

The Monster Diaries
Part 4
The Diary of Jesse Faden
Part 1: The Alternate Reality of the Director

Chapter 1

I make it back to my childhood home

Where: Dreaming

When: Present day, present time

I still remember the terror I felt that Halloween night when my brother and I were taken. It's been fourteen years, but I can still close my eyes and be back in that strange place, terrified but unable to move. I'd like to say I've put it behind me, but sometimes, just sometimes, it's like I'm back there again. That little girl, walking those same steps, like I am right now. I'm dreaming, dreaming of what I've been able to remember about that night? Or just what I think happened? Or maybe it's just a dream and I've gone totally crazy. Who could really say? But something pulled me from my home that night. Something brought me halfway around the world. Something I can't explain took from me, and gave to me, and made me forget. But it was me that made me relive it. It must be, this could only come from inside me.

In the dream we've made it around the neighborhood, my younger brother Dylan and I, and the group of kids we were with has gone their way as we went ours. It was time to head home. My parents had let the group of us go out, no parents, finally! They trusted us, trusted me, of course in our sleepy little town nothing ever happened, what was there to worry about? Nothing, I told them. And they agreed. But we were the last, and it was time to head for home. The night was crisp and our bags heavy, he was probably whining about his feet hurting or something but both of us stopped and stared at the man that stepped out from nowhere. I remember thinking about how strange he looked, how pale, but yet there was something about him that captivated me. Something inside me stirred and yearned, but for what I wasn't sure. He looked at us and smiled, his teeth sharp and pointed in his mouth. *What a cheesy vampire*, I thought to myself. *Doesn't even look like real teeth*. How little I knew then.

"You two will come with me," the man said simply, just a statement of fact about what was going to happen. Of course we would! All thoughts of fleeing, of danger from this man were wiped away. There was only the desire to please him, to do as he asked. We dropped our bags of candy and stood by him, looking up at him as though he was everything to us. And he was. Now. "Good," he told us. "Good. Close your eyes, take my hand, and I will lead you to where you must go." We did so. Rushed to it, such a reasonable request could not be wrong. But in reality we couldn't do anything else. He didn't lead us far, but the sense of being *here* changed, to being somewhere else. The sidewalk under our feet became something else, the sound of the wind through the trees became silence, our footsteps dropped away. But it was fine, I had my brother's hand and the man's hand, my eyes were closed. I trusted him to lead me. I would have followed him anywhere. All those times my parents had warned me of strangers, all the signs in school, keeping my brother safe, my own reason to not go with this man- gone from my mind. I had to obey, there was nothing else. My terror had not yet begun, but it wouldn't be long. Finally we stopped. "Master," said the man. "I have brought you something."

The voice that replied was nothing like I had ever heard before. It sounded both far away and close to us. Intimate. Hungry and eager yet restrained. "So you have. My servant, should you not be guarding the aperture? Coming through yourself, the tuatha woman could close the gateway behind you. I would not have a vampire, mad with hunger, as my cellmate for the rest of eternity. Clawing and howling at the wall just outside my cell? No, I would soon long for my solitude again though I curse it at this very moment, a paradox I am not eager to explore."

"Master, my only thought was for you, and these two were so close the risk was slight. Consume them, and you will have the strength to tear open your side of the gateway. If the tuatha has not come by now, she will not for another moment. The passageway is almost open, can you not taste your freedom? Take them and use their strength as your own!"

The voice seemed to consider, in silence, the words of the man we had followed. I felt strange, unearthly eyes upon me, taking my measure. I had never felt so small or helpless. I could feel the hunger in the voice as it spoke next. "Your plan is not without merit. Perhaps they would be enough to allow me to break this accursed wall early. See how thin it is? Never before have they left it so long. I dared to hope they had died this year. Even a moment could make all the difference, and they will not be missed. A pity they will never understand the honor they have, of helping one such as me to break free from this place. Bring them closer, I will consume them as you suggest. Their strength will be minuscule, but every bit will aid me, in that you are correct."

"Yes, my master."

I was shoved, and pressed against something neither soft or hard. I felt something reaching towards me, wrapping around me as though touching me through rubber. I wanted to run, as they had been talking my terror had increased, but despite that I still could not move. And now I had no chance to get away, the strength of the man holding me was absolute. My brother, or was it me, whimpered and squeezed their eyes shut further. "Children of destiny," said the voice. "I see it now, as close as I am. Yes, consuming them will strengthen me more greatly than I dreamed. Their potential shall become mine, instead, as their fate is rewritten. You have done better than I dared to hope. How did you come by such a pair, my servant?"

"Master?"

A low chuckle. "You can't even see it, can you? What they could have become? So blind, I forget how blind you lesser creatures are. You see nothing; not magic, nor the threads of possibility that cling to them which will soon become unraveled at my hands. Come here, young ones, yes, I can almost reach you now."

I felt it. Something was being leached from me. Something precious, something bright and whole, being taken from me by the thing trying to grasp me. "No, no!" I managed.

"I think that's about enough of that," said a new voice behind us all. The feeling stopped, but I knew I had lost. I felt weak, dizzy, couldn't focus my thoughts anymore.

"Betraxia?" exclaimed the man, clearly spooked. "You came in after me?"

"Yes. Traffic was terrible, sorry I didn't get here earlier. I felt something off about the tear tonight, and I expected at least one of you morons to be on guard duty. And here you are, inside! They really tore open this year, didn't they, if you can just walk in here like this. I'm glad I didn't just seal it. Those two are coming with me. You I don't care about, stay here between places, trapped forever, for all I care."

"I think not!"

The pressure holding us to the barrier went away, and we stumbled back. "Don't open your eyes children," said the woman. Yes, it was a woman that had come, and she was saving us? I grabbed Dylan tight, he too was trembling just as I was. We heard the sounds of combat. A sword being swung through the air? Howls of agony and of frustration from the other voice. I felt it trying to break the barrier, to reach us again and finish consuming us. "Come on, he'll regenerate in a moment," cried the woman, and she hauled me back the way we had come. "This way, if you want to live!" I stumbled forward, half dragging my brother but we weren't fast enough. The lady swore. "He's breaking through! Gods, we'll never make it. I have to seal it now, but what will that mean? I'm sorry children, I hope you come out of this all right!" She let my arm go, and I cried out. "Don't leave us!"

Then something happened. A tearing, or a sealing, or both, but it left me spinning, spinning, never stopping, never slowing. But I was stopped. I was slowed. Where was I? What had happened? I was lying on my back and I couldn't open my eyes if I wanted to. And now another voice spoke, if a voice could be the opposite of that dark and horrible voice I had heard that tried to eat me, it would be this one.

"And what do we have here?"

I could not answer.

“Poor thing. How did you come to be here?” I felt a warm something touch my face. A hand? But could a hand be so soft, so warm, so light of touch as this? “Oh I see. You’ve had a close call little one. But look at you now, so much of you is gone. Will you ever be the same? And yet, that destiny of yours... I see it now, that short sighted little fool Deogen. He didn’t realize that was only your destiny *because* of his interference. Had he not tried to sidestep his own fate... But enough of that. What am I do to with you?” There was a pause. “I suppose there is only one thing to do. I will replace what you have lost with a bit of myself, it is a small enough thing in the end. Yes, you’re so tiny I will not miss it, and it will grow in wonderful ways inside you. We will be together, and the piece of me will be able to help you in the future. Here.” And now a flowing, into me, replacing what had been taken. My eyes opened but all I saw was brilliant radiance, and the hint of a face. “Oh no,” the voice said, laying a hand against my eyes. “It won’t do to see me now. Rest little one, rest. I will return you to your world, where you belong. Along with something that can help you, I think. Yes, I know just what to make, so you will be properly protected back home. I will send you through back to the material plane, it is all I can do at the moment. Forgive me if I miss the mark by a bit, you ride the strings of destiny now it is out of my hands. You go where you need to be, to begin your true journey. Farewell little one. Come visit me, if you ever learn how. Forget your terror now, forget, *forget*.”

Blackness.

And I awoke. The hotel room I was staying in came into focus, and I groaned. *The dream again. Must be because I’m so close, it reminded me.* I looked over at the clock, I had gotten into town too late the night before to return to what I believed to be my childhood home at last. But yet I had tossed and turned, too excited to sleep. Now it was late morning, time to do this, and see if my questions could be answered at last. I got up and stretched, heading to the bathroom. My green eyes stared back at me. Fourteen years it had taken to make my way back here. Whatever had happened to me that night had left me in Russia of all places, confused and alone. I had been restored physically, perhaps, but mentally my recovery had taken years. Not being in the US didn’t help, I spoke English and only English, so I had no idea what the doctors at the hospital I woke up in were saying. I later learned I had simply been found on the street, unresponsive, and brought there by a kind stranger. I never learned who, to thank them. It took them some time to realize I wasn’t an idiot spouting gibberish, just that I didn’t belong there. I wanted to go home, but I couldn’t remember it. I could barely remember my own name, much less that I had a brother. Whatever had been done to me, the draining, or the being that saved me had made me forget too much. Those details had slowly come back to me in the intervening years, after I was returned to the states and put into foster care. Without being able to tell where I had come from, the name of a single family member, nothing- they couldn’t return me to people I no longer knew, and no one seemed to want to claim me. I had no idea where I was from, so missing children reports from the entire US would have to be searched. No one bothered, and so I wandered the world. Never quite fitting in, never quite knowing the loving family I had left behind. Oh, I had done well enough considering. I relearned the skills I had lost, speech and mathematics, sports and literature. I had graduated collage, drifted, and tried to remember. My journey had led me here. Ordinary, Maine. Getting into town last night awakened something in me. I felt these streets familiar, this place was... home?

My shoulder length red hair was tangled and tousled from the night, and that would never do. I sighed, I couldn’t look like a homeless person meeting my parents, if they still lived around here. *Let’s make ourselves presentable, shall we?* I got ready for the day, even putting on some makeup despite it being my parents, they wouldn’t care. Hopefully they would be glad to see me no matter what state I was in. But it felt almost like I was putting a buffer between myself and the world, just so whatever I faced today wasn’t going to get under my skin. I even put on nice clothes and heels, nothing outrageous of course (I was still going to walk there after all) but wasn’t this almost a job interview? Of course all

my stuff was bought second hand, but given the waste in this country you could get some nice stuff if you knew where to look. Finally I took a deep breath. I was ready. I headed for the door, which opened for me as I got near it. There was nothing odd about that, it's just what doors did when you got near them. Everyone knew that, it was hardly worth mentioning. I headed down to the cafe next to the hotel to get something to eat before I left.

“Warm up your coffee?” said the waitress, coming over.

I reached for the cup, and it smoothly slid across the tabletop into my waiting hand. “Sure, that would be great. Thanks.”

For a moment she blinked at me, as if not believing her eyes. People did that around me. I had no idea why, I hadn't even registered the cup moving, not really. But others did, before deciding, as she did now, that she had imagined it. She smiled and filled my cup as I held it up to her.

“There you go.”

When I left chairs slightly moved out of the way so I didn't trip on them, again unnoticed by me. The door opened as usual, and I headed out towards what would become more and more familiar streets.

My excitement grew as I turned down what I was sure was my street. *Yes, I remember playing here, don't I?* I quickened my steps, I was almost home. After so long, after so many strange things had happened in my life, finally- *finally*- I would be able to look my parents in the eye and say “Mom? Dad? I'm home.” I held myself back from running, it was only three houses now. Two. One. And there it was. *My house!* It was just as-

“What a dump. I lived here?” I blurted, my mouth twisting into a grimace.

I stared at the house, having yet to set foot on the path up to the front door. This house did seem to match up with my memories, but yet... This place was run down and seemed abandoned. The lawn looked like it hadn't been cared for in months, possibly years. The paint was peeling, the driveway cracked and falling to pieces. I blinked back tears. No. No! Had they left? Simply abandoned the place? Impossible, the city wouldn't let a house just go wild like this, would they? It would be sold to someone, maybe someone who knew where my parents were. But this? This was abandoned, how could such a thing- Something nagged at me and I looked up and down the street.

It's not the only one. Other houses seem abandoned too. But none as badly as this one. What-what's going on in this neighborhood? Casting my mind back I realized that as I blankly stared out of the bus window that brought me here other houses in the neighborhood looked like this too. I hadn't registered it, but it wasn't just this street. This place was dying, and it seemed no one cared.

I stared ahead, my mouth set in a line. If no one lived here it was still my house. Whatever legal route I had to take, so be it. I would take it. I would reclaim the life I had lost, and see where the future went from there. I had gone through too much to be stopped now. This was my home town, and my childhood home. I would make a life for myself here, at least long enough to fix the house up and sell it, to further my search for my family. I stepped onto the walk.

Immediately I was hit by two conflicting compulsions. To turn back, to run, to never even look at this house again. And to be drawn forward, as though something inside was calling me, calling me, calling me home at last. I stood there, one foot on the path and the other on the sidewalk, paralyzed. Where was this feeling coming from? I could feel myself sweating, as I fought myself just to stay rooted to this spot. My breathing came in gasps, *am I having a panic attack? What is wrong with me? I have to go forward, I have to know what happened to them and this is the only way.* I took another step. Another. The feelings warred within me, something inside was awakening, ready to welcome me home. But terror, oh I should turn and race from this place as fast as I could. A week or two later I was almost

at the door. Three steps. Two. I would ring the bell, wait, and then see if our hidden key was still around back. One step.

The door opened.

I almost fled at that movement. Doors opened when you got near them, at least they did for me. I never noticed them doing it for others but they had to, right? I wasn't special. Doors didn't respect me any more than any other person, right? *Unlocked* doors, to be specific. Doors I had locked myself and now wanted unlocked. This door should have been locked. It shouldn't have opened. But yet, there it was, a portal into darkness, now awaiting me and beckoning me onward, while at the same time screaming at me to run away and never look back. No one stood there, no one opened the door. It must have been unlocked. *They left and didn't lock the door behind them? Impossible. But there it is. Have squatters been living here then? What am I going to find inside?*

I had come this far, I wasn't going to back down now. I stepped over the threshold. I was home. I remembered it now. That chair, that picture, the living room was mostly how I remembered it. The walls weren't covered with graffiti, the vase wasn't broken. If not for the dust, one might be forgiven for thinking they had just stepped out. But how? I moved about the house, or at least I wanted to, but something was drawing me upwards. I felt it more strongly now, as the opposite feeling I should turn and run was reaching a fever pitch. My curiosity drove me forward, my room, I had to see my old room. I went up the stairs. The door to my room opened.

Floating there in the middle of the room was a gun.

I blinked my eyes, trying to clear them. Gun. The dust and darkness (the lights hadn't worked, I tried them) must be playing tricks on me. Gun. I rubbed them. Gun. I stepped into the room, drawn by some kind of power I could no longer resist. Waves of some kind radiated from it, this felt like a dream. I put my hand up and the gun fell into it as though it was made for my hand.

I think we're finally getting somewhere. I heard in my mind. *Maybe now we can-*

Pain awoke within me. I screamed and passed out.

Whoops, did I do that? I didn't hear.

Chapter 2

The world starts to make sense to me

Where: My childhood home, Ordinary Maine

When: Late morning, November 21st, 2021

“Miss?”

“Miss, are you all right?”

“Think she’s dead?”

“Of course not. Why don’t you go look around the place, now that we can get near it. I’m still feeling some bizarre magic in the air. Making my skin crawl. Something must have caused it, and caused it to go away. Couldn’t have been her, she feels completely human.”

“I don’t know, something odd about this one. You’re not going to do a puca thing to her, are you? I mean should I leave you two alone up here? With her unconscious?”

“And what exactly is this ‘puca thing’ you speak of?”

“You know. All of it?”

“I most certainly do not. She’s completely safe with me, as you know. I don’t do that kind of thing anymore.”

“Do I? You seem awfully eager to get rid of- okay, I’m going, I’m going.”

I heard footsteps, and they receded down the hall and down the stairs. Two voices had been speaking, and I was lying on the floor. Something was in my hand. A gun? *But that’s impossible.* I felt something stirring within me, something that had been slumbering inside for almost my entire life. A consciousness, a being, if you will, that was starting to tell me things, even as I came to. I felt things, emotions, that I knew were not mine. Before I opened my eyes I knew a man was standing there, a man... Who was not a man. I opened my eyes.

What looked like a man was standing there. He was wearing a uniform of some kind with a blue shield patch on the right breast. He was looking down at me, concerned. The man had golden eyes, something I had never seen, and a fuzziness about the ears I couldn’t concentrate on at the moment. He looked concerned though, and brightened as he saw me stirring.

“Ah, you’re awake! Sorry we didn’t get here earlier. Someone was taking their time with breakfast. You would think someone that drinks their meals wouldn’t take so long but here we are. You slipped past us this morning, otherwise we could have entered this house together, if that’s what you wanted to do. What in the world are you doing here, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Huh?” I managed. The soul of wit, that was me at the moment.

“Oh my goodness, how rude of me,” said the man. “I’m Archie, I’m with Excellus, are you okay?” He took a step back. “Take your time, looks like you took a nasty fall or something? Can I help you up?” He offered his hand.

I shook my head and pushed myself to a sitting position, then shakily stood up. My head was pounding, at least the feeling of needing to run in terror was gone, as was the feeling something was calling me. But I felt things; from him, the room, myself. Nothing was making any sense anymore.

“Never saw a gun like that before,” Archie remarked. “Not that I’m all that familiar. Not gonna shoot me, are you?” he asked with a forced chuckle.

“Found it,” I mumbled. I remembered that much. I looked down at it, it was odd looking. Not like any pistol I had ever seen in movies or anything. But what did I know about guns?

“In the house? This house?”

I nodded, dropping it to my side again. It seemed to be mine, I wasn't going to let it go. I had no idea this guy's intentions, and I was only firing on one cylinder at the moment so if it kept him back a few paces, so much the better.

"Huh. Maybe that's what that fear effect came from. It seems to be gone now. You must have nerves of steel to have walked in feeling all that. We've been trying for- hey are you okay? You don't seem all that with it." He snapped his fingers in front of me.

He radiated concern, he really was worried about me, I realized. *How do I know that?*

"This is my house," I told him stupidly. "What are you doing here?"

"We keep an eye on this neighborhood," he explained. "A lot of weird things happen here, have for years. Not the most glamorous of jobs, but it's a living. We help deal with what comes after. My partner Emmett should be back in a second. Anything you can tell us about this place? We should get a statement, or if you know anything about what happened here to have started all this bizarre stuff happening, we would love to hear about it. Maybe we can finally put a stop to it and I can get a more interesting assignment. No?"

"I don't..."

"Huh. Well, there is a hospital not far away. Maybe we should have you checked out? Would you do that? Would you come with me and get checked out?"

"Maybe that's for the best."

"Agreed. Ah, here's my partner. Emmett, our sleeping beauty is awake. What did you say your name was?"

"I-" The second man came into the room. In my haze I registered several things. Pale skin. Red eyes. A flash of pointed teeth as he smiled at me and stuck out his hand like a brute, everyone knew the man should wait for the woman to initiate a handshake. But that same feeling, that I felt so long ago, of being attracted to someone on a level below my conscious thought. Suddenly I was twelve again, that man was coming for me, he was going to take me into the tunnel. I was going to get eaten again! No! No I had to get away! Away!

Suddenly everything in the room exploded away from me. The bed tipped up against the hall, the two men went flying. The windows shattered, the light bulbs shattered. I screamed, raised the gun, and pulled the trigger again and again, aiming at the pale man. Finally it didn't shoot anymore, and I sank to my knees, weeping. *What is happening to me? At least my headache is gone.*

"Ow," said the man. My eyes flew open. "That was rude," he said with a scowl. He was getting up again. "Lady, you're gonna owe me for the shirt, my pants, and about a gallon of blood to make up for all the healing I'm doing right now. What did you have to go shooting me for? Hey Archie, you okay there?"

"What?" I managed. *He's getting up from that? Impossible! What kind of stupid gun is this that won't shoot bullets that can kill somebody? I must have hit him... Hang on how many shots does this gun hold?*

"What happened?" asked the other man. He was getting up and shaking his head.

"Your 'only human' did something funky. Man, will you look at these pants? Ruined!"

"Forget about your pants," Archie grumbled. "She needs help, look at her."

"She needs a stern talking to, is what she needs. Shooting me like that, honestly. What did she hope to accomplish anyway?"

"Impossible," I said. "How are you still alive?"

"No thanks to you," he told me. He was patting himself. "No bullets? That's odd. What, did I get shot with the idea of a gun? What's the big idea, anyway? I was being a perfect gentleman and you just flung me around and then shot me. So rude. Who are you?"

"Jesse, my name is Jesse."

“Ah, now we’re getting somewhere!”

“No, no, I’m fine, don’t help me,” Archie managed. He had been flung upside down and was righting himself, then got up. “Just worry about your pants.”

“I am worried about them! I can’t walk around town like this!”

“So take them off. Most of the woman around here have seen you like that anyway.”

He chuckled. “You know that’s right.”

Archie shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Miss? Jesse? What was that?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything.”

He considered. I felt concern from him again, a kind of amusement from the other man. “You didn’t know he was a vampire? That shooting him was useless?”

“Vampire?” I stumbled back a step, my back pressed to the wall behind me. The nightstand that used to be there had been flung and was now over there. *What had done that? Me? Did I do that?*

You really must learn control.

I felt a stab of pain again, as the voice spoke to me, and I winced. *There’s that voice again, what is going on here?*

“Oh boy,” Emmett moaned. “Now you’ve done it. I don’t think she knew. Wow, she really wanted to kill me.”

“Well, she had just met you.”

“Har de har harr.”

“He looked like someone from when I was young,” I explained, as that would justify shooting a guy. “He did something to me. I shouldn’t have shot you, but you looked like him. Felt like him. I panicked...”

Not exactly an apology was it?

Ow! It was worse that time, hearing that voice was like a pin being driven behind my eyes. Get out of my head!

Very well. I can see I’m actually damaging you so clearly this method of communication will not work out. I’ll figure out a different one.

The presence, and the pain, vanished. I blinked in relief and tried to focus on what the two were talking about.

He glanced at the other man. “A vampire in her past? I guess that would invoke such a reaction...”

“Look, clearly something has happened to you,” Archie told me. “Let’s just stay calm for now, and take it step by step. We’ll get to the bottom of this. We’re professionals, okay?”

I swallowed. *That guy just took all those bullets and laughed it off. He’s more worried about his clothes. This guy seems to be some kind of investigator. Neither is rushing me, or threatening me, despite what I just did. If I’m going to get to the bottom of this, I’m going to have to trust them.* “Okay,” I told them reluctantly.

“Okay!” He grinned as if that settled the whole thing. “Mind if I hang onto the gun for now? I think it’s out but let’s not have any more... outbursts.”

“Sure.” I stood up again, intending to hand it to him. I opened my hand. *At the same time do I want to just hand over my only means of-* The gun vanished.

Emmett whistled. “Don’t see that every day.”

I stupidly stared at my hand. *I had a gun a second ago, right? It was right here.* I looked around, had it fallen?

“No, it didn’t fall,” Archie assured me. “Curiouser and curiouser, to borrow from Alice.”

“I suppose you’re going to tell me you don’t know anything about that, either?” Emmett asked me. I shook my head. “Naturally. Well, you have fun with that partner, I’m going outside to call this in. Then I’m going to scrounge around for some blood. You still owe me, though.” He eyed me. “Buckets of-”

“Drinking his breakfast!” I blurted. *That’s what he meant! Blood, drinking blood, and most of the woman around here have seen him... Oh God.*

“She gets it, Archie, she really gets it!” He now rolled his eyes and left the room. I heard him muttering to himself as he went. *Probably about his pants again. Wait, is that really a vampire? A blood sucking creature of the night? That guy? Noooooo... Can’t be. Can it?*

“So, Jesse,” said Archie looking around the room which was now pretty thoroughly trashed. “Let’s, uh, go downstairs. We can sit at the table, I’m sure I saw one down there, and you can fill in some of the blanks for me. And maybe I can do the same for you? How does that sound?”

He’s the one with a vampire for a partner and he’s treating me like I’m the animal. That seems backwards to me. I put my hand down. I was starting to feel a little better, as if my throwing stuff around the room (*Had I just done that? The window is broken, so it’s clear something happened. How did I do that?*) had relieved some kind of pressure in me. I was feeling better, and starting to come back to myself. “You’re not concerned about the vanishing gun?”

“Believe me, that’s not even the weirdest thing I’ve seen today! Welcome to Ordinary, the town that’s anything but.”

“Thanks? Lead the way.” *I’m putting myself in your hands, I guess?*

“Sure thing.”

He took me downstairs and I headed to my own kitchen table, coated with dust. There was a terrible smell coming from the fridge, and he wrinkled his nose too. “Let me just take care of that.” He opened the kitchen door, rocked the fridge back and forth a few times after unplugging it, hefted it like it was nothing, and carried it to the door where he tossed it outside. He slammed the door shut after it but I still heard it crashing around out there. “Ah, that’s better. Where were we?”

“Uh?” *How strong is this guy?*

“I work out. Better to clean it out in the yard, if it even works anymore after so long. Might just want to hire a dumpster and chuck it inside along with anything else you don’t need anymore.”

“Right. So where do I even start?”

“Well, how about why you came to this sleepy little town?”

“Fine, I guess.” I told him about searching for my roots, and about the night (as much as I could remember) that had been the catalyst for all this. Emmett joined us before too long, saying a few more experts would arrive shortly to go over the house, and listened attentively as I talked. Neither seemed all that surprised about what I told them, but if Emmett really was a vampire, something I was still trying to wrap my head around, maybe this sort of thing happened all the time. *I did just shoot him, and he is fine, standing there sexy as you please.* I tried to suppress a blush. They both actually looked pretty hot, now that I had the opportunity to look them over. Emmett looked like a vampire. A dead guy, but a surprisingly hot dead guy. Archie had brown hair, blue eyes, probably was in his mid 30s, and had a strong chin and nose. *Is he really a vampire? I mean come on, but on the other hand...*

“The time frame matches up,” Archie told me. “It was about fourteen years ago that all the strangeness started up around here. And you say some woman came and saved you, and did some kind of sealing between this town and where some funny talking creature was imprisoned?”

“That’s what I remember.” *She seemed feminine, telling them I met some kind of goddess is probably not a good idea, even if one of them is a vampire. So I just left that part out. But the woman and the tunnel I do clearly remember.*

“Otherworld poking through here would explain a lot of the weirdness in this town,” Emmett admitted. “And maybe give us a route to ending it. We put some barrier magic in the astral and call Bob our uncle.”

“Would be nice.”

“But what happened after that?” I asked. “It’s taken me this long to remember the name of the town I grew up in. Where are my parents? Why are so many houses abandoned around here? Is my brother alive? If so where is he?”

“We can get answers to those questions, one way or another don’t you worry,” Archie assured me. “We won’t leave you hanging.”

“Can answer part of that right now,” Emmett told me. “People moved out of here because of all the weirdness drove them away. Can’t say that happened with your folks, clearly everything was just left here. Most people that move take their stuff. But that’s why there’s so many abandoned houses around here. We’ve done our best to deal with stuff, keep things under wraps, but there’s only so much we can do.”

“I see.”

“To be fair, other people have been reported as missing from here,” Archie reminded him.

“Yeah, he’s right. I guess if Otherworld is poking through, and someone got caught in it, they could be sucked back and have no way to return. Makes sense.”

“Otherworld? What is that? And are you really a vampire?”

The two looked at each other. Emmett was the one who spoke. “You really have no experience with the supernatural at all?”

“Apart from fourteen years ago, no. It must have been a vampire that stole me-”

“If you went willingly, yeah probably.”

“But after that, I just lived my life. So vampires are real?”

“Vampires, werewolves, he’s a puca.”

“A puker?”

Emmett roared with laughter. “Well, he can’t hold his liquor I can tell you that!”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Archie moaned. “Never again. But no, a puca. I’m a spirit horse.”

My eyes narrowed. He looked like a man to me. “Horse. Right.”

“I can change my shape.”

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea,” Emmett told him. “Change back to your real form and head outside. You can get started on the lawn. That’s like a buffet for you, right?”

“Funny. Very funny.”

“Because horses eat grass, you see. So because he’s a horse normally I told him to go outside-”

“She gets it, Emmett.”

“Just making sure.”

“Anyway, we have some pamphlets back at the office. They can help get you up to speed about how the world actually works. We should also have a nurse or doctor look you over. Would you mind coming with us? We’re going to have a team go over the house. Make sure its safe, there’s no lingering magic around we should be concerned about.”

“You... You can really help me?”

“It’s what we do. I’m sorry we’ve not been there for you these past few years. I know it must have been hard for you. But you know about us now. Let us make it up to you, and help get your life back on track now.”

I couldn’t help myself. Tears started to pour down my face. They could help me. I wasn’t alone anymore. “Thank you.”

Probably two hours or so later I had been comforted, driven to an office building nearby, checked over, and handed some “pamphlets” that I was going over and feeling better about every second. It seemed not only was magic real, non-human creatures of all kinds inhabited the earth and realms beyond it. Spirits and ghosts hung around, demons were a danger, as much as the more powerful “angels” as they were called. A being didn’t have to be “evil” to do harm if they just didn’t understand how frail we humans were, after all. My life seemed to be turned upside down, but on the other hand

this all made a sick kind of *sense*. What I had been put through as a child, maybe some kind of benevolent being doing what they thought was right after I got thrown from the passageway. A vampire luring me through it, that's why I didn't resist him. And whoever he was talking to? The guy who tried to eat my bother and me? Some kind of demon unless I missed my guess, they had talked about his prison. Rather than thinking about how stupid did they think I was I was finally making sense of the world. *Of course* the supernatural existed. *Of course* it was hidden from most people. What would racism look like if you knew your neighbor wasn't a black man, but a black, sentient, *spirit horse* that could turn himself *into* a man? Or a woman? Or maybe even a lawn mower? With all the bizarre things that happened in the world magic was really the only explanation. I finally felt I was moving towards being more centered, not less. This was *progress*. I had found a place with helpful people (and non-people) that could maybe get me some real answers.

The Excellus people (and boy did it speak to my frame of mind that I could accept magic being real but had trouble believing that an insurance company was actually a front for a non-human based organization dedicated to protecting humanity from other non-human forces) had gone over the house and given it the all clear. It seemed the town was "behaving itself" at the moment, and as my story spread ("someone actually came back to this town of their own free will????!!") more and more people wanted to pitch in and help. Archie said they were cleaning the place up and replacing anything that had broken down, as well as getting the water and power turned back on so I could live there if I wanted to. Getting the deed into my name might be trickier, but no one was going to evict me in the next few months anyway. If there was still a mortgage on the place the bank would have long since given up collecting it. But they were looking into every avenue they could to make me feel welcome. I honestly got the impression they had started to give up hope for this place, that soon it would be another ghost town, home to rumors and stories no one could believe. My arrival had given them hope, not only that they had some idea of what had started the madness, that maybe because something specific *had* started it, the process could be reversed. Everyone said magic was capable of great things, with the right research and people on the case this could be a perfectly normal town in a few weeks! (Apparently the non-humans just wanted to live their lives and not make waves, for obvious reasons, and places like this threatened that. The more normal things were, they more they liked it.)

And speaking of magic, back at the house there were no signs of hostile magic. Just an echo of some kind of powerful protection spell put on the place, probably to keep the gun (they hadn't forgotten about it naturally) from anyone's hands but mine. The director, a beautiful young woman (she introduced herself as a nymph) named Gretchen asked me about it and I told her I still felt it was "nearby" somehow. I had told her everything, or at least almost everything, figuring the director should know about my savior and *she* could decide to tell anyone else if she wanted. So I told her about the tunnel collapse, and some being saving me and sending me back. The whole thing, leading up to me finding this gun and it vanishing but not being "gone."

"Can you call it back to you?" she asked.

"I'll try." It was with some trepidation then that I looked at my hand, curled my fingers as if holding a gun-

And I was holding a gun.

Chapter 3

I settle in a bit and meet a dwarf

Where: Excellus office building

When: Around 2 in the afternoon

Gretchen confided that she wasn't a weapons expert, she was a people person, and to that end she wanted to see the thing so she could do some magic on it. I was interested, the gun vanishing and reappearing was all well and good, but this was my first chance to see actual magic. I was able to hand it to her, after a moment of making myself believe it was okay if she had it to look at it, and she sat with it for a moment.

"Okay," she finally said. "It's highly magical. That you may have already guessed. Magical objects typically have only one function though something made up of multiple parts can have each part do something different. This magic though, feels much more powerful than anything I've encountered before. It doesn't feel like it just has some kind of vanishing magic, it's something else. I have no idea what that means, or what it can do. We can try a few things later. Most importantly it doesn't seem like it will be used to commit any crimes or shoot anyone around here. So I'll allow you to hold onto it, or vanish it, or whatever it's doing when you're not focused on it." She held it back out to me. "If you hadn't picked it up from your room I would have said you were making it with some kind of metal spell. So odd."

"Wait, what? That's it? I don't even get a tarot reading or anything? You just sat there, that's not magic!"

"It is," she replied, sounding a little miffed. "I admit divination magic isn't the flashiest, and the results can be interpreted many ways sometimes, but this was clear enough. I do wonder about something though."

"What's that?"

"Rather than me handing this gun back to you, why don't you simply decide you don't want me holding it anymore?"

"All right." I decided I didn't like this beautiful nymph's face anymore and didn't want her sticky, no doubt sap filled hands on my piece. It vanished. "Oh!" I wanted it back in my hand, and it was back there. "Neat." *And I still like your face, sorry about that.*

"So that's what it meant. Apparently this weapon cannot be stolen. It is *yours*, to a degree nothing else has been owned in this world before. Strange, this vanishing and such doesn't even seem like magic, it just seems to be a part of you."

"Great. It figures that the first permanent thing in my life is a weapon." I made it vanish again.

"Yes, well, if this was somehow created from your subconscious or by this being you said helped you after your abduction, protecting yourself would have been paramount in your mind. You will have to learn how to use it."

"I suppose I better. Oh, I put it away, is there anything else you can get from it?"

She held up a hand. "Not at the moment. With your permission however I would like to call in an actual expert in magical weapons. They might be able to tell us more about what it can do."

"By all means!" I agreed. "I put myself into your hands. Actually, if I am going to own a magical gun, and live here, maybe I can be hired by Excellus? I mean what other career will put this to work? I must have been given it for some reason, maybe I can find that reason working here. Or is the company exclusively non-human?"

"That would be discriminatory," she insisted. "We don't discriminate based on race, color, sex, air/water breathing, species, religion, age, disability, gender or lack thereof, or magical ability. Humans do that. We don't. We know better than to do that. If you can help us protect humanity in some way, we'll give you a chance. Are you a hard worker?"

“Of course. I’ve had to fend for myself since I was twelve years old. I put myself through collage, and I have a degree in business management.” *Of course being basically an orphan at that point allowed me to use some government programs not available to those with families but the principal is there. I did the work, and got the degree, I owe the money back.* I shuddered. *So much money back...*

“Oh that’s a big plus,” she gushed. I felt she wasn’t being insincere, she really did feel excited about this prospect. “You actually graduated with a real degree? That’s great, well done.”

“I knew it was my only chance to stay out of poverty. I had no safety net, after all. I had to find a way to work and managing people just seemed to be the right direction for my life.”

“I see.” She sat and stared at me for a moment. A little too intently, after awhile, and I had to wonder if she was doing more magic, this time on me. I waited, getting a little nervous, but she finally spoke up again. “You know what? I think we can offer you a position here. I’m sure we can find a place for you. Welcome aboard!” She stood up and offered her hand, which I jumped up and shook with a smile.

Seriously? Did I just get an interview and get hired just like that? “Thanks. I really mean it. And I didn’t mean to imply anything before. I mean, they hired a young woman like you, and put you in charge. So clearly you’ve got some *amazing* skills to run an office like this, in a town like this. That speaks volumes about how the organization is run. They reward ability, not just seniority. I’m sure I’ll be a good fit, and I’ll work hard to justify your taking a chance on me.”

She laughed. “Oh child.” She patted my cheek. “You’re sweet. Young girl indeed, what a charmer you are. I’m over three hundred years old, but you are right about my skills in any case. I’ll go get the forms, shall I? We love forms around here, so... many... forms. Back in a jif!”

She swished out of the room, and I tried to pick my jaw up off the table.

Sign me up for whatever workout keeps her looking like that at three hundred! I suppose at that age she would have all the skills...

With the paperwork filled out Archie also welcomed me to their little family, and said he would be glad to drive me around town so I could do a few things. I had to pick up my luggage from the hotel and cancel my reservation for that night. I had to open a bank account so I could get paid, go to the post office and get mail service restored, and he gave me a tour of their local market and where places like libraries were. I also stopped in to Spectrum to get internet service, there were a dozen details moving into a house entailed. Even if I was only moving *back* in. He was great, quite a nice guy, or horse, or whatever, telling me about the town and what had been going on since I had left. He was easy to talk to, not like a horse at all I thought. I knew where a lot of things were of course, but things change, especially when magical nightmares could leap out of walls that drove people off.

“Of course that’s an exaggeration,” he explained. “It’s not that bad, but people do like their mundane lives to proceed as they expect. You see someone floating around or glimpse the elven realm and you’re going to question your sanity. Don’t get me wrong, there have been tragedies, people going missing, or being found torn apart. Houses flipped over, doors not leading to where they should.”

“Seems like I’ve got a lot to catch up on.”

“We’ll take it slow, of course. You’ve got a lot of reading to do about the various races that exist, and what magic can do. How to disrupt it-”

“Shoot whoever is doing the magic in the face.”

He burst out laughing. “Yes, that’s one way to do it. But you’ll do fine, I’m sure. You seem...”

“Yes?”

“Like a natural. Like being the director of some big organization is what you were born to do. I don’t know.”

“Sure, I’ll be running Excellus in five years, make no mistake.”

He laughed again. "If you do, remember the little people that found you way back when. Well, here we are." We pulled up to a house.

"This isn't... What?"

"Pretty nice, huh?"

The yard at least had been transformed. The grass was now cut, any dead branches cut off the trees and the path was cleared. The window had been repaired, the house still needed a paint job, but it looked a lot better. "Yeah, it is. Tell everyone thanks from me."

"I will. Believe me, after so long with one property after another in this town looking like your house did, everyone was willing to take one back from the chaos. We all hope it's just the first of many. We'll have an official 'welcome to the team' party tomorrow, if you're the party type."

"I could be persuaded," I said with a wink. "If I can do anything to help with that mission, bringing people back and cleaning up houses, I will," I told him. "Pay it forward, and all that."

"I know. Let me help you carry your stuff in."

We grabbed groceries from the back and walked to the house, but he hesitated. I looked back curiously, it seemed out of character for him to be shy now.

"You have to invite me in."

"What? Emmett's the vampire, not you." *Wow, how easily one says that.*

He shook his head. "It's not just them. All magical creatures have to follow certain rules."

"But you came in earlier!"

"When no one was living there. And right now I'm still not sure if it applies, because you've just stepped foot inside, but better safe than sorry. This is *your* place now, so if you don't want me inside, I won't go inside. In fact it's better for both of us if I don't. Simple as that."

He seems pretty serious about it. I won't make light of it, if he says there's rules his kind has to follow, then there are rules. I don't know his culture, but I'd like to, and making fun of him would only drive a wedge between us. "Of course you're welcome inside. I formally invite you into my home, please come and go as you wish." *Hopefully that covers it so I don't have to keep inviting him in after every bag of groceries.*

"Thank you, it really does mean a lot to me."

I held the door for him and he went in. He carried the various things I had bought into the house and helped me get settled. The inside had been cleaned as well, and I moved around the house like I owned the place. I was a bit sad, things hadn't worked out exactly as I had planned. I had to figure out what had happened to my parents and brother for a start. *Are any of the old friends I had, grown up now, still around town?* But I had a home again, a job, and was making some friends in my old home town. Life was looking up.

"I have hot water?" Archie had helped me cook dinner, he had said he was willing to leave me to it as the sun went down but I insisted. Actually I insisted on cooking for him but he said that would never do, and helped me make a meal even I was impressed with using what we had bought. The man could cook! We were washing up (without him even grumbling about it! Marry me!) and I realized hot water was coming out of the faucet.

"Yes, your water heater is pretty old," he told me. "It's working for now, but you might want to think about replacing it when you've got some extra money. Apparently it was flushed several times to get the rust out of the water."

"I can have a hot shower in my own home. That's going to be wonderful."

"Before that," he said shyly. "Perhaps one more activity this evening?"

Uh oh. He's a nice enough guy but... "What did you have in mind?"

"Finish up here, and meet me in the back yard. It seems dark enough."

“Dark enough... For you to murder me in a shocking twist that it was you all along? Then bury me back there, in the dark?”

He smiled a bit sadly and shook his head. “I’m not that kind of puca, not anymore, anyway. No, you’ll see. Back yard. Five minutes.”

“Okay.”

I finished up and headed out, looking around for him. The sun was down, and there wasn’t any light in the back yard, but I caught the motion of something. A black horse stepped into the moonlight and my hands flew to my mouth. “Oh my God, you are a black horse!”

“I am,” he said. “This is my original and natural form. That human form is for your convenience and for walking around stores in. Care for a ride?”

“I...” I walked around him. He was beautiful; a huge, perfect, black horse. “Wow, you weren’t kidding. You’re perfect, the best looking horse I’ve ever seen.” *Girl, let’s not lay it on too thick now, right?* “Are you sure it’s okay?”

“Jesse, I wouldn’t have offered if it wasn’t okay. Come on, live a little, get up here and let me give you the ride of your life!”

I couldn’t stop a giggle. “You say lines like that to every girl?”

He tossed his head. “Not every girl. Have you even ridden before?”

“No. How do I even...”

“Here.” He bent down a bit and helped me to get on his back. “Hold on with the knees. That’s it. I won’t try to throw you off so it should be fine. You ready?”

“Not to pry, but what’s with the chains?” I asked. I hadn’t really noticed before but he was draped in chains, and trying to find a good spot on his back had proven a challenge.

“No one knows,” he said back to me. “They just are a part of me for some reason. Every puca has them. Now come on, no more questions, let’s run!” He took off down the street, forcing me to grab on and hold on tight.

He ran and ran, seemingly tireless, and I finally figured out how to not bounce around like a sack of potatoes and enjoy it. We got some strange looks from passing cars, but mostly he tried to stay out of sight. He finally ended up in a field somewhere, where he slowed and looked up.

“Beautiful night, isn’t it?”

I followed his gaze up at the stars. “It sure is.” I leaned back, putting my hands on his back. “Hey Archie, thanks for this. I really enjoyed tonight. The help, cooking dinner, cleaning up, and now this? You’re a great guy.”

“I did good, huh?”

I smiled. “Yes, you did good.”

“I hoped to keep you from being too sad that you didn’t get to meet your parents. I’m glad it worked out.” He paused. “Jesse, there is one thing I should tell you.”

“Oh?”

“Not all puca are like me. Some other one offers you a ride, I suggest you politely decline. Unless you know them well, I mean.”

“Want me all to yourself, huh?”

“I should be so lucky. Look, you’re going to learn about my people in the course of your studies. It’s not going to be pretty. My kind have done some horrible things in the past. I’ve... done some things. I see things differently now, and I hope you don’t think less of me when you learn them.”

This sounded pretty serious, and I leaned forward and hugged him. “You’ve been nothing but kind to me since I met you,” I told him. “I think I’m a modern enough woman to take you for you, not for what your race supposedly does. I don’t think anything I’ll learn will turn me against you specifically. But I’ll take your warning to heart, you would know best.”

“Thanks. Shall we head back?”

“In a minute. This is nice... apart from the chain digging into me.” I hugged him a moment more and sat up again. “Is Gretchen really three hundred years old?”

“Probably. I’m over two hundred myself. Took me a bit to wrap my head around computers. And cars, for that matter. Toasters I figured out right away though.”

“What?”

“I know! The design has actually changed over the years more than you might think. You see the first toasters had a design that-”

“Not that! Your age!”

“Oh, that. Don’t look it, do I?”

“No, you don’t. But then this is what you look like, you could shape shift into an old man or a young man or a young woman for all I know. Oh, I get it. You’re all trying to prank me, aren’t you? See how far you can take this whole ‘I’m a million years old’ gag.”

“Nope. Only humans have such a short lifespan, sorry to say. I mean I’m a *spirit* horse, not a real horse, but even those from more ‘mortal’ stock like, I don’t know, trolls or something are basically ageless. Don’t know why, and of course we can’t let it be studied by humans. May have something to do with how fast we heal? Ask a doctor I guess. I’ll live for a thousand years if I’m lucky, and not die of old age I’ll tell you that. Only accident takes us in the end.”

“Wow. That’s quite the age difference between us.”

“Eh, it’s just a number.”

“Right...” *Is it really though? You’re ten times my age! No wonder you seem so mature, you’re older than the oldest man ever by a whole lifetime.*

“Shall we?”

Something to think about later. Just enjoy this moment for now. “Let’s run!” He reared up, again forcing me to hold on tight, and we headed back home. He saw me to the door and I thanked him. “And now I now why you insisted on those sugar cubes...”

“Did I do that?” he asked innocently. “Sleep well, Jesse. I’ll come pick you up for work tomorrow at 7:45?”

“That would be fine. See you then.”

I went inside and locked the door. *What a day.* I was keyed up, riding a horse bareback will do that to a person, but it had been a long day. A hot shower and bed was what I needed.

I guess I’ll sleep in my parent’s bed. They put my room back but that bed is a little small for me now. Oh mom and dad, where are you? You should be here, celebrating with me. Why did you leave? I shook my head. No more self pity tonight. I stripped out of my clothes on the way to the bathroom and thought about wild stallions carrying me off through the night.

Archie picked me up for work the next morning (in his car, not as a horse) and we drove into the office. *I need to get a car. Sigh, one thing at a time.* He showed me my new work area, we got my email account set up, all the normal new hire stuff. By that time it was lunch time, and when we got back to the office Gretchen came to find me with a short, bearded man at her side. He was carrying what looked like a replica of Thor’s hammer by the strap on his wrist, and set it down to shake my hand. In his other hand was a laptop case. By his head a drone buzzed, something I never thought I would see given how everyone around here seemed to predate just about everything in my experience.

“Herman Kruger, at your service,” he told me. “I’m a dwarf, just so you know. I’m told you’ve only come to know our side of things recently so I wasn’t about to make you guess.”

“That’s the understatement of the year. Are you tall for a dwarf or...”

“Special inserts in my shoes.”

“Really?” I looked down, and did a double take. He wasn’t wearing shoes, he had bird’s feet! *I guess he isn’t bothering to disguise that, as he knew he was coming here where it’s mostly his kind.*

He laughed. “No, we’re not *that* short. Just a bit shorter than the average human, is all. The stories only get us partly right. By us I don’t mean dwarves, I mean all non-humans races. Forget everything that you think you know, are you a Marvel fan by the way?”

“Herman doesn’t actually work for us,” Gretchen saved me from answering. “But he’s been working with one of our agents in the Rochester area on a few cases. I’m assured he knows his stuff. Hopefully he can help unravel the mystery of your gun.”

“I’m excited to take a look. From the description it’s a one of a kind item. Oh, this is Meowvis, by the way.” He pointed to the drone. “She’ll get after me later if I forget to introduce her. You are a her right now still, right?”

It bobbed once.

“Yup, still she/her pronouns. I’m he/him by the way.”

“Right. Hello,” I said to it, feeling slightly foolish. *Then again, it had been ‘looking around’ and it bobbed in the air just now in response to Herman’s question. Maybe he’s got a ‘chair guy’ somewhere that comes with him like this?* “Where shall we do this?”

“One of the conference rooms perhaps? Do you need anything special, Herman?”

“Nope. Got my laptop right here, I can bring up any of the books I need to try and decode the symbology on the item.”

“Very well. This way please.”

We followed her to an unused room and he got his laptop booted up. The drone buzzed around checking the room out then settled at the table by his side. “Okay, let’s see it!” He felt excited, reminding me there was that voice in my head situation I had to work out, was it giving me new senses or something? I handed him the gun and he started turning it over and over in his hands. He took a screwdriver set out of his case and poked at it. He scowled. He showed it to the drone, and a voice from the laptop said she wasn’t getting anything either. He looked up at me, a huge grin on his face. “This gun is so amazing. It’s completely impossible! What a find! I’ll give you... three dollars for it!”

Chapter 4

I learn about the gun and then reward myself with cake

Where: Office area conference room

When: Just now

“You mean I am imagining it somehow?” I asked, thinking back to when I shot the vampire. He hadn’t found any bullets, after all. “It’s magical energy made solid or something?”

“No, no, it’s a physical object from what I can tell. I mean I feel it’s magical, but not that you are magically maintaining its existence like a spell. It is clearly an object in its own right.”

“So what do you mean it’s impossible?” Gretchen asked.

“Let me demonstrate, that’s why I brought the hammer.” He held his hand out and it jumped across the room into it.

Show off much?

“And for no other reason,” the laptop said. “Like showing it off or anything.”

Can computers read minds?

“Exactly.” He glared at the screen, but then held it up for our inspection. “Though what do you think? Pretty nice, huh?”

“Very well done,” I praised, as it seemed fairly important to him. “It’s like it came right off the screen! What’s the name of it? Meow Meow?”

“You do know Marvel movies!”

Why does he seem so excited about that? Though if he made this hammer from scratch I guess he would be classified as a big fan.

“It does have only a 6% variance from the movie version,” the laptop informed us.

“Yes, that’s right, thanks to Meowvis’ help I- hold on.” He glared at the hammer, turning it this way and that. “I thought you said only 4% originally! Has it been damaged already? Did I scratch it somewhere? Can it *be* scratched?”

“I may have exaggerated slightly in my initial analysis,” said the laptop. “I didn’t want you to feel too bad.”

He felt frustrated, and I could tell he was clenching his jaw. He marched over to the waste basket by the door of the room, held it up like a dirty diaper, and let it go. It thudded to the ground.

“Well, I’ll draw you a picture on the whiteboard,” he told us, dusting his hands off.

“Er, if you’re just throwing it away do you mind if I have it?” I asked.

“He’s not throwing it away,” the laptop told us. “He’s just a drama queen at times. He did the same thing for me and isn’t too proud to reuse a joke.”

“Excuse me,” he sputtered. “Drama king.”

“Right, sorry, forgot you’re not fluid like I am. I’m still a girl at the moment, by the way. But I may not be soon, fair warning.”

I am rapidly losing control of this situation, Gretchen’s feeling said to me. “If we can get on with it?”

“Of course.” Herman retrieved his hammer and worked the top decoration off. It seemed to screw onto the top, it wasn’t a part of the hammer itself. He held it in his hand, just a flat metal disk.

“Take a look at this. See these markings here?” We indicated that we did, indeed, see the markings.

