

The Monster Diaries
Part 5
The Diary of Jesse Faden
Part 2: Jesse Faden Takes Control

Chapter 1

I recap, and then we discuss what to do about it

Where: Excellus offices in Ordinary, Maine

When: Jan 17th, 9:00

The four of us stood in the hall outside the medical area in the Excellus building, worried looks on our faces. The doctor had just come out to tell us the results of his examination, and he didn't look like he was going to give us any good news. *So let's recap what's been going on lately, shall we? I moved back to Ordinary in search of my parents, who I had not seen in 14 years. Not since I had been taken by a vampire to the spectral prison of a being named Deogen. This being tried to eat the life force of both myself and my brother, Dylan, so they could get a bit more strength and bust through the walls keeping them there. This was interrupted by a tuatha woman who came in after us, so as far as I know Deogen is still rotting in that cell. This "rescue" didn't go quite as she has planned, at least I hope that's the case, as it resulted in my brother and me being flung in opposite "directions" and winding up somewhere in "Otherworld." This being the layer of reality that houses "everything else" you've ever heard of, such as the realms of the fairy and both Heaven and Hell. Nice, huh? I got sent to "Heaven" as far as I can tell, because the being that found me was "helpful" and after providing me a small portion of their life force to replenish what I had lost, I was sent back to Earth. To Russia. Without most of my memories, I might add. My brother, I later learned, was found by a more demonic sort of fellow and spent the last fourteen years doing his work on Earth and basically being corrupted by him. Meanwhile I wandered around, taking years to remember who I had been, but finally getting my life straight. The portion of life I had received grew into a being I call Polaris, and they give me the magical ability to move objects with my mind. Sometimes they talk to me in my dreams, and have generally been helpful in training me. Then I met Gretchen and the others working for Excellus.*

Having reached my house I found a strange weapon, seemingly made for me by the being that saved me. I guess they figured out where I was supposed to be, eventually? Put in that effort before flinging me around the globe why don't you? Nevertheless I joined their little group of "agents" working to repair the damage to the area caused all those years ago by my "rescue." The barrier between us and Otherworld (dubbed the astral plane) had been thinned, meaning it "poked through" occasionally, and my story of how it happened gave them the information they needed to put a stop to it. That's where my real troubles began. The first site I helped investigate had brought over three "spirits of vengeance" I guess you would call them, named kanaima. Two got away, and we eventually closed the inversion, as we called them. But they can come back on their own, and after possessing two of the people I had met, Emmett and Archie, distracted me and burned my childhood home to the ground in retaliation for stopping their fun. I killed them for that, and basically swore that I would see their entire race dead. If you want to do something horrible, fine, but you better own up to it later. Being forced to do something horrible because you've been possessed by a spirit, well, that's something else. As far as I know my gun is the only thing that can kill these spirits while they are possessing someone, doing it quickly enough they can't retreat back into their home reality as they would if their host got damaged. Because I can hit them inside someone, something no other weapon can do. I discovered, to my delight, that my gun hits what I want it to hit, not exactly what the barrel aims at, because it's not shooting bullets it's simply causing bullet like damage. This "spiritual" damage therefore doesn't harm the host, only the kanaima, so I've had the great satisfaction of killing a few more since then.

I found my parents using a sword a dwarf loaned me, the sword is named Wayfinder but the dwarf is named Herman. I think he's a super hero that flies around in a replica Iron Man suit of armor but I've never asked him outright about it. Anyway, they were trapped by my brother and his demon buddy, Thahiss, stuck in time for their own "protection." Using the gun I managed to free them and eventually took on Thahiss, killing him as well. When I did my brother and the witches linked to him all

went unconscious, maybe from the shock? Demons are notoriously hard to kill, in the first place just calling them here and killing them does nothing because they just get sent back home. You have to kill them physically, but as they're not really physical beings, at least in the sense we understand it, you have to face them on their home turf. Or use a gun like mine, that can hurt things on multiple levels at once. Thankfully we were inside an inversion at the time so he was "physically" there, and his death was permanent. But unprecedented, so we're not sure how we're ever going to wake him and the others up.

This brings us to today. Some sort of government agent was supposed to show up so I could brief them on what happened. Yes, it turns out the government knows about non-humans, and we suspect has been controlled by kanaima and demons for maybe thousands of years. I had some "adventures" in Afghanistan that seem to show their influence is everywhere. In any case, the agent arrived, I walked into the room, saw they were possessed, and almost without thinking about it blew the possessor away. You would think that would make them happy, no longer being possessed, but it turns out my rash behavior just made things a lot more complicated.

"Physically, he's fine," said the doctor after walking over to us. We; that is myself, Gretchen, Archie, and Emmet, had been sitting on the waiting room bench nearby, as we didn't all need to crowd into an exam room. We had been waiting at least an hour, it seemed he was being careful or maybe he just moved slowly. Non-humans basically living forever meant they didn't always see time like we humans did, often taking longer to do things just because for them 'there's always tomorrow' wasn't just a dream. "His possessor clearly took good care of the body, so his teeth are excellent, he's fit, there's nothing wrong with him." Everyone looked worried. Gretchen managed to make even this look elegant, her nature as a nymph giving her an ethereal beauty few others could match in this world. Archie was a puca, a spirit horse, and I wondered if his control over his shapeshift into human form was slipping or he was just trying to prank us. He had horses' ears on top of his head that were twitching, and a tail that was swishing back and forth. We ignored this in any case. Pale looking Emmett, the vampire, had his hands jammed under his arms, crossed over his chest. We had been the only ones in the room when I shot the agent, and so far no one but the doctor had been told what had happened.

"But mentally?" Gretchen asked.

"Mentally he's eight years old, according to him. He thinks the year is 1990, and he's still in school. He remembers his parents, his friends, even his dog's name. But nothing about the last thirty or so years apart from some vague dreams of waking up at night briefly and having 'something scary happen.'"

"Sunrise," she spat.

"That is my guess as well."

"So wait," I broke in. "You're telling me that thirty years ago an eight year old boy was possessed by a kanaima, and he's *been* possessed this whole time?"

"Apart from briefly at sunrise when the spell would have ended, yes," the doctor agreed. "At that point, if he was awake, he would have realized his thoughts were his own again for a brief time until he was possessed again. Otherwise it would have happened with him still asleep. That's what we're faced with."

What, did he take baths and not showers the rest of the time? Running water also would have knocked the kanaima out. But he must have been pretty good, to have walked around school and such and not lose the spell. Too many onlookers would cancel that magic out too. I suppose he could have developed a reputation as a loner. "Why possess someone that young?"

"Thomas Abernacker, son of John and Celia Abernacker," he read, consulting his notes. "Wealthy parents, close ties to several government agencies, he would be very well placed if they wanted an agent in any number of positions."

“But at eight years old?”

“Naturally. Why not play a long game? They have nothing to lose by moving quickly, they’re not going to die of old age any more than we will.” He cleared his throat. “Er, most of us, anyway.”

“I’m a human, I know, just get on with it.” *Stupid non-humans. Gretchen admits to being more than three hundred years old, Archie said two hundred. Did Emmett ever say? I forget.*

“Also taking someone so young, it would create dependence. He wouldn’t know anything but possession, making it far more likely the longer it went on, the easier it would be. And being young he would have less mental fortitude to fight off his attacker. We have no data on the long term effects of possession after all, I’ve never heard of a case that went on so long. His behavior wouldn’t change too much, as he approached adulthood, so no one would suspect. Having been steered in the right direction from an early age, he would be right where they needed him.”

“But then, we had no easy way to detect it,” Gretchen mused. She glanced at me. “And the detector we do have we created by accident.”

“Right, we just wanted to see the ley line convergences that led to inversions,” I agreed. “Seeing spiritual energy inside people was a happy coincidence.” *As was me figuring out what I could do about it.*

“But instead you uncovered a plot, helped along by whoever sent that weird pull chain into my house that time that led to you Afghanistan.”

“And what is that plot, exactly?” Archie asked.

“From the facts we have,” Gretchen answered, “take over key individuals in government and steer it in certain directions. The Taliban is in disarray since Jesse’s little adventures there, so if something similar is going on inside our government? Or all governments? This proves it’s been going on for thirty years, we can assume that wasn’t the start of it.”

“But the bigger question is, what are we going to do about it?” Emmett asked.

“The plot or Thomas here?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She sighed. “As for Thomas, I don’t know. Not that we should have allowed his possession to continue, but really Jesse, just asking me to leave the room with you for a moment to speak privately would have sufficed. We could have bugged him, tracked him, a hundred better ways of dealing with it once we knew it was happening. What were you thinking, just shooting him like that?”

“I really don’t know what came over me,” I admitted. “I saw the two energy signatures inside him, and just reacted. You know my feelings about kanaima.”

“I expect better, especially going forward!”

I hung my head, she wasn’t wrong. “Yes boss.”

“I mean you see what you’ve left us with?”

“Yes boss.”

“And now I have to figure a way out of this mess that *you* got us into.”

“Yes boss.”

“Aw, Jesse got chewed out by the boss!” Archie crowed. “Has our rising star started to sputter out?”

“That aside,” Emmett pressed forward. “What about the larger issue? Any thoughts there, Gretchen?”

Her shoulders slumped. “No. Not off the top of my head. I mean we’re just an insurance company slash front for an organization trying to keep humanity safe. We may get some leeway in purchasing guns and other equipment an organization like ours normally wouldn’t, but we can’t get to any high ranking officials. My God, I mean how high up does it go? Could the president be possessed?”

“The last one, I could totally see it,” I decided. “The current one, not so much.”

Archie shook his head. “I doubt someone as high profile as the president would be,” he told us. “Think about it. Even a bunch of possessed people can’t steal an election, despite what the last one

would tell you. They would have to be possessed *after* they won. Their personality would change. Now maybe a career politician could manage to be possessed their whole life and make it to the very top, but that's a huge risk. Plus, the crowds around them would strain any magic."

"Good points," she agreed. "It must be others, those not in the spotlight but still able to influence events."

"But the current one *is* a career politician," I protested. "It was the last one who wasn't." *Why not just possess everybody that could potentially become president? I mean what else do they have to do? And how many of them exist?*

"But given what we know about the last one, can we say he isn't possessed? Look at how many businesses he's failed at running. And something lets him say and do things no other person can get away with."

"Agreed."

"Worry about the wider world later," Gretchen told us. "Think about what we're going to do with Tom here."

"I have assurances from the chancellor his ambassadors did arrive," intoned Archie. We all looked at him like he had gone nuts. "Yeah, terrible movie I agree, but it gives me an idea. What if we just say he never got here? Someone is going to have to educate him, of course, but if he never got here he can just vanish and never be found. We change his name—"

"Except whoever gives him orders will sooner or later come looking," Gretchen figured. "And may have enough of him to do a tracking spell."

"And I hate to waste Herman's time making an item to hide him," I mused, touching the medallion that hung around my neck. It only made my reflexes better, because I had gotten a fireball to the face one too many times, but it could just as easily do that instead.

"Eh, just send him back then," Emmett decided. "Let them figure it out."

"Who is them, by the way?" I asked. "I never really did get introduced."

"FBI," Gretchen told me. "I wouldn't say we have a close relationship with them or anything, but in exchange for basically leaving us alone here to deal with this inversion problem I send them reports on things. Maybe I should have skipped sending the last one."

"Oh, now the truth about whose fault it comes out." I crowed, putting my fists on my hips. "Seems like it's not mine after all! Ha!"

"No it totally is," she said with a straight face.

I growled and narrowed my eyes.

"And for all we know," Archie stepped in, putting a hand on my arm, "he reports every night. He misses a night and someone knows something is up."

"Or a car crash- wait, no," Emmett backed off glumly. "Even if he died, the kanaima would have just fled and reported back. I mean maybe, *maybe* if enough damage was done to the host before the kanaima inside could react it would be taken out too. But they're generally tougher than a regular old human so the human's body would give out before the kanaima's spirit form would be destroyed. They would just pop out of the dead body and head home. Healed up, and taken on a new assignment with someone else. Him suffering a heart attack or something as our explanation as to where he went wouldn't fly."

"Exactly," Gretchen agreed.

And wouldn't they want to study the body, make sure it wasn't foul play? We can't just say, oh he died, and we accidentally tipped the corpse into the furnace so sorry about that! They would want answers. "Wait, we're thinking about this from the wrong angle," I decided, scratching my head. "How about just telling the truth but omitting some of the facts?"

"How so?"

"We call up the FBI, right? He must have a supervisor or something. We say he arrived and seemed fine. We went into the meeting, also true. But suddenly he simply reverted to a childlike state

and we're at a loss. Some kind of mental break down? Stress due to work, perhaps? We don't have to say anything about me doing it or how. Ask if he has any history of such things happening before and tell them we're at a loss and please send someone to look into it. Let them figure it out, heck it might be better if they did because they can uncover the same thing we did. If we just 'told' them what we know they might not believe us in the first place. We could be the possessed ones, he could have found out, and we killed him to avoid him telling anyone. But there's the proof something did possess the man, there's no getting around that."

Gretchen considered. "It does have the benefit of being mostly true. That's the best way to sell a lie, after all. Any other suggestions?" She looked to the others, who all shook their heads. "Fine. I'll go make the call. I have no idea if they'll buy it and when they'll send someone else, but do try not to shoot them, Jesse. If they are possessed just signal me, and we'll go from there."

"Sure, signal you. Got it." *Can the signal be me shooting them?*

"Fine. Doctor, keep Thomas comfortable and tell him we're working on things. Hopefully they'll know where he lives and his parents are still alive and we can work out getting him home."

"I'll see what I can do," the doctor promised. "He's not manic, just scared and confused. Mostly of being so big all of a sudden. Imagine, having thirty years stolen from you, all at once. What a waste." He went back into the room and we went back to our desks.

This is mostly my fault. Depending on what happens now, the kanaima may retaliate in some way. They're going to figure out it was me, that one in Afghanistan getting away guarantees it. And this will show where I'm located. Just like before, my friends here may be taken over to try and get to me, or even worse may harm themselves to get back at me for what I've done. How can I protect them? Gretchen might be able to ask if someone is going to be possessed but can I count on that? Maybe I should leave before I cause them all more trouble. I hate to, it took me this long to figure out just where my hometown was, but really with the house burned down nothing keeps me here. My parents could live anywhere, same as me. Plus will this group even stay together if the inversions stop? Closing that last one, the first one that ever happened, may put a stop to it. That would mean they go to other assignments, this town is too small to rate this many good people here. I guess we'll see what happens now, and hope it doesn't spiral out of control. If only you could have controlled yourself! Stupid!

Chapter 2

I meet Veronica and she makes me an offer I can't refuse

Where: The Excellus building

When: Less than an hour later

A notification popped up on my computer screen with a chime, so I looked at it. Gretchen was messaging me. "Come to the same room, the new agent is here," it said. *So soon? They're really taking this seriously.* I got to my feet, locked my PC up, and headed out into the hall. I noticed a few more people wandering around than normal, maybe Gretchen wasn't taking any chances with this new agent running around? I touched the metal disk in the palm of my hand, the part that closed inversions. *Let's see what we have.* I met Herman at the door, hammer in hand, and we went inside. Gretchen got up, and the new woman did too, smiling at me. Archie and Emmet were already there. She was short, practically tiny, even in heels, and had a serious looking haircut. She was dressed like an FBI agent, in a crisp pantsuit, and more importantly than that, showed only one energy signature. I smiled too.

"Veronica Marts, FBI, at your service," she told me. "I'm told you're the best agent around here?"

"An exaggeration, I'm sure," I told her, glancing over at Gretchen. "Most hotheaded maybe?" We laughed and shook hands. Gretchen looked at me like 'you're not wrong.' "I'm Jesse Faden. Nice to meet you."

"And you. So I'm told you actually killed a demon? What did that taste like?" We sat down again.

"Strawberries."

"Nice! Now I heard something happened to Thomas?"

"Yes," Gretchen told her, sitting on the other side of her. "We were meeting in this very room and suddenly he just started babbling about wanting his mother. Has anything like that happened before?"

"This room, you say?" Veronica looked around. "That's convenient." She slipped what looked like a metal rod with a metal ball on the top out of a pocket and held it in front of her, ball up. She tapped it lightly on the table. "Reveal the past," she intoned, and closed her eyes. We all watched as she sat there, wondering what was going on. She raised an eyebrow and opened her eyes. "Suddenly, huh?" She looked at me. "You don't think shooting the man had anything to do with it?"

My initial impulse was, of course, to get out my gun but as I had been so recently chided for doing just that I looked to Gretchen, who was scowling. Herman looked ready to throw his hammer though, so I figured we were covered.

"So you're a magic user yourself," she asked.

"Naturally. How do you think I got to be a top agent in the FBI? Not that I haven't been solving mysteries in my town since I was a teenager, of course. Because I have. But yes, I'm a sorcerer."

"Can you prove it?" Archie asked.

"I can't prove I'm not connected to a demon, of course not," she scoffed. "How would I even do that?"

Wait, okay, from what I remember reading a sorcerer is a person that can use magic on their own. They don't need to make a deal with a demon for magic. But they need some kind of focus... My eyes went to the rod she was still holding. "Wait, is that a collapsible baton?"

She laughed. "It sure is!" She whipped it forward and it extended to the full length. "I need a focus for the magic anyway, why not something I can also use to smack people in the face? Magic is all well and good but sometimes you just need a big stick."

"Very practical," Gretchen told her as she swished it and then collapsed it again. Herman lowered the hammer. "I guess there's no hiding it from you. He was possessed. Jesse's gun can kill possessors while inside the body, and when she walked in--"

She snapped her fingers. "Hotheaded!"

"Yeah," I admitted. She grinned at me and I decided I liked this woman.

"Cool," she told me fiercely. "I have a bit of that myself. So, can I get the whole story now?"

"If Gretchen agrees?" I said tentatively. She motioned for me to get on with it. "Okay, here goes." I told her the story, and she got out a notebook and started making some notes before long. It took a bit, but when I was done she sat tapping her pencil against her cheek thoughtfully.

"This is a bit of a situation, isn't it?" she decided. "You're basically telling me that anyone, from my boss to his boss and in fact anyone in a government position could be working against us, and we would never know it? Mostly because they had been possessed for years and may be subtle in their manipulations to avoid suspicion."

"Looking at the state of the world does this surprise you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "It does not, I'm not questioning your findings. It makes total sense, now that I've considered it. Actually I'm a little insulted, am I not good enough for their little club? Probably because I'm a woman, those bastards!"

"I'm not sure if that's the right attitude to have?" Gretchen carefully offered.

"Bah. Thomas didn't even have magic. Not that I knew, anyway. He would have to learn it all over again if he did, being possessed at such a young age. So what do you plan to do about it?"

"Our plan just finished, it was to dump it on your lap and hope you took it from there."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh really?"

"I *want* to help," I hastily told her. "I might be the only one who can, because of the weapon I use. But I can't just walk up to every government official in the world and shoot them if they're possessed. Even if my gun won't harm the person I'm shooting, others may get the wrong idea."

"Agreed." She put her pencil down and put her chin on her hands, clasped before her. She looked at nothing for a moment. "Do you have any other proof of this?"

"I had some of my agents 'record' what happened in Afghanistan using illusion and divination magic," Gretchen told her. "You can review that footage. Match it up to what's going on over there at the moment. Those people suddenly coming out against the very organization they were once at the top of? Come on, what else could it be?"

"And there's old Tommy boy himself," she mused. "If there's one, there's a million, why would there just be him? Stupid. No, okay, I believe you. But my God do you know what this means?"

"A lot of work ahead of us?" I guessed.

"That's the understatement of the year. I really better be the best, and you better be too, if we're going to unravel this and keep it quiet and keep things stable. We'll have to move slowly, gather intel, get people alone so they can be- can I see this weapon you're talking about?"

"Sure." I willed it into my hand and handed it over. She whistled.

"Nice, it appearing like that. Magic of some kind, but nothing I've ever felt. Look at this construction, it's totally unlike any pistol I've ever seen."

"That it is," Herman agreed. "I'd love to know how it was made, myself."

"It cost me my family, and basically my childhood," I told her. "I still don't know if it's worth it."

She handed it back but I just waved that off and made it vanish again. She looked at her empty hand in surprise. "Maybe it would be, if you can use it to get the world back on the right track. But you're willing to help? If I maybe offered you a job?"

"A job? But I just got hired here, it feels like!"

"About that," Gretchen told me. "We'll probably be pulling out of here soon. It costs the company a lot of money to keep the number of people here that we have, and it doesn't make us anything. Given about a month, if there's no more inversions as we suspect, we'll move out and some regular agents will move in. The human kind, to take care of paperwork and the usual claims a town has. I honestly wasn't sure what we were going to do for you, this might solve that problem nicely."

That confirms my suspicions. I almost wish she hadn't, but that's how it goes I guess. So my shooting that guy, or not, wouldn't have changed much at all. We're still breaking up the band, that much isn't my fault. They should be safer that way, too. "Will you all go someplace else, or..." She was shaking her head.

"Not as a group, no. We were assigned here from all over, and now we'll head wherever the company needs us."

"But you've been here fourteen years! You've got a house! The company just says 'you go here and you go there' and you have to do it?"

"It sounds rough I know," she said with a shrug. "And believe me, it doesn't get easier. But our kind is used to moving around, to help avoid detection. It's nothing new for us. I bought that house knowing I may be in it a year or ten years or fifty years but sooner or later I would sell it again. All depending on how long the inversions happened."

I felt awful. "I'm sorry to hear your little family has to break up. And I wasn't even part of it for that long."

"Wait, what's that look for? You didn't think this was your fault, did you?"

"Maybe a little."

"Oh Jesse. No one here will 'blame' for you that. We couldn't have stayed here forever anyway, like I explained. You solved our problem, so it's on to the next one. That's really what we signed up for anyway. My next assignment I may get paired with people I haven't seen in a hundred years and have a great reunion with them, or make new friends I'll be happy to see again in 2222. We get it. Did you think we, or I, would be mad at you? Golly, what a thing to even think! You've been around us enough to know our ways of doing things isn't the same as the humans."

"It's true, moving on is part of the game," Archie told me. "We know it's inevitable, we don't see it as a big deal. Honest!"

They don't feel resentful, that much I can tell. But that doesn't really help my feelings on the matter any. "If you say so."

"I do."

"So you're in the clear!" Veronica announced.

"Sort of. There's still my parents, they're fourteen years out of touch. And my brother and the others are still in a coma, downstairs."

"They would have to be moved to a more permanent facility anyway," Gretchen told me. "We don't have the resources here to watch them properly. Naturally the company will pay for their care, we are an insurance company after all." She laughed.

"Thanks. I guess if my parents don't mind, we can go anywhere." *That's sort of a relief. I don't have to tell her I was worried about retaliation after all. She would probably say I was being silly but I'm not. I can't risk these people, they didn't sign up for that. If I'm going to work with someone to clean out possessed people, they need to go in knowing the risks.* "But that raises the question of where I would go. I was sort of hired to help with the inversion problem here, which I solved. Would I move on with all of you or stay here with Excellus as a regular agent? On the other hand I'd rather go where I can start taking care of kanaima and getting humans in charge of things again instead of possessed people. But how would that work? I can't be hired by the FBI, can I? That must take years of schooling."

"Normally, you would be right," she agreed. "Being who I am though, I have certain, shall we say, discretionary powers to deputize or outright hire someone I think can help us. But honestly, I have something else in mind. Something a little bit special." She smiled mysteriously and her eyes sparkled.

Wait, am I going to be hired again on the spot? "I feel like I just got hired here! Are you sure this is okay, Gretchen?"

"More than okay," she told me. "I wasn't sure where we would put you, honestly. I mean the company could find somewhere, I'm sure, but really it seems like you were made for certain things,

Jesse. I think that maybe this whole inversion thing was just a warm up, something to get you ready for the real work you have ahead of you.”

“That’s a scary thought, actually.”

“You won’t be alone,” Herman announced. “If this group is breaking up, my contract with Excellus is over as well. If you’ll have me, I’ll do what I can to outfit you and keep you safe wherever you end up.”

“I would like that, thanks,” I told him honestly. “Are you sure though?”

“Like I once said, it’s making costume pieces for cosplayers or real items that have a lasting impact on the world. I’ve done plenty of both over the years, but at least this time my creations can be used for good. I would be honored to fight at your side in this, it’s a mission worthy of the Avengers, how can I do less?”

He may have some skeletons in his closet, or to quote that same film, maybe his ledger is gushing red, and he wants to wipe some of that away? “Glad to have you, my friend. What about you two?” I looked at Emmet and Archie.

“The company helps me get enough to eat,” Emmett spoke up first. “I sort of have to stay with them. Unless you can come up with gallons of blood every month, I’m stuck. Sorry.”

“Fair enough. Archie?” We all looked at him.

“I... But... What exactly are we talking about here? Are we all being hired? Excellus has been good to me over the years, I mean I’m a puca. Not many would hire me just based on that. I need to make a living somehow. And would I really be able to help you?”

“A puca?” Veronica asked. “You bet! If we have to infiltrate somewhere, you would be the man for the job.”

“But that’s about all I can do,” he replied glumly. “Keep in touch I guess? Once you get settled let me know, and I can decide.”

“If what I have in mind works out, you’re not going to want to miss it,” Veronica told him. “But it’s up to you all.”

“What exactly do you have in mind?” I asked.

She grinned a wide grin. “Nah uh! It’s a surprise. Go get your parents, I have to look into a few things. I’m pretty sure it’ll be okay, but I want to check. If someone can get me access to the internet that would be great, otherwise I’ll just use my phone but I hate the small screen on this thing.”

“You can use the PC in my office,” Gretchen told her.

“Great. Meet back here when you can! I’m getting pretty excited!”

She feels it. What in the world is she up to? “Okay. But what about Thomas? Let’s not forget the actual reason you came here.”

“Oh, shoot, you’re right!” Her mood plummeted. “What am I going to do about him? I guess I’ll just take him back, they can run all the tests on him they want. They won’t find any chemical cause for what happened and it’ll just go into the ‘one of those things we don’t understand’ bucket. I hate that bucket. Hate it so much.”

“But isn’t ‘it was magic’ good enough?” I asked.

“Oh no, only a few people know about that. Not the day to day agents. Heavens, no. Oh I’m sure everyone has seen their share of bizarre stuff going on, and if they seem like they’re open to the truth they get told. Otherwise we keep it as quiet as possible internally as well. It’s just too dangerous otherwise. Oh don’t get me wrong,” she hurriedly went on, “I’ll be writing up two reports. The safe one, and what really happened, to submit to the ‘right’ people. It’ll be classified, and filed, and that will be that. But the official story will be one of a confused shrug.”

Sure, someone gets told magic exists they might want it. But the only way they can get it is with a deal. A deal they may not read the fine print on. Or worse, think it’s a fair trade and go bad. “I get it.”

“So I’ll look into what I have in mind, get Thomas back home and under supervision, then get back here.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“Magic?”

I smacked my head. “Right. Sorry.” *Of course she can probably teleport, saves a mint in plane tickets. It’s how she got here so fast, duh!* “I’ll see you soon then.”

So I drove out to the hotel where my parents were staying, and knocked on their door. My mother opened it.

“Yes?”

“Mom, it’s me, Jesse.”

“Oh of course, come in! I just can’t see you as an adult, honey. Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay mom. Hi dad!”

He turned the TV off and stood up. “Hey there sweetheart! What’s shaking!?”

“I have a question for you both. Given all that’s happened, are you dead set on staying in Ordinary?”

They looked at each other. “We’ve been talking about it,” her mom said. “We’ve been using the PC in the lobby and trying to get a sense of what’s been happening the last fifteen years. And trying to get into our bank accounts, of course.”

“Haven’t had much luck,” her father added. “Being dead all that time will apparently do that. Did you know the government can just take money out of accounts that have been inactive for a certain amount of time? Fascists! They shouldn’t have the right!”

But if that money really is just sitting there, and will never be touched, what should happen to it? Money needs to move around, that’s the whole point of it, despite what billionaires will tell you as they hoard most of the world’s wealth. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s not your fault,” my mother assured me. “I’m just glad the world wide web hasn’t changed that much since we’ve been... away. It works basically the same way, just faster. Though I do notice a lot more advertising.”

“The what?” I asked them. “Oh, right, nobody calls it that anymore. Never mind. So have you decided anything?”

“We’ll go where you go,” my father told me. “We missed out on your childhood. I think we’re going to need each other now more than ever. To miss out on your life now...”

“Well, we clearly need her more than she needs us,” her mother said. “At least for the moment. I still can’t get over the fact you’re all grown up!”

“Believe me, neither can I sometimes,” I muttered.

“We’re sort of like kids again, in a way,” my father went on. “We don’t know the dangers of the world now. What to watch out for. Our skills are all a decade and more out of date. We’re legally dead, no one can hire us. No driver’s license, no car or any way to get a loan...”

“We’re working on all that, maybe Excellus can still do something,” I reminded them. “Don’t give up hope, I mean people wake up from comas all the time...” *Dylan “...there has to be some mechanisms in place for people to ‘come back.’” Of course, you were never reported medically compromised in the first place, which may make it harder. You just vanished, and now you’re back.*

“Be that as it may,” my mother told me. “We don’t want to miss any more of your life. I know us living together is clearly not an option, but maybe close by?”

I laughed. “That would be a twist, wouldn’t it? You living in my basement!” They just gave me a funny look, clearly they had no idea what I was talking about. “Never mind. I’m asking because an FBI agent has made me an offer. Now that we hope this area will go back to normal I need to help them with... some things. She wouldn’t tell me exactly what she had in mind, she wanted it to be a surprise, but if you’re willing we’ll go together and check it out. Get a new hotel room, and figure out our future together. Excellus will take care of Dylan until we get settled, Gretchen has already promised me that. I trust her.”

“I still can’t believe what happened to him,” my mother told me. “My baby boy, corrupted by some kind of demon.”

“Yeah.”

We stood in silence for a moment.

“So an FBI agent, huh?” my father asked. “Sounds serious.”

“It is. And having you nearby, knowing you’re safe, would really put my mind at ease.”

“With the house gone- I’m not blaming you,” my mother assured me, “but with that gone there’s really nothing keeping us here. How can we show up at our old friends’ door and say ‘surprise, we’re not dead!’ So it’s time to make some new friends. Wherever you go, we’ll be glad to follow.”

“Okay,” I told them, feeling a bit of relief they weren’t going to fight me on this. The town had changed, after all, it wasn’t really their home anymore. And we did need to stick together, as a family. “Let’s head out.”

We headed back to the office and met up with Veronica, and I introduced my parents to her.

“Nice to meet you,” she said to both of them. I felt a great deal of excitement from her again, and she smiled at me. “I found the information I wanted,” she told me. “I got in, and went down to the parking garage so I can just pull my car through directly. I think you’re gonna love this. Come on.” She took us down to her car and we got in. She gripped her “wand” again and pointed it out the windshield. “Teleportal,” she said, and a hole opened in the air in front of us. She pulled through and then parked again. We were in a dark space, lit only by the car’s headlights. “Door to the upstairs is through here,” she told us. “Come on, let me show you.”

“Where are we?” my father asked, looking around. “This place looks old and unused.”

“It is pretty old,” she admitted. “And you’re right it’s been unused for years. But I think it’s going to be perfect. Everyone, welcome to 33 Thomas St. Manhattan, NY.”

Chapter 3

I take a tour of the oldest house

Where: The mystery building

When: Just after Veronica took us there

We emerged from the stairs leading to the parking garage into what appeared to be the first floor of an office building and looked around. Outside, cars and pedestrians zoomed by on the way to their normal lives, not giving the place a first look, much less a second one. I headed over there and the doors opened for me before I got to them, as usual, and we took a step out.

“It’s really New York City, isn’t it?” my father asked. “We got here, just like that!” He snapped.

“Sure is!” Veronica gushed. “When I got hired for the FBI I wasted no time in looking into their history and secrets and all that. Found this place, it’s still on our books but we don’t use it anymore. Something about hauntings or the halls moving? Records weren’t specific.”

“You’re offering us Hogwarts?” Herman asked, a little amused.

“Something like that. Come on, let’s check it out!”

She felt really excited, and I couldn’t help but smile. *She does love unraveling a mystery, doesn’t she?* Looking up I saw the building was fairly tall, but dwarfed by newer and more modern looking structures nearby. But it was New York, even in winter the streets were busy, honking and sirens in the distance predominating the air. *To have a building like this sitting empty in the middle of New York City though, it must be pretty bad. What are we getting ourselves into?*

We headed back in and looked around the lobby. (Yes, I made sure the doors were locked again) The furniture was all out of date, my parents decided it was a 70’s aesthetic, but it was my mother who discovered the first mystery of the place.

“Are you sure this place has been abandoned?” she asked. She was looking at the front desk, right across from the main doors.

“Far as I can recall from the records, yes. Why?” Veronica answered.

My mother held up a finger. “No dust. Even haunted office buildings have dust, right?”

Veronica hurried over and checked, scowling at the desk after running her own finger along it. “You’re right. It’s clean. Now that is odd. No one would clean an unused building, would they?”

We all were at a loss.

“Can we get to the higher levels?” Herman asked, pointing at the elevators. “Maybe some clues up there.”

“Power is off no doubt, we’ll take the stairs, but yeah, we should be able to.”

We headed up, doors opening for me like they were welcoming me home, and I did feel a strange kinship with this place. I didn’t mention this, it would have sounded crazy, but somehow I felt I knew this place. Like I had seen it in a dream. We went up floor after floor, poking our heads into each level. It seemed the place had labs, offices, a cube area, safe rooms, break rooms, bathrooms, everything you would expect an old office building to have. And somewhat surprising, all the equipment was intact, like the people here had just up and left, leaving everything behind. Herman was especially thrilled.

“Look at this stuff, these are Apple][computers,” he told us. “This place was abandoned before 1984, when the Mac came out. Or if it was after that, they never bought any. Look look! That’s a][gs, and look at this!” He held a box up to us. “Floppy disks! Never thought I would see them again! I wonder if any of this stuff still works?”

“So this place is more a museum than an office building at the moment,” my father said.

“Maybe, but it has some benefits,” Veronica said. “The building itself no one in the FBI is paying attention to. So we get it rent free, they’re still paying the bill on it. I’m pretty sure I can get water and electricity turned on, so we don’t have to worry about that. We get the whole place to

ourselves, and I'm sure we could turn some of the floors into apartments so you can live rent free too. In NYC! Imagine it! We have a good jumping off point for missions, it's basically a secret base. Building has been here forever, no one will look twice at it, we keep the lobby empty and no one even suspects we're up here. And it's protected; warded somehow, or just built in the right place. According to what I read about it, the building rejects anything tainted. So anyone here should be safe from possession or attack from the Astral or Otherworld."

"This sounds perfect!" Herman gushed. "Where do I—"

She held up a hand. "Of course it's not all roses. Like I said it was abandoned for a reason, we need to find out what that reason is. Can we even stay here? I don't know. Plus you would still be off the books. I can't put in requests to suddenly activate a whole building, or hire a ton of people. So the FBI itself probably won't give you any resources. Like, at all. Anything the building needs; repairs, new equipment, light-bulbs, toilet paper, we're going to have to cover that ourselves."

Wait, she said ourselves, is she joining us? Can she just say to her superiors, yeah, I found something more interesting to do, but keep paying me, no I can't tell you what it is. I mean, really?

"Don't give us that, lass," Herman told her. "You're talking about being a part of an organization operating in secret in the middle of New York City, with our own building, whose sole purpose is to save the world? I don't care if it's a cardboard box I have to fix up. I'll provide what funds I can, fix up what I can, the whole nine yards. I mean I get it won't be easy, but you're putting together the Avengers here. You think we would say no to that?"

"You mean from the comics?" my father asked.

"That too, oh boy do I have a treat for you," Herman told him. "You like movies? You've got some catching up to do."

Yeah, he's Iron- wait. "Shhhh. Did you hear that?"

Everyone froze. I heard it again. It was a squeaking sound. I put my parents behind me and the gun came into my hand. Veronica pulled her gun and wand, and Herman lifted the hammer. The squeaking got closer. Closer. Into the pool of light cast by our cell phones stepped... A janitor.

"Oh, hello," he said to us, seeming to ignore all the guns and such pointed at him. "Welcome back."

I looked him over. The squeaking was his yellow bucket, that he was pushing along with the mop. The bucket was full of water. He seemed fairly old, and was wearing an old janitor's outfit. He had an odd energy pattern inside him too, swirling and shifting in a way I had never seen before. But he seemed harmless enough, with graying hair that really needed brushing, yellow headphones connected to a walkman of all things, and a low, gravely voice. *I guess we know why the place was so clean downstairs?*

"Who are you?" Veronica demanded.

"I'm Ahti," he told us. "Head janitor here. Well, only janitor now, so I guess that goes without saying."

"Janitor? This building has been abandoned for years!" she protested. "What are you still doing here?"

"No one told me to leave," he explained matter-of-factly. "And I knew sooner or later someone would be along again. And here you all are!" He looked us over, lingering on me a moment more than the others. "Well aren't you interesting?" he asked at last.

"I suppose I am," I told him, lowering the pistol a little. "You've been working here since the building closed?"

"That's right. Someone had to keep it safe and clean for when it was needed again. I assume you'll be moving in soon?"

"We're thinking about it," Veronica told him suspiciously. "I notice everything seems to be put away, no papers strewn everywhere, that sort of thing. What sort of exit did people make from here? I

mean the equipment is still here, nothing we've seen so far is smashed up. Did they run screaming from the place or just not come back one day?"

"Long time ago," he mused, leaning on his mop handle. "I would say there were simply less and less people here as the weeks went by. Transferred, I would say. So slowly I don't think anyone noticed, until there was just no one left. Then everything got turned off and nobody came."

"That didn't strike you as odd?"

"Many odd things in this world."

She looked at him like "You're really not going to answer my question?"

My father spoke up. "Have you been getting paid this whole time too?"

Ah, trust my father to get to the heart of the matter.

"Oh, money?" he scoffed. "Don't need money. Just something to do, to while away the hours. Like they say; Asleep in the morning, awake in the evening will destroy the house."

Who in the heck says that? Most non-humans are asleep in the daytime because they're dragged down by sunlight. Is that what he's talking about?

"I see," Veronica told him. "Keep up the good work then, I'm sure we'll be seeing you around."

"I'm sure you will. Careful if you go back that way." He pointed. "I did some mopping so don't slip."

"We'll watch out for it, thanks."

"Er, anything *else* we should watch out for?" my father asked. "You must know the place pretty well by now."

Good question, he would be the one to know.

Ahti considered. "In your tour, don't go too far below the basement level. Even I don't know how far down the stairs go. There are tunnels there, that lead to odd places. You'll lose yourself in them."

Not 'you'll get lost down there' but 'lose yourself.' Interesting.

"Thanks."

"Of course. Enjoy the tour." He moved off, his bucket wheels squeaking as he went.

"That was odd," Veronica finally said after he was gone.

"He's really been wandering around here for forty years?" my mother asked. "How is he still sane?"

Did you consider that he may not be? I notice he didn't have a light, and some places in here have been dark if away from windows. Does he just ignore those areas or does he not need light? He could be a non-human, their whole thing is avoiding detection. But no one around Excellus had that kind of energy pattern either.

"I want to know how a janitor has made enough money to not need a salary anymore," my father wondered.

"I'll look into the old records," Veronica assured us. "Make sure he's really been here all this time. But it does seem reasonable, the place has been cleaned this whole time, if these rooms are any indication. I've been looking around, there's no dust *anywhere*."

"That's true," my mother agreed. It was. Certain things had broken down, tiles cracked and carpets were worn but the place wouldn't need cleaning if we did move in here.

"What were we saying before he showed up?" Herman asked.

"I was saying that there were downsides to the building," Veronica recalled. "If we are caught here, it could be considered trespassing. Even for me."

"What if it wasn't?" Herman asked shrewdly.

"What do you mean?"

"I have certain resources at my disposal, and I'm sure you can get me into FBI headquarters," he explained. "Get me access to your network and I'm sure I can change some records to show we're

allowed to be here. If the building is owned by the FBI as you say, it must be in a database somewhere. Let's reactivate it, put our names on the staff list or whatever. The FBI doesn't just hire agents, they must have cleaning staff too." He pointed a thumb in the direction Ahti went.

"I suppose so," she agreed. "I guess it's up to Jesse here. Is this place acceptable? Do you want it as your headquarters? And if you don't you better have someplace else in mind because this is all I've got."

"If we can get things turned on around here, sure, but am I being hired into the FBI or not?"

"That's my daughter," my father said proudly. "Always know where the money's coming from."

Yeah, I have student loans still. Just because I teleported from Maine to New York you think they wouldn't find me? They would. They would come for me. It wouldn't surprise me if they employed magic users, they're ruthless. Ruthless, I tell you!

"You would be listed as a special consultant. You wouldn't get an FBI badge or anything, if you're hoping for that. I can get you a salary, but your parents? Not right away. Even I can only do so much at one time before they start taking a closer look at what I'm up to. We don't want that."

"That's all true. But I can't do this alone, I wouldn't even know where to begin. Without being a part of the FBI--"

"What? No, don't be silly. You'll have me, I'm your FBI contact for all this!"

"You can pick your own assignments? Someone isn't going to assign you elsewhere and leave us with a building and nothing else?"

"Shouldn't be a worry. I was ordered to look into what happened with Thomas. This is all part of that investigation. Until I submit a final report, and as long as I keep submitting reports that I'm making progress in the investigation, I'll be fine."

That makes me feel at least a little better. I was on my own for a long time, but this? Totally different. "So it's the three of us against the world?"

"Uh, there are five of us," my father corrected me.

"But you two aren't going out in the field," I told them. "You will be staying safe here." *Great, and now I've become Dylan.*

"Neat," he told me sarcastically. "Maybe I can get some tips on being a janitor from that Ahti guy. Hope I can catch up to him, maybe get a sweet pair of overalls too." He turned to go after the man.

"Be reasonable dear," my mother said to him, grabbing his arm. "There will be plenty of work to do both out there and in here. Someone needs to go shopping, and furnish the rooms, and file paperwork, and keep an eye on things. That's us. We aren't demon fighters!"

"I suppose you're right. This is all we're good for now."

She opened her mouth but closed it again. He wasn't wrong, but at the same time if he started a downward spiral at this point... "That's up to you," I told him. "You can think that way, resent what's happened to you, and get moody. Or you can look for opportunity here because the fact is she's right. We're going to need people here doing things. Ahti may have kept things clean but a lot of work is still needed around here. Deciding what equipment to keep, that means testing every piece of it, cleaning out old records that we don't need anymore, looking into why everyone left, taking inventory of what we have. Trashing stuff that we don't need. I could go on. You're not prisoners here, you can go to movies and out to dinner or whatever you want when you punch out, same as any other job. And this is the city, if you find something else suited to you I'm not going to insist you stay here. Though I would recommend it, I don't want to find you possessed to try and get to me."

"Yeah, okay. I get it. I'll try."

"Thanks dad."

Our tour continued, up to the top of the building. We had plenty of space, and Herman was excitedly coming up with ideas for where to put everything. The safe rooms on each level concerned me though. It was basically a big room, surrounded by walls, and closed off with a huge metal door.

Some were open and some were closed, but after seeing the inside of one there was no mistaking it, and we figured the others were all the same. *But they must have been put in as the place was being built, not after. So it's not necessarily true there was a specific reason for putting them in. And that janitor has been wandering around here forty years. If there was something about to leap out at us, it would have taken him a long time ago.*

"Hey, nice view right?" Veronica asked us. We were standing near the top of the building, looking out over the city. "I bet it's really great at night. Shame we missed Christmas, but there's always next year."

I had to admit, it was a pretty nice view. *From here we could take back the world*, I thought to myself.

"Everything the light touches is our kingdom," Herman told us, his hand sweeping dramatically across the scene.

"Wait, I remember that," my father said, scrunching his face up. "I know that reference. What was that from? You must have watched it a hundred times as a kid, it's on the tip of my tongue!"

"Lion King," I told him.

"Yes, that's it!"

"So it's not just Marvel you're into huh?" Veronica asked Herman.

"What do you mean? Marvel is owned by Disney. Quoting a Marvel movie is quoting a Disney movie."

"Wait, when did *this* happen?" my dad asked.

