*A tuatha and a troll? But that one seems completely human, don't know why they're here. Can I take them both? One could spellbreak me, like she said, while the other blasts me. Could I get both at once? I'm a banker, they probably are professionals, I mean to keep magic up under all the technology around here? She's good, probably hundreds of years old. I should have practiced more. "But they'll kill me!"*

*"No, I'm sure your superiors will understand," Gwydion assured him. "You have no choice but to tell us, they won't blame you."*

*"What's going on in here?" said a new voice from behind Gwydion and Kelly. Security. Great, they do have cameras in here and he did jump up and try to leave with the chips still on the table. "Move aside, what's going- wait are you being threatened by a blind woman? She doesn't even have a gun and her dog is just laying there." Several other men barged into the room, but were clearly looking*

around to try and figure out what was going on. “Why are we here? We saw on the cameras that you jumped out of your chair and tried to run but she’s just sitting there.”

“Yes, she’s-”

Suddenly Reves howled, and the security officers fell all over themselves trying to leave the room again. The dealer was backed up against the far wall and Besumian had backed against another.

“Thank you, Reves,” I told him. “Now, where were we? Sit and finish the bet.”

*Is that an actual black dog? My God I was stupid, she wasn’t even hiding the fact she was a troll. Beautiful woman with red hair, my one weakness!* “Why even bother with that now?” he shakily asked.

“Makes it more official. Put in your chips and show your hand.”

“You already know my hand somehow, don’t you?”

“A girl never tells,” I told him.

“Fine, you win, happy?” He went to the table and pushed his chips into the middle of the pile, then threw his cards down. “But you know as much as I do.” *Come on, just leave me alone, I can’t tell you anything.*

I showed him and the dealer my cards to make it official and started taking the chips.

*She seems to know right where they are. She is using magic to see, I bet.*

“You really don’t know your superior’s last name? How do you get orders from them?”

“There are certain code words. Look, I don’t have much to do with those further towards the top. They’re very secretive, and this whole thing proves they were right to be. Heck, I don’t even know if that’s his real name! Why tell me even that much truthfully?”

“How far up are you?” Gwydion asked.

“I’m a banker, what do you think?” he snapped. “Yes, I manage finances for the fomorians and I’m instructed to keep my eyes open for any tuatha I can make trouble for but mostly I just go about my life.”

“You give orders to the guy that replaced Parthalàn recently though. That’s how we got your name.”

*Who?* “I do? I send orders through the mail to be passed on to the best person to enact them. That way no one is seen directly talking to anyone else in case someone gets compromised. Who is Parthalàn? But I heard a rumor the guy I send to was killed recently and we had to find someone else to take his place.”

“That’s true, hunters got to him before we did.” *And now I have to wonder, it seems that guy was the one person we needed to end all this. The guy that knew everybody and forwarded the orders on. He kept no book of names, not that we found. Maybe he keeps it elsewhere and just refers to it when needed. Referred I mean. Killian sitting around doing nothing while he was killed, did he know? Was he working against us the whole time? Was he in the ledger and wanted to make sure we never found out?*

*Hunters? Humans with guns?* “What a stupid way to go!”

“So then how did he know your name to give to us?” I asked.

*I would like to know that too. How did someone supposedly below me know my name? They’re not supposed to.* “I have no idea!”

“Maybe he just likes knowing who he works for more than this guy does?” Gwydion suggested. “So he looked into it more. The point is you’re a dead end?”

*If you don’t count all the financial records I could give you, yes.* “Yes, I don’t know anything!”

“Not sure we should keep you around then.”

“Hold on, G,” I told him. “He’s still not useless. How about a copy of those financials?” I asked sweetly. “That could be useful.”

“Are you reading my mind? Is that how you did it?”

“Among other things.”

“Well I don’t have them on me or anything. And there’s no digital copy, it’s all at home in my safe.”

“Which is hours away from here by car?” Gwydion reasoned.

“Correct. You want to take a little trip? Away from these prying eyes, who knows what might happen?” *Yes, I’ll take you out the second you step through those doors!*

“He’s right. He would probably try something stupid once out of the building and we would end up killing him by accident. Then the records would be lost, because we wouldn’t know his address.”

“Spells are hard to control sometimes,” I agreed. “Fine, we can do it the other way.”

“What other-” I got up and stepped around the table, dropping my mind reading spell for something more direct. Putting my hand on his head I went into it, battering aside his attempts to keep me out. I pulled his address out, along with any knowledge he might not have been telling us. But it was true, he didn’t have a last name they had always met in person and this Dorian fellow even went so far as to have a different appearance each time. Illusion magic, no doubt, or just possessing someone temporarily to further distance themselves. He had probably never seen the actual man’s face. *Of course, they don’t have to campaign, or debate issues or whatever. They’re elders, they’re just the oldest and those more in the know follow their orders, and the one less in the know follow those orders and on and on until you get to people like this.*

“I know his address,” I told them. “We’ll be along one way or the other to get the records.”

“He’ll just destroy them!” Gwydion decided.

“He could,” I agreed. “But I could be lying. Then when the elders want the records he’s going to be a little short isn’t he? And he’ll have to explain why he no longer has them. But we can always make a copy of them so his position stays secure.”

“You’re just going to knock on my door and demand them?”

“It’s either that or we trash your place looking for them,” I told him. “You pick. You show us in nicely and give us what you want, we leave you in peace. Or we kick the door down, possibly kill you, and get the information anyway. What are you going to do, call the police and tell them a troll is attacking your house to get financial records proving you’re part of a gang of murderers? I know you won’t run, you have too much invested in this current persona of yours to pack up so soon. Aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I shouldn’t have to move for another forty years or so. Fine, show up, see if I care. They’re not going to do you any good, I promise you that.”

“We will, believe me. And don’t get too worried, you’re not the one we want. We want the people at the top, so you can just continue with your life once we’re done with you. You’ll never see us again.” I grabbed Reve’s harness and walked out, ready to cash in my chips and get out of there. “See you soon.”

## Chapter 13

We go fishing, but have to throw it back

Where: Besumian's house

When: A few hours later

Despite my bravado earlier I had no wish to rush into a trap, the waiting arms of the police, or get into a fight with this guy in his house so Kelly stopped a few streets over and I asked my divination magic what to expect when we met with the banker in a few minutes.

*All men defend their castle, often to the final vassal,  
but in this he's quite alone, he won't even use the phone.  
He will hide behind his loves, won't put on his boxing gloves,  
stay respectful and you might, do no violence yet night.*

"Okay, let's go in," I told Kelly. "Or, no, wait. We'll walk from here. I don't want cop cars pulling up and surrounding you. My magic suggests he isn't calling anyone but let's not take any chances. Head for home, we'll just teleport there when we're done."

"Stay safe," she told me with a kiss, and we headed out to the place. It seemed a reasonable neighborhood, but of course a banker that also handled the finances of essentially a mob probably would do okay for himself. With Reves leading the way and Gwydion looking at my phone for the directions we made our way to the house and went up to the door. There were two cars in the driveway and he quickly opened the door after we rang the bell.

"You actually showed up," he remarked. "Let's get this over with." He gestured and stepped out of the way, letting us into the house.

"Are these the friends you talked about?" asked a voice, and my magic picked up another person standing there. Female, normal clothes, wedding ring on. Medium length hair, slippers. No weapons, but judging from what I felt from her, not human either. *Probably fomorian, as he is.*

"Yes, they just want to go over a few things, work stuff, nothing to worry about," he told her. "May I intrude- introduce my wife, Bellithia?"

"Nice to meet you," I told her. "I'm Tayna, and this is Gwydion. Sorry to have to come over like this, it shouldn't take long."

"How do you do?" he asked formally, giving a bit of a bow.

"Mommy, mommy!" two voices shouted, running into the room. "Oh."

"And these are my daughters, Esme and Tippia. Say hello girls."

"Hello!" they both said. "Can we pet your puppy?" asked one.

"His name is Reves, and yes, it's fine." They rushed over, and he was about as big as they were, so both must have been fairly young.

"I do hope there won't be any trouble tonight," Besumian emphasized. "I think if you just got what you came for and then left it would be best."

*He will hide behind his loves. Of course. What kind of monsters would we be, involving his family, he's asking us.*

"I'm sure this will all be straightened out quickly," Gwydion told him. "Then we can be on our way."

"Glad to hear it. Girls, leave the nice dog alone we have to do grown up stuff and she'll need him."

"Aw!!!"

I gave a good-natured laugh. "Actually, Reves can stay here, he wouldn't mind the attention," I told them. *As I was invited inside my divination magic is still going, I don't need him at the moment.*

"Play nicely Reves."

“Of course, whatever you say. I guess you really don’t need him, huh?”

*Will it make him more comfortable with Reves out here and not breathing down his neck or less, knowing he’s out here possibly making a meal of his kids? Not that he would, but this guy doesn’t know that.* “Oh but I do,” I insisted. “He’s been with me for coming on seventy years now or more. But I can manage without him for a few minutes. I am blind, it’s not an act, even if knowing magic makes it less of an inconvenience than it would otherwise be.”

We headed through the house and into his study, where he slammed a group of books down on the desk. “There you go, knock yourself out. I’m not being figurative, by the way.”

“Ha ha,” Gwydion told him. “And this is everything?”

“Going back several years, yes.”

“Fine, I’m sure we can,” he walked over and flipped one open, “hey wait a second, what’s all this gibberish?”

“I told you, but you wouldn’t listen to me.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s just rows and columns of numbers.” He flipped through one book and then another. “This is useless.”

“Yes,” Besumian told him smugly. “So you’ll be on your way?”

“What does it mean?” I asked him.

“Each ledger is broken down into sections, each section being a different account,” he explained. “This simply tracks cash inflow and outflow across each account.”

“And there’s no names?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“Of course not,” he replied haughtily. “There was every chance some low life thug might come snooping around for them.”

“Don’t hold back,” Gwydion told him sarcastically. “Tell us how you really feel.”

“I would, but my daughters could walk in at any moment and I won’t use that kind of language around them.”

“There’s a *bank* name on each section, but I don’t recognize any of these names,” Gwydion admitted.