“This is the part of the hammer that makes it burst with electricity when I hit something. You’ll notice they’re different than the marking here on the head of the hammer. Those markings are purely cosmetic. The magical markings I made on the hammer are actually on the haft, covered by the wood, which is covered by the leather I glued over it. Here, take a look at the strap- see where I stitched it? And the ring that makes it come back to me.” He took his ring off and showed me. “See the very faint lines there? Similar on all of them, right?” We agreed they were similar and he put the ring back on, and screwed the top back on the hammer. “Why is this important? Answer: these are magical runes,

these decorations on the head are not. That wouldn't have been screen accurate, you see? So I hid what actually make this a magical object. The magic is bound into the object when you make it, with these runes. Looking at them can also tell you about what the object can do. That's what I was going to look for. Now we look at your gun. What can you tell me?" He held it up and let us look at it from all sides.

"No runes," I told him, because I am observant like that.

"Correct. There are no panels to pry, such as on the grip, it's like it was created as one solid piece." He tilted it so I could see the back. "And here's another question- where do you put the bullets?"

"I don't know, where? I don't know much about guns."

"Looking at this one wouldn't tell you anything about guns anyway," he explained. "It's not a revolver, where you feed the bullets in wild west style one at a time in a cylinder." A picture of a revolver appeared on the screen. "Nor is it a semi-auto where you load in a magazine in the grip." The picture changed to an animation of a gun reloading. "But you say you fired it?"

"You don't think I used it up, do you?" I asked, a bit of panic in my voice. *Shooting a vampire that just got better?*

"We'll have to go somewhere we can do some shooting to answer that question. Sorry Gretchen, looks like I'm not going to be much help after all."

"That still tells us a lot though," she replied thoughtfully. "We know now it's not of traditional make. However, could these runes you talk about simply be hidden within it?"

"Woosh, you mean like I hid them on the hammer on the underside of something? But in this case the gun was 3D printed, and the runes are simply incorporated into the metal? I mean it's all one piece, there's no seams, covers, rivets, bolts, screws, it's like it was carved from a block of metal but still works as a gun. That would be a whole different level. Even a smith thousands of years old would have trouble doing that, I mean 3D printing is still in its infancy really. To have invented the technique a thousand years ago and then applied it to this gun, which was just hanging around Jesse's house waiting for her to come pick it up? I don't know. Maybe we could x-ray it or something but that's not my area of expertise."

"Let's go see if it shoots, this is all pointless if it's been expended and is now simply a conversation piece that can vanish and reappear at will."

"Good idea."

We headed down to the basement of the place where they had a shooting range, and put on some ear protection. I got a quick lesson in 'point barrel that way, pull trigger, don't point that thing at me what are you thinking?' and took up a beginner's stance at my little cubical. The target was way down there, and I aimed the gun in roughly the correct direction. Suddenly the barrel (I think that's what it's called) morphed, that the only way to describe it. I nearly dropped the thing in surprise, but recovered.

"What in the world?"

"It got longer," Herman noticed. "That should help with accuracy. Did you do something?"

"No, I have no idea what I'm doing here! I just raised it."

"So the gun responds to your thoughts? Wow, that's... wow. Magic needs a trigger, like hitting something, or saying a word. You just thought about shooting and the gun responded. Look at it now, it's almost in pieces. That is... I don't even know... Go ahead, see what it does."

"Okay." I sighted again and pulled the trigger. I hit the target! Not anywhere near the center, but it worked.

"How did the recoil feel?"

"Not bad, but there was a little."

"So it's obeying some laws of physics anyway. Put a few more down there."

“Right.” I squeezed the trigger several times. I hit the target two more times, the other shots simply went nowhere near the thing.

“It’s not aiding your aim,” Gretchen remarked. “Looks like you’ll have to practice same as everyone else. And take a gun safety class.”

“I don’t mind,” I told her. “So that’s seven shots, plus the shots I used earlier. I just kept pulling the trigger and it did stop shooting. But I didn’t reload it, so how is it still shooting?”

“Let’s see how many that is,” suggested Herman. “See how many you can fire.”

“Got it.” We counted fifteen shots until it didn’t fire anymore. “So now-”

He held up a hand. “Shhh, I’m concentrating.”

We waited a moment.

“Yeah, it’s doing something magical,” he finally decided. He turned to Gretchen. “Did you feel that?”

“I did,” she agreed. “You think it’ll shoot again?”

“I actually do, the magic doesn’t seem active. See if you get the full fifteen shots again.”

“Okay.” I did, then we waited a few seconds.

“Now shoot seven shots,” he suggested. “Then wait a few seconds, and fire nine shots.”

“...Okay?” I did that.

“Extraordinary. It’s magically reloading, but from where I have no idea. No casings pop out, your station is still clean.” He indicated the shelf I was standing behind. “And there’s some kind of delay. If you use all your shots you can’t fire again right away, but if you ration them, they reload on a one by one basis.”

“It’s not, like, stealing my life energy or something is it?” I asked, a bit nervously.

“Do you feel weaker?”

“Not really.”

“Then probably not.”

“Probably?” I pressed, trying not to freak out.

“I can do some more divination,” Gretchen told me. “And we have people around here that know both spirit and soul magic, so we can answer that definitively later.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Did you notice? It’s back in the compact form now that you’ve lowered it,” Herman remarked. And he was right, the barrel was shorter again.

“I wonder...” I thought about needing a shield. Or wanting to hit the target with a laser beam. I wanted a sword, a can opener, or my own drone. The gun stubbornly stayed exactly as it was. “Never mind. It looks like I just get the gun.”

“Not such a bad thing,” Herman told me. “And we’ve figured out at least some of its capabilities.”

“You think it has more?”

“Hard to say. I’ve never seen an object like this, and I’m not sure how I would even study it to try and replicate it, without the usual runes I’m used to. Someone went to a lot of trouble to make it, that must mean something.”

“I agree,” Gretchen said, nodding. “At some point we’ll have you shoot something that doesn’t have a zillion bullets in it already and see exactly what it’s shooting. That might tell us more.” *Ah, right, there’s all kinds of bullets downrange because this is a shooting range. How would they know which ones were mine? But shoot into a concrete block or something and they can dig the bullet out. Smart.* “But we have more to talk about before the party this afternoon. I’ll put you on the schedule for pistol training, and introduce you to our instructor at the party. Put it away for now and we can head back to the conference room.”

“Sorry, I just heard party. Is cake involved at all?”

They both laughed as I opened my hand and the pistol vanished. We started walking toward the hallway but Gretchen held Herman back. I walked on, figuring if she wanted to tell me something she would. The door in front of me opened and I headed to the elevator doors. The two caught up with me.

"I notice that doors open for you," she said conversationally.

"Yeah, I got hired at this great place to work with hardly any effort at all!"

"Not what I mean. I mean the door, just now, opened for you. *Before* you reached it."

"So?"

"Herman?"

"Huh? Oh, sure." He walked towards the door, which stayed stubbornly closed.

I blinked at him. "What are you saying?"

"You don't notice the difference? Go on, go back into the practice area."

I headed that way and the door opened. "Wait, you mean doors don't open for you?"

"You really never noticed before?" Herman asked as I came back again. "And that was magic, by the way. I was watching for it that time. Who are you?"

"I don't think she was *allowed* to notice before," Gretchen decided. "There was another strange thing that happened before you fired the gun the first time. Do you remember?"

"The room went crazy," I realized. *I did sort of forget about that, in all the rest of what's been going on.*

"Yes. In the report the windows were broken, the bed was moved, all from a single outburst of power. From you. There's still more to you than meets the eye, Jesse. Try to catch yourself moving things around, all right? We need to know if you can control it, and tomorrow we can run some tests."

"I'll try," I promised, my head spinning. *Doors don't open that way for others? I just thought that was how doors worked. But now that I think about it, things do seem to always be right where I want them to be. Or the path is clear when I walk. Is she right, is there some guardian angel doing things for me?*

We headed up the elevator and sat back down again. "Now, the other reason Herman was called in. Our agent in Rochester, Felix I think his name is?" Herman nodded. "Fine. He reported that you recently helped a troll and a human seal a being named Deogen back up, some kind of yearly ritual done for over a thousand years by the tuatha?"

"I know that name!" I blurted.

"Exactly. The stories are quite similar, we suspect some kind of," she looked towards the ceiling, "divine intervention, bringing together elements that will work well together. In any case, the way they sealed the tears between us and him was an item called the Bane. Care to elaborate, Herman?"

"Sure thing. The Bane of Deogen," and again the picture on the laptop screen changed to a piece of golden jewelry in the form of attached rings and bones worn on the hand, "as it's called, is a multi-purpose magical item created to help the tuatha agents, that rotate between five members every ten years, seal weaknesses between our world and the prison of a being named, appropriately enough, Deogen. I got to see it in action recently, as these tears happen around Halloween. I also got the notes used to create it, and have the item in my safe back home so Kelly and Tayna can have a pre-honeymoon i.e. vacation together now that the threat is over."

"It's relevant," she explained, "because we think something similar is happening here. Because of the unconventional way, fourteen years ago, one of the tears was sealed it caused an instability in this area. This gives rise to Otherworld 'poking through' so to speak into our world, causing the weirdness that is driving people away from this area."

"The idea then," Herman took it up, "is to study the area, what the Bane does, and possibly create a new item, one that can seal the breaches here, or thicken the area like a fine tomato sauce." He

did a chef's kiss. "With the normal astral restored, no more weird things happening in this town. Everyone goes home happy."

"In a nutshell, yes. We hope, being connected to the original event in some way, that you can be more effective in this than anyone else, Jesse. That is your first and possibly most important assignment here at Excellus. Train, work with Herman to magically figure out what's going on in this area, and then stop it from happening. It's why this entire team is here, and we'll support you any way we can."

"You think things moving around me without me noticing plays a part?"

"I think that may be incidental. Your meeting with this being after your abduction, the strange weapon you've been given, the unconscious power you have, and we may be just scratching the surface. You're at the center of this, you were there at the start of it, we hope you can be there at the end of it."

I took a deep breath. *Wow. How do you argue against a statement like that?* "Then I'm in. But I can't do it alone, I don't know about magic or non-human kind and what they can do. If I can have Archie or even Emmett--"

She laughed. "Yes, I figured you would request them. Being the only two people you actually know around here. It's fine, I already planned to assign them to you. I mean, I'll assign you to them. Sorry, you just seem so- anyway you're not a team leader yet. They can help with the magical side of things, and local lore if you need it, Herman. It's been quiet for a few weeks, maybe the dimensional energies surge where Deogen is like some kind of tide, and that left us 'dry' in recent weeks? They may come rushing back in that case, and historically that *is* the case, so you'll need to be ready. There's still so much we don't know about exactly how magic works, how the barriers between our worlds work, I mean you can guess. So train hard, and be ready. The others can brief you on what they've faced in the past, if you think that can help you prepare."

"I won't let you down, ma'am!"

"Good! Now I hope you're ready to party! Everyone wants to meet you, so let's head down there, everything should be all set. Herman, come have some cake."

"Come on slowpokes, there's *cake!*" he shouted, rocketing out of his chair towards the door.

And so I got to meet everyone on the staff. I mean not the janitors or anything, but when would a janitor have anything to do with supernatural goings on, am I right? Everyone seemed super nice, which probably happens when you've lived as long as most non-humans did, you mellow out a bit. They didn't seem to be crotchety old people, they seemed to be experienced professionals who had dedicated their lives to making sure people that would never know their deeds could live the life they wanted. I was a bit humbled, really. They all showed their "true selves" so to speak, no disguises here, apart from the ones that were horses and such naturally, of course, who stayed in their human forms. They were willing to show their true forms if I asked, so I saw a six tailed fox which was amazing, a two tailed cat that was huge, and one lady that seemed to have a faint breeze blowing her hair gently about. There was no way I was going to remember all their names but the place looked great. There was a welcome banner, and a welcome cake, and they showed me some magic, and I had a great time. I caught myself reaching for a cup or a fork and it coming into my hand, but no one else seemed to notice as was typical for my entire life. But I made a mental note to mention it to Gretchen next time I saw her. It seemed unconscious, but I did recall the mess I had made of my room and decided I should take some precautions before trying to fling any cars around or what have you. I met my new pistol instructor, a big guy named Ananias that called himself an einherjar, and said he was looking forward to seeing what I could do.

"Not much at the moment," I warned him. "I'm totally new to all this."

"We'll get you into shape," he told me, flexing. "You'll be a combat master when I'm done with you." He leaned in close to me. "Or else," he leaned in close to whisper, "you'll be dead."

I'll be dead because he'll kill me, or I'll get killed because I wasn't good enough? "Great!" I managed with a weak chuckle, not sure if this guy was for real or not. He didn't seem to notice and slapped me on the back. "Can't wait!"

Around quitting time people started saying their farewells and leaving, and I thanked them for such a warm welcome. Archie drove me home again, but said he wouldn't stay when I invited him in.

"I'll give you some space tonight," is all he would say. Which seemed odd, but okay. *Maybe he was a bit more forward last night than he usually is, and doesn't want me getting the wrong idea?*

So I made myself some dinner, cursed the fact I didn't have internet yet, or a TV, though I did scroll around on my phone. Finally I decided to just go to bed. That Ananias guy looked pretty serious, if he had me running laps or something tomorrow I needed to be ready. So I climbed into bed, trying not to think about the people that were supposed to be here instead of me. I don't know how long I lay there, I wasn't sure if I was awake or dreaming, when I heard the voice.

"I think I've given you enough space to get settled. Why don't we have a little chat?"

Chapter 5

I start my training montage

Where: Her house for sure, otherwise ???

When: That night, during REM sleep

“What?” I looked around, startled. I seemed to be somewhere else, not my parent’s room. Well, it was my room at the moment. In any case I wasn’t there. I seemed to be standing on some kind of platform, some large blocks of dark material to my right haphazardly piled on top of each other. The edges of the platform, a few meters away, dropped off into nothing and there were several other platforms floating in the distance. Before me was a swirl of light, that’s the only way to describe it.

“What the monkey?” said the voice, sounding fairly amused.

“Er, no, more like what’s going on,” I said. “Hello?” I looked around but didn’t see anyone here with me. *Now what in the world?*

“Hello there! Not even a giggle, huh? Always wanted to say that and nothing. Was my timing off? Do you not like monkeys? I’m certain I have a handle on human humor... You can hear me, right?”

“Er, I hear someone. Who is talking to me right now?” I looked around.

“You can hear me! Jes, I’m hurt, I’m really hurt. Is it okay if I call you Jes? Jessica Rabbit? Jezebel, Jerome Jeremy Jones? J-pop-”

“Jes is fine. Where are you?”

“Wait, did I get my RGB values wrong? Is white 0,0,0 or 255,255,255 I can never remember...”

“RGB? You mean...” I looked up at the ball of light that was floating there. It wasn’t just a ball, it was patterns, and swirls of energy, and I felt if I stared at it I could probably keep finding detail like one of those fractal things.

“Now you’re looking at me, so there’s two senses accounted for. Hi!”

So I’m talking to patterns of light in the air now. Neat. Not something you do every day. Why am I not more nervous about all this? In fact I don’t really feel anything at all... “Hi there. So where am I?”

“You’re not anywhere. Well I mean you’re somewhere, everything is somewhere, except for that pesky dark matter stuff. Don’t get me started on that. If you want to know what you’re experiencing, well, that’s a different thing.”

“Okay then, what am I experiencing?”

“I think your kind calls it a dream. You also may be in the astral plane, which is confusing so don’t think too hard about it. As the other way wasn’t working out, this seemed the next best thing to try, and here you are. It worked, we can chat like this at night. Unless you’ve got a small, red, plastic, toy phone somewhere so we could talk during the day?”

A dream! That explains my lack of freaking out at the moment, I guess. “Not that I know of, why?”

“Pity. Just seems like you should have one of those. Keep an eye out, okay? Anyway, I’m a part of you. Sorta. I’m you, at least, the part of you that grew to replace the part of you that got torn away. Are you following at all?”

“You’re what that angel or whatever I met gave me? Back when this whole thing started?”

“That’s me! She gave it of herself that you might live. But it’s still not you, not completely. And she couldn’t separate all her power from her essence, so here we are. I’m a part of you, but not, a separate entity yet indivisible, so you’re really just talking to yourself. But this part of yourself knows stuff your other parts don’t, hence our current need for communication.”

“I’m still not following you, sorry.”

“That’s okay, I’m probably explaining it wrong. Okay, so from the beginning, the 10 radical isotopes are- wait, no, that’s not right. Your beginning or I guess ours, if you want to be technical about it. You met a being called Deogen, and he tried to eat you, right?”

“From what I recall, yes.”

“He succeeded, in part. You lost a lot of what made you yourself and if that wasn’t bad enough, were thrown from the tunnel between this realm and the next one. You wound up elsewhere, and were helped by a divine being before being sent back to Earth.”

“Again, correct.” *On totally the wrong continent.*

“That help came in the form of her offering a piece of herself to you, to replace what you had lost. That piece grew, just like the rest of you. Because I’m separate, but also you, that means you have a little piece of the divine inside yourself. I tried talking to you in the waking world, you may remember when you first got the gun? But I discovered that was actually damaging you, so I thought I better stop. The best I can do now is send you impressions I get from whatever is around me. That doesn’t mess you up like me trying to talk directly to you does. But when you’re asleep I can give you a dream, and that’s what this is.”

Damage me how? I guess those pains in my head? “To what end? Not that it isn’t nice talking to you, of course.”

“It’s nice talking to you too, Jes! I thought you might want a safe place to practice your powers. Power, I mean. It’s pretty versatile so it might count as multiple powers but whatever.”

I looked at the blocks. “Moving things at a distance.”

“Ding ding ding! Got it. See, most people have to work up to something like this. But your ability is from me. It’s the power she couldn’t separate from herself when she used her ‘replacement therapy’ on you. So it’s as strong as it was when she had it. Which is bad for you, because you don’t have her skill at controlling it. You need to practice that control or every time you try to actively use your powers, well, you saw what happened to your room. You’d be more a danger to your friends than your enemies. I’ve been able to move little things like doors and cups around for you, because I want to be helpful!”

That little mystery solved. So even though this being says they’re a part of me, they’re still themselves? Because they want to help me? Or do I just want to help myself, so one part of me is helping another? God this is confusing. “Good point. I can do that, in a dream I mean? Practice...”

“Oh it’s not totally a dream. I said that before, right? It’s also the astral plane. But me saying it’s a dream was the simplest explanation. You’ll find that you remember it, and any control you manage here will be felt in the waking world as well.”

“I suppose everything is more complicated than I first thought. Okay, practice then, I guess?”

“Go for it! And don’t worry if you lose the blocks I can make more.”

“Lose them, right.” I turned to face them, wondering how to begin. “By the way, what should I call you?”

“I’m you, just talk to me.”

“But you should still have a name. I mean clearly you are your own... person.”

“Am I though? Sounds like a recipe for developing split personality syndrome, talking to yourself but giving the part you’re talking to another name, but whatever pleases you.”

I considered. *It seems to be, and I can only know what I perceive, and I perceive it as being separate. I mean it’s floating there, that’s not me, clearly. I’m down here. I think I need the distinction even if they don’t.* “You look like a star. I’ll call you Polaris.”

“Somehow that seems right. Polaris it is.”

“Great. Okay Polaris, how do I begin?”

“Why not try lifting this top block here?” The light floated over to one of the higher blocks and settled a moment, then came back to me.

“I guess I’ll just concentrate on it?”

“Think back to heading for a door, or reaching for something. It may have been me but it’s your body. Feel what you felt then.”

Hungry? “I’ll try.” I glared at the blocks. What did I feel during those times? I have no idea, I didn’t even know I was doing it. I wasn’t doing it. Polaris was doing it. But it’s me, so maybe I did feel something. It must be an energy, Herman called it magic. Let the magic come forth! Move! I thrust my hands out, willing the blocks to move.

The pile of blocks exploded outwards and tumbled into the void.

I stepped over to the edge and watched them tumbling into nothingness. “Oops.” *Hope they weren’t kidding about the blocks because if they were, that was the shortest training session ever. But hey, I did move them, so that’s something, right?*

“See, this is why you need *control*,” Polaris chided me. The blocks seemed to grow out of nothing, and they were lined up again. “Try again. Focus on one block this time. This top block. Move just it.”

“Just that block. Right. Float it gently up. Here goes.”

I managed, after some time I couldn’t even put a number to, to lift just the one block, even setting the blocks in a circle and lifting just the middle one. It seemed to want to fling itself around more than gently move from place to place like doors or cups, but I at least had the beginnings of a handle on it.

“I was going to have you practice other things,” Polaris told me, seeming to look off into the distance, “but maybe we should hold off until you’ve shown a bit more restraint. I didn’t expect your ability to be this, uh, energetic. I don’t want you sailing off into the void here. I mean it’s fine, you’ll wake up eventually.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Why would you wake up? Of course you’ll wake up, I mean you won’t smash into anything if you fall, there’s nothing “under” these platforms so that wouldn’t shock you awake. But it is still sort of a dream and I can’t keep you here against your will. You could wake up right now if you wanted to.”

I do feel like I could wake up, Polaris isn’t wrong. “Good to know, but I meant what did you mean about me sailing off into the void?”

“Oh that. You can move yourself, you know? Along the ground to boost yourself in one direction or another. You can even turn your power inward and boost your jump towards that next platform. Maintain it to fly up there. That’s your next lesson, when you’re ready.”

“You mean like the matrix? I can do those jumps that span buildings?” *Now that would actually be pretty cool.*

“Sure. It’s the same thing as floating a block around.”

“I guess. Maybe just a longer platform next time? And I can jump from one end to another? Even Neo missed his first jump and smashed into the ground.”

“No time left now. Think about it today, maybe do a few short jumps on some mats or something?”

“Maybe into a pool,” I mused.

“Sure, that too.”

“Could I move water?”

“You can move anything, you didn’t think it was just blocks, did you? That would be a stupid power, only moving things that are cube shaped.”

“No, I just have to consider how to best use this ability, that’s all.” *I can be a water bender? Wonder if I could move fire? I can’t make it, but three out of four isn’t bad.*

“Yes, that’s why these sessions.”

"I'll look forward to the next one then. Thanks for this."

"Oh." They seemed surprised. "Sure thing, see you tomorrow then?"

"You got it, Polaris."

"Okay! And one other thing. I've been sending you what I can, like I said before. Listen for it."

"Reach out with my feelings? I'll try."

"Good morning."

"Good- morning?"

My eyes opened as my alarm went off. For a second I was confused, now where was I? But it quickly came back to me, I was in my parent's room. Guess I had to get up and go to work. What a drag, I, Jesse Faden, was now officially a 9 to 5er. I mean technically I was an office worker, could I sink any lower? *Yeah right. Look out world, Jesse is ready to, uh, totally smash up some boxes and shoot things with her magical gun! And not that it wasn't fun to hang out with my "other self" if I can't even have some down time in my sleep I'm going to go insane in short order. Do I even tell the others about Polaris? What if they decide having a woman running around with a tiny piece of a supreme being isn't what they signed up for, and decide to take care of the problem? In other words, make me disappear? They don't seem the type but I've only known them a few days. They could be on their best behavior to see what shakes out of my training. I guess I'll hold off for now, I can always say 'she' didn't contact me until later.*

I was picked up by Archie and we went into the office. He said that Gretchen had contacted him the day before and given him his new assignment, that of helping her and investigating what could be done to make this area normal again. He was going to work with Herman for the next few days, taking him around to various sites, and collecting what he might need to create a modified Bane for this area. So he wouldn't be around today. He suggested various texts I should familiarize myself with, detailing the basic background information most non-humans learned growing up. Ananias was expecting me at 1:00 down in the basement, but he would keep his phone on should I need to text him.

"And of course you met everyone yesterday, so don't hesitate to ask around if you have questions. We need something to do anyway, during the lull."

"Sure thing. Actually, the best question to ask someone first is who is an expert in whatever I have a question about. I mean not everyone knows all the same things, right?"

"That's true," he admitted. "We do have specialties and branches of magic unique to our race, so that's not a bad idea."

I headed to my cube once I arrived, and dove into the books he suggested. I ate lunch in the common area, the place had its own small cafe and got to know a couple of people who came right over to me.

"Jesse, right?" said a fairly good looking young woman walking up to me.

"That's me! Have a seat!" I did a double take, her plate was *heaped* with food, some of which I wasn't sure I wanted to know where it came from.

"Thanks. I'm Swani, we met at the party yesterday. This is Bud!"

"My name is Budimir, Swani, please try remember it."

Russian accent? "Good to see you both again. How are you?"

"Good, is good. You practice gun today, no?"

"That's the plan. You know Ananias?"

"Everyone know him, he is very, how you say, hard to miss. He train everyone."

"It's what he does," Swani agreed. "Being an einherjar means he's taken a lot of blows to the head. He might be fine afterwards but it'll still mess you up. He knows weapons though."

"He's not dangerous or anything, is he?" I asked.

Budimir waved that off. "Only to enemy. You are pretty girl, he will like you."

I colored a little. "Thanks."

"Anyway, we'll be there," Swani went on, digging into her food. "The both of us. Figured we may as well eat together."

"You will?"

"Oh sure. I'm a dakini, I'll be monitoring you with magic. Gretchen said you were concerned about your gun maybe eating your soul or something?"

Shoot, I should have asked Polaris about that yesterday during that training! I totally forgot. If they don't know, nobody will! "Yes, because there's no traditional bullets and everything comes from somewhere, I wanted to make sure I wasn't slowly killing myself by using it."

"Would not be first weapon to turn on owner," Budimir mused, nodding. "Is good to check. Meanwhile, I will watch from the astral plane, see if gun does anything special there."

It wouldn't? Though I suppose, if that dwarf I met yesterday can make Thor's hammer, more dangerous weapons could be made too. Maybe someone made something they later couldn't control? But back to this guy- "You can do that?"

He shrugged. "Anyone can learn this. Most do not though."

"I'd like to learn!" I gushed. *That would be amazing, and give me more usefulness to the organization. Not that I'm bucking for a promotion already, but I feel like the more I can immerse myself in non-human culture the easier I'll pick it all up. That sounds magical, but he says anyone can learn it. Why wouldn't they, then? I mean maybe it's really hard or dangerous? But come on, being able to astrally project? I don't even know what that would mean but it sounds like something really useful.*

"I will give book on meditation, you can start there."

"Sure, okay." *He would know best, I guess. I wonder if I could meditate to contact Polaris, instead of waiting to speak to her in dreams? This astral, she mentioned that's actually where we were last night. She must have pulled me there, my dream self maybe, or something. I'd like to learn more about it, and this might be the perfect way.* "Forget gender studies. We need a university degree in non-human studies or something. I feel like I'm back in school again, but this time if I don't know that some guy with horns can't be hurt by fire I could wind up dead."

"There is a lot to learn," Swani agreed. "We just kind of learn it growing up, it's no big deal for us. I mean, at least about what our own people can do, and about magic in general. We tend to stay in pretty tight knit groups, actually. So until I started working here I didn't know too much about what other races specifically could do. You'll get it, I believe in you!"

"Thanks. That means a lot."

She giggled. "No problem."

We finished up and they took me down to the lower level again. The building wasn't that big but it was still nice to have a guide for the moment. Ananias was there of course, doing some kind of martial arts stuff.

"Ah, you're here!" he called as we walked up. "And with friends to cheer you on."

"We're actually here to work," Swani told him. "You were emailed about this, yes? We're observing the gun to learn more about it?"

"Who reads that stuff? Let's get to something important, shooting things!!" He made finger guns and shooting noises.

Yeah, I see what they mean.

Today it seemed I was shooting a dummy, they wanted to see what "bullets" were coming out of this thing, which they could easily dig out of a foam figure. Meanwhile it would give me a chance to shoot at something vaguely man shaped, which come to think of it was probably good practice otherwise. Shooting a target is one thing, but if something from literally out of this world is rushing me, I needed to know I wouldn't just freeze up. "Say can either of you do illusions?"

Both shook their heads. "Why?" asked Budimir.

"Just to get used to shooting things that are trying to kill me. I figured if I could see an illusionary person with a gun or something, or a monster down there, it might be a good exercise."

"I like the way you think," Ananias praised. "But don't worry about that. I'll be trying to kill you later, you can shoot me as much as you want."

"See what I mean?" Swani whispered to me, making a circle near her head.

"Uh, what?"

So my training began. We found out the gun wasn't shooting bullets, it just made bullet holes in whatever I pointed the gun at. Swani said it had nothing to do with my spirit energy or my soul, which she said was odd because normally doing magic did take some effort from the practitioner so I wasn't 'casting a spell' via the gun to create bullet holes. Budimir on the other hand did say he saw something odd happening in the astral plane, meaning it was certainly magical and could probably be used there as well.

"There are things that live there," he told me. "Some not so nice, either. What it means that gun *here* does something *there* I don't know. Never heard of such thing. Maybe topic for research, no?"

Great, another thing to look into. "I guess so."

With that done I discovered Ananias was not kidding. There was an obstacle course of sorts he took me to, via teleportation. It seemed the facility had various doors, created by dwarves, that led to other places they didn't have the room for in the building. *Good to know.* He then proceeded to stalk me through it, starting at one end while I started at the other. I went home feeling *very* depressed at how easily he nailed me every time. He had said even if I managed to hit him he would be fine by tomorrow, so please don't hold back. He shouldn't have worried, I didn't even come close.

"Don't sweat it," Archie told me on the way home. "The guy is like a million years old, and combat is about all he knows. Let him have this. You'll get there. I mean soldiers go through all kinds of things to be ready to shoot someone. It's not so easy as you might expect, as you learned today. He always went over where you went wrong, right? And encouraged you?"

"Yes," I reluctantly admitted. *The man does know his stuff.* "I won't fault him for that."

"I mean pick up a brush and paint something next to a master. You'll feel this same kind of despair, right? But they were back at that level at one time."

"You're right, I know. It's just a lot to cover all at once."

"I get it. Most people here have been assigned here *because* they've been with the organization a long time. We need good people here because of how messed up this area usually is. Normally you start with a desk job, doing paperwork and learning your place. You got tossed in to the deep end." He squeezed my knee. "Don't be afraid to ask for help, or just say you're going to focus on books a day if Ananias gets on your nerves too much. Even he understands mental exhaustion."

"I will, believe me I will. Wait, where are we going?"

"Out to dinner. My treat. I mean unless you don't want to?"

"Oh? Taking me out on a date without even asking?"

"I just thought you might like to relax a little after today, that's all. Guess I'll just turn the car around." He reached for the parking brake. "Watch this little maneuver I picked up for doing a 180 in a car!"

"Wait!" I cried. "Dinner sounds great, no need to go back!"

"Some other," snicker "time then."

I smacked his arm. "You jerk, you wouldn't have done it anyway!"

"Just keep telling yourself that."

Chapter 6

I go on my first real mission

Where: Conference room

When: A few weeks later

And so my life fell into a bit of a pattern, as most lives do. My move in was basically complete. I had internet, a second hand TV, and had cleaned the house and gotten a “new” fridge. I had no idea if the old one would have worked but being thrown out the door by Archie didn’t do it any favors. I wasn’t making a ton of money, and my savings were pretty low, (I still had student loans to pay off of course) so everything I bought was secondhand at this point. I was looking for a decent used car, but Archie said he didn’t mind picking me up and buses still ran so I could do my grocery shopping just fine. That was good, for some reason used cars seemed at a premium and new cars were almost non-existent at this point, something about a chip shortage? But I was settled in, the heat went on so I didn’t freeze, and the lights worked so what more did you need? Many people survived their entire lives with less, heck some people did with less *today* in other countries, so I was still ahead of the curve in some ways.

I trained, both in the astral with Polaris and with the “service weapon” as many started calling it. I explored my powers, and while I would probably never be comfortable flying around like Supergirl, I could hover and move about that way just fine. I practiced taking cover, shooting at things, and then throwing stuff around while the gun “reloaded” itself. I could rip up the ground to make a shield, or simply to toss it forward to attack. But I figured out how much I could reasonably lift, and while I would never separate sand grains from a pile of sand, I could toss just about anything without much effort. Polaris let me sleep some nights with no training, which I eventually worked out was just me taking a break. I didn’t have to ask “her” for a night off, she was me. She knew my limits better than I did. I also “practiced” if you can call it that, listening to my awareness of what was around me. I could tell people’s emotions, where they were, even if something hidden was a book or a rock. It was like having another sense, and I actually started to wonder how I had ever gotten by without it!

Part of my training was reading up on the various races that called the world home, and what magic could do. I figured out what Archie had been talking about, not that I went to his entry first, or anything. His kind, the puca, were trickster spirits no longer welcome in the world today. In the past, and we’re talking about the distant past, they would basically hang around the roadside as some kind of animal (usually their natural form of a horse) getting people to ride them. They never came back, at least the fortunate ones were simply thrown off of cliffs. As the humans rose to power and the modern world came into focus there was no place for beings that couldn’t control their urges and many were wiped out. No one wanted those sorts of deaths to be investigated, after all. Those that could be rehabilitated, like Archie, were allowed to live their lives though anyone in the know treated them with at least some suspicion. They still sometimes couldn’t resist a prank or two (and we come to the fridge incident?) so had a rather bad reputation. *So was he showing me he really was trustworthy, giving me a ride like that or did he just miss giving people rides because anyone that knows about puca will refuse one and he knew I had no reason to yet? And now I have to view him with suspicion as well, great, thanks puca of the past.* I resolved to try not to, to take him at his word and treat him as he treated me, but the seeds were planted.

I also took the opportunity to ask my “other half” a few burning questions, like where the gun had come from, and were there any other abilities I might cultivate apart from moving stuff around. That one was a quick no, they didn’t think so, but as we grew together who knew? As for the other, Polaris admitted the gun felt like their handiwork, though was at a loss as to why their ‘main self’

would have provided it. Especially leaving it sitting around, magically protected or not, in my old house. “My larger self may have simply seen you needing it, I suppose,” they admitted. “So they left it in a place they saw you coming back to. Honestly as much as you became more than you were before, I have been reduced by an amount you cannot fathom. My thoughts are much... smaller, now, if you take my meaning. I don’t know my originator’s thoughts, I have no connection to them anymore. But I have a sense they were much more than I am now. A poor explanation but I do not have the language to describe this feeling of loss. I have pieced some things together; It was more like raw life energy that you received, not a separate entity. In fact my existing at all may be some fluke, our energies not being completely compatible and so I ‘awoke’ to a form of consciousness that was never intended. I can see their energies simply being intended as a ‘transfusion’ to keep you alive, and should have faded with time as your own reserves returned. Clearly they did not, I became aware and persist to this day. Perhaps the weapon was to be your only means of defense, because the ability to interact with the world from a distance was not foreseen? While I know what I was, and have retained a small amount of knowledge such as the astral transfer I used to bring you here, for the most part I have had to rely on your, no offense, limited eyes and senses to experience the world since I became aware of my existence at all.”

“None taken.”

“So I’ve figured a few things out, but I don’t have the answers to questions about the past, or about events you didn’t directly observe once I became conscious.”

“At least you can share a little with me what it must have been like for you before. That will simply have to be enough, for both of us.”

“As well to call a shadow on a wall reality, but I take your meaning. I do what I can, I hope it helps you out.”

Naturally my main goal was to find my parents, and I used that time to look into it. According to town records they vanished right after I had, they had put out a missing person report for my bother and me after we didn’t come home that night, and vanished themselves. They were the first of many in the town, and while some houses were reclaimed (at least at first, by the banks in the area) mine never had been because of the fear aura that surrounded it. *Thank you Big Polaris.* In any case as they had left no forwarding address it looked like they had been sucked into Otherworld during an “inversion” and could be anywhere. Not the best news, but I was assured that it didn’t mean they were dead-dead, and there were certain avenues that could be explored to make inquiries there. Excellus would begin those inquiries and get back to me. *But after so long? I mean they would have no means to get back here, they were just regular people like me. They might be enslaved to some tuatha or demons depending on how far “out” in Otherworld they were taken. I have to maintain hope I can rescue them somehow, once we get word.* Of my brother there was nothing, he simply hadn’t reappeared anywhere they knew, but again were checking into hospitals and other facilities the world over about a small boy appearing out of nowhere that may have lost his memory, who would now be almost a grown man. *After all, if he hadn’t found a Polaris of his own, he would have been totally out of it. Worse off than me, he was smaller and had less to lose.*

I demonstrated my growing confidence in not simply smashing everything with my movement power to the others, who said it felt like magic, if not exactly what they were used to because some races did have a similar magical spell. They wondered where this ability came from, and I let them believe it was some interaction between what had happened to me and getting the gun, and not that a tiny piece of a divine being was still “renting” part of my soul. (or wherever it had taken residence) I learned about the various races that shared our planet, who was dangerous and how, and about astral projection from Budimir. I learned I was subject to the laws of magic, such that if I was in the shower I couldn’t lift a toothbrush, nor would my gun fire. Anything I was lifting fell exactly at sunrise just like

every other spell, and I couldn't float something past a threshold I wasn't invited past. I didn't see much of Archie and Emmett, who continued working with Herman, both in researching various things and taking him to various sites around town. He said he was close to finishing a modified Bane for me to use, though he said probably anybody could use it. That morning we had gotten an email that Gretchen wanted to see us, so we crowded into one of the larger conference rooms to see what she had to say.

"Good morning everyone," she began. "It seems break time is over, we're going to have an event today." There was an undercurrent of both dread and excitement that washed over the room. I felt in equal measure that they were glad for something to do at last, but dreading what might happen to the town. "Not to worry, it seems a minor event compared to what we've seen in the past. Now sadly the new measures to actively stop the event are not yet completed, so we're just going to have to use the old playbook for now. Get any humans away from the area, deal with whatever shows up, and hope it goes away without much fuss."

"What's the word on what we'll be facing?" someone asked.

"Yes, I'm just getting to that," she yelled back. "Here it is." She pulled out a journal and flipped to the end.

"The curtain parts and worlds collide, the very thing you can't abide.
Playful nature rules the day, but someone else the price will pay."

There was a general grumbling about what that could mean.

I know enough now to know she does a divination at the start of every day to see if an "event" is coming in the next 24 hours. She must have gotten this back today, and keeps a record of all the results she's gotten recorded in that book. As she got something, she knows to send us out into the field. Must be handy, being able to ask about the future like that.

"What we're thinking is some kind of park, or playground," she went on. "We've got the amusement park in town but that's closed for the season, I'll still send a team over there in case. But if you can think of a place for 'playful nature' that someone else pays for, let me know. I've got the full list of sites we've come up with, here hand these out," she handed a stack of papers to the nearest person, "as well as your assigned locations."

I waited patiently while the stack of papers made their way around, and I took one and (uh huh) passed it on. It seemed to be a map of the whole town, out to quite a ways, with various sections numbered and lettered like on a map you would buy in a store. On the back were the groups, each one assigned to a sector. I caught Archie's eye and he nodded.

Oh man, am I ready for this? My first field assignment, and there's like a one in twelve chance I'll actually see any action! She's got all the parks, trails, playgrounds, water holes, and picnic spots around town marked and covered. Arcades (do they still exist?), restaurants, etc. are not marked because you have to pay for those directly I guess? Still, we should keep our eyes open.

We headed out into the crisp winter air, naturally I had done some shopping for a winter jacket and gloves, hat, scarf, boots, and plenty of thick shirts. Everyone told me winters were terrible around here, something I wasn't looking forward to. But it wasn't too snowy just yet, so we didn't have to slog through anything to get to the parking lot. I was dressed warmly, with sensible pants and shoes, and my winter jacket. It wasn't sunny, in fact there were thick clouds overhead, much to Emmett's relief I was sure. I also knew by now that all the people that worked at Excellus, at least this branch of it, followed the opposite schedule of most of their kind. They slept during the night, like I did, even though they could see in the dark and were "dragged down" during the daylight hours. Most non-humans did it the other way, as they were simply stronger during the night. But we humans ruled the world, so anyone

that wanted to interact with humanity, as they did, needed to be on their schedule. The company had two others I hadn't met that kept an eye on things during the night, sort of a second shift, if you will.

"Hello Emmett," I greeted the vampire. He was leaning against the car, ready to go, out in the parking lot. He was wearing a half buttoned up, short sleeved shirt, and I felt colder just looking at him. *I thought we were supposed to blend in. How is walking around like that in the first weeks of winter "blending in?" At least he's not wearing shorts, I guess.*

"Morning. Ready for your first day in the field?"

"I think so. What should I expect?"

"Eh, a lot of sitting around, maybe a bit of a nap, and then going home at 5:00. Easy."

"You don't think we'll run into something?"

"We usually don't. But hey, you never know. Hope you brought a book."

"A book? And shirk our duty of keeping a watchful eye on our assigned sector?" Archie completely overreacted, stepping out of the car and leaning against it with his arms up. "How could you even suggest such a thing?"

"Don't listen to him. When something around here happens, you can't miss it." He pointed to his ears. "Just listen for the screams."

His words proved prophetic, we drove, walked, and sat in our assigned sector all morning with nothing to show for it. Emmett explained procedure was to "sound the alarm" or the "all clear" via text or email if something happened, so it seemed nothing had happened yet.

"Unless they just got sucked into another dimension and are all dead now," he explained jovially.

"Is that likely to happen?" I asked, glancing around. *And is there any way to protect ourselves from it?*

"Well, something comes here, it makes sense what's here goes there, right?"

"Yes..."

"And if the thing that's there is fire, or the middle of a glacier, or at the bottom of a lake, well, not much you can do in that case."

"Don't scare her," Archie chided. "Nothing like that has ever happened. Besides, it wasn't that dire a warning that the director got."

"I'm just being realistic. She can be scared or whatever on her own."

"It'll be fine," Archie assured me. "Just keep your eyes open and we'll deal with things as we always have."

It was getting to be about 2:00 PM and for the last half hour or so I had become increasingly fidgety. Waiting around was actually no fun at all. Who would have guessed? But Archie's phone beeped, and he took a look.

"Got a partial message," he told us. "Could be trouble one sector over. Let's take a quick drive over there and see if something's happened."

"Can't hurt," Emmett agreed. "Nothing exciting happening here anyway."

We pulled out and headed west, to the next site over. Emmett tried calling the agents that sent the message but there was no answer, making the two feel quite worried. He explained even if it interfered with magic, policy was to have your phone on while on the job, in case something happened. *So odds are, something has happened.* We were all pounding towards the site as soon as he parked, and looking around to see what could be the problem here. The other agent's car was there, they weren't inside, but we saw some kids bending over something behind the slide. It was a typical playground, with swings, slides, monkey bars, you know, stuff that won't totally kill you if you fell from it.

"Hey kids, have you seen any- oh crap!" Emmett started, then skidded to a halt and threw his arms up, holding us back too. The kids looked up at us, excitement in their eyes. There were three of

them, warmly dressed, and looking totally normal if not for all the blood, and the strange nails, and did I mention the blood? Laying there were two agents, slashed up and maybe dead. Past them was a very out of place looking building, or at least part of one. It was a brick façade, with some weird writing on it, and it looked like it was sliced out of the world and plopped here. Also the area wavered somehow, like a thin film of water over the eyes and making me want to blink it away. But I couldn't, it wasn't my eyes, the space here was being intruded upon by Otherworld. We had found the center of the Event.

"I think we've been discovered," said the one kid.

"No more playtime?" asked another.

"I don't know, I think we could take three just as easily as two," said the third.

"We surprised the first two," reminded the first.

"So what?" asked the second. "You think they're gonna hurt a couple of kids?"

"Now you're talking," said the third, and all three straightened up. They were flexing their hands, and something was dripping from them. "Who wants to play?"

"Now just a minute," Archie told them, holding his hands up. "Let's talk about this."

"I've got you two protected, they can't touch you," Emmett told us, dropping into a martial arts stance. He looked to the kids. "I'll play with you, I don't believe you're real kids anyway. You came through that building to here, didn't you? At least I can get some entertainment today."

"That's where you're wrong, old man," said the middle one. "But sure, let's see who has fun with who today."

"I don't think so," I told everybody, and exerted my will on the three. All of them went flying back, smacking against the brick building with a cry. "Now then," I told them, concentrating on holding them there. "Who are you really? And don't think about using any long distance magic on us." I brought up my hand, which now had the gun in it. "I'll shoot one of you at random if I so much as smell magic being cast."

To my surprise the three started laughing. "She's going to shoot us," one cried. "That's a bit rich isn't it?"

"Go ahead then," said the next one over. "See how far that gets you."

"Yeah, I dare you!" said the third. "Come on, what are you waiting for?"

Well I'm not going to now. Wait... I lowered it a bit, not taking my eyes off them.

"Nicely done," Archie praised me, folding his arms over his chest. "Can you hold them like that?"

"As long as I need to. What are they? Young non-humans that live in Otherworld and decided to have some fun when they found themselves here?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "It doesn't add up."

"I could have handled it," Emmett pouted. "I'll go alert the others we have... guests."

"How about we use your bodies to take out whoever shows up?" suggested one of the kids.

He looked up from his phone. "Oh? How exactly are you going to do that? From where I'm standing, I'm over here and you're over there."

"That could be changed," he replied, and the kids went limp as three figures simply flowed out of them.

I could barely make them out, and took a step back. *How did they do that, when being pressed up against the wall with my power? What are these things?* They were human shaped, but all seemingly looked the same. No clothes, no hair, just a fuzzy wavering, more a contrast to the wavering in the air that was here already than a distinct shape. But you could tell something was there, it was pretty clear. I brought the gun back up and they laughed again. "Stay back!"

"I don't think so," said one, looking me over. "You'll do, I call the female."

"You always get the female," said the one next to it.

"Then be faster. What do you say, sweet cheeks, want me to take you for a ride?"

"That's my line," Archie muttered. "Perhaps we better fall back for now?"

We should have another ride before it gets too- focus!

“Agreed, I’ve never seen anything like this,” Emmett cautioned with a nod. “If we get possessed...”

“No, that thing comes any closer and I’m shooting it,” I told them. “We’ll see it laugh that off.”

“By all means,” said the thing, spreading what could be arms wide. “The look on your face will be priceless. What, did you just start this job yesterday or something?”

I’m gambling here, but given what this gun does, and what Budimir was saying about the astral, I’m betting it can harm them. Despite the fact they seem not all the way fully here or there like the building is. Maybe some kind of magic they think is going to protect them? If this doesn’t work, well, I’ll float all three of us above them, see if they can fly. They must need to be near us to possess us, otherwise they would have tried already. “Fine.” I pulled the trigger. The figure gave a jerk and staggered back.

“What?” it croaked. It put a hand up to its chest and looked at it. “It hurt me?”

“What?” the other two echoed.

“You think we didn’t come *prepared*?” I asked it. I was feeling a bit triumphant at the time, the gun had worked on it. That was good news, quite apart from me not looking the fool. Now for a bit of a bluff. “You think you know everything? Take another step towards me, and you’ll get more of the same.” *I can hurt them, but can I protect the others at the same time? There are three of them and they’re probably pretty fast.*

“Perhaps retreat is the best option,” said one.

“No, I want her head!” said the one. “Nothing has ever hurt me before, not as myself. You’ll die for that!”

It leapt for me, and I jerked back and pulled the trigger as fast as I could as it came forward. I screamed as it passed through me, I thought for sure it was going to take me over, but it was like a mist and simply vanished. I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself and shifted my aim to the other two. Who were now pressed up against the brick wall behind them.

“We need to leave!” hissed the one.

“I’m trying,” the other hissed back.

“Trying to escape with planeshifting?” Archie asked. “Thing is, this spot seems to be all worlds at the moment. You can’t go anywhere, because you’re already there.”

“What?” both screamed.

“Yeah, it fits,” Emmett agreed. “Kanaima, right? The nails is the biggest giveaway, but I could see you after you left the kids so I wasn’t sure. But that makes sense.”

Archie nodded. “We can see them because we’re in the astral, Otherworld, and the real world at the same time here. And now we can kill you bastards.”

Well, I can, I don’t know about either of you two. But maybe best if they don’t know that.

“Mercy!” they both cried. “Don’t kill us!”

“Why shouldn’t we?” Emmett snarled. “You know how much trouble you give us? Give everyone? How many humans have you made do terrible things and then just blipped back home?”

“None, none we swear it!” said the one.

“Yes, never done that,” agreed the other. “We are good people, not like the rest of our kind. Oh, nasty brutes they are, yes, taking money for doing naughty things. We attend many protests against that sort of thing!”

“Oh yes, many protests. We’re actually pacifists, you know.”

“You just came out of those kids after jumping two of our agents, so I know you’re lying. Are you claiming you just found them like that, and maybe got inside the kids to keep warm or something?”

“Oh them! I didn’t think they counted,” said the one.

“You didn’t think-”

Suddenly the door opened and a very confused looking man half stepped out. He looked around, clearly wondering what was going on. The two looked over there, and bolted through the door.

“I say, what’s going on here?” he demanded, having flailed about like he had walked into a spider web as the two passed him. I lowered the gun, they were gone. *I wasn’t sure I wanted to kill them in cold blood anyway, so that’s probably for the best at this point.*

“If this place has a back or side door, better use it for now,” Archie told him. “This is the real world, we’re having a bit of overlap at this spot at the moment.”

“I see that. How strange. Very well, not a problem. I’ll tell management to keep an eye out and this door is out of service.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure thing.” He closed it again.

Does weird stuff happen over there so often he just brushed it off as normal? Odd.

“That was scary,” Archie told me, sagging a little. “Kanaima mercenaries, it just figures we would get- crap get some ambulances here, I’ll check the kids!”

“Right,” Emmett replied, going to dial his phone.

The two agents were not dead, it seemed kanaima liked to play with their victims so while they had been poisoned, they would live as it wasn’t the sort to kill you instantly, just cause you a lot of pain. The kids were checked over, they were fine, and Excellus rolled in with some temporary barriers to keep people seeing the building protruding into the playground. Herman showed up, saying how this was the last piece he needed, an actual site that was fresh so he could feel around and figure out what to do about the whole thing. Me? I sat and tried not to think about the creature I had just killed. From my reading they were quite the annoyance on this side, like Emmett had said, they did nasty things and got other people blamed, but I had never really killed anything before, or almost been killed myself.

That was going to take some getting used to.

Chapter 7

I try out Herman's work and put things to rights

Where: The site

When: Three days later

"Here it is," Herman announced, arriving through the gate. We were standing inside the fenced in perimeter that surrounded the inversion while several Excellus employees with persuasion magic made sure no one else got too close. Everyone in the office took turns at guard duty, but my team and I were there because Herman had emailed us and said he had the new device finished. We had blocked off the door so it couldn't be opened from the other side into our world, but needed to make sure no other kanaima drifted through and caused trouble. It had been quiet since the original event but we were still stuck with the building in the middle of a playground. Hopefully, today that would end. Herman held up a bracelet and ring combo proudly, and everyone clapped for him. He laughed. "Clap after it works. They put the warnings after the spell, you know." He handed it to me. "Would you care to do the honors?"

"Herman, I didn't know you cared!"

"I care to see this through?"

"No, no, you like me, so you're putting a ring on me?" I grabbed the ring portion and shook it at him. He laughed.

"Good one. But no, the director said to give it to you, rather than trying to do this myself. Said you would know why."

I do know why. She's hoping I'll have an easier time of it given I was there when this whole thing started. I just wish my brother was here too, maybe it would be twice as easy with his help. I took the assemblage of rings and chains and tried to figure out what I was looking at.