"Oh, Disney owns everything now," he answered. "Get used to it. Even Star Wars."

"They own *what*?"

So Veronica brought us back to Ordinary so I could pack and turn in my notice and such (and maybe have a farewell party?) at Excellus. I needed to pick up my car anyway, and Herman had some stuff to get as well. Veronica suggested I take care of that, "You're coming with me, remember? You've got hacking to do."

"Please," he said, looking pained. "Hacking? Think of it as simply avoiding a lot of red tape. And it would be more 'cracking' than hacking, words mean... Never mind. Let me go get my laptop."

"We have lots of that," she admitted with a laugh. "Red tape, I mean. Fair enough. Meet you back here in a couple of hours."

"Sure thing," I told her. "See you soon."

They headed off towards Herman's area, and I went to go find Gretchen. I filled her in on what Veronica had showed me, and she seemed impressed. "Don't let Veronica push you around though," she told me. "You need to be in charge of this, I feel it."

"You feel it, or you asked about it?" I asked shrewdly.

"I asked," she admitted. "You want to hear it?"

"Sure." I got out my phone and hit the audio record button, I wasn't just going to try and remember it after all.

"Jesse comes home to the building so tall, from here she can watch an empire fall.

Clean up the streets, put safety first, though it's for justice I know that you thirst.

A deal with a demon could be your only chance, but make sure you consider the other side's stance.

Most important of all as you take Control, the greatest threat to your plan won't strike from below."

I looked at her journal, trying to figure out what the words could mean. I took a picture of them too, just in case. "Thanks. I'll study this and see what I can come up with."

"Just be safe," she told me, hugging me. "If you do need help, you've got my number. Don't hesitate."

"I won't. I guess this is my two week notice, effective two weeks ago, huh?"

She gave a little laugh. "I guess so. I'll fix it, so if you ever want to come work for us again your record is clean. Come on, I'll help you clean out your desk."

"Oh, trying to get rid of me as soon as possible huh? Don't I even get any cake? With 'we hope you fail, you're dead to us now?' written on it?"

"That's right. I gave Archie the key to my place, he's busy throwing all your crap on the front lawn. We'll have the celebratory cake *after* you leave."

"I could shoot you and dump the body you know," I told her. "Nobody would know."

"You think so, huh?"

We both smiled a beautiful smile, to hide the pain.

So with my stuff gathered up and packed into the car I waited for Veronica to return with Herman. Of course I had his stuff too, so I was ready to go. I had said goodbye to everyone, told Archie to stay in touch because there was plenty of work to do around the old building, and was now rather glumly waiting for them. Maybe they were used to it, but I had been working with these people for several months now. It wasn't easy to just leave them behind. While I was sitting there I had a light bulb flash above my head, and pulled out my phone. Opening my contacts I smiled, and touched a finger to the number.

"Hello?"

"Sarah, hi! It's Jesse, can you talk for a few minutes? I have a great offer for you!"

"Offer? Uh, yeah, I can talk, what's going on?"

"I'm about to take possession of an old building in New York City for my new base of operations. I need manpower, and I'm pretty sure your people, naming no names, need a safe place to call headquarters, if you will. Seems like we could help each other out. Interested?"

"You're... Wait what?"

I laughed. "I know, it was a shock to me too. Look, can you get to New York City? I'll give you the address- no, I'll send you a picture of the lobby once I get back there. Just don't spread it around, if you get my drift. Or send me a picture of where you are, and I'll have my..." *Huh, what is Veronica to me anyway?* "...new partner open a gateway to that location. Just give me a time."

"You're offering *us* a building?"

I heard the emphasis on us there. Us, meaning the benandanti. "That's right. We've got tons of room, a whole building for five people at the moment and it's a little ridiculous. I think we can help each other out, what we're about to do at least tangentially is in your wheelhouse. At least come hear what I have to say. Even if you don't want to help, I want to help you, my building is your building."

"Actually, our little tussle hasn't been going well lately," she admitted. "We could use a safe-house, so your offer comes at a really good time. I'll check with the others and get back to you."

"Fine. I'll be here."

"Jesse? Thanks. I think maybe the Abbess is working through you, calling me when you did. I was not sure where we were going to go next."

She really does sound worried. Have more benandanti been killed? Has their battle with the witches escalated again? "I don't know about that, it doesn't seem like it from this end. But I'll take all the help I can get. Talk to you soon."

"Bye for now."

I tipped the phone back into my purse and heard a knock on the window. I gave a little jump and looked over, it was Veronica. She was radiating excitement again, and I couldn't help but smile. I put my window down.

"You're not going to believe what we found out!" she gushed. "Come on, let's get this car into the garage and we can tell you all about it!"

Chapter 4

Veronica puts me in charge of the whole thing

Where: Back to the oldest house

When: Ten minutes or so later, nearing dinner time

“We did find out some surprising things, poking around the FBI computer systems,” Herman said to me as we all sat down. We had picked a room on the second floor with a table and chairs, and Herman had brought an LED lamp that we put in the middle. The sun was going down, so it would be dark soon. Both felt excited, and he was carrying a bag of something he hadn’t showed us yet. My parents were there, and I heard the squeak squeak of Ahti’s rolling bucket nearby too. “Some records were encrypted, but the older ones were not.”

“Once something gets too old we don’t bother,” Veronica explained. “Like government programs from the 60s being declassified because no one cares any more. But let me tell her!”

“Go ahead.”

“This building, it’s more special then we realized,” she went on excitedly. “It was part of an FBI program, a sister organization, if you will, connected to them but with separate budgets and everything. Why it fell apart we didn’t figure out, but it has a name. Show them the badges, this is so cool!”

Herman nodded and took something out of the bag, sliding it over to me. It was clearly a badge holder, worn around the edges but still holding together. I opened it and tilted it into the light. Inside was a badge with an eagle holding a sword in one talon, a double ended key in the other. Around the edges was written “Federal Bureau of Control.” He was passing the others out to my parents, who took them to look over. I was holding mine as if I couldn’t figure out if I should throw it out the window or just calmly hand it back. *Most important of all as you take Control, the greatest threat to your plan won’t strike from below. That was the last line of the poem, the magic knew this was going to happen. But what danger won’t come from below? Is a rock going to fall on the place from the sky? I think they forced the rhyme but a few more specifics would have been nice, magic.*

“Isn’t it great?” Veronica gushed. “The five of us are now officially agents of Control!”

“What did it used to do?” my father asked. “I mean it must have been closed down for some reason.”

“Investigate strange goings on, it’s basically an FBI for the supernatural world,” Herman told us. “Can’t imagine why anyone would want that stopped.”

I can. “Go back to us being agents?” I asked.

“I was able to transfer myself here,” she told us with a smile. “Whoever is on the other side of Herman’s laptop, they work fast. Got through all sorts of paperwork in a flash. Oh and services to the building should be restored tomorrow. I hope Ahti has kept the pipes in good repair.”

“I have,” came the answer, shouted from down the hall.

She snorted. “And the wiring all still works.”

“Don’t know much about that!”

“Figures. We’ll have to deal with that as it comes. Anyway, yeah, it’s at least official enough I can carry this badge and my FBI one, I figured we wouldn’t throw that away. But you’re all employees of FBC. Uh, you’re not getting paid, like I said before. There’s only so much we could do from there. Adding us back to the federal budget wasn’t one of them. But I- Herman- put your names in the database so if anyone calls the FBI to see if you’re agents of FBC, the answer will be yes. Even if that person doesn’t know what an FBC is or what we have the power to do. That alone should clue them in it’s top secret and we can basically do whatever it is we’re trying to do. Payroll is a different system, hence no paycheck.”

How does that track? “And who did you put in charge of this little group?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“Why you, of course, Jesse! You’re Director Faden now, congratulations! Herman said he ordered you some business cards and everything.” He nodded.

“So wait, if this goes bad my daughter takes the fall as the one in charge?” my father demanded. “Great.”

“Well I couldn’t suddenly promote myself,” she countered. “Besides it felt right.”

“It’s fine, dad,” I told him. “It’s fate. Believe me. There have been... signs.”

“Okay?”

“Didn’t I see this symbol behind the desk?” my mother asked.

“Let’s go look!” the rest of us decided.

We all went downstairs again, and yes, it turned out that was the case. In fact, as we looked around the building that symbol was everywhere, we had just been looking past it as part of the scenery. But this building had belonged to some kind of federal agency all right, and for some reason they simply gave it up. *Though we all have an idea what that reason was. Now it’s starting up again. How long until the forces of the world figure that out and come after us?* I took some pictures of the lobby too, knowing I might need them.

We headed out to get some dinner, and find a place to stay. I hated to stay at even the cheapest hotel around NYC but what choice did we have? The Control building didn’t have any heat yet, so while walking around in our winter jackets was fine bedding down under a table or something was out of the question. But Veronica looked at me like I was nuts.

“I can just take you all back to Ordinary,” she told us. “You can stay there tonight, and I’ll bring you back tomorrow. Unless there’s another place you’d like to go, I’ve been lots of places, but I figure we’ll stick with what you know. You need to get your car anyway right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Not used to having someone around that can whisk us from place to place. Isn’t that a little dangerous though?”

“Not really,” she replied. “I always do magic to ‘see’ my destination before I teleport. Make sure the coast is clear.”

“Smart. Okay, we’ll head back there, then.”

Herman wanted to head home, I didn’t blame him, so she sent him back there, and sent us to Ordinary. She came with us, so we got two rooms, one for my parents and one for Veronica and me. We were sitting on the couch watching TV when my phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Jesse? It’s Sarah.”

“Sarah, how are you?” I put it on speaker phone, no reason to keep Veronica out of this. *Of course, I’m the director so what I say goes. If I want to have others show up, who is she to say I can’t? She’s just my employee now, right? I mean she did that to herself..*

“Okay, look is that offer still open?”

“We’re not there at the moment, but yeah, of course. Did you talk with the others?”

“Yes, they said I was stupid for not jumping at the chance. They know you, and remember how you helped us. We’re ready to head there, but if you’re not there now...”

“Humm, I trust you. I can send you pictures of the place. It’s not heated though, is that going to be okay?”

“It’s better than sleeping on the streets. We’ll make do.”

“It’s that bad?” We shared a look.

“It’s been pretty bad, yeah. We’re secure at the moment, that’s how I was able to call you.”

“We can head back, then send a portal for you—”

“No, no, just send me the pictures. There’s a sorcerer I trust that can send us there, we’re at his place now anyway.”

I guess if they trust this person, there's no reason I shouldn't. They're probably a lot more paranoid than I would be. I hate to have anyone seeing the inside of the Control building, but this is a special circumstance. “Yeah, okay, I'll send them along.”

“Thank you, Jesse. The others thank you too. You've really saved us.”

“It's fine. We can talk tomorrow about what's been going on with you all, figure something out.”

“Of course.”

“See you then.”

“Bye.”

The phone went dead and I texted her the pictures. She replied that was enough and they were there, along with some emoji.

“What was that all about?” Veronica asked.

“Some benandanti I helped out previously,” I told her. “You know about them?” She nodded. “Their little game with the witches changed recently. Before, the witches would back off if they got caught, and the benandanti promised a certain level of non-violence against them. But on the mission I went on with them, and others found this out at the same time, they stepped up the game. Set traps for them, and started shooting to kill.”

“No!” she looked and felt horrified.

“Yes.”

“But their conflict has gone on for a thousand years, why suddenly-” She pulled up short and scowled. “They're getting bolder, aren't they?”

“The secret war we didn't know we were fighting is going their way,” I agreed. “With so much division and problems in the world demons probably feel they have the upper hand. And they do. So it was time to stop playing nice and actually move into the endgame.”

“Do you think... Do you think we're in time to stop it?”

I shook my head. “I don't know. They'll be able to tell us more tomorrow. It's all connected, I think. Demons interfering in our world, no matter the method. Making witches, having spirits possessing people? It all has to stop.”

“I agree.” She pulled her legs up to her chest, wrapped them in her arms. “This is something a lot bigger than I expected, what I've stumbled into, isn't it?”

“The benandanti would say you were guided by the Abbess, the holy being they pray to for magic.”

“I can only hope that's true. You got contacted, shown the truth. We can only hope it's in time.”

“It's up to us,” I agreed. “We'll protect this world with all we have, at least I will. You have my word on that.”

“You have my word too,” she returned fiercely, jumping up. “I've never backed down, not when I was searching for the truth of my best friend's murder and I won't start now. Let's do it, Jesse. Let's save the freaking world!”

Her best friend was murdered? “Of course,” I told her. “We're the Bureau of Control, aren't we?”

“Yeah we are. I'm going outside to practice some magic.” She grabbed her jacket. “I have a feeling I'm going to need to be at the top of my game. See you in a bit.”

“Okay.”

Bright and early the next day we teleported back to the Control building, to find some lights working and the place filling with warm air. The heaps off in the corner must be the benandanti so I just set the bag of bagels I got for them nearby and headed to the upper levels. With the lights working we poked into supply closets and whatnot, finding a lot of really old supplies we could use. The water was on we discovered, so we could flush the toilets and use the sinks, so things really were looking up for

the old girl. I passed Ahti in the hall and he greeted me as well. He looked and felt satisfied, pushing a cart full of supplies in yellowing boxes.

Have to figure this guy out.

“Good morning.”

“Morning.”

“I took the liberty of turning off the circuit breaker for the outside lights,” he told me. “I thought that might be a bit much as you’re trying to keep a low profile here.”

“Thanks,” I told him, blinking a bit in surprise. *Right, buildings have lights on the outside sometimes. I didn’t even think of that.* “That will be a big help. Oh, I brought bagels, a whole mess of them, if you want one. They’re down by the benandanti, but don’t wake them up.”

“I noticed we had some more guests, I figured they were invited as they didn’t make any trouble. Thanks. Might just take you up on that.”

“Help yourself.”

“I will. Let me know of any leaks you see now that the water is on again. We don’t have many replacement bulbs so let me know what floors you want me to see to first.”

“Right. Need to talk with everyone, see how we’re going to do things around here.”

“Smart. No one is a blacksmith when they are born.”

“True. I’ll get back to you.”

“No rush.” He headed off down the hall. I was going to check the elevator, but thought better of it just as I was about to push the button. *Let’s test these with Veronica handy, in case we get stuck and need to teleport out.*

I found Herman gleefully powering on Apple][computers in one of the labs, surprisingly a good many of them seemed to work, though the monitors were junk.

“Oh no, that’s the way they originally looked,” he assured me. “It didn’t get much better in those days.”

“Thank goodness I was born in the future!”

He laughed. “You and me both.”

“Anyway, is this where you want to set up?”

“Uh, maybe? Why?”

“Just need to look around and see what the rooms need. I see about four lights in here working so we’re going to need all kinds of bulbs. Maybe better power strips or UPS units if you have delicate equipment you’re going to be moving in. Find where you want to be, and let’s figure out where we *aren’t* going to be too. If we can scavenge working bulbs from one place and put them in another, we should do it.”

“Good thinking. I’ll make a list.”

“Great. Once our benandanti friends downstairs are up I’ll figure out their story, then I want to have an all hands meeting. I’ll text you.”

“Got it.”

I spent an hour or so heading up to the first few floors and turning everything on. Lights. Space heaters. Faucets. I checked for leaks, noted generally how many lights worked, and put a big sharpie X on anything that didn’t work. I poked into cabinets, took inventory on what reams of paper we had (*are they even still going to be good after so long?*) and generally kept myself busy until the benandanti were up. In all there were seven people, four adults and three kids. Sarah came over and thanked me for breakfast and for the place to stay.

“Of course,” I told her. “How are your people holding up?”

“Not well,” she admitted. “We’ve been way more careful, but it’s not really helping. Our people are being targeted by demons more than ever before. I’ve been able to keep my little group safe, but

other cells haven't been so lucky. We've lost more people in the last month than in the year prior. Something has to be done."

"I agree, this is serious. However, fate or, I guess in your case divine intervention, has given us a new hope. We need each other. I need people to fill this building up and help in my mission which I'll explain in a moment. You need a safe place, equipment, and quite honestly someone with a gun to go with you on your missions."

She looked pained. "So many years of non-violence, I hate to throw it away but you're right. I can hardly admit it to myself but we're just not adequate anymore."

"It is odd," I agreed. "You have no offensive magic, not really, right?"

"We don't. We've just relied on surprise, creative use of what we can do, and witches respecting the game."

"It's almost as if you were created to work with a team but decided to try going it alone. And it worked until now, don't get me wrong, but there's no shame in asking for help."

"There's some, but I take your meaning. It does seem like that, doesn't it?" She looked away, thinking. I gave her a moment.

"So just as a preliminary 'feeling the situation out' sort of way, do you think you might consider setting up some kind of permanent base here? We've got the space, and I think it's pretty clear we need each other in the current climate. We can offer you a whole floor if there's super secret rituals you do or whatever, or we can configure some rooms- oh we have safe rooms too! With huge metal doors, it's crazy. I'm already thinking of converting a floor or two into apartments, I need a place to stay myself and I hate commuting so why not just go 'upstairs' when I clock out." *Can the director ever really clock out though?* "So you're welcome to sleep here when you do your thing, or move in here, whatever."

"I... I don't know. This is all so sudden, last night I didn't know where my group would be safe enough to sleep and today you're offering me a whole floor of this building. My initial impulse is to throw myself at your feet and thank you, I'm pretty sure I can trust you, but I want the whole story first."

"That's fair. You don't want to increase your problems, but I really do think our problems are related. In any case, poke around the building if you want. The bathrooms work now, I have no idea how much toilet paper we have but we can raid higher floors if we need to. Use the ones down here for now. Let's meet at," I looked at my phone, "ten thirty down here and we can have a meeting to discuss things."

"That sounds fine, thank you. The kids, umm, there's nothing dangerous around here is there?"

"Uh, don't go down into the basement, our janitor warned me there may be some odd stuff down there. And don't use the elevators, I haven't tested them yet. Otherwise, unless a CRT monitor falls on them somehow, I don't think so. The floors have all been solid I mean the building isn't *that* old." *Shoot, I could just call an elevator, send it to the top floor, watch the little arrow to see where it is, and then call it back again. I don't need to teleport. I'm dumb.*

"You have a janitor already?"

"He sort of came with the building? I don't know his story yet but he doesn't seem dangerous. I feel like I've known him from somewhere, but of course that's impossible. His name is Ahti, you may see him around. He's kept the place up, a demon that would rip your face off wouldn't do that, would they?"

"No, probably not. Okay, I'll take a look around."

"See you later."

She turned back to talk to her people and they headed for the stairs. I went to go check the elevators out. *There's going to be a million things to do getting this building up and running again, isn't there?*

Chapter 5

We discuss the most important thing of all and then act on it

Where: Lobby of the Control building

When: 10:30 AM, Jan 18th

“So, welcome everyone to the Federal Bureau of Control, recently reinstated by us,” I told the benandanti. Everyone was there; my parents, Herman, and Veronica. The drone he usually had hovered there too, taking us all in. “We’re semi-official, thanks to Herman and Meowvis’ efforts in hacking some records at the FBI. This is Herman, this is Veronica an FBI agent, and these are my parents.” I introduced them by name, and Ahti poked his head through the stairwell door. “Oh, and our janitor Ahti. Join us, if you want.” I motioned him over and he sauntered out, leaning against a pillar not far from us.

“Don’t mind if I do. Thanks.”

“So here’s the bottom line; We’ve discovered high ranking government officials, possibly the world over, have been possessed by kanaima and are working against our interests. You may have seen the news of several Taliban officials in Afghanistan turning on the ‘party.’ That was me. I was sent there,” *under mysterious circumstances*, “found them, and freed them. They started speaking out about their former party, condemning it and telling the world it wasn’t their choice. Recently we discovered an FBI agent was possessed from an early age, only strengthening our suspicion it’s everywhere. So we need help. I know you have a demon problem too, as witches have been more trouble lately, to put it mildly. So you need our help. I think our problems are one in the same. Demons, hundreds or maybe thousands of years ago, commanded forces here to disrupt human development. In the form of witches or more directly with possession, they’ve been trying to get us to tear each other apart and honestly, it speaks highly of the human spirit they haven’t succeeded yet. But for whatever reason, maybe they’re feeling confident because of recent events or a new leader has taken control, they’re stepping up efforts here. Something must be done. I’m offering a safe place, and whatever resources we can come up with to help you with your witch problem. In exchange you help us with our possession problem. Herman is our tech expert and magical item maker, Veronica has FBI contacts and legitimacy. I have a gun that can kill kanaima inside someone. My plan is to expand. Open our doors to anyone that wants to make a difference and help get our world back on track. Naturally we’ll have to be selective about who we let in, but I’m hoping divination magic can help there.” I looked to Veronica, who nodded. “So there you have it. Thoughts? What are you facing on your end, Sarah?”

“You told her your name?” one of the benandanti gasped.

“Yes, I did,” she snapped back. “She saved all our lives before, and maybe again last night. She deserves our trust.”

“I guess it’s your funeral.”

“It all of ours, why do you think we’re here?” She turned back to me. “The truth is we’re not safe anymore. We’ve left our spouses, hoping they don’t get caught up in this, and have basically been on the run. Witches harass us everywhere we go. I have no idea how they’re finding us, magic probably, but us coming here is a risk to you.”

I snorted. “Believe me, no bigger than we were already facing. Demons find out we know about their little possession game, and we can be sure they won’t take it lightly. Hopefully we can get some more dwarves here, and they can start securing the place properly. I was actually hoping you could all walk around and see if we’re protected already. Veronica said the notes about the building implied that, but I can’t rely on that after so long. We need to check.”

“We can do that,” they admitted.

“And the kids?” I asked, looking them over. They ranged in age from maybe 8 to 17, thankfully no babies.

“They’re benandanti too,” Sarah told me. “Not fully trained, but they can help out around here.”

So it's passed through family lines? I wonder if younger kids were left behind, either because they don't know if they are benandanti too or just because life on the run wasn't an option for them. "Okay, they can patrol around here and practice their magic." A magic school! Of course! We need to have classes or something. I should totally steal how Excellus does things. Weapons training, magic lessons, the whole works.

"If we decide to stay," said another.

"And where would you suggest?" Sarah asked her. "Look around, this is a fantastic opportunity."

"Can we really trust them? We don't know them!"

"If we wanted you dead or harmed," Veronica spoke up, "would we really be standing here offering you all this help? In fact if we did want you dead it sounds like all we had to do was *wait*. The job would have been done for us fairly soon. Instead we're doing the opposite. Jesse here is basically throwing the doors of her *home* open to you people, and offering our services in exchange for a bit of help on your end. Maybe things have been rough for you, fine. But no one is that cynical. It might be shocking but I actually believe Jesse has this 'I want to help' circuit active in her brain. She can't turn it off. You would be fools to turn her down."

And now I'm blushing, thanks Veronica.

"I'm more concerned with putting you at greater risk," said another. "Our fight isn't yours."

"I'm starting to think it is," Sarah told him. "The decision is mine. We at least need a place to stay temporarily while we figure out what our next steps are. Do you mind if we don't give you a definite yes answer just yet, Jesse?"

"Stay as long as you need to," I told them. "But you will need to help us get this building up and running while you're here. Just sitting around while we work... Nah uh."

"We're not afraid of a little work," she assured me.

"I am," said one of the younger kids, raising a hand. "I'm afraid of work."

"I'm allergic to work!" said an older one. "I get these... Hives?"

"Very funny kids. You'll get up and do what needs to be done. That's the benandanti way."

I thought that was powder-milk biscuits?

"So as I'm in charge of this little group, and I trust Jesse, we're staying. At least for now. Use your own eyes if you want to know if we should trust them. That okay with everybody?" They grumbled that it was, not the greatest of beginnings but perhaps I could win them over with enough baked goods. But that was the other problem.

"Glad to hear it. This of course brings us to the first order of business for the day. Fixing the place up. Realistically, Ahti, how set are we for supplies?"

"It's not good," he admitted. "Lights are out all over. This many people will need a lot of soap, paper, and other things like toothpaste if you're really going to set up apartments here. Apartments will need beds, rugs, desks, chairs, etc. Where will this many people eat? We have a cafeteria, but no food. We have some plates and forks and the like, but I think the stove has had mice living in it for about ten years. I may or may not have been putting out seed for them because I thought they were cute. Hard to say. I walk by. Sometimes there is seed on the floor after I sweep. Who knows where the seed comes from?"

"In any case, we're going to need money, and lots of it." He nodded. "As we're getting no taxpayer support because we're not official-official it falls to us. Herman has generously agreed to front us some money, but I want options for an actual revenue stream. It shouldn't be his responsibility to fund the entire place. So any suggestions you can come up with I'll entertain now."

I waited.

"In the short term," Herman spoke up, "I bet those old computers in the labs would sell on ebay. They're collector's items at this point. Many work, and there's no danger of old FBC data getting out because they don't have hard drives. That could bring in some cash."

“Okay, if we don’t need them all, and we should get some new machines in...” *Ugh, another expense.* “Actually, we need to get the building wired for the internet too, don’t we. It won’t have been.” *It didn’t exist at the time! Wild, when you think about it. In my lifetime, look what we’ve managed to do!*

“Cable isn’t that expensive,” he told us. “Of course it’s a big building, so we would need a lot of it. That would add up I guess.”

“Other ideas?”

“Win the lottery?” one of the kids suggested. “I mean premonition magic exists right?”

“Then every sorcerer on the planet would be loaded, stupid,” said another. “Clearly they aren’t.”

“Aren’t they?”

“No!”

“You don’t know!”

“It’s obvious.”

“How is it obvious?”

“Children, please,” said Sarah. “I know we’re a bit frazzled right now, so try to keep it together. I don’t think that would work. Would it?”

“If you could decode winning numbers from the rhymes in a poem, sure,” Veronica told them. “Easier to win in sports betting of some kind. I bet it could be used to tell which horse would win a race, or which car, I guess. If that’s a thing.”

“Once we got found out, by winning more than we should, it would raise suspicions. We would probably be barred from wherever we were gambling from,” I mused. “Plus it might attract the wrong kind of attention, that of human criminals.”

“Even better,” said the older boy. “Let’s beat up drug lords or something and take their cash. Police don’t need to buy more AK-47s or whatever they’re doing with drug money.”

“I’m not sure-”

“Actually, that sounds like a good idea,” Herman spoke up. “I could see myself doing that.”

We all stared at him.

He cleared his throat. “I mean, if I was a super hero or something, which I’m not. Obviously. But it would be a good way to get a large infusion of cash all at once, and fairly guilt free too.”

“I don’t know about super heroes,” I told him cautiously, “but we might have all the pieces we need to do something like that. Your invention,” *Wayfinder*, “could lead us to any number of places with a lot of money lying around. That money is going to be in safes. Veronica, if your magic can make us invisible you could get in there, look at the safe, and then simply leave. As long as it’s not a home, that is. Teleport it to us outside and we drive away with them none the wiser. Crack the safe here and heck, send it back to them empty. Do that a couple of times and we could have drug lords in the area paralyzed with terror over where their money is going.” *Huh, with no money they can’t get more product to sell. No product to sell means the drug problem goes away. If we kept it up, just stealing whatever money they had laying around without getting caught. Heck if they used the same safe we could just check it every night.*

“Oh, I mean, sure, you could do it that way,” he grumbled.

Did someone want to suit up? Wonder if he’ll ever tell us he’s Iron Man, if he actually is. Come on though, the whole Marvel obsession, the same drone, let’s be real here.

“I could do it that way,” she agreed. “No one would be put in danger, at least not on our end.”

“Sure, whoever we stole the money from may report to someone else who would be less than pleased their money is missing. But that’s not our problem,” I agreed. “Okay, we’ll talk about it. For the moment everyone think of ways to bring in, at least somewhat legally, large amounts of cash. Remember that we have magic, so even outlandish plans are on the table. We have resources most don’t, so think big. Sarah, spread your people out and start taking an inventory of what you would need to make this a base or a home. Claim some space, and assume more benandanti will be coming so don’t

just think about what we need for today or the next week. Think six months from now, with a hundred people here.”

“You don’t think small, do you?”

“Nope,” I replied with a grin. “I have some plans for this place.”

We got to work. I checked out the kitchen Ahti had been talking about, basically in back of the cafeteria and made sure everything worked back there. It did, so I drew up a shopping list. We could have fast food for lunch but I wanted to actually cook something for everyone tonight. Food wasn’t just the way to a *man’s* heart, after all. The day flew by, there was so much to do and so few funds to do it with. So most stuff I just listed down as “when we have the funds” but told everyone to keep it coming. *Drug lords always have lots of cash around, right? That plan is looking better and better by the minute.* Herman claimed a lab for himself and started moving stuff into it, using a portal provided to him by Veronica. He also looked into what it would take to get the building on the internet, and at least partly wired. Ahti helped with that, showing him the “inner walls” where the conduits were. Fortunately the building was built with expansion in mind, so they could “easily” feed cable from empty wall plates through the walls to a central location on the lower level, where the boilers and such were. I walked around the city a bit, getting a feel for what was nearby so if we needed something right away we could get it. I also went grocery shopping, lugging a ton of food back in my car. I had to have someone come and raise the gate on the underground parking lot once I got back, there was no way I was leaving it unlocked, but we had no one to sit there and raise it for me either. (The building had been built with a physical guard in mind, who would check your badge, as automated badges and such hadn’t been invented yet when the place was built. We would have to do something about that too. Sigh.)

After that I started dinner, the benandanti helped me clean up, and I headed to Herman’s lab to get Wayfinder for the night’s mission. *No sense putting it off, we need the money now so if there’s some lying around let’s go get it!* Veronica was limited by daylight too, not in the sense Herman was by being dragged down (as he explained it) but magic was still more constrained during the day. I wanted no slip ups so doing it at night was fine with me. I walked into his lab and stopped in my tracks.

“I knew it!” I shouted, pointing to what was standing there. It was red and gold, held up by a harness of some kind, and it looked exactly as I had last seen it.

“Ah, you guessed I take it?” Herman told me, feeling embarrassed. “Turns out secret identities are actually fairly hard. I figure anyone around here is trustworthy, and everyone else is taking a risk how can I do less? So I figured I would move it here, in case we needed it.”

“Yeah, all this, oh we happen to know a guy stuff, and you saving me that one time out of nowhere? And using the same drone? And carrying around Thor’s hammer? And talking about Marvel movies all the time? How could it not be you? Wow, and this really works huh?” I walked around it, admiring how everything fit together. *I want something like this! Imagine the work that went into it though.*

“It’s fully functional, yes. I was thinking, if you wanted a distraction or to actually take out the drug dealers we’re going to go after tonight, I could suit up and do that.”

I considered. “Having the backup would be nice,” I decided. “But the plan, for the moment at least, is to leave everyone guessing. We can start cleaning up the streets later. But I want you in the armor. You handle Wayfinder, tell us where to go from above. That way if we do need you, you’ll be close and can swoop in to save the day.”

“Thus improving my heroic image, I like it. Just tell me when.”

“We’re heading out at eleven. You can just call me, right?”

“Sure, there’s a phone in the suit, it’s how I talk to Meowvis.”

“Fine. I’ll talk to you then.”

“I’ll be ready.”

No wonder he signed up so fast. We are the Avengers aren't we? Crazy.

Eleven came, and while I didn't want my car spotted we had to drive to the locations Herman pointed out to us. So my car it was. "At least park a street or two away, I can walk the rest of the way," Veronica told me.

"We'll walk the rest of the way," I countered. "I'm at least going to be a lookout on the outside when you're in the place. You run into trouble and I'm not going to be two streets away!"

"Jesse, please, I'm a fully trained FBI agent, I have my gun and my wand. I'll be fine."

"You *were* an FBI agent," I reminded her. "You work for me now. I'm responsible for you, and this is the way we're going to do things. No solo missions."

"Oh." She considered me, her feelings changing to pride of all things. *In me?* "Thanks."

But we needn't have worried. Herman guided us to three businesses that were close by, clearly fronts for the illegal activities so they could show the 'profits' came from somewhere. A fancy boutique selling soaps and perfumes and the like, a small car lot, and what appeared to be a day care center. We found that one first, it was closest.

"Are you sure about this place?" I whispered to him.

"You don't need to whisper, Jesse. I'm high in the air and you're in a car. Just keep driving. Yes, the sword is pointing right to the building with the child care sign in the front of it."

"That's crazy!"

"But why would anyone ever suspect it?"

"I guess. Okay, I'll go find a place to park."

We headed in that direction, Veronica putting an obscuring spell on us when the coast was clear, and we headed to the building. She was able to teleport us inside by looking in the window, which we did after making sure the coast was clear. No one was there, but I noticed a ton of cameras in the place and hoped Veronica knew what she was doing. *Cameras don't pick us up, right? I mean she doesn't seem worried so I guess I won't be.* We easily found the safe, but just on a hunch I poked around a little more. *Yeah, I was afraid of that.* "Look," I told Veronica, lifting up a wall hanging. Beneath it was a rack of guns.

"Figured we might see something like that," she agreed. "You want to take them?"

"Obviously don't want to have a bunch of illegal guns in my city- wait. New plan."

"Oh?"

"I'm leaving this up and we'll leave the door open. I see a phone over there, I'm calling the cops to provide an 'anonymous tip' that I was walking by here and noticed this rack of guns. They can come deal with it. Still, if you see anything *you* might like..." *I mean if a door is open and a rack of guns is just sitting there, in the back of a day care, they won't need a warrant to go in, right? Well, they can stake the place out and come back in the morning if they had to.*

She grinned at me and helped me pull the cover back. "So they'll just think it was dumb luck, someone forgot to cover the guns and someone called in the tip. The police won't know how many guns were here and the owners aren't going to tell them. Nice."

"That's the idea. You need a picture of the safe right?"

"It would help."

"I'll get it while you shop."

We headed out, the call made. Back at the car she summoned the safe into my back seat, making it thump in there satisfactorily. "Let's head to the next place," I told them. "Herman?"

"The sword is pointing east from here, take a left."

"Got it."

We hit the other two places, both having similar setups. The car repair place actually had drugs in bags just sitting out and I felt a great deal of rage from Veronica as she stalked through the place. She had taken some of their guns too, and a picture of the safe so we were basically ready to go.

Too bad I have that circuit she talked about, we could sell them for even more profit. “We could set it on fire,” I suggested before we headed out. “I could call the fire department, wait two minutes, you fireball the place, it wouldn’t spread too far right?”

A slow smile spread across her face. “You beautiful, wicked girl,” she told me. “I’m going to have so much fun working for you aren’t I?”

“I believe in fostering a workplace that is both serious and jovial, at the proper time. This, I think, is one of those times for a little levity. I wouldn’t mind seeing the place in red.”

She bust out laughing. “Seeing it in red. Oh, that’s a good one. Make the call.”

We waited until we heard the sirens and she fireballed the place, making me think *nice to be on this side of it for a change*. We left, walking past them back to the car, with her at my side feeling very good about her choices in life. We summoned the second safe which they probably wouldn’t even miss. She had almost gone overboard, the initial spell blasting the table apart and then secondary spells lighting the room up. The building may have collapsed, but at least with the fire trucks right there it probably wouldn’t spread. The owners digging around for their safe would be quite suspicious, given they would probably find the guns that were still there while fighting the fire. (Veronica had made sure any ammo was clear, of course.)

The third place had a fancy alarm system, but I was feeding off Veronica’s high and feeling a little invulnerable myself. We didn’t go in the back. I had Herman hand me Wayfinder to I was doubly sure this was the place, and made my choice. I made sure the coast was clear and ripped a park bench out of the street, smashing it through their front windows. Veronica put the obscuring spell back on me, and we marched through the place. I smashed any doors out of the way, heading to the safe. No guns here, but plenty of product, it seemed that maybe they were hiding it in a “special inventory” they sold to “select customers.” I shrugged, grabbed some to scatter on my way out, took a picture of the safe, and we left. I threw some of the “product” around so it could be found by the cops like someone had done a smash and grab, and the third safe was ours. We didn’t bother calling the cops, I was sure the alarm or the gaping hole in the front of the store would do that for me. We headed back to the Control building eager to crack them open.

Chapter 6

We start earning our name

Where: The Control building

When: Several weeks later

Three quarters of a million dollars spends pretty quickly when you're trying to bring a whole building back to life, but spend it we did. I had saved some, Herman suggested Meowvis could play day trader and work the stock market, making us money with money, just like the big players did it. There would always be more drug dealers to put out of business (sadly) so if they lost it, we could get more. So I gave him part and told him to tell Meowvis to go wild. In the safes were also kilograms of drugs, according to Veronica worth millions, but we simply destroyed them. We didn't bother sending the safes back, the next day the news reported on the three "separate" instances of drug dens being found, all "by accident" making all of us smile for several days after that.

Naturally we couldn't trust the cash because it could have been marked in some way. That seemed like a hard problem to solve, but once again thanks to magic it proved to not be a problem. Veronica simply teleported us to various towns where we split up and bought up a "bordering on unreasonable" amount of stuff. Teleport to another town, repeat. It worked out, while we got some funny looks for spending wads of cash, no one was going to turn it down. As we only spent one wad per store, buying three chairs (for example) at one place and then another three at another, I hoped it wouldn't be too suspicious and we were hundreds of miles away after each trip so no one was going to be able to track us.

The building was 10% wired, we had a few "modern" computers scattered around, but the old stuff was still working and for writing reports or whatnot what more did you need? As our drug bust trip had worked out so well and Herman had better things to do than sell on Ebay (even with Meowvis' help) we had kept everything that was working. Anything that wasn't working and he thought could be cobbled together with other parts we put into storage. Anything too far gone we chucked. So the place was less cluttered, brighter, and as the benandanti had stayed more lively. Even the kids had been a great help, pitching in where they could without too many complaints. (I made sure to get lots of ice cream, a big TV for movies, and lots of paint so they could paint their own rooms to help keep them happy)

We had a floor of "apartments" now, tearing some office space apart to create larger rooms, and moving beds and things into them. Herman had his whole workshop here, and a line on a few dwarves that might want to come be a part of this. I said his priority was objects protecting against possession, so anyone we saved (once we were ready to strike) wouldn't just get taken over again. He had made at least one but had a wishlist from everyone as to what they could use. So he had all the work he could handle. Veronica had turned part of the parking garage (there was still only my car down there) into a shooting range, and spent time showing the benandanti how to use the guns she stole from the drug dealers. There were some oddities in the building, sometimes heading somewhere meant you wound up somewhere else, but it was nothing either the benandanti or Veronica could explain. The elevators worked to take you to the floor you wanted, at least. The protections on the building held, those that could feel magic (basically everybody but me! *Gurr*) said we were protected from scrying and possession while inside, which made me breathe a huge sigh of relief. It wasn't "holy ground" or anything so a demon itself could come in just fine, but how likely was that to happen?

In more good news other benandanti had gotten word of this being a safe place to stay and had shown up. Sarah and the original benandanti had stayed, so in total we had about a dozen of them (adults) and several more "in training" i.e. kids. They too got put to work, alongside my parents who had seemingly embraced their new role. They basically became building administrators, not daring to order Ahti around quite yet but anything that needed doing, they figured out how to do it. Plumbing repair, cooking, restocking bathrooms, watching the kids, and more. I knew they were pretty satisfied,

because I could feel it when I asked them. They weren't lying about it, things had to be done and they were willing to do them. Our rooms were right next to each other so we saw each other often. They were also looking into places nearby that could take Dylan, but I did have to caution them that if he did wake up, he could still be a crazed magic user, so maybe opening up some kind of facility here in the building was best? We weren't sure, so nothing had been done in that area yet. I was still in contact with Gretchen, no new inversions in Ordinary, and she was pleased at my new role in the Bureau. "I knew you had a great future ahead of you, Jesse!" she told me. I hoped she was right.

It was time to start making that great future come to pass. With reports of more benandanti on the way, and the stories of the ones already here about the elaborate traps witches were setting for them now (almost like they were getting some perverse pleasure in coming up with the most horrific ways to kill benandanti) we needed information. Then we could start doing something about it. I called the benandanti to a meeting the morning of February the 21st.

"I'd like to run something by you," I told them. "Any suggestions you might have I'll of course consider. I want to capture a witch. Of course they're not going to tell me what they're up to, but Veronica assures me with mental magic she can break into a witch's mind. To that end, tonight, I want to take a group of you out, use some tracking magic to track one down, and get some answers. Thoughts?"

"No witch should be underestimated," one man said. "They seem to learn magic very quickly, and are focusing on elemental magic more than ever. They won't hesitate to cause collateral damage."

"They seem to be almost frantic to destroy us," said another. "Taking risks and using magic up close even when it could hurt them. It's been crazy."

"Can witches be possessed?" I asked. "That might explain it."

"I don't see why not," he said, frowning. "But could they then use magic? I don't know. That's a scary thought."

"If they are, we wouldn't get anything because the witch may not even realize they're doing what they're doing. Is there anything you can do help?"

"We can lock them down," said a woman. "A group of us should be able to keep them from doing any magic while you check."

That's what I thought, that spellbreaking magic they have. But I only have to look at them, that part should be quick.

"But we wouldn't be able to see what they had been doing," said another.

"Leave that to me," Veronica told them.

"The other concern is the mundane one," said a man. "A pack of animals, and two women with guns chasing down another woman in the street is going to look mighty suspicious if a cop drives by."

"We'll have air support, we'll be able to see if any police are in the area," I told him. "Plus it should only take a moment."

There was silence for a moment. "Will four of us be enough?"

"Can I come dad?"

"If you promise to stay well back, yes."

"Thanks!"

I would have said no, but I guess they need to get training at some point. "Then we have our plan. You want to come in your animal forms?" They all nodded. "Okay. Choose who is going between you and meet me in the lobby when you fall asleep. At 11:30 we leave without you."

We were able to leave early, all the benandanti showed up on time, and we headed out. I had of course asked Veronica before even calling the meeting, and she had this to say about finding a witch:

Tonight upon the city street, there two figures dare to meet.

One to take the orders fair, one who has to give them there.
If you hurry, if you're bold, you will realize what I've told.

So it was a good chance we would see something, and again following Herman's directions we headed into the night. The two of us were bundled up, it was totally winter now and plows were out clearing the streets and sidewalks. We walked for probably a half hour, trailed by a pack of animals. Two wolves, a bird riding my shoulder, and a fox. Some distance behind them was a deer, not suspicious at all, no sir. But they did this all this time, so I figured it would be fine.

"You're close, I see two people around the next corner," Herman reported. "Streets are clear, no cops. Still, it's about forty meters they're right out in the open. Park bench, under a light. They'll see you coming."

"Got it." I put up a hand and the benandanti stopped. "Around this next corner," I told them. "Two people, could both be witches? We'll rush them, unless you think you can get all of us with an obscuring spell?"

"Six of us?" Veronica mused. "Tricky, but I'll try it. I don't guarantee it though. They only have to see one of us to know something is up."

"Wait. Can some of us circle around?" asked a wolf.

"Take a peek and see for yourself."

They nodded and moved forward. "We would have to go way out of our way," he reported. "Maybe head back a bit, cut across there, then come at them from behind?" He pointed with a paw.

"I can come in from above," said the bird. "Sit on the light."

"Should one of us come from there, but another come from the other side?" asked the other wolf.

"They won't physically run away, we don't need to corner them."

"Then why bother going around at all? I mean stopping them from doing magic from here would be tricky but not impossible."

"Wait," said the fox. "If we need to be closer, why not just teleport us over there? That would surprise them, right?"

"That would surprise them," I agreed. "Can you manage that, Veronica?"

"Easily, if it's right there."

"Great, get back here and let her see."

"Right." She crept forward, looking around the corner herself.

"Something's happening, he's getting up."

"Hurry!" *The magic said if we hurried, we took too long!*

"Right!" She grabbed her wand on her pocket and made a circle with it in the air. "Teleport!"

Our perspective changed, the woman that was there had stood also, and when we displaced the air in front of the bench she gave a start but finished casting her own spell. "-eport!" She vanished. "Crap!" I shouted. "You're not going anywhere!" I flung him to the ground, realizing too late that there was an energy signature next to him which vanished.

"I'll go after him!" the bird cried, and muttered "Oh Abbess, open the way before me!" and vanished.

"Wait, take me-" *And they're gone. You have no offensive magic, what exactly do you think you're going to do? Stupid bird!*

"What's going on?" cried the man. "Where am I? Who are you? Take what you want, just don't hurt me!"