“Naturally, they’re all off shore. My true employers don’t want any scrutiny on these transactions. The US has made it quite difficult, with transactions over ten thousand dollars attracting federal attention, to move money around in our circles. But other countries are not so concerned.”

“I see large amounts going in, then smaller amounts going out. What’s that all about?” Gwydion asked.

“That’s what we in the business call ‘payments made for services rendered.’ Oh I’m sorry was that too technical for you?”

“Don’t push it. I could still set these on fire and force you to rebuild them. I doubt you have a secondary copy anywhere.”

He sighed. “Look, I get a letter, okay? It says something like ‘move such and such amount to account number this’ with a code. I check the code against the code book to make sure the request is legitimate, and I wire the money and balance the books. When a certain account is low I send a request to a certain post office box and assume the money will be moved shortly. I don’t know why the money is being moved and I don’t care.”

*We saw in the records that jobs ranged in amount, it seems there was sort of a standard rate for destruction of property, assassination, kidnapping, etc. So this guy doesn’t know anything about what the money is going to, he just moves it around. So if he gets caught, like just now, he can’t really tell us anything. He’s not doing the destroying or killing or whatever, he just makes sure the bills can be paid. Can I really say he’s a part of it from just that? Even if he didn’t have a wife and kids, could we turn him in to the tuatha him for being an accountant?*

“Where does it come from though?” he pressed.

“Dummy corporations, perhaps? Who knows. The elders probably dug up a billion dollars worth of gold five thousand years ago and have been slowly selling it. It’s none of my business. I simply keep the numbers positive so that whatever they want to do with it, gets done.”

“Do you have any recent letters?” I asked, figuring I could do the divination trick and at least get a sense of who wrote it.

“Good heavens, no, they’re burned immediately. Do you think I’m stupid?”

“That McMullen guy really screwed up, didn’t he?” Gwydion asked. “Keeping everything like he did.”

“Yeah, if we could have only grabbed him when we had the chance!”

“Damn that Killian, was he working against us the whole time?”

“... I don’t know,” I admitted. *But it looks that way more and more.*

“So are we done here?” asked Besumian.

“What post office box?” I asked. “Get me the address.”

“Of course.” He scribbled something on paper and handed it to me.

“And this is the real and actual address of the box?” Gwydion asked.

“Yes.”

“He’s not lying. Fine. Anything else we can think of?”

“I don’t suppose you have a copy machine around here?” I asked.

“A what?”

“What about a printer with a scanner on top?” *We can make some copies that way.*

“Again, what?”

“You have kids, they must go to school as you live in the US, how do they do homework without a computer and a printer?” *Even if you’re a thousand years old, your kids aren’t, and they would be begging for cell phones and such like their friends have. So even if you don’t understand it, they do for sure.*

“Oh, uh...”

“Hold on a second, you work at a bank. You can’t seriously tell me you don’t know what a copy machine is. And you typed into a computer to look up my account!”

“Fine, yes, we can make copies. No getting things past you guys, you’re too on the ball. This way.”

*Hah, gotcha! Also I think my sarcasm detector just went into the red. Wait, has he gotten something past us and is mocking us for it? But what could it be?* “Just bring the latest book along,” I told Gwydion. “No wait, the last two years. We lost last years thanks to Parthalán being replaced.” We went in and made copies of the pages, though of course Gwydion was useless at it despite it basically being a few button presses on the printer. I just couldn’t load the paper because I couldn’t see where the writing was. But he finally managed it, and he said it was readable.

“Then I think we’re done here,” I announced. “Thank you for being so cooperative.”

“What choice did I have? It was this or watch my house burn down or whatnot.”

“Yes, I suppose we would have had to take some measures,” Gwydion agreed, sounding a little reluctant. “But we have a job to do, and this helps save the lives of my people. From, you know, your little terrorist organization?”

“And what about my people, that have suffered at your hands for thousands of years?”

“I didn’t have anything to do with that!”

“But you’re not making up for it, either.”

“No, I suppose I’m not. Come, Tayna, we have intruded here enough.”

“Front door is this way.”

We collected Reves and said goodbye to Bellithia, then found a quiet place to teleport back home from. I plopped down on the couch, while Gwydion stood nearby.

“Does this record help us?” he asked.

I took my glasses off and rubbed my eye. “Not in the short term,” I admitted. “Now, we can look through the records we have, match last years records to amounts in the letters. It shows fomorians were paid for jobs, and what accounts to seize, but the tuatha government in Otherworld can’t just seize bank accounts in this one. Looking up all the routing numbers and account numbers used for the payouts could lead us to agents that work here, but again that’s just people at Parthalán’s level. And those accounts may have been closed right after the payment was made. It would be a lot of work, impossible for us, to track all that down. We want the people giving the orders. Without revealing them new agents will just be chosen and nothing will change, if we found the current ones.” *I mean if I was handed a book full of names of people that did terrible things here under orders I would count it a win, but that’s not really what we were hired for.*

“But we do have a new location to stake out! Perhaps that will be someone in charge, or at least closer to the top if they have the power to release funds.”

“No,” I told him, putting them back on. “We’re doing it my way this time. We tried your grabbing someone plan, and it ultimately lost us Killian. Now maybe that was a good thing if he was working against us the whole time, but my plan would have worked a lot better. We’re doing that this time, not trying to grab someone remotely. You’re going to work on an envelope that teleports the next person that touches it to us. Then we’ll just leave it in the box after hours, and wait for the person that monitors that box to come get it. They pick it up and whoosh, they’re in our hands.”

“But that could be days away! And where would be put them?”

I touched the side of my nose. “That’s easy. I’ll set that cage up in my basement. Not an ideal location but we can put up some curtains so the victim can’t see where they are. We just check it a few times a day and we’ve got them.”

“Oh, the cage Zane was kept in? I forgot we had that...”

“Yes, clearly, or someone would have suggested it during the whole Parthalán debacle. We know magic can be cast into it, but not out of it. So it’ll be the perfect place to put them.”

“I agree there is probably no better option. Very well, let us return there and set it up, and I will get to work making the appropriate envelope.”

Gwydion worked on the envelope for the next two days, discarding anything he felt wasn’t perfect before binding the magic into the markings on the inside of it. “It has to be perfect,” he explained. “There’s a lot of technology in a post office, and there could be witnesses. I don’t want anything to go wrong and for it to be my fault because I rushed the process and the magic fails to catch our target. So better to miss them if their usual time was yesterday and wait a week than to lose the element of surprise as we did the last time.”

*So you can learn from your mistakes? Good to know.* “Whatever you think,” I told him. “I’m not rushing you.” *And I hate to just make someone vanish from the middle of a post office, that might freak people out, but what else can we do? I have to get this guy or we have no more leads. We can’t fail here like we did with McMullan and the fake Parthalán.*

Once the magic was bound into the paper it would teleport anyone but him into the cell, and we prepared the site. Making sure it was locked we hung sheets all around it, making a tent. This was far enough away they couldn’t be pulled down, and disguised where the cage was. *After all, they’ll probably make some noise when they discover themselves down here. That will keep them from being alone for hours until we check on them. We could just bring the cage back to the mine shaft but I think it being here is a little better.*

Putting the “letter” in the box was fairly simple. We went out to the post office where the box was at night, after Reves put obscuring magic on us. Teleporting past the doors was simple, they were glass so you could look right through them, as was simply teleporting the letter into the box past the door as it only needed to go a few inches. (Usually of course you had to have seen your destination at

least once to teleport to it, but Gwydion worked out a spell to simply displace something in space enough to get around that limitation. It was difficult to pull off, but he wasn't teleporting himself past a door or anything, it was just a sheet of paper out of his hand and a few inches forward)

We waited several days. I caught up on my email, made some onlyfans videos, and found a place to sell a few of those gold coins Parthalán had sent us before sending us to fight that dragon, or whatever he was. Finally there was a lot of screaming and carrying on in the basement, and we all rushed down there.

"Is it just me or does that sound like a child?" Kelly asked.

"It does, rather," Gwydion agreed.

"Hello?" called the voice inside. "Is someone there? Where am I? What's going on?"

"Could be a trick, I'll check it out." He parted the curtain enough to look through. "Oh no, it is a child."

"Hello? Who's there?"

"One second." He closed it again. "Now what are we going to do?"

"Could it be a trick?" Kelly asked. "Someone shape-shifted to look like a kid?"

"It could," I agreed. *Even if he didn't look like that before, magic works inside the cage. It just can't be cast outside from the inside. So he could have changed his looks inside it.*

"Humm," Gwydion mused, looking back in the cage area. "I feel a fading magical presence. There was magic on the child, but now there is not."

"Wait, we just captured a normal human kid?" Kelly gasped.

"Er, so it seems?"

"Let me by!" She pushed past him and clicked on a flashlight so she could see. We had not turned the lights on, and made the "tent" pretty thick though of course any non-human we captured would have still been able to see perfectly in the dark. "Are you okay?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Kelly, what's yours?"

"Am I in a cage?"

"That's a funny name, why did your parents name you that?"

"What? No. I'm not telling you anything. Let me out of here!"

"We will, don't worry. I think there's been a bit of a mix up. Why were you getting the mail for that post office box? Is it yours?"

"What post office box? What are you talking about?"

"You came here by touching a letter, right?"

"I don't know?"

"You're still holding the letter," she told him gently.

"You want it? I don't want it. Let me out of here!"

"I think we better, and sort this all out. We won't hurt you, please don't run or anything."

"Er, is that such a good idea?" Gwydion called in to her.

"I can't let an innocent child remain locked up. Clearly your 'great plan' didn't work out very well."

*Clearly.*

"Come on out of there. I'm sorry about all this, we'll get you back right away."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

We both stepped back as the curtain was pushed aside, Gwydion turning to flick the light on. A young boy stepped out with Kelly, squinting against the light. "Where am I?" he asked.

"My house," I told him. "These are my friends. Can you tell us what happened?"

"I was out shopping with my mom when I saw this man at the end of the row. He said I should come over to him, so I did. He said we were going for a little walk and I went with him. He gave me a

key, said to go open a post office box and bring him anything inside, and give him the key back. But when I did I found myself here.”