"So the bracelet will let you see spiritual energy," he explained, separating the pieces. He turned the bracelet so I could see the runes on the inside of it. "When we were sealing the openings to Deogen's prison a friend of mine, Tayna, would cast magic on Kelly, who had the Bane on, so she could see lay lines and thus trace where the opening would be. I figured out this place, and the other inversions, are similar. They happen along convergences, which makes sense. Convergences happen across all three worlds, so they're the thinnest point. So rather than having to cast magic on you time and time again I just put it into the bracelet. Now the flat disk, that's the sealing portion. Smack it against the convergence, and if I'm right in what I've done, it'll un-align the dimensions and force them apart again. Hopefully so far they'll never tear through again. Do enough of them and this area goes back to normal. The ring acts as a sort of power source, drawing off the lines in order to do this. I figured we would need as much power as we could get in order to accomplish this. I mean think about what we're proposing here! To put it on put the ring on first, slip your hand through so the disk is at your palm, and put the bracelet on. That should hold the whole thing in place, instead of me just making three disks and stacking them together and making some elaborate chain to try and hold it on."

I managed to accomplish this, when I finished putting the whole thing on I blinked and looked around. I did see a strange, ghostly white "line" running past me, joining several others nearby. "At least that much works." I did a double take as I looked back at him, then at the others, then at my own hand. There was an inner glow there now I hadn't seen before. In fact, looking at my hand closely I noticed two distinct patterns of energy within me, and we all knew why that was!

"Might take some getting used to," Herman told me. "But you'll be able to see people through walls, at least their energy out to a distance of a few meters, and the strength of the glow will tell you how much spiritual energy they have. The brighter the glow, the more dangerous they probably are."

"I could get used to this," I admitted.

"Yeah, thinking of making one for myself. Maybe as a watch band?" He held up his watch, which looked like an Apple product. "I already wear one of those anyway. Now, give it a try!"

“That’s what we’re here to do. I feel I should ask though, does this have a fancy name?”

“Of course! Wouldn’t be a dwarf if I didn’t name my creations. And thanks for asking, you do me credit by inquiring before using it. Its name is Auseinander, the world banisher!”

“Ouchender?”

“Auseinander.”

“House and dander?”

“Auseinander.”

“Oust and ander?”

“Close enough!”

“Right. Okay, everyone get clear I have no idea what’s going to happen when I do this!”

“I’ll stay with you,” said someone, stepping up. It was that lady I met at the party with the long hair that seemed to blow in the breeze, even indoors. She was dressed in all white, a white skirt, white leggings, white jacket. I felt outclassed by her in looks, and her long blond hair was unbound and just like the first time I saw her, dancing around despite there being no wind in here. The barrier around the place was solid, so people couldn’t see in. That meant most of the wind was deflected too.

“Margarita, right?”

“No one forgets my name,” she replied with a smile. “Not until they’ve had too much of me, anyway.”

We both chuckled. “I appreciate the offer, but isn’t that a bit dangerous? I have no idea what this is going to do.”

“That’s why I need to be here,” she explained. “If you get tossed into Astral or Otherworld along with the building, who is going to get you back here?”

“Uh...” *That’s an excellent point!*

“That’s what I thought. I can step through using magic, and bring you with me. I need to be here.”

“Welcome aboard. Aboard. Welcome abroad.”

“Was that a crack about my beard?” Herman yelled over his shoulder.

“Not at all!”

“Better not have been. Good luck!”

I’ll need it.

“How should we approach?” she asked. “Where are we going, anyway? I’ll be behind you the whole time.”

“Don’t go that way!” I shouted, “you’ll step right on the-” Her leg passed through the lay line and she stopped, looking back at me in concern. I stared at her leg, back up at her face, which radiated confusion, back to her leg, back to her face and she tilted her head.

“Sorry, what’s going on?”

“Never mind.” I fought the urge to smack myself. *They aren’t physical things, dummy. I’ve been stepping through them my whole life. Just because I can see them now, doesn’t make them solid things I have to worry about people hitting. They aren’t laser beams, they’re just energy conduits.* “We’re heading for that space right between the swing set and the climbing dome.” I pointed and got into position and Margarita stood behind me. She put her hands on my back, reconsidered with a little humming sound in her throat, and stepped closer to me, putting her hands around my waist. “No sense taking chances,” she muttered.

“Ah, yes.” *Not into girls, I’m not into girls, even otherworldly wind sprites or whatever she is. I’m into horses. Wait, that’s not right... Think about that later.* “Forward then.” I held up Auseinander and started forward. I only made it a few steps, the convergence was still maybe twenty paces away when I felt I was trying to push through a sponge instead of air. I started shoving, even considering pushing my arm forward with my power, got another two steps, and it was turning into rock not sponge. “I can’t get any further!” I managed.

“Lass, are you touching a line?” Herman shouted from the edge of the barrier. “You’ll need more power!”

I’m giving her all I’ve got, captain! “Of course I’m-” I looked down. No line. *Right, I didn’t want to touch it now that I could see it. Silly of me.* “Heading to the right, Margarita,” I told her. I adjusted my course, going sideways a few steps, and Margarita stepped with me. I could go sideways just fine, and when I intersected the line it bent upwards, passing through the ring. Suddenly the rock was gone, it was more like sponge again, and we pressed on a few more paces. *We know that part works too, he really does know his stuff I guess.*

“It’s working, the building is going away!” she cheered. “Keep it up, you’re doing great, Jesse.”

“I’m trying,” I grumbled through clenched jaws. I didn’t turn my head to look, I couldn’t spare the concentration. *Come on, another step. Help me out here, Polaris! What are you good for anyway?* I made it another step, another, we were almost there! The nearby lines were bending towards me, like the ring was a magnet for them. *Come on, hold it, when they impact it I can move forward more easily again.* I held it, finally they touched me, and I surged forward again. “By the power of Auseinander I command this intrusion be banished!” I cried, smashing my hand down on the convergence. Margarita was now shoving me forward, with what seemed like all her might, rather than holding onto me. I swished through it, and suddenly the pressure was gone. We fell forward, tumbled together, and she landed on top of me. A cheer went up from the crowd.

“Wow, that was crazy!” she told me with a wide grin. “You okay there?”

I was looking up at her face, which was flushed with what I hoped was just exertion. “I think so. You?”

“Sure thing. Sorry about landing on you.”

“It’s fine.”

She rose up, not using her arms to brace herself, just floated up without support and righted herself. Her hair seemed to fluff out and went back to gently waving in the air as she lightly touched the ground. “Want a hand?” She held her hand out.

Huh, if I tried that with my power I would just go shooting off into the sky, we learned that the hard way. I do need more practice, she looked so elegant doing that. “Thanks.” I gathered myself and took it, and she helped me up.

“Well done,” said Herman, coming over with the others. They were all smiles and I felt a great deal of pride, satisfaction, and awe from the assembled crowd.

“It worked then?” I asked.

“Take a look.” He swept his hand back, and there was no more building there. The odd shimmer was gone, it looked like everything was back to normal. “We did it. This area seems completely normal again.”

“So we did,” I agreed. “Look like we have a means of putting things right around here.” I held up my hand. “Everyone, three cheers for Herman, who made this possible!”

They cheered for him and smacked him on the back, and he was saying it was nothing, anyone could have done it.

Meanwhile I thought back a bit. *Sorry about that ‘what are you good for’ crack, I was under a bit of pressure. No hard feeling I hope?* I didn’t expect a reply, but I felt it important enough to have said it. *Apologizing to myself? I guess if you can’t apologize to yourself, who can you apologize to?*

I stuck around, helping everyone tear the barriers down and load them onto the truck, because I am a team player and just because I, personally, with no help whatsoever, had sealed the breach that didn’t mean I couldn’t still do my share of the grunt work. Okay maybe I had a little help. “Thanks for your help back there, and for sticking with me,” I told Margarita as the truck drove away. “I didn’t even think about getting stuck on the other side, I’m glad someone was thinking ahead.”

“Don’t mention it,” she told me. “I would have gotten you, had you vanished while doing it. I just figured this way we shared the risk, and that would make it a little easier. Just don’t do one of these without me, or at least without someone with dimension magic to back you up.”

“Noted. Having you at my back did make a difference.” *Both physically and mentally. I had to go forward because I couldn’t let you, or Herman, down. I had to make it work. If you hadn’t been there, maybe I wouldn’t have stuck it out. Is that showing off or simply teamwork?*

She giggled. “I was flying as strongly as I could at the end. That’s why we tumbled over. You really pushed through.”

“I think Auseinander helped, I’m not really that strong.” *Unless Polaris was helping keep me grounded as well? I was rotating a big chunk of the worlds apart, literally, by the feel of it. Even with the energy from the lines, does that account for what I felt?*

“If you say so, Jesse. See you back at the office, and let’s get lunch together today!”

“Yeah, sure, I’d like that. See you.”

She bounded away to her car.

We headed back to the office, leaving several people there to make sure everything was stable, and nothing new would pop up. Archie told me they would probably watch it for a few days, make sure nothing happened there. “After all, it would be fairly embarrassing if we declared victory, left, and two days from now that building was back bigger than ever.”

“I don’t disagree. Say...”

“Yes?”

“We know it works at this point. Are there any other inversions in town we should go after?”

Emmett turned in the front seat and shook his head. “Thankfully they don’t usually last too long. Two or three weeks at most, from what we’ve seen. Then things snap back into position.”

“Oh. So what’s the point of this?” I rubbed the disk on my palm.

“Doing it in a controlled manner, like blowing a building up instead of just letting it fall over. Now we can shove things back where they belong right away, instead of watching to make sure no humans stumble across the site for weeks. This one happened fairly out in the open this time, but it’s happened inside of houses, buildings, trust me, that little thing is going to come in handy.”

“That makes sense.”

“Plus isn’t that making sure the dimensions are far enough apart it doesn’t happen again?” asked Archie. “We do this enough and we all go home. That’s the mission, right?”

“Do they re-open?”

“Sure do,” Emmett chirped. “Actually, I wonder if Herman couldn’t work up some kind of prediction gizmo to help us tell when. Divination magic isn’t much help at pinpointing the location, as I understand it, but there may be math behind it. Then we could be there right as it happens, shove it back together, and have even less disruption around here.”

Right, we were all assigned a sector rather than just asking the magic where we should go after it warned Gretchen an inversion would happen today. One would think if it could tell us exactly where to go, we would have been there instead of spreading out and hoping one of us would spot something.

“We could ask him. He’s sticking around, right? See how his invention works out?”

“I think so. Yeah, have to ask him.”

“But it would still be divination magic,” Archie told us. “I don’t think one type can get any more information than another.”

“You don’t know,” Emmett grumped.

Once back at the office I wrote up and submitted a report on how Auseinander worked, what I felt when using it, and how effective I thought it would be in the future. I emailed Herman, asking if he did have a better way to find the sites tucked away that we could use. Margarita came to get me for

lunch, and we chatted. I had a feeling she was fishing for information a little bit, asking me stuff like did I have a boyfriend and maybe she could point out some single guys if I thought I was interested. I told her I didn't have a boyfriend, but I wasn't really looking at this time, and felt a bit of disappointment from her. But she quickly recovered, and told me about great places to eat around town, and the best place to get my hair done.

"Is that your natural color?" she asked.

"Ever since I can remember. But I doubt what I went through would have turned my hair red!"

Sadly I don't recall what color my brother's hair was, which one of my parents had red hair? Can I even be sure?

"Yeah, doesn't seem likely."

"How do you deal with yours, though? It's so long, doesn't it get tangled all over the place?"

"You would think that, wouldn't you?" she agreed. "Whatever makes it blow around like this seems to take care of it. I don't even really have to think about it." She gathered it up, flung it behind her, and it seemed to just gently waft down again, not a tangle to be seen.

"Neat. Have you ever considered getting it cut short? I just wonder if it would still move like that if you did."

"Oh no," she seemed aghast at the very idea. "Have my hair, like, separated from me? No, no, I'm a vila, that would never do. Can you even imagine what that might mean? No thank you." She shuddered.

"I didn't realize, is your hair somehow special?" *I don't recall reading anything about non-human hair that is dangerous or anything. What's she so concerned with?*

"It's not something we like to talk about," she told me.

"Okay, I won't pry. Say, what happens when you swim? Does it still move like that, like say if you were at the bottom of the deep end?"

"I does," she giggled. "But I think that may be normal for anyone to have happen? When I shower is really the only time it gets plastered down and stays there."

Magic being washed away by running water. Right. "That must be really heavy."

"Yeah, I really feel the whole weight of it at that point. But it dries out pretty fast, so it's no big deal."

"Well, I like it. Maybe I'll let mine grow out a bit more."

"You should, I bet it would look good on you!"

"Thanks."

We finished eating and I headed back to my desk. *Back to studying, I guess? I hope I put her off, she seems nice but I think she wanted to know if I was interested in her. Sorry, we can be friends but that's about it. Maybe I'm imagining it, I'm just 'the new girl' and everyone's trying to figure out where I stand. Office gossip being what it is, and all. Maybe I'll go down to the shooting range, actually I can't believe I didn't get the rest of the day off, after sealing that inversion. I mean come on, give me a little break here. Oh well, only two days until the weekend.*

Chapter 8

I get a new toy to play with

Where: The office

When: The next day

Not long after I got into the cube and booted my PC up to check my email for the day Herman knocked on my doorframe and tossed something down on my desk. I looked down at it, then back to him.

“Is that a massive sword on my desk or are you just happy to see me?”

“Both,” he replied. “It’s the answer to your question from yesterday.”

“A sword is the answer?”

“That’s right. Ever hear of Wayfinder?”

“No.”

“Oh. Well, it’s from a book about twelve swords that are forged by the god Vulcan for a game the gods want to play. It ultimately causes their destruction, but the point is, this is as close to one of them as I can come. I plan to make all twelve, each has a different power and some are more dangerous than others and will simply be replicas without any magic. Go ahead, take a look.”

I grabbed it and looked at the handle. It had a white arrow on an otherwise unadorned, black hilt, and I yanked it out of the scabbard. It was fairly long, with what I recognized as the mystical runes adorning the blade that bound magic into an item. I tapped them with my other hand. “Is this book accurate?”

He looked down. “No. The original blades are said to contain a pattern in the steel that puts Damascus to shame, and I hadn’t yet thought about how to hide them. Now I would put the runes on the hilt, and cover them with wood. Of course I’m not Vulcan, and while I am experimenting with various “lost” techniques on my own the best I can do is just a regular old sword blade. The point is the magic. Wayfinder, the original, could lead you to anything you could frame in your mind to ask for. Ask how to break into a vault, and the sword would lead you to the exact group of people you need to do so. Mine isn’t quite that powerful but does have a fair bit of divination magic put into it. So it works in a similar way just more directly. It could lead you to a vault but not all the steps in between.”

“You think this can lead us to the next site once Gretchen tells us one is coming?”

“I think you have nothing to lose by trying it out. I know you managed to find your way there *after* the fact, which saved the day but hopefully this can get us here sooner.”

Yeah, but that was just thanks to technology, not anything I did specifically. “Herman, thanks!” I shoved it back into the scabbard and hopped up to hug him. “You’re the best!” *If we can use this to find an inversion before it opens, so much the better. I would rather not rely on people I know getting hurt to tell me where to go the next time.*

“Yes, well,” he said, a bit off balance. “Go spreading it around, as my reputation grows my prices can go up too.”

I laughed. “You got it. So I can borrow this?”

“Sure, just don’t lose it. I won’t be able to use it to find it, if you get my drift.”

“Huh, the one thing in the universe it can’t find. Itself. I’ll keep an eye on it.”

“I’m serious though, don’t lose it. I used to make weapons for others, but I don’t anymore. This doesn’t count because the weapon isn’t enchanted to do something combat related, but I debated for some time even letting it out of my sight. Don’t make me regret it.”

“I won’t, I’ll keep it safe, honest.”

“You better. See you later.”

He left and I propped it up against the wall. I tried to concentrate on email, but my eyes kept flicking over to it. *Okay, he’s probably gone. So you can find things, huh? Let’s give that a quick test shall we?* I quietly pulled it out again and focused on my parents. Nothing happened. *Maybe I should*

have asked exactly how to use it? Or maybe they are dead, or in Otherworld... I slowly started spinning around and suddenly the blade started to vibrate in my hand. *Oh! I see. Right. So they are still alive, huh? This is incredible, it actually works! And in the same place too, as I didn't specify which parent so they must be together.* I broke into a wild grin, that was the best news I could have gotten all day. *What about my brother?* I felt it go dead again and turned in a circle. I made it two revolutions before putting the point down again. *Is he gone? That would be terrible! But my parents, they are alive!* I slammed the blade back into the scabbard, locked my PC as is corporate policy, grabbed my jacket, and raced over to see Archie.

"Hello again," he said when I skidded to a halt at his cube. We had just said goodbye as he had once again driven me here.

"We have to go, right now!" I told him.

"We do?"

"Yes! Look at this!" I shook the sword at him.

"You murdered someone with a sword and need me to help you hide the body? Didn't know you knew how to use a sword, don't you have a gun now for that sort of thing?"

"What? No. Herman gave it to me. It can find things. It pointed the way to my parents!"

"They're nearby?"

"Uh..." I hesitated. "Not necessarily. It doesn't give a distance, just a direction. But it didn't point in a crazy angle, does it know to follow the curvature of the earth?"

"Hate to break it to you sis," said Emmett, coming over to see what the commotion was about. "Earth is flat."

"I can show you pictures proving it isn't."

"All doctored. We know the truth."

"Don't confuse her," Archie told him. "It's not flat."

"Oh, a round earther. Typical."

"Can we focus here?" I demanded. "Parents. My parents. I've been trying to find them for 14 years and Herman just casually hands me the means to find them. Can we take a quick trip, see if they might be nearby?"

"Leave work? I don't know..." Archie hedged. "I've got some, uh, important emails or something to go over..."

"No you don't. You were saying how boring it was around here with the lull in inversions. Plus I deserve a break for my work yesterday. And this is work related, sorta."

"How so?"

"I won't stop pestering you until we leave. That means neither one of us does any work today."

He laughed. "Fine. We can drive for a bit I guess. But you're paying for my gas."

"Done!"

"Let me put it on our calendar so no one comes looking for us." He fiddled with his PC, while I stood there and fumed and fidgeted. "I emailed the boss, let's go before she reads it and emails me back saying I can't leave."

"Easier to ask forgiveness?" Emmett asked.

"Exactly. Let's go."

We headed out to the car and I pulled the blade out again to give him a direction. "Okay, we'll stop every few minutes to make sure we're still on track."

"Okay."

We were clearly heading out of town and Emmett wanted to know exactly how long we were going to drive for before we gave up.

"I figure an hour," Archie told him. "If it's any longer than that, we'll head back and try it a bit smarter."

“Smarter?” I asked.

“Sure. We’ve got doors that lead all over. We get a map, ask the sword where they are, and draw a line. Head to the next place we have a door to, repeat. Simple triangulation.”

“Why didn’t we just do that to start?” Emmett whined.

“To get out of the office for a couple of hours and have a drive with a... With Jesse. Of course then *you* had to butt in...”

“Oh I see how it is.”

“Then get out!”

“No! You two need a chaperon, clearly.”

“We actually don’t,” I said icily. “We’re both adults.”

He barked a laugh. “You’re a baby!”

“I...” I made a face. I couldn’t exactly refute that, given how old everyone around the office admitted to being.

“See, she knows I’m right. So why then?”

“Why would they be that far away?”

“Why be this close and not be at, oh I don’t know, their own house?” he countered.

“Okay, good point. Let me pull over.”

“What? No!” I whined. “You said-”

“I’m just going to ask. Sheesh, you think Gretchen is the only one with magic that can reveal the future? And we need a new heading away, I said we would stop every few minutes didn’t I?”

“Oh. That’s fine then.”

“Thank you.”

So we pulled over and Archie got out so he could be away from the technology of the car, and I got out to get a new heading so I could swing the sword around. Then he asked to hold it and I handed it over. He got it pointing in the same direction I had gotten, and nodded. “It’s a positive result. I got a good feeling about finding the location of her parents if we keep going on our current path. So they can’t be all that far away.”

“Odd,” Emmett mused. “Very odd.”

“I agree. But I guess we’ll see. If we can reunite them today, we do have an obligation to try.”

“I retract all complaints. Jesse, you sit shotgun, I’ll be in back.”

“You don’t have to-” But he was already climbing in back. “Thanks.”

“You still owe me buckets of blood, don’t think I forgot. And some new pants.”

“Pants are easy, we can go shopping any time. But you have model for me! Blood... I don’t know.” *How does he get blood, actually? Animal blood? Does that work? I think I read that works but not as well?*

“Just one little bite. I’ll even buy you a drink first if you want. You’ll like it, never had any complaints.”

“Stop, just stop.”

He laughed and laughed.

“What other magic do you know?” I asked when we got back on the road.

“That’s it. Changing shape and some premonition abilities. I’ve never really practiced those to any extent, I guess I just am the type of guy who lives in the moment, and can let the future take care of itself.”

“Strange pairing.” *Also, what? If I had magical abilities I for sure would try to get the most use out of them that I could. But then, I’m not a spirit horse that used to be a murdering trickster so what do I know about his thought process? I’m looking at it from the outside still, he was born with certain things and so doesn’t see them as all that exciting.*

“Yeah, I guess. Most races get five magical abilities, I feel like I got the short end of the stick on that one.”

“But you can turn into anything,” Emmett reminded him. “I can only be a bat, a wolf, and rat.”

“How useful are our shapeshifting abilities day to day though?”

“I admit, not very much. You get to blend in with it but you’re not a secret agent, impersonating people to break into places and plant bombs or whatever. Then it would be more useful.”

“I guess.”

“What about a wolf with giant bat wings?” I asked, thinking aloud.

“Er, don’t think so. Maybe? Never tried it. That would look weird.”

“So what magical powers *do* you have, Emmett?”

“I can talk to and command vermin, make myself like smoke, enthrall people which you’ve already experienced from one of my kin, move faster, and change shape.”

“Yup, that’s five, it checks out.”

“And remember this isn’t my real form,” Archie went on. “I have to maintain it all the time, while he just gets to walk around looking like himself. I mean what good is changing into anything when I have to be human most of the time anyway? What good has it ever done me?”

Oh, I can think of some fun lovers might have with that- bad thought Jesse, do not give in to the bad thought.

“Look like myself dead,” Emmett clarified. “Not that anyone seems to mind.”

“Still a drag. I’m used to it, but I do wish I could be night shift, so the daytime wasn’t dragging me down too.”

“But then we would never have met!”

“And I would have been all the poorer for it, believe me.”

“Thanks.”

After about an hour and twenty minutes the sword swung off the road and towards the woods. Archie found a place to park, a nature trail that no one was going to be taking this close to winter, and we trooped ahead. I hated to be wandering around with the sword just stuck out in front of me, making me wonder just how practical this shape was and maybe a different shape, and exact replica be damned, was the way to go? But it was fairly quiet once we got into the trees, and we followed the point of the blade forward.

“So they’ve decided to camp out in the woods for the last 14 years?” Emmett remarked. “I don’t buy it.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Archie agreed. “But you have to admit to a certain amount of curiosity at this point. What the heck are they doing out here?”

“How much did they owe in back taxes?”

“Quiet, I think we’ve found something,” I told them. The blade was vibrating as I pointed it into a strange cave formation. It was basically two rock arches, with trees growing all over the top of it. In front of the caves, which I couldn’t see into they sharply turned, was a whole bunch of water. “They’re in that cave?”

“Very strange place to be, maybe they’re hiding out from something? Winter here must be brutal though.”

“And I’m going to be freezing because I don’t have waders on, just sneakers. But there’s nothing else for it.” I started forward.

“Hold your horses there,” Archie told me. “You don’t have to get wet. Stay here a minute.”

“Okay?” I stopped and he looked around. “Yeah, be right back.” He headed off into the trees.

“He’s gone nuts,” Emmett told me. “It’s really pointing you in that direction?”

“It really is. My parents are in that cave!”

“I believe you. I’ll be very interested in why they are out here.”

You and me both. “Oh.”

A black horse stepped out of the trees, and I smacked myself. “Looks like your ride is here,” Emmett told me with a snicker. “How about that, your prince is actually the horse.”

“Oh, quit it,” he said. “Feels so good to be back in my real shape. Hop on.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Emmett told him.

“Not you, Jesse. You can wait here.”

“Nuh huh. We’re all going. You don’t know what you’re gonna find in there. You might need a vampire.”

“I guess I can carry you both.”

“I have something else in mind.” He left as well, and a moment later a rat ran towards us.

“A rat! Kill it, kill it, kill it, kill it!” I was waving the sword around, nowhere near him, of course. I knew what had happened.

“You done?” he asked, looking up at me and sounding very high pitched right now.

“For the moment. You want to ride in my pocket or something?” *Because too bad, women’s clothing doesn’t have pockets. I guess the jacket does...*

“I was thinking your shoulder?”

“Fine.” I sheathed the sword, and let Emmett climb onto my hand and then my shoulder. He sat up on his hind legs and balanced there. I then climbed onto Archie’s back, thankful I had some experience with this at least, and he splashed forward into the cave. The water wasn’t too deep, for a huge horse, and we headed inside where it started to rapidly dim.

“Let me get out my cell phone so I can turn the light on.”

“Don’t bother,” Emmett told me from my shoulder. “I’ll let you know if anything interesting shows up.”

Weird that I can see their “glow” but it doesn’t actually provide any light. And hello, what’s this? A lay line? Heading right in the direction we seem to be going in. How about that. “Okay. Uh, are there bats in here?” I looked up, but didn’t see any tiny life signs. *How high is the cave ceiling in here though?*

“What if there are? You have something against bats?”

“I have something against rabies shots.”

“Well, don’t worry about it. I don’t see any.”

“Yeah, it’s actually weird we don’t,” Archie remarked. “This would be a great place for them. Do bats migrate for the winter?”

“Some do, others hibernate. Never cared to look into the exact species of bats in this area though, so I don’t know.”

“Could be anything then.”

Okay, this is sort of creepy. I’m riding a talking horse, while a talking rat sits on my shoulder, in total darkness. My parents better appreciate-

“Hello? What’s this?” Archie stopped.

“Now that is interesting,” Emmett agreed.

“What is this doing here?”

“What? What do you see?”

“We can’t go forward any more,” Archie said. “Did you see any side passages?”

“No, just this. Can you feel that though?”

“You’re right. What in the world?”

“What? Is? It!” I demanded.

He snickered in a horsey way. “It’s a wall.”

“A wall?”

“Yeah. Brick wall.”

“A magically active brick wall,” Emmett clarified. “Move us a little closer?”

“Sure.” Archie moved sideways, and I leaned over. My fingers felt bricks, and Emmett touched it too. “It covers the whole cave, top to bottom and side to side. Someone didn’t want anyone getting past this point.”

“We can bring some tools back, right? Smash it down?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” They were both silent for a bit. I finally got fed up that I dug my phone out and activated the light.

They were right, it’s a brick wall. Hang on a second. This close I was able to clearly see runes. Like on every brick. “That’s a lot of runes!”

“Protection, it feels like,” Emmett mused. “All kinds of protection spells on this one spot. This wall isn’t going anywhere soon.”

“Call Gretchen,” Archie told me. “Tell her she needs to get a team down here, and we’ll meet them by the road and lead them here. We need Swani, maybe someone with earth magic? And Herman, to look at those runes for us.”

“You know partner, could be this wall isn’t keeping something from getting in, but keeping something on the other side from getting out.”

“Yeah, my parents!” I fumed.

“But why?” he pressed. “Why put so much effort into it? Just a wall would have sufficed, why put all this magic on it too? This is a heavy duty warding, like you might use to keep a demon sealed someplace. Not a couple of humans.”

“I don’t... I don’t know. Can we see through it somehow? Magic?”

“Swani can,” Emmett told me. “She can step over into the astral, then past the barrier here, then just peek back into the real world to see what’s beyond it. We do know what we’re doing, you know.”

“I know, sorry, it’s just I’m so close.” I laid a hand on the wall. “Mom and dad are maybe just past here.”

“We’ll get them out,” Archie promised. “As long as it’s safe to do so.”

I made the call, and we waded back out to meet them. It would take them about an hour to drive out here, less than it took us because they wouldn’t have to keep stopping. I was surprised to see her stepping out a van with several others.

“You came yourself?” I asked, eyes wide. *Is hugging your boss acceptable?*

“Of course, this is important to you. And you said there was water to deal with, so here I am. Not many of us know cold magic, to freeze it, but I can at least get it out of the way for us.”

“Whatever the reason. Thanks. It means a lot to me.”

“Taking care of bizarre things in this area before humans find them is important to me, so whatever.” But she felt pleased.

Maybe she likes being out of the office just as much as the others do.

“Using Wayfinder for a bit of a personal project then?” Herman asked me gruffly while looking at it. I had it hung at my hip, like I was some kind of fantasy character or something.

I stuck my fists on my hips and glared back at him. “You loaned it to me free and clear with no stipulations. To find the next inversion, yes, but there it was sitting the whole rest of the time. If I wanted to use it to find buried treasure, nothing you said implied I couldn’t.”

He got a dreamy look on his face. “Now that’s an idea lass. Once this is all over, you and me, we’ll take a trip and look for some pirate gold or something. How does that sound?”

How rich is he that he didn’t do that the second he quenched the blade for the final time? “50/50 split?”

“Who made the dang thing? 30/70, but I like your style.”

“I thought we were in a hurry?” Gretchen asked icily.

“Caves are this way,” I told her. “Let’s go.” I saw Swani, Margarita, and several others standing near the van carrying various things, mostly toolboxes and sledgehammers, and we headed back to the cave. “I’ll go as low as 40,” I whispered to him.

“35 and you better know how to cook while we’re on the road!”

We headed back in, Gretchen simply making a path for us by parting the water like Moses, and we trooped in there. Staying together no one got wet, and the water “bubble” moved around us, keeping us dry as we headed into the cave. They went to work, Swani vanishing but appearing again a moment later.

“If it’s not an inversion,” she reported, “someone went to a lot of trouble. This whole area is the same in all three places. There’s this brick wall, and this cave, all the way through. I can’t get around it. And trying to go from astral from further out, it’s just the inside of the rock if you get my meaning.”

“So is the convergence being protected then?” I reasoned. “If it’s an inversion it must have one, right?”

“It stands to reason, but we only have the one to go on, we never checked for them.” Gretchen told me. “Can you close it from here? Then we could get beyond the wall easily.”

“There’s a line that runs right along here,” I told them. “But it goes beyond the wall. I need to physically touch the convergence, at least I did last time, for it to be closed.” I held my hand up, the one with Auseinander still on it, and swished it through the air. “No resistance, we’re not close enough for me to even feel it. It doesn’t work just touching this line here.”

“Ah, that’s too bad.”

“That’s a problem,” Herman mused.

“How so?” she asked.

“See this brick here? The runes on it?”

“I do.”

“Very similar to what I used on the ring, to help power Auseinander. This is forcing power into the other runes in this wall, making them stronger. I doubt a bomb could take this wall out, if we could even risk such a thing without bringing the whole place down on our heads.”

“So what are we going to do?” I asked, trying not to be hysterical about it. That wouldn’t help anyone. “Wayfinder says my parents are beyond there, I can’t just leave them.”

Gretchen put a hand on my shoulder. “We won’t, Jesse. Believe me. We’ll study this wall and figure out a way to safely get past it, or destroy it. Maybe we can dig down from above or something. We’ll figure it out. You have my word, okay?”

I took a deep breath. “Okay. Thanks.”

“Why don’t you three head back,” she suggested. “Get something to eat, and keep an eye on the office. I’ve brought what experts I can, you’ll just be in the way here. I’ll call you if we find something. With me here I’ll need someone I can trust if something comes up. You’re it for the rest of the day. I’ve left some forms to that effect on my desk, and set a forwarder for my mail. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I do.” *She giving me her position while she’s here. To show she is taking it seriously, and her trust in me by basically giving me her branch of Excellus while she’s away instead of whoever is usually the second in command. Huh, I’ll have to figure out who that is and keep them close so they don’t feel slighted by this, keep them involved and all that. Could go a long way towards smoothing this over if it ruffled any feathers.* “I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will. Good job getting this far, let us take it from here.”

“Okay. Good luck.”

“I’ll open the water if you want.”

“Nah, I’ve got a ride.” Emmett had since changed back, but Archie was still a horse. He nodded and bent at the knees, inviting me up.

“I’ll ride back with them,” Emmett told us. “So don’t wait up for me.”
“Thanks,” I told him with a smile. *He can be sweet, can’t he?*

Chapter 9

I get to be there when the next inversion happens, lucky me

Where: The astral plane

When: That night

Archie went back into the trees and emerged as himself, and we walked back to the car.

“Er, why did you two have to leave to change?” I asked him. “Is it embarrassing somehow?”

“Sort of. Our clothes don’t change. In Emmett’s case his clothes wouldn’t have come with him when he turned into a rat. So he probably went back to the car, got out of them, turned into a bat, flew most of the way, and then ratted it over to us. Had he just done it right there he would have had to make his way out of his clothes, and they would now be on the ground in a pile. Me, well, opposite problem. I start every day as a horse. Then I change to a man, and then I put on clothes. If I changed back I would bust out of them. Then I would be stuck as a horse until I got home.”

I mean, I guess, but not really? I wouldn’t mind... “I get it. That seems quite inconvenient.”

“Oh, it is. If I got attacked by something and wanted to become a bear or an elephant or something I would have to ask whatever was attacking me to politely wait a moment while I stripped. That’s why I was talking before about how useful it was. I can change shape, but I ruin my clothes to do so if I do it in a hurry. So I don’t do it. So why allow me to do it?”

“Hey, don’t think asking wouldn’t work, depending on who was attacking.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Could just use a gun though.”

“I sign one out when I’m going on a mission that would seem to require it.”

“Smart.”

We talked about various things on the way back, stopped for lunch, and I settled into my new and temporary position of director. There was a second in command, as I had expected, a tuatha named Aoife. I said I would be relying on him if something came up, and apologized for Gretchen not following what must be standard operating procedure.

“I’m sure she has her reasons,” was all he would say about it.

I was actually too keyed up about my parents to focus much on work anyway, but it was quiet the rest of the day so it was fine. Gretchen showed up at 5:00 to send me home, and told me nothing they had done had scratched that wall. They weren’t sure what could, and it seemed the protection magic extended some ways into what must be the chamber beyond, as they walked around the area looking for weaknesses. She said they would keep at it, but not to expect anything soon.

“After all, if they are in there, and something must be, there must be a way to get food and water in there at the very least. We’ll find it.”

“Thanks.”

I was now on the usual floating islands in astral, while asleep or however that worked out, and Polaris was before me. I noted with some confusion the service weapon was hanging there in the air as well.

“What’s up?” I asked. “Another hybrid exercise tonight?”

“Not exactly. I’ve been studying the weapon, after what I felt at the wall today, and I’m wondering if it can’t be used somehow.”

“Okay, so many things I have questions about now. One, you can do that? Two, what did you feel? Three, how so?”

They laughed. “Let’s see, in order then. Yes. Magic. Shooting.”

“Thanks for clearing that up.”

They just laughed harder. “Oh, you want the long versions. Okay, can I do this; clearly, as I am doing it. The weapon does go somewhere, I’ve already told you everything is somewhere except that dark matter stuff, and this weapon isn’t dark matter. I’m a part of you, you can summon the gun. So it makes sense I can too. Don’t see why I would most of the time, no hands. I’d wave my hands to show I don’t have hands, but I don’t have any hands! This version more spiritual than physical, of course, but enough for my purposes.”

“You’re welcome to it, I guess. So can you tell me more about it?”

“That relates to your third question. Yes. I feel it has a greater potential than we have seen thus far.”

“Great! How do we unlock it?”

“That’s the part I’m not sure of. But let us review what we know about it; We know the weapon can change shape to a certain extent.”

“Right.” *Elongating the barrel when I go to shoot.*

“And we know it’s tied to the astral in some way, as you can wound things like the kanaima with it. Plus the whole vanishing act it does, where does it go, really?”

“I have no idea. You think it goes into the astral, becomes the idea of a gun until I need it again physically?”

“As things that pass into astral become expressions of what they truly are, perhaps. I think if we were to feed it, so to speak, energy from the dimensions it may get stronger in some way.”

“How do we do that?”

“Have you not already seen such a place where energies are brought into play such as I’ve described?”

“The inversions,” I breathed. “Everything is connected to them. Me, the gun, maybe my parents as they’re possibly locked inside one now. But I fixed one, the gun didn’t change. At least, not that I noticed, and I did go use it that afternoon for my daily practice.” *Could the being that gave me Polaris have seen me doing this, and given me a gun that would grow as I did? Like even they couldn’t give the gun the full power it might have at the start, but saw a way to energize it when I did things I was going to do anyway?*

“Did you have it out at the time of the sealing?”

“Oh. No.”

“There you have it. Next time allow the gun to bathe in the energies of the inversion and let us see what happens. There seems to be a ‘space’ inside and if energy is applied, well, anything could happen.”

“It can’t hurt. Okay, I think I can do that.” *I was pushing pretty hard but only with my one hand. I could have the gun in the other no problem.*

“As for what I felt at the wall, those protection magics are formidable. But again, there was almost an echo in the weapon when you were near it.”

“You think the gun can get through it?”

“Not as it is now, no. But it can attack the wall on many levels. Physically, magically, and across dimensional barriers.”

“But if it’s an inversion, it’s Otherworld and this one at the same time!”

“Is it? Or are there simply walls constructed in all three places to look like an inversion? Remember, Swani wasn’t sure. Perhaps it is not just that line that strengthens the barrier, but a similar wall in Otherworld?”

That would have been a lot of work to set up. Who would have done such a thing, and why? Are my parents so dangerous? “So we would have to take all of them down at once to get past it. And only the gun can do that, at least from here. Agents could go there and maybe coordinate enough to smash it at the same time. Tricky though.”

“Indeed. I think our best bet is to see if the power of the gun can be increased at the same time as the natural order is restored.”

“It’s all we’ve got,” I sighed. “They’ll get through the wall, or they won’t. If they can’t, I’ll take a shot (literally) if something happens with the gun after my next inversion. But it’s all tied together, I think you’re on the right track. Thanks, Polaris.”

“Of course. I have little to do but think of these things, so I’m hopeful my thoughts are of use to you.”

“When you say it like that I feel bad. Like you’re trapped inside me. Could we use soul magic and give you a body or something?”

“Oh no!” They floated upwards. “That would kill you, I can’t be removed, don’t you remember? No, no, I’m happy enough looking out our eyes and feeling things out. I didn’t mean to imply dissatisfaction. No, no, of course not.”

“If you’re sure. Maybe we could swap places for a day or something, let you walk around as me while I was, here, or looking out or whatever.”

“An intriguing idea, like a set of twins taking each others place for the day. I don’t see how it’s possible but I’ll let you know if I start to yearn for a set of hands.”

I chuckled. “You do that. Now,” I put my hand out and the gun smoothly came to me. “Shall we do some practicing?”

“Indeed. I have a great setup for you tonight!”

See, they have more to do than just look out my eyes. They set up my training courses.

The next few days were murder on my nerves, but I started to despair in the end of Excellus being able to help me directly. Though various people went there every day to try things, the walls around the place held, and no one was seen going in or out. The sword continued to point to that place when I asked about my parents, so we figured they were still being held in there. Then it was needed for another use, as Gretchen called us all to another meeting.

“There’s going to be another event today,” she told us. “Jesse, after your stellar performance last time we’ll be depending on you to close the inversion wherever it should pop up.”

“You can count on me!” I told the room.

“Good. To that end we’ll be in the usual teams with a twist. We’re not covering the last point, the playground, we’re going to assume it’s closed forever. Archie’s team will be using a new method, proposed by Herman, for finding the site. Margarita will be joining that team in case they succeed. Otherwise, the drill is the same. Keep your eyes open for any strange behavior or features, and call it in when you do. Any questions?”

She didn’t say exactly what the method was. Probably at Herman’s request to keep Wayfinder at least somewhat under wraps. Do I have any questions? Don’t think so. She looked around the room, it was business as usual but as usual, Gretchen seemed to need reminding.

“What’s the scoop today?” was called out.

She pulled out her journal. “Oh yes, here we are.

“These four walls of brick and stone, darkness that these foes call home.

In this world they’ll find a treat, lots of human meat to eat.

When that portal opens wide, better rush to pick a side.

Ghastly army you will face, from citadel of twisted space.”

“A four liner!” was muttered about the room.

“What?” I asked Archie.

“Four lines to the answer,” he whispered to me. “Last one was only two.”

“Yeah, okay, I recall.”

“Usually the longer it is, the worse it is for us.”

“Ooooooh.”

“Yeah. Better hope the sword works and we find it fast.”

“If only it could be more specific, like at thirteen hour, forty two, by the ice cream truck of blue.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, we should be so lucky. Come on, let’s go find Margarita. Would it be an ice cream truck in the winter though?”

We found her and piled into Emmett’s car, as Archie said it was his turn this time as he had been doing all the driving lately.

“You’re better at it than I am,” Emmett told him.

“Naturally. I don’t take my eyes off the road to look at pretty girls going by.”

“You do too. Besides, everyone is wearing winter clothes now, it’s starting to snow. Not much to look at, you know.”

“Great, that’ll make our job so much easier.”

“It will?” I asked. “Does snow ground out magic like rain would?”

“Maybe in a total blizzard, but no I was being sarcastic.”

“Some of us are still fairly new to all this, thank you,” I told him. “By the way that was me being sarcastic.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to mention it, but yes, it seems you are still fairly new to all this.”

“How so?”

“You’re the one with the sword? We’re going where you tell us, and you didn’t consult it before getting in the car! So how do we know which direction to go?”

“Oops. Oh, uh, Margarita, I have to swear you to secrecy. The sword is how we’re going to find, or attempt to find I should say, the site for today.”

“I wondered why you were carrying around such a weird thing. Don’t you have a magical gun?”

“I do.” *And one I need to keep out once I start shoving the dimensions apart, thanks for the reminder.* “Actually, can you handle a sword?”

“Passably, I’m not that old you know. But I took a class, oh, forty years or so ago?”

Oh gods. All these ancient people that still look so good. I won’t look half that good in forty years. “Why don’t you hang onto it then? I’ll show you how to use it, pretty simple.”

“Okay.”

We got out of the car again, that Emmett hadn’t actually started up, and we probed for the site. She said she got a reaction in one direction, and we were off. Stopping to consult it we were led to a field, and got out of the car. We walked across it, then she cried for us to hold up.

“Wait a second, it stopped vibrating. Hang on.” She started swinging it around again, and nodded. “Yeah, now it’s pointing that way. I think it’s going to happen in this field.”

“Is there a convergence here?” Archie asked.

“There is,” I told him. “No resistance on the world banisher yet.” I was able to walk up to and touch the convergence just fine. *Pity I can’t preemptively seal it, but I guess that’s like preemptively eating an ice cream cone. How are you going to do that?*

“You want to wait in the car?” Emmett asked. “I don’t mind the cold, but you living people seem to.”

“I’m not exactly alive,” Margarita clarified. “But I still don’t like the cold. I’ll wait in the car.”

The three of us went back while Emmett stayed on watch in the field. We waited. Eventually we ran out of stuff to talk about and were just sitting there, somewhat cold by now because he hadn’t kept it running, when both Archie and Margarita snapped up again.

“Something just happened,” he said. “Come on!”

We headed out again, and didn't take very long to see the landscape had changed. The field wasn't there anymore, instead there was what looked like a stone castle, with strange figures at the walls. More and more were popping their heads over the side, and seemed to be excitedly pointing down at us.

"Oh crap," Archie breathed. "A whole castle of demons? Really? That's what it brought over this time? You have got to be kidding me. I hate four liners!"

"Where's Emmett?" Margarita asked, then brightened and swung the sword back and forth. "Oh. Yeah. He must have been in the field, he's in the middle of that structure now."

"What?"

"It's what the sword says, don't look at me. We should have stuck together!"

In other words, never split the party?

"Too late for that now. You can get us inside, right?"

"Maybe? It's daytime and going full insubstantial, for all three of us? That's going to be really tricky."

"We better do something fast. Remember the poem, something about when the gate opens we had better choose a side?"

"Those gates are going to open?" I asked them. "What's going to come out? You said demons?"

"Most likely, you don't have architecture like that in the good parts of Otherworld. Crap, we need the whole team here, three of us are not going to cut it."

"I didn't read much about demons..."

The heads vanished from the top of the castle, I wasn't sure if that was good or bad. Sure, they could have been intimidated by the three of us. We looked pretty powerful, with our winter hats on and everything and snow starting to stick to us. I found the gun in my hand, but could I fight an army?

"They're bad news, but usually restrained by someone summoning them here. There are beings brought over by the inversion, they'll be at their full strength. They've got magic, and no love for us in the material plane. Except to eat, that is."

"And if those gates open, they'll roll over this town because how are regular humans going to defend themselves?"

"Exactly. Oh, this is bad. Very, very bad. The worst... possible... thing."

"We could just run for now?" Margarita suggested.

"No. I won't leave Emmett in there. He can't really die, but they can tear his body apart pretty good. We have to get in there."

"I'll do what I can, send out the SOS and turn your stuff off, it's going to be hard enough as it is making us able to get in there."

"Right." He started punching numbers into his phone.

"Wait, no time!" I yelled, "the gate is lowering!" I lashed out with my power, shoving it back up again. "I'm holding it, hurry!" The demons inside must have figured out something was wrong, a moment later they started popping up again at the top and flinging themselves over the side with a savage yell. I saw their bodies now, twisted and inhuman, with all sorts of tails, wings, extra limbs, horns, and tentacles. "Crap, that didn't take long." *How are these guys so on the ball?*

"Is your phone off?" Margarita asked, starting to panic.

"No, in my pocket, here, take it out."

She rooted around in my coat pocket and pulled it out. She was trembling, but managed to get it powering off. She did the same with hers.

"This is Archie, we have the event, it's a huge castle full of demons. I need everyone at the Thomas field, we will hold them as long as we can. Repeat that back to me!"

He paused, the demons were landing and looking ready to run at us.

“You got it. Get them here, going dark now.” He hung up and started turning his phone off. “Get it ready,” he shouted to Margarita. “Whatever you can do, just protect us from that horde, we can get in through the gate.”

“Okay, it’s not going to be great if you want your clothes to come too.”

“I’ll take what I can get.”

“Come on, they’re heading this way!” I shouted. I fired off a few shots, just to see if I could discourage them. They didn’t seem all that discouraged. The line of demons was getting nearer and nearer, why do phones take so long to turn off? What are they doing? They just have to stop working, I mean come on!

“Done!” he shouted.

“Casting now!”

The line was upon us.

Chapter 10

I take on the hoard

Where: The field outside the stone castle

When: Just in time

I felt claws tear through my body, but they passed through as if I was made of smoke, and the thing attached to them stumbled and part of it passed through me. It skidded to a halt and glared, as did the other five that were swishing weapons or claws or tentacles through the others.

“Couldn’t manage full incorporeal,” Margarita panted. “But I’m shocked I got us to mist form. We can still be hurt by magic though.”

The demon at the front held up a hand and the others stopped attacking. It was slightly bigger than the rest, with leathery wings, a twisted face, and a strange, lumpy skin. “Entold, spell break them, then we feast!”

“No, no,” another shouted. “They are defenders. Leave them. They cannot hold the gate for long, let our brethren take them and possibly die. We are the first, let us away from here and have our fun in the village beyond.”

The creature seemed to consider. “True. You speak wisdom. Come, leave them to their fate, let us disperse and finally show the humans true fear.”

A cry of joy went up from the others and they plunged through us and were going to start heading out.

“No.” My voice stopped them cold as I raised the pistol at their backs.

“No?” said the big one, slowly twisting his head around to look back at me. “Did I hear that correctly?”

“Jesse, what are you doing?” Archie whispered out of the side of his mouth. He had gotten his gun out, and I saw Margarita was gripping the sword and holding it in a guard position.

“That’s right.” *What am I doing? Jesse, you can’t be serious right now.* “I’m not going to let you terrorize this place. We don’t stop you now, we’ll just have to run you down later. You’re not stepping foot outside this field.” *Oh right, that’s what I’m doing.* The big one’s face twisted (even more than it already was) but at least two of the others took a step back. They felt cautious, and as well they should. They didn’t know what we could do, I mean we were standing here and not fleeing, right? I just wished Archie had more active magics, premonition wasn’t going to serve us very well here, and I doubted they would let him take his clothes off. For my part I wished I had more actual combat experience, but it seemed Ananias did have the right idea in his training. Polaris too had sent more than one combatant at me at once, so I wasn’t completely out of my depth. Of course, these things wanted to tear me apart and eat me, which was a little different from practice.

“You have sealed your own fate then!” it screamed. “We outnumber you two to one. We will tear you apart! Entold, do as I earlier commanded! The rest of you, the leader is mine.” He stepped forward, as if daring me to attack him.

Wait, am I the leader? Of course I am, I’m the one who opened my stupid mouth and kept them from leaving.

“Yes, of course! Break!”

“Ha! Denied!” cried Margarita.

So we’re still safe?

The demon to the left of the big one pointed at her, sending a gout of flame at her which she narrowly dodged.

Or not? Or no, she said magic could still hurt us.

The two to his right pointed at Archie, and a frigid wind sprang up, pelting him with shards of ice. He got clipped on his right side, wincing a little but avoiding the worst of it.

Right then, the leader wants a piece of me, he can have the pieces that come out of my gun. I put some shots into him, I mean he was standing right there wasn't he? His mouth opened in surprise as four of my five shots found their mark, two of them ripping through his chest, one catching the side of his head, and another tearing through his left wing. Then I sent him smashing backward with a wave, realizing that I wasn't concentrating on the gate anymore, it was now behind me and had totally slipped my mind. *Nothing I can do about it now.* He went flying into two of his buddies, and they went down in a tangle of limbs. One of the demons had long, pointy horns on the top of his head, and I realized they were sticking up through the big guy's chest. "Impossible," he managed, and started to dissolve before my eyes.

The ones who were still upright had of course noticed this, and turned their heads to me, murder in their eyes.

Eh heh. Hi fellows.

Beside me, Margarita made a shooing motion with her hand and a roar of wind came out of nowhere and swept the remaining demons off their feet. Two died instantly, the third tumbled backwards.

"Show off," Archie grumbled, taking aim at the demon nearest to him with his pistol. It didn't have to untangle itself from anyone and hopped back up. As soon as it did he put six shots through its chest and it started burning away.

Meanwhile the other two were getting up, and Margarita looked over at me. "Would you like to do the honors?"

"I'd be delighted," I told her, and put my last three shots in their direction. *Now to wait for it to reload.* They froze, but when I stopped shooting they were still there.

"Really?" she asked, an incredulous look on her face.

"I... I just don't know what went wrong!"

"Fine." She slammed them down with air again, or at least tried to. They dodged out of the way, left and right.

"Really?" I echoed.

"Huh. I deserved that."

The two demons glared at her, and suddenly a fireball erupted where she was standing. "Margarita!" I yelled, shielding my eyes.

"That almost got me," she managed, as it faded. She was on the ground, having thrown herself down, but didn't look hurt. *Thank goodness.* "Crud, I'm not dissolved anymore, one of them must have gotten through my spell."