"We screwed up, didn't we?" the wolf asked.

I sighed. "Yeah, maybe." I released my power and he scrambled back. "Don't go anywhere." I raised the pistol and he froze. "Ver-" *Almost said her name. Wait a second why not say her name?*

We're legit, right? "I'm agent Faden, FBC." I got out my badge, flipping it open so he could see it. "You want to tell me what you're doing out this late?" I put it back.

"I don't know! I just, like, woke up here!"

"A likely story. Agent, check him." *He's terrified, no faking that. But I have to be sure.*

"Right, director. This won't take a minute sir. Just stay calm. What's your name?"

"Ralph Alvarado, what's happening to me?"

"Drugs," she told him. "You may have been drugged. Just a moment. Meld." She touched him with the wand, and the two were motionless for a moment. "Nothing," she said. "He was possessed. He's lost a few hours today."

"Great, perfect. Can you get home from here?" I asked him, making the gun vanish.

"Sure, of course!" he assured me. He felt confused, probably didn't even know where we was.

"Get going then, and you will not tell anyone this happened, understand?"

"Of course! Not a word. To anyone. I'll just go then. Bye." He scrambled up out of the snow and picked a direction, running away.

Meanwhile the bird reappeared, looking around. "Did it come back this way?"

"Not that I saw," I told them. "What happened?"

"I checked the astral, and I checked Otherworld. No sign of it."

"What? How is that possible? I'm sure I saw an energy signature next to that guy that vanished just as we got here."

"I don't know," they admitted. "They should have been right here in astral."

"And what, should they have been there, would you have done about it?" I asked with fake sweetness. "Peck their eyes out? You should have brought me with you."

"Or at least one of us," agreed the wolf.

"I would have dumped it back out here so you could shoot it."

That actually made sense. "Oh. Well, that would have worked out I guess."

"Not that I don't trust you, but I'll go check as well," said the fox. "Two heads and all that."

"I'm telling you, there's no trace. But sure, we might as well double check. We'll see if they just started running or something, and got further than I expected. Be back soon." They vanished with another quick prayer.

"Sorry it didn't work out," said one of the wolves. "If we had been just a moment sooner, we could have caught them."

"Can you track the witch?"

"Though the astral, we can at least tell which direction she went in. Maybe a distance too, but they know we can do that. They always teleport to a car and drive away."

"That figures. So we blew it."

"Not so fast," Veronica cautioned. "I can still salvage this, we know there was a witch here. We know she got orders from a kanaima. Let's see what those orders were, maybe we can catch up with her or at least see what they were talking about."

"Worth a try, do it."

"Reveal the past," she cast. Again she went blank for a bit. "Okay, that's interesting," she told us. "He gave her a sign, I guess that's how he knew she was to take his orders." She made a sign with her hands after putting the wand away. She held her fist up, then with her other hand put her middle two fingers down, and put them together. From the front it looked like a head with horns. "Her orders were to enthrall the mayor, and get compromising pictures of him, uh, doing the deed with her. She was to take him to a local hotel, they said the room was 'prepared.' We should go check that out tomorrow."

"You know the location?"

"Yeah, it's not far from where the mayor works."

“That doesn’t make sense,” the wolf remarked. “They can possess people to do what they want. Why try blackmail all of a sudden?”

“Could people be resistant to possession, like being naturally immune to a poison or something?” I asked.

“Just like any other magic if the person is strong willed enough they can fight it off,” the other wolf told me. “Then it becomes a battle of endurance. Can the possessor simply try again and again and wear the person they’re trying to possess down before they can’t do any more magic? Or just send five, or even ten, kanaima and everybody tries once. Honestly, someone isn’t going to be able to hold out for long if someone with resources wants him possessed.”

“So the question remains. Well, let’s worry about it tomorrow, it’s freezing out here.”

The others agreed, but I was concerned. *A kanaima got away. Somehow. If they saw me, now they know I’m not in Ordinary anymore and will come looking for me here. Neat.* We waited for the others return, but they said there was still no sign. So we headed back to the Control building, in a more straight line this time so it didn’t take us as long.

The next day Veronica and I took Wayfinder and headed to the hotel the witches were going to use. She headed to a potted plant in the lobby and when no one was looking, looked under it. There was a card all right, for a room in the hotel. *I guess we don’t need Wayfinder after all, the card for the room was still there so they clearly haven’t changed rooms.* With a nod we headed to the elevator and went up. “You don’t think they’ll still go through with the plan, do you?” she asked on the ride up.

“Hard to say. The fact we couldn’t find that kanaima worries me. They must know we know. We could be sitting there in the room when the mayor arrives, ready to save him. I mean if he’s not there right now, and we’re here pretty early, we’ll just wait and see what happens today. It would be a big risk to the witch at this point, right?”

We stepped out of the elevator and she looked both ways. “Ah, this way.” She pointed, and we headed down the hallway. “You’re not wrong. But at least we can see how the room was ‘prepared’ and if they left any clues. Saving the mayor would also be good for our image.”

“Ah, thought of that, huh? That’s actually why it’s just you and me here. I mean Herman stomping around as Iron Man is all well and good but he did say he would rather stay in the shadows as much as possible. Some kind of magical experiment he’s running? I didn’t really understand it. And the benandanti would have to come as they are, and none wanted to be seen by a witch that way.”

“Yeah, we really need some more help,” she agreed.

We kept walking.

“Wait a second,” she stopped and put a hand up. “We passed it, the numbers are too high now.”

“That’s odd. Okay.” We turned around and headed back down the hall. Suddenly she stopped again.

“No, now they’re too low. What’s going on here!?”

“What? We can’t have missed it, it’s a straight hallway.”

“But we did. Come on.” We headed back again, this time looking at each door as we passed it. Somehow, again, we missed it. “Okay this is crazy. Something magical must be going on. I’m doing a spellbreaking in the general area the door should be, which is right down the hall.”

“Right.”

She got her wand out and concentrated. “There’s magic here, I can’t pinpoint it. So strange, okay spellbreak!” She pointed her wand down the hall. “It’s gone, let’s see what we’ve got here.” We walked forward, now able to come to a stop before the right door, and hanging on a small chain was an engraved object. “Here’s the problem,” Veronica said, taking it off the handle. “Some sort of obscuring magic, so anyone walking by here simply ignored the door. Why in the world did they do that?” She handed it to me, put her wand away, and slipped the card into the door reader. I heard it unlock and she went to turn the handle.

“Wait!” I told her, as she was about to push it open. “Something’s wrong!”

“What?” She turned her head to look at me. “What is it?”

“I feel a lingering emotion. Hatred. But excitement? It must have been so strong, for me to still feel it. There’s something on the other side of this door, something dangerous. I just know it!”

“Uh, how are you doing that?”

“What?” *I’ve never told anyone about Polaris, so naturally she would be confused how I could do that. As far as I know it’s not magical.* “Oh, never mind that now. Take your hand off the doorknob slowly. That’s right. Okay, no it doesn’t add up. Why put this charm on the door? It must be a permanent item right? It didn’t go away at sunrise.”

“I suppose. It is odd, what’s wrong with opening this door?” We both stared at it.

“So it was expensive to make, and to, what, keep maids out or something? Right, I’m using astral projection and taking a look at the other side of the door,” I decided. “Cover me.” I sank down in the hallway, relaxing and doing my breathing exercise to force my spirit out of my body temporarily. It didn’t come in handy very often, but I figured this was one of those times. I would slip out, take a peek through the door, and see what was up. I found myself looking down at myself and figured it worked, so I walked through the door. The room seemed normal, it did have a camera set up in it, but nothing else seemed out of place. I turned around to go back through and stopped. Wired to the door was some kind of explosive, that much was clear. *That’s what I was feeling. What are we going to do about it?*

The solution to that was fairly easy. Veronica used her own divination magic to see inside the room, then teleported past the door. She then sent the whole darn thing into the astral, where it could explode harmlessly or just sit there for all eternity unexploded. Up to it, really. With the danger past we looked the room over but didn’t find anything. We took the camera, no sense leaving it there, and left the keycard on the dresser. We headed back to my car, a bit stunned.

“So the plan was to what?” I finally asked after a few moments of driving. “Blow up the mayor? But the camera was there, so it doesn’t add up. They wanted to discredit him? Make up your minds.”

“Could be a multi-layered plan,” she decided. “They enter the room, arming the bomb. If the door opens again, it goes off, right? Local benandanti find out about the whole thing, and rush the place. Boom.”

“But that kills the witch and the mayor!”

“Maybe the witch screwed something up and was being punished? Or would have protection magic on? They probably don’t care about the mayor, or the fact the camera would be recovered would further discredit him? I don’t know. Maybe that was in case benandanti didn’t show up, they would still have that footage.”

“That’s a comprehensive plan. They really left nothing to chance, huh?”

“They left everything to chance, same as we did.”

I paused. “Explain.”

She sighed. “I have to get into the weeds a bit here but hey, it’s a bit of a drive right? It all has to do with divination magic. As soon as both sides have it, you have a problem. I assume you have some experience, you asked me to use it before we left.”

“We knew the days inversions would happen using it before.”

“So nothing with a will, it was a natural phenomenon.”

“Right.”

“But now we throw other people into the mix. Benandanti usually hire sorcerers like myself to do divination for them because they can’t, and how else would they find witches? Chance? Not likely. There’s a million square kilometers of Earth out there, you can’t just wander around randomly and hope to stumble across a witch. You could pass by the vacant lot they were in and never know it

because of a fence around the place. So just like you did, they ask magic about it. 'Where should I go to find a witch tonight.' And the magic gives you a vague answer. But witches can do that do. Before they go out, they ask 'Where can I go where the benandanti won't find me tonight?' Now who asked first? If the witch does how does the magic answer? Does it know the benandanti are going to ask? Of course not. But it 'knows' if the witch goes to the library she'll be found so it suggests the river, because the benandanti plan is to go to the library first tonight. That's the current trajectory of the future at that moment. Now the benandanti ask, and get a clear 'you must go to river blue, and you will find a witch, it's true' because the witch is heading to the river as they speak. So they head to the banks of the river. But the magic told the witch she would be safe there! It can't account for the million and one possibilities of someone doing, or not doing, something. After all, maybe the benandanti don't do divination magic that night, it's just a choice someone made after all. But the magic had to answer in some way, not that the witch would never be safe because it knew the benandanti were going to ask and so would find her wherever she went. So naturally the witch doesn't exactly trust the magic and asks once she gets there if she'll be safe. The benandanti are on their way so the answer is no. So she leaves, and the benandanti show up, so now the magic seems to have lied to them. No witch. So they ask again, and on, and on. Basically the rule is; the closer to the event you're asking about the more certain you can be in the response.

"For example take tonight. The demon that set up the whole thing probably asked about the success of the plot, killing benandanti with the bomb, let's say two days ago. It answered there was a good chance of that if the kanaima met the witch at such and such a time the benandanti would see the orders given and investigate, ultimately being exploded. So it told them, be on the lookout for benandanti and flee the moment one shows so you don't get caught. Because he knows some will be by. Hey presto, that part *did* work out in the demon's favor! We learned of the plot, the bomb is in place. Of course we only knew to come here because we asked divination magic where to go tonight, so did the magic know we would ask? But the demon knows that the benandanti might ask how to foil the plot; i.e. not to be exploded, once they learn there *is* a plot. Maybe the magic tells them they will die for sure if they act on what they learned if they use the door. So they decide to go into the room from the astral, from above maybe. Or bypass the bomb and come in from the window. They could do anything, including not show up at all, that would keep them safe. The mayor wasn't going to be killed, just blackmailed after all, they decide it's not worth looking into. But *we* went there, before the mayor got there, because the demon probably didn't ask about us, just benandanti, who would have waited until nightfall again so they could be animals. But then the whole mayor thing is a bust, no benandanti were killed. So they do the blackmail just in case the magic tells the benandanti to stay away, or they don't ask and miss the whole thing entirely.

"So you see how they have to cover all angles, even with magic that can suggest how the future is going to go. In this case they got nothing, and he'll know to ask about any other external forces next time so as to not make the same mistake. But then we'll have to ask, you get the idea."

"So up until the very last second, going up against other magic users with divination is pointless if they've also used divination? That's what you're telling me?"

"It's difficult, yes. The main problem is you can't risk *not* using divination, because if you don't and they did, they'll have the upper hand."

"Weeds is right. Next time I ask you for divination magic kick me in the shin!" *Everybody changes what they're going to do based on what result they get from the magic. So no divination magic would ever work, but divination magic must work, same as any other magic. It just picks the most likely future at that moment, which could always change. No wonder it's just a vague rhyme if it has to deal with all that.*

"And then do it anyway?" She smirked.

"And do it anyway," I agreed with a sigh.

Chapter 7

I get offered a deal for my brother's life

Where: Control building

When: Several days later

I was reading the news from last night to make sure the mayor was still un-blackmailed and hadn't gone missing otherwise when my phone beeped. "Come to the security office, about to turn on our camera system!" was written by Herman.

We have a security office? "Where is it?" I typed back.

"Meet by the third floor elevators I'll take you there," was the reply.

So I headed there, met Herman, who guided me to our security office. It was a room of closed circuit TVs exactly like you would see in movies of such things. There's not many other ways to do it, after all. It's a wall of screens. In this case, some really old CRT screens that had sat around for forty years or more.

"With this area wired now I've set up some cameras," he explained, pointing to them.

"Meowvis wrote some software to do facial recognition so they don't have to check it again and again, and this way we can have the system turned on just in case, but not have to hire someone to sit here and watch the cameras."

"Can you really tell anything from monitors this old?" I asked the laptop, tapping a screen. "Not exactly HD, are they?"

"Depends on the monitor quality," Meowvis answered. "My algorithms are perfect, of course."

I laughed. "Of course."

Herman went on. "I've added this place to the budget spreadsheet, when we get some spare money we can replace all the monitors in there. And the cameras out there. And the wiring."

"So basically the whole system?"

"Basically the whole system," he agreed. "Ready?"

"Sure, let's see what we've got."

He flipped a switch and the monitors started to glow. As they warmed up images started to appear, showing scenes of the lobby, elevators, the usual points one might put cameras in a federal building.

"Alert," said the laptop sitting on the desk. "Unknown person detected."

"It's already busted," I told him. "Nice job! Also did you just say 'alert?' lame."

"It can't be busted," Herman protested. "Where, Meowvis?"

"Lobby. Six across, two down."

We counted the monitors and stared at the image. She was right, there was a man sitting in the front lobby, a man I had never seen before.

"I guess you're right, it's not busted. Sorry Meowvis, I should have trusted you," I told her.

"I'm not worried. Denial is the most predictable of all human responses."

"No it's not!"

"I predicted this response."

"No you did-"

"And that one."

"Seriously, who is that guy," Herman interrupted our little comedy routine.

"Let's go find out." I pulled out my phone and texted Veronica and a few of the benandanti to meet me at the second floor elevator and to bring guns. "Do not go through the lobby!"

We headed out to the lobby, weapons out, and the man stood as we approached. Black hair, a suit, red eyes. He waved.

"Can I help you?" I asked, because I was the director around here.

"I'm here to help you, Jesse," said the man. "Let's talk somewhere, there's no need for all that." He indicated our weapons, and I slightly lowered the gun.

"You know me?"

"I've been learning quite a bit about you lately, yes. But don't you recognize me? I'm hurt, I really am."

"Never seen you before in my life."

"Oh but you have. Sisaroplex, at your service." He bowed. "I can understand, I don't normally look like this unless I'm out and about in the human world."

"Human world? Who are you?"

"You recently humiliated me with your fancy wordsmithing and a technicality. Remember?"

"You're a demon!?" I raised the gun again. "The demon from the mall?"

"Come now, we both know you waving your thing around and having it go off isn't going to get you anywhere. Shoot this body dead, I'll just be resummoned and come back here. I just want to talk, and while you probably won't believe me when I say it, I'll say it anyway. I'm here to help."

"So you say. How did you know where to find me?"

"Word has spread about you in our community. Sloppy, Jesse, so sloppy, and after that inspired performance before. You know, when you were faking it? I'm disappointed, you were supposed to be a worthy adversary. Ah well, I shall simply have to wait for another to stick my business into. That's a human phrase right? Hard to keep up with them sometimes."

Great, that kaimana that got away. It's been blabbing to others. Are we going to be under siege here shortly? Maybe I should have a guard stationed down here, just in case. "I'll try to contain my despair at not being found up to your standard. You're offering some kind of help? That should amuse me for a moment. Make your pitch and get out."

"Why yes, indeed, and there's no need to be rude about it, Jesse. I think maybe you have the wrong idea about us. Shall we sit?" He offered me the seat nearby.

"Do I have the wrong idea?" I asked the benandanti, tilting me head but not taking my eyes off the man. They still wouldn't give me their names, just their "code names" which I felt was silly and refused to use.

"It's a demon. It wants something, but I suppose it will play fair until we know exactly what and what it'll cost us."

"I just want to help," he insisted again.

"Ha!"

"Fine. There's a conference room over there." I pointed. "You first, take the furthest seat, we'll follow you in."

"Very well." He pulled out a cell phone (of all things for a demon to carry!), sent a message, then went over there and went inside. I waited a moment and followed him. We took our seats, and Veronica put a protection spell across the room so it couldn't get at us. "Now can we get on with it?"

"You in a hurry?" I asked, sitting down. I kept the gun out and pointed at him though. "So tell me about this help you're so anxious to provide us."

"As I said, I've been learning a lot about you, trying to figure out how I might have my revenge upon you for the humiliation you gave me at the mall. Imagine my surprise when I found out you had a brother! And one so helpless too, just lying there, why one could do *anything* to him in that state."

"Keep your hands off him!"

He put his hands up. "Now, now, let's not be hasty. I'm talking about what might happen if others found out about it, not me specifically. Attacking the facility he's in could be done, of course, but my heart went out to you. Yes, my heart! Imagine it! Looking for revenge but finding a way to help you. Such is life, don't you find."

I wasn't convinced of this little performance, but I did get a feeling of sincere surprise from the demon. "You can help him?" *Can feelings be faked? With magic? But why bother, no one knows I have that ability from Polaris, right? I've never told anyone, not even Gretchen, about it.*

"He's in a coma after being separated from his former master, no? Thahiss, I think was the demon? Poor soul. But after you've had a demon inside you, well, it's hard to settle for anything else. I can understand his pining away and not wanting to wake up."

"I'll take your word for it." *Crap. I should have made sure he couldn't be scryed upon. Demons getting information about him, while he's vulnerable like this, is bad news. Any one of them could abduct him and demand I do things for his return. I'm actually a bit shocked this guy hasn't done that. Perhaps he thinks he'll get a better deal coming to threaten me like this.* "What about it?"

"It is his soul I have come to speak to you about. He will never wake, nor will the other witches, ever again. Not without my help, that is."

"You're sure of that, are you?"

"Yes." He leaned forward. "What do you humans know of how the creation of a witch actually works?"

I looked to the benandanti who shrugged. "We don't know the exact mechanics, not really. No one is going to do that, just to find out. It's enough for us to know that they are made, just like I know cell phones are made. Don't need to know how to use one."

"Humm..." the demon considered. "I should charge you for this, then. Ah, screw it, call it a gesture of good faith. I'll tell you what we do, free of charge. How does that sound?"

"Like a scam to get me to agree to something later."

He laughed. "Normally yes, many of my kind would do that. You have that much right about us. Decide for yourself at the end. Now, as to what is done--"

"Wait a second." I got my phone out and started recording it. "Okay, go on."

"Hello! Sisaroplex here! I will now explain the witch making process. As part of the contract that is made with one of my kind an exchange takes place. A bit of the human's soul for a part of the demon's essence. How this is *inserted* is not relevant to our discussion at this time," he waggled his eyebrows. "But I could describe it, in exacting detail, moment by moment if--"

Ew. I can guess. "That's not needed, thank you, just get on with it."

"...As you say. Suffice to say it is necessary. It is with this bit of ourselves inside the witch that they are given access to magic. Logical, when you think about it, is it not? How else would they do it?"

He's got a good point. Just making a deal with a demon doesn't mean anything. It's just words. Something gives non-humans, sorcerers, and witches access to magic. It's the soul. Without that piece of soul, the witch is just a regular human again. "Doesn't that weaken the demon?" I asked.

"Alas, yes," he agreed, putting the back of his hand to his forehead. *Enough with the drama.* "It's a delicate balancing act for us, actually, and related to demon politics. To be able to support a number of followers while still maintaining enough power in our realm is a great mark of status. The most mighty among us have dozens or hundreds of followers here while still being able to command enough power to order lower demons around. It's one way our hierarchy is maintained."

Interesting, but somewhat irrelevant. "What does this have to do with my brother?"

"I'm getting to that. When you did the unprecedented and actually destroyed a demon physically, Dylan no longer had his link to that demon. But the piece of soul that was taken from him as a child wasn't replaced with anything."

"You know about that?" I interrupted.

"I needed to know why a male had been picked, usually we demons go for females of your species. For obvious reasons. Not that we have anything against males, but--"

"I'm going to need to bleach my brain after this conversations, aren't I?" Veronica moaned.

The demon went on. "So I looked into your whole history. Naturally I would find out how he came to be in our service. Similarly for the other witches. Their pieces of soul are scattered somewhere

in Otherworld, unable to find their way back. And so all of them are unable to move around as they normally otherwise would. To put it in human terms, one of their batteries is missing.”

“So Thahiss gave my brother enough ‘soul energy’ so to speak to make up for what he lost. With him gone that link is gone, and he’s stuck that way. Can we give him some kind of infusion, I would gladly link part of my soul with his if he could live his life again.” *Live it without demonic influence, that is.* I looked to Veronica, who shook her head.

“Only demons have soul magic, or I suppose more generally powerful beings from Otherworld. Angels, lesser gods, and the like. Humans are either forbidden that power or do not know yet how to harness it. I mean, can you imagine if we did?”

Figures. She’s right, when the rules of magic were drawn up, if such a thing happened, I wouldn’t give the ‘little people’ access to that kind of power either. Imagine what we would do with it, given what we’ve done with what magic we do have access to!

“Indeed, a being such as myself is your only hope for waking him, and the others.”

And now we come to the deal. He wants Dylan for himself. That’s his revenge, taking control of my brother and the other witches! Then he can order Dylan around, all while laughing himself sick that his sister, me, is powerless to do anything about it. Interesting though, there must be multiple ways to do this. Polaris came from some heavenly being as far as I can tell. Am I linked to that being? I doubt it, though I have no idea if witches talk to their ‘demon part’ like I talk to Polaris sometimes. It was a “baby” and grew as I did, from what it’s told me. I’m independent, they aren’t. There’s a link from the demon to them. Right? I mean I’m not linked to the being that Polaris came from, am I? I don’t have access to magic, just the one movement ‘spell’ that was a leftover basically. But how can I ever know? All I know is what ‘it’ told me, and it could be lying.

“I see from your face that you have worked out what I have to offer you?”

“You want to replace what has been lost, taking up the witches and Dylan into your service.”

“You do think badly of us, don’t you? No, in fact it’s not that way at all. Here is what I’m offering. I’ll find the pieces of soul for all the witches and return them. They wake up. Having their complete soul back they will no longer be witches, but I’ll make them a new deal *if they want it*. If they don’t, no harm, no foul, they get their lives back and have no demonic influence anymore. But Dylan, ah, he’s a different story. His soul has been *damaged*. He’ll never wake up without new ‘batteries.’ I’ll provide them. Yes, this will mean he’ll owe me, and still be a witch. It can’t be avoided. And yes, he’ll have to do certain things for me in exchange, I can’t be seen as just giving him free reign now can I? That’s my price as well. I want nothing from you directly, just your consent for the transfer. Or should we ask your parents, I’m told they’re here as well.”

“Stay away from them,” I growled.

He put his hands up. “Of course, I figured that would be your reaction that’s why I’m talking to you, not them.”

“You want nothing but my brother?”

“That’s correct.”

“And the other witches walk, if they want.”

“Again, correct.”

“Why?” the benandanti asked. “That seems awfully one sided.”

“Not really,” he explained. “Think about it. Right now the witches are useless to everybody. No demon can claim them, and they’re not doing anything useful for you or us here in the human world. So I lose nothing by waking them up. But if they did want to still be witches I’ll be right there to make that happen, furthering my own status in my society. A potential gain! So it’s in my interest to see if they want to sign up with me, I can’t force them to I have to ask. It only benefits me.”

“I suppose.”

“I-” I started to say, but my phone rang.

“That should be the facility,” the demon said. “You better answer it.”

"If you did something..." I threatened. "Hello?"

"Jesse?"

"Yes."

"This is Rebekah, I'm a nurse for Excellus? I was told to call you if something happened to the patients here. I have great news, one of the witches just woke up!"

"Really?"

"Yes. Oddest thing. She just sat up and looked around. We're checking her over now but she seems totally fine. She tried to do magic but couldn't. As far as we can tell she's not a witch anymore. Bit of a shock for her, but she's reluctantly cooperating with us. Complaining about it, but she's not crazy either."

I glared at Sisaroplex. "That actually makes a great deal of sense to me, given something on my end. Don't let her go anywhere until I can get there myself, but don't chain her up or anything. She's not a prisoner but she's not exactly innocent either. I'll be along soon. Thanks for the update."

"Sure, we weren't sure what we were going to do next, she lives out west someplace. I'll tell her we're working on what to do with her."

"Thanks."

"See you later."

"Bye."

"Good news?" Sisaroplex asked when I hung up. He was smiling like a cat that just pushed something off a table and was smug about it.

"A witch woke up."

"Ah, happy day," he purred. "Again, as a gesture of good faith I found one of the witch's souls already and one of my agents has restored it. So you know I'm telling the truth." He laughed. "Unless you think that was a coincidence I mean."

"I suppose you could have used divination magic to see when one of them would wake up," I suggested. "Then came here on the day."

"Not with that kind of accuracy," Veronica countered. "You sent a text to your agent to restore the soul when we came in here, didn't you? I mean he didn't know when we would find him here, he could have waited all day. He signaled someone."

"Correct. I figured they would wake up very soon after being made whole again."

"And your intention is to restore all of them?" I asked.

"I will continue to have my agents in Otherworld seek out the other lost pieces of soul, so they too can be restored. When that's done you can give me your answer about Dylan. Unless you've decided now?"

"No. Restore the witches first."

"Of course! Your consideration is all I ask of you for the moment regarding that one. But believe me when I say, only one of my kind can wake him up. So, any other questions? I'll leave you a number to call, so you can get in touch with me when you've decided." He set a card down on the table from his pocket. "Hopefully finding the other bits of soul won't take too long. A month at most? So you have some time to think it over."

"How do we know her waking up isn't some kind of trick?" Veronica asked. "We'll have to examine her."

"Am I really that suspicious? Very well. I will simply find and hold the other pieces of soul for now. Keep the one that has been restored under surveillance. See if they have been negatively impacted in any way. Make sure they have all their emotions and whatnot. When I find them all I'll let you know, and you can decide then to have them all restored at once or not. How does that sound?"

“We should make sure they aren’t possessed and are just walking around before we agree to anything,” she told me. “It could be a trick. Make sure it really is her soul that’s been restored. I have no idea how, magically, to tell, but...”

If she isn’t possessed, what else could it be? “We’ll see what we can do,” I agreed. I turned back to the demon. “Fine. We’ll keep an eye on her, see how she acts for the next month. You know where to find me when you’re ready on your end.”

“I do! We’ll be in touch.”

“We’ll answer everything then.”

“Fair enough. Anything else?”

I looked around the room but no one spoke up. “I guess not. Thanks for coming.”

He seemed surprised. “Of course! We’re not all bad, you know. At least, not the mustache twirling kind of evil you humans seem to expect.” He got up. “I’ll be on my way then.”

We escorted him out the door and made sure he headed down the street.

“I’ll need to get back to the Excellus building,” I told Veronica. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” she told me. “I’ll want to look this woman over myself. Imagine, that’s how they do it. Gives me the creeps. I’m glad I was born with magic.”

“Me too, playing with humans souls like that. I wonder what his game really is.”

“I suppose there is a spectrum of Otherworldly beings,” she admitted. “Ranging from evil to good. Maybe he’s more in the middle.”

“He wanted to burn hundreds of people in the mall!”

“Or maybe he just wanted to see how you would stop him, and had no intention of hurting anyone. You can’t know for sure.”

“I guess. Come on, let’s head over there.”

We teleported back to Ordinary and spoke to the newly awakened witch, some doctors, and Gretchen. The witch herself seemed fine, had only one energy signature which relieved me. I told her to expect someone contacting her to make a new deal if she wanted magic again, and to think carefully about saying yes. But she did seem perfectly normal, and accepted our story about what had happened. “We witches suspected something of the sort,” she told us. “But of course we couldn’t prove it. This does seem to prove it.”

“If you got asked right now, would you sign back up?” Veronica asked her.

“I don’t really know,” she admitted. “Having the magic was nice, but I took care of the situation that drove me to seek magic in the first place. Having it back now...”

Right, no one seeks out magic for the fun of it. She had a problem she felt she couldn’t solve any other way. The demon just happened by at the right time, and then had a hold on her. I’m not saying she’s totally blameless, she did have to make a choice here, but just like being homeless or in poverty from medical bills (or student loans!) the situation she found herself in may not be her fault. We, the world, failed her and pushed her into a demon’s arms. We have to do better if we want to solve that problem and keep people from being backed into a corner so they reach for magic, no matter how dangerous it might be to their souls. “Just keep in mind what it will mean. And if you do have a problem, you know better where you can go now, to ask for help. We’re willing to offer aid, and without such a high price either.”

“I know better now, believe me. So I can I go or...”

“About that...”

Chapter 8

Attack us and we will counter

Where: Control Building

When: That afternoon

I was finishing lunch in my office when my phone dinged again. I could have eaten in the cafeteria of course, but my office was one of the places that was wired and I was looking through Herman's digitized books for lore on demons and other Otherworld denizens. I started at the message in disbelief, it was from Meowvis:

Warning! Building is under attack. 12 individuals with guns and riot shields have entered the lobby. Recommend benandanti take children to higher floors, Director Faden to meet combat ready participants on second floor landing, east building side to decide response.

Combat ready participants? That's, uh, Herman and Veronica. We really need more help around here. The three of us against a SWAT team or whatever this is? Witches? It's not going to go well!

I jumped up, slapped Auseinander on my wrist so I could see possessed people and ran to the elevator. I stared at the sign that was hung over the call buttons.

"Elevator shaft maintenance this afternoon. Please use stairs. Sorry for any inconvenience.
--Ahti."

I resisted the urge to scream, very adult of me, and instead headed for the stairs. *We really need some kind of intercom system in the building. Phones are all well and good but being able to talk to everyone or have Meowvis tell me what's going on with the cameras would be a lot better.* I floated myself down the stairs, whipping around and around holding onto the railing. I made it to the second floor and Veronica burst in from that side. Herman was rushing down the stairs, shield and shotgun in hand from above.

"We're under attack?" she asked me.

"That's what Meowvis said. They'll probably take the stairs soon enough, once they secure the lobby. Cover me and I'll take care of any kanaima."

"Right. Here." She waited until Herman reached us and waved her wand in a circle. "Metallic Rejection! Okay hopefully you're resistant to bullets."

"Hopefully?"

"It's magic, not an exact science. I won't know how good it is until someone actually shoots you."

I suppose it's better than nothing. And that many could degrade the magic, if they all looked at me at once. "Great. Come on."

"I'll follow your lead," Herman told me. "I've got non-lethal set for now."

"Fine."

We headed down the next flight of stairs and the door, as usual, opened for me before I was even close enough to reach it. The surprised figure on the other side jerked back, clearly not expecting this. He was decked out in SWAT gear, from the helmet to the body armor. "What is the meaning-" is as far as I got when in sailed several gas canisters, fired from behind him. *Wait, not bullets? Gas? What in the world?* Before they had much chance to spew any gas out I reached out with my power and chucked them back out. I must have been off my game as they plunked, rather than bashed, into the nearest three troopers. They probably would have been able to get out of the way, had they not all been

crowded around the door as they were. But at least the gas was spewing out over there now. They had masks on so they wouldn't be very inconvenienced but it was better than us choking on the stuff.

"Possessed?" Herman prompted.

"Uh, no," I told him, and it was true. The lead guy, recovering from jumping back from the door, had only one energy signature.

"Ugh." He was above me on the stair and sent a shot into the crowd. It bounced off a shield but at least threw the guy off balance.

Another canister sailed into the stairwell, so I sent it back out. This one smashed into a guy, but this still wasn't going to get us anywhere. Veronica had the right idea, as several more cops went to pull their triggers she pointed her wand. "Astral doorway!" she cast, and a white rectangle filled the doorframe. One slipped through, so I tossed it and it went into nothing.

"That will keep them off us," she told us. "I'm dropping your protection spell, by the way. You won't need it now and I may need to do other magic."

"That's fine," I told her.

"But that doesn't solve anything," Herman said, lowering his gun. "We're still under attack."

"There's only the one door," I reminded him. "The elevators don't work, they're shut down for maintenance."

"That's handy."

"Yes." *A little too handy.* "We have a minute to figure out what to do."

"I'm open to suggestions."

"I made the doorway one way," Veronica told us. "If we could get them in there, well, the gas wouldn't work and we could maybe talk them down?"

"Can you make it bigger or just the size of a doorway?" I asked.

"It can basically be any size, why?"

"Okay, here's the plan. We're teleporting behind them. Put up a large one right in front of us. I'll peak around and fling them into it. Herman you come from behind and knock any into it. Sound good?"

"I can do a couple of spells in quick succession but it'll take a lot out of me. Don't expect much more."

"I'll take care of it." *I hope. If they simply charge into Herman here they might be able to get past him. We can't allow them further into the building, we would never chase them out again.*

"You better. Remote Vision!" She stared into nothing for a second. "There's a clear enough space. I'll teleport, that will draw their attention because of the noise. They'll turn around, I'll drop this doorway and cast the new one. It's up to you two after that. Have I got that right?"

"Go for it."

"Okay." Her lips were moving, she must have been reviving the plan and what she was going to do in her mind. "Here goes. Teleport!"

Our perspective changed, and as expected the cops all turned to see what that noise had been.

"Astral Doorway!"

Another white rectangle appeared in front of us, and I heard more shots from gas canisters. They must have vanished, and I peeked around the edges of the doorway. *Still ten of them. Here goes.* I concentrated, wondering how many I could get at once. *Go for half?* I picked my targets and all five went sailing into the rectangle. *Nice! Only five more to go.* This of course freaked them out even more than gas canisters flying around on their own or doorways to nothing appearing, so they started to panic. They dropped their guns and ran, heading for the door, which had been smashed in. I let them go, I wasn't going to shoot them in the back, and they jumped into a waiting truck with SWAT on the side of it and roared off.

"I guess they didn't want to play any more," Herman said, coming around the doorway. "Better work on making those doors unbreakable sometime. Put it on the list."

"Yeah you will," I told him. I looked back at the doorway. "Now I better go talk to them, see what they're doing here."

"Let me get rid of the gas first," Veronica told me, and swished her wand through the air. "Air Bending!" The gas whooshed out of the broken doors and into the street, and I tossed the canisters out there too. *I'm sure it'll be fine. Not many people out in front of our building in the middle of winter. But what was with that spell name?*

"What?" she asked, as both of us were looking at her.

"Air Bending?" Herman asked, as if not believing his ears. She went red.

"What would you have named a spell that can move air around?"

"Something with a bit more pizzazz than that."

"You two worry about that, I need to get in there and calm those officers down." I pointed to the astral doorway.

"You're not going in there physically are you?" Veronica asked, putting a hand on my arm. "They may still try to attack you."

"Nah. I'm going the other way. Cover me okay? I don't want a hundred cops coming through the doors after they call for backup."

"Got it. I'll repair the door and put a protection spell on it so it can't be broken as easily. I can manage that much."

"Sounds good, exactly as I would have ordered." We grinned at each other and I sat down, the rectangle vanishing. I relaxed and tried casting my spirit into the astral.

"Hello boys," I called when my perspective changed to being the astral. Basically a white nothing, but now populated by the astral forms of seven officers. Being the realm of emotion I didn't need Polaris to tell me they were terrified, just looking at them was enough. While they were no longer "physical" they were still there, it was an odd place that Herman hated, and I could see why. It was confusing to see 'emotion' as a physical thing. As I was projecting my spirit into the astral I more or less appeared as myself, so they had something to focus on.

"What have you done to us?" one demanded. "Where are we?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. My turn. Why did you attack us?"

"The chief said there were terrorists hold up here, about to blow up major New York buildings. We had to stop them!"

"Terrorists."

"Yeah, that's right," the others agreed.

"Do I look like a terrorist?"

"I don't know, this place isn't dark but it's not exactly light either. I don't know what's going on."

"Well, you've made a mistake," I told them. "You just assaulted a federal building, specifically the Federal Bureau of Control. We're an equivalent to the FBI."

"There's no such thing."

"There was, and now there is again. The program was... paused for a time. I'm the director, Jesse Faden."

"She's telling the truth," said one. "I don't know how but I can feel it. See it, even. How is that possible?"

The others grumbled about it but agreed. "We really just assaulted a bunch of federal officers?"

"You didn't know, I'm willing to overlook it. If you take me to this 'chief' of yours so I can straighten him out personally."

"But what did you do to us?" he demanded. "It can't be gas, we were wearing masks!"

"It's classified," I wanted to say. But I couldn't. "You're in the astral plane," I said instead. *What in the world? Why did I say that instead of what I wanted? Herman said strange things happen here, is that one of them? That you can't tell a falsehood?*

"The what?"

"I told you that you wouldn't understand. Look, you want out of here?"

"Yes please."

"Fine. I'll open a door. I see any gun raised when you come out and you're just going right back in. Clear?"

"Anything, just get us out of here! We won't attack you!"

I saw he was telling the truth as the others agreed with him they wanted out and wouldn't attack us. "One minute." I willed myself back into my body and opened my eyes. The doors were repaired as promised, and I got up. "Okay, open a door to bring them back. They're not going to give us any trouble. I'm going with them to see this chief of theirs they say gave them the order to attack."

"A kanaima?" she asked, coming over.

"More than likely. I'll follow them in my car, you two stay here in case more attack. Anything that looks like a SWAT car pulls up, just put that astral barrier across the door." *Or I guess zap the car with the hammer before they can get out. That would make them think twice about it and probably wouldn't kill them.*

"You got it."

We got them out and they behaved, waiting outside while I pulled my car around. I also told Sarah, who had come down, to stay up there for a bit longer. There could be other attacks, after all.

"How are we going to prevent this from happening in the future?" she asked, a worried look on her face.

"Good question. Further ward the building I guess, to make it tougher to break the doors down? Hopefully hire more people so no one would think of attacking? I'll have to think of something."

"I suppose once word gets out a lot more people than one police chief would have to be possessed before they would try this again."

"That's the hope. I'll come get you when I'm back."

"No, I'm coming too. You shouldn't go alone, and I still have some magic after all. Get me a badge and a gun while I go quickly change into something more suitable for an agent."

I didn't consider long. "Okay." *Better to have her support magic at my side than here, even if she's not as versatile as Veronica. I'll leave her here because of that, so if we get attacked again while I'm away we'll still have some defensive options.*

We headed out and followed the van back to their headquarters, where I parked and got out. I followed them inside, wondering if I shouldn't have tried convincing the local police we were legit from the start. We may have needed their help before this, if NYC got attacked or something, and that would have been the worst time to try convincing them we were a legitimate organization. Even if that was only tenuous at the moment. Thoughts of that fled as we walked in the door; The place was in full panic mode, as obviously the other van had gotten here first. I heard a lot of shouting, people were rushing back and forth, no one spared a look for us which was going to be a problem. But at least they weren't rushing past us this second to go assault the building with heavier weapons

"That's the chief's voice," reported one man. "His office is this way."

We headed there, and it was clear the chief was arguing with his men.

"I don't care what you saw," he was shouting. "Get back out there and take care of those terrorists!"

"But chief-"

"Don't you but chief me, these people are dangerous and it's our job to keep this city safe."

The office we were heading to was jammed full of people, so much the door wouldn't close because people were in the doorway. *Why so many people here? Ah, maybe once the initial ones came back he ordered more people to go there and they're all in there trying to talk him out of it.* There was a window to the side so while the officers tried to shove their way into the place I stepped to the side and peered in through the window.

"Chief, chief, I brought back the director of the place!" said the guy trying to get into the room. "She's FBI or something, you have to talk to her. They aren't terrorists you were wrong."

"Director? What direc-" He looked over at me and his eyes widened in fear. I could just see enough of him through the press to tell he had two energy signatures. *Crap, I can't get my gun out around here, can I? These people shoot first and don't bother asking any questions later.* It didn't matter, the man threw himself down under the desk so I lost sight of him at once. Everyone yelled and was looking around to try and see what he was reacting to. But was just little old me, so they turned back to him. *Thank goodness I didn't get the gun out, that could have gone very differently.* A second later he was up again, looking around confused.

"Oh, hey everyone. Sorry, I think I fell asleep or something. I was lying on the floor for some reason. What are you all doing here?"

"What?" everyone yelled.

Great, and we can't just vanish out of here in front of everyone either. It's going to get away!

It took maybe half an hour to get everything calmed down, we could finally show our badges and explain we were not terrorists, we were a legitimate organization on par with the FBI. The chief didn't seem too with it, continuing to glance at the calendar, his watch, and insist he hadn't sent any SWAT teams out especially not against terrorists supposedly occupying an old building. I didn't particularly want to explain everything so once I had his assurance this wouldn't happen again I left with Sarah. We were now sitting out in the car.

"So he was possessed," she mused.

"Clearly," I agreed. "But what are we going to do about it now? How do we strike back against a foe that can take over anyone? Or even protect others? Next time it won't be SWAT it'll be the national guard or something rolling up tanks to our doorstep. And all under the orders of some possessed person. We can't kill people like that, who are just following orders."

"It's a problem," she agreed. "I do wonder though, could you use Wayfinder to simply find the nearest possessed person? Take a week and just blitz the city destroying every kanaima in reach? That would send a clear message you're not going to tolerate such a thing around here. Then do random sweeps every day to make sure people stay unpossessed? I bet divination could at least give some sort of yes/no answer to there being possessed people in the city limits."

"So, what, you want to turn us into the Ghostbusters?"

She giggled. "Well, with you, me, and Veronica all we need is one more woman and we've got the remake nailed."

"Too bad it's Herman and not Hermione, we would already be there."

Her eyes widened. "Let's see if Veronica knows any magic to turn him into a woman!"

But then the armor wouldn't fit right. "Anyway, it's not a bad idea. The sweeping the city plan, I mean, not the turning Herman into a woman plan. Though maybe he wouldn't mind? Let's go back and get the sword, collect Veronica, and see what it has to tell us about possessed people in the area."

And that's how I found myself entering a run down bar and looking around later that afternoon. The place was dimly lit, but at least it wasn't smokey, that law had done wonders to keep air breathable in enclosed places. Veronica was holding the sword, currently placed under an enchantment so normal people didn't see it. She swung it left and right and settled it on a couple of people nearer the back. I

could make out one of them, and they were possessed. They were hunched forward, eyes darting around nervously and saying something to the person on the other side of the booth I couldn't see.

"Can I help you ladies?" asked the bartender. We moved over there, out of sight of the guy though I hated to lose sight of him too. Couldn't be helped.

"Jesse Faden, FBC." I flashed my badge. "These are Veronica and Sarah." They opened their badges as well. "We've tracked at least one wanted individual to this establishment and would appreciate your assistance in keeping things quiet while we deal with it."

"Anything I can do to help, but where did you say you were from? FBI?"

"FBC. We'll take a table over there," I pointed to the opposite end of the bar from the guy I had seen, "while we plan our next move."

"Sure, sure. They aren't dangerous, are they?"

"They could be armed, yes. We'll deal with it."

"Should we get everyone out of here?"

"I don't want them tipped off. Just leave it to us sir."

"I don't want my bar smashed up!"

"I said, just leave it to us, and I'll let you know if we need anything from you. For now we're going to go sit down, now that we've found them we'll plan out how we're going to take them in."

"Okay."

I led the other two to the booth and we slid into it. "What is our next move, anyway?"