“His mom is probably freaking out,” Kelly told us.

“And he’s telling the truth. Crap!” Gwydion spat. “These people really are paranoid aren’t they? I don’t believe this!”

“What’s going on?”

“You were possessed, most likely,” he told him. “Made to act against your will.”

“Poss-what?”

“Never mind,” I told him. “Let’s head back there, get you back to your mom. I’ll go, come on Reves.” Reves got up and I took the kid’s hand, and he obscured the three of us. We then went back to the corner of the post office where I figured no one would be, and we headed back towards the store. It wasn’t far, and before I got inside and it was harder again, I did a quick mental magic spell on the kid. He would now believe the story I was about to tell his mother, because from his perspective that’s what happened. No cage, no basement, nothing out of the ordinary. We went to the front desk, and as expected the woman was there. She swept the boy up into a hug.

“You found him!” she cried. “What happened?”

“He saw my dog and must have followed after me,” I explained. “Once I realized he was there I asked where his mother was and he must have realized what happened. It took a moment to calm him down and we headed here to the front desk where I figured you would be by now.”

“Is that what happened?” she asked the boy.

“I wanted to see the dog!” he agreed. *Thank you, magic.*

“Thank you for watching him, er...”

“I know what you mean. It was no trouble. Have a good day.”

“Bye!” said the kid.

“Bye little one.” I left the store, breathing a sigh of relief. I headed back into the post office, but the box was closed and locked again, the key gone. *So much for my great plan. Maybe it should have been on the letter inside the envelope, but I didn’t want him sensing the magic on it and just burning it to a crisp. I wanted him to touch it and get caught right away. I guess even my plans can go wrong. But who would have thought whoever was picking this mail up would be paranoid enough to go down the street, grab up someone random and force them to open the door? And a kid at that. Of course we just proved them right to do that, because something happened. So they’ll be on even higher alert now.*

“Let’s head back outside and find a quiet place,” I told Reves. “What a crappy day.”

## Chapter 14

A ghost of a chance

Where: Kelly's house

When: Not long after

We folded the cage up and took the sheets down again, clearly the 'teleport the person that goes to get the mail out of that box' plan wasn't going to work. The person that ultimately got the mail would keep using innocent agents and there were ways to make sure even following them didn't work out. *If it were me and I knew teleportation magic, I would just have them walk into a crowded area like a store, and teleport the letter out of the hands of the person they forced to do the job. We would never know who got it in that case.* Then we went upstairs and sat in the living room.

"So that's it," Gwydion finally announced. "We have no more leads. Our investigation is over, they've hidden themselves too well."

"We promised the fake Parthalán we wouldn't go after him again for six months, and the name he gave us didn't pan out. I'm not sure where else we can go from here," I admitted. *Did he realize that? Know the record keeper would do things in such a way that we wouldn't get anything from him? He did give the name up pretty easily.*

"A promise to one such as him carries no weight!"

"Maybe for you, but my word does mean something to me. There must be another way, or something we missed along the way we can go back to."

"Then we must find it. What set us on this path, anyway?"

"Let's see. Zane got abducted, we went after him and found the person who did it. William enthralled him, got the name of McMullan who we went to see, and who got killed allowing us to take his records. The one thing we *can't* use in all of this because everything is too vague."

"Ah yes, Zane. So it was sheer coincidence. Had Zane not been taken we would have wandered around this world with no leads and no idea how to get started."

"Seems that way." *I mean what would have led to McMullan otherwise? He was one fomorian living in a dump, did someone use fateweaving magic on us at the start? Did Parthalán, maybe to change our fates to finding the right guy right away? Is that why he was killed and replaced, as the 'cost' of using that magic? It all seems so unlikely otherwise.*

"And there's nothing in these records you have that's useful?" Kelly asked. "I mean there must be something you've got boxes of the stuff."

"Let me go and get a random box, and I'll show you," Gwydion told her, opening a portal to the storage unit. He came back with a box and we looked through it. "It's all in code, really. This one here says subject: Lesail Terrence Mugler. Assignee: power wash. Time: one week. Location: and it gives an address. I mean, power wash?" He flipped through the stack. "I've got buy glasses, power wash, swimming lessons, collect fees, all sorts of weird stuff. It must be code but for what?"

"And this McMullan would take these orders, send a release to the banker guy for where to put the funds, and another letter to the person who did the deed? Then he was probably supposed to shred the orders, but instead saved them all for some bizarre reason."

"Probably, it's evidence of a crime," he agreed. "But you have the right of it. A complicated scheme but it has stymied us so I must admit to a certain respect of the whole operation."

"So how did he know who to mail?" she asked. "I see all sorts of locations here, so fomorians must have quite a network of agents or at least people willing to make trouble for the tuatha. How did he keep them all straight? Add new ones? Remove ones that had died or been compromised or just didn't want to do it anymore?"

"A fair question," he admitted. "We found no such book of address when we searched the house."

“Nor did William when he looked at his computer,” I agreed. “If we assume for the moment that William knew what he was doing.”

“It’s true, none of us knew what to look for.”

“Hold on, you use a computer all the time,” Kelly told me. “I mean come on, you have a huge following on OnlyFans.”

*Which thanks to you ‘performing’ with me has only gotten bigger.* I shook my head. “His computer was twenty years old. I’m not sure what assistive technologies existed back then but I know they’ve gotten a lot better now. Heck, the only reason I can use a smartphone *at all* is that I can just ask it to do stuff and it can verbally tell me the result of such actions. I would have had to figure out how to turn on anything like that, and then try to use a system I’m totally unfamiliar with. William sat down at the thing so I figured he knew what he was doing. Besides, the guy didn’t throw anything away by the looks of it. Even if he kept that record specifically on his computer he would have started with an address book. We would have found something.”

“So it was hidden?”

I again shook my head, and tapped my glasses. “You can’t hide things from me. I can tell what things are around me, extending a certain distance depending on how well I’ve cast the spell. For example,” I got up and went over to the wall, starting at one end of it and running my finger to the left. “Stud. Stud. Stud. Pipe. Electrical wire. Stud. Stud. You see what I mean? If there was something hidden in the floor or a wall I would have known. I walked through the whole place specifically to check for that.”

“How do you keep it all straight in your head, if every little thing shows up for you at all times?” she asked. “I mean there must be nails in the walls, and in the floor, heck do you know exactly how much change someone is carrying or how many hairs are on their head?”

I laughed. “Not to that level, no. The magic helps,” I told her, coming back to sit down. “And I’ve gotten used to it. And really now that I think about it I can focus on more or less detail so my brain does ‘skip past’ so to speak a lot of the unneeded details most of the time. I mean you aren’t aware of every inch of fabric on your skin at all times, are you?”

“No I guess not.”

“But to return to our original point,” Gwydion reminded us, “what are we going to do now?”

“I asked because that book of address, which we’re assuming to exist, must still be somewhere. He didn’t memorize all those names. Track that down and it may have the codes they use, a full list of agents, maybe even where to send requests for help in an emergency. That could help us get the names of the elders right?”

“Yes, yes, that’s all true,” he excitedly realized. “Tayna, can you use your magic to give us a starting point? And I can call the demon he excels in tracking down lost things.”

“But is this really lost?” Kelly asked. “Someone must have it, if he didn’t.”

“It’s lost to us.”

“That’s a good point,” I agreed. “Do we think he called someone maybe? Some keeper of the book, and that was their only task? So if they were caught it was just a book of addresses unrelated to anything, while if he was caught all people would get was the encoded orders? With no way to put them together no one could be charged with any crime.”

“Something like that, yes,” Gwydion agreed. “He had a phone, perhaps we should look into his family?”

“Too obvious,” I decided. “He would have given the book to someone unrelated. But trustworthy. Okay, let me see what my magic has to say about it.” I headed to the room with the least amount of technology in it and dropped by vision spell, casting a divination for a book of names used by the fomorians to track their agents.

*Such a book exists, it’s true, used by agents one and two*

*that planned their mischief far and wide, despite an ocean of divide.  
How to find it, that's the key, the book was never known by three  
but only two and one is gone, and so the book is lost, erelong  
one chance you have to find yourself, in possession of this wealth  
if you ask a certain one, no longer found under the sun.*

“So I got something back,” I told the others, coming back into the room. “But I don’t think you’re going to like it.” Kelly transcribed the recording I had made, and the two sat there looking the answer over.

“Okay so this other person isn’t even in the United States?” Kelly asked. “That’s what ‘an ocean of divide’ could refer to.”

“Agreed,” I agreed. “But only two people knew about it, probably a further safety precaution. And one of them is dead.”

“So how do we ask ‘a certain one’ if the only person left that knows about it,” asked Gwydion, “is the only other one that knows about it?”

“Yes, that doesn’t sound like ‘ask your demon friend to find, the result will be divine’ we need to know what this ‘found under the sun’ refers to,” I pondered.

“Moved to Otherworld? But what could someone in Otherworld tell us about an address book we want to find here if they don’t know about it? That doesn’t seem right.”

“I only know about stuff from TV and whatnot,” Kelly put in, “but can’t you hold a séance or something and ask his ghost? Does that sort of thing work, with magic I mean?”

“Oh.” Gwydion sounded like he didn’t like that idea, putting a lot of emotion into that one word.

“That means yes, doesn’t it?” Kelly pressed.

“We could, perhaps, call up his spirit, yes,” he admitted. “But I don’t like doing it. No, I do not like doing that at all.” He gave a rueful laugh. “It comes back to this, does it? Remember when you suggested something of the sort just before he was killed, Tayna? Had we known then what we know now.”

“I hear you. We’ve already admitted running into a wall,” I reminded him. “This is our shot at blowing the whole thing wide open. We ask his ghost who has the book, find that person, take the book, and we’ve got everything we need to give your government to end all this. Our job would truly be done with that one act. They pick up everyone in the book, discover what crimes they’ve committed, and put them on trial. With no one to do their dirty work the ones at the top are stopped, okay we never found out who gave the orders but this is the next best thing, right?”