"Worry about that later," Archie told her. "Take those two out!"

The demon on the right apparently decided he had enough of this, and turned to run away. Archie shot him in the back, while Margarita sent a blade of air towards the remaining one. (I had been counting, my gun wouldn't be reloaded yet) They both vanished, and the heavy metal gate leading out of the castle slammed into the ground.

We spun, and demons started to pour out of it.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Go!" Margarita called to us, making a shoving motion with her hand. "I'll whip up a tornado out here, they won't be able to pass or get near me. I can't do that with you both here." She rose into the air, her hair already starting to whip about.

"Are you sure?"

"Choose a side, remember? You're both still protected for now I'll keep it going as long as I can."

"Come on, she can do it," Archie told me.

"You better not die!" I shouted, and we both took off running toward the demons that were spilling out. Little did I know that I should have been worried about myself, not her.

Hey, we actually survived that. Wow, Margarita's wind magic is pretty strong. But I think they underestimated us, and these ones won't.

I was right, they were having a gleeful time slinging spells at us, those that didn't just ignore us and start heading towards Margarita or parallel to the castle wall heading for the nearest point they could get away. My gun was reloading itself and I was too busy dodging bursts of fire, lightning, and water to worry about flinging anyone around. They didn't know we were dissolved, though it was fairly obvious to look at us, they weren't paying that much attention. I mean, two humans were basically storming the castle, that would give anybody pause. We were either so confident we could take them or just insane, and even I had to question which one it was. Behind me I heard more than felt winds starting to whip up.

We squeezed past the amassed demons at the gate and looked around. I had a few cuts and bruises, nothing serious thank goodness, but knowing I could still be injured despite basically being a vapor at this point was disconcerting. Directly in front of me seemed to be a courtyard of some kind, which made sense. The thing was basically a square, put your rooms along the walls so that even if an enemy force got past the gate, they could be pelted by arrows while they tried to break down each individual door along the edges. But we didn't need to go anywhere, the convergence was basically in the center of the place. Along with a few things I had hoped not to see.

Standing there were four figures, a huge demon that towered over the others and actually had on a set of armor. Two demons the size of the "leader" from before flanked him with wings, and before him knelt a familiar figure.

"Emmett!" Archie cried.

"No longer," boomed the demon. "He is now Azzuc, my willing servant. Aren't you, Azzuc?"

"I live only to serve you, lord."

"Good. Tear your former friends apart for me, won't you?"

"Of course." He rose and turned.

"Crap, this is bad," Archie told me. He started changing, becoming much like a humanoid lizard, with scales instead of skin and claws on his one hand. His right hand didn't change, as it was holding the gun.

Yeah, no kidding. Looking around it was basically an empty courtyard, the demons had all spilled out and were now hopefully dealing with a lot of wind outside. But there was the ground, and was I an earth bender or was I an earth bender? I tore a huge chunk of the ground up in front of us, but held it there. *Remember, the point of all this is to seal the convergence. If we can back them off...*

Both demons took to the air, circling left and right and clearly able to see us. That's when the fireball took us in the back. It tore through us, smacking into the dirt and rock that was supposed to be protecting us.

Okay, maybe playing defensively wasn't the way to go. Also, ow.

Emmett must have jumped, he was suddenly looking down on us from the barrier of earth I was holding, and this further reinforced my belief I had screwed up. He jumped down to take a swipe at Archie, who dodged back.

Figuring I might as well get some use out of this floating failure I shoved it forward, then took aim at the flying figure to my right, hoping my gun was reloaded by now. I missed completely, my head was killing me and I felt I had just been set on fire. Oh right, I had.

The boss exploded out of the dirt I had thrown at him, looking hardly worse for wear. Thankfully though he just stood there again, content to watch I guessed?

With Emmett and Archie now in melee range the two demons couldn't use their fireball attack without hitting their new "friend" so one hovered there, watching, while the other came at me. I tried to dodge away from it but a claw clipped me, passing through. It landed behind me. "Ah, that's how you're still alive," it said to me. "What should we do about that?"

“How about nothing?” Archie told it, turning away from the guy he didn’t actually want to shoot. He put six shots into the demon instead. It didn’t go down, but it looked pretty wounded. Emmett took another swing at him, but he ignored it and the attack passed through him.

“See how you like being material again!” roared the demon, probably trying to negate the magic on at least me, as he was staring right at me. *But I wasn’t the one that shot you!* “Ha ha!”

Crud.

“Reloading,” Archie shouted, pulling a magazine from his pocket.

Gotta take this guy down before he does another spell. I couldn’t risk missing again, so I stepped up closer.

“What... What are you doing? Are you mad?” the demon screamed.

I’m beginning to think so. “I guess,” I told it, pulling the trigger. That did it, he burned away leaving us with three demons to deal with.

“I may have to get my hands dirty,” said the big one. “You are disappointing me, servant.”

“I cannot touch this one, master!”

“Alcateon?”

“Yes, lord! It is done.”

Great, are neither of us protected now? I looked down at my hand, it wasn’t misty anymore. *Nope.*

Emmett struck out at Archie again, he tried to catch the blow but took it on the head, instead.

Pretty sure that’s it on bullets for the moment, luckily I still have this. I yanked Emmett back, trying to give Archie a chance to reload, and flung him at the other demon. He connected, and both flopped around like rag dolls. They started getting up though. Archie dropped the empty mag and slid in the fresh one. “Back in it.”

I pointed my (yet to refill more than likely but he didn’t know that) gun at the big guy. “I’ll cover him, you take out that last demon.” *I only need three seconds, come on!*

“Right.”

Both were up and coming towards us. *Oh crap, he has no more reason not to-*

Another fireball exploded near us, but the guy’s aim was totally off, it didn’t even come close to us. He looked a bit wobbly, maybe he was about done? And he was, as Archie finished him off with another barrage of shots. He shifted to Emmett.

“How tiresome,” the big guy lamented. “I really must find better help.” He gestured, and the area filled with electricity.

Both of us went down, unable to control our limbs. My gun had gone flying, not that I could feel my arms or legs anymore. The demon strode over to us, I could make out Emmett knelling again. “And now I will watch you- Buha!” The demon jerked forward and whirled around, and in my half dead state I saw a blurry red thing hanging there in the air. *What in the world?*

“Hey, how about you pick on someone your own size?” it asked.

“You dare?”

“What, shoot you in the head from behind? Uh, yeah? Why wouldn’t I?”

“Azzuc, watch these others while I-”

Something happened, and the demon’s head exploded off its shoulders.

“Thank goodness. Archie, you still alive?” Emmett got up and rushed to his side. “He’s hanging on, barely. Thanks for the help?”

“Sorry I didn’t get here earlier. Oh man, Jesse is messed up. Jesse, can you hear me?”

I think I groaned in response, it was hard to say.

“Crap, she needs to seal this thing off. My healing cream won’t help with this much damage.”

“Can I do it?” Emmett asked.

“Maybe, but it was made for her. Crud, see what you can do for them, I need to take care of the gate it looks like some demons have noticed I killed their boss and are coming back.” It flew off.

“See what I can do?” Emmett repeated. “I’m a vampire! What, you want me to turn her into a vampire?”

I must have passed out briefly, when I came to again I was upright at least. My arm was out, and my feet weren’t touching the ground. I was pretty sure, anyway. “Come on, you have to tell me where to go!” Emmett was saying. “I can’t see the convergence!”

“Lines,” I tried to mumble, and move my head to the side. “Lines.” I wanted the gun in my hand, and it was there. I tried to point with it.

“You want to be over there? Okay?” Me moved me, and I nodded. He pushed me forward, and I tried to adjust my hand so it would be in the right place. That pressure started building up again, but I had no choice but to press forward, I wasn’t in control of myself. I floated closer and closer, and then...

Darkness.

When I came to I was lying in a bed, I was pretty sure, and I hurt all over. I heard voices, and tried to open my eyes.

“I think she’s waking up. Jesse, can you hear me? Take it slow, you’re okay. You’re in the medical wing of Excellus, okay? Archie is with you, he was beat up too but he’s tough. He’ll be fine.”

“mamuphu.”

“What?”

“wawa.”

“Just take it easy, you got electrocuted and burned pretty badly. Magic can only do so much, you’re healing fast but it’ll still be a few days. Just relax.”

Oh right, the whole demon thing. Did we win?

When I next came to I could more easily open my eyes, and Emmett was there watching over me. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” I managed back. “How long...”

“Three days. Surprised you’re still with us, actually. You’re tougher than you look. Sorry about attacking you back there, we vampires aren’t the only ones with enthralling magic I guess. Don’t ask me how, but they were ready for the inversion. Captured me right away and he turned me to his side.”

“We won?”

“We did! I had to use my motion magic to basically shove you into the convergence, don’t you remember?”

“No.”

“I see. Well, I did, your gun went crazy, and then Margarita had to come get us. We went with the castle back to Otherworld. But we’re back now. The others will be glad you woke up. How do you feel?”

“Thirsty. Achy. Tingly.”

“That’ll be the electricity. It should fade, your wounds are healing up nicely. Magical healing doesn’t scar that much, you’ll be fine.”

“That much?”

“He hit you with everything he could, I guess. What were you thinking, charging in there like that anyway?”

“Had to be done.”

“I guess. Oh, here’s the doctor.”

By the next day I was totally fine, and both Archie and I walked down to the cafeteria area to applause. Everyone was there, even Herman, glad to see us back on our feet.

“Don’t applaud,” I told them, face red. “I was nearly killed. We both were.”

“Nonsense,” Gretchen told us, coming over. “You’re the heroes of the day!”

“We were almost the corpses of the day,” Archie agreed. “We should have waited for backup.”

“You did get backup,” Emmett told us. “That armored fellow who showed up. He blew the head off that demon with a shotgun.”

“A vaguely recall that,” I allowed.

“Yes, I contacted him once I suspected it would be a bad one, based on the premonition I had,” Gretchen told us. “He’s an ally of ours, I’m glad he was able to come through in the nick of time.”

Where is that smug feeling from from? Herman? That’s odd, what does he have to feel smug about? Oh well, not my business.

“He saved us,” Archie agreed. “Thank him for us, would you?”

“Of course. Now come and eat, you must be starving after your hospital stay.”

Yeah, hardly ate for three days while I recovered, because I was laid out.

So we told the story of assaulting the place, and Margarita stuck by me the whole time. She said the item I had loaned her was back with Herman, he would get it to me sometime. She was glad I wasn’t dead, and I did feel a great deal of relief from her.

“But what happened outside?” I asked. “I guess you came through all right?”

“Oh sure, not a problem. I can create a pretty good cyclone when I need to. I call it my ultimate attack, not much stands up to that kind of wind. Was starting to tear some of the stones out of the castle, not to brag.”

“But did any demons get away?”

“If they did, they’ve been laying low,” Gretchen assured me. “No unexplained deaths or disappearances have been reported.”

“So at least one person did what they set out to do,” I grumbled.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” she told me with a playful shove. “You were great, you proved yourself again, even if you did take some magic to the... everything.”

“Yeah, this magic stuff. There’s really no defense against it?”

“Not really,” she told me. “Getting out of the way, that’s all you can do sometimes.”

“Great. Say, I was still paid for the days I was recovering right?”

“Did you fill out your time sheet?”

“I was unconscious for most of it!”

“I can’t pay for you laying around!”

“What?”

“I’m just joking.” Everyone laughed. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll just take it out of your sick days.”

“What?”

“Joking!”

Chapter 11

I reflect upon my past battle, and ask around for some suggestions

Where: Home

When: That night

That night when I went to bed and talked to Polaris they also expressed their gratitude I wasn't dead.

"Did you help me at all? They were surprised to see me alive, and I had no defense against that demon's spell at the end."

"I did what I could," they admitted. "I am limited in what I can do for you. Don't rely on me, any forcing I do of your body will only come back to haunt you in the end."

"Meaning I might not live as long."

"That is one side effect that is possible. There are others; paralysis, loss of motor function, mental impairment-."

I sighed. "I get the picture! Need to do something about magic, it doesn't make sense there's no defense. Anyway, I see the gun is out again."

"Yes. As you did manage to hold onto it, despite being hardly conscious, the weapon did absorb dimensional energies as I predicted. Go ahead, take a look."

The gun floated down to me and I noticed it was in a different configuration now. While normally the barrel was elongated, now it was much stubbier, and parts of it were definitely floating. Two "wings" out the side made a triangle out of squares, though as it floated down I noticed they were all stuck there, like a magnet over a superconductor. No wiggle at all, as though it was still one solid piece. I took it, noting that Polaris had created a target for me to shoot at, and a name came to me.

"Shatter."

"What's that?" they asked. "What did you say?"

"Shatter. That's the name of this form. Grip." The gun smoothly reconfigured into the long barreled version I was used to. "Incredible. Shatter." The gun slid back again, into the "wings" configuration. "What is this gun?" *And how do I know the names of the forms? Or do I just think I do, I came up with one, and the gun responded?*

"Clearly made by one of great power," Polaris decided.

"You? Or to be more accurate the original one, who saved me."

"The most likely candidate, they are the only one that would know about you, having met you. As I have previously stated I have no connection to them anymore, I cannot know the true extent of their ability. Perhaps they delight in making things, and finally have an agent in this plane that can make use of their handiwork. Perhaps they simply saw you needed it."

"I guess it doesn't matter, I have it now. Let's see what it can do!"

What it could do was act as a shotgun. When I pulled the trigger it sent out or made holes in the thing I was pointing at as though it was firing buckshot. I didn't get as many shots before it had to recharge, and it had a lot more of a kick, but maybe the wider spread and greater number of potential hits would compensate for that. "I'm going to have to be careful with it though," I mused, looking at a wall Polaris had pulled up for me. I was checking the spread pattern at various distances. "I don't want to hit an ally by accident." *And I pull the trigger when it's in the 'wrong' form expecting one thing and getting another, could be a disaster. I'll have to be very careful about that.*

"I wonder if that's a concern at all," Polaris said from behind me. "Allow me to construct a different scenario."

"Okay?"

The wall melted away and was replaced by two blank template people we often used in these exercises. This seemed to be a hostage situation, as one was holding the other in front of them. That one took on features of Archie. "Shoot the one behind in the chest."

"I can't, there's no way," I protested. "The fake Archie completely covers the guy in back."

"You are thinking in a far too limited way," they chided. "Think about what we know. The gun does not shoot bullets, it simply causes bullet like wounds in the target. The gun is connected to you, and you do not want to hurt your friends. Point at the two, focus on your need to hit only the man behind, and pull the trigger."

"Shoot through Archie?"

"I repeat, do not think in so limited a way! You are not shooting through them, you are simply shooting the man behind and another person is also there. Trust the gun to know the difference."

"Right, right, not bullets. Right." I stared at the gun, wondering if I could even do this. Then I shrugged. *It isn't like I would hurt anyone if it fails. They're both made of dream stuff, or astral stuff, or whatever Polaris uses to make things around here. Why not give it a try, what do I have to lose?* I pointed at the pair, focused on shooting who I wanted, and pulled the trigger. The guy behind Archie burned away with holes in him, while Archie was unharmed.

"You see?"

"You were right," I breathed. "It hits what I aim at, not what I point at. How many layers does this weapon have? Do you think it can get through the wall now?" *So I could have saved those kids by wanting to shoot the kanaima inside them. Good to know for the future.*

"Not yet. This is simply more per shot of what you have already seen. The gun will need to be fed more power in order to break down such a protection spell as is around the site that Wayfinder shows hides your parents."

"Yeah, I get it. But man, we're on the right track, aren't we? It worked, the gun powered up and I learned something new about it. This is great!"

"Indeed, a cause for some jubilation. Now, let us return to the site of your latest battle and see where things may have gone differently had you made different choices."

I groaned, but Polaris was right. I needed to learn from my mistakes, and this was the only way to do that.

The next day I marched right in to see Herman, who jumped a little.

"Oh, hey, Jesse! Good to see you up and about."

"Thanks. How are you doing?"

"Fine, just fine. You?"

"Recovered and ready to go when the next inversion hits."

"Glad to hear it. What can I do for you?"

"Defense against magic, let's talk. Gretchen said before there wasn't much except getting out of the way. I want your opinion."

"She's right... from a certain point of view. I assume you're talking about demon level magic or worst case against people assumed to be masters who are trying to kill you?"

"Let's assume that, yes."

"Okay. So we'll figure you can't just will it away, the magic is too strong. You can do that, you know? Just think about not being the subject of a spell and if you think hard enough, you won't be. Neat huh? But I see in your eyes you want something foolproof. The trick there would be to disrupt magic done to you, but not around you, and that's the problem. If you were alone I could think of some ways. I mean not practical ways, but, take a for instance. Magic is disrupted by technology. Solution: simply carry as much advanced technology around with you as you can. But again we're talking about masters, so that probably wouldn't effect them too much. Or carry magic to make it rain around you, but not on you, so your magic didn't get ground out but others did."

“A limited practicality, I see what you mean. But what about just straight up defense? I did a search this morning about protection from magic in video games and stories, just to get some ideas. I know you like making things from books and whatnot.”

“That I do! Even if it has to be adapted to what magical effects are possible, I try to get as many ideas for things from as many sources as I can. Reminds me, here’s Wayfinder back.”

“Ah, thanks. So I was thinking, what about some kind of ‘reflect ring’ that turns magic back on the caster?”

“I’ve thought about that, trying to figure out how I might make Doomgiver, one of the twelve swords. It turns attacks, magical or otherwise, back on the person that attacked you. But then there’s Shieldbreaker, which should really be called Swordbreaker, but I didn’t write it. It makes you proof against *any* attack, magical or physical, with one weakness. It smashes weapons and spells, but if your attacker is not using a weapon or spell, it can’t touch them. So a two year old can come up to you and punch you in the face and there’s not a thing the sword can do about it. Anyway, how do I protect against spells? And you’re on the same track I was, you can easily make an imperfect version of this. Let’s say someone tries to enthrall you, or turn you into a sheep. That we can defend against, because the magic is reaching out and touching you directly. We could, with a very good etching of some runes (such as myself might manage, humblebrag) almost guarantee complete protection and even the turning back of a spell like that on the caster, so both swords are possible! Yay! Except not, because elemental spells exist. They simply cause fire, or air, or water or what have you to appear and hurt you. The magic isn’t touching you, the effect of the spell is touching you.”

“So no good for the Doomgiver defense. It doesn’t get reflected.”

“Exactly. Now I’ve made a barrier ring, this ring, that can absorb a certain amount of punishment before dropping.” He showed me the ring on his finger.

“Like a force field from Star Trek or something?”

“Just like that. It works, but it has the opposite problem. If something isn’t damaging me…”

“It does squat. Got it. So had I been protected back in that fight against the demons with such a ring, they simply switch tactics and take me over, like they did with Emmett. That’s not any better.”

“Most likely. Or use illusion, or make you forget how to fight, or make your gun really heavy. I despair of ever having as complete a defense as either sword provided in the books. There’s just too much to defend against for any one item. But they were forged by a god, so I have something to aspire to, at least.”

“What about that guy in armor?”

He got a little shifty. “What about him?”

“Could his armor have been made tougher? Could I wear some armor? I mean that could help, right?”

“Oh, sure. I made some leather cat suits for Tayna and Kelly that were much tougher than leather would be.”

“Cat suits?” My eyes narrowed.

“Ninja uniforms, more like. Tayna trained as a ninja, it was all black. They were running around at night doing ninja stuff, I couldn’t make them a ninja burka. What do you call a skin tight, black leather, all concealing garment?”

“A cat suit,” I reluctantly agreed.

“Actually,” said his laptop that was sitting there on the desk, “there was a cartoon about a ‘Burka Avenger’ from 2013.” Some images flashed up on it showing a ninja like figure wearing a burka.

“That would be totally impractical in real life,” I decided. “You would spend more time tripping over it than fighting crime.”

“Anyway, sorry I don’t have a good answer for you at the moment. I’m doing my own research for the sword but as the ring is more practical…”

“There’s no rush on your end. I get it.” *Plus you’ll live a million years or whatever, provided we humans don’t cook the Earth like we’re doing. So what’s the rush for you?* “What about doing what she suggested and getting out of the way?”

“Battle magic or body enhancement magic can sharpen your reflexes. You could go that route.”

Of course if it can do that, maybe it could help me shoot more accurately too. I recall someone mentioning the gun itself wasn’t, like they were surprised. A good defense being a good offense, and all that. “Could you make me something like that? A suit or an item of some sort with magic in it?”

“I can make you anything I can find that has been researched, or research it myself. I have reasonable rates, and as it’s defensive and not a weapon I would be happy to do so. My online shop has been closed for a bit as I’ve been running around recently, and then got hired here as a consultant so after I finished Auseinander I didn’t have much to work on. Weird for me. Was going to maybe start another project for myself but that can wait. Just let me know.”

“Okay. But it won’t be right away. Get me your typical fees, I’ll have to save up. I haven’t worked here long, after all. But if I keep getting trashed like that, it’ll become more of a priority. I’ll let you know what I want after I think about it some more.” *Maybe talk to the others around here, see what they’ve dealt with, and see if they have any strategies. I mean, probably not Archie was right there next to me getting electrocuted, right?*

“You got it. Hey, talk to Gretchen, maybe the company can finance it if you agree to leave it with the company if you get another job. They do have an armory for just that sort of thing after all.”

“I’ll do that! Maybe they will.”

My next “target” was Archie, who I found in his cube.

“Hi Jesse, how are you?”

“You drove me to work, you know I’m fine.”

He snorted. “Force of habit I guess. Did you need to talk to me about something?”

“Yup, now that we’re at work we can talk work stuff. That’s why I didn’t bring it up in the car, figured we might as well get paid for this conversation.”

“Fair enough. Have a seat.” He pulled it out for me, like a true gentleman. Then he pulled it away from me as I sat down.

“Thanks.” I rubbed my butt and stood up again. “What did you do that for?”

“Sorry! I just haven’t pranked anyone in like two days, it’s not like me at all. I have to take them where I can get them, now.”

“You were in the hospital for at least three days.”

“And?”

I rolled my eyes. “Can I just sit down now?”

“Oh sure. So work stuff.”

He let me sit. “Yup. I’ve been going over that battle,” *with Polaris*, “to see how I could have done better. And something’s nagging me. You told me you have two magical abilities. Changing your shape, which you did to grow scales and claws to try and fend off Emmett.”

“Correct.” He seemed confused about where I was going with this. “It was all I could do without busting out of my clothes. Which thinking about it I probably should have done, gone full dragon or something. I might not have been taken out so easily.”

“You’ve got to show me that some time! Can you do a unicorn- never mind.” *Of course he can do a unicorn, it’s just his normal form with a horn. Duh. Wait, do unicorns exist? Do dragons exist?!*

“Topic at hand; divination magic. Those are your two areas of magical aptitude from what I recall you telling me.”

“No.”

“So here’s the question; can your magic only- What?”

“This is a bit confusing, you’re right. *Nymphs* have divination magic, while we *puca* have premonition magic. There’s some overlap, but there is a difference.”

“Oh, it’s just, when we were looking for my parents... Anyway, the main question I have for you is, could that magic be used in combat as well? To sense the future and, for instance, know that Emmett was going to come over the wall I was trying to make and jump away from there before he even lands.” *Because if you can do that, maybe that’s the way to go for the item I want Herman to make. Getting a sense of the future, even a half second ahead, should be unbeatable. They commit to an action, and you’re already reacting to it before they know it. Had I known those two would fly around it, and he could just jump it like that, I may not have done it. My knowing the future would have changed my action. But wait, there’s a million things I could do, how would it not overload me? Hummm...*

He sadly shook his head. “No, can’t be used like that, but that’s a really good idea.”

Huh, maybe that’s why, it’s just too complex?

“Maybe divination could, but I’m pretty sure premonition can’t. No, I don’t know, divination is great at long, wordy answers about the future. Locating things, like the sword does, even projecting your senses. I can get vague information like a flash of insight about a topic in the future, nothing as detailed as a nymph can. If I’ve cast the spell beforehand I could tell if I was about to fall into a trap, or get jumped. But only that *something* was going to happen, like am I going to get knifed or shot or tripped or is a brick going to fall on my head? I have enough trouble walking around during the day in this shape to go adding another spell onto it. So I don’t bother all that much. And I knew I was walking into trouble when I saw that castle, I didn’t need magic to tell me. Now maybe *time* magic could do it, but I don’t know anyone that can work with that magic naturally. And sorcerers are strongly cautioned against it.” *I’ve seen Dr. Strange, I get it. “So that’s a big ‘I don’t know’ on that one for me.”*

“Shoot.” I deflated a bit. “I really thought I had something there. I guess you guys that have lived hundreds of years actually know your own limits, huh?”

“Hey, chin up.” He tapped my chin. “Sometimes we need a new pair of eyes on things, to see what we’ve been looking past the whole time. If you see something I seem to be clueless about, tell me. At worst we waste a few minutes in pleasant conversation, and you learn a little bit more about me.”

I grinned. “Fair enough. Okay, I’m heading back to my desk.”

“See you at lunch.”

But halfway back to my desk I changed my mind. I could sit there, and research types of non-humans and their magic and what magic was capable of. Would that help protect me when fireballs were exploding nearby or some demon was throwing lightning around? No, it would not. But one thing I could do is improve my aim with the service weapon. Had I not missed some of those shots in that battle it would have been over faster. We probably wouldn’t have been hurt. That was my priority right now. It was time to see Ananias and do some more training. I also asked him how he would have handled that fight, but he had little to offer other than strategies for not getting into such a situation next time.

“Don’t get overwhelmed by the odds,” he told me. “You should always try to overpower your opponent as much as you can right at the start. If you are fighting two to one, you’re already at a terrible disadvantage even if you can take one of your opponents out at the start. While you’re doing that, his buddy is hitting you from the side. The whole shield thing was a good idea, had they not been able to fly. You also tend to throw people into each other, that’s great. Keep that, as it keeps multiple people busy at once. Otherwise, yeah, don’t rush into a fortress full of demons, dummy.”

“Noted.”

“Now as for improving your aim, I wonder...” He went over to the lockers and unlocked one, got something out, and locked it up again. “Let’s see the gun.” I handed it over, and he taped something onto the top and handed it back.

“A laser sight?”

“Make the gun vanish.”

“Okay.” I did, and the sight fell to the floor.

Hey, good point. I've got a shape changing gun, why can't it have a laser sight naturally? I mean come on, mystery gun, get yourself together. I want to pimp. You. Out!

“I was afraid of that. Hoped it might go with. Well, never mind. You rely on something like that now, and it's just going to be worse when you don't have it.” He put it back again. “You get to do it the old fashioned way. Lots and lots of practice.”

If only there was a spell to make my practice be more impactful...

So I spent the majority of the day training. I could come in the next day, of course, but it was the weekend so I wanted to put a little distance between my almost failure at the last inversion and myself. *And I'll keep training in my sleep, no question about that. Man, if twelve year old me could see me now.*

Chapter 12

I go on a date, sorta, and something really bad happens

Where: Home

When: Saturday Evening

I was relaxing at home around 4:30 when my doorbell rang. Looking outside I saw Archie's car and he was standing there.

"Hey Archie, you're early, it's still not time to pick me up from... work." I cocked my head. *Something's off. He feels enraged, why is Polaris telling me he feels angry? He looks happy, he's smiling. And he's dressed a lot better than usual.*

"No, I'm not pranking you or anything, I actually wanted to see if maybe you wanted to have dinner with me tonight?"

"Are you feeling okay?"

"Sure, why wouldn't I be?" He looked confused. But he still felt like he wanted to tear my throat out. "I understand if you're busy, it was just a date. Thought. It was just a thought. Not a date! I mean unless you wanted it to be a date?"

Well he's acting like a nervous school boy, am I just getting it wrong? Do I want to date him? Not much time to think about it, not that I haven't thought about it, because I most certainly have.

"Sure, it can be a date," my mouth said. *Well, that's that settled.*

"Really? That's great!"

"You want to-"

"I'll wait out here!" he told me sharply. "I know I kinda sprang this on you suddenly, you'll want to get ready so take your time. Don't mind waiting, I'll just be out in the car." He turned and started back there.

"Okay." *His feelings didn't change. And he didn't want to come in?* I softly closed the door and watched through the window at the top as he went and leaned against the car. My eyes narrowed and I went to get Auseinander, the only other piece of magic I had that might show me anything off about him. I slipped it on and peeked through the window. I did not like what I saw. *Two energy signatures. One looks squished by the other. Something has happened, he's been possessed. What do I do?* I ducked down again and leaned against the door. I was shaking a little, what was going on? *But if he's possessed, why invite me out to dinner? Is he going to attack me in public, make me show my hand and get one or the both of us in trouble?* I ran for my phone and hastily picked it up, opening the contacts and hitting Emmett's name.

It rang.

It rang again.

It rang- "Hello?"

"Emmett? It's Jesse."

"What's wrong? You sound panicked."

"I am panicking! Archie just showed up and..." *How can I tell him what I felt? I've never told anyone about Polaris. I guess I don't have to.* "He's acting funny. Then I looked at him with Auseinander and he's got two energy signatures. I think he's possessed."

"Wow, you can use it like- wait. You say possessed? Crap, that's a problem!"

"You're telling me!"

"What did he want? Are you in danger?"

"He wants a date."

"..."

"Are you still there?"

"Sorry, you said a date? Like, dinner and dancing, that sort of thing?"

"Just dinner, I don't know. What should I do?"

“Don’t suppose you could offer him the customary, pre-date communal shower your religion demands?”

“He didn’t want to come in, rushed off, in fact. He’s standing out by the car.” *Wouldn’t showering with him mean I was suddenly in my tub with a farm animal? It would knock all magic off him, not just possession.*

“Sure, if you didn’t invite him in again the possessor would be knocked out. It hasn’t been invited inside. He can’t take that chance. Short of that or waiting for sunrise...”

“I can’t wait until sunrise!” *That’s, what, fourteen hours away?*

“I know, I’m thinking. Look, Excellus has its share of enemies, okay? As you’re a new member but have been there long enough to learn our procedures and stuff maybe he’s just trying to find out information. You can’t arouse his suspicions- Go with him for now.”

“Go on a date with a possessed person?!” I hissed.

“Let me finish. Go out with him, stall him. Try to get him to the closest restaurant you can to your house. Don’t tell him anything about the company, if he asks just make stuff up.”

“But why would he ask questions he would already know the answers to?”

“He wouldn’t ask them directly. He would say, like, what do you think of our policies, do they seem fair to you? And you would go on a rant about whatever, and he would get info indirectly. Believe me, there are ways.”

“I guess.”

“Meanwhile I’ll get some people together. There is magic to force a possessor out. We’ll check the local restaurants, there aren’t that many in this town, and get in behind him. If you go to one near your house we won’t have to check very many. Don’t worry, we won’t hurt Archie.”

“Okay, yeah, okay, that makes sense. Maybe jump him when we come out, so we don’t get any innocent people in the crossfire?”

“Good, you’re thinking like an agent. Exactly what we’ll do. Try to stay calm, we’ll be right there, okay? Don’t try to ask him directly what he wants, he’ll know you know. Just play it cool and we’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“Okay. Thanks, Emmett. You better be there.”

“I will. He’s my partner, I won’t let him hurt you or anyone else while possessed, okay? We’ll save him, it’s what we do.”

“I know you won’t. I better go then, I don’t want to make him wait too long. Wait, can’t you just come here?”

“But then we won’t be able to see what he’s after! We need to know what he wants to know first. Believe me, it’s better this way, maybe he’ll let slip who sent him or some other detail by accident. We go there he’ll just slip back home and that will be that. We’ll have learned nothing. Better the enemy you know than whoever this is trying to get what they want in a more direct way.”

It is a somewhat convoluted plan, taking over a person I would say yes to going on a date with. “Good point. I’ll do my best.” *Great, now I get to be a secret agent, too?*

“You’re strong, you can get through this too. I believe in you, Jesse. Bye.”

“Bye.” I hung up. *Now for an evening out with someone who looks like Archie but has some other intent. What do you wear to a date like that?*

Twenty minutes later I stepped out in some nice clothes, and he went around and opened the car door for me. “You look great,” he told me. “Thanks for agreeing to this, especially on such short notice.”

At least I can be assured he won’t pull the car out from under me. “I admit I’m a little nervous, I haven’t dated anyone, you know, in a while.” *In like my whole life. I was too busy being an orphan, and going to school, and studying, and trying to survive a male dominated world. You know, girl stuff. But at least that should cover any slips, right?*

“No need to be, we hang out all the time.”

“Not like this.”

“I guess you’re right. But if you are a little nervous, maybe that’s good because there is something to be nervous about? I mean like exploring a relationship, which is always a bit scary, not that I’m going to, uh, I’m going to stop talking now.” He closed my door and got in next to me. “So where shall we go?”

“Oh, no place fancy, or anything. I’m a cheap date!” *God did I just say that? Get it together already!* “There are some places nearby I wouldn’t mind checking out.” *This was not covered in the packets, or in my time at the shooting range. I am not trained for this.*

“I think I know just the place.” He pulled the car out and we headed down the street.

Whew.

Had I not felt his continued hatred of me, and watched his energy as I glanced at him with Auseinander on (yes, I left it on, and he didn’t seem to make a big deal of it so I didn’t have to explain it, thank you) I wouldn’t have known he was possessed. He seemed quite charming, talking about how I was getting on with the house, and if I thought I would get a pet, and did I think the roof needed to be replaced any time soon? We headed to a restaurant not far away and got seated, and he didn’t seem to want to talk about work at all. He even made some jokes, which I am ashamed to admit I laughed at, and we seemed to be having a really good time. He didn’t seem rushed, in a hurry to ‘get back to my place’ or make any suspicious moves. I kept my feelings on high alert, so I could detect any change like if he suddenly felt triumph while I looked away I could guess he had just poisoned my food. Nothing. So to say I grew more and more confused as the date went on was an understatement. But I also grew more worried, I didn’t recognize anyone from the office trying to catch my eye and signal they were there. Of course I couldn’t keep looking at the door that would draw suspicion I trusted they would make themselves known to me while keeping Archie out of it. Nothing. *Of course they have illusion magic there, and people that can change shape. I’m probably under observation right now and I just don’t know it. Play it cool, it’s fine, we’re fine.*

Finally the check came, he paid it without blinking, and we walked back to the car. I expected someone to jump him right out the door. Nothing. I expected someone to jump him in the parking lot. Nothing. I expected someone to jump him as he held the door open for me. Nothing. The ball of ice in my stomach was getting bigger every second. There was one reason why nothing was happening.

“He’s in on it too, isn’t he?” I finally asked, dreading the answer but breaking ‘cover.’ It was now or never, I wasn’t getting back in the car with him. To kill me all he had to do was accelerate for a bit and hit the button on my seatbelt release a second before smashing into something. What would a possessor care about the car?

“What’s this now?”

“Emmett. He was possessed too. You figured I would call his partner, and made sure to possess them at the same time so neither could warn the other. What’s your game, why are you here?”

“What are you talking about, Jesse?”

“I know you’re possessing him,” I told him, voice hard. The service weapon was in my hand, in the ‘Grip’ configuration. I pressed it to his chest, just to the left of center. “Now tell me why.”

“Yeah, he called me while you were getting ready, so I knew you knew. We didn’t plan on that, but it worked out just the same, you came with me. Was interested to see how far you would go, like would you go to a hotel with me? But back to the issue at hand, are you really thinking of shooting me? My dear, that will only hurt your boyfriend, not me. As for the reason? It’s what we do, baby. Revenge. Normally we get paid for it, but this time it was personal.”

It clicked into place. “You’re the two that got away at the first inversion,” I deduced. “Taking me out on a date was your *revenge*? You’ve got a weird sense of things.”

He laughed. “No, no, this was the distraction. Emmett has been doing the first part of our revenge plan while we were here. There are many to come. You’ll see. Let’s head to your house, I mean, what’s left of it.” He laughed again, and I thought my veins ran with ice before.

“You didn’t.”

“Come see for yourself.”

“I will. With Archie, you won’t be joining us.”

He scowled. “Oh yeah? What exactly are you going to do about it? I’ve explained that. You can’t kill me, not when I’m inside this body.”

“Now that’s where you’re wrong,” I told him sweetly. “This gun doesn’t hit what it points at, *it hits what I aim at.*” I leaned close and looked into his eyes and whispered, “And I can see you just fine.”

I pulled the trigger.

Archie’s body jerked and spasmed, and the energy left his body. “Shatter,” I said, and the gun changed. I could feel the hatred and pain of the kanaima who was now standing next to Archie, (plus see his energy of course) and I leveled the gun at them. “Bye bye,” I told them, and pulled the trigger again. The glow melted away, and I caught Archie as he stumbled. *One dead kanaima, one to go.*

“Archie?”

“What? Where am I? Jesse? What’s going on?”

“You were possessed! We have to get home, my house, I think something terrible has happened.”

“Terrible? What?”

Aarg, we don’t have time for this, but at the same time what’s been done is done. It’s been an hour. “You were possessed! You came asking for a date. I called Emmett, who I now know was also possessed. He said he would bring backup, but I think he’s been doing something to my house. Can we go now?”

“Jesse? Yeah, sure.” He was looking around. “I do seem to be at a restaurant, and I seem to have eaten. I asked you for a date? Never mind I guess, tell me on the way.”

We climbed into the car and he zoomed off. Meanwhile I seethed. Attacking me like this? It was crazy. How could I have been so stupid? *I thought I was doing the right thing! Call Emmett my gut told me. He’ll know what to do! Stupid, stupid, stupid. They knew just what to do, probably have been watching me for days, or weeks since the first inversion. I’m really starting to hate magic.*

I filled him in on the way and the flashing lights, smoke, and activity around my house told me what I had already suspected. My parent’s house, that had weathered them being gone, and sheltered me when they couldn’t, was currently burning to the ground. “Oh no,” he said.

The understatement of the year.

I rushed out, looking for someone in charge. Firefighters were everywhere, spraying it down, but it looked like it had been on fire for hours.

“Miss!?” someone said. “Gonna have to ask you to stay back.”

I looked at the man who was coming over, it was a police officer. I pointed. “That’s my house! It’s my house that’s burning!”

“You’re the owner? Was there anyone inside?”

“No, I live alone and I was... Out on a date.” *I mean I sort of was, right?*

“You’ll be glad to know we caught the guy that did it.” He stood a little straighter as he said this, and felt pride, though that was dumb given what he said next.

“What?”

“Yeah, weirdest thing. He stood there after setting the blaze, a dozen gas cans all around. Admitted to it. We put him in the car right over there.” He pointed at his car.

So really you didn't do anything, so stop feeling so smug about it. In the lights I could see Emmett staring back at me, and he gave a little grin and a smile.

Anger exploded out of me. *He's going to pay for this.* I shoved the cop, who went flying, and tore the door off the car with my power. I made a fist and crushed it, then tossed it aside. He started to look a little nervous. I yanked him to me, grabbing him by my left hand and pressing Grip against his chest. I knew where to look, and where to aim.

"Now just a minute," he stammered. "You can't hurt me in here."

"Not as much as I want to right now, but enough. Your partner was spouting nonsense like that right before *he* died, too."

"Died?"

"Yeah. Let me show you a little trick I learned at the start of the war."

"War?"

"Yeah. The one I just declared on your entire. Fucking. Race." I pulled the trigger, and once again having been damaged *inside* the host he couldn't maintain the magic, and was shot out of the body. "Shatter." And another kanaima died as I shot him at point blank range with my new weapon form.

"Gonna need you to put him down," said a voice, and the officer was up again, with his gun out. "And throw the gun down. Do it now."

"Jesse?" Emmett said, eyes darting around. "What's going on?"

"Drop it. On your knees! Now!"

I screamed in frustration. Everyone flew away from me, the cars nearby crumpled. Even the fire trucks were jolted. "Stop getting in my way and do something!" I shouted to the world.

"Jesse, this isn't helping," Archie said at my side. He hadn't gone flying, obviously my power knew the difference between friend and foe, just like the gun did. "I've called Excellus, they said some people should be... Yeah, they're here."

"We got here as soon as we could after the police report went out about your house burning," Gretchen told us, striding over to us. "Clearly we knew it was her house, but it took us some time to get everyone where. What happened?"

"Kanaima happened. Can we get the fire out?" Archie asked.

"I've got some people with fire magic, but there's a lot of water being sprayed around. Jesse, did you do this? With the cars and stuff? Oh man we've got a lot of memories to erase. And I see those people recording this with cell phones, wonderful. They probably caught the whole thing and it'll be on youtube in ten minutes."

"Fire first," I told her. I followed the lines of the fire hoses to the nearest hydrant, and simply snapped the thing off causing water to shoot out of the ground, and the hoses to go slack. "There, no more water," I told them. "Magic has screwed me enough for one night, maybe it can redeem itself as well."

"I guess that works, I'll make sure those with the fire magic know."

"Now for cell phones."

"Er, can someone tell me what's going on?" Emmett asked politely. I let him go, he had been just awkwardly standing there with my hand on his throat. He was strong enough to have gotten out of my grasp but smart enough to know any sudden move would probably set me off again.

"I'll tell you what I know, which isn't much," Archie told him. "Let's stay out of her way for now."

Which they did, which was a good thing because I was a one woman wrecking crew. I tore cell phones out of people's hands and smashed them up good, and they ran off. By then the officers had gotten themselves together and were looking to regroup to try and catch the person who was just standing there but had admitted to setting the fire, and possibly me though I was not holding a gun but

seemingly had smashed at least one car in my rage? The Excellus people knew what they were about and were using mental magic to calm the situation down. Those with fire magic were getting the flames under control, leaving the fire fighters scratching their heads and packing up. A tow truck arrived to haul away the remains of the cop car I had smashed up, the officer was now clearly confused how that had happened, but went with someone else. *I guess he doesn't remember, thank you mental magic.* It was a big mess, and it lasted another two hours before Gretchen and the others could really talk to me. By then they had gotten the story and figured out the details so they knew what had happened, if not exactly what I had done about it.

For my part I was staring at the burnt out wreckage of my house. The kanaima must have doused the whole thing top to bottom in gas, there were two dozen cans there, for it to have caught so quickly. I had nothing, and an empty pit had been there in my stomach for the whole time.

"Hey, you're still alive," Gretchen told me, laying a hand on my back. "It's just a house after all. Your parents house, perhaps, but you'll get them a better one, mark my words."

"No, I won't," I told her. "I can't. I have already failed."

"Over? Nonsense! Collect the insurance money and..."

I turned to face her, and she could see the tears that had been pouring down my face.

"You didn't..."

I nodded. It was *exactly* that bad. "In the excitement of the move, and getting the new job, there were bound to be a few things I forgot. Insurance being one of them."

Her eyes flicked to the house and back to me. "It's not insured."

"It's not insured. I was basically squatting there, in my childhood home. My name isn't on the title, or whatever. As far as the city is concerned, it just lost another abandoned house. Nothing more."

"Oh dear."

"Yup. The only things I own are my purse, my cell phone which I don't even have a charger for now, and these clothes. Everything else is gone. Wayfinder is gone. At least I had the presence of mind to wear this so I could see the energy inside Archie." I shook Auseinander at her. "How do I recover from this? I'm homeless."

"But you are not without friends," she told me gently. "Look." She spun me around and there were a lot of people from the office. "We're here for you, Jesse. Even if it's the oldest house in the neighborhood, we'll find you a place to live. Don't give up, okay?"

And then everyone was hugging me, and telling me it was going to be okay. Was it? I had no idea. But if not it was a nice lie, and everyone was in on it. Only two stood apart, Archie and Emmett, who I knew felt as wretched as I did because I could feel it. But I didn't blame them, maybe a little for not being able to do more against those kanaima, but that was in the past now. I went and hugged them to show no hard feelings. "Come on, you can't feel worse than I do," I told them.

"We'll do anything we can to help," Archie told me.

"Of course," Emmett agreed. "You need a place to stay. Just say the word."

"Thanks. We're going to have to figure something out. I can't stay here."

Chapter 13

I retrieve the sword

Where: ??

When: The next day

I woke up in a strange bed, but at least no one was in it next to me. I remembered, and blinked back tears. *None of that now. I have kanaima to find and murder. And I'm going to kill every one of those-*

There was a soft knock at my door. "Jesse?"

"I'm up," I answered Gretchen. Yes, I was staying with my boss, for the moment. Of course Archie, Emmett, and even Margarita offered but I felt two of those three were fraught with their own problems. And Emmett admitted to not bothering with little things like heat, or lights, so staying with him in his "bat cave" wouldn't be all that comfortable. "I guess."

"There's someone here to see you."

"If it's not my mother and father or my brother tell them to go away." *Wait, what if it's the publisher's clearing house with a huge check? Or a time traveling dinosaur that has a prophetic warning about the even worse thing that's going to happen to me today? Or what if-*

"It's Herman. He's quite insistent."

"I'm sure he is, I got his sword burned up. I'll write him an apology." *Wait, how did he even know that? He wasn't there that night. Eh, someone must have told him about the fire and he put two and two together. Or maybe she called him and he rushed over here.*

"That's just it." She paused. "He insists it'll be fine. But you need to get over there right away."

"Huh?" I sat up and rubbed my eyes. "What?"

"Just get out here and talk to the man himself."

"Okay."

I heard her heading back down the hall and looked to the only clothes I owned in the world. I had taken them all off to sleep, and wondered what I would be putting on tomorrow. *Let tomorrow take care of itself, I guess. Strange, to own less now than when I arrived in town. At least when I got here I had a suitcase full of clothes and things I had picked up along the way. Now I don't even have that.* I washed up quick in the sink, put my clothes on, and headed downstairs. Herman was there with a mug of what smelled like coffee. The drone was there as well, buzzing nearby. I looked around, I hadn't actually gotten to see much of Gretchen's house last night, I was in no state to pay attention to anything. Her kitchen was a complete mix of technology that looked to be from the 1920s onward, of course some of that stuff still worked. Just her toaster looked like it was solid steel and probably would burn your house down if you looked at it funny. *Safety features? What are those? It just draws electric in and heats up the elements. Probably not a fuse to be found. Surprised the cords haven't frayed though.*

"Morning," he said to me. He took a sip, I guess that mug wasn't for me. "You look like crap."

"Why do people always have to point out the obvious?" I asked no one in particular. *At least she has a modern fridge, and not an ice box or something silly like that.*

"I know you don't feel like it, but have something to eat," Gretchen told me, sliding a plate with some toast on it. It looked odd. Like it was made with love, not by a machine. It looked *real* in a way most bread didn't. I bent over it.

"Is this homemade bread?" *And this plate, is that from the Ming dynasty or something?*

"Yes it is. Eat it and we can get going."

I looked over at her. "You actually make your own bread?"

"I'm over three hundred years old, of course I make my own bread. Along with a lot of other things I've been perfecting since I was old enough to bake. Store bought bread? Are you nuts? Have you had store bought bread? Eat the bread. There's butter here if you want it."

Okay mom, you don't have to be so pushy. "I'm eating the bread." I looked at the crock of butter on the table with the knife next to it. Both looked like antiques as well. The butter though... "Did you-"

"I didn't churn the butter, that's from a store. I'm old fashioned, not insane."

"Ah." I put butter on the toast and ate it. It was delicious, and somehow I did feel a little better afterwards. *Does she make her bread with a little extra green, if you get my drift?* She offered me freshly squeezed orange juice and some of the best coffee I ever had as well. "Huh, I should be dating you, if it meant I got a meal like that every- what else do you know how to make? Do you make your own pasta? I may have to marry you if you make your own pasta. I remember my dad saying I should marry the first person I met that made their own pasta."

"Come on, we should get going," Herman told us. "Talk about food later. It was good coffee though, thanks."

"Yes, what is this all about?" Gretchen asked as she got her keys. I had a key, to a house that didn't exist anymore. The good feeling I had from the bread was wearing off again. "Why do we have to rush over to a..." She glanced at me.

Go ahead and say it. A burned out wreck of a house.

"I'll tell you when we get there."

"Fine," she said with a sigh. "Have your little reveal, it's fine."

Maybe he need to ask forgiveness for something instead of permission?

We got out to the house and took stock of the situation. The lawn was a mess from the fire trucks tearing it up, bits of glass and metal from the car door and later car I crushed were laying around, the place was a mess. The walls and roof had fallen in, what was left of them anyway, so inside what used to be the basement was just assorted rubble that smelled strongly of smoke. At least there were no reporters hanging around trying to get "the scoop" on what had happened here. It was probably just another thirty second story on local news and everyone had already moved on with their lives, never to give it another thought. *But then, would I have given another thought to someone else's house burning down?* "Okay, start floating this rubble." He made a lifting gesture with both his arms. "We need it where we can get at it."

"Do what now?" I asked. *I mean I've lifted some heavy stuff with Polaris during my practice nights but this?*

"Absolutely not!" Gretchen commanded. "Do you know what kind of crowd we would draw if she started using her powers out in the open like this? Besides, after last nights' little display I'm not sure if I should allow her the use of her powers until she's gotten more training."

"Oh, allow me the use of? That's rich. You know I didn't want any of this, right? To find out about magic, and you people, and have my parents taken away, and nearly die trying to do something you haven't been able to do in fourteen years, and have a cute guy come to my house and ask me to dinner, and he's possessed, meanwhile my house burns down while I'm on said date. You think I couldn't turn these abilities into cold, hard, cash? But no, I'm playing by the rules, and look where it got me!"

"Look, I know this isn't the best time in your life,"

Oh wait, we have a new contender for understatement of the year!

"...but we can't make things worse."

"They're going to be worse if we don't get my sword back," Herman told us. "Someone else picks that up and decides they want to know where something is? It'll work for them just as easily as us."

"But it's gone," I insisted. "Look at this mess!" Three floors of rubble lay there, in a big pile that would take hours to sort through.

“You still don’t get it. Jesse, I made those swords as book accurate as I could. There was only one thing that could destroy them. Shieldbreaker. That’s how they all went, one after another. A little fire like this? No, my sword is under there someplace. We have to dig it out before someone else does.”

“It’s not burned up?” I asked, hope beginning to flourish inside me a little.

“It’s not burned up,” he insisted. “The possessed Emmett couldn’t have gone in to get it, not past the threshold because he was possessed. It must still be in there somewhere. The scabbard would have burned, yes, I didn’t protect it. But the sword would have fallen when the floor did, but not with enough force to damage it, trust me. I just hope you have the raw lifting power we need, but we can take it in layers if we have to.”

“We have to get it out,” I told Gretchen, who was looking stubborn. “Come on, give me this at least. I need something good right now! Do you know how terrible I felt, when I thought about having to tell Herman I lost his blade? All that work for nothing? To say nothing if he couldn’t make another in time for the next inversion. And something bad happened and that was my fault too? We could need it today- okay maybe tomorrow as I assume you asked the future about today and didn’t get a positive result and now I sound like a six year old. Great. You see what you’ve reduced me to? I’m so messed up.”

“You’re not messed up,” she assured me. “But you have had a string of bad luck lately, that’s for sure.”

“Huh, maybe I should forge Coinspinner next,” Herman mused. “Have you hang on to that for a bit. I’ve got a good idea how to make that one.”

“Coinspinner?” Gretchen asked, probably to stall.