"Before that, it was so cool watching you in action there Jesse!" Veronica squealed. "You were so professional there it was like watching a real FBI agent at work. Not that you're not, but it's more an honorary position if you know what I mean."

I did feel a little flash of pride at what she had said, and was glad she couldn't feel my emotions like I could feel hers. I'm a horrible person, I admit it. "Worry about that later, there's at least one possessed person what are we going to do about it?"

"Here, take the sword." She passed it to me. "I have an idea. You can only get one, reasonably, at a time, right?"

"I can fire a lot, but it will be gunfire. Everyone in here will panic. As soon as I start shooting if there's more than one, and I have to believe he's talking to at least one other, that one will leave his host and vanish."

"Okay. I'm going to try a mental spell then. I'll turn their thoughts off. That way they should just sit there and let you shoot them. What do you think?"

"I think that's a terrible plan," Sarah told her.

"You have a better one?"

"I do. I send Jesse into the Astral plane right now. One of us does a spellbreaking on them which should knock them loose and surprise them. The other does a planeshifting on them, sending them back to their home dimension. Jesse is waiting there to gun them down. No fuss here, the two just 'wake up' and wonder why they're sitting there. I collect Jesse after a moment, we all go back without a lot of screaming and the cops showing up."

"Wow, that's way better than my plan!" she admitted. "I'm glad to a part of it."

"Thank you. We benandanti have to be pretty creative with our magic after all. So we need to come up with good plans on a moment's notice. Are we agreed?"

"Sounds good to me. Here." I handed Auseinander over. "They're invisible around here once not inside someone, right? You'll need this to see them. Whoever is going to 'banish' them so to speak should wear it."

The two looked at each other. "How confident are you in banishing them?" Veronica asked.

"I've practiced both a fair amount, I'm comfortable doing either."

"Whereas I know a lot more magic, and so I've spent less time practicing each." She thought it over a second. "You know what, they're probably jumpy anyway. If I miss and they know they're under

attack, they may just run anyway, not knowing they're running into Jesse's arms. So if I miss one, they may still show up to be killed. I'll take that part."

"Good thinking," Sarah admitted, seeming impressed. She handed it over.

"One of you take the sword then," I told them, setting it back on the table. "It'll just be in the way in the astral. As a point of interest, what happens if you miss and they don't run? Like they try and take you over?"

"If you see a doorway open that leads back here, throw yourself through it and come in shooting," Veronica told me. "Because we messed up in that case. Either one of us can do that, so hopefully a maximum of one escapes our initial assault."

"Fair enough."

So I once again found myself in the Astral, and walked in what I hoped was the right direction to be closer to the figures when they popped over. Then I smacked myself and pushed into the air. I knew they couldn't fly, and I didn't need them taking me over either. I waited. Two figures radiating surprise appeared in the space below me, and I smiled. I didn't bother aiming, simply raining shots down on them from above. I was pretty sure I nailed the one in the head at least once, the other taking several shots to the body and going down. The other one that was still up looked up at me in anger. "You'll pay for that!" it shouted up at me. "Bye." It didn't go anywhere. I had five shots left so I pulled the trigger five more times. It jerked and started burning away before my eyes. Then a surprised looking Veronica and another kanaima showed up. The gun was recharging, I couldn't fire it again until it was finished. *Should have left a single bullet in there, should always leave a single bullet! Stupid! But I can do this.* I yanked her into the air with me.

"Shoot it, shoot it!" she was screaming.

"Recharging!" I told her.

"Bye!" said the kanaima, and Veronica said "Spellbreaking!" The kanaima vanished.

"Crap, it overpowered me. Do we go after it?" she asked.

"Where would it go?"

"Otherworld! It figures it's under attack in the others, right?"

"The gun is still charging, even if we went... Hold on." I waited until I knew it was changed again. "Go!"

"Otherworld Jump."

I found myself looking at a much nicer restaurant, but from above, jammed up against the ceiling. Everyone there looked up at us, scowling. I tried to ignore them.

"Where is it?" I swept the gun around, looking for it. Those below us cried out and started pointing up at us.

"I have no idea. Wait, that guy has two energy signatures!" She pointed, and a tuatha was heading for the door of the place. He glanced back and up at us.

He possessed someone to try and escape. Of course. I pointed the gun at him, but then realized the glaring flaw in my plan. "I can't see it to shoot him!"

"This will take too long to get off."

"Here!" I handed her the gun.

She took it but seemed hesitant. "Will this work?"

"Just focus on shooting that second signature!" *I, Jesse Faden, authorize the woman next to me, Veronica Marts, to fire my service weapon to kill the kanaima only she can see right now. Please, let this work, Polaris!*

"Okay." She pulled the trigger and the man started jerking. He didn't fall.

I grabbed him so he couldn't go anywhere, figuring I might as well make myself useful somehow. He was yanked back and pinned up against the nearest wall. Of course now that a gun had been fired people were really starting to freak out, but these were all magic users not humans. Imagine

if everyone in our world carried guns, like it was still the wild west or some fantasy land republicans lived in where everyone was handed a gun at birth. It was like that. Spells of all kinds headed towards us, so I grabbed Veronica and shoved us both. We avoided everything, but that only meant the spells hit the ceiling, the walls, and the nearby area around us. *Stupids, what are you doing? You want to bring the place down on yourselves? You'll do more damage than I ever would have done just shooting the guy I'm supposed to be shooting at.*

"Yes, protect me!" shouted the tuatha I had pinned. "I'm innocent!"

"Shoot it again!" I cried.

"I've lost sight of it!"

"What? It's right there!" *Did it use magic to try and hide?*

"Right where?"

"Right there!" I flung at chair at it, fortunately or unfortunately it flew feet first, smashing into the guy and impaling him in several places. "Crap! Sorry, crap I didn't mean to do that!"

"I think that actually killed it, I'm getting us out of here. Earthwalk!"

We were back in the restaurant, looking at a worried Sarah who was trying to calm the three men in the booth down by the looks of it.

"You're back," she exclaimed. "Did you win?"

"Those two are flying!" someone shouted.

Chapter 9

We free the director of the FBI

Where: Control Building

When: The next day, fairly early in the morning

We didn't get much else done that afternoon because we had to calm everyone in the restaurant down after our somewhat disastrous plan went off. The three men at the booth had no idea how they had even gotten there, and didn't buy the fact they had been possessed. The truth was all we had to offer them though, and they had seen us flying. Or really, dropping, as I hadn't just stayed up there once we got back. I flashed my badge around, cleared the place out, and Veronica finally got a chance to look into the past and see what they had been talking about. Basically us, now that they knew we were here what they were going to do about us. No specific plans, of course, they hadn't thought further ahead than the police chief scam. At least these three had only lost about two hours, they hadn't been possessed for long. So clearly they were just 'free agents' ready to create what havoc they could.

After finally getting everything smoothed over I remembered the wounded kanaima and went back to the Astral, but it was gone. I had no idea if they died, got up, or had someone else wander by and rescue them, but in any case they were gone. We headed back to the Control building, a bit wiped out and not ready to tangle with any more possessed people that day. But we had learned that the sword could lead us to possessed people, and vowed to clean up this city by any means necessary in the coming weeks.

It was now early the next morning just after breakfast when I got another chime. Meowvis had texted me again.

"More people at the lobby. Suits this time. Wondering where everyone is by the looks of it. Better get down there. I'm a 'he' today by the way."

I met the others at the second floor elevators, which didn't have a sign on them today, and we walked down to the second floor to greet our guests. Yes, we could have taken the elevator directly to the lobby but I wanted Herman to hang back in case we needed backup. They perked up as we approached, and I looked them over. One man, one woman, average looking enough but more importantly, only one energy signature.

"Can I help you?" I asked them as we got near. "Sorry for keeping you waiting, we don't have any support staff yet as you can see." I indicated the empty main desk. "Really should think about hiring some people actually." *But we really don't have a steady stream of income. In fact we should think about doing another drug bust or three, we're starting to run low on funds again.*

"Agent Moulder, this is agent Schoolly," the two introduced themselves, flashing their badges. "And you are?"

"I'm agent Faden, this is agent Marts," we flashed our two badges as well, because two can play at that game. "Do you have something you would like us to investigate?"

"Actually we're here because of a disturbance that popped up on our radar yesterday," said Agent Schoolly. "Something about a SWAT team being dispatched to this location, being chased off, then some people flashing badges around in a local bar and stories of people flying around. You mind if I have a look at that?" She pointed to the badge. I had no qualms about handing it over, it was legit, albeit out of date, and perhaps more importantly stolen from storage by Veronica and Herman when they went to hack the FBI records. They wouldn't know that though. I handed it over and they both looked at it.

"Yes, exactly what agency do you claim to represent?" Moulder asked.

"I assume you can read," I said dryly. I pointed to the huge logo over the main desk. "The Federal Bureau of Control, of course. We are at your service. Is that a problem?"

"It's a problem because it doesn't exist."

"That's odd," I told them. "Because everything inside this building seems to suggest it does. Oh, and your own organization will corroborate our claim if you ask them."

"Go make the call," Moulder told Schoolly.

"Right. Don't go anywhere," she told us, holding a hand out for Veronica's badge before moving off.

"It's our building, we *can't* go anywhere. Would you like to sit?"

"I'm fine. What exactly does your organization do?"

"We're sort of like the FBI for the supernatural world," Veronica spoke up. "I understand your skepticism, we haven't been active for a long time. But with recent events it was decided the place should start up again."

"Recent events?"

"Yes, recent events."

There was a pause. "I see. So why does there need to be two organizations? Do you not think the FBI can handle anything?"

Now it was our turn to share a look.

"Personally, no, I don't think the FBI can handle the things we investigate," I told him. "It's no slight against you of course, it's just our agents have a more open mind."

"I have a very open mind," he insisted. "Give me a for instance."

"Okay, sure." *Let's just get rid of this guy.* I pointed to the couch behind him and lifted it, dragging it through the air towards us. "Are you sure I can't offer you a seat?"

"No I'm-" He glanced over at it then did a double take. He looked from the floor to the couch repeatedly while agent Schoolly's mouth was hanging open. She hastily went back to her phone conversation. "How..."

"Like I said, you're just not equipped to deal with what we deal with. Stick to the mundane, let us handle everything else."

"It's floating."

"Yes."

"It's real. It's all real. Are you aliens?"

"Aliens? I was born in Ordinary, Maine."

"I'm from Neptune, California," Veronica told him.

"Yeah, we have enough problems here on the ground, don't go adding beings from other planets into it," I chided him.

"Can you even imagine?" Veronica agreed, rolling her eyes. "That would be a disaster."

"But the... The floating!"

"What about it?" I set the couch back. "Perfectly reasonable, on our side of things."

He was touching it, trying to assure himself it was real probably.

Schoolly got off the phone and came over to us. She handed our badges back. "Their story checks out, at least these two are in our system. Veronica Marts was FBI before she transferred to this..." she glanced over at the seal on the wall. "...organization. Jesse was hired more recently. And apparently this building *is* listed as belonging to a branch of the FBI called the Bureau of Control but he had to dig pretty deep to find that. This place was abandoned in the 80s apparently."

"Yes, we're looking into why exactly that was," I told her. "The world would be a different place now if that hadn't happened."

"I'll take your word for it. Come on, Moulder, we're done here."

"But it's real. It's all real! There's so much they could tell us!"

"It was some kind of trick, probably wires to impress the locals. And if it wasn't it's probably classified. Let's go." She started off and he hurried to catch up to her.

"But Schoolly!"

“No.”

“It’s all real!”

“It’s not.”

They left.

“So that worked out,” I announced when they were driving away. Herman came to stand with us, shotgun on his shoulder.

“Or they just left to go get backup,” Veronica countered. She sighed. “You know, I think we need to get in front of this either way.”

“How so? Hang a banner in front proclaiming we’re open for business again?”

She snorted. “No. Let’s take a trip to DC, to the main FBI building. We need to do the same thing as before but higher up. Think about it, who would have the power to shut down the whole FBC? Probably only the director of the FBI. If I had to wager on it I would say possession, he’s in a good position to be as he’s at the top of a shadowy organization to begin with. We should find any records of the FBC, make them current, maybe put out some memos the program is being restarted so there’s no confusion, that sort of thing. Then while we’re there we can check out the director and if possessed, make him not so. He can then do anything we couldn’t get to.”

“Meowvis and I are willing,” Herman told her. “I can see some problems with that plan though.”

“Oh, I’m sure there will be challenges,” she agreed. “We can plan for them.”

“You still have FBI access though, right?” I asked her. “What would the problem be?”

“Doors,” he explained simply. “We went before to her local office. So the doors there opened for her because she was expected to be there. And we changed what we could in their database, but we couldn’t access everything from there. Now we suddenly appear in DC, well, she’s not supposed to be there. So I doubt many doors would open beyond maybe the main door into the building.”

“He’s right,” she agreed. “I don’t know exactly how that all works but it does.”

“If they’ve done it correctly, and they probably have, the system that controls the doors isn’t even connected to the internet. You have to be sitting there at a local terminal to change it. It’s a separate system from anything else. Someone high up has to provide paperwork and tick boxes saying this person can access this door and this door and none other, and a local security officer punches that all in. We can’t just ‘hack’ it like movies would allow you to believe.”

“So you just cut the wire. Cutting the wire always opens a door, right?”

“Ah, no. In fact it does not.”

“Movies lied to me?”

“Besides, we can’t leave a trail of cut wires and smashed panels because then someone will really know something is up.”

“Fine. Spoilsport. So how do we do it?”

She pondered a moment. “I can see two ways. The first is to put my astral doorway spell up twice, a few inches apart. We pass into this astral, go a few inches, and pass out again. That bypasses the door. Cons to this are having to do it over and over, tiring me out and fighting all the electronics that will no doubt be in a place like that. I might only be able to get us through a few, and keep in mind we can only do as many in as out.”

Because the effort to get out is the same as getting in? Right, because we won’t know where the security office is to add ourselves to that door record. “You have to activate the lock from both sides?”

“In a lot of cases, yes. They want to know who is where at all times. If you can badge in, but don’t badge out, and then someone uses that badge to come in again an alert will sound because something funny is going on. Or if you’re in two places at once, maybe the badge was cloned somehow.”

“Wow, security is more complex than I thought.”

“It’s worse now, with face recognition cameras and such, or maybe I should say better? But we shouldn’t have to worry about that. Even the FBI is slow to change their whole building security because of cost.”

“What’s the second way? Nuke the site from orbit?”

“No, silly. We go into astral right at the start. I doubt they’ll have any defenses there. Then we just peek through and try to figure out where to go that way. The downside there is we would be totally blind most of the time, I doubt Wayfinder can point us to something in the real world while we’re not in the real world.”

“It cannot,” he agreed.

“Right. So how we would find anything would be a matter of chance.”

“Okay, correct me on something here,” I told her.

“If I can.”

“Magic is basically the will of the practitioner, right? Fire spells can create fire, change fire, put out fire, manipulate fire, anything one can think of relating to fire.”

“That’s right.”

“So why not make your ‘window into the real world’ spell follow along with you. Don’t cast it to just stick there and then shut it down again. Do one casting of a spell that just lets us walk the hallways as normal without being there.”

“Er...” She tried to think of a way this wouldn’t work, but clearly she failed. “I could probably do that.”

“Sounds like that’s the way to go, then. If you want to do this, I’m all for it. It ticks all *my* boxes, and if the director of the FBI isn’t possessed, well, we can ask him a few things as to what he thinks is going on in the world today.”

“I’ll let you know when I’m ready to leave,” Veronica told us.

“Sounds good. I’ll just do director stuff in the meantime I guess.”

Veronica scrolled around in google maps street view finding a quiet corner within walking distance of 935 Pennsylvania Avenue NW where the FBI building was. She decided upon the parking garage of Ford’s Theater, but of course the mapping didn’t extend to that area. Wasn’t a problem, she could cast a divination spell to let her see the entrance, as she could see that clearly on the map. Then simply move her “camera” further in to a quiet spot. We teleported there, Herman with both his hammer and shield, but not the armor. He had a laptop bag strap across his body, and he had put the drone into it too before we left.

“Electronics work oddly in the astral,” he told us. “So I’ll leave the whole armor behind. The drone and stuff we may need once we get there.”

We headed out, lurking by the entrance to the street which was still fairly crowded even in winter. When we were sure there was no one looking Veronica popped us into the Astral so we didn’t have to try finding a quiet spot further on. It was also a good test of her new spell of “Mobile Astral Window” which flashed into existence and let us see a fair amount around us. She took a few steps and the window stayed relative to her, which made her sigh in relief. “Okay, let’s go.”

We headed in the correct direction, following the streets because walking through buildings didn’t seem right. Finally it loomed up ahead of us, and I realized the small flaw in our plan. The building had more than one floor. *I can just float us around, it shouldn’t be a huge deal. As long as her window stays relative to her and not to the ground, that is. But she thought of that. Right? Right.* And that’s when the kanaima, who must have been there the whole time on the other side of the window jumped us through it. We were focusing on the real world, knowing there wasn’t anything we could bump into around here, and none of us considered the fact that the building may be protected. At the very least this one kanaima, a vague humanoid shape, was here and jumped at us. Herman, specifically.

“Herman, watch out!” I cried, shoving him with my power. The kanaima’s claws missed him, but he also lost his balance and went down.

Another one plunged through it, and Veronica dropped the window so we could see what was happening. It looked like six of the things were converging on us. “Summon,” she cried, pointing at one of them. It appeared before her, and the one attacking her sunk its claws into that one instead of her. It sort of shrieked but didn’t seem seriously hurt.

Another went for Herman, who was still getting up, and while he tried to bash it aside with the shield it nailed him in the leg. He cried out.

The gun dropped into my hand and I sprayed the area to the left of me, where the two going after Herman were. Both took some hits, recoiling back but neither was fatally wounded. Another went for Veronica, who shouted “Summon” again, moving the one she had previously brought to her again as a shield. It wasn’t having a good day and again failed to resist, taking another shot to the leg. A hole had been created right in front of me by my spraying the area to the left so another had a straight shot at me. I didn’t want to fire again and then have to have the lengthy recharge but it seemed to be working for Veronica so I simply yanked the initial one that attacked her into the path of the one coming for me. That worked, and I noticed that one was also scratched in the legs. *Are they not trying to kill us? They’re just trying to incapacitate us?*

The one that had been teleported twice didn’t seem to enjoy being hit by his “friends” and lashed out at the one behind him. It jumped back, unhurt.

Herman was up, and had blocked another strike from the kanaima near him. This bounced off the shield, thankfully.

“Shatter,” I told the gun, which quickly reformed into the shotgun configuration. I pulled the trigger again, aiming for the two in front of me. The one I was aiming at vanished though, appearing behind the other and slashing it across the leg. *Thanks, Veronica.* It would have hit me instead probably, she had saved me. I knew I had two shots left and Herman seemed to be keeping his two at bay with his shield so I sighted on the two in front of me again. Another shot taken, but again it didn’t go down. I still had two shots, the gun had regenerated one, but I had to dodge back as the one I had just shot took a halfhearted swipe at me.

“Teleportal,” I heard from the side, as Veronica defended herself again and again from the two on her.

The one further from me shoved the one that had just been shot and came for me again, so I just hopped back and shot him. He jerked back, snarling, but was still up. *Okay, this really isn’t getting me anywhere. I shoot one more time and I’m looking at the full reload time. Need to buy us some time, get Herman attacking too not just defending. Nothing to hide behind here though so...* I threw them back. They went flying, landing in a heap some meters away from us. “Spin.”

One by one the kanaima got up, and Herman was whirling his hammer around and grinning. When the one right in front of him was up he let it fly. It tried to get out of the way but took the hammer right in the chest, exploding it in a shower of sparks. He opened his fist and it flew back to him. “That’s better,” he cried. “Now yer in for it, laddies!”

Wait, when did he become a pirate- never mind.

“Fireball!” Veronica cast, as all the ones near her were up. A huge dome of fire erupted around them, nearly reaching us and I flinched back from it. When it dissipated all of them were gone.

“Showoff,” Herman chided, lowering the hammer.

“It was a team effort,” she corrected. “Without Jesse flinging them back like that I couldn’t have used that spell. So thanks for that.”

“Sure.” I told her, feeling a little miffed myself. I had planned to gun them down with Spin as they ran towards us, but no need for that now. “Everyone all right?”

“I took a bit of a scratch,” Herman told us, showing us his pant leg. “Poison is pretty bad but it’s fading. You?”

“Didn’t touch me. Veronica?”

“Just a scratch.” She showed me her leg too. “I think they weren’t trying to kill us. Typical kanaima, actually. Make us suffer as long as we could. They probably figured it was fine, two to one. We showed them.”

“Don’t suppose you know healing magic?” he asked her.

“Sorry, I don’t. Healing magic is really tricky, and if you get it wrong you can kill somebody. I never wanted to take the chance.”

“Okay. I’ll live, give me a second though.”

“No time to rest. This just proves there’s going to be others inside,” I worried. “Are you good for a few more spells?”

“A few more, I’m not quite out of it yet.”

“Fine. Get the window back up, but this time one of us is walking in front of it. Or make it transparent or something. We can’t get jumped like that again. We’re just heading to the director’s office directly, clear him first and he can get us into any other system I’m sure.”

“Good plan.”

“I’ll just limp along then, shall I?”

“You’ll be fine. What was that line? If you die, walk it off?”

He snorted. “My own franchise, used against me! Oh, the humanity!”

We didn’t run into any other kanaima on the way to the building, and I floated us around while Veronica maintained her window spell. We finally found his office and I charged up Pierce. I put it right up against where his head was going to be and nodded, I was ready. Veronica dropped us back over into the real world and I saw he had two energy signatures. I released the trigger. His head jerked forward, smashing into the desk, and the kanaima inside burned away without ever realizing what was happening. The others looked every which way but it seemed he was alone, as we had seen from the Astral. He groaned and sat up.

“What’s going on?” he asked, blinking. “Did I fall asleep on the first day on the job?” He looked around. “Who are you people? What?” He looked at the gun, which I lowered.

“Christopher Wray?” Veronica asked.

“Yes. Who are you?”

“Veronica Marts, FBI and FBC. We need to have a talk with you, sir.”

“You’ll have to make it quick, I’ve just been appointed to this role by the president and there’s so much to do. In fact where did everybody go? I could have sworn someone was explaining something to me a second ago.”

We shared a look. “What year do you think it is?”

“What? It’s 2017 of course! Is this some kind of prank, because I fell asleep? Wait, has my office been changed? What’s been going on here?”

“I’ll explain things,” she promised him, “but sir, you’re not going to believe them. I ask that you remain calm and try to keep an open mind.”

It took some convincing, but if his own calendar plus the calendars of others on the walls of the building weren’t proof enough, four years of emails in his inbox were. He frantically tore through his sent box, protesting he would never had said or ordered those things done, and finally realized we were telling the truth. He had lost four years of his life to a kanaima, who was steering the FBI in the wrong direction completely. “And the president?”

“Joe Biden,” I told him. “The last guy lost, but to this day continues to claim election fraud stole it from him, like he couldn’t have lost at anything because of who he is. It’s all garbage, nothing came of any efforts to look into it, it’s just part of a grift to make him money and/or allow his party to change voting laws so people who vote democrat can’t do it anymore. Or he’s possessed too and just

looking to stir up trouble, in which case he's also doing a great job. Look into January 6th sometime, if you want a laugh. That's the direction this country is going in, because of all the interference from demons."

"I see. So shortly after I was appointed to this office I was possessed too?"

"Right. Before you weren't useful enough, but after you were given this post you were, and your behavior has been directed ever since."

"And what stops this from happening again?"

"Here." Herman handed him a metal disk with a hole in it on a chain. "This will prevent you from being possessed. Keep it on you at all times. Don't take it off for an instant. A kanaima is invisible in this world, and could be following you at any time waiting to possess you."

"Yes, don't make us come back here," I told him.

"I won't. Thank you, I'll wear it forever!" He slipped it over his head and tucked it under his clothes. Then he tore his clothes off in horror. "What am I wearing under my suit?"

"Looks like some very nice woman's underwear," I told him, trying not to burst out laughing. "I think your love life will be interesting when you make it home this evening. I wonder who will be waiting for you there..."

"Oh God, what has this creature done to my life?"

"No idea," I told him jovially. "But it's going to be a lot of fun finding out. Now, let's talk about restarting the Bureau of Control shall we?"

"Whatever we have to do to keep this from happening to others," he agreed. "Oh God, are there pictures of me like this? What if he's set up some kind of delayed switch that he activated every twenty four hours, but since I don't know to do it, the images get released? I'll be ruined!"

"The fate of the world is at stake here and that's what you're worried about?" Herman demanded.

"If I'm laughed out of office I won't be able to help you!"

"True," he agreed. He got his laptop out and opened it. "Let's just plug into your network and see what we can find that you've been doing the last four years, shall we?"

"How do we even know what password this thing used? As far as I know my accounts haven't even been set up yet but I'm getting email just the same. I don't know what it is!"

"That's a problem," he agreed. "Good thing my friend knows his way around a network."

"I guess we better get started," he sighed.

Chapter 10

The FBI director freaks out

Where: Control Building

When: Mid March

We had taken care of Christopher as best we could and thus far no racy pictures of him walking 'round in woman's underwear had surfaced online. He was being quite helpful, learning you were possessed the last four years and working against the country you professed to love will do that to a person. Meanwhile work on the building continued, and we planned our next move against any other kanaima in the area. We didn't have any real funding yet of course, that was beyond him, but he did offer to get us more recognition within the FBI as a legitimate organization. At first I was all for it, but Veronica cautioned me against it.

"Right now there's so few of us, we should stay as low key as possible," she explained. "Make the records active so if anyone asks yes we do exist. But we don't want to shout from the rooftops that the FBC is back quite yet. That will just paint a target on our back, and yours. That talisman probably isn't foolproof, we want to make it seem like you're still possessed as long as possible."

"So they don't try my defenses, that's a good thought," he admitted. "Okay. So I'll see what I can do to make your lives easier in secret, but keep in touch."

He had our numbers and we had his, so it was no surprise that day when my phone rang and I saw it was him. "Director Faden," I said into the phone.

"Jesse, thank goodness, I'm still myself then."

"Was there some doubt?"

"I'm not sure, but as I was able to call you I'm a bit relieved. It's been such a challenge, everyone notices I'm acting differently but today I've been feeling all tingly. I'm afraid they're trying to possess me again!"

"It could just be nerves. Don't freak yourself out, the talisman Herman made must be working, right? He's the best, don't worry about it."

"But I am worried about it! Can you come by? Please? Just to have a look around?"

"There's not much point. If there was one in your office it would hear you having this phone conversation and just leave. It would already be gone at this point."

"Please? Maybe check that between space you said was their home? If any more gathered you can chase them off, right? Make them think twice about coming back here?"

"...Not a bad idea, actually. Okay, hang on." I headed down the hall to Veronica's office, she had moved a bunch of books in and was studying them lately. Learning new magic maybe? And of course she had all of Herman's digitized books from the historian society to go through and Excellus had of course given me a copy of their digital files as well. Can you imagine if groups hoarded information instead of trying to work together to make a better world? Madness! I poked my head into her office. "Veronica, you up for a trip back to DC? I've got Christopher on the phone, he wants us to check his office, he thinks he's under attack by kanaima."

"We can go to his office directly," she told me. "Tell him to keep the area in front of his desk clear."

"Got it. Keep the area in front of your desk clear, we'll teleport there directly."

"Thank you. Thank you so much!"

"Sure thing, it's what we do." *For no money or recognition. Just for the betterment of the world. What a bunch of suckers.*

We collected Herman who brought his hammer, and Sarah, in case we needed to do cooperative spell-casting again, and appeared in his office. I took a quick look around, gun out, but the office was

empty apart from us and Christopher. "It's clear," I announced, lowing my gun. "We're alone." *As I fully expected, of course.*

"Thank God, that's such a load off my mind," Christopher gushed.

"Do you not trust my talisman?" Herman asked.

"No, no, of course I do!" he hastened to assure us. "How can I not? But I have to be sure, don't I?"

"Of course," I told him. "Veronica, Sarah, would you mind looking into the Astral around here? See if any are prowling around?"

"Wait, before you rush off," he interrupted, "can you take a look at my second in command? His name is Paul Abbate, he's been acting strange the last two days. Locking himself in his office, asking for information he should already know, that kind of thing. That would indicate possession, right?"

"You're not wrong," I admitted. "Sure, I'm happy to take a look."

"Great. I'll have him come down here." He started typing at his computer. Meanwhile Veronica cast an obscuring spell on the three of them, while I was just going to hide behind the door. With Pierce charged up, after he came in I would check him over from behind the door, shoot him in need be, or just stay hidden until he left. We got into position and waited.

"You wanted to see me, Chris?" Paul asked, walking into the room.

"Yes, I was looking over this latest report and..."

I peeked around the door, it didn't seem like he had seen me. *Crap, he's possessed all right. Is this never going to end?* I raised the gun, which unfortunately gave off light, which he did notice.

"What's that?"

I raised the gun and released the trigger. He jerked back, clutching his head, but I must have just winged him. The second energy signature didn't burn away. "You!"

Crap. Me.

"We are as numerous as the stars, you will never defeat all of us!"

"We'll see about that. Grip!" I unloaded the pistol at him, driving him back against the desk, and he burned away as my sixth shot hit him, so I didn't bother firing the seventh. He crashed backwards, falling on top of the desk. Of course this caused a commotion in the halls, as people ran towards the sound of gunfire. I ducked back behind the door as several people rushed in, making the gun vanish.

"What was that?" they demanded, their own guns already out.

"Nothing, just Paul tripping over himself and falling. Nothing to worry about. You okay there Paul?"

"What happened? Where am I?"

"We'll get you squared away, nothing to see here."

"Those were gunshots, not someone tripping!"

"Oh I think I know what gunshots sound like, believe me," said Christopher. "Sounds nothing like that. Everything's fine here, you can go."

"Are you okay, Paul?"

"I think so. Why did I come in here?"

"He'll be fine, back to work everyone, things are under control here."

They grumbled about it but the man wasn't shot, anyone could see that. He was dazed and looking around after being helped up off the desk, but otherwise unhurt. They left, closing the door behind them.

"Whoa, where did you come from?" he yelped in surprise when he saw me standing there.

"Not so loud," Christopher shushed him. "How do you feel?"

"Confused, what's going on? Who is this and why were they hiding behind the door?"

“Oh boy, you’re not going to believe me.”

His phone dinged, and he reached for it out of habit. “My wife is leaving me? What’s this chat history? I didn’t write any of these things, I have to call her!” He rushed out of the room.

“That can’t be good,” Herman said, appearing out of nowhere. “You want we should go after him, boss?”

“I think we should take a little tour of the place, both inside and out, to see if any more possessed people are hanging around,” I decided. “Then Chris here can explain it to everyone at once.”

“I can?”

“That’s why they pay you the big bucks!” I told him. “Come on, give us a tour.”

Christopher led us around the building, and we did find one more possessed person, a woman, coming out of the lady’s room. We passed her without comment but as soon as her back was to me I spun making Pierce appear in my hand, charged it up, and blew its head off. She tumbled to the floor and we made a big show about making sure she was all right, getting her out of the hallway and into a conference room. She was babbling about being late for school, clearly another agent taken over at a young age, and we left her to deal with it while we checked the Astral. There were another five there, making me groan, but this time we had the drop on them. Literally. Entering the Astral from above I was hovering over them, alone. They were standing in a rough clump, looking outward for anyone that dared to come from that way. Poor souls. The service weapon was in the Surge configuration, and I put three neat shots down on them. I stuck two of the three, which wasn’t bad, and triggered the blast. When it cleared one was still there, though it looked like one of his legs had been blown off. I shrugged, didn’t bother changing the mode, waited until the gun recharged, and set three more grenade like cubes around them. They didn’t survive the second attack, and I nodded. (Sarah was maintaining a window into the Astral to see me, while Veronica had stepped me over for as long as she maintained the spell.) The spell ended and I popped back into the real world.

“Another five destroyed, a total of seven for today, that’s a new personal best,” I crowed. I did a flourish with the gun and made it vanish. “That worked out great.” *Explosion type attacks are the best kind, if your allies are far enough away that you can use them. No wonder I got fried so often before Herman made me my booster.*

“Glad to hear it,” Christopher told us. “But what about tomorrow? Or the next day? We need some kind of long term plan here. I can’t keep finding people that are reverting to childhood or cheated on their spouse.”

“I can’t make talismans for every member of your staff,” Herman told him. “I haven’t even made any for my own teammates. Been too busy wiring the building and finishing up my forging backlog so I can start doing this full time.”

“So what can we do?”

“Not a lot,” Sarah told him. “They’re not demons, not really. So sanctifying the building wouldn’t help to keep them out. You would have to rely on trying to ground out the magic. Have a station where everyone coming into the building gets drenched with water.”

“And the new dress code is what, bathing suits? I don’t think that’s going to work. How would I ever explain why it was needed?”

“It wouldn’t work anyway,” Veronica told her. “I mean, depending. Sure it would keep long term possessions from happening but imagine you’re a kanaima, right? You’re possessing someone or you want to. So they approach the ‘wash’ station and the kanaima leaves. They don’t have to control anyone, they can just ride along and not make them do anything. They slip through to the other side of the wash, it doesn’t hurt them or even make them show up. The person comes out, dries themselves off, and they get possessed again. Accomplishing nothing.”

“This possession stuff is pretty brutal,” I agreed. “It can’t be caught on camera, only with human eyes looking for the dual energy signatures. The problem with making human detectors is the

same problem as making anti-possession charms. They're time consuming to make and expensive. Making the building proof against them is no good, right?"

"I could make any kind of area effect charms," Herman told us, "but you would have to rip down the walls, hide them, and then put all the walls back. Otherwise someone could easily get at them and just be paid to gather up all the artifacts in the building. Plus the range would be pretty small, we would need a ton of them. That could take a year or more of doing nothing else!"

"So we're screwed, is that what you're saying? What good is magic if there's no way to use it to fight against these spirit things?"

"Hold on now, we're coming up with ideas here," I told him. "Why don't you go handle those possessed people and we'll see what we can come up with?"

"Fine, but you better have something for me when I get back." He stalked off.

Or what, you'll fire us? You need us, dude, not the other way around. You can't really threaten us.

"He's just frustrated," Sarah told us. "I wouldn't take it personally."

"Thanks, but I will just a little," I shot back. "He has a whole organization, we're just four people. Say, could benandanti be hired for some kind of building security?"

"I guess," she admitted. "Or other sorcerers, but that would be really expensive. Our people would have to move here, we can't teleport. And we have witches to fight, that's our main purpose. At least, it was."

"They would need a copy of Auseinander, at least the sensing portion of it," Herman mused. "And at that point what good are they? They don't have weapons that can hurt kanaima, only you do. Maybe they could spell break them, or send them to the Astral, but what then? They just come back. It's a losing proposition."

"What about something in the Astral? Some kind of, I don't know, mole deterrent thingy," Veronica suggested.

"Mole. Deterrent. Thingy," we all repeated.

"You know, one of those things you stick in the ground and it's supposed to drive moles away. It gives off a sound they don't like so they go elsewhere."

"Never heard of anything like that," he admitted. "And they're not moles, they could just destroy it or send it here with magic."

"What about an Astral bomb?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Don't really want to make weapons, you know that. I've seen them get twisted and abused past their original purpose all too often. Besides, isn't that just a regular bomb you drop into the Astral?"

"Technology wouldn't work past the Astral boundary," Sarah reminded him. "Jesse's gun--"

"Is magical in a way we don't understand, I know," he grumbled. "Same as my armor not exactly working there. I know, I get the picture. Boy, it would have to be complex. Go off at random intervals, remain here when it's not going off, have a huge radius, but send an energy pulse that can kill someone into the Astral. I mean just making one is useless, I would have to make a whole bunch and that's not how it works. Can't be done."

"Yeah, I guess so."

We sat (or leaned, or stood) in silence for a moment.

"Wait though, we're thinking of complex solutions when we need a general one," I decided.

"General?" Veronica asked.

"Yeah. Something easy to do, that follows the laws of magic and makes them work for us instead of against us like always. Possession is magic, right? These kanaima are pretty good at it, being that's about all they do, but we could still interfere with it. Come on, let me look around." I left the room, and they trailed after me. We toured the building a bit, and I kept nodding my head. *Yeah, that*

could work. I don't know if he'll go for it, but it's all we can offer him at the moment. We headed back and found Christopher, trying to calm down the woman I had shot. It didn't look like he was succeeding, and told her he would be right back.

"Did you think of something?" he asked me.

"I did. Magic fails for a couple of reasons, as I understand it. Sunrise, being washed away by running water, having too many onlookers around, and being too close to technology. Two of these four things you can't do. Sunrise for sure is off the table, but onlookers and technology you can control. You've got the space, and it'll take some doing, but it's nearly foolproof. Rearrange the layout of the building. Make it more of an 'open floor plan' as they say. Cram as much technology into this space as you can. With everybody able to watch everybody else, and everyone being in that one area, magic would be very, very hard to keep hold of. Right?"

"It could be tricky," Veronica agreed. "I wouldn't want to work in a place with a hundred other people, a spell or two going, and stand next to a rack of computers or whatever."

"You know this is the FBI, right? We're pretty secretive about things? How are we going to make a cube farm work? And a half height one at that! Full size cubes isn't going to do it, right? Everyone has to see everyone else?"

"That's right. It's a shift in thinking but what choice do you have? You said it yourself, you can't keep allowing people to be possessed."

He sighed and scowled. "I must admit, for 'some reason' I previously ordered no one should come to my office unless it was an emergency. So most of my business was done via the phone or email. Now we know why, of course, to make this magic easier to hold onto during the day. My sudden shift to walking around and seeing how people are doing has taken everyone off guard. They all think they're going to be fired, at least that's the rumor going around."

"Probably for just that reason," Herman mused. "Keep you away from people that could knock the spell off. I notice you didn't have much technology in your office either. Just your computer. No clock, no funny spinning kinetic sculpture, nothing."

"The more people who are around," I told him, "and the more technology you have in the building, the safer you're all going to be."

"I'll consider it," he promised. "If that's all you've got to try and keep us safe."

"We'll keep thinking about it, of course," I told him. "We need to protect our own building after all." *Though I think we're already protected against possession, right? Something about impurities not being tolerated inside the walls? I'll have to ask Herman again, he looked into it.*

"Fine. You know my number. If you'll excuse me, I have recently un-possessioned people to try and deal with."

"Good luck," we wished him. We headed back to his office and teleported back to the Control building.

That afternoon we got another visit from Sisaroplex.

Chapter 11

I take the witch's destiny into my own hands

Where: Control building lobby

When: That afternoon

"I have excellent news!" the demon Sisaroplex announced when we met him in the lobby. He was holding a rectangular wooden box under one arm, which he set on the table in front of us. With a flourish he opened it, and we saw it contained several small bottles with what looked like a glowing orb inside them. They were labeled too, a nice touch I thought, which of course raised the question of how he knew that. They sat upon a satin pillow of mauve, and the tiny lights inside darted and pulsed like tiny fairies. The entire thing was quite beautiful, and I had to admit that the demon had a good sense of presentation. "As you can see, my people have found and collected the souls of the witches previously held by Thahiss. With these they can be brought out of their coma and we can discuss what to do about your brother. Imagine, this very day you could see him up and around again. Are you not excited?"

If he doesn't try to kill me for ending his 'bestie' maybe.

"Hold on there," Veronica cautioned, reaching over and closing the box. "I've been reading up on demon deals over the years and they are never what they seem to be."

"Or," he countered, raising a finger, "are they exactly what they seem to be and humans just have sour grape syndrome? Or were not careful enough in their wording of the contracts? It was Jesse here that gave such a masterful performance, tricking me with my own words, that got me interested in her in the first place."

So I have a demon stalker now? Lucky me.

"However you want to say it, you claim these souls or I guess pieces of soul are the property of the witches currently in comas back in Ordinary?"

"Of course, I did label them for your convenience."

"Yes, very considerate of you. My question for you is, how many other witches did Thahiss have under his sway at the time of his attack?"

"Others?"

"That's right, others. Were the six that attacked us the only ones? Or did other young women around the world fall into mysterious comas on that day? We only get one shot at this, and you yourself said you want to restore *all* of them. Not just the ones we currently know about. I don't want you 'finding' them later and scooping them up, and we find out about it and you're all 'oh, but our deal was for just those' or some crap."

"I, I, I really hadn't considered that," he told us, seeming genuinely taken aback.

"Really?" She crossed her arms over her chest and give him the stink eye.

"You have my word, I only considered the six. Finding any others, without having the bodies there to perform magic on to get a starting point? That could be almost impossible!"

"I have faith in your abilities," she told him. "Look into it. Come back here and tell us, plainly, that you gave your best effort to discover any other followers of Thahiss and discovered their souls as well. If there are none, fine. If there are more, I expect to see more bottles."

"I suppose that's fair. It shouldn't take me too long to at least discover if there are more, we can move from there. Consider this a progress report then, and I'll be-" He reached for the case but Veronica put her hand on it. "Eh?"

"We'll just hold onto these," she told him, sliding it towards herself. "Not that we don't trust you, of course. We do. Don't we?" She looked at us.

What's she up to? "Oh, obviously," we all agreed.

"But they're useless to you! Only a demon can rightfully restore them!"

"Not about restoring them at the moment. Maybe I want a fancy night light," she countered.

"It's true, it's not like we're going to ask some other demon to their help putting them back. That would

be stupid.” She laughed. “So stupid. But I would just feel better about knowing they were close at hand.”

“That would be stupid. I hope you’re not making deals with other demons in my absence? You won’t get a better offer from someone else, I hope you realize.”

“Oh I do!”

“Humm. Very well.” He got up. “I will leave them in your care. Just keep in mind I’m not finding them again. You trip and they fall out and shatter, that’s on you.”

“I’ll keep them safe, don’t worry.”

“Very well. I’ll be back when I have more news. You still have my number in case you need to get a hold of me?”

I nodded.

“I shall take my leave.” He walked out, and Veronica breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’m glad he went for that,” she told us.

“What are you up to?” I asked.

“Naturally I don’t trust this demon,” she began. “But with this much going for us,” she opened the box and looked the souls over again, “at least we have options.”

“Options to do what?” Sarah asked. “We can’t move souls around, like he said.”

“Explore alternatives. Jesse, you told me you got saved by a being who helped you, gave you the pistol, right?”

“Fifteen years ago now, sure.”

“Is there any possible way you could ask for their help? He said only a demon can manipulate souls but we know that’s not true. You got saved, I’m guessing beings from the other side ‘of the tracks’ if you will can do so as well. And may be more willing to help us or at least be more straight with us. If we can do this without Sisaroplex, okay we have a demon mad at us, but at least the witches and your brother are safe. Someone has to summon him here, he won’t last past sunrise on a particular day. We find that person, and convince them to stop doing that. Boom, he can’t strike at us.”

“And the demon world is against us anyway,” I agreed, “with all of the possessions we’ve ended and whatnot. And he claimed to only be interested in my brother anyway, so as long as we have a discussion about him he can’t really claim to have been cheated. But to call out to an angel, for lack of a better term? How would I even-” But I recalled a red, ringing telephone that appeared in my room not so long ago. Who was I talking to on that? I had suspected the being that saved me, who else would know about me? Could I *make* a call with it? Could Polaris help? I still had it, it was sitting on my desk. The others had never asked about it, for all I knew never even looked at it. But it was there.

“You’ve thought of something, haven’t you?” She leaned close to me. “You went all funny.”

“I don’t know,” I told her. “Secure those, and I’ll get back to you. I need to... make a call.”

“You got it boss.” She closed up the box.

I went back to my office and sat staring at the red telephone on my desk. It was just a small, seemingly plastic, toy rotary telephone. I had never seen a real rotary phone, what was this, the 1960s? It didn’t have real numbers on the dial and I really had no number to call anyway. I reached for the receiver but stopped with my hand on the top. *Okay, I wish to be connected to the being that gave me a portion of their essence, which became the part of me I call Polaris. Polaris, if you’re listening and can help, please allow me to get the attention of our ‘mom’ the being that helped us all those years ago. When I pick up this phone, they will be on the other end.* I had only the briefest glimpse of the area surrounding the being I had seen and their face when I was a kid, but I tried to recall everything I had seen, felt, smelled, touched during that time. I imagined putting all that down through my hand into the phone, I wanted to connect with that place. I would connect with that place. With nothing to lose I lifted the receiver and put it to my ear.