“You don’t really know what you’re asking,” he told me. “Calling up the dead, it’s never pretty. Especially one that was murdered. And we would have to go back to the house, where he died, to have a chance.”

“On the plus side, we’re the ones that avenged him,” I reminded him. “We tracked down his killers and got them to confess to the murder. Okay that was William’s magic but we helped. Maybe he will be more inclined to help us because of it?”

“I don’t think it works like that. Between the two of us we can probably handle it,” he admitted. “But it will have to only be the two of us. Less risk that way. We can go tonight, we know the time he was murdered, that can also help in summoning his spirit. We will not need to do much preparation, it is not a ritual only necromancy magic. But it is still quite dangerous. Rest until then, so you are completely prepared.”

That night the four of us teleported to behind McMullan’s house, using Reves so Gwydion could save his strength, and I noticed a few changes. There was a dumpster there, so someone was

cleaning it out. The door with the melted lock was gone, but the window bars were still there. It was a bad neighborhood, after all. The dumpster was fairly full, but Gwydion hardly gave it a second look.

“The place is being cleaned out,” Kelly remarked. “Will that hurt the magic, not having his stuff there?”

“No, that won’t matter,” he told us. “The place is deserted, as I hoped. Come, we will teleport inside as I doubt there is a threshold now. Someone has been here and the place has no owner.”

“One moment. Are you sure about this?” I asked Kelly. *She knows how my magic works and offered to amp me up. As she can’t go inside she can still help me out.*

“If it can help you, do it,” she told me.

“Okay.” I cast my usual combat spell and touched her, draining her energies into myself. I just hoped I wasn’t taking too much. She staggered a little and I stopped. “Thanks.”

“I just wish I could come in with you. But I’ll keep a watch out here. Be safe in there.”

“I will. Okay, Reves, take us inside, then come back out and keep her safe.”

“Woof.”

We appeared inside and headed to the room his body was found in, closing the doors between rooms. I took a deep breath. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be. You recall what we discussed?”

“Of course.” I dropped my divination and turned towards the wall, touching it. I let my magic flow out across the walls, a protection spell designed to keep a spirit in. Naturally I threw all the willpower I could into it, the reason I wanted Kelly’s power too. I still had another spell to do, and maybe more if it went wrong. I nodded.

“No, do it again,” Gwydion commanded. “It needs to be stronger, I know you can do better than that.”

“Very well.” I dropped it and did it again.

“Yes, that’s much better. Now the same for both of us.” He stepped towards me and took my hand, and I protected us from possession as well.

“I hate not being able to see,” I told him. “If you need help...”

“I’ll let you know, believe me. And trust me, you don’t *want* to see what is about to transpire here. The soul of a man like this? I can only imagine how twisted it has become in the afterlife. Focus on maintaining our protections, no matter what.”

“I’m ready when you are.”

“I shall begin. Let the curtain between life and death be opened before me now! James McMullan, I call to you. James McMullan, hear my voice and come to this place where your soul left this realm. James McMullan I command you, appear before me now!”

The temperature was dropping in the room, and despite the darkness that my eyes could see my soul knew something was happening. Some kind of tear had opened in the center of the room, something my soul wanted to fly into. Moaning and chill wind swept through the place. I felt something, beckoning, but also pushing, grasping, trying to escape. The bridge between life and death had been opened here, and any soul strong enough might come through. But one was compelled to step through, and Gwydion had hoped they were still ‘nearby’ enough it didn’t take too long.

“Back, back you other souls. Only James McMullan is allowed here! It is to him I call, only he will head my voice. James McMullan. James McMullan show yourself!”

I felt it. A presence, now in the room with us, confused perhaps but steadily gaining in strength.

“James McMullan you will answer true. We know of the book, the book of names you used in life to perform your wicked deeds against my people. You will tell me the name, the true name, without deception, of who holds that book.”

*I mean we’re assuming there’s a book, but why tell him that? If there isn’t, if there’s some other way he figured out who to assign these jobs to, he can tell us himself. And we’re assuming he knows the name, the true name, of who he gave it to. But that’s a fair one I think.*

“Escape...” whispered through the room. “Life. Taken. Rebirth!”

“Back spirit, by your name James McMullan I command- Aarg!” I felt my magic tested, the spirit must have gone for him, but bounced off my protection. A shrill shriek of frustration issued from the spirit, and my intuition warned me it had dashed past him towards me. I struck out, my protection spell allowing me to repulse the spirit in an almost physical manner. I felt it smack into my open palm, bouncing back.

“Curse you,” the spirit managed. “Perhaps this...”

My magic wavered again, this time on the walls. Like someone or something was beating on them, trying to escape. They held.

“There is no escape for you, James McMullan. You must see that now. Answer my question true, and return to your torment in the afterlife. Give me the name of the one who holds the book I desire. You must tell me. Now.”

“No!”

“Yes! You are compelled by my magic to obey. I have brought you here. I control you. Give me the name!”

“The name.”

“Yes, the true name, you cannot resist my will!”

“Iarlaith MacCaffrey.”

“And where is he to be found?”

“Greece.”

“What? We’re in Greece right now, spirit. Are you saying he’s within walking distance?”

“Greece!”

“Maybe he means the country?” I suggested.

“Yes,” croaked the ghost.

“Very well. Return now from whence you came, spirit. May your blackened soul never find rest for what you did in life. Begone from this place and this world forever!”

“No, do not send me baaaaaaaaa...”

And there was silence again.

“Quick, where’s my pen. Ah, here. Iarlaith MacCaffrey, right. Found in Greece.”

“Is it done?” I asked.

“The tear is closed, he’s gone. You can drop the spells.”

I did so, recasting my vision spell to find a shaken looking Gwydion standing there. “Are you okay?”

“Tearing open the veil, seeing all the souls trying to get out, then talking to one? It’s not for mortal eyes. Be glad you didn’t have to see it. I’ll be fine. We got the name, let us be done with this whole business.”

We headed outside, where Reves bumped up against me and Kelly hugged me. “Oh, you’re cold. I saw a ghostly light from in there, it was horrible to see. Did it work?”

“It worked, we got the name,” I told her. “I just hope he’s easy to find, though he’s in another country altogether. We can get there like always, with a picture, but finding one fomorian? That could prove to be tricky.”

“One step at a time. Come back to the house and rest, you look like you could use it,” Kelly told us both. “You’re back in the game again, focus on that.”

“We are another step closer, aren’t we?” he admitted. “I will take comfort from that. Let us go.”

## Chapter 15

Here, kitty, kitty, kitty

Where: Back at Kelly's house

When: Just after summoning the ghost

"So it looks like Greece isn't that big," Kelly told us, looking at her computer screen once we got home. "Clicking on any of the furthest points in the country and estimating a car trip to the center of the country is always less than five hours."

"That's still a huge area to cover!" I protested.

"When all you have is a name, yes," she agreed. "Too bad you couldn't get the phone number from the ghost as well."

"I didn't think of it," Gwydion gasped. "I'm not used to this technology stuff you humans use. Courier spirits are so much more civilized."

"And can you send a courier spirit to this guy, having found out his name?" I asked. "You need to know where the spirit is going to go, right?"

"I... Yes, that's true," he admitted. "Just the name does us little good at this time."

"So how are we going to find him?" she asked. "Or I guess I should ask how are *you* going to find him? I can't contribute much to that effort."

"We don't have a piece of him, so we cannot scry upon him," Gwydion told her. "In fact I'm not really sure how to proceed from here. I don't suppose there is a central repository of addresses, such as like where the spirits go when they must deliver a letter?"

"How does that work exactly?" Kelly asked.

"Quite simply! If one wishes to be reached by what you humans might call the 'mail' they simply register their current name and location with the courier guild. Then if I wished to send a missive to someone's location I did not know, the spirit would go there first, ask for the location, and be given it."

"Sounds like a system ripe for abuse."

"No tuatha would do such a thing, the guild is a sacred trust!"

"I'll take your word for it."

"To answer your question," I stepped in, "not exactly. If he was a human and had a social media account no doubt he would have posted many pictures from various locations we could use to narrow down his location. And we do have a white pages in this country, at least we did before everyone got cell phones, that we could use to look up address at least at the local level. I'm sure it's online as well, but other countries have a more strict policy about that sort of thing I understand. I'm not sure, as I'm not a citizen of the country, if I can even get to something like that they may have. There may be controls in place, we would have to try it." *Still, even with a somewhat Irish name like he has, there could be more than one, or he may go by a completely different name there. Just doing a search isn't going to guarantee we'll get the guy. He could have had several identities in his life, like most of us long lived people have to do because humans.*

"But if I was an old fashioned, no offense Gwydion, sort of person like a fomorian is going to be, I may not even have a phone."

"He must have been contacted somehow though," I protested. "Gotta be by phone, right?"

"That's true. But he wouldn't go out of his way to announce where he lived, I mean he's the guardian of the book. He wouldn't want any scrutiny."

I sighed. "Right, so like James he would live somewhere nobody would think to bother him."

"Pretty hilly there, lot of open space. But dense cities too, could be slums?"

"How you humans allow such a thing I'll never understand."

"Believe me, I don't understand it either," Kelly told him. "So how are you going to find him? Get local law enforcement to track him down?"

“We don’t speak the language, that could be tricky,” I told her. “Try and convince someone we need to find this guy but, oh sorry we can’t say what crime he’s committed.” *My vocation magic can help, but I’ll never sound like a native speaker.*

“Apart from giving out names he hasn’t,” decided Gwydion.

“Exactly,” I agreed. “We would have to try and explain the whole plot, it’s not going to work.”

“What else is there?”

“I’m not sure even my demonic contact can find a single person across a whole country,” he admitted.

“I would hesitate to call him again,” I cautioned. “You’ve been racking up a lot of ‘charges’ if you will with that guy. I don’t want you even more beholden to him. There must be another way.”

“I can’t think of one.”

“Doesn’t mean you won’t, we only just started thinking about it.”

“True.”