“It provides unbeatable luck to the person holding it,” he explained. “In the story it leaves you at the worst time of course. It can just vanish from you, I would leave that part out.”

“Probably for the best. Still sounds dangerous, given how our fateweaving magic works. Look, how long do you think this will take?” she asked me.

“I can lift a lot,” I told her. *Don’t ask me how I know that.* “I think if I treat everything here as one big thing and just haul it out to the lawn we can go through it and look for the sword. I don’t have to float it around in the air.”

“Still,” she mused, “we’re not doing it out in the open. Enough strange things happen around this town we don’t need to add to them ourselves.” She looked around the yard. “I could maybe make a bunch of trees around here, obscuring the whole place. But then everyone would wonder where they came from. Let me make a call, don’t do anything until then.”

“Okay?”

She stepped away and turned her cell phone on, then dialed a number. Herman and I walked around the wreckage of my house looking for the best place to attack it from and if we could spot the sword and just yank it out so much the better. But we didn’t. Gretchen came over to us when she was off the phone. “I’ve reached him, someone who can help will be here shortly. We’ll wait until then and try not to draw too much attention to ourselves.”

“It’s a Sunday morning,” I told her. “There’s not that much traffic on this road. And I’m just looking at the wreckage of my house if any police show up.”

“I suppose.”

Half an hour later a car pulled into the driveway and an Asian looking man stepped out. I remembered him from the party, he was the one that turned into the fox with six tails.

“Han-Gyeol, thanks for coming out on a Sunday,” she told him.

“Not a problem,” he told her. “I was here last night putting fire out. Very tragic. Jesse, so sorry to see house burn down. Some have no respect for what fire is.”

“Thanks.” *Something to toast marshmallows with?*

“So you want to look through rubble?”

“Yes, we’re looking for something that hopefully survived the fire,” Gretchen told him.

“Okay. But with daytime I will need to change.” He started stripping out of his clothes, he was just wearing a loose track suit. He hadn’t minded at the party either, maybe if you live long enough you stop caring about that sort of thing, or because he was a fox normally he just didn’t? Once he threw his clothes back in the car he changed into his true form. “Step back a bit, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.”

“What is he doing?” I asked as we headed towards the house again.

“The next best thing. I could cause trees to grow but then we’d be stuck with them. He’s going to make some out of illusion, so they can go away later. Anyone drives by, hopefully they won’t think it’s too strange to see some thick foliage here. That should obscure what we’re about to do. Then we leave and it goes away.”

“Interesting plan.” *I guess it’ll work.*

He got to work and said to go ahead, he had done what he could so I stared at the wreck of my house. *Okay Polaris, work with me here. I want to gently lift all this rubble, not shoot it into space. Let’s slowly pick it up.* I focused, taking a deep breath, and sticking my arm out not that I thought that was strictly necessary. My power responded, and I lifted my hand slowly, willing the pile to lift at the same rate. It did, slowly rising out of the basement of my house and hovering there at ground level.

“Wait, I can help here,” Han-Gyeol told us. “Though I am impressed someone young as you can lift so much with no practice for many years. I pull mess apart, make smaller piles.” He did this, yanking it apart bit by bit and depositing on the lawn all around. Finally it was a fraction of the original size and I tossed the rest onto a free space and relaxed my will. “You want me stay?” he asked Gretchen.

“I don’t think we’ll need the illusion anymore,” she told him. “And this isn’t your job. Thanks for the help, I appreciate it..”

“Is no bother. You find who set fire, I set them on fire for you, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed. *But they’re already dead. I saw to that.*

He changed back, got dressed, and drove off.

“Let’s start looking,” Herman told us, heading to one of the piles.

We dug through everything and eventually found the sword, which as Herman predicted didn’t seem to have a scratch on it. He tried it, telling it to look for something, and announced it worked just fine. He put it into a scabbard he had brought, which looked like it had been thrown together because it looked awfully rough. But it was enough to cover the sharp parts of the thing and carry it. I felt a little better it had been found, but still, staring at the remains of my house that feeling was short lived. There wasn’t anything salvageable here. We had found what might have been the twisted remains of my laptop, various bits of furniture, a lot of roofing material, plaster from the walls, metal pipes, wire that was melted into a ball, that sort of thing. Very soon I would have to pay the garbage company to come with a dumpster, and haul this all away. *Which will be expensive, and something I can’t afford right now. But what are we going to do about this hole, here? I can’t leave it like this, someone will fall into it and sue me. Well, they’ll try to sue my parents, who they won’t be able to find. Until I rescue them, and they come home to find a hole in the ground where their house used to be. I’ve made them homeless too. But wait, do I? Technically no one was living here, the place wasn’t insured so why should I pay to clean it up, too?* “So now what?” I asked.

“We can grab an early lunch and I can take you shopping. You’ll need to buy a few things to start rebuilding your life.”

“I hate to be a bother, but yeah I’ll need to remake my travel kit at least to start.” *I can afford that much, I guess.* “I’ll just take a bus or something, you don’t have to-.”

“Jesse,” she told me. “I have, no doubt, hundreds of years ahead of me. One Sunday afternoon helping you is not you being a bother. Let me help, I feel bad enough all this has happened to you and part of the blame is mine. Let me do what I can for you.”

“Hold on, how is any of this your fault?” Part of me seized upon *someone else to blame for this mess!*

“If I had thought ahead a bit more, I might have provided all my employees with protection against possession. In fact that should almost be a standard company wide, we deal with a lot of things and us being possessed brings terrible consequences. As you can see. We trust each other, and have access to a lot of sensitive information. We get possessed, and one house is just the start. It’s a miracle this was the catalyst for me thinking of this, and not our whole office building being blown up or something. I mean we’re a small group here, we don’t go for all that Blue Cross/Blue Shield rivalry like bigger cities sometimes do. We just do what’s needed. There have been some close calls, I should have seen something like this coming sooner and protected everybody. I don’t know what Blue Cross does in other parts of the country about possession, but I know what we can do here.”

“Funny story,” Herman spoke up. “While on the case sealing the gateways to Deogen we came to an army base. Some soldiers got possessed and were guarding it. We got them out by spraying the whole place with water from fire trucks and such, and the sergeant we talked to said the army knew about us. Us being magic users and non-humans. He was quite concerned that measures against possession weren’t being taken for high ranking officials once I mentioned it. Went quite pale actually.”

We stared at him. “What’s the funny part of that story?” I asked. “That our military or even the president or military personnel and leaders in other countries could be possessed at any moment and that’s part of the reason our world is so screwed up?”

“Yeah, I don’t see it either,” agreed Gretchen. “Do you know what a joke actually is?”

“When you put it like that, I guess it’s not funny at all,” he admitted.

“No, it’s not,” we told him.

“Great, something else to worry about. The fact of the matter is, I should have had dwarves *churning* out items protecting against possession, to be worn by employees at all times. That two of my people were taken over, and you got hurt because it, is unacceptable. At least you had some advance warning, and didn’t get taken entirely by surprise. Imagine if they had not been so short sighted, and actually took you over? I mean what was their plan after this? I get Emmett would have gone to jail for arson, would they have slowly gotten anyone you knew thrown in jail until finally you were alone? Madness! What if they took you over last, to get you killed in some spectacular fashion? The havoc you would wreck in twenty four hours if you didn’t care about being hurt, and just laid waste to someplace with your power? I can’t even imagine it.”

I wonder what Polaris would have to say about that? Could they protect me? Kill the invader from the inside? I don’t want to have to put that into practice, but I think anyone that did try to take me over might be in for a surprise.

“And there are people older and more powerful than you that could be taken by surprise and be taken over, and rampage over a whole town. This has really shown me how vulnerable we are. Something has to be done about it.”

Herman was nodding. “Sounds like a full time security job, for the right dwarf.”

“Interested?”

I had to chuckle. “Watch out, she hires people basically on the spot if she thinks you’re what the company needs.”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I have my own things going on, but on the other hand is making costume pieces for people the best use of my time? I could make a dozen anti-possession items and each one could be unique and special. Handle security for the place,” his eyes flicked to his drone. “The company could afford certain resources, allowing various agents to be spun up. Even be a field agent for tough missions. It would be a worthy cause.”

“The job is yours if you want it,” she told him. “Think it over. But you have not sufficiently distracted me, Jesse. We are going shopping this afternoon, and you are picking out some nice things, and I’m taking care of the bill.”

“What? No, you can’t-”

“Jesse, look at me.” She took my hands. “And listen. I will say it one more time. I am over three hundred years old. I have worked, at various jobs, my entire ‘adult’ life. Imagine what that means. I have been a model, a personal assistant to many powerful people, a zookeeper, a florist, a singer, and probably more I can’t even remember at the moment. I think as worked as a photographer briefly when color film started to get big. Right now I run the local branch of Excellus, keeping this town safe. My pay is excellent. Humans work about 40 years of their lives. That means I have saved for over seven human lifetimes, and you saw my house. I bought my toaster in 1924, I keep things until they stop working, I don’t run out and buy something new just to have it. I have investments dating back two hundred years, and I know divination magic. You think I can’t play the stock market like my own personal slot machine? Of course I can. Buying you some toothpaste and a few outfits will make me more money than I will spend on you, even on a Sunday, because my investments earn so much interest at this point. Life has kicked you around enough. Let me do this for you.”

“Thank you,” I managed at a whisper.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” she asked, a twinkle in her eye and cocking her head to the side. “Didn’t quite catch it.”

I just hugged her, I couldn’t speak.

Chapter 14

I take a little trip, but it's no vacation

Where: Gretchen's house

When: Several days later

The problems, we discovered, that is Herman and I, in finding buried pirate treasure or other lost artifacts were many. In the first place, if you looked up "lost treasures" online you could find whole lists of them. Many relating to Nazis who it seemed loved gold and other treasures but couldn't seem to hold onto them. Lost works of art such as paintings or writings also existed. The problem was most of these weren't lost, it was just a joke or trick played on humans. Many of those relics Gretchen knew were in the hands of non-humans who had been around during those times, who simply kept them in their private collections. Anything gold was probably in the hands of leprechauns while an organization called the historians probably squirreled away anything written. (Herman emailed a guy he knew that worked for them who confirmed this.) So finding anything truly lost to begin with was the first problem. Those things not in non-human hands originally soon became that way, because magic. Lots of different non-human types had divination magic or the equivalent, so while the fall of some empire or another may have temporarily misplaced some object, they could be found at any time. Plus a lot of non-humans could have scooped up treasures now considered lost and still be hanging on to them, because they were still alive! Distance was also a factor, unless you had your own private helicopter to get around in, just the sword pointing in a direction that might be on another continent on the other side of the world wasn't that useful.

So needless to say we hadn't had much luck finding lost treasures around Ordinary, which is basically all we had access to on a day to day basis. So I was still living with Gretchen who, as promised, had showered me with gifts in the form of clothes and other basic necessities like a comb. And tampons. I refused anything too extravagant, even after she showed me her bank account balance which I had to admit was fairly impressive. I wanted to deal with this on my own, which I at least hoped increased her opinion of me as a strong, independent woman rather than decreasing her opinion of me as a blathering idiot because it was totally clear she would not miss even a few zeros of her bank balance. But we got along well enough and I was usually riding to work with her these days and not Archie. Christmas was coming up, she called all of it "A Christmas gift, if you insist. You haven't worked at Excellus long enough to get any kind of Christmas bonus yet, so it's the least I can do."

Things with that pair, Archie and Emmett, were on the mend. I knew it wasn't they who had caused all these issues, but the now dead kanaima that had taken them over. They finally seemed to accept that, and they stopped apologizing every five minutes and started acting normal again. They also made it clear they were preparing to "host a Christmas party for you the likes of which you have never seen" and not to worry about getting them anything. "In the spirit of the holiday, there shall be no guilt on your part," Archie had told me. "We are going to bury you in gifts, and there is not a thing you are going to be able to do about it." I promised them I would do my best to accept everything without thinking what a crappy person I was for not getting them anything. In truth, with everything that had been going on I had sort of been ignoring the whole season, not easy I know when Christmas music and decorations were everywhere. As I was now broke and homeless there was no way I could afford to get them anything but a token gift, and someone would have to drive me to a store in order to get it! *My Gad my life is messed up now.* So at least they weren't springing this all on me, they knew the score.

I had turned off the electric and water at the old house, canceled the internet, that sort of thing, so at least my bills had gone away. Still that pesky student loan to worry about, if I ever wanted to try for a mortgage. Gretchen suggested some foreclosed houses in the area, which could probably be had fairly cheaply, but that required paying the whole amount up front. Again, not really feasible for me yet. Meanwhile we waited for the next inversion and I doubled my practice down at the shooting range which made Ananias happy at least.

And so I believed it was yet another normal day at the office when I got up that morning. I stumbled to the bathroom, showered, dressed, and when I was about to open my door to go down to breakfast (*yummy bread, yummy bread, can't get enough of that yummy bread!*) something registered to me and I froze. I looked to my right. I looked up. I looked down again. I rubbed my eyes. No, it was still there. I stepped closer. I looked up again. Hanging there, seemingly going up into the ceiling was a pull chain, like from a lamp, but really long. It had an ornamental green bit of what looked like glass at the end, where you would tug it, and the chain was made of brass. It was a fairly fine chain, but the chain didn't go anywhere, just up. I had never seen such a thing before, I was pretty sure, and slowly opened the door while keeping one eye on it.

"Gretchen, can you come up here please?" I shouted.

"Sure, be right there," she called back.

"Thanks."

I waited a moment, keeping an eye on it. She came up the stairs and I let her in. "What's up?"

"Do you see anything different about this room?" I asked.

"Do I see anything different?" she repeated. She looked around the room. "I can't say that I—" Her head whipped back around, looking at the chain. "What the heck is that?"

"So you do see it. I was beginning to wonder. You've never seen such a thing?"

"Never. It looks like a chain from a lamp."

"That's what I thought!"

She went over to it, walking around it, looking it up and down. "Did you touch it?"

"I was afraid to, honestly."

"Don't for now, let me check something."

"Okay?"

She left and I heard her pulling the stairs to the attic down, and she went up there. A moment later she came back. "It's not going up through the roof or anything, it stops right at your ceiling."

"This can't be an inversion, there's no convergence nearby, right?"

"You're the one with the thing."

"Right." I put Auseinander on and looked around, then went to the window. "May be one some distance from here, I can't tell. I have to say, if it is, I prefer it to buildings that appear out of nowhere or strange castles full of things that want to kill me."

"Agreed. So which of us is going to poke it?"

I grinned at her, making a fist and putting it in my other hand. "Oh, very well."

"One, Two, Three!" I threw scissors and she threw rock. "Crap!"

"HA! You can't beat me, train for three hundred years if you want to challenge me again!"

"But then you would still be three hundred years older." *And besides that, can you really train in rock-paper-scissors?*

"Don't change the subject, you get to poke it!"

"I guess I picked the challenge..." The gun appeared in my hand and I poked it with the barrel. It swung like it was made of chain and then settled again. I looked around, nothing had happened. I touched it. "Feels like metal, and this is glass. So weird."

"Yeah. I guess pull it?"

"Pull it? Just like that? You don't want a whole team here?"

"If the director and her newly rising star can't handle one little pull chain in her own house, don't you think she should- hang on I'll ask." She concentrated. "Okay, now that's odd."

"What did you get?"

"Chain of brass, ends in glass. It's the best, for your quest. Don't be scared, give a yank, three times or the check is blank."

"Who comes up with this stuff?"

"Don't ask me. It didn't say we would die or anything so..."

"My quest, huh?" *The only quest is a) killing all kanaima and b) rescuing my parents. I suppose c) finding my snot nosed little brother but I'm sure he's fine. I would take any one of those.*

"You're not thinking of pulling it, are you?"

"You're the one that said I should!"

"Oh right. I guess we can't just leave it here. It must have appeared for some reason."

"Agreed." *Polaris, or my patron savior, is this your doing? Is there any way to know?*

"Go for it. But first, let me do what any red blooded American would do. Get my gun." She brought a shotgun back. "Give it a yank."

Was she born here? "I will haunt this place if it kills me, you know."

"I believe you."

After all, I am part Polaris now, what does that even mean for my eventual- eh, that's a question I don't even want to ponder. I put my hand on the bead and gave one last glance to Gretchen. She nodded. I pulled. There was a flash, and a weird sound, but nothing else seemed to happen. I pulled again. Then again. "So that's kind of a let... down," I said, looking over at Gretchen. She wasn't there. Or more accurately, *I* wasn't there. I was standing in a hallway with 6 doors, one on each side, and the hallway opened up a bit further on. I nearly tripped back peddling and bringing the gun up, my back hit the wall, and I waited. Silence. "Hello?" I called. "Is anyone there?" More no one answering me. *What in the world?* I took a closer look at the doors, each one seemed to have a symbol on it. I saw an inverted triangle, an upright triangle, a swirl, I couldn't make out the others at this angle. "Hello?" Nothing. I lowered the gun but kept it around. I knocked on a door, which made a hollow sound like there was only a small room beyond it. "Hello?" All the doors proved to be locked, and each did have a unique symbol painted on them. I headed past them, and realized I was in a roadside motel or something. "The Oceanview Motel and Casino, huh?" I read. The place seemed to be a straight line, with 6 rooms back where I had come from, a front desk, the main doors to the place, a door to the back, and 6 more rooms straight ahead. It looked like a typical but somewhat out of date motel, with a desk, a radio that was playing some music, travel brochures, and the like. *This place is too crazy, I'm going to go see what's outside.* I headed to the door and gave it a shove. It rattled and went nowhere. Locked. I tried putting my hands up against the glass but it was so filthy I couldn't see much through it. Light was coming in, so it wasn't dark outside, but I couldn't make out any details. *Well the key must be in the desk, or something. I can always smash the window if I had to. Let's see what else is around here. This is so crazy, how did I get here? I mean I know teleport magic exists but this was a chain.* I headed to the desk and noticed the bell sitting there, so with a shake of my head I gave it a smart ding. Then I whirled to my left as I heard a noise and raised the gun again. *Sounded like a door slamming.* "Hello? Anyone there?" I sheepishly looked at my gun, *right, good way to make a great first impression. Act like you're robbing the place. Brilliant strategy.* I lowered it. "I don't mean you any harm, sorry if I startled you. Can I... get a room?" *Yeah, that's what someone would ask in this place, right.* Silence. "I know I heard you back there!" I dinged the bell again, and the noise happened again. "Okay this is stupid." I stalked in that direction and the third door down the hallway on the left was open. I peaked into the room, and it looked like a motel room. Small, single bed, small desk, filthy window. Clock radio with alarm, ceiling fan, nightstand. No person though, I even looked under the bed. "Huh." I headed back to the desk, still no one there. *Is this place abandoned? Then why have the radio and the lights still on? How does this relate to either of my missions?* In frustration I rang the bell again. Again my head whipped to the side and I ran down the hall. Now the first door on the left was open and the third door was closed. I pounded on it. "Open up. I mean, please come out, I won't hurt you I'm just confused. Are you the owner?" Silence. I checked the first room, it was much like the other one. *This is getting obnoxious.* It didn't take me long to realize somehow that ringing the bell opened and closed certain doors down the hall, a very strange system if ever there was one. All other doors in the place were locked. The register had nothing in it, and the drawers behind the desk were all empty. *Right.*

Shooting out the window then. I raised the gun, hoping no one was standing out there but honestly I couldn't see how that would be. I pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

In a panic I pulled again and again. Nothing. No earth shattering kaboom and one less pane of glass in the world. The gun didn't work here, wherever "here" was. *Does it only work in Ordinary? Who ever heard of a geo locked gun? Fine.* I grabbed the trash bin (empty) from behind the desk and flung it as hard as I could at the window. It bounced off. *You've got to be kidding me.* I tried a few other ways to smash the glass, none of them worked. As the gun wasn't doing me any good I put it away, then stood there with my hands on my hips staring at the desk. I was clearly missing something, but what? *Look, I don't mind a little pain if you have so ideas, Polaris.*

None, was the reply, which I winced at.

Okay, message received. You're in the dark too. The first room was open again, so I went and sat down at the desk. The radio was on, but I wanted some piece and quiet so I got up again and turned it off. Or at least I tried to. The switch didn't move, nor did the volume control knob or the station selector knob. "Okay?" I said to it. "What are you-" *wait, was the radio on in the third room? I'll just go in there.* I rang the bell until that door opened and went in there. The radio wasn't on, so I sat down. But then the silence was bugging me somehow, and so I decided to see if I could fiddle with this one. *Ah hah!* The radio in here would go on, but again was stuck on one station and the volume couldn't be adjusted. *Fine, I'll just turn you- huh?* I couldn't budge the power switch now. *You're kidding me. Wait, is this some kind of puzzle or something? Am I being watched by snickering beings in a higher dimension or something?* I went back to the first room, tried to memorize the position of everything (the chair had gone back to being pushed in once I closed the door) and then made all three rooms as similar as I could. I mean I had nothing better to do, right? When I came back out something had changed. I saw a key on the main desk. "Do you think this is funny?" I shouted to no one. "Am I amusing you sufficiently? I should at least get a score for my effort, don't you think?"

No answer.

I rolled my eyes and took the key. No symbols on it, but I tried it in all the doors. Only one opened, the one with the copyright looking symbol on it. I went inside, and there was another of those pull chains that went up into nothing. I stuck my head back out the door, no change there. "Sure, why not," I said. "In for a penny and whatnot." I yanked it, possibly a bit harder than was strictly needed, and on the third try found myself elsewhere. I was in a room, a small one, and I heard voices. *Ah hah! Back in the real world or whatever?* Looking to the side I saw the chain was there, and figured that was my way back. I peeked out the door and two men had passed me, two very strangely dressed men, who I could tell were not speaking English. They were dressed in a sort of robe and had a turban on their heads. I almost called out to them, but as I looked at their backs I saw something chilling. Two energy signatures per man. *They're possessed!* The gun was back in my hand, I hoped it was working again or this was going to be a short adventure. The two went around a corner and checking the other way, I slipped out after them. I peeked around the corner they had gone around to find them now in front of a room with two men standing there with guns. I listened, they were saying something I could just catch it, but heck if I knew what language it was. The men all looked middle eastern, the two with the guns were not possessed, and they were let in, the guards going back to looking bored. I pulled back, realizing how exposed I was here, and thanking the gods or angels or whatever no other people were in this hallway. My gun was nearly as loud as a real gun, I couldn't drop those guys quietly and besides, I didn't want them dead, did I? The kanaima inside those other two, yes. These guys, eh, who cared about them? Though their guns were concerning to me. I headed back the way I came, passing something and jerking back. This door had a window in it, and it showed stairs heading up and down. I smiled, things were looking up. Literately. I opened the door a crack, listened, and when I didn't hear

anything I slipped inside and headed up several flights of stairs. At the very top I paused, the door seemed locked but not alarmed that I could see. *Yes, this must be roof access.* I listened. Nothing. So I gave it a burst of power and smashed it open, right where the lock was. The noise wasn't too bad, and I was through. I headed to the side of the building and looked around. This was clearly the tallest building around, and wherever I was their infrastructure was terrible. *Maybe they should pass more infrastructure bills around here, so their roads and such don't get into this condition. This is what happens when you let Republicans run everything. Let's see now... That I think is a mosque, churches have a distinct look it's not that. This is crazy, can I really take out some kanaima here? But who is controlling all this, and brought me here?* Before I had a chance to chicken out and just head back to the room with the chain I reached out with my power, grabbing the door and floating it next to me. Mentally reviewing the hallways I figured it was this side of the building, four floors down. *Here goes nothing.* I pushed off the ground, hovering, and dropped down counting four floors. Looking through the window I saw six men around a table and yes, all of them were possessed. One spotted me, eyes going wide and pointing, but I had other things to worry about. I whipped the door forward, at an angle, smashing it through the glass and the door into the room, hopefully blocking it off. I didn't want to be disturbed, after all. The man that had seen me had covered his face as the door smashed through the glass but now went for a pistol that was beneath his robes. *Crap, are they all armed?* I concentrated on his "other" energy signature and fired, hoping to drive the kanaima out and kill it all in one go. It seemed to work, he dropped as the energy signature vanished from his body. The rest went for weapons and I needed something to distract them, and hey, the table was right there, right? So I grabbed it up and simply whipped it back and forth in that space. I held off shooting, I knew by now that if I "emptied" the gun I would have to wait for it to fully "reload." But if I allowed the ammo I had used to regenerate itself I would always have a few shots in reserve, which I might need facing so many. *That should have gotten me back a shot or three, I can risk another burst of fire.* Two of them went sprawling, having gotten out of the way at least, but the other three were slammed into. I put six more bullets into the first one that got up, and he went down again.

I looked for my next target, but suddenly the room seemed empty. I heard a banging on the door and shouting, they were trying to get it open from the outside, so no one had left that way while I was shooting the last guy. I knew they could move between the planes, that's how they got here in the first place, but I had to wonder if that's what they had done. *We're pretty high up, and they can't fly. Would they rather splat on the ground in the astral or take their chances here?* I knew from studying them they could do something else magically too, that of obscuring themselves, so I had to believe they were still in that room somewhere, and probably exactly where I had last seen them. So I swirled the table through the place again. Two of the three appeared so I shrugged and started putting shots into them. They weren't moving so I could gauge when the kanaima had died and I could shoot them slowly enough my "bullets" regenerated as I shot them. I had the rhythm down now, and all the bodies were free of kanaima though I was still missing one. The two outside were about to bust through, so I shoved the table to make it harder for them, and popped into the air again. I had a feeling losing that last guy was going to haunt me at some point, but there was nothing I could do about it now. Once again on the roof I headed back downstairs, of course I had really kicked the anthill now and people were racing around the halls trying to figure out what was going on. I waited as long as I could, ripped the door to the hallway off its hinges, flung it down the hall to knock over anyone that was coming that way, and made a beeline to the room I had come from. Thankfully the chain was still there, and I yanked it three times.

Chapter 15

I learn about the benandanti and agree to help one

Where: Gretchen's place

When: Seemingly not long after

"Wait, she's back," Gretchen was saying on the phone. But my concentration was elsewhere, as my gun was changing shape again. The barrel was now as long as it was in "grip" form but now smooth pieces were floating above it, as though they could rotate like some kind of mounted gun.

"Spin," I named it. The pieces spun once around, it seemed the gun liked that name. "Shatter. Grip." I moved it back through the two forms and released it. *Sure, whatever. I guess going into and out of that place charged it with enough energy to change again? I really don't know the rules of this thing.*

"Are you all right?" Gretchen asked me, phone away from her ear.

"I'm fine, it's fine. Oh, the chain is gone!" *I was hoping it could be studied, or others could go to that weird place and maybe figure out where it was.*

"And good riddance, where did you go?"

"I think I better submit a full report," I stalled her. "It was quite an adventure, it'll take a little bit to tell." *Do I tell her I used my powers out in public, high above the street to kill a bunch of kanaima? Eh, she'll understand, right?*

"We can talk about that later." She lifted the phone to her ear again. "Cancel the alert, she's back. We'll be in soon. Thanks. Bye." She lowered it. "How can you have that much to tell, you were gone like five minutes."

"Five minutes? It took me at least twenty minutes to figure out the stupid puzzle in that motel I went to."

"Motel?"

"Let me at least record it, then I can transcribe it later. I don't want to forget anything." I got my phone and opened up the voice recorder. I told her (and it) what had happened. She scowled at the part I said I stalked and killed some kanaima, but didn't interrupt. That was basically the end of the story anyway, I told her I used the chain on the other end to come back here, and that was that.

"You do recall our stance on using your magical abilities in public, right?"

"Look, whatever set this all up wanted me there, clearly, to kill those kanaima. No one else can do it but me, yes?"

"It's tough, without killing the host, yes," she admitted. "You basically have to follow them into the astral, and kill them there."

"So maybe we trust it? Clearly it needed to be done, if someone went to all the trouble to set that up. And I had to do it that way, else I risked killing the guards on that room, alerting the kanaima, possibly letting them think of a way to escape. Taking them by surprise and from behind was the only way."

"Normally I wouldn't conscience taking someone by surprise and from behind..."

"Very funny." I snorted. *It was a little funny. But such things are serious and should not be joked about, obviously. Consent is paramount.*

"Something very powerful did that," she agreed, but shook her head. "Jesse, you have to understand something. Beings like that, they don't really see the bigger picture of life having to proceed in a certain way around here. They may have the best intentions but are fuzzy on the details at our level. We can't trust them to have a good outcome for us in mind even if everything they foresee happens flawlessly."

"So I should have refused the call?"

"I'm just saying be careful what call you answer. You don't know what they want, and what they want, even if it seems like it's what you want, may be very different."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"Thank you. As far as the other... I suppose in this case you were high in the air, it would have been hard to see you. And the possessed people probably won't remember anything that happened. Maybe it won't be so bad."

"Exactly."

"But what I don't get is the whole motel thing. You did the same thing, just with more steps. Why not have the cord take you directly to that room?"

"From what you were saying time didn't pass there, maybe it was passing, just differently. Maybe it was set up to take me a certain amount of time to complete, which was the amount of time I needed to travel through time to get to when I needed to be."

"So it was some kind of illusion? Maybe it was some kind of vehicle and not a place at all?"

"It wasn't a normal place, the gun didn't work and the windows didn't shatter. I didn't feel it was moving but then, I probably wouldn't according to Einstein. Or was that Newton?"

"So really, who knows? Maybe it was in Otherworld, and the windows were obscured to hide the fact. But really, it could be anything. Oh Jesse." She hugged me. "You took a big risk, assaulting a group that large. I'm glad you're back, and safe."

"So am I. I just wonder where the heck I actually went."

"We may never know. Please, for my own sanity, if one of those chain things shows up again, stay away from it!"

"I can't guarantee that. You really don't know how badly I want to kill kanaima. If offered the opportunity, how can I say no?"

"That's what it was *this* time, for sure. But can you say for certain it will be the same next time? Whoever did this knows you'll just blindly jump through hoops if they present something odd to us."

"I- huh. But the chain was there, I could have left without doing anything. It was my choice."

"And it will be there the next time too, or work if you don't do what they want, stranding you somewhere dangerous?"

"I... can't say that with certainty, you do have that right."

"At least promise me you won't go through alone. Pull it together with a team, or at least one other person. I don't assign solo missions for a reason, we need to stick together and cover each other."

"Fair enough. I won't go alone, you have my word."

"Thank you."

"Now let's get something to eat, I'm starving after all that."

Once I got to the office I went down to the shooting range to try out "Spin" and found it was some kind of burst fire weapon. When I pointed the end at the dummy I was shooting at (the target dummy, not Ananias) I destroyed it completely in two seconds. Of course, in a shooting range situation I could take my time to aim and it didn't have cover, so how I would fare using this mode out in the real world was a good question. Also I couldn't fire it more than once before it had to recharge, meaning I could *only* fire it once every few seconds, if I just held the trigger down until it was empty. (The complete recharge was slower, I mentioned that, right?) Fine if I was attacking something really big I wanted destroyed, but not so great for facing, say, six kanaima in an office building. Still, good to know what it could do. We counted 30 holes in the block I fired it at, so "spray and pray" was the order of the day with that mode, which Ananias explained.

"This seems to be the SMG mode," Ananias remarked after we finished counting the bullet holes in the concrete block I had fired at. "You started with pistol, got a shotgun mode, and now an SMG mode. I wonder what we'll see next?"

"You think there are more modes?"

"Sure, plenty of different types of guns still left for this one to emulate. All in one pistol sized package. Not bad, Jesse, not bad."

“I didn’t really have anything to do with it.”

When I got back to my desk I found I had a meeting request for 1:00 PM that afternoon, and it was just “Meeting with Moon’s Tooth” and no other explanation. I didn’t even know the moon had teeth, but I accepted it and wrote up my report on the experience I had in the motel and wherever I had gone. I headed to lunch, and when I got back went to the conference room that had been assigned for the meeting and went in. Gretchen was there along with a middle aged woman with short brown hair, conservatively dressed and looking quite nervous. They both got up when I entered the room.

“Ah, here she is, this is Jesse, the woman I think you’re going to want to talk to,” Gretchen told her. “Jesse, this is...” and here she rolled her eyes, “Moon’s Tooth.”

“Nice to meet you,” I struggled to say without snickering or sounding too sarcastic. “It’s an unusual name. French, is it?”

“No,” said the woman, taking my hand to shake it. “I know, it’s stupid, but those are the rules so...”

“You have to use a name that sounds like someone was trying to emulate a Native American name but forgot they were white and so should never have even thought of such a thing?”

She blinked a few times. “I mean when you put it like that... No. I’m a benandanti, a witch hunter charged by the Abbess to vanquish evil in the world. We use code names so that our enemies don’t find our waking bodies.”

“Huh. Uh. Found you?!”

“I know, I’m taking a risk but this is important.”

“Well, I’m here, sit down and tell me about it.”

“Of course.” We all sat. “Do you know anything about benandanti?”

“I’ve been reading through the various databases we have on the supernatural, but recalling specific facts about a specific group...”

“It’s fine. All you need to know is we fight evil, there are very few of us left, and we take animal forms when we sleep, to go out and fight witches at night.”

“Sounds exhausting.” *At least I get to be asleep when I train with Polaris in the astral.*

“We’re considered asleep. It works out. The reason I’m here is we need some help.”

“We the benandanti you work with?”

“That’s right. There’s only a few of us, and we have to cover a wide area, but we do what we can. Lately out in Colorado there’s been an uptick in activity since the death of one Robert Eniart, a radio personality. I have his wikipedia page here, I wasn’t sure how computer savvy you would all be.”

“As much as anyone born in the last twenty years I guess,” I admitted, taking it. “Oh, he died of-”

“Ignorance and superstition, yes,” she agreed. “Like many other “popular” conservative radio talk show hosts recently. A fact I try not to take too much pleasure in because the loss of any life is a tragedy but on the other hand...”

“Yes, I see what you mean. Anti-abortion, anti-compassion for victims of AIDS, convicted of child abuse, wonderful, his 60 days in jail didn’t change his ideals any, and anti-vax and anti-mask. Oh, had extra-marital affairs what a shock, married three times, of course. Died in September. What a peach of a man! He didn’t stand for anything but he was against so many things.”

“Indeed. We don’t want him back walking the earth, which is perhaps what is soon going to happen.”

I didn’t register exactly what she was saying, engrossed in this horrible, horrible man’s so called life, but then did a double take. “Wait, what?”

“It’s the reason I’m here. His body was recently dug up, which can mean only one thing. Someone is trying to return his soul to Earth.”

“You can do that?”

She nodded. "With some effort. You see, witches gain their power from demons, either promising their souls at death or agreeing to see to the demon's interests in this world. Naturally, a man that spreads this kind of hatred and hypocrisy of his own free will would be well rewarded by the dark powers in this world. Perhaps he made his own deal with them in the past, should he die that he would be returned to Earth. We can't know that for sure, but putting two and two together we're worried that a big ritual is going to happen very soon. So we need your help."

"My help, specifically?"

"If you're the person referenced in our attempts to divine the future. We can't do it ourselves, of course, but we work with various sorcerers and seers to augment what we do. When we learned witches were active in the area we kept a close eye on them, to see what they were up to. Naturally we could have simply disrupted their plan from the start, but then they just would have moved and maybe taken more precautions. We didn't want that. So they've been going out at night and corrupting a certain site we think is a lay line convergence. This will help with a dark ritual they no doubt wish to perform. With the site ready they dug up the body and we think tonight they'll try to reanimate it. Essentially, calling back the soul and binding it into the body, creating a revenant. It can then go back to what it was doing, spreading hatred and division between people."

"So you asked the universe who you should ask for help?"

"Given the seriousness of the sites' corruption and the number of witches involved we believed we had better get the most help we could. Of course we had been asking our contacts about the whole process, it's how we find out about sites and about the theft of the body. Our answer to the question of who can help us pointed us in this direction specifically." She slid another paper over to me, and it was hand written.

Hair of red, eyes of green, kills undead, those unseen.
Touched by those hands divine, protects two worlds 'cross time.
Take she whose aim is true, kanaima slew, shield of blue.

"That would seem to describe me," I admitted. *But what second world, across time, am I supposedly protecting? Was the motel thing even weirder than I thought?*

"It was the shield of blue that led us to Excellus of course," she explained. "It was perhaps divine intervention we found you, specifically."

"I'm not sure about that," Gretchen told her. "Word of you is spreading through the company, Jesse. This place has been a thorn in our side for years now, and the company is taking notice that something may finally crack this nut. It's no wonder anyone up on gossip would know of a new recruit that's making waves."

"However you want to think about it," Moon's Tooth told her. "But we didn't quite know what to believe. You've actually killed kanaima? I didn't think that was even possible, given they can just melt away at a moment's notice."

"I can hit them from within the bodies they've taken over. My weapon also has some connection to the astral, so I can wound them outside of bodies too. Using an artifact made for me to see lay lines myself, I can see their energy so I know where to shoot."

"Extraordinary. That would be of tremendous value in this case. I hope I can convince you to help us."

"How so? Do these witches use kanaima as well? If so when do we leave?"

"She, uh, has a history with them," Gretchen explained. "I guess she's declared war on them."

"Good for you! We know all about hopeless causes. But no, something similar though. To protect their sites, witches typically summon demons, who both physically manifest, and go hunting for normal people to posses and act out the ritual they're doing. So we never know who is a witch and who is just an innocent bystander."

So maybe it wasn't kanaima, but demons in those people? Same difference, just my satisfaction is marred by maybe it not being what I thought. I mean demons running around as humans is probably worse, especially in the middle east. So good was done in any case. I wonder if there's a way to tell by energy signature? I would have to look pretty closely though, I would imagine. "Ah, so you can't nuke the site from orbit, just to be sure."

She looked horrified. "Of course not! Not that we would even if we knew it was only witches. We don't kill, oh no, that totally goes against our teachings."

"So you have to fight evil witches, controlled or at least compelled to do evil by actual demons, and you can't fight back?"

"We can fight back, we just can't murder them. To say nothing of how it would look for the mortal authorities, women mauled in the woods by wolves that shouldn't exist in the area we operate in, we would be killers. Wanted men and women no better than those we oppose!"

Hard to prove it was you, though, if you were in bed asleep at the time. "I see what you mean by hopeless causes."

"It's a point of contention, especially among the younger members, who despair of ever seeing the end of this mission. But we must maintain the discipline of our order, and not kill if it can be avoided."

I get it. I was relieved I didn't have to kill Archie when he was possessed, because I knew the gun would only hit the kanaima within. But these guys seem a little too pacifist. "So I could tell which people were possessed, kill the demons inside, and you take care of the witches?"

"Yes, we would ask you not attack any witches, or wound only. It would be a great help to us if you could come with us."

"Boss?"

"The order is known to us," she admitted. "And the cause is just. She's refused a squad of Blue Cross personnel, she's afraid we would just go in shooting. Which, admittedly, we might. We non-humans take a dim view of humans seeking magical power from demons, who make our lives miserable the most because less and less humans believe in such things. That suits them just fine. But we know, and we see the violence in the world as stemming from one source."

"Humans would do just fine on their own in that regard," Moon's Tooth insisted.

"You may be right, but at least we would then know it was just them being awful on their own. Not knowing if someone hates you because they genuinely believe in that cause or they are just acting that way because they are possessed or otherwise working for demons is far worse. In any case, it's your decision. Balance their need against ours, you may be the only one who can help around here. If you get hurt there, I mean you've already almost died once."

"Yes, that's a good point. She may have refused help, but I wouldn't. Could you get in contact with my knight in shining armor? Something tells me he wouldn't refuse a calling like this."

"Oh, looked into him, eh?"

"Of course! A man, probably a non-human unless I miss my guess, flying around at night doing good deeds for people and stopping crime? And he doesn't kill people either, he seems to have a shotgun and keeps it loaded with non-lethal rounds. Excellus seems to have a file on him, but it was above my clearance level a thing I didn't even know we had, so clearly someone knows more about him than we're letting on. At least ask him, he had no problem killing that one demon that was about to kill Archie and me. If he (or she of course) says no then maybe Archie and Emmett will just "happen" to be in the area if I asked them nicely. You did say no more solo missions, right? I would be with the benandanti but I have to assume you would feel better if I had some people from this place at my side at the time."

"That's true, I would."

"So you'll help?" Moon's Tooth asked, hope beginning to shine in her face.

“Herman would say, with great power comes great responsibility. Yes, I’ll help. I have this power for a reason, and this is it. Just tell me where to be.”

“Thank you.” I felt her gratitude, it wasn’t faked, she really did feel greatly relieved. “This is going to make my whole team breathe a lot easier. Can you get us back?” she asked Gretchen. “Flying back isn’t going to be an option, we have to hurry.”

“We can get you where you need to go,” she agreed. “I have some calls to make, why not show her the cafeteria and I’ll see what our armored friend has to say about all this.”

“Thanks, Gretchen,” I told her. “Come on, Moon’s Tooth, you can tell me more about your order in the meantime.” We got up.

“Of course! We were founded in Italy in...”

Chapter 16

I help beat up some witches

Where: Colorado

When: That night

And that's how I found myself hiding behind a barn somewhere in Colorado that night. The sky was clear, and the site would be lit up because the witches were still human and needed light to see by. But as the sun had gone down hours ago it was still fairly dark to my eyes. Clustered around me were two wolves, Moon's Tooth and Nightfang. Yes, I sensed a theme there. With them had come two other animals, a raven named Darter and what appeared to be a cheetah named Softpaws.

"Not swift legs or bites you and then vanishes or something like that?" I asked them.

"Mock our ways all you want," they growled. "It keeps us safe."

Is that why there are so many of you, I wisely didn't ask in retort. *Because you've been kept safe?* Nor did I say things like "who is going to find you from just a first name?" or "how did you pick those names, putting the worst suggestions into a hat and choosing at random?" I'm a people person! At my side was the hulking (figuratively, as they weren't all that tall) figure in armor that insisted upon being called Iron Man. I hoped all this naming nonsense wasn't going to rub off on me and soon I would start insisting people call me Morphgun or Lady Shootsalot. Now "Director Faden" had a nice ring to it, that I wouldn't mind. The Iron Man suit itself was fairly impressive, I had to admit, looking at it up close. It reminded me of a carefully crafted hammer, from a similar movie franchise. Could the one have been made by the same guy as the other? It was possible, the guy in armor, who sounded very familiar when they introduced themselves and I thanked them for before, had released a very familiar looking drone a moment ago to scout the area.

"Must be a popular model," I remarked as it took off.

"Oh, it is," they assured me. "It folds down nicely that's why. Good camera, fairly quiet, you know."

"Sure. I should look into getting myself one, if software ever allows it to be as autonomous as the ones I've been seeing lately. I wouldn't mind a cute little hovering companion to talk to."

"I'm sure it won't be long!"

"Uh huh."

The reason we were hiding behind a barn is because it was the only cover for miles. At least from what I could tell, this place was as flat as could be. It was fairly cold but it hadn't snowed so the ground was clear and we wouldn't have that slowing us down on the approach. But these witches doing the ritual out in the middle of a field somewhere, that was going to be a problem.

"You're going to be the problem," Moon's Tooth said to me.

"What?"

"The three of us are fairly low to the ground, and while they'll be watching for animals because witches are evil, not stupid, we can probably creep up on them. Iron Man here can fly, as can Darter. That just leaves you. There's no cover here, they'll see you coming for miles."

"I can fly too, you know," I told her petulantly. "I'm just not that elegant at it. I'll tag along with Iron Man."

"I stand corrected. I guess we have our battle plan. Anything yet, Iron Man?"

"The drone is moving towards what seems to be a fire in the distance. Stand by."

"Hold on, we have our approach plan," I protested. "That's not a battle plan!"

"I should have thought that was obvious," Nightfang told me. "We each do what we were brought here to do. The four of us will keep the witches and demons from doing any magic, and do what we can do disrupt the circle. You shoot anyone that seems to be possessed, and Iron Man shoots any demons that are wandering around."

"I only have lethal shot loaded," he told us. "So I'm trusting you to handle any humans there. I can knock them out of course but that brings up a good point. How are we handling our inevitable triumph?"

"We get Shawarma after?" I joked.

He laughed "Not a bad idea! Glad to see you've had some exposure to culture." *Have I though? Is that what that is?* "I'm talking about prisoners. You don't want them killed but are they just going to give up and leave? And do we let them?"

"If they teleport away, that's fine," Softpaws agreed. "Remember, more than likely these witches owe their souls at death to a demon. They'll be in no hurry to be collected, so if their guards are gone and we've got the area locked down, they'll surrender. We'll let them go, without the body of course. That we'll have to bring back with us, and burn it properly."

"So they won't fight that hard?"

"They'll use magic against us, of course. But no, once we have the upper hand witches typically accept it. It's an old game we're playing."

"Fair enough."

Something was nagging me about what the cheetah had said, but I couldn't put my finger on it. "Now that sounds more like a plan," I told them.

"I have the site in sight," Iron Man told us. "They are clearly doing a ritual, and there is a body of some kind in the center of the circle."

Does the body have veins in vain? Will these witches reign until it rains? Is this the tail end of their tale?

He went on. "Head that way, or better yet I'll keep my speed down so you can follow us. We'll fly above and drop down once you reveal yourselves."

"Right. Good luck, and may the Abbess be with us this night," Moon's Tooth told us.

"May the Abbess be with us," the others repeated.

Herman rose into the air so I followed.

We basically hovered over the fields, Iron Man was keeping his speed down so the others could track him, and I appreciated it too as I didn't know how fast I could really go. I saw a fire of some kind far below us, and Iron Man swore.

"What is it?" I asked. *Has this mission gone south before it even begins? Wait, is saying something is going south racist?*

"I'm looking at them magnified, they seem to have shotguns."

"Ah ha!" *There it is! That's the thing I couldn't put my finger on before. They're all assuming these witches will just use magic exclusively, but why would they? I'm not. Sorta.*

"We have to come up with a new plan, somehow call this off. Aarg, this is why I shouldn't work with people that can't hold a cell phone, how are we going to tell the benandanti?"

"I don't think we can. I'm going to try something, you better cover me."

"What?"

"No time, the wolves could attack at any moment." I turned my power from holding me up to forcing me down, and the ground rushed up at me at an alarming speed. *Have to time this just right, and hope my aim is good. Polaris, if you can help, I'd appreciate not dying!* I screamed out of the air and at the last second as I did the three point "superhero landing" (*that's what it's called, right?*) I did something, I'm not even sure if I can explain what, but I cushioned my fall and at the same time, sent a wave of power out in a circle around me. As all the witches were in a circle around me they all went flying. *Thanks!* The gun was in my hand again as I stood up. The candles were knocked over, they had gone flying, so the site was pretty messed up. I quickly looked around, seeking a target. There were indeed lay lines here, I was standing about at the convergence of them, having missed the body of the man that was lying there which given the state of the place at this point probably would have been very

messy. I spotted where the witches had fallen, but giving each a quick glance I realized, *wait a second, none of them seem to be possessed at all. They each only have one energy signature apiece.* There was, however, a surprised looking demon that had whirled around that was right in front of me, and as I had as much love for their kind as I did kanaima I raised my gun and put 6 shots into him. Pretty sure I only grazed him twice.

I felt heat at my side and looked right, a demon was gesturing at me and I was about to dodge clear but I saw a bird flying by and it fizzled. I figured I was in the clear, I had the benandanti covering me, which is when the universe said “na uh honey, I’m not letting you get away with arrogance like that,” and a fireball engulfed me from behind. My hair caught fire, which isn’t the best situation to be in, and in my panic I wondered if there wasn’t something I should be doing about that. What was the saying? I couldn’t recall.

“Jesse!” cried Herman, I mean Iron Man, who landed next to me. He grabbed up the wrapping the dead guy was enjoying, and started wrapping me in it to smother the flames. This worked pretty well, so I wasn’t on fire anymore at least.

“Thanks,” I told him.

“You okay?”

“Not really, but I think the fire is out.”

“Better take care of this quickly then.” He grabbed up his shotgun and fired off a quick round, at least I thought he did, the gun didn’t make any noise as he did it.

“Are you all right, master?” I heard someone say.

“Yes, yes, kill them!”

“But they aren’t benandanti!”

“Never mind that! Where is my gun?”

“Here, master.”

“Fine.” My eyes widened as it slid easily into the witch’s hand, and she pulled the trigger with it pointed in my direction. Nothing happened. “What? Oh, the safety must have gotten smacked. Unbelievable.”

I couldn’t have her shooting me, and my head felt like it had just been on fire, so I just tried to shove her with magic. That worked, throwing both her and the demon behind her back in a tangle of limbs. *Whew.*

“I’ve done what I can for you Jesse,” said a voice below me. *Oh, there’s a wolf. That’s nice.* It bounded off towards a demon.

Meanwhile Herman shot the demon again, which I noticed was now twice as big as it was before, but again it didn’t go down.

“We are not your enemies,” one of the witches shouted. “Fight for us, man in armor!”

“No thanks,” Iron Man said back to her.

Oh sure, he gets the kind of magic you can just shake off. But I get the fireball to the face. Where’s the justice, I ask you?

Looking around for something to do I spotted a witch looking at the ground where her shotgun was, and helpfully threw it to her. She dodged it as it sailed past, so at least she wasn’t getting a hold of it any time soon. *I’m helping!*

Herman it seemed finally had a bead on the demon, shifting his shotgun slightly and pulling the trigger again. The demon vanished. “Finally,” he muttered.

I saw the two I had thrown making their way back, so I told my gun “spin” and pulled the trigger in their direction, hoping for the best. They threw themselves to the ground while my gun barrel spun as I unloaded on them.

“Good, keep them pinned down!” Herman shouted at me. He stepped to the side where a wolf, I wasn’t sure which one, was snapping at a witch. She went down in a heap as he bonked her on the head.

There was another burst of fire from in front of me, but the cheetah dodged it. *You go, girl or boy, whatever you are.*

Herman took to the air, heading for the demon fighting the cheetah.

“I don’t think we’re going to win this!” shouted the witch in front of me.

“No, you think?” shouted back the one that was pinned by Spin.

“Do we retreat?”

“Not until all the demons are gone!”

Oh, is that an invitation? My gun ran out, so I needed to wait until it reloaded, but it seemed there was only one demon left, and three witches standing. We could win, they looked pretty beat up.

And that’s when Iron Man came down on the last demon like a ton of bricks. He tried to roll out of the way but didn’t manage it, so a knee was driven right into his arm. Iron Man followed it up with two quick punches, both to the head, and it vanished. He stood over the one witch that was right next to him. “The benandanti don’t want me to kill you,” he told her. “But I’m not feeling especially generous tonight. What do you think about that?”

“We’ll leave,” she said in a panic. “Please, don’t hurt me!”

“Not good enough,” he told her. “How about you all come with me, and we try to get you away from this demon that’s got a hold over you?”

“What?” She stared up at him. “You’re crazy, it can’t be done. We pledged ourselves willingly, there’s no going back.”

“She’s right,” said the wolf. “There’s never been a recorded case of that.”

“Maybe no one ever tried hard enough?”

“It’s not really a question of trying...”

“Anyway, get over here, you two. I want you were I can see you.” He pulled his shotgun back out and gestured to her. The other two came over, looking sullen. The other three, I noticed, hadn’t gotten up or had gotten up and knocked back down again, after my little display.