It was ringing.

Oh my gosh, has this actually worked? Wait, what I even say to them? I should have rehearsed something-

“Hello Director/Jesse/catalyst. What can singular/we do for you/them at this current space/time?”

It’s them, it’s the same voice I heard before! “You’re there! I mean, hi, I mean hello, this is- You already said you know who this is. Sorry, I didn’t think this would work. Is this, I mean, how do I know-”

“Amusement. Breathe/relax Jesse. I am the singular/being that discovered you as an incomplete/child. I am pleased/relieved your fate/destiny/alternate life is going so well/on course. You are calling to request/demand my help with some aspect/issue?”

“Yes. That’s it exactly.” *Okay, awkward. But they’re taking it in stride, this is the important part, so don’t blow it Jesse.* “We need your help. We have some souls that we need returned to the body of some women who made deals with demons to become witches. But I would rather you, or one of your kind, do it instead of the demon. Is that possible?”

“Delighted/awed to be thought of. Mostly beings/lower wish to summon/call to higher/improper beings. This always confused singular/us. Our names are not hidden/withheld yet we are never called/invited to lower plane. Similar/same abilities exist in singular/us if you wish to call/invite to lower plane.”

They’re okay with it! That’s amazing! “Thank you, thank you so much! What do I need to do? I don’t know that anyone around here knows summoning magic, but I can ask.” *Pretty sure the benandanti don’t, but maybe Veronica does?*

“Long/hard way can be used. Do you have instrument/ability to record information?”

“Uh...” *Record information? Wait are they going to give me instructions?* “One second!”

“All time/space is one time/space, Jesse.”

I rooted around in the desk for a pencil and yanked some paper out of the printer. “For you maybe. Okay, I’m ready.”

“235.2543”

“Okay?”

“I look forward to meeting you/them, my name is Sariel.”

The line went dead.

“Ahhhhhh what?”

I took the number back to the group and Meowvis spoke up from the computer. “It’s a Dewy Decimal number, with 98% certainty. I would suggest checking the largest library in the area for a matching tome. 235 is the designation for spiritual matters and beings, which has been factored into my probability analysis.”

“Maybe it’s a book on ritual magic?” Veronica decided. “A how to guide on calling angels?”

“Just sitting around in a library? A public library?” I wasn’t buying it.

“The New York City public library system has a total of 96 locations with a combined estimated book count of 53 million. Some percentage of those do hold some probability of containing real magical rituals.”

“It’s true,” Veronica admitted. “In the books I’ve been looking over there’s any number of mention of what we call demons and their names, and how to call them. Angels and the like, not so much.”

“Because they’ve probably been destroyed by demons,” Sarah figured, “and their agents, witches.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me in the least.”

Right, always get rid of the competition as quickly as you can. If no one knows the names or rituals for angels, if they want magic they have to call to demons. Simple logic. “Then let’s head out. Herman, you want to stay and man the building?”

“Actually, I was going to get my digitizer and see about grabbing a copy of the whole book. If they are that rare the historian society should get a copy if they don’t already have one.”

“Fair enough. Veronica, you’re in charge then until I get back.”

“Finally, the power is mine!” she shouted to the ceiling. “All mine! Hahhahahah. I mean, sure boss.”

“Please don’t burn the place down or anything.” *I’ve already had one house burn down.*

“I’ll do my best.”

“By the way, you don’t know summoning magic, right? We need to do this the long way? I know you would have spoken up but just to avoid any head smashing later I thought I would ask.”

“Sorry, I don’t know summoning magic.”

“Not a problem, just checking.”

The biggest library wasn’t that far away, so Sarah, Herman, and myself headed there in my car. We poked around, both to find the book and to find a quiet corner to set up the cameras. Strictly speaking sitting there digitizing a library book was probably against some copyright or another but when we found it we discovered it was pretty old. So he set the equipment up and I had my badge out to make sure no one bothered him. When he was done he started taking the station down and I sat in front of his laptop.

“The book does indeed contain a ritual ceremony that could be used to reach out to an angelic being,” Meowvis told me. “I have compiled a list of components you will need to complete the ritual.” The screen opened to show a text document with a list of components.

“Components?”

“Indeed. This type of magic is more external to a person, rather than internal. Just like baking a pretty cake means doing your cooking by the book, so to does doing this summoning magic take certain steps and certain objects to harness the magic. The alternative is for Veronica to study summoning magic herself and simply use it to reach out to this being.”

“Whichever way is faster I guess.”

“I do not have data on how fast Veronica learns new concepts or where such concepts could be learned. Thus I estimate simply performing the ritual will be faster, with an 86% accuracy rating.”

“You mean we only have an 86% chance of getting it right?”

“Negative, I mean there is an 86% chance performing the ritual will be faster than Veronica-”

“I get it. Thank you for clarifying. How difficult is the ritual?”

“There are no complicated requirements, simply elements of timing. If you can pass a bowl from one person to another without dropping it I believe you can succeed.”

“So we should have less people involved, to minimize risk?”

“A balance must be struck. The more people involved the more magic can be drawn but the greater the risk one member screws up and ruins the whole thing.”

“Great. How did someone ever come up with these rituals anyway?”

“Perhaps there was a time the worlds were closer, and Otherworldly beings taught in this world how to summon them? How did sword smithing come about, or making advanced processors with billions of transistors in the space of a postage stamp? Trial and error, and much work done over the centuries.”

“Yeah okay.” I read the list over, it didn’t seem too bad, no eyes of newt or anything like that, but still. Candles, incense, white feathers, silver crosses, purified water from a certain place on earth, it went on and on. No one thing was impossible to get but finding everything in one place? “Where are we going to find some of this stuff?”

“As for that,” Herman said smugly, “leave it to me.”

After heading back and parking the car Herman showed Veronica some pictures and said “they” should be open by now, could she take us “there.” She said she could, and I left Sarah in charge this time, as someone needed to be. *Need to find my own second in command, though really it’s Veronica it’s just not official. I should make it official. So much to do.* We found ourselves outside a run down part of Rochester, NY. The coast had been clear according to her, and Herman opened a door to what looked like a closed and run down gun shop. He held the door for us and we headed inside. The inside was quite cozy and neat, shelves of every sort of odd ingredient you could wish for, by the looks, and standing at the back was an elegant looking red haired woman dressed in an apron. I wasn’t really attracted to girls but she was a knockout, she could go on the list. What list? If you have to ask...

“Herman!” she said when she saw who it was. Her face lit up, clearly these two knew each other. “It’s so good to see you again!” She came around the counter and hugged him.

“Hey there, Linnea, nice to see you again too. How are you?”

“Good, very good. Coming in with two ladies, you stud? Is that why I haven’t seen you in so long? Been busy?”

“Uh... busy, yes.” He cleared his throat. “May I present Director Faden, of the Federal Bureau of Control *and my current boss*, and my coworker, Veronica Marts, recently of the FBI and now with the FBC.”

“Oops.” She smiled, not looking embarrassed at all. “Your boss, huh?”

“Director, Veronica, I’d like to introduce you to Linnea, as you can see she and her brother Peder run this supply store. I’m sure we can get everything we need here.”

“Oh, you’re here for supplies,” Linnea asked us. “Don’t scare me like that Herman, not that I have anything illegal around here! We run a clean shop, what can I help you with?”

“I need everything on this list,” I told her, handing it over. *And what’s in the back I would have to ask for that isn’t illegal?* She looked it over, pursing her lips. Her soft, supple lips that- I looked away, shaking my head. *What in the world? I mean she’s pretty but why am I responding like this?*

“Sure, I can accommodate you. So what is the, what did you call it?”

“Federal Bureau of Control,” I told her, trying to stay on track. “It’s like the FBI but for non-human investigations. We’re an old group recently reactivated.”

“Yeah, it sounded familiar, that’s why I was so shocked. And you work for them now?” She looked at Herman.

Sounded familiar? How old- right, she’s not human is she? Like Gretchen she could be hundreds of years old. It’s hard to wrap my head around sometimes.

“It’s a better use of my talents than just making costume pieces for people. Though it’s been mostly building maintenance thus far. I’ll be making items for the group once we have a building that functions correctly and I’m sure won’t fall down on us.”

“Good for you. Still, better keep my nose clean, now that the FBC is back in action again.” She laughed, throwing her hair back. Her soft, silky hair that shone in the-

“It’ll be a hundred years before we’re operating at this level,” I assured her. “Honestly, we just want to keep the world safe. As long as you’re not building nukes in your backyard, we’ll probably be fine.” *Or making deals with demons I guess, but would that be illegal? If you’re both getting something and no one is dying...*

“I should say not!” she insisted. “Now, this list says white candles. Are you sure about that?”

“Positive.”

“Because we have mountains of black candles. Everyone wants black candles. But you want white candles?”

“Right. We’re not summoning a demon, we’re summoning someone from the other side.”

“Get out of here!” She dropped the list, staring at me.

“What? Shouldn’t we?” *Is she going to throw us out? Did I ruin it for Herman? Are we going to have to find someplace else to get this stuff?*

“What?” She stared back. “Oh, sorry!” She laughed. “No it’s fine, you just surprised me again. No one summons angels, do you even know the name of one?” She bent over to pick up the list again.

“I do.”

“You’re serious?” I nodded. “This is so crazy. Just a second.” She headed for the door behind the counter and opened it. “Hey Peder!”

“Yeah?”

“You know that box of candles that weird lady dropped off?”

“No?”

“The white ones, she even paid us.”

There was a pause. “Oh, I remember. Yeah, they’re around here someplace.”

“Bring them.”

“Bring them? They’re buried under fourteen years of junk! I don’t know where they are now.”

My blood went cold. *How long?*

“Just find them!”

“Fine.”

“We don’t carry much religious iconography,” she explained, coming back to us. “Most trolls, such as myself and my brother, can’t stand the sight of it. But I’m sort of the black sheep of the family, or I guess you would say the white sheep?” She laughed again. “I’m fascinated by them. I say this because things like the cross that you need, I have to keep them away from Peder. And the white candles? Well, they’re the only white candles we’ve ever had for sale. Like I said, not much call for them.”

“But you have call for crosses?”

“Sure, destroying a cross is a component of many demon summoning rituals.”

“I should have guessed.”

“Now these candles, some years ago some weird lady came, gave them to us, paid us what we would ask for them so we would hand them over for free, and told us to hold onto them because one day someone would come for them. And now here you are.” She looked me over. “Here you are.”

“Here I am,” I agreed. *More of Sariel’s doing?*

“And you’re going to summon an angel? A real, live, actual, higher being of light?”

“That’s the plan.”

She got up close, almost touching me. “Can I help?”

“Er...”

“I’ll give you a discount. Five- no ten percent! I know all about ritual magic, people don’t just come here for supplies, I mean at first they did. But they kept asking me stuff too so I figured I better learn some things about it. I can help.”

“Uh, boss, can I talk to you for a second?” Veronica pulled me to the side. “I think we should take her up on her offer.”

“Really?” *Is she feeling the same things I’m feeling when I look at this person? Never really asked what Veronica’s preferences were... Focus, you’re the Director, not some lovesick school girl. Not attracted to woman anyway. What’s Veronica saying?*

“The directions seem simple enough but none of us have ever done ritual magic. With her to lead us, I think it would greatly increase our chances of success. Even if she’s only done one ritual magic spell, that’s 100% more than us. And she’s offering. If she really can look at crosses or whatever without a problem she’s telling the truth. She may really want to see an angelic being, that desire could help in the ritual.”

I only felt excitement from her. She was nervous when we first came in, but that went away almost at once. But her emotions when I confirmed I wanted white candles... Us coming to this shop, run by a person that just happens to have experience with ritual magic? More coincidence or is it simply Sariel giving me what I need? Or are those two things the same thing? I nodded and went back to Linnea. "Okay, you're in."

Chapter 12

We call on an angel

Where: Excellus building back in Ordinary

When: Later that evening

Linnea passed a series of tests devised by Veronica, including holding a cross (that was in a box so Peder couldn't see it) and heading to a nearby church and going inside. She was looking around at all the statues on the walls and such and Veronica admitted she had somehow gotten over her natural revulsion of religious stuff.

"Probably because when people, even trolls, are told they can't do something naturally they want to do it. So she worked at it to see what the big deal was. Probably was disappointed in the end."

I snorted. "Or the opposite, when they are told *to* do something, like get vaccinated, they say, nah, I'd rather get sick and die."

"Exactly. Let's head to Ordinary and let her read the ritual over."

She headed back to the shop, picked up a few more things she said we would need, and we headed back to Ordinary through a portal. In total it was myself, Sarah, Veronica, and Linnea. Herman was in charge of the building until I returned, which he said was fine. Gretchen met us there, and said she had some knowledge about ritual magic as well, though she was out of practice. That brought our total to five, which I figured was a good, balanced number to have.

Linnea looked the site over, the sterile looking hospital room containing the five remaining witches and my brother, all still in a coma, and pronounced it unfit for the ritual.

"Look, when you get a demon you want to do it on a corrupt ley line, or at the scene of an old murder or something. We're doing the opposite. We need a nice open space, preferably outside but it is winter so... Near a church would be ideal."

"I could, in theory, keep us warm with fire magic," Veronica told us.

"For a very brief moment?" I asked, unsure where she was going with this. *Is she advocating setting us on fire?*

"By keeping fires going nearby," she clarified.

"Ah, thank you!"

"Outside it is!" Linnea proclaimed. "We'll need to ritually wash ourselves, I've included the correct soap and directions which I will hand out, and wear the robes I've brought too. The site should be purified before we begin as well. Does someone know purification magic?"

"I do," Sarah told her. "It's not a problem."

"Great!"

"Why all the washing and everything?" I asked. "Do you smear yourself with dirt to summon a demon?"

"Honestly I'm just doing the opposite of stuff I would do for a demonic ritual so hopefully it works out. The instructions you gave me just deal with the ritual itself, not preparation of the site or ourselves but it can't hurt. If we can get these people somewhere open where we can see the stars or I guess the clouds at this time of year, I think we have a real chance of pulling this off! Really, the ritual starts now. Every part of it matters, it all goes into calling the magic. You should treat it as such."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Please do. Magic of this type is all about belief, you have to believe each step of the ritual has meaning, if you want it to go well. You do want it to go well, don't you?"

"Of course."

"So get into the spirit of the thing already!"

"I can show you where we have a small shower," Gretchen told us. "Come with me."

So freshly washed we headed to the site where the comatose ladies were being brought, the parking lot of a church. I needed some light, after all, as did Veronica and Sarah. Once there Linnea had Veronica create a circle of fire to burn off any snow and ice where we would stand, then another, smaller one with a star pattern in it with the point facing north. This created a nice circle, saving us the bother of making one out of rope or anything else. This would contain the magic while we worked. Behind us she placed another ring of fire that she was going to concentrate on, keeping us warm. Linnea placed the candles at each point, and we stood at each point in our circle. Behind each of us was a witch on a gurney, draped with white cloth. The witch that had been woken up earlier was also awkwardly standing there, feeling out of place. She had offered to help but there were five of us, and five witches. Linnea told us there was a certain symmetry in that and keeping her out of it was probably for the best. Naturally Han-Gyeol, the kumiho that worked for Excellus had covered the whole place with the illusion of a tent being there. Not perfect, but it was after dark so I had to believe no one would come poking around while we worked. Linnea had the ritual written on a paper she put on a stand in front of her, and we had the ritual components strewn around the area where they needed to be.

“Is everyone ready?” she asked formally, looking at each of us in turn.

“We are,” we intoned back, as she had instructed.

“Has the site been cleansed?”

“I have cast cleansing magic upon the whole area,” Sarah told her.

“Then we are ready to begin. Let us stand as we have come into this world, that the angel we wish to summon knows we have nothing to hide.” She shrugged off her robe and let it fall in a circle around her.

Uh, she never mentioned that! And she’s grinning like a fool and knows how much she shocked me, so that was completely intentional. Well played, Linnea. And may I say it’s totally not fair she gets to look like that? Look at that- Focus, Jesse.

“Skyclad,” muttered Veronica. “I should have guessed. Thank God Herman stayed behind.”

We took our robes off and stood there, surprisingly warm in the night air. *Veronica may have turned up the fire?*

And we started the ritual. Basically, Linnea took the lead by demonstrating each step of the process, be it ringing the bell, pouring water from one bowl to another, or swinging a censer around us. She would perform the steps, formally walk the path between herself and me, hand it over, head back, and I would do the same thing and then turn to walk and hand it to Veronica. She would do the same, hand it to Sarah, and so on. Veronica seemed to have the most trouble, possibly because she was maintaining the fire behind us, but she didn’t dump the water or anything and the ritual proceeded, well or ill I had no way to tell. But after all the steps were taken we started chanting the name of the individual we wanted to talk to, Sariel, and suddenly in a flash of golden light a being was floating there in the circle. Her golden hair floated gently about her, and her form was beyond even Linnea’s, which I wouldn’t even have said was possible until that moment. Linnea gasped and bowed her head, dropping to her knees, but I wasn’t sure if that was even appropriate. It hadn’t been discussed.

“You really did it properly, didn’t you?” the figure asked, a slight smile on their face. Their voice was rich and high, an angel’s voice if ever I heard one. “You know, the infirmary would have been just fine.”

“We... We couldn’t!” Linnea gasped.

“Oh child. Rise now.” She floated down and took Linnea’s chin in her hand, lifting her up. “No need for that. You have had a hard time of it, haven’t you? But you made it work, I value you for that.”

“You... you value...,” she whispered. I thought I saw tears starting in her eyes.

She nodded and turned to us. “Hello, everyone.”

“Sariel?” I asked quietly.

“You called to me, didn’t you? Is it so hard to believe I would come?”

“You just sound so different over the phone.”

She laughed. “Yes, my direct line isn’t perfect, is it? It’s the best I could do. Your power, having brought me here, allows me to speak to you at your level, so I can be more understood. That’s not so hard to believe is it?”

“At this point I’ll believe just about anything,” I told her. *From what Veronica said about demon summoning, the better you do at the ritual the more of the demon’s power you can pull into this world. We made her body out of magic and poured her ‘self’ into it. The demons I’ve talked to even said killing them was pointless, they were just summoned here and their intellect would go back to Otherworld if killed. So this body is the same, it’s not ‘her’ real form, just something the magic lets her walk around this world in. Having no idea how the phone works, I may be speaking more ‘directly’ to her, without any filters, and that’s just how my brain is interpreting her words. Now that she’s here she’s more limited, or more filtered in a way, so she seems to talk to us normally.*

“Good, for all things are possible. Now, there was something about these poor souls behind you?”

“Yes, we-” I stopped, starting to feel cold again that had nothing to do with being outside. “Er, did anyone remember the box?”

“I brought the box,” Veronica told me. She got it out of her robes and held it up, opening the lid. *Thank goodness someone is on the ball.*

“Yes, I see the problem. Freed witches, what an innovation. I never thought I would see the day.”

“You said over the phone you could help?”

“If they want it, yes. Let’s see what they have to say, shall we?”

“Can we-” I started to say, but she gestured. The world seemed to fall away from us, it was almost as if we entered the Astral, but it was still a bit different from that. What was different as well was the six witches, or ex-witches at this point, were now standing there instead of lying down. They were blinking in surprise, looking around as if they couldn’t believe what was happening. We were all in our same positions, so it was one witch behind one of us, with the angel in the middle.

“Hello children,” she said to everyone, slowly spinning in a circle. “Take a moment to get your bearings, I don’t mind.”

“What’s going on?” the one behind Veronica asked.

“Wait, I recognize you,” said the one behind me, coming around me. “You were there fighting our master!”

“I won, too,” I told her. “Your master is no more. You’ve been in a coma for several months now because of it.”

“Impossible,” one sneered. “You can’t kill a demon.”

“But he was there,” said another. “Physically there, because of that weird place he stuck those sleeping people. If it could happen, it would be there. Tell us the truth- Is he really gone?”

“He’s really gone. You’re free of him.”

They shared a look.

“How do we know you’re telling the truth?” asked the one behind me. “And why are you naked?”

“Why are *you* naked?” I countered.

She looked down. “I am! We all are! What in the world?”

“I got woken up a few days ago,” said the one who had been awakened, coming over to her. “It’s the same story they told me. I don’t have magic anymore, but I still feel like myself. They’re telling the truth, but I don’t know what this space is any more than you do.”

“This is simply a shared space we can use to talk,” said Sariel. “I would like to know, if I restore your souls, what your intentions would be.”

"If we really are free from the demon," the one behind Linnea said, "we can go back to our normal lives? No more doing horrible things in the world? We can just... walk away?"

"That is one option," she agreed. "Try to repent for the misdeeds you were involved in, and perhaps one day your souls can be at peace. But there is another option, one that will help assuage your guilt and do good in the world. It would also allow you to continue doing magic."

"Oh I love magic!" said the one behind Sarah. "I would hate to give it up. What's that option?"

"You become my priestesses," she explained. "In much the same way you did terrible things in the name of your former master, you would do great things in my name."

"We can do that?" blurted the one next to me. "For real? We could have served a goddess instead of a demon this *whole time*?"

She smiled. "For realzies dudette, ain't yanking your chain or nothing, shazam!"

"Oh Goddess, oh angel, I implore you. Don't... don't talk like that, please," she pleaded.

She cocked her head to the side. "Did I get it wrong?"

"So wrong. So you're offering what the demon offered? We keep our magic, you train us the same way he did, and in exchange we do your bedding- I mean bidding, in the world. Which will be saving puppies, and birds with broken wings, and cats up trees, stuff like that?"

"Perhaps to start, but do you not aspire to more?"

"I just worry..."

"Yes?"

"If deeds done in the name of the greater good can still be evil. Is killing an evil man wrong when it could save other lives? Will I still be required to kill, to ruin, just in the name of a different master, and we call it justice?"

"Oh, my child." She swept the woman up into an embrace. "You have had a hard time of it, haven't you? We don't work the same way, you know. I will simply lay out a situation I think must be redressed, and allow you the freedom to redress it. Or not, if you think the means are not justified." She pulled back. "I think you would make an excellent priestess of mine."

Her whole upper body was scarlet. "Oh. Well, we'll discuss it if you don't mind. We've stuck together this far, I think maybe we should continue to do so."

"Of course." She waved a hand and a door appeared. "You may be assured that through that door I cannot hear you. Return when you are ready."

"Thank you." The five headed into the room and closed the door.

This left us staring at the angel or goddess or whatever she was. I figured it would be rude to ask, but there was one thing I really should do, now that I had the opportunity.

"Thank you for saving me, all those years ago," I told her.

"You did rather surprise me," she said with a chuckle. "Dropping into my garden in that way. I hope what I gave you has been helpful?"

Which part? Polaris? The gun? My life back? "Very helpful, yes. I just hope I've become worthy of it."

"I have no complaints thus far. You do realize the danger you are placing yourself in, I hope?"

"It's basically our little group versus the world, yes. It will only get harder from here."

"The call to arms would not be ignored, you know, should you choose to sound it."

"I'll keep that in mind." *But how to go about it? Ads in craigslist? I'm not so sure.*

The door opened again, and she turned as they filed out. The door vanished.

That was quick.

"We've decided to take you up on your offer," said the one in the front. "And we humbly thank you for the opportunity. We, each of us, had our own reasons for seeking out power in the way we did. If we had known-"

"I understand, child. Truly. For too long the forces opposite me have used horrific methods to insure they are called upon in need, and not us. We cannot stoop so low, but they have no qualms using any method to insure only knowledge of their own summoning survives in the world. Perhaps today will be the start of a resurgence between your kind and mine."

"I hope that's so."

"When you wake you will be a priestess of Sariel. I believe you would be accepted by Jesse, if you wished to take some time to decide what that means for each of you personally. I will send you missions in the usual way, but if you wish to align with her for now, she does my work and I would be pleased to see you aiding it."

The usual way? Are they all getting their own red, plastic telephone?

"We've been gone for months?" I nodded. "That's probably for the best. Our friends probably think we're dead. If we had any friends left." She looked sour. "To say nothing about our families, who probably hate us now."

"We can talk about it," I told them. "Salary isn't great at the moment, but we do have a whole building to ourselves in New York City. Better than being homeless, we can get you some clothes, and the food, well, we have a cafeteria but we still just sort of cook for ourselves." *Call to arms, eh?*

"That still sounds wonderful."

Another spoke up. "This isn't all of us, though."

The first one nodded. "We'll need to track down more of Thahiss' followers. Tell me, oh holy one, is the offer you have made us open to all?"

"To all who would spread my light in the world."

"Then we will call upon you when we find them. We know summoning magic, after all."

"I look forward to it. I will see you all shortly."

The space around us vanished, and we were all back in our original positions. Sariel took the soul bottles, absorbed the glowing energy inside, and put a hand on each woman in turn. They all came to, unsteadily looking around.

"I'm so weak," one complained. "I can barely move!"

"Not moving for a few months will do that to you," I told them. "Plenty of time to get your strength back. We'll have to see what it's safe for you to eat, probably only soup to start, while you get used to food again."

"I'm sure all will be well," said Sariel. "If there is nothing else?"

"There is one thing, if you don't mind?" I asked.

She sighed. "Your brother."

"Yes. Is there anything you can do for him?"

"I'm sorry, sweet Jesse, but no. His is a different problem, as you have no doubt imagined. You both received the essence of a higher being that day, but where I gave freely, allowing the hole in your soul to be 'grafted' if you will, and grow with you, the demon Thahiss did what demons always do. He offered not help but instead a collar. He linked his life force to your brother's, so the hole in his soul remained, but there was no repair, merely a patch. When Thahiss died, that hole opened again because the patch was gone. I would fill it if I could, you must believe when I say that, but for too long that hole was filled with a demonic power. The soul is too tainted to accept my help. It would only be rejected, causing further harm to the soul. Thus only a demonic soul once again can make him complete enough to wake up. I am truly sorry."

"I understand. Thank you."

"Then I will depart. You know how to get in touch with me, should you need to. And I hope I can count on you being on the other end should I need to ring up your phone again, Jesse?"

"Of course. I know you would help if you could. This changes nothing between us."

"I am glad to hear those words. Fair well, all of you."

"And you," everyone said. And she was gone.

We got the group looked over and got them some food, and the doctor gave them a recovery timeline and a recommendation for physical therapy and psychiatric evaluation. They gave me the names of the other two witches connected to Thahiss, and I texted the names to the number the demon had given me. He wrote back that would help tremendously, but how had I gotten them so fast? I told him to just concentrate on his mission. I thanked Linnea for her help, rightly telling her that we might not have succeeded without her, and she said to call upon her at any time. I had the beginnings of an idea involving her, but now wasn't the right time nor was it fully formed, so she went back to her shop after putting her number in my phone. "Call me anytime," she had said with a wink. With that done I said goodbye to Gretchen, headed back with the new priestesses, and texted my parents I wanted to see them in my room.

They came to my room and knocked, and I let them in and had them sit on the office chairs that served as my only "couch" for the moment.

"What's wrong Jesse?" my mother asked.

"We have to make a decision about Dylan," I told them. "His only hope for waking up is a new demonic contract, and his soul being supported by a demon. His own soul was too damaged by what happened all those years ago, and too corrupted to be supported by an angelic soul. The question is do we wake him up, knowing that?"

"What would that mean?" my father asked.

"He gets magic, but he has to do what the demon wants. This demon that has taken an interest in all this seems all warm and chummy but Veronica believes it's all an act. I'm inclined to agree, based on what I saw it do in the past. But at least it gets him up and moving again. Maybe with more time we can come up with a different solution, so he's not just laying there wasting away."

"I would like my son back," my mother told me, "but to know he's an agent of a demon?"

"And he's been an agent since your disappearance, right?" my father asked.

"That's right."

"So how sane is he now?"

"When he came to talk to me he seemed a bit out of it," I admitted. "But he was hanging around Thahiss constantly at that time. If Sisaroplex will back off, maybe we can get him some help, reprogram him or something." *Of course if he's mad about his "buddy" being killed he may lash out. That demon was his "friend" for a good number of years and warped his thinking. Can he ever be brought back from that?*

"But if he's okay, or can live a somewhat normal life, don't we owe it to him to give him that chance?" my mom asked.

"Yes, of course," I told them. "We have to give him a chance to bounce back from this. I failed protecting him all those years ago, it's time for the big sister to step up."

"I really hope you don't blame yourself for that!" my mother protested. "Knowing what we know now, we've been talking to Ahti he seems surprisingly knowledgeable about all this," *Oh he does, does he?* "there was nothing you could have done."

"I just wish we could track down that vampire that set all this in motion," my father grumbled. "He's clearly still alive out there someplace."

"I never thought of that," I admitted. "Maybe one day. Okay, I'll have the demon wake him up. I'll come get you when he does, so it can be a proper reunion." *I just have to hope he doesn't attack me for pulling my parents out of stasis, but he'll be pretty weak if the witches are any indication. I can take him. And if he should die, well, at least that will be an end to it. Not a pleasant thought but what else can I do?*

"We'll get through this, as a family," my mom told me, getting up and hugging me. "You'll see."

“I hope so.” For now I better talk to Veronica. If she’s been researching demons like she said maybe she’ll have some hints on our next steps.

Chapter 13

Dylan wakes up

Where: Veronica's room

When: A few minutes later

"Sariel was correct in her assessment," Meowvis said from Veronica's computer, sitting on the desk in her room. "The digitized books I have received from the historians show scant information on the Otherworldly beings of light in contrast to the beings of darkness. In fact, Herman's contact has been looking around their physical archives and swears he has seen some other works which are now not present."

"Which can't be coincidence," Veronica mused.

"There is a 14% chance of that," they agreed. "After all it is possible someone has legitimately taken related volumes for some kind of research study. But no one he has talked to admits to such a collection, so as I previously stated the probability is low."

"On the other hand," she said, brightening, "all these books on demons are now coming in useful because that's what we're dealing with now. We know what they want, and there are plenty of stories of what people have wanted, gotten, and wished they hadn't gotten. I can work with Meowvis here and come up with a contract of some kind. They love those, can't imagine why." She of course said this last part drenched in as much sarcasm as she could slather on.

"Why would we need one though?" I asked. "It's a straightforward thing, he wakes my brother up and takes over where Thahiss left off. The only thing I'm getting out of it is the knowledge my brother isn't in a coma anymore."

She raised a finger. "You're thinking too small. He's getting a new servant, which means more prestige for him in his world, and an experienced agent here in this one. We need to demand more. Don't let it be just about waking him up. He's getting Dylan's services for another sixty years or so, you don't need to get the short end of the stick here. Bargain for a better deal."

"But what if he laughs in my face and walks away?" I worried, going a bit pale I was sure. "We'll never wake him up! I can't risk that!"

"One of the most important techniques in negotiation," Meowvis told us, "is to never let the deal become one sided enough you can't walk away. Put another way, don't let the other side suspect you must have the object of the negotiation at all costs, and have no other options. They will, even if not a demon, take advantage of you. The situation with Sariel thus ties in perfectly in this situation. This demon will expect to see the witches there. He'll expect to have all the power, and may try to talk you into agreeing to more because he thinks you can't walk away from him. He'll be off balance when you show him the room and say you don't need his services for that anymore. That's when you show him the contact, and make your own demands first. If he thinks you're able to get a better deal elsewhere he'll at least consider his situation carefully."

"Turning the tables on him," I reasoned, and Veronica nodded feeling pleased. "Now it's he that can't walk away, because if he wants my brother he has to deal with a person he thinks has options. Even if we only decide it's fair he is woken up, and nothing else, at least I won't have to agree to anything I don't want to."

"Exactly," she agreed. "And technically you do have options. You could ask another demon to do it, and again they get the benefit of another follower so most would probably at least act like they were going to bargain in good faith. We would have to watch the language of course but we have to do that anyway."

"And I have you two on my side, so hopefully we can word it in such a way as to not leave any loopholes."

"I will do my best," Meowvis told us.

We spent the rest of the day going over our demands, making sure the language was right, and deciding what we wanted from the demon. With that done I texted the number again, asking for a meeting for the next day because I had made up my mind.

“This is Sisaroplex’s earthly agent,” came the reply. “I will inform my master of your request and get back to you.”

He’s probably not summoned at the moment, and has earthly agents handle his business here in the meantime. He wouldn’t want his phone just sitting around someplace. Ugh, that’s something else we can ultimately go after, demonic organizations here on Earth. “Thank you,” I texted back. *No sense antagonizing the help, may as well be polite.*

The next day I got a text back and agreed to meet Sisaroplex in Ordinary. I collected my parents, Sarah, and Veronica again, and we made our way over there. My parents were going to stay out of sight, no doubt Sisaroplex knew about them but I didn’t want any more variables in all this than I already had. I was already nervous enough about it, despite a good divination result the night before. *If he does a divination before coming he can mess ours up because his will be more recent. I can’t trust it too far, and have to be on my guard.* Gretchen wasn’t thrilled with an actual demon showing up and walking around the place but I insisted we be taken to the now nearly empty room. She did admit it was a rather cunning plan, and messaged everyone to clear the halls for the duration. She met the demon herself at the front lobby, and brought him back to us.

“Hello, Jesse,” he smoothly greeted me as he came into the room. “You’ve decided to let me inside your brother at last?”

“I’m willing to negotiate,” I told him.

“I don’t think you quite understand the position you’re- hang on.” He looked around the room. “Aren’t we missing something? Where are the witches?”

“As you had no interest in them, only my brother, I had them taken care of by someone else. Not that I don’t trust you, of course, but I do so like having my options open.” I smiled a big smile at his scowl. “That wasn’t a lie, was it? You did only have interest in my brother?”

“Of course!” His face became neutral again and he waved a hand. “Makes no difference to me at all. I would have done the witches for free though. I hope you got a good deal, and won’t come back to bite you in the butt later?” He said this in a tone that indicated he, of course, hoped that is exactly what would happen.

“I think I came out on top,” I assured him. “But I’m sure you’ll be a better negotiator. Here you are; read it, and sign it, then we can get on with this and get my brother patched up.” I handed him a copy of the contract we had printed up the night before. I didn’t want to give him too much time to get his feet under him again, that’s why I was rushing a bit. “Pen?” I handed him one.

“Now hold on just one minute here!” he insisted. “I’m not just signing something! What’s this all about?”

“Just a few demands, in exchange for my brother’s services. As he can’t ask on his own, I, as his sister, must make sure his wishes are respected. It’s my way of looking out for him, as I haven’t been able to do so most of our lives.”

“A few demands?” he echoed, holding the pages away from himself and turning over a corner of the first one as if at any moment they might burst into flames. “How many pages is this?”

“I admit, it may be a bit wordy.” *It was mostly written by an AI, after all. And how crazy is my life that I can say that without a hint of incredulity?* “I felt it better to cover all my bases, so to speak.”

“All this just to fill your brother’s hole?”

I glared at him. *He better be talking about the hole in his soul.* “Of course. For your revenge on me, don’t think I haven’t forgotten the mall incident, perhaps you order him to kill himself the moment he wakes up. Perhaps you order him to fight me. Any number of unpleasant situations could come up. This insures they will not, if you are a being of your word, that is.”

“You should never have thought otherwise. Fine, I’ll read it, at least.”

“Splendid!” I passed him a chair, the worst one Gretchen could find for me in the building. “Make yourself comfortable.”

Some time later he looked up from the pages. “Most of this seems fine. I had no intention of having him harm you, Jesse, or give him impossible missions he would die from so I have no qualms about all that verbiage. And I was going to find the other two souls anyway, handing them over instead of pounding them in myself is fine.” He didn’t exactly sound convinced of this but went on. “The troublesome part is here.” He pointed. “You want some free services from me, monthly, while he’s in my service?”

“Three per month I believe was the stated amount,” I recalled. “If I haven’t seen him in awhile I want to be able to get you here and ask why. Or send you after him if you’ve put him in a bad spot.”

“So one of my agents comes here, teaches Veronica or another agent of yours summoning magic, and you get three services from me a month? Too high, I’m not a genie. Make it one and we have a deal.”

Personally any dealings with demons is best avoided, even if they are supposedly ‘under control.’ But we needed to put some things in that he would object to, so we can appear to be bargaining in good faith. He’s picked one of the things, good. “What about two?” I offered. “But of a different type for each.”

“That’s way more vague than what is written here, I would need a lot more specifics before I could consent to that.”

“I expected nothing less. Two services; one that is physical action to the best of your ability-”

“Jesse, please be more forward about your needs. You don’t need to be coy, if all you ladies want some ‘physical action’ from me I’m happy to service you individually or as a-”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it!” I hastened to assure him, smacking my palm on the table. “I’m just contrasting it with the second type! I mean magic or other demonic abilities of course. You physically going and doing something for me, a service!”

“Ooooooh. I see what you mean. So not *that* kind of service, I see. I see. I mean I would be happy to, are you sure you don’t want...”

“No! Honestly. The other part is a consultation, *non-physical* in other words, say an hour a month maximum? I promise not to demand hours or days of your time. You won’t have to do anything but give your opinion on something, or if we need information that you have-”

“Hold on, do you know how valuable information is to us? It’s really all we’ve got back home!”

“Equally important to having a seasoned agent here, no?” I countered sweetly. “He’s not just some witch you need to break in, he can be doing missions for you... Well not today he’ll need to get his strength back but much sooner than normal!”

“I...” He glanced at Dylan. “Half an hour.”

“Fifty minutes, and no waffling and drawing your speech out by speaking slowly or anything like that. We ask, and you answer. No lying. If you don’t know the answer to something that’s fine, don’t make anything up. If you’re only 30% sure of something, you tell us that.”

“Agreed. Forty minutes.”

“Agreed.”

“Make the changes to the contract and I’ll sign it.”

That was all he had a problem with? I guess I did better than I thought, or I messed up more than I thought. Paper spewed out of the printer nearby and I handed it to him. “That was quick,” he muttered suspiciously. “Don’t you have to use that pressy thing and clackity-clack the keys?”

No, thanks to a being that lives inside a computer. I wonder what that’s even like? I shrugged. “I value efficiency, there’s no problem with that is there?” *No need to tell him how it happened.*

"I suppose not." He sat down and began to tediously read every word again. I groaned internally but had the situation been reversed, I would have done the same. *I believe he couldn't be trusted not to change some word somewhere, why should I believe he believes me trustworthy? Those who live by the sword, and all that.*

He and I both signed, and I gave him a copy. He then went over to Dylan and put his hand on his head, concentrating. "It shouldn't be long," he told us. "While usually this whole process is a ritual in and of itself, his vessel has been prepared for demon essence so I can just perform the climax of the ritual and be done with it. I know you might be disturbed by the whole thing, and probably would be torn between wanting to leave the room and rapt fascination. I'll spare you the agony of the choice." And he was right, Dylan's eyes fluttered open.

"Dylan? How do you feel?" I asked him, shoving the demon out of the way and taking his head in my hands.

"Rude."

His eyes focused on me. "Ah, sister. It seems you survived attacking my little vault. Or am I dreaming again?" he asked.

"No. You're safe. The attack is over, I won."

"My friend? What did you do to my friend?" He looked around wildly, but seemed too weak at the moment to rise.

I put his head back down on the pillow. "Thahiss? He's dead, Dylan." I put a hand on his arm. *May as well not try to hide it. He'll either attack me or not, right now. But I suppose if I framed it as me not actually doing the deed, and it being somewhat tragic...* "Actually it was Emmett who finished him off. Once I rescued our parents we were back in the real world and Emmett just shot the demon that had just appeared out of reflex. He's gone."

"My friend is gone? Why? Why couldn't you have just stayed away? I told you they were safe, didn't I? All I wanted to do is keep my parents safe. Now I can't even do that anymore."

"Not so," Sisaroplex assured him. "Once you are fully recovered you may continue your work to keep them safe. When it does not interfere with your duties to me, that is."

"Who are you? I... Feel you. Inside me."

Ugh, does he really? Great.

"Sisaroplex, my boy. Your new master." He smiled quite a bit wider than I would have liked to see.

He looked at me. "New... master?"

"Wait, your kind doesn't like that word anymore, do they?" the demon asked. "Sponsor? Power source? Patron? Owner? No, that's no better. Hummm..."

"I had to do it. Thahiss was the one keeping you awake." *A vast simplification but it'll do for now.* "You needed another demon to do the same thing for you, or you would have slept forever. I couldn't have that, I wanted my brother back."

"So you gave me to him? My friend said to never trust anyone but him!"

"He would though, wouldn't he?" Sisaroplex asked. "I would have said the same thing. Don't look so down, I'm sure we'll become the best of friends, in time. You'll see."

"My only friend is gone. Leave me alone. I can't even get up, what did you do to me?"

"It's been a few months, Dylan," I told him gently. "You've been laying here a long time. We haven't done anything it'll just take some time to get your strength back."

"Friend, hummm." Sisaroplex was tapping his cheek with a finger. "Can't exactly have you pining for an old master, now can I? But how best to do it? Ah, of course! The truth! That always works. If you'll allow me?" He didn't wait for any sort of confirmation from me, putting his hand on Dylan's head.

"Hey, what are you doing?" I demanded.

“Some kind of mental magic,” Veronica told me. “He can’t harm your brother, not directly, remember?”

Yeah, but that contract isn’t magical or anything, he’s not magically bound into not breaking it. Demons just have a habit of keeping their word because usually they are the ones giving out the terms. It gives them great pleasure to throw our words back at us. But nothing says they have to, they can lie just as easily as we can, and that signature is just ink on a page. There’s no ‘court’ that I can take him to, if he breaks it right now.

In the time it took me to think that, whatever was being done was done, and he lifted his hand again.

“He wasn’t my friend at all!” Dylan decided. “He was just using me! Like you’re going to! I don’t believe this!”

“That’s right. Hate your sister all you want for your situation, but she was only thinking of waking you.”

Yes, he sounds positively ecstatic for that to happen. “What did you show him?” I demanded.

“I simply re-contextualized much of what he had been asked to do these last few years. Showing him his former master was not his friend. That’s all.”

And maybe showing him how you would be a better one? I mean I have to believe you’ll both make him do similar things in this world. “You believe what he showed you?”

“He’s opened my eyes,” Dylan admitted. “I guess I always knew, I just didn’t want to believe it. So what happens now? Are mom and dad safe?”

I glanced at the demon, who stared back at me innocently. “Yes,” I told him. I went over to the door and it opened. “Come on in,” I told them, and they rushed in, exclaiming over Dylan and hugging him.

“Stay away from them,” I told him.

“Of course. I only want your brother. Now, I’ll leave you to your reunion.” He pulled something out of his coat pocket, it was a thick brown envelope. “Here is a new phone for him, with some pictures of where he should go after this. One of my other agents will get him settled in the area. Don’t worry, he’ll be treated well. All my followers are, he’ll just be the latest.”

I didn’t take it. “Before you rush off,” I told him, “I’m calling in some of my forty five minutes for this month. I want some answers.”

“Of course.” He looked resigned and threw the package on the bed and looked at my parents again. “Right here?”

Like he said, knowledge is dangerous. If it got out I asked about what I’m about to ask about, anyone hearing it could be put in danger. “Better go somewhere else,” I agreed, and looked to Gretchen.

“I’ll take you to a conference room,” Gretchen told him.

“Thanks,” I said gratefully.

“What would you like to know?” he asked when we were seated. “Also please note that I am noting the time. Forty five minutes, that time shall not grow longer, no matter how hard you beg. Until next month, of course, as per our contract.”

“Demons have some kind of plan going on,” I launched right into it. “Having kanaima possess people, cause trouble in the world, that sort of thing. I want to know what the deal is.”

“The deal?”

“Yes, what’s the endgame? What are demons doing here? Do they want to rule, or what?”

He felt genuinely confused. “You just said what they’re doing here.”

“Don’t be difficult! Do I have to get the contract out?”

“I’m not, I’m just confused, Jesse. You seem to know what... certain demons are doing... here in the material plane.”

I snorted. "Implying you're not among them?"

"I have my interests here, of course. Do you know how boring it is back home? Much nicer here, believe me. But are my interests the interests of my kind? Who is to say?"

You, maybe? You could say? "I'm sure. I want to know what they're doing! You will tell me."

"They're doing exactly what you said, I can't make you swallow your own words. Having people taken over for their own ends."