We sat in silence for a moment. I got up and started pacing the room. *Reves can’t find him, we didn’t have a scent to track. Divination magic might help narrow it down but only as a rhyme. We would still have a large area to try and cover to catch him at the laundromat or whatever. Fateweaving, well, I might find this guy but lose Gwydion somehow. As it’s so improbable I’ll run into this guy by accident it would extract a high ‘cost’ to make that happen. Or even worse, Kelly! Wouldn’t look forward to it. Mundane means, do we have any? He’s not going to be in a phone book he’s laying low and working for a terrorist organization. I mean come on.* “There’s only one way I can think of, with the magic I have,” I told them. “Summoning. Try and cover a wide enough area that he is forced to come to us. Gwydion, you can help so maybe it won’t be too bad. You say you can get anywhere in the country pretty quickly, so we’ll just sit in the middle of it somewhere and make him come to us.”

“But we need something of his to focus the magic on, right?” he protested.

“I’m not so sure of that,” I countered. “Do you have something of the demon except his name when you summon him? And he’s coming from a whole different dimension! I think it’s all we’ve got. We just focus on the name and the fact he has the book we want. It’ll have to be enough.”

“How would it work?” Kelly asked.

“We just send the magic out as wide as we can,” I told her. “And he’ll be compelled to come to us. We don’t get him day one we didn’t cast a wide enough net, and we try again until we get him.”

“He could resist, but a spell powerful enough to cover a country, I suppose it would be difficult,” Gwydion admitted. “I can help, as I know summoning as well, but I’ve never summoned a person before. We would have to practice working together to do that.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem. We’ll practice a bit now, take a rest, and when it’s just past sunset there we’ll find a spot to hang out and do the spell. Maybe a hotel, we’ll need to be undisturbed if we’re going to sit for hours maintaining our call.”

“Like the sirens of old,” he mused. “I just hope the two of us are strong enough by ourselves.”

“I do too.” *I don’t know of anyone else that know summoning magic, so let’s hope this works.*

And so we found ourselves in the middle of Greece at their sundown in a hotel. Luckily tourism was a major part of their economy so they were used to people not speaking the language. My phone helped, but I had to wonder what they thought of me. *Here’s a woman that can’t see, walking around Greece to see the sights! Whatever.* Gwydion and I settled ourselves on the floor and started working our magic. And that’s when basically the miracle happened. Don’t get me wrong, I’m decent at magic, and I can throw some willpower around when I have to. But Gwydion’s magic dwarfed my “feeble” efforts by being, as far as I could tell, twice as strong. *Wow, I guess he really is a grandmaster, or something. I felt his magic was powerful when we first met but come on, now who’s holding out on who? His willpower must be the greatest in the world.* We focused on the man’s name and the concept of the book with all the names in it, telling our magic who we wanted. I wished we had more of an idea

who we were “ringing up” with this, we didn’t even know if it was a fomorian. *I mean who else could it be? But still. It might have made it easier, but given I can barely hear myself think over the strength of Gwydion’s magic this might be enough.* We sat there for three hours at least, as magic basically covered the entire world (I’m not kidding) drawing in the person we wanted. Finally there was a knock at the door, and we broke it off. I hastily put my divination spell back on and stepped to the side, Reves crouching beside me. Gwydion threw the door open, and there was a fomorian seeming to come back to themselves, shaking off the influence of the magic.

“Come in, let’s have a talk,” Gwydion offered.

“What am I doing here?” asked Iarlaith snappishly. “Who are you?”

“Why not come in and find out?”

“No, I’m out of here.” He turned to go and Reves vanished, reappearing in the hall before him.

“Are you sure about that?” Gwydion stepped out after him. “I don’t think you want a fight here in this hallway. Let’s keep things nice and quiet.”

“I have to get back to work.”

*Yes, even to me that excuse sounds a bit weak. Try again?*

“Soon, my friend, soon. We won’t take up a lot of your time. But you will come in and speak to us.”

“Ugh, fine, but this better be good.” He entered the room and looked around, catching sight of me. “Oh, it is good! You should have lead with her. Is management finally rewarding all my hard work?”

“Sit down,” he commanded, closing the door after Reves followed him in. “And get your mind out of the gutter.”

“Yes, this isn’t what you think,” I told him.

“It could be though.”

“No. Look, your name is Iarlaith MacCaffrey and until recently, you were contacted by a man named James. James would tell you what kind of job needed to be done, and you would give him the name and address of someone to do that job. How am I doing so far?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Oh Iarlaith, try to be reasonable, okay? You’re here, I just told you your name, there’s no getting around it. James stopped calling you because he died, but I’m sure the fomorians have found you a new partner. We don’t care about that. We want the book. You’re going to give it to us.”

“Look, lady, I don’t know what you’re talking about, really.”

“So why did the shade of James McMullan give us your name then?”

“I don’t even know a James!”

“Dear me, we are going to have to do this the hard way. I know you’re lying, Iarlaith. The fomorian plot is over, and you people are going to stop making trouble for my people in this world. Understand? We’re going to get to the bottom of this, by getting to the top of it. Finding out who gave the orders. But right now we need that book. Unless you’re claiming you have all the names of all the fomorian agents memorized?”

“What plot? What names? This is crazy!”

“Tayna, why don’t you use your mental magic to just get his address and we can simply go there and get the book ourselves. I’m sure he’ll be happy to think of the location for you as well.”

“That’s easiest,” I agreed. “This won’t hurt a-”

Iarlaith bolted for the window, throwing a blast of air at it and magically shattering it, blowing a whole section of where the window used to be out. Without pausing he jumped through the hole and fell several meters probably catching himself with another blast of air.

*Good thing it’s nighttime but there goes our security deposit. No way to explain that, we better get gone before someone comes to investigate the noise.*

“Get after him!” Gwydion shouted, running to the window and casting himself. He took to the air, probably with movement magic, and I grabbed Reves’ harness. *Though it would look cool, me tumbling through the air and landing I don’t want to risk screwing it up. I could use movement magic myself, catching myself at the last second to slow my fall but I come down too hard because I misjudged the distance and I go splat. Better to just let Reves handle it.* “Ready!”

“Woof!” We shifted, and he took off after the man. He swiftly caught up but just as he was about to pounce must have slipped on something in the alley and stumbled.

“You okay?” I shouted as I caught up to him.

He made a grunting noise and shook it off.

“I have him,” Gwydion called, gesturing down at the fleeing figure. A doorway opened in front of him, bent around him in a half circle so even though he tried to skitter to a halt and dodge back he was running full tilt and couldn’t manage it. He got swallowed up and vanished. “Ha, another victory for our side!” he called, swooping down to me and landing by my side. “We have him now.”

“Astral?” I asked.

“Astral,” he confirmed. “It’s one way, unless he has studied such magics himself he is now trapped. Let us see what the man has to say now, shall we?” We walked over there, and he was behind the “window” clearly shouting at us and trying to pass through. He saw us and made a rude gesture or two, probably cursing at us. “What’s that?” Gwydion asked, exaggerating his confusion. He pointed to his ears. “Can’t hear you.” He went on raving, and Gwydion just shrugged and folded his arms like *I can wait here all night if I have to.* Finally the guy calmed down and gestured like *So come in and get me then.* “What shall we do with him?” he asked.

“Take no chances,” I decided. “I’m draining his energy. I’m going to walk around this doorway and get behind him. When I’m in position I want you to bring him back, you can do that right?”

“I can see him, it should be a simple matter to bring him back to this plane.”

“Great. I’ll smack him, see how he likes that. Then I can just mind read him, get his address and the location of the book, and this can be done.”

“Very well. I will wait for your signal.”

“Come one Reves, the usual pin and poke.”

“Woof.”

“And hey, don’t worry about missing him before. Not your fault, there were some wet leaves or something back there you slipped on. Could have happened to anybody.”

He whined.

“I’ve already forgotten about it. Put it out of your mind.” By that time we were in position, roughly where he was going to appear from, at least Reves stopped and nudged me into place. I couldn’t tell where he was anymore, we were now looking “past” where he was, but I trusted Reves. I put my energy draining spell on, sparing no amount of willpower as I knew I was about to get it back so why bother holding back? “Ready!”

“Here he comes.” He popped into existence before me and Reves grabbed him on the left arm despite him trying to get away. Once pinned by those teeth he cried out and tried to get away but Reves held him fast. I struck out, but missed, tried again, missed again.

“Reves, come on, hold him will you?”

“You won’t take me!”

*Fine.* I gave up trying to pummel him and just lashed out with my palm, smacking him in the head and snapping it back. His energy flooded into me, and he went limp.

“Slippery little devil wasn’t he?” Gwydion remarked, and I realized the doorway into the astral had gone.

“Yes, my sensei would reprimand me greatly.” *It was my own fault. Holding onto so much magic dragged me down, and I was trying to hit him multiple times. That makes me less likely to hit. He’s always saying to go for the sure strike first, then follow up with multiple hits if my opponent*

*doesn't go down. He'll be drained and injured by that point, less likely to dodge. I always just go for the quick hits right at the start.*

"Wof wof wof," Reves laughed.

"Oh now you don't feel so bad?" I asked him. "You could let him go now."

He spat out the arm and the fomorian slumped to the ground.

"Let's get what we came for." I dropped the spell and went into his mind with mental magic.

Unconscious as he was, I got in easily and learned he had really been straining to try and dodge me, making me feel less bad. He couldn't have kept that up for much longer. But I wasn't there to sooth my bruised ego, I had information to extract. I got the combination to the safe, his home address, and what his car looked like. "We're done," I said as I came back out. I hauled him up with one arm by the back of his shirt, and his arms dangled down.

"There's a dumpster right over there," Gwydion suggested. "I'll go get the lid for you! I mean you're not taking with us, are you? If he wakes up he'll just make trouble."

"I'm putting him back in his car. He doesn't deserve it, but I won't just leave him lying here. Or put him in a dumpster." *It is the way we treat our enemies that shows our inner nature.*

"Suit yourself."

"Hey, what's going on down there?" someone called from above.

"Someone's up in the hole," he told me, looking up. "Don't know if your 'vision' extends that far. We better get out of here."

*Then let's at least do something cool tonight.* "Reves, vanish!"