“So what do we do with them?” he asked the wolf. “And where did the others go? So help me girls if you’ve killed them...”

“Teleportus!” all three shouted when they were next to each other. All of the witches vanished.

“Crap! That’s that, I guess. I still want to know where the others are.”

“Hopefully they either were hurt and woke up, or someone used spellbreaking to force them back into their bodies. I won’t know until I can call them.”

The cheetah came up to us. “I guess we better get started purifying the site.”

“Hold on there, bucko,” Herman told them. “I seem to recall a few, oh this will be easy and they’ll just run from you a little while ago. What was that?”

“They seem to be getting more serious,” the cheetah answered. “They’ve never used guns before. Good move, that slam thing you did Jesse. Uh, Jesse, are you okay? Your face seems a bit crispy.”

“My hair is all burnt off!” I had been trying to feel it, and I still had some, but my beautiful hair was now all burnt up and I was pretty pissed about it, actually. *Fire bad. What’s with fire getting all up in my grill lately? Man, I could go for some barque, what smells like pork?*

“I did a healing spell,” claimed the wolf, “but it’ll still be hours before she’s back to normal. She took a fireball to the face.”

“Yeah I did,” I agreed. “Where you you, oh, we’ll handle the witches!?”

“Sorry, that one got past me,” the wolf admitted. “You’ll be fine. We managed somehow, I counted six demons, they each must have summoned one. No decoys this time. They really wanted us dead. Was this some kind of trap for us? We’ll have to warn the others the game may have changed...” She looked down, deep in thought no doubt.

I blinked at her. “What were we talking about? My hair is all messed up, did you notice that?”

“Okay, we’re getting her back to Excellus so a doctor can look her over. How long do you need for this purification or whatever?” Iron Man asked.

“Not too long, let’s get started.”

“Fine, hurry it up.”

The two did magic, cleaning the site up of whatever dark energies the witches had polluted it with, Iron Man grabbed the dead guy, now wrapped again in the slightly smoldering cloth while I held the guns. This was an important job, and I was glad to be the one to do it. I wouldn’t drop a single one of them, no sir! I was worthwhile, you know? Not like that wolf that didn’t even have... they didn’t have something. Wings? No, no wolf had wings. Thumbs! That was it. Didn’t have thumbs. Stupid, to not have thumbs when you had thumbs most of the time anyway. *Why turn into an animal, that’s so limited, when you could do the same job as a human and hold something, like a gun? They have no offensive magic, you wouldn’t catch me running around as a wolf even if I could do it asleep. Just seems like a step backwards to me.*

We stepped back through a portal that had come from somewhere, and Iron Man took me to the infirmary, where someone checked me over, gave me some stuff to drink, and put me to bed. I heard him and another person, maybe Gretchen, talking about what happened.

“It’s my horsey!” I suddenly said, realizing someone was holding my hand.

“They really did a number on you this time, didn’t they?” Archie asked.

“I’ll be fine!” I assured him. My head had been all bandaged up, so I probably looked terrible. “I’m feeling better already.”

“Just get some sleep,” he told me. “You did good tonight, but you are some kinda trouble magnet, aren’t you? Getting hurt all the time, we need to do something about that.”

“A big old bubble suit? Asbestos underwear, oh, oh, asbestos lingerie.”

He barked a laugh. “That’s one option. How did this happen anyway?”

“They cheated. A big open field with no cover, and they had guns, and demons were there. I hate demons! I didn’t even get to shoot that many of them.”

“Next time.”

“Promise?”

“I promise. Now get some sleep.”

“Fine.”

So I did.

“You know,” said Polaris, “you really need to be more careful on these missions.”

I looked around, I was standing on a single platform, floating in the astral. Polaris was there, floating before me. “Yes, I’m fine, thanks for asking.”

“I know you are. But you keep cutting it too close. You’ve been lucky so far, I admit, but you got pretty badly hurt, again.”

“What would you suggest? There were twelve of them and only six of us. I think we did pretty good, assuming those two benandanti didn’t die. It’s this magic business, there’s no warning or anything, just *poof* fireball. How am I supposed to deal with that? The others may be able to sense magic coming but I can’t, I’m just a person.”

“I’m not sure. I cannot show you the future, only share my own interpretation of things such as feelings and the presence of people. Nor can I sense magic, I’m as limited as you in that sense. I don’t mean to be preachy I’m just worried about you. There’s the two of us in here, you know?”

I chuckled. “I know. Look, I’ll go talk to Herman again. Maybe that shield ring is good enough. I don’t need to be Supergirl but having some resistance to damage would probably go a long way.”

“Even just resistance to fire would be a start, the problem there is you got electrocuted that one time.”

“Don’t remind me, I still taste copper in my mouth all the time.”

“Just try to stay safe, all right?”

“I’m doing my best out here, Polaris. I’ll talk to him, see what we can come up with.”

“I know. Get some rest, no training tonight.”

Chapter 17

I try to figure out how to stop getting burned

Where: Office conference room

When: Five days later

When I woke up the next morning I was not feeling better, and according to the nurse there the magical healing done for me by Moon's Tooth was the slowest kind possible. She saw how hurt I was, and didn't want to chance her healing not working or have the opposite effect, making things worse. Even the slowest "fast" healing was worlds better than I would have done normally, it might have been a month of bandages for me otherwise I had been that badly burned. In fact I learned a lot about burns that day, like the reason I hadn't felt it at the time. Burns that are that bad damage the nerves so you don't even get the pain signal anymore. I really must have been a fright to look at, and was very relieved that magical healing didn't scar. There wasn't anything they could do for me, competing magics didn't work out so well, so they couldn't accelerate it any more. Since I was awake they could give me some instructions and free up the bed though, so that's what they planned to do. I could lay around at home just as well, which I would have agreed with, had I had one to lay around. But they got ready to discharge me, and told me not to remove the bandages they had wrapped around me for at least the next two days.

"You know I don't have a home," I told the nurse. "It burned down."

"Do you need a place to stay? Wait, did you get those burns then? I thought it was from an altercation with witches!"

"It was. The house thing was before. I'm staying with someone."

"Well, wherever you go, don't remove the bandages."

"Okay." *I hope Gretchen will give me a ride there now. I really hate this.*

Before we left work on Friday, the 24th, the nurse said I was in the clear, the healing was proceeding exactly as expected. I could safely remove the bandages the next morning, which was a nice little gift for me. My hair, she said, would still a fright, apparently that didn't grow back like my skin, which was fair. How would it know when to stop? So I would have to get it cut and evened out, leaving me with shockingly short hair. At least for me. *So I get to go to the Christmas party looking like a two year old took a scissors to my hair but not like a mummy. I guess I have to take what I can get.* The morning arrived, I unwrapped myself and found to my relief I looked completely normal, and as promised my new friends hosted a Christmas Dinner for me, a big one. (Teleportation magic making this fairly easy to pull off) All of their friends and family came, most of them meeting for the first time and rallying around me, and I managed to hold it together despite being a bit overwhelmed by the support I felt from people I had never met. I was a bit mortified, looking as I did and not really having anything nice to wear, but Archie said everyone had been told what I had been through and not to worry about it. They knew life's ups and downs, Gretchen's parents for example were more than five hundred years old! (Given the "modern" Christmas celebration began only after Charles Dickens wrote A Christmas Carol in 1843 they were old school in ways I couldn't begin to imagine.) But they knew feasts, and we had one. They told stories about the hardships they had gone through in the last half a century, the others chiming in with stories of their own. I did have to admit, even being as down on my luck as I was, living in the modern world afforded me certain advantages. I mean at least any water I drank probably wouldn't make me sick, just to quote one "minor" example. By the time the night was over I knew a dozen new people, all who had their own specialties and told me "if you ever need X just give me a call."

Oh, and they collectively bought me a car.

It was an older electric model, one that didn't have a very good range, but Herman said he had been working on enchanting the battery like in his own vehicle, it would never run out of power. So

who cared what the original range was? I would never have to worry about it, plugging it in or spending money on gas. Those savings would add up over the years, I was pretty sure. They also got me smaller stuff of course, but the car was huge. With my own vehicle, and no car payment to boot, I could maybe find an apartment to rent and start getting some semblance of my life back. I must have thanked them a hundred times, finally they would hear no more. The party wound down early on the morning of the 26th, and I staggered to bed, exhausted.

It was now Monday the 27th, the holidays were winding down and 2021 was as well. I had manged the whole weekend to not think about this meeting, I had no idea how it was going to go but we had sort of squeaked out a victory so she couldn't be too salty about it, right? Gretchen said she wanted to meet though, I just hoped it wasn't going to be news of two funerals I needed to attend.

"Glad to see you up and about," Moon's Tooth said after we sat down.

"How did the others fare?" I asked her, figuring I might as well get the worst out of the way quickly. But I shouldn't have worried.

"They were forced back to their bodies with magic. Apparently the witches simply wanted to kill us, not resurrect anyone, but when we showed up with you and you bowled them over they decided to thin the herd and take what they could get. Which was us two that were left, but they didn't even accomplish that, thank God. On the other hand all the witches at that site got away too, so I guess you could say we didn't win or lose. Before I forget, I did want to formally extend my apologies both to you and the Excellus company. We did not foresee that situation, where they simply tried to kill us. We gave you incorrect intel, and you suffered for it. That's on us."

That's wonderful news! So then what's this meeting about, exactly? Just to apologize? I'm not holding a grudge against them... Much.

"Yes, Jesse here nearly lost her life in your little game," Gretchen told her. "That speaks of carelessness on your part, something I wouldn't have expected from such a respected group."

Wow, twist the knife in a little more, Gretchen. But I did kinda almost die, so she's not wrong.

"It was, in a way," she admitted, looking down. "But at the same time the situation should have been something we've dealt with many times before. It's an unspoken agreement we have with witches over a long tradition. We don't try to kill them, but if we can disrupt their plans they'll retreat peacefully. We can block their magic so typically just delaying their ritual or breaking their circle is good enough. And there may be a demon or two around, but they're hard to control so each one having their own summon is unheard of. Maybe a greater demon ordered them to cooperate? And then the whole guns thing, it's just..."

I was a bit confused. I felt a great sadness in her, like she was struggling not to break down, but it didn't make sense. We had gotten away. The witches knew the score now, and could prepare better for next time. That seemed like a win to me. Unless... "Something else happened that night, didn't it? Something you haven't told us?"

"Yes, how did- never mind. That wasn't the only site. We lost some good people that night, all around the world. Witches seemed to be doing normal witch things, but they turned out to be elaborate traps meant to kill us. As there are so few of us, we suffered a pretty horrible loss all around."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thank you. It would have been us too, had you not been there. We were totally unprepared. All of us were. All four of us owe you our lives."

I wasn't sure how to respond, so there was an awkward silence. Gretchen spoke up.

"It seems the world is getting to be a more dangerous place. Maybe demons just now woke up to the fact guns exist, and decided to try arming their followers a little better. Sadly this seems to have proven effective. What are the benandanti's plans now? Can you tell me?"

"They'll try again, you're right about that," she admitted. "But we can't turn aside from our calling. We're still reeling from the loss, we need to elect new leaders and come to some decision about

our next move. On the one hand we can't ignore any site, what if we hadn't gone there and they did actually raise that radio guy from the dead? But on the other we can't combine our resources and overwhelm half the number of sites, say, to stay safe. Send eight to one site instead of four to two sites. They'll regroup, figure out some new mischief, and again do several things all in one night. So honestly I don't know."

"I can send an appeal to the main office, we're rather specialized here and have a small team to begin with, I can't really off you any long term help. But maybe Excellus at large can offer you some manpower for the immediate future."

"This isn't your problem though," she protested. "We have a holy mission!"

"That, not to be insensitive, is now in danger of failing completely. Yes, Blue Cross and Blue Shield have their own missions, but there is some overlap with what you do. Helping you is helping ourselves, if you're all taken out in the long run it would fall to us anyway. We're the next in line for who witches would target, as we are against what they stand for. If witches are going to start escalating their efforts you need to show you can be flexible too. Accept help. Show them force will be met with force."

"You're talking about killing them."

"The rules of your little game have clearly changed. It is difficult to hold magic users, I admit, but not impossible. If something doesn't change, they'll know they've got you and step up their efforts even more. It must be considered. Even just at first, until they back off and say 'okay, we'll go back to the old ways' and then actually do it."

"I admit, something will have to be done. Anyway, I said what I came here to say, what we do is internal politics and I can't even say what direction we'll go in. I should go. Jesse, thank you for your help, and thank Iron Man for me as well, when next you see him. And again you have my apologies. Both for the mission and for letting that fireball get past us. I... hesitate to ask more..."

I looked at her. She felt wretched, there was no hiding that from Polaris. Bitter, and frustrated, and sad, and terrified, and angry. Three days ago she thought she was in control of her little part of the world, and had been rather rudely awakened to discover she wasn't. I could relate. I could hardly help myself, but could I deny her any help I could give? *Who does that make me if I do? Someone I'd want to see in the mirror every day?* "Go ahead."

"If the fates suggest you will be key to our survival in the future may we call upon you again?"

"I'm happy to do what I can. I'm going to be looking into some protection on my own as well, so hopefully I'll be of more help next time."

"That slam move you did really did save us, you know. Making them go flying and lose their guns made that whole thing manageable." Her sense of relief was clear, like she was shouting "she doesn't hate us!" to the stars. I almost smiled, feeling it, but trying to explain that smile would have been tricky. "Thank you, I was afraid you would just turn us down after what happened. You're... A good woman, Jesse." She stood up. "My name is Sarah. Sarah Bently. I've left my contact information with Gretchen, please call upon us if we can ever help you in some way."

We both stood up too, and I hugged her. "Thank you for that, I know that wasn't easy, Sarah. I'm sorry about your people, I hope you figure it out." *She broke her own rules for me. If I hadn't felt what she was feeling, I would know just from that. I'm like an honorary member of her group now, aren't I?*

"Thanks. Good luck on your mission too."

"We're all just trying to protect our world, huh?"

"We sure are. Gretchen, thank you for setting this meeting up."

"Of course. I'll show you out."

They left.

So they suffered losses. And I could have been one of them. Was she telling the truth? Have witches up until now held to this “treaty” of simply trying to outsmart the opposition rather than outright kill them? In order to not be killed themselves and be claimed by the demon they sold their souls to? Something’s changed. With all the division in the world lately, even just here in this country, it seems too coincidental to be chance. That whole thing with the election, and this virus going around, and people waking up to the fact police aren’t so much protecting them as working against them. And the economy, and shortages of everything, and yet there are guns everywhere. If this is some master plan it’s working great, and we need to be ready. Let’s go find Herman.

“Hey, you recovered after the party!” he greeted me. “How’s the car working out?”

“Great, thanks. Drove Gretchen here today, may as well not buy gas if we don’t need to. It’s weird seeing 100% power the whole time. I like it.”

“Glad to hear it. What can I do for you then?”

“I’ve come to discuss what can be done about making sure I don’t take any more fireballs to the face.”

“Sure, sure, you know I’m happy to make you anything magic can do, I just wonder if that’s the best course of action for you.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“It could become a crutch, you know. I made my shield ring,” he held up his hand, “because I didn’t have the opportunity you did to train in actual combat maneuvers. I needed this just to even the score. You have that opportunity.”

“Herman, just being a slightly better shot wouldn’t have helped me there. It was two to one, in their favor. Now maybe if you could make me move as fast as the Flash or something...”

He shook his head. “First of all, that’s DC not Marvel. Secondly, your gun takes time to shoot the bullets out, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So even if you were fast enough to have your opponents seem like they were standing still, your gun would take the same amount of time to shoot. You would be waiting around between shots because the gun isn’t moving as fast as you would be.”

“True. I guess he just punches stuff, or runs around it?”

“I wouldn’t know, DC remember.”

“You don’t watch any- never mind. The point is, okay, Marvel, right? I’ll put it in terms you can understand. You have the movies around somewhere, right?”

His eyebrows went down and he crossed his arms across his chest. “Do I have the movies around somewhere? Who do you think you’re talking to?”

“That’s what I thought. Okay, the scene with Natasha, I forget which movie it was, she was with some regular guy and they were breaking into someplace. He took like the whole fight to lay out one guy-”

“Iron Man 2, timecode one hour, forty one minutes, fifty four seconds,” the laptop said. The screen changed to show the movie. “Shall I play the scene?”

“Please do.” *Uh huh, who exactly is behind this laptop anyway? Something smart enough to run an armor, perhaps? He said ‘her’ name was Meowvis, a clear take on “Jarvis” so am I actually talking to an AI he came up with? Is that possible with magic? Technology disrupts magic but what if it doesn’t for everyone? Like this guy? What could he accomplish in that case?*

We watched as Happy went first into the building and as Natasha headed inside, beating up eleven men, he finally knocked out the first. “Okay, so Happy here represents reality,” I explained. “That is exactly how that fight would go. Boxing exists, after all. Two men can bash each other in the face for minutes on end until finally one goes down. Stupid sport, but there you have it. It isn’t one punch, man, and the fight is over. Natasha here represents fantasy, or I guess the will of the writers. She

just does some cool looking spin moves, taking two guys out at once and they just stay down after being hit once. She moves to the next, and the next, and the next, no one person taking more than one move to take out. Sure, she's better trained and everything but you're telling me these eleven people didn't have a stun gun, or a real gun for that matter, between them? Really? They just let this one woman stomp all over them? No one just shot her, grabbed her, tripped her? Flying armor, and infinity stones, and magic, that I can accept just fine. But this is the least believable scene in the whole movie. It's the same for me out here. I'm not Natasha, not the invincible version we see on screen. No amount of training will allow me to do what she did, people just don't go down that easily, nor will they just run up to you to be picked off. They'll throw stuff at you, like, you know, fireballs? Or gang up on you, like why didn't the last four guys stick together? I need something to negate that, because that's what keeps messing me up. Fireballs just going off out of nowhere and turning me into fried chicken."

"The shield ring could do the job."

"You don't sound so sure," I pressed, suspicious now. "How does it work?"

"Basically the protection magic it creates absorbs a certain amount of damage and drops. It resets at sunrise, and can take that amount of damage again. It's good for one fight only, in other words, unless you don't get hit a lot in the first fight. I don't know, an explosion of fire might just take it out. I've never really tested its limits because, wait, I'm inside it. It may save you once but not twice."

"That's a good point. Is it just against physical forces or if you stuck a fork in an electric socket," *never do this kids*, "would it stand up to that too?" *I did get electrocuted that one time, after all.*

"Never tried it."

"Great." I put my face in my hands. *I'm going to be fried chicken forever.*

"Sorry, I don't get into many scrapes. Not like you have these past few weeks. It helped me fight off a werewolf, he would have cut me to shreds without it, but he wasn't using magic. So I don't know how it would react to every type of magic out there. You're not a brawler like I would be, you fight different things. So your item should reflect your style."

"Can we test it anyway, see how it stands up? I need some starting point after all."

"Test it." He regarded me seriously. "You mean fireball me?"

I made a tiny space between my two fingers. "Just a little one. I need to know if it's going to be worth it before I have you put a whole bunch of effort into it! You'll heal, right?"

"I suppose. But maybe ask Gretchen to ask the universe about how it would fare instead of potentially blowing my arm off?"

"Oh." I hadn't considered that. "I mean I guess if she agrees."

We headed up to her office and explained what I wanted to do, and she agreed asking first was probably the way to go. She concentrated for a moment, then wrote something down and handed it to us.

The most minor magic won't make a dent, just like a cannon ball hits and is spent.

But put in some effort and I think you will find, this ring of his won't be what you have in mind.

"Okay, what does that mean?" I asked, reading it over.

"I don't know about your ability to move things at a distance," she explained, "but any magic we do comes from within to a certain extent. It's willpower. If I want to move a puddle out of the way, I can do that without a lot of mental effort. But when I moved all that water back in the cave? That took a part of my mental reserve. I wouldn't be able to keep it up. Or take attacking with air, for instance. I could make a blade of air without effort that could cut through a rope no problem. But cutting through steel? That would take a serious mental effort. I could only do that a few times before I was mentally

exhausted. Once that happened, doing more magic would be potentially dangerous for me, or I could even pass out!”

“Huh, I guess you’re right, I never thought of it in those terms before.” I read the thing over again. “So if someone threw a lazy fireball at Herman it would bounce off his barrier and not hurt him. Same with a cannon ball, I guess? But if the spellcaster put effort into making the spell specifically to cause as much damage as possible, then he’s no more protected with it than without it.”

“That’s how I read it,” Herman told us. “Good to know. Stay out of the way of elemental magic, is what I’m hearing.”

“I have to assume demons and witches put effort into their magic,” I mused. “I still would have ended up in the hospital with my face half burned off.”

“Any protection type magic is going to work the same way,” Gretchen mused. “Making you tougher, kinetically bouncing things back, it’s true even the most novice of magic users can call up fire hot enough to melt tank armor. It’s trying to knock a single leaf off a tree instead of every leaf that takes practice. *Of course* when you’re attacking something, unless a friend is right there, the attacker goes as big and as hot as possible. Nobody practices taking leaves off of trees, who needs that kind of precision? So yeah, I see why you keep getting fireballed, it’s efficient.”

“Then we’re going about it all wrong,” I decided. “What about making me faster? Not physically faster, I mean allowing me to react faster. Let’s go down and try something, I think I can make myself faster on my own. Thanks Gretchen, I’ll let you know what we come up with.”

“I’d be interested, to see if more can be made for our field agents.”

“Right.” *Though it’s odd they haven’t thought about this before and had a standard defensive item that teams in the field are assigned. Of course, most everyone here is non-human, and so has their own defensive magic and heals a lot faster than a human does. Also they’re able to sense magic coming and have for example in the case of Gretchen three hundred years of combat experience. I said I could never do what Natasha did, but someone training for a hundred years? No doubt they could!* We headed down to the obstacle course I ran with Ananias in our training sessions, I wanted a wide open area which there was one in the front. I loosened up and thought about what I wanted to do. *There must be something he can throw at me around here, I’m not dodging his hammer.* I rooted around the boxes of stuff and came up with something. “Here, throw these fake knives at me.” I handed Herman a handful of plastic knives that were used in hand to hand combat. I didn’t really take those classes, I could push people away and shoot them. Plus I figured I had enough on my plate, training with the pistol. And as we saw it was magic that messed me up anyway, not people stabbing me. Once I could hit what I was shooting at every time, then maybe we could worry about me getting rushed. It’s not like I would ever be without the gun.

“Okay,” he said doubtfully.

“Just trust me, I want to see if something will work.” I stepped back a few paces.

“Here comes one.” He tossed it, and I focused on my movement power. I didn’t turn it upwards though, I turned it to where I figured the knife wasn’t going to be. I went two meters to the side, stumbled a bit, but caught myself.

“Hey, how did you do that? That was fast!”

“Again! Quicker this time!”

He threw the knives, five in all, and while he certainly wasn’t going to be doing any knife throwing on America’s Got Talent (is that show still going on?) it gave me something to focus on. I was able to use my movement ability to “push” myself from side to side, going between two and three meters every time. It was a little disorienting, suddenly being in a different spot, but I hoped practice might get me used to it. I went back over to him after I picked the knives up. “So that seems to work.”

“You’re using your movement power on yourself.”

“Right.” *It’s something that was mentioned to me, by Polaris I think, way back when I first spoke to her. She wanted me to practice it that first night, but my control was lacking, remember the*

cubes I was tossing around? That and jumping across wide gaps by boosting myself over them. We never got around to it because I was focused on throwing stuff where it needed to go, and going back and forth with the gun and the movement power. I have the control now, at least not to go flying myself, but she did tell me I could do this. I just needed to listen to her! “If you can make me something to enhance my natural reflexes, or put me into some kind of “battle time” if I happened to be in danger of getting hit by something, I could do this sort of dodge and get away from it. What do you think?”

“I can manage something, I’ll look into what’s best from a magical standpoint. I can see this being better than the shield ring in some ways because it’s something you’re already good at, movement magic. But you could still be taken by surprise.”

“Not if you do your job right.”

“I suppose. If you had better reflexes maybe you wouldn’t be taken by surprise anymore. Maybe you could shoot faster, too. Hard to say- no, easy to say. We could probably find someone around here that could do that spell and let you try that out.”

“Let’s go ask around and you can get to work! Er, the company is paying you, right? You may recall my house burned down not long ago? I’m basically broke because of student loans and such?”

“I can take an IOU, I offer very competitive interest rates as well. I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Deal. Thanks, Herman.”

Chapter 18

I have a stand off with a demon

Where: Excellus Conference Room

When: About two weeks later

It was a brand new year! I had a lead on some apartments, my car was humming along, and I hadn't been turned into fried chicken since Christmas. (Of course I hadn't been attacked by anything either) Life was looking up. Oh, and Herman and I had decided on a design for my new magical object, basically a small medallion I could wear as a necklace, or just carry with me. He took me through the Rochester, NY branch of Excellus, where he introduced me to his contacts there, and we went shopping at the cute little shop he frequented. Well, the inside was cute, the outside looked like a run down, closed, busted up old gun shop. I met Linnea and her brother Peder, both trolls, and he had me pick out various things that invoked speed to my mind. These would be "consumed" in some way during the process of binding magic into the metal, and according to him should reflect the purpose of the item. The shop sold just about everything, and was always looking for odd materials so I took their number and address, in case I ever came up with anything I thought they might want. Materials could be used both for ritual magic and this kind of enchanting, so whatever you wanted to do, you could find something that represented it. To that end I got some cat's claws, a rabbit's foot, some feathers from a falcon, and they even had some fulgurite so I threw that in there. I also just handed him a crisp, new, \$50 bill because nothing moves faster than money! He came back with a small disk of metal that had a lightning bolt on the front and magical runes on the back. Wearing it did exactly what I wanted, namely boosting my reflexes enough that even taking a fireball from behind I could feel it coming and dodge out of the way. I just hoped it would be enough.

It seemed I was going to be put to the test as Gretchen had called an all hands meeting that morning, and we knew what that meant.

"All right everyone," she told us, "let's get right to it. There will be another inversion today, and it's another four line warning so let's be on our toes. We're doing this one a little differently, as well. We know the method for finding where the site is going to be works thanks to Jesse's efforts with the previous two that have happened lately, so we're just going to follow her. So suit up, make sure nothing happens to the humans when the inversion happens, and for goodness sake someone keep Jesse away from any fireballs!"

There was a general chuckle and poking me, which I endured because I am a stoic and level headed individual.

"Here's the poem:

Market forces, so bazaar, goods from near and good from far.
Sea of asphalt, yellow box, rev your engine start the clocks.
Grinning faces, they are kin, to the ones that once came in.
It's the dish that you serve cold, beware those who have grown so bold."

"Gazpacho soup?" someone called in the crowd. There was a laugh.

"I'm hoping it's an ice cream place," said another.

"In winter?" said a third.

"I'm not gonna eat it outside."

"Children, please, this is serious," Gretchen cried, getting control back. "Can we take this seriously please? Thank you. I don't like what this poem is implying so please be on our guard. You know your jobs, get to it."

The meeting broke up and my team and I headed out. We had been upgraded to the customary black van you might shove someone into after yanking them off the street, but this one had no seats in

back. Just a big empty space I could stand in and move the sword around to get an idea where to go. We would head there first, with the rest of the folks following close behind. “Just try not to hit anything,” I told Archie, who was driving. “You get into an accident and I impale myself on this sword I’m going to be very cross.”

“Ugh, don’t mention crosses,” Emmett told me.

“Fine,” I told him. “I’ll be very garlic. Is that better?”

“Not really, no.”

We headed out and I followed the pull of Wayfinder as it led us through town. Right to the local shopping mall. Which for some reason was beyond packed. Cars were already choking the parking lot, and people were parking wherever they could and there were huge crowds trying to get in. We couldn’t get near the place, though no one was yet leaving so we could at least drive by it okay without getting stuck circling to try and find a parking spot.

“What in the world?” Emmett gasped, looking at the whole scene. “We’re never getting through all this. You’re sure this is where the sword is pointing?”

“I’m certain. But how would an inversion cause this? It’s like everybody in town is here!” *Some kind of insane after Christmas sale? But with our current shortages of everything, no store in their right mind would have a sale.*

“I’ll text the others to park where they can,” he told us. “Oh, this is bad.”

We regrouped about a half a mile away, traffic around the mall was getting worse, and we got out. I didn’t want to leave Wayfinder just laying around even in a locked van, but Archie said he was staying and would make sure no one took it.

“Staying?” I almost shrieked. “What are you talking about? You have to come with us, we can’t just leave one third our fighting force up here!”

“You’re going to have to,” he insisted. “I’m a horse, remember? And there’s hundreds of people down there. My magic won’t hold up, and I’ll be turned back for sure. How do you think those crowds will react when suddenly there’s a black horse standing there?”

I blinked at him for a moment. *Oh. I just see him as human so it’s hard to remember he actually isn’t. He’s magically transformed himself. And apparently he can’t even go to a ball game or concert because even though no one would suspect he was anything but human, his magic takes a beating and there’s a chance it just outright fails? What a crappy way to live.* “I get it. Okay, have fun watching the van, or whatever.”

“I will!”

We made our way over to the assembled group, hoping they had some idea of what to do next.

“We figured out what is causing all the traffic,” Gretchen told us, raising her voice to be heard. She held up a cell phone. “Apparently everything in the mall is 75% off today. It went out about half an hour ago across social media, and this is the result. Everyone and their brother made a beeline for the place.”

“That can’t be a coincidence!” someone cried.

“We don’t believe it is. Look, if it’s really chaos over there someone is behind it. Mingle, get in there as best you can, and keep in touch. I have a really bad feeling about this.”

Every store announcing such a deep discount at all once? Yeah, there’s no way that happens naturally. It’s some kind of trap, but how? Did something come through earlier today, like early this morning? She must ask when she gets up, but if the event happened before then, like closer to midnight, it could be going for hours before we get into the office. Maybe she should ask twice in a day, when she gets up and when she goes to bed, asking about 12 hours ahead to catch this sort of thing.

Emmett and I headed down there as we broke the whole group up, though there was no disguising we looked quite different from the other “shoppers.” Apart from the fact their glammers

would hide the fact they weren't human, nothing would cover up the fact that many wore armor, both archaic and modern, and carried a variety of weapons about their persons.

Wait though, these glamours are simply magic, right? We're heading into an area with a thousand regular humans. If what Archie was saying about his shapeshift magic being disrupted by normal people just not believing in it is true, what keeps the glamours working in the face of all this disbelief? The collective unconscious belief that people have that non-humans don't exist, thus reinforcing that kind of magic while simultaneously shutting down anything more overt? I'll have to remember to ask about it some time.

Police too were arriving on the scene, but given they had gotten there much too late, they too had to basically fight their way down to the entrance to try and keep order. Each smaller group headed for a different entrance, some even heading to the roof to try and get in that way. We entered the building as we could, alert for whatever trickery was going on. I wasn't here for any sale, but the atmosphere was contagious. I wondered if I couldn't snag an item or two while still looking around.

"Do you see the lines yet?" Emmett asked me.

"I doubt there's a short line in the place at this point," I told him.

He looked at me like I had gone nuts. "The lay lines, Jesse. The lay lines. You know, the thing only you can see so you can lead us to the convergence and seal off the inversion?"

"Oh, that! Right. Uh, no, but I can't see them through this press. There's like blobs of energy everywhere, it's like they're all carrying a light bulb and you're looking for a laser beam. We'll have to walk the mall."

"Great."

We finally emerged into the chaos that was the inside of the building, where people were rushing to their favorite store to try and grab anything that was left at this point. I noticed a lot of security guards in here at least, and the walkways were far less crowded than the store interiors, which I could see were packed.

"Er, shouldn't the security guards be standing on the inside of the stores? I just saw one human punch another, maybe not something that should be going on?" he asked. "Oh, look, he's bleeding all over the floor, what a waste!"

"Hold yourself back, buddy. I'll do you one better," I told him. "Why are the security guards all looking at me?"

"They like your new hair cut?"

"Excuse me."

I jumped and almost pulled the gun out, but looked over my shoulder. "Yes?" Standing there was another guard, and people streamed past us with annoyed looks because we had stopped. Their looks said, 'if you're not here to shop, then get out of the way!'

"Are you from Excellus?" he asked.

"What?" both of us exclaimed.

"Are you Jesse from Excellus?" the man repeated.

"Well, yes, but--"

"One moment please." He took his walkie-talkie out and pressed the button. "I have her. Front of Lenscrafters and Sprint."

Immediately all the security guards slammed the gates down in front of all the stores, making people cry out.

"What are you--" I started to say, when there was a pop, and the biggest demon I had ever seen slammed into existence near us. I raised the gun as people around me screamed and freaked out. The demon roared, clearly loving this attention. People started running, while the people inside the stores switched from pounding on the chains to freaking out and heading in the other direction.

"I wouldn't," the demon told me, pointing a misshapen claw at my gun. "Think of the lives that will be lost if you pull that- SILENCE!" he roared, and everyone still nearby shrank back and many simply fell over. But it was quieter, I had to give him that. "That's better. Show yourselves, my brethren." Grinning demons all melted out of the humans in uniforms, making them fall over and start gibbering as well. "Now... Fear not, humans within the sound of my voice. I bring you glad tidings. Your release, and return to your normal, petty lives stands before you. Do you see her? She will release you from your bondage and bring forth your salvation. Applaud her bravery. Applaud!" He whirled around and those nearby gave a halfhearted clap. "I tried," he told me. "I truly did."

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I want what I already have, sweet Jesse," he purred. "You, figuratively, in the palm of my hand. But soon, so soon, my claws at your throat physically as well." His hands opened and closed, claws at the end of them sharp and pointed. He seemed to be straining against just rushing me then and there, instead whirling around again. "Look, all of you, upon your heroine. She who will gladly trade her own life for yours. How selfless of her, how noble. Should you not aspire to have so pure a heart?" He roared with laughter for a moment. "But no, each and every one of you would gladly sell her out for your own freedom. I love it! It's like we don't have to do anything at all to corrupt you. Or perhaps I'm mistaken? Prove me wrong, let one voice cry out 'hold' and step forward to take her place. No?" He put a hand to his ear. "I'm waiting!"

"Somewhat pretentious for a demon, aren't you?" I asked him. "You don't have me yet."

He turned back to me. "But I do. Look at the wondrous scene I have created for the two of us. All of these people held hostage, and so many, many more at every stall. Is stall the right word? Trough? I'm implying that you're all- anyway, you get the idea. While the others in this... place... will not know of who saves them I'm sure they'll put up a statue or something of you. I've trapped this entire place is what I'm saying. Oh yes, it was worth the effort, don't you think?"

"You'll never be able to do magic before so many."

"What gives you this confidence, Jesse? Do you know something I don't? Do you know those of my kind around you to be such poor users of magic? No, I say you are wrong. I have chosen each of these beings for their strength of will, their ability to do magic in just such a situation. You will hand yourself to me, willingly, to save them. It is simply your nature, even now you struggle not to throw yourself at my feet and beg for my mercy. But soon, yes, I think you will very soon."

Crap, he's right. The possession of the humans would be magic, just like anything else. And he teleported himself here when he got the word. They're all good enough spell casters to ignore a crowd like this, I can't believe their magic will fail now. Better than Archie thought he would be, he didn't want to risk coming down here. But they were all standing there bold as you please. It's fried chicken time again, isn't it? I'm really starting to hate this job...

"Don't listen to him," Emmett told me. "He's a demon, lies are his stock and trade. We just have to save as many as we can."

"You do not interest me," said the creature. Then he reconsidered. "Unless you are offering yourself up as sacrifice in place of her?"

"No one is getting sacrificed today!"

"There I think you are wrong. Come Jesse, don't leave these people in terror. Put down your weapon, allow me to visit upon you such agony as you have never dreamed, rip out your soul, and we shall depart. All these others will be released, unharmed. You have my... word."

Can he even do that? I've got to stall him. Try to think of something. He's right, he's holding all the cards. He orders it and no doubt his demon buddies will start lighting up those innocent people with magic. I can't take the chance their disbelief in magic will save them, not after the possession didn't break. "You know my name, how? Did I personally wrong you in some way?"

"You assaulted one of my strongholds, naturally I would discover who did this. Imagine my surprise when I looked into your past! Such a busy bee you are, and that gun. Very dangerous, to my

kind and others. And so I decided to do something about it. Oh, the magic wasn't easy, figuring out when next we would be able to come to your world like this. Traveling there, holding the location. Then figuring out what to do on this side once we were here. Ah, but my followers came up with some wonderful ideas, that they did. But taking over this, what is this, shopping center? Winning our battle before you even knew you were under attack? Delightful."

"So it's just," *a dish served cold*... "revenge then? Not for your kind but simply because I made sure those others didn't run over my town?"

"That does happen to be a large part of it, yes."

Maybe another angle, what's the other part? "Are you being paid to do this? Do you even have a currency system?"

"Bringing you down will increase my standing, and allow me to ask certain favors, yes," he admitted. "Are you trying to bargain for your life? I did not come here to bargain. I came here to end you."

"Did you? Because you're doing an awful lot of talking and not much ending. Afraid I might end *your* existence before you get near enough to me to do any damage? You do claim to know what *shatter* can do." The gun smoothly changed into the shatter configuration. I wanted to hit this thing with as much as I could, as quickly as I could, and the shotgun was probably still the best for that. It was big enough I could hardly miss, especially if it was charging straight at me.

"It is a remote possibility your heart may be stone, that you would not care even if all these people died," he admitted. "It would be what I would do. In fact I would respect you for making that choice! But that's not your type at all, is it, Jesse? On the other hand you might see me falling as worth a few dozen human lives. But at the same time you are not shooting me and simply taking your chances. So I wonder which of us will blink first."

Yeah, so do I. How am I going to get out of this? I can't let him kill me, but I can't let him kill these others either. There must be something I can do though! Wait, maybe there is something... "I have your word that if I die here, you'll leave?"

"Of course!"

"You can't trust the word of a demon!" Emmett insisted. "He'll betray you for sure!"

"I would want certain assurances," I told the demon.

"Jesse, you can't!" he pleaded. "We can come up with something else, don't let him back you into a corner! What will I tell Archie when I have to tell him you're dead!?"

"It's my choice," I told them. "If there's even a chance of me saving them, that's what I'm going to do."

"Very wise," the demon chortled. "Put the gun down and I will advance on you." He held up a paw, claws out, but I held up a hand, stopping him.

"Grip." The gun changed again. "Oh no, you don't get the satisfaction," I told it. I put the gun against my own head. "I'm shooting myself, I will not be sullied by your filthy claws."

"What!" both cried, but the demon looked skeptical while Emmett just looked horrified.

"What are you up to?" the demon asked, taking a step back. "Also I'll have you know I wash my hands for at least twenty seconds every time, as per CDC guidelines. I am not filthy! Stupid filthy demons, ruining it for everyone else. I hate those guys!"

I can't tell if he's being serious. "Assurances," I told it. "Get your demons here, and allow me to get my people here. Everybody gets to see it, and everybody is here should I be betrayed. I pull this trigger, you leave. That's the bargain, you did come to bargain, didn't you?"

The demon seemed torn. "To watch you murder yourself, it would be a delicious irony, wouldn't it? Especially in front of all your friends, who would be helpless to stop you! But to feel your blood splash against my claws, what an ecstasy that would be. What to do, what to do?" He started pacing a few steps in place. I took a step back. "Blow out her own brains, or slash out her throat. Very well! Get everyone here! I will accept your bargain!"

Excellent. I tried not to smile. “Fine. Emmett, get our people here. Move!” He looked sullen but got out his cell phone. Soon the hallway was clear of bystanders, and it was demons on one side and our people on the other. The big one and myself were in the middle. “Once more so everyone is clear on it, now that we’re all here; The agreement is I shoot myself and you all leave,” I shouted. “No humans are harmed. Agreed?”

“Agreed!” he announced. He seemed to be drooling, and quivering with anticipation. “Do it. Pull the trigger, while all your friends here watch!”

“Very well.”

I pulled it.

Chapter 19

I put one over on the demon and find out some things

Where: The mall

When: After I pulled the trigger

Naturally I had to make it look good. I cried out, and toppled over. The demons shrieked in ecstasy, and I lay still. *Ow. Hit my head. Falling over is hard. Good thing I took that acting class in high school, these jokers totally bought that I bought it. The farm. Bought the farm.*

“So leave,” Gretchen yelled. “Go on then, you saw. This isn’t your world, release those humans and go back through the inversion to where you came from.”

“Ho, ho, ho, I wonder if I’ll do that,” he mused as the demons quieted. “I am a demon, after all. But she did entertain me, I’m half tempted to leave it at that.”

Come on, just leave!

“We’re all here now, you won’t find us easy to kill,” she went on. “You lost the element of surprise and let this all play out. Now I’m looking for some revenge, so leave before I decide to enact it despite our little truce here.”

“I’m thinking it over.”

The demon is loving this, not committing to one thing or another. Someone else has been doing that recently, who was it? Presidential candidate, what was his name again?

“Master, master, do not let her deceive you! The woman is not dead!” cried a voice.

“What’s this? Come forward, faithful servant. I give you leave to speak.”

Oh come on, what now? I’m getting a cramp and my nose itches. Playing dead is hard, I hope I never run into a bear. I mean I could shoot a bear. I wouldn’t want to.

“I wished to see the spirit vanish, to see the light leave her, oh master. How glorious it would be to have seen it. But I did not! It’s a trick, a trick I tell you. My magic did not show me her spirit leaving, even now it shows me her body glows with life!”

Sigh. Probably the same kind of magic that lets me see inner energies and lay lines. Of course someone would have something like that going and mess this whole thing up. But there is still another card to play. After all I chose my words very carefully. I sat up, and everyone gasped. “Happy Birthday!” I exclaimed, as that’s the sort of thing one says when you come back from the dead. At least according to one old Christmas cartoon I used to watch.

“There is treachery afoot!” the demon exclaimed, in glee or disgust or some unholy union of the two. “Masterful, I can watch her die twice today! Once at her own hand, and once at mine. You will feel my claws yet this day, Jesse.”

“Shatter. Not so fast,” I told it, holding the gun up again as I got to my feet. “I held up my end of the bargain, you hold up yours.”

“Do you claim to be undead, then?” the demon demanded. “Because I see you full of life before me, which was not our bargain!”

“Wasn’t it?” I asked sweetly. “Demons should be more careful about the exact wording of their deals, shouldn’t they? What was our exact deal? Tell me the words.”

“You!” He pointed to a seemingly random demon. “Recite her words!”

They bowed low, coming to stand with another demon, who I glared at. *That’s the one that messed up the whole thing. Ugly brute, I’ll remember your twisted face, yes I will.* “Yes master. Her words were, and I quote, ‘The agreement is I shoot myself and you all leave. No humans are harmed. Agreed?’ You then agreed.”

“You see?” I asked. “I never said kill, I said shoot. So I did. I shot a single hair on the other side of my head. It counts. I held up my end.” *I mean I had to have the gun shoot something, and it was right by by head, right? Seemed the best thing given I’ve already lost most of my hair anyway.*

“Such trickery, from a human! I must have been blinded by my anticipation of your death. Such guile. Such pedantry! I want to take you back with me, raise you up as my queen. I want to tear you apart for your blatant treachery. I want to ravish every inch of you, give you pleasures you have never dreamed of as a mortal woman. I want to tear your skin off an inch at a time. I cannot decide, oh, what to do! Perhaps all of these things, one after another?”

“Why not take a few hundred years to think it over, and just come back then?” I suggested.

“Nice try, but I know you will be long dead by that time, as you are still only human. Oh, but I am angry! But at the same time my passions are aroused!” *Ew. Thank crap that isn't visible... Do demons even have-* “Nuts! I cannot decide if I want you on a throne by my side or your skull decorating a necklace made of your bones. Very well! We shall depart, and for now I will bow to your superior wordplay. But expect treachery from me in kind to repay you. Servants, I have had enough of this lower world, we shall return to our own, and leave the humans unmolested.”

“Aw!” was the universal outcry from the demons.

“Fear not, my servants. I will think of some suitable rejoinder, and make sure to record her later downfall that we may watch it for thousands of years in the future.”

“Yay!”

Great, something to look forward to, I was thinking as the demon rounded up his followers and headed down the hall. We, of course, went with them, and they passed through a doorway sticking out of the wall. The convergence was nearby, and I, with the gun out of course, sealed it up without a problem.

“What were you thinking?” Gretchen congratulated me on my cunning plan as everyone spread out to release the trapped humans. Announcements were already being made that the 75% off “sale” was canceled, and legal action would be taken, blah, blah, blah. She felt relief, exasperation, subsiding terror, and a tiny nugget of respect was in there someplace.

“One second,” I told her, watching the gun. As expected, it started to change, becoming more angular than I had ever seen it. Completely triangular “wings” extended backwards, floating in mid air around the gun, while the barrel had taken on various “fins” sticking out from the sides. “Pierce,” I breathed, locking it in. *What sort of thing can I expect with you, I wonder?* I made it vanish. “Okay, what were you saying? Thank you for saving all the people here? Of course, director, just doing my job!”

“That’s not what I was saying at all,” she smacked my arm. “You scared me to death, pulling that stunt. How did you know it wouldn’t hurt you?”

“We’ve at least figured out a little of how the gun works,” I told her. *I guess I never told her the secret of how it operates? That it hits what I want it to hit, not just what is in front of the barrel?*

“Besides, you really think the gun, connected to my own soul, that appears and disappears at my whim, could hurt *me*?”

“Yeah, it’s a *gun*. It doesn’t care.”

“This one does.”

“I’m glad you’re right, but...” She grabbed me up in a hug. “Don’t do that again, okay?”

I hugged her back. “Don’t worry, the same trick probably won’t work twice. I’m just glad it did. I’m kinda bummed though, they canceled the sale, did you hear the announcement? I’m mean we’re already here and I think I’ve earned the rest of the day off to shop. I could use some stuff at 75% off. If everything is back to normal I may as well just go back to work.”

She laughed and shook her head, releasing me. “Unbelievable. Fine, play it off like that. But this whole thing was a mess. It’s going to take hours to get these people out of here, and all of them are going to be mad about the sale thing. Hundreds saw demons with their own eyes, they got locked in the stores, I’m sure someone has video of you shooting yourself in the head. Even if they don’t allow it on youtube it’ll be up somewhere, and then what do we do with it? And let’s not forget the demon who

can't decide if he should screw you, marry you, or kill you! Or maybe all three, in that order. Clearly a powerful demon, if it was his 'citadel' you stormed before. And those demons he had seemed to obey his commands easily enough so it does seem they work for him. He'll be back to make trouble for you, he won't forget how you played him."

"That's future Jesse's problem," I waved off. "Current Jesse has her own issues to worry about."

"I suppose she does. Come on, you get to help direct traffic and keep order around here."

"Fine," I allowed with a sigh. *Is that really my job?* "By the way, what was your brilliant plan to save the day, if I may ask?"

"Set off the building's sprinkler system. That would ground out magic and at least level the playing field. With a lot of running water spraying around they couldn't roast the people they had trapped, and we could shoot them like fish in a barrel. They had made them safer, after all, by locking them up like that. It would have just been us versus them, and I'm confident we could have won the day without magic. I was heading to the mall control center when I got the call, and rushed down here instead."

"Oh." I thought about it. "I guess that would have worked."

"There may have been some loss of life though, so I do thank you for that. You did get us out safely, civilian and agent alike." I brightened and opened my mouth. "You're not getting a raise or anything." My face fell again.

"What's the point of even working here then?" I demanded, throwing my hands in the air. "Maybe I'll pass a hat around to the survivors."

"You do that."

So we got the mall straightened out, and went back to the office. Archie was glad to see me once he heard from the others what I had done, and apologized he couldn't be there at my side in such a trying time.

"You just wanted to see her prank the demon," Emmett teased him.

"There's that too, don't get me wrong," he agreed.

In the end, Gretchen seemed less upset about the whole thing than I would have guessed for all her complaining to me, which was odd. I finally decided stuff like this must actually happen all the time, I mean demons did have their own ways of getting here. And non-humans made trouble all over, and magic was loose in the world so strange things were bound to happen. People just shrugged it off, or they weren't believed, and slowly the stories faded away as people went back to their lives. It made sense, how could the mundane world function as it did without a healthy dose of denial? *Not my problem anyway, that's the communities' problem at large. If they didn't want people to freak out, they should have told them way before now.*

Back at the office I went down to see about "pierce" and got out the gun, shifting it over to that form. I pulled in the trigger, expecting my target to be blasted apart in some way, but to my surprise the whole thing started glowing.

"That's new," Ananias remarked. "Or is it?"

"It's never given off light before," I agreed. Holding it in front of me it was like my focus was concentrated, and somehow I knew it was charged and ready. (For one thing it stopped getting brighter) As it had been charging I had focused my aim, I wanted to hit the dummy's head. I released the trigger and down the way it exploded apart.

"Ah! Maybe a high caliber sniper rifle mode?" he suggested. "How many shots do you get?"

I pulled the trigger again and it started charging, so I aimed at the center of the dummy and waited a few beats. It too exploded when I released the trigger. It wouldn't glow again until 3 seconds had passed.

“So two shots,” he unnecessarily told me, because I can count to two just fine. “Not bad, if you have time to change it up, and only a few opponents to shoot. It’s getting more powerful, that’s for sure.”

“But powerful enough to take down that wall?” *There’s been no activity down there, and no one has found a way inside yet either. That Gretchen has told me about, and she would, right? Of course she would.*

He bobbed his head. “Not sure. This seems localized, a foam dummy is different from a brick wall. This seems more like a pinpoint strike, you need an explosion to both open a large enough gap and get through the thickness of the bricks. But you’re working your way up. I wouldn’t be surprised if the next forms go in that direction.”

“Bring on the inversions then, I guess?”

When I got back up to my desk I had a teams chat from Gretchen to come see her, so I headed over to her office. *I’m not going to get chewed out again, am I? Once was enough, thank you very much. At least it isn’t eight bosses, and I’m sure I used the new cover sheet on my TPS report...*

“Thanks for coming up, Jesse,” she said to me as I entered her office.

“What can I do for you?”

“Thought you might want to know. We figured out where you went on your little trip through the motel with the lampshade cord.”

“The motel has been found?” I blurted. *Stupid doors, and the bell, and the radio, and the silence, and the rooms, and the-*

“Humm? Oh, no, not that part. We have no idea what that place could have been. No, I’m talking about when you recklessly used magic in front of a city full of people by flying around in the air and then attacking an office building. Ringing any bells?”

“That was weeks ago, Gretchen. Someone that lived as long as you have should know to let the past go.”

“...Yes. Anyway, we’ve been watching news reports all over the world and have come across an interesting one. From Afghanistan.”

“Afghanistan,” I repeated.

“That’s right. It matches up with what you reported. It’s been hard to track down because of course the people in charge there aren’t exactly forthcoming with news, and given the nature of what happened were in no position to spread it around. But it caught the attention of Excellus, so we had someone head there and check it out with magic. Looking into the past with magic we clearly saw you, so we know exactly where you went.”

“So who were those guys? What were they meeting about? Do we know?”