"And what are those ends, is what I'm asking."

"Ah, now I see the thrust of your argument. Have you seen the world today?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Then you know the answer to the question. Honestly, we're winning. Humanity doesn't even know it's under attack, but it is. All the hate, all the division, I mean you're all humans, apart from those that aren't, of course." He glanced at Gretchen. "No offense. I mean you're human like, close enough—"

"I get it," she told him.

"It's all our doing. We're turning you against each other, and honestly it seems easier than ever before. Like I said you're all humans, but you act as though you don't all share a planet together, and have the same problems. But you do. A Tucker Carlson here, a radio personality there, a few voices from the shadows about 'conspiracy theories' that make no sense whatsoever, that's all it takes. I mean really, didn't I see a few months ago about people waiting for the dead to come back to life and lead them to some glorious victory? Insanity! Such fun! I myself would like to know which of us came up with that one, it was inspired."

This was a bit of a revelation to me. "So you don't want to kill us all or anything, just have fun with us? See how far you can push us?"

"Exactly. If we killed you all then what would we have to do? Now of course there are those more invested in the plan than others. As there are others who really do hate you. Some wouldn't mind seeing you all perish for one reason or another. But there's not many of them."

"Are you sure? It seems like you guys are having an awful lot of 'victories' lately."

He laughed. "It does seem that way, doesn't it? I suppose there's a few reasons for that."

"Which are?"

"For one, it's been going on for hundreds of years. We're starting to get the hang of it now. How humans think, how to rile up the loudest voices so even if they are in the minority, they *seem* like they're in the majority. Stuff like that. This is helped by all these wonderful inventions you've created." He got out his own phone and tapped it. "Things like this facebook, wonderful tools for us! Imagine giving every person a platform, no matter how awful that person might be. Might not even be a person!" He laughed again. "Hard to tell the difference between the demons and the people now, isn't it? That's what we've been able to do to you, turn you into us. How sure are you this Mark person isn't a demon?" He paused, considering. "It suddenly occurs to me that could have been the real goal all along. Make you more like us. Huh."

Well you're doing a bang up job, that's for sure. "It's Meta now, haven't you heard?" I grumbled.

"Ah yes, I don't think that was our doing, but it's hard to know sometimes. That's also part of the fun."

"You said there were some more invested in this than others," Gretchen cut in. "Is there one that stands out in your mind?"

Good idea, maybe if we take down a big player that will start the dominoes, so to speak.

"Well, let me think... I would have to say the biggest name in the disruption of the human world was Ahramin. Yes, he seems to have the most followers, and the most *kanaima* on his side."

"How do we get to him?"

"Get to? You mean kill, like poor Thahiss?"

“Say for the moment the answer is yes,” I told him. “How can we do it?”

He just sat there grinning at me and wiggling his eyebrow. “Do it?”

“We can’t,” Veronica said sadly.

“She knows,” Sisaroplex crowed, looking at her like she solved a great puzzle for him. I sent a questioning glance her way too.

“Come on Jesse, you know as well as I do how this works. Even if we killed Sisaro here-”

“Sisaroplex, please.”

“Even if we killed Sissy here-”

“Sisaroplex.” He started to feel annoyed.

“Even if we killed Sis here what good would it do? Maybe we could get his phone but that’s it. Summoning this Ahramin a hundred times and killing him a hundred times would do no more than inconvenience him. He’s not going to be stupid enough to come here physically.”

“Yes, Thahiss was a fluke,” Sisaroplex explained. “And forget going the other way either. You would have to pass through to Otherworld, then somehow make your way to the outer realms where we exist. Quite a feat for a corporal being such as yourself.”

“Can we hold him? So he can’t give orders anymore? Something?”

“Give orders?” Sisaroplex laughed. “My dear girl, what do you think he’s doing all day? Sitting and twirling his mustache as he barks orders to underlings? You humans still do that, right? Mustache twirling? I notice you don’t have one, you should consider growing one, I’m sure it would look quite good on you. Anyway, he gave his orders long ago. It all runs on automatic now. A kanaima takes over a human until that human is no longer useful, and then it goes to another. It doesn’t need orders, it knows what to do.”

“They just go about their business,” I breathed. *Some may have worn eight or ten bodies by now, maybe more. Stealing a person’s entire life so a demon can spread hate in this world to amuse itself. That’s what we’re fighting. We can’t disrupt their orders, there’s no communication between demons and kanaima anymore. Why would there need to be, after so long. We’re screwed.*

“Correct.”

“You don’t have to sound so pleased about it.”

“But I’m afraid I do. You want to disrupt something spread across the whole world. You have no one enemy to attack, and most now that spout deplorable opinions are simply parroting them from others. They aren’t possessed, they’re just misguided humans. There’s nothing you can do about them! It’s delicious seeing you squirm.”

“Glad I can amuse you. Get out of here, I’ve got a few minutes left this month if you get called. But be sure to send someone to the Control building to start training Veronica in summoning.”

“At a reasonable hour,” she clarified.

“Of course. Until we meet again, Jesse.” He got up and with a final word of “Guess it’s time for me to pull out!” teleported away.

We sat in silence for a moment.

“So that was depressing, huh?” Veronica asked us with a forced cheerfulness.

“Yes, it’s no wonder he was fine with telling us all that,” I admitted. “It does us no good. No good whatsoever.”

“We have a name, something must be possible!”

“I don’t know. In any case, I’m sure Gretchen has Excellus things to do, we’ve intruded on her time long enough. Let’s go collect my parents, call a meeting, and see what our next move is back at headquarters.”

“Headquarters,” Gretchen repeated with a smirk. “Leadership role looks good on you, Jesse. I’m glad you found your place.”

“It does seem pretty natural,” I admitted. “But I had a good mentor.”

“Thanks.”

We returned to the infirmary to find my parents sitting there, holding hands. My brother was nowhere to be seen. “He left,” my mother told me without me asking. “Just vanished, after he looked at those pictures. He said we would see him again. He needed to get things straight in his head.”

Maybe that demon will be good for him. If he got the truth at last, maybe we can turn him partly human again. “Hopefully in a civil manner,” I muttered. “Well, he’s up and about anyway, what he does with it is up to him again. At least he’s not under the sway of that Thahiss demon. And yes,” I raised a hand, “I know the current one could be just as bad or worse. At least this time he has a contract protecting him. Let’s head back to the Control building.”

“Thank you, for looking after my son,” my dad said to Gretchen.

“I’ll send you the bill.”

He paled, looking around at the room. The no doubt very, very expensive room he had been “sleeping” in the past few months.

“I’m just joking!” she told him. “I’ll send *him* the bill.”

Chapter 14

I preside over the true rebirth of the FBC

Where: Control building conference room

When: Half an hour later

Back at the Control building I had called an all hands meetings, (such as it was, though we did have the new priestesses in addition to the benandante, who I had heard weren't sure what to make of the "reformed" witches and each was staying to their 'side' making me sigh a bit) and went over what the demon had told me about exactly what we were facing. Everyone sat in silence, mulling things over.

"No one said it was going to be easy," Herman said at last. "This doesn't change anything. In fact it's good news, because now we do know the scope of the task we're facing. If we have to take kaimana out of people one at a time, so be it. If we have to clear out one country at a time, so be it. Isn't that a goal worthy of dedicating your life to?"

"Even if those victims revert to childhood?" Veronica reminded him. "How will we ever explain it?"

"What other choice do we have?" he retorted. "Leave those in league with demons, however that happens, in power? That's no better. And if 'mental breakdowns' due to stress start becoming noticed by the greater world, well, it's the perfect time for them. Have you looked out the windows lately?"

"No, they're kind of filthy."

"Sorry about that," said Ahti, poking his head through the door to the stairs, where I'm sure he was just happening to pass at that exact moment and not listening to our conversation at all. "I don't do windows, not exterior ones anyway. That's dangerous! Get a robot or something to do that, we have those now right?"

"That's fine, Ahti," I told him. He raised his mop in salute but came into the room, leaning on the wall by the door. I didn't care, he seemed like a part of the place by now so I doubted he was going to turn on us. And he had been listening anyway so... "Herman's right, we'll just have to let people come up with their own conclusions about what's going on. They do that anyway, from what I've heard, so it's not much different from the norm. But I know this for sure, we can't leave things the way they are, now that we know what we do. We humans are no longer in control of our own destiny, it's being decided by demons. That spills over into the non-human communities too." I looked at my friends. "Like the angel said, we all share this world. You drive on roads, are impacted by weather, and policy made by lawmakers a thousand miles away. Our troubles are your troubles. If someone rolls back environmental protections and CO2 emissions rise again, planet heats up if you're human or not. We need to work together, and the angel implied it was possible. 'If you build it, they will come' she totally didn't say but meant."

"Let's talk about that angel," Sarah spoke up. "That demon that 'helped' your brother gave us a name. And we have some priestesses here, let's call upon her again and make a plan to assault that demon's strongholds in Otherworld. We know the truth, it's not separate locations for 'Heaven' and 'Hell' it's just various regions of the same place. The angels must know where this Ahramin is. The demon said it would be 'quite a feat' for us to get there, but not that it would be impossible. So let's go there! Take some higher beings of light with us, assault the place, and at least put an end to a known threat. That will make things here easier because any kaimana we eliminate won't be replaced."

"Would you be willing to ask her?" I asked the six priestesses.

They turned to discuss it among themselves, and one of them, Debra, was pushed to speak for the group. "We don't think she will mind, but it's also a little early to be making demands of her. We just went into her service, after all." She let out a nervous laugh. "We don't even really know what that means yet."

But she said she was happy with you just following my orders for now, so I have to believe we're all doing her work. She must have seen me doing this when she saved me, given all she did to make this whole thing possible. “For now,” I told her, “if you can get her here easily, we can just explore if it’s even possible to do such a thing. We’re not rushing off into Otherworld right this minute after all. And she might want time to gather support there, if time even works the same there.” *She’s implied it doesn’t, but that could be our connection garbling what she was saying. I’d rather hear it from her directly.*

“Okay. Betty, Laura?”

The two she had named nodded and they had us all stand in a circle. We had met in the lobby, there wasn’t a conference room big enough for the whole group, so we had plenty of space. The three called out to her, working magic, and in a twinkling the familiar form of Sariel was before us.

“We’re sorry to have bothered you so soon,” Debra told her, stepping forward and falling to her knees. “Please don’t be angry with us, oh angel, oh being of light and love!” She inhaled to go on.

“As long as your purpose is pure, you have no need to fear calling me, child,” Sariel told her, raising a hand to forestall the continuing platitudes. “I see everyone is here to greet me, it must be important.”

“We would like your help,” I told her, explaining what we purposed to do. But she shook her head.

“I would never be able to convince my fellows to attack in such a manner,” she told us. “Attacking our own kind, and yes we are of a kind it is the choices we make, just as with you, that makes us ‘demons’ or ‘angels’ in your eyes, simply is not done. Also, I do not think you realize the danger in the task you are looking to undertake. You would need to move through vast territory controlled by demons to reach any major stronghold, and I have no idea which stronghold belongs to the being Ahramin. I could perhaps discover it, but a group of mortals moving through Otherworld towards such a place of power would draw every denizen for... a distance. Inches?”

“Miles?” I offered.

“Yes, that’s it. Miles. You would face constant attack, even before reaching your destination. And the laws of nature there are not what they are here. You would not be able to fight as you expect. No, you must simply do what you can here. I’m sorry.”

“I understand,” I told her. “It was a long shot, but we had to know. Thank you for telling us.”

“Of course. Is there anything else?”

I looked around the group, no one spoke up. “It seems not. Thank you for coming, I hope we haven’t inconvenienced you too much.”

“It’s no trouble. Fair well.” She looked to the ones that had summoned her and they nodded, releasing the spell and causing her to vanish.

“So we do it the hard way,” I told them. “Let’s talk ideas you have for recruitment and our next steps, we’re going to start building our ranks here and start actually cleaning up the mess these demons have made of our world.”

Smiles and feelings of excitement washed over me. We had enough of the building ready, and I had at least some experience running this place. How much more difficult could adding some people be?

“If I could start?” Herman asked.

“Of course,” I told him.

“The way I see this going is once the demons realize what we’re doing they’ll react. Probably to place more guards on those currently possessing humans. Even now there were guards around the FBI director, right?” I nodded. “Imagine dozens more surrounding their targets. I have no idea how many kanaima there are compared to how many there are here, nor how they reproduce or how long they live. But I doubt anything in their home, the Astral, is all that dangerous to them. There could be millions.”

"If you're trying to psych us up you're doing a terrible job, Herman."

"No, I'm just saying we need more experience. If we're going to do missions where we have to break into places and take out kanaima, we need to be ready. Say we discovered the president was possessed, no even better- Vladimir Putin. He's surrounded by kanaima, both here and in Astral. Who would be confident, right now, to leave and confront him." He looked around, everyone looked uncertain. "You see? We need to start small. Like Spider Man."

Leave it to him to reference a Marvel movie. "Wait, what are you suggesting?" I asked him.

"I'm suggesting we get that experience out there." He pointed out the front doors. "I know, I know, this isn't a movie, or a comic book. In comic books the hometowns of heroes seem to have a constant stream of evildoers just around the corner. Banks are always getting robbed, muggings are always going down. And the hero just happens to be right there when it happens. Well, we have magic! Divination magic, that can allow us to be in the right place at the right time too. We start dealing with issues the police can't, because they're always at least two steps behind the criminals. We can be one step ahead. And if we can't handle a couple of punks off the street there's no way we would be able to handle kanaima in greater numbers."

"That could work for recruiting too," Veronica added. "As far as I know, non-human types are a bit bitter humans are lighting up the night and being more active. I mean it makes it easier for them to do business and such but there was a time the night was feared. Because that's the time their kind got to rule the world, and humans were powerless to fight back. Word gets out that a group is 'taking back the night' so to speak and I bet you would have a lot of non-humans willing to sign up."

"As long as they agreed not to just go around killing people, I would be for that," I admitted. "The kind of non-human that would jump at that chance like you said would probably be the kind we didn't want. Violent types."

"But we want good fighters," she protested. "But I agree about the killing thing. Capture and deliver only. We don't need more problems, just less. The police going from needing to investigate the theft of a car to multiple murders committed by us doesn't improve our situation any."

"True. It would help hone our ability to move around undetected. Give us real world experience in somewhat dangerous situations. Small groups of people, rotating each night or each taking an area, so we can all cover for each other. No solo exploits. It could work. You were doing something similar back home, were you not, Herman?"

"I was. And I'd love to do so again."

I hesitated. "I would rather you make things for the group, rather than be a field agent. Your talents lie more in that direction anyway, no? Though what you can do is useful..." I scowled.

"Not to worry, I know plenty of other dwarves," he assured me. "If we can pay them, I'm sure they'll be happy to set up shop here."

"Yeah, money," I groaned. "That's the biggest problem. We're going to have to do another run soon, find some more drug money."

"Our portfolio is doing okay," he reported. "Stock market is down again though, but we're bringing in some money there still."

"Couldn't we get sponsored or something?" one of the benandanti asked.

Darter, right? "Sponsored?"

"Sure. There are some pretty old people in the world, right? Maybe some of them don't want to fight themselves, but wouldn't mind donating to our cause. When you're five hundred years old I would hope you had more money than you knew what to do with, and something like this may appeal. Heck, it could even be counted as charity and be tax deductible or something. I don't know how that all works. But with that and any money we recover from crime lords we can't find the owner for should set us up, right?"

"Okay, that may be the money side of things covered. Herman, at least at the beginning I would need you to make sure any dwarves we hire are up to snuff, and provide training if you think someone's

skills are rusty. We need weapon trainers too, magic trainers for young sorcerers if we can find them, and a source for guns. Though..." I looked over at Veronica. "We can just take them from criminals like we did before." *I wonder if Ananias would come work for me, now that the situation in Ordinary doesn't need him anymore? We could use a person that good in combat just on his own, and if he is willing to continue training my folks like he did Excellus folks...*

"Sure can!" she agreed. "Heck, we could 'hit' some places like police stations, do they honestly need assault rifles and such? I think not. If a few cases of guns simply vanished into the astral it would be the perfect crime."

"I'll think about it."

"I can pass on my techniques," Herman agreed. "But don't expect their stuff to work as well with technology as my stuff does. That takes many years to master, if others can master it at all. I don't really know if it can, or I'm just a fluke, or what. Never tried teaching *that* to someone before."

"As long as their stuff works, we're not using it out in the open anyway," I told him. "I'm not too worried about that."

"Okay."

"I think we could get more benandanti here," Sarah told me. "I mean, you guys are convinced, aren't you?" She looked to the 'newcomers' the benandanti that had come later. They all nodded.

"You seem really serious about all this," said one man. *Nightclaw I think?* "And the Abbess knows we could use the strength that comes from banding together. If you can help us with our duties, making sure witches don't cause too much trouble in the world, a street gang or two that needs to be taught a lesson should be easy to deal with."

I considered a moment. "I can see it working out fairly well," I admitted. "Your kind don't have that many directly offensive abilities, it's like you were meant to be support for others but instead just stuck with your own kind. A group made of half benandanti and half 'other' could work out fairly well."

"Work with non-benandanti?" I glared at him. "I- I guess. That would take some getting used to, but we're all on the same side right?" He nervously laughed.

"Exactly," I told him. "That's why we're doing it this way, going after small fish to learn how best to work with diverse groups. That's what's going to keep us alive, not fancy powers. Looking after each other, and keeping the group safe." *The fancy powers won't hurt, of course.*

"And you're not advocating for the slaughter of anyone you see as evil, just helping the police do their jobs. I can get behind that."

The others muttered their agreement to this.

"Great. Reach out to whoever you can, but non-benandanti first at the moment if you know any. Right now there's an imbalance. We need sorcerers, other magic users to balance the groups out with. Let's try to keep equal numbers. Of course don't turn down help, but maybe just make a list of other benandanti to call later, once we have more diversity here." They nodded. *I don't want any mutterings of favoritism after all. I want a wide assortment of powers, abilities, and skills, and that means every kind of non-human I can lay my hands on. Not literally. Everybody is so used to just hanging out in their own little groups, I need to get them mixing as quickly as possible and trusting each other.* "Anything else that anyone can think of?"

"If you do hire a bunch of dwarves they're going to need materials," Herman reminded me. "I can't supply everything."

"As to that," I told him with a wink and a finger on the side of my nose, "I have a lead."

To that end I dismissed everyone to get to work on recruitment and such, and pulled my phone out. I dialed the number and someone answered.

"Hello?"

"Linnea? Hi, it's Jesse, do you have a minute to talk?"

“Jesse? It’s great to hear from you, how are you?”

“Doing okay, and the new priestesses are too. Thank you again for your help.”

“It was nice to get out in the field for once. I know all about ritual magic to help my customers but don’t get much call to do it myself. Plus, you know, troll, so I can do any magic I study- anyway, what’s up? Are you in town?”

“No, I’m back in New York City. Look, I know this would probably be better to talk about face to face but I thought I would at least sound you out.”

“Sound me out? Sounds serious.”

“It could be. Have you ever wanted, you know, more?”

“More... Scoops of raisins in my raisin bran? Sure, I love raisins.”

I had to giggle, I admit it. “No, silly! More out of life. Like, would you ever move to the big city?”

“Oh. My. God. You fell in love with me at first sight and are asking me to move in with you? This is so sudden I don’t know what to-”

Okay, I don’t need to sense her emotions to tell she’s kidding around. She is kidding around, right? Right? “No. Linnea, focus. No, wait I’m the one making a mess of this, sorry. Start over. Linnea, I need you-”

“I thought we were starting over?”

“Aarg! No, what I mean is,” I took a deep breath, “would you and your brother consider moving your store to New York City so we can use your contacts in the supply world to supply the dwarves I’m going to hire so they have enough materials to make the things I’m going to need for them to make?”
Whew.

“Wait, what? You want me to sell my store and move down there with you? Set up shop there instead?”

“Yes. I’ll set you up with a huge space, bigger than you have now, because you’ll need it. I want you to be my supplier. And for NYC as well, maybe we can have a stairs built or something and have a separate door installed on the second floor just for you. Whatever, I don’t know if I want people heading through the lobby I haven’t thought that far ahead. If you just laughed in my face, I mean it wasn’t worth putting much thought into until I knew if you were at least open to the idea.”

“...”

“Linnea?”

“I’m... Not laughing in your face, at least. Move to New York City? Wow, that would be, huh. I mean...”

“Obviously you have to talk it over with your brother at least,” I told her. “It’s a big decision, I don’t need an answer for a week or more, I only have one dwarf here at the moment anyway. But I would like to know soon.”

“Herman?”

“Exactly.”

“I know him, he’s a good guy. I guess I wouldn’t have to move-move, I mean teleportation magic exists for a reason. I could still live here, and just run the store there.”

“Sure!”

“Would you mind if I stopped down sometime, saw the place for myself, see what I had to work with?”

“Come down any time, we’re here. I can send you some pictures, or the street address if you can use google maps.”

“I’ll just do it that way. Thanks.”

“Of course. I’ll see you later then.”

“Yeah, see you soon.”

I lowered the phone, that had gone pretty well. She hadn't rejected me out of hand, and sounded like she was going to give it some serious thought. I would need a supplier to keep my dwarves in materials, that much I knew. If it was someone I already knew and had done me a good deed without even asking for something in return, so much the better. I looked out over the lobby of the building. *Yes, this place is where big dreams are going to begin.*

Chapter 15

I take in some unexpected help

Where: Control Building

When: May 2nd

“I have people for that.” It’s a phrase I never thought I would think, much less say, but here we were, a month and a half after my big speech about “let’s clean up the world, one government official at a time if we have to.” The control building was humming with life again. Turns out, and I can’t believe I hadn’t thought of this before, there are not a lot of great places for non-humans to work that can be said to have a “career path” instead of just being a “job.” Or to “make a difference” in the world instead of just living from paycheck to paycheck. It makes sense though, at least minority groups are recognizably human and anyone not at least somewhat sympathetic to their plight can rightly be called a horrible person. But even the most disadvantaged minority group has it way better than an actual non-human person, who has goat legs or doesn’t touch the ground when they walk. Those sorts live in constant fear not of police brutality, or “doing X while black” but of being outed as inhuman and being beaten to death by ordinary citizens on the street. (We, as a race, have problems) At least, *at least*, cameras are everywhere now and finally police officers and others can be recorded doing horrible things to people even if justice never comes to them. (See above, problems) No one would record Herman’s death if someone found out he had the feet of a bird, they would rotate in for their chance to swing a pipe or a bat. The upshot of all this was, once it got out that the FBC was reopening, and what our mission was, and who we wanted to help see that mission through, we got inundated with resumes from local talent. New York City had a population of 19,000,000 people, give or take. Non-humans numbered in the tens of thousands, and working for a place like this, where they could be among ‘their own kind’ and not have to worry about being outed? And they got the benefit of being able to use their magic ‘openly’ and to help others? They signed up in droves, Sariel had been right about that.

Walking around the place now showed a dramatic transformation from how it was when we first arrived here, when the place was silent and echoing with the ghosts of the past. Now the place was alive again, in some instances literally. I saw plants, *yes plants*, and pictures of kids, and funny posters, and artwork everywhere in the cubes. We even had a snack service delivering and stocking vending machines, and the cafeteria now served three meals a day as many people lived here full time on the apartment levels. Signs of life were everywhere, the place felt happy again. Ahti seemed to reflect this, despite now having far more work to do he was always whistling his way through the halls with his mop and bucket, or cart full of odds and ends to repair this and that. I even let him hire some help, he couldn’t keep up with everything by himself, and we had the funds now.

That was the biggest relief to me, that I was securing the money to keep this place afloat. We essentially had a patreon account, which wealthy individuals could donate to as a form of insurance. While we didn’t charge for our services directly, if you had a missing item or person, a ghost problem, or any other supernatural occurrence you needed investigated and you had donated in the past you got priority treatment. I sort of hated the necessity of such a system, but we *needed* the cash. Of course we recovered lost stashes of art, busted drug houses, and the like, so we could finance ourselves that way too but every little bit helped.

For my part I had given up interviewing potential candidates because now I had people to do that for me. Everyone got the same treatment; you wanted a job? Fine. You tell us your skill set, and we put you to work. You got a month to prove yourself. If you seemed competent or trainable you had a job for life (at least mine, I would be long gone before accident took even a fraction of the people now working in the building). Naturally we heavily employed divination magic, if we got a result like “If you hire that there brat, with them everyone will spat. They are jerks and no mistake, office supplies they will take” they were out of there. But if we got “a team player that guy is, and at magic he’s a wiz. Hire him you won’t be sad, even if he dresses plaid” then they got their shot. We also employed that

magic to track down criminals, usually managing to be in the right place at the right time to catch someone in the act and stop them doing whatever stupid/crazy/illegal thing they were doing. It was stressed, and we had posters up about this too, we were not some kind of League of Justice that operated openly and could have our pictures on the front page shaking hands with the mayor. We would *never, ever* have that. The human race was decades *at best* at coming together to truly expunge racism from our collective unconscious, revealing non-humans and magic were real was further decades past that point. We were more like a group of mutant turtles, hiding under the streets and protecting the city. For the moment everyone seemed to accept that, and there hadn't been any incidents. Everyone was just glad to have a place they *belonged*, where they could walk around as themselves and use their innate magic to make their city (and they did see it as their city just as much as the humans did) a better place. I made sure every patrol group was a *group* of at least four so they could cover for each other and no one got any ideas about eating anybody (or whatever) in the darkness. The benandanti especially because now they were going up against gun wielding maniacs not just 'you found out so we'll back off' witches as they had for centuries. Each group had a mix of powers and abilities, and jails were filling up with humans we delivered.

This of course was being noticed by both the police, who were scratching their heads at their newfound "efficiency" of tracking down perpetrators, and the news outlets with headlines like (and I'm paraphrasing here) "hey look crime is drying up around here for reasons. Are police finally doing their jobs?" They were long headlines, yes. My fear at the moment was that it would be noticed by criminals too, who would start their own little groups to try and fight back, but thus far we hadn't had any major incidents. We prepared for every eventuality though. We had enough personpower to back up each team with a drone operator, watching the action from a distance so they could call in for help and the people that needed the help could focus on their thing. Yes, this had been Herman's idea, and while distrust of technology ran high (especially among beings hundreds of years old) the "youngins" could be trained to operate one and everyone saw the value of "getting backup when you needed it." So if a team did run into something they couldn't handle, they could be pulled out or reinforced, whatever the situation called for, simply using the images from the drone operator who could be a block away and safe.

And speaking of safety we had a cadre of dwarves now supplying us with gear, including Herman's parents! They had come at his call, "I taught him everything he knows about smithing you know?" and all, and seemed like nice enough people. His mother was handling our uniforms, oh we had uniforms now, toughening them with magic like Herman had done for his friend Tayna's ninja suit. (He said she was interested in the whole thing but was dealing with her own problems at the moment and might be along later.) They were single piece garments, that way the magic would only have to be applied once, and were a strange combination of formal wear and ninja gear. It worked. This way we could wear them during the day and look sort of like FBI agents if we needed to interact with humans, but also at night during our cleanup missions when we needed stealth. They were black, of course, and she knew her stuff (she was over 500 years old!) cranking them out alongside the other dwarven women that had shown up. (When you're 500 years old the phrase 'traditional values' takes on a different meaning, so I hesitated to suggest that even women dwarves could make things other than clothes. I mean, we needed them, and they seemed happy enough to work on them, so...) They were custom fitted to each person so they looked good on us, and further cemented our group being a real organization not just a bunch of people who happened to work in the same building.

All this magical crafting required lots of components, but we had good news there too. We were supplied by Linnea, who had opened a *second* location here rather than simply give up on her location in Rochester, NY. She hired her own people, and she or her brother were in and out daily to see how things were going and track inventory. It made sense, why not have two revenue streams, especially with magic allowing you to basically be in either place at the blink of an eye? So their network expanded to this city, so new materials were always being brought in and then snapped up for Control by the resident dwarves. Some argued we should be ordering materials directly, to save on some costs,

but I waved them off. Better to do a good deed for a “small business” and let them do what they did best; Running that business. Rather than hiring people directly to do the same thing and causing resentment in “the community” because we bypassed “the little guy.” Any savings I made up ordering material directly would be offset paying an employee (or several) to manage that inventory. Linnea already knew what she was doing, had her system in place, let her do it! They agreed this made sense, they were just trying to look out for me, which I appreciated. For the moment the ‘shop’ was simply on the sixth floor, that was the space that needed the least work for what she needed, and until we got a badge system going in the building I simply hired an elevator operator/guard to escort anyone visiting the shop to that level and back. With all the magical beings and goings on in the building I hesitated to install too much technology, not everyone was Herman after all. So witches and others were sometimes seen going through, directed by whoever was working the front desk at the time. (Yes, the lobby was now open, and guarded, so the public could come in. Those in the know, anyway, who wanted to shop at the new store or had a “case” for us had to get in somehow.)

Yes, I even allowed witches in which the benandanti argued against, but I told them I had a plan. Let them see the followers of Sariel for themselves, who I “suggested” be “browsing” the shop whenever a witch happened in. Much better to let them strike up a conversation naturally “oh what coven do you belong to?” “wait you follow a freaking angel not a demon?” than grab them by the shoulders and shake them until the demon fell out. Once it got out that there was another option, a *better* option, they might come on their own and seek our help to leave their demonic masters behind. Trying to force the issue would just make them dig their heels in and defend their position, because humans. Did. That. The benandanti realized I had a point, but said they would be watching for any funny business by the witches. I told them to “have at it,” they could be spies after all so having more eyes on them was all to the good. I made no secret this was a federal building and they were checked by metal detectors and divination magic at the door to make sure they wouldn’t make trouble. Then again on the way out to make sure they had no “evil” plans in mind with what they purchased. (Signs were posted this would happen, and Linnea’s employees also made sure the buyer knew this) Carrot and stick, all in one convenient package. Basically it was my own “war on drugs” that I was waging. Before, witches had to slink around to get stuff, I mean Linnea’s shop in Rochester was disguised and off the grid. This way if you wanted to do some magic, and you meant no harm by it, you were welcome to shop in a clean, well lit, safe, environment. (Linnea’s shop was spotless but you get the drift) We got the sense of what witches were buying, what they were doing with what they bought, and got them to trust us by respecting their life choices. If they wanted to start making different life choices, we were there for them. They knew where we were, after all! Maybe we would only get one or two to “convert” but that was better than nothing. Word would get out, sometimes just people knowing they had another option on the table could make all the difference in the world.

It was the person on duty that rang me that afternoon, and I answered my cell phone by the third ring. *Could be anything from a new case to the place being attacked.* “Hello?”

“Director? It’s the front lobby, there’s something I think you’re going to want to see down here. No immediate rush but I wouldn’t dawdle either.”

“I’ll be down shortly.” *Who says dawdle anymore?*

I headed down to see what the trouble was, and nodded to the elevator guy as I stepped past him. I did a double take as my lobby seemed to have been taken over.

By dogs.

Specifically black dogs, who lounged, sat, and sniffed around the lobby. All of them were big, black dogs, while others were bigger, blacker dogs. All of them looked up and over at me as I came into the room.

“Thank goodness you’re here,” the receptionist said. “I just had no idea what to do about- er, for them, I mean. For. Is what I said!”

Her name is Tabitha, right? “They haven’t threatened you or anything, have they Tabitha?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that. I saw the bunch, uh, pack of them outside and suddenly they were in here. That big one there,” she pointed, “was sort of woofing and snuffing like he wanted to tell me something but I didn’t get anything out of it so I called you.”

“Got it. You did the right thing.” I noticed the big one she had pointed out was now coming over to me, and I didn’t feel any hostility so I just crouched down and offered my hand. They sat in front of me and put their paw into it. “Welcome,” I told him/her.

“Woof snuffle arf arf gur ooof oof murfle yap.” Having said this the dog opened it’s mouth and it’s tongue hung out.

“You don’t say?” I stood again. “I’m going to need you to repeat that in a moment, if you don’t mind.” They sighed. “Sorry, are you cursed or something?”

“Huuuuuh?” They looked up at me with their head cocked.

“I guess not. Look, just wait here. Stay. Stayyyy.” I took a few steps back and I could swear they rolled their eyes at me. I dialed a number on my phone.

“Hello?”

“Veronica, hi. You’re in the building right now?”

“Yeah boss, what can I do for you?”

“You have mind reading magic, right? Or maybe thought projection would be better suited...”

“Sure do, what do you need it for?”

“Great. Come down to the lobby and you can see for yourself.”

“Be there in a minute.”

“Thanks.” I hung up. “Okay, she’s on her way,” I told the dog. “Can I get you something? Some water maybe?”

The dog nodded and looked over his or her shoulder to the rest of the pack.

Well, you did ask. “One minute.” I walked over to the desk to see if there was anything I could use as a bowl when Ahti walked up dragging something.

“Ah, there you are,” he said. “I found this small wading pool stuffed in a closet somewhere, figured I would ask if you had any use for it before I threw it away. I mean I can’t imagine what a thing like this would be doing in the building but what do I know?”

“You found a...” I looked over the desk and there it was. A small, inflatable, wading pool that just so happened to be blown up. I glared at him.

“What?” Total innocence radiated from the man. “Wait, this isn’t exactly what you needed at this very moment is it? No!” Maybe a little too much innocence. *What is his deal, anyway? Who is this guy?*

“Put some fresh water in it for the dogs.”

“Dogs?” He looked around. “Oh, nice dogs. I’ll go get a bucket.” He returned a moment later with a huge bucket of water, I had no idea how he even managed to carry it, but he dumped it into the pool and the dogs came over to lap it up.

Sure, must be hard to find fresh water when you’re a dog. Finally Veronica arrived at the lobby and looked the scene over.

“Oh, black dogs, a whole pack of them. Wow.”

“Yes, I see they are dogs. Black dogs. What do they want?”

“No, no, they’re not ‘black’ dogs, I mean yes, of course they are black colored dogs, but these are black dogs!”

“Yes, unlike Rowling we can name things what they are, but you’re still not telling me anything useful.”

She laughed. "Black dogs are to dogs what other races are to humans. These are dogs with magical abilities, and they're smart. I mean not building rocket ships smart but they can understand us. What are they doing here?"

"You're here to find out."

"Ah, mental magic, got it. And we have a volunteer!" The dog I saw before padded over and sat down in front of us. "Greetings," she greeted it. "May I cast a spell upon you?"

They nodded.

"Splendid. Mental Projection! Okay, you should be able to project your thoughts to us."

Finally. My name is Chases the Wind. I hear you're recruiting our kind for some reason. We would like to offer our services.

"I'm recruiting those with magical powers, yes," I admitted. "I didn't even know you existed."

"I think they mean our kind as in non-human, sentient beings," Veronica clarified.

Something like that. Our needs are few. Shelter from the cold. Good food and water. Uh... They paused. Actually I think that's it.

"Space we have, I take it you're, uh, housebroken?"

Please.

"Sorry, I had to ask. Are you sure you know what you're asking? We are doing some dangerous things."

Life in this place is dangerous for us. We can be hit by cars. Caught by men and put in cages, not that they can hold us. Food is there, but only leavings. Water is bad. We want better. If the cost of protecting my pack is a bit of danger, we accept that.

"I suppose that's all true," I agreed. "You would be mistaken for regular, if very large, normal stray dogs. And you can help us?"

Yes. We can hide you. We can change our shapes. We can move from place to place easily.

"Allow me to clarify," Veronica said, scrolling on her phone. "From what we know of black dog lore wounds inflicted by them take a long time to heal, and they're very tough and strong. There are reports of them simply biting someone's neck and ripping their head clean off. Gunshots just seem to annoy them, they're very tough to kill. Their howl causes terror in their enemies. They don't leave tracks. And like they said, they have the magic of obscuring, shape-shift, and teleportation."

"Huh." I looked back at the dog, who was now feeling a bit smug. I had to wonder, they could be a valuable asset to team in a number of ways. "And you're willing to work with us? Say one of you per team, to keep that team safe and get it away from danger if needed?"

You move in packs, as we do? We can join your packs, as equals.

"Of course. I bet our dwarves can make you all some collars maybe, that can allow you to project your thoughts like you're doing now."

Collars are for pets. We are not pets.

"I'm not implying you are. You would be a member of our org- our pack like any other. We wear clothes, and we are not each others pets. What would you suggest if you wanted to wear something? It would be to your benefit to be able to communicate with us, would it not? You would have to, in order to have that magic on you all the time."

I suppose. Perhaps something with spikes on it, to remind everyone.

"I'll see what we can come up with. Okay, it's a deal. It looks like there are fifteen of you. If there are ever more come see me, I'll welcome all of your kind to my pack." *If all they want is just shelter, water, and food they would be far cheaper than any other employee and it sounds like they would make great support personnel for any number of missions.* "For now welcome to the Bureau of Control. Would you like a tour or just to look around on your own?"

We will look around on our own.

“Very well. Come this way, I’ll introduce you to the elevator operator. He can take you around to the different floors. I suggest not teleporting around the building, you never know when you might run into something or some one.”

Of course. I will tell the others.

“Okay. I’ll tell the cafeteria to prepare meals for you. Do you just want... meat?”

Meat, yes. Clean, fresh, meat. We will be pack with your kind for meat.

That’s probably how wolves turned into dogs in the first place. “I’ll tell them. Thank for you seeking us out, I’m sure we’ll be able to help each other a great deal.”

They just snuffed, doing a doggy sneeze, and he turned to the others, who came over. *Looks like four adults, the rest are a little smaller. Two packs? Well, we take all kinds I just wonder how much they eat?*

I took them over to the elevator and told him to take the dogs to whatever floor they showed by tapping, and he said that was fine. I headed back to work, I had some new emails to send to everyone to not freak out about seeing ‘animals’ in the building. We already had a few kitsune and one tanuki, so it wouldn’t be a total shock. They were sometimes in their natural forms which were animals, this should hopefully be no different.

I just hope no one is afraid of dogs.

Ten minutes went by.

Two kitsune burst into my office. “We’re totally terrified of dogs!” they shouted. “They’re everywhere! What are you doing about it?”

Oh boy... “Get over it!”

Chapter 16

I go a bit overboard

Where: Control building conference room

When: That night

We had our nightly meeting about who was going to go where and what crime they should look for, this time including our newfound black dogs. Veronica looked a little more serious than usual and once everyone was quieted down she told us why.

“When asking about quadrant four we got a very concerning result back, my recommendation is to send our heavy hitters out there. That means you, Director, and probably me, and Herman too.”

“That bad? What’s the warning?”

“Your path is known, your cover blown, you will not find one group alone.

The elements of evil pack have finally taken up their slack, and they prepare a harsh attack.

So beware their use of force, that is their only plan of course, from life to cause you to divorce.

But naturally you must win through, for you must send a message too, or this day forever rue.”

“That does sound pretty serious.”

“It’s clear something major is going to go down tonight there. Maybe various people in the area banding together because word about our cleansing effort are starting to get around? The last line is clear. They’re trying to send us a message, we have to foil their plans and send a message back that no matter how strong they think they are, we’re stronger.”

“Sounds about right. Okay, you’re with me. Herman, suit up. Moon’s Tooth, you’re our forth, and if I can get a black dog volunteer?” One got up and padded over to us. It was one of the smaller ones, but probably the oldest “puppy” of the group. It hadn’t even been a day so no collars were made, we would just have to get along as best we could. “Fine. Thank you. As I don’t know your name I will refer to you as...”

“Backup!” Veronica exclaimed.

“Er...”

She looked a little embarrassed. “I had a dog named Backup growing up. I miss that dog.”

“Is that acceptable?” I asked the dog. They nodded. “Backup it is. Let’s assign the other quadrants. Mom and dad, I’m putting you in charge until I get back. Phone me if anything happens around here.”

“Of course,” they both said, nodding. I wasn’t leaving them totally defenseless of course, we always kept two groups on standby here to reinforce the field on short notice, watching the feeds from the drones that were sent back. We didn’t need a drone operator, we had Meowvis, so I hadn’t included one when making my team. We went through the other quadrants of the city but according to divination activity everywhere else but where I was going was light tonight. I didn’t like it. I couldn’t risk sending everybody to my location, someone using divination after we did would realize that and possibly change their plans, hitting a place we weren’t. We had to spread out and follow our normal routine so we had eyes all over the city. But I trusted the team I had, what could go wrong?

We stepped out of an alley that was clear into the border of our assigned area and started the normal patrol. Herman was in his armor and flying above, while the drone was nearby fluttering around looking for anything out of the ordinary. We couldn’t use Wayfinder because our information was too nebulous, I had nothing to picture in my mind about what I wanted to find, so we just had to rely on our senses and the fact the divination magic had told us we were basically being targeted for an attack anyway. We needed to become a big enough target whatever was going down tonight was drawn to us like a magnet. Usually we would use divination to narrow it down, able to ask more informed questions after each result. That would usually get us to a street or section of city at the very worst, and the teams simply used what magic they had from there to find what they were there for. This time, however, “our

path was known” so I figured if we simply walked along the city streets someone would attack us saving us the trouble of running them down. So we cautiously made our way forward, a wolf on one side and the black dog on the other.

Looking around depressed me. Endless one way streets, all packed together with brick buildings that were all stuck together. No yards, no driveways, so both sides of the streets were thick with cars, and the occasional bike lane. So different from where I had come from, in Ordinary. *How can people live like this? All squashed together, no back yard to play in, no knowing if your car is going to be there the next day. How do they even plow, I know this area gets snow, do they have to dig their cars out one at a time?* The silence around us was broken by the sound of gunfire, and Veronica and I threw ourselves behind a car.

“Taking fire,” Herman said to us from the phone in my pocket. “It’s coming from those windows, I think we’ve found our target.”

Looking ahead I saw he was right. There was an apartment building with four windows facing towards us, all which looked broken out or at least open, and every one of them had a man with a gun behind it. They were taking care not to lean out the windows or even put their gun muzzles out, but were firing at Herman, who was taking evasive action in the air.

“Great,” spat Veronica. “This is going to be tough. As long as they’re behind that threshold, our magic will probably be useless.”

“An apartment has one?” I asked.

“I admit, it’s not as strong as one on a house, but it’s there. We could bust down the door, stay in the hall, but each separate apartment is protected. Rushing in there would probably be a bad idea as they’ve probably taken the place hostage.” She got her gun out. “I’m carrying non-lethal rounds, like you wanted, but...” She looked over at the black dog and Moon’s Tooth. “One member of this team can’t even go in and black dogs don’t really know the meaning of the word restraint.”

“Woof!” Their tail was wagging. They felt happy, like *that’s right, we don’t.*

“We have to do something. I’m going to get us closer.”

“Okay how are you going to do-” I focused on the car in front of me and with a silent apology to the owner willed it to lift. It did, so I flipped it on the side and moved forward. “Oh. Damn, girl, you can lift!”

I concentrated on moving the car and not snorting and we crept forward towards the building. The guys on the lower floors started shooting at the car I heard the glass breaking and such but no bullets made it through. Once it was close enough I let it drop and waited them out. *They have to reload sometime, unlike some.* Finally there was a pause and I poked my head out. “Just what do you think you’re all doing in there?” I shouted. *You know, I reflect now upon the fact that I really haven’t had any classes in hostage negotiation or anything like that. This could be a problem. Winging it, when lives are at stake, probably not the best option. But it’s all I have at the moment.*

There was a garbled response as several people shouted back at me. Looking around the side of the car I saw everyone at the front window indicating everyone else at the front window should be the one to talk. *Well aren’t we all the polite ones?* “Just pick someone!” I shouted. “You!” I pointed to the closest one. “You tell me.”

“Who’s asking?”

“I’m Director Faden, Federal Bureau of Control. Come out with your hands up!” *Police are always saying that, right? I think that’s right.*

“No chance. So that witch lady was right, the big boss herself showed up. Good.”

Witch lady? No, deal with that later. “Glad my presence pleases you so much. What are your demands?”

“Come up here and let us shoot you!”

Oh for crying out- “Why?”

“The last month and a half every petty crook or big time gangster around here has been captured almost before the crime is even committed! Our storehouses are raided, our weapons taken, we’ve had enough of it! So we got together to figure out how to stop it. Then some lady showed up, claimed to be a witch, told us what to do, and said the person behind it all would show up. And here you are! So come out of there, let us shoot you, so things can go back to the way they were!”