"Hey, get back here!"

"Where did they go?"

"I don't know! Come on, someone should get down there."

"I'm not going down there, call the cops or whatever. Do you see this hole? Was it a grenade or something?"

"Nice job," I told him. "Come on."

We headed to his car and I took his house keys out of his pocket. (I left him his car keys) I locked the door with him inside, and put the image of his house into Gwydion's head with mental magic. He teleported us there and we simply went in through the front door. I didn't bother putting my divination magic back on, simply telling him where to go in the house and he found the safe, punching in the combination. With the book in hand we closed up the safe, left his keys on the table, and headed back out to teleport home.

## Chapter 16

We finish up with the tuatha, but then I get a strange offer

Where: Kelly's house

When: Just after that

"We should get this to the tuatha elders right away," Gwydion told me excitedly. He was paging through the book we had snagged.

"Hold on there, we're making at least one copy of it first," I told him. "We don't need it 'disappearing' on us and then we've got nothing."

"True, we don't exactly know who to trust, as one of my people has already been replaced. But you trust your contact, do you not?"

"Indisputably," I agreed. "They've risked their lives using the Bane many times before for this world, someone who replaced them wouldn't bother." *And they wouldn't have called me, concerned about you and Killian coming to blows they would have encouraged it. So I think we can safely say they're not been taken over or replaced.* "Still, it's a form of insurance and it won't take long."

"Very well. Go ahead." He handed the book over to me, and I handed it over to Kelly.

"Oh, how do I scan stuff again?"

"For crying out loud. Enhancement!" I used my vocation magic on her, and her voice brightened.

"Right, right, how did I forget that? Should be a breeze, come on."

We headed after her, and watched as she scanned the whole book in, then printed several copies.

"Actually, let's give them a copy and secure the original," Gwydion decided.

"I know where we can leave it," I told them. "Hey Reves, lets go check in on sensei. Even if someone tracked it to Japan, they would have to get through a squad of ninjas to get it."

"Woof!"

"Be right back."

Once in Japan I explained to my teacher what the book was, and he agreed to keep it safe for me. "Thank you, sensei. Hopefully this mission of mine will be done soon, and I can return here as usual to continue my training."

"We will be waiting. Be safe, my student."

When I got back Gwydion was sprawled in a chair, and my magic told me he was scowling.

"What's wrong?"

"I do not wish to lessen our accomplishment here but this book only seems to have the names of field agents. Those that would be tasked with completing the objective they were given. There are still no names of the fomorian elders that may have given the orders. Our true objective still eludes us. At least, unless those names are mixed up with the others, and noted in this funny code they used? I suppose that could be the case."

"With all the secrecy they employed, I doubt we'll ever find them," I agreed, sitting next to him. "They did go through a lot of trouble to stay hidden."

"That they did. I suggest we waste no time. Call your contact and arrange to have these records picked up so that we may put an end to this mission."

"Sounds like a plan to me." I got out my phone and had it make the call.

Half an hour later Sereni was sitting across the table from us, looking through the pages and pages of fomorian agents.

"This is quite a find," she admitted. "I'll take the copies and get them to our leaders right away. With luck we can have field agents picking up all these fomorians in the next twenty four hours. But you say you lost the evidence of any crimes from the last year?"

“Yes, we gave it to the person we thought was Parthalán,” I explained. “We have older records than that, if you need them. But you can do mind reading and divination magic on everyone you pick up. You don’t have to worry about human conventions of ‘oh, was the gun he fired at that woman really his’ or whatever nonsense their courts get into.”

“True. Just being in this book would seem to indicate a willingness to do violence to members of our race. Even if they have done nothing, they bear watching.”

“So our part is done then?” Gwydion asked. “I may return to my tower and my studies?”

“Unless you feel you have other leads you wish to follow up on?”

“I don’t think so,” I told her. “We could spend a year tracking everyone in the book down, seeing if they happened to know who a fomorian leader was. But you can do that much easier.”

“Quite. Now, tell me how the scheme worked again? I want to make sure I have it straight in my mind.”

“A tuatha would be chosen, or some mischief would be decided upon by the fomorian leadership,” I began. “They would send a letter to James in Greece NY, who would in turn call his contact in Greece the country. We have no idea if this was a joke on their part or it happened randomly or what. He, James, would get the name of an agent from Iarlaith of someone in the right area that could do that job. The fomorians have agents all over the world it seems. He would send two letters, one to the banker to put the funds into the account of the person doing the deed, and one to the person themselves about what the job was. He then, for some bizarre reason, kept the evidence of such deeds in his own house rather than just shredding or burning them.”

“Or flushing them?” Sereni asked. “I heard some famous person was accused of that recently?”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” I lied. *Don’t get me started with that guy.* “This was all done in code, so if someone caught one of the people involved nothing could be traced backwards, and it all looked innocent.”

“Even in the book,” Gwydion agreed. “It’s all code, the same ‘power wash’ and ‘take for a swim’ we saw in the letters. They knew what it meant, the code isn’t spelled out there. In court a good lawyer could argue all these entries are simply innocent, legitimate, businesses. It would create doubt, maybe enough to get him off.”

“Lucky for us we have better ways of doing things,” I mused. “The banker would separately send notices to a PO Box picked up by an innocent third party if an account was running low on funds. Money would be put in, there would be no confirmation of this back. How they kept him from embezzling... Or maybe they didn’t?”

“He was a patriot, don’t forget,” Gwydion reminded me. “He was probably glad to do it ‘for his country.’”

“And I suppose the fomorians that hired him could watch him with magic, a simple yes/no question of if the man was stealing from them would be enough. He may not have dared.”

“That too.”

“Okay, got it,” she told us, finishing her notes. “The thing to do will be to try and catch as many of them at once as we can. We’ll have to move fast, so word doesn’t get out and they run. But I’m sure we can find the resources if it means making sure our people here are safe. Thank you both for this, on behalf of my people in both worlds.” She lifted the sack she had brought and set it on the table, and it clinked quite nicely. “Your payment, for services rendered.”

“Thank you,” I told her.

“And that stupid Killian doesn’t get a copper of it,” Gwydion crowed. “Serves him right.”

“Yes, well, I do apologize about him. I thought we had screened him well enough, and his geas would keep him from betraying you as he did. I guess not.”

“We didn’t have to hurt him, and he’s joined a ‘cause’ that is about to crumble,” I told her. “I think it’s a fair enough fate he doesn’t get the full payment for his efforts.”

“True enough. These are all the copies?”

“Yes.”

“Then I will take my leave. Tayna, Kelly, I hope we can call upon you again if something should come up your skills could be useful for?”

“Not for a month at least,” I pleaded with a laugh. “I have films to make!” *Though if those are gold coins like before in that sack, I should be set for quite a while thank you very much.*

“Of course. But we do leave on good terms?”

“Call upon me any time,” I told her. We shook hands.

“Excellent. Gwydion, thank you again, we knew you were the right man for the job.”

“Naturally. It was my pleasure.” He gave a bow and they too shook hands. I showed her out, and by the time I got back he was already making piles out of the coins. With them divvied up (he sacrificed a few to give to Kelly for her part at the end) he put his share back in the sack and looked around. “I guess this is goodbye,” he told us.

“I suppose so,” I agreed. “It was nice working with you.” *You turned out to be a nicer guy than I expected, with how you were introduced.* “If I can ever help with something, you know where to find me. Though we may move soon... Just ask Sereni if you need to find us, I’ll give her our new address if and when the time comes.”

“Very well. It was nice working with you as well, Tayna. You pushed to truly see this mission through to the end, and for that I am grateful. I make the same offer, if you need my skills please don’t hesitate to get word to me.”

“I won’t.” I hugged him and he bowed to Kelly.

“Goodbye.” He opened a door to Otherworld, closing it behind him.

“I for one am glad that’s over,” Kelly told me. “I finally get you all to myself again.”

“I know what you mean. Running all over like that, trying to figure out all these plots. I’m ready for a very long weekend of cuddling, audio books, hot baths, more cuddling...”

“Poor baby,” she told me, pulling me close. “Maybe if you get those clothes off you can have a massage for those achy muscles of yours.”

“Now that’s the best offer I’ve heard all week,” I told her, pulling away and grabbing my shirt to whip it off, “and I’m sitting not ten feet from a pile of gold coins!”

It was two days later when the doorbell rang, and Kelly went to answer it. I was reviewing some scripts for my next film, all short form adult entertainment pieces sadly still no offers of serious roles from serious producers. I had a lot of offers, I was good at what I did after all, and they were piling up after so long chasing fomorians around.

“It’s for you,” Kelly told me, coming back into the room. “And there’s a weird looking vehicle out there. Never seen anything like it.”

“Vehicle?”

“Like a cross between a car and a plane.”

“Come on Reves.” He padded by my side as I debated putting my energy spell on. I decided against it, someone after me wouldn’t have rung the bell, would they? “Yes?”

“Tayna?” asked a voice. I didn’t recognize it, nor did my magic register this person as familiar. They were male, possibly human but that didn’t mean anything.

“That’s me.”

“My name is Jeremiah,” he told me. “I’m mainly just a driver but I’ve been instructed to make you an offer. I understand you’ve been looking for the fomorian leadership?”

“Yes...” I hesitantly answered.

“Very good. If you agree I’ve been instructed to bring you to meet one of the council. If this is a bad time I can return later, or if you do not wish to hear his offer I will tell him you decline.”

“What offer?”

"I'm afraid I'm not privy to that," he admitted. "Something about a great opportunity I believe? But it does relate to your recent exploits, if I may call them that."

"For him or me? No, don't answer that. Do you mind waiting a moment? In fact, why don't you come in? I can offer you a drink at least while I make up my mind."

"That would be very kind of you."

I showed him to the kitchen and poured him some lemon-aid, introduced him to Kelly, and excused myself for a moment. Going into the other room I asked my magic what this was all about.