“We do. They were high level taliban leaders, or more accurately they were. It seems once you knocked the kanaima out of them they had no interest in being leaders of a terrorist organization slash ‘legitimate government’ anymore. It threw the whole group into disarray actually, one reason why it took so long to get the story out. But they’ve started speaking out against their former associates, claiming they were brainwashed or otherwise manipulated with drugs. Of course they have no idea it was magic, but they’ve all lost years, according to them. At first they had no idea they were even taliban leaders! So clearly they’ve been possessed a long time. I don’t think the group will fall apart because of this, but more resistance to the ‘movement’ is growing. It’s hard to say what the outcome will be but you really kicked the anthill over there.”

“Oh.” I sat there a moment in silence. “I’m not sure how to feel about that.” *On the one hand it’s the freaking taliban, so waving goodbye to that ‘little’ group would make the whole world breathe a sigh of relief. We don’t need any more leaders looking backwards, oppressing women, and believing it’s all Allah’s will they be as horrible to everyone as they can possibly be. On the other hand does that area need more chaos? I think not.*

“We’re puzzled, ourselves,” Gretchen admitted. “It was such a roundabout route to get you there, and you could have easily walked away.”

Not so easily. I really want to kill kanaima.

“Or gotten yourself killed. But you did do it a smart way, and took most of the possessors out. One, it seemed, escaped. He wedged himself in the corner I guess, and avoided that table you were throwing around. After you left he became visible again, and then dropped himself, so whatever was possessing him probably left him. As far as we know, it hasn’t been back.”

“That’s good, right?”

“At least they all told the same story. I don’t suppose you’ve been... contacted... or anything, by beings that might have had a hand in this? Praising your good job, or saying that wasn’t why you were sent? Anything?”

“What? No, I would have told you if angels were showing up in my bedroom or whatever.” *I mean, Polaris, that’s just a part of me, right? No need for you to know about that. But if the being that made the gun and sent me back visited me, I wouldn’t have held that back.*

She regarded me, but nodded. “Okay. Please tell me if anything like that happens.”

“Of course. Do you think this means something?”

“It happened, didn’t it? We got shown something, that much is clear. But what that something means we’re going to have to work out for ourselves. Someone went to a lot of trouble, of course it means something.”

“Stupid question I guess. Well, the cord hasn’t been back, so there’s that. Thanks for telling me, it was bugging me a little that I did all that and didn’t hear anything on the news about it.”

“Wanted to see yourself flying around the building?”

“For one, no, and for two, it was more like floating. I can’t really fly in that sense. Hover, yes. I don’t trust myself with any more than that.”

“Uh huh. That’s it, that’s all I had for you.”

“I’ll get back to work then,” I told her, rising. “See you tonight?”

“See you tonight.”

That night, after dinner, Gretchen and I were washing up when the doorbell rang. “I’ll get it,” she told me, and walked out of the room. She was back a second later. “It’s some guy, looking for you.”

“Some guy?”

“Delivery man, or something? Just go see, he’s got flowers.”

“Flowers? For me?”

“I don’t know, but he asked for you by name!”

Did Archie send me flowers or something? He hasn’t been by, of course I’m staying at the bosses’ house and it’s freaking cold out so no rides at this point but still. Maybe he didn’t like me as much as I thought, but maybe that all changes tonight. “I’ll go see.” I walked out there, and opened the door again. There was a man standing there, and he brightened. He was holding flowers, how about that!

“Jesse Faden?”

“That’s me.”

“Hummm,” he hummed, looking at something in his other hand. “Yes, I guess that could be you, after all. You grew up. But then, so did I, huh? You wearing your hair differently now? But of course why would you keep the same style all these years?”

“What? What are you-” I looked over at what he was looking at. “Where did you get that?” It was a picture I recognized. One of my brother and me, taken by my parents. “All those pictures should have been destroyed in the fire! Give me that!” I reached for it, but my hand stopped. *What?*

“Don’t be so grabby. Honestly, you might act a little more glad to see me.”

“What? Why? Who are you?”

“Have I changed so much? It’s me big sis, your dear brother Dylan.”

Chapter 20

I have a nice chat with my brother

Where: Gretchen's house

When: Just after the proclamation

And it was Dylan. Looking at him now, I could see hints of his boyhood self in the man that stood before me. My hands flew over my mouth. "Dylan?" But he felt *wrong* in a way I had never felt before. His emotions were all jumbled up, shifting and changing almost faster than Polaris could feed them to me. I felt in danger, like I was looking at a photocopy of my brother but changed in some way. I didn't like the feeling.

"Didn't expect to see me again, huh?" He put the picture away and leveled the shotgun at me. "He was right about that. Let's have a talk, you and me."

"What?" I froze, looking down at the gun. Where had the flowers gone? Answer: *he never brought me flowers*. "Illusion?"

"That's right. You always were the bright one. Knew you might not be the one to answer the door, so I had it ready. My friend says to always be prepared for the worst, and then think about something worse than that because that's what will happen. He cares about me so much."

"How can you do magic?"

"You mean you can't?" He seemed a little taken aback by this. "Is that way you never came looking for us?"

"Us? What us? I've done nothing but look for my family. I found them, too. Dylan, what are you doing? I'm your sister, you don't need that. Put it down, I know where mom and dad are! We can work together to take down the wall that's around them."

"Yer a little late to that party, sis. I know where they are because unlike you, I asked for them to be kept safe. And my friend agreed. They're fine. And I won't put this down. My friend says you might try something stupid, and this is a good way to make sure you won't. Especially if I have to go in that house for some reason, but you won't make me do that, will you? You'll talk to me right out here, won't you?"

As long as I'm behind the threshold his magic won't reach past it. At least not unless he's really, really good at doing magic. So of course he brought something that would. Not exactly the reunion I'd hoped for, my brother showing up with a gun! "Of course I'll talk to you. I'll do better than that, I'll get my jacket. If you know where mom and dad are, take me to see them. Let me talk to them, see them safe with my own eyes."

"Eh, nah. I don't think so. We don't need you stomping all over the place. Besides, this isn't a reunion, I'm here to tell you about a dream I had. I mean a message, I'm here to give you a message. That was it. Or was it a dream? I get confused sometimes, my friend says not to worry about it."

"A dream? Dylan, you're not making sense. Let's go somewhere and talk about this." *Because I'm for sure not inviting you into this house. Even if that would work. You don't really seem all there to me, and who is this friend you're going on about? What happened to you? I have to be careful, I don't want to spook him. Have to keep him talking, see if he lets something slip I can use!*

"Nah, it's fine. The cold never bothered me anyway. Did you see that one? Got some good ideas for using ice magic there. And you never got magic, weird."

"Why would I get magic? What happened to you after we got kidnapped that night?"

"Why wouldn't you get magic? I did. Did the person that found you not take pity on you like the person that found me did for me? Did they not want you to be safe in the dangerous world? Poor big sister, so helpless now, without magic. No wonder your life is such a mess, and you have to rely on things others made for you. I'm glad I don't have to live that way, doing magic is the best."

Could they have done that? The being that became Polaris inside me, could it have given me magic like something did for Dylan? "I'm sure it is, Dylan. What did you want to tell me then?"

“So you do want to hear about the dream? I thought maybe for a second there you didn’t. In my dream, my big sister just let us be led by some vampire into the prison of a being trying to return to our realm. She did nothing about it.”

“How could I?” I countered. “You can’t blame me for that. I was just a kid, the same as you. I didn’t know about vampires being real and even if I did-”

“Then, when *someone else* came to save us, we got separated. Do you know where I ended up?”

“Where?”

“In a place where someone who cared about me could take care of me. Teach me about how the world really works. Train me in magic. He’s done so much for me, unlike my so called sister, who didn’t care about me at all.”

“Don’t say that, of course I cared about you. We all did, mom, dad, and me!” *So he got rescued too. Must have been by a being similar to one that saved me. But he didn’t get returned, he got kept? Is that what he’s saying? Did he not lose his memories, or did he recover faster or what?*

“Debatable, at best. In the dream, you went your way and I went mine. There was only me. We watched you, growing up, you know. Sometimes, he has better things to do than watch you all the time. But he showed me, just to prove you didn’t care about me. I saw you. Hanging out at an orphanage, like you didn’t have parents to go back to? Then abandoning us forever, going to collage, living your life. And then coming here to spoil my friends’ plans all out of the blue. It was me, by the way, who talked him into letting me have this chance to convince you. Because I still care about you, even if you don’t care about me anymore.”

“Of course I care about you,” I shouted at him. “I would have told you, had you asked. Why I didn’t look for so long; I was messed up from what happened. Plus I got returned somewhere in Russia, nowhere near our country to say nothing about the house. How was a kid that didn’t even speak the language supposed to get back here? Heck, I didn’t remember even my own name for the longest time. When I did I did my best! It took a few years but I didn’t give up on you. It wasn’t ‘out of the blue’ like you said it was when I finally remembered my old address. You think I wouldn’t have rushed back here? I would have! It took years to remember. I got dragged into all this right after that, it wasn’t aimed at your friend specifically. As soon as I had the means I looked for you just like I looked for mom and dad. I just couldn’t find you. The sword pointed right to them, but it was like you didn’t exist anymore. What was I supposed to think?”

“Sword?” He looked confused, and shrugged. “Whatever. I must have been away at the time. I go back and forth all the time, doing things for my friend. You did try more than once, didn’t you? Or did you just not care enough? My friend says to listen to the words people say, but see what they do to reveal their true selves. Which is your true self, sister? The sister of words, or the sister of actions?”

He had me. In this, he totally had me. I had only checked once, why hadn’t I checked up on him again? Because the more I checked and didn’t find him, the more likely it was he was dead? But I couldn’t tell him I had looked more than once, that would be a lie. He noticed my silence anyway. *He’s right in that sense, I’m a terrible sister! And I’ve just handed him confirmation of what this ‘friend’ of his has been telling him. Super, way to go Jesse!*

“Ah, it’s the sister of actions that’s true, you didn’t try to look again. My friend was right. He’s always right. He’s always been so good to me.”

“What friend is this? Who are you talking about?”

“Oh no, I’ll not have you coming after him, too. You’ll want to break us apart, that’s what he says. And he’s right, you’ll be jealous of our friendship, and the magic he gives me. You won’t take me away from him, sister, I won’t let you. But he does have a message for you and he trusted me to deliver it and not be swayed by your words. Stop messing with the joinings of our two worlds. They’re supposed to spread, so our two worlds can be closer together. Not further apart. You’re always driving things apart, sis. For once in your life try to bring things together. Like I do. Now that we know it’s you, well, he’ll be sad if you continue because then he’ll have to hurt you. Make you stop. Even if you

are on the wrong side you're still my sister. I don't want him to have to hurt you, but I'll let him, for the good of the world."

"I can't stop, the inversions are wrong. Can't you see that? The human world is too far gone, it's too late to tell them magic and everything else is real. It would be war, between the humans who saw them as invaders into their world and everyone on the other side. They have to stop."

"My friend says we could do so much for you, if we were together. That the joinings are a wonderful gift. You're just too blind to see it. Is it because you can't do magic? I can do such amazing things. My fiend said humans who don't get magic just aren't worthy of it, that's why there's so few. He gives it to some he finds, who can do his work here, like I do. But the rest, oh, if only they knew they would welcome us, he's sure of it. We just have to show them we're real, all at once. After they can't deny us, they'll welcome our power, and everyone can be safe! Isn't that a great dream?"

He's talking like this guy is making witches. Is his 'friend' a demon? Did he get sent the other way, I got found by some kind of angel and he got some kind of demon? Who kept him and warped his mind? "It does sound like a pretty great dream. Can I meet this friend of yours? Talk to them directly? I want to hear what they have to say, not from what you think they say, but what they do. Like you said, remember? I want to see what they do." *Ha, you can't throw that back at me, brother, those were your words.*

He laughed. "I already said I wouldn't tell you about him, why would I take you to him? No, he can take care of himself of course but you would just mess things up. Or would you? Do you really want to learn the truth? You've already shown your actions are different from your words."

"We can talk about that, some way to convince you."

"I don't know, he thinks you're pretty far gone. You would have to do something big to make up for what you've done in the past. I'll ask him, maybe he can think of something."

"Sure, sure, Thanks. But our parents, you're certain they're safe? You've seen them, recently?"

"Of course. They're not far from here, I know you know the cave they were brought to. The world is so dangerous, it's so nice of my friend to have protected them. I help, you know. I'll help keep them safe from you, if you try to get in there. I know people have been poking around there, but they'll never get in. My friend's magic is perfect."

"I want to protect them, too! How does my trying to get in there make them less safe?"

"That's the Jesse of words I'm talking about, not the Jesse of actions."

"What are you talking about? How have I not shown I want to protect them?"

"You let our old house burn down? Yeah, I know about that too. My friend said it was for the best, letting it burn down. We didn't need it anymore, that was in the past. He was right, I should have burned it down years ago myself. He provides all I need, what did I need that yucky old house for? It would just remind me of the bad times, living with my big sister who didn't care about me. But it proves my point, you can't protect them, my friend and I can. We have been, for years and years. What did you ever do for them? You see I'm right? If you got them out they wouldn't be protected anymore. I just want to keep them safe."

"I did mess up with the house, I admit that. I'm still learning what's possible in this world. I didn't get a teacher like you did. You can't blame me for that, can you?"

He considered. "I guess not. But the fact remains you're on the wrong side now. Maybe I can work on him, get him to let you see them at least. I could at least get you a picture, that would be something, right? You did lose everything when the house burned up. You are their daughter, it wouldn't be fair to deny you that. I'm sure he'll agree. But you have to do what I say, so he knows you're not against him anymore. Now that you know the truth, give up making the joinings go away and you can work with us. Maybe he can give you magic, too. Wouldn't that be great!"

Yeah, not if I end up crazy like you, but I have to get you away from this person or whatever he is. To do that I have to meet him, have a chance to do something against him. "I would love to learn magic, and you could give me lessons too, right?"

“Sure. We could be together as a family again.”

“I would like that very much.”

“Then you know what you have to do. We’ll be watching, Jesse. Sister. To see if are just saying words or if you’ll do the right thing now that you know. When I’m convinced you’re doing the right thing I’ll bring it up to my friend. I’ll need the proof before I broach the subject, he said you would poison me against him. I have to show you didn’t. You didn’t, did you? I don’t think you did.”

“If he’s your friend I want to know why,” I told him. “I want us all to be friends.”

“That’s good. I hope you’re not lying to me, sister. See you later.”

“You could still stay and talk!” *I want to know exactly what you’ve been studying, maybe you’ll let something slip about this friend of yours.*

“Teleportus.” He vanished.

Crap.

I had felt Gretchen there the whole time, and she stepped around the corner. She looked determined, and set aside her own pistol. “So, that’s your brother, huh?”

“It looked like my brother, but clearly something’s been done to him.”

“Agreed. This friend of his he kept mentioning. Classic cult leader stuff, getting him to rely on what I’ll assume is a demon, and inspire complete loyalty. If he’s been in a demon’s clutches since the incident with you as kids, he could have a very twisted view of the world. We’ll need to take precautions. I’ll have the people studying the cave back off, no sense antagonizing them. I can start talking to my contacts in Otherworld, see if anyone’s seen someone matching his description wandering around there and who he might be wandering with.”

“Thanks. As if we didn’t have enough to worry about. But he’s alive! My bother and presumably my mother and father are all still alive.”

“That is pretty great news Jesse, but clearly a lot of work is going to have to be done to snap your brother out of this... whatever he’s into. That could take just as many years as his ‘friend’ has put in at this point, if it can be done at all.”

Sure, his brain grew into certain patterns as he aged and now it may be stuck that way because he’s an adult. “I know, I know, I’m just relieved. We know why Wayfinder didn’t work, we know that, however misguided it might be, Dylan is focused on keeping my parents safe. So we at least don’t have to worry about them starving or anything in there. He’s looking after them. We can save them!”

“I hope so. Can we shut the door now, the cold does actually kind of bother me. I’m not trying to heat the whole neighborhood, you know!”

“Oh, sorry.” I closed it. *My brother is alive. And he wants me to stop closing the inversions. I can’t, of course. Meaning it’ll probably come down to a fight between him and me, which I should prepare for. He can use magic and has probably been studying it the whole time I grew up and went to collage. I don’t want to know what that battle will look like. Probably me getting fireballed and someone else swooping in to save the day. But if this demon friend of his shows up, if I can defeat it, show how weak it is because I don’t have magic and he does, maybe it’ll show I’m right and it isn’t. Or would that just drive us further apart because now he would want revenge for-*

“You want to talk about?” she asked gently. “Or do you just like staring at the door?”

“Huh? Oh, right, I should go sit down or something. I don’t know. Is my brother a bad guy now?”

“Well, to quote what he said to you, what did you observe him doing? I don’t know if he’s running around in this world killing puppies, but probably not. Someone has him believing some wrong stuff, but hopefully not so strongly we can’t undo it. People that get certain ideas in their heads, well, it can be hard to shake them out of it. Even the truth doesn’t work in a lot of cases.”

“Like the followers of a certain ex-president I refuse to name?”

“Something like that, yes. You did good, what did you study in school again?”

“Business. I took a psychology course though, I guess it rubbed off on me?”

“Something. You kept him talking, agreed with some points, and didn’t outright reject him. So we wasn’t put on the defensive, and he may trust you a little more as you didn’t make a grab for him or anything. One step a time, we’ll save him, Jesse. Well, I’m going to go finish cleaning up. If you want to talk, I’m here.”

“Thanks. I don’t know, it’s just a lot to take in.”

She went back into the kitchen and I headed to the living room, plopping down on the couch. I had a lot to think about.

The next day memos were circling around work with his picture (taken with a combination of divination magic and illusion to create a sort of “hologram” in the air that could be photographed) and orders to not approach. He was considered armed, magically adept, and not in total control of his actions. Anyone seeing him should simply report his presence and surveil if they could. Everyone was pulled out of the cave, and past inversions were marked on a map to see if there was any pattern to them, or how they could be used to other ends than making people around town reinforce their beliefs they lived in the strangest town in the USA. They were concerned about what he had said, that if unchecked they could start spreading to other areas, and they looked into nearby areas to make sure they were not experiencing inversions too. It had been fourteen years, after all, but luckily everyone agreed that sort of thing would move slowly. Those with divination magic tried to get what they could about Dylan directly, but there wasn’t much. He was either back in Otherworld again or protected. They even traced his teleportation through the astral, but he was too smart for that, probably taking a car someplace else once he went where we went. There was no further teleport from there, in any case.

Dead ends everywhere. But I’ll find you, Dylan, and I’ll bring you home. Not the home that burned down, another home. Where we won’t live, because we’re adults now. We’ll each have our own homes. You know what I mean!

Chapter 21

We take on a water spirit

Where: The big conference room

When: Friday morning

“It’s that time again,” Gretchen told us. Everyone groaned, but she was smiling. “I know, it’s only been a few days since the last one. This could be good, it could mean we’re making a difference closing these weaknesses in the local area and that’s why they’re opening faster. In any case, it should be an easy one, it’s only a two liner. What to hear it?” We indicated that we did want to hear it. “Okay, here it is.”

“Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink.
Cut the flow off at the source what else would you think?”

“The plan is the same, Jesse’s team will take the black van and head out, we’ll follow and take care of whatever happens. Yes, I have a few people monitoring social media this morning, we won’t get caught again if those demons make trouble for us. Though I doubt they would have had time to come up with anything new in so short a time. Any questions?”

There were none, so we all headed out. It seemed we were being pulled out of town this time, which I was fairly pleased with. Houses and shops dropped away, and we actually headed along the route I had gotten to know heading to my parent’s cave. I was starting to get worried it would actually be there, but no, we turned and finally had to get off the road. All of us were trooping through the forest, until we got to a large pond. I saw the lay line convergence out in the middle of it, and we made sure we could get to it because it was pretty frozen by now. One of our number, a fomorian, said they could strengthen the ice with cold magic when the time came. So we picked a spot and settled in to wait. It was fairly snowy by this time, making it not the most comfortable stakeout, but it wasn’t too windy. I wondered if Gretchen was doing something to keep the wind off us. But we waited. And waited. She sent someone on a food run at lunchtime, and they came back with our order. We waited. Finally Margarita spoke up.

“Are we sure this is the site?” she asked.

“Why do you ask?” Gretchen asked her. “Our method has been pretty reliable so far.”

“It’s just that, according to social media, there’s some kind of hydro monster attacking the town.”

“What?” everyone exclaimed, pulling out phones.

“I’m livestreaming now from Ordinary, Maine,” said the person on the screen we were all crowded around. Behind them something was happening, though it was hard to make out on the tiny screen. “Do you see this? Some kind of monster, it’s huge, smashing up everything! It looks like it’s made of water, oh my God it just crushed that car. I don’t think anyone was inside. People are screaming and running everywhere.” the camera turned and showed a better shot of it, and it was some kind of water monster. *Great, thanks for getting this right out on the webs, non-humans must love there being cameras everywhere now.* The camera flipped again. “This is no joke, it’s really happening. I gotta get out of this town, people. What the? It’s shooting water out, wait no it just cut that fire hydrant in half with like a stream of water. It’s getting bigger, it’s sucking up the water and getting bigger, are you seeing this?”

“Turn it off,” Gretchen said. “Looks like this place will have to wait,” she announced. “Let’s head back into town and see about taking care of this so called monster.”

We all headed back, sprinting back to the vehicles and heading back into town. I did one more test with Wayfinder, asking it where the inversion was, and it pointed back where we had come from. *So is this unrelated? It's happening so far away, it's weird.*

"What do you think it is?" I asked, stowing the sword and at least sitting on the floor near the front seats.

"Some kind of spirit that decided it had enough of us?" Emmett guessed.

"Water spirit, in case it wasn't obvious," Archie agreed. "Odd though, where would it have come from?"

"Most spirits have retreated to Otherworld by now," Emmett explained. "Air spirits are the most common, they tend to make hurricanes when conditions are right and send them places."

"Wait, hurricane season happens because of air spirits?" I asked.

"Sure, did you think it was some kind of natural phenomenon?"

I looked to Archie, but he nodded. "Yeah, he's right about that. I mean a water spirit here? Sure, were kinda near the ocean but any water around here is frozen. They should be asleep or whatever they do until spring. Timing is awfully coincidental too, so odd."

"Isn't this a little obvious for a spirit?" I pressed. "I mean, it causing a flood or something I could see, but this is wandering around like a monster. How does that help anybody?"

"It's true, most have agreed not letting the humans know they exist is for the best. Can you imagine the reaction if certain people learned about them? I mean didn't that one guy want to nuke hurricanes? They would just want to bomb spirits too."

"So some kind of rouge spirit, one that didn't get the memo about keeping a low profile?"

"Or one that has been asleep a long time and was disturbed somehow," Emmett mused. "I don't really keep up on well digging or city water main repair schedules. It must have really been freaked out to do all this though."

"Anyway, what are we going to do about it?" I wondered.

"Get people out of the way of it. Try to knock it down to size, reduce its power," Archie told me. "Then try to reason with it. Short of that purification magic has been used to calm spirits in the past. But usually you have to go to the site they emerged from for that to work. It's not just magical, you have to repair whatever damage was done to the site that riled them up in the first place."

"Wait, why don't we head there?" I asked. "Get a start on it from that angle?"

"None of us has purification magic," Emmett protested.

"None of us has nature or water magic either," I countered. "We can safeguard people, sure, but isn't solving the problem the way to go? If we can find where this thing came from, and it must have come from somewhere, maybe we can see what disturbed it. Or at least be able to tell those with purification magic to come to such and such a place. If we just go with the others now, and we can't stop it, we'll have to find the site anyway meaning we'll have lost time. Let's split up if there's a chance we'll have to do it anyway."

"Motion seconded," Archie said. "All those opposed?" He waited. "All in favor?"

"Aye," Emmett said, raising his hand.

"Motion passes, Emmett, you tell the boss we're not abandoning them for fun, Jesse, see what Wayfinder can tell you about where this thing emerged from."

"Wait, it went from a committee to a dictatorship!" I decided. "That escalated quickly." But I got the sword out and went into the back again. "Okay I'm getting a result to the right, so turn right where you can."

"Rodger that."

We broke off from the main group, Gretchen approving our action and telling us to keep her informed, and we drove more towards the outskirts of town again. It wasn't long before we come upon a trail of destruction anyone could have followed, they didn't need a magical sword. It terminated in

the town water tower, looking like it had burst from the inside. The top of it was all mangled, though the structure itself was fine, it hadn't fallen over. The fence was flattened and the trees in the way were as well, so it must have come out the top, landed on the fence, and started knocking stuff around. We parked and found some people standing around, looking up at the wreckage.

"Excuse me, what happened here?" Emmett asked, getting out of the van. I stowed the sword and slid the door open so I could get out too.

"The water tower exploded," said a man. "Then some kinda monster crawled out and started heading that way." He pointed. "Never saw anything like it."

"I should hope not. Was anyone hurt?"

"Nah, no one around here. I live right over there, was getting my mail when it happened." He pointed again. "It's like I'm in a movie, but it's real life, you know?"

"At least you're taking it well," Archie told him.

"Eh, no sense getting all hot and bothered by it. Water wants to go take a walk, who am I to stand in its way? Nothing of mine got smashed. Shame about the trees though, I suppose someone will have to come cut them down, that'll make a lot of noise."

Is this guy for real?

"Thanks for the info," Emmett told him. "You better head back inside, just in case."

"Sure thing. You think it's the end of the world?"

"What, because of one little water monster? Please, when it's the end of the world, you'll know it."

"I suppose you're right." He turned and went back home.

Odd fellow.

Meanwhile I looked around. It was a regular old water tower, or at least it was, not that I knew anything about them. One interesting thing I noticed was there were several lay lines here, not as many as the pond site but a good convergence anyway. I put my hand over it, the one with Auseinander but I didn't feel any resistance. Archie came over to me.

"Anything?"

"Nope. Some lines, but that's about it. This isn't an inversion site, there's no push back from the lay line convergence."

"Weird." He looked up. "If this spirit was living here, and I doubt it was, it must have been here since the tower was put up. What would set it off? There's no trucks here from the water company, unless they drove off once the thing emerged. So I don't think work was being done. And even if repair work was being carried out, I can't see that being enough to cause this kind of a response. It's weird."

"Why wouldn't it live here?"

"Too artificial. Man collected this water and put it here. They exist best in natural lakes, streams, rivers, ponds, etc."

"Maybe it got swept here? It was asleep, got moved here by accident, woke up, freaked out, and went on a rampage."

"However it happened, at least we know the site. Let's go join the others."

"Right."

We headed out, following the line of destruction it had caused towards the city center. When we got there we found it battling our people, standing there in the street throwing water around. It looked like a lump of water, with two rough "arms" sticking out and a somewhat bulbous "head" at the top. It was clearly swirling around inside, as smaller debris had been sucked up and was churning inside the body of the beast. Those with useful magic were closest of course, trying various things by the looks of it. Everyone else was at the edges, evacuating the area and trying to keep people calm. Gretchen had set

up a sort of command post behind a tractor trailer that looked like it had been washed there, it was setting at an unnatural angle.

"It's all we can do to keep the water off us," Gretchen told us when we headed to her to get our orders. "It's disrupting magic, but not only that we'll freeze to death if we get wet out here. Actually hurting it hasn't seemed possible yet."

"So the talking option hasn't worked out?" Archie asked.

"Haven't been able to get near it to try that. Something really set this thing off! It's just flinging stuff everywhere."

And it was. I could see it over the trailer, flailing away and shooting water in several directions at once. *No wonder we're having trouble with it, can this be just one spirit? Or it is just shooting water off randomly?*

"Where do you want us?" Emmett asked.

"Neither of you has anything that can combat this thing," she mused. "Unless you want to try enthralling it, Emmett?"

He looked at the huge water creature off in the distance. We could see the top of it over the roof of the building it was near, it was growing into kaiju size territory. *We need to do something fast before it gets any bigger.*

"No, I don't think my charms will work on it, director."

"Then just go do what you can. This thing is making a mess, get people out of here."

"Right boss."

"What about me?" I asked, as they hurried off towards it.

"Right now I just need your eyes. Take a look at it, what do you see?"

"I've been looking, believe me. Uh..." I studied at it, thrashing around over there. "There's no one spot that seems to have any more energy than another," I told her. "If the spirit is in there it's not like a possession. There's nothing for me to aim at."

"I was afraid of that. Well, see what your gun does to it anyway. Aim for the inside if you can, since it seems you can shoot through things."

You aren't still sore about the whole fake suicide thing, are you? "Right. Pierce." I took aim at the thing's head, the gun glowing in my hand as I stepped back from the truck to get a good shot. When it was at peak energy I let the trigger go, and the head exploded. *Gotcha! And it did nothing.* The head reformed almost immediately, and it threw up a curtain of water all around it, smashing into everything around it.

"Okay, what your gun does is make it angry. Good to know," Gretchen decided as we covered behind the truck. She had put up some kind of water barrier as the water coming from above us as the curtain traveled outwards just slid by us, keeping us dry. "Maybe do that a few more times, see if it gets the message?"

"You want to make it so angry it'll wrap around and be the most calm thing on the planet, is that it?"

"We know it felt it, what do you suggest?"

"Fine, let's go. You're keeping the water off me."

"I guess that's fair," she decided. We ducked around the trailer again.

"Hey, where's it gone?" she asked. "Is it trying to get away?"

It threw that water at us as a distraction, then moved when we weren't looking at it. "Let's get after it."

"Right."

We chased it, and it hadn't gone far, but it had smashed its way through the corner of a building instead of just, I don't know, going around. We had much less cover here, so I charged up Pierce again and this time put a shot into the center of it then ducked back around the remains of the building. Again

water burst forth out of it, but reformed without getting much smaller. I put another shot into it, the creature couldn't seem to tell where I was shooting from, then while I waited for it to recharge I figured I would reduce the mass of the thing and started yanking water away from it. I got a fairly large chunk off, making Gretchen exclaim that was a good idea and did the same, but it just smashed into the street which started leaking water. It stood over the rupture, drinking up the water and getting bigger again. *Great, it knew where the water main was, and just decided to get a drink to replace what it had lost.*

"It's a stalemate," she growled. "Unless we can shut off water for the whole area, it's just going to be able to repair itself. Keep it up though, maybe we can wear it down?"

"Your call boss," I told her. The gun was ready to fire again so I put two more shots into it. I was about to pull more water off when it decided standing there was bad news and headed off again. This time through a parked car, sheering it in half with a fine stream of water, and shoving through it rather than take two steps around it.

And I finally realized why. *The poem told us the answer, if we had bothered to listen to it. Cut it off at the source, dummy, it said. But did we? Noooooo.* "It's following the line," I told Gretchen. "That's why the building before, and the car just now. It can't leave the line. Maybe if you shoved it hard enough to break contact it would fall apart?"

"Ugh, of course, that's where it's getting all this power from," she agreed. "You know how heavy water is? Can even the both of us get it? I'm getting worn out you know."

"I don't know," I admitted, looking at the line it was 'riding.' "Could someone with a spirit spell hook me into..." I looked back the way it had come and remembered the site of the emergence.

"Jesse?"

"We're so stupid!" I yelled. "We could have taken care of this ten minutes ago, at the source. Quick, I have to get back to the original site."

"What? Why?"

"It's the inversion. This is it. They don't have to be dramatic, if nothing is there in Otherworld it would look totally normal, right?"

"I suppose."

"That's what happened. Something got brought over in the inversion, or is still there in Otherworld controlling this. Say, a water spirit? It rode the lay line until it found a source of water, the tower, and then burst out of there. It's been following the lines ever since. Cut it off at the source—"

"And this creature should go away. It's not really here, it's just water being thrown around to confuse us. The spirit itself is not even here. We're not hurting it at all, so it won't get 'worn down' it can't feel it. Get going."

"Right!" I headed for the van, not that I had driven something that big before but I would have to manage. There was enough panic in the streets without me adding to it. I headed back to the forest, ditching the van by the side of the road, grabbing up Wayfinder because I wasn't letting it out of my sight at this point, and heading back to the pond. *I just hope it's really frozen enough... Oh wait you can fly, stupid.* I hovered over it when I got there, getting the bright idea of letting gravity help me a bit and coming at the convergence from above, rather than the side. This helped, and with the gun out pressed myself downwards, sealing it off. I powered my way back to the edge of the lake and watched as the gun changed again. This time it took the form of three separate 'rods' along the barrel, and I understood its name to be "Charge." That was promising, but put it away for now as my phone buzzed. It was Gretchen.

"I take it you were successful?" she asked.

"Yeah, just got it back to normal. Did the creature vanish?"

"Like it never was. Well, I mean the damage is still done, of course."

"Of course."

"But the creature, if you can even call it that, has vanished. You were right, it must have just been magically controlling water from Otherworld, as it saw a chance thanks to the inversion. Closing

it cut that off, so no more attacker. Good work. Not fast work, as we could have avoided the whole thing from the start-”

“Hey I was just following orders. You said to go with you, so I did.”

She sighed. “I guess that’s the case. We’ll clean up here and head back to the office. See you then.”

“Right, see you.”

Time to see what my new weapon form can do! Not looking forward to news reports tomorrow, but I guess that’s not my problem. We’re going to need some major spin doctors on this one, especially if better video footage of that water creature was taken than by that one guy we saw at the start. He wasn’t that close, so it could have been anything. Add it to the list of weird things happening around here, I guess. If this town hasn’t driven you off by now, I doubt this will do it. Now for you, van, let’s try not to hit anything on the way back, okay?

Chapter 22

We start our trek through the woods

Where: Gretchen's house

When: Two days later

I was being shaken awake. "Come on, we have to go," someone was saying.

"Huh?" I asked, the soul of wit and poise.

"There's an inversion, come on!"

"On our day off?"

"It doesn't care about that. Get up, we need to get over there, the place is already being swarmed."

"Fine. What time is it?"

"About five in the morning."

"It'll still be there in in two hours, right?"

"Come on!"

"Joking, I'm up, I'm up."

"I'll meet you downstairs."

I struggled into some clothes, shading my eyes against the light, and at least gave my hair a quick brushing. I put on Auseinander and headed downstairs, where Gretchen handed me a muffin and hustled me into the car.

"How bad it is?" I asked, fearing we had another fortress on our hands for all the rushing around she was doing.

"I got the alert from my night staff, and the humans have already found out about it and made their way there. I've alerted who I can but we're going to be short staffed because it's so early. They'll start tearing each other to pieces unless we get over there."

"More possessions?"

"Something like that. I don't have the full story, just a lot of chaos outside of town that sounds like it's up our alley."

"I guess we'll see when we get there."

"Right."

Riding in her car I thought about the last few days. I had tested my new weapon form, "Charge" and found it did charge up. It was another "hold the trigger down" form like Pierce, and when I did parts of the gun around the barrel floated into the air. When I released the trigger they shot forward, impacting whatever I aimed at and somehow returning to the gun barrel to do it again a few seconds later. They made quite the impact, I could blow a whole dummy apart with all three at once, they even seemed to make a small explosion when they landed. I could send one, two, or three of the "rods" around the barrel flying at once, depending on how long I held the trigger down. I was excited, but didn't rush off to try busting the wall down yet. I knew I might only get once chance, if I tried and blew it they might be moved and I would have to find them again. At least at the moment I knew they were nearby. So I asked Polaris about it that night.

"What do you think?" The gun was hanging in the air before them, and they were slowly turning it in the air looking at it from all angles.

"I believe the weapon is almost at full power."

"Almost? It can get better than this?"

"I still feel potential within it. Have a bit more patience and I think you will not be disappointed."

"Fine. Better to be sure, I guess."

“Indeed. In fact, if I may make a recommendation or two, make plans with Gretchen to leave for the site immediately after you gain the next weapon form. And do this while under protection magic so you cannot be scryed upon. Yes, this will be suspicious if you are being watched, but it is better than the alternative. You will want to negotiate from a position of strength, having already spirited away your parents. If you wait, or discuss your plans with anyone, your brother could be watching and you could break into an empty vault.”

“I agree. I wonder if there’s a room we can use that’s always protected? I’ll look into that.”

But of course there wasn’t, and as it had been the weekend and nymphs like Gretchen didn’t have protection magic, I hadn’t been able to bring it up. And here we were, heading to the next site. *I can’t chance this being the last one for a while, and not have the gun out. I have to absorb the energies or whatever the gun does to upgrade it. We’ll just have to hope for the best, that they won’t be any more prepared for me going over there at this hour than I was getting up this morning. With luck Dylan will get up on this ‘lazy Sunday’ and find I’ve already broken into his vault. Secured my parents, and hidden them behind anti-scrying magic until we can deal with him.*

Gretchen brought the car to a halt outside the city, after being waved down by a person I recognized as Aoife, the second in command at the office. We pulled off the road and cars zoomed by us, clearly heading towards the inversion. He ran over to us.

“Thank goodness I caught you,” he told us. “The inversion starts right behind the treeline there, but we can’t get close to it.”

“Why not?” Gretchen demanded.

“I’ve lost contact with all our agents that have gone in there,” he explained. “Something is happening to them.”

“Happening? What’s happening?”

“I don’t know, I lost contact with them like I said. I sent the last pair that come in with their phones on, so I could see what was happening in there. Once they got a bit further in they just started fighting over something and left the phones behind. Didn’t bother to turn them off, but of course they are now pointing at the ground. I couldn’t get any picture so I ended the call, in case you called me.”

“Fighting over something? Agents? That doesn’t sound good.”

“Can we get information another way? You can do a divination spell, see what you come up with.”

“I could. But there’s another way. Jesse, weren’t you studying astral projection?” The two turned to me.

“I’ve been able to do it a few times,” I admitted. “I’m no expert though.”

“Just being able to get near the place and give us a description of what’s going on would be helpful. Are you willing to try?”

“Sure, it can’t hurt.” *Not the greatest place to try a meditation ritual though. I’m cold, keyed up, and I’ve only just started learning the technique. I suppose I don’t have far to go though, I’m not trying to get into the astral plane, just see a bit more what’s over there. Let’s give it a try.*

Gretchen blew the ground off so at least I wouldn’t have to sit in the snow, and I sat down to try and relax. I steadied my breathing, wiggled around to try and get comfortable, and thought about Polaris. *Help me leave my body. We’ve done it before, you pulled me out I think. You do it all the time when I’m asleep, now I need to do it while I’m awake.* I imagined the form of Polaris before me, swirling light drawing me like a magnet out of my body. My perceptions changed, I no longer had eyes to close, it had worked. I hadn’t done more than simply fly about in the room for a moment and then come back to my body while practicing, so there wasn’t much there to see apart from myself and Budimir. But out here the area was alive with impressions, color, feelings, all of it jumbled together and hard to separate. I was in luck, I could “see” a line still, as the magic was still with me, and headed over to it. *I stay on this line and I can get into the wooded area there and follow it back. Maybe I don’t need*

to, maybe I can just 'wake up' again but I don't want to take any chances. Budimir said I still have a lot to learn about this and not to do anything stupid before we went together on a few trips. And here I am flying solo because I'm too poor to buy a drone like Herman has, which would have been the ideal way to do this without risking myself. So that's a thing. Let's head forward and see if I can tell anything. I shot forward, following the line into the trees, or what I assumed were trees because I felt age, and stubbornness, and sleepiness from a bunch of things before me where I remembered trees to be. Nothing here was really visible, like I said I didn't exactly have eyes anymore, but at the same time I could 'see' enough to get around. It was an odd sensation, one you needed a lot of practice interpreting to figure out what your eye would have been looking at. But we needed to know at least partly what we were dealing with so away I went. I didn't have to go far before the feelings around me changed. I felt figures running every which way, and great mirth up above. Around me was wealth, so much wealth I have never dreamed of such wealth. Before me was greed, jealousy, rage, paranoia, while above was happiness, mirth, a great time. Around me everything glittered, it wanted to be taken, held, adored. It called out to me. "Take me! Use me! Love me!" I backed out again and followed the line back to where my body was. I opened my eyes.

"Did it work?" Gretchen asked.

"I think so. I mean it worked, I left my body and felt around over there, but is it useful? I'm not so sure."

"Just tell us what you felt," Aoife pressed.

"I felt a lot of greed, and great riches, and someone was having the time of their lives life up in the trees."

"Ah," he said, thinking about it. "Greed, yes. That would explain it."

"What are you thinking?" Gretchen asked him.

"Unless I miss my guess, it could be a greed grove, fairly common in Otherworld," he explained. "Well, in the less reputable parts of Otherworld, that is."

"Greed... Grove?" we both asked.

"Yes. Natural law can be very different in Otherworld, as you travel from place to place. One such place is home to spirits of greed. The surroundings tend to take on expressions of greed as well, resulting in, to put it simply, forests of gold."

"Gold trees?" I asked.

"Gold trees, gold leaves, golden rocks, yes. The spirits of greed lure the unwary into their dens and cause them to fight over more riches than any one person could even carry anyway. I can sustain a protection spell on us three, allowing us to shrug off the effects of these spirits. We can then safely travel through the region and you can perform the sealing."

"You say safely," I clarified, "but at least four other agents are in there, correct?"

"Four that I know of, yes, some could have arrived before me."

"Plus an unknown number of humans."

"Yes, cars have been steadily pouring into the area, even this early. Once one person realized what they were seeing no doubt they alerted others, who alerted others. The effects are not very strong until you get some ways into a grove, so they would have had most of their facilities depending on the size of the inversion. And of course the effect intensifies the longer one stays, or if you are spotted by a spirit and they cast a mind spell on you directly."

One would think so soon after the mall incident that people in this area would know enough to stay away from the bizarre things that happen but people will be people. Maybe these are different people than before.

"What are you getting at?" Gretchen asked.

"I'm saying if they're all mad with greed, and we show up, they'll know what we're there to do. Shut it down. Plus you say fight, will they attack us on sight to protect 'their' riches? Even we humans can be dangerous you know. They may just attack on sight on principal if it's as bad as you say."

“Ah, you could be right. We would not want to serious injure anyone inside, they are simply victims of the greed spirits.” He stared at the forest beyond.

“No help for it,” Gretchen told him. “Put your spell on us and let’s get going.”

“Yes, quite.” He concentrated and nodded. “Done. But let me know if you feel any kind of madness come upon you, like you must have something. I will try to strengthen the spell with another casting.”

“I don’t know, that jacket of yours looks pretty nice,” I told him. “I kinda want it right now.”

“The effects have reached this far?” He looked panicked and took a step back.

I laughed. “I’m just joking, I don’t want your stupid jacket. Let’s go.”

“I’ll have you know I paid- never mind. Humans. Never know when to take them seriously. Be ready.”

Yeah, you say that but short of throwing them around, which can get them killed, my only other weapon is a gun. Which will get them killed. Maybe I should have taken some of those martial arts classes after all?

We headed into the trees, following the line I had discovered before, and walked only a few minutes before the scene changed. I had my phone out and the light turned on, I couldn’t see in the dark, and suddenly it reflected off of something in front of me. It was the inversion, part of Otherworld coming here, so like a curtain being parted we were suddenly among metallic trees. They had metallic bark, metallic leaves, and all around were metallic rocks. The whole place glittered, even in the pre-dawn gloom. I think this was helped by the other lights in the place, no doubt held by humans, darting this way and that through the trees ahead of us.

“You know,” I said to one one in particular, “one branch from here and my money problems are solved.”

“It is a fool’s gold,” Aoife warned me. “Away from here it would begin to revert to its normal state. Simple wood, in other words.”

“That figures,” I sighed. Then I stiffened. Someone not holding a light was coming out of the trees.

“It’s all mine!” they were screaming. “You can’t have a single leaf!”

I registered a huge shape, far bigger than a person would be, but that was it as all the light went out around me. I, and presumably the others, had just been plunged into absolute darkness. I could still perceive the figure, through Polaris at least knowing something big was there, and through Auseinander because it was just perceiving energy, not seeing it with my eyes exactly. I got the gun out, but held off shooting in that direction. We had just discussed not hurting anyone around here, had we not? I knew there were golden rocks and branches around here, I could throw one of them. If I could see it. I waited to see what the others would do.

“Darkness begone!” shouted Aoife, probably expecting a result. The darkness persisted. “Crap!”

“Always hated you, Aoife, you’re not getting my gold! It’s mine!” shouted the figure.

“Stand down, Eziquiel, that’s an order from me!” Gretchen shouted, though I felt a stirring of air as she did this. Maybe casting some kind of air spell? The figure didn’t go anywhere.

“You’ll have to do better than that!”

I can see him well enough, could I slam him down? That wouldn’t hurt him too much, would it? I slammed him with my power, driving him into the dirt below his feet.

“No!” he cried, only going down on one knee. “I won’t be denied my gold, it’s rightfully mine!”
Crap is right, maybe I should have flung him instead?

And then I had to dodge as a fireball (*it’s always a fireball!*) shot into the area. I felt the heat of it, believe me I knew what fireballs felt like by now, and hoped the others would be okay. I shifted myself with my power, hoping he couldn’t see into the area of darkness any more than we could see out of it. But suddenly I was out of it, so I guess he hadn’t made it that big? He seemed surprised to see me zipping out of it, and I figured, *you know what? It worked before.* I pushed myself into the air, then

slammed down again, doing whatever I had done in that ring of witches. He went flying backward away from me. *Nice!* “Come forward a few steps, the darkness isn’t that deep,” I told the others.

They emerged from it and I saw it vanish, he knew we had gotten out of it.

“Well done!” Aoife told me.

“Can you protect him from the spell like you did for us?”

“I can try to knock it off him, that’s *Spellbreaking!*” he cried, pointing at Eziquiel.

We all paused to see if it had worked.

He got up.

“It’s all mine!” he screamed.

“Crap. Spellbreaking!”

He stopped. “Huh? What am I doing?” he asked, looking around.

We relaxed. “Shrink down, Eziquiel,” commanded Gretchen.

He did, becoming his normal size. “Sure boss. Hey, neat the trees around here look like they’re sold gold! Didn’t I read something about that? That rock would set me up nicely actually.”

“Just get out of here,” she told him. “Before you get caught up by the greed aura in this area again. Actually, Jesse, look around you should be able to spot any spirits by their energy. You see anything?”

I took a quick look. “Nothing near us.”

“Okay, so hopefully he won’t be targeted by mind magic and can maintain his focus on leaving. Head out that way, we’re taking care of this.”

“Right boss. Sorry if I attacked you or something. I don’t know what came over me!”

“Never mind that, go.”

“I’m going.” He went.

“Nice, getting him on the ground like that,” Gretchen told me. “You though,” he turned to Aoife, “need to put more oomph into your spells.”

“I have no idea how many of my former colleges I’m going to have to go through this morning,” he protested. “Very bad to be exhausted after two giving spells my all when there may be six or seven in here. Not to mention any humans. I put everything I had into our protection spell so we’re not fighting each other in here. I can only do that a few more times.”

“I guess. Come on, let’s see what’s next in this place. Jesse, you keep an eye on the treetops, I don’t want any spirits getting the drop on us.”

“Isn’t that what the protection spell is for?” I asked. “Or can they do other things?”

“The protection is for the general miasma of greed that always surrounds a place like this,” Aoife explained as we moved on. “Several spirits working together to affect our minds could do it.”

“Great. I’ll keep an eye out.”

We headed deeper into the forest but like sharks in the water, our scuffle had attracted two others, both screaming about this place being theirs. *It’s going to be a long morning.*

We tensed up, but nothing came at us out of the trees. But something else did; a scream of agony. *Whoops? Two people coming towards us and deciding to take care of the other one first?* We shared a look and plunged further in. There between some trees was a fox with six tails, ripping into a human who was screaming and trying to fight them off.

“Han-Gyeol, no!” Gretchen shouted, making a throwing motion with her hands. His tails fluttered in the wind, but he gripped in with his claws and didn’t go anywhere.

“It will all be mine, this forest, the power of magic, everything!” he announced. “You can’t stop me, no one can stop me!”

“Oh Han-Gyeol, what have you done,” she muttered.

Something bad I take it? That lady is still alive though so isn't there hope? Well wind didn't work let's see if mine will. I gestured and willed Han-Gyeol to be thrown, but again the fox didn't go anywhere.

Gretchen tried the opposite approach then, slamming the ground with her hands and causing roots and branches, probably gold, to pour out of the ground around them to ensnare him. He dodged to the side, laughing. "All mine!"

"Spellbreaking!" cried Aoife.

Han-Gyeol seemed to come back to himself. "What? What's going on? Oh no, what have I done?"

"Are you yourself again?" Gretchen asked.

"I'll never be myself again," he told us sadly. "Just kill me. Jesse, shoot me with your gun, I beg of you!"

"What? No, I'm not shooting you." I held the gun up and away from him.

"But I've consumed human flesh! You don't understand!"

And so gotten a taste for it and nothing else will ever do? Come on... "She'll be fine, let us through and we'll heal her."

"No, I won't live like this!" he insisted. "I'm sorry to make you do it, but it's the only way. They can explain later. You have to kill me!" He rushed me.

"Crap!" I lashed out with my power, and now that he wasn't digging in with his claws he flew sideways, impacting a tree and going limp. "Oh no, did I accidentally kill him? Wait, no, I see his energy he's alive. Whew."

"This day extracts a heavy price," Aoife told us sadly. "I'll see to the lady."

She was gibbering about all of this being hers, despite being wounded, and one "Spellbreaking" later she too snapped out of it and started going on about the fact she was wounded.

"Yes, what are we going to do with these two?" I asked.

"We leave them," Gretchen told us. "We can't spare any time."

Aoife glared at her, but nodded after a second.

"Wait, you're going along with this?" I asked.

"No choice. Neither of you can counteract the magic of this place, and we can't turn around now. Gretchen can't carry one of them out of here, much less both. We'll have to come back once the inversion is taken care of."

"You're leaving me here?" the woman screamed. "What if that thing wakes up again?" She pointed to Han-Gyeol.

"Sleep," Aoife told her. She dropped unconscious. "Let's go."

I didn't like it, but she was right. We had to move on, but there was something I had to know first. "What did he mean? What's so serious about what happened back there?"

She sighed. "A kitsune that eats a human *changes*. Their skill with sorcery expands but they can only eat humans after that. And they have to steal energy from humans too, in order to power their magic. In the bedroom, if you get my drift. He's lasted so long only to have this happen. It's truly a tragedy. Han-Gyeol has become a true monster."

"Oh." I wasn't sure what else to say to that. "Too bad you don't have, like, a time stone, you could rewind his body to before he ate that lady. I mean do it quickly enough and-"

I found myself being grabbed up in a hug. "Jesse, you're amazing! I could kiss you!"

"Oh, well, I mean I've never really been, by a girl, you know, but you're a nymph so..."

"Not hearing a no!!" She kissed me.

When she finally let me go she was smiling and I was swooning a bit. *So that's what three hundred years of practice will do for that. Good to know.* "Wow. What was that for?"

"You solved his problem!"

"You mean that would work?"

“I believe so. I know someone who very carefully studies time magic. That wouldn’t cause any paradoxes or anything, it’s just targeting him. I’ll take him to see the man right after this, oh I’m sure that’ll work! It’s a cure, he won’t have to live like an animal.”

“I hope so.” *Could you cure his wounds like that too, just rewinding him back to-*

“Incoming!” shouted Aoife.

Now what?