Hey, we’re doing better than I thought! Not only the police noticed, the criminal element noticed too. So all of this is my fault. Great. But I’m still not letting them shoot me. “Uh, no?!”

“I thought you might say that!” He reached behind himself and pulled a struggling, tied up, gagged woman to the window. “You come in here and let us kill you or this woman gets shot in your place!”

I stared for a second, wondering what to do about this. “Veronica, little help?” I ducked down a little.

“Sorry boss, I can’t do it. I tried three times, I can’t teleport her out here! There’s too much electronics, witnesses, and I can’t get through the threshold. He would just grab another away, I can’t save everyone in the building!”

“Great, just great. What am I supposed to do then?”

She shrugged. “We shouldn’t negotiate with terrorists.”

Not all that helpful! “Yeah, I guess that’s why they pay me the big bucks.” I poked my head out again. “Get on with it then!” *Sorry lady.*

That gave him pause. It was his turn to gape at me, and even the woman’s eyes got a little bigger. “What?”

“You heard me. Get on with it. Kill them all, if that’s what it takes. You’ll be back in the same situation, and there will be no force on this planet that will stop me from hunting every single one of you down.”

“I’ll do it!” He jabbed the gun he was holding at her.

“I don’t doubt it.”

“The witch can get us out of here, she said she could. She showed us magic is real, we’re going to live like kings now that we know that! Once you’re dead, that is. We’ll be long gone by the time you get into the door!”

“We’ll find you all sooner or later, you said it yourself. We’re cleaning this town up it’s only a matter of time. I know what you look like, I won’t just turn you over to the cops, I’ll rip you in half.”

“You would let her die?”

“I’m worth more than she is!” *I mean, it’s not nice to say it, but I kinda am, aren’t I?*

“Fine, I’ll give you to the count of five, and then I’m blowing her brains out!”

“Hope you’re wearing ear protection, that’s gonna be loud. And you’ll get brains all over you.”

“In fact, everyone grab somebody, pass the word!”

“Have you started counting yet?”

“You shut up!”

“Come out here and make me!” *Oh man, this is probably not how this should be going.*

“Oh no, I ain’t sticking any part of myself out of this window!”

Shoot, he knows about the threshold? Who is this witch, I’ll make sure she pays for this too.

What was she thinking, telling a bunch of people like this that magic was real?

At every window a hostage appeared, and the gunmen switched to covering us to pointing at the victims.

“All right, on five then! One!”

“Jesse, we have to do something!” Veronica pleaded.

“Two!”

“Like what? You said your magic can’t help, and just storming the place isn’t going to work.”

“Three!”

“Something. Anything!”

Fine. Time to see just how powerful I really am. You say magic won't work to penetrate into the rooms, for reasons, but I bet magic will be happy to work on the outside of the building. Polaris, if you can help in some way I would really appreciate it! The building began to tremble as I focused my lifting power on it.

“Four!”

The windows that were on the other sides of the building all shattered, as stress forces started to act on the outside.

“Fi- hey what's going on, what was that noise?”

Come on, come on! The sound of cement cracking filled the air and the building started to shake more. The people at the windows were knocked around, and I stood up fully, putting my hands out before me and “cupping” the building with them. *Come on, lift it!* I was screaming now and the building ripped off the ground and as I flung my hands to the side it went sailing down the street, slamming into the road and tipping over. Everyone in the building screamed as the place crumbled around them, it wasn't meant to be flung like that and the outer wall simply started to disintegrate. This caused the inner walls to crumble as well, causing the rooms to collapse. Water shot out of broken pipes in the ground, and the basement of the place was now laid bare. The building skidded to a halt but didn't stop falling apart, now completely on its side and having slammed into a bunch of cars along the way as well. It wasn't so much of a building anymore as a pile of rubble. I collapsed against the car, barely able to keep my eyes open. The others were staring at me, clearly not able to believe what I had just done. “I'm not doing an encore,” I told them. “Get the reserves here, heck get everyone here to start combing through the wreckage. Hopefully it wasn't enough to kill anyone.”

“You just threw a whole building!”

“And?” *That's what happens, I guess, when you get part of an angel inside you. Sometimes you can do some amazing things.* “Get going, I don't want the gunmen to recover, or that witch to get away.”

“Right, right.” In a bit of a daze, not that she had any right to be she hadn't just lifted an entire two story apartment complex, she started combing through the rubble as more of my people arrived. Sirens were also now heard, so no doubt we would be getting some more “help” whether we wanted it or not. I straightened up, I still had work to do as the director.

As soon as the cops started getting out of their cars I started flashing my badge and ordering them around. *Better to assert my authority right at the start rather than letting someone else 'take charge' and then have to fight them for it.* Naturally they resented this, but did see the wisdom of getting some barriers out and keeping the nosy away from the area. Clearly a building had been tossed down the street, there was no arguing that. “If you want to explain to me how that's possible,” I told them, “be my guest. If you would like people with actual experience in that sort of thing to take a look, then take a step back!” Of course I knew full well how it happened, I had made it happen. But I didn't have to tell them that. And I kept them bamboozled enough they didn't question how we had gotten there so fast if we were in fact there to investigate the flying structure.

People were starting to come see what all the fuss was about, and everyone had their version of the story to tell. Someone had the bright idea to tell all the black dogs to head to the site, which they did, sniffing and digging people out. Anyone dressed as a criminal (you know what I mean) was shoved into the back of a police cruiser, and we fished their guns out of the wreckage as well for evidence. The people living there were somewhat hysterical, which I wouldn't really fault them for in the end. Their lives had been overturned, first by a bunch of men bursting in and taking them hostage, and then the building floating around by itself. There was nothing I could do to keep them telling their side of the story, all the criminal types of course weren't talking. This did serve to make the guilty look even more guilty, all the people living there had the same story, so the cops had no choice but to arrest all the

gunmen. So that was hopefully a majority of the crime bosses in the area put away, which was the one bright spot in all this. But one person we pulled out of the wreckage was talking. She, like the others, was battered, bruised, filthy, and in shock. Unlike the others though, she actually knew someone here.

“Veronica?” she gasped, putting her hand over her mouth.

“Willow?” Veronica equally gasped, radiating surprise. “I didn’t know you lived in New York City. And in a dump, no offense, like this?”

“Oh, ah, no,” she gave a halfhearted laugh. “I’m sort of the witch that was assigned to this mess? How did you throw the whole building like that?”

“Wasn’t me. Hey director, over here!” She waved me over and I shooed away another officer, telling him to do his job and help serve and protect, i.e. help dig people out. I walked over to them. “She did. Willow, this is Director Faden. Director, this is the witch those guys were talking about.”

“Moon’s Tooth!” I yelled, looking around. The wolf came over to me. “Ah, there you are. Spellbreak her if she so much as sneezes. I don’t want her going anywhere. In fact.” I grabbed a hair off her head and yanked it.

“Ow!”

“Don’t give me that!” I told her angrily. “It’s the least you deserve for all this. Someone get me a baggie!” I put the hair in a bag someone handed me and put it in my pocket. *Now she knows I can track her anywhere on Earth, and believe me, I will.* Meanwhile she was looking down at the wolf.

“Benandanti?” she asked.

“That’s right,” she replied, showing her teeth. “Go ahead, make your move.”

“Against that?” She pointed over at the rubble. “Are you nuts?”

Yeah, not doing that again any time soon, if ever, but she doesn’t have to know that now does she? In fact I’ll probably get a stern talking to from Polaris later about exceeding my limits and shorting my own life...

“So witches can be smart. Good. You know this one?” she asked Veronica.

“Yeah, sort of. Trina Exolls, I dated her brother back in high school. I didn’t know she was a witch. Everyone in town called her Willow, never really asked why.”

She is kind of thin and willowy I guess?

“I guess we both kept things hidden from our sleepy little town,” she explained. “So you’ve got the magic too huh? That explains a lot. All those ‘cases’ you solved, you used magic to do it, didn’t you?”

“Maybe. No law against it, and unlike you I was born with it, so I get to use it to help people if I want!”

“I’ll let you two catch up later,” I told them. *Or argue, or whatever it is this is turning into.*

“Right now I need information. What’s the story here with these jerks trying to take a building over and use that as leverage to shoot me?” *I mean I can guess, but I would rather hear it from her. And this probably isn’t the time but I’m too tired to think straight.*

She sighed. “My demon patron came to me two days ago. Said someone in this area was messing up the status quo and needed to be stopped. That’s you, I guess. Said I would find a meeting of criminal types at such and such a place and to provide my expertise to them. Direct them to working together and taking out whoever showed up. So I did, because I have to do that.”

“Or do you?” Veronica asked, a gleam in her eye.

“Yeah, because I’m a witch?”

“We can maybe do something about that,” I told her. “So who were the people you were working with?”

“Various criminal types that live in the city. Once they figured out their, uh, business model was being threatened they decided to get together. Mutual protection, and all that. There should have been twenty five of them, all together, in that building. Five per apartment. Not that it will help, but I can

show you their meeting location just in case some others were stupid enough to stick around. You can bag them too.”

“So helpful,” Moon’s Tooth exclaimed. “Weird, isn’t it, how helpful they become... after they’ve been caught, that is.”

“You think I wanted to do this?”

“You knew what you were signing up for.”

“Or did I? I was just a kid at the time! I was approached and told magic could solve all my problems, and all I had to do was-”

She does feel remorse, and frustration, and helpless. Maybe we can do something for her, but I still have a lot of work to do tonight. “Ladies, please,” I told them, interrupting. “Trina, if you really want out of your demonic contract we can see what we can do. Moon’s Tooth, I’m assigning you to watch her for now. There’s still a rescue effort going on and there’s no hiding what I did. I have no idea if this will make things worse or what,” *they know what I’m capable of now, as do I. This may provoke an even bigger response in the area.* “But right now I have to focus on getting everyone out and making sure they have a place to stay tonight. And keeping the cops from asking too many questions. Table it for now.”

“I’ll help,” Trina said softly. “I know healing magic, if you need it. Or I can help dig people out, or whatever.”

“You got us into this!” Moon’s Tooth protested. “Do you think we’re stupid enough-”

They were already meeting, it would have been this or something just as bad even without her. “Again, table it,” I told her. “Watch her, yes, but if she wants to help that’s fine. I doubt her situation is as cut and dried and you would like to believe, and for the moment I will accept that maybe she has had second thoughts since her initiation. If she does want to make up for it, I will help her do that. She can start right now.”

“But helping us? That’s against her demon’s wishes I’m sure. You would really put yourself at risk like that?”

“My demon patron never said I couldn’t...”

Moon’s Tooth looked as troubled as a wolf could, probably this attitude was at odds with what she considered witch behavior. “Fine. Just know if this is an act, and you do run...” I patted the pocket with the bag. “I will find you.”

“I know.”

“Fine. Toothy, you okay with this?”

“Toothy? Yeah, sure, whatever.”

“Then the matter is- Hey you, don’t touch that!” I rushed off to the next crisis.

Chapter 17

We try to help Willow

Where: Control building

When: The next day

As much as I hated to wait, getting the site safe enough and satisfying the cops there I was a federal agent and what had really happened here was classified took most of the night. Naturally I took everyone's information, everyone that had been living there was now homeless, and had an agent of mine go back and get a wad of cash I could hand out so they could get someplace to stay for the night. It would be a huge mess figuring out if insurance on the building would cover it, and what I was going to do with the survivors, as their predicament was sort of my fault? They were alive, that was the important thing, but their lives were going to be harder for the foreseeable future. I told them we would be in touch and left myself a note to assign someone to look into it in the morning. I did have people for that kind of thing now, right? I dropped into bed, simply setting a benandanti guard on Willow. They were asleep anyway, so that worked out fine. The next morning I made sure she hadn't run in the night (or been teleported away by her demon or someone else who worked for them) and she was still in the room I left her in. Trailing me was Laura Coleman, one of the new priestesses of Sariel. The benandanti guard was, of course, already there in their human form. I brought her some breakfast and she dug into it.

"Thanks."

"Of course. Now, are you serious about leaving your demon?"

"You guys kept saying that last night," she replied between bites, "but I don't think it works that way. I can't just say, 'I renounce you, demon' and that's that."

"That's because you don't know what I know. We know how it works now. A piece of your soul is being held by your demon master. Into it's place went a bit of the demon, to give you access to magic. We just need to get the demon to give it up and make your soul whole again."

"And then what? Just go home? I burned a lot of bridges after I got magic, not that my father or brother cared for me all that much even before I got it."

"You'll have some choices," I explained. "You can go to jail after I dig up all the things you've been doing at the 'request' of your demon master. No doubt any one of them would get you quite a sentence."

"Yeah, you're not selling me on that one."

"Fair enough, that's just your first option. Your second is to come work here, our janitor could always use some more help. There's always paperwork to file, that sort of thing. No, don't like that one either?" She was making a face that told me that was not the answer. "Fine. Your third and final option is to take a new path. Trina, this is Laura. Laura, this is Trina, a witch we picked up last night. Why don't you tell her about yourself."

"Call me Willow," Trina told her. "Everyone else does."

"Okay Willow. Nice to meet you. What Jesse wants me to tell you is, I was a witch too," she admitted. "My master, my *old* master, fought Jesse and lost. He died, the real death, and I was freed. She offered me a new way, the way I'm going to offer you. Pledge yourself to our goddess instead, Sariel, and use your knowledge of magic for good in the world and not evil."

She looked between the two of us, suspicion plain on her face and her feelings. "I don't know which story is more unbelievable. You killing a demon for real," she gestured to me with her fork, "or you getting out of your contract! I mean throwing buildings around is one thing..."

"Believe it," I told her. "As far as the demon goes that was a special circumstance, I won't be able to kill yours. As for the other, well, we can call the angel here yourself if you would like to talk to her."

She paused. "You're serious?"

“Quite. So, is the third option the charm? I’m going to be taking time and resources away from other things for a person I hardly know, so some assurance on your end would be nice.”

“I mean, of the three it’s the best one for me, but will your ‘goddess’ accept me?”

“If you pledge yourself, truthfully, to making up for your past sins and doing good in the world, yes. She accepted all of us.”

“I never thought there was another way...”

“If I may say something?” said the benandanti hesitantly.

“Starfire, right?”

“Yes.”

“Go ahead.”

“Why *are* you taking so much time and resources away from other things, as you said? You admit to not knowing this witch, so I’m confused.”

“I should just kill her, is that it?” I raised my hand and the gun materialized in it, and she froze. “Do you want to be exploded, shot with bullets, pellets, or simply have your head blown apart with a sniper round?”

“Neither?” she squeaked.

“No, don’t just kill her!” Starfire panicked, grabbing my hand and pulling it away.

“That’s what I thought.” I made the gun vanish again. “But now we come to the problem, don’t we? For generations you benandanti did your little dance with witches. They would try something, you would find out and catch them. They would hang their heads and say ‘you caught us, we’ll be on our way’ and you let them. You just *let them*. Then they planned something else, and got caught, and again they walked because you let them. I am not just going to let her walk after this. I can’t just lock her up, even with anti-magic measures going like spraying her down with water twenty four seven. Someone would try a rescue. So her demon is giving her up one way or the other. I’m just offering her some choices as to what comes next.”

“You really think you can make her demon give her up?”

“I’ve talked it over with Veronica, who is learning summoning herself. We’ve come up with a pretty good idea of how to pressure the demon into *begging* us to restore her soul. You want to hear it?”

“I do, this should be good,” Willow muttered.

I grinned at her. “Check me on this now, but according to her those that learn summoning magic typically start small. They bring minor spirits into this world not because they couldn’t summon something more powerful, but because the amount of that spirit they can bring depends on how well the summoning is performed. Yes?”

“That’s right. You don’t summon a major demon at first because you wouldn’t be able to sustain it’s power. And a demon humiliated like that is not going to take kindly to the experience.”

“Exactly. But humiliation is exactly what we’re going for in this case. We’re going to summon this demon, in a powerless state, day in and day out at sunrise. And we’re going to put them in a tiny box. They’ll have no powers, so they can’t escape. Nor can they give orders to their followers or whatever else they’re usually doing. I don’t think it’ll be long before they realize keeping you around just isn’t worth it, and willingly give up your piece of soul to us.”

“You’re insane,” Willow breathed.

“Not so much. I already kicked that particular beehive, setting up the Bureau again. This demon holds a grudge? Sends forces after us? Bring it on. I’ll just capture them like I did you and start the whole process all over again. We’ll see who laughs last. I’ve got applications for employment up the wazoo now, new hires are coming in every day. Magic users all, people that have been spoiling for a fight for maybe hundreds of years. I’m going to give them one. A secret one, yes, with a narrow focus and out of the public eye, but anyone attacking this building or humanity at large will find we are ready and willing to defend ourselves and them. And once this building is full of people like that, we’ll buy another somewhere in another city. And another. And another. We’re not going away, not this time.

Demonic influence in this world is at an end, that is my promise to you.” *I’m the one most suited to take out possessors, after all. It has to be done in my lifetime, I don’t know if I can pass the gun on to anyone.*

“Jesse? Wow! You think big!” I turned to look at Starfire, who was looking at me as pride and happiness radiated from her. Laura too. “You really mean all that?”

I cleared my throat. *Maybe that one got away from me a little.* “Yes, well, anyway, I have some plans, as you can see.”

“Sign me up!” Willow announced. “May as well be at ground zero for all this. How do we start?”

“You can summon your master, I take it?”

“To get orders directly, yes, sometimes I call on him, sometimes I just get written orders, or someone texts me. There’s no one way so there’s less chance of that way being spotted and utilized against us.”

“We’ll head wherever you usually do that. I’m not showing them the inside of my building, and your place is probably tainted in just the right way they like anyway. Do the worst summoning of them you can, so they get no powers, and let me do the rest of the talking.”

“You got it.”

We stepped through a teleportal to Willow’s summoning location, basically just the basement of her house, and by “we” I meant four of the black dogs, most of the benandanti, Veronica and several other sorcerers she had hired, and a handful of other agents. Ahti had found a nicely sized iron box somewhere that we set down nearby, and everyone got into position around her summoning circle. We were decked out in our special uniforms, those that had them, and everyone was armed to the teeth. *Intimidation factor, one million.* “Let’s get started.”

Willow didn’t bother lighting the candles and such, she wasn’t doing a ritual to summon the demon she was just using summoning magic, which as with most “real” magic took no time at all. She explained that she would have to go against her normal instinct of throwing as much willpower into the magic as she could so as to leave the demon as powerless as she could. She figured she could manage it.

“And I can’t wait to see the look on his face. You’ll protect me if this goes wrong somehow though, right?”

“Of course,” I promised her. “Get on with it.”

“Okay, here he comes. Tearistimo I!” She paused, seeming to remember what she just said. “Summon. You?” She finished much weaker and a demon popped into existence. As usual it was fairly large, had wings, claws, and a misshapen face.

“And make sure that shipment of- hello!” he said, looking around. “And I’ve been summoned- Willow! Doll! How... Wait, what’s all this?” He looked around, noticing the ring of angry looking people around him. “Oh, don’t tell me-”

“Yes, your little plan to have me killed failed. Big time,” I told him. “Now we’re going to have a brief chat.”

“I don’t think so!” He gestured, and I stood there with my arms folded. *If Willow has betrayed me...* “What?”

I breathed a sigh of relief and gave her a fractional nod. “Yes, you’ve been brought here without the bulk of your magic, because we’ve come to bargain. You’re not going anywhere but inside that box. You see it? See that box? That’s going to be your new home from now on until I have my way with you.” *Ugh, could have said that better.*

They stood up as tall as they could, claws outstretched. “You dare? Do you know who I am?”

“Nope, don’t care either. Right now you’re just a powerless little spirit, unless you think,” I raised my hand, the gun materializing, “that you can fight all of us here with no powers?” I pulled the

trigger, making Pierce light up and start charging. "I doubt you could even fight just me, alone and powerless as you are. Look around."

"Wait. Just. Wait." He looked around, everyone was raising their weapons. "That gun, I recognize- that must mean you're... What did you have in mind?"

So I'm getting a reputation among demons? I don't know if that's good or bad. "That's better." I canceled the charging and lowered the gun. "I want Willow here freed. Technically I want all your witches freed, but we'll start with her because she's the one here at the moment."

"And in exchange I get?"

"Freedom. Like I said, you're going to get summoned at sunrise from now on. And then you're going in the box until the next sunrise when the spell is broken. Then you get summoned again. That box is going to be your life from now on." I gestured and the lid flew up, showing the inside. "Take a good look. Everyone? Let's introduce our guest to the box." Everyone around the circle took a step towards him.

"Hold on, hold on," they protested, hands up. "Let's talk about this!"

"Nothing to talk about. You endangered a dozen lives, sending Willow to inform that gang of thugs about how magic worked, so we couldn't be as effective against them. You gambled against us and lost. While it's true I can't kill you, I can do the next best thing. Now give me what I want or get in the box."

"But I can't, just, you know, give something away! Especially not a witch. One of my beautiful, beautiful witches." He reached for her face and she jumped back from him.

"Gag me," Willow managed, making a face.

"Oh, is that what you li- never mind!" I was bringing the gun up again. "Maybe some sort of deal?"

"I'm not unreasonable," I allowed, eyes narrowing. "If you have something in mind I'm listening."

"Find me someone to replace her. A benandanti would be ideal, I see several here."

"No chance!" they all said, in one variation or another.

"No? I guess that was a long shot, but I figured I would ask. Maybe one of you had a secret desire- no? Okay, I have other things in mind. Murder a prominent official? Corrupt some babies? No? Come on, work with me here, I'm losing a lot."

You'll be losing a lot more if I ever find any other witches connected to you.

"There is one thing, a ritual. It's not harmful, but it's lengthy. I never ordered it done because I knew benandanti would just stop it. But if you could guarantee it's done, that could be worth it."

"What's it do? If it's not harmful why do it at all?"

"It just nudges the behavior of everyone in the spell's reach towards temptation. And it can only last twenty four hours, obviously. Sunrise the next day will knock it out. Come on, I've always wanted to see it in action, that's my final offer!"

"Temptation."

"Yeah, that's it." He was nodding vigorously. "For a little while, that's all. Probably no one will even die. They might even have a lot more fun!"

"What about people already contemplating suicide," one benandanti asked. "If they give more easily into temptation..."

"Oh, maybe, who can say? Come on, it'll be fine, they'll die sooner or later anyway."

"Not helping," I grumbled.

"It's true though," he maintained.

"We'll have to look it over, of course. Make sure it is only doing what you say."

"Of course! And no fair doing it out in the boonies somewhere, it has to be in the city. And you have to perform the ritual for at least three- no four hours. Twenty hours of operation. Start at sunrise and stop four hours later. That will make it pretty big. Do we have a deal?"

I looked around the room, but no one had any better ideas. *It's better than the other suggestions, corrupt babies what does that even mean? I suppose that's why he lead with that, same reason I started with 'jailtime' for Willow here. Make us more receptive to later offers.* "Fine. Write it up as a contract. We perform the ritual, it goes off, twenty hours later you free Willow."

"Agreed!"

They told us where to find the book with the ritual in it, and Willow let the summon go.

"Thanks," she told me. "Never really had someone stick up for me like that before. Not a stranger, anyway. I'm not really sure how to take it."

"Don't worry about it. Just don't make me regret it."

"Of course."

"I already regret it," said a benandanti. "Is this really the best way?"

"It's the only way we have now," I told him. "Maybe Sariel could force the issue, if she were here at the same time the demon is. But remember we know they don't want to act directly against each other. And maybe the soul shard is somewhere else, not on the demon's person. How could it be, when it's summoned here like that? The more we learn and the more we do this the better we'll get though, I hope." *There may come a day we just get what we want because the demons know it's futile to resist us, but that's a long time in the future.*

"I guess."

"The ritual doesn't seem too bad, I mean it could have been worse," another allowed.

"You've got that right."

"Actually, Willow has just brought up a good point," I realized.

"I did?"

"Yup. I think the benandanti mission statement, if you like, should change. We've been using divination to determine when crimes are going to happen, right? How about I ask them to expand what they're looking for? They try to discover people about to sign their souls over to demons. There can't be that many per month. The benandanti work then isn't just 'fighting' witches, it's 'converting' and 'preventing' witches. You catch a witch, you find the demon they work for and bargain for their soul back. If you can catch a person before it gets that far, offer them Sariel instead, or see if the Abbess wants to get in on this action. After all to provide magic an angel would have to follow the rules too, they're probably made weaker by it. Find other angels willing to sponsor humans. If books don't have the names, ask Sariel for some, she implied earlier there were other angels willing to support us. Or solve whatever problem they're desperate enough to sell their souls for, so they don't need magic at all. You can draw on Control's resources just like any other agent, don't forget." *Those on the cusp of signing their souls over would be receptive to magic existing anyway, so being offered a magical solution to their problem wouldn't be that much of a stretch. We dry up the supply of people becoming witches, and a hundred years from now, if we do our jobs properly, no more humans beholden to demons will exist!*

"That could work," he admitted. "With all the magic users we've had coming in lately, I doubt there's much we *can't* do at this point!"

"It can't be worse than what you're doing now, that isn't working. Sorry to be blunt, but that's the way it is." *I lay part of the blame for this whole mess at your feet. If you had been better at dealing with witches when you found them, demons would have far less of a grip on this place.*

"I understand," he said. "You're not wrong. We just kept doing the same thing, and getting the same result. Look where it got us, witches are more aggressive than ever and that forced us here. Not that I don't like being at Control," he hastened to add. "I do. It's just, after so long..." He sighed. "I don't know. It's like admitting we weren't good enough."

Were you, though? "There's nothing wrong with admitting you need help. We're all stronger for your talents, we can't do it on our own either."

“Yeah, okay.”

We kept Willow under surveillance the next two days, while we gathered the ritual and the materials for it. Reading it over everyone agreed it didn't directly harm anyone, simply lowering their inhibitions for a time. That didn't seem too bad, and I got a good night's sleep before the morning of the day we performed it. I wanted to be as alert as I could be, in case the city really did devolve into a mess. It was... fine. There were a lot more fights, and a lot of fights turning into makeout sessions in the streets that day. Crime went up, but mostly theft as people didn't stop to consider their actions. They simply saw something they wanted, and they grabbed it and ran off. The people we really had to watch were the police officers, they were trigger happy in the best of times, and this was the worst of times. But at sunrise the next morning the spell broke, we summoned Tearistimo who said he had watched the whole thing with great amusement, and kept up his end of the bargain. Willow got her soul shard back, Sariel got a new follower, and the other priestesses welcomed her with open arms.

Only one thing worried me. Before the demon was let go they looked at me. “I won't be quiet about this, you know. Everyone back home is buzzing about this place being back in operation, you and that weapon of yours in particular. Your bulling me into letting a witch go is just going to add more fuel to that fire. Expect our solution to that problem soon, with a bang!”

Chapter 18

I nearly get blown up, along with the rest of the city

Where: Control building

When: One week later

I had hardly sat down at my desk to look over my messages and email when I heard a sound I had heard twice before. The toy phone on my desk, the red one that seemed to connect me to Sariel in Otherworld was ringing. I hastily grabbed it up.

“Hello, is this Sariel?”

“Yes, Director/Jesse/catalyst. I bring you warning/caution. Something terrible will happen to your current space/time and must be stopped/defended.”

“Thank you for letting me know. Can you be more specific though?”

“Negative/denial. This is the only warning singular/we can give you/them. Please exist/continue after this event/crisis Jesse. Training a replacement would be impractical/burdensome. Besides, we like/tolerate you. Good fortune/destiny.” The line went dead.

“I like you too, Sariel,” I said into the headset, and put it back down. Then I pressed the button next to the small box on my desk. “Attention please, your attention please,” I said into it. *Good thing we got this working recently.* “This is Jesse, I need every person with even the remotest talent in divination type magic in my office immediately. There’s been a threat to the building and we need to find out what it is and what to do about it. That is all.”

Moments later my office was full of nervous looking people all performing magic to try and work out what Sariel had been trying to warn me about. I read over the cryptic words everyone had provided me.

“Bird of prey, tail of fire, beak of steel, funeral pyre.
If you stay, you will die, you won’t feel, buildings fry.”

“From a land far away, where you wouldn’t care to stay,
where there lives a rocket man, wearing uniforms of tan.
Today he tempts an awful fate, makes entire earth irate.
But know that he is not himself, any more than he’s an elf.
When you find him you will see, what his cause of action be.”

“When released is ninety four, you won’t be saved hitting the floor,
nor hiding underneath your desk, who thought that action would be best?
When two two four is in the sky, millions in the city die.
Heed the warning that you heard, and keep a lookout for this bird.”

“From the air death rides a steed, tucked inside a steely bead,
that when triggered brings the sun, not to spare a single one.
Flash and fire, then the cloud, for miles the sound is heard aloud,
and blinding flash to show the earth, of the end time’s violent birth.”

“Okay, all of this sounds awful,” I told them. “Thoughts?”

“I fear a nuclear missile has been fired from somewhere and is even now heading towards New York City,” said Meowvis.

“What gives you that idea?” I asked them, having come to that same conclusion myself. But I needed to know if they were thinking along the same lines I was. *That demon I recently humiliated and*

bullied wasn't kidding, was he? Their revenge really is going to take place with a bang, and take out half the city with it. They really wanted to be sure!

"The third poem, Plutonium is element ninety four on the periodic table. Also the line about 224 would refer to the atomic mass of that same element. Looking online at cold war era 'safety' videos I see kids were instructed to hide under their desks at school should a nuclear device be detonated. Plus the bird imagery suggests the delivery mechanism. It is not being delivered by truck, but by air."

"Rocket Man is something the old president would call the leader of North Korea," Veronica added. "You don't think they launched something from there, do you?"

"I think it's entirely possible," I told her. "Given that Sariel called to warn me and all these portents seem to indicate the same thing. So, we may not have much time. Options?"

"I'm getting Herman up here," Meowvis told us. "He may have some ideas."

"Magic isn't going to help," Veronica cautioned us. "We can't protect an area as wide as the blast radius would be. Too much to protect against, heat; light, shock-wave, radiation, fallout, there's no way."

"Can we make it blow up in midair?" Willow asked. "Without triggering the complete blast I mean."

"You know how fast one of those things would be? How would we target the thing with magic before it blew right past us?"

"I don't know!"

"Look, get ideas first, shoot them down later," I told them. I was writing down "blow it up" on a sheet of paper.

"Shoot them down, good one," she told me.

"Yes, har har. Herman, good, you're here." He walked in looking worried, and we filled him in on what was going on.

"I have no ideas," he announced.

"Fat lot of help you are!" I told him. "Nothing?"

"I don't know anything about missiles," he protested. "Just because I fly around in a suit of-hello, there's an idea."

"What is?"

"We've got fliers around here, people with kinetic magic, right?"

"But as we've already discussed," Willow said scathingly, looking at Veronica, "none of us could keep up with a missile."

"We don't have to, at least, not if we do it right. We need two groups in the air. The first group is like a mile out, they're the spotters so we know what direction it's coming from."

"A modern missile can travel at five kilometers a second," Meowvis informed us.

"Never mind. I'm going to start packing. I thought maybe we could do an Avengers reenactment, where I just grab it and throw it through a portal but I can barely hit 20 meters per second not 5000. The 'real' Iron Man suit is way faster, there's no chance to survive, let's make our time."

"Be serious," I told him. "We have to stop this!" *It does beg the question, how in the movie Tony knew where the missile was exactly. He just sort of found it, but he doesn't have a huge radar dish on his head, so how did he know where it was?*

"I am serious. I don't think we can."

"There must be something. Hang on." I hit the button on my desk again. "Attention everyone, this is Director Faden again. The threat against the building seems to be a missile of some kind, possibly nuclear." I released the button. "Even old non-humans know what that is, right? I don't have to explain it?"

"Anyone around during the cold war knows what a nuke is," Herman told me.

"Okay." I pressed it again. "I need options. If you think you have some solution for keeping a very fast moving thing from exploding us into oblivion, come up and tell me. I'll make an

announcement in another te-twenty minutes if we're evacuating or not." *Hopefully we have at least that much time. I hate to lose it but if we can't come up with something we have to get out of here. The building, even the city, can be lost. I can't lose the momentum I've gained here in trying to free humanity from demons and the possessed. I can't. And we'll have something to avenge, so that should give Herman some warm fuzzes anyway. But that one poem was right, if we let a nuclear device detonate in this city, it's going to be world war three as every nation blames every other. Correction, when our nation blames every other. We, being the targets, and with the means to retaliate. Given humanity no one in this country would council restraint, even if it meant their own deaths down the line. The stinging scorpion, and all that. We wouldn't be able to help ourselves. We need a way to get rid of it safely, with no one being the wiser it was ever a danger!*

We waited, our magic users throwing out ideas but the reality was that anything traveling that fast would be past us in the blink of an eye. Herman had gone to suit up, just in case, and a minute later all the benandanti burst into my office. The others squished to the other side, though I had a pretty big office so it wasn't that bad.

"We're willing to attempt to send it into the astral," Moon's Tooth told us. "We can use a gateway type spell, and just open a hole in the air it can fly through. If someone can fly us up there, that is. Will all of us acting together cover a large enough area? We think so. If so it wouldn't have to be super precise."

"But it's too fast," protested Veronica.

"Perhaps not," Meowvis clarified. "We know from the poems the likely point of origin is North Korea. This gives only a finite number of possible paths a missile can traverse from there to here. Placed along the most probable route I may be able to predict the exact path it will take once I see it at a distance. This will allow the spellcasters to correct their positioning and place the spell in the missile's path, thus swallowing it up into a magical doorway."

"Use the missile's speed against it," Veronica reasoned. "It wouldn't know something was there, and once in the astral it would be harmless."

"Correct."

"We'll wait until Herman gets back," I told them. "If no other ideas come in we're doing it." I pressed the button on the intercom system. "Attention, attention. All practitioners with kinetic magic or with magic to open a gateway into the astral please meet on the highest floor of the building. We have a plan. Everyone else, either get into the deep tunnels or get out of the city in case we fail. I'll send the all clear once this crisis is over. Director Faden out." *Hopefully not for the final time. Please, get out of here, survive, and carry on this work if we fail. I've started the ball rolling but it's still so small. But we can't let it stop rolling now!*

And so I found myself hanging in the air above the control building. It had taken longer than I thought to get the benandanti into the air because no one followed my orders to evacuate. Everyone had come to the top floor to offer what magic they could, and I could hardly refuse it. So we had battle magic on to make us faster, obscuring to make sure no one saw us flying around, body magic to help cope with the cold and reduced oxygen of the air, and the witches still had demonic contacts so we had a host of minor spirits that had good eyesight along with us too. Anything those that didn't have kinetic magic thought was useful and could safely apply to us, they did, and we took off out the windows to try and save the city. Some had body magic on to make their vision better, other had binoculars, and everyone was scanning the sky. Herman was flying away from us, trying to get ahead of the situation and give us as much time as we could get to correct our position. He was heading in the most likely direction the attack would come from, and coordinating with us. I was carrying five of the benandanti, I could do no less after flinging a building around, but that was all I could do. Now it was just a question of waiting. I forced myself not to keep looking at my watch, simply sweeping my gaze left and right,

making sure I knew where Herman was. I figured if I couldn't even see him, who was so close, what hope did I have of spotting a missile?

"Contact," Herman told us, making my heart race again. "I see on thermal vision something coming straight for us. Meowvis needs more information to begin calculating vectors though."

"Follow my instructions please," Meowvis told me through the phone. We did, raising ourselves and making a grid pattern in the air with the benandanti, all spaced ten meters apart. The demons with good eyesight had all pointed, now they knew which general direction to look in, so Meowvis was able to use that to help position everyone. They told everyone to simply put their gateway directly in front of themselves, and there should be no gaps. They put as much willpower as they could into their spell and made a large grid, hard to see here but leading into the nothing that was the astral plane at this position. I rose above it, I wanted to make sure we caught it as from here all we could see was the astral. I didn't have to wait long. Screaming out the sky came the missile, I could hardly track it, but into the "net" it sank, and was gone. I wasn't even sure I had seen it, but hung the phone up and dialed another number.

"Amos, check with divination. I think we're clear but I need to be sure."

"Okay boss." There was a pause. "Only one missile, the danger is past."

"Thanks." I yanked the five on mine back, and the others flew around towards me. I pointed to the ground. "Let's go, we're done here!"

A victory cry went up from the group and we headed home.

"Here are all the photos of North Korea that exist," Meowvis explained, flashing them up on the projector in small batches.

"That should be good enough to open a gateway over there," Veronica agreed. "But are you sure about this, Jesse?"

"The missile was real," I told her. "If he doesn't hear about New York City being destroyed, he'll know he's failed. Then he'll probably try again. We need to get there and make sure whatever kanaima ordered this done pays for what they tried to do. We have to move fast."

"Okay."

It was dark when we arrived there though the gateway, spilling out into what we hoped was the palace of the current leader of North Korea. Thankfully there were pictures of the place, which stretched for about 12km, so we could avoid all the walls and security and mines or whatever protected the outside. Herman, with Wayfinder in hand, stalked ahead of us. I had brought a large team, twenty people in all plus all the black dogs, and as it was night here everyone was at their full strength. The place didn't have much of a threshold, Veronica said it was just too big, magic wouldn't be that impacted. We had protection barriers around us, provided by the followers of Sariel, and I simply swept any military people aside that I saw. Shock and awe was the order of the day, no killing, even here, so the others would magically make fireballs and such appear but not directly harm anyone. They set empty rooms on fire to provide more distraction, and we basically rampaged through the place (which was huge, glad your people aren't starving or anything oh wait they are!) following Iron Man who was leading us through the corridors to where we would find the great leader. The place felt odd to me, more in disarray than I would have guessed was possible, even accounting for our attack. *Something is wrong here.*

We came to a long hallway and there were two dozen soldiers at the end of it, guarding a door. The sword pointed right past them, so we strode forward. With the combined magic of all seven of Sariel's followers their shots simply bounced off the air, and when I was close enough I tore the doors off their hinges and plowed them into the troops from behind. They didn't see that coming. A few teleports by our black dog companions later, sending them all outside, we had free access to the room and I strode in, gun at the ready. A bunch of confused and scared feeling people met my eyes. None had

more than one energy signature, especially Mr. Square Head himself, who was staring blankly at nothing in his bed.

“Gibberish gibberish gibberish!” yelled the woman who was next to him. The man on the other side of the bed looked like a doctor, and there were some young kids in the room. I also noticed some older men, and wondered if they were ‘party leaders’ or whatever they had here. People high in the government rank anyway, to be allowed so near the ‘great leader’ in his time of crisis. They were wearing uniforms, so it was a good bet they were.

“She wants to know the meaning of this,” Herman told us. Some gibberish came out of the suit, probably Meowvis using the speakers to speak Korean. They had a conversation, and finally Herman turned to me.

“Guess what?”

“Judging from the vacant look in the great leader’s eyes, which we’ve seen before, I would guess possession?” I asked him.

“That’s my guess too. Not long ago he ordered a missile strike against a set of coordinates. His ‘generals’ couldn’t talk him out of it and they fired the missile. ‘Just following orders’ and all that rot, what? Shortly after that he collapsed and he’s been like this ever since.”

“Meaning he was probably possessed as a baby,” Veronica mused, “and the kanaima ran off figuring if you survived it, which you did, you would come looking for it. Otherwise it would just take the guy over again later when it was safe.”

“Or just write the place off as a loss. They’ve had their fun here, after all, and look what chaos would have been generated by that missile strike. That’s all they want.” *It explains this entire country. Probably the leaders here have been possessed for thousands of years, even the ‘great’ leader. Maybe by the same kanaima just jumping from body to body.* “As we have survived I suggest we continue to do so,” I told her. “They can’t teleport, only move into the astral. We’ll head there now, they can’t have gotten far from this place. Iron Man, ask them if anyone else recently collapsed as well. Probably more of these ‘generals’ you spoke of. That should give us an idea how many to expect.”

“Got it.” He turned to her and asked some things. “She says yes.”

“So expect a bunch of them. Debra, Willow, uh, Diane... Others. Can you adjust your protection magic to keep out kanaima once we pass into the astral?”

“No need,” Willow told us. “They become physical in the astral, and our barrier is against anything physical getting through. They can’t get near us. Just be aware they could still try to possess us from a distance magically. They don’t have to enter our bodies, just see us, and they could control our actions. Take them down hard before they get a chance to turn us against each other.”

“We’ll watch for that,” the benandanti assured us. “Spellbreak anyone that looks like they’re about to attack someone inside our little bubble.”

“Good plan. Express my ‘sympathies’ for the ‘great leader’ and tell her if anyone ever does anything like this again, I will be back here and I will personally shoot anyone *and everyone* connected with their government to death. Charge.” I morphed the gun and charged a shot, sending it into a wardrobe that exploded. They all cried out and shrank back. Herman told them, and the men in the room fell all over themselves saying how that would never happen again.

“It better not,” I told them. *That should keep them from trying a stunt like this again, even if they revert back to a ‘great leader’ structure after this. If we come back here and make sure no one is possessed for a month or so, maybe this place can turn itself around. It’s not going to be the personal playground of the kanaima anymore. After all, they just fired the missile, these guys have to be wondering how a strike team got here so fast after that, and without alerting anyone struck at the very heart of their leader’s power. His ‘house.’* “Right. Those with long distance magic, get ready. Those without, your jobs are done. If our four legged friends wouldn’t mind taking them home?” Everyone that wasn’t going vanished after we worked out who that should be. Herman said he would stay behind, covering this room until our return, which was fine. He was the most armored, he didn’t need

protection magic. I turned to the others, ignoring the pleas of the men in the room probably demanding to know how they had done that. “We’re going to the astral. Feel free to kill any and all kanaima you see.”

That made everyone grin, and we transitioned there, probably making the assembled leaders freak out even more. I didn’t care. It was North Korea, who was going to believe anything these people said? Their leader was essentially brain dead, he had never had a thought of his own in his life by the looks, so those about to pick up the pieces needed to *fear* us. This was far beyond a nuclear deterrent, they no doubt had bunkers and such they believed would protect them from such things. We had invaded their ‘house’ only hours after their attack. That was a power they couldn’t comprehend, and they knew we could have killed every single one of them. That, I hoped, would cause them to think twice about allowing such a thing in the future, and impress upon them we didn’t want them dead, just to stop attacking us. *But I’ll have to have some divination done when I get back, in case they go the opposite way, and just fire everything they’ve got at the US to wipe us out. But even they wouldn’t be that stupid. Would they?*

The surprised kanaima hanging out there, no doubt waiting for us to leave, didn’t stand much of a chance. The barrier came with us, meaning they couldn’t get close, and my gun could bypass it because of how it worked. Magic of course could get through, and they had no more offensive magic than benandanti did. Speaking of benandanti they were as good as their word, spellbreaking any escape or possession attempt on the part of the kanaima, so we could kill them all. Which we did. We then stepped back into the real world, collected Herman, and just to show we could marched out again. Once outside Veronica opened a gateway back to New York City and we headed through. Not wasting a minute I asked those with divination magic to make sure they would not retaliate, and it didn’t seem they would. Then came the larger question.

“How do we respond to this on the demon side?” I asked the others. The priestesses were there, along with the original team of Veronica and Herman.

“This was probably the doing of my former master,” Willow told us. “Given it happened right after messing with him. But we can’t prove it. And while he may boast about it if pressed, we did survive. He may just stay quiet and say he had nothing to do with it. We did show him the box, after all. He will believe you will follow through on your threat and put him in there every day.”

“I’m afraid you may be right,” I told her. *He may even have plans in place with his kind, if he did vanish every day they are to assume he’s in the box and to retaliate further against us. It’s a delicate balancing act at this point. A cold war, if you will.* “Not sure how much more I want to push him at the moment. I’ll think about it. But I have a new assignment for you all. Just like back at Excellus, it’s time for us to ask every day if in the next twenty four hours some crisis is going to erupt that we need to deal with. Sariel gave us this one, but we know what these demons are prepared to do against us now. We need to stay vigilant.”

They all agreed, saying they would include any results in my morning messages.