*Peace in our time, that famous phrase,  
the clock starts to chime, you know there are ways,  
the offer, sublime, it's not a maze,  
first step of the climb, on your shoulders it lays.*

*So I guess it's not warning me away, in fact it's suggesting that this straightforward offer could lead to peace in our time, and it's on my shoulders. I can take care of myself, or run if I had to with Reves, there's no reason I shouldn't see what this is all about.*

"All right," I told the man, popping my head back into the room. "I'll go with you. Anything I should pack?"

"Pack? Even with a round trip I'll have you home by dinner time," he promised. "You won't need anything."

"Are you sure about this?" Kelly whispered to me, coming over.

"I asked. It's fine. Something big is happening, I have to see what it is."

"Okay." She kissed me. "Good luck."

We headed out to the vehicle and Reves got in the back seat while I hopped up front. My magic was a bit confused, telling me this was both a plane and a car, I had to narrow the focus a little and try to tell about various parts of it and put it together in my own head.

"And we're off," said the man, touching a control. The craft smoothly rose into the air, the ground dropping away from us.

"Wait, you didn't start any engine," I protested. *Unless it's the quietest one ever made.*

"Indeed, I did not. But I will do so now." He touched another control and my magic told me the propellers on the front of the thing started spinning up, but almost silently. The ship started moving forward, slowly and then more quickly.

"What is this vehicle?"

"As you may know, or perhaps not, flying cars have long been the dream of the common man. I don't know why, flying is much more dangerous, and do you really want to live so far from something you have to *fly* to it? Why not just move closer to it if it's so important? Anyway, this one has been modified with magic."

"But it's technology!" *Of course Herman could do it, but I want to stay in character here and act the 'interested but clueless person' as long as I can.*

"Only in part. The hovering system is magic, as it's quite easy to make something go up and down with magic. Not so much trying to get any kind of speed out of your flight I'm afraid. So we simply installed an electric motor to turn the propellers, and the batteries are far in the back, magically made to deliver unlimited power." Of course he said "unlimited power" as one might expect. "This has the added benefit of providing unlimited range to the vehicle."

I rolled my eyes. "Right. So we get a faster cruising speed by using at least that much technology." *And Herman enchanted his batteries too, I remember that much, for his car.*

“Exactly! We should be up to our full speed in just a moment, so please sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride.”

“Where are we headed, by the way?”

“New York City.”

We landed on top of a building in New York and Jeremiah escorted me down some stairs, then to an elevator, and then to an office. “If you wait here a moment I’ll announce you,” he told me.

“Of course.”

He left and was back in a moment, leading me into the office which as far as I could tell was fairly nicely furnished.

“Ah, Tayna, we meet at last,” said the man behind the desk. “Welcome to New York. Jeremiah, you may go for now. Please send him in.”

*Him? Playing the pronoun game with me now?*

“Thank you sir.” He left and closed the door behind him as I sat.

“I hope you had a nice flight.”

“It was an interesting one. So why am I here? Something about peace in our time, I’m to understand?”

“Did Jeremiah tell you that?”

“Not exactly. Just that you were someone I had been looking for.”

“Well, I would be disappointed if you didn’t come here with some idea of what we wanted. Given what you were able to do against us, when you put your mind to it. Yes, I’m to understand you were looking for those in positions of power among the fomorians. The elders, you may have called us?”

“Yes. We wanted to ask you nicely to please call off your attacks on the tuatha- by the way I didn’t catch your name...”

He laughed. “I haven’t given it. Why not hear my proposal first?”

“Before you give me your name? Seems suspicious.”

“I accept that,” he agreed with a sigh. “But you have been working against us.”

“You’re the bad guys, of course I am.”

“Are we though?”

“Yes.”

“Are we?”

“... Yes?”

“The fact is, we fomorians have never been the instigators in our conflicts with the tuatha. I hate to say this, Tayna, but you’ve been working for the wrong side the whole time.”

“Doesn’t that depend on your perspective?”

“Indeed.”

The door opened behind us, and the guy called to the other to come in. As he approached I realized it was someone I knew. “Well, well, well,” I said, clicking my tongue. “Wondered where you ended up.”

“You know Killian, of course,” the man told me.

“Hey Tayna. Nice to see you again.”

“Is it though?” I parroted from the man before.

“Yes. I hope you don’t think too badly of me.”

“Killian here had gotten everything he needed, hanging out with you, and we hoped your investigation wouldn’t stop with him gone,” the man said. “And in fact the opposite happened. You stepped up your game and did it without any help from us. I’m impressed. Now our agents in the field are getting snapped up by the fomorians, and it’s come to this.”

“Come to what?” I asked, feeling I was about to learn why I had been called there.

“Killian?”

“I tried to tell you,” he told me. “Remember your history, or better yet our history. We settled in Ireland first, then the tuatha came and kicked us out. Then they left for Otherworld. But did they offer us Ireland back? No, of course not. Then we tried to simply live our lives, but the tuatha couldn’t have that. They had to use their political power to keep us down, trampled our rights, kept us second class citizens. That’s who you’ve been working for.”

“But your side isn’t all roses,” I countered. “Killing people here, destroying their portals?”

“Yes, to keep them in Otherworld, as they love it so much. Let us settle somewhere, it’s been thousands of years. But no, they keep disrupting us, making our lives miserable. We had enough of it.”

“The problem with living so long is,” said the man, “all those old grudges never go away. Human society only moves forward by those people holding despicable opinions dying off. That doesn’t quite happen with us. I was a child when the tuatha came to Ireland, to drive us out. And for what? So they could leave again when they got tired of it? All that death, that sacrifice done by my people turned out to be for nothing. But I’m tired of it. We lost, it’s time to admit that.”

“So what does that have to do with me? Write a letter to them and say you surrender.”

“Were it so easy,” he told her. “No, this latest ‘purge’ if you will shall only serve to harden our hearts further. The cycle begins again, and where does it stop? No, it must be stopped, the elders see that now. I see that now. And that’s where you come in.”

“But I’m not tuatha or fomorian.”

“Exactly. You’re a neutral third party each side respects. Tayan, we want you to help us broker a peace, a real peace, between our peoples.”

## Chapter 17

Peace actually has a chance

Where: Some building in NY

When: No time has passed

“You want me?” I gasped, not believing a word of it. “I’m no mediator. In fact I can recommend one, we found him trying to find Zane when this all started.”

“It’s not exactly a mediator we’re looking for.”

“It’s not going to be a trial by combat is it?”

“Not that either.”

“Just tell her,” Killian grunted.

“I’m getting to it. Tayna, we want to have a peace talk, but not the one you’re envisioning. There’s just so much bad blood between our two people having a discussion on such an important topic could be a disaster. Heck, just figuring out what to order for lunch among the council takes twenty minutes. Can you even imagine it? Twelve or so people around a table, half one race and half another, all wanting to be heard, all with something to say? No, it wouldn’t work. Don’t get me wrong such things have worked in the past, barely, but we want to try something different. Something that may actually produce results, and quickly. Let it not be said we cannot learn the lessons of history ourselves.”

“I would never say that,” I promised. “You’ve got my attention, just what are you planning?”

“In order to keep each side safe, and on track, and so we don’t have to look at the smug, stuck up faces of those smarmy, insolent-”

Killian cleared his throat.

“Yes, sorry, so there is no temptation to start anything physical or let our old prejudice at how they dress, or talk, or smell, or sneer at us like we’re-”

He cleared his throat again.

“Yes, sorry, we would like you to be our avatar for the purposes of this meeting.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“Well it’s never been done before, so I wouldn’t expect you to. In essence, we are going to assign one of our members to mentally link with you before the negotiations begin, and the tuatha will do the same with their avatar. Then, the two of you will meet so that we stay safe in an undisclosed location. We will then decide what you should say, and you will tell the avatar, which will be relayed to the tuatha delegation and vice versa. We will hopefully stay more civil if it’s just us in the room, and you will have only one voice to listen to. We can shout it out among ourselves all we want, and not look foolish in front of the tuatha. You can be our face and our voice. A neutral party, meaningless to attack so the proceedings are less at risk.”

“But I helped your enemy! I gave the book with all your agents in it to the tuatha. How can you not hate me?”

“Do not think of it as aiding our enemy. Think of it as an audition for us.”

“What?” I had no idea what he was talking about.

“We suspected when I was assigned to the task,” said Killian, “that another would be chosen to try and keep us in line, away from each other’s throats. Someone the tuatha knew could handle the job. We guessed correctly, as you showed up. I mean come on, a fomorian and a tuatha on the same case to stop us fomorians killing tuatha? Rather absurd, but they went with it. Of course they didn’t know, but they must have suspected it was us. Who else would have the motivation or the power?”

*I really haven’t given these guys enough credit, have I? This is nuts, they were counting on me, not me specifically but someone, showing up?*

“Honestly,” the other fomorian said, “we needed those agents gone but were not sure how to get rid of them. The way we did it worked out exactly as we expected.”

“What?” I shouted at the risk of repeating myself. “Am I on some kind of bad acid trip or something here? They were your people!”

He laughed. “I understand your confusion. This terrorist vibe we’ve been exploring these past forty years or so, it’s not working. It never would work. The tuatha have more resources, more magic, and they’ve had the upper hand so long... But if we called for peace our own people would rebel against us. Say we were just weak, or too old to lead anymore. We needed those voices, the most radical voices, the voices willing to kill, to destroy, to cause trouble, *silenced*. And that’s exactly what you did. And for that you have our thanks.”

“You threw them to the wolves,” I breathed. “You got rid of your most loyal subjects, the ones that would protest peace the loudest.” *Who would be the biggest threat to that peace. With them rotting in jails or magically prevented from doing harm somehow, more liberal voices can be heard.*

“Correct. With them gone we can proceed. We showed the tuatha we *could* have continued these acts, we *could* have killed more of them. And we could again, should they not listen to us. We bargain from a position of strength, not of weakness. After all, say peace talks fail. Now even more of us will rise up, to get our people back and continue the fight. We would create the next generation of fomorian resistance. Or the first generation to know peace. We wanted to give the peace option every chance, and that meant sacrificing a few for the many.”

“So,” I was trying to keep up here, “all of this was according to your plan? Just how far ahead did you plan for?”