Chapter 23

I finish up in the forest

Where: Still not far into the greed grove

When: Just after the kiss

Five people burst from the trees, it looked like a family with three kids. All of them were laden with gold, the youngest so much they could hardly walk. Gold rocks, gold branches, and I saw a trail of golden leaves from behind them they must not have noticed.

“It’s all ours,” shouted the man. “You can’t lay a finger on any of it!”

“Aoife, if you would be so kind?” Gretchen told him, gesturing to the people.

“They won’t attack us,” he decided. “They would drop their gold. Let’s just go, I can’t take care of every human we run across. I need to save my strength for those who are actually dangerous.”

“A wise precaution,” said a voice above us. We looked up, and floating down towards us was Margarita. Air was swirling around her, we could feel it whipping up as she came down, and her hair was flying every which way. “As was not picking up anything from *my* forest. These others, however, were not so fortunate. You, humans, lay that stuff down and you can go. Otherwise...” She raised a hand.

“No, it’s ours!” said the man again, holding his horded gains away from her. “You can’t have any of it.”

“Margarita, stop this at once!” shouted Gretchen.

“I don’t need you anymore,” she sneered. “I have this place. It’s all mine, I’ll live like a queen.”

In a drafty old castle without any running water, TV, the internet, and full of mice and other vermin? And not the helpful, singing, dress making kind either. No thanks.

“It’s not yours, it’s ours,” shouted the woman.

“Insolence!” Margarita made a slashing motion with her hand, and Gretchen threw both her hands up. Air clashed above us, but Margarita’s spell overpowered Gretchen’s, tearing at our clothes. Air tore my coat in several places, and I felt pain from my side and my left arm. I snarled, but didn’t want to shoot her down. Instead I reached with my power towards one of the rocks the family was carrying, a large one, and yanked it away from them. It hovered a second by my side and I chucked it at her. I tried to hold back, I didn’t want it tearing through her after all, and she dodged to the side. The air around her must have helped, the path of the rock bent enough that it missed her.

“I’ll try and negate that,” Gretchen told me. She made a gesture with her hand, opposite the way the wind was blowing. Nothing seemed to happen. “That didn’t work,” she admitted.

“Spellbreaking!” cried Aoife, pointing at her. Again, nothing seemed to happen. “She’s too far away,” he called. “Can you get her down here?”

He was looking at me, so I nodded. “I’ll try.” I wanted her down here, and this time I wasn’t holding back. She gave a cry and slammed into the dirt.

“Great!”

But Margarita lifted her head. “Defend me.”

“Of course,” Aoife agreed, then looked at us and snarled. “How dare you hurt her!”

Oh great. But then I had to throw the man back, he was running up with a rock in his hand ready to smash Margarita’s head in. I threw him back, or at least I tried to, again I didn’t want to kill him. I winced, that blade of air that had cut me was bothering me and he had no such desire to be gentle with us. He pushed through it, making Margarita have to roll out of the way on her own. Now her air defense spell worked against her, it was trying to tear up the ground as clearly it was designed to be a sort of shield while in the air. She didn’t manage to roll away and there was a sickening thunk as he bashed her skull.

“Fire- what?” Aoife almost roasted us, blinking. “What just happened?”

Meanwhile Gretchen saw the spray of blood from Margarita and her face twisted. “Get away from her, human!” She gestured, and air rushed past her. It slammed into the guy, sending him spinning away from her, and he landed in a heap.

The rest of the family screamed and greed magic or not, panicked and headed back into the trees.

“Oh no,” Gretchen swore. “Now look what you made me do.”

“I almost fireballed you,” Aoife told us. “She made me do it. I knew it was your weakness Jesse so I was-”

“Just start them healing,” Gretchen commanded. “I’ll try and stop her bleeding at least.” She gestured and vines started wrapping themselves around Margarita’s head. I at least could see she was still alive, and the leaves that were growing on the vines should help stop the bleeding. The man on the other hand was in much worse shape. His one arm was at a terrible angle, his left leg was torn up, and his jacket was exploded apart at the chest. Aoife went to cast on Margarita and then looked the man over.

“It’s pretty bad, Gretchen. He needs a hospital and he’ll probably lose the arm in any case.”

“Just do what you can.”

“Of course.” He concentrated as she stood there looking down at Margarita. I felt a lot of guilt from her, anger at herself, and frustration in general. What could I say to all that? Not much, so I just checked for energy signatures in the trees to make sure no greed spirits were nearby. I was pretty sure I saw some faint indications in the distance but they were staying out of sight.

“I’ve done what I can,” Aoife told us. “But I’m not good for much more, Gretchen.”

He had propped the man up against a tree, and Gretchen had done the same for Margarita. Both were out cold, but hopefully not in danger of dying if we took care of this quickly. *They could freeze to death pretty fast after all. It’s cold out here and we don’t have anything to cover them with. At least Han-Gyeol had fur.*

“I get it. Jesse, you’re bleeding!” She ran to my side and spread my jacket where I had been sliced.

“Don’t worry about it for now,” I told her. “It’s not too bad.”

“Not too bad? Are you kidding, you’re just a human, you don’t heal like we do. Plus your jacket it ruined, and you just bought that!”

“Yes, I remember,” I told her dryly. I noticed she had taken a couple of hits as well, as had Aoife, he had a cut on his head that looked pretty bad. None of us had come out of that without a scratch, though it was nice she was thinking of me. “I can get some healing once this is over. Come on, the line runs this way.”

“I guess you’ll have to. Crap, was that from her attack, the one I didn’t deflect completely?”

“Could have been anything, who knows.”

She sighed and looked away. “I was, wasn’t it? I’m sorry. This whole thing is my fault.”

And I thought her mood couldn’t get any more black. And so soon after she felt happy enough to be kissing me. Wait, was Polaris enhancing that, making me feel what she was feeling so our two feelings got all tangled up and... Focus Jesse. “Come on,” I told her, taking her chin in my hand and raising it. “These inversions are random. It’s just our bad luck to get something like this stupid grove. I thought the demons would be the worst, but I was wrong. We’ll work through it, pick up the pieces, and go from there. So far no one has died so let’s just go and keep it that way.”

“Fine, you’re right. Take point, and just shoot anything that comes at us in the legs. We have to get rid of this inversion as quickly as possible.”

I’m not sure I could shoot a little kid, even in the leg. “Sure,” I told her. “Right in the crotch.” I pointed at Aoife’s crotch and made a finger shooting motion with my left hand. I wasn’t going to use the actual gun in my right hand, gun safety is the most important thing, kids.

“I said the leg, not in the di-” She looked at me, I was grinning and trying not to laugh. “Oh, you’re terrible,” she moaned, shaking her head. I felt she felt a little better though. “Come on.”

We headed deeper into the forest following the line and didn’t have much further to go before I noticed a lot of activity ahead of us. I gestured to the others who stopped, and we flattened ourselves against some trees. There was a clearing ahead, and peeking around the tree I saw a figure standing there. I couldn’t make them out, it was too dark, but I did see the energy of several floating things. They were in a circle around the convergence, I could easily tell that much.

“It’s Swani,” hissed Gretchen. “What’s she doing over there?”

“Swani?” *The lady that made sure the gun wasn’t stealing my soul?* “Is she dangerous?”

“All magic is dangerous,” Aoife told us. “What’s she doing over there? I can’t see her from my angle.”

“Just standing there.”

“She’s got a bunch of spirits with her,” I told them. “They’re guarding the convergence.”

“So shoot her in the legs, we’ll handle the spirits,” Gretchen told me. “Go for the convergence and get it closed. We’ll cover you.”

“Okay.” *I can’t use the slam attack against spirits, I guess. Hopefully it won’t come to me shooting her either.* I looked down, as I hadn’t specified any other form the gun was still in “Grip” form, which would allow me the most controlled shots while still being fairly fast.

“Let’s go.”

We all stepped out together, and this was our first mistake. There was a flash, and a ball of light flew from all three of our chests. This was absorbed into Swani, who stretched and shivered. She glowed brighter, while Gretchen nearly stumbled, and Aoife went down like a brick, simply falling forward on his face. I didn’t feel all that different though. *What just happened? Did she just absorb our energies?*

“Ah, there you are,” Swani told me. “One out of three? Not bad. I doubt you’re worth much more, Gretchen. Turn around and leave, I’ve dropped the spell, you can go back the way you came safely. Then I won’t have to hurt you.”

“What are you doing?” she demanded. She was steadying herself on a tree.

“Protecting what’s mine,” Swani answered lightly. “I knew you would get Jesse here to seal this inversion. So I headed here and set that trap. Once I take care of her this inversion will stay, and it will be all mine.”

“You know it’ll go away eventually.”

“If it can be forced to go away, it can be forced to stay here,” she told us. “Simple logic. I’m sure someone can figure it out before its gone.”

“You’re being manipulated by those spirits. You know that!”

“My friends here? No, they just opened my eyes. We’re working together, they would like to stay here too. They told me so. They’re so friendly.”

“They are not your friends, we are!”

“Oh really?”

“Of course we... were.” A strange gleam had come into Gretchen’s eyes. “But now all of this is *mine!*”

“No, it’s mine!” Swani told her, making a yanking gesture. Again light flew from Gretchen’s chest into Swani, and she gave a small cry and toppled over. “I told you. Now, what do you have to say about all this?” she asked, looking at me.

What just happened? Why did she- we were protected by Aoife’s magic, and he went unconscious. “I... Want it all... For myself,” I told her. *Come on, fight it!* I could feel the magic in the air now. This close to the middle, and several of the greed spirits floated there. *Have to close it fast, before they get hold of me.* I raised the gun.

“Spirits, protect me!” she shouted, and the spirits in the area rushed before her. I honestly couldn’t really make them out, it was too dark and their inner energies didn’t give them much shape. But it didn’t matter, as suddenly it seemed like a riot of color like a wall sprang up between us. I squinted but couldn’t see past it. *What in the world magic is this?* I also felt myself about to be thrown with telekinetic magic, but I held myself in place with my own power. *So she can move things like I can, drain energy, what else? I don’t want to shoot her but I need time, it takes time to seal the inversion away.* I saw one of the spirits shoot past the “barrier” of color and into a tree next to me, but figured I could worry about that in a second as a ghostly voice was trying to convince me to shoot myself. My arm started to pull back, but I steadied it. *No.* The only spirit I could see was the one that moved past the “wall” and into the tree, so I shot it. I could see the spirit inside the tree, that was no problem, so I just aimed and wanted the gun to hit it. The light went out. *One down, four to go.* I then had to dodge a rock that came at me, so I took that opportunity to shove myself forward, hoping it wasn’t a physical barrier of some kind and I was about to smash into it. I plunged through it, and Swani’s eyes went wide as she tried to dodge away from me. She didn’t manage it, so while I didn’t intend for this (wasn’t that always the way?) we smashed into each other.

“Get off me!” she cried.

“No” I shouted back. “It’s mine! It’s all mine!” And I pushed the barrel of the gun against her and pulled the trigger. She cried out as she got slammed with a shot. And then she went still as I pulled it again. I rose up using my power, the spirits now around me.

“Yes,” they whispered to me. “It can all be yours.”

“All of it,” they told me. “This place. Magic. Anything you want.”

“You should have it,” they told me.

“You’re worthy of it.”

“I am worthy of it,” I told them. “I’ll go hunt down the others. Yes. In fact, I better start with these two.” I touched the ground again and held the gun up to shoot Aoife. He could ‘fix’ me, put me back to the way I was. The me without clarity. Without my friends the spirits all around me. I had the power, I was stronger and had better magic than any of them. Now I would have wealth too, all that I needed. I could build a huge house for my parents, and-

My parents.

Suddenly I felt and could almost see Polaris in the air before me. A burst of light and swirling energy seemed to surround me. Together we *pushed*, and my mind cleared. What had I done? But there was no time for that. I rushed to the convergence, and the spirits tried to stop me. More colors, walls, and magic assaulted me, but I knew that wasn’t real, it was just illusion. I raised my hand and forced power into myself, to keep me moving forward against the push of the barrier I was trying to move. I was in the line, energy was flowing into Auseinander to help me, and with a final effort I slammed my hand down on the lines. The golden trees around me vanished, to be replaced with normal ones.

It was over.

But now I had a new problem. Gretchen and Aoife were still unconscious, Swani had been shot, by me, and was probably dying. Who did I call? *Archie. He must be around somewhere.*

“Archie?”

“Jesse? Where are you, did you get the alert too?”

“I’m out in the forest, I have no idea how to tell you where. But you have to get here fast, it’s bad. Really bad.”

“Calm down, where’s Gretchen, shouldn’t she be with you?”

“She’s down. So is Aoife. I shot Swani, we need someone to rewind time for Han-Gyeol because he ate somebody-”

“Ate somebody?”

“There are humans here, Margarita got hit in the head with a rock, she’s probably dead-”

“Holy crap, Jesse, what happened there?”

“Just get here! I’ll try and signal you.”

“Okay, I’m near the forest now, there’s a ton of cars here and some humans are wandering around.”

“Just tell them to go home. Or better yet ignore them, you have to get here.”

“Where is here? How are you going to signal me, exactly?”

“Crap, if only you could get-” I patted my hip. “Uh.”

“What? I think you cut out there.”

“Find Gretchen’s car, I left Wayfinder behind like an idiot. I forgot it. Use it to find me.”

“Right. Find Gretchen’s car.”

“That’s what I said.”

“I was telling Emmett. I know there’s dozens of cars here, just look!”

There was a few moments of silence as they were looking around. “We found it, but it’s locked.”

“So bust the window, you have to get here.”

“I suppose so.” I heard breaking glass and he opened the door. “I got it.”

“Okay, are there others with you? You’re going to have to retrace our steps and help all the people we beat up to get in here.” I paused. “There will be several.”

“Beat up?”

“Just do it, okay, I’ll explain later.”

“I’ll see who I can find.”

And so over the course of the next hour we got things sorted out. We flushed everyone out of the forest, most complaining that their gold had vanished, not that it had been gold in the first place but we couldn’t tell them that. Agents carried the unconscious people out of the place, and there were a fair number of humans as well as the non-humans we had run into on our way in. Wayfinder proved invaluable, it could home in on the nearest person in trouble so we didn’t have to comb the whole place and just hope we didn’t miss anyone, and by the time it was getting lighter the sword didn’t vibrate anymore, so we had clearly found them all. Someone got Gretchen on her feet, and she called her wizard friend who came out and rewound time for the woman and Han-Gyeol, leaving them both very confused as they lost their memories of the rewind time as well as their wounds. As far as time was concerned, those events hadn’t happened for them. (The wizard said it was good they had stayed there, and it was a small area with only those two. There would likely be no temporal reproductions to this, and I dreaded what he could mean by *that* little statement.) We didn’t tell them exactly what had happened, figuring it best to just leave it at that. Han-Gyeol may have guessed, but didn’t press the issue. I also had thanked Polaris for the help, they had previously said they could easily know what I was thinking, it was only detrimental to me to let me know what they were thinking. I knew I would talk to them tonight, ask what they had done to help me. But I had bigger concerns at the moment.

“You really came through for us this time, Jesse,” Gretchen told me as the last of the humans were leaving. “Thanks.”

“Just doing my job. But if you wanted to give me a more tangible reward...”

“You want a raise?”

“Screw that.” I raised the gun, in the form it had taken after I closed this latest inversion. This form was called “Surge” and looked like a stubby pistol with a square block floating in front of the barrel. I had no idea what it was going to do, but if it was better than “Charge” we were ready. “Let’s go get my parents.”

Chapter 24

I confront my brother's demons (demon, in this case)

Where: The forest

When: No time has passed

"Can't it wait?" Gretchen asked. "This isn't a great time for you to be running off. We still have a lot of damage control to do around here."

"No, it can't. I've been trying to find them for over fourteen years. This is the key that takes that wall down." I shook the gun at her.

"You'll be basically on your own," she cautioned. "I'm wiped out. I can barely keep my eyes open. I got some energy to wake me up, but I'm still exhausted. I'm afraid I'll totally flub any magic I try to do. And I can't send too many agents with you, both because this is technically a personal project of yours, and because of what we just all went through. We're all out of it."

I suppose because it's just two people that would qualify as a personal project. She's not wrong. But it's fine, I'll do it alone if I have to. "I just need to go in and get them. Bring them to Excellus, my brother wouldn't be foolish enough to attack the place in broad daylight. I can't risk his moving them, I've closed two inversions since he came to see me. He's going to realize I'm not his 'his friend's' side. Then we can discuss what we're going to do about him."

"We'll go," Archie told her. "We were there at the beginning, we should see it through to the end. And we got here late, we didn't get into the forest so we're still fresh."

"You know she still owes me some pants," Emmett told him. He got a scowl in return. "Okay, okay, fine, we'll help the lady out. Despite the fact she'll just owe us more."

"Thanks," I told them. "I'll take you both out to dinn- wait..."

Gretchen shook her head. "I advise against this, but if you're dead set on going, I wish you luck. I hope your parents are okay."

"He wanted to protect them, so I have to assume they are. I'll meet you at the office, you're going there now right?"

"If I don't crash my car on the way by falling asleep, yeah. We have so much spin to do because so many people were out here. We have to start now."

Or you could just tell people the truth! rang in my mind, from a certain blue genie. "Right. You two ready?"

"Get patched up first," Emmett told me. "I'm not saying I would go nuts with all that blood you're leaking out, but better safe than sorry. I do get thirsty and it seems like a terrible waste from my point of view."

"Fine."

I got bandaged up, some healing magic, and some painkillers. I gave Wayfinder to Gretchen, no sense getting that anywhere near my brother as I had told him about "a sword" and didn't want him any more curious. *Of course if they've really been watching me somehow they probably did know about it.* Then we piled into Archie's car and headed to the site where the wall was. I tried to keep calm, but I was finally going to rescue my parents! He couldn't get there fast enough, and after about a week of driving we finally pulled off the road at the familiar spot we used as a jumping off point. We made our way to the site, it was finally getting light enough for me to see though it was still overcast with a light snowfall. The water was frozen, so we carefully made our way into the cave and I flicked on a flashlight.

"While we were driving I was accessing the records that were made while we were still studying this place," Emmett told us. "There were some notes about how they tried to bring it down, and where we should probably attack too. There are some weak points."

Is that what he was doing? I didn't even think of that, that there would even be notes made. I'm thinking too narrowly, have to stay on my toes for all this. "What exactly should we do?"

"The researchers theorized that any attack must target at least three points across all three layers of reality simultaneously. That's because the barrier exists in all three at this spot, and they somehow reinforce each other. There is the one spot you already know about, that is directly in line with the lay line, and another two 'keystone' points that, if taken out, should allow the wall to be taken down."

"Hopefully they provided some kind of a picture?" Archie asked.

"I think they're marked."

"But all that is irrelevant," I protested. "I can hit things in at least the astral, we know that for sure. But I'm still only one person. How am I supposed to hit these three points at once? Charge could hit them one after another but I'd have to get the timing on them exactly right. We might be wasting our time here."

"You've never tried your latest form though, right?" Archie asked.

"No," I admitted. "But I don't see how it's going to help."

"Just have a little faith."

This has been all connected. I can't see Mom Polaris foreseeing enough to give me the gun and not make it what I need in the end. So he's right, this must be the thing I need.

We reached the wall and looked it over, finding the three points the researchers said we should focus on. They were in an inverted triangle with the bottom point the lay line brick. I got out Surge. "Here goes, I guess?" I told them. "Be ready for my brother to show up, by the way. He can do magic, so be careful of him."

"Now she tells us," Emmett complained. "I'm ready."

"Go for it," Archie told me, shifting into his scaled form. *He could have taken his clothes off, if he wanted to be something bigger and nastier. I wouldn't mind.*

"Right." I aimed with both hands, and pulled the trigger, wondering what would happen. Part of the cube flew off and stuck to the wall, right on the brick. I carefully looked at the remaining block, now 2/3 the size, it seemed there was a shining, glowing part in the middle. The same glowing middle part showed on the "projectile" I had just fired.

"Look like a third came off," Archie remarked.

"Convenient, that," Emmett agreed.

"So, what, this is a grenade launcher form?" I asked.

"If so maybe we should stand further back?" Archie decided. Both moved away, and I went with them. *It may hurt me if it explodes, this isn't exactly the same as the other forms. I've already hit the thing I wanted to hit, and primed the explosive, if that's what it is. Shards of brick could hit me too.* I sighted the second and then third bricks, and the centers of the "projectiles" began to flash.

"Yeah, they're going to blow, get back!" I told them. It wasn't easy, the ice was fairly slippery but we got back a bit as the explosion went off. When the dust cleared there was a jagged hole in the wall, entering into darkness. I glanced at the gun, counting five seconds for the blocks in front of the barrel to reform. This clearly showed the structure of the shape, rebuilding itself in layers and showing the glowing center piece well.

"I guess we know what it does now," Emmett remarked. "But even I can't see anything beyond. That's one dark chamber."

"It worked though," Archie allowed. "It really hit all three points, in all three realities at once. What an amazing thing."

"I'll go through first," I told them. "Shatter." The gun changed and I held it out. The flashlight was in my other hand. "Let's go get my parents."

"Right," said the other two. We stepped up to the hole and I stepped through.

I blinked my eyes against the sudden “light” and looked around. “What the?” This was clearly the astral, basically a white nothingness and a large platform of black “rock” to stand on. I swung the gun left and right, but I was alone. “It’s safe to come through,” I called back. There was no answer. I risked a glance behind me. More astral. Somehow I had been deposited at one of the edges, but there was no door or portal of any kind on this side. And given the others were not appearing, something was going on to prevent them getting here. *Great, how do I get out afterwards?* Leaving that for the moment I headed forward, there was something in the middle of this block. I clicked the flashlight off and set it down, taking the gun in both hands. I didn’t need it now, I could see just fine. Or could I? As I moved it was like more of the space was revealed, this platform wasn’t flat. At the edges were “towers” or at least protrusions and there was something up there. I couldn’t quite make it out they were too high, but something up there was sending a beam of energy towards the center of the platform. Reaching it I gasped and put my back to it, crouching low, swinging the gun around again. Nothing. *That would have been the perfect time for an ambush so you missed it.* I carefully stood again, looking over what was in the center of the space. *My parents.* They were laying on a table of some sort, eyes closed, and were surrounded by a field of green energy. This energy was being fed by the four pillars, which in turn was being fed by lay lines meaning the space where my parents were was a convergence. I was feeling a slight resistance on my left hand, and realized it must also be an inversion point. But this barrier of energy was in the way, and I had no idea what it was going to do to me if I touched it. There wasn’t much to hit it with around here so I tentatively hit it with the butt of the gun. It didn’t make a sound, but my hand stopped. “What is it?”

“It’s time,” said a voice, and I spun. As expected there were now several people there, not that I would call them all “people.” The humans were dressed in gray robes, and they had hoods up. They were arranged in a semi-circle behind the two figures in front. The one that did not have his hood up was my brother, who looked disappointed. He stood side by side with a large creature with a bony face, wings, and a staff of some kind in one hand. *Demon. The one who found him, maybe?* It was a gnarled branch with a glowing crystal at the top, and I couldn’t help but think *yeah, shoot the glowing bit first.* The gun shifted to the Pierce configuration, making me realize that, of course it responded to my will, not my talking to it. *What a dummy I am.*

“Time for you to put an end to my meddling, is that it?” I asked. *That form should take the crystal out in one hit, if he gives me the time to charge it up.*

“Something like that,” said the demon, smiling to show the jagged teeth and long tongue in his mouth. “But he was directly answering your question.”

“It’s time,” my brother said again. “My friend made sure nothing would ever threaten them again. Even old age. Is it not magnificent? Only he could have done it.”

“Uh huh.” I hadn’t taken my eyes off the big guy. *Who knows what he can do?* “Does your friend here have a name?”

“In your limited symbology I am known as Thahiss.” He gave a small bow. “So nice to meet my friend’s sister in the flesh at last.”

“The pleasure is all mine. So, you’ve been watching over my brother for the last fourteen years?”

“I like to think of it as both of us learning from the other. A partnership.”

“Don’t be so modest, my friend,” Dylan told him. “You taught me far more than I ever taught you. Yes, he’s the one. He’s been by my side ever since that night, fourteen years ago. He never stopped caring about me.”

“Now, now, Dylan,” said the demon patiently. “She explained that, didn’t she? That Deogen, he may have simply taken more of her that night than you. Or she was hit harder by it. You can’t fault her for that, or the crowd she fell into after you were separated.”

“You’re right, Thahiss. I should strive to be more forgiving, like you.”

“It will take time, I have lived many human lifetimes. Don’t be too hard on yourself. You have me here to remind you of these things.”

“I do. You’ve done so much for me. I can’t ever thank you enough.”

“Nonsense. You do much for me in the human world, it isn’t a contest. You have more than repaid me.”

What in the nine Hells is going on right now? “Get a room you two! Now are you going to let me take my parents or not?” I know a great motel, may not be in the world, perfect for a demon/human tryst to take place.

“Take them? Are you crazy?” my brother scoffed. “Do you know how dangerous it is out there? Disease, and civil unrest, and financial uncertainty, and bad sequels to movies. You can’t put them through all that!”

“And laying here in this cave or whatever is better? Where they don’t get to experience life at all, so why even bother being- Where are we, by the way?”

“Hoping your friends will be able to help you?” the demon asked. “Friends are important, it’s true. But I thought talking to you alone would prevent any misunderstandings or hasty behavior. No, the entrance to this place was sealed up again after you passed the doorway. We’re still in the same place. They won’t be able to join you.”

Because the sword pointed here. Right. “So it is another inversion?” My eyes went to the four pillars. I’ll have to take all of them out, whatever is up there making this bubble. Then come down on it and seal the inversion off. Can I do that, with all these forces against me?

“I consider them a joining,” the demon replied. “This one was the first.”

“We kept it here,” Dylan bragged. “Thahiss did, I mean, I don’t want to imply I was taking any credit for his work, obviously.”

“Thank you for clarifying that, friend. She might have been confused about that statement, so it’s good you corrected yourself. But yes, that is exactly what I have done. In the hope of bringing our two worlds closer together I have allowed this one to remain open. Thus does the dome of anti-time serve a dual purpose; keeping your parents safe from even the ravages of age, and keeping this inversion in place.”

So they haven’t aged? In fourteen years? They won’t recall the time they’ve lost? They’ll just wake up to me being grown up, and their house having burned down even though they remember it being there today? “So, I close this one,” my eyes flicked behind me, “and no more inversions?”

“Don’t be selfish,” Dylan told me angrily. “We should be one world!”

“Oh really?” I spat back. “Did you watch the last two ‘joinings’ as your friend puts it? A spirit went nuts and almost trashed the town, and then a ‘greed grove’ showed up and we all almost killed each other trying to claim ‘riches’ that didn’t even exist! How can you say these joinings are so great after all that?”

“That’s such a small part, you don’t-” Dylan seemed genuinely angry.

“Calm yourself, Dylan,” said the demon gently. He laid a clawed hand on Dylan’s shoulder. “She doesn’t know. She has a skewed perspective because of the company she keeps. It’s not her fault. And she hasn’t traveled as you and I have, seeing the sights.”

He took a deep breath. “Of course. Can you explain it to her? I will work to calm myself.”

“Just relax, my fiend, mastery of the self is within reach at all times. Also, I would be glad to explain, thank you very much for asking me. I will humbly attempt what explanation I can.” *Gag me. Now, please. Or better yet gag him.* “Jesse, may I call you Jesse? We haven’t been formally introduced... No matter. Jesse, I agree that some places in Otherworld are quite strange, to the untrained human eye. And I agree, there would be an adjustment period on both sides once the worlds were brought together. It’s nothing that couldn’t be done. Even now, in your human cities, there are many dangers. You still stay in them, and hardly give those dangers any thought, because you are familiar with them. You know not to wander into the street where the cars are. You know not to travel

alone. You know to avoid areas of construction. Once familiar with the dangers of the new combined world, life would return to normal and all would be well.”

“Be well?” I echoed.

“Indeed! There are just as many wonderful places as dangerous ones I wish you could see! Magical meadows of flowers and unicorns. Great caves full of singing crystals that harmonize with the rising sun. Rivers that flow with sparkling water, that make you feel more alive with a single sip. And so much more. It’s all here, just out of reach of humanity, and we have a chance to share that with you. Would you really stand in the way of all that?”

“That all sounds wonderful,” I admitted. *But it comes with all the bad, like where you guys live. And that’s what you’re really after, isn’t it? Easier access to this side, to do whatever it is that you want.*

“It is!” Dylan beamed. “Come with us, we can show you! Join us, and we won’t have to hurt you.”

“It *sounds* wonderful,” I emphasized, raising a hand. “There’s just one thing that keeps me from believing you.”

“It’s the tail, isn’t it?” the demon lamented. “I so wish I could have gotten a nicer looking tail...”

“I love your tail,” Dylan told him. “And your wings, and the strength of your arms...”

“You’re too kind. But could you see me with a cute, fluffy tail? Like a bunny, or a-”

“It’s the mirth,” I interrupted, before they started making out or whatever.

“Mirth?” both echoed.

“Yeah. Chuckles here,” I indicated the demon, “is about to bust a gut laughing, he’s enjoying himself so much. He doesn’t feel pride in you, Dylan, he feels contempt. And every time he has to pretend to be nice it feels like he wants to crush your head.”

“I never!” the demon claimed, somehow feeling even more amused. He put a hand on his chest as if to protest his great innocence. “I am the soul of openness. I wear my heart on my sleeve, you know. I’m an open book, ask anyone.”

“How would you even know that?” Dylan demanded. “You don’t have magic.”

“There are ways though,” he admitted, looking me over. “I had suspected, of course. But I could never quite tell, scrying magic being what it is. Looking at you now though, it’s clear.”

“What is it, Thahiss?”

“Someone cheated with her. Didn’t they? Who was it? Exothirmisil? Or perhaps Dermothynamics? They’re always trying to get in touch with feelings.”

“I have no idea who those people are,” I admitted.

“She’s telling the truth?” Dylan demanded.

“Oh, no, that’s just part of the deception,” he assured Dylan. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s possible she can sense our feelings, and more besides. Someone was naughty, I’m sure of that. It isn’t magic, this is something else. As for *what* she’s feeling; I’m sure it’s only my deep respect for you. She’s just making things up to try and drive us apart. Chuckles indeed.”

“It will take more than that!”

“Well said, my friend! Our unity is our strength!”

You know what? Screw this. I gathered my will and threw the big guy back, hoping to smash him into his followers. He was caught completely off guard and barreled into them with a shout. I jumped into the air, pulling the trigger on the gun to charge it up. The fight was on!

Chapter 25

My final battle to free my parents

Where: The astral plane

When: Just after the surprise attack

“Get off of me,” bellowed the demon, struggling to his feet. I was zipping backwards, watching them past the gun and counting the seconds until the shot was fully charged. A fireball bloomed near me, and I realized I wasn’t going fast enough backwards to dodge it. I poured on the speed, letting myself go and then giving myself a shove again to try and get some more speed. It worked, the fireball dissipated in the air. I was heading for the furthest tower away from me, hoping that would buy me some time.

“Don’t make me fight you, sister!” Dylan cried.

“Family or your fake demon friend,” I called back. “Choose.”

The demon had planted his staff and was using it to lever himself up as his witches were untangling themselves, leaving it in plain sight of me. The gun was charged, so I pulled the trigger. The crystal exploded, causing him to put a hand up to protect his face as the shards rained down.

“You’ll pay for that, human,” he growled. He gestured to the staff and there was a green light that shone around it. The crystal flowed back together and he winked at me.

Oh right, he knows time magic. I should have gone for his head. I glanced back, probably about 8 meters until I could duck behind the pillar that was supporting the whatever it was that was keeping my parents and the convergence stopped in time. Shooting that out was the priority, as much as I wanted to kill the demon. I pulled the trigger again and kept flying back.

One of the witches yelled something, and I felt myself being pulled back. It hardly amounted to anything, so I ignored it.

But what I couldn’t ignore was falling out of the sky as the demon gestured to me. “Fly no more,” he said. I tried to roll with it, but my gymnastics experience was watching the Olympics on TV one time so I tumbled to the ground. My finger came off the trigger too, so the charging stopped. *Great, just great.*

“Stay down Jesse,” cried Dylan. “Encasement!” Ice erupted from where we had standing, which raced towards me and started to encase me.

“Well done, my friend,” crowed the demon.

Not so fast. I gave a yank and pulled myself free, trying to roll to my feet. The ice shattered and vanished around me.

“Oh dear,” clucked the demon. He gestured and a net started to fall out of nowhere. I ducked under it, pushing power into my body again to help. I zipped backwards just under it, and it landed behind me. “Well this is becoming tiresome. Followers?”

Good, he just knocked me out of the sky, he’s not concentrating on keeping me from using my movement power. I yelped as fire, electricity, and air exploded behind me, and I kept scrambling backwards. I was close to the pillar, it was just a little further.

“Seriously?” he asked.

“She’s too far away, master,” said one.

“Excuses.” He gestured, and I felt myself being pulled towards them. It was my magic against his, and while it wasn’t pleasant, I pushed myself back further, finally bumping up against the pillar. “I see how it is,” he said to no one in particular.

“I’ll get her here,” Dylan told his master. “Teleportus!”

I found myself looking at up the demon, who grinned. “Why didn’t I think of that?” He grabbed hold of me, and I let him. Not that I was idle, of course. My gun was changing to the Spin configuration as he did that. “Now perhaps we can-” He gave a cry of surprise as I brought the gun up and pulled the trigger. He somehow dodged out of the way, even with me as close as I was, and shoved

me to the side. Guess what I saw at that point? Right, all his witches. So I just held the trigger down and sprayed the gun in an arc, causing them all to cry out and hit the deck. I swung it back and forth, causing both Dylan and Thahiss to take a step back and do something to protect themselves, and when it was empty I made a grab for Dylan, who was still fairly near me. I had a plan. I got one arm around his neck, and with the gun changing to the Grip configuration, I put it to his head. "Gotcha. Now we'll see where your friend's loyalties are," I told Dylan. "Will he save you, or sacrifice you to get to me?"

Of course in the words of Neo, "you're empty" but maybe they don't know that? I really wish this thing recharged faster!

"Hold!" cried Thahiss, putting a hand out towards his witches who were cautiously raising their heads. "This seems interesting. No one is to move, understand me?"

"Yes master," chorused the witches.

"Good. Now, Jesse, you have brought up an interesting point. But I don't think you'll shoot your brother, so it's an empty threat. Change my mind."

Changing my mind is actually shooting my brother though... Time for some bluster. "Oh I'll shoot him," I warned. "If you take one step—"

The demon took one step closer.

"Two steps closer!"

The demon laughed. "You see, Dylan. She is only lies, her actions tell her true story. You are quite safe, I promise."

"I trust you, my friend," he said back.

"Still, let us remove that temptation, shall we?" He gestured, and Dylan flowed out of my grasp like smoke.

I am getting tired of this guy. I sharpened my willpower and threw magic at the demon. He pinwheeled his arms, which would have been quite comical given other circumstances, and smashed into the pillar that was to my right. His staff flew out of his hand and tumbled away into the endless void of the astral. The witches started to get up.

"Oh no you don't," I told them. "He hasn't given you an order to move yet!"

They sort of looked confused, and shrank back down again. *Thank you, absolute loyalty. Thy name is doubt.* Dylan tried to grab me, but he was still mist, and as I was currently pinning the demon to the pillar I raced towards the far one again. I glanced at the gun, somehow knowing it wasn't recharged yet. *Come on, come on,* I uselessly urged it.

"Spellbreak," said the demon, and I felt I wasn't pinning it anymore. *Crud.* "Get up and attack her, you fools!" *Double crud.* I was running and pushing myself with my power so I didn't bother to look back, I had to reach cover and this might be my only chance. I wasn't flying, as such, I didn't want to take a tumble again, but I was boosting myself as I could with my movement power. Ice came at me again, probably courtesy of Dylan, but I boosted over it. The gun was recharged! I shifted it back into Pierce mode and pulled the trigger. I reached the tower and slipped around it, finally getting out of sight of the others. It was irregularly shaped, providing small areas one could stand on or climb up to. I just pushed myself upwards as a fireball went off behind me.

Dylan appeared at the base of the tower, and looked up at me. I ignored him, focused on the top of the thing. Another fireball went off and he had to dodge back. "Hey, watch it!" he cried.

And there it was! A green crystal, maybe half a meter tall, set in an iron holder, and blazing a beam of light down into the center area. I raised the gun and released the trigger. There was an explosion of shards as it burst apart, and the dome in the center of the room got dimmer.

All that, for a single drop of blood, I thought to myself. *But at least I can see the others now?*

"Stop her!" cried the demon, who I noticed had his staff again. "She's destroying my work!"

And will continue to do so, jerk. Suddenly I realized there were half a dozen identical looking pillars around the place and I had no idea which ones were real. But one thing I did realize was real was the demon, who had taken wing and was flying towards me. I grabbed the only thing I really had at

hand, the iron stand, and chucked it at him while pulling the trigger in to start changing the gun again. He dodged it and kept coming. I figured he wanted to sweep me off the pillar physically and drive me to the ground as he made a lunge for me. I dodged him and he went past. I had no idea which pillar was real and figured one of the witches was responsible, but which one? Not the two that were throwing fire at me, though it fell short. *Just out of range. I need to finish this somehow before they get close enough to be effective again.* The gun stopped charging. *Bingo.* I raised it and put a shot into the demon, who was coming around again. Nailed him right in the head, exactly where I was aiming, he had just turned and tried to get out of the way of my aim, but somehow leaned into it. He was knocked out of the sky and fell.

“Are you all right?” Dylan said, rushing for him.

“Of course I am,” he snarled. “Get her!” He gestured to me again and I hopped down to the lower part which was now coming in handy as air was ripped away from the area. I crouched down, I could still breathe but felt air rushing to try and fill the vacuum that was now above me. “I can’t believe this! She’s one person!”

One person in trouble. I’m pinned down here now until the gun recharges, and I have no idea where the real pillars are.

“I’ll get her off the pillar,” Dylan told him, and I heard someone running towards me. The demon had been knocked down towards my left, so I peeked around that corner. The witches were advancing, and I realized I might have a way to tell which pillar was real after all. I grabbed the witch nearest to the edge of the platform, yanking her off her feet. I then pulled her towards me a little, and then flung her through all the platforms on that side until she bounced off one. *Bingo. That’s the one.* The vacuum stopped and I heard something land above me.

“Now I have you,” said the demon, looking down on me. Fire started to erupt from the surface below me, and I knew if I didn’t do something I would get roasted. So I did something I don’t think either of us expected, I hopped *up* again, and shoved my left palm towards him. Of course this was just a cover for my movement power, which slammed into him and sent him careening across the platform to slam into the ground. *Huh, that worked out pretty well.* I ducked down again, I didn’t want the witches to target me directly.

“You know,” growled the demon. “This isn’t exactly going the way I thought it was going to. What are all you looking at?”

“Are you all right master?”

“She can’t hurt me, get going!”

“Yes master.”

I ducked down as fireballs went off behind the pillar, they were obviously trying to target me but they didn’t know exactly where I was. I bided my time, the gun should be about recharged by now. Ah hah, it was! But I heard Dylan’s voice calling out “Glacierious!” and looked down to see ice starting to creep up and encase the pillar I was on. I didn’t have long before this place was going to be too cold to handle. But I knew where one pillar was now, it was the one by the body of the witch I had just thrown. No way they could have gotten too far away from it by now. I pulled the trigger on the gun and got ready to pop up to see about shooting the next one before I had to move.

Come on, that ice is getting closer. Come on! Now! I popped up onto the higher platform again and realized I only saw one pillar over there now. *Could I have gotten lucky and taken out the person maintaining that magic? Oh well.* I sighted down Pierce and let the trigger go. A second one exploded. I ducked down again as another fireball went off near me. Followed by two more that were way off the mark. I started charging the gun again, wondering if just a shot or two from Grip would shatter one of these crystals? *If only I knew the range on Surge, I could more easily attach two of the explosives to them, that would take them out I bet. But I’ve only used it once, and that was a very short range. So how can I chance it?*

“I like how you’re thinking,” I heard the demon say. “But it’s a bit slow. Let me show you how I would do it.”

Oh crap.

A beam of light lanced out, past me, and I peeked around the corner again. The demon had a laser beam coming out of his finger and he swept it across the pillar. It burst out the other side, and the whole thing started to slide as he had swept it at an angle. I had to move! But at the same time, he had given me a nice gift- something to throw. I went into the air and twisted around, my power grabbing the chunk of pillar before it could fall. I pulled it back and let it fly at him. He shouted some curse and tried to move, but it slammed into him and knocked him over.

“Sister or not, this has gone too far!” Dylan shouted. He put a hand up. “Ice Dance!” Multiple shards of ice appeared, and he threw his hand down to make them fly towards me. I barely managed to get out of the way, shoving myself towards the third pillar, to my left.

“Save the master!” the witches cried, and rushed to the pinned demon. They magically lifted it off him, tossing it to the side.

“She’s dead, you hear me?” the demon bellowed as it got up. “I’ll rip her heart out of her chest! Dylan, she’s mine you hear me!”

“Not doing a great job so far,” I taunted.

Dylan looked ready to hurl more ice at me, but paused. “Of course, Thahiss, whatever you say.”

He was up, Dylan had stepped to the side and put his hand down, the witches were behind or to the side of him. I had a clear shot. I raised the gun. His eyes widened, he was hurt, I could feel his desperation from here. He knew this was it for him. One shot would end it. He could dodge to the side, and my cover was gone, then he would have a clear shot at me. That was all part of the plan. I hit him with the pillar again, from behind, and he never saw it coming. He went down and I was in the clear.

Or was I?

The witches and Dylan were still looking at me, but I had a shot left. I lined it up with the third crystal, rising higher into the air before I released the trigger. It exploded as well.

“Master?” said a witch.

“If... If he dies he can’t take my soul!” said another. “Nunc ardeat!”

“Spell breaking!”

“Traitor! Protect the master!”

“No, don’t you see, we can be free!”

“Grab her!”

You know, I’m not complaining. I kept one eye on Dylan as I boosted closer to the last pillar, which was now at the far end of the platform. He had rushed to defend Thahiss and it seemed two of the witches were of the mind they had been witches long enough, and wanted out. The other two, plus Dylan, were trying to defend him. Suited me fine. I hovered over the center of the place until Charge was ready to fire again and smashed the final crystal. The barrier around my parents went down and I boosted myself into the convergence, left arm outstretched. I impacted it and pressed on, not having any lines at this angle but it seemed to want to close, after all it had been open a long time even if time hadn’t passed inside the bubble. It slammed shut, and I found myself in darkness again. We were back in the cave. I heard Archie frantically talking to someone and wished I had a light, but the witches were screaming and freaking out after being plunged into darkness.

“Demon!” Emmett said, and I heard a shot ring out. This finished the demon off, and as it died a wave of force or magic or something exploded out of it. The witches’ screams were suddenly cut off, and there was silence in the cave.

“Jesse? Are you all right?” Archie was by my side, offering me a hand to help steady me. It seemed I was back on the ice.

“My parents, are they here?”

“There are two people here, if those are your parents then yes. Is that your brother?” He shined the light off in the distance.

“Yes. Dylan, give it up. Your so called friend is dead and my parents are back in the real world. You can either help me protect them or at least stay out of the way. You’ve lost.”

“Er, he can’t hear you,” Emmett told me. He walked over and shined his own light on Dylan’s form. It was laying on the ice, it looked like he had slid a ways after the demon died.

“Is he-”

“He’s alive, by the looks,” he confirmed, bending down to him. “Out cold though.”

“What happened? Where did you go?”

“I’ll tell you later,” I told them. “We have to get my parents out of here. These are witches, though you just killed the demon they were connected to so I don’t know if they have magic anymore. They are still here, right?”

“They’re also out cold,” Emmett confirmed, walking over and shining his light on their prone forms. “What in the world?”

So backup arrived shortly after that, and my parents woke up. They had no clue who I was, not believing that fourteen years had passed and that I was their daughter. They would have no choice but to accept it though, after we explained things to them. They were fine physically, they recalled following Dylan, that is a young Dylan, outside so he could “show them something” and then they were waking up here.

He got them out of the house, past the threshold, and the demon or some witches got them. They were put to sleep and put in the cave right after that, I bet. I was telling them about my childhood, what I could remember of it anyway, to prove I was their daughter and showed them my cell phone with the date on it.

“What the heck is that?” my father demanded to know. He wasn’t looking at the date, he was just turning the phone over and over in his hands.

“This is what phones look like now,” I told him. *Wait, when did the modern smartphone debut?*

“I have a cell phone, a blackberry,” he told me. “It looks nothing like that! This doesn’t even have a keyboard, it sucks.”

“Oh boy, you’re going to have a little catching up to do. Ugh, you’ll need to get vaccinated right away.”

“Vaccinated? For what?” my mother wanted to know.

“Sort of a plague going on, you’ll get used to it. Oh mom and dad, it’s so good to have you back.” I hugged them.

“This is all very strange,” she said. “Can we go home now?”

“Oh Gods. About that...”

Epilogue

Ring a Ring ring, banana phone

Where: Gretchen's house

When: A day later

It had been a whirlwind day, when my parents were given the medical okay by Excellus that their time spent in the "null time bubble" hadn't seemed to harm them that they could start putting their lives back together. My brother and the other witches they were keeping an eye on, as none of them had woken up yet. I drove my parents (in my electric car, which they were rather surprised at) out to the wreck of the house, where they both stared in a sort of stunned silence and finally wondered what they were going to do now. I didn't have any easy answers for them, I was struggling myself and they had been "missing" for fourteen years. My parents were certainly not getting their old jobs back anytime soon, that was for sure. Their bank accounts, which I didn't even know what bank would have had them, would be in limbo and they had no way to prove they were who they said they were. I told them Excellus had resources and I had friends there, we would work something out. *I hope.*

I spent much of the rest of the day telling them about everything they had missed the last fourteen years. My mother had gotten quite upset about who the previous president had been, but my father seemed sorry to have missed all the drama. "Really shook things up, did he?" he asked, rubbing his hands together. "What a time to have missed!"

"In the worst way possible?" I sort of hedged. "He put kids in cages. He looked into the sun. He served football players fast food at the white house. He signed blank pieces of paper. He molested a flag. Person, woman, man, camera, TV is now a national joke. The entire UN General Assembly laughed at him. He gassed people so he could hold up a bible in front of a church. He said we should inject bleach. *I COULD GO ON.* People died, dad, of something he said would go away 'like a miracle.' You could die, we need to get you a mask."

"I ain't wearing no mask. That's for sissies."

I took a deep breath. "Eight hundred thousand people to date—"

"I'll work on him," my mother told me. "It really has been fourteen years, hasn't it? My baby girl is all grown up now!"

"Oh mom..."

We got them a room at a hotel late that night, and I said I would be back tomorrow with some clothes and such for them. They were still in shock, just learning magic was real would do that to a person but to know your kids could do it, and your son had been following a demon around the last fourteen years, that was a real kick in the shorts.

"And you say after this demon died, he and the witches just passed out?"

"Yeah. From what I read about witches after I met the benandanti no one gets out of the witch contract because no demon has been recorded as being killed before. But it came with us into the real world and Emmett put a bullet in it, finishing it off. I have no idea what that means for any of the witches connected to him."

"But he's alive?"

"He's alive mom. You can see him if you want."

"My little boy. What have you done?"

I had been too keyed up to sleep but Gretchen sat with me and we talked, and I finally must have dozed off because I was waking up. I heard a phone ringing nearby. Struggling to open my eyes it wasn't my cell phone that was ringing, it was something else. Something that looked suspiciously like a small, red, plastic, toy telephone. Gretchen stormed into the room.

"What is that noise?" she complained to me. "It sounds like a ringing- oh."

“Gretchen? What’s going on?” I asked.

“Your, uh, toy phone is ringing? When did you get this?”

“It’s not mine, I never saw it before.” *But why does it seem so familiar to me, like I’ve heard of such a thing before?*

“Well, it’s been ringing for like five minutes now so please answer it because it’s driving me crazy!”

“Answer... A toy phone? Sure, why not?” I picked up the receiver and put it to my ear. “Hello?”

A strange, broken voice answered me. “About space/time you picked up/answered. Good work/job so far, Jesse. Nice start/beginning. More work/job to be processed/completed. Corruption/badness runs deep. Must be cleansed/made right/repared. Keep Auseinander near, key/catalyst limited time/today only. Go to work/job, to continue fate/destiny/alternate life. Good luck/fortune be with you/them.”

The line went dead.

“Sir, this is a McDonalds,” I said, having no clue what had just happened. I put the receiver back on the cradle. I stared blankly into the distance and tried to work out what they had said could mean.

“Who, or what, was that all about?” Gretchen demanded to know. She picked up the phone, it wasn’t connected to anything, and set it down again. “Was someone there?”

I shook myself. “Honestly? I’m not even sure. But we better head into work. Something might happen today.”

“It better not,” she grumbled. “We’re getting some sort of government official who wants to know about the death of the demon and our progress here. Apparently the US military knew about this place, but was content to let us handle it. But now that we’ve apparently killed a demon they want to know how it was possible.”

“Really?” I was surprised. “They didn’t want to weaponize the whole area somehow themselves?”

“It was too random for them, I think. I don’t know. Anyway, I’ll be sending a memo to everyone to be on their best behavior while they’re around. You’ll be called in for some kind of debriefing-”

“My favorite kind!”

She rolled her eyes. “So write up some notes and be prepared to answer questions.”

“Yes boss.” We both glanced at the phone like it was a live snake, and slowly backed away from it. It didn’t ring again and we left for work.

The meeting was for 2:00 so I had some time to call my parents, tell them I would meet them later that day, and to stay away from Fox “news.”

“Too late honey,” my mother said to me. “Your father has been glued to the set since he got here. And TVs today, they’re so good! Have you seen them?”

“Yank it off the wall if you have to mom, I’ll be down after some important meeting this afternoon. I have to get ready for it or I’d be there with you now.”

“See you then.”

I brought the notes I had made into the meeting, and a military man stood up as I entered the room. He was in uniform, and seemed average enough. Gretchen was there, along with Archie and Emmett, who had been there and seen the end of it, at least. Better than I had, with their low light vision. They were seated, it was just a minute past 2:00.

“Ah, you must be Jesse,” he told me. “Hopefully this will be quick and you can get back to work. Sorry to put you through this, I know you just got your parents back and everything. Er, what are you doing?”

What I was doing was lifting the service weapon, glowing and charging with Pierce at the ready.

“Jesse, put that away!” Gretchen screamed.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” I told the man. “Haven’t you heard? I’m at war with your kind.” I released the trigger. He spasmed and slammed back against the wall, crumpling to the ground. I stared, making sure nothing else needed to be done.

“Put... That... Away!” Gretchen repeated, running over to me and trying to wrest it out of my grip. I let it vanish.

“You’ll thank me,” I told her.

“What?”

Meanwhile the other two had rushed to his side.

“There’s no wound,” Archie told us. “He’s totally fine. What did you shoot, was he-”

“Mommy?” said the man, looking around wildly. “Where’s my mommy? I want my mommy!” He started to cry.

“Crapbaskets,” Gretchen spat.