Yay, more things to read, but if it keeps us safe... Thanks Sariel, you really came through for us that time. I just hope we’ve learned our lesson and so have they. Honestly, a missile, really? If we really had been taken out, can you imagine the state of the world? And they thought just slipping away would save them. They know differently now. We’re starting to unite against them, the one thing they probably feared most. They liked us not working together, pooling our talents and our magic to cover for each other. But things are going to be different from now on, I can tell you that much.

Chapter 19

I don't plan ahead enough and someone almost dies because of it

Where: Jesse's office

When: Later that week

There was a knock on my door and I looked up to see Veronica and Willow standing there.

"What's up?" I asked them. They came in and sat down.

"Hey Jesse," Veronica greeted me cheerfully. "You should give yourself the day off."

"Okay..." I slowly said, wondering what was going on.

"You're working yourself too hard," she continued. "Founding Control, trying to keep on top of everything, handling the missile crisis a few days ago. It's taking a toll on you."

"You want a girl's night out?"

"More like a change of scenery. Willow and I have been talking, and she's brought up a good point. Thought we might want to take a little trip, see the sights, and make sure some people aren't possessed."

"Specifically, the supreme court justices," Willow told me. "I've got a funny feeling about them."

"She brought up a good point to me," Veronica admitted. "You remember two presidents ago, when there was a vacancy near the end of the term and everyone was all 'oh, you should let the next guy appoint the next judge.' And so he did, because he was a good guy and wanted to do the right thing. And then it happened again, and again everyone was all 'let the next guy do it' and he totally didn't? Because he is not a good guy and does not care about doing the right thing?"

"Hence last year's abortion ruling disaster, yes, I recall," I told them. *The only reason Roe vs. Wade was revisited after so long was because the court had been packed with a bunch of republican judges they knew would vote the way they did.*

"What if those new justices are possessed? It did rile people up, exactly what we know the demons want."

"You want to go check it out?"

"Exactly. What do you say?"

"Any plan that involves me blowing away kanaima is an instant yes. Let's collect Sarah and a black dog and head over there. I take it you can get nearby with magic?" *Won't be able to take a drone operator, not inside the supreme court building, we'll just have to deal with that.*

"Of course. Wouldn't have suggested it otherwise. Travel by plane? Ha!"

"All right, give me a minute." I texted Herman, putting him in charge while I was gone, and Sarah to meet us in the lobby. We headed downstairs to where the "on duty" black dog was, and I went over to them. It seemed like one was always guarding the front desk, while the others were off in other corners of the building. This way I always knew where to find one, I supposed, though I hadn't asked them to do that. They really were pretty smart. I noticed they had the only mental projection collar on, "Hey, time for a mission, you up for it?"

They stood and yawned. *Of course, director. You may call me Irongrip. I know we mostly look alike to you humans.*

After Sarah had joined us I filled her in on our mission while Veronica did some remote viewing of the area and found us a good spot to teleport to. And suddenly we were there in DC, within walking distance of the place. We headed to the building, which was huge, with many columns out in front and walked in. *No one around? That's odd, would have figured at least a few people looking at the building.* Naturally the door sprang open while I was only a few steps from it, but that didn't surprise any of our group by now. The guard on the other side, different story. He jumped up, looking shocked.

"The building is closed!" he stammered. "How did you get the door open?"

"All doors open to me," I announced, flashing my badge. *That's not a lie either, they do. Thanks, Polaris! As far as this guy goes, act like you belong somewhere, and no one will question you. As I actually do belong here, that's not a stretch.* "Director Faden, FBC. These are agents Marts, Exolls, and Bently." They flashed their badges as well. "We need to see the justices right away."

"You can't just barge in here- Never heard of the FBC anyway- Who are you people?"

"Since when has the building been closed?" Veronica demanded.

"Since the start of the pandemic, of course!"

"Oh yeah, that's still a thing," Willow remarked. "Don't even think about that, what with missiles flying all over and such. Say, you don't think demons are making that worse too, do you?"

"I wouldn't put it past them," I agreed. *There must be demons that specialize in disease, and of course anti-vax sentiment is at an all time high which has the fingerprints of demons all over it.*

"Demons?" asked the guard. "What are you talking about? Leave immediately!"

I focused on the man, he seemed clean, only one energy signature and feelings of surprise, with a bit of panic. "Not until we see the justices."

"Court is in session anyway, you can't just walk in here and demand to see them."

"I can if the safety of our country is at risk," I told him. "Escort us there if you have to, but we will see the justices before we leave here. We can simply observe them from a distance, if you prefer."

"I can't authorize that! Let me see that badge again."

"Very well." I handed it over.

"Control? Never heard of it, and I don't recognize this symbol. Impersonating federal agents is a serious crime you know!"

"You will allow us through," Willow told him, stepping up and looking him in the eyes. "Be enthralled."

"I... I... Okay." He handed the badge back, his eyes losing focus a bit. "Up the stairs, courtroom is in back."

"Thank you," she said sweetly. "Come along."

"I'm not sure I approve of that," I told her, once past the guard.

"So sorry," she singsonged. "But not sorry. I may follow a different master now, but I haven't forgotten my old magic. We do want to get in and see the justices, right? We're doing good in the world. One man assigned to keep normal people out should not stand in our way."

"But we get too comfortable doing that sort of thing, maybe we start with that instead of doing things the right way. Then where does that leave us?"

"With a lot more justice in the world? Red tape destroyed? Actually doing good instead of arguing with a pretty- I mean petty guard?"

"I'll work on her," Sarah told me. "Her demon master probably valued such efficiency, but Jesse is right, it's no substitute for doing things the right way."

"Please. There were other ways we could have done it. Left and teleported into the building while obscured. Walked in the front door while obscured for that matter. Is Irongrip still around?"

I am nearby, I did not think the human would be pleased to see me entering the building. They seldom are.

"See? Gone in through the astral-"

"Okay, I get the point. We could have bypassed him completely once we knew he was there, I get it. This was just one way of many, and no harm done. Come on." We made our way up the stairs and past the great hall, quietly slipping into the courtroom as the doors opened for me. Everyone turned to look, the place was mostly empty apart from the nine justices, and what must be lawyers before the bench. So we just sat down and they shrugged and continued.

"Well?" Veronica prompted, whispering to me.

“Three of them,” I told her with a nod. “From the left number three, number five, and number nine.”

“Brett, I’m not surprised, honestly.” She got out her phone and looked something up. “Looks like the others are Neil Gorsuch and, oh, another surprise the chief himself, John Roberts. Now what?”

“Good question.”

“Guys, this area is full of negative energy,” Sarah told us. “Let me do something about that first, good thing there aren’t a lot of people in here.”

“She’s right,” Willow told me. “This place stinks of demon power, I should know. I wouldn’t be surprised if demons were summoned here regularly. Or at least came by all the time to influence things with their magic.”

Those not possessed could be demons, I can only tell if someone has two energy signatures. A demon would only have one. Well, I can only do what I can do. “Even better,” I told them, rolling my eyes. Sarah started softly praying, looking around the room with her hands clasped. The three justices’ heads snapped over to look at us, they could feel the magic being worked in the room and knew what was going on. They had no excuse to stop the proceedings and confront us though, and I smiled and gave a little wave at them. *Yeah, sweat it out you foul creatures. I’ll be cutting you down in just a moment. But how to do it, that’s the question.*

A tense moment passed and Sarah breathed a sigh of relief. “I’ve done what I can.”

“It feels better,” Willow agreed.

The room did seem brighter, somehow, and everyone was sitting up straighter. “What’s the play?” Veronica asked me. “Waiting until they’re alone?”

“They know we’re here, did you see them looking at us when she started the cleansing? We can’t let them leave this room. Can you protect those three I mentioned? Their bodies I mean?”

“I guess? From what?”

“Any physical force I guess. Explosion, dropping, that sort of thing.”

“Yeah, sure, give me a second.”

She muttered something while I looked around. High ceiling, that was good. The plan was to latch the three “surge” explosives onto the kanaima. One. Two. Three shots, I was fast enough with Herman’s item on it shouldn’t be a problem. *Then I fling them into the air, pin them to the ceiling, and detonate the explosive. Then I drop them. Their bodies will be fine, but the kanaima inside will certainly be destroyed. Then we slip out in the confusion. The witnesses in here will swear there was an explosion of some kind that went off, and the ceiling may be damaged but they won’t find any trace of it. The only thing they’ll be able to say for sure happened was the three flying up and then landing again. The three will be fine, if disoriented and maybe with some lost time since they became justices, but that’s just the nature of getting them free of possession. Odd that all of them aren’t possessed, but that would mean unity and thus invoke suspicion on why they were so agreeable. This way 1/3 of the justices are possessed, issues are argued, and bad results happen more often. They don’t want to ‘rule’ they want to cause trouble. You’re doing a great job fellows, but that ends today.*

“Okay, they’re protected.”

“Great.” Without standing I materialized the gun into my hand, already in the ‘surge’ configuration and keeping it low but aimed high squeezed off three shots. All three landed on the chests of the three, and they all looked down at themselves. *Bye bye, suckers!* I reached out with my power as the room started to react to the sound of the shots being fired and tossed the three into the air. All were ripped from their seats and went flying, and everyone gasped. With a fierce grin I detonated the three explosives, then let them fall, trusting Veronica’s magic to keep them safe. The room erupted in a panic, some rushing to check on the justices while others just stood there screaming. *Yeah, that’s helpful. Call 9-1-1 or something you doofus.* I nodded and the four of us calmly got up and made our way back to the door. Of course when the door opened I was greeted with a sight of several uniformed men with

guns running down the hall. And also of course every one of them was possessed. *Yay, more of them to kill today!*

None of us had any cover, the hallway leading to the courtroom was just a straight line but I had the best chance of dodging their fire thanks to Herman. I had to lead them away from the others, or at least distract them enough they could get some spells going. So I raised the gun in the 'grip' configuration and dashed to the side, shooting one of the lead guys I thought had his gun raised the highest. Five shots slammed into him, throwing him back and getting the attention of the others. Oh, they wanted me dead I could feel it radiating off them. Hatred. Anger.

Two of the guards in back shot at me, but I pushed myself to the side and their shots went wild. More people were screaming now in the courtroom, people being flung around was one thing, but those were actual gunshots. One of the guards lifted their rifle and started shooting through the door, followed by another a second later. Veronica shouted "Metallic Rejection" at the same time I heard Willow scream and fly backwards, blood flying.

"Oh Goddess," Sarah screamed. "I'll try and stabilize her! Let these wounds be rejected!"

Crud, they were supposed to shoot me, that's why I rushed out here! Come on! I blasted another one, while Irongrip appeared out of nowhere and slammed into another.

"Teleport," shouted Veronica. I glanced over, both Willow and Sarah were gone, hopefully to safety.

One of the guards stepped around another and shot at Irongrip, making them yelp, but not go down. *Okay, this isn't working. Distract first, then shoot them. They are nicely lined up.* I focused my power on the nearest one, and slammed him into his buddies. All four of them that were in a line went down.

"What's going on?" asked the one I had shot before, who had finished standing up. He was looking around confused. "How did I get up here?"

Irongrip glanced at me. *I did have that one, you know,* and bounded towards the last one standing. He managed to grab that one's arm and shook it, making him drop the gun.

"Nice one," I shouted to them. I fired at him, and he was blasted off his feet as well.

"Hey!" shouted the confused one. "You can't do that!" He reached for his gun.

Oh great, I can't shoot him again, it would really hurt him this time. "Veronica?"

"Teleport!" she shouted, pointing in their direction. Both vanished.

"Nice."

I sighted on the next nearest guy, who was up and sighting on me, but it was too late to stop what I was doing. We fired at each other, but his bullets whizzed past me while mine found the mark. *That's what practice will do for you!* He went down, the kanaima inside burning away. *Two left.*

"Metallic Rejection!"

Yeah, little late on that one.

Irongrip lunged for another one that was standing up nearby, managing to get his gun arm but not shake the gun out of his grip. He wasn't going anywhere so I shot him, but only with 3 shots because I knew I only have 5 left and didn't want the lengthy reload time. He went down, clean.

"I surrender!" said the last one, throwing his gun down. "I didn't want to do this anyway."

"Oh really," Veronica asked him. "Evidence suggests otherwise."

"I'm not going to argue with you," he told her, and flowed out of the guy. He went limp, and I knew his next move would probably be to escape into the astral. I waited, as long as I thought I could, then said "spin!" and brought the gun up, emptying all the shots I had left into it. They impacted as I sprayed them, and they burned away as my gun clicked empty. There were still conscious guards getting up and looking around confused, but none of them went for their guns at the moment.

"We done here?" Veronica asked. "I don't want to hang around if you get my drift."

“One second.” It was actually five, I waited until the gun was recharged and didn’t bother changing the mode, spraying the last man down that had a kanaima in him. “Now we can go.”

“I sent Willow and Sarah to our infirmary, are you hurt?”

“Me, no. Irongrip?”

I was hit, but it’s not going to kill me. When you get a moment a bit of healing magic would be appreciated though.

“Okay, let’s get out of here.”

“Right in front of them?”

“The day they’ve had, this is the least of their worries.” *They just discovered themselves attacking a bunch of federal agents. Even if possessed just now, they’re going to have a hard time explaining that to their superior officers. If long term and they have no idea what day it even is, well, we already said we were okay with that to a certain extent.*

“I guess you’re right. Gather round. Teleport!”

We appeared in the corner of the “medical center” we had set up, where there was a big quarter circle painted on the floor. That was the teleport point of the room, to be kept clear in case someone needed to get there in a hurry. Willow and Sarah were there, along with the nurse I had hired.

“I’ve stabilized her,” Sarah told me, “but she was hit pretty bad.” Walking over I saw she had been hit three times, they had cut her shirt off, and both were applying pressure to her.

“I’ve called for someone with metal magic,” the nurse told me. “It’s either that or surgery to get the bullets out.”

“Brooke right?” I asked. She nodded. “Okay. That makes sense. How badly is she hurt?”

“Badly enough I don’t want to attempt healing magic,” she explained. “I’m afraid even trying to accelerate her healing a little will backfire on me.”

“Crap. But getting the bullets out is going to be just as bad, isn’t it?”

“Depends on how gently they can make her body reject them.”

“One of you come here and hold this,” Sarah commanded. I went over and took her place, keeping pressure on the wound.

“Where are you going?” I asked her.

“To get the others. One person trying to heal her isn’t going to work, but all us benandanti working together should be able to do it. Don’t let anyone move the bullets until I get back!”

“Okay.”

We waited until they got back, and the sorcerer was there who knew metal magic. We were all crowded around the bed with her lying there, looking pale and breathing shallowly.

“We’re going to have to be fast,” Sarah told everyone. “We’ll start our prayer, and hold onto it. Get those bullets out of her, and we’ll release our magic. Everyone aim for a double enhanced healing and don’t spare the willpower.”

Everyone nodded, they saw how serious it was. “Here we go!” They started praying and Harvey, the sorcerer with the metal magic, started pulling out any foreign metal inside her body. With the three bullets rejected they let the healing magic go, flowing into her. “We did it,” she announced, sagging a little herself. “She should be fine by tomorrow.” Looking her over the wounds did seem to be closed or at least they weren’t bleeding anymore.

“Thank you, everyone,” I told them. “I’m sure she will too.”

“Maybe next time I’ll put the protection spell on at the start of the mission,” Veronica told us, clearly feeling relieved at this news. “Yeah, that’s what I’ll do.”

“Good plan,” I told her. *And something I should have thought of. These people are my responsibility. If I had gotten her killed, and just after she got away from the demon... I need to be a better director, that’s clear enough.*

Now, if you have a bit of magic left over, perhaps someone can see to my wound? Irongrip asked. Not that it's a terrible inconvenience of course.

Chapter 20

I get to see my brother again

Where: Jesse's Office

When: The next day

"Letter for you Jesse," I heard a voice say as I was sitting at my desk. I looked up, the voice was familiar but the words the voice was saying were not.

"Letter?"

One of the former witches walked into my office, Diane I think her name was, and handed me an envelope. "It was overnighted, so someone wants you to see it right away. The woman at the desk signed for it, I hope that's okay."

"Huh, never thought we would have mail delivered, so I never thought about it. We start getting a lot of mail and I'll have to get Ahti to look at the old tube system." I looked over at the wall where a tube sat, a mail tube, which was currently broken because we had texting and didn't exactly need it.

"Oh, that would be fun, watching the tubes zip around."

"This is from the white house!"

"Is it?" she asked, feigning disinterest. "I didn't notice."

"Uh huh." I waited.

"I guess I should get going then?"

"Stay if you want," I told her with a laugh. I held the envelope up and materialized the service weapon. "Now, I'm going to have to be pretty exact if I want to shoot just the top millimeter of this envelope off. You might want to stand to the side." *Wait, could I even do that?*

"I could get you a letter opener! Or a knife, or just tear it open don't shoot it!"

I stared at the gun. "I guess you're right, just been so used to having this one tool I didn't consider a different one."

"You're... just messing with me, right?" I glanced over at her. "Okay, okay, I'm going. Open your stupid letter all alone, what do I care?"

She left and I opened the letter in the usual way, finding it to have the official white house letterhead. Basically the letter said they were sorry for not knowing any other way to reach me, the place wasn't listed in any phone directory. *Yeah, the building doesn't have phone service, everyone just brought their own cell phone so...* It went on to say the president wanted to meet with me as I had been recorded, the day before, entering the supreme court before some "strangeness" went on there. Several justices were spouting nonsense, there had been a fire but no one had been hurt, and could I please come and explain all this? Also did I know anything about a recent change in leadership in North Korea? Diplomats were talking about a woman that matched my description being spotted there recently, and how was that possible? And thirdly the organization was known to the White House but no one seemed to know who had authorized its return, and they would like to know who that was, and meet me as the director. It was somewhat subtle but they indicated that maybe I should have already been giving reports to the president if I was who I said I was, and if I really was the director I should have known that. So I wasn't sure they believed we were legit, and to be fair we only half were at best. They said my appointment had been scheduled for such and such a time today, if that wasn't convenient to please call this number and have it changed.

Wait, so they sent this letter to the building here in NYC, but expect me to be in Washington DC by this afternoon? So they either know I'm able to teleport around, or they sent it here hoping someone would open it and call me themselves because they think I'm still in DC. Either way, I suppose I can accommodate them. I picked up my cell phone and texted Veronica, "Want 2 go back 2 DC, see White House today?"

"You think pres possessed?" came back.

“No, got invite.”

“Invite or summons?”

“Little of both?”

“Sure, I’ll go w u.”

“Come up at 12:45.”

“k.”

When the time came Veronica looked at DC again and said White House tours were also suspended for the moment, so the place was pretty quiet. She knew where to go, what entrance and whatnot, (a map had been provided with the letter along with an official looking “card” I was to hand over to verify it was me) and we basically teleported right to the entrance. We didn’t have far to walk, and I got my first look at the White House up close. I wondered if it actually counted as a “house” as far as a threshold went, but Veronica said probably not. Too much traffic in and out, it was partly an office building after all. We went to the door and I swiped the card, making it open. *Shouldn’t there be guards on the outside of the door too? Odd. But it did say to swipe it at the door so I did.* A guard was there a little ways in to meet us. *At least there’s one on this side. Why does he feel so nervous? What’s going on here?* It looked like you talked to the guard through the bars, and he would buzz you in through the door that was ahead of us. I put the card through the bars in the wall and he picked it up to look at it.

“Jesse Faden and Veronica Marts to see the president,” I told him. *Never thought I would be saying that when I left Ordinary.*

“I’m afraid the building is not taking... Hang on.” The guy looked up at us in surprise. “Didn’t I just let you in here like ten minutes ago?”

“Er, no?” I told him. “How could you, I’m right here.”

“No, no, I remember that red hair!” he protested. “You’re the same- hang on.” His phone started ringing, and he picked it up. “Hello? What do you mean that’s her? Yes I thought she looked the same too but isn’t she still... Right. That’s impossible, she can’t be both down and up there holding... Uh, doing the thing she’s doing up there! You’re asking me?”

“What’s going on?” I demanded, starting to get worried. “Are you sure I came through here before? Did something happen?”

“I’m not authorized to tell you that!”

“I’m Jesse Faden, director of the Federal Bureau of Control and if there’s been a situation I need to know what it is and get into the building *now*.” I flashed my badge.

“I don’t know what that is.”

“I’m getting tired of people saying that to me. We’re an equivalent to the FBI. What’s the situation?”

“I can’t take your word for it. No, not you, she’s talking to me. Of course I’m not going to let her in.”

“Oh really? Come on Veronica.” I turned and marched towards the door. Helpfully, it opened for me.

“Hey!” the guy shouted.

“You never did tell me how you do that,” she remarked as we passed through it. “It can’t just be movement magic, can it? How do you manipulate so many different kinds of locks?”

I have no clue how it works, it just does. “I have to keep some secrets, which way?”

“We were going to meet in his office, let’s head there. This way maybe?”

“Okay.”

We headed through the empty halls, something was definitely wrong around here, and finally some suited men caught up with us, pointing their guns in a most macho way. I looked them over.
Clean.

“Hands in the air!” they told us.

“What is this all about?” I asked instead. “We were invited here, I can show you the letter.”

“You’ve taken the president hostage, did you think you would get away with it?”

Is that what this is all about? But why? Why not just possess him like everybody else? “When did you become president?” I asked Veronica.

“I didn’t think I had,” she replied. “News to me.”

“No, not that woman, President Biden!”

“Do you see President Biden standing anywhere in this hallway?”

“Uh, no?”

“So how could I have taken him hostage? He’s not small enough to be carried on my back, is he?”

“She’s got a point,” said the one next to the one that had been doing the talking. “She’s coming up from the outside, there’s no way she got out of the room and *came back in* without us realizing it. Plus I’ve never seen this other woman before.”

“Director Faden and agent Marts,” I told them, luckily I hadn’t put the badges away. “Federal Bureau of Control. We look into strange occurrences, do you think maybe this qualifies?”

“All right, we need to get to the bottom of this,” said the agent. He stepped to the side and lowered his gun. “Move.”

“Pretty sure I outrank you, but that’s where we wanted to go anyway. Come on Veronica.”

“Metallic Rejection!” she said by way of reply.

“What was that?” asked the man.

“Just a little spell, finally remembered to put it on *before* the bullets start flying.”

“Ah, nice one agent!”

“Thank you director.”

“Just move, I don’t need your imaginary nonsense.”

“Oh boy, is he going to be surprised,” I told her as we moved down the hall.

“Yeah he is. Why did someone shape-shift into you though?”

“And how did they know I would be here today?” I further added. “Odd they’re still here. And now I’m here, so the plan is going wrong, right? I mean, if ‘I’ had come here and shot the president, I would have been arrested walking up to the place. Cops would be all over. But this situation is still going on. It’s very odd.”

“I agree, something is very wrong here.”

We headed to the Oval Office which was surrounded by secret service agents, and I just kept walking.

“The door has been locked somehow,” said the agent. “We’re trying to figure another way in.”

I stopped, probably better to try and get the story before I rushed in there. “What’s the situation, apart from the obvious I mean.”

“I don’t have to tell you anything!”

You know, maybe bringing Willow for some more enthralling magic wouldn’t have been the worst thing to do.

“Sir, isn’t that?”

“It does look like her, yes. Watch her.”

“Watch me what, exactly? Clearly someone, who is not me, is in that room with the president. The sooner you tell me what’s going on, the faster I can figure out how to deal with this situation.”

He seemed to struggle with himself for a moment. "Fine. About ten minutes ago a woman claiming to be from some Federal Bureau showed up. Cameras showed her entering the office, and suddenly all the secret service agents left their posts around the president. She got out a weapon from somewhere, and when we tried to get back in we found we couldn't. The cameras show the woman holding a gun to the president but no demands have been made."

"Did the cameras show how the door was locked?"

"No, she only just looked at it."

"It's been magically sealed, I can feel it," Veronica told me.

"Could you get us past it?"

"I've seen pictures of the office, but how recent they are? I don't know."

"What are you talking about?" demanded the agent.

"Are you able to get in there and resolve this situation?" I asked him sweetly. "Oh wait, no, you're still out here," I answered him just as sweetly. "Let the people that actually have the means to save the president's life work."

"You're not going to blast the door down, are you?" Veronica asked.

"That or just tear it out of the frame, provided it doesn't just open for me normally." I stepped up to it. Nothing. "It didn't." *I guess my ability isn't foolproof after all.*

"Wait, I think there's another way..." She stepped up next to me and raised a hand.

"Oh, some magic you know? I did hate to destroy it..."

"More like a joke than a spell." She pounded on the door. "Knock Knock!" she called.

A knock-knock joke? Really? Also, you're just going to knock and expect someone to say-

"What is it?" came through. It did sound like me.

Okay, they are going to answer you. Well, why not, it's no more absurd than anything else that's happened today.

"Don't you mean who's there? Anyway, it's Jesse Faden, you know, the person you're shape-shifted into? You haven't shot him or teleported away and I assume you could do either so let us in and we can maybe resolve this whole thing."

"Ugh, fine!" The door opened.

"See how easy that was. Didn't figure you to start thinking with your gun, Jesse."

She knows!

"Move aside!" growled the man, and yanked the door open. He went flying back and crashing into several other agents. They started trying to untangle themselves.

"Only Jesse is allowed inside!" came from inside.

"Hey, I'm with her," Veronica complained, poking her head in. "We're a package deal."

"What? Oh, I recognize you, one of the FBC agents, right? Fine, you can come in."

"Thank you." We both walked in and the door slammed shut again. There was the famous desk, and the old man sitting behind it. Wearing a mask, because he's a gentleman like that unlike some people who take them off when they are still contagious or never put them on knowing they are. Next to him was, well, me. *Is that really what I look like from this angle? Weird.*

"So who are you?" I demanded, looking them up and down. "And that gun is all wrong, the real service weapon looks like this." I raised my hand, the gun materializing in it. "Wait, you aren't possessed, who are you?"

"You asked that already, Jesse," said fake Jesse. "This has all gone so wrong."

"If you meant to shoot the president and get away, yeah I would say it has," Veronica agreed. "How about you put it down and we can talk about this?"

"I just couldn't do it," the fake went on, seeming not to hear her. "I couldn't frame my sister, no matter what he said. I know he's my new master but--"

"Dylan?" I blurted. "Is that you?"

“It was supposed to be simple,” he told me. “In and out. I was fully willing to shoot this guy, what do I care? But framing you...”

“Dylan, it’s okay, we can work this out,” I told him. “We can just say it was a drill or something. Are you okay, Mr. Biden?”

He had just been sitting there quietly, probably for the best when a bunch of crazy people are busting into your office and you have a gun to your head, but suddenly he started to laugh, and pound his palm on the desk. Fake Jesse pulled back a little, as one would when your supposed victim starts losing their mind right in front of you, but I saw the cause was more sinister. He suddenly had two energy signatures, and I switched my gun to be pointing at him. *Oh, that’s going to be great for the cameras, good going Jesse.*

“Ah Dylan, don’t fret. I blame myself, ordering you on a mission like this so soon after your recovery. Your feelings for your family do you credit, I should have foreseen something like this happening.”

“Master?”

“Yes, I followed you. Wanted to see the show, but you hesitated, and waited, and soon the original showed up. What a pity. Of course you had a very small window, to see him just a little bit early but not so early he made you wait and then you were both in the waiting room or whatever. How to fix this...”

“Master? Sisaroplex, is that you?” I demanded, somewhat sarcastically.

“The one and only! Goodness, never taken over someone so *old* before. Ugh, I don’t recommend it.” He was looking at his hand like he wanted to chop it off. “I mean a human, I’ve taken over non-humans that were older.”

“But how? I didn’t see your energy signature anywhere! Even invisible I should have seen that.” *Right? I think?*

“Ah Jesse. What a bumbling, ignorant, hick you are. Do you really think those with possession magic can only possess humans? No, we can possess pretty much anything. Even the smallest bug, and fly wherever we want.” He made a “so tiny” gesture with two fingers.

“So you were a bug, and now you’re transferred into Biden?” *Sure, even if I saw a bug flying around, I wouldn’t check to see if it was possessed. Great going, past me. Thanks, present me.*

“But your powers of stating the obvious, they can’t be beat, I tell you that much.”

“Get out of him, I’ll shoot you out don’t think I won’t. Biden will be fine we both know that.”

“I know, and it’s so *unfair*. That stupid gun of yours, why she ever made that for you. I mean I know why she made it for you, to do this very thing.” He looked over at fake me. “I don’t suppose I could order you to shoot your sister?”

“You can order it, but I won’t do it! You can’t make me!”

“Well I could...” he protested weakly, “but I sense some kind of protection magic on them. It would probably bounce off. I could spell break them, but while I’m doing that she’ll be shooting me, which would be unpleasant. I also feel some kind of body magic on her, probably making her faster.”

“Believe it,” I growled.

“And what’s your deal anyway? You don’t want to frame her by letting the cameras show your sister shooting this body?”

“That’s right?”

“So if we changed venues, maybe headed up to the roof and I made it look like you made this guy jump over the side, would that be okay?”

“Why, then it would be the fall that killed him, not me- I mean my sister!”

“Exactly!”

But I would still be guilty of murder. If I poisoned someone, say, they wouldn’t just say ‘oh the poison killed him’ and not look to who put the poison inside the person. Dylan really is messed up, isn’t

he? *Maybe I should have gone after him, but he could have been anywhere and I had the FBC to get off the ground.*

“But what about all those people out there in the hall?”

“Don’t worry about them, you can open the door now.”

“Yes, master.”

I closed my eyes briefly as the door opened and the secret service agents piled in. There were a dozen of them, all armed, all of them just standing there waiting for orders.

“More bugs?” I asked.

“More bugs,” Joe agreed, getting up. “Did you think I wouldn’t travel with a- Oh, this guy’s knees. And his back. And whatever that is. I’ll be doing him a favor, most like. Come along, but don’t forget to make it look good. Jesse, you stay and play with my forces here. Toodles.”

“Yes master,” Dylan agreed, grabbing him and putting the gun close to his head. “Like that?”

“Just like that.”

“Right. Sorry, Jesse.”

“It’s okay, Dylan. I’ll save you from this guy somehow.”

“And I turn him into a coma patient again, you know that Jesse. You’re stuck with me, and you know it. Come on.”

“Do we...” Veronica asked, indicating the president.

Probably asking if we should do something before he leaves. I gave a brief shake of my head. *I have a plan, but I have to separate them. Can’t let the president get shot by a stray bullet, or even an aimed one! It’s risky, but I think we can manage it if we can take these guys out quickly enough. He’s not going anywhere fast and he’s got a lot of stairs to climb. As long as I can get to him before he reaches the ground, we win.*

“Kill them both,” Joe told his goons as he went out the door. “And try to do it quickly, I know you like making them suffer but aim for the heads, will you?”

They grumbled and raised their guns, moving around the office.

“Let’s dance,” I told them.

Chapter 21

I don't let the terrorists win

Where: The Oval Office

When: Just then

I took stock of my situation as the group before me raised their guns. I had by my side my trusted lieutenant, Veronica Marts, who had been with me since the beginning. Who had "left" the FBI to come with me and help found the FBC, sticking with me as the place reawakened and grew. And I had my trusty gun. In the room, behind me, was the presidential desk, which I figured I could pretty easily fling forward if I carried it over us. To the sides of the room were various flags, small tables, busts, and there were some pictures on the wall. All valuable ammunition, should it come to that. Before me were twelve secret service agents, all possessed. They wouldn't stand a chance.

Before anyone could get a shot off I acted. Even if Veronica's magic protected us from all this gunfire, I needed to thin the herd, so to speak. So I flung the desk over top of us towards the guys in front and opened fire on the one to my right with the gun in the "shatter" configuration. Two of the guys in front threw themselves to the side to avoid it, but another two (the desk was huge!) took it right in the chest and went down with a crunch.

Sorry!

The guy to my right spasmed as my gun went into the kanaima inside, and went down.

Five guys out of it for the moment? I'm happy with that.

"Spellbreaking!" Veronica shouted, focusing on the guys to her right.

Smart, knock the possessor out of them, that will keep them busy for a second trying to reassert control.

Their answer was to return fire on her.

Okay, or not?

The bullets bounced off her, making them throw down their guns in disgust. "Claws out, brethren!"

A cheer of joy went up among them as guns were tossed away, and they all brought their claws out.

"It's the electronics in here," Veronica told me, disgusted. "Spellbreaking!" This time two of the agents jerked and lost their claws, looking around and wondering what was going on. "Ha! Gotcha that time."

I retrieved the desk, figuring I should make it as hard as possible for these guys to reach us, and put another shot to my right. He didn't go down.

To my left Veronica shouted "Deflect!" as one of the kanaima lunged for her, and it seemed to bounce off the air before her. "We're going to get overwhelmed!"

"I can see that!" I called back, as it was true. Around the desk I could see the kanaima scrambling to get into position. I put another shot into the closest one, trusting distance to make it more effective than my last one. *But as long as I fire only one shot at a time, rather than multiple, I should be okay. It only takes a second for this form to regenerate a shot, so as long as I don't fire more than that, I won't have the lengthy reload time where I'm completely helpless.* The claws of the one I was firing at were an inch from my leg, it seemed they were not following their bosses' command to go for the head, but they were thrown back as my shot connected. He went down.

But another was right behind him, claws out, and I didn't want to shoot yet so I threw him into the one next to him.

"Deflection," Veronica cast again at my side. But she missed it, and got caught in the leg.

"First blood!" cried the kanaima, showing its claws. It licked them. "Or not?"

Thank you, Herman's mom, for these wonderful uniforms!

"Now it's my turn!" shouted the one next to that one. It too struck out.

“Deflection! Aarg!”

“I’m authorizing lethal force, stop holding back!” I commanded her. *I’d rather she switch to attacking and hope they don’t die than her getting hit and leaving me alone against this hoard.*

“Right! Air bending!”

“Ieeeee!” One of them went flying, the other two near her jumped back to avoid it. “Ha ha, missed us!”

I gave a tight nod, and focused back on the one nearing me. It was maybe two steps away so I put a shot into it. It stumbled and faceplanted, but it wasn’t good enough. All of them I had shot still showed two energy signatures. *Fine, I guess. Take care of them and go save the president. If I’m a bad enough dude to do it. Worry about these guys later, my vengeance quest will be sated one way or another if they die today or not.*

The next nearest one to me had actually thought better of it, about to attack me then backing off. It backpedaled towards the next nearest one that was rushing towards us. “We’ll attack together, she can’t shoot both of us at once!”

“Right!”

“Air bending!” Veronica cast again. Four of them near her went flying, and I heard bones cracking as they slammed into the walls. “Sorry!” she told them, wincing. “Ack! Jesse, help!”

I didn’t want to take my eyes off the ones coming towards me, I especially wanted to put a round or two into Mr. “can’t shoot both of us at once” just to show I could (it was still a pistol after all, not a real shotgun, despite how the “bullets” were coming out) but I glanced over at her. An energy form stood here trying to take her over. *Crap, one of the ones she expelled earlier decided to try and take her over instead? But how did she know? Can you feel it trying to take you over?* I focused on it, pulling the trigger, and it flew back, vanishing. “You’re clear!”

“Thanks.”

But this let the two get up to me, and both took a swing at me. They probably expected me to dodge or something, but I mean the desk was right there. I simply reasserted my power on it and swung it at them, crunching both of them with it.

From behind me I heard a scream and one of the ones I had thrown earlier sped towards me, so I figured he was volunteering to be next in line and put a shot into him. He went flying backwards, landing in a heap. The other one next to him looked at the heap, looked back at me, and the body crumpled as the energy signature left it. I had no problem putting a shot into that one as it tried to go home again. It vanished, I don’t know if it died or got the spell off, but I was pretty sure I hit it.

Then I had to dodge a strike by the one that I had just hit with the desk, it had taken advantage of my shooting the other one I guess to sneak up on me from below.

“Deflection!” cast Veronica, as all hers had been blown away a second ago. It bounced off the spell.

“Curse you!” it shouted.

“If only you could,” she told it. “But you don’t have that magic! Give it up! Deflection!” Another had ran for her, now that the way was clear because we weren’t behind the desk any more.

It lunged for me again, but I knew it was coming now. I put a shot into it, jumping back a bit as I did to get away from the claws. The energy signature burned away and the man dropped, so I knew I had put another one of these guys away for good.

There were three left, and all running towards us. “Flame Wall!” Veronica cast, raising her hands dramatically. A wall of fire appeared between us, making them flinch back. I hoped it wouldn’t send the office, and thus the whole place ablaze, but took the second of them figuring out what to do now to change my configuration to “Surge.” Three shots later (I could still see their energy form through the flames) I attached three explosives to them, grabbed Veronica and pulled her down under the desk with me, and let them explode. When I peaked back up over the desk their energy was gone.

“Come on, I think everyone is down in here, kill the flames.”

“Right.” She popped up and the fire wall went out. “The nearest stairs are-”

“Forget that!” I turned instead to the window, and focused on it. I knew it was probably bulletproof, but I wasn’t shooting it. I yanked it with my power, thinking *come on, come on* and hearing it crack apart from the frame. Suddenly it shot backwards with the sound of stone tearing, and we had our escape portal. I tossed the window against the door, I knew more people possessed or not would be heading our way after all that, and headed outside.

“We aren’t going after them?”

“Probably just more kanaima out there,” I told her. “We’re going outside where he’s going to jump! I’ll just catch him.”

“Oh, got it. Right.” She followed me, and I grabbed her with my power the moment she had cleared the frame. Then I pushed off the ground, heading upwards.

“Whoa!”

“Look for them!” I told her.

“I know!”

We looked around desperately, but it was Veronica who shouted “There!” and pointed. Joe and Dylan were on the roof, though he still looked like me. “I’ll get us under them, you won’t be able to catch him from here.” Joe dramatically seemed to be pleading with Dylan to let him go, and basically jumped off the roof himself, though no one from the ground would have been able to tell that.

“Teleport!” Veronica cast, changing my perspective and making me hope I was still fast enough to catch him. I was, he was coming down almost right on top of us so I just caught him and slowly lowered him into my arms. I looked him over quickly, and breathed a sigh of relief. *He’s clean, no second signature. He’s himself.*

“Someone want to tell me what in the Sam hill is going on?” Joe demanded. “I was in my office a second ago, how did I get out here? And I was falling to my death just then?”

“You were, Mr. President,” I told him. “You’re safe now though, everything is going to work out.”

“Oh yeah? I’ll take your word for it. Perhaps you should set me down though, wouldn’t want any misunderstandings.”

“Are you okay to walk?” I set him down.

“A little more sore than usual, but I’ll live.”

“Great. Still need to do some cleanup in your office, let’s head there and we can talk.”

“We can go in through that way, I suppose,” he started to say, pointing to the nearest door.

“No, if you don’t already know it’s time you did,” I told him, my power grabbing him and Veronica again. “And this will save me a lot of explanation.” I hauled them both into the air again, causing Joe to let out a “my word!” while we soared back over the white house and landed near the office again.

“What was that?”

“Magic, Mr. President,” I told him. “Lots of others in your government know, mostly because a lot of them are being controlled by demons, so it’s time you did too. Come on.” I left him standing there trying to process that, heading back into the office. Someone was trying to force the door open past the window (which being bulletproof glass was very heavy) and I couldn’t have that so I slammed it shut again while I worked. Once I had put enough bullets into the unconscious men still carrying kanaima to kill them all I released my power. By that time the president had poked his head in the room, aghast at what I was seemingly doing.

“What are you doing, shooting those men?” he demanded. “You saved me, I thought you were helping me!”

“I am, but I need to do this before they get away.”

“Get away? These men look totally beat up, and what happened to my desk? How did it get moved it must weigh a ton.”

“You already know.”

“Young lady I think you better start from the beginning. But first let those people in here, they need to know I’m safe.”

Or be taken out themselves. I threw the window aside without touching it, and forces poured into the office. I flashed my badge, as did Veronica, and Joe waved them off. None of them were possessed, so it seemed that danger had passed. “Just get these bodies out of here,” he told them. “This lady and I are going to have a talk.”

“Sir, your office is totally compromised,” one said, indicating the hole in the wall. “We need to secure you immediately.”

“I’m not moving until I get an explanation.”

“This one’s alive,” cried one guy.

“This one too.”

“They’re all alive,” I told them. “At least I hope.” I looked around the room and it seemed they all had energy, so they weren’t dead.

“But I saw you shooting them!” Joe protested.

“Or did you?” I asked.

“You tell me. Because it looked an awful lot like you were.”

“Very well.” I gestured and his chair righted itself and rolled over to him. “Have a seat.” The others all froze as I did this. “Get back to work!” I yelled.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” Veronica asked me.

“Immeasurably,” I told her, grinning widely. “By the way are you okay? Did they get you?”

“The outfit took it,” she told me, showing me her leg. “Not even a scratch.”

“Good. What was I saying? Oh yeah, this guy here is going to make all our funding problems vanish once I tell him our story. Finally we’re going to be a real organization again, and actually start making some changes to the world. For the better. Just one percent of the military budget of this country would set us up for life. So, Mr. President, our story begins when an FBI agent came to see us one day...”

And so I told the story of the founding or I suppose rediscovery of the FBC. What our mission was, how things had gotten so bad in the world, the works. With Veronica to demonstrate other magic and his own experience being tossed around he had no choice but to believe me. I was somewhat surprised to find he hadn’t been told, but then it made sense he wasn’t. Given the director of the FBI had been possessed, and probably members of his own staff were, they would want him as ignorant as possible. No more of that! Within the hour reports came back that while some of the men were badly hurt, some from odd wounds they couldn’t explain but others that looked like they had a desk dropped on them, they would probably all live. I had called back to headquarters and gotten someone with restoration magic to come and work on putting the window back together, so that was done, and the office was secure again. Even put the man’s desk back, and he was now sitting with his head on his hands, thinking things over.

“Do you think the last guy was possessed?” he finally asked. “He did so much damage, riled up so many people. He’s still claiming he couldn’t have lost to me, that somehow the whole thing was a scam. As if an entire country the size of the United States could be rigged at once. I mean get real.”

“It’s entirely possible,” I admitted. “Demons want to disrupt human society. Going back and forth like this, possessed guy, not possessed guy, is sure to continue that trend.”

“No doubt. And you want to make sure no one is power is possessed?”

“That’s right. Military leaders, decision makers, everyone at every level needs to be checked. If humans are going to be terrible to each other, let it be because they’re terrible. Not because some demon decided they should act like that.” I sighed. “Of course that’s just the start. After that we have move on to other countries. As long as there’s a stronghold of demon activity no one is safe. So that one

day, the world will be back in our hands again.” *We learned that the hard way, if a possessed person can just order a nuke launched, think what damage could be done if we aren’t careful.*

“So you do know something about North Korea?”

“Yes, we took care of a little issue there. Should head back, make sure whoever took over isn’t possessed now. But I’m only one person.”

“I see.”

“Sir, no one matching her description or the description of this Dylan person has been spotted on the grounds,” said an agent, barging in.

I figured as much. He teleported away no doubt. Oh Dylan, am I ever going to get you back now? Is there no chance for us to be a family again?

“Thank you,” the president said. He nodded and left again. “You tell an interesting story, Jesse Faden,” he told me. “I’ll want a tour of this building you’ve opened back up, and to see some of your records. I can’t deny *something* is happening, if you call it magic then fine, it’s magic. But I won’t just hand you money, even if I could. But you have my support at least.”

“We’ve made it this far,” I told him, resisting the urge to choke the man. “We’ll continue to take it one step at a time. You’re welcome to come by though, I’ll give you my number so you don’t have to mail me.” I floated some paper over to myself and noted my number down, sliding it over to him.

“Appreciate that. And for saving me, of course. Events here will never be published, I still don’t believe them and they happened to me. Can you imagine what the press would say about me if I thought magic was real, or I announced demons were sending invisible agents here to possess people? I would hand the presidency back to that guy. Heck, even if he doesn’t run even my supporters would write his name in to get rid of me.”

“Let’s not have that,” I agreed. “Whatever you can do, I’ll appreciate.”

“I’ll move as quickly as I can,” he said, standing and offering his hand. “Just in case.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” I told him, as Veronica and I stood and shook it. “If the next guy is possessed, we’ll be there to take care of the problem. Thank you for your time, Mr. President.”

“My pleasure. It was nice meeting you both. I’ll be in touch.”

“And if you don’t, I know where you live,” I told him. “Veronica?” I put a hand on her shoulder.

“Bye Joe! Teleport!”