“Indeed. You performed admirably. When Killian here left you didn’t give up, you soldiered on and finished the mission. Had you not I would have had him drop a few hints in your lap, see if that got you going again. We needed someone strong, someone that could see the mission, and later our peace talk through. We were lucky to get you.”

“Oh, now you’re just... stop... come on.”

“No, I’m serious. We need you. Become our avatar, and when the peace treaty is laid out and we actually come together to sign it, which we will have to do, act as security for us. Of course we’ll have others but we would be honored to have you. You’ll already be known to everyone where, it won’t be unusual for you to still be there. Tayna, this still won’t be easy, acting as our avatar. But we think you’re a good fit. An actress, good with magic, good at hand to hand so you have no visible weapons, you’re ideal. They chose well. Now, let them see you again, someone they trust, asking for peace on our behalf.”

“It’s such a crazy idea. An avatar? Just the two of us backed by all of you and whoever is on their side. I mean, give me a minute to ask, to think about it. It’s never been tried.”

“Take all the time you need, we need to propose the idea to the tuatha anyway. And we think it’s finally time to stop doing things the same way, as clearly that way isn’t working. I mean have you seen the world. Not literally, I mean no offense of course. But you must listen to the news?”

“I have seen, I get it. I won’t need long.”

“Very well. I can you have brought home if you need?”

I shook my head. “I could get home and back here, now. Just give me a minute.” I got up and headed to the other side of the room. *Let’s see what my magic has to say about all this.*

*You need to ask? Their intention is pure  
so go out there. And don’t be demure.*

*Huh. I guess that was clear enough...*

“Okay, I’ll do it!” I told them.

“Wonderful!” they both said.

“Thank you, thank you so much,” said the fomorian. He stuck out his hand, started to realize how stupid that was, but I grabbed it anyway. “Right, right, he said you could... Head home for now, there’s a lot of work to be done on our side but when we have a date we’ll let you know. Naturally you’ll be paid in actual American dollar bucks, whatever they call those things now. Starting now, I mean, you have to make a living too and as we’re not set on the dates we don’t want you turning down work and regretting it. We’ll try to set it up within the next week or so.”

“Thank you!”

“Of course, it’s our pleasure. Can I have my driver fly you home?”

“I’ll just go directly, if it’s all the same to you. Flying doesn’t do much for me.”

“Yes, I could see, er, yes, that could be a problem couldn’t it? Whatever you wish. We’ll be in touch.”

“I’ll look forward to it. Let’s go Reves!”

And so I got some new professional looking clothes (duh) and when they set up the date and location I got ready. The whole nine yards, makeup, heels but not too high, hair styled and put up. Reves again got brushed and I bought him some more expensive food too, as a thank you. He was going to have to sit around for hours during the negotiation so I wanted to make sure he knew I appreciated it. I promised him some days off too if he wanted, after it was done.

“I’d give you peace and whatever else you wanted in a second!” Kelly told me when I emerged from my room. “Go wow them!”

I fully intended to, heading to the building where a fomorian used mental magic to “connect” to my head, and then sent me on to the location we were going to use as the meeting room. I sensed plenty of drinks and snacks on a cart to one side, and as it was still a bit early I checked out the bathrooms and generally looked around for any explosives or other traps. Couldn’t hurt to be too careful, right? With that done I settled in to wait, but the tuatha avatar showed up a bit early too, and I stood as she appeared in the room. We took one look at each other and both started laughing our butts off. *I was more tense than I realized, and she must be too. But I think it’s going to go okay.* I got an extreme sense of confusion from my fomorian counterpart, and when we were finally laughed out we shook hands. She too was wearing professional attire, and my magic told me she was a knockout based on that silhouette I was sensing.

“Nymph?” I asked. *Probably the only other race that can say they’re better looking than us trolls.*

“Yeah,” she admitted. “Troll?”

“That’s me.”

She shook her head. “Honestly. Now I see why they picked me. Tuatha, am I right?”

“They can be a bit much, no offense to those in your head.”

“They say none taken.” She giggled again. “They knew who was coming for the other side and said ‘well, if that’s how they’re going to go we’ll show them!’”

“I should have dressed down, *that* would have shown them. Arrived wearing a trash bag or something.”

“Gone the opposite of their expectation. I would have approved. That is what this whole meeting is about, isn’t it?”

“So they tell me. I’m Tayna, by the way. And this is Reves, my companion and helper.”

“Isabella. Nice to meet you both.”

“Woof.”

“And you. I’ve checked the place, but please feel free to check yourself.” *Before you wreck yourself, am I right? No?* “Bathrooms are down the hall to the left, and we have drinks.”

She stared at me a moment. “No, I think I’ll choose to trust, thank you very much. If you say the place is clean, it’s clean. You’re not going to blow yourself up. I’ll get us a drink, what will you have?”

“Just a cola, I think.”

“All right, lemon lime for me.” She carried two drinks to the table and poured them from the can into some glasses she had put ice in.

“Thank you.”

“Sure thing. You ready to talk some peace?”

“Let’s get this peace thing started!” I told her.

“Very well.” She opened her briefcase and I opened mine, and we sat across from each other at the table. Pulling some papers out she squared them and set them to the side. I got out a laptop and booted it up, bringing up a text file to type in and make notes. I also turned on an audio recording. She put on her serious face with a deep breath, squaring her shoulders and sitting up straight, and I did the same.

“I’ll begin, if you don’t mind?” she asked.

“Please,” I allowed with a wave.

“Hello everyone, my name is Isabella and I am the official avatar of the tuatha delegation here at the request of the fomorian elders. With me are...” and she named them.

“The fomorian elders greet you, Isabella, and wish to begin by thanking the tuatha delegation for agreeing to meet with them. I am Tayna, official avatar of the elders for this peace talk. With me are...” and I named them.

“The tuatha delegation greets the elders and wishes to begin with a high level overview of what the elders wish to accomplish with this meeting.”

“Of course. The elders wish, in this meeting...”

And so it went. The two of us acted as a buffer between the emotions of the group, they could rant and rave among themselves all they wanted, while we sat there passively sipping our drinks or munching doughnuts or whatever. When they were ready to speak I put it in terms the other side could relate to, and they did the same. In essence the fomorian “demands” were simple enough. They wanted to finally be left alone to raise their kids wherever they wanted. They wanted not to be judged against tuatha culture but their own. They wanted reparations for past wrongs, and the opportunity to study magic without the tuatha freaking out about it. The tuatha of course wanted reparations for past wrongs (so I figured they would cancel each other out to some degree) and to know there would be no more violence against them. Help rebuilding broken portal tombs, which the elders agreed was fair, though of course that was just the manual labor side not the secrets of their passage into Otherworld. Speaking of Otherworld the elders wanted fomorian teachers in tuatha schools, to start teaching that their race was not inferior and if other fomorians wanted to settle there laws for both races would be equal. Both sides demanded a neutral court, in case of conflict, and to my surprise Zane’s initiative was offered. Neither side was against it, and both promised resources and personnel to help staff the place and keep it running smoothly as long as both sides contributed equally. There was of course nuance, and compromise to all this, but that was the gist of it. We could each call for a break if the voices in our head got to be too much (it was weird having another person riding around in there, and Isabella agreed with me on that one) or if we just got tired of sitting there for so long. I showed her some stretches I did as part of my warm-ups for my martial arts, and she showed me some yoga poses she liked, so we got on well enough during the breaks. She was a model, of course, and expressed interest in any films I had been in.

“Uh, it’s nothing you would have seen,” I hedged.

“Are you sure? I could have sworn you were familiar when I first saw you.”

“Nope, very niche stuff, not popular, best not to look into it.”

“Okay...”

Days passed, but for a wonder, it worked. We came to an agreement, signed it as avatars, and the next day the two groups got together for real. Things were tense there for a bit for nobody started flinging fireballs though they just had to acknowledge the authority of the other group and sign their names, all the negotiation had been done. Each side seemed a little surprised, honestly, at how easy it had been. *But of course. We're just that good. But really, after so long did anyone want all these negative experiences to continue? Of course not.* The whole thing had made me realize just how messed up the human court system was as well. Having the accused in the room there, no matter how much a person professed to ignore race or gender, made such things possible to matter. Why not have an avatar stand in for the accused? They could do it with a simple earpiece and microphone, not magic. That way the jury would see only the facts of the case, not the person behind it, because wasn't justice supposed to be blind? The judge shouldn't even know the true identity of the accused, not really. That would truly bring equality to the courtroom. No more harsher sentences for people seen as “deserving it” or those not minorities getting lighter ones. *But how to introduce such a concept and make it stick across the whole legal landscape? Maybe I'll mention it to Zane and they can have a court system like that, which could spread to the human world after we prove it works here? They want to do things differently, after all. Because the old ways aren't working. Well, this is a new way, right? We proved this avatar stuff worked, let's expand the use of it and finally get the blind justice we should have.*

“You did it,” Kelly squealed when I finally arrived home after the final meeting. “I'm so proud of you!” She swept me up into her arms and I hugged her back.

“It was certainly an experience,” I told her, stepping back and letting my hair down. “And things can finally go back to normal around here, whatever that means.”

“But they're going to stick to it?”

I shook my head. “That's for them to decide. But I think they both want this, honestly. That's why it went so well. That fomorian was right, everything they had done up to that point hadn't worked. Why not just drop all the hate and ill will and start trying to work together. What has working at odds with each other gotten them anyway? Everybody loses, in the long run. But this way, everybody can win. Tides and boats, and I don't just mean rising sea levels either.”

“I hope so. I'm glad it went well, and they didn't need you as security after all.”

“Nope, everyone was on their best behavior. They signed the treaty, shook hands, and went their way again.”

“I'm glad. Go get some rest, you look like you could use it.”

“Of course. I can try to get back on a regular schedule again. And Reves, as promised, you're free to go.” I stripped off his harness. “Thanks for being by my side through all that. I know it must have been boring for you. See you in a few days, right?”

“Woof!”

“That's my guy. See you.”

He vanished.

*Now for some much needed rest. Getting to know Kelly better. Getting back to making films. Spending some of this money I've earned. Oh yes, the future looks good indeed.*